

**TESTIMONY OF THE GREENWICH VILLAGE SOCIETY
FOR HISTORIC PRESERVATION
REGARDING 122 GREENWICH AVENUE
in the GREENWICH VILLAGE HISTORIC DISTRICT**

March 7, 2006

Good morning Commissioners, and thank you for the opportunity to testify before you today. My name is Andrew Berman, and I am the executive Director of the Greenwich Village Society for Historic Preservation. Since 1980, GVSHP has fought to protect the integrity of the Greenwich Village Historic District and to promote sound planning and preservation policies in our neighborhood. An extraordinary number of our members and members of the public have contacted us about their concerns about this proposed development and the design's lack of appropriate relationship to the historic district of which it will be a part. We also share that very strong concern, as well as concerns about the implications of approving this design would have upon the basic protections of the landmarks law, and therefore strongly urge you not to accept the proposed design as is.

In many ways, this may be the most important C of A application in Greenwich Village to ever come before the Commission. The proposed new building would be the largest yet built since the designation of the Greenwich Village Historic District, and as the only remaining vacant lot in the district, it will likely be the largest new building ever built. And it would not only be large, but uniquely visible, lying at the confluence of three streets, at the head of two major avenues, and across the street from historic Jackson Square. As a result of the unusual street pattern of the West Village and the series of open spaces which emanate off of streets which radiate out from this site, whatever is built here will be highly visible for blocks around ([CLICK HERE](#) for map), more than all but a few other sites in the Greenwich Village Historic district. This makes this not a transitional site between the historic district and the rest of the City, but a site with a disproportionately large visual impact upon much of the existing historic district.

We are grateful that the developer did extensive outreach in advance of the Commission and Community Board hearings, including to GVSHP. In fact, the development team and the architect have shown a great degree of thoughtfulness and have been extremely solicitous of feedback throughout the process, which is too rarely the case. As a result, the proposed design had previously been reviewed by GVSHP's Preservation Committee, composed of architects, designers, community leaders, and Village residents. Among this diverse group, consensus on C of A applications can sometimes be a challenge.

However, in this case, there was virtual unanimity – all felt that the current design is simply not right for the Greenwich Village Historic District. GVSHP has no objection in principle to a modern design at this location, and has supported applications for modern designs in this district before. However, we felt very strongly that the design ought to build upon and relate to the character of the district and its surroundings, and in the almost-entirely flush glass, undulating facade of this design, we do not see that relationship. With the individually landmarked former New York County Bank across the street, the Richard Morris Hunt-designed former library just to the east, the federal houses and the 1920's apartment buildings directly across 8th Avenue and Horatio Street, the site's surroundings are a typical Greenwich Village mix. Nevertheless, they all share common characteristics of materials, scale of facades, and solidity of form.

While the Greenwich Village Historic District may be among the city's most heterogeneous districts, there are clearly common characteristics found throughout to which we believe new designs should relate. Buildings in the district are largely solid, and much of their rhythm comes from the relationship between solid and void. In the proposed design there is virtually no solidity, and therefore little or no such relationship. Instead, this largely glass facade will glow by night and reflect by day, creating a dynamic substantially different than that which is pervasive

throughout this district. Additionally, glass buildings are largely defined visually by the placement of glass relative to its framework. This design appears to have nearly flush glass supporting an unrelenting horizontal design. By contrast, if well-proportioned glass is recessed in a framework that expresses both vertical and horizontal elements, even if the framework itself is thin, the shadow and depth created by the framework allows the building to relate to 19th century surroundings. The greater the proportion of glass in a façade, the more important this becomes.

Additionally, the unrelieved horizontality of the design concerns us. There is virtually no precedent in the district for such an insistently horizontal orientation, and we would respectfully disagree with the applicant's assertion that this mirrors the horizontality of rows of Village houses which, on the contrary, are a complex pattern of combined vertical and horizontal elements. Horizontality may make for an eye-catching design, but it will not make one which speaks to the character of the district within which it is located.

In fact, while the architecture of the Greenwich Village Historic District is incredibly varied, it is generally quite modest, with occasional punctuations of whimsy. The very bold and dramatic design before you today speaks a very different language. Anticipating occasions such as this, the 1969 designation report of the Greenwich Village Historic District said regarding new construction within the district: "The architect should take into account his surroundings, including the adjoining buildings and those across the street and along the entire block front. The new building should relate well to its neighbors in terms of the materials that are used, the architectural proportions, the size and shape of the windows and the details on the front of the building...Essentially the most successful design in an Historic District will be the simplest. The architects should avoid the use of too many different materials and the creation of bizarre effects." The report goes on to say "the Commission hopes that these new buildings will be well-designed so that they can enhance the charm of the community...progress in an historic district should mean that the best of the past is preserved and that new buildings built there will enhance those which are already there."

