

DISTRICT LINES

NEWS AND VIEWS OF THE HISTORIC DISTRICTS COUNCIL AUTUMN 2006 VOL. XX NO. 2

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ROBERT SILMAN UPHOLDS LANDMARKS LITERALLY— STRUCTURAL ENGINEER IS NAMED HDC'S LANDMARKS LION

QUESTION: What holds up Carnegie Hall, the Guggenheim Museum, the Tweed Courthouse and all the restored parts of Ellis Island and St. John the Divine?
ANSWER: Beams and bolts planned by the engineers at Robert Silman Associates, P.C.

No other engineering firm has shored up so much historic New York architecture. In addition, the office has reinforced thousands of projects in 29 other states. Robert Silman, founder of the 90-person, 40-year-old practice, will receive this year's Landmarks Lion Award from the Historic Districts Council on November 9 in a ceremony and dinner to be held, appropriately, at Columbia University's Low Memorial Library, another of Mr. Silman's projects. He is the first engineer HDC has honored this way.

"There is not a historic building Bob has ever met that he didn't think could be saved, and he's saved many of them," says



Robert Silman

HDC board member Fanny Eberhart. "More importantly to those of us in the trenches, he puts his office's expertise and commitment into supporting advocates who are staving off the doom and gloom demolition types."

Mr. Silman is affable and modest in person, and constantly in motion. A hundred-odd rolls of plans requiring attention are piled on the desk at his Greenwich Village office. A quarter of them are restorations and the rest new construction, including collaborations with starchitects such as Renzo Piano, Rem Koolhaas, Robert A. M. Stern, Richard Meier and Herzog & de Meuron.

"I love the variety of what we do," Mr. Silman says. "I have no favorite style or period of architecture and no favorite



P. BAREAU

Low Memorial Library at Columbia University, a McKim, Mead & White building finished in 1897, was worked on by Mr. Silman from 2001-04. It will be the site of his award ceremony.



P. BAREAU

The Robert Silman Associates firm is currently restoring the exterior concrete of the Guggenheim Museum, Frank Lloyd Wright's late-1950's world-renowned architectural extravaganza.

job. Picking one would be as impossible as picking a favorite child. I love the hand-hewn beams at the 1698 farmhouse we worked on in New Paltz, and I love the Guggenheim's concrete. We try not to have our engineers specialize in new or old. Restoring old buildings, with their many different pathologies, helps us foresee the problems the new ones might have, and engineering new buildings gives us ideas for new ways to handle the old ones."

Construction and reconstruction sites, he adds, have captivated him since his childhood in Rockville Centre, on Long Island. His mother, Dorothy Mahler Silman (a cousin of the composer Gustav Mahler), was an interior decorator; and his father, David, a textile-manufacturing executive, invented ConTac paper. "In the 1940's," Mr. Silman recalls, "my parents commissioned a house from the firm of Schuman Lichtenstein. It was a not very original Prairie house, but it fascinated me—all those wide dramatic overhangs, in a neighborhood of Tudors and Colonial Revivals. I found myself retracing the architects' drawings."

He studied architecture, liberal arts, government and civil engineering at Cornell University and New York University.

At Cornell he met and married Roberta Karpel, a novelist; they have raised three children in an oft-expanded 1950's bungalow in Ardsley, New York. (The children are not much interested in architecture, but the five grandchildren show precocious skills at building block towers—"I'm encouraging them to knock down what they build," their grandfather says, "so they'll be sure to learn how to rebuild.")

After stints working for developers, construction companies and engineers,



DON PERDUE

Carnegie Hall, the ne plus ultra of musical experience, has employed Mr. Silman's services over more than 30 years for expansion and restoration.

including Tishman Realty and Ove Arup, Mr. Silman started his own practice in 1966. Pennsylvania Station had just been razed—Mr. Silman was among the picketers—and the Landmarks Preservation Commission was a toddler. No architecture or engineering schools yet offered any courses in preservation.

"I had to teach myself," Mr. Silman recalls. "I worked on hundreds of housing rehabs in Harlem and Bed-Stuy, the buildings the city would sell for a dollar and no back taxes. I became more and more confident dealing with old buildings, even the most horrendous burnt-out shells."

By 1970 he had hired six staffers and was upgrading elevators and fire-suppression systems at Carnegie Hall. (Mr. Silman has since stewarded that building


through phase after phase of expansion and restoration.) By the early 1980's Silman Associates had teamed up with the preservation architecture firm Beyer Blinder Belle to crawl around Ellis Island preparing Historic Structure Reports.

"By then our office was on the map, at least in the Northeast, but it was Fallingwater that made us known internationally," Mr. Silman says. In the early 1990's his firm figured out how to reinforce Frank Lloyd Wright's failing cantilevers invisibly, by stretching concrete-anchored cables alongside the drooping original joists and beams.

Another major miscalculation by Wright is now on Mr. Silman's boards: the Guggenheim, its curvy skin painted a dozen times, yet still not watertight.

Other current restoration commissions span a century of styles: an 1840's vernacular commercial building that is being turned into lofts in Tribeca; the Romanesque/Gothic 1870's government chambers at the New York State Capitol in Albany; Cass Gilbert's neoclassical 1930's U.S. Courthouse at Foley Square; and Skidmore, Owings & Merrill's Corbusian 1950 apartment towers at 200 East 66th Street in Manhattan.

