

Combined Victorian Society Testimony for November 28, 2023: 366 Atlantic Avenue, 74 Wellington Court, 80 Irving Place, 320 West 77th Street, Riverside Park-Dinosaur Playground

Approximate time: 9:00; join Zoom by: 9:00

LPC-23-03811 - 366 Atlantic Avenue - Boerum Hill Historic District Extension, 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.

The Victorian Society does not support this proposal to construct a full-height addition extending the full depth of the lot at 366 Atlantic. The central green space in the center of this block, the donut, is recognized as an important feature of historic districts which the Commission has determined, on many occasions, should be maintained.

The applicant has provided photographs and drawings showing that the adjacent buildings, at 364 and 368 Atlantic Avenue, already have additions which cover their property. We do not feel that these examples are relevant: the addition at 364 was filed with DOB in 2002, the one at 368 in 2003, each at least 15 years before the Boerum Hill Historic District Extension was designated in 2018. And in neither case do these neighboring extensions extend both to the lot line and to the full height of the building.

We will also note that this lot is zoned R6A. On an R6A lot, on a wide street, lot coverage of 65% is allowed, with a rear yard of 30 feet. We believe the Commission should use these figures as a guideline for this application. At the least, an explanation should be provided for why the proposal doesn't conform to the typical rear yard requirement.

Finally, these presentation drawings are titled, "PROPOSED RENOVATION TO THE STOREFRONT OF 366 ATLANTIC AVE." Drawings 13, 14 and 15 show new storefront infill with a note "New storefront to be filed and approved at staff level." But the storefront proposed is not a restoration. We're aware that the designation report for 366 notes many alterations to the existing storefront, but we point out that the report also states that the twin building at 364 Atlantic retains its historic, projecting wood storefronts. Many similar storefronts have survived on Atlantic Avenue, resulting in a unique cluster of these mid-19th century storefronts. We strongly urge the Commissioners to require that the new storefront at 366 be based on the historic storefront at 364.

Approved 9-1 (Goldblum), but require that front 10 feet of the second floor be retained.

Approximate time: 12:00; join Zoom by: 11:00

LPC-23-08409 - 74 Wellington Court - Fiske Terrace-Midwood Park Historic District, Brooklyn

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

The Victorian Society does not support the proposed work at 74 Wellington Court, finding it will completely overwhelm this Colonial Revival-style landmark structure. It will also detract from the streetscape and the overall character of this “garden suburb.”

The proposed work is the antithesis of preservation. The applicants would first rip off all of the historic material now visible on the primary north-facing façade. Except for the front doors, every material selected by A. White Pierce, the original architect, will be trashed.

Then, having demolished the north facade, the applicants would destroy the original proportions of the house. Their plans, to erect a new primary façade 17 feet closer to the street, will significantly alter the appearance of both the east and west elevations. The east façade, 15 feet from East 17th Street, loses its balanced proportions and domestic character. The west façade becomes a jumble of roofs.

Finally, we find that the open character of this district and the two streets adjoining this property will be significantly diminished by increasing the footprint of the house by 40%. We urge the applicant to explore ways to modestly expand this house without destroying its character and so much historic material.

No action. Review additions in rear or appendage on side with DOB and BSA.

Approximate time: 2:00; join Zoom by: 1:00

LPC-23-11282 -- 80 Irving Place - Gramercy Park Historic District, Manhattan

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

We think the proposed rooftop changes are appropriate. Though somewhat visible from the street, the addition doesn't obscure any significant features and we think will go essentially unnoticed. It could be made completely invisible by reducing or eliminating the brise soleil, without reducing the occupiable space.

However, the change to the doorway at the second floor is inappropriate. The existing door is barely visible; the enlarged one would be very visible and appears to crowd the lovely bay window immediately adjacent. It seemed odd to us that the illustrative description of this very visible and problematic change on a street façade was relegated to the Appendix. We nearly missed it and mention it here to be sure the doorway graphics are viewed as part of the evaluation of the proposal.

