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Tea Leaves, Ink Blots, Entrails

By GLENN COLLINS

After a much-anticipated hour and a half hearing that bristled with questions, comments and clarifications, the Landmarks Preservation Commission declined to rule today on the New-York Historical Society's controversial proposal to renovate the exterior of its landmark building at 170 Central Park West.

And so, some 70 onlookers — who filled every seat in the commission's ninth-floor hearing room, and overflowed into its anteroom at the New York City Municipal Building — could not engage in a typical orgy of post-hearing-vote spin. Rather, it was more a matter of Rorschach reading and tea-leaf-scrutinizing.

Amid the rattling of the steam radiators and the hissing and popping of the sound system, onlookers strained to hear the commissioners questioning the society's architect, Paul Spencer Byard, as he marshaled renderings and plans with occasional prompts from Sarah Carroll, the commission's director of preservation.

They heard Robert B. Tierney, the commission's chairman, say that though he had "some concerns," he found the society's approach "sound and sensible." Commissioner Stephen Byrns, one of the six present (there are 11), said the redesign "makes the facade fussy," and objected to two ramps on Central Park West as "too much."

"I hate to see the bronze door go," said commissioner Diana Scarf Chapin. Commissioner Margery Perlmutter questioned the prominence of revolving doors. And commissioner Pablo Vengochea thought it would be "worthwhile exploring other alternatives."

The panel seemed to accept the contention of Louise Mirrer, the historical society's president, that the exterior-renovation plan was not linked to the construction of a 23-story luxury residential tower

that the society has proposed as an addition to its four-story building. The proposal debated by the commission “is completely, 100 percent independent of any future project,” Dr. Mirrer stated during the hearing, to a chorus of tsk-tsks from her opponents in the audience.

But Kate Wood, executive director of Landmark West, an Upper West Side preservation group, said the exterior renovation and the tower were “one project,” adding that if renovations are approved, “the building is going to lose its historic character, and a lot of its historic fabric.”

After the hearing, the commissioners’ inkblots were interpreted quite differently. Dr. Mirrer said she was “encouraged to think that we’re moving in a good direction,” adding that “we will regroup and reconsider our design. We really want to renovate the building.”

Even the society’s opponents disagreed. Peter M. Wright, co-chairman of the Park West 77th Street Block Association, said that “the commissioners’ comments suggest they want a complete redesign, which once again shows the complete disconnection between the historical society and the powers that be.”

However, Joseph Bolanos, president of the West 76th Street Park Block Association, said that “listening to the comments, it seems it’s a done deal, that it’s being done behind closed doors. This was a fix.”

It is now the burden of the historical society to sort those tea leaves very carefully indeed. Its architects must go back to the drawing board to present new revisions. Lisi de Bourbon, who speaks for the commission, said that another public hearing would be scheduled when the society’s response is received.

More entrail-sorting is inevitable, then, this month or next.