The firm is applying ever-higher technology to these landmarks. At the Guggenheim, he explains, "a comprehensive structural analysis has never been done. We just laser-measured the as-built conditions and created a computer model so sensitive and realistic that you can tell it to simulate a 60-degree temperature change and watch how the building expands or contracts. You can watch how the building breathes."

Despite his hectic schedule and far-flung commissions, he still takes time for calls from preservationists and activists hoping to prove some threatened buildings are not beyond repair. In just the past year he has fought for Saarinen's TWA Terminal, the Survivor's Stair at Ground Zero and the Church of St. Thomas the Apostle in Harlem. At age 71, he finds himself becoming happily more outspoken: "One of the beauties of getting older," he reports, "is that I'm not afraid to say what I think any more. Almost no building today is beyond salvaging. There are ways of working around any damage, of reusing any building that seems hopeless, as long as there's sufficient will and community support." 

**DISTRICT
LINES**

NEWS AND VIEWS OF THE
HISTORIC DISTRICTS COUNCIL

EDITOR - PENELOPE BAREAU
ART AND PRODUCTION - MOOM LEE
EDITORIAL CONSULTANT - JACK TAYLOR

CONTRIBUTORS - SIMEON BANKOFF, PENELOPE BAREAU,
EVE M. KAHN, ALICE RICH, FRAMPTON TOLBERT,
NADEZHDA WILLIAMS

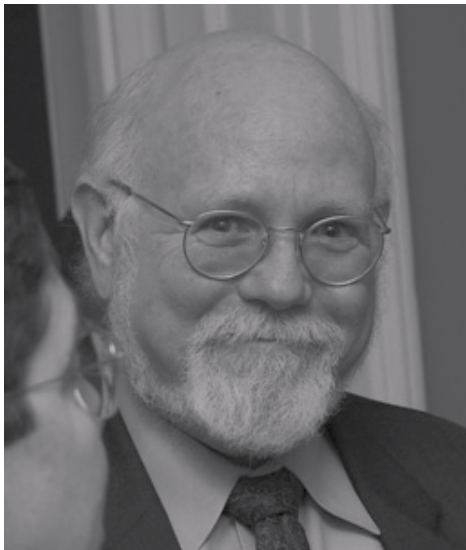
STAFF - SIMEON BANKOFF, EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR
FRAMPTON TOLBERT, ASSISTANT DIRECTOR
ALICE RICH, NADEZHDA WILLIAMS,
PRESERVATION ASSOCIATES

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THE HISTORIC DISTRICTS COUNCIL IS THE
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MERITING PRESERVATION. THE COUNCIL IS
DEDICATED TO PRESERVING THE INTEGRITY OF
NEW YORK CITY'S LANDMARKS LAW AND TO
FURTHERING THE PRESERVATION ETHIC.

PRESIDENT'S COLUMN

EVERY SO OFTEN an organization should take a look at itself. Even in preservation, "change" is what we are about. The Historic Districts Council is dedicated to enhancing the public awareness of the



TWIG

David Goldfarb

preservation ethic, and we must regularly ask, "How are we doing?" and "What can we do better?"

In July, HDC began a process of strategic planning. Board and staff met for a retreat at the landmarked Alice Austen House on Staten Island and took a look at our declared mission, our track record and our future direction.

We carry out our mission in many ways: advocating at the Landmarks Preservation Commission for new historic districts and individual designations; monitoring and commenting at the Certificate of Appropriateness proceedings; seeking law and policy changes to better effectuate preservation. How we priori-

SAVE THE DATE

18th Annual Landmarks Lion
Award Ceremony & Dinner
honoring
structural engineer
Robert Silman
Thursday, November 9, 2006
Visit our Web site for details
www.hdc.org

tize and carry out these goals can have an impact on our own structure as well as how we present ourselves to the public.

No matter what path we choose, one thing is certain—we must be engaged in building a wider movement. By means of its assistance to communities throughout the city, HDC has one of the broadest bases of any preservation-oriented organization. No matter what path we choose, we need to dedicate ourselves to bringing this potential "army of advocates" with us.

As part of our planning, members of our board and advisers interviewed a broad spectrum of people to see how they perceive HDC. It was interesting to notice the varying answers. As might be expected, some saw us as "too establishment," others as "too bleeding edge"; some thought we were "too radical" and others "too conservative."

As we continue our process of strategic planning, we will be clarifying our role and our direction as an organization. However, one thing will not change: we will go on serving the preservation community and seeking your input and support.

—David Goldfarb

MEDICAL SITES OF YORE: TWO TALKS AND A TOUR

DURING SEPTEMBER the Historic Districts Council will join with the Library of the General Society of Mechanics and Tradesmen to present "Forlorn and Forgotten: Preserving the Historic Hospitals and Medical Institutions of New York City," a series of programs about the history, archaeology and preservation of New York City's former hospitals, asylums and quarantine sites. Speakers will be historians, preservationists and architects who will relate the history of these sites and talk about how they are being interpreted and reused today.

On Tuesday, September 12, the reuse of medical facilities will be discussed and local examples of them shown in "From Health to Home: Adaptive Reuse of Medical Institutions." The lecture will be given by preservation architects who have worked on them.

