

Testimony at public hearing on 20 November 2003 in support of One Bryant Park

The AIA New York Chapter, the founding Chapter of the American Institute of Architects, which represents nearly 3,200 architects, professional affiliates, and public members, and its Planning and Urban Design Committee, is in support of the proposed building at One Bryant Park by Fox & Cook Architects and the condemnation process making the assemblage possible. The site, because of its size and location, is a pivotal link between the corporate office corridor on Sixth Avenue, the open space of Bryant Park and the animated Times Square entertainment district. The proposed 51-story Bank of America building will be about two million gross square feet on an 87,000 square foot site; it will house 8,000 workers. The proposed project is significantly larger than its neighboring buildings; however, because it is to the north of Bryant Park, it will not cast shadows on the park itself.

The project is being proposed under the auspices of the Empire State Development Corporation, rather than through City Planning, to facilitate the condemnation process. It is our understanding that both the City Planning Commission and the Landmarks Preservation Commission have been instrumental in the review process of the building. The spirit of the underlying zoning regulations and landmark law are being met; the ESDC is providing a "friendly" override.

We believe the condemnation serves a public purpose for the following architectural reasons:

1) Architectural merit

The size, form and expression of the building will give it an iconic presence on the midtown Manhattan skyline. The bulk of the building area is contained in a sculpted tower that has facets which will change the perception of the building with the passage of the sun, giving it a kinetic, crystalline appearance.

2) Sustainability

The building has been designed to qualify for a LEEDS Platinum rating, a first for a building of this scale. It incorporates a number of "green" strategies, reducing emissions, energy and water requirements to a significant degree. Facets of the curtainwall to the south have been designed with a deep double wall as part of this sustainable strategy; this is the most visible portion of the building where the "green" nature of the building will be easily apparent. This building will set a high standard for future commercial office buildings.

3) Transportation/Circulation

The site is located within walking distance of the major regional transportation hubs of Grand Central Terminal and the Port Authority Bus Terminal. It sits between the Sixth Avenue subway station at 42nd Street (B, D, F and V) and the Times Square subway station (1, 2, 3, 9, 7, N, Q, R, S, W). This unique concentration of public transportation facilities can absorb the density of the proposed development. A public benefit of this project is that it will enhance public transportation facilities by providing a number of subway related amenities. These new facilities include a stair and glass entry pavilion within the property line at the northwest corner of Sixth and 42nd Street, providing a new below ground walkway between Sixth Avenue subways and the Times Square subways, and new stairs at the western end of the site to this passageway. This connection will expand the capacity of 42nd Street for pedestrian movement and will allow pedestrians to walk below ground from Eighth Avenue to Fifth Avenue. The character of these below grade passages needs to be addressed, particularly if it is in the free or paid zone, and whether there will be retail.

4) Public Amenity Spaces

The project will provide a number of pedestrian circulation amenities. These spaces include a 5' sidewalk widening on 42nd Street, an open entrance plaza on the south side of the site at 42nd Street and Sixth Avenue, an enclosed "urban garden room" to the north at 43rd Street and Sixth Avenue, and a through block arcade at the west end of the site connecting 42nd and 43rd Streets.

Although in excess of mandated minimums, taken as a whole, the amount of publicly accessible space seem inadequate for the size of the project. Concern is expressed particularly about the character of the through block arcade and size of the "urban garden room". The arcade is buried under the main trading floor proposed for Bank of America, so that there is no possibility for daylight. There is no connection to the theater from the arcade, although it forms the eastern boundary. As the design progresses, we hope there will be a mechanism for enlivening the space such as retail development or entrances of some kind.

The "urban garden room", serving as an entrance to the lobby as well as a public amenity, is undersized for the scale of the project. Added population coming from the building will put even more pressure on Bryant Park, and one possible solution would be to increase the size of the "urban garden room" by eliminating the through block arcade, and consolidating this space at Sixth Avenue by pushing the building about 35 feet closer to 4 Times Square.

An alternative public amenity to relieve the congestion created by the new population might be to create a rooftop garden on the setback portion of the building, located between the tower of 4 Times Square and the new One Bryant Park tower. Rooftop gardens were a characteristic of the Times Square area at one time.

5) Landmarked Theater

On the 43rd Street side the site and façade encompasses the Henry Miller Theater, a New York City Landmark. The interior of the theater is not viable for use as a theater in its current condition for code, functional and market reasons. The proposed project retains the 43rd Street façade for a nominal dimension in its current location as well as certain spatial and decorative elements of the internal plan, while completely rebuilding the theater to modern specifications. The restoration of the façade and the proposed separation of the historic materials from the new building's curtainwall are appropriate measures for the façade of the landmark. The loss of the remainder of the Henry Miller Theater is partially mitigated by the retention of the spatial and decorative elements in the new theater design. Another aspect of mitigation is the proposed theater's size and use as a "playhouse," in an effort to revive the original purpose of Henry Miller's theater space.

Altogether, the building's high quality of design, sustainable features, transportation enhancements, public amenities and theater restoration/new construction outweigh our concerns. We support the project and the condemnation proceedings which are required to make it possible.