

Synagogue Looks Up, but Not as High

By DAVID W. DUNLAP

Congregation Shearith Israel has the richest history of any synagogue in New York and one of the most glorious sanctuaries. But it has another extraordinary asset: unused development rights overlooking Central Park West.

This month, almost two decades after it outraged neighbors by unsuccessfully proposing a 42-story, 488-foot apartment tower over its landmark synagogue, the congregation will return to the Landmarks Preservation Commission. Now it seeks to develop a 14-story, 157-foot building that would include the synagogue's community house at its base and 10 residential floors above.

The new building, designed by Platt Byard Dovell White, would rise next to the synagogue on 70th Street, taking the place of a vacant lot and the current four-story community house, which was built in 1954 and is not a landmark.

There would probably be no more than two apartments on each floor, perhaps only one. Even in a weakening economy, there will presumably always be a strong market for newly built apartments with broad windows facing Central Park, in part because so few become available.

Under the most likely plan, a developer would control the apartment floors as a condominium unit separate from the synagogue's space. The congregation would share in the proceeds from the apartments.

It is not possible now to estimate how much the sales would yield. But the congregation can use the money. It has just completed an \$8 million restoration of the sanctuary designed by Stephen Tilly and sees much more work ahead.

"There is no limit to what we have to do, which is why the building project is so important," said Peter Neustadter, the parnas (or president) of the 348-year-old congregation, also known as the Spanish and Portuguese Synagogue.

Besides the 19th-century neo-Classical sanctuary and adjoining parsonage, which is currently empty, the congregation must care for three small historic cemeteries in Manhattan, a chapel designed by Calvert Vaux in its cemetery on Cypress Hills Street in Queens and its own considerable archives.

Income from the development might be used to restore the Vaux chapel or the old cemeteries on Chatham Square, West 11th Street and West 21st Street, said Shelly S. Friedman of Friedman & Gotbaum, a lawyer for the synagogue.

But the most significant preservation benefit, he said, was that the proposal would pull the development away from the synagogue. In contrast to the tower proposed in 1983, which would have cantilevered over the landmark.

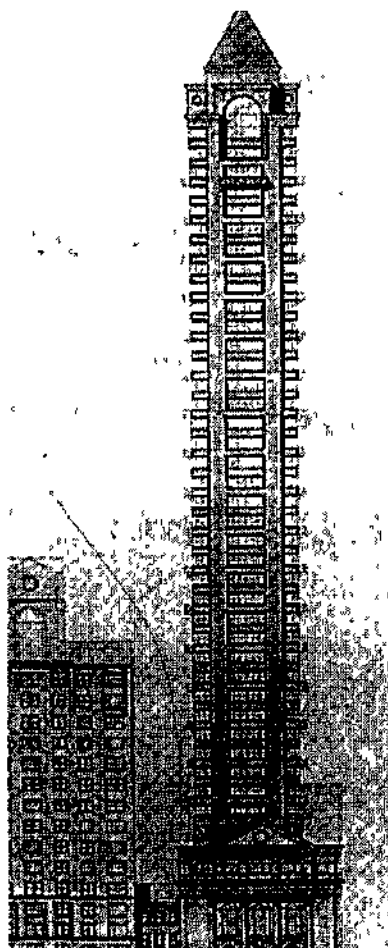
At a hearing on Nov. 26, the congregation will argue that the preservation benefits warrant support from the landmarks commission for the variance it needs to construct a 157-foot tower in a zoning district with a row house-scaled 75-foot height limit.

Because the site is in the Upper West Side-Central Park Historic Dis-



Platt Byard Dovell White Architects LLP

Above, a Central Park West view of Congregation Shearith Israel's proposed 157-foot building on West 70th Street next to the synagogue. Left, the 1983 proposal for a 488-foot building.



trict, the scale of the proposed building is already being criticized by preservationists as a destructive precedent citywide.

"The entire application is a way to create spot zoning that would compromise the contextual zoning district for midblocks," said Simeon Bankoff, executive director of the

Historic Districts Council. "They're breaking the zone by proposing a new design that has twice the height of allowable buildings."

Landmark West, a local preservation group, is worried about the relation of the new building to the landmark and the possibility that the terms of the project will change once a developer is designated. It is also not persuaded that the project has a preservation purpose, as it must for the landmarks commission to endorse and join the application for a zoning change.

Norman Marcus, a former counsel to the City Planning Department, who lives next door to the synagogue, allowed that the new proposal was modest in comparison with the 1983 version. "On the other hand," he said, "it's still a very long stretch from a brownstone scale."

But it happens that Mr. Marcus's 16-story building at 91 Central Park West — along with several other nearby structures of 9, 14 and 18 stories — are cited by the congregation as the real context for its proposal, which Mr. Friedman described as "well suited to its neighbors."

In determining how large a building to propose, Mr. Friedman said, the congregation decided to forgo the use of about 50,000 square feet of development rights. "A building height of about 160 to 170 feet," he said, "seemed to be the most that was practical to ask for."

Metro Briefing

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