

PROPOSAL TO DESIGNATE THE INTERBOROUGH RAPID TRANSIT POWERHOUSE A NEW YORK CITY LANDMARK



Prepared by
The Powerhouse Group

INTRODUCTION

New York City is cleaner, safer, and more “livable” today than it has been in decades. The exodus begun in the 1950s as a result of the accessibility of the automobile, the ensuing decline in municipal funding, the rise in crime, and infrastructure decay, has been reversed. Today, people want to visit and live in New York once again. This is a great turn of events for the life of the city. It is a danger, however, to many of the buildings that make this city great.

One such building is the Interborough Rapid Transit Powerhouse on Eleventh Avenue and 59th Street (“Powerhouse”). This Proposal recommends that the Powerhouse be designated a New York City landmark in order to preserve this exceptional, historical building for the future generations of New Yorkers.

ABOUT THE POWERHOUSE

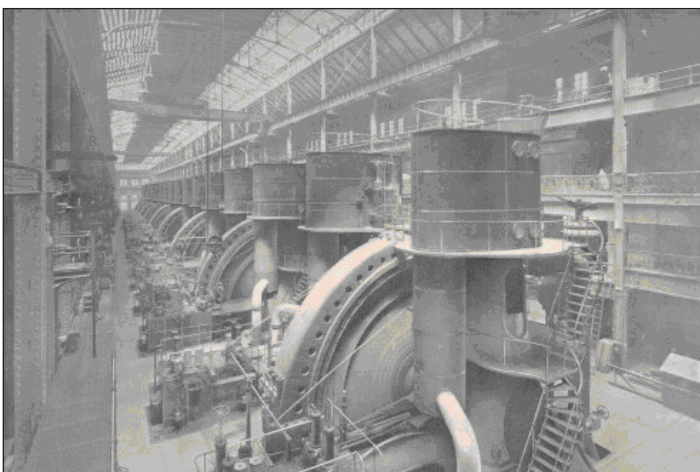
HISTORY

On October 27, 1904, New York’s first subway system opened to great acclaim. Begun in 1899 by the Interborough Rapid Transit Construction Company, the system was a masterpiece of planning and engineering made possible by the efforts of Chief Engineer William Barclay Parsons.¹ Though today’s subway system is owned and operated by a public entity, the Metropolitan Transit Authority, the privately-owned Interborough Rapid Transit Company (“IRT”) was responsible for constructing the first segment of the subway system. The architectural firm of Heins & LaFarge “had overall responsibility for the various aspects of the architectural and artistic design” of the system.²



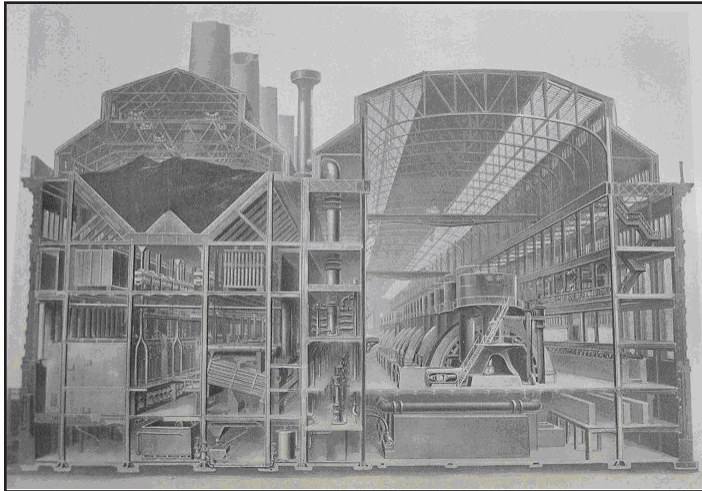
THE POWERHOUSE IS SURROUNDED BY MANY NEW DEVELOPMENTS

The IRT was responsible for not only building the tunnels, tracks, and stations that comprised the IRT system, but for powering the system’s trains. To power this system, the IRT needed a means of generating and transferring electricity, as well as massive buildings to house the generators. Accordingly, the IRT built a number of power stations throughout the city. In the first years of the twentieth century, it commissioned what would become one of the most unique buildings ever to house a power plant of any kind: the Powerhouse. Completed in 1904, the Powerhouse provided electricity for the IRT system and its successor, the New York City Subway, until 1959. Occupying the entire block bounded by Eleventh and Twelfth Avenues, West 58th and 59th Streets, the original powerhouse of the IRT Subway is, in the plainest sense of the word, monumental. Upon its completion in 1904, the mammoth structure was the largest powerhouse in the world, and “it represented the highest level of technical sophistication in the production of electrical



