



December 27, 2021

Do As I Say, Not As I Do?

The LPC has refused to calendar two significant markers of Black history, while publicizing a new policy of “inclusivity” just in time for Black History Month.

Apparently, 116 Edgecombe Avenue and 857 Riverside Drive are to be lost, through complex decisions made behind closed doors, before the commissioners have the opportunity to vote, or the public to comment at a hearing.

How can this be happening? We call on the LPC to reconsider.

116 Edgecombe Avenue is the address of a picturesque 120 year old Harlem church, which has been home to various congregations over time; most recently, it was Mount Calvary Methodist Church, which merged with nearby St. Mark’s Methodist Church, and subsequently, congregations shrinking, the unused building was offered for sale, according to the *Daily News*, February 3, 2017. “The developers are expected to turn the church into condos that largely preserve the historical exterior, Carrington [the Pastor] said.” Subsequent events put this in some doubt.

As a matter of public record, the buyer of the church was 116 Edgecombe LLC, and James Taussig, partner in 116 Edgecombe Avenue LLC, whose address is given as 767 Fifth Avenue, New York, soon applied for a full demolition permit for 116 Edgecombe Avenue, and obtained it on December 4, 2017.

Our ubiquitous helpmate, Google identifies Mr. Taussig as the real estate specialist at GF Capital Management, a private equity company for which Google shows two addresses, one of which is 767 Fifth Avenue, (otherwise known as the General Motors Building.)

To judge from the smiling photographs on its website, GF Capital Management (whose offerings seem to be attuned to the needs of high-net-worth individuals) would be unlikely to qualify as a Minority or Woman Owned Business. They offer a wide range of investment opportunities in sports, entertainment and fashion as well as three in real estate. Seemingly a boutique firm, they are not listed among New York's top ten private equity companies.

Obviously now, the handsome church would have no future as an individual landmark. The LPC can no longer prevent demolition once a demolition permit has been issued, making the site effectively a vacant lot. However, that is not the end of the story. The picture has been clouded by a posting from an entity called Invictus, undated and unsigned, which announces that the church has been sold to an unidentified party for "conversion". As of January 24th, the most recent deed recorded on Automated City Register (ACRIS) for 116 Edgecombe is the one dated 2017 and subject to the demolition permit.

Perhaps following the lead of the State and National Register of Historic Places, the LPC has been looking at a Dorrance Brooks Square Historic District. It has consulted the community, distributed a potential boundary, and obtained community support. The map shown to the community, like the State and National Historic District, included 116 Edgecombe Avenue, a key architectural feature and anchor of the district. Yet at the last moment, the site has been cut out from the local district proposal, before the commissioners' vote to calendar for a public hearing.

No new building permits have yet appeared on the DOB website, and there has been speculation that existing zoning (R7-2) could be limiting the site's marketability at the highest price levels. "The height factor regulations for R7 districts encourage lower apartment buildings," according to a city zoning guide. So the future appears to be in flux and potentially unclear.

Nevertheless, it seems unfortunate that just as it is ushering in Black History Month by publicizing its newfound concern for inclusivity, the LPC has nevertheless simultaneously (though privately) refused to consider designation of not only one, but two significant markers of Black history, for which elected officials, the public at large and the local communities are demanding protection.

It has been argued that since this church can be demolished it need not be included in the Dorrance Brooks Square Historic District, but this is specious. The church has not yet been demolished, but if it is, something will replace it. If the site were included in the historic district, the LPC would regulate the new construction.

There have of course been rumors that the church is “not really” going to be demolished “after all,” so we should not “worry.” Without dignifying that undocumented contention with further discussion, let us move on to the LPC’s second recent refusal to protect an endangered building in Harlem.

It is profoundly discouraging to see cynical speculators bent on the destruction of scarce historic resources even characterized as “developers.” It is worse when protection of the public interest is denied by a government body, based on a rationale that has no basis in law.

The Landmarks Law specifically protects properties with a “special character or a special historical or aesthetic interest” (our emphasis). Even if the architecture is damaged, significant history alone can be the reason for designation, avoiding an “irreplaceable loss to the people of the city.” (§25-301a)

In an action now questioned by the *New York Times*, the *Daily News* and the *New York Post*, the LPC Research Department has refused to consider 857 Riverside Drive for landmark designation. The department opines that the building is too much altered.

The Society for the Architecture of the City recalls contesting that same flawed rationale before. Oddly enough, it was also invoked to avoid protecting another marker of Black history, 227 Duffield Street. We were told, way back in 2006, that the building was too much altered to be considered. The rationale was that it had “lost its integrity.” There was a quiet intervention at a different level of government, and the house was not taken by eminent domain. Years passed, the owner who had fought to protect it in 2006 died of old age. A new generation of advocates arose. In July of 2020 the Research Department must have discovered that the house had not lost its integrity after all, because it was calendared and heard for individual landmark designation, with widespread support, including that of the Attorney General of New York State, Letitia James. Reportedly, the reconsideration was generated by an inquiry from First Lady Charlene McCrae. Perhaps now 227 Duffield Street will be designated with fanfare during Black History Month?

Like 227 Duffield Street, 857 Riverside Drive has indeed been much altered architecturally, its small wooden porch and cupola dismantled, its front covered with siding. Its original appearance is fully documented in a lovely photograph by Berenice Abbott, recently reproduced in the *New York Times*, as part of an extended study by John Freeman Gill. Abbott had been chosen to record the distinguished old buildings of New York City by the WPA Federal Art Project during the Depression, leading to her celebrated photographic study, *Changing New York*. There was no Landmarks Commission then. Exterior restoration of 857 would be feasible, the photograph provides documentation, reconstruction of its wooden decorative elements would not be technically difficult or particularly costly, nor is removing fake siding unusual or problematic. Similar projects in historic districts are routinely approved at staff level by the LPC. Research in support of designation has been submitted by historians Matthew Spady and Joseph Armadio.

When it was first established, the LPC was properly concerned to identify and designate landmarks of African American significance, and the Hunterfly Road Houses, the last survivors of the 19th century free African community of Weeksville were designated in 1970. The houses were in dire need of protection and repair, but the LPC did not hesitate. James Hurley had found Hunterfly Road on a 19th century map and rediscovered it by flying over the neighborhood with a friend in a small plane, as the old road was by then off the grid, hidden and long forgotten. Once protected, it was possible with great effort and over many years for community activists to restore the houses, and they are now honored as the Weeksville Heritage Center. That was the original LPC in action.

Marketing an opportunity is not the same thing as moving to build a new building, but that ubiquitous term, “the developer” circumvents all rational analysis and shoots straight for the heart, whether you are preservation minded, in which case you might be expected to respond negatively, or growth minded, in which case you might cheer. Neither response is exclusively aligned with a rational public policy, and unfortunately, public policy is not immune from confused terminology. Even so, it is unnerving when someone called a “developer” is able to give at least the appearance of stifling debate and setting a governmental agenda behind the scenes—and this just to secure a future for his relatively minor private investment

Jesse Jackson exhorted us to “Keep hope alive” at a time when civil rights protests were fraught with danger, and despair was indeed a rational response to unpunished murder and false incarceration. So in these less dire circumstances today, we must try to have hope. During the Giuliani administration in New York City, Mr. Michael Henry Adams chained himself to the double doors of the LPC headquarters at Old Slip, blocking the entrance, and stood there shouting “Save Harlem Now!” The LPC Chair called the police and had him arrested. But his outcry still resonates, because 857 Riverside Drive and 116 Edgecombe Avenue may not be there much longer, without intervention.

The Society for the Architecture of the City

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