

May 15, 2023

Sarah Carroll, Chair
Landmarks Preservation Commission
1 Centre Street
New York, NY 10007

Re: Former firehouses at 209 Elizabeth Street and 269 Henry Street

Dear Chair Carroll:

The mission of the Lower East Side Preservation Initiative (LESPI) is the recognition and preservation of the historic Lower East Side through the designation of New York City Historic Districts as well as Individual Landmarks. This letter accompanies Requests for Evaluation for two architecturally and culturally distinctive buildings:

- Former Fire Engine Company No. 15 at 269 Henry Street
- Former Hook and Ladder Company No. 9 at 209 Elizabeth Street

These buildings exemplify a pride in civic architecture that was embraced by the city when it hired the distinguished firm of Napoleon LeBrun & Sons to undertake a building campaign for the Fire Department from 1879-1895. Such buildings were particularly significant in the immigrant neighborhoods as symbols of both dignity and protection.

Former Fire Engine Company No. 15, at 269 Henry Street, was built in 1884, a decade before the celebrated Henry Street Settlement opened on the block, in an area that would become home to predominately Eastern European Jewish immigrants. The former firehouse presently houses a neighborhood center under the auspices of the Settlement House, and it completes a historic row of buildings on the north side of Henry Street.

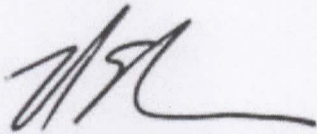
Former Hook and Ladder Company No. 9, at 209 Elizabeth Street, was built in 1883. It, similarly, is distinguished not only for its architecture but also as a touchstone for an immigrant neighborhood—in this case, “Little Italy.” No. 209 presently houses an art gallery and is situated beside the sculpture-filled Elizabeth Street Garden; it is integral to the streetscape. While the building’s architectural features recall its firehouse function, it is also adorned with a faded sign for an Italian bakery, signaling yet another layer of its history.



Lower East Side Preservation Initiative

Several of the firehouses of Napoleon LeBrun & Sons—found throughout New York City—have been landmarked, but none on the Lower East Side. Such distinguished civic structures have symbolic resonance for those who live close by and must have held special importance for new arrivals to the city. These two elegant firehouses help tell the story of this city's and country's role as a home for immigrants. No. 209 Elizabeth Street and No. 269 Henry Street merit the distinction and protection of Individual Landmark status.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in dark ink, appearing to be 'R. D. Moses', with a long horizontal flourish extending to the right.

Richard D. Moses
President

LESPI Individual Landmark Committee:

Lisa Vogl (RFE preparation)
Deborah Wye (Coordinator)

5. STATEMENT OF SIGNIFICANCE—No. 209 Elizabeth Street

Executive Summary:

Built in 1883, No. 209 Elizabeth Street—the former Hook and Ladder Company No. 9—typifies the exemplary civic architecture that came to represent government services in late 19th – early 20th century New York. Such buildings were especially resonant when found in densely populated tenement neighborhoods, filled with newly arrived immigrants. This former firehouse, on a site that earlier served a volunteer fire brigade, is located in what would become the city’s primary “Little Italy.” It was designed by Napoleon LeBrun & Sons, a distinguished firm that served as the official Fire Department architect from 1879-1895. No. 209 Elizabeth Street demonstrates that firm’s commitment to thoughtful and intricate designs even for more modest civic structures. It is remarkably intact today and its striking attention to detail—accomplished primarily with brick—stands out within the streetscape. The building is highly noteworthy within the fabric of the neighborhood. No. 209 Elizabeth Street has been cited as a “Building of Special Significance, and “a unique building in the district,” by the National Register of Historic Places in their *Chinatown and Little Italy Historic District* designation report.

Architectural Description:

The 1883 former firehouse of Hook & Ladder Company No. 9 is located on Elizabeth Street between Prince Street and Spring Street. Its style is inspired by the Aesthetic Movement and is predominantly Romanesque Revival, featuring materials of red brick, terracotta, and stone in a richly textured façade. Its cast-iron base encases a wide central overhead door with 70 glass panels, some of stained glass, as well as two flanking pedestrian doorways. The base is embellished with pilasters, medallions, and rosettes. Above the base, are two stories of red brick.

The second and third stories have three bays, both with four over four windows. Between the stories are stone belt courses and friezes ornamented with molded brick tiles. The third story window arches are capped by three brick archivolts and filled with bricks laid in a dog-tooth pattern. The pressed metal cornice is flanked by



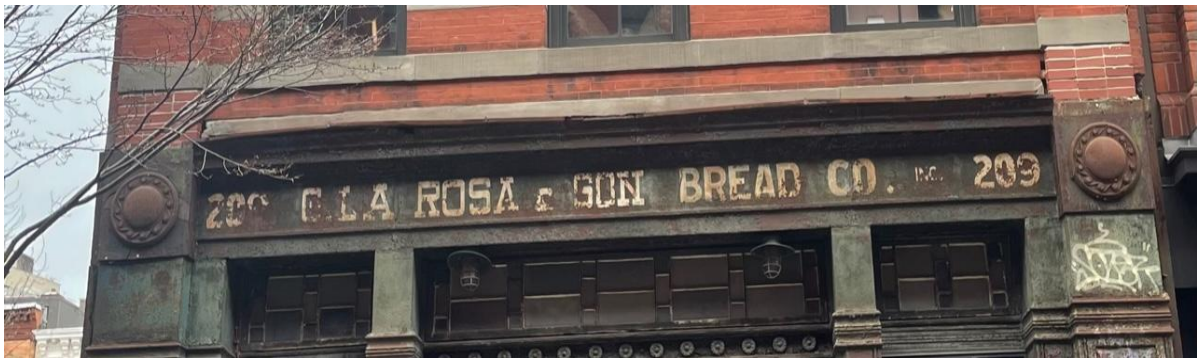
pedimented, corbelled brick brackets, and has a row of decorative terra cotta medallions along its underside.



