



ARCHITECTURE, PLANNING & URBAN DESIGN

PHILIP LOHEED, AIA, NCARB
PRINCIPAL

15 April 2012

LANDMARKS PRESERVATION COMMISSION

1 Centre Street, 9th Floor
New York City, NY 10007

Attn: Robert Tierney, Chairman

RE: SOUTH STREET SEAPORT — PIER 17

Dear Robert Tierney, and Members of the Commission,

At the request the members of the Historic Districts Council, of the New Amsterdam Market, and regarding the proposed replacement of the Pier 17 building at the Seaport, I offer the following observations.

I am writing because I believe the Pier 17 building should be preserved as an architectural landmark that represents the Manhattan waterfront with singular distinction. It should remain—but be reinvigorated—as a vibrant center of the Seaport waterfront emphasizing enhanced public activities, supported by appropriate and reconfigured commercial activities.

GENERAL BACKGROUND

Under the direction of AIA Gold Medalist Benjamin Thompson, I served as the BTA Associate in Charge of master planning and design for the South Street Seaport project. At BTA as well as in my own practice I have served as a principal designer or retail consultant to other specialty public-private partnership projects including Harborplace, Baltimore; Bayside, Miami; Union Station, Washington, DC; and Grand Central Terminal, New York.

The Pier 17 building was the result of collaboration over several years by The City of New York, The Rouse Company, BTA, and the South Street Seaport Museum. The Landmarks Commission, and New York State played significant roles in the design, approvals and financing for this project. Several other architects contributed, including Jack Beyer of Beyer Blinder Belle on the Museum Block, and Jan Hird Pokorny on the Schermerhorn Row buildings.

Benjamin Thompson & Associates, Inc, now BTA+, had completed the design and opening of Faneuil Hall Marketplace in 1978, introducing The Rouse Company to the project after several years of search carried out by Ben Thompson beginning in 1970–71. The BTA/Boston/Rouse partnership became a widely emulated model for subsequent projects, including South Street Seaport.

Over the years, the place-based spirit of seminal urban projects of this type has been slowly eroded by a lazy sort of greed, driven by the financial “bottom line.” Control of such projects by owners primarily motivated in that way has, paradoxically, reduced the very profits desired. This has led to a long-running sequence of “fixes” that have brought a numbing uniformity wherein “bankable” national and international tenants have displaced “indigenous” home-grown creativity and innovation.

PIER 17

Initially, the expansion of the ruins of the old Pier 17 to support a new pavilion building was proposed by Ben Thompson to solve the problem of inadequate “critical mass”—uses associated with the Seaport—to create a functional “waterside” destination in support of the Museum. The final design reflects his sensibilities regarding public access to the water, views to the Brooklyn Bridge, and historically appropriate contextual design. In addition, the elaborated pier edge details and the “working pier” along the north side provide continuous public circulation levels showcasing the Museum ships and the Brooklyn Bridge. As an expression of the collaborative intent of the Development Plan of

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1980, the Pier building has become an icon, perhaps unexpectedly, of the Seaport Museum and the entire Manhattan waterfront. As a part of the 20th Century additions to the Seaport, it relates to the Tin Building and New Market Building, but recalls the spirit, and uses, of former ferry terminals such as the Fulton Ferry that once stood on South Street. It is a building designed by an AIA Gold Medalist in response to a major public-private partnership at a time when faith in the city was at a low ebb, and when the Seaport Museum was threatened with extinction. While it is not a perfect realization of the spirit originally intended, a significant case for its preservation should be made—combined with modifications to expand public uses on the pier and updates to its commercial components.

PROPOSED REPLACEMENT OF PIER 17

The South Street Seaport project was undertaken by the largest UDAG partnership ever funded. In spite of this, the proposed replacement of Pier 17 continues the ongoing failure of its owners to fully realize and maintain the goals of the original partnership. The programming of this new proposal provides an illustration:

Enter the suburban “big box” of the distributed landscape! The new scheme for Pier 17 imagines two floors of large tenants (such as Target?), enclosed along their back sides by glass. I have to wonder whether this expression will avoid the look of a service corridor (with giant graphics?), or simply place the detritus of delivery on public display—whether through clear or translucent channel glass. Such tenants rely on extreme turnover of stock to achieve adequate sales, and are thus usually surrounded by large parking lots in low rent quarters. As the pinnacle of container-based shipping and marketing, this programming hardly relates to the break-bulk history of South Street Seaport.

QUESTIONS TO BE CONSIDERED

- **Can the localized New York spirit of place for South Street Seaport be rebuilt?**
 - Yes—It is quite possible to reverse the erosion of uniqueness with “re-localization” to restore place-based spirit. Strong “spirit of place” can lead to extraordinary success—weak spirit leads to weak economics.
- **Can the existing Pier 17 building be updated to strongly support today’s goals?**
 - Yes—its iconic presence can respond to much stronger public environment—countering years of “maintenance leasing” and progressive privatization.
- **Is reliance on large “bankable” tenants contributing to Seaport goals—and further, is glass an appropriate primary architectural material in this historic context?**
 - No—It is historically inappropriate and very unlikely to be economically successful.

At BTA+ we have evolved a wide variety of techniques used to create extraordinary success in our projects. Unfortunately, successive project teams have not understood, or have ignored, the principles involved. The result has been the erosion of spirit and localized uniqueness readily observed today. However, such erosion can be reversed, and in the case of Pier 17 should be.

I encourage you to consider the preservation, with update, of Ben Thompson’s Pier 17—in preference to a far more expensive and questionable replacement.

Sincerely,

BTA⁺ Architects



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Principal