On Tuesday, September 19, "The Evolution of Sickness: Historic Hospitals of



P. BAREAU

Ruins of the Smallpox Hospital at the southern tip of Roosevelt Island, a Gothic Revival structure that opened in 1856, designed by James Renwick Jr.

New York" will examine how illness used to be managed in New York City and will look at the buildings and sites that were developed for the treatment of sickness.

Both lectures will begin at 6 p.m. and will be held at the Library of the General Society of Mechanics and Tradesmen at 20 West 44th Street in Manhattan.

On Saturday, September 23, the series will conclude with a rare hard-hat tour of Ellis Island that takes visitors through the route that was followed for immigrants detained for medical treatment. It will be led by the staff of Save Ellis Island, Inc., the private nonprofit partner of the National Park Service dedicated to the restoration and adaptive reuse of the island's 30 derelict and abandoned buildings, including those of the south side's hospital. The tour will meet at 10 a.m. at a location to be announced.

Each lecture is \$15, or \$10 for Friends of HDC and for General Society Members. The Saturday tour of Ellis Island is \$45, or \$35 for Friends and Members. The complete series of three events is \$65, or \$45 for Friends and Members.

Advance reservations are required. Telephone HDC at 212-614-9107 or e-mail hdc@hdc.org. 

A PAIR OF CENTURY-OLD SCHOOLS WITH VASTLY DIFFERENT FATES

C. B. J. Snyder, 1860-1845, was Superintendent of School Buildings for the New York City Board of Education from 1898 to 1923 and designed all the school buildings built during those years, a monumental enterprise. District Lines is taking a look at just two of them: his masterpiece in The Bronx, Morris High School; and Public School 64 on East Ninth Street in Manhattan, a vacant, vandalized and botly contested building.

OWNER AND NEIGHBORS CLASH IN A LANDMARK FIGHT OVER P.S. 64

PUBLIC SCHOOL 64 is a French Renaissance Revival-style structure between Avenues B and C in Manhattan's East Village. It is a block-through (Ninth to 10th Streets) five story building with a mansard roof of slate, with terra-cotta and stone moldings, trim and decorative elements, and pediments bursting with carved fruit and foliage.

At least it was when the Landmarks



P. BAREAU

One wing of the Ninth Street facade of P.S. 64, designed in an H configuration for enhanced light and air. The owner is removing the trim.

Preservation Commission designated it on June 20, 2006, against the aggressive opposition of its owner, Gregg Singer.

P.S. 64 was built in 1906 and designed by C. B. J. Snyder, then New York City

Superintendent of School Buildings, when the area was teeming with immigrants, most of them from Eastern European countries. It was not a slum, but it was not a Gold Coast either; it was a place—and a time—where education was highly valued as a steppingstone to a better life. Many achieved it at P.S. 64, among them Yip Harburg, lyricist for the “Wizard of Oz” movie and other familiar American popular songs; and Joseph L. Mankiewicz, the Hollywood film director.

By the mid-1970's, however, the neighborhood had changed so much that the Board of Education decided to close it. Members of CHARAS/El Bohio were squatting there, former Puerto Rican gang members who later leased the space and used it for more than 20 years as an arts and community center for such activities as dance classes, computer training and teaching of English as a second language. Then in 1998, under Mayor Giuliani, the city sold the building at auction, restricting it by deed to community use. Mr. Singer, a fourth-generation developer, bought it for \$3.15 million, evicted CHARAS/El Bohio and said he intended to demolish the building and put up a 23 story dormitory. A community uproar forced him to say he would demolish only the 10th Street side for his 23 stories.

There were problems with that plan, however, the main one being that he did not have a client lined up to rent dormitory rooms and couldn't find any; and recently enacted Department of Buildings regulations clearly state that no dormitory can be built without a client signed, sealed and delivered. In fact, DOB refused demolition permits three times because Mr. Singer had no tenant. Dormitory buildings are easily converted to residential use, but the deed restriction prevents that.

Mr. Singer took out a Buildings permit to strip the structure of its architectural trim. That permit was due to expire in October 2006. Meanwhile, the school

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MORRIS HIGH SCHOOL IN THE BRONX, A VIRTUOSIC WORK

SITUATED ON THE HIGHEST GROUND in The Bronx, at East 166th Street and Boston Road, Morris High School is a landmark in two senses—a beacon to travelers and the focal point of a designated New York City historic district. Its 189-foot Gothic towers rise well above the surrounding neighborhood, and residents for miles around take pride in it.

In 1982 Morris High School and sev-



P. BAREAU

Morris High School in The Bronx is considered Snyder's masterpiece. Restored in the early 1990's, it continues to function as a school today.

eral dozen houses around it, plus a church across the street and one tenement, were designated an historic district by the New York City Landmarks Preservation Com-

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OWNER AND NEIGHBORS CLASH*continued from page 4, column 2*

was proposed for designation as an individual landmark. CHARAS/EI Bohio had tried to get it in the past, but now the wheels seemed to be turning.

As they did, other things were going on. According to *The Villager* newspaper, Mr. Singer said that the city offered to waive the deed restriction and allow residential construction, permitting him to add four floors to the five story school building; but he said the community-facilities zoning bonus would allow him to build 19 stories and he was holding out for that. He petitioned the Board of Standards and Appeals to void DOB's denial of demolition permits and was turned down.

