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May 7, 2019

Chair Sarah Carroll,
New York City Landmarks Preservation Commission
David N. Dinkins Municipal Building
1 Centre Street, 9th Floor North
New York, NY 10007

Dear Chair Carroll:

I write on behalf of the board of Save Chelsea in opposition to the proposal to gut 418 West 20th Street, the westernmost house in Cushman Row, and replace it with a larger building behind a preserved street face and front roof slope. The proposal claims precedent in decisions like the Commission's 2016 approval of a similar fate for the oldest house in Chelsea, 404 West 20th Street, at the other end of Cushman Row. Far from an example to be followed, that decision is one of the most decried actions taken by the Commission in recent years. It was a major factor in the appeal by Community Board 4, Save Chelsea, and other community groups to Mayor de Blasio to appoint a preservationist as chair of the Commission. We were heartened by your selection as chair and hope it will ensure better-reasoned decisions.

The proposal for 418 in fact closely parallels that of 404. The owners of both houses are professional real estate developers. As with 404, the owner of 418 proposes to create additional floor area by excavating under and behind the existing cellar, blowing out the back of the house, and projecting into the rear yard. The resulting building would substantially deviate from the scale of the original house and greatly reduce rear-yard open space, light, and air—character-defining features of the block's open core. The extensive new cellar space excavated from the rear yard would not have sufficient soil cover to support trees, and new construction above it would reduce potential for even shallow plantings. Half of the existing on-ground rear yard space would be lost, contributing to urban heat island effect. Such excessive rear intrusions have a real if unrecognized cumulative impact on the environmental health of the city. They also threaten the structural stability of nearby dwellings and inconvenience their occupants.

In 2016, the owner's architect for 404 made unsubstantiated claims that the house was structurally deteriorated beyond salvage, particularly its historically sensitive wood side wall—highlighted in the 1970 Chelsea Historic District Designation Report—which stood in the way of his plans to fill in the house's side alley. The owner's architect for 418 now claims that its back wall—so sensitive for its surviving historic fabric and completion of Cushman Row's continuous rear wall plane—has structural problems. Its preservation, while warranted, would thwart his plans to build into the back yard. If this wall is indeed compromised, its repair, not destruction is called for, as befits a landmark.

The similarity between what was approved for 404 and the current 418 proposal appears intentionally highlighted in the latter's "Existing" and "Proposed Rear Axonometric Diagrams" where 418 clearly breaks ranks with the other Cushman Row houses to mimic 404's outsized replacement house. This is a critical issue. 418 has already been enlarged under a 2006 LPC permit (COFA-07-2883) that allowed its existing rear tea porch to be extended six feet farther into the back yard, in keeping with existing Cushman Row additions. These are in the tradition of mid-nineteenth-century back porches off kitchen (basement) and parlor (first floor) levels. The permit noted that the building's scale "contributes to the special architectural and historic character of the Chelsea Historic District." It also noted that the extension's depth would increase by an amount "only slightly perceptible from the street," not exceeding the twelve-foot depth of the deepest neighboring addition in the row, that it would retain the pre-existing porch's fenestration, and "not further detract from the altered rear façade of the building or from Cushman Row." The permit also took into account that other changes to the rear façade would help restore its historic character. Nothing has changed to diminish the validity of this permit's reasoning. The still-unbuilt "precedent" of number 404 is irrelevant in lying outside the unified ensemble of Cushman Row. Worse, the approved proposal for 404 is a mistake to avoid repeating; Community Board 4's 2016 advisory letter to the Commission on the 404 proposal found it "contrary to the very purpose of historic districts" and warned of the damage it would do other landmarks by setting a dangerous precedent:

The proposal amounts to façadism, a strategy long discredited as a developer's superficial preservation compromise. . . . CB4 is concerned that the proposed demolition of the oldest house in the Chelsea Historic District will set a precedent for the gutting of other rowhouses in the District including Cushman Row, reducing the District's blocks to a false front of historic façades.

As a precedent, the approved proposal for the oldest house in Chelsea can only inspire profiteering; with the Commission's permit in hand, its owner put it back on the market for 50% more than he paid— after claiming he needed a larger home for his extended family and without even executing the approved work. For his private gain, so much of Chelsea's public legacy will be lost.

Yesterday's less wealthy rowhouse buyers could typically not afford to replace their new homes' shells or structures, but today's buyers are often deep-pocketed speculators intent on replacing everything behind the façade with the modern construction and luxury finishes that command top dollar, especially in desirable neighborhoods. To the extent that the Commission's approval of substantial added area can be counted on, fuel is added to this history-consuming fire. The Commission can greatly deter gutting of rowhouses by more conservatively protecting exteriors. According to the Chelsea Historic District Designation Report, Cushman Row is "the outstanding feature of the district." It notes that "changes in the row are so few as to constitute a miracle in ever-changing New York," and calls it "one of the most splendid and best preserved uniform rows of town houses in New York City." If the obvious good sense of the 2006 permit limiting the size of 418's addition and preserving Cushman Row's uniformity is not held to, the Commission will send a message that its standards have eroded, that even a major landmark is now fair game for façadism, and only façades are protected in historic districts.

The Commission's calendar description for this proposal reads, "Application is to . . . construct rear yard and rooftop additions." This is untrue. The application drawings clearly show, and the owner's architect has publicly stated to Community Board 4, that the project will preserve only

the façade, front roof plane and side walls, and remove everything else. The house is virtually being treated as a teardown for a larger, modern replacement. There will be no original building left to be added onto, just a façade that acts as a commemorative plaque to the authentic history that once stood behind it. A new replacement house, not an expansion or addition, is proposed. This too follows the example of the oldest house in Chelsea. No one reading the Commission's permit "to construct additions and excavate the rear yard" at 404 would ever know that it allowed demolition of the entire house except its façade and its replacement with a new building twice the size of the original. If the Commission endorses façadism, it should have the integrity to openly say so and not hide behind doublespeak.

We also ask the Commission not to merely scale back the proposed addition while allowing loss of historic fabric, as it did in the case of 404 and its clapboard side wall. Scaling back isn't preservation when just as much historic fabric is destroyed. We fully agree with Community Board 4's letter, including its call for retention of the existing front areaway and rear façade.

In implying 404 as a precedent, the owner of 418 has forced the Commission to define itself. Is it still the Commission that so betrayed the public trust in condemning 404, or the renewed, accountable one, headed by a preservationist?

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Laurence Frommer". The signature is fluid and cursive, with a long horizontal stroke at the top that extends across the width of the name.

Laurence Frommer
President
Save Chelsea

Cc: Mayor Bill de Blasio
City Council Speaker Corey Johnson
Manhattan Borough President Gale Brewer
Public Advocate Jumaane Williams
Assembly Member Richard N. Gottfried
New York State Senator Brad Hoylman
Simeon Bankoff, Executive Director, Historic Districts Council
Lynn Ellsworth, Human-Scale NYC