

# DISTRICT LINES

NEWS AND VIEWS OF THE HISTORIC DISTRICTS COUNCIL WINTER 2006 VOL. XX NO. 3

## TOWERS ATOP 980 MADISON AVENUE WOULD CAST IMPLICATIONS EVEN LONGER THAN THEIR SHADOWS

### I. THE HEARING

TWO HUNDRED PEOPLE jammed into a second-floor room at the Surrogate's Court building in Lower Manhattan for a special public hearing on October 24. The Landmarks Preservation Commission had been expecting a lot of people, but not this many—for those who arrived a mere ten minutes early there was standing room only. People spilled out the door into the public corridor.

Aby Rosen, the developer, was the first to speak. Excited about his new project and confident of its merits, he talked about the building he bought two years ago at 980 Madison Avenue—the Parke-Bernet Galleries—almost as if it were decrepit and described how he would restore it to its original glory. He admitted that to build the two connected high-rise residential towers he was proposing would require zoning “modifications,” but he intimated that the alterations LPC had approved in the 1980s had somehow made Parke-Bernet shabby. He would remove the added windows, restore the roof garden, add a public sculpture garden and create 24,000 square feet of art-exhibition space.

Lord Norman Foster spoke next, the architect of the towers. A distinguished-looking, well-dressed man, he, too, seemed confident of the project's merits. It would be compatible with the neighborhood, he said, because it was a part of New York, Manhattan's Upper East Side, that demonstrated “eclectic growth” and “regeneration,” which may have raised a few eyebrows. He

also spent time talking about how green his building would be, how it employed the latest environmental technologies to be virtually self-sufficient in terms of energy use.

But William J. Higgins, a principal of Higgins & Quasebarth preservation consultants, really made a strong case for appropriateness. The towers were triply appropriate, he said—for the historic building, Parke-Bernet itself; for the

designated district that it may occupy; and for the basic principles according to which the landmarks process has been conducted over the years. Expanding, he bemoaned the windows gained and the garden lost in the LPC-approved alterations. He stressed that the horizontality of the gallery building balanced the verticality of the towers and that though the two buildings shared the site, they were independent of each other with, nevertheless, a “harmonious interaction of materials” and an “organic relationship.”

The towers would be appropriate to a district in which change is a constant, Mr. Higgins said, where different scales of buildings harmonized and where luxury and quality abound. And finally, the towers are appropriate to the landmarking process, he argued, because they “harmonize the juxtaposition of evolutionary changes,” as Harmon Goldstone, an early chair of LPC, was known to say.

Public testimony, both pro and con, was given until after six in the evening. Testimony in favor of the project dealt mainly with how a renovated Parke-Bernet building would revitalize the neighborhood, adding gallery space on Madison Avenue that had been lost to Chelsea. Some neighbors liked the addition, and a representative of the Real Estate Board of New York said the plan allowed for development without demolition.

Other neighbors, especially those who live across the street or around the corner from the project, said it was “unharmonious, alien to the area” and “a developer's folly. ...Do not



RENDERING BY PLATT BYARD DOVELL WHITE ARCHITECTS

*Rendering of the towers proposed as an addition to the Parke Bernet Galleries in Manhattan. At press time, the Landmarks Commission had not made a decision whether to approve the design.*

*Historic Districts Council*

enrich this developer at the expense of the neighborhood."

Preservationists spoke as well and were unanimously opposed to the project. Although details of their testimony varied, all agreed that the proposal was inappropriate for the neighborhood:

**Elizabeth Ashby**, co-chair of Defenders of the Historic Upper East Side, said she did not see a relationship between the vertical, elliptical glass towers and their solid, rectilinear masonry base, let alone an "organic" one, as Mr. Higgins had averred. "There's an organic relationship, too," she said, "between a lettuce and a gorilla."

**Simeon Bankoff**, executive director of the Historic Districts Council, testified on the basis of regulatory grounds: provisions of Section 74-711 of the Zoning Resolution and those of the Special Madison Avenue Preservation District, a zoning amendment. Section 74-711, he said, "was adopted to encourage the rehabilitation and reuse of landmark buildings that were otherwise unusable," in return for which the applicant would be granted a Modification of Use and Bulk. The Parke-Bernet Galleries building is in good condition and currently in use, vitiating that argument. The Special Madison Ave-

nue Preservation District, Mr. Bankoff went on, stipulates height and setback restrictions, 210 feet being the overall limit. "In fact," he said, "as mandated by Section 99-08 [of the zoning ordinance], a waiver of the maximum building height may only be authorized by the City Planning Commission if (a) the development will not alter the character of the neighborhood and (b) the development will have a harmonious relationship with the building to be preserved. It is our contention that this proposal does neither."

