

Victorian Society Testimony for May 6, 2025: Central Park - Scenic Landmark - Perimeter at East 103rd Street, Manhattan (LPC-25-07995); -- Governors Island, Building 19 (LPC-25-09619); 432 Lafayette Street - 432 Lafayette Street Building - Individual Landmark (LPC-25-09295); 11 Bond Street (LPC-25-07909); 1466 Broadway - The Knickerbocker Hotel - Individual Landmark (LPC-25-08773); 20 West Drive, Prospect Park (signs for Vale area) (LPC-25-08170); 956 Park Place (LPC-25-08411)

Approximate time: 10:00; join Zoom by: 9:30

Good morning commissioners, _____ for the Victorian Society New York. Olmsted and Vaux were adamant in their objection to the presence of sculpture, monuments, and memorials in Central Park. The problem the designers foresaw was this: Whether the sculpture was to commemorate a great achievement, a sorrowful loss, or an inspiring idea, the effect would be the same--to focus on the human condition. Central Park was supposed to be the opposite of this, to be all about nature and to be a place where people could forget human affairs.

The battle to keep sculpture out of the park was lost almost from the beginning. Those who steward the park today, however, need to understand the origins of this idea, because it should inform every decision about what is appropriate to Central Park, even beyond sculptures and monuments.

Regarding this proposal, the situation is mitigated because the work is largely outside the park wall. In addition, there was previously a sculpture here. We will not comment on the artistic or iconographic qualities of the proposed work. These are properly in the purview of the Public Design Commission. However, several features of the design and its materials affect the scenic landmark in problematic ways. These are well within LPC's purview.

We believe it is unprecedented to create an opening in the park wall behind a sculpture where there is not a park entrance. This increases the effects of the sculpture on the park proper and is an inappropriate meshing of the worlds outside and inside the park. The historic park wall should be restored, or a new section of wall should be designed in coordination with the sculpture.

The few metal gates that exist in the park are all at entrances. It would be unprecedented to have metalwork that resembles a gate where there is no entrance. The proposed wrought ironwork behind the sculpture detracts from the sculpture itself by its scale and fussiness. It contrasts, not in a good way, with the simplicity and solidity of the historic park wall. It also, we fear, will not compare favorably to the historic Vanderbilt Gates just a short distance away.

We believe the decorative paving treatment proposed in front of the sculpture is also unprecedented for the park perimeter. Some modifications to the design of the historic cobblestones and hex pavers can reflect the sculpture's base. However, the existing pavement materials, simple form, and continuity around the perimeter should remain largely intact, as it has been for over a century.

Approved 8-0.

Approximate time: 11:00; join Zoom by: 10:00

LPC-25-09619 -- Governors Island, Building 19 - Governors Island Historic District, Manhattan

Good morning commissioners, _____ for the Victorian Society New York. Creative re-use of 19th century buildings is the lifeblood of historic preservation. Changes need to preserve the structure's essential character while supporting new uses. Building 19 was built as a two family house in 1891. Unfortunately, if all the changes being proposed are approved, its domestic character will be lost.

We must note the extreme difficulty in understanding the full extent of the proposed changes because the presentation doesn't use the standard convention of showing existing and proposed conditions side-by-side.

The Victorian Society has no objection to the removal of the existing 20th century garage, parking pad and driveways. However, we question the following changes: The applicant is proposing construction of two ADA ramps for this small building. Building 20 was recently re-built with only one ramp. One of the ramps at Building 19 should be removed from the proposal.

The applicant is proposing to double the width of the two sets of entrance steps leading from the pedestrian path to the twin front porches. Access is also provided to these porches by ramps and stairs on each side. 12-foot-wide stairs are totally out of scale for a small 19th century house. The existing width should be maintained.

The historic photos provided by the applicant show that the porches had wood railings. The wood railings on the south porch should be retained, not eliminated.

The chain-link or metal wire fencing on the north access ramp, shown on Board 26, is alien to this building. Brick, painted wood balusters, and wood lattice are appropriate materials.

