

GDPC

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Memo

To: Landmarks Preservation Commission
From: Gregory Dietrich, Principal, Gregory Dietrich Preservation Consulting
cc: Save Gansevoort LLC, Councilmember Corey Johnson, Manhattan Borough President Gale Brewer, New York State Senator Brad Hoylman, New York State Assemblymember Deborah Glick, U.S. Representative Jerrold Nadler, and Vikram Viswanathan, Sr. Advisor to the Deputy Mayor
Date: February 5, 2016
Re: Rebuttal to Project Team PowerPoint Presentation dated February 9, 2016
Proposed Gansevoort Block Redevelopment
Gansevoort Street / Block 643, Lots 43, 49 & 54
NYC-LPC Certificate of Appropriateness Application Nos. 17-6619/6620/6621

Introduction

This memorandum was completed on behalf of Save Gansevoort LLC. It is intended to provide a rebuttal to the follow-up presentation by BSKS Architects LLP and Higgins Quasebarth & Partners LLC, consultants to the applicant, Aurora Capital and William Gottlieb Real Estate, for the proposed Gansevoort Block Redevelopment.¹

In countering the public testimony in opposition to its proposal (including GDPC's letter evaluation dated November 10, 2015), the project team cites the following:

- The Commission's intent to allow for a less rigorous approach to regulating the Gansevoort Market Historic District
- The historic precedent of select building typologies that justify the design and larger scale of new buildings
- Historic redevelopment trends that justify substantial new rooftop additions; and
- Post-designation precedent for approvals that justify larger replacement buildings and additions

Summary Rebuttal

It should be noted that there is nothing contained in the Gansevoort Market Historic District designation report that indicates that it is to be regulated any differently than the other 114 historic districts and 20 district extensions in New York City. Consistent with its regulatory role in other districts of the city, the agency and its commissioners are bound to the same set of regulatory criteria

¹ It should be noted that this rebuttal is limited to the project team's PowerPoint presentation that was prepared in advance of the February 9th hearing and not the verbal presentation that was to accompany it since the latter was not available at the time this memo was drafted.

as set forth in the *New York City Landmarks Law* and the *Rules of the New York City Landmarks Preservation Commission*. Thus, any comments taken out of context at the time of designation suggesting otherwise should not be interpreted as legally justifiable under the city's landmarks law and the agency's rules.

As for the project team's assertion that the historic precedent of select building typologies, such as warehouses and larger market buildings found in other parts of the district, justifies the scale and design of new ones, or that historic redevelopment trends justify substantial new rooftop additions, these assertions ignore the "distinctive character of low-rise market buildings" constituting this block, which is a character-defining feature of this blockfront and by extension, the district-at-large.² Consequently, to replace individual buildings or substantially expand them would belie the intent of the designation, which is to preserve and protect the *authentic* experience of the district, as manifested in both purpose-built market buildings dating to the early-mid and mid twentieth century and non-market buildings that were historically modified to accommodate market uses.

Beyond its reliance on historic precedent to make its case, the project team also offers an inventory of "no-style" buildings which were subsequently demolished and replaced with larger buildings, along with market buildings which were subject to substantial rooftop additions, all under post-designation approvals by the New York City Landmarks Preservation Commission (LPC). However, a review of all of these examples indicate that they were situated on blocks that were more varied in scale than the Gansevoort Street blockfront, which remains cohesive and significant as the last intact streetscape of low-slung market buildings in New York City.

Project Team PowerPoint Slide Presentation Rebuttals

As for the individual slides contained in the project team's presentation, I offer the following rebuttals:

Slide 4: 46-74 GANSEVOORT STREET; Slide 5: SUMMARY OF EVOLUTION

Contention: Historic photograph showing mid-rise tenements on the block, thereby citing historic precedent for mid-rise buildings, and streetscape chronology showing expanded, reduced, and/or replaced buildings.

