

## 'Popcorn Ceilings' Halt Construction

**T**HE pounding of hammers, the whine of screw guns and the scratching of scrapers ceased last week at the Sheffield on West 57th Street, as tenants still in the building won a skirmish in the war over its conversion into a luxury condominium.

What stopped construction, at least for a while, was not the ongoing harassment case brought by the owners against a tenant leader, or the wrangling over the rights of tenants during condo conversions, but the discovery of asbestos by city inspectors in "popcorn ceilings," the rough material troweled or sprayed on concrete ceiling slabs when the project was put up in the late 1970s.

The findings vindicated tenants who had complained about hazards during renovations in the 48-story building with 853 apartments. Susanne Jansson, a tenant who has lived there for decades, raised concerns about asbestos after reviewing the records of permits filed by the developers, a group led by Kent M. Swig. The tenants did their own tests and found asbestos in five samples.

At first, nothing was done. A state judge refused to issue an injunction stopping construction. The city's Department of Environmental Protection did tests, and for a time could not confirm the findings. The developer, which had done repeated tests of its own, questioned the integrity of the tenants' tests.

But then the facts changed. Prodded by tenants and City Councilwoman Gale Brewer, city environmental officials sent inspectors back once more to test locations identified by the tenants, accompanied by the tenant as-

bestos consultant, Evan Browne. Ian Michaels, a spokesman for the city's Department of Environmental Protection, said that this time, 7 of the 12 ceiling samples tested positive for significant amounts of asbestos, on 5 floors.

Asbestos, a substance that can cause cancer or lung disease if inhaled, was, according to the industry, last in use in most construction materials in 1978, the year that the Sheffield was completed.

It was unclear why the asbestos turned up in some samples and not others. Mr. Browne, a division manager at JLC Environmental Consultants, said it was possible the mortar had not been mixed completely so that tiny samples used in testing might have missed the asbestos. Mr. Swig said it was possible that only a few bags of asbestos-containing materials had found their way to the project.

Regular construction at the Sheffield stopped early last week, as the developers began a cleanup of the entire site by a licensed asbestos contractor under a plan approved by the city. Mr. Swig said construction would resume floor by floor as the cleanup was completed, on two or three floors each day. He said that the air in the building would be monitored regularly throughout the construction.

The popcorn finish has been removed from about two-thirds of the building, Mr. Swig said, and he expects the remainder to be taken out as well. "We tested over 180 samples, and all tested negative," he said. "Now we are erring on the side of caution. We are cleaning from the bottom of the building up, every single surface in the building whether it has asbestos or not."