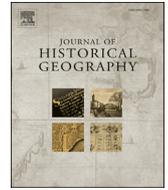




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The color of preservation: Black historic placemaking in New York City

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ABSTRACT

Since 1965, New York City's Landmark Preservation Commission (LPC) has listed over 37,900 buildings and sites, overwhelmingly located in 156 historic districts. While official landmark criteria have not changed, designation reports reveal shifting narratives of place and race. I examine historic placemaking in Black-identified districts, focusing on how designation rationales have evolved. Evidence comes from four predominantly Black historic districts, contextualized by comparison with similar cases. In 1967, the designation of St. Nicholas or 'Striver's Row' stressed notable architectural histories while regarding race as a secondary issue. After memorializing the African Burial Ground in 1993, Black district reports increasingly included cultural histories of racial justice. In 2011, Addisleigh Park illustrated the broadened approach, featuring the distinctive single-family homes and the Black celebrities who challenged restrictive racial covenants to live there. In 2018, another shift began with Central Harlem's extensive report and online story map, juxtaposing the built heritage with the Harlem Renaissance and Civil Rights movements. This designation foreshadowed the LPC's 'equity framework' of 2021, prioritizing racial inclusion and civil rights. Thus, I argue that antiracist activism has repeatedly driven LPC policy shifts toward greater social diversity in the historic places of New York City.

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On December 14, 2022, concerned preservationists and elected officials gave a press conference on the steps of New York City Hall. Speakers included three City Council members and representatives of the Historic District Council, Village Preservation, Save Harlem Now!, Mount Morris Park Community Improvement Association, Community Board 10, Friends of the Upper East Side, and Justice for 441 Willoughby in Bedford-Stuyvesant. The protesters charged that the city permitted over a dozen landmarked buildings to be torn down in 2022, allowing the historic structures to deteriorate so that the Department of Buildings (DOB) would order their demolition. Speakers also blamed real-estate interests, a pro-development mayor, and the Landmark Preservation Commission (LPC). According to James Singletary of Save Harlem Now!, 'We must take action now; otherwise, Harlem will be erased by the DOB wrecking ball! Harlem residents will not allow the erasure of our rich built history and legacy'. So, nearly sixty years after enacting landmark legislation, conflicts continued among preservationists, developers, property owners, and city agencies (Fig. 1).¹

Since passing legislation on April 19, 1965, the LPC has designated 156 historic districts, 1459 individual landmarks, 121 interior landmarks, and eleven scenic landmarks. The city has listed over 37,900 buildings and sites, overwhelmingly located in historic districts. To become an individual landmark, a building must be at least thirty years old and possess 'a special character or special historical or aesthetic interest' for the city, state, or nation. This broad category includes the 'exteriors of individual buildings, ranging from farmhouses to skyscrapers'. In contrast, historic districts comprise buildings and public spaces that broadly reflect a neighborhood. For instance, as Brooklyn Heights became the city's first official district in 1965, the designation protected 1375 buildings. The LPC criteria for historic districts specify a 'style of architecture typical of one or more eras in the City's history', 'a distinct sense of place', and 'a coherent streetscape'.² Beyond such guiding principles, the commission left ambiguous the precise eligibility requirements to prevent legal challenges. However, preservationists soon deciphered the preferred formulas.³

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¹ Frampton Tolbert and Andrew Berman, 'Elected Officials, Preservationists, and Community Leaders from Across City Condemn Rash of Demolitions of Landmarked Buildings Under City's Watch', Historic District Council and Village Preservation, 14 December 2022.

² New York City Landmarks Preservation Commission (LPC), 'Designation Criteria', <https://www.nyc.gov/site/lpc/designations/landmark-types-criteria.page> last accessed 1 October 2023.

³ Anthony Tung, *Preserving the World's Great Cities: The Destruction and Renewal of the Historic Metropolis* (New York: Three Rivers Press, 2001), pp. 347–49.



Fig. 1. James Singletary, director of Save Harlem Now!, protesting against the demolition of landmarked buildings, asked: ‘How long are we going to stand by and allow this trend to continue before it gets utterly out of control?’ (Photo by the author).

While official criteria have not changed, landmark rationales and practices have noticeably evolved. Most notably, designation reports for early Black historic districts initially stressed architectural distinction but, over time, began to include cultural history and struggles for equity. The first transformative shift occurred in 1993 with the African Burial Ground’s designation.⁴ A second significant change came with LPC’s ‘equity framework’ of 2021, which called attention to Black history, ethnic and social diversity, and civil rights. In retrospect, this recent shift began in 2018 with the more explicitly antiracist stance of Central Harlem’s extensive report and related story map. As creative innovations, such story maps bring places more fully alive by interactively linking maps with texts, photographs, and other multimedia.⁵

The LPC’s intensified emphasis on social diversity responded to national ‘systemic failures, as well as the killing of George Floyd, Ahmaud Arbery and Breonna Taylor, and the despair and anger expressed subsequently’. Such tragedies informed the Black Lives Matter protests in New York and other cities.⁶ In this fraught context, the commission proclaimed its ‘commitment to equity in all aspects of our work’, including landmark designations, community outreach, technical assistance, and streamlined applications. Current LPC chair Sarah Carroll explained, ‘As part of the agency’s equity framework, I am committed to advancing the designation of landmarks that better represent the city’s diversity and tell the story of all New Yorkers.’⁷ Since the boroughs of Manhattan and Brooklyn concentrate more than eighty percent of LPC landmarks, enhanced diversity would mean more spatial

dispersal to the Bronx, Queens, and Staten Island. The commission has already published online a series of story maps, including the city’s abolitionist past; places of Black history; women’s suffrage; LGBTQ + Pride; New York City Marathon landmarks; and Greenwich Village, Morningside Heights, and Central Harlem Historic Districts.⁸

While promoting this general social diversity, racial justice is central to the LPC’s equity framework. Three story maps — Central Harlem’s and two others — illustrate this point. *New York and the Path to Freedom* identifies eighteen antebellum sites of abolitionist homes, places of worship, and communities of free Blacks.⁹ For example, the intact houses on Brooklyn’s Hunterfly Road — Weeksville Heritage Center — are individual landmarks designated in 1970.¹⁰ In contrast, a mid-nineteenth century ‘Little Africa’ encompassed what are now Manhattan’s South Village and Sullivan-Thompson Districts. Additionally, twelve rowhouses on West 29th Street comprise the Lamartine Place Historic District, designated in 2009 as an abolitionist network linked to the Underground Railroad. This LPC designation highlights the Civil War Draft Riots of 1863, when mobs attacked and burned the house of Abby and James Sloan Gibbons, known for helping enslaved African Americans escape to Canada. The report concluded, ‘this district has remained an enclave in the changing city and has survived as a rare extant physical reminder of a dramatic and unfortunate chapter in the city’s history’.¹¹

Preserving Significant Places of Black History is more contemporary, featuring landmarks and districts ‘that illustrate the experiences and achievements of African Americans’.¹² Individual landmarks include the homes of famous Black figures, places of worship, entertainment venues, and other sites. This story map also lists thirty-three historic districts with buildings and public spaces important in the city’s Black history. Only a few early district reports made such references: before 1993, just seven out of sixty district designations even mentioned race. Still, recent materials elaborate on issues previously ignored. For example, the report for Brooklyn Heights in 1965 focused on architectural styles without referencing Black history. Yet, the recent story map notes ‘significant ties to the abolition movement in Brooklyn Heights before the Civil War’.¹³ Such early omissions and belated corrections reflect shifting racial narratives (Table 1).

While individual abolitionist landmarks constitute essential milestones, I focus on historic districts that reflect neighborhood racial change. This inquiry asks how designation reports depict four notable Black districts, briefly compared with similar cases, approved between 1967 and 2022. These primary and secondary examples suggest that the Black mobilization to memorialize the African Burial Ground, achieved in 1993, effectively broadened landmark rationales to include cultural histories of racial justice. Furthermore, Central Harlem’s 2018 designation report and story map reflect heightened antiracist activism, culminating in the LPC’s ‘equity framework’ of 2021.

⁴ LPC, ‘African American Burial Ground and Commons Historic District, Designation Report’, LP-1901, 25 February 1993.

⁵ ESRI, ‘Meet StoryMaps, Your New Favorite Way to Tell Stories’, <https://storymaps.com> last accessed 25 November 2023.

⁶ Joshua Inwood, ‘Urban National Politics in the United States: #BlackLivesMatter and the Challenges to Normative National Identity,’ in *The City as Power: Urban Space, Place, and National Identity*, ed. Alexander Diener and Joshua Hagen (Lanham MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2019), pp. 153–68.

⁷ Sarah Carroll, ‘LPC Launches Equity Framework’, New York, 19 January 2021 <https://www.nyc.gov/site/lpc/about/pr2021/lpc-launches-equity-framework.page> last accessed 8 January 2024.

⁸ LPC, ‘Story Maps’, <https://www.nyc.gov/site/lpc/discover/maps.page> last accessed 8 January 2024.

⁹ LPC, *New York and the Path to Freedom: Landmarks Associated with Abolitionist and Underground Railroad History*, 15 February 2022.

¹⁰ LPC, ‘Houses of Hunterfly Road, Designation Report’, LP-0728—LP-0769, 18 August 1970.

¹¹ LPC, ‘Lamartine Place Historic District, Designation Report’, LP-2324, 13 October 2009, p. 2.

¹² LPC, *Preserving Significant Places of Black History: African American Landmarks and Historic Districts in New York City*, 7 June 2023.

¹³ LPC, *Preserving Significant Places of Black History*, 2023.

Table 1
Selected Black historic districts (source: LPC, 'Preserving significant places of Black history', 7 June 2023).

