

Victorian Society Testimony for August 6, 2024: 115 Fifth Avenue (aka 881-887 Broadway) (LPC-24-10084); 253 West 125th Street - Apollo Theater (LPC-24-10008); 1197 Clove Road - John King Vanderbilt House (LPC-21-05596); 64 and 66 Horatio Street (LPC-24-02924)

LPC-24-10084 -- 115 Fifth Avenue (aka 881-887 Broadway) - Ladies' Mile Historic District, Manhattan

Update to our public hearing testimony of July 16, 2024

We're pleased that the lighted Aritzia sign on Fifth Avenue has been reduced in size as we previously suggested; that there are now two of them instead of one is unfortunate.

We're also happy that the number of proposed full-window LED signs has been reduced by one, but that still leaves two greatly oversized signs, which will be on 24 hours a day.

Most importantly, the proposal still calls for displacing the American flag over the Fifth Avenue sidewalk with an advertising flag. The commissioners asked for documentation of examples of other advertising flags on Fifth Avenue approved by LPC; this hasn't been provided. In any event we continue to urge the Commission not to allow new advertising flags over this great public, civic space. It should be reserved for American flags or occasionally for flags promoting civic events.

Our previous testimony follows:

This application includes what are essentially two components. The first consists of signage including flagpoles, vinyl signs on display windows, and illuminated signs above the main entrances on Fifth Avenue and on East 19th Street.

We are troubled by the proposal to push the American flag to a secondary position on the façade and add a new flagpole for Aritzia in the primary, centered position. We saw a similar proposal by the same company earlier this year at the Goelet Building on Fifth Avenue. Of all streets, Fifth Avenue is the one that has historically been most often characterized as a celebratory civic space. The areas over the sidewalks are, in fact, public spaces. The street has traditionally been lined with American flags, as immortalized in the paintings of Childe Hassam. We urge that proprietary advertising flags not be approved for Fifth Avenue, period.

Regarding other signs, we support the vinyl signage, which appears modestly scaled and easily reversible. But we question the design and installation of the two internally illuminated signs above the main entrances. The applicant is proposing 2 feet 2 inch tall individual letters on the Fifth Avenue sign, and 1 foot 1 inch tall letters on 19th Street. We believe the smaller size is appropriate in both locations and would help unify these facades.

We also note a more serious problem with the proposed supports for the sign facing Fifth Avenue. The installation detail, on Drawing 11, is for a sign which is to be attached to a concrete wall. The designation report states that the Fifth Avenue façade is cast iron. This must be corrected.

The proposal also calls for the installation of interior partitions and digital screens. We don't actually understand why the proposed interior partitions are under review. In the late 19th century, when Arnold Constable built and occupied this building, department stores often had display windows with solid rear walls.

However, we recommend denial of the installation of the proposed LED signs. We find both the size of these signs, 15 feet 10 inches tall, and the applicant's proposal to leave them on 24 hours a day, seven days a week, to be excessive.

Thank you, commissioners.

Approved as modified (two smaller signs on Fifth Avenue, one fewer LED screen) 7-2 (Lutfe, Goldblum)

LPC-24-10008 -- 253 West 125th Street - Apollo Theater - Individual and Interior Landmark, Manhattan

Update to our public hearing testimony of June 18, 2024

We wish to comment again on the proposed replacement of the historic Apollo neon signs with LED signs. While the consensus of the commissioners at the public hearing was to approve this change, no vote was taken. We urge the commissioners to rethink this position. There is simply no good reason to change neon signs that are historically connected to the Apollo and similar theater buildings. Neon is not a difficult-to-obtain, exotic product. Though they are disappearing, many historic neon signs remain, and other owners are able to keep them operating consistently.

A recent National Trust for Historic Preservation “saving places” publication (<https://savingplaces.org/stories/six-places-where-you-can-bask-in-the-glow-of-historic-neon-signs>) discusses historic neon signage and mentions the Apollo Theater as one of two excellent examples of remaining historic neon in New York City, the other being the Nathan’s Famous sign in Coney Island. How embarrassing it would be to report that New York City’s preservation agency approved the destruction of an example of historic neon called out to the nation by the National Trust.

Our original testimony follows:

It appears to us that few if any historic features and finishes remain in the lobby. The changes proposed will restore some missing features, such as the pilasters, wall paneling, and coved ceilings. This is appropriate as far as it goes. We wish it went further.

There are three major changes proposed to the lobby that should be revised. The large opening proposed into the adjacent, non-designated space will significantly and inappropriately affect and dilute the room’s historic form and integrity. Installation of piers dividing this opening into sections would mitigate the change and would help maintain the historic rhythm of wall divisions formed by the recreated pilasters.

