

Kate Wood

From: Simeon Bankoff [sbankoff@hdc.org]
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To: Kate Wood
Subject: 2 columbus circle is now the litmus test for preservation!

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Historic Reservations

Is West Hartford's Board of Education building historically important? One group says yes, and if so, it could stop Blue Back Square.

by Adam Bulger - April 28, 2005

Before we met, I was suspicious of Elizabeth Spinella's motives. She's the president of West Hartford Initiative to Save Historic Property (WHISHP). Her group has come under fire for its choice of battleground sites; the West Hartford Board of Education building, which is slated to be dramatically changed in the construction of Blue Back Square.

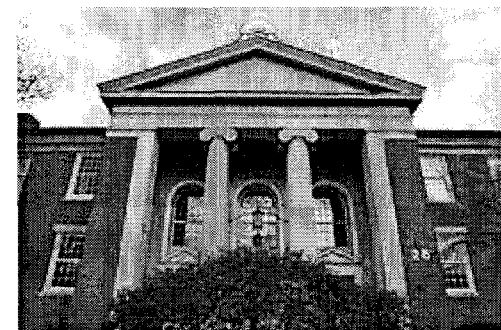
Several parties have accused the group of being Blue Back Square obstructionists exploiting historic preservation. West Hartford's Mayor, Scott Slifka called WHISHP an "anti-development all-star team."

Some evidence seems to support the obstructionist contention. Spinella's sister, Ellen Brassil, is a plaintiff in a lawsuit brought against the town. Spinella herself has been active in anti-Blue Back Square actions; she was involved with anti-Blue Back group Committee to Prevent Public Money for Private Development, which reportedly accepted \$9,000 from Westfarms owners Taubman Center.

On April 19, the group's application to have the Board of Education building deemed a historic landmark was approved for study by the state's Commission on Culture & Tourism's History Division. The day before, the West Hartford Town Council voted to amend its agreement with Blue Back's developers, stipulating that construction -- scheduled to begin in June -- could start despite pending litigation.

However, construction on Blue Back Square could be delayed by the historic landmark proceedings.

NICK LACY PHOTO



Historically significant?

"There's a state law that allows citizens to sue to prevent the unreasonable demolition of historic sites," said Christopher Wigren, deputy director of the Connecticut Trust for Historic Preservation. "That can be applied when a site is being considered for a listing."

The West Hartford Historic District Commission, a town government board, worked with Blue Back Square developers in planning the design. Jessica Ladieu Colliton, the chairperson of the Historic District Commission said the developers were responsive to the commission.

"We had some concerns about the Board of Ed. building and about how the parking garages are going to be constructed," she said. "From what we've seen, they've followed our recommendations."

Spinella contends that WHISHP is sincere in its concern for historic preservation, and dismisses accusations of ulterior, Blue Back Square-obstructing, motives.

"One of the silly things that the *Courant* says is that we're people who are shills, people who are insincere, puppets for Taubman, whatever," she said.

"It qualifies, man," Spinella said of the education building. "It qualifies, big time."

Wigren said a site can be designated historic for four reasons: something important happened there, there's an association with a famous person, the building has historic architectural importance, or if there is something about the site that's not immediately apparent.

Spinella claims the Board of Education building qualifies for two of those categories.

"It was built as a public works project by Franklin Roosevelt," she said. (It was one of approximately 125,000 public buildings put up by Roosevelt's WPA in the 1930s and early 1940s.)

Spinella adds, "The building itself is a prime example of Georgian architecture," and while its facade would be preserved in the Blue Back plan, Spinella says any change would "disfigure" the building. "Georgian architecture is all about symmetry," Spinella said. "The changes they're making to the building will make it big time asymmetrical. And it will no longer be Georgian."

Meeting Spinella didn't alleviate my suspicions. In the course of our conversation, Spinella digressed several times into general objections to the Blue Back Square project -- she objected to Blue Back's aesthetics, referring to the plans several times as a "Disney-scape."

She seemed less well-versed in historic preservation than she did in objections to Blue Back Square. After she told me that she lived in Manhattan, I asked her what she thought about the 2 Columbus Circle building, which the National Trust for Historic Preservation included in its list of the 11 most endangered historic places in America. She hadn't heard of it.

I found that odd. Big time.