

# On Churches, Some See Increased Preservation Effort

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The city is stepping up its efforts to save houses of worship from the wrecking ball, some preservation advocates say, contending that recent decisions to landmark churches are emblematic of an increasingly aggressive approach. Other preservationists say these decisions are but a small distraction as developers clamor to scoop up historic churches across the city.

Following a number of recent high-profile church teardowns, the announcement that the century-old [Bay Ridge United Methodist Church](#), a stately stone structure also known as the Green Church, would be sold, razed, and replaced with condominiums has set off a firestorm in the neighborhood.

Meanwhile, in [Manhattan](#), some Upper West Side residents are trying to block a plan to tear down a portion of the 19th century West-Park Presbyterian so that luxury condominiums and below market-rate rentals could be built there.

Some in the preservation community say the tide could be turning in their favor.

Earlier this year, the city's Landmarks Preservation Commission designated as landmarks St. Aloysius and the Church of All Saints, two Italian Gothic-style structures in Harlem — marking the first time in 25 years that Roman Catholic churches in [New York City](#) have earned such a distinction. Also, a commission decision last year to include St. Veronica's [Roman Catholic Church](#) in the extension of the [Greenwich Village](#) Historic District ensures that the [Victoria](#) Gothic Revival church cannot be demolished.

"For a long time, it was not a battle the city was willing to take on, but they seem to be dipping their toe back into the water," the executive director of the Greenwich Village Society for Historic Preservation, [Andrew Berman](#), said.

In an attempt to avoid being mired in church-state legal battles, the city has generally favored a hands-off approach to landmarking worship sites, unless a religious institution requested landmark designation, preservationists say. The Archdiocese of New York and many religious organizations, fearing interference in their affairs, have often actively opposed landmark status for their institutions because of the associated restrictions and upkeep costs.

The president of the New York Landmark Conservancy, Peg Breen, said resistance to landmark status for religious institutions has made churches particularly vulnerable when developers make lucrative offers to buy some or all of their property — and, unlike Mr. Berman, she said she doesn't see things getting better. "The threat has become more intense," she said. "You have developers actively seeking out religious institutions, saying, 'Hi, can I buy your church?'"

The conservancy has a Sacred Sites Program that provides matching-fund grants and technical assistance to religious landmarks throughout the state.

The chairman of the Landmarks Preservation Commission, [Robert Tierney](#), in an e-mail to [The New York Sun](#), did not allude to any policy change in designating houses of worship as landmarks. "Religious sites are an important part of New York City's urban fabric, and many are worthy of landmark status," he wrote. "Our approach to saving these buildings has been to collaborate with religious organizations to arrive at solutions that benefit them and the public interest."

Saving sacred sites was a common concern expressed by several dozen preservation advocates who met earlier this month with the president of Manhattan, [Scott Stringer](#). Mr. Stringer said he supports landmarking of religious structures with "significant historic value, and that he is planning events that will bring together preservationists and Manhattan religious leaders. "This is going to be a priority of ours," he said.