

Plan for new home tests landmark rule

By Joshua Payne

The first application to build a new house in Fieldston since the neighborhood became a landmark historic district and since the city tightened the rules governing the Riverdale Greenbelt sailed through Community Board 8's land use committee last week.

The committee chair used the occasion to renew his criticism of the Landmarks Preservation Commission's procedures, while the architect, who had opposed the revised Greenbelt regulations, called the commission cooperative but the process expensive.

Architect Hal Dorfman outlined his plan to build a single-family, detached house on a vacant lot adjacent to the home at 4506 Greystone Ave. at the June 28 meeting at the Conservative Synagogue Adath Israel of Riverdale.

He said he had worked closely with the staffs of the city Landmarks Preservation Commission and the City Planning Commission, meeting with them periodically during the design process.

The owners of the home at 4506 Greystone also own the neighboring piece of land and want to erect the new house for their own use, Mr. Dorfman said.

He described the project as a narrow, Victorian-style house.

The Landmarks Commission's first concern was ensuring that the new house would be in context with the size of surrounding homes and lots, according to Mr. Dorfman.

He said that after looking at neighboring properties, Sarah Carroll, Landmarks' director of preservation, determined that a new home would not be out of place, given the lot size, roughly 60-feet wide and 110-feet deep. Many nearby lots are between 50 and 70 feet in width and have a comparable depth.

The commission also weighed in on the plans for the home's roof, windows, front stairway and the materials to be used in construction.

"We put a lot of effort into selection of the materials," said Mr. Dorfman, who ticked off brick, stucco, ashwood veneer and forest green shingles among the aesthetic elements that will comprise the house's exterior.

When it came time to design the home's front entrance stairway, the commission even provided Mr. Dorfman with a list of a few similar Fieldston homes that he could study.

"I have to say, they've been very helpful," Mr. Dorfman said, estimating that he spent between 15 and 20 hours meeting with Landmarks staff members to hammer out details on the project.

The proposal won unanimous approval from Board 8's land use committee, but not before chairman Charles Moerdler, who had been a vociferous opponent of the historic district proposal, asked Mr. Dorfman some pointed questions about how the Landmarks

Commission affected his work.

"Did you have before you from Landmarks any rules or guidelines as to what specific standards you had to follow?" Mr. Moerdler asked.

"You mean written guidelines?" Mr. Dorfman asked.

"Yes," Mr. Moerdler said.

"No," Mr. Dorfman answered.

Leading up to the City Council's approval of the Fieldston Historic District in late April, Mr. Moerdler had repeatedly asked the Landmarks Commission to establish a set of rules to govern house construction and renovation in the district.

While the commission has consistently said that guidelines are forthcoming, in the meantime Mr. Dorfman said it is using the rules that govern the Douglaston Historic District in Queens as a guide.

Mr. Moerdler pressed on, asking Mr. Dorfman if the Landmarks Commission had given him any indication that, for example, a green door would be preferable to a yellow one, or if there had been any indication as to what style of house should be built.

"They didn't say, 'We want to see a ranch house; we want a Victorian or a Queen Anne.' They didn't specify that," Mr. Dorfman explained. "They said, 'Produce what you think will work.'"

Then Mr. Moerdler shifted gears to the cost.

"How much extra did it cost the owner of the property to get to this point through Landmarks, would you say?"

"I don't know. She got a better design, I think," said Mr. Dorfman, referring to the homeowner.

"Do you think that by complying with Landmarks it added to the cost of the process?" Mr. Moerdler asked.

"Certainly."

"Several thousand dollars, would you say?"

"Probably more than several."

Upon hearing that Mr. Moerdler leaned back in his chair with a look that called to mind the cat that swallowed the canary.

Mr. Dorfman had the added challenge of designing the home with Special Natural Area regulations to consider.

The new rules stringently regulate construction on steep slopes, requiring a 15-foot buffer zone between the house and the edge of a slope on a portion of the Greystone Avenue property.

There is also a large red oak tree on the site, and the home cannot be built within a 22-foot radius of the tree to protect its root zone.

One small maple tree, which stands in the middle of the proposed house, is slated for removal.

Now that the proposal has been vetted by the staffs of both the Landmarks Commission and the Department of City Planning, all that remains before construction can begin is the official vote of each commission, which should occur over the summer, Mr. Dorfman said.