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Can Harlem's Heritage Be Saved?; Many Jewels of Its Vibrant Past Are Gone. Now Some Residents Are Fighting to Landmark the Rest.

BY NINA SIEGAL

IN 1976, Josephine E. Jones set eyes on stained-glass windows, carved cherry bannisters and Minton tiles in a Queen Anne-style row house at 137 West 122d Street in Harlem, and she knew it was the home she had dreamed of owning. The detailing was a signature of Francis H. Kimball, one of New York's leading turn-of-the-century architects, and the street was once known locally as Doctors' Row.

Mrs. Jones had made her way north from Greenville, S.C., where her father, a cotton sharecropper, worked for a white landowner with an expansive Victorian estate. Though Mrs. Jones's family had lived in a tiny shack without running water, she remembered playing in the Victorian house and fantasizing about owning one as grand.

On 122d Street, Mrs. Jones discovered that treasure, but hardly anyone else recognized it. The neighborhood had been neglected for 30 years, and there were more abandoned buildings on the street than inhabited ones. Thieves had filched many gargoyles, gables and other ornamental details from the row houses, and one historic brownstone had been painted bright orange.

None of that fazed Mrs. Jones, who bought the house for \$15,000. In 1992, she asked the city's Landmarks Preservation Commission to designate her home, and the row houses adjoining hers, as official landmarks. She was not the only one. Middle-class and professional African-Americans were increasingly drawn to Harlem, attracted by relatively inexpensive real estate prices, dropping crime rates and signs of economic renewal. They, too, wanted their historic homes and Harlem's other jewels to gain landmark status, which they hoped would help their preservation efforts.

Too many markers of their heritage, they say, have already been destroyed. The famed Cotton Club is gone, as is the Audubon Ballroom, where Malcolm X was killed. So are the Lafayette Theater, where Orson Welles staged the first all-black production of "Macbeth," and the Harlem Opera House, which Oscar Hammerstein opened in 1889. Other important cultural moorings have deteriorated or been partly dismantled, like the Renaissance Ballroom and Theater, Minton's Playhouse and Small's Paradise, where many jazz legends took the stage.

Preservationists argue that many cultural touchstones remain, and can be saved if the Landmarks Preservation Commission acts quickly. They point out that the city's landmarks law lets owners of historic properties qualify for special grants and low-interest loans for restoration work. And the law carries penalties for alterations that compromise a building's historic integrity.

But the landmarking process is never easy, and it is complicated by Harlem's own economic and social dynamics. Some community developers, for example, argue that landmarking brings bureaucratic restraints and higher expenses that make it more difficult to renovate old buildings. Others say that poverty and other social problems make it harder for neighborhood activists to focus on preservation efforts.

Nevertheless, in the last several years, people like Mrs. Jones have formed local advocacy groups to pressure the city and the commission to recognize historic sites in Harlem. In 1991 the city landmarks agency issued a list of 25 sites it promised to place at the top of its agenda. But some residents say the

process has stagnated, and neighborhood leaders are expressing frustration.

"Harlem has been ignored up until now," said Carolyn Kent, co-chairwoman of the parks and landmarks committee of Community Board 9, which covers West Harlem. "It has been ignored by its own residents, by downtown advocacy, by the commission, by elected officials. It's a tragedy because we've lost all these places that are of great international importance."

The president of the Hamilton Heights-West Harlem Community Preservation Organization, Ron Melichar, said that many architecturally significant buildings have been ignored. "The concern we feel is that as you look generally at the housing stock in Harlem, you see a deterioration and an increasing disregard for the historic value of what is there," he said. "It has had a big impact on our community, because it doesn't allow for us to move ahead with the revitalization that should happen."

Michael Henry Adams, a preservationist who is writing a book about historic Harlem, has become one of the area's most vocal advocates of landmarking. He argues that the Landmarks Preservation Commission has neglected buildings above 96th Street, thus erasing "the heritage and history and culture of so many people."

"It is not the kind of racism where someone calls you a name," Mr. Adams said. "It's the worst kind, where they just ignore you." He added: "It is an utter scandal that the incredible architectural and cultural heritage here can be destroyed when we have a law in place to protect it. But it is being used in an inequitable way."