Historic District (HD)	Borough	LPC Number	Designation Date
1. Brooklyn Heights Historic District (HD) ^b	Brooklyn	LP-0099	11/23/1965
2. St. Nicholas HD (Striver's Row) ^a	Manhattan	LP-0322	03/16/1967
3. Mount Morris Park HD ^b	Manhattan	LP-0452	03/11/1971
4. Fort Greene HD ^b	Brooklyn	LP-0973	09/26/1978
5. African Burial Ground & Commons HD ^a	Manhattan	LP-1901	02/25/1993
6. Lamartine Place HD ^b	Manhattan	LP-2324	10/13/2009
7. Addisleigh Park HD ^a	Brooklyn	LP-2305	02/01/2011
8. Bedford Stuyvesant/Stuy. Heights Ext. HD ^b	Brooklyn	LP-2496	04/16/2013
9. 'Little Africa,' South Village HD ^b	Manhattan	LP-2546	12/17/2013
10. 'Little Africa,' Sullivan-Thompson HD ^b	Manhattan	LP-2590	12/13/2016
11. Central Harlem West: 130–132 Street HD ^a	Manhattan	LP-2607	05/29/2018
12. Dorrance Brooks Square HD ^b	Manhattan	LP-2651	06/15/2021
13. Cambria Heights – 222nd St. HD ^b	Queens	LP-2655	06/28/2022
14. Cambria Heights – 227th St. HD ^b	Queens	LP-2656	06/28/2022

^a Historic Black districts used as primary case studies.

^b Comparative examples of Black-identified districts.

Contexts of memory, place, and race

Multicultural New York City has experienced growing interests in heritage and identity, reflected in debates over public art, monuments, and statutes. Given concerns about racially offensive statuary, former Mayor Bill de Blasio appointed an Advisory Commission on City Art, Monuments and Markers. After extensive public comment and review, the commission recommended relocating the statue of J. Marion Sims from Fifth Avenue to Green-Wood Cemetery, along with informational plaques about non-consensual medical experimentation on women of color. Other statues would remain in place, including the controversial monument in Columbus Circle, but with added historical context to provide teachable moments and civic engagement.¹⁴ Plans proceed to erect a memorial sculpture for Shirley Chisholm in Prospect Park.¹⁵ Lincoln Center has added visual art in 'San Juan Heal' to commemorate the displaced West Side community of San Juan Hill.¹⁶ The City Council approves honorary co-names for streets. Civic organizations sponsor countless walking tours. Among the various ways to view Black history, I examine the placemaking narratives of historic districts.

During the late twentieth century, multicultural social movements broadened landmark preservation beyond the highbrow 'great building' approach once dominant in architectural history. A public debate in 1975, published by *The New York Times*, pitted sociologist Herbert Gans and architectural critic Ada Louise Huxtable. Gans argued that the LPC preserved 'the elite portion of the architectural past', while Huxtable defended wealth for making 'superb examples of the art of architecture possible'. In addition, she noted that the commission 'had designated twenty-six historic districts including 11,000 buildings' of vernacular architecture.¹⁷ By this point, community activists and scholars increasingly favored an emphasis on social history, popular culture, and vernacular landscapes in historic preservation. An influential perspective was Dolores Hayden's view of 'the power of ordinary urban landscapes to nurture citizens' public memory, to encompass shared time in the form of shared territory'.¹⁸

¹⁴ Mayoral Commission, 'City Art, Monuments, and Markers, Report to the City of New York', January 2018.

¹⁵ Zachary Small, 'City Approves Design for Shirley Chisholm Monument in Prospect Park', *New York Times*, 17 July 2023.

¹⁶ Will Heinrich, 'Geffen Hall Commissions New Art That Honors Black and Latino History', *New York Times*, 8 October 2022.

¹⁷ Quoted in Dolores Hayden, *The Power of Place: Urban Landscapes as Public History* (Cambridge MA: MIT Press, 1997), p. 3.

¹⁸ Hayden, *The Power of Place*, p. 9.

With the proliferation of UNESCO World Heritage sites — now numbering 1200 properties of 'outstanding universal value' in 168 countries — landmark preservation has become a common development strategy.¹⁹ To create distinctive landmarks, historic placemaking involves narratives of origin, malleable enough for the use of communities, state institutions, and commercial endeavors. As one textbook suggests, 'Heritage is a view from the present, either backward to a past or forward to a future'.²⁰ Like creative placemaking, which harnesses public art and aesthetics, historic places imply narratives of 'authenticity'.²¹ Historic placemaking also contributes to contemporary 'urban branding'.²² As a result, landmark designation reflects debates over the 'right to the city'. I argue in a study of Rio de Janeiro, 'The right to remember — in my view, a logical correlate of the right to the city — now shapes social identities, community profiles, and popular cultures in this spectacular, if highly stratified city'.²³

Landmark preservation has long interested historical, cultural, and urban geographers, such as David Lowenthal who in 1985 first published his classic *The Past is a Foreign Country*.²⁴ Proponents of geography have suggested that the field's methodologies, such as morphology and cultural landscapes, 'can also contribute significantly to the analysis and management of urban heritage'.²⁵ Recent work on American Black heritage by geographers Marcus Hunter and Zandria Robinson celebrates the popular culture, placemaking, and mapping of 'chocolate cities'.²⁶ By broadening the preservationist lens, such fresh approaches reveal the growing diversity of heritage studies. Although architecture has long been predominant, other considerations include urban planning, sociocultural diversity, economic development, and property rights. Nir Mualam and Rachele Alterman argue that 'although urban form and design

¹⁹ World Heritage Center, 'The List', UNESCO, <https://whc.unesco.org> last accessed on 14 December 2023.

²⁰ Brian Graham, G. J. Ashworth, and J. E. Tunbridge, *A Geography of Heritage: Power, Culture, and Economy* (Arnold/Oxford University Press, 2000).

²¹ Sharon Zukin, *Naked City: The Death and Life of Authentic Urban Places* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010).

²² Miriam Greenberg, *Branding New York: How a City in Crisis Was Sold to the World* (New York: Routledge, 2008).

²³ Brian Godfrey, *Preserving Whose City? Memory, Place, and Identity in Rio de Janeiro* (Lanham MD: Roman & Littlefield, 2021), pp. 6, 197–203.

²⁴ David Lowenthal, *The Past is a Foreign Country* (Cambridge University Press, 1985 and revised in 2015).

²⁵ Matthias Ripp and Dennis Rodwell, 'The Geography of Urban Heritage', *The Historic Environment* 6 (2015) 240–276 (p. 241).

²⁶ Marcus Hunter and Zandria Robinson, *Chocolate Cities: The Black Map of American Life* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2018).

issues are quite dominant, other non-physical considerations shape the dynamics of conflicts, practices, and policies surrounding heritage protection'.²⁷ Similarly, LPC rationales for landmarks and historic districts in New York City have broadened over time.

New York's loss of Pennsylvania Station did not begin the struggle to protect the city's landmarks, but anger over the station's demolition, starting in 1963, prompted legislation to empower the LPC in 1965.²⁸ Since then, preservationists and planners have largely endorsed historic districts, according to Dennis Gale, 'as a device for encouraging respect for architectural and historic attributes of a neighborhood, but also as a means to stimulate property rehabilitation and community reinvestment in infrastructure'.²⁹ Early examples of U.S. historic districts include the French Quarter in New Orleans, designated in 1936; Charleston, South Carolina in 1944; and Boston's Beacon Hill in 1955.³⁰ In New York City, the Greenwich Village Association began to advocate a historic district in 1954, as did Brooklyn Heights activists in 1959.³¹

With passage of the National Historic Preservation Act of 1966, the National Register of Historic Places began listing historic districts and landmarks of national significance. At present, the National Register recognizes 161 historic districts in New York City compared to the LPC's 156.³² Since the national list is highly symbolic with fewer regulations than local jurisdictions, my focus is on historic districts authorized by the city. Contemporary politics of gender, sexuality, race, and ethnicity have encouraged the preservation of sites that embody social diversity. Patrick O'Bannon suggests that the official narrative may reflect 'the specific goals and objectives of those who prepared and promoted the district designation, but a broader, more inclusive history always exists behind the official designation'.³³

As New York City's primary heritage agency, the Landmark Preservation Commission's decisions greatly affect urban cultural landscapes. Approaching preservation as historic placemaking, the commission serves as a preeminent memory broker or what Diane Barthel calls a 'symbolic banker'.³⁴ The LPC consists of eleven commissioners — including at least three architects, one historian, one city planner or landscape architect, and one realtor — whom the mayor appoints for three-year terms that may be renewed. A staff of about eighty professionals assists with research, administration, and implementation of decisions. The commission enjoys broad latitude in setting priorities. City Council approval is not required, but the council can modify or nullify landmark decisions by majority vote. The mayor may, in turn, veto a Council's vote, but the council can then override a veto by a two-thirds majority.³⁵ The commission deliberates in private, which allows political pressures to remain largely hidden from public view. The public must read

between the lines to discern current policies. Still, landmark designations include public hearings, where comments carry weight in the court of public opinion, often magnified by the press.³⁶ The following case studies illustrate these issues.

