



CITY OF NEW YORK

MANHATTAN COMMUNITY BOARD FOUR

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Chair

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District Manager

May 18, 2009

Hon. Robert B. Tierney
Chair
Landmarks Preservation Commission
Municipal Building, ninth floor
One Center Street
New York, NY 10007

Re: 469 West 21st Street, Chelsea Historic District Extension

Dear Chair Tierney:

Manhattan Community Board 4 is writing about the proposed alterations to the row house located at 469 West 21st Street and backing on Clement Clarke Moore Park in the western portion of the Chelsea Historic District Extension. The board supports almost all features of the restoration of the façade on 21st Street, but believes that the proposed new rear façade facing the park is inappropriate in design and materials.

The Board commends the applicant for the fine restoration of the principal façade of this late Greek Revival row house, one of a group of five identical houses at the west end of the block of 21st Street between Ninth and Tenth Avenues. The restoration of the fine windows and elaborate ironwork in particular is excellent. We do question, however, the introduction of a pair of lamps on tall posts at the foot of the staircase. There appears to be no evidence that historically there were such lamps on this row, and introducing this pair will bring three different installations of similar lamps at the three easternmost houses of the otherwise identical row.

The proposed new rear façade is problematic as designed. Unlike most rear façades of row houses, the presence of Clement Clarke Moore Park ensures that the backs of most of the row are visible from the public way, although existing fences typically hide the basements and much of the parlor floors, and vegetation in the rear yards and the park partially obscures the upper floors. The rear façades of all the houses in the row except the westernmost one, which is largely hidden by the building in back of it on Tenth Avenue, are visible from the park itself, from the western end of this block of 22nd Street over the park, and from the sidewalks of Tenth Avenue nearby, especially on the west side. A few glimpses may be possible from that new viewpoint, the High Line, especially in the leafless season.

At present the basement and parlor stories of number 469, the stories which have been traditionally extended to the rear since the early days of row houses of this type, have rear extensions in a polygonal form, with a deck on the extension roof behind a heavy railing. The second and third floors are intact and largely visible behind the railing. The extension is rather similar in shape to a higher existing extension on 467, its neighbor to the east.

The proposal is to demolish the existing extension and to create a new extension, filling in the lot to the 30-foot line at the basement and parlor floors. The new second story will be set back somewhat from the rear line of the new structure below, creating a kind of balcony behind a light railing. The top story will not be extended but will be completely altered. The materials of the rear wall will be entirely different from the traditional materials of the other extensions on the row: the rear walls of all but the top story will be of large glass panes in a dark steel matrix enclosed in a white enframement. The top floor will be treated to harmonize with the floors below; the historic windows will have smaller panes in a similar steel matrix and will be somewhat lengthened downwards—the central one to form a door for access to the deck formed by the roof of the extension below—and the new rear wall at this level will also be of a plain white color.

This complete transformation of a visible historic wall is clearly inappropriate. No part of the original rear wall of the building will be preserved to recall the historic row-house character of the building, not even the top floor, which the Commission typically requires to be preserved even if it is not visible from the public way. The character of the building as seen from the rear will be completely altered, given the change in color and materials. Even the character of the park will be significantly changed, since the traditional darker materials of the other extensions, whatever the design, serve as a sympathetic background for the attractive vegetation in the park and in the rear yards of the historic row, while the new rear wall will stand out in contrast to the darker vegetation. Since the new extension will be widely visible, the character of the edge of the district seen from the northwest will change as well.

Since the lower part of the extension is hidden by the existing high fences enclosing the rear yard and there is no real “doughnut” in this area, one way of reconciling the striking design with the demands of historic preservation might be to allow a lower and shorter extension, ideally based in form on the polygonal existing extension and the one just to the east, but in any case with a treatment of the rear wall similar to the one proposed in the application. The rear walls of the top floors, the second and third, which are completely visible from the public way, should be preserved intact in accordance with current policy, perhaps with a lighter railing at the deck above the new extension both sympathetic to that proposed for the deck below and allowing better views of the upper floors. This solution might be more acceptable if the design of the upper part of the rear wall of the parlor floor, the only part of the new extension truly visible from the public way if this approach were to be adopted, were more transitional in character between the floors above and below.

Sincerely,



Jean-Daniel Noland
Chair, Manhattan Community Board 4



Edward Kirkland
Chair, Landmarks Committee

c.c.

Applicant
Sarah Carroll, Preservation Department LPC