

# Philip Johnson feels the wrath of NIMBY

By PARKE CHAPMAN

Philip Johnson's exotic, 26-story residential project on Spring Street has been called plenty of things by architecture critics and the development team behind it. But many of the locals who attended last week's presentation by the developer simply want him to call it off.

The Friends of Hudson Square — a neighborhood group that represents the western confines of Spring Street, where the development is slated to be built — led the meeting, which took place 48 hours

before a formal zoning board hearing at which the necessary variance was scheduled to be voted on by Community Board #2.

Place Vendome Realty, the developer, must still meet with the Board of Standards & Appeals this summer before anything is set in stone.

That this project could be a seminal piece of work by an acknowledged architectural genius appeared to matter more to the developer of the project than those who may live in it's wake. To these residents, aesthetics took a backseat to the

height of the project.

A 1961 zoning resolution only allows for a ten-story building here, but various zoning lot mergers have added up to the current 26-story proposal.

On paper, Johnson's building resembles a Cubist sculpture with multi-dimensional surfaces clinging to its sides. The building will feature double-hung windows, keeping with the spirit of the neighborhood's existing buildings, and various colored bricks.

Place Vendome recruited their zoning at-

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torney, construction manager, energy efficiency representative and an HRH Construction executive to speak on their behalf.

In a videotaped address shown at the meeting, Johnson said that the project would be "a statement of this community."

"It will be the most exciting building in New York. And I expect to live there," said Johnson.

Vendome Group then articulated how the project could benefit this fringe locale of lower Manhattan. Over and over, a string of speakers dwelled on the aesthetics of a project dreamed up by an undisputed American master.

"Ever since I moved here back in 1972, I've tried to make a difference. I stand before you not as a developer but as a member of the community," said Nino Vendome, chairman of Place Vendome Realty, who repeatedly referred to his status as a local.

Vendome said that his building could become "the heartbeat" of the neighborhood, "the tall tower" that people choose to meet beneath in the manner

of "the greatest communities in Europe."

One incensed resident countered that the neighborhood "already has a heartbeat."

Central to Vendome's basis for 328 Spring St. is the potential that needed services — dry cleaners, grocery stores — would all be lured to the area.

"There is development coming to this area. Maybe you can find some welcome characteristics in this project," said Vendome.

One resident in the back of the room rebuked the developer for "their 350-foot monstrosity" and "bogus rationalizations." His barbs drew applause from the fifteen or so seated residents.

In the main, the proposed height of the building — 26 stories on a low-rise block — has drawn the most fire from neighbors. Since the area is zoned M2-4, strict rules apply to residential development. The FAR cannot exceed five times the lot area yet the project is slated to rise 26 stories from a diminutive 7,808 SF footprint.

Directly beneath the site runs the Holland Tunnel and immediately west — across the street — one of the tunnel's ventilation shafts rises several stories

above street level.

From a development standpoint, there are myriad "hardships" involved here — factors that will inflate the cost of development. The zoning lawyer present at the meeting admitted that the project "will cost more" than most due to these factors.

Adding to the "hardships" for the developer is the fact that next door sits the venerable Ear Inn, one of the city's oldest taverns. This bar/restaurant — housed within the James Brown House — is a weak-kneed landmark that relies on its western wall for structural support.

The building was condemned in 1906 and resuscitated, so to speak, by the Landmarks Preservation Commission in 1964 when they bequeathed Landmark status on the building.

It's patron saint — Rip Hayman, who lives upstairs here and has doggedly fought to keep it standing for the past 25 years — told those gathered that this project "can benefit the James Brown House."

According to Vendome Group's Nathaniel Plotkin, the firm is committed to making the James Brown house sturdier, while also giving it 375 extra SF for their space-starved restaurant.

Rip Hayman was admittedly pleased to hear that, though he made a gracious mock-offer to settle the matter at once.

"If you want to make it simpler, I can just rent Philip Johnson a room above the Ear Inn," said Hayman.

***'It will be the most exciting building in New York. And I expect to live there,' Johnson told the community.***