At the west elevation, the metal canopy supported by tie rods, the two large openings in the façade at the ground floor, the stone deck base, and the obtrusive attic louver that doesn't relate to the adjacent window are all false notes. This building is seen in the round. The back façade should be treated in a way historically typical of a free-standing Victorian house. The metal canopy supported by tiebacks above the west deck is especially notable for looking out of place. It has the appearance of a loading dock in Tribeca. Pergolas or retractable canvas awnings are historically typical for buildings like this and would be more in keeping with a small 19th century house. The standing seam metal roofs in place at Building 19, which appear to be the design source for this canopy, are completely different.

They are roofs over buildings, and in any event these additions are labeled “Rebuilt” on the plans and may not be historic.

Finally, we note that the Commission has approved the addition of lifts to several buildings on Governors Island. The use of a lift at Building 19 would be a less obtrusive way to provide access.

No action; revise proposed materials and designs to be more sympathetic to the historic house.

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

LPC-25-09295 -- 432 Lafayette Street - 432 Lafayette Street Building - Individual Landmark - NoHo Historic District, Manhattan

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

Last December the Commission approved a similar lift for another of the four individual landmarks that comprise this row called LaGrange Terrace. We objected to the bulky design of the lift. We also noted that these buildings have been in poor condition since their 1965 designation and that meaningful restoration should be undertaken prior to the issuance of discretionary, non-restorative permits.

Now we're seeing the same lift proposed for a second one of these buildings. This time, slices of stonework—perhaps original, but we can't tell—have to be taken off the building to make the lift fit. There is no material in this presentation that shows what the lift will look like in place, a serious flaw in a presentation to the Landmarks Commission.

As we said last time, the proposed lift is bulky and obtrusive. Other models are available that are more transparent. Some of them are able to recede below grade when not in use. A better design should be proposed.

Approved 8-0.

lunch

Approximate time: 1:30; join Zoom by: 12:30

LPC-25-07909 - 11 Bond Street - NoHo Historic District – Manhattan – May 6, 2025

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

The Victorian Society supports some of the changes proposed for this Colonial Revival style building. These include the installation of a terrace structure and mechanical equipment at the roof. The work is modestly scaled. It will be seen in conjunction with the red brick side wall of the taller building to the west. And a precedent was set by the historic rooftop addition built before the 1940 tax photo was taken.

We also support the installation of the metal inlay at the concrete thresholds of the Lafayette Street entrances, the non-illuminated blade signs, the vinyl signs applied to the glass, the halo-lit signs secured to the stringcourse above the ground floor windows, and the corporate symbol secured to the blind arch above the central entrance. These all seem modestly sized and in keeping with these commercial streets. However, we couldn't find notes about attaching the signs at mortar joints and using concealed conduit to provide power to the electrified signs. These notes must be added to the final drawings.

However, we recommend denial of the installation of interior window linear light surrounds at 32 window openings on the Lafayette Street façade. These linear lights, on floors 1 through 4, are shown in red on drawing LM-09. We also recommend denial of the installation of 8 interior transparent ticker screens with individual letters spelling out the word GYMSHARK in 8 windows on the 4th floor, shown on drawing LM-37. There aren't any dimensions shown for these letters, but they appear to be around 6 feet tall.

The Victorian Society has supported the installation of many different types of signs. These include electrified signs at 19th century storefronts reflecting the design and scale of the original painted wood signs; large wall signs on the secondary facades of buildings in industrial districts; LED signs in poster boxes at churches and theaters where they didn't detract from the historic appearance of the building; and stunning illuminated signs in keeping with the historic character of a specific neighborhood such as Times Square. The proposed window light surrounds and ticker screens don't fall into any of these categories.

They seem designed simply to create a spectacular effect without any attempt to harmonize with the building's Colonial Revival style. They are not in any way an appropriate response to this historic building or this neighborhood. They must be denied.

Approved in part (8-1): rooftop elements approved; no action on signs, which are excessive.

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

**LPC-25-08773 -- 1466 Broadway - The Knickerbocker Hotel - Individual Landmark -
Manhattan**

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

The Victorian Society is happy to support this proposal to replace specific unsound terra cotta units on these facades with a substitute material.

This excellent presentation lays out the existing conditions and the benefits of using this specific material in a clear and informative manner. The visual match for existing terra cotta seems excellent, based on the photographs. We do remain concerned about differences in appearance after weathering and about differences in appearance when the façade is wet.