**Frank Sanchis**, senior vice president of the Municipal Art Society, said the society's Preservation Committee "found the design of the addition...to be inappropriate to both the building and to the Upper East Side Historic District [because of its] proposed height, massing, design and materials."

**Roger Lang** of the New York Landmarks Conservancy testified: "The addition is simply too tall, too discordant in massing, and too dissimilar in materials to bring to the Upper East Side Historic District what the late Harmon Goldstone called 'a harmonious juxtaposition.'"

**Teri Slater**, co-chair of Defenders of the Historic Upper East Side and a vice president of HDC, where she is co-chair of the Public Review Committee, testified that "LPC normally reviews visibility issues where a few feet are called into question. Here the rooftop addition will be visible for miles. ...When the commission routinely and methodically turns down all partially visible rooftop additions for hundreds of other applicants, how then could it possibly bless and allow this proposed change?"

**Leo Blackman**, an award-winning architect, vice president of The Drive to Protect the Ladies' Mile District and a director of HDC, took the commission to task in a written statement: "It is the role of the Landmarks Commission to protect the visual character of the neighborhoods they have deemed significant. It is not the role of the LPC to enable large-scale development, no matter how prominent the developer. A famous architect should not get a free pass from the commission... and a landmark should not be considered a suitable base for a tower."

Newspaper columnists, too, were dubious:

**Nicolai Ouroussoff**, architecture critic of The New York Times, found it

too big—"the tower's outsize height is a problem," he said in an article published October 10. Largely approving in tone, Mr. Ouroussoff's article contrasted 980 Madison with Renzo Piano's proposed (and later withdrawn) addition to the Whitney Museum, saying that "the Foster tower will serve the interests of a wealthy elite, not the public at large. ...I'm not sure a luxury high-rise should be allowed the same freedom as a major civic building."

**Tom Wolfe**, preservation's most voluble player, wrote in a long, scathing Op-Ed piece in The Times (November 26), "It would be hard to dream up anything short of a Mobil station more out of place there than a Mondo Condo glass box by Aby Rosen."

And **James Gardner**, writing in The New York Sun (October 31), was similarly doubtful: "To have this tasteless new tower directly across the street from [the Carlyle Hotel] would immediately and irreversibly rend the delicate urban fabric of the Upper East Side."

Ultimately, the period during which testimony could be submitted was extended six weeks to December 5, which allowed people who live in the neighborhood to organize a street-corner campaign to stop the project and get their petitions in on time.

The outcome could go one of three ways—approval of the proposal, approval of a revised proposal, or outright denial. Tom Wolfe thought Aby Rosen would get his approval—"the contest is already completely snookered in his favor," he said. Noting that nine out of 11 commissioners are doing service on expired terms, Mr. Wolfe suggested that they might all be told not to come in again if their decision does not favor Mr. Rosen, a scenario—unlikely though it may be—that has implications best left dangling.

Alternatively, the applicant could propose and the commission approve revisions to the design. They could be approved at a public meeting which, distinct from a public hearing, does not admit public testimony. A couple of the guesses:

**James Gardner** in The Sun: "[Lord Foster] and Mr. Rosen will get as many square feet as they now desire, but it will come in the form of a box rather than a tower. It will be less dramatic and the

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**DISTRICT  
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NEWS AND VIEWS OF THE  
**HISTORIC DISTRICTS COUNCIL**

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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.

## ...IMPLICATIONS EVEN LONGER THAN THEIR SHADOWS

*If approved, the 980 Madison proposal to build a tower above the Parke Bernet Galleries 355 feet overall could have lasting effects on preservation throughout the city. The Landmarks Preservation Commission had not made a decision by press time, but whatever the verdict, the application raises major issues, among them the integrity of historic districts and the use of Section 74 711 of the Zoning Resolution.*

### II. DISTRICT INTEGRITY

EACH OF NEW YORK CITY'S 85 historic districts has, in the words of the New York City Landmarks Law, a "special character" and "special historical or aesthetic interest representing one or more architectural styles or periods." Those qualities are specifically what the Landmarks Preservation Commission is mandated to preserve and protect.

The larger and older of the city's historic districts, such as Manhattan's Upper East Side Historic District (designated in 1981), are often heterogeneous. Nevertheless, what ties a neighborhood together and creates a distinct sense of place not found elsewhere in the city comes down to three main elements: the buildings' scale, style and materials. The proposed tower for 980 Madison Avenue strikes out on all three counts—it is much taller than most in the district, looming over even some buildings that are symbolic of the area, such as the Carlyle Hotel; it is extremely contemporary in an area of classically inspired styles, oval in contrast to prevailing straight lines; and it is predominately glass in a neighborhood known for its masonry.

