

# HABITAT

## Chelsea Group Seeks to Block “Monstrosity” Condo

### Chelsea



*The French Evangelical Church on West 16th Street, which sold its air rights to Einhorn Development Group (image via Google Maps)*

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In the February issue of **Habitat** we **profiled** a co-op board president, museum docent and neighborhood activist named **Paul Groncki**. One of his many endeavors is to fight an 11-story condo building **Einhorn Development Group** plans to erect abutting his co-op on a quiet block on West 16th Street in Chelsea. “Oh man, it’s a pain,” Groncki told **Habitat**. That ongoing fight has put Groncki back in the news.

The **Save 16th Street Committee**, of which Groncki is a member, has filed a petition in **Manhattan Supreme Court** asking the city’s **Department of Buildings** (DOB) to hand over documents they believe could prove that Einhorn’s plans violate city statutes

and codes, or show that the department improperly approved the project, **DNAinfo reports**.

“They’re building this monstrosity over the church,” Groncki said. “This is a really ugly building, and it’s not appropriate for the scale of the block.”

The church he’s referring to is the neighboring **French Evangelical Church**, which sold its **lucrative air rights** and an adjacent church building to Einhorn several years ago. Einhorn had originally filed plans to construct a six-story building at the site – roughly the same height as Groncki’s co-op – but added five additional stories to its plans by filing a “post-approval amendment” with the DOB, the committee’s petition says. The DOB issued a permit for the project this past October, records show, and construction started soon after.

“Since the additional stories are... evidently being added to the building in disregard of and/or in violation of applicable statutes and codes, and DOB may have [approved] the additional stories improperly, or not at all, [the committee] urgently requires production of the documents sought, so as to review and protest DOB’s improper approval (or lack thereof) through appropriate legal means,” the filing continues.

“We thought we were safe from development on the block,” Groncki says, “and then these guys snuck in.”

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## DESCRIPTION

**Paul Groncki** talks about how being a curious man led him to board service.

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## ABSTRACT

- The cooperative element of co-op living has always been part of the appeal of board service for Paul Groncki.

Paul Groncki says it with a touch of pride. “I work at the Rubin Museum of Art as a docent.” That’s Latin for teacher. “I’m a guide, I show people around the museum. It’s a museum of Himalayan art. I do it in my spare time.”

Groncki, the board president of the 40-unit co-op at 130 West 16th Street in Manhattan, does a lot in his spare time. He’s also on the board of Hudson Guild, a settlement house that runs a senior center and a technology center to teach kids about computers and technology; preschool, after-school, and college prep programs; a meals-on-wheels program; and a mental health clinic for the indigent. He’s also the president of his block association and, for the past 10 years, has been the treasurer of the local Democratic Club.

How does he do it? More to the point: why does he do it? He says that he’s just a curious man. Take his role as a docent. “I’ve been doing that since the museum opened a decade ago. I started out because I was more curious than interested. Over time, I’ve become interested in it.”

Taking an interest goes hand-in-hand with Groncki’s core beliefs. He calls himself an “old-line liberal Democrat” with an old-line liberal belief in doing good things for people. “That’s part of what the cooperative movement is about, isn’t it?” he says matter-of-factly.

Groncki learned the liberal line growing up in Schenectady, New York, where his grandparents met and married in the late 1800s. Groncki earned a Ph.D. in economics

from SUNY Stony Brook and then became an economist and market researcher. Over the years, he has worked for Citibank, JPMorgan Chase, and HSBC.

Now officially retired, Groncki, 68, is still an imposing figure: six feet tall, balding, and self-admittedly “overweight.” He and his wife, a college professor, moved into 130 West 16th Street in 1987, and he has served on the board for most of the ensuing 30 years, primarily as president. “It’s a co-op,” he says, explaining why he signed up for board service. “That means the residents are supposed to take a role in the management of the building. At least, that’s the way I interpret a co-op.”

The challenges Groncki and the four other board members have faced over the years are just what you’d expect in a small co-op built as a rental in 1925: heating and plumbing issues, and now the roof. “I don’t think it’s been replaced since I’ve been here,” he observes.

Less typical is a recent battle the board has undertaken. After the nearby French Evangelical Church sold its air rights, the two groups that Groncki heads – the co-op and the block association – joined forces to oppose the 11-story structure that developers planned to be erect right up against the six-story co-op. “Oh, man, it’s a pain” Groncki says. “It’s a pain in lots of ways. We’re fighting it, and we are hoping, in the best of cases, to shave a couple of stories off it.”

In this fight, as in most matters, Groncki’s fellow board members – a musician, a banker, an investor, and a real estate professional – work well with him, according to Richard Dworkin, a 10-year veteran board member. “He’s very proactive, very on top of things, and has good communication with the board and with the shareholders,” Dworkin says. “If there are complaints, he takes it upon himself to find out what’s going on.” He’s also savvy about dealing with people. When the lobby was redone recently, Dworkin says Groncki probably reduced the typical amount of criticism a lobby redesign gets by including non-board shareholders on the design committee.

“He looks at it as a partnership,” says Moshe Herman, the agent from J.C. Dwight who has managed the building for the last nine years. “He respects me, I respect him. We work very nicely together. We get things done without a lot of fanfare.”

Groncki “morphed” into his retirement a few years ago, but he sees no imminent retirement from the board. “My wife’s going to retire,” he says, “and we’re going to stay

in this building. We have no intentions of leaving. This is our 'retirement home.' I'll stay on the board as long as they want me."

That could be for quite a while. "The general sense about Paul is that we'd be lost without him," Dworkin notes. "I don't know that anyone else could do what he does for the building."