The abstract terrazzo floor pattern doesn’t relate to the architecture of the lobby and seems to fight against it. It has no discernable historic significance or relevance to the theater. It should be revised to support the proposed and historic designs of the lobby and theater.

The large, LED ring lights proposed for the ceiling have become a cliché. Surely something more fitting can be found for this historic space.

Now to the exterior Apollo sign lighting. First, there must be no confusion. There is no such thing as “LED neon.” There is LED lighting and there is neon lighting. They *are* different and they *look* different. Nothing matches the glow of neon. Neon is a historic but still available technology. Neon is historic to this location and is especially important historically to theaters and their marquees. The making of neon signs requires craftsmanship. The Commission should care about and encourage the retention of historic technologies and traditional craftsmanship and use of historic materials. It would be a tragedy to destroy the essence of these historic signs by converting them to plastic LED strip lights.

Approved 8-0 as modified (floor design, light fixtures, doors, wall and ceiling trim), with further modifications including a plan for protection of auditorium plasterwork, installation details for fabric panels, final layout of HVAC diffusers in auditorium.

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

LPC-21-05596 -- 1197 Clove Road - John King Vanderbilt House Individual Landmark, Staten Island

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

In our view, the main issue here is the appalling condition of the individual landmark. This must be addressed first and foremost in any discussion of the appropriateness of building houses on the landmark site and reducing by more than half the designated open space around the individual landmark. The presentation materials include one small drawing implying restoration of the landmark. But notes like “railing system to be verified,” “round wood columns,” and “vinyl cedar shakes” do not inspire confidence in the applicant’s intent. The details of the three proposed new houses are not much more complete.

An ironclad mechanism to ensure the restoration and maintenance of the landmark should be in place *before* issuance of permits for the new buildings. This can take the form of requiring the restoration to be completed first. Another way is to create an escrow account held and administered by a third party such as the Landmarks Conservancy.

We also believe that the loss of so much of the landmark site warrants creation of a preservation easement and maintenance fund for the designated house.

We do not think there is much point in addressing the design of the proposed new buildings until assurances for the restoration and future maintenance and protection of the landmark are in place. We recommend, however, that any new buildings be set back on the lots so that their street facades don’t project beyond the facades of the Vanderbilt House. Doing so will help retain site lines to the landmark.

No action; new buildings design and site design including screen plantings and driveway location to be reconsidered.

Approximate time: 1:30; join Zoom by: 1:00

LPC-24-02924 -- 64 and 66 Horatio Street - Greenwich Village Historic District, Manhattan

Good afternoon 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 questions several aspects of this unusual project. Starting with the big picture, we're concerned about the applicant's decision to remove all of the interior partitions and chimney breasts in both buildings, and all the floors at #66. These are the supports which have preserved these buildings for 180 years. We fear this demolition will endanger both them and the other three houses in this row. We must repeat our belief that allowing applicants to go forward with projects which gut so much of the structure of historic buildings is stepping away from the Commission's mandate to "preserve."

The proposed rooftop additions appear to be minimally visible and will often be seen in context with taller buildings. However, we don't know why the elevator proposed for #66 has no override. This should be clarified.

The exterior changes to the front façade of #64 seem minimal, but we couldn't find any notes on the drawings stating that the existing historic front door and ironwork are to remain. This should also be clarified.

Finally, we find the ground floor changes the applicant is proposing for #66 to be overly "genteel." We believe that the history of retail use at this building goes back much farther than shown in the historic photos provided by the applicant. The Greenwich Village Designation Report states that the original builder of this row of houses, Abraham Demarest, sold #66 to "Henry E. Clark, a grocer whose living quarters were above his store." The proposed design inappropriately erases the history of this 1845 residence-above-store building. This is a significant building type from this period and illustrates the way retail establishments were integrated into rowhouse developments.

We recommend that the ground floor on both the front and side facade retain the historic features indicative of this early use. On the Horatio Street façade this would include a larger and taller storefront window. This will moderate the overly wide expanse of wall between the ground and second floors. On Greenwich Street, the varied door and window openings should remain to reflect the historic building configuration.

We also recommend the use of a strong stringcourse to cap the brownstone cladding at both ground floor façades. It should have the weight and stepped profiles of the window surrounds on the upper floors.

Finally, is the corner column at the storefront cast iron, wood, solid masonry, or stucco? It's depicted in various ways in the renderings. The material should be identified so that if it's a historic feature, proper restoration can be undertaken.

Thank you, commissioners.

No action; retain configuration of ground floor storefront and existing window levels; less intervention.