Changes that can affect a district's special character the most are new construction and alterations to existing buildings. New construction, which the tower on 980 Madison Avenue essentially is, often has the largest potential impact on a district's integrity. A well thought-out new building can enhance a district and do more for a neighborhood than an empty lot or a noncontributing previous structure it replaces. This past summer LPC approved a design by architect Kevin Wolfe for a new house in the Douglaston Historic District, a Queens neighborhood known for Early 20th Century Revival-style residences. Mr. Wolfe, an Historic Districts Council adviser, designed an Arts & Crafts-inspired house with wood-framed and leaded-glass windows, cedar shingles, slate roof, copper flashing and fieldstone base. It replaces a 1960s ranch-

style house and, while a new building, will be a better fit in the neighborhood.

Alterations to existing buildings can also change the character of an historic district. For example, an even subtle alteration in the fenestration of just one row house can destroy the flow and harmony of the whole block. Similarly, changes on one element of a building can take away from the character of an entire area, even though the architecture of the building in question is not directly related to that of its neighbors. HDC opposed, and LPC turned down, a proposal in October to remove the scalloped aluminum awning over the entrance to a 1959 Greenwich Village apartment building. Though the building is dissimilar to other ones on the street—the district was designated ten years after that building was built—the canopy proposed was without character and could have been found just about anywhere. By preserving the original entrance, not only is the historic fabric of the building retained but also part of the quirky character of the Village.

A rooftop addition can also greatly change not only a building but its relationship to its historic district. Typically, such additions are required to be as invisible as possible from the public way, and so LPC seldom approves additions of more than one story. Even that was too much in one recent case when the commission rejected an application for a rooftop addition on an 1839 Greek Revival house on Washington Square North. It would have been hardly noticeable, but the commissioners felt the block was so evocative of its era and so well preserved that they denied the proposal, confirming the primacy of the district's sense of character.

The integrity of an historic neighborhood can extend to the rear of its buildings as well. Rear-yard additions are popular expansions, and when they are visible from the public way, much debate at LPC is focused on ensuring that the style, materials and scale are in harmony with the neighborhood. When

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### III. MANIPULATING 74-711

BATTLES TO PRESERVE historic buildings in New York City under the Landmarks Law have gone on as long as the law itself has existed, and zoning and planning have been part of the action from the first. When the law was enacted in 1965, many in the real estate industry thought the limitations it imposed could spell financial ruin. It seems absurd now that in 1978, the idea that an obsolescent building might be adapted for a new use was so novel that Barbaralee Diamonstein-Spielvogel's 1978 book, "Buildings Reborn: New Uses, Old Places" was considered controversial. Even as late as 1986, when Manhattan's Ladies' Mile Historic District was heard for designation, most industry representatives expressed grave doubts about landmarking commercial buildings.

However, at the time, governmental action was clearly needed to ensure the economic viability of privately owned historic buildings subject to regulation—the new law would founder otherwise. During the mayoral terms of Robert F. Wagner Jr. and then of John V. Lindsay, the first Landmarks chair, Geoffrey Platt, worked closely with Harmon Goldstone, then a member of the City Planning Commission, to come up with ideas for economic compensation that might forestall a rush to litigation and possible demolition. In 1968 Goldstone became the first paid chairman of the Landmarks Preservation Commission.

Unused bulk allowed by zoning on a site—formally called "development rights"—had long been used by builders to accumulate bulk from sites nearby. They could acquire zoning rights for, say, nine stories from the owners of a nearby six-story building in a 15-story zone. Historically, air rights transfers had been allowed only to contiguous properties, but Goldstone and Platt developed an amendment to the 1916 Zoning Resolution, Section 74-79, that authorized such transfers from landmarked properties



across nearby streets and intersections and through chains of ownership. It required only a finding of a “harmonious relationship” between the landmark and a new building created through the approved air rights transfer.

Such provisions were cited by the Supreme Court in the 1978 Penn Central decision as part of the justification for allowing the landmark designation of Grand Central Terminal to stand—“under a transferable development rights program,” said the majority opinion, “it was possible for the owner to transfer the development rights it was foreclosed from using...to other neighboring properties which it owned.”

In a further search for means to lessen the burden of designation while encouraging restoration and maintenance, Messrs. Goldstone and Platt developed a novel, more complex approach. They hammered out another zoning amendment, Section 74-711, that allowed lifting most restrictions on use and massing on a designated property on three conditions: (a) if the commission determined that the proposed changes were appropriate; (b) if the owner undertook to restore the property to first-class condition; and (c) if the owner would commit to a continuing maintenance program, signing a restrictive declaration to bind present and future owners to the same conditions.

Originally the Commissioners reviewed the restoration plans and maintenance agreements in 74-711 applications, discussed them in open meetings, and sometimes asked for changes. Real restoration was seen as a fair exchange for exemption from zoning requirements. Once the restoration and preservation plan was accepted, the LPC itself became the applicant in an action to City Planning, recommending the issuance of a Special Permit.

