

Museum's Plan To Build Tower Stirs West Siders

By DAVID W. DUNLAP

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23-Story Project Fought at Landmarks Hearing

By DAVID W. DUNLAP

What is at the base of a battle over a proposed Central Park West apartment tower is exactly that — its base.

Because the elaborate peak-roofed tower would rise above the landmark New-York Historical Society building, most speakers at a hearing yesterday asked the Landmarks Preservation Commission to reject the proposal.

"In the future," said the chairman of the local community board, Ethel Sheffer, "will we know where the landmarks are in Manhattan only by being able to point to the towers above them?" Fearing that, she said, the board voted against the plan 30 to 1.

Hugh Hardy, architect of the 23-story apartment that would rise the four-floor museum between 76th and 77th Streets, said the plan was a "way to preserve landmarks."

Viewed as a Balance

Unlike the austere glass or brick boxes to which New Yorkers have become accustomed in recent years, Mr. Hardy's design calls for a limestone-and-granite structure stepping back three times, each step topped with copper-clad gables.

"It is a balance between economics and the idea of design itself," Mr. Hardy said. The developer's lawyer, John E. Zuccotti, said, "An apartment tower is hardly unusual for Central Park West."

"But the central question is, 'Why build this at all?'" said Anthony M. Tung, a member of the landmarks panel, which rules on the esthetic, historical and architectural merits of the proposal because it adjoins a landmark and is in a historic district.

"The society feels a need to expand," Mr. Zuccotti replied, "and it needs the money to carry out that expansion." The structure would add to the museum space, and from 70 to 85 apartments overhead would add to the institution's revenues.

After Mr. Hardy and Mr. Zuccotti, local officials, preservationists and



The New York Times / William E. Sauro

Hugh Hardy, the architect, at meeting of Landmarks Preservation Commission with a model of his design for a tower to be built over the New-York Historical Society building. Existing structure is at the bottom of the model.

Upper West Side neighbors spoke against the plan, many of them gazing at a two-foot model of the building in the center of the overcrowded and overheated hearing room, at 20 Vesey Street.

"Surely most people will agree that the architect's design has many strong attractions," said George Lewis, executive director of the New York chapter of the American Institute of Architects. "Would that apartment houses all over town were done half so well.

"The issue is simply if this design were executed, would it transform the essential architectural character of the landmark? We think it would, drastically.

"To certify this proposal as appropriate would open the doors for developers to begin imagining the possibilities in major alterations of landmarks all over town."

Councilwoman Ruth W. Messinger said:

"It would violate what is perhaps this district's and the Upper West Side's greatest treasure — namely the Central Park skyline. As this project goes, so goes the skyline. For the New-York Historical Society to seek this luxury residential structure, violates its stated commitment to history and preservation and would allow it to engage in speculative real-estate development."

At 5:25 P.M., after three and a half hours of testimony, the panel voted to end hearings on the matter. It may vote Feb. 28, at its next meeting, whether to grant what is called a certificate of appropriateness.

Mr. Zuccotti said if that were not granted, the society might appear again before the panel to argue that its building was an economic hardship and

might have to be torn down.

The 76-year-old central part of the gray granite museum was designed by York & Sawyer. Wings were added in 1938. Mr. Hardy's firm, Hardy Holzman Pfeiffer Associates, is known for renovating and expanding historic structures.

"Our contention," Mr. Zuccotti said, "is that Mr. Hardy's design reflects the spirit of American eclecticism that prevails on this block. The material, color, texture and design are all consistent."

The 340-foot tower would rise on steel stilts built through the museum. Mr. Hardy said he thought the gallery spaces could be left undisturbed. An entrance to the apartments would be on West 76th Street.

Mr. Zuccotti said if the landmarks panel accepted the plan, it would also need approval by the City Planning Commission.