April 19, 2021

Members of the New York City Landmarks Preservation Commission
Municipal Building, One Centre Street, 9th floor
New York, NY 10007
via e-mail

Re: Application for Demolition of 14-16 Fifth Avenue in the Greenwich Village Historic District

Dear Chair Carroll and members of the Commission:

I write to follow up on the discussion re: the proposed demolition of 14-16 Fifth Avenue. The decision here has broad implications not just for this site, but for the Greenwich Village Historic District and historic districts throughout New York City. As an application to demolish a building constructed in 1848 by one of New York’s great builders, Henry Brevoort, and which had such a huge impact upon the development of Greenwich Village, Fifth Avenue, and New York City, this proposal warrants the highest level of scrutiny. I hope you will consider this additional information.

The debate among Commissioners about the appropriateness of allowing the demolition of this building has raised several key issues which deserve further examination and clarification:

- **Condition of the interior of the buildings.** Much has been made about the ‘dilapidated’ state of the interior of the buildings, and how such conditions support the argument for demolition. However, this is not an interior landmark, and the Commission has no jurisdiction over the interior other than as it relates to structural integrity and outward facade manifestations. For better or worse, this and all other historic districts are full of buildings with much less historic integrity on the interior than these, and more than a few in worse condition.

  In fact, the Commission routinely approves renovations which remove all interior features, issuing them certificates of no effect. And the poor condition of the interior in terms of maintenance or decay is a direct reflection of the conditions the owner has fostered and allowed to occur since emptying the building of tenants several years ago in the hopes of demolishing this landmarked building.
**Conjoining of the two original buildings into one 84 years ago.** There has been significant discussion of this fact, with some implication that this supports an allowance for demolition. The Commission should note that historic districts in this area contain literally scores of buildings which are combinations of prior buildings, including some of its most prized sites, such as the landmarked and National Register-listed New York Studio School at 8 West 8th Street, the former Hugh King Store Building at 630-632 Hudson Street, or 567 Hudson Street, home of the White Horse Tavern. Such building combinations were especially common in these rapidly changing neighborhoods in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, with older, no-longer fashionable townhouses often conjoined to share common spaces and services for multiple tenants. Other historic districts contain hundreds more such properties.

For example, just a few block east in the St. Mark’s Historic District, Nos. 109-113 East 10th Street were combined into a single building at around the same time as 14-16 Fifth Avenue, with a similar removal of architectural detail on the facade (the current balcony is not original, but a much later, simple replacement). When designating this small district, the Commission purposely included these buildings (located at the district boundary and thus easy to exclude if they had chosen to), with no indication whatsoever that the changes or alterations made these buildings less worthy pieces of the designated district. Would the Commission similarly allow demolition of those buildings?

Additionally, it must be noted that in the Greenwich Village Historic District and elsewhere, the Commission regularly approves the combining of multiple townhouses or other structures into a single building — just a few examples include 755-757 Greenwich Street/311 West 11th Street, 273-275 West 11th Street, 36-38- 40 West 10th Street, 280-282-284 West 4th Street, 85-93 Jane Street, and 138-140 West 11th Street. How can the Commission approve and find such changes “appropriate,” and also say such a combining of structures makes 14-16 Fifth Avenue no longer a contributing building to the district? Would the Commission approve subsequent applications for demolition of those formerly separate buildings, given that they have been combined into a single structure?

**The degree of loss of architectural detail makes 14-16 Fifth Avenue no longer qualify as a contributing building to the district.** Here as well it must be noted again that this district at the time of designation contained literally dozens of similarly altered buildings, as do many of our districts. Some have been restored beautifully to their original condition or something similar, such as No. 10 Fifth Avenue just to the south. Many others remain in that altered condition like 14–16 Fifth Avenue. Would the Commission allow all such similar buildings to be demolished?

It should also be noted that 14-16 Fifth Avenue actually retains more detail and indication of its townhouse roots than the applicant has let on. Current images show the building shrouded in a sidewalk shed placed around the building since the new
Examples of some of the more iconic “conjoined” buildings in the Greenwich Village Historic District: (from top l.) The New York Studio School at 8 West 8th Street; the former Hugh King Store at 630-632 Hudson Street, and 567 Hudson Street.