During the Giuliani administration, a second working partnership between the then chairs of City Planning and Landmarks, Joseph Rose and Jennifer Raab, made a number of little-publicized changes in the Zoning Resolution. They also changed how 74-711 was to be administered and codified the change through the adoption of LPC rules.

As part of the 1989 Charter Revision, the City Administrative Procedures Act had stipulated that rules followed by city agencies must be formally adopted

through a public process and publication. Unfortunately, a new Restoration Rule,



adopted by the Landmarks Commission in 1997, the same year as the amendment of 74-711, significantly changed public accountability in the interagency administration of development benefits. It sets forth what changes to historic buildings may be made with staff-level permits—permits which, under present policy, are not readily available for public review and need not go through a public process at all.


The restoration-and-maintenance plan can now be negotiated behind closed doors, and the public benefit that was part of the original 74-711 provision is no longer available for public scrutiny. Some applicants voluntarily present details of their restorations at a public hearing; but if the approval has already taken place at staff level, it is only a gesture. Sometimes a tenacious commissioner may raise questions and negotiate an improvement if there is a new design component in the project.

While the Landmarks commissioners have lost authority through the Restoration Rule and the public no longer enjoys transparency in these commission decisions, at least LPC is no longer the applicant to City Planning. The developer himself must go for his Special Permit, bringing only an accepted—hopefully not rubber-stamped—scheme with him from LPC.

Recently another argument has been put forward; namely, that it is unfair to require major restoration as a component of 74-711 because it “penalizes” an applicant whose building is already in decent condition. Perhaps the idea has arisen because in most historic districts, where Section 74-711 typically comes into play, buildings are seldom blighted and properties that owners consider suitable for development are typically well maintained. Some recent applications have proposed little more than minor restorations of a structure in what seems an ill-disguised attempt to evade zoning regulations and circumvent any requirement

for real public benefit.

The 980 Madison Avenue proposal, which would perch irregularly shaped elliptical glass towers on the northern end of the well maintained Parke-Bernet building, is applying for a 74-711 permit. The design violates the height and massing rules of the Madison Avenue Special Preservation District in a spectacular way, while the proposed restoration does little more than reverse some alterations that the Landmarks Commission itself previously found appropriate. Nevertheless it could be argued that reversing those alterations is a “restoration” that returns the building to its original condition, one of the defined parameters for staff-level approval under the Restoration Rule. A supporting argument in this case might be that “cutting edge architecture” is in itself a good regardless of context.

The fundamental concept that there should be some proportionality between the impact of the zoning change sought and the public benefit received from restoration and maintenance has been lost. And if it can happen at 980 Madison Avenue, why not elsewhere? What a paradox that the Landmarks Law, once seen as a harbinger of ruin, could be manipulated to magnify wealth beyond the dreams of human avarice! 

## UPDATE ON OUR “CREATING AN HISTORIC DISTRICT”

AS EVERYONE CAN SEE, New York City is undergoing a huge building boom, the largest in a generation. While this may bode well for the city’s economy, especially the real estate sector, it is worth considering that most of this new construction is getting shoehorned into existing neighborhoods. As older buildings come down and new ones sprout up, communities are now more than ever looking for ways to protect their historic neighborhoods and help guide the new development that may come.

In response, the Historic Districts Council has recently published a newly revised edition of its authoritative “Creating an Historic District.” It details how a neighborhood can become a designated New York City historic district and what a community can do to help it happen. Drawing from real-world examples, such as the successful preservation campaigns


in Manhattan's Tribeca and Gansevoort Market, "Creating" provides simple and clear strategies for individuals and community groups pursuing landmark designation. One feature of the book is a section on dispelling anti-preservation myths. There are also tips on how to raise public awareness of a campaign, how to best use the efforts of volunteers and how



*HDC's revised edition of its authoritative book, Creating an Historic District, is now available.*

to raise money.

In its appendices are the text of the Landmarks Law, an architectural reference section and sample forms for building surveys and permits from the Landmarks Preservation Commission.

Illustrated with historic photos and images of designated districts from HDC's Digital Image Library, this guidebook is a must for anyone who wants to learn more about community efforts and the landmarks process in New York City. "Creating an Historic District" is available for \$34.99 including shipping, or for \$24.99 for the Friends of the Historic Districts Council. To order, go to [www.hdc.org](http://www.hdc.org) or call 212-614-9107. 