Early designation: St. Nicholas Historic District, 1967

Long a prestigious neighborhood of Upper Manhattan, St. Nicholas — famously nicknamed 'Striver's Row' — was the first historic district in Harlem. Designated by the LPC in 1967 and listed on the National Register in 1975, the district has long enjoyed a special sense of place. As an early historic district, the city's report consists of only six typed pages with no photographs; a separate LPC map appeared later. After an overview of Harlem's history, the document focuses primarily on urban planning and architectural history: 'The St. Nicholas Historic District is a striking example of overall city planning at its best, exemplifying, in its three architectural building types, some of the outstanding work of three noted architectural firms'.³⁷

Harlem's history of racial flux goes back centuries. After arriving in 1626, the Dutch West India Company claimed to have 'purchased' Manhattan Island from the native Lenapes for trinkets. Yet, the Manahate Lenapes did not control the upper island, where the Rechgawawank Lenapes settled near seasonal agricultural fields and fishing camps. Peter Stuyvesant, last Dutch director-general, founded the village of *Nieuw Haarlem* in 1658. After the British conquest in 1664, small farms and large estates filled Harlem, as the new rulers Anglicized the area's name.³⁸ Completed in 1802, Alexander Hamilton's 'Grange' — now a city landmark and national memorial — remains the era's most famous estate.³⁹

With the arrival of the Harlem Railroad in 1837 and the IRT trains in 1881, upper Manhattan became a streetcar suburb for affluent white families. According to the LPC report, 'A period of Victorian gentility had led to ... that disastrous spurt of over-investing which occurred at the end of the Nineteenth Century'.⁴⁰ In fact, Harlem's appeal led to periodic speculative overbuilding. Since racial integration remained such a sensitive topic, the reports on Harlem's early historic districts downplayed the Black influx by emphasizing the architecture instead of segregationist barriers to residency.

The district's urban identity dates from 1891 when developer David H. King envisioned a project 'on such a large scale and with such ample resources as to "Create a Neighborhood" independent of surrounding influence'.⁴¹ King hired notable architects to design four long blocks with a total of 146 rowhouses along West 138 and West 139 streets (Fig. 2). James Brown Lord designed the brownstone and red-brick buildings on the south side of West 138th Street in a Georgian-inspired style. Bruce Price and Clarence Luce designed yellow-brick houses in Colonial Revival style on the north side of 138th Street and the south side of 139th Street. On the north side of 139th Street, Stanford White designed dark-brick houses in the Italian Renaissance style (Fig. 3). The designation report found that 'the basic simplicity and elegance of the houses support the

²⁷ Nir Mualam and Rachele Alterman, 'Architecture Is Not Everything: A Multi-Faceted Conceptual Framework for Evaluating Heritage Protection Policies and Disputes', *International Journal of Cultural Policy* 26 (2020) 291–311 (p. 291).

²⁸ Randall Mason, *The Once and Future New York: Historic Preservation and the Modern City* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2009).

²⁹ Dennis Gale, 'The Impacts of Historic District Designation: Planning and Policy Implications', *Journal of the American Planning Association* 57 (1991) 325–40 (p. 337).

³⁰ George Born, 'Urban Preservation and Renewal: Designating the Historic Beacon Hill District in 1950s Boston', *Journal of Planning History* 16 (2017) 285–30.

³¹ Anthony Wood, *Preserving New York: Winning the Right to Protect A City's Landmarks* (New York: Routledge, 2008).

³² National Register of Historic Places, <https://www.nps.gov/subjects/nationalregister/index.htm> last accessed 10 November 2023.

³³ Patrick O'Bannon, 'Where Is the History in Historic Districts — Some Concluding Thoughts', *The Public Historian* 32 (2010) 69–75 (p. 74).

³⁴ Diane Barthel, *Historic Preservation: Collective Memory and Historic Identity* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1996).

³⁵ LPC, 'About LPC', <https://www.nyc.gov/site/lpc/about/about-lpc.page> last accessed 12 November 2023.

³⁶ Tung, *Preserving the World's Great Cities*, p. 349.

³⁷ LPC, 'St. Nicholas Historic District, Designation Report', LP-0322, New York City, 16 March 1967, p. 5.

³⁸ Eric Sanderson, *Mannahatta: A Natural History of New York City* (New York: Harry Abrams, 2013).

³⁹ LPC, 'Hamilton Grange, New York, Designation Report', LP-0317, 2 August 1967; amended 30 June 2020.

⁴⁰ LPC, St. Nicholas Historic District, p. 2.

⁴¹ Matthew Postal, *Guide to New York City Landmarks* (Hoboken: John Wiley & Sons, 2009), p. 198.

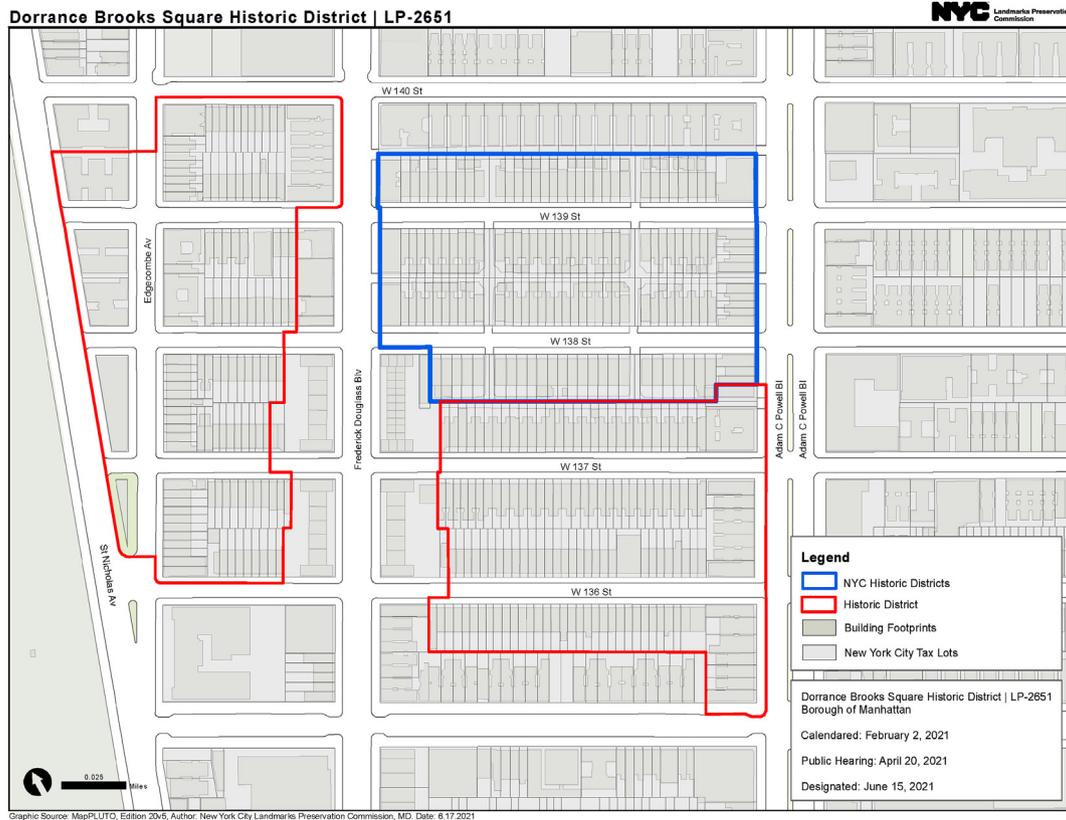


Fig. 2. The St. Nicholas Historic District map, designated in 1967, is shown with blue borders; the two parts of the Dorrance Brooks Square Historic District, established in 2021, have red boundaries. (Source: Landmark Preservation Commission).



Fig. 3. Striver's Row, 235-221 W 138th Street, built 1891–93 in Colonial Revival style with yellow brick, white limestone, and terra cotta trim, designed by architects Bruce Price & Clarence S. Luce. (Photograph by Beyond My Ken, Creative Commons of Wikimedia, 2014).

dominating sense of quiet refinement in this handsome and unique area.⁴²

Intended for affluent white buyers, King's project suffered from the Depression of 1895. The developer sold only a few houses before Equitable Life Insurance, which financed construction, foreclosed on many vacant units. Harlem attracted African Americans, but Equitable Life would not sell or rent to them. Given the

segmented housing market, fear of lost profits combined with racism to segregate housing. After two more decades, the company finally began selling houses to all races in 1919–1920. In the 1920s, Wallace Thurman called the block on 139th Street 'the most aristocratic street in Harlem. Stanford White designed the houses for a wealthy white clientele. Moneyed Negroes now own and inhabit them. When one lives on Striver's Row one has supposedly arrived'.⁴³ Besides Harry Wills, three-time winner of the 'World Colored Heavyweight Championship', prominent Black doctors, composers, singers, and other professionals lived there. While mentioning the racial connotations of Striver's Row, the LPC justified its designation strictly based on 'special historical and aesthetic interest' and 'one or more periods or styles of architecture in the history of New York City'.⁴⁴

The LPC report on Striver's Row exemplifies the initial tendency to tread lightly on racial topics. Other early historic districts received similar reports. The six-page document for Mount Morris Park Historic District praised the architecture 'largely built up during the latter part of the 19th century, with rows of unusually handsome townhouses and several notable churches' of various styles. While mentioning that Depression-era vacancies led to a Black neighborhood in the 1930s, the report endorsed Mount Morris Park's 'special character and special historical and aesthetic interest'.⁴⁵ Such early designations emphasized architectural or

⁴³ Wallace Thurman, *Negro Life in New York's Harlem: A Lively Picture of a Popular and Interesting Section* (Girard KS: Haldeman-Julius Publications, 1927), p. 4.

⁴⁴ LPC, 'St. Nicholas Historic District', p. 6.

⁴⁵ LPC, 'Mount Morris Park Historic District, Designation Report', LP-0452, 3 Nov. 1971, pp. 3–6.

⁴² LPC, 'St. Nicholas Historic District', p. 6.

aesthetic distinction. Yet, twenty-five years later, a politically charged case reframed rationales for Black historic districts.

