

CITY OF NEW YORK

MANHATTAN COMMUNITY BOARD FOUR

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Chair

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October 18, 2019

Sarah Carroll, Chair
Landmarks Preservation Commission
Municipal Building, 9th floor
One Centre Street New York, NY 10007

**Re: 261 Eleventh Avenue – Terminal Warehouse Building
Certificate of Appropriateness for Proposed Renovation & Modification**

Dear Chair Carroll:

On the recommendation of its Chelsea Land Use Committee, following a duly noticed public hearing at the Committee's meeting on September 16, 2019, Manhattan Community Board 4 (CB4), at its regularly scheduled meeting on October 2, 2019, voted, by a vote of 35 in favor, 0 opposed, 1 abstaining, and 1 present but not eligible to vote, to recommend, with conditions, the approval of an application to the Landmarks Preservation Commission (LPC) for a Certificate of Appropriateness for the proposed restoration and conversion of the Terminal Warehouse building into a modern office building with ground-floor retail.

The Board's conditions, set out in detail below, are largely based on its desire to see a more accurate, historic restoration of the eastern end of the building to balance the more modern restoration of the rest of the building.

The Building

The building, bounded by Eleventh and Twelfth Avenues and West 27th and West 28th Streets, is within the West Chelsea Historic District. It was built in 1891 as 25 separate "Stores," with the odd-numbered Stores, 1 through 23, on West 27th Street and the even-numbered Stores, 2 through 26, on West 28th Street. The Stores were of non-fireproof wood and masonry construction and were uniformly seven stories in height. Following fires, Stores 3 and Stores 15-20 were rebuilt to a height of nine stories using fireproof steel and concrete construction. Store 26 was rebuilt with fireproof construction to the original seven stories.

Built to provide storage for goods transported by rail, the Stores were arranged on either side of two train tracks running the length of the building. Each Store was a self-contained storage building with its own vertical circulation. Goods could be unloaded from the central door of a railcar directly into the adjacent Store and then moved to the appropriate location within the Store. On the western end, the tracks connected to the Hudson River float bridges and thus to New Jersey and, with the completion of the transcontinental railway, to the west coast. On the eastern end the tracks connected to the New York Central System.

As traffic increased on New York's west side, trains, motor vehicles and pedestrians increasingly came into conflict. Tenth Avenue became known as "Death Avenue" and was famous for the cowboy preceding trains with a warning flag. The situation ultimately was resolved by the construction of the elevated rail line we now know as the High Line. With its tracks no longer directly connected to the NY Central System the importance of the Terminal Warehouse building declined.

Though disconnected from its railway past, the building has continued to be used for storage over the intervening years. It also has had a variety of other commercial uses including the conversion of the central train tunnel into the Tunnel night club, which on busy nights restored the unlamented high levels of traffic congestion.

Description of the Proposal

The applicant proposes to convert the complex into a modern office building with ground-floor retail and food and beverage uses while restoring the building and many of its historic features.

- The exterior will be repaired and restored, including repair of damaged masonry and the removal of the fire escapes that have long dominated the exterior. The variously multi-pane, arched windows will be replaced with fixed single pane windows, most with shutters. Windows that have been converted to non-arched rectangular windows will remain rectangular and will not have shutters but will be fitted with single, fixed panes. The entry arches on either end of the tunnel will be restored and modernized.
- A mid-block entry to the tunnel will be created on West 27th Street in Stores 9, 11 and 13.
- An open-air courtyard designed to bring light and air to the center of the building will be created in Stores 11-14; the tunnel will run through the courtyard and will remain enclosed. The timber removed for the creation of the courtyard and from newly-created double height spaces will be reused elsewhere in the building.
- The building's loading docks will be consolidated on the western end of West 28th Street.
- A one-story glass and steel penthouse will be added to Store 3. A four- and six-story glass and steel addition will be built on the west end over Stores 15-26. Both of these additions will relocate floor area from the courtyard and from newly-created double height spaces.

