

Combined Testimony for December 19, 2023: 212 Columbia Heights; 442 Waverly Avenue; 168 Midwood Street; 160 & 162 Fifth Avenue; 1030 Amsterdam Avenue; 105 Chambers Street

Approximate time: 11:00; join Zoom by: 10:00

LPC-23-11110 -- 212 Columbia Heights - Brooklyn Heights Historic District, Brooklyn

Good morning, commissioners, _____ for the Victorian Society New York. Founded in New York City in 1966, the Victorian Society in America is dedicated to fostering the appreciation and preservation of our 19th and early 20th century heritage. The NY chapter promotes preservation of our historic districts, individual and scenic landmarks, interiors and civic art.

When we first saw the presentation for 212 Columbia Heights, we were reminded of another application, heard at the October 31, 2023 Public Hearing. Both 212 Columbia Heights and 183 Amity Street are single family houses with rear yards and balconies on several levels. Both rear facades are visible from public spaces. Both applications included changes to window openings and the construction of a roof deck. And both roof decks will be visible from public spaces.

But there is one big difference between these two applications. The rear façade and rooftop addition at 183 Amity Street will be only partially visible looking down an alley from Pacific Street. The rear façade and rooftop addition at 212 Columbia will be fully visible not only from the Promenade, but, in all likelihood, from lower Manhattan.

We will also note that at the Public Meeting for 183 Amity, the Commission made its approval conditional on the applicant's moving the proposed roof deck back from the primary façade to a location where it would not be visible from the street.

The Victorian Society supports the proposed modifications to the window opening to install a door opening to an existing first floor balcony. The work will not require the removal of a significant amount of historic masonry and will be partially shielded from view by the balcony railing.

But we do not support the construction of the roof deck in its present location. We find that it looms too close above the rear façade and its historic bay window, as shown on LPC-9. We ask that you follow the precedent set on Amity Street 7 weeks ago and require the applicant to move the proposed deck back to a location where it will not be so prominent. We suggest aligning the westernmost section of the deck with the existing chimneys. You can see, in the photos of the rear façade, that the chimneys aren't visible. This is also shown in the section on LPC-13.

Thank you, commissioners.

Approved 10-0, but roof deck to be lowered and/or set back in keeping with other decks on the promenade, in consultation with the staff.

Approximate time: 11:30; join Zoom by: 10:30

LPC-24-02517 -- 442 Waverly Avenue, aka 451 Clinton Avenue - Clinton Hill Historic District, Brooklyn

Good morning commissioners, _____ for the Victorian Society New York.

The designation report for the Clinton Hill Historic District describes this building as “a brick one-story, five-car garage that is of no architectural interest.” We believe this remains an accurate assessment 40 years later. Based on the presentation materials, it appears that the building is to be demolished and then reconstructed. Once a non-contributing building like this is demolished, it loses its “grandfathered” status in the historic district. Any reconstruction must be found appropriate using the same criteria as for any proposed new building.

We cannot believe that the proposed structure, very similar to the existing one, would ever be found appropriate based on the Commission’s usual criteria for new construction. We therefore urge denial of this application. There are many good examples of historic carriage houses in this district and on this block that can be used to inform an appropriate new design.

Approved 10-0, with brick to return on side walls.

Approximate time: 12:15; join Zoom by: 11:15

LPC-24-04099 -- 168 Midwood Street - Prospect Lefferts Gardens Historic District, Brooklyn

Good afternoon commissioners, _____ for the Victorian Society New York. The Victorian Society supports this proposal, even though it violates what we believe is a good policy of retaining at least the top floor of rear facades in their original configuration. In this case, the beautiful, historic oriel window at the second floor so dominates this façade, that we think the top floor alteration will have a minimal effect. The retention of the two outer windows at the top floor also helps to minimize the disruption to the rhythm of fenestration.

Approved 11-0.

lunch

Approximate time: 1:30; join Zoom by: 12:30

LPC-24-04320 and LPC-24-04321 – 160 Fifth Avenue and 162 Fifth Avenue - Ladies' Mile Historic District, Manhattan

Good afternoon commissioners, _____ for the Victorian Society New York.

The Victorian Society has reservations about this proposal.

First, the applicant is choosing to locate the “skybridge” where the construction will require removal of a large section of the prominent cornice at 160 Fifth Avenue. A typical “parti” for architect-designed office buildings in the early 20th century called for an elaborate two- or three-story base, a more simply detailed shaft, and a fully developed cornice which would stand out against the sky. This is the pattern at both 160 and 162. Cutting through the cornice at 160 will diminish the historic unity of this building. A skybridge on a lower floor would not require destruction of any part of this fine cornice.