Rethinking designation: The African Burial Ground and Commons, 1993

The rediscovery of the African Burial Ground began in 1991 with plans for a new federal building in Lower Manhattan. As archeologists examined the site, as required by law, they came upon the remnants of a colonial cemetery with the graves of what turned out to be some fifteen thousand free and enslaved Africans. Given time pressure and construction costs, the General Services Administration (GSA) continued work. But when the news became public knowledge, African American activists protested the rush to redevelopment. Feeling insufficiently consulted, the descendant community demanded a halt to construction, an archaeological study, and a proper memorial monument.⁴⁶ Against the odds, the struggle succeeded and changed landmark preservation in New York City and beyond.⁴⁷

Political debates over the African Burial Ground coincided with the city's first Black mayor, David Dinkins. The LPC chair from 1990 to 1994, Laurie Beckelman, later recounted, 'There was a downturn in the economy, and I think there was great concern that the Landmarks Commission was going to hold things up'. With the city suffering from a recession, the mayor was reluctant to delay the construction of the new federal building. Still, Beckelman liked the mayor, 'who was so open and so easy to work with, he understood what value this would play in history'. She added that it 'was an opportunity to get this into the schools, to start teaching and training people about the history of the African Burial Ground'. She convinced the mayor to support public hearings on the rediscovered burial grounds, which would take preservation beyond Manhattan elites and into other parts of the city that 'cared enough to go out and vote'.⁴⁸

Anthony Tung served on the Commission from 1978 to 1988, but Mayor Ed Koch removed him for opposing plans to redevelop Bryant Park. The episode only strengthened Tung's resolve as he proved equally critical of the subsequent mayor, David Dinkins. Hailing from Harlem, Dinkins may have favored inclusive histories, but he depended on a diverse political coalition during a sluggish economic era. Tung and many other preservationists thought the mayor moved too slowly on several race-related projects. Dinkins opposed landmarking the Audubon Ballroom, the site of Malcolm X's assassination, and initially the mayor opposed preserving the African Burial Ground. 'The thing that was so odd about both of those issues was they occurred during the mayoralty of David Dinkins', Tung noted. 'He was the first African American mayor of the City of New York and one of the main obstacles to the designation of two highly significant landmarks in regard to African American history in the United States'.⁴⁹

Despite pressures from the Black community, the Dinkins administration initially maintained that the burial ground was a

federal issue. After attending a town meeting with the principal stakeholders, Tung realized that the federal agency had tacitly agreed to only a small museum in the new GSA office building, after disinterring remains from their resting places. Outraged by the paltry proposal, Tung composed a strongly worded opinion editorial for *New York Newsday*, published on July 9, 1992, pointing out that 'the GSA has offered to allocate \$250,000 toward a monument (the cost of the tower is \$200 million) and 600 square feet of corridor space for this memorial. This proposal is amazingly meager, insensitive, and inappropriate'. Tung argued for the open space to be memorialized: 'When will we learn that it is important to understand and preserve the history of all the groups of people who have contributed to the growth and welfare of New York?'⁵⁰

His words quickly hit the mark politically. Hours after the publication of Tung's piece in *New York Newsday*, the Congressional Black Caucus threatened to block approval of the federal budget, including funds for GSA projects, unless the African Burial Ground was preserved. This maneuver convinced leaders on Capitol Hill to change course. The GSA agreed to halt construction to assess the site. Subsequent archaeological work uncovered 419 bodies, many of whom died young and malnourished. The political tides shifted. The LPC public hearing in 1992 included a who's who of city politics: Mayor Dinkins; Senator Daniel Moynihan; Congressman Charles Rangel and Ted Weiss; the Manhattan borough president and others. Also in favor were such influential groups as the Municipal Art Society and the Landmarks Conservancy.⁵¹

On October 6, 1992, President George H.W. Bush signed an appropriations bill that allocated \$3 million to memorialize the site. On April 19, 1993, the African Burial Ground became a National Historic Landmark, listed on the Register of Historic Places. After this federal action, the LPC designated the historic district on September 25, 1993. The landmark report set a new standard with a text of forty-four pages, four pages of references, and thirty photographs and maps (Fig. 4). In 2006, the burial ground also became a National Historic Monument. Designed by Rodney Leon and Nicole Hollant-Denis, the memorial features a Circle of Diaspora — built of granitic stone from South Africa and North America, the monument symbolizes the joining of two worlds (Fig. 5). On October 5, 2007, the dedication ceremony included prayers, songs, dances, and speeches, including 419 drummers to honor those reinterred. A visitor center opened in 2010 to interpret the site and teach its history in the new GSA building.⁵²

The African Burial Ground proved to be a turning point. The LPC previously listed as individual landmarks the homes of prominent African Americans, the Apollo Theater, the Schomburg Center, and abolitionist sites.⁵³ Yet, earlier historic districts such as Striver's Row in Harlem stressed architectural distinction to justify their designation, downplaying the struggles and achievements of Black residents in racially segregated neighborhoods. The pattern changed with the African Burial Ground, which provided an anti-racist narrative and encouraged the designation of other Black-identified districts.⁵⁴

Subsequent rediscovery of the Seneca Village site revealed the buried remains and neglected histories of a community that reached at least 220 families at its peak, comprised of free Black property owners with a scattering of Irish and German immigrants.

⁴⁶ Cheryl La Roche and Michael Blakey, 'Seizing Intellectual Power: The Dialogue at the New York African Burial Ground', *Historical Archaeology* 31 (1997) 84–106.

⁴⁷ Michael Blakey, 'African Burial Ground Project: Paradigm for Cooperation?', *Museum* 62 (2010) 61–68.

⁴⁸ Laurie Beckelman, *Leading the Commission: Interviews with the Former Chairs of NYC's Landmarks Preservation Commission — The Reminiscences of Laurie Beckelman*, interview by L. McEnaney, New York Preservation Archive Project (NYPAP), 8 September 2011, pp. 53–55, <https://www.nypap.org> last accessed 11 November 2023.

⁴⁹ Anthony Tung, *Leading the Movement: Interviews with Preservationist Leaders in New York's Civic Sector — The Reminiscences of Anthony Tung*, interview by I. Guzenfeld, NYPAP, 16 November 2012, p. 71.

⁵⁰ Anthony Tung, 'Paving Over Black History', *New York Newsday*, 9 July 1992.

⁵¹ LPC, 'African American Burial Ground, Designation Report', LP-1901, 25 February 1993.

⁵² National Park Service, 'African Burial Ground National Monument', <https://www.nps.gov/afbg/index.htm> last accessed 11 November 2023.

⁵³ LPC, *New York City and the Path to Freedom*, 2022.

⁵⁴ LPC, *Preserving Significant Places of Black History*, 2023.

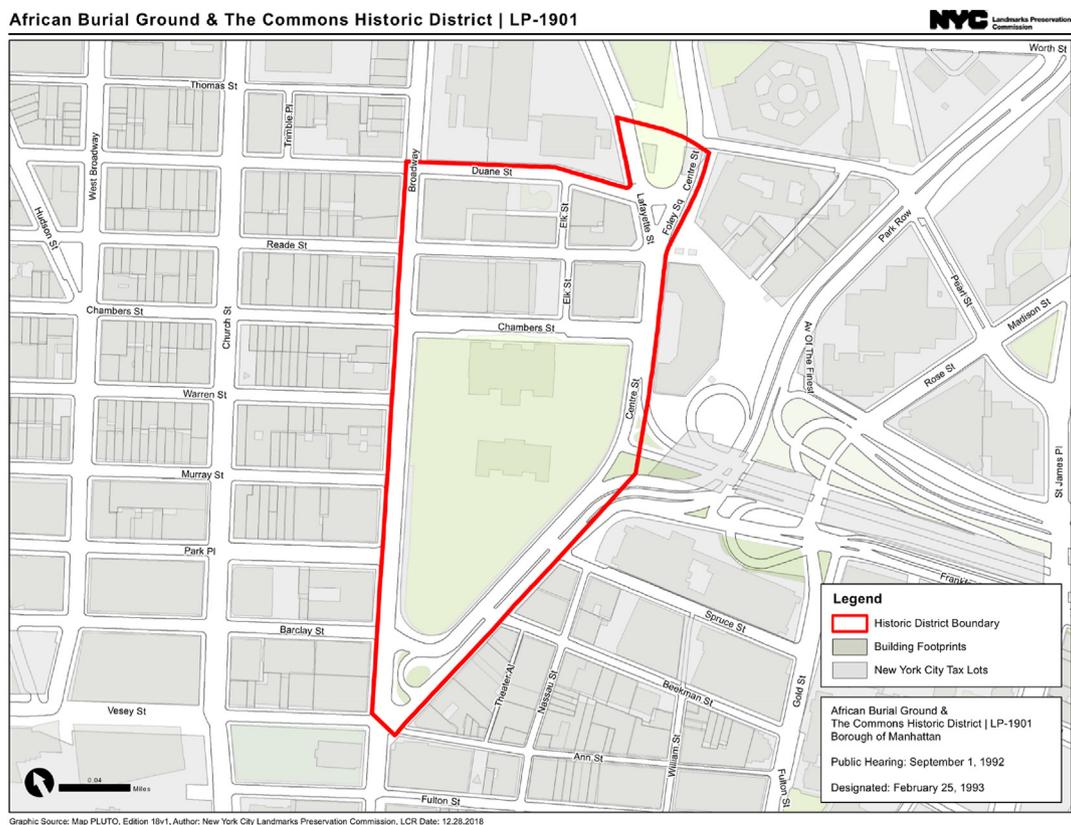


Fig. 4. Map of the African Burial Ground and Commons Historic District, designated in 1993. (Source: Landmark Preservation Commission).