Analysis and Recommendations

The Board welcomes and generally supports the applicant's plan to restore the Terminal Warehouse building and convert it into a modern office and retail building. The applicant points out that the building was built as a machine for storage, not as a place for people to work. Accordingly, much of the proposal focuses on getting light to as much of the building's interior as possible. We thus support much of the current proposal. We believe, however, that the current proposal sacrifices too many of the building's historic features.

The proposal would remove any trace of historic window types and add several stories of modern construction above its western end. It also would demolish a substantial amount of the complex's timber-framed original fabric. While not strictly an LPC concern, we are pleased that the preservation of the building's timber is important to the applicant who has pledged to use removed timber elsewhere in the building. We note that a dendrochronologist retained by the applicant determined that the samples studied came from trees grown in northern Georgia and Alabama and date from as early as 1512, which predates Shakespeare by a half century.

In 2012 we reviewed and approved a carefully reasoned window-replacement master plan for the complex which selectively preserved both original fenestration types and historic changes to them over its history. This plan reflected the consideration typically accorded historic windows in the restoration of any landmark. Terminal Warehouse's description in the 2008 Designation Report for the West Chelsea Historic District is comprised of several pages primarily documenting, Store by Store, the complex's many windows.

Members of CB4's Chelsea Land Use Committee studied the Designation Report while visually inspecting the structure. The great majority of the windows are "special windows" as defined by the LPC Rules, which include in this category "operable true arch-headed double-hung" windows—the complex's most common type, originally approaching 400 in number. Reflecting their particular sensitivity, the Rules state that replacements for special windows can be approved by LPC staff only if they match the original or historic windows in terms of details, operation, configuration and finish. To do otherwise requires a public hearing. We cannot recommend approval to replace all windows with fixed single panes of glass designed not to look like traditional windows at all, erasing all physical record of a landmark's original appearance.

Differences between the warehouse's east and west ends, both existing and proposed, suggest a solution: conservatively preserving the complex's east end and taking a more relaxed, forward-looking approach at the west end. While the following recommendations exceed what LPC usually calls for, particularly regarding reintroduction of long-absent elements, the proposal before us exceeds what is usually requested by an applicant. We hope our recommendations guide the applicant to electively reshape the proposal in a way that respects preservation principles while vitally adapting the Terminal Warehouse to its modern context. In this we are encouraged by the applicant's clear passion for the property's history and the choice of a thoughtful and imaginative architect.

- **An Accurate, Historic Restoration of the Eastern End**

The Board recommends an accurate, historic restoration of Stores 1 and 2, and preferably of Stores 3 and 4 as well, including the restoration of their original window configurations. The Eleventh Avenue elevation addresses the entire city from a position at its edge. As such, it was historically the complex's public face. Compared with the west façade, it has greater symmetry befitting this role, a more centered train entrance better recalling a castle portal, and deeper windows more strongly emphasizing wall thickness and solidity. This façade's greater prominence is reflected in the surviving, elaborate mounts for the complex's original, heraldry-evoking pennant. The formerly taller corner parapets simulated a castle's turrets, an effect heightened by the staggered windows below them that suggest stairs ascending to their tops. The original architect's choice of a fortress image made a virtue of the sparse windows required by the structure's storage function while advertising secure storage and leavening utilitarian construction with architectural fantasy.

The windows are a critical element of this façade. The applicant argues that since the panes are deeply recessed it is the shutters that give the windows character. We disagree. Over its life the building has seen a variety of window configurations, many of which remain in place today. The uniformity achieved by pairing shutters with aggressively modern, single-pane windows throughout much of the building might be dramatic, but it would come at the expense of legibility of the complex's age and history.

Stores 1 and 2 have full-arch windows on Eleventh Avenue and on both West 27th and West 28th Streets, while Stores to the west, including Stores 3 and 4, largely have segmented-arch windows. Windows in some of the other Stores have been converted from arched to rectangular. We recommend that LPC require the restoration of the full arch windows in Stores 1 and 2 to their original 10-over-10, double-hung configuration with 10-light arched transoms. We recommend that LPC require restoration of the segmented arch windows in Stores 3 and 4 to their original configuration as well.