GENERATORS OCCUPIED THE VAST SPACE

power at that time.”³ Current was generated and fed to eight substations to power the signal and lighting systems. In its role as a company symbol, the building heralded a new era of electrified urban transportation, illustrating the power of technology to improve urban life. And like many of New York City’s great buildings, the Powerhouse was created to ensure the continued growth of the city. The Powerhouse still stands as a monument to the engineers and architects who planned and built New York City’s first successful underground transit system. Viewed as such, it is a monument to the grandiosity of the city itself.



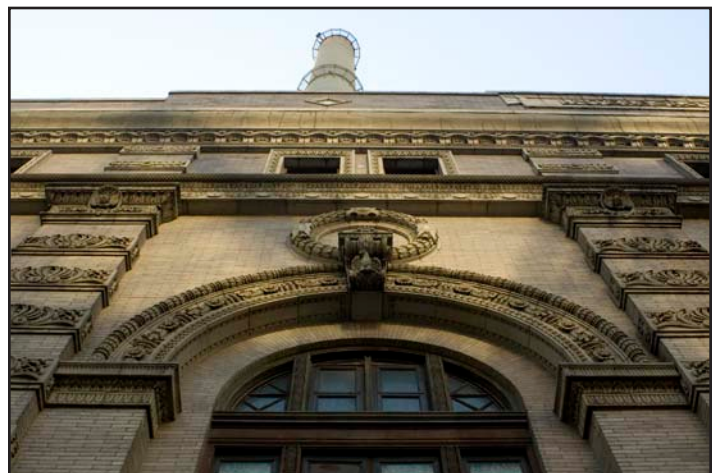
CROSS-SECTION

In 1959, when it was no longer needed to power the subway, the City sold the Powerhouse to Consolidated Edison for use as a power station.⁴ Over the next five decades, Con Edison’s electric generation at the site slowly tapered off; the building came to serve primarily as a steam generating facility. Sometime in the 1980s or 1990s, the City reacquired title to the Powerhouse. As of 2008, Con Edison continues to use the building, presumably as a lessee, to provide steam for private customers in the area.⁵ Yet, the City of New York maintains ownership of the Powerhouse.

Twice in the past 30 years, the Powerhouse has been considered for designation as a landmark. In 1979 and then again in 1990, the Landmarks Preservation Commission held hearings and solicited testimony on the proposal for landmark status. Each time, Con Edison objected and fought the Commission, arguing that its use would be hampered if the building was landmarked. Despite the Commission’s offer to devise guidelines that would allow changes to the building to be made in times of emergency, Con Edison won both battles.⁶

DESIGN

The Powerhouse was designed originally in the form of an Italian Renaissance Palazzo. The engineering design was created by the engineers of the IRT under the direction of Paul C. Hunter.⁷ The structural design of the powerhouse was the responsibility of William C. Phelps, assistant engineer in charge of the Mechanical Department of the Subway Construction Company.⁸ While most powerhouses and power plants are utilitarian structures, built as cheaply as possible and only as necessary to protect the generators, the Powerhouse was designed to serve an aesthetic purpose as well. To this end, the IRT hired the legendary architectural firm McKim Mead & White to design the building for its new flagship power station. As noted in a previous Landmarks application, “by commissioning such a grand design for a very functional purpose, the IRT Company was visually expressing its belief in the greatness, usefulness, and civic importance of this new mode of transportation.”⁹ In their book, *One Thousand New York Buildings*, Jorg Brockman & Bill Harris note that “[t]he reason behind its elaborateness was the fear that a factory-like structure would be a blight on the neighborhood.”¹⁰



ORNATE DECORATIONS GRACE THE FACADE

The exterior of the Powerhouse as designed by Stanford White is a rare example of utilitarian design. “Executed in the Beaux-Arts style drawing upon Renaissance prototypes, it is the embodiment of the aesthetic ideals of the civic-minded City Beautiful movement, spawned by the World’s Columbian Exposition of 1893 in Chicago.”¹¹ The City Beautiful movement held that public improvements could beautify American industrial cities.¹²

