

Victorian Society Testimony for March 4, 2025: 39 Sidney Place (Public Meeting Item No. 1) (LPC-23-09523); 74 Hudson Street (LPC-25-04653); 535 Broadway (LPC-25-06784); 817 Washington Street (LPC-25-06717)

This item is not to be read. Submitted as written testimony only

Public Meeting Item No. 1

LPC-23-09523 -- 39 Sidney Place - Brooklyn Heights Historic District, Brooklyn

This proposed design is an improvement over the original proposal. The upper floors of the house will now retain important features of its significant early 20th century redesign. The new design, however, still proposes to eliminate the basement entrance and ground floor features and will seriously compromise the integrity of the building.

As evidenced by recent discussions, some commissioners seem to have a misconception that rowhouses with stoops should not be multi-unit dwellings and rowhouses without stoops should not be single family dwellings. The fact is, the city has thousands of rowhouses with intact stoops that have been internally divided into multiple dwellings, and it has thousands of rowhouses that were either built without stoops or have had their stoops removed that are single family dwellings. Architectural and stylistic integrity should be the determining factors on whether a stoop is or is not appropriate on a particular building.

We continue to object to the addition of a stoop on this building, which will ruin its integrity as an important example of a redesigned rowhouse from the early 20th century. Our original testimony follows.

November 29, 2024

This is one of two applications on today's hearing for reconstructing street facades in the Brooklyn Heights Historic District. This one is not appropriate; the other one is. The two proposals illustrate clearly what historic preservation is and is not.

The façade of 39 Sidney Place was raised a story and reconstructed in the early 20th century. It's a perfect example of the architecturally important reimagining of rowhouses going on in several of the city's neighborhoods that had become tired and unfashionable 50-60 years after their initial development. Features of this building that conform to this trend are the removal of the stoop and creation of a main entrance at the basement, a stucco façade, small balconettes with ironwork railings, multilight sash, and aa visible, tiled and bracketed roof. This alteration appears to be intact and must be preserved as a significant alteration reflecting an important period in the architecture and development of the city.

The proposed remodeling would create a façade that did not exist historically. It's over-scaled for its style and has neither nuance nor elegance in its details. We don't object on principle to speculative restorations when they are based on good evidence, nor to reinterpretations of historical styles. After all, the latter constitute the bulk of what we revere today as historic design. In this case, however, the proposed façade is unsuccessful in scale and detail. More importantly, the existing façade is a significant example of its type and makes an important contribution to the Brooklyn Heights Historic District. It should be left intact.

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

LPC-25-04653 -- 74 Hudson Street - Tribeca 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.

Our review committee found this application difficult to understand on several levels.

Regardless of possible limitations of zoning and easements, we find a one-story building on this prominent corner site, surrounded by six and seven story buildings, to be inappropriate. It doesn't appear that the restrictions prohibit a taller building at the front of the lot. Both the present proposal and the one previously approved would leave this corner looking like the proverbial missing tooth.

We also found the proposed design difficult. The Commission has approved many modern style buildings which we'd agree are exciting and appropriate additions to the city. On Board 18 you can see photos of some of them.

Unfortunately, these photos expose our concerns with the present design. The design defies most of what we know about how to be a good neighbor in a historic district.

If you examine the photos, you'll see that many of the precedent buildings are similar to the height of their neighbors. They create a strong street wall on the block.

You'll also see that many were designed with a discernable base and an obvious cap. A strong base establishes a building's relationship to the street. A strong cap provides a defined silhouette. The concept of base, shaft and top is a well-established design principal. Even for buildings of a Modernist style, the concept has long been used to help these buildings fit comfortably into a historic context. The design being proposed today lacks any sense of these divisions, giving it the appearance of an intermediate floor from a much taller structure. And the exaggerated scale of its features only emphasizes its "look at me, I'm different" aesthetic.

We urge the Commission to reject this proposal and have the applicant apply historic preservation design standards that result in infill buildings respectful of and harmonious with their historic district neighbors.

Approved 7-0.

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

LPC-25-06784 -- 535 Broadway - SoHo-Cast Iron Historic District, Manhattan

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

The VSNY supports the changes proposed for this ground floor storefront. The installation of the new pair of glass doors will not destroy any historic material. The new doors are entirely within the modern glass storefront and are so simply detailed they will not call undue attention to themselves. Removing the modern cladding and restoring the cast-iron column covers will bring these hidden elements back to view and enhance the streetscape.

The installation of the new sign-band will conceal the existing exposed conduit at each end, and the new storefront cornice with concealed lighting will be similar to string courses on the upper floors, helping to unify the building. The new metal letters with halo lighting seem appropriate for this busy commercial street. The bracket sign appears to meet the rules.

Thank you, commissioners.

Approved 7-0.

lunch

Approximate time: 12:45; join Zoom by: 11:45

LPC-25-06717 -- 817 Washington Street - Greenwich Village Historic District, Manhattan

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

The proposed alterations to the modern storefront infill that would convert some doors into windows and regularize the bulkheads are innocuous and appropriate. However, the proposed destruction of the historic masonry wall at the Gansevoort Street façade is not. The beautiful, corbelled brickwork, belt course made of rotated soldier bricks, brownstone trim, and small, square windows are significant historic features and are typical of the Queen Anne style. Note also the former cellar entrance with remnants of carved faces near the sidewalk. All this would be tossed out to add a few show windows to a ground floor that is already almost entirely show windows and doors. The applicant does not seem to be aware, or care, that this decorative historic masonry is nearly 140 years old. The Commission *should* care and should *not* allow the removal of any of this material.

We point out that the city recently completed a major street reconstruction project in this district. Historic streetscape elements like cobblestones, granite crosswalks, and cast-iron manhole covers for the old refrigerating company piping systems were salvaged and reinstalled. Vast amounts of additional, compatible materials were added, including granite cobblestones, curbs, and crosswalks and bishop's crook lampposts. All this was done by the city to support and strengthen the historic architectural character of the district and its sense of place. In light of that public investment, it would be a travesty to allow private owners to remove significant historic features of their buildings for what's likely to be a short-term storefront reconfiguration. There should be no compromises here; this is a definite "no."

Finally, what looks to be recent electrical conduit destructively installed on this façade should be removed and the masonry repaired. Hopefully an LPC permit was not issued for this destructive work.

No action; return with a modified design preserving some masonry.