## PRESIDENT'S COLUMN

IN OCTOBER our board of directors adopted a revised mission statement: "The Historic Districts Council works to

ensure the preservation of significant historic neighborhoods, buildings and public spaces in New York City, to ensure the integrity of New York City's Landmarks Law, and to further the preservation ethic." Along with the mission statement, the board articulated its vision, guiding principles, organizational roles, goals and strategies. Among them are these:

- Foster a climate that supports historic preservation
- Build and mobilize networks of advocates for historic preservation
- Develop a broad range of tactics and strategies to move the preservation agenda forward

These objectives create a new focus for HDC. In the past, as part of our mission, we have worked for specific reforms to enhance preservation efforts, and we



*David Goldfarb at the podium of Columbia University's Low Library during the Lion award ceremony (see page 7).*

have worked with local groups to further our efforts. But we have never looked at a comprehensive preservation agenda and worked with a broad range of strategies to further that agenda. Many of you will remember that in 2005, in order to protect 19th century houses being razed in Brooklyn, Queens and Staten Island, we put a great deal of effort behind proposed City Council legislation to delay demolition of potential landmarks more than 50 years old. The legislation had a majority of Councilmembers as sponsors and a num-

ber of hearings, but it never got out of the Council's Subcommittee on Landmarks, Public Siting and Maritime Uses.

The political climate for historic preservation has not changed since the new City Council session commenced in 2006, so we did not renew our legislative efforts but instead looked to educate elected officials and to reinvigorate a climate that supports historic preservation. We also looked inward at our own strategic planning to help us decide on a feasible direction for the future.

Meanwhile a number of events have begun to change how preservation and the work of the Landmarks Preservation Commission are seen. Demolitions and the destruction of our historic built environment continue. In a number of instances, buildings have been stripped of architectural detail after they were calendared for designation hearings but before they were heard. These and similar actions have clarified the need for remedial legislation, but no legislation will work unless the Landmarks Commission and the City Council stand behind the principles of historic preservation.

We will not abandon the work we do reviewing applications to LPC for Certificates of Appropriateness; nor will we discontinue our educational programs. Yet to be relevant, we must also work to change how landmarking and landmark protection operate in New York City. This will require time, effort and resources. In the next few months we will begin to structure our boards of directors and advisers and our staff so that we can work with the larger community to put together a preservation agenda and to identify laws and regulations, policies and procedures that need to be introduced or changed.

I hope that you will join us to develop these goals and to increase the number of actively engaged, financially involved supporters, both organizations and individuals.

—David Goldfarb

*Historic Districts Council*

## NEW YORKERS MOURN DEATHS OF 2 LEADING PRESERVATIONISTS

IN ONE MONTH RECENTLY, the preservation community lost two of its pioneers: **Richard Blinder**, 71, a founding partner of Beyer Blinder Belle died September 7, 2006, in Shanghai; and **Evelyn Ortner**, 82, died less than two weeks later, September 19, in Brooklyn.

The architecture and planning firm Beyer Blinder Belle is best known for such high-profile restorations as Grand Central Terminal and Ellis Island, but also for saving and renewing individual



**Richard Blinder**

landmark buildings and buildings of landmark quality. For their work in historic preservation, they received the Historic Districts Council's Landmarks Lion Award in 2004.

When BBB was established in 1968, the nascent historic preservation ethic was completely overshadowed by that of urban renewal; the possibility of adaptive reuse had barely been conceived. Mr. Blinder's partners remember that in the early years it was the community-based work they did in which he took most pride, projects such as the Villa Borinquen in Jersey City and the Highbridge Concourse Houses in The Bronx, work that emphasized rehabilitation and affordable housing. "His belief in social objectives," recall his partners, "as well as design objectives, shaped the firm."

Although the practice continues to be solidly New York based, it has grown to include projects around the world and

offices in Washington, D.C., and Beijing, China. Mr. Blinder was the design director of the Beijing office and was working there on the Shanghai Cultural Plaza, a planned theater complex, when he died unexpectedly. It was his vision that led the firm to open that office. He had been loving the challenge and getting to know the country, often traveling as the Chinese do, on a bicycle.

Mr. Blinder was the lead architect for many of the firm's notable cultural commissions, including the conversion of the former Barney's store on Manhattan's West 17th Street into the Rubin Museum of Art, where HDC celebrated BBB's Lion award. He was also the lead architect for the Center for Jewish History in Chelsea, the Henry Luce Center for the Study of American Culture at the New York Historical Society, the Japan Society on East 47th Street and the Ford Center for the Performing Arts in Times Square. He was one of the founding members of the Seventh Regiment Armory Conservancy, the landmark at East 67th Street and Park Avenue in Manhattan.




**Evelyn Ortner**

Evelyn Ortner's interest in preservation began in 1963 when she and her husband, Everett, bought an 1886 Park Slope row house in Brooklyn. An interior designer trained at Pratt Institute, she became enchanted with the Victorian details of the house and, together with her husband, related the charms of ones like it to thousands of people who were ready to abandon the city for the suburbs and then, because of her influence, did not.

