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Society for  
Historic  
Preservation

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**TESTIMONY OF THE GREENWICH VILLAGE SOCIETY  
FOR HISTORIC PRESERVATION  
REGARDING “PHASE II” OF THE  
PROPOSED SOUTH VILLAGE HISTORIC DISTRICT  
June 25, 2013**

Good afternoon. I am Andrew Berman, Executive Director of the Greenwich Village Society for Historic Preservation, the largest membership organization in Greenwich Village, the East Village, and NoHo. In 2002, GVSHP first met with the LPC to urge landmark designation of the South Village, and in 2006 submitted a formal proposal for a historic district with proposed boundaries, an 82-page report by architectural historian Andrew Dolkart supporting designation, and research on every one of the 750 buildings within the proposed district.

We are pleased today to urge the Commission to approve “phase II” of that proposed district, the first phase having been designated in 2010. However, we strongly urge you to move as quickly as possible, as construction and demolition permits -- information about which we have shared with the Commission -- are being sought in the proposed district right now. We also strongly urge you to keep the boundaries of the proposed district intact, especially as it regards the ten 1840’s houses on West Houston Street and NYU’s Vanderbilt Hall and Kevorkian Center, which were initially excluded from the draft proposed district but are now included. Finally, we urge the Commission in the strongest of terms to consider the not-yet-calendared section of the proposed South Village Historic District south of Houston Street as soon as possible. Like the other parts of the South Village, this area faces tremendous development pressure, now markedly increased by the recently-passed Hudson Square Rezoning. And like other parts of the South Village, this section has unfortunately lost several key historic sites already, and more are likely to succumb soon.

The South Village is one of the most important places manifesting evidence of our nation’s last great wave of immigration in the 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries, particularly of Italian-Americans. The South Village is even more pre-eminent as home to a wealth of sites associated with artistic and counter-cultural innovation and ferment in the late 19<sup>th</sup> through the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

It should therefore be no surprise that in 2007 New York State determined the South Village eligible for the State and National Registers of Historic Places, and in 2012 the South Village was named one of New York’s “Seven To Save,” one of the seven most significant endangered historic sites in the State.

The number of sites of historic significance in the South Village and the reasons for its landmark-worthiness would be nearly impossible to enumerate here. But just a few of the people known to have lived or honed their craft there include Bob Dylan, Edna St. Vincent Millay, Eugene O’Neill, Allen Ginsberg, Jack Kerouac, Louisa May Alcott, Pete Seeger, Richie Havens, Berenice Abbott, Elizabeth Irwin, James Baldwin, and Jackson Pollack, among many others. The work of architects including Ernest Flagg, Raymond Hood, and Calvert Vaux are represented there.

Among the area’s incredible list of credits include the birthplace of modern American Theater (the Provincetown Playhouse – now sadly largely demolished); the first non-profit theater, Circle in the Square; the city’s first progressive school, Little Red Schoolhouse; the first coffeehouse in America to introduce cappuccino, Caffè Reggio; the site of Dylan’s earliest performances and where he wrote Blowin’ In the Wind; the site of Lenny Bruce’s last arrest for obscenity; and one of the earliest and largest examples of reform housing in America, Mill’s House No. 1 at 160 Bleecker Street .

The South Village was also home to the City’s most prominent African-American community in the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century, “Little Africa,” located around Minetta Lane and Street, and what was probably the city’s first visible gay community, centered around MacDougal, West 3<sup>rd</sup>, and Bleecker Streets, in the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries.

Starting with Jane Jacobs, Greenwich Village activists have been seeking landmark status for the South Village for almost fifty years; GVSHP has been trying for more than ten years; and you, the Commission, have had the current proposal before you for almost seven. With all the development pressure it faces and all the losses it has already experienced, now is certainly the time for landmark designation for the entire South Village.

Thank you.

***Testimony continues on page 3 below.***



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Good afternoon and thank you for the opportunity to testify. My name is Amanda Davis, the Director of Preservation and Research for the Greenwich Village Society for Historic Preservation. While the entire proposed South Village Historic District is eminently worthy of designation, I want to highlight the merits of some of the buildings which were not in the LPC's original draft proposed district, but which are now under consideration, and urge that they remain in the district which will be voted upon later this year. All are integral to the character and history of the South Village, and their removal would be a blow to the district's integrity.

