

Combined Victorian Society Testimony for February 27, 2024: 885 Manhattan Avenue (LPC-24-02545); 252 Cumberland Street (LPC-24-04312); 233 Wyckoff Street (LPC-24-05444); 487 Henry Street (LPC-24-04607); 28 Prospect Park West (LPC-24-04640); 459 West Broadway (LPC-22-07889); 828-850 Madison Avenue (LPC-24-06416); 1295 Madison Avenue (LPC-24-06148); 38-47 Douglaston Parkway (LPC-23-11199).

Approximate time: 9:45; join Zoom by: 9:30.

LPC-24-02545 -- 885 Manhattan Avenue - Greenpoint 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.

According to the designation report, this building is a one-story taxpayer from the 1880s. But we agree that the existing storefront has little architectural or historic significance. However, the new storefront proposed is no more appropriate to this 19th century historic district than the one being replaced. Arguably, it is less so, as the existing storefront is 75 years old and at least reflects the history of the neighborhood's development.

The proposal includes a large, blank, wood plank wall, corrugated metal bulkhead, painted aluminum framing, and lighted sign stuck onto the façade. This collection of features does not make a coherent design. It has no harmonious architectural relationship to the district, the historic building that was, or still is, on this site, or the fine historic buildings that are adjacent and nearby. Neither is the proposal an example of good, modern design that might in the future be found to contribute to the character and historic development of the district. It could be anywhere, and probably is.

Corporate entities like Chipotle can build stores that are contextual and fitting for historic districts when they are required to do so. There are examples around the world and across the country. Greenpoint deserves no less.

Approved, 10-0 with applicant to work with staff to simplify upper portion in color and/or material to integrate with adjacent storefront.

Approximate time: 10:45; join Zoom by: 9:45.

LPC-24-04312 -- 252 Cumberland Street - Fort Greene Historic District, Brooklyn

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

Our two concerns about this proposal are for work shown in the presentation but not calendared for this public hearing. The first is the proposed replacement of the wood clapboards at the front façade with Hardie-board siding. This doesn't appear to meet the Commission's rules for replacement of wood façade materials. The new siding is described as having a 4-inch exposure; the existing siding and the siding in the 1940 tax photo, which may be shingles and not clapboards, appear to have a larger exposure. Also, the first-floor siding under the porch is flat shiplap siding with no reveal. Was this perhaps determined in the past to be the historic pattern at this floor, revealed beneath later siding?

We have noted before that there is a real wood alternative to cement board and other substitute materials. Acetylated wood is natural, non-toxic, sustainable and has a 50 -year warranty against decay even if unpainted; yet it holds paint better than any other wood. It is cost competitive with Hardie-board. It should be explored as an option.

Second, the drawing showing proposed work at the entrance is troubling. The existing door has four panels and sits within an ensemble with two sidelights, a transom, and a pair of plain pilasters. Much of this appears to be visible in the tax photo and may represent original material. The proposal shows a flush door and has notes about replacing glazing. We are concerned that the proposed work doesn't reflect the preservation of materials and attention to detail that this possibly historic entrance deserves.

Approved, 10-0, but top floor rear windows to maintain height of lintels, except for a single door.

Approximate time: 11:15; join Zoom by: 10:15.

LPC-24-05444 -- 233 Wyckoff Street - Boerum Hill Historic District Extension, Brooklyn

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

Almost every rear yard addition on this block is one story. We think the proposed addition should remain at only one story. However, if two levels of addition are deemed acceptable, they should align. The first-floor addition should be pulled back to the depth of the second-floor addition. The stepped plan proposed is atypical and too disruptive to the character of the interior block.

The roof may require protective railings because of the new HVAC equipment. Railings are not shown in the presentation.

Finally, at the front façade, we oppose covering the historic red brick basement with brownstone stucco. There is no historic, architectural, or preservation justification for doing this.

No action: retain brick on front basement façade; reduce height of addition; consider retaining historic brick at top floor.

Approximate time: 11:45; join Zoom by: 10:45.

LPC-24-04607 -- 487 Henry Street - Cobble Hill Historic District, Brooklyn

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

We find the proposed rooftop addition will be too visible from the very large opening on DeGraw Street. This will be no fleeting glimpse!

We also think the fenestration pattern and window divisions at the rear façade need some additional thought. The fenestration at the addition seems to miniaturize the historic windows at the top floor.

Approved 10-0, with modifications: restudy proportions of fenestrations of top floor of the addition; proportions and detailing of brick spandrel between basement and parlor floors; and review color of stucco of rooftop addition to make it less noticeable.

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

LPC-24-04640 -- 28 Prospect Park West - Park Slope Historic District, Brooklyn

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

The Victorian Society strenuously opposes this application. The driveway and curb cut will be on Montgomery Place, a unique block built in a short span from 1887-1892 in an impressive variety of late 19th century architectural styles. Frances Morrone notes that it's one of the City's "most celebrated blocks." The AIA Guide calls it "one of the truly great blocks in the world of urbane row housing...a symphony of materials and textures." Robert A.M. Stern says it's "one of the period's great urban ensembles."

