

Victorian Society Testimony for August 13, 2024: 125 Chambers Street, aka 95 West Broadway (LPC-25-00396); 51 Barrow Street (LPC-24-09981); 857 Fifth Avenue (LPC-24-03833)

Approximate time: 10:10; join Zoom by: 9:30

LPC-25-00396 --125 Chambers Street, aka 95 West Broadway - Tribeca South 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.

The Victorian Society supports the proposed painted wall signs and light fixtures on the secondary, north-facing façade of 125 Chambers Street. There is a long history of painted wall signs on 19th and early 20th century buildings, and they were often seen on the side facades of hotels. The work will not damage or conceal any important architectural features. It's easily reversible. The proposed light fixtures are small and painting them to match the wall will minimize their visibility.

But we have a couple of questions. First, the rendering makes it look like there will be light fixtures at the base of the sign as well as above, but there aren't any notes explaining this. We can imagine that they're to be placed out of sight on the roof of the two story building north of 125 Chambers, but this should be clarified.

Second, we couldn't find notes stating that there will be no exposed conduit to provide power to the two light fixtures to be installed above the sign. Notes should be added to the drawings stating this.

Thank you, commissioners.

Approved 8-0 (no exposed conduit; no uplights at bottom of sign)

Approximate time: 10:30; join Zoom by: 9:30

LPC-24-09981 -- 51 Barrow Street - Greenwich Village Historic District, Manhattan

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

The Victorian Society supports most of the changes the applicant is proposing for this very early, very small rowhouse. Because the building is set between two taller structures it seems that the proposed rooftop addition, essentially a stair bulkhead and mechanical equipment, will not be seen from any public way. Because the rear cornice on the wood-clad rear façade appears to have been boxed out in a previous alteration, raising the rear façade will not destroy any significant architectural features. Given the amount of deterioration visible in the photographs the applicant has provided, the reconstruction of the previously altered rear façade seems appropriate.

However, we do not support the formal symmetrical design of the rear façade.

Commissioners, the Greenwich Village Designation Report states that 51 Barrow is part of a row of speculative houses built between 1826 and 1828. It describes them as “seven attractive, though modest, houses of the late Federal period.” It goes on to say that the original tenants included two carpenters, a mason, and a stonecutter, “all of whom may have played a part in the construction of these houses.” These were workmen’s cottages.

The rear facades of many of the neighboring houses have an informal quality and retain smaller, punched window openings. We believe that the generic, formal design proposed for 51, as presented, is not in keeping with the overall character of this block, nor does it reflect the very early period of this house. We urge review of the proposed floor plans to find ways to break down this formal symmetry.

We also do not support the use of brick cladding on this façade. The original construction was timber framing with brick infill, faced with wood clapboards and later wood shingles. This is a significant feature, denoting the early date and modest character of the house. A new rear façade should reflect this history in its design and materials.

Laid over. See Sept. 17, 2024.

Approximate time: 12:10; join Zoom by: 11:10

LPC-24-03833 -- 857 Fifth Avenue - Upper East Side Historic District, Manhattan

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

We comment on this proposal for a Modernist building for the same reason we did so last month for a similar application. In that case the proposal was to replace the original rose granite base at 69 West 9th Street with gray granite. We argued that the design integrity of the building, and of all buildings, should be respected and that the original choice of granite material and color was deliberate. The commissioners had mixed views on this. The applicant was willing to consider retaining the original color stone, but the Commission approved the proposal as presented.

Here at 857 Fifth Avenue, we needn't speculate on the architect's intent. We have it in his own words, in a New York Times interview conducted by Christopher Gray in 2000. We thank our colleagues at HDC for finding this. The architect, Robert Bien, was happy to have a client interested in the design, and he was given a freer hand and budget. He created a building that's anything but the plain white brick standard of the era. It has bays, insets, and a series of wavy, undulating piers. "Let's liven it up," Mr. Bien said at the time.

This livening up included the use of color, something the architect was interested in. Thus, the use of a red granite base and the original complementary pink color of the undulating piers. We urge that the red granite remain and be repaired or replaced in kind, and that the owner be encouraged to repaint the piers in their original pink color.

To conclude, it's our position that buildings even of this date deserve to have their architectural integrity respected. We preserve for the distant future as well as for today. If we continue to strip away the details that make these buildings what they are, future generations will lose the ability to understand and appreciate an important period in the history of architecture and development of our city.

Approved 7-1 (Chapin). (There was much confusion about what the original cladding was at the first floor. The architect claimed some red granite was a later alteration and original cladding was limestone and/or white glazed brick.)