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New York City Landmarks Preservation Commission
1 Centre Street
New York, New York

RE: 11-3346 – Block 1502, lot 12 Manhattan
Spence School rear yard enlargement and
Its impact on the Emily Trevor Townhouse

Dear Chairman Tierney & Commissioners:

My office has conducted a review of the Spence School application for a glass, three-story equivalent enlargement in the rear yard that contains an amenity (an atrium and/or lounge) and two wide corridors. Our review has focused on the impact the proposed three-story glass enlargement would have on the neighboring Emily Trevor Townhouse at 15 East 90th Street, which was designated as a New York City Landmark in 1974.

Summary

The proposed addition, which requires a zoning variance for its height, will impair the rear of the Emily Trevor Townhouse. The rear yard of the Trevor Townhouse, which is already impaired by a 1987 variance granted to the lot directly behind it, will become largely enclosed by two buildings both of which require zoning variances. Further, due to the nature and design of the proposed addition, the privacy of the rear yard, the first floor kitchen, the second floor dining room and the third floor master bedroom will be compromised.

A much smaller connection between the main Spence School building and 17 E. 90th Street will serve the purpose of connecting the two buildings while also not requiring a variance for its height, nor will it significantly impact the Trevor Townhouse.

Submitted as evidence to support this document are photosimulations that show existing conditions, proposed conditions and the alternative and are attached herein.

Existing conditions

The Emily Trevor Townhouse is 14.67 feet from the existing cafeteria of the Spence School, which is directly behind the Townhouse rising approximately 20 feet over the existing rear yard. The yard is 25.0 feet wide and is demarked on the east and west by brick walls approximately 9.0 feet tall. The rear yard of the Townhouse is at elevation 103.5 feet. The curb elevation of 15 E. 90th Street is at 105.0' and the curb elevation of 91st Street is at 111.5'. This means that the rear

yard of the Townhouse is in a small hole, 8.0 feet lower than the elevation of the curb at 91st Street and 1.5 feet lower than 90th Street.

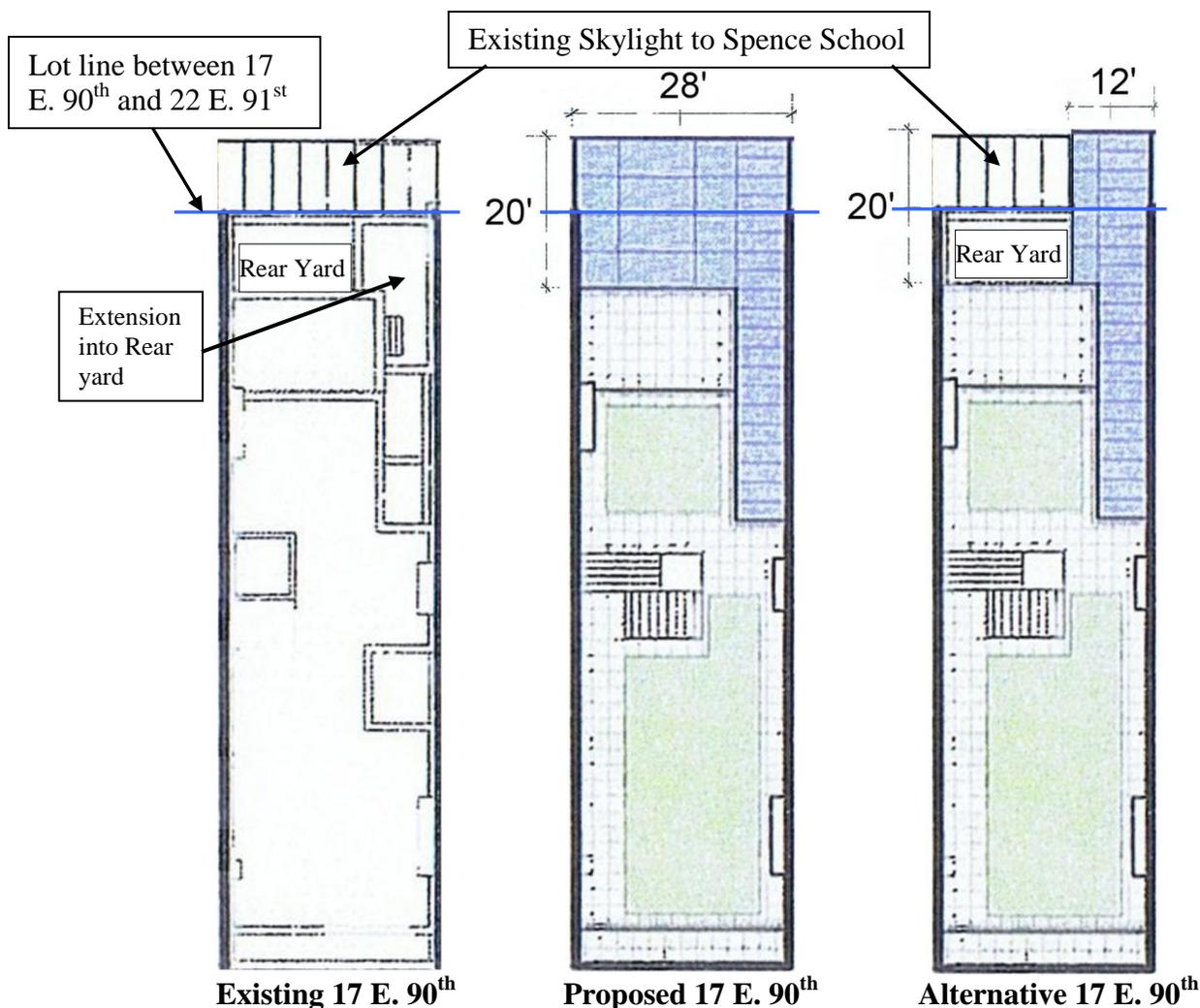
The first floor kitchen overlooks the rear yard, tucked under the bay window that extends from the second floor dining room. The dining room bay window extends 4.25 feet into the rear yard and is about 10.42 feet from the Spence School cafeteria wall. The third floor contains the master bedroom which overlooks the rear yard, looks down into the skylight of the Spence School cafeteria and across from classrooms. The fourth and fifth floors have bedrooms overlooking the yard and are across from the roof-top playground of the Spence School.

