



CITY OF NEW YORK

MANHATTAN COMMUNITY BOARD FOUR

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October 3, 2010

Hon. Robert B Tierney
Chair
Landmark Preservation Commission
Municipal Building, 9th floor
One Centre Street
New York, NY 10007

**Re: Former R. G. Williams Warehouse
West Chelsea Historic District**

Dear Chair Tierney:

Community Board 4 Manhattan is writing about the application by Avenues New York to modify the former R.G. Williams Warehouse at 259 Tenth Avenue in the West Chelsea Historic District for use as a school. The proposal, although it in most regards restores and respects the building, includes some minor changes at the base as well as a very visible rooftop addition that would not be appropriate to the building and the Historic District. The application materials presented to the Landmarks Committee also lacked sufficient details for a close evaluation of many aspects. The board notes that a 74-711 action would be necessary for this application to be fully accepted.

This fine, monumental poured-in-place concrete warehouse building designed by Cass Gilbert is located at 259 Tenth Avenue, on the west side of the avenue between 25th and 26th Streets, and forms as it were the entrance to the West Chelsea Historic District. With its triple windows and strong massing it bears a considerable resemblance to the now well-known Austin Nichols Warehouse in Williamsburg by the same architect. The reason that this building is not better known, beside its somewhat remote location, may be that it has been more or less consistently dismissed by the AIA Guide, seemingly partly out of taste and probably also out of confusion with another building nearby that was at one time under the same ownership.

The proposal is to adapt this extraordinary warehouse to the use of "Avenues, the World School." The exterior changes are limited mainly to the entrances and the roof. The Board believes that most of the proposed changes at the base appear to be appropriate in principle, although the materials shown to the Landmarks Committee lacked detail. At the ground floor the present infill wall of the original row of truck loading docks in the center of the façade along Tenth Avenue will be removed so as to recreate the original voids and create a kind of "colonnade" with a recessed entrance. The largely glass entrance façade to be erected where the loading platforms ended on the inside will reflect the original condition and once more make at least partially visible some of the mushroom columns distinctive to such warehouses that dominate the interior spaces. Small changes

are also to be made at other street front locations, most importantly to accommodate a younger children's school on 26th Street. The High Line platform at the rear of the third floor—the building was built in anticipation of the High Line—will be surrounded with a glass fence, while adapted existing overhead doors will fill the doorways to the interior, allowing access to the platform and to the view. They will not provide access to the High Line itself, however, since there are to be no private entrances to the High Line.

The Board regrets that it saw no real details of these alterations—at most such phrases as “window to match existing,” and “glass storefront beyond.” In general they appear appropriate, but we believe careful attention must be paid to maintain as far as possible the original symmetries, strength, and simplicity of details and surfaces. A handsome doorway surviving on Tenth Avenue from the last remodeling is just visible from the exterior, and we have been assured that it will be salvaged and if possible reused within the building.

We are glad that the proposal for a glass canopy to be installed over the existing concrete canopy has been given up along the Tenth Avenue and 25th Street façades. We believe that the canopy should be restudied on the 26th Street side as well, where it was described as useful for sheltering the pre-schoolers that enter the building at this location. Since the proposed canopy extends only a foot farther out than the existing canopy and is somewhat fussy in design, we believe that if a canopy is actually required at this point, it should, to be appropriate, be both more functional and more sympathetic to the building. We note further that there is no indication of signage.

The major concern of the Board is the upward enlargement of the northern part of the building to accommodate the double floor height required by a gymnasium to be located immediately below. The enlargement will cover almost the entire roof of the northern portion of the roof except for 10 feet at the eastern edge and 15 feet at the north end.

The height of the building wall is listed as 131' 11" and the height of the gymnasium roof is 143' 10". (We were assured orally that the rooftop row of trees indicated on the materials provided us would not be planted.) While there are existing obstructions on the roof, some of them quite considerable, they are, except for two small stair bulkheads, set well back from the avenue and the side streets and especially from the north end. They are thus only visible from a considerable distance, where their effect on the view of the building silhouette and mass is much diminished.

Based on the materials presented and a site visit, the large mass of the addition on the north roof would be significantly visible from even as close by as the northeast corner of Tenth Avenue and 26th Street. The impact on the views from farther north on the avenue, and especially the future canonical views from the High Line, would diminish severely the effect of the monumental, clean-cut form of this building, which is emphasized by its strong but plain ornament, and which forms its glory. There will be a similar but considerably lesser effect from some other angles, where views are more broken up.

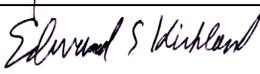
We regret that no mockup had been installed at the time of our review.

We have been informed that efforts are underway to reduce the present structures on the roof, and we urge that some way be found of eliminating or at least significantly reducing this effect—perhaps by relocating or reconfiguring the gym—so that what could be a promising way of reusing this important building can be reconciled with the integrity of the building and the historic district. For example, must the height of the entire gym be determined by the need of a 20-odd feet ceiling for basketball, or could the height be lower near the north end of the facility, and the gym achieve full height only near the existing addition in the center of the building?

The zoning height limit of 125 feet set on this section of Tenth Avenue in the recent and complex West Chelsea Rezoning was carefully negotiated to protect the character of this section of the Historic District and the area nearby. The Board finds it hard to believe that the results of breaking this limit through the Section 74-711 action

required to make the addition legal as proposed would be fully compatible with the preservation purpose that is essential for such action.

Sincerely,

		
John Weiss <i>Chair</i> Manhattan Community Board 4	Edward S. Kirkland Co-Chair Landmarks Committee	John D. Lamb Co-Chair Landmarks Committee

To: Landmarks Commission

Cc: Howard Zipser, Esq. (for applicant)