

Combined Victorian Society Testimony for March 19, 2024: 420 Amsterdam Avenue (LPC-24-03142); Prospect Park Boathouse (LPC-24-07178); 119 Pierrepont Street (LPC-24-06643); 712 Fifth Avenue (LPC-24-07069 and LPC-24-07310); 331-339 Columbus Avenue (LPC-24-04307); 19 Circle Road (LPC-24-05494)

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

LPC-24-03142 – 420 Amsterdam Avenue - Upper West Side/Central Park West Historic District, Manhattan

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.

This application seeks to legalize the replacement (without a permit) of a metal fence along the side of a circa 1891 corner building. Part of the character of rowhouse blocks on the Upper West Side is the visual richness that historic decorative railings offer to pedestrians. The essential criterion for reviewing illegal work is whether it would have been found appropriate in the first instance. We do not believe the Commission would have found appropriate the complete removal of an elaborate, historic cast- and wrought-iron fence for the purpose of installing trash containers. The remedy, therefore, must be replication of the original ironwork.

There are examples of extant articulated railings with 1890s motifs in the surrounding blocks, which the applicant could use as a model for a replacement railing system. Some of these appear to be exact duplicates of the removed fence.

Thank you, commissioners.

Approved 10-0, with modifications: that the new fence be replaced with a fence matching or recalling the historic fence that was removed.

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

LPC-24-07178 -- Prospect Park - Scenic Landmark, Brooklyn

Good morning commissioners, _____ for the Victorian Society New York. The Prospect Park lake shore has been abused and neglected for more than 100 years. The overall proposal for restoration is laudable. The most welcome and important part of the proposal is the restoration of the soft, naturalistic lake edge.

The historic shoreline originally had many islands, inlets, small hooks, and peninsulas. The proposed restorations go in the right direction. But we encourage a bolder approach to the restoration of the shoreline's complex, historic form. This is a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity.

Here are some details from the various phases that we think can be improved.

Wood boardwalks are something that might be found in a modern-day nature preserve. They should be eliminated, except where used as the walking surface for rustic bridges.

The small, wood bridges *are* typical rustic features of the park. But we think it would be more appropriate to replace missing original rustic structures instead of building new ones.

Re-introducing planted medians to the drive where they existed originally is a great, restorative idea. It can help separate the pedestrians, cyclists, and occasional vehicles that jointly use the drive. But these medians should be planted with large canopy trees, as they were originally, not smaller ornamentals.

Olmsted parks are known for their innovative design for the separation of traffic. Each user--pedestrians, equestrians, and vehicles--had its own separate and distinct system of walks, bridle trails, and drives. In a few locations, pedestrian paths are shown to merge with the bridle path and drive. As a practical matter, these intersections may be required. But the distinct design details of these three types of circulation should be maintained.

Well House Drive isn't an original feature, so there's some flexibility in its redesign. But the design should be based on historic precedents. We fear that the proposed design will look like either an over scaled pedestrian walk or an undersized vehicular drive.

Finally, this large project is an opportunity to revisit some standard details that are inappropriate to the historic park. These include concrete curbs, black asphalt pavement, modern bottle fill stations, and the recently installed, obtrusive Parks Dept. signs. These signs have quickly become magnets for graffiti, as we predicted. Now that vehicle use is mainly prohibited, the drives and their edges can be redesigned to restore their rustic character.

Approved 9-0, with recommendation that the 19th century stone retaining wall at Well House Drive be retained.

lunch

Approximate time: 1:00; join Zoom by: 12:00

LPC-24-06643 – 119 Pierrepont Street – Brooklyn Heights Historic District, Brooklyn

Good afternoon commissioners, _____ for the Victorian Society New York. The Victorian Society supports this proposal to replace the brownstone spires at the First Unitarian Congregational Church with a substitute material. The applicant has provided photographs which show that the exposed stone spires at this 1844 building have been repaired many times; that when these earlier repairs were made a substantial proportion of the original stone was replaced with cementitious material; that the composite spires now in place have numerous areas which are cracked or broken; that sections of the decorative carvings which originally extended the full height of each spire have been lost; and that the installation of the replacement spires will bring the building closer to its original appearance.

Also contributing to our recommendation for approval are the spires' great distance from the ground, the inability to come in contact with the material, and the poor durability of natural brownstone with this kind of exposure.

Approved 7-0.

Approximate time: 1:45; join Zoom by: 12:45

LPC-24-07069 and LPC-24-07310 -- 712 Fifth Avenue (aka 712-716 Fifth Avenue) - Rizzoli and Former Coty Buildings - Individual Landmarks, Manhattan

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

As best as we can determine, the building by Beyer Blinder Belle at 716 Fifth Avenue is not a designated building and is not on a landmark site. Nonetheless, its design was carefully reviewed and approved by the Commission as part of a special permit. This permit allowed construction of the tower that incorporates portions of the original lot of 716 and the lots of the individual landmarks at 712 and 714 Fifth Avenue, the Coty and Rizzoli Buildings. We believe that the design of 716 is therefore inextricably and irrevocably tied to the existence of the tower.

