

CITY COUNCIL  
CITY OF NEW YORK

----- X

TRANSCRIPT OF THE MINUTES

Of the

SUBCOMMITTEE ON LANDMARKS, PUBLIC SITING AND  
MARITIME USES

----- X

March 18, 2014  
Start: 10:53 a.m.  
Recess: 12:06 p.m.

HELD AT: 250 Broadway - Committee Rm,  
16th Fl.

B E F O R E:  
PETER A. KOO  
Chairperson

COUNCIL MEMBERS:  
Annabel Palma  
Maria del Carmen Arroyo  
Rosie Mendez  
Stephen T. Levin  
Inez D. Barron  
Ben Kallos  
David G. Greenfield

A P P E A R A N C E S (CONTINUED)

Jenny Fernandez

Director

Intergovernmental and Community Relations

Landmarks Preservation Commission

Thomas Lucania

Representative

Bronx Borough President Ruben Diaz, Jr.

1 SUBCOMMITTEE ON LANDMARKS, PUBLIC SITING AND MARITIME USES 3

2 [background comment]

3 CHAIRPERSON KOO: Not yet?

4 [background comments]

5 [pause]

6 CHAIRPERSON KOO: Good morning. This is  
7 Council Member Peter Koo, Chair of the Landmark  
8 Subcommittee; the Committee is gonna come to session.  
9 We wanna welcome Council Member Stephen Levin and Ben  
10 Kallos and Rosie Mendez to our committee. And  
11 today's hearing is LU No. 34 (20145279 HKX), the  
12 Bronx General Post Office in Council Member Arroyo's  
13 district and Jenny Fernandez, representing Landmarks  
14 Preservation Committee will give the testimony.

15 JENNY FERNANDEZ: Thank you, Chair Koo;  
16 Council Members. My name is Jenny Fernandez,  
17 Director of Intergovernmental and Community Relations  
18 for the Landmarks Preservation Commission. I'm here  
19 today to testify on the Commission's designation of  
20 the Bronx General Post Office Lobby, First Floor  
21 Interior.

22 On October 29th, 2013, the Landmarks  
23 Preservation Commission held a public hearing on the  
24 proposed designation of the Bronx General Post Office  
25 Lobby, First Floor Interior. Four people spoke in

1 SUBCOMMITTEE ON LANDMARKS, PUBLIC SITING AND MARITIME USES 4  
2 support of designation, including representatives,  
3 Congressman Jose Serrano and Bronx Borough President  
4 Ruben Diaz, Jr., as well as representatives of the  
5 Historic District's Council and the New York  
6 Landmarks Conservancy. There were no speakers in  
7 opposition to designation. The Commission also  
8 received 13 letters and emails in support of  
9 designation. On December 17th, 2013, the Commission  
10 voted to designate the building as an interior  
11 landmark.

12 The Bronx General Post Office building  
13 and its notable interior lobby were planned and  
14 constructed between 1934 and 1937. The architectural  
15 design was executed by Thomas Harlan Ellett. The  
16 space contains a series of 13 mural panels created by  
17 noted artists Ben Shahn and Bernarda Bryson. In the  
18 early 20th century, as the Bronx was becoming one of  
19 the fastest growing urban areas in the country, it  
20 became apparent that the Borough needed improved  
21 postal facilities. Efforts to secure a proper  
22 headquarters began as early as 1902, but it was only  
23 during the depths of the Great Depression and the  
24 advent of the New Deal Public Works program that the  
25 Bronx General Post Office was finally completed.

2 Funding came from the Public Works Administration and  
3 the architectural design was overseen by the Federal  
4 Government's Office of the Supervising Architect of  
5 which Ellett was a temporary employee.

