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A Classical Gem Off Central Park West

Abroad in New York

By [FRANCIS MORRONE](#)
September 20, 2007

In the hot [Manhattan](#) real estate market, nonprofit institutions are seeking to increase revenues by exploiting air rights. One high-profile example is Congregation Shearith [Israel](#) on the Upper West Side, which hopes the city will grant permission to allow for the construction of a residential tower on the site of the synagogue's community house, on 70th Street just off [Central Park](#) West.

On September 10, the congregation, also known as the Spanish and Portuguese Synagogue, submitted a revised application to the city's Board of Standards and Appeals seeking a zoning variance that would accommodate the project. Many West Siders, led by the vigorous preservation advocacy group Landmark West!, worry about the precedent such variances may set.

The congregation seeks to build a structure with a 95-foot-high street-wall and a 106-foot total height on a site zoned for 60-foot-high street-walls and 75-foot total heights. The current community house is a rather unattractive 1954 modernization of two old row houses. The congregation's claim for a variance presumes financial hardship if denied. The Landmarks Preservation Commission enthusiastically endorsed the synagogue addition back in March 2006, contingent upon the city's granting the zoning variance.

The city's oldest Jewish congregation, Shearith Israel, wishes to put up a modernist residential tower next to its landmark synagogue. The synagogue, which fronts on Central Park West, may be the most beautiful in the city. That makes any appendage to it a matter of urgent public concern. As in the similar case of the New-York Historical Society, on Central Park West at 77th Street, the vexing issue for me concerns not so much whether such an appendage is built, as whether or not it honors or debases the landmark building the new construction adjoins.

Congregation Shearith Israel dates back to the arrival in New Netherland of 23 Sephardic Jews from [Brazil](#) in 1654. The Dutch, who practiced religious toleration, had ceded their Brazil colony to the notably intolerant Portuguese, thus sending Asser Levy and his friends packing. Another Dutch colony made sense, though when the Jews arrived the director-general, [Peter Stuyvesant](#), a rather crabby Calvinist, sought to forbid them to settle. He was overruled, indeed admonished, by the directors of the Dutch West India Company, who would later act similarly when Stuyvesant tried to suppress the Quakers. Two years later, the Jews received permission to establish a burial ground beyond the New Amsterdam city wall (along the line of present-day Wall Street), where the First Shearith Israel Graveyard may still be visited at 55 St. James Place, between Oliver and James streets.

The congregation's first purpose-built synagogue came in 1730, on Mill (now South William) Street. Over the years the congregation grew and prospered, and in 1896 had the firm of Brunner & Tryon design a lavish new synagogue on Central Park West. Brunner, possibly the city's most accomplished Jewish architect at the time, had a sound classical training, having worked for George B. Post. The 1890s marked the high tide of classical synagogues in New York. Between the Victorian-Moorish style of Congregation Ahavath Chesed (1871-72) on Lexington Avenue at 55th Street, and the Khal Adath Jeshurun (1886-87) also known as the Eldridge Street Synagogue, and a new round of Near Eastern forms in synagogue architecture — Congregation B'nai Jeshurun of 1918, on West 88th Street, for example — the classical reigned. And in Brunner's hands, it did so at a level of refinement scarcely excelled by any other New York

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building of the 1890s.

In proportion, detail, materials, and just sheer presence, Congregation Shearith Israel must be counted among the city's great buildings. It meets the sidewalk of Central Park West with a broad flight of steps set into which are four great stone bases for the four majestic fluted Corinthian columns that rise to an entablature and cornice topped by a beautifully proportioned pedimented attic. Acroteria, the acanthus forms that rise from the ends and top of the triangular pediment, lend a Grecian note to a building otherwise chiefly Roman. In much of New York's "Greek Revival" architecture of the early 19th century, such pediments, with their raking cornices, remained blank, like empty picture frames. The Greeks themselves filled these framed spaces with elaborate figure sculpture. Judaism, however, forbids figuration, but Brunner did not wish to leave his frame empty. So he created the lush, flowing floral forms we call rinceaux, centered about a wreathed oculus. The design gives the frame a density of ornamental pattern — as fine rinceaux as to be found in the city — that makes the viewer forget the absence of the human form.

Shearith Israel's exceptional richness requires an addition that speaks to it, that isn't just a crisp block of masonry and glass. Platt Byard Dovell White's tower design, based on the images of it I've seen, looks like it would make a fine apartment house in Yorkville. But its contextual feints aren't nearly enough to mitigate the damage it will do in forming an inappropriate background for the synagogue when viewed from Central Park West. That's why the approval of the Landmarks Preservation Commission is as disturbing as any potential granting of a zoning variance. The commission should have said: If you seek a variance, then you'd better show us a much, much better design. But to "get through landmarks," goes the reasoning among some institutions, you'd better go at them with a modernist design. Architects say they don't wish to ape the past. They don't mention that the modernist presumption also absolves architects of the responsibility to understand the past, as Brunner did.

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