

April 30, 2019

Dear New York City Council Members,

I write to you today to encourage the New York City Council to take into account the historic significance of the Elizabeth Street Garden as you consider proposals to redevelop the site. As an Architectural Historian qualified by the Secretary of the Interior's Historic Preservation Professional Standards, I feel that this landscape is of regional and national historic significance. While the Elizabeth Street Garden is significant as a green space in a neighborhood starved of such infrastructure, there is an additional exceptionalism in that the landscape is the expression of an outsider artist. Outsider art is that which is produced by a person who is creating work outside the mainstream art world and often without any formal training. Allan Reiver created Elizabeth Street Garden as an artistic expression of his vision for the Little Italy lot. He laid out the garden design in 1991, adding lawn spaces, pathways, and horticultural features including the two still extant anchoring pear trees.

Reiver added statuary and architectural elements in response to the site's layout and with regards to their own spatial relationship. According to The Cultural Landscape Foundation, Reiver's curated collection of garden statuary includes "marble columns and an iron gazebo designed by Olmsted Brothers for the Long Island estate, Burrwood ... and a stone-and-granite balustrade designed by French landscape architect Jacques-Henri-Auguste Gréber. The balustrade was removed from the 36-acre Lynnewood Hall, considered to be one of the largest Gilded Age mansions in the Philadelphia area" (online at <https://bit.ly/2Uv3TOt>). Reiver collected and curated art by noted architects and placed these pieces in an inspired, expressive design within the landscape. The pieces were selected and displayed in a thoughtful manner. His curation of the landscape came from his own expression rather than formal training in landscape design. Reiver produced similar work, slightly later, on a property at 63rd Street and 2nd Avenue in Manhattan. This landscape is no longer extant, which makes Elizabeth Street Garden the last remaining expression of his vision.

Outsider art has been recognized by the National Register of Historic places in such landmark listings as Opus 40 in Saugerties, New York, and Watts Towers in Los Angeles, California. More closely to home, the outsider artwork at 5Pointz in Queens, New York, and was most recently highlighted for its value in highlighting the in situ work of artists outside of the academy.

There is further in that this is potentially the only green space that exists as a singular artist driven creation in New York City. This novice artistic expression can be linked to predecessors such as the Liz Christy community garden network, which was recently determined to be of historic significance, and the demolished Garden of Eden earthworks by Adam Purple.

As noted in *The New York Times* article dated June 20, 1991, Elizabeth Street Garden was built on what "had been an abandoned lot filled with the usual urban detritus." While the garden has been a noteworthy element of the North of Little Italy neighborhood since its construction in 1991, it has also served as a community building spaces since it was opened to the public in 2005. The Elizabeth Street block on which the garden is located has transformed from a predominantly industrial and commercial strip to a block of residential, commercial, retail, and restaurant spaces. The garden has served as a key in this transition—the community as it exists today was created around the garden.

I very much appreciate the opportunity to submit comments and hope that you will consider the above concerns as you move forward with your review. In light of the site's historic significance, I have begun preparing and plan to work with New York's State Historic Preservation Office on application to the National Register of Historic Places. I would ask that the City Council review the outcome of that application in order to better assess the impact of the proposed work.

Sincerely,  
Melanie Macchio  
Architectural Historian

cc: Manhattan Community Board 2