

September 17, 2018

STATEMENT OF THE NEW YORK LANDMARKS CONSERVANCY BEFORE THE SUBCOMMITTEE ON ZONING AND FRANCHISES OF THE NEW YORK CITY COUNCIL REGARDING THE ZONING, 27 EAST 4TH STREET, MANHATTAN

Good morning, Chair Moya and Council Members, I am Glen Umberger, speaking on behalf of the New York Landmarks Conservancy. The Conservancy opposes the proposed new building at 27 East 4 Street, adjacent to the Merchant's House Museum at 29 East 4 Street.

The Merchant's House is truly a special place and its significance cannot be overstated. The New York City Landmarks Preservation Commission recognized this when they designated the house as an individual landmark on its first day of existence in 1965; the Commission later designated the interior as a landmark stating in the designation report that "[t]he Old Merchant's House [is] a unique document of its period which shows with unrivaled authenticity how a prosperous New York City merchant and his family lived in the mid-nineteenth century." The house is also been listed on the National Register of Historic Places and is a member of the city's Historic House Trust. The building with its surviving historic exterior and interior spaces should not be placed at risk.

The proposed new building next door, accordingly poses a real physical threat. Adjacent construction of a large building could result in significant and irreversible damage such as settling of the Museum's rubble masonry foundation walls, which in turn would cause damage to the interior's delicate plasterwork and other architectural features. In 2012, at the time of the Landmarks Preservation Commission hearing for this proposed project, preservation engineer Robert Silman, representing the Merchant's House Museum, wrote that this construction has the potential to cause severe damage to the landmarked house. This concern is not theoretical; in 1988, the building immediately to the east of the Merchant's House was demolished, resulting in damage that required \$1 million of structural repairs and interior restoration work at the museum, closing it to the public for over two years.

Even if the most sophisticated monitoring system is employed for this construction project, it will only track the damage. Nothing can truly ensure that the landmark will remain unscathed through the excavation and construction phases.

We are aware that there have been some discussions for the project to move forward on an alternative development site nearby and we would encourage such a compromise to protect this venerable building while allowing the developer to move forward with their plans.

We urge the Council to protect the Merchant's House Museum, one of the city's rare architectural assets.