The building was artfully decorated with cornices and friezes in the Renaissance Revival style. It consists of two main cathedral-like halls: an operating room and a boiler house separated by a colossal partition wall. The operating room originally contained a row of engines and electric generators; the boiler house contained the boilers, of course. Sitting on a base of smooth ashlar granite, the Powerhouse “has symmetrically designed facades of buff-colored brick arranged in bays with two-story arched window openings that are decorated with terra-cotta moldings and keystones.”¹³ The arcades are surmounted by an attic story with paired window openings framed by terra-cotta rustication blocks and topped by terra-cotta wreaths. At the long north and south facades, pairs of rusticated brick pilasters separate the arched bays. Many of the windows retain their original multi-pane industrial sash. One of the original huge smokestacks required when the plant burned coal remains, and one chimney near the southeast corner has been added. The original terra-cotta roof tiles and the upper cornice have been removed. Four openings have been cut into the base of the south side and one on the north side. An addition was constructed in 1940 at the Twelfth Avenue façade (the western end of the powerhouse). This extension is not included in the proposed designation.¹⁴



MANY OF THE ELABORATE FRIEZES ARE STILL INTACT

The building was located close to the Hudson River “to facilitate delivery of coal to fire its generators.”¹⁵ Architect Stanford White “place[d] the conveyors for bringing in the fuel and removing the ashes discretely underground. He also designed its smokestacks to look like tapered Classical columns.”¹⁶

REASONS FOR LANDMARKING

The most immediate and effective way to ensure that the Powerhouse remains for generations to come is to designate the building a landmark. There are several reasons why this building is worthy of landmark designation.

HISTORICAL SIGNIFICANCE

The Powerhouse at 59th Street is one of the last great powerhouses standing in New York City today. In the past two years alone, three historically- and architecturally-significant powerhouses have been either destroyed or closed off from the public by redevelopment as condos.

The Kent Avenue Powerhouse was constructed in 1905 and provided the electricity for the original Brooklyn Rapid Transit system. Located on the Brooklyn waterfront in Williamsburg, the Kent Avenue Powerhouse featured a stone foundation and 4-story high arched windows with cream colored terra-cotta trim.¹⁷ As the site of the 1937 strike that led to the formation of the Transit Workers Union, it was an integral piece of the city’s transportation history. Nevertheless, in the spring of 2008, it was demolished by Con Edison. As Mary Habstritt, President of the Society for Industrial Architecture noted, “We are losing a lot of grand power plants but this is probably the most stunning. It tells the whole story of our subway system.”¹⁸

The East River Powerhouse, located in Manhattan adjacent to the FDR Drive between 38th and 39th Streets, was another example of a Beaux-Arts water-side power plant that has been lost. In 2007, the East River Powerhouse was demolished to make way for a residential development by Sheldon Solow.¹⁹

In Long-Island City, yet another power plant has been forever altered and removed from public accessibility. The Long Island City Pennsylvania Railroad (PRR) Power House in Long Island City, Queens, was converted to residential condominiums by architect Karl Fischer.²⁰ Though residential reuse is preferable to demolition, the general public is still not able to enjoy this piece of New York history.

Another reason to designate the Powerhouse at 59th Street as a landmark is to preserve for generations an irreplaceable piece of New York transportation history. The Powerhouse serves as a powerful reminder of how proud New York once was of its subway system. The builders of the subways and civic leaders were so proud of their subway system that they even languished over the ancillary elements of the system. Rather than build a plain utilitarian structure to house its power source, the designers and builders of the subways designed an ornate, classical building. The fact that most riders would never see this building was irrelevant. It spoke to their pride in the overall system.

As New Yorkers' interest and pride in their transportation systems and transportation history enjoy a revival, it is only fitting that the Powerhouse be preserved. The recent redevelopment of the High Line was just the



