



February 1, 2018

Hon. Meenakshi Srinivasan, Chair
New York City Landmarks Preservation Commission
One Centre Street, 9th Floor
New York, NY 10007

Re: 140 Broadway, Marine Midland Building; LPC-19-20734; Block 48 - Lot 1

Dear Chair Srinivasan,

I write on behalf of The Cultural Landscape Foundation (TCLF) to express strong opposition to the proposed changes to the plaza at 140 Broadway and, by extension, the Marine Midland Building. Having reviewed details and renderings of the proposal now under review by the Landmarks Preservation Commission, it is clear that the redesign of the plaza would adversely affect the integrity of what has been designated a New York City Landmark. In fact, pending the outcome of your deliberations, TCLF has officially recognized the site as now being [at risk](#).

As you know, 140 Broadway was designed between 1960 and 1964 by Skidmore, Owings & Merrill under the direction of Gordon Bunshaft, the firm's chief architect, and was one of the first projects to conform to the 1961 Zoning Resolution that incentivized developers to incorporate public plazas into their office-building plans. To complete the design for the 80-foot-wide plaza fronting Broadway on the site's western flank, Bunshaft turned to celebrated artist Isamu Noguchi, with whom he would collaborate many times. The result was the iconic *Red Cube*, the 28-foot-tall vermilion sculpture that seems to defy gravity as it teeters on one edge, meant to be the solitary feature on the otherwise uninterrupted ground plane. While five low planters were placed along Cedar Street, to the south, the plaza facing Broadway was left free of any landscape embellishments or site furnishings, making it, in effect, an expansive travertine plinth for the minimalist sculpture. Indeed, a 1978 exhibition catalog (*Noguchi's Imaginary Landscapes*) described the sculpture as "serenely dominating the plaza." Having stood for half a century, Noguchi's *Red Cube* has been declared an unqualified success by both popular and critical acclaim.

The current redesign of the site calls for six new circular planters with engaged seating (larger than those of the original design), along with eight light bollards, along Cedar Street, thus replacing the linear planting beds now in that location. The redesign also includes a raised, circular planting bed, fourteen feet in diameter, to be installed near the southwest corner of the plaza. According to renderings of the proposed work, three trees would be planted within the new circular feature. As those renderings also show, the large new planter and its trees would visually rebalance the plaza, negating the *Red Cube* as the solitary, dominant element on the ground plane. Doing so would not only adversely affect the experience of Noguchi's sculpture, but of the building and the plaza as well, for all three elements are compositionally intertwined.

Arthur Drexler, director of the Department of Architecture and Design at the Museum of Modern Art, succinctly described the interdependence of the plaza, the sculpture, and architecture: "Together the three elements—building, paving, cube—are somehow more than they seem to be, as if the composition had been created by a sculptor of the minimal school intent on transposing the empiricism of architecture into the metaphysics of abstract form." Noguchi also recognized the enormous potential of his sculpture to impact the larger urban environment. In 1968 he said, "...a sculptor is not merely a decorator of buildings but a serious collaborator with the architect in the creation of significant space and of significant shapes which define this space."

Many other critics closely attuned to the New York cityscape have also written about the plaza at 140 Broadway. Certainly not least among them was Ada Louise Huxtable, who called that space a “demonstration of New York at its physical best.” In an extensive, laudatory article published on March 31, 1968, she added:

Space is meaningless without scale, containment, boundaries and direction. The fabled massing of the Wall Street skyscrapers has been given masterful urban definition by the architects' ordering of these few blocks of new construction. It has been done by concerned, coordinated effort. This is planning. It is the opposite of non-planning, or the normal pattern of New York development. See and savor it now, before it is carelessly disposed of.

Bunshaft's biographer Carol Krinsky wrote: “This is probably Noguchi's most popular work of art done in conjunction with architecture, partly because it requires no interpretation. It is a teasingly precarious-looking object for a sober building.” And perhaps most notably, the 2013 designation of 140 Broadway by the Landmarks Preservation Commission also recognized the importance of the sculpture as an element not only in harmony with, but essential to, the experience of the space and architecture around it.

...rather than place the sculpture in the center of the Broadway plaza, as a Beaux Arts architect might have done, it was installed asymmetrically, to the left, increasing one's awareness of the surrounding void. Furthermore, by employing a strong color, Noguchi created an additional counterpoint to the dark surface of 140 Broadway and the older buildings that flank it.

Without rehashing the changes to 140 Broadway that have already diminished the integrity of the plaza's original design, we believe it is imperative that the Landmarks Preservation Commission deny any request to place additional site furnishings or landscape features there. We hope that you will agree that the best design for the plaza, and those who encounter it, is the original minimalist vision borne from the collaboration of two masters, which remains a much-admired benchmark for future urban design.

Please do not hesitate to contact TCLF if we can provide additional information. We thank you in advance for considering our concerns and observations.

Very best regards,

A handwritten signature in black ink, consisting of a stylized 'C' followed by a horizontal line that tapers to the right.

Charles A. Birnbaum, FASLA, FAAR, President, CEO, and Founder
The Cultural Landscape Foundation

Cc: Peg Breen, New York Landmarks Conservancy; Simeon Bankoff, Historic Districts Council; Susan Chin, Design Trust for Public Space; Jennifer Nitzky, American Society of Landscape Architects, New York Chapter; Elizabeth Goldstein, Municipal Art Society of New York; Stacey Anderson, Municipal Art Society of New York; Laurance Fauconnet, Municipal Art Society of New York; Roger Byrom, Manhattan Community Board 1, Landmarks and Preservation Committee; Bruce Ehrmann, Manhattan Community Board 1, Landmarks and Preservation Committee