The chairwoman of the Landmarks Preservation Commission, Jennifer J. Raab, said that protecting Harlem was one of her top priorities, along with lower Manhattan and Douglaston, Queens. When Ms. Raab was appointed by the Mayor in 1994, she said, no action had been taken on 12 of the 25 sites that had been nominated. Since then, she said, seven of those sites have been landmarked, including the 1933 Harlem Y.M.C.A. on 135th Street, near Adam Clayton Powell Jr. Boulevard, where many important black figures from Richard Wright to the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. have lived, visited or spoken.

Mr. Adams was not impressed. "What is that?" he said. "Seven buildings compared to some 600 buildings in Douglaston, Queens, alone, and hundreds of buildings designated in TriBeCa and Greenwich Village. Fewer than 7.5 percent of the buildings that have been designated in New York have been above 96th Street."

Ms. Raab contested Mr. Adams's count, saying that the agency did not tally landmark designations that way. She said her own agenda for Harlem included landmarking more buildings in the Hamilton Heights Historic District, the area between 140th and 145th Streets and St. Nicholas and Amsterdam Avenues. Once that is done, she said, she would consider requests for a Sugar Hill Historic District between Edgecombe and Amsterdam Avenues from 145th to 155th Streets.

"We have been very active in Harlem, very active," Ms. Raab said. "I've been up, I've been out, we've been planning and we are trying to make good decisions. This is something we care about a lot."

But she also said that she tended to focus attention on neighborhoods where there was a strong outpouring of support for landmarking from residents, because she wanted them to understand that landmark status was a responsibility as well as an honor.

Yet as Yuien Chin, an organizer of the Hamilton Heights-Sugar Hill Historic District Committee, a group seeking expansion of the historic districts in western Harlem, pointed out, "The people who fight for landmarking do it in their free time, and there are just so many other quality-of-life issues in this neighborhood that the resources are spread thin." Nevertheless, she said: "We are organized. It just may not be in the traditional way the commission is used to."

But some community developers who want to revive Central Harlem say landmarking would hurt rather than help. Karen A. Phillips, chief executive officer of the nonprofit Abyssinian Development Corporation, said the cost of rehabilitating a historic building under the landmark law can be 20 to 25 percent higher than renovating an ordinary building. For example, she said, some landmarked buildings must have a special kind of wood-frame window that costs three times more than a modern aluminum window.

"If you landmark all of Harlem, you're preserving a ruin rather than preserving a community," Ms. Phillips

said.

Even defining the boundaries of Harlem is tough. The landmarks commission contends that sites in Morningside Heights qualify as Harlem, for example, and some preservationists would like to see the neighborhood's borders extend above 155th Street, which is generally considered the beginning of Washington Heights.

In the area traditionally considered Harlem (between 96th and 155th Streets on the East Side and 110th and 155th Streets on the West Side, excluding Morningside Heights) there are now three historic districts: the Hamilton Heights Historic District, in the elevated western section of the city near City College; the Mount Morris Historic District, near Marcus Garvey Park in Central Harlem, and the St. Nicholas Historic District, the two blocks of 138th and 139th Streets commonly known as Striver's Row, because the elite of Harlem lived there.

The commission has also given landmark status to about four dozen individual buildings. Some of the best known are the Apollo Theater, on West 125th Street; the former home of Alexander Hamilton, known as the Grange, on Convent Avenue; the Abyssinian Baptist Church and Community House, on West 138th Street; the Harlem Courthouse, on East 121st Street, and Astor Row on 130th Street. These sites, the commission says, represent pre-Civil War Harlem, the ecclesiastical heritage and the social history of the area.

By way of comparison, however, almost all of Greenwich Village, from St. Luke's Place to West 13th Street and from Washington Street to Washington Square East, is an official historic district, complemented by some 30 individual landmarks in the West and East Villages. A large swath of the Upper West Side -- from Central Park West to Amsterdam Avenue beginning at 62d Street and ending at 85th Street -- is a landmark district, and 50 buildings in the area have landmark status.

Andrew S. Dolkart, an architectural historian who teaches at Columbia University and wrote "Touring Historic Harlem: Four Walks in Northern Manhattan" (New York Landmarks Conservancy, 1997) as well as a history of Morningside Heights published last year, said the city landmarks commission was off to a good start in Harlem. But, he said, "There are still a lot of things, many of them equally good, that have not been landmarked, so there is a pressing need to do more."