Founded in the 1820s, Seneca Village became a multi-ethnic settlement with three churches, a school, planting fields, and orchards. The city removed the village by eminent domain in 1857 to construct Central Park. Cynthia Copeland, a Black historian who co-founded the Seneca Village Project in 1998, noted the role of the African Burial Ground ‘to prove that there was an early African presence here in New York’. She added, ‘This helps to give name and place and space to people who have been told for centuries that they have no history. That’s why the African Burial Ground rediscovery and the work that was done on it was so important and so revealing’.⁵⁵

In 2011, archaeological excavations recovered artifacts of the lost village near West 86th Street in Central Park. In 2020, the LPC launched *Seneca Village Unearthed*, an online exhibit of 300 artifacts to show what the villagers’ life was like.⁵⁶ By revealing a long-hidden chapter of African American history, this exhibition complicated the familiar narrative of Central Park, approved as a scenic landmark in 1974. In the park’s designation report, the only reference to the prior residents noted ‘that the land chosen for the park, with its shanties, pig farms and dismal swamps, would do little to inspire the people of the city if left in its natural state’.⁵⁷ Even with the park’s scenic beauty and recreational value, such an ethnocentric report would have been unthinkable after the rediscovery of Seneca Village.⁵⁸

⁵⁵ Cynthia Copeland, *Saving Preservation Stories: Diversity and the Outer Boroughs — The Reminiscences of Cynthia Copeland*, Interview by L.H. Strong, NYPAP, 13 October 2017, p. 34.

⁵⁶ LPC, *Seneca Village Unearthed*, Curated by Jessica Striebel MacLean, New York City, 18 February 2020.

⁵⁷ LPC, ‘Central Park, Designation Report’, LP-0851, 16 April 1974, p. 3.

⁵⁸ LPC, *New York City and the Path to Freedom*, 2022.

Defensive designation: Addisleigh Park historic district, 2011

After designating the African Burial Ground and Commons in 1993, the LPC included cultural history and racial diversity in district rationales. The designation of Addisleigh Park in Queens confirmed the revised approach, featuring both the distinctive single-family homes and the Black celebrities who challenged restrictive racial covenants there (Fig. 6). This district includes 422 houses, built mainly between the 1910s and 1930s in the Tudor Revival, Colonial Revival, and Arts and Crafts styles. The designation report reached 368 pages, including an interpretive text and bibliography, a detailed map, twenty-seven photographs, and an inventory of individual houses. While giving due credit to architectural history, the designation also focused on cultural history: ‘Today, Addisleigh Park remains a distinctive enclave with a remarkable sense of place and a rich history that represents the African American struggle for equality, and the “Glory Years” of an affluent Black elite’.⁵⁹

Given the affluence, detached homes, and outlying position in the city, the community exemplified early Black suburbanization and defensive rezoning to protect the single-family homes. After first attracting upwardly mobile white residents, the district beckoned the city’s African American elites after World War II. Racial integration was a struggle, as white property associations used coded advertisements and restrictive racial covenants to limit the sale of properties. Yet, Black elites began to move into Addisleigh Park during the 1940s, mainly by circumventing the restrictive covenants through reliance on third parties to purchase property.

⁵⁹ LPC, ‘Addisleigh Park Historic District, Designation Report’, LP-2305, 1 February 2011, p. 26.



Fig. 5. Artist's depiction of the African Burial Ground National Monument (Source: Rodney Leon, U.S. National Park Service).

So, the in-moving families worked around discriminatory practices. Local activism catapulted Black middle- and upper-class citizens into homes outside of the traditional enclaves.

The LPC report noted that despite initial struggles with segregated housing, 'the richest and most gifted African Americans' moved into Addisleigh Park, sometimes called 'New York's Gold Coast'.⁶⁰ Among them were baseball stars Jackie Robinson and Roy Campanella, boxer Joe Louis, composer and bandleader Count Basie, soul singer James Brown, jazz vocalist Ella Fitzgerald, and actress Lena Horne. In fact, Basie and Horne purchased their homes in 1946, when the courts still upheld racial covenants. In 1947, while upholding racial restrictions due to legal precedents, the State Supreme Court acknowledged the district was already home to forty-eight Black families. In 1948, the U.S. Supreme Court decision in *Shelley v. Kraemer* ruled that such restrictive covenants violated equal protection under the Fourteenth Amendment. This favorable decision allowed more African Americans to move legally into the district.

Addisleigh Park remained affluent and predominantly Black through into the late 1970s but gradually lost its elite luster. The

neighborhood did not suffer the violence and blight of some communities, but residents became concerned about crime, abandonment, and deterioration nearby. Local churches and neighborhood watches strived to maintain the quality of life. The Addisleigh Park Civic Organization felt growing pressure to rezone the district. A former association president, Greg Mays, recalled that under Mayor Bloomberg the city urged the district to intensify its residential land-use by demolishing single-family homes and building multi-family dwellings. The community organization vehemently opposed this measure. During an interview, Mays reflected on the city's proposal to rezone the district for higher densities: 'We were like, 'Why in the world would you suggest that?' He added, 'In particular when the city was exploding and so much about southeast Queens, where single-family homes were going down and four-family homes going up in their place, was really destroying neighborhoods'.⁶¹

Given such pressures, the Civic Organization organized: instead of permitting higher densities, the organization advocated a

⁶¹ Rene Cheatham Hill, Greg Mays, and Olney Ryland, *Saving preservation stories: Diversity and the outer boroughs: the reminiscences of Rene Cheatham Hill, Greg Mays, and Olney Marie Ryland*, interview by L. Strong, 16 September 2017, NYPAP, p. 40.

⁶⁰ LPC, 'Addisleigh Park Historic District', pp. 4, 25.

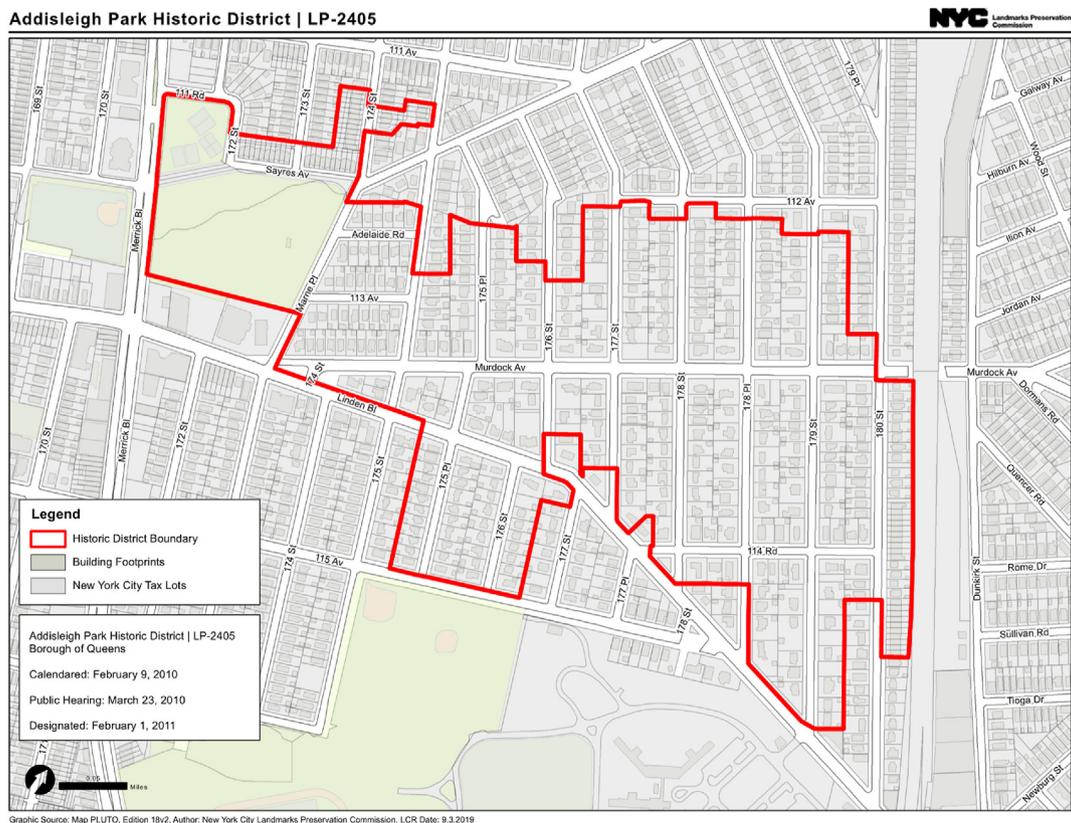


Fig. 6. Map of the Addisleigh Park Historic District, designated in 2011. (Source: Landmark Preservation Commission).

defensive rezoning that would not allow multi-family buildings. Collaborating with the Historic District Council (HDC), local residents documented local architectural and social history, aided by grants from the New York Preservation League, the State Council on the Arts, and the National Trust for Historic Preservation. With the support of such groups, Addisleigh Park applied for designation as a historic district. Addisleigh Park’s designation showed how historic districting could be used defensively to prevent redevelopment. In effect, preservationist discourse advocated neighborhood stabilization to maintain property values, while celebrating the history of housing desegregation. The LPC designation report illustrates an even parity of the architectural and cultural histories: while the affluent district ‘remains a distinctive enclave with a remarkable sense of place due to its period revival style houses’, the history also ‘illuminates African Americans’ struggle for and achievement of the basic civil right of homeownership’.⁶²

In a similar vein, the Cambria Heights-222nd and Cambria Heights-227th Historic Districts in Queens, designated in 2022, tell a more recent story of ethnic flux. Once virtually all white, the area became predominantly Black during the 1960s. Despite initial resistance by white property owners, middle-class African American and Afro-Caribbean families settled in the whimsical Storybook-style rowhouses. Still, the designation reports note change with continuity, as the districts still ‘evoke the early days of Cambria Heights’ development, when residents flocked to the area with their automobiles to inhabit a new suburban landscape promising a fairytale life during the Great Depression’.⁶³

Affirmative designation: Central Harlem Historic District, 2018

While Harlem’s early historic districts boasted of their *fin-de-siècle* townhouses, their designation reports mentioned only in passing the social histories and race relations. Only the two most recent of Harlem’s seven historic districts (including extensions) have explicitly highlighted Black civil rights and cultural achievements, besides architectural history, as rationales for designation. The first Harlem district to do so was the Central Harlem Historic District, designated in 2018 (Fig. 7). The LPC report went to 263 pages, including an explanatory narrative, essays on both architectural and cultural history, color photos, and an inventory of the protected buildings. In addition, an engaging online story map elaborates on these themes with colorful graphics and detailed historical materials. The designation report noted, ‘This highly intact historic district illustrates not only the architectural development of Harlem, but the rich social, cultural, and political life of Harlem’s African American population in the 20th century’.⁶⁴

Developed as a residential neighborhood during the 1880s, Central Harlem features rowhouses built with red-brick and brownstone façades. Comprised of 164 properties, the historic district includes 115 neo-Grec structures, seventeen Queen Annes, nineteen Renaissance Revivals, and two Romanesque Revivals. The initial residents were affluent New Yorkers of English, Irish, and German origins. Compared to the city’s elite neighborhoods, however, homeowners in Central Harlem commonly subdivided their buildings into multi-family apartments and even took boarders to supplement their incomes. In the early twentieth century, this district shifted to predominantly African American residents,

⁶² LPC, ‘Addisleigh Park Historic District’, p. 5.

