

Congregation Shearith Israel: What's the Plan?

by

August 15, 2007, came and went. So? That was the 60-day deadline for Congregation Shearith Israel (CSI) to submit a revised application to the Board of Standards and Appeals (BSA), whose approval it needs in order to construct a 124-foot-tall building on the largely brownstone midblock of West 70th Street, where the predominant height is more like 50 feet. In a June 15, 2007, letter to CSI, the BSA wrote, "Failure to respond in a timely manner could lead to the dismissal of the application for lack of prosecution."

As this Fall 2007 newsletter goes to press, CSI has yet to address any of the 47 objections raised by the BSA—echoed by many in the community—placing it no closer to getting the 8 zoning variances it applied for back in April 2007. Much of the proposal's non-compliance results from CSI's desire to stack luxury apartments on top of a new community house. But the BSA would first have to find that the institution faced some kind of special "hardship," a case that CSI has still not made, even though it's been over a year and a half since the LPC approved the design, in theory, back in March 2006. (For other examples of LPC's worrisome short-sightedness when it comes to the broad, long-term, public policy implications of its decisions, go to www.landmarkwest.org.)

CSI may well drag this process on for many weeks, perhaps months. And developers all over the city—starting with the New-York Historical Society and other low-rise institutions along Central Park West—will continue to watch and wait for their turn. As Otis Pratt Pearsall wrote in a recent letter to Brooklyn Borough President Marty Markowitz, if "one developer on some rationale or another is now permitted an exception, can anyone believe that henceforth every developer will not also seek his own exception?...Please, make no mistake. The dam will be broken."