

July 20, 2021

The Honorable Sarah Carroll, Chair
New York City Landmarks Preservation Commission
David N. Dinkins Municipal Building
1 Centre Street, 9th Floor North
New York, NY 10007

Re: 390 Park Avenue – Lever House
Certificate of Appropriateness

We would like to thank Brookfield Properties, Skidmore, Owings and Merrill and their project team for thoroughly presenting their proposed alterations to representatives of our chapter and of DOCOMOMO US on July 9th. Because of the exceptional importance of Lever House as an iconic, celebrated and influential work of Modern architecture, any proposed changes to it are of the utmost concern to our organization.

We applaud the carefully researched design of the proposed new concrete terrazzo plaza pavement, replacing damaged non-original paving with material chosen to replicate the appearance of what was originally installed, while providing greater durability. Similarly, we support the proposed restoration of the plaster plaza ceiling, removing later accretions, and returning it to its original appearance. Although the proposed restoration of the stainless steel column enclosures is being reviewed at staff level, we commend the team for developing a methodology to retain and restore the mostly original column enclosures, rather than replacing them with new material.

The proposed new openings within the black limestone wall are the interventions which we find the most troubling and problematic. That apparently monolithic wall, entirely uninterrupted across the entire width of the plaza, is an important element of the original composition, providing a strong background and contrast to the other elements within and surrounding the plaza. Interrupting that wall would significantly alter the way its form is perceived. The larger full height opening could be even more prominent at night, with light emanating from it, than it is shown during the day in the renderings. The facts that the outdoor dining, which these new openings would support, is seasonal and that the programmatic use of this space could change in the future lead us to further question whether these prominent and permanent changes are appropriate.

The proposed new stainless steel letters in the “Lever House” font seem like the best way to introduce new signage. However, there is far too much new signage being proposed. While it may appeal to prospective tenants, it simply isn't necessary to have their names in so many places.

The original paving of the level 3 terrace was a terra cotta colored quarry tile and the existing non-original paving is a similar color. The proposed replacement is a warm gray color, which would be a significant departure from the original and current appearance. Although it isn't visible from the street, this terrace is very visible from the upper floors of neighboring buildings. We do not see a need to arbitrarily change the color of this paving and believe that the replacement should match the original color. Also at level 3, the proposal would replace a 74' long section of aluminum panels on the north façade, which was originally aluminum, with fritted glass. While it is presently partially obscured by plantings, this part of the façade is located at a rather prominent location. We believe it should remain clad in aluminum panels as originally designed.

Finally, although it is not included in this application, we regret the plan to eliminate the marble seating designed by Isamu Noguchi from the plaza. Round and square seats in black and white marble were fabricated and installed, with the permission of the Noguchi Foundation and the LPC, during the landscape renovation designed by Ken Smith completed in 2002. Inspired by Noguchi's unrealized original schemes for the plaza commissioned by Gordon Bunshaft, they have enlivened the otherwise spare plaza and provided welcome seating for the public. We wonder whether their removal has been approved by the Commission.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "John S. Arbuckle". The signature is fluid and cursive, with a large initial "J" and a long, sweeping underline.

John Shreve Arbuckle
President
DOCOMOMO US/New York Tri-State
info@docomomo-nytri.org