Mr. Singer offered to swap the developable air rights attaching to the building, which he claimed amounted to 120,000 square feet, for a vacant city lot of comparable size. According to *The Villager*, Deputy Mayor Dan Doctoroff said no.

The developer seemed to be getting angrier and angrier. He threatened to sue the mayor and the three city agencies that had thwarted him—the Department of Buildings, the Board of Standards and Appeals and the Landmarks Commission. He admitted in 2003 that the purchase price had been a steal—“The best deal I ever bought”—and CHARAS/EI Bohio had offered to buy it back from him for \$6 million the same year. But that was a piddling 200 percent return on his investment, and by May 2006 he was so mad he sued the city for \$100 million, which is a return too high to calculate. He threatened to begin stripping the building of its trim, even before designation—the permit already in place would allow that. His argument was that without the trim, the building would be of no distinction and unworthy of landmark status.

Neighbors came out in force for the designation hearing at LPC, which had been on a fast track. Thousands of proponents testified by letter, postcard and in person during the three-hour hearing. Two spoke in opposition. One of them, a lawyer, implied the designation was a payoff, which earned him a reprimand from commission Chair Robert B. Tierney. The other opposition testimony, by an architectural historian, said that better examples of Snyder buildings exist in the city. This is true, as the accompanying

article on Morris High School illustrates; but the witness's conclusion, that therefore P.S. 64 was not worthy of designation, was rejected.

LPC Commissioner Roberta Brandes Gratz, voting for designation, said, “This is one of the most significant decisions of the Landmarks Preservation Commission in recent years...For the first time, the commission will be recognizing a building not only of enormous architectural merit but one of unique cultural significance that acknowledges and celebrates the contribution to the robust regeneration of our city made by community-based efforts.”

Now that he has lost that skirmish, Mr. Singer promises to use the building as shelter for 400 homeless people, recently released convicts, battered women, mentally ill individuals, drug addicts and everything else he can come up with that would scare the neighbors into submission. But they were delighted to be neighborhood hosts for those social services and said they welcomed them. Chino Garcia, the executive director of CHARAS/EI Bohio, even said at a press conference, “We would love to have these programs and will help him get the money to bring them here.”

Workers started stripping trim the last week of July. “It's a shame,” Mr. Singer told reporter Sarah Ferguson, writing for *The Village Voice*. “The city forced me to do it. I thought there was a chance the city was acting in good faith, but they're full of shit.”

Asked the day after work started what recourse LPC has, Mr. Tierney told *District Lines* that if the owner does the slightest thing beyond what he has a permit for, the commission will slap him with a stop-work order and ultimately try to get him to restore the work he undid, using whatever leverage can be mustered.

Work stopped a few days later, but there is no telling when it may resume. After he strips the building, Mr. Singer promises to sue to overturn designation on the grounds that the building no longer has architectural merit. No designation has ever been overturned in court, only in the City Council. In this case, the strong support of both the district's councilmember, Rosie Mendez, and City Council Speaker Christine Quinn, makes that unlikely. Even stripped, the building would retain its history as a monument to community-based regeneration efforts.

The developer, however, insists he would win any court case.

A furious community group gathered outside the building in August for a press conference. Ms. Mendez, also a member of the Landmarks, Public Siting and Maritime Uses Subcommittee, led the meeting. She is among those being sued by Mr. Singer, so she and her staff were circumspect about the issue but vociferous in expressing their outrage. Manhattan Borough President Scott Stringer was perhaps the most outspoken of all when he said, to resounding applause, “Singer should take his marbles and get the hell out of New York.”

MORRIS HIGH SCHOOL*continued from page 4, column 3*

mission. Morris High School is the key-stone of the district.

In fact, because of its size and magnificence it overwhelms everything else in the area. When it was built from 1901 to 1904 the neighborhood was still a predominately rural part of Morrisania, and the building's splendid English Gothic presence must have reminded the recent immigrants who lived in the community of a medieval European church, for the school adhered to the same high aesthetic standards.

During the years 1880 to 1910 the city's population grew about 250 percent, according to U.S. Bureau of the Census figures. This created a demand for schools, which had been a loose agglomeration of independent institutions that were brought under central administration in 1898 as the Consolidated School System of Greater New York, operating in all five boroughs.

LPC's designation report explains that the event was marked by the decision to build “in each of the five boroughs a spectacular Collegiate Gothic school building” as a symbol of the new educational planning system. In The Bronx it was Morris High School. At the end of the 19th century, English Gothic Revival style was widely used for American universities and colleges, and its influence extended to secondary-school design, all a result of the far-reaching influence of the English critic and aesthete, John Ruskin.

Charles B. J. Synder had begun working for the school system as an architect in 1891 when he was 31, according to “Who's
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ALBANY PASSES TAX CREDITS FOR OWNERS OF HISTORIC HOUSES AND BUILDINGS

AT THE END OF ITS JUNE SESSION, the two houses of the New York State Legislature passed S.8392/A.11987, together sometimes called the Historic Homeowners Tax Incentive. Late in August, Governor George Pataki signed the legislation, landmark bills that reward private individuals for restoring their historic properties. The bills also include incentives for historic commercial properties that are listed or eligible for listing on the National Register of Historic Places and that qualify for the Federal Rehabilitation Tax Credit.

