

EDITORIAL

Vigilance needed on Hudson Yards

The Hudson Yards development is notable not only for its size and the legacy it will undoubtedly leave, but also because it is an odd case of the tail wagging the dog: As many community members have pointed out, MTA has accepted bids on the Western Rail Yard (WRY) before it is even rezoned. For that and other reasons, the request for proposals (RFPs) distributed to developers by the city includes few guarantees on issues that matter most to residents of Community Board 4 and the neighborhoods surrounding the Yards: affordable housing, publicly accessible open space, the High Line, and provisions for cultural and nonprofit organizations. Given what's at stake here, a closer look at each is in order:

Housing: The RFP requires that, of the 5.7 million square feet of residential and commercial development slated for WRY, a minimum of 20 percent go toward residential. However, it does not require that any of those units be rentals—though it does provide developers incentives to build not only rentals, but *affordable* rental units by providing state bonds (low-interest loans) to developers who opt into the state's 80/20 program, which stipulates that at least 20 percent of a building's rental units are affordable. Developers would get bonus square footage on-site if they make those units permanently affordable through the city's Inclusionary Housing Program. Just what percentage of units will be affordable and whether they'll be permanently so remains to be seen. CB 4 is pushing for 30 percent of all rentals in WRY to be permanently affordable, which exceeds slightly the 28 percent and 27 percent guarantees, respectively, it got in the Hudson Yards and West Chelsea rezonings back in 2004 and 2005.

Open space: The RFP mentions "approximately five acres" set aside at WRY comprising the "central open space" in the center of the required housing and retail towers, a "12th Avenue Linear Open Space" near the Javits Convention Center, "urban plazas" (read: pedestrian malls) at the northeast and southwest corners, and linear open spaces along 30th Street (the 30th Street space is also supposed to provide "vehicular access"). CB4 and the Hudson Yards Community Advisory Committee are insisting not on gated, groomed spaces used for private functions but on a public park that draws residents from nearby neighborhoods and is reserved for passive and/or informal recreation, complete with playgrounds for children and public restrooms. The city came back with an open-space plan that stipulated acreage and design elements (including which areas should be allotted to passive and active recreation) but left specifics up to developers. Since this will go through a public-review process, it is bound to change over time. Either way, getting open space is one thing. Getting livable green space is quite another.

High Line: The fate of the High Line's northern section is up for grabs as MTA seeks maximum return on its land and developers seek maximum profit in their bids. The RFP called for developers to submit bids with and without the High Line present, ostensibly so MTA can gauge whether it can stomach the profit differential. The elevated rail line is a critical link in the open space network connecting Hudson River Park and the neighborhoods of the West Side. It is also the only remaining piece of history in what will become a gleaming new development, serving as a probable anchor for increased land values for adjacent properties, as it did in West Chelsea. Preserving it seems like a no-brainer.

Cultural center: While zoning for the Eastern Rail Yards mandates that developers can build on the southwest corner of that site only if they provide a large cultural facility that the city hopes will house the New York City Opera, CB 4 wants a greater number of smaller spaces that would house administrative offices for arts nonprofits being priced out of the theater and other districts. Combatting gentrification to help small arts organizations stay in Manhattan makes good sense.

Since all of these issues are up for grabs in what promises to be a lengthy process, it is crucial that the public stays vigilant and speaks up during the public review process to protect the few community benefits they have—undefined and vague as they are at the moment—in this multi-billion dollar development. Anything less will be cheating future generations.

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

Tilting at windmills

To The Editor:

It is sad to see the impressive energy and zeal of Fern Luskin and Kathy Casey flying in the face of obvious realities in their Letters of Oct. 26. They seek contributions sufficient to buy the house at 339 West 29th Street from its developer/owners. The likelihood of raising \$1.3 million (the house's supposed "official" assessed valuation) is virtually nil. But just supposed that sum were raised and the owners were willing to sell. Where would the money come from to run the building? Evidently the existing tenants' rents are insufficient to that purpose. A museum to the Gibbons family and the abolitionists' cause of the 1860s would cost significant money to create and to run. Who would visit it, and what admission charge could be imposed? Where would the additional money come from? And how would the carrying costs of the building be handled while the alterations were done to create the museum? How would the museum pay for itself on an ongoing basis? And what about the costs of the lawyers, accountants, and architects whose services would be needed? Add it all up and it becomes clear that these naive women are tilting at a windmill. And while they are doing that, real landmarks that might realistically be saved are languishing for want of their interest. What a waste!