In 1968 the Ortners founded the Brownstone Revival Committee (now the Brownstone Revival Coalition) and sponsored Back to the City Conferences that spread the gospel of urban life to 13 other cities in which its conferences took place. BRC also published a newsletter—still does—called The Brownstoner and sponsors lectures, seminars, workshops and tours. One of the group's major contributions was to combat redlining, exclusionary lines drawn by lending institutions around areas considered economically risky. Houses in many of those areas, the very neighborhoods where the Ortners inspired interest, now command multimillion-dollar prices.

To encourage more people to buy and restore Brooklyn brownstones, Mrs. Ortner approached Brooklyn Union Gas Company and persuaded it to renovate a derelict house and publicize the result. It became the legendary Cinderella Project, a home improvement program that changed the face of Brooklyn and made row house living a dream come true for thousands of families.

Most recently the Ortners created Preservation Volunteers, a program modeled on a similar French one to set teams of unskilled people of all ages to work restoring derelict monuments. In 2006, its fifth summer, Preservation Volunteers from France and the United States worked two-week stints at historic sites including, in New York City, the Morris-Jumel Mansion, the Dyckman Farmhouse and the Queens County Farm Museum.

In addition to these endeavors, Mrs. Ortner was a founder and long-time chair of St. Ann's Center for Preservation and the Arts as well as the Brooklyn Stained Glass Conservation Center. She was a self-taught expert in Egyptian history and archaeology and served on a variety of boards and committees at the Brooklyn Academy of Music, the Brooklyn Museum, the Montauk Club, the Victorian Society in America, the Brooklyn Center for the Urban Environment and the Municipal Art Society. 



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## ROBERT SILMAN RECEIVES HDC'S HIGHEST HONOR

IN EARLY NOVEMBER the structural engineer and preservation advocate Robert Silman received the Historic Districts Council's 2006 Landmarks Lion Award. The ceremony and the dinner that accompanied it took place under the massive dome of Columbia University's Low Memorial Library, one of Mr. Silman's many restoration projects. Preservationists, architects and engineers all gathered to salute this accomplished and unassuming man, who has engineered the structural underpinning of countless restored landmarks in New York City and beyond.

Mr. Silman is admired throughout the preservation field and is very prolific—if you chose any well-known preservation project within the five boroughs, chances are his firm has worked on it. Since 1966, when he founded Robert Silman Associates, he has consulted on more than 13,000 projects, many for historic buildings. Some of the best known examples of the firm's work include Ellis Island National Museum of Immigration, the Guggenheim Museum, Radio City Music Hall, the Cathedral of St. John the Divine and the project that brought him to national attention, Frank Lloyd Wright's Fallingwater.


More than 250 people were present for



P. DECKER

*Presenting Robert Silman, second from right, with his Landmarks Lion Award are, from left, John Belle, partner of Beyer Blinder Belle Architects, winners of the 2005 Lion; Simeon Bankoff, executive director of the Historic Districts Council; David Goldfarb, HDC president; and right, Fred Bland, partner of BBB.*

the event, including several past Landmarks Lions. John Belle and Fred Bland, partners at Beyer Blinder Belle Architects & Planners, HDC's 2004 Lion, presented the award and spoke glowingly about Mr. Silman, the individual and the engineer. Never one to rest on his laurels, Mr. Silman used his acceptance remarks to speak about an important and little-discussed issue within the preservation world today: "There is a certain ethical basis to

our professional resolves that we need to consider in all our decision-making. But we cannot develop this framework in a vacuum....To all of us here at the Historic Districts Council's annual awards dinner, who come from such diverse backgrounds in historic preservation, I would urge that we each examine the moral imperatives that underlie our various advocacies. Then we can speak with an authoritative and united voice." 

## HDC ADDS FIVE NEW ADVISERS

THE HISTORIC DISTRICTS COUNCIL recently welcomed to its board of advisers five new members selected for their ability to provide expertise and guidance to HDC's programs and mission. The advisers now number 30 individuals who represent every borough and a variety of professional fields.

• **Annice Alt** had a long career working with early-childhood education organizations, frequently providing them with technical assistance and helping them find suitable space. Since retirement, she has

been able to devote time to her lifelong interest in architecture and has researched the firm of Boak & Paris, architects of her building in Washington Heights, Manhattan. Recently she helped revive the local chapter of the Society of Architectural Historians.


• **Page Ayres Cowley**, FAIA, RIBA, is the principal of Page Ayres Cowley Architects, an award winning firm specializing in the rehabilitation and preservation of cultural-heritage and landmark-eligible properties. She serves on the boards of the James Marston Fitch Charitable Foundation and the Metropolitan Structures Association and is co-chair of the land use committee of Manhattan Community Board 7 in her Upper West Side Man-

hattan home district. Her firm's current projects include the Corbin Building, part of Manhattan's new Fulton Street Transportation Center, and the rehabilitation of four golf clubhouses for the American Golf Corporation and the New York City Parks Department.

