



Testimony before the Landmarks Preservation Commission
Regarding Congregation Shearith Israel Synagogue
Application for Certificate of Appropriateness and 74-711
November 26, 2002

Good afternoon, Commissioners. I'm Vicki Weiner, Kress Fellow for Historic Preservation at the Municipal Art Society of New York. The Society's Preservation Committee received a presentation by representatives of Congregation Shearith Israel describing their Certificate of Appropriateness and 74-711 zoning applications. They outlined the nature of these requests, the special provisions being sought, and the way they believe the preservation purpose criterion for the 74-711 is met by the proposal. They also presented designs for the new building and made their arguments for its appropriateness. In its discussion, the Preservation Committee identified three issues that we feel are key:

First, the issue of height and massing of the new building: the Committee was divided over whether or not the building height and massing are appropriate to the historic district. A slight majority of members felt that on this particular streetscape, and in this location, a fourteen-story building is appropriate to the neighborhood. Others did not, expressing concern about the tower's relationship to the low rise buildings in the middle of the block.

Second, the issue of design: the Committee found the design to be inappropriate for the historic district. A number of design components appeared to be unresolved, such as the overall fenestration and the penthouse proportions. In addition, the Committee questioned the relationship between the Synagogue entrance and the residential entrance.

Third, the validity of authorizing the shifting of bulk under 74-711: the Committee felt the preservation purpose as described was not compelling enough to warrant this action. The restorative elements mentioned to us, such as replacement of the roof and addressing water damage, appeared to the Committee to be more on the order of routine maintenance. We appreciate the Synagogue's past attention to restoring its building, but would like to be assured that there is a comprehensive preservation program in place. We were not provided with any details regarding a continuing maintenance plan, nor was there any indication of how revenues generated by the proposed project would meet expenses for restoration of the Synagogue.