Under this new legislation, State and National Register-listed owner-occupied residential structures in distressed areas are eligible for a New York State Income Tax credit covering 20 percent of exterior rehabilitation costs, up to a credit value of \$25,000. Approximately 4,100 historic residential structures statewide are qualified, primarily in urban neighborhoods. According to statistics provided by the nonprofit Preservation League of New York State, one of the prime movers behind this legislation, at least 415 houses in New York City would probably be eligible for this incentive, the third-largest concentration of eligible houses in the state.

Historic commercial properties that qualify for the Federal Rehabilitation Tax Credit would qualify also for an additional New York State Income Tax Credit covering 30 percent of rehabilitation costs, up to a credit value of \$100,000. In order to qualify for the credits, whether residential or commercial, work done would need to conform to the Secretary of the Interior's standards for work on historic buildings and would require approval from the State Historic Preservation Office.

The effort to get preservation incentives through state tax credits has been going on since 1998, led by the Preservation League through their Lobby Partners program, of which the Historic Districts Council was a part for several years.

Now that the bill has been signed, the State Historic Preservation Office, which is to administer the program, will begin drafting implementation rules in consultation with the league and others. The



PAULA SEGAL

Lincoln Building at Manhattan's Union Square, an individual landmark listed on the National Register in 1983, used federal tax credits for a restoration. The new state tax credits could have been even more helpful.

program could be ready to accept applications by early 2007.

These two rehabilitation credits will have a significant impact on community renewal in New York State. The residential rehabilitation program will provide a first-ever financial incentive for New York State homeowners and homebuyers for upkeep and stewardship of historic homes. The commercial tax credit offers a financial incentive that complements an existing federal program for historic structures and is likely to attract more projects to it. In addition to the federal programs, 21 states already provide some rehabilitation tax credits for commercial and/or residential historic properties. Nationally, these programs have demonstrated that they encourage and enhance preservation projects that would otherwise not be undertaken.

The Historic Homeowners Tax Incentive legislation was passed under the leadership of Assemblymembers Ron

Canestri, Alexander "Pete" Grannis and Sam Hoyt and State Senators Vincent Liebell, Frank Padavan and Catharine Young. Assemblymember Grannis represents designated areas of the Upper East Side of Manhattan and Roosevelt Island, and Senator Padavan represents three designated New York City historic districts in northeast Queens—Fort Totten, Douglaston and Douglaston Hill. Both Messrs. Grannis and Padavan have been supporters of local preservation campaigns in the past.

Groundbreaking as it is, there is still room for improvement. The original version of the bill applied the tax credit to any owner-occupied property that was listed or was eligible for listing on the National Register, not just those in distressed areas. The earlier version could have been used to rehabilitate three times as many properties as the current version does. It also would have allowed owners of locally designated properties that are not listed on the Register to apply for these credits. However, even as it stands, the bill offers New York property owners an unparalleled opportunity to restore historic buildings and revitalize historic neighborhoods in need, and perhaps future sessions of the Legislature can revisit the issue and offer these incentives to still more residents and communities throughout the state. 🐾

CITY'S GRASSROOTS PRESERVATIONISTS HONORED BY HDC

ALTHOUGH RAIN THREATENED throughout the event, the Historic Districts Council took to heart its job as an umbrella organization at the 16th Annual Preservation Party on May 11. Six groups and individuals were honored with Grassroots Preservation Awards:

- **Coalition to Save the Austin, Nichols & Company Warehouse**, formed to advocate for the preservation of an iconic Cass Gilbert-designed warehouse on the Williamsburg waterfront in Brooklyn. After the community came together against a proposed addition to the building, it looked toward the possibility of landmarking this remarkable piece of in-

dustrial history. Through a major outreach campaign including petitions, postcards, rallies and meetings, the group succeeded in getting the building designated an individual landmark in September 2005. Although the designation was overturned by a divided City Council, the coalition's effort sends an important message of community solidarity to similar organizations everywhere.

- **Victoria Hofmo**, the first person to ask City Councilmember Vincent J. Gentile to look at rezoning Bay Ridge, Brooklyn. Starting with the retention of the unique Special Purpose District, an area that preserves the neighborhood's

every property in the community.

- **Linda Eskenas**, vice president of the Preservation League of Staten Island and a preservation dynamo, according to the league's president and HDC director, Jim Ferreri. Ms. Eskenas is the owner of two landmarked properties, one of which would probably have been lost without her efforts. She has worked to preserve endangered cemeteries, waterfront greenspace and sacred Native American sites on Staten Island and is a well known presence at many preservation rallies and hearings in other boroughs as well.

Awards were also given to an elected official and a media outlet that have been

Friend from the Media Award

CityLand, published by the Center for New York City Law of the New York Law School, has become a respected periodical in only two years of existence. Reporting monthly on actions and decisions by a host of city agencies, including the Landmarks Preservation Commission, the City Planning Commission and the Board of Standards and Appeals, the publication is the brainchild of Ross Sandler, a prominent legal scholar and a former commissioner of the city's Department of Transportation. 🍷

MORRIS HIGH SCHOOL

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Who in America 1922-23." He was first the architect for Manhattan and Brooklyn schools and was made Superintendent of School Buildings in 1898, when the city's school system was consolidated. He remained in this position until 1923. During that time he designed and/or supervised the construction of about 400 school buildings, according to an article in *The New York Times* of May 7, 1922. An argument could be made that he was overworked, and he did make it, requesting that the education board allow him to retire on July 1 of that year and noting that he had not had a vacation since 1904. He was not permitted to retire, however; but he was granted—and took—a four-month vacation and finally retired for good the following year.