While Store 3 was rebuilt with new window types in 1910-11, Store 4 has its original upper-floor openings and some of its original windows. Store 4 is representative of the majority of the complex's Stores. Originally, all of the warehouse's side-street Stores shared its design vocabulary and window type. Given the very limited elements composing the facades of these stores, their dense 15-over-15 window divisions were all the more impactful. Their pronounced, fine texture had a specific relationship to the scale and materiality of surrounding shutters and brickwork; much of the warehouse's architectural character resides in the effect of this combination. Historically accurate window replacement in Stores 1-4 would encapsulate the warehouse's appearance when it drew Lewis Mumford's eye in 1931; his *New Yorker* piece of that year on the Starrett-Lehigh Building took time to comment on the "admirable old warehouse" across 27th Street.

As viewed from Eleventh Avenue, restored windows at Stores 1-4 would also give much the appearance that the entire complex had historic windows, an illusion aided by the deep window reveals on the side streets which conceal glazing from oblique views. We note that replacing the windows of Stores 5 and 6 to their original types as well would quite thoroughly ensure this effect. Ground-floor openings on the side streets throughout the complex have been altered from their original arched form, which can be seen in historic photos to have produced a dramatic

arcade. Restoring these at some of the eastern stores would similarly contribute to a historically accurate view from Eleventh Avenue

- **Restoration of the Eleventh Avenue Corner Parapets**

Historic photos show high parapets simulating corner towers on the north and south corners of the Eleventh Avenue façade. The applicant says the parapets were in place for only the first ten years of the building's existence and does not plan to restore them. We would like to see the parapets restored. The complex was designed at a time when New York architects routinely modeled new buildings on medieval or Renaissance precedents. The high corner parapets had arched-corbel brackets based on a defensive feature of medieval fortifications called machicolation; it is perhaps most familiarly seen in Florence's Palazzo Vecchio and Sienna's Palazzo Pubblico, above both of which rise flaring towers evoked by the Terminal Warehouse's original smokestack near Eleventh Avenue. Similar but less pronounced machicolation is retained on the surviving central parapet of this façade, but it has largely been lost on the west façade. Reintroducing the high corner parapets over Eleventh Avenue would return the castle form that makes sense of this and other contributing features which now seem merely arbitrary. It would also restore the main façade's original picturesque roofline and sense of vertical culmination.

The applicant has told the Board that the restored parapets would be outside the currently permitted zoning envelope. We note, however, that the applicant's presentation shows that an appreciable portion of the building's top is existing non-compliant construction. We also note that an application to the Department of City Planning is currently being developed for a text amendment to the NYC Zoning Resolution that would expand the Special West Chelsea District to include the Terminal Warehouse building and the Starrett-Lehigh building. Text permitting the parapets could easily be incorporated into the amendment.

The Board recommends that LPC request that the applicant pursue the appropriate modifications to the pending text amendment and, when permitted, restore the eastern parapets. The result would be a more attractive and a more accurate historic restoration of the Eleventh Avenue façade.

In contrast, the west end of the building is both more altered and originally less carefully composed. Restoring the high parapets at the west façade would compromise the design of its proposed overbuild.

- **Windows and Shutters**

The applicant plans to install fixed single pane windows in all windows. Many of these arched windows will be outfitted with shutters in the original style. Shutters will be fixed in one of three positions: flat against the building, at a 5° angle from the building and at a 10° angle from the building. We believe that the proposed windows are consistent with the repurposing of the building and that the non-uniform shutter configurations will reduce an otherwise stark

homogeneity. We recommend approval of the proposed windows and shutters, following the required public hearing, except in Stores 1-4, as discussed above.

- **West 27th Street Mid-Block Entrance**

The proposed West 27th Street mid-block entrance is designed to enliven the street and provide a connection to the Starrett-Lehigh building to the south. We recommend approval.

