

November 17, 2013

Commissioners
Landmarks Preservation Commission
1 Centre Street, 9th Floor
New York, NY 10013

Dear Commissioners:

As you know, a new in-fill building at 100 Franklin street is proposed for Tribeca East Historic District. More than 1200 Tribecans have signed a petition against the design because it is not ‘contextual,’ a zoning requirement for buildings on that site. This letter provides background to community opposition.

Inspired by Steven Semes’s work, “The Future of the Past”, we observe that there are several policy approaches to in-fill sites within Tribeca’s Historic Districts. They are not equal.

Approach 1. Fully Contextual

This kind of design approach rigorously adopts the existing architectural languages of a historic district. Because there are a great variety of architectural styles within Tribeca’s historic districts, this approach gives wide latitude for any architect and ample room for creativity. Stunningly successful examples of this approach can be found in Tribeca at 124 Hudson, 50-52 Laight, 71 Laight Streets, and the series of townhomes at 148-150 Reade Street. Acceptable, but not quite as successful examples of this approach would be the Greenwich Hotel or 2 North Moore. The weakest example might be the Tribeca Grand Hotel. In general, this approach succeeds at blending in. It does not rupture the overall fabric of the historic district. It tends to generate the broadest public support. This approach makes the district the resource, not the individual parts. New construction of this type reinforces the significance of the entire district rather than detracts from it.

Approach 2. Abstractly Contextual

This kind of design mixes abstract forms with the vaguest of referential elements to the existing architectural language. In Tribeca, in-fill of this style typically limits itself to replicating the contextual massing of the historic district, but not much else is offered. Typical examples would be 200 Church Street and 130 Duane Street. The poorest example might be 21-23 Hubert Street. These usually adopt some brick, stone or cast iron façade elements. They sometimes conform to, but more often exaggerate existing void-to-solid window ratios. There is very little detailing and a tendency to geometric minimalism. Cornices and lintels are absent. There is no patterning within the masonry. In sum, these are mostly abstract buildings with only the faintest of historic references. Sometimes, as in 102 Franklin, you see a few more references in the skin, but an aberrant and alien choice of materials. Most examples of this approach fit into the historic district only in the loosest and most debatable sense of “fit”. The buildings are acceptable only to the extent that the eye can ignore them and focus on the quality of the neighboring buildings. This approach is a clear second best option compared to the first.

Approach 3. Anti-Contextual

This kind of design stands in purposeful, antagonistic opposition to the architecture of the historic district. An example might 33 Vestry Street. It aims to rupture the streetscape and to deliberately contradict the overall sense of architectural harmony within the neighborhood. These buildings demand attention by ignoring the pre-existing architectural language around it. They impose shapes, angles, materials, decorative elements, and patterns not found in the district. They insist on contrast and contradiction. They are anomalies by design. In these cases, the architect invariably claims to be doing the architecture “of our time”. We see this claim as ignorance of the historical record and an unwarranted ideological approach. It features a strangely limited concept about what constitutes an object “of our time”. Meanwhile, the older form languages are still in use and quite obviously relevant to the spirit of our day. Designs that take this antagonistic, anti-contextual approach always raise widespread protest in the Tribeca community. This is for good reason: they rupture the fabric of the existing historic district. They make a mockery of the very idea of a historic district. They are seen as architectural statement-making and experimentation in the wrong location. They do real harm to the district.

The infill design of 100 Franklin Street is clearly of the third kind: anti-contextual. A petition circulating in Tribeca opposes the current design for that site. The petition does not represent opposition to new construction. Rather, it is a natural, theoretically and historically informed reaction to a purposeful attack on a designated historic district and to approaches that are not fully contextual. There has been far too much poor design work within Tribeca of the anti-contextual and abstractly contextual approaches. Were the developer to propose something truly and fully contextual in the first approach described above, opposition would likely melt away.

We urge the commission to encourage developers within the boundaries of our historic districts to adopt the first approach.

On behalf of Tribeca Trust,

Lynn Ellsworth, Chair

Copies to: Margaret Chin, CB #1, CB #2, Historic Districts Council, Downtown Independent Democrats, Daniel Squadron, Deborah Glick, Downtown Action Coalition, Residents of 17 White Street, Thomas Street Block Association, Municipal Arts Society, Landmarks West!, Landmarks Conservancy, Save Washington Street, Save our Seaport, Greenwich Village Society for Historic Preservation, Gail Brewer.