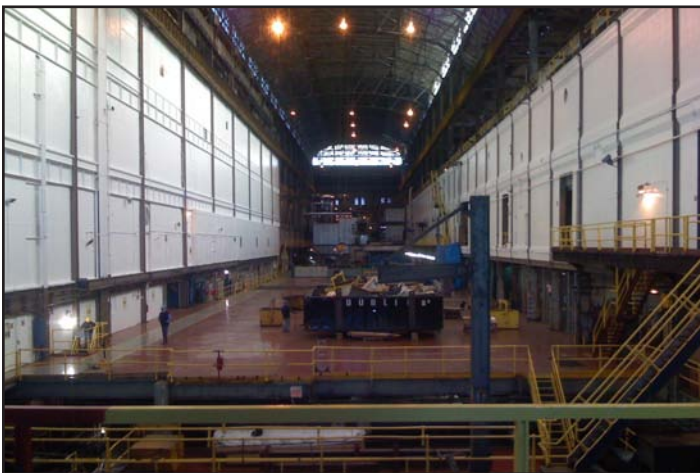
A LARGE WINDOW OVERLOOKS THE HUDSON RIVER

beginning of this movement to preserve our city's historical transportation infrastructure. The Powerhouse is the next step in that movement.

ARCHITECTURAL SIGNIFICANCE

The Powerhouse should be preserved because of its architectural significance. It is a beautiful building and one of the few existing-yet-unprotected McKim Mead & White buildings in the city. McKim Mead & White remains one of the most celebrated architecture firms to ever have worked in NYC. Though few buildings should be protected solely because they are the work of famous designers, it is widely accepted that the work of these men in particular is inherently worth preserving. To allow this building to remain unprotected might condemn the Powerhouse to the same fate as that of Pennsylvania Station, the most famous, and missed, McKim Mead & White building this city has hosted.

The Beaux Arts style of the building provides admirable contrast to the changing character of the neighborhood in which it resides. The Powerhouse is quickly being surrounded by modern glass buildings, the construction of which risks erasing the industrial architecture that once made the northern reaches of Hell's Kitchen unique. Contextually, the building adds a great deal to the landscape of the area, which is rapidly becoming an endless sea of glass and steel. Preservation of the Powerhouse pays a necessary tribute to the history of the neighborhood and the city alike.



THE INTERIOR AS IT LOOKS TODAY

FUTURE USES

While the primary goal of this proposal is to achieve landmark designation for the Powerhouse, we cannot help but begin to imagine the potential future uses a landmark designation and preservation might allow.

A re-imagined Powerhouse offers an amazing opportunity to provide unencumbered indoor space for the public. Though the possibilities for the Powerhouse are endless, the building's two huge, cavernous halls would provide the ideal venues for a premier indoor market, a world-class art museum, an event space, and more.

MARKET

The North Hall of the Powerhouse would serve as a perfect home to New York's largest indoor market. Just as London's Borough and Spitalfields' markets provide a fora for London's restaurants, bakeries, and fish, meat, and vegetable vendors to sell their goods to the public, the Powerhouse might provide New York's restaurants, bakeries, and fresh food vendors the opportunity to sell their goods to New Yorkers in a vibrant public space 365 days a year. Though New York has several markets currently operating around the city, none of these markets operates year-round, rain-or-shine. Nor do any of these existing markets enjoy a space as large or as beautiful as the Powerhouse.

MUSEUM/GALLERY

The South Hall of the IRT Powerhouse is the ideal setting for a world-class art cooperative, a place where all of New York's great art museums can exhibit work that might otherwise wait in a dark storage room for a brief showing for a few weeks a year. New York is home to many of the world's greatest art institutions: the Metropolitan Museum of Art, the Museum of Modern Art, the Guggenheim Museum, the Whitney, the Cooper-Hewitt National Museum of Design, the Brooklyn Museum, the International Center of Photography, Dia Art Museum. Yet due to the size of their collections and the inevitable space constraints of New York City, these museums are only able to exhibit approximately 10% of their collections at any given time. The IRT Powerhouse could host a series of rotating exhibitions of the works owned by New York's preeminent art museums. In January, the South Hall will host an exhibit of lesser known works in MoMa's



THE POWERHOUSE FILLS AN ENTIRE CITY BLOCK

collections, works that otherwise would wait in storage. In February, the Met would have its turn. In March, April, and May, the Whitney, Guggenheim, and Brooklyn Museum would have their opportunities to fill the space.

Alternatively, the South Hall of the IRT Powerhouse could serve as a museum in its own right. The Powerhouse is the only building large and grand enough to serve as Manhattan's answer to London's Tate Modern, a museum which itself occupies a former power plant on the banks of the Thames. Several museums are currently looking for museum space in Manhattan. For example, the new Dia director, Philippe Vergne, has stated that finding an exhibition space in Manhattan is his first order of business.²¹ The Powerhouse might meet this need. Whatever institution ultimately occupies the space, there is little doubt that the IRT Powerhouse, with its cathedral ceilings and inspiring design, is perfectly suited to serve as a home to great art.