6           The Bronx General Post Office and its  
7 lobby were designed in the modern classical style of  
8 architecture preferred by the New Deal era public  
9 works programs. Ellett's design combines modified  
10 classical ornament with a tendency to abstraction and  
11 simplification of these motifs. Integral to the  
12 design of the Bronx General Post Office lobby was the  
13 series of murals titled, "Resources of America,"  
14 conceived by Shahn and completed with Bryson's  
15 assistance. The artists won the commission through  
16 an open competition sponsored by the Section of  
17 Painting and Sculpture, a Federal agency closely  
18 aligned with the Office of the Supervising Architect.  
19 Per the requirements of the competition, Shahn's  
20 designs comprise a unified decorative scheme that  
21 integrates with the architectural setting of the  
22 lobby. All of the panels relate to the general theme  
23 of labor and depict dynamic, even heroic views of  
24 American workers, which include African-Americans and  
25 women.

2 An acclaimed photographer as well as  
3 painter and graphic artist, Shahn often used  
4 photographs as a basis for his paintings. In 1933 he  
5 apprenticed with Mexican muralist Diego Rivera.  
6 Several of the panels in the Bronx Post Office were  
7 clearly inspired by his photography trips to the  
8 American heartland during the 1930s, which others  
9 were derived from his extensive collection of  
10 newspaper clippings.

11 The Bronx General Post Office has  
12 continued to serve its original purpose since it  
13 opened in 1937; the murals have been restored on at  
14 least two occasions and the lobby underwent extensive  
15 renovations, all of which occurred in the 70s. In  
16 spite of alterations that have occurred in the  
17 interior space, the Bronx General Post Office lobby  
18 retains much of its original fabric and modern  
19 classical architectural design. The notable series  
20 of murals executed by Shahn and Bryson are in tact  
21 and are still situated in their original context.  
22 This structure, whose design incorporates a  
23 significant synthesis of architectural sculpture and  
24 painting, remains a monument to the ideals of the New  
25

1 SUBCOMMITTEE ON LANDMARKS, PUBLIC SITING AND MARITIME USES 7

2 Deal era Public Works program. The Commission urges  
3 you to affirm this designation.

4 CHAIRPERSON KOO: Any questions from  
5 Council Members on the panel? [background comments]  
6 We just wanna hold on for a while; Council Member  
7 Arroyo, she's coming.

8 [pause]

9 CHAIRPERSON KOO: We are also joined by  
10 Council Member Annabel Palma and Council Member  
11 Arroyo. The proposed General Office, Post Office is  
12 in Council Member Arroyo's office... Arroyo's district.

13 [pause]

14 [background comments]

15 CHAIRPERSON KOO: Any questions for...  
16 [background comments]

17 [pause]

18 CHAIRPERSON KOO: Council Member Arroyo;  
19 do you want a statement? [background] No. No.  
20 Okay, then; next we have Thomas [background comments]  
21 Lucania from Borough President's Office.

22 THOMAS LUCANIA: Good morning, Council  
23 Member Koo; Members of the Landmarks Committee; my  
24 name is Tom Lucania and I'm here on behalf of Bronx  
25 Borough President Ruben Diaz, Jr. regarding LU 54

1 SUBCOMMITTEE ON LANDMARKS, PUBLIC SITING AND MARITIME USES 8  
2 [sic], the designation of the interior of the Bronx  
3 General Post Office as an interior landmark.

4 Commanding the intersection of the Grand  
5 Concourse and East 149th Street, the Bronx General  
6 Post Office has been a focal point for those working,  
7 living or visiting the Bronx since it was first  
8 opened in 1937. The Bronx GPO is the significant  
9 example of a grand public space; its outer perimeter  
10 precincts create a sense of place and aspiration that  
11 an important public service is being provided  
12 therein; its exterior forms a focal point for all who  
13 traverse this intersection.

14 Beyond the grand exterior is the true  
15 heart of the building, where the public has been  
16 served for more than 75 years. The interior lobby is  
17 the place where citizens communicate with the world  
18 by posting their mail, applying for passports and  
19 completing financial transactions. The grand  
20 interior space is glorified with the notable murals  
21 by Ben Shahn, making the ordinary transaction of  
22 business at this facility an enable experience.

