

Craig Morrison AIA

*architecture
preservation
restoration
interior design*

*139 Fulton Street, Suite 203
New York, New York 10038
212 513-0409
craigmm@concentric.net*

February 11, 2008

Hon. Meenakshi Srinivasan, Chairperson
New York City Board of Standards and Appeals
40 Rector Street
New York, New York 10007

Subject: Congregation Shcarith Israel
6-10 West 709th Street
New York, New York
74-07-BZ

To the Honorable Meenakshi Srinivasan:

I have reviewed the letter dated February 4, 2008, from Charles Platt of Platt Byard Dovell White Architects, and have a number of comments. For convenience I have grouped them into several categories:

EXPERIENCE

Mr. Platt states that I have had no experience in design or planning for religious institutions. This is not true. I have attached a list of religious institutions which I have served in professional and non-professional roles.

ELEVATOR ACCESS TO MAIN SYNAGOGUE

Mr. Platt states that I am incorrect in suggesting that the existing elevator could be modified to provide access to the Main Synagogue. I made no assertion that this would be a simple task, only that it is possible. It certainly would require a new cab and some degree of modification to the existing shaft. As the subject existing building is only four stories high the structural issues would not be insurmountable. The point is that construction of an entire new building is not required in order to remedy this problem. Mr. Platt also ignored my point that all access issues are covered in a small part of the footprint of the proposed building.

CONVENIENCE VERSUS EFFICIENCY

In questioning my statement that the Congregation's programmatic needs can be met comfortably (which Mr. Platt emphasizes) within the as-of-right envelope Mr. Platt cites calculations of efficiency. This is an incorrect and unfair comparison. Efficiency and comfort are entirely different qualities. I maintain the correctness of my assertion. Regarding "efficiency," see my comments below, in the section entitled Educational Space Requirements.

CODE MINIMUMS VERSUS DESIGN GUIDELINES

Mr. Platt states that my use of code mandated minimums for purpose of analysis is inappropriate. At no point did I suggest that these minimums should be considered to be design guidelines.

EDUCATIONAL SPACE REQUIREMENTS

CSI has indicated an educational occupancy of 35 to 50 Hebrew School students and 20-60 toddler program participants. It is not clear that CSI can in fact go forward with its planned Toddler Program, which is supposed to occupy the second floor of its proposed New Building, as the regulations of the NYC Public Health and Mental Health Department appear to prohibit having educational facilities for infants and toddlers above the first floor. (See §47.41. Indoor physical facilities, in Article 47 of the New York City Health Code). However, my analysis is based on the assumption that CSI can overcome this obstacle.

Mr. Platt's design provides 12 classrooms for these two programs, a ratio of one classroom per nine students – at most. This can only be considered excessive, especially considering that the Hebrew School meets for only 2.5 hours on Thursday afternoons and Sunday mornings.

Additionally, the proposed as-of-right building contains two floors of non-mission-related, income-producing residential space. If additional educational space is needed, any or all of this space could be so utilized. Mr. Platt did not discuss placing the custodian's apartment on the upper two floors nor did he discuss the use of the small synagogue expansion space as a flexible classroom/seminar space as noted in my paragraph 11. This latter space would provide ample space for the adult classes currently proposed for two of the south-facing classrooms on the fourth floor, which could then be used for Hebrew School classes.

TOILET REQUIREMENTS

Mr. Platt states that the proposed number of toilets is "reasonable" for the anticipated occupancy. Code-mandated minimums, which I have never suggested as appropriate design standards, indicate that the proposed facilities are sufficient for 840 users. I continue to maintain that this is excessive. A 50% reduction in fixture count, to provide a capacity of 420 users, would be entirely adequate for the 35 to 50 Hebrew school students or the 60 toddler program students who use the facility non-simultaneously, as well as for faculty and the occasional handicapped individual. The space that they occupy could be reconfigured as educational space.

CUSTODIAN'S APARTMENT

Contrary to Mr. Platt's assertion of its modesty, the proposed custodian apartment can only be considered a luxury accommodation. Nowhere have I stated that this is objectionable. I maintain the appropriateness of my suggestion that this accommodation can be located elsewhere than in its currently proposed location in the building's educational area.

The custodian could be housed either: 1) off site, 2) in the Parsonage, currently a residential area, or 3) on the fifth or sixth floor of the as-of-right new building, currently proposed for residential use.

I note again that earlier versions of the plans, submitted to LPC, did not even contain a custodian's apartment.

THE PARSONAGE

The Parsonage currently contains mission-related functions at its first floor level and non-mission-related income-producing residential function on its upper levels. Mr. Platt states incorrectly that I am incorrect in suggesting that it can be turned more fully to mission-related use. I maintain my assertion that its upper floors can accommodate the custodian's residence. The existing condition drawings made available for my review also suggest that the second floor living room can be connected to the Main Synagogue stairway to provide sufficient egress for that room to be turned to mission-related adult education use. The multiplicity of available meeting rooms allows for program accessibility. The first floor Rabbi's study and Elias Room will continue in mission-related use.

THE LEVY AUDITORIUM

Mr. Platt states "The Levy Auditorium, which Mr. Morrison defines as 'the substantial space under the Sanctuary', is already in use for life cycle events year round and for summer services as well." Applicant's Counsel, in his December 28, 2007, letter states (page 8) "Approximately two to three scheduled Bar or Bat Mitzvahs, baby naming and Bris (circumcisions) per month are held in the Synagogue's Main Sanctuary. The ritual meal and communal gathering that follows these events each can only be held in the Levy Auditorium. Many of these events generate attendance in excess of the Levy Auditorium's limit of 150 occupants... The New Building's larger multi-function room will permit CSI to accommodate congregants whose family members exceed 150 persons for a particular event."

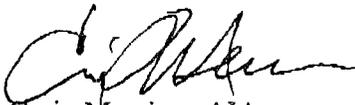
I note also that on the Drawing Prog P-7, prepared by Mr. Platt's firm and submitted as part of Exhibit D to the December 28, 2007, letter to the Board from Applicant's Counsel, there are notes indicating that the Levy Auditorium will only be used for summer services from 11:30 AM to 12:30 PM on Saturdays.

This strongly suggests that the Levy Auditorium will be used infrequently and that, with a little of the "flexible scheduling" to which Applicant's Counsel refers in his letter, it should be possible to get considerable additional educational use out of it.

BASIS OF INFORMATION

My comments have been based upon a sequence of small-scale drawings prepared by Platt Byard Dovell White, Architects. I have had no opportunity to inspect the actual fabric of the building. Should the Board conduct a site visit, I would request to join such a visit.

Sincerely,



Craig Morrison AIA