Approved 11-0 (2nd floor door proposal was modified for staff approval).

Approximate time: 2:30; join Zoom by: 1:30

LPC-23-00917 – 320 West 77th Street West End-Collegiate Historic District, Manhattan

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

Regarding the window sash lights proposed, applicants usually seek fewer muntins and more clear glass in a renovation. This applicant is requesting 4-over-4 divisions in the window glass while historically they were 1-over-1, as seen in the tax photo, and typical for this building style. They would not have been 4-over-4. We recommend that window replacement respect the historic 1-over-1 configuration unless there is a compelling reason to introduce a new pattern.

For the railings, we wonder what inspired the design of the proposed metal work, which at 42 inches is taller than other railings in the area. The new railing should match the height of the previously approved design, which is similar to the height of the neighboring fences. The style proposed seems to be a cross between Art Deco and Arts and Crafts styles. This isn't necessarily inappropriate for this modified house, but there are examples of extant original railings in the surrounding blocks with 1890s motifs, which might be a better model for the proposed new railing.

Finally, regarding the proposed facade modifications: the elaboration of the entry door surround is appropriate and typical for modified basement entrances, but it needs a better-detailed keystone. For the rear window change, the previous approval for the window sashes included multipaned glass. That pattern may unify the rear façade's appearance. However, the newly proposed expansion of the top floor's center masonry opening, apparently to create symmetry, is not defensible. Retaining the pattern of top floor windows would respect at least one historic aspect of the rear façade.

Thank you, commissioners.

Approved 10-1 (Goldblum); consider 6/6 instead of 4/4 sash, work with staff on details of basement entrance and ironwork.

Approximate time: 2:45; join Zoom by: 1:45

LPC-24-03689 -- Riverside Park - Dinosaur Playground - Scenic Landmark, Manhattan

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

Unlike the playgrounds inserted into earlier park designs, this playground is integral to the now historic Clarke, Rapuano, and Lloyd expanded Riverside Park design. For the most part, the current proposal maintains the integrity of the site's formal geometry and character, which have Classical and Beaux-Arts precedents fused with a modern, popular recreation purpose.

There are, however, several details that should be rethought, as they are at odds with the historic design and character of the site. Their problematic nature is described more fully in our written testimony. These details include:

1. Introduction of undulating planting beds rather than maintaining their historic rectilinear form. Enlargement is fine, but the form is wrong.
2. Significant increases in the amount and height of fencing. See slide 23 for the ill effects. This fencing should be reduced in height and extent where not strictly required. In addition, there is potential to further reduce the picket fencing by modifying the grades, the low walls which are being rebuilt, and the historic pipe rail fencing.
3. Use of metal and wood "World's Fair" benches rather than the traditional and existing concrete and wood benches. The concrete and wood bench is original to this playground and the entire expanded park and should be used for historic authenticity and consistency.
4. Replacing the original, 9-foot tall park lampposts with the ill-proportioned 12-foot version shown in the drawings. The 9-foot posts, or a 10-foot alternative, should be used.
5. Removal of most of the seven iconic granite and bluestone step ramps, a characteristic of this park. It doesn't appear necessary to remove them all for access compliance. Other access solutions, if needed, should be explored.
6. Removal of the two Classical "bird bath" drinking fountains in the exedra-like semicircular paved niches in the mid-playground area. These fountains are becoming scarce and should remain. See photo in our written testimony. Any bench substitution should follow the arc of the pavement.

If the Commission decides to recommend these or other changes, we strongly urge that Parks be asked to return with revised plans before a report is issued. Otherwise, there is no incentive for Parks to make changes. And as we have seen in several recent projects, both the Parks Dept. and the Public Design Commission have ignored LPC's recommendations with some very unfortunate results. The review process can, should, and once did work in a more useful way.

Approved 10-1 (Goldblum) with report noting there should be continued study of railing height and design and retention of more plan formality.