There are no driveways or garages on this block. They exist elsewhere in the historic district but are not characteristic of it. Like the six examples shown in the presentation, all appear to pre-date designation.

The creation of a driveway and curb cut essentially privatizes the public sidewalk and curb space. Such a change is not appropriate in a dense, 19th century historic district of rowhouses. Beyond this general concern about the takeover of public space are more specific findings: that visible gardens of this type are a significant feature of corner houses and contribute to their historic character and that of the district; that paving over this very visible garden and storing a vehicle in it will destroy its character as a garden; that a sloped driveway at the sidewalk will not be visually compatible or harmonious with this block or this historic district; that the work will destroy an intact section of bluestone curb; and that no doubt yellow paint and private no parking signs will soon intrude into the streetscape.

The owners of this house have one of the finest in the neighborhood on one of the best blocks in the city, across the street from one of the greatest works of landscape architecture in America. The applicant will be protected in perpetuity from inappropriate alterations to these neighboring historic resources by the city and their owners. The applicants should not be permitted to diminish the public's experience of this street and district.

Approved, 10-0, but maximize planting space in rear; retain bluestone curb "if feasible." (CB 6 recommended denial.)

Lunch

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

LPC-22-07889 -- 459 West Broadway - SoHo-Cast Iron Historic District, Manhattan

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

The proposed master plan appears to comply with the rules for such painted wall signs in the SoHo Cast-Iron and similar historic districts. We have no objection in principle to approval.

However, we raise the issue of graphic appropriateness. Some of the possible signs shown in the presentation are examples of photorealism. The craftsmanship to achieve this with hand-painted signs is remarkable, but we find this type of image to be stylistically alien to this historic district. These signs are more akin to modern printed or LED signs seen on highway billboards. They are nothing like the signs found historically in SoHo.

To be clear, the issue is not content, which the Commission rightly doesn't regulate. The issue is graphic style. Although the two can be related, we think it's possible to avoid this type of photorealistic sign without unduly limiting content. Historic painted signs have an identifiable character. It's possible to describe their characteristics to allow creation of signs that are historically appropriate to the district and that do not appear to be an incursion from I-95.

We urge the Commission on this and future applications to restrict the use of photorealistic signs as being incompatible with and inappropriate to the historic district.

Approved 10-0.

Approximate time: 3:15; join Zoom by: 2:15.

LPC-24-06416 -- 828-850 Madison Avenue - Upper East Side Historic District, Manhattan

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

This building is a perfect example of the benefits of a master plan. It's a building that calls for a consistent storefront treatment, and the master plan has achieved that. This proposal would violate the plan and destroy the unity of the building's base for no discernable functional reason. It should be denied.

Approved 7-2 (Chapin, Goldblum).

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

LPC-24-06148 -- 1295 Madison Avenue - Expanded Carnegie Hill Historic District, Manhattan

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

The signs have two problems. First, the two large signs extend beyond the masonry openings, interrupting the rhythm of stone piers. The sign on 92nd Street is especially egregious. Second, the sign boxes are applied over glazed transoms, never an appropriate approach. Less damaging would be to place the sign behind the transom glass, or to back paint the glass directly.

This proposed legalization should be denied.

Approved 9-0, with modifications: on Madison Ave. sign moved to within window opening and on 92nd Street limiting it to window openings and aligning with transom.

Approximate time: 4:00; join Zoom by: 3:00.

LPC-23-11199 -- 38-47 Douglaston Parkway - Douglaston Historic District, Queens

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

We are limiting our testimony on this application to the failure of the owner to properly tint the concrete sidewalk to the Douglaston standard “winter beige.” One of our committee members worked extensively in the past with the Department of Transportation on standards for appropriate materials and designs for public rights of way in historic districts. The resulting standards often apply to all or most historic districts, but in some cases like Douglaston, they are specific to one district. Cobblestone curbs and gutters are other unique features of the Douglaston streetscape that are a standard for the district.

The Commissioners should be aware of the significant effort that was required to reach agreement on these historic district standards. The effort involved the Commission itself, the Public Design Commission, the Department of Transportation, Department of Design and Construction, Office of Management and Budget, individual community associations, and others. Many, if not most, of the standards are not codified in rules. It’s critical that the Landmarks Commission uphold the standards. Otherwise, there will be a tendency to return to the one-size-fits-all treatment of the past. Over time, the protection and restoration of designs and materials special to the public realm in historic districts will enhance the character of these districts; the reverse will degrade it.

We urge the Commission to deny legalization of the sidewalks as proposed in this application and require that they be replaced with correctly tinted sidewalks.

Approved 8-1 (Ginsberg) with recommendation to replace granite blocks with planting for drainage issues.