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**TESTIMONY OF THE GREENWICH VILLAGE SOCIETY**  
**FOR HISTORIC PRESERVATION**  
**IN SUPPORT OF THE PROPOSED LANDMARK DESIGNATION OF**  
**UNIVERSITY VILLAGE/SILVER TOWERS**  
**AND SURROUNDING LANDSCAPING, OUTDOOR FURNITURE,**  
**AND SCULPTURE**  
**June 24, 2008**

Good afternoon Commissioners and thank you for the opportunity to testify. My name is Andrew Berman and I am the Executive Director of the Greenwich Village Society of the Greenwich Village Society for Historic Preservation. [In December of 2003, GVSHP submitted a detailed nomination of the complex to the Commission](#), which I have attached to my testimony, and we are deeply gratified that the Commission has chosen to move ahead and consider designation. We strongly support the proposed designation. However, we also feel strongly that designation should not only recognize and preserve the balance of open space to built form and the design of the landscaped spaces, but rightfully should include the entire superblock, around which this design was planned, with auxiliary structures such as the supermarket and gym included as ‘non-contributing’ structures, as requested in our original nomination.

Designed by the firm of Pei Cobb Freed, the University Village/Silver Towers complex and superblock is an important early design by one of the late 20<sup>th</sup> century’s most important and celebrated architects. The design represents an important moment in the evolution of Pei’s career and in the evolution of modern design in general, as well as an important moment in Greenwich Village and New York’s architectural development. These buildings, their overall arrangement within this superblock, and their placement within the surrounding landscaping and larger street grid, are an unusually sensitive and sophisticated manifestation of 1960’s modern design. In typical Pei fashion, the design not only conveys the desire for structural truth and transparency typical of traditional modernism; but also displays a carefully articulated abstraction, acknowledges subtly relates to the larger urban fabric around it, and gently shapes the experience of the pedestrian at street level.

When compared to earlier Pei works such as Kips Bay Plaza, it becomes clear that University Village/ Silver Towers pinpoints a critical moment in Pei’s architectural career, where the interaction of geometric shapes, the relationship of overall layout to component parts and the surrounding cityscape, and the creation of dynamic surfaces replaced abstraction and repetition as the primary characteristics of his designs. The project must also be noted for its genesis in the urban renewal schemes of Robert Moses; University Village/Silver Towers is very much a child of Moses’ “superblock” redevelopments, and yet, perhaps somewhat uniquely among them, is deferential and in many ways tied to the fabric of the cityscape around it. Unusual for projects of its time, the design allowed Wooster and Greene Streets to visually continue and flow through it. In fact, the plan creates one of the quintessential modernist spaces in New York; open and two-dimensional, but with the urban fabric around it clearly

acknowledged and interwoven, as the surrounding streets flow through it as walkways. The central plaza and circulation space are defined and brought to life not by the traditional creation of a contained outdoor room, but by the subtle interplay of the surrounding geometric forms, by the flow of intersecting paths around a circular central space, and by the addition of a striking piece of modern cubist sculpture, with multiple perspectives, as a focal point. The use of Picasso's *Portrait of Sylvette* is perhaps one of New York's most prominent and striking uses of modernist outdoor sculpture, and arguably its most successful use in a residential context in New York City.

Additionally, University Village/Silver Towers serves as a superlative example of university planning and design in this era, as well as of designs for publicly supported housing. Thus it forms a unique intersection of three powerful forces shaping American architecture during this era. The design coincided with NYU's commission of Marcel Breuer to design new dormitories for their University Heights campus, marking perhaps the high point of NYU's architectural ambitions, as well as marking the beginning of an unusually creative period in the design of some publicly assisted housing in New York, which included University Village/Silver Towers' highly regarded contemporaries Chatham Green (Gruzen and Partners, 1965) and Riverbend (Davis, Brody, and Associates, 1967). This design probably also marks the high-water mark for the now-defunct Mitchell-Lama housing program which so transformed New York's cityscape, as well as its housing market.

University Village/Silver Towers is truly in the best of the modern tradition where all of the design elements, not just the buildings, come together to form an integral whole, and the loss of any one element would have an extremely detrimental effect. That is why inclusion not only of the three main buildings, but the landscaping, outdoor furniture, and outdoor sculpture is so critical. Designation of the entire site will ensure that future work done to maintain and restore the landscaping, outdoor furniture, pathways, and facades of the buildings maintains the spirit and careful originally created.

We also believe that the two adjoining buildings on the superblock should also be included in the designation. While neither were designed by Pei and each were built separately, the complex's design clearly envisioned the remainder of the superblock as low and horizontal, neutral and deferential to the main composition of the three towers and the spaces that flow through and around them. The supermarket building and gym, while not individually distinguished, support this design in their basic placement and their horizontal orientation, and thus should be included in the designation and treated as "non-contributing" structures, allowing for changes so long as they do not negatively impact upon the overall design scheme and the relationship of the main structures. A large and/or poorly designed structure there could completely destroy the balance of the design and the way in which it is viewed and experienced by the public. As evidence that low structures were presumed for these sites, I am [attaching a copy of the urban renewal restrictions for the superblock](#), which you will note say that construction on the current site of the gym, which it refers to as the "Educational Area," "shall be limited to a maximum height of 23 feet above grade," and that for the current supermarket site, which it refers to as "retail," shall be "one story or 20 feet, whichever is less." These requirements were supposed to last for at least 40 years, and while there is some debate about whether or not they are still in effect, there can be no denying that these restrictions were part of the understanding of how the superblock would be developed at the time when this complex was designed.

inward to the project where the great modernist space radiates around the Picasso sculpture. To alter this relationship in any way, especially with a 40-story tower that would block much of this view and the view of the 'Sylvette' sculpture, would violate the entire design. For NYU to say they support landmark designation but want to build 40-story towers on the green space, supermarket, and gym is like saying you support an end to global warming, but want to continue riding around town in your gas-guzzling SVU and 18-wheeler diesel truck. NYU is holding a gun to its neighbor's head and saying "pick your poison" – either a 40-story tower on the supermarket site or on the open plaza in the complex. But neither is in any way or appropriate, nor should be allowed.

Philadelphia's Historical Commission has designated Society Hill Towers a "significant" design within the Society Hill Historic District, the highest determination possible. According to the Commission this means the design is regulated as tightly as they would an 18<sup>th</sup> century house, and they have never allowed construction on that complex's ample open space nor have they allowed any significant changes to the landscape. I hope that this Commission would hold this design to a similar standard. As evidence that the landscaped open space in the Silver Towers complex is as originally intended, I am attaching for the Commission a [copy of a site plan from the Pei Cobb Freed files at the time of completion of the complex, showing the landscaping much as it is today](#).

I urge the members of the Commission, if you have not already, to visit the site and see for yourself how profoundly the integrity of the design could be harmed by development on the landscaped open spaces, and by inappropriate development on the supermarket and gym sites. While we would certainly not argue that there is no room for change on some of these peripheral sites, there is also much room to destroy the meaning of this design without comprehensive regulation by the Commission. Much as the Commission would not allow development on the plaza of the CBS or Seagram Building, or on top of the two-story wing of Lever House, or in the landscaped areas or on top of the one-story commercial structures in First Houses or the Williamsburg Houses, we hope that the Commission would not allow inappropriate development on these sites within the Silver Towers complex. We urge that the wording of the designation report, and the scope of the designation, reflect the need to preserve and regulate these areas in order to preserve the design.

I have also [attached several recent photos of the site](#), including those showing the siting relationship between the three main towers and the surrounding landscape and low-lying structures, and the various design elements described above. Thank you.