



**Greenwich  
Village  
Society for  
Historic  
Preservation**

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May 19, 2008

John Sexton, President  
New York University  
70 Washington Square South, Room 1216  
New York, NY 10012

Re: NYU's Plans for Provincetown Playhouse and Apartments,  
133-139 MacDougal Street

Dear President Sexton:

I write regarding NYU's recently revised plans for the Provincetown Playhouse and Apartments at 133-139 MacDougal Street. I am glad that the University has listened to the strong concerns the Greenwich Village Society for Historic Preservation and many others have expressed about the historic significance of this building and site and has revised its plans as they relate to the theater space within the building and the entry façade. However, we do feel strongly that the remainder of the building is also historically significant and merits preservation, and thus we urge you to consider further revisions to preserve the remainder of the building. We also have questions regarding the plans for the theater space which we feel require further clarification.

From Friday's presentation and materials NYU has provided, it is our understanding that the university has committed to preserve the four walls of the theater and the façade of the entrance to the theater, and specifically stated in response to questions that these elements would remain standing at all times, including through the demolition and new construction process. I ask that you confirm this commitment in writing. I also ask that you provide details regarding NYU's stated plans to reconstruct the theater space itself. I urge that any such reconstruction include restoration of the historic elements which were destroyed in the university's last renovation of the theater in 1997-98, which included the loss of the original dome over the stage designed by George Cram Cook, as well as the original stage. If the university were to proceed with its current plan to demolish the remainder of the building and retain the four walls and theater entrance façade, I believe that further details are needed in writing describing this commitment and exactly how the university intends to accomplish that.

It is also critical that the university commit in writing to the use of the space as a theater in perpetuity, and who the theater will be made available to and for what purposes. By all accounts and to the great consternation of many in the theater community, the theater has been dark much of the time over the last 10 years, and there is a great need for space within Greenwich Village for use by theater groups. This need has been exacerbated by the loss of many of our most historic theaters in recent years, including the Circle in the Square, Sullivan Street Playhouse, Variety Arts, Perry Street, and Actor's Playhouse; it is these losses which made the retention of the Provincetown Playhouse theater, the birthplace of Off-Broadway, all the more vital.

Additionally, the Greenwich Village Society for Historic Preservation continues to strongly urge the university to preserve, retain, and re-use the whole building at 133-139 MacDougal Street. A recent tour of the building and inspection of the 1940 renovation plans show that behind the 70 year old façade are four joined 19<sup>th</sup> century buildings, likely built in the 1840's, a fact which is plainly apparent when viewing the rear facade of 133-139 MacDougal Street.

However, these are not just any four 19<sup>th</sup> century buildings; the four buildings which currently compose the Provincetown Playhouse and Apartments were at the epicenter of cultural and political life in Greenwich Village, and arguably in American Bohemia, in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century. While #133 housed the Provincetown Playhouse since 1918, #139 was the Playhouse's original home from 1916 to 1918. In between, #135 and #137 served as the home to the Liberal Club, the Washington Square Bookstore, and Polly's Restaurant, which collectively were ground zero for radical social, political, and intellectual movements in Greenwich Village in the early part of the last century. Margaret Sanger lectured on birth control, while Jack London, Upton Sinclair, Max Eastman, Theodore Dreiser, Jack Reed and Sinclair Lewis argued and debated there. Polly's Restaurant was run by Polly Holladay and Hippolyte Havel; Havel was an anarchist who refused to join even the radical Liberal Club because it was still an "organization," while Holladay was on the editorial board of *The Masses*. When the four buildings were combined in 1940, the Provincetown Apartments were created, which also attracted residents deeply connected to the arts, including actors Eli Wallach and Anne Jackson, and artist Dorothy Gillespie.

NYU has committed to "prioritize re-use before new development" in the planning principles it signed with Borough President Stringer's NYU Community Task Force, and to support the designation of the proposed South Village Historic District, of which 133-139 MacDougal Street is a key part. It would therefore seem entirely consistent for NYU to work with and preserve the existing building rather than demolishing all of it apart from the theater box and entry façade. The current building is being used by NYU as a theater, offices, and housing, while the new planned building would consist of a theater and offices, and only 17,000 more square feet of space than the current building. It is clear that the current building can continue to house uses which clearly are needed by the university, and it would seem that there would be room for reasonable and appropriate expansion of or additions to the building if necessary. I strongly urge you to consider this route rather than razing the existing building.

It is gratifying to see the university reconsidering its original plans, and we appreciate your willingness to continue to hear feedback from interested parties. I hope this will lead to further revisions to the current plan, and that the university will provide further details and specific commitments regarding the theater space so that there is a clear understanding regarding the university's plans.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Andrew Berman". The signature is fluid and cursive, with a long horizontal line extending from the end of the name.

Andrew Berman  
Executive Director

Cc: Borough President Stringer's NYU Community Task Force