



April 20, 2010

STATEMENT OF THE NEW YORK LANDMARKS CONSERVANCY BEFORE THE N.Y.C. CITY COUNCIL LANDMARKS SUBCOMMITTEE REGARDING THE PROPOSED DESIGNATION OF WEST PARK PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH AT 165 WEST 86TH STREET IN MANHATTAN AS A LANDMARK

Good morning, Chair Lander and Members of the City Council. I am Ann Friedman, director of the Conservancy's Sacred Sites program.

The Conservancy strongly supports the designation of West-Park Presbyterian Church as a New York City landmark. In his book *From Abyssinian to Zion*, David Dunlap calls West-Park Presbyterian "one of the finest Romanesque sanctuaries in Manhattan," and "a landmark in every sense but the official one." The Conservancy believes the time has come for the Commission to make this landmark status official.

You will probably hear more about the architectural merit of this building, so I will refer you to the written copy of this testimony for more information on the architecture – if you have visited the site, you have seen that it speaks for itself.

[This handsome Romanesque Revival church, anchoring its prominent corner at West 86th and Amsterdam, was designed by Henry Franklin Kilburn in 1890, expanding an 1886 chapel designed by Leopold Eidlitz at the east end of the site. Kilburn was recognized by his contemporaries especially for his church designs, including other Romanesque Revival churches of the same period. Among these are several mid-block Baptist churches with simple gabled facades: the 1887 Mount Moriah Baptist Church [slated for redevelopment in 2006], the 1888 former First German Baptist Church [altered], and the 1890 Chambers Memorial Baptist, all in Harlem; as well as the 1889 former Second German Baptist Church on West 43rd Street, now the Westside Theater. Nineteen blocks north of West Park at 105th and Amsterdam is the handsome 1891 West End Presbyterian church, which also features a tall Romanesque corner tower. Among these surviving Manhattan churches, West Park Presbyterian is the most grand in scale, design, and materials.]

West Park Presbyterian Church is not only architecturally distinguished but much loved by its community for the religious, cultural, recreational and educational services provided for over a century, and particularly in the last 30 years. It is also clear that the congregation faces many challenges, including the financial burdens caused by years of deferred maintenance. Designation will be a first step, but not a solution to the problems facing this building.

As the building continues to deteriorate and is now for sale, significant outside funding and neighborhood support will be necessary for its preservation. Since 2001, the Conservancy has worked with the congregation, the Presbytery, the church's neighbors, elected officials, affordable housing advocates, and a series of consulting architects and developers, to generate a solution which would meet the financial needs of the congregation, and preserve this important structure. We will continue to work with these constituents and



any new owner to develop solutions for West Park now that this important step is being taken.

Landmarking need not freeze this building in time. There are many examples of landmark religious properties that have been adapted for use by different congregations or even different uses after designation. Throughout our years of involvement with West Park, we have been open to redevelopment plans, air rights sales, or the sale of the building to a new congregation. In working with hundreds of landmarked religious properties across the City, we have seen these approaches work. We have also provided direct assistance: Our Sacred Sites Program has granted total over \$2.6 million to nearly 200 New York City landmark religious properties, and our Historic Properties Fund has made over \$5.1 million in low-interest loans for restoration work on these buildings.

The New York City Landmarks Law applies to religious properties as well as secular properties. This was upheld in the pivotal case of *St. Bartholomew's Church vs. City of New York*, where the US Court of Appeals ruled that landmark regulation of historic religious properties per se does not unconstitutionally burden the free exercise of religion.

We look forward to having West Park Presbyterian join the impressive group of religious properties that receive the protection of the Landmarks Law. I thank you for the opportunity to present The New York Landmarks Conservancy's views.