

# Shearith Israel (8 W. 70th Street): R8B...or Not to Be?

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Newsletter

by Ron Prince

*[The Congregation Shearith Israel proposal] will irreparably harm the balanced land use regulatory policy that has helped make this area one of America's leading urban neighborhoods.*

- Dr. Elliott D. Sclar, Columbia University, urban planner

Whoever thought land-use policy could elicit such passion? Oh, but it can, especially when it comes to individual landmarks, historic districts, and R8B contextual zoning, designed to protect the low-rise midblocks of the Upper West Side and other rowhouse-rich NYC neighborhoods.



CONGREGATION SHEARITH ISRAEL DESIGNED BY BRUNNER & TYRON, 1897, SHOWN HERE WITH PROPOSED NEW TOWER ON W. 70 STREET. IMAGE SHAWN TRIPOLI.

Beginning in October 2002, neighbors, architects, planners, historians, elected officials, and civic organizations – led by LW! – united to urge the LPC to protect the special character of our historic districts by denying an application to construct a 15-story, 168-foot tower at 8 W. 70 Street, on the midblock between Columbus Ave. and CPW. Here's why: the building would be several times the size of its neighbors, mostly 4-story, 50-foot-tall brownstones and, immediately to the east, the Spanish & Portuguese Synagogue, a.k.a. Congregation Shearith Israel (CSI), an individual landmark (designated in 1974) and also the applicant. The site is located in an R8B zoning district (mapped by the City Planning Commission in 1984) and in the UWS/CPW Historic District (designated in 1990).

To paraphrase NYS Assembly Member Richard Gottfried, if this building does not flunk the 'harmonious' test, what does flunk? Fortunately, the LPC agreed. In December 2003, the community scored a victory when the LPC told CSI to return to the drawing board and come back with a smaller, more contextual building that addresses the midblock.

CSI has considered real estate development before. In 1953, it demolished 3 brownstones to erect its existing 4-story community house. Thirty years later, an outraged community defeated CSI's proposal to cantilever a 42-story apartment tower over the landmark synagogue. Large parts of the neighborhood were rezoned R8B to ward off such development in the future. This effort to preserve the low-rise integrity of the midblocks set the stage for the LPC 1990 historic district designation, spearheaded by LW!. The result: a rational alignment of landmarks and zoning protections, and a block that is still, according to *NY Times* columnist Christopher Gray "full of late-19th-century row houses."

CSI's most recent proposal asked for a series of special permits to stack more than 10 stories of luxury condominiums on top of a new community house. The project would not significantly expand CSI's facility; instead, CSI's president has called the tower an "economic engine." No doubt other developers are watching with interest to see if such special concessions might come their way in the future, eroding the historic scale we *thought* was protected. It's not over yet – this issue is one to watch.

Ron Prince is a marketing consultant to the media industry and has lived in the Upper West Side/Central Park West Historic District since 1994