



HISTORIC DISTRICTS COUNCIL

THE ADVOCATE FOR NEW YORK CITY'S HISTORIC NEIGHBORHOODS

232 East 11<sup>th</sup> Street New York NY 10003  
tel (212) 614-9107 fax (212) 614-9127 email hdc@hdc.org

February 16, 2024

## HDC's Response to Vornado's Proposed Tennis Courts on the Hotel Pennsylvania Site

HDC is both baffled and outraged by [Vornado's latest plan](#) to erect four tennis courts and a 10-story billboard on the site of the former Hotel Pennsylvania, which was once a 2,200-room hotel that could have been converted into thousands of units of centrally located housing in one of the city's most transit rich environments.

Vornado's scheme to lure the US Open to 7th Avenue is an attempt to solve a wholly self-created problem: The developer demolished the Hotel Pennsylvania in 2023, *after* its plans for an office tower on the site were halted by the pandemic. Vornado created a vacant lot out of what was once the world's largest hotel, and is now looking for a way to fill that space. But the logic of adaptive reuse provides the obvious answer: People could have filled that space. In the midst of New York City's crippling housing crisis, the hotel itself was readymade for occupancy.

Vornado's needless solution to its manufactured emptiness trades 2,200 rooms for no rooms at all. In New York City, 2024, that trade is not laughable or puzzling; it is unconscionable: Nobody is asking for new tennis courts; everyone is asking for new housing, and that is exactly what the Hotel Pennsylvania could have been.

As preservationists, we see New York's built environment as an opportunity, not a hindrance. We strive to preserve structures not only for their historic, architectural or cultural significance, but also for their potential.

On the merits of significance, the Hotel Pennsylvania was certainly worth saving: built by the Pennsylvania Railroad to accompany the original Penn Station, the hotel made legible, at monumental scale, the ambition and majesty of long haul train travel. Made famous for its phone number, Pennsylvania 6-5000, which were both the title and lyrics of a popular song, the hotel had iconic status within American culture.

What makes the destruction of a building of this size, scale and significance so shameful in 2024 is that the demolition destroyed not only what the Hotel Pennsylvania once was, but also everything those 22 stories and 2,200 rooms could have been.

Adaptive reuse helps us to be conscious of history while building for the present and the future. Preserving the Hotel Pennsylvania confirms that the city once cared about mass transit, and contained structures that made the experience of travel both convenient and beautiful. In the midst of New York's housing crisis, adapting the Hotel Pennsylvania into housing is to say about housing what the city once said about transit: that it matters. Creating housing in a building as beautiful and significant as the Hotel Pennsylvania is to

say that New Yorkers are worthy of homes within our great monuments, our icons of civic pride. To take that space and erect tennis courts is nihilism. It is to say that nothing matters.

New York's historic structures, ripe for reuse, are catalysts for the urban imagination, and tools in the fight for new housing, and environmentally sustainable development: the greenest buildings are the ones that are already standing; the easiest 2,200 units of housing to build are the ones that are already there.