

The Municipal Art Society of New York



**Testimony from the Municipal Art Society of New York (MAS) to the Landmarks Preservation Commission regarding 959 Sterling Place in the Crown Heights North II Historic District**

Designed in the Romanesque and Gothic Revival styles and constructed in two building campaigns from 1888-9 and 1911-13, the former Brooklyn Methodist Episcopal Church Home is a rare survivor of its type for both Crown Heights and New York City. The MAS Preservation Committee strongly supports its full rehabilitation and restoration.

It is because of this all-important objective that we have concerns about the proposal at 959 Sterling Place. First, we question the decision to employ a campus typology, which generates a single, large institutional building, rather than responding to the context of the surrounding neighborhood, which is a rowhouse typology, comprised of multiple repetitive small buildings. Members of the committee offered that shifting the program might resolve some of the site planning issues. For example, mixed uses in both the historic Church Home and new building may better suit the programming needs.

If the Commission determines that the campus configuration is indeed the appropriate direction for the site, then a more nuanced approach needs to be taken with the new building. While the application of two different tones of brick is intended to reduce the experience of bulk, the treatment is not successful at minimizing its monolithic horizontality. The Sterling Place façade should be modified to increase setbacks and introduce welcome glimpses of the courtyard. The overall height should be reduced by at least one story to minimize visual impacts on the Church Home and the transition to the adjacent townhouses needs to be better considered.

Finally, and perhaps most importantly, there is no guaranty that the Church Home will indeed be returned to its former glory following completion of this project. The cost of the rehabilitation and restoration has not yet been determined and there is no formalized commitment for following through. There is also uncertainty around the inclusion of affordable housing, and at what levels.

This project has the opportunity to offer the community important, lasting benefits – a beautifully restored school building and much-needed affordable housing. Such a project must be undertaken with great care and transparency. The MAS Preservation Committee respectfully asks the Commission to work with the applicant to achieve a more sympathetic, contextual design for the new building and commit to a plan for the full restoration of the former Brooklyn Methodist Episcopal Church Home.