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December 20, 2023

Community Board 2, Brooklyn – Land Use Committee  
350 Jay Street, 8th Floor  
Brooklyn, NY 11201

Re: 39 Grace Court - Brooklyn Heights Historic District  
Brooklyn - Block 251 - Lot 6  
LPC-24-02285  
Application is to construct a new building.

Dear Chair Daughtry Carstarphen and members of the Land Use Committee:

The Brooklyn Heights Association Landmarks Committee has reviewed the proposal for 39 Grace Court and considered its impact on the Brooklyn Heights Historic District.

We don't think this proposal's design is ready to be deemed appropriate under the standards of the Landmarks Preservation Commission.

Grace Court is a special block in Brooklyn Heights. The rows of gardens facing the street's north side are a chief reason. The views into these gardens through their wrought-iron fences, and the sense of open space they provide as a group, have been a quasi-public amenity to the entire neighborhood for over 170 years. They've existed in their current form since before the Brooklyn Heights Historic District was landmarked almost 60 years ago. We're thankful to the owners who made the remarkable collective choice to maintain these lots as gardens for so long.

We think any new building at 39 Grace Court, on one of these garden lots, has a high bar to meet. The design needs to respond to the unique size and zoning constraints imposed at this particular site. And it needs to engage with the rich architectural heritage that immediately surrounds it on Grace Court.

The proposed design doesn't yet meet these requirements.

First, we think the house's relatively small size should be celebrated in the design instead of grudgingly tolerated. The current design appears to be a grab-bag of Brooklyn rowhouse elements awkwardly adjusted to fit what zoning allows here. For example, the wide bay window on the front of this short house doesn't look right, which is why this configuration isn't contextual in our district. And the cornice and parapet are too high and out of proportion to the rest of the block, especially when viewed in profile from the west, and even after having been toned down since the first iteration we saw.

(continued)



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We think the design would be better served by starting fresh with an approach incorporating smaller stand-alone house precedents – buildings that are like jewel boxes appropriately proportioned to their sites. There was never any building on this site so a new design shouldn't be conceived as rowhouse infill.

Second, Grace Court contains a diverse mix of building styles that could have served as inspiration for either echoes or contrasts. But the rich architectural precedents seem to have been ignored. There's Richard Upjohn's iconic Gothic Revival Grace Church at the Hicks Street end of the block. On this side, the Anglo-Italianate limestone at No. 27 is one of NYC's only surviving residences designed by Upjohn. A couple of rows of Italianate brownstones line both sides. And the harbor-side of the block is book-ended by the three large, early 20th century, Gothic-inspired apartment buildings that replaced the grand 19th century mansions of the Prentice and Packer families.

The proposed design doesn't engage with any of these surrounding buildings. For example, we don't understand why the entryway seems to be designed to match the proposed fence, instead of taking cues from neighboring entryways. The house is neither a harmonious interpretation of traditional façade elements that complement the existing streetscape, nor something that reads as a new 21st century building, or reflecting the best of contemporary design. For that reason, the timid and inconsistent design detracts from Grace Court's special architectural charm, even beyond the disappointing loss of the garden lot.

We think the design would need to be significantly revamped before it could be approvable.

Thank you for the opportunity to submit these comments for your Committee's consideration.

Sincerely,

Jeremy Lechtzin, Chair  
Brooklyn Heights Association Landmarks Committee