The proposal

The Spence School proposal is for a glass, three-story equivalent enlargement in the rear yard that contains an amenity (an atrium and/or lounge) and two wide corridors. The enlargement connects the existing Spence School to 17 E. 90th Street, which was acquired by the school for expansion, and is 35 feet taller than the rear yard of Trevor Townhouse, against which it will abut. The proposed three-story glass enlargement will be directly visible from the first floor kitchen, the second floor dining room and the third floor master bedroom, and will require a variance for its height which is 27 feet above the curb elevation of 91st Street and 33.5 feet above the curb elevation of 90th Street.

The alternative

My office modeled an alternative that would connect the Spence School to 17 E. 90th Street in a one-story connection, with level(s) below mean curb elevation, as desired. It follows an existing extension into the rear yard of 17 E. 90th Street and connects to the Spence School one floor below the current proposal. This alternative would create a corridor 12 feet wide and between 10 and 11 feet tall, (reflecting the sloping floor to match the floors between the two buildings). With a maximum elevation of 122 feet, the alternative is 17 feet above the curb elevation of 90th Street, and would no longer need a height waiver. Plans for the existing building, the current proposal, and the suggested alternative are presented below. The format borrows from a plan that can be found in Spence's LPC submission.



The areas to be built are shown in blue. The alternative respects the current context, replacing and extending an existing rear yard extension on 17 E. 90th Street to the main Spence School building. The alternative also preserves many of the skylights that currently bring natural light to the lower level of the Spence School, as well as the existing rear yard behind 17 E. 90th.

To be clear, this is not a designed alternative, is it simply a massing model that demonstrates the size and location of an alternative connector. In the photosimulations it is represented using the same materials as the proposed three-story glass enlargement for ease of comparison. This representation should not be viewed as an acceptance of the use of the same materials. Details like materials, window placements, architectural articulation, etc. would still need to be designed with an eye for minimizing the impact of light and noise on neighboring buildings.

The photosimulations

My office modeled both the current Spence School proposal and the alternative as translucent 3D massing models to reflect the glass design. People were inserted

into the models for scale and also to reflect the use of this space. These models were then rendered to match existing conditions photographs of the site taken on November 18th while the mock up for the addition was strung and marked with yellow and orange flags. The photosimulations created are all “verifiable digital photomontages,” which means that their accuracy can be verified because they are made from dimensionally accurate 3D CAD models and rendered with a computer camera set to exactly replicate the camera used to take the photographs. The photosimulations are attached to this document¹.