- **West 28th Street Loading Docks**

With the conversion of the building from storage facility to office building, fewer loading docks will be required, thus reducing disruption of traffic by trucks maneuvering in the cross streets. The Starrett-Lehigh loading docks on West 26th Street create a significant problem for the community because of heavy vehicle and pedestrian traffic on the street. West 28th Street is expected to have much less traffic than West 26th Street. We believe that the consolidation of the building's loading docks to the west end of West 28th Street where truck traffic can be more carefully monitored and controlled is beneficial to the community. We recommend approval.

- **Store 3 Penthouse**

The applicant proposes the addition of a one-story, glass and steel penthouse on top of the nine-story Store 3. Because Store 3 is already two stories higher than the rest of the eastern end of the building the proposed penthouse will be readily visible from the street, especially from West 27th Street east of Eleventh Avenue. As discussed in detail above, we would prefer that the eastern end of the building be restored as closely as possible to its historic appearance, in contrast to the modern addition proposed for the western end. Consistent with our desire for an accurate, historic restoration of the east end of the building, we recommend that the penthouse on Store 3 be denied. If LPC wishes to approve the penthouse, we recommend approval only with the condition that the Eleventh Avenue parapets be restored in order to partially block the view of the penthouse addition.

- **Western Addition**

The applicant proposes a glass and steel addition to the western end of the building on Stores 15-26, immediately west of the proposed courtyard. While we generally approve of the design of the proposed addition, which incorporates both size and color cues from New York Central railcars and the underlying stores, we have some concerns about its size. The addition would rise to approximately 153 feet, four stories (approximately 42 feet) over the nine-story height of Stores 15-20 and six stories (approximately 65 feet) over the seven-story height of Stores 21-26. The adjacent Starrett-Lehigh building is 147 feet at its western end.

The applicant's 124 slide presentation goes to considerable length to establish that the proposed addition is dwarfed by the planned buildings on the Western Rail Yards and on Block 675 (Eleventh to Twelfth Avenues, West 29th to West 30th Streets), and that the westernmost Block 675 building (which is on indefinite hold because its site is being used for the construction of the new trans-Hudson tunnels) will block views of the addition from the High Line. While both of

these assertions may eventually be true, the addition would increase the height of the existing building by approximately 75% and will be clearly visible from the West Side Highway and from Hudson River Park irrespective of any buildings on the Western Rail Yards or Block 675.

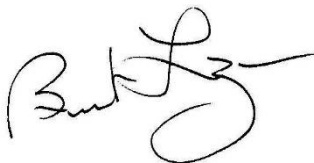
We are concerned that even with a 25 foot setback from Twelfth Avenue the addition would dominate and diminish the Starrett-Lehigh building and block dramatic views of it from vantages to the northwest within the Hudson River Park. However, the owners of the Starrett-Lehigh building are strongly in favor of the Terminal Warehouse renovation plan and believe that the design is aptly considered in the context of history and location and is thoughtful and complementary to the Starrett-Lehigh building.

We recommend approval of the western addition but request that LPC review carefully its effects on the Starrett-Lehigh building.

The Board welcomes the restoration of the Terminal Warehouse building and its conversion to a modern office and retail building, thus preserving its place as a cherished part of the community and of the West Chelsea Historic District. As discussed in detail above, we are especially interested in the conservative preservation of the east end of the building and look forward to LPC's support. In particular, we look forward to the required LPC public hearing on the proposed replacements for special windows.

We hope that the applicant will accept our recommendations as being in their best long-term interest and incorporate them into a modified application.

Sincerely,



Burt Lazarin
Chair
Manhattan Community Board 4



Lee Compton
Co-Chair
Chelsea Land Use Committee



Betty Mackintosh
Co-Chair
Chelsea Land Use Committee

cc: Hon. Corey Johnson, Speaker, City Council
Hon. Gale Brewer, Manhattan Borough President
Owners/Representatives of 261 11th Avenue