

Losing the fight for Hebron- Suzanne Spellman

The Crown Heights North Association worked for years to earn our 2011 historic district designation (Crown Heights North Historic District (CHN HD)) and placement on both the State and Federal Registers of Historic Places, but that effort has been put in jeopardy by a plan to build a massive apartment building on the south campus of the historic landmark in the center of the Crown Heights North Historic District II. The enthusiasm with which the Landmarks Preservation Commission (LPC) has embraced this project is emblematic of the unequal and unfair treatment that low-income, mostly minority neighborhoods have come to expect from the City's institutions.

The site is the south campus of the Hebron Seventh Day Adventist (SDA) church and school. The building was built in the 1880s as a home for the elderly, and it's one of just a few historic institutional buildings with their grounds largely intact remaining in all of New York City. The project, conceived by Jeffrey Gershon and his company, Hope Street Capital, would obliterate the entire south campus, destroying the integrity of the site and entirely diminishing any views of the chapel with its beautiful stained glass windows and any other part of the historic building from Sterling Place. The building was meant to be kept at a distance from its neighbors by the campus lawns which were designed to support the health and well-being of its aging residents. Gershon's modernist apartment building would be bigger than any other structure in the neighborhood, loom over nearby townhouses, block views of the historic asset from Sterling Place, and overwhelm it from other vantage points, the very definition of an adverse impact. It will remove half a block of life-saving green space from an environmental justice area. And it will do nothing to create truly affordable housing for Crown Heights families. It will instead overwhelm the neighborhood with young, transient tenants who will not be looking to settle down and integrate into the community.

The neighborhood's response to this has been nearly unanimous. Community Board 8 voted 28-2 against recommending the project to the LPC. More than 7,000 people have signed our petition against the project — but more importantly, over a thousand people wrote letters to the LPC against, and more than 40 took time out of their busy day to testify at the LPC's hearing on the project in October 2020. The district council member testified against the project and he, along with other elected officials, wrote letters opposing this development.

We had hoped that the LPC would take these concerns—this overwhelming sentiment—seriously. But they all agreed that the crown jewel of our neighborhood, as one Commissioner put it, "can sustain a substantial amount of development." One commissioner wondered why we would care so much about the open space that's on private property and so not available for us to use. And though they asked for changes that could have gone some way to addressing our concerns, they didn't hold the developer to them. Hope Street Capital returned to the Commission with only very modest tweaks: the building would still be the longest in the neighborhood, it's actually taller at most points, and still almost entirely blocks views of the historic building from Sterling Place, and overshadows it from New York Ave and Park Place. Yet the Commission approved it on May 11, with just a few minor changes. This wouldn't happen in the neighborhoods where the Commissioners actually live. We know this because in 2014, a developer proposed to build at 144 Clinton Street, across from a historic church in Brooklyn Heights, where Vice-Chair Bland lives. Though the project would have been far less intrusive than the current plans for 959 Sterling Place, the Commissioners were appalled. Then-Commissioner Bland called their initial design "wrong-headed in all its aspects." The developer seems to have abandoned that project. On March 16th, Vice-Chair Bland waved our very similar concerns away. "I'm

sorry to hear that there is so much opposition still locally," he said at the recent hearing. "You want there to be a little more support, but sometimes that's hard in neighborhoods."

We see now that the whole process is riddled with conflicts. In their day jobs, the Commissioners earn their living working for developers, and they live in the City's wealthiest neighborhoods, far removed from the concerns of people in North Crown Heights. When the Commission considered this application, they saw a presentation partly prepared by a fellow Commissioner. They addressed the lead architect as a friend.

The City must commit to remaking the Landmarks Preservation Commission, so that it is less beholden to real estate developers and more responsive to communities.

The construction of a massive apartment complex is being proposed on the original grounds of the Methodist Home for the Aged, now the Hebron SDA School, at 914-920 Park Place in Crown Heights, Brooklyn. This is an iconic and historic building that will be impacted. The community will be impacted as well. There is a reason Crown Heights North is so desirable to live in- its wonderful architecture. This is why CHNA came into being- to protect our historic neighborhood and community.

For more information on proposal, please go to [Friends of 920 Park](#)

If you'd like to attend the CB8 meeting, please register here: [Brooklyn Community Board 8](#)

©Suzanne Spellen/ CHNA inc