⁶³ LPC, ‘Cambria Heights — 222nd Street Historic District, Designation Report’, LP-2655, 28 June 2022, p. 9; and ‘Cambria Heights — 227th Street Historic District, Designation Report’, LP-2656, 28 June 2022, p. 9.

⁶⁴ LPC, ‘Central Harlem, Designation Report’, LP-2607, 29 May 2018, p. 4.

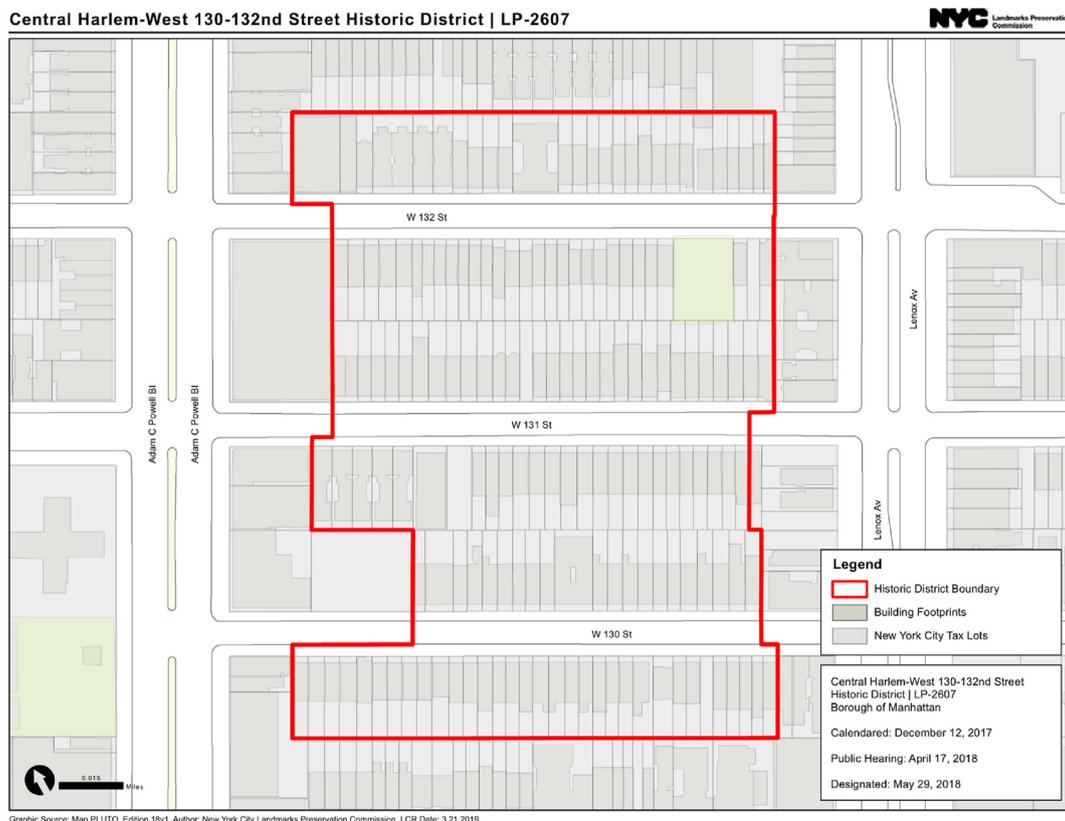


Fig. 7. Central Harlem — West 130–132 Street Historic District, designated in 2018. (Source: Landmark Preservation Commission).

despite vocal opposition by white property owners. Central Harlem went from about ten percent Black in 1910 to seventy percent in 1930.⁶⁵

A decisive turning point came in 1904–1905 when a housing boom again went bust. Philip A. Payton, an enterprising Black realtor, persuaded property owners to rent their vacant apartments to African Americans. Payton's Afro-American Realty Company encouraged the Black movement uptown from the downtown districts of San Juan Hill and the Tenderloin. Central Harlem became predominantly Black by the 1920s. Despite white 'protective associations' resistance, Payton promised landlords top rents and efficient management of Black tenants. Payton initially intended to end housing discrimination, but he soon realized racial segregation was profitable. Given the demand for housing, this business model allowed Peyton (and his white backers) to charge African Americans higher rents.⁶⁶ This system opened more of Harlem to Black residents while encouraging racial segregation of buildings, then whole blocks and neighborhoods. Kevin McGruder has pointed to Payton's business as an example of racial capitalism, as the realtor profited from African Americans with limited capital and relatively few housing options.⁶⁷

The Harlem Renaissance of the 1920s made the district a symbol of Black success, prosperity, and refinement. Central Harlem's rich cultural history includes diverse music, dance, theater, visual arts, and religions. Scott Joplin composed 'Maple Leaf Rag', his most

famous ragtime song. Bandleader James Reese Europe served as a lieutenant while leading the Harlem Hell Fighters military band during World War I. In 1921, James Hubert 'Eubie' Blake collaborated on the first all-Black musical on Broadway, 'Shuffle Along'. During Prohibition (1920–1933), basements served as nightclubs, restaurants, and speakeasies.⁶⁸ 'A nightclub map of Harlem', produced in 1932, noted that 'there are clubs opening and closing at all times — too many to put them all on the map' (Fig. 8).⁶⁹

Long called the 'Lafayette Theater neighborhood', Central Harlem got this nickname from the 1500-seat theater on 132nd Street, which opened in 1912 and became an early theater to desegregate racially. Famous for Black productions, the Lafayette Players presented such Broadway hits as 'Madame X' and 'Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde', which attracted white downtown theatergoers. Duke Ellington, who made his New York debut in 1923, gained his reputation as a jazz pianist and band leader while performing at the Lafayette and the Cotton Club. Despite the Depression, the Works Progress Administration's 'Negro Theater Project' (1933–1939) employed Black performers. The most famous WPA production was 'Voodoo Macbeth', set in the Caribbean. But with World War II, Harlem's live entertainment waned. The Williams Christian Methodist Episcopal Church bought the Lafayette Theater in 1951, then removed the marquee in 1990, much to the dismay of preservationists.⁷⁰ Given worsening finances, the church sold the property to be redeveloped as an eight-story apartment house in 2013. Michael

⁶⁵ LPC, 'Central Harlem', pp. 9–16.

⁶⁶ Kevin McGruder, *Philip Payton: The Father of Black Harlem* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2021), pp. 168–72.

⁶⁷ K. McGruder, *Race and Real Estate: Conflict and Cooperation in Harlem, 1890–1920* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2015).

⁶⁸ LPC, Central Harlem, 2018.

⁶⁹ E.S. Campbell, 'A Historical Night-Club Map of Harlem' (Dell Publishing Company, 1932), Creative Commons and Library of Congress, Washington D.C.

⁷⁰ Christopher Gray, 'Harlem's Lafayette Theater; Jackhammering the Past', *New York Times*, 11 November 1990.

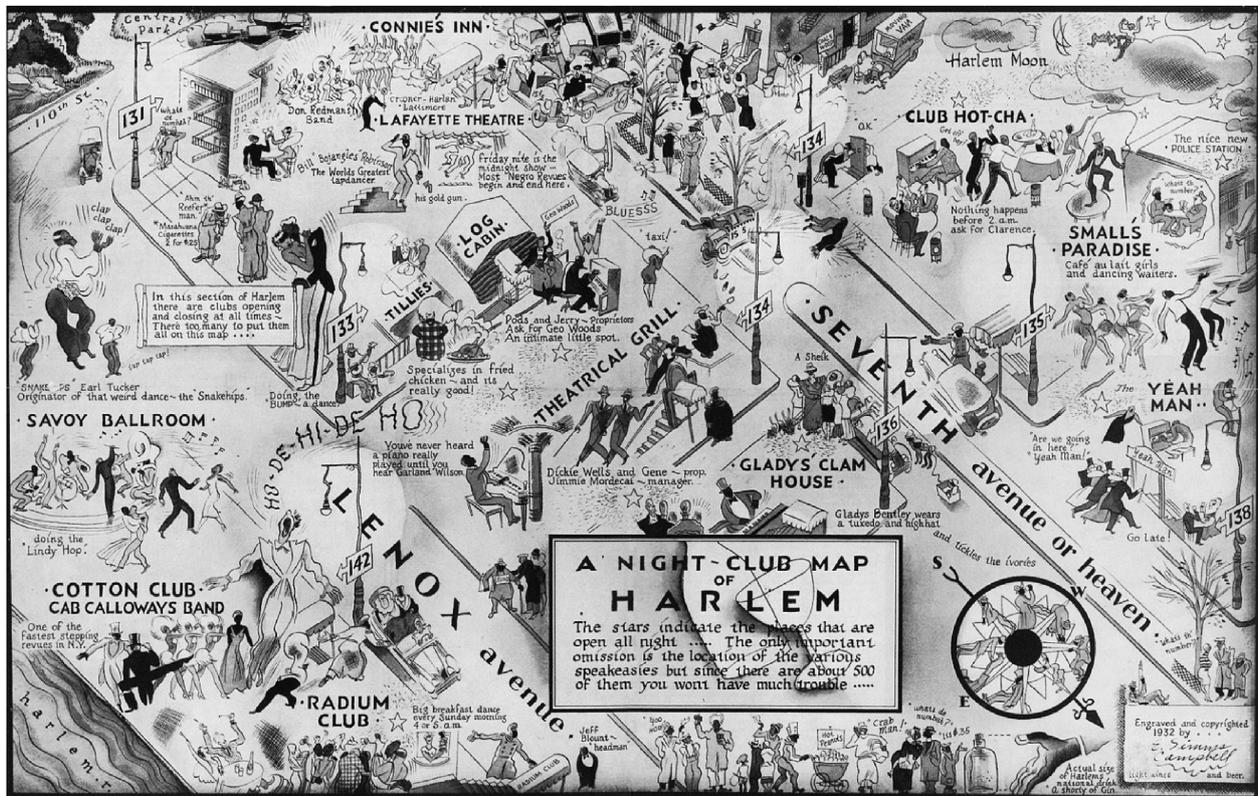


Fig. 8. E. Simms Campbell, 'A historical night-club map of Harlem', Dell Publishing Company, 1932. (Source: Library of Congress Geography and Map Division, Washington D.C.)

