



14 January 2019

Community Board 2 Public Hearing – Elizabeth Street Garden – Oral Testimony

Thank you for this opportunity to submit written and oral testimony on behalf of The Cultural Landscape Foundation concerning the Elizabeth Street Garden.

The Cultural Landscape Foundation is a Washington, D.C.-based education and advocacy non-profit established in 1998 with a mission of “connecting people to places.” The foundation, created by New York native Charles A. Birnbaum, is considered a leading national authority on the country’s landscape legacy. It hosts the most comprehensive free, online database of the nation’s cultural landscape legacy – the *What’s Out There* database; it has produced more than a dozen award-winning video oral histories with leading landscape architects in the United States, including New York-based practitioners M. Paul Friedberg and Nicholas Quennell; it has organized and curated critically acclaimed traveling exhibitions, including *The Landscape Architecture Legacy of Dan Kiley*, which was shown at the Center for Architecture on LaGuardia Place; and it has created print and online guides to New York City and cities throughout the country. All of this can be accessed on the foundation’s website: www.tclf.org.

The Cultural Landscape Foundation considers the Elizabeth Street Garden to be a nationally important cultural asset, one that is unique to New York City and that cannot be replicated. The Elizabeth Street Garden is not simply a generic swath of green space. In fact, because of the present threat, the foundation has designated the garden as a *Landslide* nationally significant landscape that is threatened and at-risk. *Landslide* is TCLF’s advocacy program, and the *Landslide* designation has proved an effective means of preventing the destruction of significant sites in New York City, including the Frick Collection’s viewing garden on East 70th Street, designed by Russell Page, the modernist plaza at 140 Broadway with Isamu Noguchi’s iconic *Red Cube*, and Sunnyside Gardens in Queens.

The Elizabeth Street Garden was created 28 years ago when Community Board 2 leased a vacant lot to Elizabeth Street Gallery owner Allan Reiver on a month-to-month basis. Echoing the work of Elizabeth ‘Liz’ Christy and the Green Guerrillas from the 1970s, Reiver not only cleaned up the lot and planted grass, trees, and shrubs, but he also envisioned something that was a unique artistic expression. Reiver, who was involved in salvaging architectural ornaments from once-celebrated buildings that had been demolished, carefully realized a community-garden design, strategically locating outdoor statues and structures from his personal collection. In the process, he transformed a once-vacant lot into a rare section of green space that should be viewed as a unique and irreplaceable artistic expression in the tradition of Watts Towers in Los Angeles and Opus 40 in Saugerties, New York, which are, respectively, listed as a National Historic Landmark and a National Register-designated property.

The statuary collection at Elizabeth Street Garden includes a pair of marble columns and an iron gazebo designed by the Olmsted Brothers firm for Burrwood (the former home of Walter Jennings) 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. Reiver has gifted both the gazebo and the balustrade to the garden in perpetuity. These are important elements that bear witness to the Country Place era, a bygone period in estate design from around 1890 to 1930. In 2013 a group of community members worked with Reiver to further revitalize the site, opening it to the public and increasing community engagement.

The garden falls within the Chinatown and Little Italy Historic District, which is listed in the State and National Registers of Historic Places and was designated a New York City Landmark in 1998. However, the garden is not currently part of the National Register designation. The Liz Christy Garden was also once an unrecognized landscape feature within a historic district. Fortunately, it was listed in the National Register of Historic Places as part of the updated Bowery National Register Historic District in 2013.

As noted earlier, the Elizabeth Street Garden is not a generic swath of green space; it is an artistic expression that is unique to New York City and should be considered in its totality. Consequently, The Cultural Landscape Foundation believes that every effort should be made to prevent its demolition and that the National Register designation for the area should be advanced as part of a commitment to 'best practices' by the city, one that could ultimately lead to the Elizabeth Street Garden's designation on the National Register of Historic Places as a work of outsider art that could never be recreated today or in the future.