Snyder was an innovator not only of school architecture but also a developer and spokesman for its expanded function. "The development of the public school building," he was quoted in *The Times* article as saying, "is due largely to the need for a structure that will render much community service. ...The whole top part of the school, where the classrooms are, can be shut off from the lower part of the building. If there is night school in the building, the classes can go on, while there may be a dance in the gymnasium, a concert in the music room or a lecture in the auditorium. A schoolhouse of this kind can fill a great social need in the community."

Morris High School has been divided into mini-schools today, each of which operates on a different floor of the building: Bronx International School, Bronx Leadership Academy II, Morris Academy, School for Excellence, and Violin & Dance. 🍷



DENISE CERMANSKI

Partygoers mingle outside HDC's offices, in Manhattan, before the Grassroots Awards ceremony.

low-rise character, the rezoning was a successful step toward maintaining the existing housing stock and quality of life in the community.

- **Tottenville Historical Society**, organized in 2003 as an all-volunteer group dedicated to collecting and interpreting historic materials from this small community on Staten Island's South Shore. The group has done oral histories with local residents, met with owners of historic homes to gather information and continues to assemble a rare and diverse collection of artifacts from the Atlantic Terra Cotta Company, which was located in the area. Now numbering more than 150 members, the society recently received a grant to begin conducting an inventory of

active in highlighting the complex issues surrounding historic preservation. The honorees were:

Friend in High Places Award

City Councilmember **Letitia James**, 35th Council District, Brooklyn, has long been a friend to preservation in her landmark-centric district, which includes the Clinton Hill and Fort Greene Historic Districts and parts of Bedford-Stuyvesant, Crown Heights, DUMBO, Prospect Heights and Vinegar Hill. A fixture at numerous civic meetings, she has recently worked with preservation organizations to help save the Admirals' Row Houses in Wallabout, to designate the Crown Heights North Historic District and to rezone parts of Fort Greene and Clinton Hill.

SIGNS OF THE TIMES: STREETScape CONTROLS ARE CHANGING THEM

BELIEVE IT OR NOT, there are rules governing signage in New York City, and they have been in place since adoption of the 1961 Zoning Resolution. The problem is, they have been largely ignored. Finally, in 2002, the city began issuing summonses to violators, and an uproar ensued. On one side were City Councilmembers John Liu and David I. Weprin of Queens and others who vowed to liberalize the rules. On the other were community groups who called for enforcement and further restrictions. It was such a hullabaloo that a six-month moratorium on summonsing was established to allow the rules for signage to be reviewed and revised. Since then not much has been done by the city other than to renew the moratorium.

The 45-year-old signage code as written distinguishes between an awning, meant for the protection of merchandise and customers, and a sign, meant to advertise. Lettering on an awning may not be more than 12 inches high, and no advertisements such as phone numbers or lists of merchandise are supposed to be on it. Single-face signs parallel to a building cannot project more than 12 inches, and a multiface sign more than 18 inches. These are the basic rules governing buildings that are not individual landmarks or that fall outside designated districts.

The Landmarks Preservation Com-

mission has oversight over proposals affecting designated properties and regularly reviews applications for signage, awnings and lighting on landmark properties for placement, materials, design and colors. Its rules state, for example, that an awning is to be at or below the lintel and should conform to the size and shape of the window or door opening; that it must be made of water-repellant canvas or fabric with a matte finish; and that it should be either a solid color or vertical stripes that “harmonize with the historic color palette of the building.”

As New York City’s first designated historic district, Brooklyn Heights has had more than 40 years to consider and deal with such issues on its commercial strip, Montague Street. Since 1910 the Brooklyn Heights Association has been actively working both to preserve its residential neighborhood and to enhance and improve Montague Street. It expects—and generally gets—merchants’ compliance with LPC regulations. An eclectic collection of buildings, Montague is just four blocks long, three of which are inside the historic district. Near Borough Hall it is bustling with activity. Cross Clinton Street into the historic district, though, and a change is noticeable. Simple, slim signs without neon, backlighting or LED (light-emitting diodes) prevail;

and unobtrusive awnings, as opposed to huge ones with a lot of clutter, characterize a variety of businesses. While still active, the area has a less frenetic feel.

Unlike some historic districts, Brooklyn Heights does not have a special set of rules. BHA Executive Director Judy Stanton admits that “LPC permits things that we might not permit if the decision were ours alone,” such as fixed awnings that look retractable. Overall, though, the community is happy, and the rules are working. Most sign violations along Montague Street in the historic district have been cured, and with LPC strengthening the enforcement of its rules and holding contractors responsible, fewer new violations have occurred.

Each historic district is different, with its own distinct sense of place; as a result, the same rules do not always fit. LPC has worked with some neighborhood groups to tailor guidelines for them. For example, specific rules have been written for bracket signs on the commercial buildings of Manhattan’s four designated Tribeca districts and in the SoHo/Cast-Iron, NoHo, and Ladies’ Mile Historic Districts. Staff-level approvals are given to signs that use a simply designed armature of a dark-finished metal; to signs of metal or wood less than two inches in thickness and less than 24 by 26 inches; and to signs



JACKSON HEIGHTS BEAUTIFICATION GROUP

BEFORE: About 1996, 37th Avenue near the corner of 80th Street in Jackson Heights was a jumble of garish and messy signage. The storefronts are complicated—some of the most complex in the city. Still, the competition for the attention of passers by was deafening.