Second, we question the proposal on stylistic grounds. The applicant has provided photos of several historic skybridges. In the examples shown, the architectural detailing of the bridges and the buildings they serve are stylistically compatible. The architects for those historic bridges weren't slamming an obviously contemporary addition through the walls of 100-year-old landmarks.

The applicants may argue that the modern materials proposed for their bridge will ensure that it almost disappears against the sky. However, we've heard the same argument for glass railings. We know that they are effectively not transparent and that they get dirty. Dirty glass, dirty stainless steel and dirty carbon fiber will not, in fact, disappear against the sky.

Finally, we question the necessity of the installation of a bridge connecting adjacent buildings in the age of Zoom. We know that the Commission does not regulate use, but we feel that in this case it is an appropriate discussion. In addition, the top floor where the bridge connects to 160, shown on Board 61, will contain a “small lounge area”, toilets, one conference room with seating for 10 people, and a skylit atrium with stairs leading to the floor below. We don't believe that an addition which will yield such a small amount of functional space is an appropriate exchange for the removal of a significant section of the prominent cornice.

We recommend that, if the concept of a skybridge is in fact appropriate, it should be lowered to a floor where the installation will be minimally destructive.

Approved 7-3 (Chapin, Goldblum, Chu dissenting)

Approximate time: 3:45; join Zoom by: 2:45

LPC-23-10724 1030 Amsterdam Avenue (aka 500-502 West 111th Street; 1028-1034 Amsterdam Avenue) - Morningside Heights Historic District, Manhattan

Good afternoon commissioners, _____ for the Victorian Society New York. We suspect others reacted as we did--with a moment of panic--when we realized that this application references the long-time home of the Hungarian Pastry Shop. It seems that a substantial part of New York's architecture and preservation communities has a fondness for this establishment, as it has provided sustenance for generations of Columbia affiliates. We're relieved that the new storefront is not for a new tenant.

For such an important project, we felt it was necessary—in fact, absolutely essential—to make a site visit. We found that the existing storefront is not historic or architecturally distinguished, and that the proposed storefront has several good qualities: it retains the historic masonry enframements, it's well-proportioned, apparently eliminates the obtrusive security gates, and retains the appropriate and distinctive retractable awnings. The row of operable transom windows is a nice feature, both functionally and architecturally. We might ordinarily find that the mosaic tile artwork calls undue attention to itself in a storefront, but in this context, it seems to us an appropriate and laudable addition. Finally, we found that the cheese Danish are as good as ever. Therefore, we are pleased to urge approval of the proposal.

Approved 10-0.

Approximate time: 4:15; join Zoom by: 3:15

LPC-23-11234 - 105 Chambers Street, aka 89-91 Reade Street and 160-170 Church St - Cary Building - Individual Landmark and Tribeca South Historic District, Manhattan

Good afternoon commissioners, _____ for the Victorian Society New York.

The Victorian Society must oppose some aspects of the proposed repairs to the north, south and east facades of the Cary Building, identified in the designation report as *“one of New York's most important 19th-century commercial structures... designed by one of New York's most prominent firms specializing in commercial architecture, with cast-iron fronts fabricated by the city's most important foundry.”*

We support brick replacement on the east façade, as well as replacement of the minimally detailed cast iron elements which are at the south-east and north-east corners of the building. The east façade was originally a demising wall; the secondary brick has been painted many times and the cast iron plates at the corners were probably not original to the building but were added to stabilize the corners when the adjacent building was demolished to widen Church Street.

However, we do not support the use of either fiberglass or GFRC to replace all the deteriorated elements on the two street facades. The applicant has provided drawings with numbered photos of deteriorated elements. Photos 3 and 8 on slide 6 show minimally detailed plates on the south facade. It seems acceptable to replace these with an alternate material. But on the south façade there are also finely detailed elements which are called out as deteriorated. These are shown in photos 1 and 5, cast-iron brackets supporting the cornice; photos 2 and 6, cast-iron capitals; and 7, a cast-iron column cover. These are the exactly the cast-iron parts which caused the report's author to name the Cary Building *“one of New York's most important 19th-century commercial structures.”* All of the called-out pieces on the north façade are equally fine.

We were especially alarmed that the applicant identified half of the beautifully detailed brackets at the cornice, 5 on the south façade and 3 on the north, as deteriorated. Replacing half of them with either fiberglass or GFRC now opens the door to replacing more of them in the future, to the point where none of the original brackets will remain. This would not be in keeping with the spirit of Preservation.

While we often find substitute materials appropriate, that is not the case when a great part of the significance of a building comes from the very material of which it is made. All of these fine elements should be replaced with cast iron.

Thank you, commissioners.

Laid over.

