



THE COMMITTEE TO PRESERVE THE UPPER WEST SIDE

**Testimony of LANDMARK WEST!  
Certificate of Appropriateness Committee  
Before the Landmarks Preservation Commission  
165-167 West 86<sup>th</sup> Street, aka 541 Amsterdam Avenue – West Park Presbyterian Church  
June 14, 2022**

LANDMARK WEST! is a not-for-profit community organization committed to the preservation of the architectural heritage of the Upper West Side.

The Certificate of Appropriateness Committee wishes to comment on the individually landmarked 165-167 West 86<sup>th</sup> Street, aka 541 Amsterdam Avenue – West Park Presbyterian Church. A Romanesque Revival style church complex designed by Henry Franklin Kilburn and built in 1889-1890, which incorporated an existing chapel designed by Leopold Eidlitz and built in 1883-1885. Application is to demolish the building, pursuant to Section 25-309(b)(2), on the grounds of hardship.

Good Morning Commissioners, Sean Khorsandi for LANDMARK WEST!

The Landmark West! C of A Committee recognizes that there are many raw emotions today, on both sides of this application. These lay bare the importance of landmarks not only on people's daily lives but in their own futures. Future-focused, in 2010 you recognized the significance of West Park, as "one of the best examples of a Romanesque Revival style religious structure in New York City". This has not changed. You also recognized the social significance, serving as the site of the City's first same-sex union, the cradle for God's Love, We Deliver, and the proving ground for Joe Papp's Shakespeare Festival. These achievements cannot be taken away. Since designation, these milestones are joined by further accomplishments through adaptive reuse by the Center.

Then why are we here questioning the physical manifestation of a congregation, once recognized as the 'Millionaire's Gates to Heaven'?

Because it all became too much. But not overnight. Disinvestment started decades prior and falls at the responsibility of the congregation. While we hear much about section 25-309 of the law today, what about the specific legal obligations which arise for the owner when a building is designated, notably 25-311 which outlines Maintenance and Repair of Improvements? That remains ignored. The church has exercised demolition by neglect. Church leadership let a building molder to a point where they claim they cannot achieve a sufficient 6% rate of return if they make the necessary repairs. It is curious how after waiting decades to act, their calculations demand restorative work happen at once.

Verified estimates by parties seeking to restore the landmark estimate judicious repair and stabilization efforts to total \$6.6M whereas the applicant's figures top \$18M—nearly three times more. The applicant's figures fail to consider the 20% tax credits they are eligible for given their landmark status, but regardless, this significant discrepancy of nearly \$11.5M, (\$13.7M when factoring credits) handily moots any of the three income approaches shown via base, infill or multi-family scenarios. These facts are inalienable.

The question becomes one about belief systems. Simply put, who do you believe?

Do you believe the community is the neighborhood that has rallied and offered to support repairs? Or do you believe the community is the five remaining congregants of a church whose leadership fled?

Do you believe this building has failed to be suitable for the church's religious ministry or the growing religious group, Lighthouse Chapel, that regularly worships here proving its adequacy?

Do you believe this is a non-profit, which, by law has no right to the highest and best use of its property, and if so, why then it is simultaneously following section 25-309, stretching its charitable mission towards the construction of a luxury condominium in search of greatest return?

Do you believe the City would recklessly let a building allegedly so dangerous to public safety stand unchecked? Do you believe the ghastly photos of a wall separating from the roof structure or an eroded finial or do you recognize that these are dated photos--and the roof has been fixed and the finial removed?

Can YOU believe THIS at all?

Throughout its history, and site lineage dating to 1883, this complex fostered and served the community. Its past is extraordinary and at times unbelievable. With your vote against hardship, we expect you can keep it unbelievable.

The Landmark West C of A Committee is in vehement opposition to rewarding demolition by neglect and this application. It recommends denial of hardship and invites you to our full comments on our website.

Thank You.