



Testimony of the Municipal Art Society
Before the New York Landmarks Commission
By Lisa Kersavage, Kress/RFR Fellow for Historic Preservation and Public Policy
175 9th Avenue (aka 415 West 20th Street) - Chelsea Historic District
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The Municipal Art Society of New York is a private, non-profit membership organization whose mission is to promote a more livable city. Since 1893, the Society has worked to advocate excellence in urban design and planning, contemporary architecture, historic preservation and public art.

I am Lisa Kersavage, speaking on behalf of the Municipal Art Society's preservation committee, which had several presentations on this proposal to demolish an existing building and construct two new buildings. We are appreciative of the Seminary's willingness to keep the committee updated as the project progressed and changed. Those changes have generally made the project more appropriate. Overall, the committee found the proposed new building on Ninth Avenue appropriate, while the one on 20th Street has yet to rise to that level.

In reviewing the proposal, the committee established that it is critical that the design assert the primacy of the close, a truly unique feature of this landmark. The close is a protected sanctuary, a quality that is achieved by the green areas being surrounded by buildings, and being raised from the street level with few entrances or penetrations. When in the close, it is possible to look up and see the sky, which adds to its special sense of place. The overall effect, as an 1893 guidebook put it, is the "velvety green lawns . . . make a charming oasis of verdure and peace in the vast whirl of the city's secular life."¹

The Ninth Avenue building is deferential to the close -- it is low enough that significant views of the sky are retained. Furthermore, the Ninth Avenue building is modest, referential, and responsive to the historic context. It has certainly reached the level of appropriateness and we recommend the commission approve it.

Most of the committee's concerns are with the 20th Street building. While the committee took no exception to the size of the building, they did not find the siting to be appropriate. The 1836

¹ *The New York Times*, Christopher Gray, May 1, 1988.

West Building is the oldest remaining building on the campus and one of two freestanding ones. Connecting the new building to it is problematic, as it changes its character and setting rather dramatically. Furthermore, the proposed building intrudes on the close's open space in a way that is intrusive; and there are a number of proposed grade changes, the impact of which are unclear but potentially of concern. The committee thought that the architects should have explored a connection to the Tutu building instead of the West Building, which could be more respectful of the history of the site and character of the close.

The design of the Twentieth Street building is too busy – there are too many different gestures and materials. Rather than being an effective means of establishing compatibility between the new and the old, the design's incorporation of several historic materials – the single schist wall and the brownstone base with lancet windows – has a disjointed and jarring effect. The schist wall, in particular, tends to belittle the individuality of the schist building rather than complimenting it. The street entrance, particularly the glass "flying canopy," is incongruous to the character of the seminary and the continuity of Twentieth Street. On the rear, the glass extension of the new building intrudes on the close in an unfortunate and disruptive way.

Although we recommend the approval of the Ninth Avenue building, we urge the Seminary to rethink the siting and design of the 20th Street building.