

Circuits: Using Technology to Stay Ahead of the Curve

By Polly Seddon

As hard as we work to stay on top of the game, the plain truth is that preservationists spend a lot of time putting out fires. We're always on our toes. Bricks, brownstone and terra cotta give way to glass and steel. Is there any way to know where the next preservation emergency will arise? Sometimes, yes. Can we afford to overlook the early symptoms of a neighborhood crisis in the making? Emphatically, no! That's why this past spring LWI set out to raise \$75,000 to produce a 3D, digital model of Central Park West from 59th to 110th Street (see Save Our Skyline below).

Why this area? Why now? Why a digital model? A number of issues, all somehow threatening to forever change one of the West Side's most precious historic resources, indicate that this study, while proactive, comes none too soon. And computer modeling offers a tool for understanding the potential impacts of future development in realistic and compelling ways. Developers—including such Central Park West institutions as the New-York Historical Society, Congregation Shearith Israel, the Society for Ethical Culture, the congregation now occupying the former First Church of Christ Scientist at 96th Street—become ever more creative in finding ways to extract dollars from their sites.

And so, using up-to-the-minute planning technology, LWI has initiated a community-driven effort to model the existing skyline, identify potential "soft sites" vulnerable to redevelopment, and lay the groundwork for effective action to defend the architectural and urbanistic qualities that make our skyline so special in the first place. Moreover, we see this project as a template for similarly proactive study of other parts of the West Side, not to mention the other 3 skylines framing Central Park.

Call it a roadmap for advocacy, thinking like a developer, grabbing the bull by the horns. We call it preservation in action—not reaction!

Changes are also afoot on LWI's website, www.landmarkwest.org. We are close to realizing a long-time dream to create an online, publicly accessible database of Upper West Side landmarks. Original architect, construction date, architectural style and materials are among the kinds of information you will soon be able to find about any of over 2,000 buildings (and there are more to come), along with links to photographs, maps, and other research and advocacy materials from LWI's files.

People, not robots, are largely to thank for our technological progress. Our in-house wiz, Columbia intern Sarah Sher, recruited her father, Joel Sher, a professional computer consultant, to help out. We also have Winter Hill Associates to thank for their excellent work (some of it pro bono!). Visit our website soon, and let us know what you think.

Polly Seddon is a 2nd-year graduate student in Columbia's Historic Preservation program. She has interned with LWI since May 2007.