


New-York Historical Society: Déjà Vu All Over Again

by Elizabeth Starkey

“The Society’s tactics remind me of the card shark in my home state of Texas who looks across the table at his mark and says, ‘Now play the cards fair, Reuben, I know what I dealt you.’”

Bill Moyers, in a March 15, 2007, letter to LPC



Late last year, Upper West Siders glimpsed the future of Central Park West — and it wasn't pretty. *The New York Times* broke the news that the New-York Historical Society (N-YHS) planned to redesign the façades of its Triple-Crown Landmark* on Central Park West and build a 280-foot glass tower on West 76th Street, looming over the Landmark and Central Park. Over several months of legally required public review before Community Board 7 and the Landmarks Preservation Commission, N-YHS insisted (to widespread disbelief) that the façade changes and the tower were two entirely separate projects and refused to discuss plans for the tower.

Journalist Bill Moyers, who was among hundreds in attendance at various meetings and hearings, cautioned LPC Chair Robert Tierney that N-YHS “is pursuing a ‘divide and conquer’ strategy, splitting the project into what it hopes will be more palatable ‘phases’. The ‘Phase 1’ façade alterations, if approved, will create a wedge that the Society will use to leverage approval of the ‘Phase 2’ tower.”

The community pushed hard, and only after significant design modifications did N-YHS gain Landmarks approval of the façade work in April 2007. Then in September, the NY State Office of Historic Preservation weighed in that the changes (for which N-YHS is seeking state and city funding) would still have an “Adverse Impact” on the historic building. Meanwhile, the now-you-see-it-now-you-don't tower is anything but history. Informed word on the street is that N-YHS has selected the developer and architect to build its tower. Hundreds have signed an online petition (available at www.landmarkwest.org) calling on N-YHS to be upfront with the public about its future plans.

History has a way of repeating itself. And old dreams die hard. Remember the 1980s plan to build on top of this Triple Landmark? N-YHS clearly continues to eye its architectural gem (and the surrounding historic district) as mere real estate, to be exploited as a “development opportunity” (a term used in one of its fundraising letters circulated soon after the *Times* article appeared). And if this Landmark becomes a footstool for a tower, all Landmarks are at risk.

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* N-YHS, designed by renowned architects York & Sawyer and completed in 1908 (with ca. 1938 wings by Walker & Gillette) is a NYC Individual Landmark (designated in 1966) and located in both the Central Park West – 76th Street Historic District (designated in 1973) and the Upper West Side/Central Park West Historic District (designated in 1990).