

SOCIETY OF
ARCHITECTURAL
HISTORIANS

19 March 2018 (revised)

Ms. Meenakshi Srinivasan, Chair
New York City Landmarks Preservation Commission
Municipal Building
1 Centre Street, 9th Floor, North
New York, NY 10007
msrinivasan@lpc.nyc.gov

Re: objection to redesign of plaza for the Marine Midland Bank, 140 Broadway, New York

Dear Ms. Srinivasan,

The Society of Architectural Historians (SAH) expresses strong support for the continued preservation of the Marine Midland Bank, 140 Broadway, and its outdoor plaza, featuring Isamu Noguchi's sculpture *Red Cube*. Marine Midland Bank is listed as a landmark by the New York City Landmarks Preservation Commission, and we greatly appreciate both its listing and the continued review over proposed projects for the building and site.

The Marine Midland Bank, designed by Gordon Bunshaft of Skidmore, Owings & Merrill (SOM), was designed between 1960 and 1964, completed in 1967; its plaza is rightly recognized as one of the most accomplished fusions of modern architectural, landscape architecture, and sculpture in lower Manhattan, and remains one of the most visible landmarks of corporate modernism in the United States. Marine Midland Bank is one of the first buildings design to conform to the 1961 Zoning Resolution that incentivized the development of public plazas, in this case resulting in a 51-story building with a footprint that occupies only 40% of the site, the remainder of which was developed as a privately owned public space (POPS). The building is surrounded on three sides by a 25- to 30-foot sidewalk, with an 80-foot wide-open plaza facing Broadway. The plaza was designed as a simple, stark plane of travertine pavers, and few furnishings. The highlight of the plaza is Noguchi's *Red Cube*, installed in 1968, a 28-foot tall steel and aluminum sculpture that balances on one corner of the cube. The plaza was designed to be open, so that Red Cube was the dominant visual element of the space. The sculpture was described in the exhibition catalog *Noguchi's Imaginary Landscapes (1978)* as "serenely dominating the space." Ada Louis Huxtable hailed the plaza, writing, "Instead of thoughtless destruction through new construction," in the Marine Midland Bank plaza, "there is a calculated relationship between past and present, and between buildings and spaces."

We understand that an application has been made to modify the plaza where Noguchi's *Red Cube* is situated on Broadway. We also understand a revised proposal was submitted on 16 March, after our initial letter was composed. The revised proposal calls for the removal of post-1968 elements including the four, raised linear planting beds (installed in 2000), and the large plaque to Harry B. Helmsley (also installed in 2000), which SAH supports as they do not contribute to the significance of the plaza. The revised proposal also calls for the installation of six new circular planters with integral seating, along with eight light bollards. The revised proposal includes the installation of four new rectangular planters (with new adjacent seating) along the Broadway side of the plaza. We recognize that the new design elements on the Broadway side are located outside of the property line, and not subject to Landmarks Preservation Commission review. Our concern is that by adding new design elements at the perimeter of the plaza - without modification to, or mitigation of the proposed changes regarding the placement of food service carts on the Broadway side of the plaza - the character-defining, modern, open space of the plaza would be compromised. SAH does not support the

installation of these new elements. We believe that the cumulative effect of all changes - the objectionable changes on the Cedar Street side of the plaza, as well as the objectionable changes on the Broadway side - detract from the significance of the plaza and work against its design intent. We strongly urge the New York City Landmarks Preservation Commission to guard against inappropriate alterations to the plaza and the siting of Noguchi's *Red Cube*, such as the current proposal. We believe that the plaza, incorporating Bunshaft's design, coupled with Noguchi's *Red Cube* is of national significance, and all efforts should be made to preserve this plaza as one of the best examples of the modern fusion of architecture, landscape architecture, and sculpture, into a memorable public plaza.

The Society of Architectural Historians expresses strong support for preservation of the plaza at the Marine Midland Bank Building, and the denial of the proposed alterations. The Marine Midland Bank Building including its plaza Noguchi's *Red Cube*, is an architectural landmark of national significance, and is well deserving of protection. We urge the New York City Landmarks Preservation Commission to deny the permit for inappropriate alteration the plaza to insure that future generations are able to experience this monument of modern American architecture.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, consisting of the letters 'B', 'C', and 'G' in a stylized, cursive font, followed by a horizontal line.

Bryan Clark Green, Ph.D., LEED AP BD+C
Chair, Society of Architectural Historians Heritage Conservation Committee

cc: Ms. Kate Lemos McHale, New York City Landmarks Preservation Commission; Ms. Tara Kelly, Municipal Art Society of New York; the Historic Districts Council; Ms. Erin M. Tobin, the Preservation League of New York State; Ms. Peg Breen, the New York Landmarks Conservancy; Ms. Kelly Carroll, Historic Districts Council; Ms. Pauline Saliga; Ms. Deborah Slaton; Mr. Kenneth Breisch, Ph.D.; Mr. David Fixler, FAIA; Mr. Jeffrey Cody, Ph.D.; Mr. Ken Oshima, Ph.D., Mr. Anthony Cohn, Members, SAH Heritage Conservation Committee