THE JACKSON HEIGHTS GARDEN CITY SOCIETY

AFTER: A remarkable turnaround in Jackson Heights, this stretch of 37th Avenue between 80th and 81st Streets converted many nonbelievers, who said, “If they do it, I will; otherwise not.” Much leaded glass had to be restored or sometimes re-created. Photo taken in August 2006.

painted with colors appropriate to the neighborhood. An establishment that wants to use a bracket sign cannot also use flags or banners. Areas that are more residential in nature, such as the Jackson Heights Historic District in Queens and the section of Madison Avenue that is within Manhattan's Upper East Side historic districts, have more detailed, wider ranging sets of guidelines.

Jackson Heights is notable for its consistency of style throughout its 80 blocks. The first planned garden community in the nation, it was also one of the first in the city in which commercial thoroughfares were created and did not simply evolve from previously residential streets. Thirty-Seventh Avenue was planned as Jackson Heights's retail strip because it runs the length of the neighborhood and all residents are within walking distance of it. The avenue has the same architectural styles and features as the residential buildings throughout the district, so that all the area's buildings present a unified appearance. Out-of-control signage threatened this cohesiveness.

The Jackson Heights Beautification Group, established in 1988, took on the cause. Even before the neighborhood was designated an historic district in 1993, JHBG had drawn up recommendations for building and storefront signs that emphasized well proportioned, simply designed, uncluttered signage. Once the neighborhood was designated, and

with the force of LPC rules behind them, Jackson Heights residents began reporting abuses and attending LPC hearings. Realizing that this was a major problem and one that the neighborhood cared deeply about, JHBG and LPC worked together to create signage rules for proposed alterations and new construction of storefronts in the district.

JHBG member, HDC adviser and area business owner Jeffrey Saunders says that initially there was resistance, so he went from store to store, at times with an interpreter, to explain the basics of historic preservation and the rules. Once everyone was informed, he says, competitive signage simmered down and so did resistance to regulations. True, some businesses retain their old awnings, but the clean simplicity of newer awnings clearly shows the influence of compliance.

The Jackson Heights plan has been so successful that Manhattan's Landmark West! organization used it in 1997 as a basis for its Retail Assistance Program, piloted on West 72nd Street (see District Lines, Winter 2006), in which banners and illegal canopies and security gates were removed. Furthermore, Mr. Saunders says, a local building owner from outside the Jackson Heights Historic District came to him for advice a few years ago and, with guidelines in hand, worked with his tenants to create a series of stores that seem to look just as good as those inside the district.

Madison Avenue from the East 60's through the East 90's is a busy, upscale shopping district, but it was once a street of sedate single-family row houses. Most were converted early in the 20th century to shops and offices and gradually began to install unsightly storefront awnings, signage, lighting, security gates and air conditioners. Landmarks Commission guidelines for these streetscape elements had existed in the early 1980's but they had no legal force. They were not officially adopted as rules by the agency until the end of 2000. Now three similar plans are in place, one for each of the historic districts the avenue runs through—the Upper East Side, Metropolitan Museum and Carnegie Hill Historic Districts—so that LPC staff can issue permits without public hearings.

Madison Avenue guidelines are complex, based on the amount of historic fabric still remaining in each structure. The guidelines show architectural drawings of each block with codes for storefront infill and signage. They were drawn up as an accommodation to the real estate community, which was concerned about the large size of the then-proposed Upper East Side Historic District in 1981. The guidelines follow the general LPC rules but are less strict in some cases. For example, graphics are allowed on an awning slope if they are no more than four square feet or ten percent of the awning surface (whichever is less). Sidewalk canopies are



JACKSON HEIGHTS BEAUTIFICATION GROUP

BEFORE: Obviously, fish was sold at the corner of 37th Avenue and 78th Street in 1996, and black anodized aluminum had been applied from the tops of the windows down to the ground, covering masonry and even parts of the windows.



THE JACKSON HEIGHTS GARDEN CITY SOCIETY

AFTER: Discreet signage for Ingrid's Beauty Salon and the jewelry shop in this August 2006 photo replaces a billboard that was twice as high as the parapet and obscured the architecture. Now the signage reflects the more upscale nature of the building's tenants.

not permitted at all. The guidelines clearly indicate what is permitted: small bracket signs, identification signs or plaques on the ground floor for story tenants on the second and third stories; and what is not permitted: projecting flagpoles and advertising banners. ❧

TWO NEW PLAYERS ON THE LANDMARKS STAGE

AS EVEN THE MOST INCURIOS OBSERVER of New York's preservation scene would agree, the last several months have seen some of the fiercest battles in decades. Recently, two prominent positions in preservation have been filled by relative newcomers who come from different backgrounds but the same neighborhood, and both bring with them expectations of change at the Landmarks Preservation Commission. The first is Jessica Lappin, the new City Councilmember from Manhattan's Upper East Side, who took over the chair of the Council's Subcommittee on Landmarks, Public Siting and Maritime Uses from Brooklyn Councilmember Simcha Felder in January. The second is



Jessica Lappin

Margery Perlmutter, a newly appointed commissioner of LPC. Ms. Lappin is young, enthusiastic and pro-preservation; Ms. Perlmutter is seasoned, experienced and a paid real estate lobbyist.