**130-148 West Houston Street, between MacDougal and Sullivan Streets** are a row of ten houses built as part of an 1844 development that also included the western half of today's MacDougal-Sullivan Gardens Historic District, one of New York City's earliest designated historic districts. Created by the estate of prominent New Yorker Nicholas Low, they actually pre-date the 1850 row houses on Sullivan Street which form the eastern half of the MacDougal Sullivan Gardens Historic District.

Despite the fact that they have been altered, the Houston Street houses retain the exact same scale and many basic architectural details from when they were built 170 years ago. Some also retain crenellated parapets, a typical early 20<sup>th</sup> century alteration. If not landmarked, future large-scale development at this location would negatively impact the groundbreaking communal gardens of the adjoining MacDougal Sullivan Gardens historic district, which the 1967 designation report calls out as "a very important feature of the plan."

**NYU Vanderbilt Hall, at 40 Washington Square South** was constructed in 1951 to the designs of Eggers & Higgins. Though the firm devised an elaborate college campus plan for NYU in the late 1940s, Vanderbilt is the only part of the complex that was realized. Vanderbilt was the first purpose-built NYU building off Washington Square.

In stark contrast to NYU's later additions, Vanderbilt blends with the historic, small-scale buildings of Greenwich Village. Its brick cladding and stone trim are sensitive design choices that recall the predominant building material of the neighborhood. Architectural historian Christopher Gray, writing in *the New York Times*, called Vanderbilt Hall a "neo-Georgian brick quadrangle of subtle sophistication," crediting the building as one of the earliest examples of "modern" historicist architecture in New York.

When commissioning Vanderbilt Hall, the university responded in part to the Greenwich Village community's desire to preserve the area's character and Washington Square's scale by keeping the building to four-and-a-half stories in height, and including a planted courtyard which connects the building to the Square. The

dean of the Law School at the time, Russell D. Niles, said that the neo-Georgian style was chosen to reflect the traditional architecture of Washington Square and Greenwich Village as a whole. Neighbors, including two former chairmen of the Save Washington Square Committee, who formerly opposed the project, came out in support after its completion.

Otto Eggers of Eggers & Higgins was born in Greenwich Village and studied architecture at Cooper Union. He said, "The design of the building also reflects my personal as well as professional interest...For years I was a member of the New York City Art Commission, which had continually advocated the preservation of the cultural and artistic atmosphere of Washington Square."

Vanderbilt Hall uniquely reflects the impact and historic significance of NYU's development in the post-war era, the conflict between the university and the Greenwich Village community about these plans, and the protracted struggle during this time to preserve the character of Greenwich Village and especially Washington Square and its environs. It is the rare case where the university's vision for expansion was fulfilled by successfully connecting to and continuing the scale and fabric of the Village. If not included in the district, Vanderbilt Hall could be replaced with a 300 ft. tall tower under the existing zoning.

**The NYU Kevorkian Center for Near Eastern Studies, 50 Washington Square South** was designed by the noted architects Philip Johnson and Richard Foster. Decidedly modern, the Kevorkian Center's low-scale is as harmonious with Greenwich Village as the more traditional Vanderbilt Hall. Constructed in 1972, it stands as the fourth and final building that Johnson and Foster collaborated on for NYU.

Kevorkian is a perfect example of a fully modern building which shows respect to its historic context. It has received critical praise; Robert A. M. Stern described it as "undeniably effective in establishing a powerful presence and providing a visual antidote to decorative Modernism of its earlier NYU neighbors," while Paul Goldberger applauded the design as "a crisp, clean building that achieves urbanistic success through its streetside scale" with "a monumentality that is at least as powerful, and surely less strained, than that of the [Bobst] library."

Called "the dean of American architects" by *the New York Times*, Johnson also awarded the very first Pritzker Prize for Architecture in 1979 and the American Institute of Architect's highest honor, its Gold Medal, in 1978.

We hope these twelve buildings will remain part of the ultimately designated district.