Response: Argument focuses primarily on a non-market building typology (tenements) as the precedent to revisit through new additions and new construction on the subject properties. Yet, the past modifications via replacement market buildings and/or reductions in height resulting in the streetscape that is there today, inform this block's particular significance as part of the Gansevoort Market Historic District.

Slide 6: DESIGNATION REPORT PHASES OF DEVELOPMENT

Contention: Former LPC Commissioner Meredith J. Kane's statement regarding the Commissioners' future "approach to regulation in the spirit of the growth and change of this area" as the process in which the Gansevoort Market Historic District will be regulated.

² Jay Shockley, "Gansevoort Market Historic District Designation Report," ed. Mary Beth Betts, Director of Research (New York: New York City Landmarks Preservation Commission, 2003), 4.

Response: As noted, the project team is interpreting this quote to mean that the agency and commissioners will be applying a different set of criteria to the regulation of this district. However, there is nothing contained in the designation report that allows for this divergence from the city's law and the agency's rules. Further, this quote is taken out of context and fails to acknowledge Commissioner Kane's appreciation and passion for the distinct sense of place engendered by the existing buildings. In her concluding remarks, she stated, "Yet at the same time I think recognizing that what has developed over the course of this has really been extraordinarily architecturally distinctive, a sense of place, a distinct section of the city, and something that is really well-deserving of being *carefully stewarded* from here into the future." [author's italics]³

Slides 8-10: THE GANSEVOORT MARKET, 1880-1928

Contention: Both tenements and market buildings similar in size to the subject properties' former tenements were contemporaneous with the evolution of the Gansevoort Market during the 1880s and are therefore consistent as relevant building prototypes for the proposed Gansevoort Street block redevelopment.

Response: The historic significance of the Gansevoort Street block is its association with the development of purpose-built market buildings and the conversion of non-market buildings, such as tenements, stables, workshops, into low-slung market buildings. Thus, to re-order the historical narrative of the blockfront's evolution by reintroducing these previously modified buildings will unduly compromise the character-defining features of this streetscape and the district as a whole.

Slide 11: THE GANSEVOORT MARKET, 1880-1928

Contention: This has always been an area that has been about "architectural change and flexibility" so the applicant's proposal to introduce substantial additions to existing buildings and/or to replace low-rise buildings with substantially larger buildings is consistent with the district's redevelopment over time.

Response: While "architectural change and flexibility" has been a hallmark of the district's evolution, it is the way in which it has been manifested that distinguishes this district from other commercial districts in New York City. Most notably, "change and flexibility" has been manifested in the redevelopment trend of constructing new buildings that were more diminutive in scale than their predecessors and through the reduction of existing buildings to accommodate market uses. Thus, to cite a massive complex, such as the Manhattan Refrigerating Company, as exemplary of the district's evolution belies a redevelopment pattern that makes this district both significant and anomalous within the context of other commercial districts in the city: the construction of purpose-built, low-slung market buildings and the conversion of non-market buildings into market buildings through reductions in building scale.

Slide 12: THE GANSEVOORT MARKET, 1880-1928

Contention: The conversions of larger non-market buildings into smaller market buildings were a result of economic necessity due to the Great Depression, and as such, were a victim of circumstance and not intent, thereby diminishing their significance as a historic alteration.

³ Meredith J. Kane, LPC Commissioner, Gansevoort Market Historic District designation hearing, September 9, 2003.

Response: According to *The New York City Landmarks Law*, economics is one of the five types of associations that can inform a building's significance.⁴ Further, the Great Depression, with its many manifestations of development, ranging from the construction of WPA-style buildings to the conversion of single-family dwellings into multi-family dwellings and multi-family dwellings into single-room occupancies (SROs), constitutes a significant redevelopment trend in American history. Thus, the local phenomenon of purpose-built market buildings and the conversion of larger non-market buildings into smaller market buildings due to this national economic downturn is not only a legitimate part of the district's evolution, but also a significant aspect of its history.