The Mount Morris Historic District, for example, was too narrowly defined when it was designated in 1971, Mr. Dolkart said. He said the district should include the Queen Anne row houses on 122d Street, which he said make up "one of the outstanding rows in New York." In 1996, the row was listed on the National Register of Historic Places, with the help of the New York Landmarks Conservancy, a nonprofit group that offers financial and technical help to save historic properties.

But a National Register listing is merely honorific, said Peg Breen, the Conservancy's president, and offers few protections for city buildings. Only the city landmarks law, which carries penalties of up to \$5,000 for an initial violation that is not corrected after two warnings, can insure that historic homes are not torn down or altered beyond recognition, she said.

Debbie Wright, president and chief executive officer of the Upper Manhattan Empowerment Zone, said that historic preservation is crucial for Harlem because it can help promote tourism. If important sites are preserved, she said, more tourists will visit and spend money in local restaurants, shops and clubs.

In 1924, the writer Arna Bontemps said that the hub of Harlem, near 135th Street, was "like a foretaste of paradise," adding, "A blue haze descended at night and with it strings of fairy lights on the broad avenues."

But that paradise is barely recognizable today. The home of Florence Mills, perhaps the most famous stage performer of the Harlem Renaissance, is one example. The building where she lived, at 220 West 135th Street, is boarded up and so untended that the limbs of a tree reach out of the windows from within the building's husk.

The scholar James Weldon Johnson, who at the turn of the century wrote the poem "Lift Every Voice and Sing," as well as "Black Manhattan," the first historical account of African-Americans in New York City, lived at 187 West 135th Street, next door to the jazz pianist Fats Waller. James Van Der Zee, an important

photographer whose work chronicled life in northern Manhattan from the 20's through the late 60's, had his first studio at No. 107.

At the corner of 135th and Adam Clayton Powell Jr. Boulevard is Small's Paradise, which Lana Turner once called "the home of the happy feet," where waiters wore roller skates or danced the Charleston as they served black and white customers in the 20's. Near the opposite corner was the headquarters of the United Negro Improvement Organization, founded by Marcus Garvey, the first major black pan-African philosopher. Though these buildings still stand, they are unmarked and in various stages of disrepair.

Around the corner on 136th Street, the home of the New York Urban League, founded in 1911 to help Southern blacks who had moved to the city, also still stands, although it has been modernized. But the house on the block with the greatest cultural significance, according to Mr. Dolkart, is gone. That was the rooming house run by Iolanthe Sydney, at No. 267, which Mr. Dolkart wrote, was "the headquarters of the Harlem Renaissance's vanguard wing" and a temporary home to the writers Langston Hughes, Wallace Thurman and Zora Neale Hurston.

And though the intersection of 135th Street and Seventh Avenue (now Adam Clayton Powell Jr. Boulevard) was known the Campus of the Harlem Renaissance, according to David Levering Lewis, a historian, only two major historic sites on these two critical blocks have been designated as city landmarks.

Some who live in the existing Harlem historic districts argue that landmarking is uplifting for neighborhoods. The president of the Hamilton Heights Homeowners Association, John Cardwell, said he wanted to see his district expanded because he believed the landmark designation enhanced community pride.

"This neighborhood is changing from a war zone where there's been an active drug war going on to an historic district that is interpreting Alexander Hamilton's time and bringing attention back to the architecture and the streetscape," he said.

When Mrs. Jones began her crusade to expand the Mount Morris Historic District, she had the support of Landmarks Harlem, an advocacy group founded by State Senator David A. Paterson to lobby for preservation in the district. In 1994, the group helped get the National Register of Historic Places to pick Harlem as one of its top 11 most endangered places in the United States. But Landmarks Harlem collapsed in 1996 after a controversy involving one of its officials and allegations of misappropriated funds.

Since then, Mrs. Jones said, she has not been able to garner the kind of community support for landmarking in Central Harlem that the commission seems to want. She said she declined an offer to have just her house designated because she wants the Mount Morris Historic District expanded to include it and many more houses.