• **Gregory Dietrich**, an architectural historian with the Cultural Resource Consulting Group, serves as a consultant to the Borough of Rockleigh [New Jersey] Historic Preservation and Planning Boards and oversees the restoration of several important New York City landmarks. He holds M.S. degrees from Columbia University in historic preservation and real estate development. He is a Manhattan resident.

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• **Victoria Hofmo** is the founder of the Bay Ridge Conservancy and chairperson of City Councilmember Vincent J. Gentile's preservation committee. She was instrumental in the recent rezoning of Bay Ridge and continues to advocate for preserving the community's history. She is also a founder of the Scandinavian East Coast Museum, which is dedicated to telling the story of Scandinavians who settled along the East Coast of the United States.

• **Seri Worden** has been the executive director of Friends of the Upper East Side Historic Districts since 2004 and has previously worked with such noted preservation organizations as DOCOMOMO, Historic Landmarks Preservation Center, and Design Trust for Public Space. She is a graduate of Columbia University's graduate preservation program. A resident of Brooklyn, she was an important part of the Coalition to Save the Austin, Nichols & Company Warehouse on the Brooklyn waterfront. 

## I THE HEARING

*continued from page 2*

prices it commands will be somewhat scaled back, since it will not be able to offer its clients the bracing pleasure of


blocking other people's views or ensure that clients can be seen from as far away as Hoboken."

**Frank Homan**, a neighborhood resident, perhaps thinking of a box, testified that "the greater danger is that this [proposal] is so far out that Plan B will be welcome," a design that would never have been approved the first time around.

Or the proposal could be turned down cold. It has happened, but not for a long time. The commission turned down an application for a tower atop Grand Central Terminal in 1977—that one went to the Supreme Court, which supported LPC. In 1981 the agency said no to a 15-story limestone obelisk by Mario Gandelsonas proposed for the rooftop of 22 East 71st Street; and in 1987 it refused to approve a 39-story residential tower above the Metropolitan Club on Fifth Avenue—both of these on the grounds of inappropriateness to the neighborhood. In 1985 the commission turned down a tower on top of the New-York Historical Society, an individual landmark; and in 1989, LPC sent back for revisions a James Stewart Polshek tower for Tishman-Speyer to the Siegel-Cooper Building on Sixth Avenue and West 18th Street in

the Ladies Mile Historic District. Public testimony and the letters opposing the addition were so numerous that the developer withdrew the application hours before it was to be considered in a second public hearing.

- Those decisions happened a long time ago. Things may be different now. A looming glass tower six times the height of its base in an historic district should be an obvious no. However: We have a mayor and deputy mayor who want to see cutting-edge architecture competitive with that in European capitals;
- We have 85 historic districts now and X,XXX individual landmarks, which still leaves a lot of room for as-of-right building elsewhere, but less than in the 1980s;
- We have a housing problem that will get worse as the city's population pushes toward nine million in 2020;
- And we have a world famous architect who is soft-spoken and charming, to say nothing of knighted, working for a developer who owns two prominent New York City landmarks, the Seagram Building and Lever House, and has taken care of them well.

Despite common preservation sense, despite the testimony of many preservation organizations and scores of citizens—despite, even, Tom Wolfe's scathing article—Mr. Rosen could get his glass towers. We will see what kind of courage the current Landmarks Preservation Commission has. 

## II. DISTRICT INTEGRITY

*continued from page 3, column 2*


an extension is not visible, its design is less scrutinized. However, the commission has made it a point to maintain the historic fenestration of top floors, which is often one of the first architectural elements to go in rear-yard alterations. Large rear-yard additions that threaten to damage the garden core of blocks in districts such as Brooklyn Heights, Greenwich Village and the Upper West Side are hotly contested.

Unlike individual landmarks that stand on their own, historic districts gain their quality from a grouping of buildings and how they relate to one another. A change to one building, whether a thoughtful restoration project or an inappropriate alteration, affects the integrity



*Photograph of the model prepared by the office of James Stewart Polshek Partners showing, right, a tower proposed above the Siegel-Cooper Building on Sixth Avenue. The application was withdrawn just hours before its second hearing.*



of the whole, positively or negatively. That integrity—"the quality or state of being complete or undivided," as the Merriam-Webster dictionary defines it—is vital to New York. The history of the city is in the interaction and relationships of its people, and these stories are told in our neighborhoods. 