Before running for office herself, Ms. Lappin worked for seven years for the

City Council staff, most recently as senior adviser and district chief of staff to former Council Speaker Gifford Miller, who was term-limited out of office. She is a native New Yorker, a Stuyvesant High School graduate and holds a B.A. in government *magna cum laude* from Georgetown University.

Through her work with Speaker Miller, Ms. Lappin learned how the landmarks system operates and said she sees no reason to change it much. "I would hope," she told District Lines, "that LPC is functioning as it should, that it is holding hearings and designating sites with comments from the public and other elected officials. And if it is, you don't need another governmental body to force and review an issue. I prefer to look at ways to improve the Landmarks Commission, rather than insert the City Council into the designation arena."

These comments were made not long after the City Council overturned the designations of both the former Austin Nichols & Company Warehouse in Brooklyn and a former Jamaica Savings Bank in Queens. The preservation community was still smarting from those defeats, and Ms. Lappin seemed to be sensitive to that—she was one of the main sponsors of a successful budget initiative to increase funding for LPC.

Margery Perlmutter comes to the Landmarks Commission with outstanding and relevant credentials: a Bachelor's degree from Bennington College, Master of Architecture from Columbia University, founding partner at an architecture firm where she worked for 15 years. She then branched out to law and earned a J.D. degree *cum laude* from Fordham University and joined the firm of Bryan Cave LLP as a specialist in land use. She recently finished a three year stint as co-chair of the Landmarks Committee of Community Board 8 in Manhattan.

The problems arise because Ms. Perlmutter is a lobbyist for real estate developers, which means she represents clients who pay her and her firm to pursue variances in land use regulations that may inhibit their ability to maximize profits. They may also pay her to pursue changes in the Landmarks Law to benefit their interests—indeed, she has stated that one of her objectives is to draft amendments to that law.

To many in the preservation community, this profile makes Ms. Perlmutter



Margery Perlmutter

hostile to landmarks issues, placing her in direct conflict with preservation concerns. Numerous speakers opposed her confirmation in a long hearing before Councilmember Diana Reyna's Rules, Privileges and Elections Committee precisely because they saw this situation as running counter to LPC's best interests. The New York City Conflicts of Interest Board, however, had cleared her based on her promise to recuse herself from any decision affecting clients of her law firm or her husband's architecture firm. Ultimately, her nomination was confirmed 39 to 10 in the full City Council on a day that has been described as the most contentious in 20 years.

In practice, the two new appointees have not yet had the opportunity to affect lasting change, although Ms. Lappin has been working on it. In April, as chair of the Landmarks Subcommittee, she hosted a rowdy oversight hearing of the Landmarks Commission at Queens Borough Hall to address the perceived lack of attention to proposed historic districts in the borough. Following up on that, she has introduced legislation to mandate a survey department within LPC.

Meanwhile, as an LPC commissioner, so far Ms. Perlmutter has proven to be a centrist at the agency's public hearings. According to close observers, she is outspoken but no more so than others, and her opinions have been mainstream. If this is an indication of future performance, fears about her being a fox in the henhouse could be put to rest. ❧

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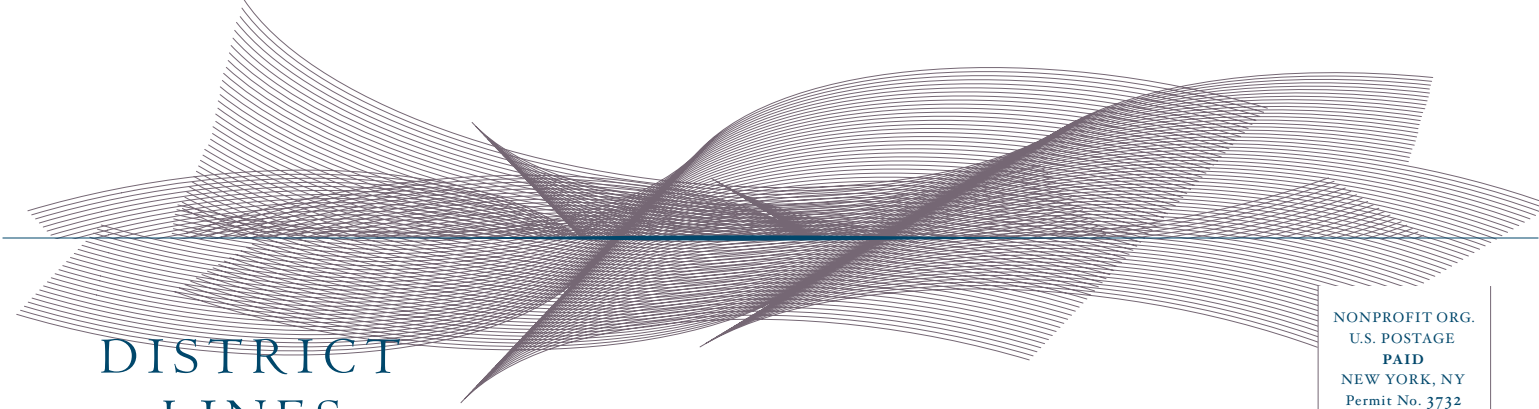
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