The façade of No. 209 Elizabeth Street is primarily intact, remaining much as it has been for its entire presence on the Lower East Side. At some point, after 1977 (see photo) two structures on the right and left side of the roof were removed. Later, in 2003-2005, a new addition was added to the roof; it is set back and not visible from the front of the building.

Another distinction of the building, one that reflects the layers of history in this formerly dynamic Italian immigrant neighborhood, is an original hand-painted sign for an Italian bakery, G. La Rosa & Son Bread Company, across the top of the well-preserved cast-iron base.

*[G. La Rosa & Son Bread Co.,
209 Elizabeth Street.] Photograph by
Edmund Vincent Gillon, ca. 1977.
Museum of the City of New York*



Napoleon LeBrun & Sons:

Napoleon LeBrun & Sons designed churches and office buildings in New York City beginning in 1864, including the landmarked Metropolitan Life Insurance Company tower at 1 Madison Avenue. This firm was appointed to design fire stations during a campaign to enhance municipal services. Between 1879 and 1895, Napoleon LeBrun & Sons designed and constructed 42 firehouses, 12 of which have been landmarked, but none on the Lower East Side.

As was often the practice for civic architecture, Lebrun repurposed his designs, in full or in part, for the sake of efficiency and cost. For example, 209 Elizabeth Street is a more modest example of the firehouse design at 269 Henry Street. The former firehouse at 223 East 25th Street is quite like 209 Elizabeth Street, whereas the former firehouse at 185 Lafayette Street shows only some similar features.

Cultural History:

The former firehouse at 209 Elizabeth Street, built in 1883, served a community that would become densely populated with newly arrived Italian immigrants. Well before that date, in the early 1860s, the site had been home to a volunteer firefighting company—the original Hook & Ladder Company No. 9—one of the infamous fire brigades serving New York from the 1830s-1860s. That volunteer company later transitioned into a paid firefighting force when the Metropolitan Fire Company was formed in 1865. Much later, when Company No. 9 resided in the present building, it is said to be one of at least eight firefighting forces that responded to the nearby Triangle Shirtwaist Factory Fire, in 1911. Hook and Ladder Company No. 9 left this building in 1948 and it later became home to an Italian bakery.

In 1990, the empty lot next to 209 Elizabeth Street, once a school playground, was leased to Allan Reiver who owned the Elizabeth Street Gallery across the street. Reiver cleared the lot, landscaped it, and populated it with large outdoor sculptures and architectural fragments from his collection. He later bought 209 Elizabeth Street and moved in, re-locating his gallery there. In 2013 he opened up the landscaped lot next door to the public. It has since become Elizabeth Street Garden, a beloved neighborhood spot and one that is threatened with demolition. The building at No. 209 Elizabeth and the garden next door make unique contributions to the streetscape.

The present building at 209 Elizabeth Street represents the oldest firehouse in the Little Italy neighborhood, older than the only other historic firehouse located there, a designated landmark at 363 Broome Street, built in 1898-99. Designating this building an Individual Landmark would help tell the story of Little Italy as an important component of Manhattan's Lower East Side and our city's and country's continuing history as a home for immigrants.

Timeline:

1861:

Ladder Company No. 9 originates as a volunteer company at 209 Elizabeth Street

1862:

City buys lot at 209 Elizabeth Street

1865:

Metropolitan Fire Department (no longer a volunteer department), organizes the paid Ladder Company No. 9 at this site.

1865-1879:

City institutes a ban on the construction of new firehouses in an effort to weed out Tammany influence remaining from the days of volunteer firefighting companies; civil service will be introduced in 1884 to increase professionalism and keep the Fire Department out of politics.

1879:

Era of firehouse construction begins under the direction of the architectural firm of Napoleon Lebrun & Sons.

1883:

Lebrun-designed building is completed at 209 Elizabeth Street; includes first sliding pole in New York.

1911:

Ladder Company No. 9 is said to be among at least 8 wagons rushing to the nearby Triangle Shirtwaist Factory Fire.

1948:

Hook and Ladder Company No 9 moves out of 209 Elizabeth Street.

1967-1974:

G. La Rosa & Son Bread Company buys the building operating a bakery there.

1990:

Empty lot next to former firehouse is landscaped and filled with sculpture and architectural fragments by art dealer, Allen Reiver, with a gallery across the street.

2003-2005:

Allen Reiver of Elizabeth Firehouse LLC acquires the former firehouse building and moves his art gallery there. A loft is added to the top of the building; it is set back and not visible from the street.

2013:

Reiver opens garden next door to 209 Elizabeth Street as a public, community space

2023:

The future of Elizabeth Street Garden remains in contention.

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