

December 6, 2004

Hon. Robert Tierney
Chair
Landmarks Preservation Commission
1 Center Street, 9th Floor north
New York, NY 10007

Re: Former New York Savings Bank at 81-83 Eighth Avenue

Dear Chair Tierney,

Manhattan Community Board No. 4 thanks you for the opportunity to comment on this application, which would have major effects on this individual landmark designed by the distinguished architect R. H. Robertson. The building is one of a pair of Classical banks at the western corners of 14th Street and Eighth Avenue that were designated together. The Board supports the approach of application in general, but has concerns about some aspects of it.

This structure has endured repeated alterations, some of them major, and the details are often hard to ascertain. The original design of the principal façade on Eighth Avenue showed two central columns, set on square bases located between the pilasters or antae at the corners, with expansive steps leading between them to a central doorway to the banking hall set in the solid marble wall behind the columns. In 1930 the narrowing of the sidewalk for construction of the Eighth Avenue Subway led to a thorough redesign of this façade. The steps were shortened and reduced to the width of a reconfigured doorway with an eagle holding a lantern set in the façade above it. Night-deposit boxes on wide heavy bases were placed on either side of the entrance, filling in the base of the openings between the columns and antae. The insertion of three long windows in the upper part of the front wall was related to changes made to the interior lobby behind the doorway.

Over the years significant alterations affecting the interior took place in which original material was often conserved and reused in various places. The latest of these alterations was to accommodate the departing user, a carpet company, in which huge racks for rugs were installed and a large mezzanine with a projecting staircase installed in the rear of the designated banking hall as well as in the undesignated north wing.

The approach of the present application is an ingenious attempt to achieve the desirable goal of avoiding the creation of a service entrance on 14th Street listed in the original application as well as facilitating disabled access to the raised floor of the former banking hall. The façade is to be altered to create three entrances at grade with modern glazed doors: the central one leading to interior steps up to the banking hall; one on the left leading to a glass-walled elevator that serves both the main floor and the cellar, thus enabling an improved solution to the requirements of accessibility and delivery; and one on the right providing possible access to a fire stair as well as secondary access to the center entrance within the new vestibule to be created.

The Board commends the architect on conceiving this approach to the problem, given the lack of easy alternative ways to enable the proposed reuse. Removing the awkward boxes and their bases would reestablish the line of the historic front wall and free the bases of the columns, while the three entrances would strengthen the present composition by corresponding to the three windows of the 1930 alteration above them. (The program apparently prevents the removal of these windows.)

This solution also would require reconfiguration of the current entrance vestibule, which now has a makeshift unfinished feel with the only element of quality a bit of Greek-key ornament over the doorway to the banking hall that is clearly truncated from an earlier design. While we understand that this area is not included in the designation, it is part of the experience of the user and should not be neglected in the redesign. The limited space of the vestibule in this solution would make it difficult to produce the declared goal of an earlier version of this design, to recreate at this point some of the effect of the original more expansive steps.

The vestibule would still need reworking, but less extensively so, since much of the current floor level at this point would be unchanged. In any case the transition at this point would need to be carefully treated: the present openness to the interior at this point should be retained and if possible enhanced. On the inside of the banking hall the main floor front of the vestibule contains ornamental marble and is either original to the design or part of an early modification. It should be preserved. The upper part of the vestibule is not original or distinguished and might well be modified to open up this portion of the interior and ensure that light can be seen through the windows of the exterior façade.

The openness of the designated interior should clearly be maximized in order to preserve the effect of the remarkable domed space. In this respect the removal of the current huge carpet racks will be a major gain. The Board supports the removal of the current mezzanine, which was added by the carpet company, and the addition of the proposed new mezzanine. Removing the stair leading down from it into the midst of the open space is a major improvement and frees the center of the banking hall under the dome from an intrusive element. The new mezzanine is intended to be a bit lower and more transparent, and this should be an improvement. The mezzanine should occupy as little of the designated space as possible in order to maximize views of the fine interior.

This interior has undergone many modifications. The starting point for any change should always be preservation of the historic materials, such as the marble that covers both floor and walls, often in ornamental forms. The applicants are clearly concerned about the difficulties of

maintaining the marble floor in the new use. This problem needs careful thought in order to preserve the banking hall in the long run through current uses and future changes. Closing the stair leading down from the banking hall to the basement will be an improvement; the opening in the floor should be replaced in the original marble. A supply should be available from such alterations as the introduction of elevators.

The northern wing was not designated because it was an addition to the original bank and had undergone many changes. Nevertheless it cannot be treated in complete isolation from the original hall onto which it opens and on which it has a considerable visual impact. It effectively forms much of the north wall of the space. In addition, materials and forms have been shifted around between various points in the interior so widely that to alter the walls of this wing extensively is to lose handsome original fabric.

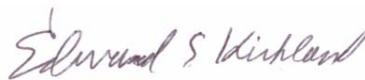
The introduction into the bank interior of structures such as elevators, display cases, and refrigerators, even if they are considered furniture, will have a major effect on the space and the floor. The taller ones should be placed where the visual impact will be as small as possible, preferably in the non-designated wing. Where possible only the weight should hold the objects to the floor, and locations should be selected to minimize penetration by service connections by providing connections above the floor where feasible and not intrusive on the space. Lighting and colors should be minimally distracting. Creating a master plan with clear guidelines would be a desirable means of ensuring these principles through the changes that are sure to occur over time.

The Board commends the architect and consultant on their expressions of respect for the building and their intentions to do right by it. We urge the Commission to continue to work with the applicant, particularly on such major issues as the main façade and the area of the entrances and the preservation of the interior during the new use. We hope that workable solutions can be found to enable a major reuse while preserving essential historic fabric and character in a complicated situation.

Sincerely,



Walter Mankoff
Chair
Manhattan Community Board No. 4



Edward S. Kirkland
Chair
Landmarks Taskforce

Cc: Elected Officials
Applicant