Slide 13: 1970s TO THE PRESENT

Contention: According to the designation report from 2003, recent alterations and new construction had not compromised the integrity of the district to such an extent that it could not convey its significance as a market district. Thus, the district can withstand future new developments without losing its "strong and integral sense of place."

Response: In contrast to this quote from the designation report, one could certainly argue that some of the developments within the district that received pre-designation approvals had undermined the district's "strong and integral sense of place" by the time of—or immediately following—designation. However, the salient point here is that designation provides regulatory oversight as a means of ensuring the appropriateness of future redevelopments, and in doing so, has the capacity to protect a district's character-defining features and distinct sense of place by preventing such non-compatible developments.

Slides 19-20: 70-74 GANSEVOORT STREET

Contention: Historic photograph showing a mid-rise tenement at this location, thereby citing historic precedent for mid-rise buildings.

Response: Argument focuses primarily on the larger scale of a non-market building type (tenement) as the precedent to revisit through new construction. Yet, the applicant proposes to replace a low-rise market building with the facsimile of an enormous factory building that bears no relation to either anything that was there before with regard to either building type or scale.

Slide 21: BUILDING TYPES IN THE GANSEVOORT MARKET HISTORIC DISTRICT

Contention: The precedent for a variety of building types (specifically store-and-loft buildings and warehouses) informing the district's historical evolution justify their introduction on the subject properties.

Response: The historic precedent of store-and-loft buildings and warehouses in other parts of the district does not justify the replacement and/or expansion of market buildings on the subject properties since the existing buildings are a significant aspect of the district's evolution and were designated as such. Further, the prospect of re-writing history through alternate building typologies

⁴ The other four types of associations are architectural, cultural, political, and social.

that never existed in this location belies the intent of the landmarks law, which is to preserve the authentic experience of place through district designation.

Slide 22: MARKET BUILDINGS HISTORIC DISTRICT: 2 TO 5 STORIES

Contention: The precedent for larger market buildings on one of the subject properties (46-48 Gansevoort Street) and elsewhere in the district justifies the redevelopment of other buildings on the subject properties.

Response: In contrast to 46-48 Gansevoort Street, which is a legitimate component of the Gansevoort Street block's evolution, the other examples found elsewhere in the district are not. Thus, to offer them as prototypes for potential redevelopment of the subject properties is to undermine the "strong and integral sense of place" engendered by the existing block of low-slung market buildings that merit protection.

Slide 23: LPC-APPROVED DEMOLITION OF "NO-STYLE" BUILDINGS

Contention: LPC's prior approvals to demolish and replace "no-style" buildings in the district justifies the demolition and replacement of the western section of 46-50 Gansevoort Street and 70-74 Gansevoort Street.

Response: All of the "no-style" buildings in the project team's presentation were in locations where at least one building on the block was significantly taller than the "no-style" buildings targeted for replacement. Thus, a compelling argument could have been made that the scale of the buildings that were to replace the "no-style" buildings were contextual with those taller buildings. It bears noting that this is not the case on the Gansevoort Street block.

Further, 46-50 Gansevoort Street was not identified as a "no-style" building in the designation report, but instead "clad with no-style covering" on its western section; hence, this is a misrepresentation of the building's designation. Moreover, the designation report highlights Gansevoort Street's "distinctive character of low-rise market buildings," and in doing so, makes the preservation of these low-rise buildings an imperative.

Slide 24: LPC-APPROVED ADDITIONS TO TWO-STORY MARKET BUILDINGS

Contention: LPC's prior approvals of substantial rooftop additions to market buildings in the district justifies the substantial rooftop addition proposed for 60-68 Gansevoort Street.

Response: Similar to the "no-style" buildings in the project team's presentation, the market buildings that the project team identifies are in locations where the adjacent buildings on the block are of varying heights that are commensurate with the scale of the rooftop additions that were approved. Thus, a compelling argument could have been made that the scale of the additions atop the market buildings were contextual. By contrast, the designation report highlights Gansevoort Street's "distinctive character of low-rise market buildings," and in doing so, makes the preservation of these low-rise buildings an imperative.