(Below) The conjoined former townhouses at 109, 111, and 113 East 10th Street (now 111 East 10th Street, purposely included in the small St. Marks Historic District, which has had most of its façade ornament removed, similar to 14-16 Fifth Avenue.)
Some of the many examples within the Greenwich Village Historic District of conjoined 19th century buildings stripped of ornament in the early 20th century: (clockwise from upper l.) 560-566 Hudson St., 101 Perry St., 56 Jane St., and 90 Bank St.; all but 90 Bank are former rowhouses.

(l.) 10 Fifth Avenue at the time of designation, with highly altered ground floor and façade stripped of ornament, and (r.) after restoration.
Examples within the Greenwich Village Historic District of approvals granted by the Landmarks Preservation for conjoining or combining existing buildings: (from top l.) 755-757 Greenwich Street/311 West 11th Street, 273-275 West 11th Street, 36-38- 40 West 10th Street, 280-282-284 West 4th Street, 85-93 Jane Street, and 138-140 West 11th Street
The developer/owner took possession. However, images without the shed show the still-extant articulated base, entry surround details, sills, and fenestration which directly reflect the original design. Even if the Commission were to consider this state too highly altered to merit preservation for a different, less significant structure, does this connection to what is clearly a uniquely important building in the story of the development of this district, neighborhood, thoroughfare, and our city over the last nearly 200 years not make it worthy of saving when already in a historic district?

- **There are other remnants of the period of townhouse development of lower Fifth Avenue which remain, and thus the loss of 14-16 Fifth Avenue would not be significant.** This is just factually inaccurate. 14-16 Fifth Avenue are the only surviving townhouses on lower Fifth Avenue other than the restored 10 Fifth Avenue. All of the other examples cited on Fifth Avenue in the Commission’s discussion—Nos. 57, 59, and 64—lie outside of the Greenwich Village Historic District and could be demolished at any time. In fact, the zoning for those sites encourages their demolition and replacement, which is likely to eventually happen.

  Ironically, Village Preservation has been campaigning for landmark designation of those and surrounding buildings for several years, and the Commission has consistently refused to designate them. The only other exception is the former Ira Hawley Mansion at 47 Fifth Avenue (now the Salmagundi Club), an individual landmark which actually lies outside of the Greenwich Village Historic District. More importantly, the double-wide mansion is a different typology than townhouses such as these, and while a reflection of an incredibly important stage of the development of this thoroughfare, neighborhood, and city, it is a different part of that story.

  It should however be noted that when the Salmagundi Club was landmarked in 1969, it too had been shorn of a significant amount of its façade detail, which in the intervening years has been meticulously and lovingly restored.

- **A restoration of the facade of this building would be too “Disneyland.”** We recognize that the Commission has no power to compel restoration of the facade of this building (much as it has no power over the gutting or preservation of interior details), and that decisions must be made based upon the condition the building is in. However, much has been made of the argument that even if restoration were to take place, it would be a disingenuous and therefore undesirable outcome. This seems entirely inconsistent with the Commission’s actions, and with the other element of the application before you.

  The Commission regularly approves such restorations all the time, as it did at neighboring 10 Fifth Avenue. But perhaps more relevantly, the Commission is considering allowing this building to be demolished and replaced with what could just as easily be argued is a “Disneyland” version of a pre-War 1920s Manhattan apartment building. Would building an entirely new 220-foot tall tower mimicking pre-war models be more authentic, and more appropriate, than the possibility of these buildings, which
The former Irad Hawley Mansion (now the Salmagundi Club) at 47 Fifth Avenue (l.) at the time of designation as an individual New York City landmark with ornament stripped from its façade, and after restoration.

A closer look at details remaining on the facades of 14-16 Fifth Avenue.
retain their original shape, form, and fenestration, being restored to their original condition, as so many like them have been? Or even being renovated with a more contemporary take on the original townhouses, retaining the distinctive connections to the past while reflecting the changes over time which have taken place? The “Disneyland” argument, if accepted, would seem to work equally or more so against the proposed new building than allowing the existing building to remain.

- **The variation in form of lower Fifth Avenue.** There has been much discussion about how this thoroughfare within the Greenwich Village Historic District is characterized by tall, streetwall buildings. While there are several of these, as many Commissioners have noted, the street is characterized by an “up-down” of multiple heights and building forms. Demolition of the existing buildings and the allowance of the proposed one would change that “up-down” to “up-up,” as the proposed building is about 70% taller than the average building height on lower Fifth Avenue within the Greenwich Village Historic District.