23 Concern has been made for preserving the  
24 famous murals, but their display in any lesser  
25 circumstances would be inadequate. This additional



2 protection is especially welcome, given that the  
3 United States Postal Service has essentially refused  
4 to engage the people of the Bronx in the ongoing  
5 process to sell this structure. The Bronx GPO is not  
6 merely a retail facility, but a great public space  
7 that respects those who visit and those who work  
8 here; one of those great public spaces that are  
9 disappearing from everyday life all too frequently.

10 I continue to enthusiastically endorse  
11 the designation of the Bronx General Post Office  
12 lobby interior at 588 Grand Concourse as an official  
13 landmark of New York City. Thank you.

14 [background comment]

15 CHAIRPERSON KOO: Any questions for Mr.  
16 Lucania?

17 COUNCIL MEMBER ARROYO: Mr. Chair. I  
18 just wanna thank Tom and the Borough President for  
19 putting their voices on the record; I was hoping to  
20 see the Community Board here as well, but the battle  
21 around this particular building and the service that  
22 it provides in the community is not the subject of  
23 this hearing; must dialogue has occurred in the  
24 community to try to preserve the post office and it's  
25 not only landmark status, but the service that it

1 SUBCOMMITTEE ON LANDMARKS, PUBLIC SITING AND MARITIME USES 10  
2 provides in our community and to no avail, and this  
3 is not the forum where we're gonna have that  
4 argument; the deep disappointment that we feel as a  
5 community that the Federal Government has not heard  
6 our pleas to preserve that service in our community,  
7 but thank you for coming down and for making your  
8 voice heard here regarding the landmarking of the  
9 interior of this beautiful building. Thank you, Tom.

10 THOMAS LUCANIA: Thank you, Council  
11 Member.

12 CHAIRPERSON KOO: I wanna make a  
13 correction; I said LU No. 54 before; it should be  
14 LU No. 34 on the Bronx General Post Office. Anyone  
15 else here to testify on this item, from the public?  
16 No? We are going to close the public hearing on  
17 LU 34.

18 Please note we are laying over LU 35, the  
19 South Village Historic District, to our next meeting.

20 I'll now call on a vote to approve LU 34,  
21 Bronx General Post Office, recommended by Council  
22 Member Arroyo. May the Counsel make the call, roll  
23 call?

24 COMMITTEE CLERK: Chair Koo.

25 CHAIRPERSON KOO: Yes.

1 SUBCOMMITTEE ON LANDMARKS, PUBLIC SITING AND MARITIME USES 11

2 COMMITTEE CLERK: Council Member Palma.

3 COUNCIL MEMBER PALMA: Yes.

4 COMMITTEE CLERK: Council Member Arroyo.

5 COUNCIL MEMBER ARROYO: Yeah.

6 COMMITTEE CLERK: Council Member Mendez.

7 COUNCIL MEMBER MENDEZ: Yes.

8 COMMITTEE CLERK: Council Member Levin.

9 COUNCIL MEMBER LEVIN: Yeah.

10 COMMITTEE CLERK: Council Member Barron.

11 COUNCIL MEMBER BARRON: Yes.

12 COMMITTEE CLERK: Council Member Kallos.

13 COUNCIL MEMBER KALLOS: Yes.

14 COMMITTEE CLERK: By a vote of 7 in the

15 affirmative, 0 in the negative and 0 abstentions,

16 Land Use Item 034 is hereby adopted.

17 CHAIRPERSON KOO: 'Kay. Thank you very

18 much. [background comments] Yeah. So meeting

19 adjourned.

20 [gavel]

21 [background comments]

22

23

24

25

C E R T I F I C A T E

World Wide Dictation certifies that the foregoing transcript is a true and accurate record of the proceedings. We further certify that there is no relation to any of the parties to this action by blood or marriage, and that there is interest in the outcome of this matter.



Date \_\_\_\_\_ April 11, 2014 \_\_\_\_\_