



c/o Village Alliance
8 East 8th Street
New York, NY 10003
(212) 886-3742

www.vicsocny.org

Combined Victorian Society Testimony for April 16, 2024: 712 Fifth Avenue (aka 712-716 Fifth Avenue) (LPC 24-07069 and 24-07310); City Hall Park Bicycle Repair Shop and Charging Station (LPC-24-06401)

Public Meeting Items 4 and 5, April 16, 2024

LPC-24-07069 and LPC-24-07310-- 712 Fifth Avenue (aka 712-716 Fifth Avenue) - Rizzoli and Former Coty Building - Individual Landmark Manhattan

This resubmission is like a child’s brain teaser: can you find what’s different about the two proposals? After several commissioners at the hearing would not approve the application, the applicants were given the direction to restudy the ground and upper floors to help retain 716 Fifth Avenue’s distinction from the corner building. Instead, the applicant has returned with a design that is the same, except for a single, almost imperceptible, change.

We view this as a cynical attempt by the applicant to get a “do-over” review of essentially the same proposal. We hope the commissioners do not succumb to this ploy.

At the hearing, in trying to persuade the commissioners, the LPC counsel stated that the previous Commission’s findings, in 1986 and 87, were “broad and general” in nature regarding the design of 716. We submit that a reading of the plain words of the Commission’s permits reveals the exact opposite. The findings were quite specific 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.” These findings made sense then, they made sense three weeks ago, and they make sense now.

We urge the Commission to once again reject this proposal.

Our testimony from March 19, 2024, is below.

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.

Approved 8-0 after minor—virtually imperceptible—changes to the design originally presented.

LPC-24-06401 - City Hall Park - Individual Landmark - Manhattan – April 16, 2024

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

The Victorian Society supports the installation of the three Small Hoop bicycle racks that are a secondary part of this application. They are not the sort of electrified racks which serve as recharging stations for electric-powered “Citibikes.” They have a small footprint, are finished in a dull metal, and will be quite unobtrusive. We believe they won’t noticeably affect City Hall or the Park.

Regarding the proposed demolition and new structure, the application makes no mention of two important facts. One is that the proposed kiosk is also within the African Burial Ground and the Commons Historic District. As the designation report makes clear, this historic district fully protects above ground features, as well as those below. Second is that the park underwent a curb-to-curb reconstruction in 1999. That work restored a number of missing historic features and added some new features in traditional styles. The historic park today encompasses the neo-Classic City Hall and perimeter fence, the eclectic Victorian Tweed Courthouse and Calvert Vaux fountain, the Classical Revival lampposts and subway entrances, and historic landscape features from several eras. The result is a harmonious whole.

The Victorian Society does not support the proposal to demolish the existing newsstand and construct the proposed bicycle repair shop and charging station. The newsstand pavilion is a modestly scaled, well detailed, Classically inspired feature that fits this setting. It reflects extant historic features such as the BMT subway entrances, lampposts, and fountain; the now lost IRT entrances; and the newer Classically inspired security booths, subway elevator, and reconstructed fence. It’s typical of other such features in historic parks and in similar settings in the city. Its harmonious relationship to the rest of the park’s features and the surrounding traditional buildings, many of which are designated, makes it unobtrusive and draws no attention away from City Hall.

The proposed repair shop is the antithesis of the existing structure. The large windows, cantilevered roof, rounded corners, illuminated signage, and LED strip lighting demand attention. It has no relationship to or respect for the park’s design or for a building which the Designation Report describes as “the most beautiful city hall in the United States.” It strikes a false note in its setting.

We also believe a legitimate concern is the reduction of public sidewalk space caused by the larger building and its sloped apron. It’s also likely that this type of activity will spill out beyond the structure’s footprint.

We urge the Commission to deny the construction of the proposed structure and adaptively reuse or sensitively modify the existing kiosk.

Approved 8-1 (Goldblum) with modifications: work with staff to reduce front of roof screen and explore lowering height overall and increasing transparency.