## DISTRICT PROFILES

### WEEHAWKEN STREET HISTORIC DISTRICT, MANHATTAN

TO MOST PEOPLE, "Weehawken" means the river city Weehawken, New Jersey; but there is a tiny thoroughfare in Manhattan's Far West Village of that name too, which may be why the Landmarks Preservation Commission calls its May, 2006, designation the Weehawken Street Historic District. "The Street Book, an Encyclopedia of Manhattan's Street Names and Their Origins" by Henry Moscow [1978] says that the little road's name derives from its having once been the Weehawken Market, selling produce from New Jersey, perhaps from the Weehawken that is across the river and a few miles north. That seems like a good enough explanation.

The street itself runs parallel to West Street, forming a block that is only 30 feet deep. One of the most intriguing buildings in New York City straddles that block midway between Christopher and West 10th Streets, a small, two-story frame building—little more than a shanty—whose West Street address is 392-393 and Weehawken address is 8. It has caused comment for more than 100 years, meriting an observation in an 1893 issue of Harper's New Monthly magazine that it was built in 1796 or maybe even as early as 1767, which shows that it looked old even then. In fact, according to the Landmarks Commission designation report, it was built in 1834 as part of the Weehawken Market.

That market was built on the site of the Old Newgate State Prison, which

occupied four acres there after its construction in 1797 until inmate rioting and arson caused its closure in 1829. The prison itself was a remarkable building, taking up four acres and built of massive stone surrounded by high, thick walls with a walkway on top. Designed by architect Joseph-François

Mangin, who later collaborated on the design of City Hall, Newgate was the first United States prison to emphasize rehabilitation of prisoners. It also rejuvenated law-abiding citizens, apparently, because great numbers of them came as tourists from Lower Manhattan to see it, relax in its pleasant surroundings on the river and perambulate the wall



*Weehawken Street Historic District shows a narrow block between West and Weehawken Streets. It is only 30 feet deep and has inhibited development for that reason.*

containing it.

Having bought the site from the state in preparation for the prison's closure, the city plotted and sold the land in 1829, keeping that between Christopher and what is now West 10th Street for a public market. Formally called the Greenwich Market, it was just around the corner from another, well-established one of the same name outside what is now the Archives Building, so it became known as the Weehawken Market.

As luck would have it, both markets were threatened when the Jefferson Market at Sixth and Greenwich Avenues



P. BAREAU

*Federal house at 398 West Street, built in 1830 and largely intact today but painted gray.*

opened in 1833, but the wheels had already been set in motion and the Weehawken Market opened in 1834. According to LPC's designation report for this district, the Greenwich Market succumbed to competition and closed in 1835, but the Weehawken Market soldiered on, selling meat, fish, fruit and vegetables until it was abandoned in 1844. Finally, four years later, the city divided the property into seven different lots and sold them.


One of the lots was bought by George M. Munson, a boatbuilder, who lived nearby on Christopher Street. The designation report says that his building "today is almost certainly the sole surviving part of the Weehawken Market house, making it extraordinary as a very rare surviving market shed structure of that era." It and the other open-sided sheds were enclosed by the new owners; Munson "probably raised [his]...to a full second story, with an exterior staircase on the Weehawken Street facade." And so it survives today.

Five other buildings survive from the early days, among them 185 Christopher Street and 398 West Street. The Christopher Street building is a three-story brick house built for Stephen Allen, who was apprenticed to a sailmaker at age 12. Through numerous entrepreneurial ventures, Allen became wealthy and influential, serving as mayor of New York

City (1821-1824), later as state assemblyman and senator and then commissioner and chairman of the Croton Water Works (1833-40). He died at the then ripe old

age of 85 in the steamboat Henry Clay disaster in 1852. His building is now a restaurant and bar with apartments upstairs.

The 1830 building at 398 West Street is an altered but largely intact 22-foot-wide, three-and-a-half-story Federal with dormers and north-end chimney, built for flour merchant Isaac Amerman. It has had a colorful career as a restaurant and bar, and was once owned by a Russian liquor dealer who was convicted of murder in 1910. Since 1965 it has been the home of Cuban-American playwright and director Rene Buch, winner of many theatrical awards, including the Drama Desk Award for "sustained excellence."

Like these two buildings, the district as a whole has had a checkered past, much of it related to maritime uses and workers. It has contained factories, bars, sex shops, boat manufactories, dwelling houses, haberdasheries, stables, heating and plumbing businesses and hotels. As new residential towers continue to be built on West Street, this low-rise, mixed-use, eclectic enclave could become an island in a sea of glassy condos. 



P. BAREAU

*One of the most interesting buildings in all New York City, this two-and-a-half story frame house was built as an addition to the Weehawken Market shed, which once occupied the land. It straddles the block and has a store with a separate entrance on West Street.*

## RECENT GIFTS AND GRANTS

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