

MICHAEL DEVONSHIRE

About six years ago, I was attending a function about – what else, historic preservation – and this tall, handsome guy, with a grizzled look, walks up beside me and says with that thick, resonant voice of his, “You’re Michael Hiller.”

And my first reaction as I looked at him was, “Holy Mackerel, Michael Devonshire knows who I am!” That’s not false modesty. I had never spoken with a Commissioner of the Landmarks Preservation Commission before, and I frankly was convinced that none of the Commissioners knew who I was.

He mentioned that he had seen me testify before the Commission and that had wanted to introduce himself. Before long, we were talking about historic properties and districts, how important the Landmarks Law is, and what it means to live in a City where the people take the time to remember the past, and when a property or building or an area is particularly special, to preserve it.

When I left the event, I couldn't help but reflect on Michael's passion and encyclopedic knowledge of preservation and New York City. Well, in the next few moments, I'm going to

walk you through a few Michael Devonshire moments at the Commission, which reflect, to some degree, how that knowledge and passion translated to his work at the Commission and how Michael has made a difference to preservation here in New York.

One of my favorite Michael Devonshire
comments

involved 827-831 Broadway – one of the first

artist-in ₂

residence loft buildings in Greenwich Village, just outside the historic district. There was an application to construct a 4-story addition to the rooftop – one that drew substantial

criticism, both from the perspective of visibility and the extent to which it would not be in harmony with the existing features of the buildings.

Here's an example of Michael attention to detail. He said:

When this building was built, we were burning coal. And so limestone being self cleaning, there was probably an area that got carbonized but now we don't have that issue. So, assuming that we could go back to the original limestone finish, what was the trim color at that point?

Clearly, Michael had done his homework, and raised an issue that ensured that the ensuing addition

and any ³

restoration work would be consistent with existing finishes. Michael later pointed out that the proposed addition, if visible, would be, in his words, at “discord” with the historic building itself, and eventually, the addition was moved back several feet and made smaller so that it would be less visible.

On an application to install a rooftop apartment across the top of the Hopper Gibbons House, the last known intact shelter point of the Underground Railroad in Manhattan, Michael noted that the rooftop apartment would cut across the preserved

escape route for runaway slaves in the 19th Century. When the applicant suggested that the apartment could somehow become part of the story, Michael

responded with his characteristic wit:

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the aesthetics of any creation going onto that roof is 'no story' any more than I would vote for putting a holiday inn on the battlefield of Gettysburg."

The application was ultimately rejected.

On an application to perform excavation work adjacent to the Merchant's House Museum, Michael questioned the engineers and architects who had been testifying on behalf of

the applicant about a shared facade wall. He asked “How far does the wall go underground,” in response to which, the consultants said that the portion of the wall that’s part of Merchant’s House doesn’t go underground. Michael immediately responded, “Sure it does.” And when the consultant indicated that the plans didn’t reference the wall being subterranean, Michael answered – “Well, it’s there.

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I’ve seen it.” And he was right. The plans were wrong. And his comment forced the applicant to reconsider the application, which, as of this moment, is still pending. Again, Michael had

done his homework.

And perhaps that's one of the things I admire most about Michael. Far too often in today's society, we have passion without commitment; we have people with a passing interest in subject matter but who lack the dedication necessary to fully understand it. With Michael, we have had a perfect marriage of passion, knowledge dedication and commitment, which made him an indispensable part of the Commission for over 10 years.

Michael, there are scores of buildings,
properties and

historic districts throughout the City which
have been ⁶
preserved, and thus bear witness to our City's
precious history, primarily because of you and
your work on the Landmarks Preservation
Commission, where you fought so hard for
preservation. For this Michael, we are all
forever in your debt. Your career on the
Commission truly has made you a Landmarks
Lion.

Having said all of that, I want to emphasize
to you, Michael – and for the moment, I will
continue directing my comments to you –

we're not quite done with you yet. You see, while development and preservation should work hand in hand, they often don't. And so we have more work for you to do.

For those of you who missed Michael on
Nightline a

couple of months ago, Michael stood up for
the West Park 7

Presbyterian Church and explained, not only to New Yorkers, but to the nation, why it is that landmark preservation is so important. Michael, I hate to say this, but we still need you. And the good news for everyone here is: we know that, whether or not a member of the

Commission, Michael, you will bring your passion, knowledge, commitment and dedication to the battle to preserve the West Park Presbyterian Church, and the next landmark, and the next district and the one after that and so on. We know, Michael, that we can always count on you, our Landmarks Lion, to fight for preservation.

And so, I ask all of you to rise from your seats (if you're able), and stand up for the ardent preservationist who has, for so long, stood up for us. We stand up for our
Landmarks Lion, for the work he has done in

the past and for the battles we know he will
wage in the future to ensure that New York
City will never forget its amazing history.

Ladies and gentlemen, Michael Devonshire