Andrew Alpern

Whose Side Are You On?

To The Editor:

In case you're wondering who that "architectural historian" is who unleashed such ad feminem vituperation at Fern Luskin in the Letters section two weeks ago, a new acquaintance of Ms. Luskin has identified him as an almost-70 New York real-estate profiteer who, on the side, wrote books on the super-luxurious homes of Manhattan's rich. Andrew Alpern parlayed a bachelor's degree in architecture into at least 14 years as editor of Legal Briefs for the Construction Industry and at least 15 years as construction-industry arbitrator for the American Arbitration Association. He was head of the Dept. of Real Estate and Planning for Coopers & Lybrand, special counsel for Hughes Hubbard & Reed, and (more recently) with Peter Kimmelman Asset Management.

After getting an L.L.D. at Cardozo in 1993 at age 55 or so, Alpern was emboldened to write a book on the 1999 copyright law. According to the book's editor, one of his key points was so misstated that probably both author and publisher would have sunk in a quicksand of lawsuits if she had not corrected the error. A Chelsea note is that, in a 1984 book by Alpern and real-estate mogul Seymour Durst (1913–1995), he called a woman who said in 1929, "I'm not going to move [from the last tenanted 1845 London Terrace townhouse]. It's a matter of principle" a "cantankerous soul whose sole reason for refusing to move is...to obtain a bit of notoriety and...to tilt in an otherwise pointless battle." One wonders if he has a similar opinion

on current Chelsea tenant hero Daniel Peckham—and if Alpern is linked to the management agents or owners of the 1847 row house at 339 W. 29th St. that was an Underground Railroad station.

Kathy Casey

On the side of preservation

To The Editor:

Re "Neighbors crusade to stop construction on historic row house" (news article, Oct. 12) and subsequent Letters:

There are many reasons that both 339 W. 29th St. (former home of Quaker abolitionist/activist Abigail Hopper Gibbons) and its related row of houses once known as Lamartine Place (likely named for Alphonse De Lamartine, a French romantic poet and patron of anti-slavery and liberal causes) are important and worth preserving, both architecturally and historically. Rather than quibbling, it would be more constructive to embrace them all in the hopes of preserving a valuable remaining historic resource.

The row houses on the north side of 29th Street from Eighth to Ninth Avenue and the similar block of West 30th Street from Eighth to Ninth Avenue were built in 1847 by Cyrus Mason, in partnership with William Torrey. Mason and Torrey were involved in the construction of Clement Clarke Moore's 1845 row house development, London Terrace, on the site of the present apartment complex of that name, 23rd to 24th Street between Ninth and 10th Avenue. Both of these two "Lamartine blocks" show Moore's influence, with several row houses still preserving in varied degrees the front yard: a setback characteristic of Moores' blocks to the south near the Episcopal seminary.

These two miraculously surviving blocks are both a lovely 19th-century oasis and a sorely needed respite, wedged as they are between Penn South's huge "tower in park" complex and the "super-blocks" of the Farley Post Office and Madison Square Garden/PennStation (not to mention the many mega projects to come). This alone is reason enough to be on the side of preservation, as immense development pressures are encroaching from all sides these days.

Perhaps it is not too late for the Chelsea community to create of these two blocks a mini Historic District. This would be ideal (no doubt replete with "non contributing buildings" and the rowhouses in various states of alteration or not). Barring this, at least these historic "Lamartine Blocks" need a firm lowering of the attendant FAR from the R8 range to the R6 range, which is more akin to West Village townhouse sidestreets.

Laurence Frommer

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MIKHAELA REID