It's also unclear to us how the proposed work will resolve the underlying problems described in the conditions assessment on the first slide. How will the work minimize continued deterioration of the remaining historic terra cotta?

Despite these misgivings, and our usual preference for in-kind replacement, we recommend approval and hope the Commission will keep this material on hand to show other applicants.

Approved 8-0.

Approximate time: 3:15; join Zoom by: 2:15

LPC-25-08170 -- 20 West Drive, Prospect Park - Scenic Landmark, Brooklyn

Good afternoon commissioners, _____ for the Victorian Society New York. Two aspects of this proposal were not made clear in the presentation. Is the proposal to set a standard for signs across the park or is it only for the Vale? And will it replace the Parks Department standard signs the Commission reviewed a few months ago (and didn't like)? Or will the two styles remain in disharmonious juxtaposition with each other?

The proposal appears to have been developed by an expert in wayfinding with no understanding of historic landscapes, especially naturalistic Olmstedian landscapes. Many inappropriate things that must be rethought.

First, there are too many signs. Every time an object like this is put in the landscape, it chips away at the park's purpose of imitating nature and spiritually removing the visitor from the outside world. That's why the original park signs were rustic or picturesque, to blend with the landscape. The Alliance has unaccountably not included any views of historic signs in their presentation, so we have attached some to our written testimony. Rustic signs could be reproduced today using durable materials.

Second is placement. As our pictures show, signs were placed parallel to paths, so they would not call attention to themselves. The mockup images show that the applicant has done exactly the opposite. In Olmsted parks the visitor is meant to walk along a path, drawn towards landscape views of varying types and degrees of mystery. It's absolutely wrong to have landscape vistas disrupted by colorful signs.

It's true that for some, destinations are more important than casual wandering, and that's why discrete directional pointers are acceptable. These are already used in the park. And everyone has a cellphone capable of providing directions.

Third, the large banners on streetlights are inappropriate. These lampposts are necessary modern intrusions. It's wrong to call attention to them with banners. The result is suited to a business improvement district, not a historic park.

Our last point concerns the sign at the new Flatbush Avenue entrance. The existing cast-iron park entrance signs were designed in 1992 in a collaboration between LPC and the Alliance. They exist at every major entrance. Despite minimal maintenance they remain in good condition and will outlast any other signs in the park. The obvious thing to do at this new park entrance is to reproduce the successful design used at every other entrance. That is the only appropriate design for this location.

The Commission should require a resubmission, rather than shrugging and saying “We’re only advisory” and sending the proposal off to the Design Commission. PDC has neither the expertise nor the mandate to review work in scenic landmarks based on standards of historic appropriateness. Effective regulation of scenic landmarks is LPC’s job.

Approved 8-0.



Drinking Fountain, Prospect Park.

Note how the large rustic sign blends with the naturalistic landscape. Also note that it is parallel to the path, minimizing its effect on views as visitors move through the landscape. Such signs could be recreated using durable cast materials.



Two historic signs are seen here, one in the left foreground and one in the center, being read by the man on the bicycle. Again, note that the design and placement minimize disruption of views and naturalistic landscape.

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

LPC-25-08411 -- 956 Park Place - Crown Heights North Historic District II – Brooklyn

Good afternoon commissioners, _____ for the Victorian Society New York. When we began our review, we were disappointed to find the presentation lacked basic information concerning the recent reconstruction of the bay window the applicant now proposes to remove. But we were interested to see it did include part of a 1908 Sanborn Map which shows rear-facing bay windows at 956 and five of its immediate neighbors. And we noted that there were three identical rear-facing bay windows visible in the photos of houses facing Sterling Place on the other side of the rear donut. We then wondered why there are so many identical bay windows on this block.

So we looked at the Crown Heights II Designation Report. It turns out that every house on this block--a total of 37--facing Park Place, Sterling Place, and Brooklyn Avenue, were built by architect Axel Hedman for Charles Reynolds between 1897 and 1903. It appears that 19 of the Hedman-Reynolds houses on the block retain their historic bay windows.

We believe that the rear-facing bay windows constitute a significant defining feature of this block. They must be retained. Although this bay was recently reconstructed, it apparently retains its historic cornice, window openings, details and footprint. We strongly recommend this proposal to remove the bay window and extend the rear ell be denied.

Laid over.