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The Upper West Side – Central Park West Historic District and
The Spanish-Portuguese Synagogue

A harbinger of importance to the Upper West Side – Central Park West Historic District is before you. It is the request by the Central Park West Shearith Israel Congregation to permit within the Historic District a midblock 14-story structure containing 10 residential condominium floors. It seeks to shift its development potential away from the historic Central Park West “wall” into the vulnerable underbelly of the District, its characteristic brownstone/limestone midblocks. This request was unanimously rejected by The Landmarks Committee of Community Board No. 7 last Thursday night as “inappropriate” and unworthy of receiving a Certificate of Appropriateness from the Landmarks Preservation Commission.

It is a harbinger because there are at least a half dozen institutions waiting to apply the precedent: The Ethical Culture Society, The Holy Lutheran Church, The Second Church of Christ Scientist, The Universalist Church, The New York Historical Society, The Museum of Natural History, and The First Church of Christ Scientist. In all of these cases we have significant, underbuilt structures which punctuate the historic Central Park West wall – and which help define the shape of the District.

Because these structures are individually landmarked or significant contributors to the Historic District, they are protected unless hardship claims can be substantiated by them. To the extent these are charitable or religious properties, the ability to fulfill their charitable or religious purpose defines their reasonable investment-backed expectations as property owners. Commercial exploitation of their unused zoning potential is neither a “right” of these institutions, nor does it promote the character of its surrounding Historic District.

The Congregation in this case proposes to demolish its low rise school and open space used at a midblock scale and replace it with a tower three times its height. The midblock on the north side of 70th Street – where the new tower’s shadow will fall – stands entirely at brownstone scale. The south side has however within its brownstone rows, two pre-war 9-story buildings.

The historic district report of the Landmarks Preservation Commission traces the evolution of the district and remarks on the survival of so many 19th Century brownstone blocks. The two 9-story multiple dwellings which replaced isolated brownstones in these midblocks did not become the “new” midblock look as they did in much of the Bronx. The proposed 14-story structure will tower mightily over the brownstones and over the 9-story apartments from the 1920’s as well. It’s as if a Central Park West building, denied its usual location, migrated around the corner to the midblock.

A Certificate of Appropriateness application to the Landmarks Preservation Commission (“LPC”) in a Historic District must be judged against its historic context. Measured against the built form of the 70th Street midblock, or the midblocks within the entire historic district, the proposed 14-story tower is a visitor from another planet; it has no place on this midblock. Nor

can it be seen as a setback part of the Central Park West wall of the Historic District since it is more than 100 feet west of this wall. By all common sense, historic and zoning criteria, the 14-story proposal sits in the West 70th Street midblock, as defined by the land use public policy of the community and the city. Because its sponsor is a nearby designated landmark does not change the criteria LPC must apply to the proposal. It is neither necessary nor appropriate to financially benefit a landmark at the cost of the Historic District. Architectural "appropriateness" is not transformed by a multi-million dollar real estate contribution to the designated landmark.

This proposal is modest only in comparison with the synagogue's earlier 42-story incarnation. It destroys the scale of 70th Street. It fills in one of the characteristic dips in the CPW historic skyline. It gratuitously bottles up the inner courtyard of 18 West 70th Street above the zoning and historic height limit of the area. I can't rationalize these impacts just because of the economic advantage to the CPW property owner, the respected historic Spanish-Portuguese synagogue.