Regarding the district itself, the designation report states that "from the totality of Greenwich Village emanates an appearance and even more a spirit and character of Old New York...it is this collective emanation which distinguishes an historic district...and gives it a unique aesthetic and historic value...it contains the greatest concentration of early New York residential architecture to be found anywhere in the five boroughs of New York City... there is visual harmony here, achieved through the uniform rows of builder constructed town houses, the predominantly low building heights, the use of materials such as brick and brownstone..."

This would seem to clearly map out the intention of those who originally enacted the Greenwich Village Historic District to define and preserve the basic character of the designated areas of Greenwich Village. While this leaves a great deal of latitude – as it should – this new design does not appear to in any way meet that definition or to reinforce that character. The materials, elevation, and modulation of the façade all stand in dramatic contrast to its surroundings and to the character for which this district is known throughout the world and which was the clear basis for its designation.

Beyond these concerns about the main facade, we also had some strong concerns about the north wall and other portions of the rear of the building which are visible from 14th Street. While the site to the north may be developed at some point in the future, the north wall of this building as currently proposed is rather forbidding and quite prominent. And while we appreciate that this facade has been modified somewhat since earlier iterations in an attempt to address this issue, we feel it still has a way to go. Similarly, we have some concerns about the rear-facade of the building, visible from further east on 14th Street, which largely consists of the open side of the proposed building's single-loaded corridors.

We also have some concerns about the proposed design extending beyond the height allowed by the zoning. About half of the 15 additional feet proposed are to increase the building's residential floor-to-ceiling heights, which seems neither necessary nor to have an aesthetic justification that the Commission need approve. The other half is to allow a higher ground floor retail space, and while there we do recognize the aesthetic justification for the height, we are not convinced that an aesthetically appropriate configuration of the ground floor is not possible without the additional height.

We think that the overall massing of the building, following the zoning requirements for setbacks and a lower wing along Greenwich Avenue, makes a great deal of sense for the site, and we applaud the architect and developer for sticking to it. In fact, we believe that the underlying zoning requirements, combined with the unusual geometries of the site, will almost assuredly make for a distinctive and interesting building. And as an open lot adjacent to a small, underused park, there is clearly an opportunity for development to improve this location.

According to the designation report for the Greenwich Village Historic District, a small diner stood on this lot at the time of designation, which at the time the Commission claimed "detracted from the character of the Historic District" because it's choice of glaring white materials for its exterior served to "disassociate it from the brick buildings which surround it." The report went on to advise that the owner of this and other properties which did not relate well to the character of the newly enacted historic district would be "urged to recognize that a special treatment, involving compatible materials...will be most suitable for Historic Districts, **where architectural controls will be used to maintain the character of the area.**"

We urge you to use such controls to maintain the character of this district, as this case seems exactly the sort for which these powers were intended. If the original designators of this district felt that a tiny diner was so inappropriate due to the lack of appropriate relationship of its materials to its surroundings, then surely a 128-ft. tall undulating glass building should set off at least the same alarm bells. The Greenwich Village Historic district was one of the city's first and largest historic districts, and to this day remains one of the most important and recognizable historic neighborhoods anywhere in the country and the world. In fact, Greenwich Village was one of a handful of areas that the original proponents of the landmarks law envisioned as having the kind of unique character that such regulations would preserve.

So we ask you today not to judge this design solely on whether or not you think it is good architecture or even great architecture, though we hope any new development in our the historic district would be just that. But we ask you to judge it above all on the one thing it must be, and that is appropriate to the Greenwich Village Historic District. In that key respect this design clearly fails. For the sake of preserving the integrity of the Greenwich Village Historic District and of the original spirit and intention of the landmarks law, we therefore strongly urge you not to approve this proposed design. We are hopeful that with the Commission's assistance, a building which adds to rather than detracts from the Greenwich Village Historic District can be added at this site. We are confident that this thoughtful developer and highly skilled architect are more than capable of arriving at a design with the level of quality they have already displayed but which also relates more closely to the character of the Greenwich Village Historic District.

Thank you.