



CITY OF NEW YORK

MANHATTAN COMMUNITY BOARD FOUR

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CHRISTINE BERTHET
Chair

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District Manager

January 14, 2015

Hon. Meenakshi Srinivasan
Chair
Landmarks Preservation Commission
Municipal Building, 9th floor
One Centre Street
New York, NY 10007

**Re: Application for Townhouse Renovation, Enlargement & Penthouse Addition
353 West 20th Street, Manhattan**

Dear Chair Srinivasan:

At a regular Board meeting on January 7, 2014, Manhattan Community Board 4, by a vote of 33 in favor, 1 opposed, and 0 abstaining and 0 present but not eligible, voted to recommend, with reservations, approval of an application for alterations and additions to the mid-19th century row house at 353 West 20th in the Chelsea Historic District. This vote reflects the recommendation of the CB4 Chelsea Land Use Committee which voted on this application on December 15, 2014.

The applicant proposes to restore the part of the street façade visible from the public way to its historic appearance, add a set-back, two-story rooftop addition, modestly extend the first two stories into the rear yard, and modernize the rear building face with larger glazed openings and new cladding.

The Board is pleased that the front façade of the townhouse will be restored to its original style. Windows, doors, cornices and decorative elements will reflect the building's historical origins.

However, the Board feels that this proposal challenges the merit of the Commission's limitation of its purview to publicly visible portions of buildings in historic districts. Specifically, the proposed rooftop addition takes its shape in part from the line of sight from the opposite sidewalk, and slopes back to match its diagonal profile. What results is an otherwise arbitrary and unsympathetic building form shaped by the Commission's very definition of its own purview. This shape - which is also of unharmonious materials, color and detailing - will be visible from all the windows of neighboring buildings across the street, and even from their front steps. Viewed in orthogonal elevation, the addition overwhelms the modest brick façade below. While views of the addition from vantages

above the opposite sidewalk are technically outside the Commission's purview, they are for many a part of the experience of the street wall of the historic district, which in this case would not be improved, but worsened, for having been so literally shaped by the Commission's policy.

The applicant's claim that "precedence can be viewed at numerous buildings within the district, but most importantly with the adjacent east building, 351 West 20th Street," only highlights the drawback to this approach to preservation. The cited next-door row house has a historic pitched roof with dormers which contribute to the building's formal composition in a way fully experienced only from higher, but habitable, elevations than the public way. From these above-sidewalk viewpoints, the applicant's proposal will only create an impression of a false front and superficial historic preservation.

The Board requests that the Commission revisit and clarify its position regarding alterations within historic districts which are not visible from the public way. The Board would appreciate an opportunity to discuss this issue with the Commission, which arises often in the Board's review of historic district proposals.

CB4 recommends approval of this application except for the two-story rooftop addition which is not harmonious with the historic character of the front façade of the townhouse and other nearby townhouses.

Sincerely,



Christine Berthet
Chair



J. Lee Compton
Co-Chair
Chelsea Land Use Committee



Betty Mackintosh
Co-Chair
Chelsea Land Use Committee