That tie doesn't mean that changes to the façade of no. 716 can't be made. It does mean, however, that any proposed change must conform to the findings the Commission made in 1985 and 1987. And the Commission couldn't have been more clear in its findings. It found that the new building "retains the scale and massing of the two adjacent landmark buildings" and that "the design of 716 Fifth Avenue...[was] found to further the perception of 712, 714 and 716 Fifth Avenue as separate, discrete structures."

The proposed new façade for 716 does exactly the opposite of what the Commission approved. It subsumes no. 716 into no. 718 at the corner. By mimicking elements of the corner building's façade and taking away its own entrance, 716 now appears as part of the corner building, or an addition to it, rather than a separate building. It also weakens one of the great urban characteristics of this block of Fifth Avenue: a group of rowhouse-scale buildings repurposed and redesigned for commerce in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. This vestige of old Fifth Avenue has become even more scarce and precious since the 1980s. For these reasons, we find the proposal to be inappropriate and urge the Commission not to approve it.

We close by expressing our disappointment that a purveyor of fine and beautiful objects appears to have so little regard for a beautiful work by important architects. Even though relatively new, No. 716 contributes much to the historic character of Fifth Avenue. It shouldn't be sacrificed to what amounts to a branding exercise.

No action. Restudy ground and/or upper floors to help retain distinction from corner building.

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

LPC-24-04307 -- 331-339 Columbus Avenue (aka 60 West 76th Street) - Upper West Side/Central Park West Historic District, Manhattan

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

The proposed storefronts require some revisions before we can recommend approval. Of the six bays along Columbus Avenue, the applicant is proposing to install what are in effect glass and metal roll-up garage doors in three of them. Drawings should be provided that show what the building will look like when the three doors are open. This type of infill has no historic precedent for storefronts in buildings of this age and type. There are more appropriate ways to design storefronts that can be partially opened in mild weather. We also note that there are low bulkheads at each door, the details of which remain unclear in the presentation. They are apparently fixed in place and thus won't allow safe passage through the open doors.

The gooseneck lighting above the sign is reasonable. But at the other bays it lights only the tops of the black awnings. These lights should be eliminated, and consideration given to providing lights under the awnings, which will undoubtedly be desired but aren't shown.

Finally, some sizes and positions of storefront elements should be adjusted. At around 4 feet high, the space between the historic masonry frieze and the storefront window is too tall. We suggest putting the awning just below the sign band rather than below the louvers. This will help the proportions and also obscure the louvers. And for those bays without the sign, perhaps the well-made, scrolling ironwork, though we assume it isn't historic, should remain exposed in front of the white painted wood band.

Approved with modifications 6-0, with final finishes to be reviewed by staff to maintain a contrast of new storefronts with historic piers, that material for bulkhead be reconsidered for something more durable, and that the white sign bands be enclosed in frames.

Approximate time: 3:00; join Zoom by: 2:00

LPC-24-05494 - 19 Circle Road - Douglaston Historic District, Queens

Good afternoon commissioners, _____ for the Victorian Society New York. The Victorian Society finds the description of this proposal, legalization of the installation of a retaining wall, to be incomplete. Other work that appears to have been done without permits includes removal of a mature tree protected under the Douglas Manor Deed Restrictions, in place since 1906, and the Douglaston Master Plan, in place since 1997; enlargement of a parking area; removal of a historic retaining wall; and installation of a wood fence. The work is destroying what was a historic, charming, and picturesque treatment of the garage entrance.

The Victorian Society recommends denial of all aspects of this proposal.

The Master Plan for this garden suburb regulates “mature” trees, defined as any tree “with a trunk diameter of 12” or greater.” It then states that “A mature tree may be removed because such tree is dead or seriously diseased, or where such tree is causing, or threatening to cause, significant damage to a building” but “In such a case, the application shall include a report from a certified arborist regarding the health of the tree.”

The designation report notes that 19 Circle Road has “mature trees.” The tree in question is visible on the left of the driveway in the 1997 designation photo we’ve attached. It appeared to have several trunks rising from a single base that was at least close to 12 inches 25 years ago. By 2023 it must have grown larger. Legalization of this removal must be denied: a new tree, as large as possible, should be replanted in the original location.

Before the new tree can be planted, the retaining wall must be rebuilt as it was at designation, returning the driveway that serves the existing two-car garage to its original width.

The new wood fence should be moved back to a less visible position, to restore the prominence of the porch and entrance terraces. The presentation calls for adding gutters and leaders cutting across the striking brick terrace retaining wall. But the illustration of these white gutters and leaders that was in an earlier version of the presentation has been removed. Is this part of the proposal, or not? If it is, it should not be approved.

And finally, we note that a terra-cotta street name sign, indicating the property is within the Douglaston Historic District, is right outside this house, just a few feet from where the illegal work is occurring.

Laid over to a future hearing.

