



Landmarking the Black cultural capitol of the world

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People all over the world view Harlem as a living historical monument to Black culture, but many of the actual historic structures in Harlem are not protected by local landmark laws. With major changes sure to come with the impending 125th Street rezoning, many Harlemites are worried that some of the community's unique treasures will be bulldozed in favor of cookie cutter condos and soul-less retail chains.

Offering zoning alternatives to the City's complex plan is not an option for the average concerned Harlemite-though Community Board 10 has offered a fairly detailed alternative plan-so some have turned to landmarking as a way of staving off unwanted development.

Landmarking essentially builds a bureaucratic shield around a building, protecting it from the wrecking ball. Though it is not impossible to demolish a landmarked building, it is infinitely more difficult and extremely rare. Once a building is landmarked, it is very unlikely that it would be approved for demolition. There has not been a single landmarked building demolished in the two years that I've worked here," said Lisi de Bourbon, Landmarks Preservation Commission (LPC) spokeswoman. Even just alterations to landmarked buildings have to be approved by the LPC.

Michael Henry Adams, an architect, author and Harlem historian, believes Harlem deserves to have more landmarks designations. "Harlem has the same cultural and architectural significance as New Orleans, Charleston and Savannah. You shouldn't have to be Woody Allen to get a historic district," said Adams, referring to Woody Allen's successful efforts to establish the Ladies Mile Historic District in Manhattan. "Our local law is flawed. It's old and timid. Mayor Bloomberg essentially dictates what gets designated or not. The system discourages people from participating."

The LPC does not agree with that characterization of the process. "The Commission bases its designation decisions on a building or neighborhood's architectural, cultural and/or historical significance," said de Bourbon. "We have applied this standard to every individual landmark and historic district in every borough, including 55 buildings and seven historic districts in Harlem." To put that in perspective, there are 770 individual landmarks and 52 historic districts in all of Manhattan.

There are some notable buildings missing from that list of 55 landmarked Harlem buildings. Famous structures such as Blumstein's Department Store (built in 1923), the site of Adam Clayton Powell's legendary "Buy Where You Can Work" campaign, the Victoria Theatre (built in 1917) and even the New York Amsterdam News Building (built in the late 1800's) are all examples of Harlem treasures that are not protected by local landmark laws. All are listed as eligible for the national registry, however.

Adam Leitman Bailey, the attorney representing business owners on the northwest corner of 125th Street and Frederick Douglass Boulevard, is exploring landmark designation as a way to save his clients from the wrecking ball. Sixteen business are slated for demolition (some have already closed) because KIMCO, the largest owner and operator of shopping complexes in the country, purchased the property last year and intends to build a mixed- use office and retail complex on the site.

Bailey has drafted legislation that would create a river-to-river historic district in Harlem and has begun circulating it to politicians. "The standing of New York City as a world capital of culture cannot be maintained or enhanced by disregarding the historical heritage of the city and by countenancing the destruction of such cultural assets," reads the draft document after listing important Harlem landmarks such as the office of W.E.B. DuBois at 139 West 125th Street and

Bobby's Happy House, which was the first Black-owned business in the area.

Some landmarked buildings are getting a new lease on life. The long vacant Corn Exchange Building (125th Street and Park Avenue) built in 1884 is a beautiful example of Queen Anne and Romanesque Revival architecture and the serious restoration it needs is almost underway. The proposed use for the building is a mixed-use development which will include a culinary institute.

At times, landmarking is not always the will of Harlem residents and land owners. Last year, the Abyssinian Development Corporation successfully fought to not have the fabled Renaissance Ballroom (Adam Clayton Powell Boulevard and 138th Street) designated as a landmark, so they could move forward with a plan to build a mixed-use development, which is to include affordable housing. Mayor David Dinkins, who was married at the site years ago, sided with ADC. Those in favor of the new project noted that the deteriorated condition of the building did not warrant designation, but rather responsible development.

On March 18, 2008, the LPC moved forward with designating two libraries on 125th Street, the 125th Street Branch at 224 East 125th Street (built by McKim, Mead & White in 1904) and the George Bruce Branch at 518 West 125th Street (built by John Mervin Carrere and Thomas Hastings in 1914-1915). Both sites began the designation process as a result of being included in the 125th Street Rezoning Environmental Impact Statement. Other sites from that from that study are also being considered.

As the public review process for the 125th Street Rezoning nears its close and the anticipation of significant changes to the famed thoroughfare are realized, landmarking designation could have a major impact on Harlem's Main Street.

If you have a suggestion for a landmark designation you can visit the LPC website at <http://www.nyc.gov/html/lpc> and download and fill out a Request for Evaluation form or you can call 311.