EVENT SPACE

The Powerhouse is the ideal setting for the dozens of special events that take place in the City each year. The North and South Halls can easily host charity events and galas, fashion shows, movie premiers, inaugural balls, and concerts. These cathedral-like spaces can accommodate even the largest gatherings, while providing the funding needed to restore and operate the facility.

As the home to a market, an art museum, and a space for special events, the IRT Powerhouse would be one of the most unique year-round destinations in all of New York City. In the end, however, the Powerhouse

is one of New York's gems and as such, its destiny should be open to public discussion. Whatever its use, the IRT Powerhouse offers the ideal opportunity to preserve a piece of New York's industrial past while creating public space for the future.

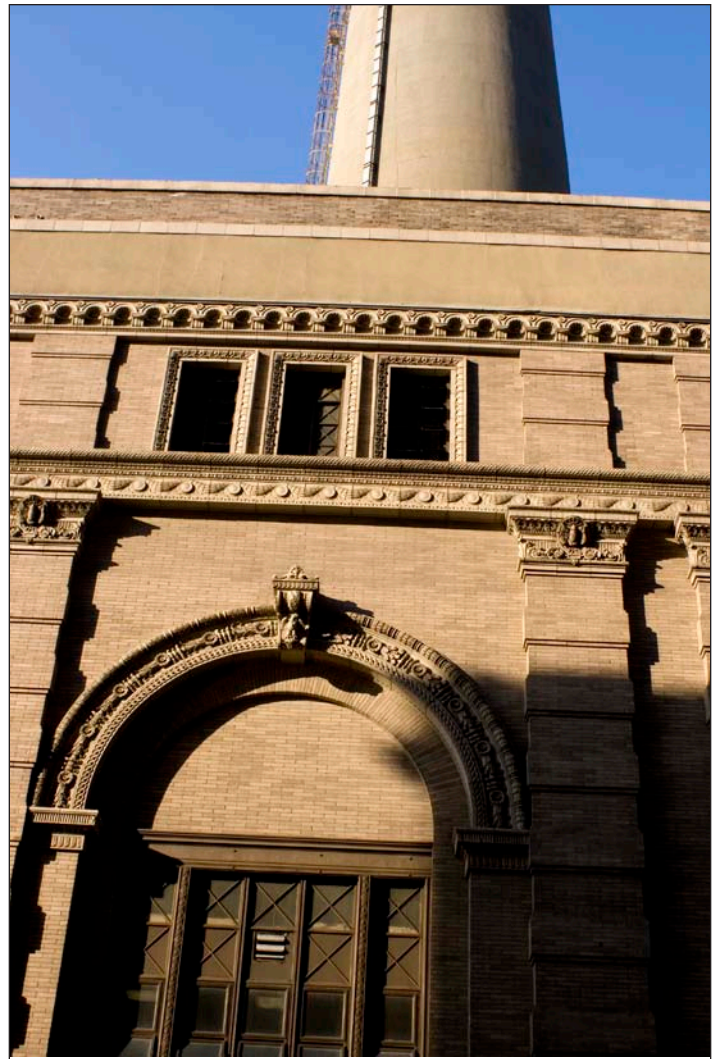
PUBLIC SUPPORT

This Proposal to designate the Powerhouse is supported by many New Yorkers. [Community Board 4]²² supports the Proposal, as does [City Councilwoman Gail Brewer]²³, [State Senator Tom Duane]²⁴, [State Assemblywoman Linda Rosenthal]²⁵ and [Speaker of the City Council Christine Quinn].²⁶ The Municipal Art Society,²⁷ the Alliance for the Arts,²⁸ the Historic Districts Council,²⁹ the Beaux Arts Alliance,³⁰ and Robert Hammond,³¹ Co-Founder of Friends of the High Line, all support the Proposal. We ask the Commission to follow the lead of these respected New Yorkers and groups and designate the Powerhouse a New York City Landmark.

