

Combined Victorian Society Testimony for July 16, 2024: 176 Remsen Street (aka 172-178 Remsen) - Brooklyn Union Gas Company Building - Individual Landmark (LPC-24-10800); 81-11 Roosevelt Avenue (LPC-24-09220); 402 West Broadway (LPC-24-09280); 436 West 20th Street (LPC-24-05901); 210 East 62nd Street (LPC-19-21568); 115 Fifth Avenue (aka 881-887 Broadway)(LPC-24-10084); 119 Fifth Avenue (LPC-24-08557)

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

LPC-24-10800 -- 176 Remsen Street (aka 172-178 Remsen) - Brooklyn Union Gas Company Building - Individual Landmark, Brooklyn

Good morning commissioners, _____ speaking 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 proposal for work at this individual landmark includes many changes to the building. But before we discuss those, we need to bring up some underlying assumptions about the neighboring buildings that the presentation doesn't address.

The street view on Board 2 shows this building flanked by a pair of new, taller buildings. This is just a rendering, a wish list. The street views on Boards 33, 34 and 35 show what's actually in place, and a mock-up of the proposed rooftop addition. The mock-up is fully visible. And unless those two taller buildings are actually built, the rooftop addition the applicant is proposing will also be fully visible.

For many years the Commission would not issue permits for additions based on the possible construction of a building which might eventually block views of the addition on the landmark. So, as there's no sign of construction activity at either of these sites, no "steel rising out of the ground," the proposal must be evaluated based on its visibility with the existing lower flanking buildings in place.

Concerning the other proposed work, the VSNY supports the proposed alterations at the rear façade and courtyard, and the gate installation, restoration of the revolving doors, and related modifications to the main entrance facing Remsen Street. We also support the installation of signs at the ground floor facing Remsen, using one existing bracket and one recreated bracket. We also can support infill of a portion of one of the sunken areaways to improve barrier-free access.

However, we do not support the complete infill of both sunken areaways. These are an original building feature, designed by Frank Freeman, and should be maintained.

We do not support removal of rectangular limestone panels in the parapet above the 9th floor to install horizontal windows, shown on Board 21. These would be clearly visible from the park in front of Borough Hall, as shown on Board 20 where you can see the steps of Borough Hall in the photo taken from atop the cornice, adjacent to the parapet, and in the photo on the left side of Board 33 where those masonry panels are visible.

Finally, even if the two new flanking buildings shown in the rendering on Board 2 are constructed, the proposed addition would still be visible across Remsen Street, as shown on board 3. The addition's height must be reduced so it is not visible from the street.

Approved 9-0. (Note that the flanking buildings are an integral part of the project and all will be built together. Approval of the rooftop addition is contingent on the construction of the adjacent buildings.)

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

LPC-24-09220 - 81-11 Roosevelt Avenue - Jackson Heights Historic District – Queens – July 16, 2024

Good morning commissioners, _____ for the Victorian Society New York. The Modern Classical style bank building at 81-11 Roosevelt Avenue, built in 1922-24, would normally be outside the focus of the Victorian Society. We're testifying today because of the broader issue of approving work done in violation. This is of particular importance when the removed feature was significant and the proposed work, if approved, would prevent any future restoration. The glass and metal vestibule stood at the corner entrance of this bank until 2002 or 2003. It has been gone a long time, but it is not forgotten.

This vestibule is partially visible in the tax photo shown on Board LPC-004. A better image is attached to our written testimony. The black metal framing and anthemions are clearly visible, and were substantially intact when John Graham, a VSNY Board member, was a Commission staff member in the Preservation Department. As such, he was part of the discussion when the Enforcement Department issued Notice of Violation V-03-0303 for the "Removal of vestibule enclosure without permit(s)."

We believe that additional photographs of the vestibule were in the files of the Enforcement Department when the violation was issued. There may also be useful photos in the applications for work at this building filed between designation and 2003. We urge the Commission to retrieve and review all available files before taking action.