Yet Mr. Adams said he worried about the perception that broad community support was needed for landmarking. The law, he said, does not require neighborhood lobbying. If that were the case, he added, only people in wealthy communities would be able to preserve their pasts.

"To contend that only if you have the leisure and the time to advocate on behalf of your community will you be able to get attention, then it's a foregone conclusion that people who live in poor neighborhoods will not get preservation," Mr. Adams said. "The dynamic is that poor people and minorities are shortchanged over and over again by government because people say they aren't organized."

A Glance at the Past That Has Been Lost

BLACKS were originally restricted to the balcony of the 1912 Lafayette Theater, near right, on Seventh Avenue between 131st and 132d Streets. In 1936, Orson Welles staged the first all-black production of "Macbeth" at the theater, where Bessie Smith, Duke Ellington and other legends had also performed. A church bought the building in 1951 and had the facade demolished during renovations in 1990.

In 1965, Malcolm X was assassinated at the Audubon Ballroom, center, on Broadway between 165th and 166th Streets. The 1912 building, with lavish terra-cotta details, was gutted in the early 90's for a Columbia

University science center, but the facade was preserved.

The Harlem Opera House, far right, at 209 West 125th Street, was opened by Oscar Hammerstein in 1889. In the 30's it featured swing bands and then became a cinema, but it was torn down in 1959 for a bowling alley.

Photos: "It's to save history," said Josephine E. Jones, who wants the Mount Morris Historic District expanded to include the row houses of her block on 122d St. "If we don't get Harlem landmarked now, it's just going to be gone." (Ozier Muhammad/The New York Times); In 1967 the Cotton Club, at 142d Street and Lenox Avenue, was torn down to make way for housing for middle-income families. (Corbis/Penguin)(pg. 1); From the top: The Hotel Theresa was landmarked after its interior was destroyed; 41 Convent Avenue, once the home of Joe Louis; the Cecil Hotel, site of Minton's Playhouse; the Renaissance Ballroom and Small's Paradise, two clubs where jazz legends played. (Ozier Muhammad/The New York Times); Michael Henry Adams, a Harlem preservationist, complains that the city's landmarks law "is being used in an inequitable way." (Ozier Muhammad/The New York Times)(Culver Pictures)(Corbis/Bettmann)(UPI/Corbis-Bettmann)(pg. 10); In 1958, 57 musicians, including Count Basie, seated on curb, posed outside 17 East 126th Street. (Art Kane, 1958) Below, the boarded-up building today. (Ozier Muhammad/The New York Times)(pg. 11) Chart: "GUIDES: Next Stop: Harlem" Some resources for exploring Harlem: Walking Tours New York Historical Society -- Tour of the Mount Morris area led by Michael Henry Adams, neighborhood preservationist. Next tour Feb. 20 at noon; \$25 (includes lunch); 212 873-3400. Big Onion Walking Tours -- Tours throughout the year, at least once a month. Next tour March 13, 1 P.M. Meet at northwest corner of 135th Street and Lenox Avenue; \$10 for adults, \$8 for students and people over 65; 212 439-1090. Museum of the City of New York -- Tours of East Harlem, April through October. Next tour: April 3; meet at 1220 5th Avenue at 103d Street; 212 534-1672, ext. 257. Books Guide to New York City Landmarks -- By the New York City Landmarks Preservation Commission, John Wiley & Sons, 1998, \$19.95. Harlem on my Mind: Cultural Capital of Black America, 1900-1968 -- By Allon Schoener, The New Press, 1995, \$19.95. Touring Historic Harlem: Four Walks in Northern Manhattan -- By Andrew S. Dolkart and Gretchen S. Sorin, The New York Landmarks Conservancy, 1997, \$14.95. When Harlem Was in Vogue -- By David Levering Lewis, Penguin Books, 1997, \$14.95. (pg. 11) Map: "BOUNDRIES: Wish List" Local preservationists would like the current landmarked districts in Harlem expanded. Map shows those districts, the proposed larger districts, some already landmarked and others whose landmarking has been suggested. (Source: "Touring Historic Harlem," Andrew S. Dolkart and Gretchen S. Sorin, (New York Landmarks Conservancy, 1997)(pg. 11)