CONCLUSION

It is no secret to anyone who lives in New York that the city is in the midst of perhaps the most dynamic urban revival in American history. Even the term revival does not capture what is happening presently. A revival implies a process with a beginning and an end, yet there seems to be no end in sight to New York City's newfound fascination with its physical appearance and condition. The revitalization that began in the 1990s in neighborhoods like Times Square, Tribeca, Greenwich Village, Dumbo, the Meatpacking District, Williamsburg, and Harlem, has spread to the Financial District, Hell's Kitchen, Fort Greene, Washington Heights, Long Island City, and the Lower East Side. While this urban reinvestment has been good for the city in countless ways, making the city cleaner, safer, more aesthetically pleasing than ever before, the process has also sparked a real estate development frenzy that has made every empty lot or deteriorating building a target for the wrecking ball. New York's success paradoxically threatens its historically and architecturally significant buildings, including the Powerhouse.

This revitalization of New York's neighborhoods must be done with an eye towards preserving those buildings that are an integral part of New York's urban fab-



DECORATIVE ARCHED WINDOWS

ric. Many of the parking lots, factories, and garages that face redevelopment will not be missed. But frenzied redevelopment tends to claim innocent victims as well: beautiful, architecturally significant buildings that are unprotected from alteration or demolition.

With revitalization we risk becoming victims of our own success. As development in and around Hell's Kitchen, the Time-Warner Center, and Riverside Park South drastically changes the landscape in this part of Manhattan, there is an increased risk that the Powerhouse might meet the same fate as that other McKim Mead & White work: Pennsylvania Station. Without landmark status, the Powerhouse might continue to suffer degradation at the hands of Con Edison. Far worse, if the building is not designated a landmark now, there is nothing to stop a future owner from razing the building once it ceases to be needed for electricity or steam.

¹ Prior Landmarks Application, obtained from the files of the Landmarks Preservation Commission, attached at Appendix A.

² *Id.*

³ *Id.*

⁴ Christopher Gray, *Streetscapes: The IRT Generating Plant on 59th Street; The Power of Design vs. Con Ed Power*, N.Y. TIMES, November 17, 1991, available at <http://query.nytimes.com/gst/fullpage.html?res=9D0CE6DD1E3EF934A25752C1A967958260&sec=&spon=&pagewanted=print>, attached as Appendix B.

⁵ See Appendix C: ACRIS Property Records.

⁶ Gray, *supra* note 4.

⁷ Prior Landmarks Application, obtained from the files of the Landmarks Preservation Commission, attached at Appendix A.

⁸ *Id.*

⁹ *Id.*

¹⁰ JORG BROCKMAN & BILL HARRIS, ONE THOUSAND NEW YORK BUILDINGS at 260 (2002).

¹¹ Prior Landmarks Application, obtained from the files of the Landmarks Preservation Commission, attached at Appendix A.

¹² *Id.*

¹³ *Id.*

¹⁴ *Id.* See also Tom Fletcher's New York Architecture, at <http://www.nyc-architecture.com/MID/MID136.htm>, attached as Appendix D.

¹⁵ BROCKMAN & HARRIS, *supra* note 10, at 260.

¹⁶ *Id.*

¹⁷ David Freedlander, Community Shocked as Plug Pulled on Historic Power Plant, AMNEWYORK, April 18, 2008, available at <http://www.amny.com/news/local/multimedia/am-powerplan0418,0,6752842.story>, attached as Appendix E.

¹⁸ *Id.*

¹⁹ *Id.*

²⁰ *Id.*

²¹ Mary Abbe, *Gotham Revival*, ARTNEWS, September 2008, 78, attached as Appendix F.

²² See Appendix G: Letter of Support from Community Board 4.

²³ See Appendix H: Letter of Support from [Councilwoman Gail Brewer].

²⁴ See Appendix I: Letter of Support from [State Senator Tom Duane].

²⁵ See Appendix J: Letter of Support from [State Assemblywoman Linda Rosenthal].

²⁶ See Appendix K: Letter of Support from [Speaker of the Council Christine Quinn].

²⁷ See Appendix L: Letter of Support from the Municipal Art Society.

²⁸ See Appendix M: Letter of Support from the Alliance for the Arts.

²⁹ See Appendix N: Letter of Support from the Historic Districts Council.

³⁰ See Appendix O: Letter of Support from the Beaux Arts Alliance.

³¹ See Appendix P: Letter of Support from Robert Hammond, Co-Founder, Friends of the High Line.

CONTACT INFORMATION

Jimmy Finn Paul Kelterborn John Egnatios-Beene

The Powerhouse Group
561 Tenth Avenue
Apt. 41B
New York, New York 10036
917.494.3586
interboro.group@gmail.com