View 1, the yard

The depth of the rear yard of the Trevor Townhouse is shallow, at 14.67 feet. It is bounded by the Townhouse to the south, an approximately 20 foot high wall to the north, and approximately nine foot high walls on to the east and west. The bay window on the second floor overhangs the rear yard by about 4.25 feet and is visible to the right of the photograph. These conditions make the space feel enclosed and smaller than it actually is.

The proposal will abut the easterly lot line of the rear yard of the Trevor Townhouse, removing the yard wall of 17 E. 90th Street. The proposed three-story glass enlargement appears to tower over the yard, with the top of structure 35 feet higher than the elevation of the yard. The first floor of the connector will be about eight feet over the yard elevation and people inside would look down onto the yard. The use and design of the three-story glass enlargement will bring many eyes to the rear of the Townhouse seriously compromising its privacy.

Conversely, the alternative is largely hidden behind the existing yard wall. Tops of heads may be visible from the far end of the yard if a glass material is used, but the privacy of the rear of the building is maintained.

View 2, the dining room

The view from the dining room is from a bay window that is just over 10 feet from the rear wall of the Spence School cafeteria. The most open view is to the east where the three-story glass enlargement is proposed. Because the dining room is on the second floor the views are over the easterly yard wall.

The proposed three-story glass enlargement will be less than eight feet from the closest bay window and will look directly into the dining room. Both the first and

¹ The photographs were all taken with a wide angle lens (24mm). We typically try to use a normal lens (50mm) for photosimulation, which better replicates the human perception of distances. Because of the close distances and large size of the proposed addition, however, a normal lens simply could not show the entire action within the frame of the photographs. Consequently, a wide angle lens had to be used. This means that the distances in the photographs are different from how the human eye would perceive them; in reality, objects in the photographs are actually closer and larger than they appear. In effect, the photosimulations understate the project’s impact on the Trevor Townhouse.

second floors will have views into the dining room seriously compromising its privacy as well as adding concerns about light and noise generated by the use.

The alternative reduces the scale and pushes the connector about 30 feet away from the dining room window. The enlargement would still be visible to the lower right, but would not dominate the view from the dining room like the proposed three-story glass enlargement.

View 3, the master bedroom

The master bedroom spans the entire rear of the 3rd floor of the Trevor Townhouse. Views from it look down into the skylight of the Spence School cafeteria. These windows have much more light than the lower floors because the 1987 Spence School addition directly behind the Townhouse steps back from the rear yard and exposes these windows to more sky.

The proposed three-story glass enlargement can be clearly seen directly outside the window of the master bedroom. Because it is designed as a two-story atrium facing the Trevor Townhouse, it appears that people will not normally be visible from the master bedroom window, but noise and light emitted by the use remains a concern, as well as the existence of a building so close to the master bedroom window².

The alternative will not be seen from the master bedroom and will likely have no impact.

View 4, the roof

The roof of the Trevor Townhouse is not easily accessible and is not a view commonly experienced. Even when it is, the proposed connector can only be seen by looking down off the rear of the building.

The purpose of this view is to demonstrate the material difference in both volume and use of the proposed three-story glass enlargement when compared to the alternative. As proposed, the enlargement is designed to bring people to it, so they can enjoy the view; it is part hallway, and part common gathering area, in a place where such a use is not appropriate.

The alternative is much more modest size, and is functional in its purpose. It will not have the views or the size to draw people to it as a gathering place. People will traverse it as they need to get from the Spence School to 17 E. 90th Street, thereby reducing possible noise and light impairments created by the connector.

² The fourth and fifth floors have smaller bedrooms in the rear of the Townhouse. The proposed three-story glass enlargement will not be visible from these bedrooms but impacts from light and noise generated by the proposed use remain a concern.

Conclusion

It is difficult to argue against growing a school, especially an Upper East Side institution like the Spence School. The proposal, however, is not classroom space; it is a very large--indeed monumental--hallway, which is far larger than it needs to be to achieve the programmatic goals of the institution. The alternative removes the need for the height waiver and dramatically reduces the impact on the Landmarked Emily Trevor Townhouse. Consequently, the proposed three-story glass enlargement should not receive a Certificate of Appropriateness.

I appreciate the Commission's attention to this important matter. Should you have any questions or comments in the meantime, please feel free to contact me at (646) 652-6498.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'G. M. Janes', written in a cursive style.

George M. Janes, AICP
Principal