

CB#2 Manhattan – Landmarks Committee Amended Resolution

Item 3 - 425 Lafayette Street – Astor Library/Joseph Papp Public Theater Individual Landmark, NoHo Historic District

An Italianate style building, originally the Astor Library, designed by Alexander Saeltzer, Griffith Thomas, and Thomas Stent, and built in 1849-1881. Application is to alter the sidewalk, construct a stoop, and install signage, lighting, and rooftop mechanical equipment.

Whereas, the current Public Theater building is actually comprised of three buildings, built over a span of forty years: the first one in 1849 with a two-sided stoop; a second in the 1850s also with a stoop; the third in 1890 with a stoop, but this construction also involved removing the two original stoops; in the 1920s, the third, latter stoop was also removed; and

***Whereas**, in 1965, shortly after the creation of the LPC, the building was destined to be demolished. However LPC suggested to Joseph Papp that he buy it from the owner/developer for a theater and it would be landmarked, but in 1971 the City of New York purchased the Landmarked building from the Public Theater; and

***Whereas**, the proposal calls for a reconfiguration of the lobby in order to regain its useable full space unencumbered by the current interior steps. This will be accomplished by removing the interior steps leading from the street door to the lobby and reintroducing a stoop, (much larger than the original), 75-feet long and projecting 18 feet from the building line, on a 21 feet sidewalk described more accurately as a monumental stairway, grandly leading up to the lobby level from the sidewalk, like there is at the Metropolitan Museum of Art or the Brooklyn Museum, both buildings designed and built originally as museums with monumental entrances; and

***Whereas**, the building had a stoop originally, projecting out maybe 10 feet. The eastern side of Lafayette Place (the original name of the street until 1893, when the extension of Elm St. incorporated Lafayette St to Astor Place and the Astor Subway Station was installed in 1903) was lined with townhouses, whose stoops projected minimally beyond the building line; and

***Whereas**, the western side of Lafayette Place, where the Colonnades stand, may originally have had front gardens and fences also projecting, say, 15-feet from the building line, but their stoops were, as they are now, inset into the Colonnade Building(s).

***Whereas**, with the exception of the Colonnades the prominent buildings on this Landmarked block were built for manufacturing or commercial uses and not designed to compliment the earlier “promenade” roadbed: (See NoHo 1 Designation Report, Pgs. 17-27, http://home2.nyc.gov/html/lpc/downloads/pdf/reports/NoHo_HD.pdf.)

***Whereas**, there is no precedent for a stoop, now or in the past, of this magnitude; and

Whereas, the original, historic solid wood-paneled door has been removed, resulting in the entry door losing its importance. This application seeks to return the importance of the central building by bringing back an 11-foot high entry door in metal and glass with

divided lights to mimic the original wood panels; and

Whereas, a steel and glass canopy, an essential element of any theater, will be placed in a horizontal line with the cornice of the second floor, which should cause minimal obstruction; and

***Whereas**, generally, we do not appreciate canopies except in special situations, say the Gansevoort Historic District or certain buildings that incorporated them for specialized uses. However, the specific use of this building as a theater was part of the consideration for landmarking it in the 60s.. Furthermore, the proposed canopy 'floats' and does not detract from the building and,

***Whereas**, the application calls for several 9'9-tall poster boxes - free-standing, glass-encased, vertical boxes with posters that advertise upcoming events, another common element in New York theaters, like those in front of Lincoln Center and also in front of another Individual Landmark, Rockefeller Center. The 1890s Astor Library had signposts for a brief time in front of its then existent 10' deep stoop; and ,

***Whereas**, although poster boxes are integral to theaters, there was **additionally** concern with the 9'9" height, as well as their placement in the pedestrian pathway.

Height:

Although the poster boxes in front of the Metropolitan Opera house are 8-1/2 feet tall, as well as being very close to the building line, unlike the poster boxes proposed in this application, they are also located in front of a structure much more massive than the Public and situated within a gigantic public plaza, diminishing their obtrusiveness. The poster boxes in front of Rockefeller Center are within the building line and only three feet in height.

The application's proposal at 9'9" is far too tall. The façade windows start at six feet off the ground. Any box taller than that will obstruct view of the historic window.

Placement:

Some thought that the poster boxes should be closer to the building, but the applicant said that would interfere with the 'campers' who wait in line for free tickets to Shakespeare in the Park. But long lines only happen a brief time in a year and should not dictate the placement of accoutrements that impede pedestrian flow. DOT also will weigh in on this case of sidewalk furniture. Perhaps their placement to accommodate free-ticket seekers is a case of the cart pulling the horse. The applicant may wish to re-consider the poster boxes, and

Whereas, lighting will consist of: small up lights in the new sidewalk to highlight the edge of the sidewalk; small LEDs on the stair risers; channel lighting around the perimeter of the poster boxes; up lighting on the window sills at night to illuminate the building and partially the banners; small lighting on the canopy pointing downward to illuminate the steps. All of this is to give the Public Theater a heightened and perhaps dominant public identity; and

Whereas, the proposal calls for five large banners, 25' by 5'; and

Whereas, Joe's Pub entrance and exit will be brought into the lobby with additional customer space on the stoop, and the alley that it now uses as an entrance will be used as a secondary means of egress; and

Whereas, the proposed HVAC mechanical unit is barely visible and is concealed in a metal enclosure of bronze color; and

***Whereas**, the proposed work will cause minimal damage and is reversible; and

***Whereas**, to accommodate the protrusion of the stairway onto the existing 21-foot sidewalk, an 11 foot extension or bulb-out, is proposed to provide adequate pedestrian clearance, but has been pre-approved by DOT. and

***Whereas**, at the committee meeting and in subsequent emails to the committee chair, there was concern from people who live/work in NoHo that the extensive renovation will draw undue attention to the building and distract from the building's and architecture designated in the NoHo I historic district; now

Therefore, be it resolved that Community Board 2 recommends overall limited approval of this application with a few suggestions with the following recommendations:

In our limited approval, we also recognize that the physical factors of this application may warrant modifications subject to review and recommendations of other CB#2 Committees as to revocable consents for stoop, signs and bump-out.

- The Stairs/Stoop

Although there is precedent for stairs, the historic stoops did not project out nearly as far as proposed. We encourage the applicant, in the interests of keeping in scale with the rest of the historic block, to try to re-work the design to bring the stairs closer to the building line with a total depth closer to 10 feet from the building line. This could be partially achieved perhaps by reducing the western steps and retaining the stairs at the north and south.

- The Front Door

The lights proposed are horizontal. We recommend four lights instead of the five proposed in order to echo the rhythm of the building. That is, we raise the question whether the proportion of panes in the door should reflect the masonry or whether the orientation of the panes should reflect more the front façade windows

- The Bulb-out

This element is in conflict with the contextual character of the NoHo Historic District, serves no cohesive purpose for the streetscape being necessary only to accommodate the stoop extension.

- The Canopy

Because of the building's use as a theater and because the canopy does not detract from the building, we approve of it.

- Lighting

It should be neutral color and low intensity, and monitored by the Commission, if necessary.

- Poster Boxes

Height: We recommend a maximum of six feet to avoid obscuring the façade windows,

but having them at the same height as those in Rockefeller Center – three feet – would be more appropriate.

Placement: Although their proposed placement does not detract from the building, it does make them more intrusive. We object to them as proposed.

-The Banners

Banners are common for public venues, and although a bit numerous and large, we approve them.