Henry Adams, a Harlem preservationist and author, blamed the LPC for not landmarking the theater. However, the agency countered that it never received a formal request for designation.⁷¹

Since African Americans still did not enjoy full access to the city, Black organizations arose in Central Harlem. The New Amsterdam Musical Association, Alpha Physical Culture Club, Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters, Clubman's Beneficial League, and the Progressive Commercial Association were among them. Black churches were also vital community institutions. West 131st Street was 'Pastors' Row' with the Union Methodist Episcopalians, Union Baptists, Seventh Day Adventists, Metropolitan Baptists, and Friendship Baptists. With such diverse institutions, Central Harlem represented artistic, religious, and cultural innovation. W.E.B. Du Bois argued that the 'color line' segregated institutions, such as those in Harlem, forcing African Americans to juggle a double consciousness behind the 'veil' of racial segregation with their dual roles as both Black and American.⁷²

After the end of Prohibition in 1933, the glamor of Harlem's nightlife faded with the demise of most clubs and the loss of jobs for residents. As African Americans suffered higher unemployment rates than whites, unemployment, poverty, and housing deterioration rose. Harlem's public health situation was considered the city's worst by the mid-1930s. Building maintenance declined. The Manhattan map of the federal Home Owner's Corporation redlined Harlem with a 'hazardous' rating, which advised banks not to invest there.⁷³ What had once been an affluent

district became, by the 1930s, an impoverished Black ghetto where it was difficult, if not impossible, to get a mortgage. Thus, as Richard Rothstein suggests, racial segregation resulted from governmental action and private choices.⁷⁴ Many African Americans subdivided their apartments during the Depression, but paradoxically the increased crowding created a 'slum boom' for property owners. Although World War II increased employment opportunities, Harlem's overcrowding and physical deterioration intensified. After the war, housing disinvestment and abandonment worsened as urban renewal programs displaced residents to build new traffic arterials, public housing projects, and government office buildings in Harlem. Even formerly well-to-do blocks, such as Striver's Row, suffered deterioration. By the 1950s, Black Harlem became what historian Gilbert Osofsky famously called 'the enduring ghetto'.⁷⁵

Central Harlem served as a vibrant center in the 1960s civil rights movement. Along with other civic institutions, Black churches supported this activism. After Martin Luther King Jr. spoke to Friendship Baptist Church in 1955, the members organized food and supplies for the March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom in 1963. The National Headquarters, organized by Bayard Rustin, operated at 170 West 130th Street. Like the Reverend King, Rustin promoted nonviolent resistance, economic opportunity, and civil rights legislation. As such, the tone of the district's designation is explicitly antiracist. The report presents Central Harlem as 'a remarkable reminder of the substantial role that the African

⁷¹ David Dunlap, 'Icon of Harlem's Gay Night Life Gives Way to Wreckers', *New York Times*, 10 March 2013.

⁷² W.E.B. Du Bois, *The Souls of Black Folk* (Oxford University Press, 2007; first published 1903).

⁷³ Home Owner's Loan Corporation, *Mapping Inequality: Redlining in the New Deal*, Manhattan, NY, 1938.

⁷⁴ Richard Rothstein, *The Color of Law: A Forgotten History of How our Government Segregated America* (New York: W.W. Norton, 2017).

⁷⁵ Gilbert Osofsky, *Harlem: The Making of a Ghetto, 1890–1930* (New York: Harper, 1966).

American community of Harlem played in creating political and social change in New York City and the nation'.⁷⁶

Nearby Dorrance Brooks Square's Black history also shapes the district's sense of place. Dedicated in 1925, the square honored Dorrance Brooks, a Black serviceman killed while serving in a segregated unit during World War I. By the 1920s, the area was home to middle-class African Americans, including W.E.B. DuBois and other figures in politics, the arts, and education during the Harlem Renaissance. The 'Harlem West Side Literary Salon'— known simply as '580' to attendees — met at 580 St. Nicholas Avenue with Countee Cullen, Langston Hughes, and others. The district served civil rights organizations such as the National Urban League, founded in 1910, and the Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters, the first Black trade union, in 1927. Walter F. White, longtime president of the National Association of Colored People (NAACP), lived here. Founded in 1909, the NAACP organized a 'Silent March' on Fifth Avenue in 1917 — the country's first massive protest against racism and related violence. Dorrance Brooks Square became a common site for political demonstrations in the 1920s. President Truman visited in 1948 and 1952 to receive awards for desegregating the armed forces.⁷⁷

The designation report of 2021 extends to 410 pages, including a historical narrative, color photographs, references, and inventory of the 325 protected buildings of Renaissance Revival, Queen Anne, and Romanesque Revival styles. Divided into two sections on either side of Frederick Douglas Boulevard (Fig. 2), the Dorrance Brooks Square features rowhouses, churches, and apartment buildings designed by prominent architects to form consistent streetscapes. The LPC commended the 'highly intact streetscapes of late-19th century and early 20th-century architecture and rich associations with the Harlem Renaissance and Civil Rights movements'.⁷⁸

Landmark preservation and gentrification in Harlem

During the 1980s, Harlem real estate began to experience an upswing as affordable housing grew scarce in Manhattan. Increasing rehabilitation of historic buildings enhanced the district's status. When Richard Schaffer and Neil Smith published 'The Gentrification of Harlem?' in 1985, the notion seemed far-fetched to many observers.⁷⁹ But the argument proved prophetic. Despite a downturn during the stock market decline of the late 1980s, the real estate market heated up again in the 1990s. Since then, rents and real-estate prices have steadily spiraled upward. With an extensive stock of historic rowhouses, a famous cultural history, and transit connections in an expensive city, the district became what Michael Adams has called 'a burgeoning neo-Harlem Renaissance'.⁸⁰

Andrew Hurley has argued that public engagement with local history and diverse historic districts could revitalize struggling urban communities.⁸¹ The point is a good one, following movements toward inclusive social history, vernacular landscapes, and community engagement discussed earlier. Yet, much of Harlem has now escalated beyond revitalization to gentrification. The waves of

physical renovation, affluent in-movers, and upscale commerce in long-deteriorating cities have become national, even global phenomena. Like other historically Black, Latinx, and Asian-American districts in U.S. cities, Harlem's fame has attracted new residents and visitors, while threatening many long-time residents with displacement.⁸² As a result, historic placemaking can celebrate racial diversity in local landmarks and districts while reducing the actual Black presence through commodification and policing. As Brandi Summers suggests for contemporary H Street in Northeast Washington, D.C., 'Gentrification promotes freedom of movement (for white residents and tourists) while at the same time it establishes control and surveillance (of Black bodies) on the street'.⁸³ Harlem shares this contradictory racialization in which Blackness is aestheticized while Black people may have their movement restricted.

In New York City, a comprehensive study found significant increases in property values and socioeconomic status in historic districts but 'no evidence of a change in the share of residents who are Black following designation'.⁸⁴ Over the last three decades, however, racial instability beset Harlem. With soaring rents and property values, Harlem's Black population fell from 88% in 1990 to 58% in 2020 — a drop of 30%.⁸⁵ Meanwhile, a Striver's Row townhouse sold for an unprecedented \$1.7 million in 2003. By 2023, two decades later, the district had twenty-one townhouses and apartments for sale with a median listing price of \$1.65 million and a top price of \$3.95 million.⁸⁶ The linkages between historic preservation and gentrification have long been subject to debate: does architectural rehabilitation provide more local benefits or, on balance, does it ultimately promote housing speculation?⁸⁷ Surely housing policy matters, given the variety of local conditions. A report from Philadelphia rightfully argues for the need to 'disentangle preservation and displacement if the social and political will exists to do so'.⁸⁸

The affordable housing provided by Harlem's non-profit organizations hinders racial turnover to some degree. Since 1989 the Abyssinian Development Corporation (ADC) — a non-profit arm of the famous Black church — has become a large property owner and provider of renovated housing. ADC's 'Displacement Prevention Strategy' has renovated hundreds of apartment units for the local community. Of course, local changes are not only about race, but also involve class in complex ways. Harlem has become a place of resettlement for affluent, professional African Americans, often not originally from the neighborhood or even New York City, who may

⁷⁶ LPC, 'Central Harlem', p. 2.

⁷⁷ LPC, 'Dorrance Brooks Square Historic District', 2021, LP-2651, 15 June 2021.

⁷⁸ LPC, 'Dorrance Brooks Square Historic District', p. 11.

⁷⁹ Richard Schaffer and Neil Smith, 'The Gentrification Of Harlem?', *Annals of the Association of American Geographers* 76 (1985) 347–65.

