



HISTORIC · DISTRICTS · COUNCIL

Testimony

Delivered January 24, 1984 Before
Proposed Tower over the New-York Historical Society

At its last Executive Meeting, the Historic Districts Council, a coalition representing the city's historic districts and those neighborhoods seeking designation, voted to oppose the tower proposed for the New-York Historical Society.

In the Spring of 1973 the Landmarks Preservation Commission designated the Central Park West-76th Street Historic District. The Historical Society is located in that district. Historic District designation recognizes that the historical and architectural character of a neighborhood is of value to our city and should be protected. Designation does not freeze a neighborhood. It does mean change is regulated so that the essential nature of the place is not unnecessarily lost. The success of such regulation is seen in the over 40 neighborhoods that are designated historic districts and in many more seeking that cherished status.

Other speakers today will present in great detail professional evaluations of why the proposed project is not in keeping with this historic district and how the proposed tower will fundamentally change the essential relationships in the district. We wish, however, to underscore two points. The Historic Society building was specifically included in this historic district. Because it was already an individual landmark it did not need protection. Its inclusion was a recognition of the significant role the building plays in creating the sense of place of this district. The proposed tower does not just alter the fundamental architectural qualities of the designated individual landmark, in essence, it replaces that building with a new one with its own architecture; one small feature of which is the old building.

It has been said that this proposal is a wonderful solution to a difficult problem. We do not see the problem. If the Historical Society was seeking hardship relief under the landmarks law then the Commission might find that there is a problem needing a solution. That, however, is not the case here.

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The Society is seeking permission to build the tower on the grounds of architectural appropriateness. Despite the skill of the architect and the quality of the building materials, the tower is not an appropriate addition to either the individual landmark, or to the historic district that is home to that landmark.

If approved, the disturbing message that Historic Districts are now ripe for large scale development over low-scale institutional landmarks would be sent out loud and clear. One need only look at the number of such institutions in our historic districts to appreciate why we are upset by this proposal.

New Yorkers, community groups, civic leaders and organizations, and the Landmarks Preservation Commission have worked long and hard to successfully designate and regulate the city's historic neighborhoods. To approve this tower in this historic district would threaten the very accomplishments it has taken so many years to achieve.

We urge you to reject the proposal.

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