

GABRIEL SHERMAN

On West Side, a Protest Against Phantom Gristede's

Here's a recipe for an Upper West Side neighborhood-development controversy: Take one part vilified grocery-store chain, add a beloved local landmarked movie theater, mix in a heady dose of rumor and innuendo, and *vola!* The latest real-estate scandal to ripple down the Broadway corridor.

In early September, Upper West Side residents learned that the Metro Theater, the landmarked Art Deco palace on Broadway between West 99th and 100th streets—which had been operating as a Clearview Cinemas theater—shuttered its doors and plastered an ominous "Sorry, We're Closed" on the once-luminous marquee, below the bronzed terra-cotta façade. Just what was to become of one of the last of the independent Upper West Side movie houses, now that classic theaters like the Embassy have gone under?

Whispers of the Metro's demise swirled through the neighborhood, and a vigil-like constellation of signs, fliers and leaflets began appearing outside the theater, solemnly asking residents to "Save the Metro!" No one claimed responsibility for the protest. The supposed source of the threat to

the Metro: the much-maligned Gristede's grocery chain, which operates a store across the street.

Now, Gristede's has become a favorite enemy for neighborhood partisans loyal to the deli counters at Fairway and Zabar's. The groups fearing the Metro's downfall proclaimed that Gristede's had purchased the Metro and intended to transform the

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theater—which was built in 1933 by the architects Boak and Paris, and achieved landmark status from the city in 1989—into another outpost in the Gristede's empire.

The only problem is, the Metro isn't going anywhere. And Gristede's isn't moving in.

In fact, the building's owner, Albert

Bialek, the general partner of Broadway Metro Associates L.P. (the entity that owns the theater), plans to restore the Metro as one of the city's top-tier art-house cinemas, he told *The Observer*. And according to John Catsimatidis, the president and chief executive of Gristede's, his company never had plans to remake the Metro.

"The building is already saved. I have no idea who is behind this campaign and why they're doing it," Mr. Bialek told *The Observer*. "I love the theater, we're proud of it, and we're going to open it as soon as possible."

Peter Elson, the president of Guild Enterprises, said he'd been in talks with Mr. Bialek to manage the theater for nearly two years. The six-figure renovations to the Metro will feature an update to the Art Deco interior, including new seats, sound and projection equipment and a new screen. The theater will reopen by mid-October.

"We want to offer the finest first-run independent and art-house films," Mr. Elson told *The Observer*.

No group has stepped forward claiming responsibility for Metrogate. One flier, affixed to the theater's entrance—which, on the morning of Sept. 20, was covered in poster boards signed by hundreds of Metro sympathizers—was titled "YOU CAN HELP SAVE THE METRO!!!" and admonished supporters to call Community Board 7, the Landmarks

Preservation Board and the corporate office of Gristede's to "put pressure on them to save this theater and keep it a theater ... [and] to let them know how you feel about demolishing the interior for their supermarket."

"It's just a misunderstanding. It's like a game of Telephone," said Arlene Simon, the president of Landmark West. Ms. Simon said her office fielded as many as 20 phone calls on Sept. 20 about the Metro, everyone from local residents to organizations like the ArtDeco Society and Friends of Terra Cotta. Landmark West then called Mr. Bialek and asked him to arrange a public meeting at the theater to assuage the local fears.

Diane Jackier, the director of community and government affairs for the Landmarks Preservation Commission, said that under the city's preservation code, no changes could be made to the exterior of the Metro without an appearance before the commission. She said no plans had been submitted by Mr. Bialek for review.

"Somebody is putting up these posters that just aren't correct. We only have Mr. Bialek's word for this, but I don't see why they would mislead us," said Penny Ryan, the district manager of Community Board 7, speaking to *The Observer*. "I have no idea who is doing this—if I did, I would call them myself."

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