

Landmarks Panel Vetoes Tower Plans for St. Bart's and Historical Society

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Landmarks Panel Vetoes Tower Plans for St. Bart's and Historical Society

By DAVID W. DUNLAP

Plans to build new towers above the landmark St. Bartholomew's Episcopal Church and New-York Historical Society were rejected yesterday afternoon by the city's Landmarks Preservation Commission.

After years of impassioned testimony and stormy arguments, the two plans came to a quiet halt in separate votes at City Hall.

A lawyer for both projects said no decision had been reached on what to do next. An appeal to the landmarks

panel might be made in either case, he said, and the church might undertake a court challenge.

Although the result of the votes was the same, the commissioners made it clear before reaching their final decision that they viewed the two plans very differently.

In the case of St. Bartholomew's, parishioners wanted to raze the Park Avenue church's community house and replace it with a saw-toothed, reflective-glass, 59-story skyscraper, the panel members attacked the plan

before rejecting it unanimously.

In the case of the historical society, which sought to build a 23-story apartment tower behind and over its Central Park West structure, the commissioners praised an "outstanding" architectural plan. Many confessed reluctant opposition. The plan was defeated, 6 to 2.

Before the vote on St. Bartholomew's, two large models of the proposed skyscraper and the church, between 50th and 51st Streets, were brought into the Board of Estimate

chamber, where the panel met.

Gene A. Norman, the commission's chairman, said, "The kind of quality that I think needs to be alongside the superior quality of this Byzantine-inspired, beautifully organized, wonderfully ornamented church is so severely lacking that it becomes a case of night and day."

"The sheer size of the building dwarfs the landmark," said Charles A. Platt. "Its forms are angular, disagreeable. It is sharp, metallic, reflective, tinselly. It is actually at war

with the landmark."

"It is egotistical, self-centered and narcissistic," said Elliot Willensky. "It says, 'Look at me, look at me, look at me! Don't look at the church!'"

In a motion adopted by an 8-to-0 vote, Mr. Willensky said that the office tower "conflicts with, competes with, minimizes, trivializes and confuses the meaning of the landmark" and that it "hangs over the landmark in such a way as to almost crush it."

Paul D. Selver, a lawyer whose

firm, Tufo & Zuccotti, represented both projects, said he could not comment on the esthetic judgment of the proposal.

St. Bartholomew's was designed by Bertram G. Goodhue and finished in 1918. The community house was completed 10 years later to the designs of Mayers, Murray & Phillip. The office tower was designed by Edward Durrell Stone Associates.

Mr. Selver said the parish would

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choose from four alternatives: redesigning the proposal, challenging yesterday's decision in state court, challenging the landmarks law in Federal court or trying to prove to the landmarks panel that its decision created an economic hardship for the church.

The commissioners said they had a much harder time deciding on the historical society proposal, by the architect Hugh Hardy of Hardy Holzman Pfeiffer Associates. Mr. Willensky and Anthony M. Tung favored the plan.

"If this were 30 years old, we'd consider it as a landmark," Mr. Willensky said of the proposed tower, which was to rise between 76th and 77th Streets, with peaked roofs and setbacks. The 76-year-old central portion of the museum was designed by York & Sawyer. The wings were added in 1938.

Mr. Willensky said that the proposal "enhances the landmark" and "picks up the style and materials in a very imaginative way" and that it "places the building in the proper context for the site."

"I do not find the landmark, as a landmark, to be a building that does the greatest justice to the site," he said.

Mr. Platt, an opponent, said: "I wish I wasn't sitting as a landmarks commissioner because, from a planning standpoint, it is excellent. But it so radically changes the building as to debase it."

"It may not be the city's greatest landmark," Mr. Platt said, "but the law doesn't differentiate. We don't rank them."

Mr. Norman called the plan "outstanding" and "very skillfully integrated" before explaining his opposition. "It's very, very unfortunate," he said, "that the decision to place this building on top of a landmark was made."

Mr. Selver said the historical society might make an economic hardship appeal to the landmarks commission.

In both cases, the commission had been asked to grant a "certificate of appropriateness" to the proposals. This certificate, which is not subject to further review by city agencies, authorizes demolition or alteration of a designated landmark.