



NEW YORK STATE SENATOR

Brad Hoylman-Sigal

## Testimony of State Senator Brad Hoylman, Assemblymember Deborah J. Glick, and Council Speaker Corey Johnson Before the Landmarks Preservation Commission regarding a Certificate of Appropriateness for 14-16 Fifth Avenue

BRAD HOYLMAN-SIGAL March 9, 2021

| ISSUE: **SENATOR BRAD HOYLMAN, SD 27, LANDMARKS PRESERVATION**

*March 9, 2021*

Thank you for the opportunity to testify before the New York City Landmarks Preservation Commission (LPC) regarding a Certificate of Appropriateness for 14-16 Fifth Avenue. This building, located in the Greenwich Village neighborhood of Manhattan, is a low-rise apartment building that is evocative of the character seen in our neighborhood. We are deeply concerned that the proposed demolition and replacement structure is out of context with the surrounding community and, more importantly, runs counter to the very purpose and nature of historic districts. We join Manhattan Community Board 2 and Village Preservation in strong opposition of this proposed development and hope that the LPC will see this project as the community intrusion that it truly is and deny the application.

Under the current proposal, 14-16 Fifth Avenue will rise to a height of 241 feet in a midblock lot and alter a significant portion of the streetscape between 8th and 9th Streets. While the proposed building is still shorter than 1 Fifth Avenue, it will rise higher than the parapet and mechanicals of its neighbor at 20 Fifth Avenue. Because of the limited frontage in a

midblock lot, such a tall structure will be out of context with the surrounding buildings. Tall buildings on portions of lower Fifth Avenue—like 1 or 2 Fifth Avenue and the Brevoort—occupy entire blocks and their setbacks create an undulating quality along the street. In contrast, the proposed structure at 14-16 Fifth Avenue is more akin to the skinny super-tall structures seen on 57th Street where the desire for the ultra-rich to have novelty apartments creates intrusions into the skyline. While 14-16 Fifth Avenue is within the bounds of as-of-right height limits, the LPC can consider neighborhood quality and context in reviewing proposals. In this instance, the proposal is out of keeping with neighborhood context for what is typically seen midblock in Greenwich Village.

Although the current structure is much altered from its original 19th Century construction and façade, 14-16 Fifth Avenue is an example of the many housing changes seen in Lower Manhattan as single-family townhomes and mansions were converted to multifamily dwellings. The practical nature of the building's layout is notable for the many historic figures which have called these spaces home. Significant names in American culture like the industrialist Isaac Singer once owned and lived in 14 Fifth Avenue in the 1860s, and silver screen actress Celeste Holm lived in an apartment here following its conversion into multifamily spaces. While the LPC does not always consider historic quality outside of architectural significance it is important to note these names for the record. New York City, and in particular, Lower Manhattan are

integral to the history of the United States and New York overall. It is not surprising to find that a building in the Greenwich Village Historic District once housed a person known in history. However, it is remarkable how these two buildings have served as homes to many notable Americans.

Finally, we are concerned that a low-rise pair of buildings in Greenwich Village that once housed rent-regulated apartments will be demolished only to be replaced by a structure

with few luxury units. So many low-rise apartment buildings in Greenwich Village have been lost over the years, and their residents pushed out in favor of high rent upscale buildings. The COVID-19 pandemic has depressed the Manhattan real estate market so significantly that many expensive luxury units are sitting on the market and vacant for months or years. This harms neighborhoods where these empty structures are built, and our communities suffer by losing long-standing rent-regulated tenants who contribute to their blocks. This building's developer, Madison Realty Capital, should understand this concept well. Madison Realty Capital was the financial backer behind notorious East Village landlord, Raphael Toledano, who with little to no management experience was provided \$124 million to purchase a portfolio of buildings where he aggressively harassed tenants out of their homes. These were such egregious violations of statute that New York Attorney General, Letitia James, settled a suit last December with Madison Realty Capital which paid over \$1 million in restitution to tenants who suffered harm. While the LPC cannot consider these actions, they are important to understanding the underlying motives behind this proposal.

We are deeply concerned that the proposed demolition of 14-16 Fifth Avenue and the out-of-context tall structure to be built in its place will detract from the streetscape and character of lower Fifth Avenue. This is a significant part of Greenwich Village, and is centrally located near Washington Square Park which is synonymous with the impression and character of our neighborhood. Historic districts preserve communities which are fundamental to New York's history and highlight our community's unique role in our city. It is unacceptable to have totally out-of-context and out-of-scale buildings replacing and destroying the historic sense of place which is currently under threat. Too many historic low-rise buildings that have hosted notable Americans have been lost in Lower Manhattan because as-of-right heights and seemingly appropriate designs are inaptly deemed contextual. We urge the LPC to consider the overall project's nature and proposal when reviewing 14-16 Fifth Avenue's

design and architecture. We hope the LPC will see this as an intrusion and deny this project a Certificate of Appropriateness.

Thank you.