

SEPTEMBER 15, 2008

STATEMENT OF THE NEW YORK LANDMARKS CONSERVANCY BEFORE THE WATERFRONTS AND LOWER MANHATTAN REDEVELOPMENT COMMITTEES OF THE CITY COUNCIL REGARDING THE PRESENT AND FUTURE OF THE SOUTH STREET SEAPORT

Good morning Chair Gerson, Chair Nelson and members of the City Council. I am Andrea Goldwyn speaking on behalf of the New York Landmarks Conservancy. The Conservancy's Public Policy Committee has reviewed the plan presented by General Growth Properties for a new development at the South Street Seaport.

The South Street Seaport Historic District is composed of approximately 120 buildings and several piers which represent over 200 years of New York's maritime history. Many of the structures were built in the first half of the 19th century of brick and stone, three to four stories tall, in styles that have been lost in neighborhoods across the City: Greek Revival, Federal, and Georgian. Today the Seaport is a small oasis amidst the high rises, built on a very human scale. The Landmarks Conservancy would like to voice support for maintaining the special character of the South Street Seaport.

The proposal presented by General Growth Properties has three main parts: demolition of the existing Pier 17 building (1985); dismantling and reconstructing the Tin Building; and, the construction of several new buildings within and adjacent to the South Street Seaport Historic District.

On the first issue, the Public Policy Committee found the demolition of the existing Pier 17 building acceptable. The Committee agreed to the reconstruction and resiting of the Tin Building, with a proviso. This historic structure is one the last remaining historic buildings on the east side of the FDR Drive. It was severely damaged by a fire in 1995, and partially rebuilt at that time. Much original detail, fabric, and the third story were lost. The developers have indicated that they plan to re-employ this building in order to link the history of the Seaport to the new development, and avoid a potential "Disneyfication" of the site.

If this action is approved for the Tin Building, the developers will have several responsibilities to the building. They will have to: replicate many details, both extant and those lost to the 1995 fire; address the issue of the ground floor façade, which was traditionally open to the public, in a sensitive way that does not diminish the historic fabric; and, they will have to create an interior that respects the historic use of the building, and does not lose the sense of place it represents.

On the third issue, the Committee considered the plan, height, massing, and design of the new buildings within the Historic District. It also looked at the proposed tower, since

this building is immediately outside of, and surrounded by the District. By virtue of its height, it will become an anchor of the District, physically and visually.

The height of the proposed buildings on the pier ranges from 90 to 120 feet. They are at least twice as high as the smaller brick buildings at the core of the District. While it is understood that historically, buildings closer to the water were of a different scale, and that presently the FDR Drive bisects the District, with these new buildings all to its east, they are simply too tall to stand next to the existing buildings in the District. The proposal does offer some new views, at specific points, of the East River and the Brooklyn Bridge, but these buildings will cut off the River from the rest of the District. The new proposed tower building at 495 feet will overwhelm both the Historic District and block views to the Brooklyn Bridge beyond it.

The Committee was also concerned that the massing and design of the new buildings did not speak to, or respect, the existing buildings. The sizes are bulky; and the materials, colors, and fenestration of the overall composition are not in harmony with the existing buildings within the District.

Committee members voiced an additional concern. The South Street Seaport Historic District is connected by a grid of Belgian block streets. The Committee found that the proposed plan, which will open up the street grid of the district and allow people greater access to the waterfront and the buildings along it, was successful. The proposal did not however, speak to how the large number of cars and trucks, that will be necessary to provide transportation and services to hotels and residential units, retail and commercial tenants, and new community spaces, will be addressed.

The Conservancy recognizes the need for a successful revitalization project at the Seaport. It also agrees that there is a need for more open and community spaces in a neighborhood with a rapidly growing population. Nonetheless, this proposal threatens to diminish one of the last slices of New York's early history, and in so doing, damage the unique sense of place that draws people to the South Street Seaport.