



THE CITY OF NEW YORK

MANHATTAN COMMUNITY BOARD 7

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Steven Brown, Board Chair

Date: May 5, 2022

Re: 165 West 86th Street – West-Park Presbyterian Church (Amsterdam Avenue). Application to the Landmarks Preservation Commission pursuant to NYC Administrative Code §25-309 for a Certificate of Appropriateness authorizing the demolition of the entire structure based on claimed financial hardship.

Preservation Committee Vote: 8 In favor 1 Against 1 Abstention 0 Present*

Non-Committee Board Members: 8-2-2-0.

This resolution is based on the following facts and circumstances:

The subject building (the “Church Building”) is a landmark church building constructed ca. 1889-90 in the Romanesque Revival style designed by Henry Kilburn, architect, who modified and re-clad an earlier chapel designed by Leopold Eidlitz in the Victorian-Gothic style . It was designated an individual landmark in 2010.

The Church Building is situated at the Northeast corner of Amsterdam Avenue and West 86th Street in Manhattan, and features two primary facades – one facing Amsterdam Avenue, and one facing West 86th Street. The primary facades are constructed of red load-bearing sandstone with elements of rock-faced brownstone randomly coursed. The secondary facades are largely composed of common brick. The primary facades consist of alternating gabled sections, square towers, and recessed planes, topped by a series of broadly sloping, pyramidal, or bell-shaped roofs. They include subtly decorated recessed lancet and round stained glass windows among other significant architectural features. The West 86th Street façade includes a separate but integrated structure containing offices, classrooms and other community spaces (the “Community House”).

According to the January 12, 2010 Landmarks Preservation Commission’s Designation Report (No. 425 LP-2338), “the West Park Presbyterian Church is considered to be one of the best examples of a Romanesque Revival religious structure in New York City” and “is one of the Upper West Side’s most important buildings.” A complete description of the Church Building can be found in the LPC Designation Report and in materials supplied by the applicant, which are available on the Community Board 7/Manhattan website (nyc.gov/mcb7).

The application for removal of landmark designation and demolition is based on the claim that the present condition of the Church Building is profoundly deteriorated and is unsafe; that the cost to renovate, repair and restore the Church Building is significantly beyond the ability of the Church and the Presbytery to which it belongs to fund or raise; that if the necessary funds were invested in the Church Building, it would not be possible to earn the statutorily acceptable rate of return on such an investment; and that pursuant to a contract entered into between the Church and Presbytery with Alchemy Properties, a development partner, a new as-of-right mixed residential and commercial building would be built on the site (conditioned upon demolition) that would include 10,000 square feet of space that would be available to the Church and community and arts groups to use going forward. The condition of the Church Building can be traced at least in part to long periods of deferred maintenance as well as the fragility of the materials and arrangement of elements comprising the Building’s structure and facades.

While the Church Congregation and others have attempted to raise funds for the repair, renovation and restoration of the Church Building through donations to the Church itself, the amounts raised and invested have fallen well short of the amounts needed to address the Building’s condition.

Since or about the time of its designation as an individual landmark, the Church Building has been home to a not-for-profit arts and cultural institution now known as The Center at West Park, which has supported and nurtured numerous performing and fine arts organizations and individual artists seeking space to perform, rehearse, display, develop, and learn and hone their crafts and give voice and moment to artistic expression. The artists served by The Center include members of marginalized communities unable to access space and find a welcome elsewhere in our City.

The Center has invested significant funds beyond the amounts contractually required of it to be able to continue to use the space in the Church Building, and has made an offer to purchase the Church Building.

Granting the application will result in the removal of all obstacles to the complete and irreversible demolition of the entire Church Building (including the Community House).

There are options, open areas of inquiry, and potential alternatives to demolition that warrant denial of this application. They include without limitation:

- the possibility of transfer of ownership of the Church Building and Community House to a not-for-profit entity in order to explore and capitalize on the anticipated differences between governmental and private fundraising available to support a religious institution versus such fundraising efforts potentially available to support a not-for-profit arts or community organization;
- concerns over uncertainties arising from the computation of the estimated rate of return presented in this application, including without limitation:
 - the underlying assumptions and methodologies used to generate the estimates of the costs to repair, restore and renovate the Church Building;
 - the extent, nature and quality of the work the applicant contends is necessary to address the current condition and functionality of the Church Building, and whether there are other means of addressing such conditions and functionality that would be sufficient to stabilize the Building in the short- and long-term;
 - the impact of such potentially different approaches to addressing the condition and functionality of the Church Building on the cost estimates used by the applicant in its return-on-investment computations;
 - the cost impact of options concerning the appropriate sequence of work to be performed and the potential to perform such work in phases;
 - the value of the Building, including the assumptions underlying value estimates; and
 - the potential revenues that can be derived from future operation of the Church Building; and
- architectural alternatives to demolition, such as making use of the footprint of the Community House and modern cantilever and other design and construction techniques to generate revenues to support the work needed for and operation of the Church Building.

Given the irreversible finality of the total demolition of the Church Building, and the appropriateness of the heavy burden to be met on an application for such demolition, and given the options, open areas of inquiry, and potential practical and architectural alternatives to demolition, the applicant has not met the heavy burden of proof required for this application.

THEREFORE, BE IT RESOLVED THAT Community Board 7/Manhattan resolves to **disapprove** the application as presented because the applicant has not met its extremely heavy burden of proof to support the demolition of this individually designated landmark.

**Subject to vote of the Full Board on June 7, 2022*