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BLOCKS

When a Neighbor's 2 Cents Yield Quite a Bit More

By DAVID W. DUNLAP

CONGREGATION SHEARITH ISRAEL and Kobe Bryant are not typically mentioned in the same breathless breath. Yet there they were last week, sharing top billing on "Celebrity Justice."

What put Shearith Israel on the tabloid television map was the fact that Peter Jennings, who lives near the congregation's Central Park West synagogue, had publicly joined opponents of its development plans.

"We've all seen ABC News anchorman Peter Jennings covering wars in places like the Middle East," said Carlos Diaz, the "Celebrity Justice" co-host. "But now a battle is being waged in his own Manhattan neighborhood. And Jennings isn't just covering this skirmish, he's directly involved in it."

And he is just the latest well-known New Yorker — Woody Allen, Walter Cronkite, Stephen Sondheim, Jacqueline Kennedy Onassis and John F. Kennedy Jr. were others — to jump into the land-use crucible. Headlines are almost always guaranteed. Less clear is whether celebrities draw needed attention to overlooked planning issues or simply amount to a momentary distraction.

In 2000, the Landmarks Preservation Commission turned down a plan for a 17-story apartment building at Madison Avenue and 91st Street. The presence of Mr. Allen, a neighbor, among the opponents brought an unaccustomed crush of reporters to the commission's meetings.

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"You had to laugh," said Jennifer J. Raab, who was the chairwoman at the time. "They wanted Woody's reaction when we turned the building down rather than find out why we turned it down."

The current battle concerns plans by Shearith Israel to develop the property behind its landmark synagogue at 70th Street with a building 15 stories tall (or 14 stories and a penthouse, in the congregation's view). The congregation would have space in the lower four floors and share in the proceeds from the sale of apartments in the upper floors, using that money to continue restoring and maintaining its sanctuary.

Part of the building would be more than twice the height permitted by zoning rules on the site. And though its immediate neighbor is nine stories tall, the proposed building would exceed the overall brownstone scale of the block, which is part of the Upper West Side-Central Park West Historic District.

Opponents have argued for months that a new 14- or 15-story building will damage the character of the block, diminish the landmark, subvert the intention of contextual zoning rules and compromise other historic districts.

But all it took was a three-page letter from Mr. Jennings — who was quick to say, "My view of Central Park will not be affected" — to propel the issue to the front page of The New York Observer and then on to national television.

"The synagogue," Mr. Jennings told the landmarks commission, "gives the impression of having worked to bypass the neighbors, to have its way whatever the neighbors think. No wonder that I find the neighbors frustrated, even angry."

"Here's what else I hear on the street: that people have lost faith in the process — the governing process — because they believe 'the fix is in.' "

This is an irresistible story, said Harvey Levin, the creator and executive producer of "Celebrity Justice" (carried locally on WNBC), because it shows that "somebody as big as Peter Jennings has real estate problems."

"In New York, you can own a \$10 million house and you're still part of the neighborhood," he said. "It's very egalitarian."

ACTUALLY, the fact that Mr. Jennings has at least briefly dominated the debate illuminates a wide gulf in access, if not influence.

"It's awfully frustrating for community-based groups and low-income individuals to get their point across," said Ronald Shiffman, former executive director of the Pratt Institute Center for Community and Environmental Development in Brooklyn. "When community groups do it, they have to organize by the thousands in order to get a voice equal to one telephone call."

On the other hand, asked Ms. Raab, who also heard from Paul Newman on the Madison Avenue project: "What are you going to do? Not take the call?"

The current landmarks commission chairman, Robert B. Tierney, said Mr. Jennings's

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letter was just one of many read into the record during testimony last month. "I don't want to diminish it," Mr. Tierney said, "but I certainly don't want to place it in any higher category."

Even opponents of the Shearith Israel project, while welcoming the attention generated by Mr. Jennings, said the involvement of a high-profile neighbor was not the most efficient way to present complex issues.

Given a chance to rebut Mr. Jennings on "Celebrity Justice," the lawyer for Shearith Israel, Shelly S. Friedman of Friedman & Gotbaum, invited him to a presentation of the synagogue's plans and wondered aloud how someone who lived in an 18-story building could fault a 14-story project.

Asked later what effect Mr. Jennings's involvement would have, Mr. Friedman said, "The major impact is that my mother gets to see me on national television."



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