Finally, we'll note that this building's architects, Fellheimer and Wagner, designed the designated Art Deco style landmarks at 57 West 86th Street and 103 West 72nd Street; that early in his career Mr. Fellheimer was the lead architect in Reed and Stem's partnership with Warren and Wetmore to design Grand Central Terminal; that they designed many railroad stations across the US, including the spectacular Art Deco-style station in Cincinnati, and that their papers are preserved at the Avery Architectural Library.

Approved 8-0, but applicant to work with staff to restore and not replace remaining pair of historic bronze doors and design new doors to match.

See tax photo on following page.



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

**LPC-24-09280 -- 402 West Broadway - SoHo-Cast Iron Historic District Extension,
Manhattan**

Good afternoon, _____ for the Victorian Society New York.

We do not believe a white storefront is appropriate on a building of this style and material. The Commission once maintained a chart of historically appropriate colors for SoHo buildings, based on its own research. Color does make a difference, and the starkness of the white storefront proposed does not work with the rest of the building. It also seems impractical to paint the stairs and platform white.

The proposed signs are individually modest and well scaled, but there are so many of them! We think a reduction by about half the number would result in an appropriate design.

Approved 8-1 (Chapin), but steps and platform to be darker color.

lunch

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

LPC-24-05901 -- 436 West 20th Street - Chelsea Historic District, Manhattan

Good afternoon, _____ for the Victorian Society New York.

We do not find that a good case has been made for the complete reconstruction of this 1835 façade. The only significant external damage we see has been the recent removal of face bricks by the applicant. The settling that's visible likely occurred a long time ago. If there is a question about stability, its severity and extent should be confirmed by a preservation-oriented architect or engineer before being used as a reason to destroy the entire façade. Smaller sections of the façade that require intervention and reconstruction can be rebuilt as needed. If the entire façade is removed it's unlikely to be reconstructed with the fine brickwork it has today.

We are also concerned that the extensive interior work at the building may be a cause of any recent issues with the front façade. If that's the case, it will be especially important to minimize the amount of reconstruction of the historic façade to the greatest extent possible.

No action, not persuaded this extent of work is required; find an expert specialist to consult; preserve as much historic fabric as possible; if successful, can be resolved by staff.

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

LPC-19-21568 -- 210 East 62nd Street - Treadwell Farm Historic District, Manhattan

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

Because of the unusual history of this building, we ask the Commission to limit all changes approved today to work which will bring the building into a sound condition, protect the stability of the adjacent buildings, and restore the street façade. Only after those steps are taken should the Commission agree to review additional changes to the building. This is a perfectly tenable position because, the owner has an obligation under the law to properly maintain the building, and LPC has the ability to enforce that requirement.

No action; make substantial revisions and return as quickly as possible.

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

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.

No action; reduce number and/or size of LED panels; don't span column with sign on Fifth Avenue; look at further precedents for flagpoles on Fifth Ave.

August 6, 2024: Approved as modified (two smaller signs on Fifth Avenue, one fewer LED screen) 7-2 (Lutfe, Goldblum, who thought LED panels should be smaller)

Approximate time: 4:30; join Zoom by: 3:30

LPC-24-08557 -- 119 Fifth Avenue - Ladies' Mile Historic District, Manhattan

Good afternoon, _____ for the Victorian Society New York.

We're not sure what the issues are based on this presentation. There is longstanding historic precedent for placement of partitions behind storefront windows and blocking views to the inside of the store. In fact, for some types of stores, like department stores, there is never visibility into the store, and vitrines are almost universal. Appropriateness is determined by what's within these vitrines. Signs directly on the glass need to be minimal, and any sign needs to be restricted in size. The signs proposed here are too big.

LED panels are especially problematic. They're unlike any historic sign, and their brightness, motion, and graphics can easily overwhelm the storefront, building, and street. More insidiously, they're a poor substitute for creative and artistic window displays that depend on style rather than bright lights and quick motions to catch the eye.

Approved 7-0, with requirement to increase views into store.