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REJECT THE SHEARITH ISRAEL PROPOSAL

Testimony by Assembly Member Richard N. Gottfried
Before Landmarks Preservation Commission
November 15, 2005

My name is Richard N. Gottfried. I am the Assembly Member representing the 75th Assembly District, which includes Shearith Israel and the site of the proposed building. I regret that, because I am chairing a previously-scheduled committee hearing in Albany today, I am unable to testify in person. I urge the Commission to reject the proposed project.

Shearith Israel came before the Commission three years ago with a plan for a 14-story development project, adjacent to its landmarked synagogue in the Central Park West/Upper West Side Historic District. That plan was opposed by Community Board 7, Shearith Israel's neighbors, preservation advocates, and almost all of the neighborhood's elected officials. It was rejected by the Commission for being inappropriate for the historic district and for the landmarked synagogue.

Shearith Israel should have responded by reaching out to its neighbors and the preservation community to work collaboratively on a new design that would meet the congregation's development goals while being appropriate for the historic district. If they had done so, they might very well be before you today with a new design that would have the support of the community.

Instead, Shearith Israel worked behind closed doors on a new plan and design without a word to its neighbors or the preservation community. Not surprisingly, the new design is inappropriate for this historic district and thus adamantly opposed by the synagogue's neighbors and the preservation community. And so, we urge you to reject the proposal.

Under Section 25-307 of the City Administrative Code, in determining whether a proposed project is "appropriate," the Landmarks Preservation Commission must consider "the relationship between" the proposed project and "the exterior architectural features of other, neighboring improvements in such district" with respect to "factors of aesthetic, historical, and architectural values and significance, architectural style, design, arrangement, texture, material and color."

The proposed building fails this test. Although the new proposal is smaller than the original proposal, it has a jarring design that conflicts with the historic district.

If this design does *not* fail that test, it is disturbing to contemplate what it *would* take to fail.

West 70th Street, like many other side streets of the historic district, is characterized primarily by decades-old brownstones and small apartment buildings. The proposed ten-story building is not contextual in any way with this streetscape.

Apart from the fact that the façade is apparently now proposed to use brick and the windows will use glass – materials commonly used in the historic district – the proposal is utterly and stunningly out of context with the rest of the block and the historic district. Its “relationship” to its neighbors is open hostility and rejection; hardly what the Landmarks Law calls for.

A growing and extraordinarily prosperous congregation can and should support its mission without detracting from the historic character of its landmarked synagogue and the district in which it resides. Shearith Israel should start from scratch, reach out to its neighbors and preservation advocates, and design a building that respects the historic character of the neighborhood and its magnificent synagogue.

I urge the Commission to reject the proposed project.