



HISTORIC DISTRICTS COUNCIL

THE ADVOCATE FOR NEW YORK CITY'S HISTORIC NEIGHBORHOODS

The Historic Districts Council sees the proposed Empire District as a lost opportunity to preserve and protect a vital part of the city's landscape, while creating a state-of-the art train station. These goals do not have to be mutually exclusive. A revised plan that incorporates the vernacular architecture for which this area is known into a 21st Century transit center will demonstrate that New York City can honor the past while planning for its future.

The proposal reminds us of a misguided 1950's era urban renewal project. Has the city not learned from the mistakes of its past? The words, "Don't tear it down" was a familiar battle cry at a time when wholesale destruction of intact neighborhoods was happening throughout the city. The fact that those words are finding their way into the public discourse again should be a wakeup call.

Over 35 buildings in the area have been identified in the draft EIS as being worthy of state or national landmark recognition. Ten of them could be eligible for New York City landmark designation. Losing these structures and the neighboring buildings will create a void in a vital part of midtown Manhattan. "Old" should not be equated with "obsolete." These streets are lined with independent businesses that contribute to the economic health of the city. Thousands of New Yorkers live and work in this neighborhood. Once displaced, they will have no place to go.

The HDC strongly supports the creation of a historic district incorporating these buildings. The list of architects responsible for so many of them is a Who's Who of revered designers whose work has long made our streetscapes come alive. Napoleon LeBrun's 1872 St. John the Baptist Church and McKim, Mead & White's 1908 Penn Station Service Building are among the structures deemed eligible for NYC landmark designation.

Soul-less supertalls planned for the area will blight the landscape and pierce our hearts. A development whose size will exceed that of Hudson Yards is an affront to those who love this city. While no one can predict if and when the demand for new office space will match or exceed pre-pandemic levels, it is foolhardy to say the least to go forward with a plan created before the rise of work-from-home culture.

The LPC must act immediately to schedule hearings for all the buildings deemed worthy of designation. The HDC will work with the commission to define the boundaries of a proposed Penn Station Historic District for approval. This concept has the full support of our colleagues and the community.

Photographs of the demolition of the Hotel Pennsylvania will echo those devastating images of the destruction of the original Penn Station. Is this how we want to document the future of the city?