⁸⁰ Michael Adams, *Harlem Lost And Found: An Architectural and Social History, 1765–1915* (New York: Monacelli, 2002), p. 15.

⁸¹ Andrew Hurley, *Beyond Preservation: Using History to Revitalize Inner Cities* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2010), p. 201.

⁸² Brian J. Godfrey, 'New Ethnic Landscapes: Place Making in Urban America', *Contemporary Ethnic Geographies in America*, ed. Christopher Airriess (Landham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield, 2016), pp. 59–89.

⁸³ Brandi Summers, *Black in Place: The Spatial Aesthetics of Race in a Post-Chocolate City* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2019), p. 154.

⁸⁴ Brian McCage and Ingrid Ellen, 'Does Preservation Accelerate Neighborhood Change? Examining the Impact of Historic Preservation in New York City', *Journal of the American Planning Association* 82 (2016) 124–46 (p. 141).

⁸⁵ U.S. Census, including census tracts 186, 190, 200, 208, 212, 214, 216, 218, 220, 222, 224, 226, 228, 230, 232, 234, 236, 1990 and 2020, New York, NY.

⁸⁶ Zillow Real Estate, 'Striver's Row — Harlem New York Real Estate', https://www.zillow.com/harlem-manchattan-new-york-ny/strivers-row_att/ last accessed 10 June 2023.

⁸⁷ David Listokin, Barbara Listokin, and Michael Lahr, 'The Contributions of Historic Preservation to Housing and Economic Development', *Housing Policy and Debate* 9 (1998) 431–78; and Neil Smith, 'Comments on Listokin, Listokin, and Lahr', *Housing Policy Debate* 9 (1998) 479–85.

⁸⁸ Francesca Ammon, 'Resisting Gentrification Amid Historic Preservation: Society Hill, Philadelphia, and the Fight for Low-Income Housing', *Change Over Time* 8 (2018) 8–31 (p. 9).

encounter local differences of class. Monique Taylor attributes this phenomenon to a narrative of ‘racial return and revival’.⁸⁹

Local Black preservationists have complained that the Landmarks Commission has been slow to protect the district from redevelopment. As preservation gained momentum downtown, historic Harlem’s buildings deteriorated through the 1970s; as the district subsequently gained popularity, revitalization often conflicted with conservation. Michael Adams, a vocal critic, has argued that recent historic district designations came too late: ‘Our Harlem is being remade, upgraded and transformed, just for them, for wealthier white people’.⁹⁰ But other Black preservationists have different views. According to Tom Bess, an advocate for the Bronx and Harlem, ‘See what’s happening in Harlem right now? I think it’s wonderful. There are services now—you can pay for your groceries by check in stores and they deliver, and I think it’s a wonderful balance’.⁹¹ Similarly, Keith Taylor, former chair of the landmarks committee for Community Board 10, stressed the benefits of the LPC designations in Harlem: ‘So the area offers a lot, in both the architectural beauty as well as the cultural and historical significance for the city and the nation’. He added that with the addition of Dorrance Brooks Square Historic District, ‘we’re all one big happy family with Striver’s Row Historic District ... So now this area around Alexander Hamilton’s House, a federal park in St. Nicholas, is all preserved for future generations’.⁹²

As a result, paradoxes now abound. On the one hand, the Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture has become world-famous. Harlem Hospital has unveiled a pavilion of renovated Works Project Administration (WPA) murals of African American life during the 1930s. Still, long-time businesses find themselves hard-pressed by higher rents. The venerable Lenox Lounge, which opened in 1939 as a speakeasy and hosted such legends as Billie Holliday, Miles Davis, and John Coltrane, closed in 2012 when a new lease doubled the monthly rent to \$20,000; after the old building’s demolition in May of 2017, a new four-story structure features a storefront bank and upstairs a mental health clinic. Michael Adams lamented, ‘Just a short while ago the Lenox Lounge was included in Community Board Ten’s ‘Comprehensive Preservation Plan’, prioritizing an array of new historic districts and individual landmarks. Apparently, this plea was not persuasive’.⁹³ Harlem has been changing, raising hopes and fears among residents.

Reading historic designation reports

Critical reading of designation reports provides insight into the prevailing conceptions of historic preservation, whether UNESCO World Heritage sites or historic districts in New York. Although official LPC criteria have not changed, evidence suggests that policy and practice have evolved consistently. Four designations of notable historic districts and their related comparisons between 1967 and 2022 indicate shifting explanations for districts with significant Black histories. Besides becoming longer, more detailed, and better illustrated, the reports document changes in designation rationales. From an early emphasis on architectural histories and

aesthetics, Black activists have driven the LPC to recognize cultural achievements and struggles for civil rights. Since rediscovering and memorializing the African Burial Ground and Commons during the early 1990s, the commission began encouraging more racially inclusive heritage sites. As the agency responsible for approving and preserving landmarks, the commission is the city’s preeminent memory broker. As a result, LPC-curated placemaking has significantly influenced the diverse district identities of New York City.

Surprisingly, little overt opposition has arisen to new designations. While the commission has worked with a wide variety of stakeholders — including mayors, city agencies, property owners and developers, and local community associations — few opponents have made a case in public hearings. Although mayors have been cautious due to their need for electoral support from developers and real estate interests, the public appeal of historic preservation has tended to prevail. As a result, the LPC’s evolving discourse has accompanied broad trends in historic preservation. In addition, opposition has often been informally resolved early in the designation process, avoiding the harsh glare of publicity in public hearings. As Anthony Tung has suggested, the LPC has ‘screened potential designations for clearance, commonly doing so in private rather than having a landmark officially rejected in the public record’.⁹⁴

Still, the passionate debates over the African Burial Ground resonated worldwide. The memorialization of the reinterred burial site in 1993, despite initial opposition from developers and their political allies, served as a turning point for public opinion. Similarly, two decades later, the rediscovery in 2011 of the buried Valongo Wharf in Rio de Janeiro, the world’s most active slave port in the early nineteenth century, now a World Heritage site, created a similarly dramatic cause for human rights activists in Brazil.⁹⁵ Such preservationist victories have broadened the identity of heritage sites to include social diversity, racial equity, and cultural history. We should not underestimate the local and international impacts of heritage sites. Continuing community support for the designation of Black-identified districts reflects the broadening of rationales for historic preservation.

In Addisleigh Park, the 2011 report featured the role of Black elites in challenging restrictive covenants in housing, while protecting single-family houses against threats to rezone the district for higher densities. In 2022, the designation of Cambria Heights-222nd and Cambria Heights-227th Historic Districts tells a similar story. The two recent historic districts in Harlem — Central Harlem in 2018 and Dorrance Brooks in 2021 — reveal a heightened awareness of past struggles and cultural achievements. Besides the explicit antiracist tone, the Central Harlem report and story map effectively juxtaposed the built heritage of late nineteenth-century rowhouses with histories of the Harlem Renaissance and the Civil Rights movements. For these reasons, the designation of Central Harlem began another change in LPC narratives of race and place, culminating in the LPC ‘equity framework’ of 2021.

Landmark designations over the last six decades reflect changing urban politics. Most of the antiracist activists mentioned earlier were African American, including both the politically moderate and the more radical, while non-Black supporters often helped the cause. Despite concerns about gentrification, Black community groups like Save Harlem Now! and the Mount Morris Park Association regard their historic districts with pride.⁹⁶ Still, landmarks

⁸⁹ Monique Taylor, *Harlem: Between Heaven and Hell* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2002).

⁹⁰ Michael Adams, ‘The End of Black Harlem: Gentrification Is Destroying The Capital of African American Culture’, *New York Times*, 29 May 2016.

⁹¹ Thom Bess, ‘The Reminiscences of Thom Bess’, Interview by I. Guzenfeld, NYPAP, 28 October 2008, p. 22.

⁹² Keith Taylor, ‘Inspired by Grassroots Stories: Community Architectural Advocacy’ — Dorrance Brooks Property Owners & Residents Association, Interview by Kelly Carroll, NYPAP, 27 August 2021, p. 6.

⁹³ Michael Adams, ‘Last Call: Who’s to Blame for Destruction of the Lenox Lounge?’ *Medium*, 2 May 2017.

⁹⁴ Tung, *Preserving The World’s Great Cities*, p. 349.

⁹⁵ UNESCO, *Valongo Wharf Archaeological Site*, World Heritage Center, 2017, <https://whc.unesco.org/en/list/1548> last accessed 24 December 2023.

⁹⁶ Tolbert and Berman, ‘Elected Officials, Preservationists, And Community Leaders From Across the City Condemn The Rash Of Demolitions of Landmarked Buildings’, 14 December 2022.

of Chinese American, Hispanic, and Native American sites remain relative rarities. As such underrepresented groups gain political clout, they may receive more recognition in landmark designations. In fact, preservationists recently identified more than eighty sites in the Bronx for consideration.⁹⁷ In December of 2023, the LPC reaffirmed and broadened the LPC 'equity framework', announcing four new individual landmarks in the Bronx, including an 'Enslaved People's Burial Ground' in Hunts Point.⁹⁸ Thus, the color of preservation has broadened considerably since 1965. Antiracist activism has repeatedly driven policy changes to commemorate past and present Black lives, leading toward greater social diversity among the historic places of New York City.

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⁹⁷ Historic District Council, 'Preserving Bronx Sites', <https://hdc.org/preserving-bronx-sites/> last accessed 10 June 2023.

⁹⁸ LPC, 'Press Release: LPC Advances Equity and Climate Resiliency Goals, Strengthens Protections for Vulnerable Buildings, and Promotes City's Economic Growth in 2023', 21 December 2023, <https://www.nyc.gov/site/lpc/about/pr2023/lpc-advances-equity-and-climate-resiliency-goals-20231221.page> last accessed 24 December 2023.