No. 14-16 Fifth Avenue, along with No. 10, are an important part of that variation, and the only two sites of surviving townhouses on the avenue within the district. That variation also manifests in the low wing of 2 Fifth Avenue at the avenue’s base, designed in response to protests about the destruction of the scale embodied by the large new main tower. It also manifests in the houses of Washington Square North east of Fifth Avenue and the 2-story structures of Washington Square Mews behind them; in 12 Fifth Avenue (1910), which is only 9 stories tall; in 29 Fifth Avenue (1920), which is only 7 stories tall; in the Church of the Ascension (1840); and in First Presbyterian Church (1841).

The applicants claim that since the passage of the 1916 zoning resolution, all new construction on this stretch of Fifth Avenue has been tall streetwall structures. Aside from the clear exceptions just cited, and both No. 2 and No. 11 Fifth Avenue, which are set back substantially from the street, it should be noted that when in 1959 First Presbyterian Church built an addition to its property facing Fifth Avenue at 12th Street (within what would become the Greenwich Village Historic District), they chose to build a modestly-scaled 5-story historicist building (nearly the exact height of 14-16 Fifth Avenue) designed by Frank Lloyd Wright-acyote Edgar Tafel.

Clearly variation in form is a hallmark of lower Fifth Avenue, and these smaller structures are an important part of that. No. 14-16 Fifth Avenue remains, along with 10 Fifth Avenue, the sole remaining vestige of the all-important townhouse phase and scale of that development.

- **No. 14-16 Fifth Avenue, as they exist in their post-1937 form, are of no significance.** Putting aside the many other arguments already made, this seems entirely inconsistent with other actions taken by the Commission, and with the history of Greenwich Village.
The “up-down” of Lower Fifth Avenue within the Greenwich Village Historic District: (from top l.) Washington Square North rowhouses and Washington Mews 2-story buildings next to 1 Fifth Avenue; 5-story wing next to 2 Fifth Avenue; 1 and 2 Fifth Avenue with their low-rise neighbors south of 8th Street; 12 Fifth Avenue (8th/9th Streets); 29 Fifth Avenue (9th/10th Streets); Church of the Ascension (10th Street); First Presbyterian Church and its 5-story 1959 addition (12th Street).
There can be no denying that the period from 1937 through the latter part of the 20th century was one of tremendous significance for Greenwich Village, when it was at the center of various artistic, literary, political, and social movements with profound reverberations. Discounting this fact flies on the face of other actions taken by the Commission recognizing the historic significance of buildings and places during this same era, and with similar characteristics.

As pointed out in our testimony, the Commission recently designated as an individual landmark a much more highly-altered rowhouse on the Upper West Side which served as the home of James Baldwin. The Commission did the right thing there. The argument here is not whether 14-16 Fifth Avenue rises to the level of the Commission designating it as an individual landmark, as it did in that case. The issue is that 14-16 Fifth Avenue is an already-designated building within a historic district, and whether its altered state, in spite of its clear historic significance, justifies demolition.

The Commission has clearly demonstrated with the Baldwin House designation and other actions that it does not believe that alteration from its original form disqualifies a building from being considered significant or contributing. While we would argue that the building is NOT so highly altered from its original state as to lose any significant connection to that incredibly important history, we would also argue that the layers of history it has acquired since 1937, during what is clearly a period of significance for the building and the district, also warrant its preservation. As per documentation submitted to the Commission (here, here, and here), this building continued to house significant figures in the fields of theater, literature, politics, and the arts during this time period — people who in many cases undertook some of their most significant accomplishments while living here, and who clearly chose this building and location due to its proximity to and setting within the center of cultural life and ferment in New York at that time.

The implications of allowing the demolition of this building at this location, and its replacement with the proposed new building, are unusually broad and far-reaching. I strongly urge the Commission to consider all of these issues and to deny the application for demolition of the building.

Sincerely,

Andrew Berman
Executive Director
Cc: Borough President Gale Brewer
    City Council Speaker Corey Johnson
    State Senator Brad Hoylman
    Assemblymember Deborah Glick
    Community Board #2, Manhattan
    Historic Districts Council