



**TESTIMONY BEFORE THE NEW YORK CITY COUNCIL  
SUBCOMMITTEE ON LANDMARKS, PUBLIC SITING AND MARITIME USES  
REGARDING DESIGNATION of the JACKIE ROBINSON YMCA YOUTH CENTER  
March 9, 2017**

Good morning Chairs Koo, Greenfield and Committee Members. My name is Kate Lemos McHale, Director of Research at the Landmarks Preservation Commission. I am here today to testify on the Commission's designation of the Jackie Robinson YMCA Youth Center, at 181 West 135th Street, Manhattan, Tax Map Block 1920, Lot 7. It was designed by John Jackson and built in 1918-19. After holding a special Backlog public hearing on November 12, 2015,<sup>1</sup> the Landmarks Preservation Commission voted unanimously to designate the YMCA on December 13, 2016.

Built in 1918-19, the 135th Street Young Men's Christian Association (YMCA) building was one of the first African-American YMCA buildings constructed in New York City and became the center of intellectual and social life for African Americans in the first half of the 20th century. Designed by John Jackson, a specialist in YMCA buildings, the building followed design guidelines that were developed and used to give branches across the United States a uniform look. This branch is typical of branches built at that time. It is designed in the Italian-Renaissance Revival style, and has a high base with alternating arched and rectangular openings, surmounted by a cornice bearing the inscription "Young Men's Christian Association." It has arched windows at the second story and the expression of an arcade at the sixth story.

African-American YMCAs were the direct result of the national organization's policy of racial segregation from its beginnings in the United States in 1851 until 1946. Though excluded from white YMCAs, African Americans were encouraged to form separate branches, which became autonomous community centers. The Great Migration and World War I fueled the need for the YMCAs in New York and in other cities across the nation. In 1910, Julius Rosenwald, president of Sears & Roebuck, pledged \$25,000 to any city that raised \$75,000 for a new YMCA building with high quality amenities for African-American men. Thousands of African-American citizens in New York City and across the country

Meenakshi Srinivasan, Chair

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**Landmarks Preservation  
Commission**

rose to the challenge and supported the YMCA's building fund drives with contributions from 25¢ to \$1,500. With the success of a local fundraising campaign, and donations from both the public and private sectors, this branch opened in November 1919.

By the mid-1920s, the 135th Street YMCA became a center of the Harlem Renaissance, where the African American literati met to exchange ideas, give lectures, and perform plays and music. Among the noteworthy individuals associated with the 135th Street YMCA were James Weldon Johnson, Alain Locke, Paul Robeson, John Henrik Clarke, Claude McKay, Langston Hughes, Richard Wright, and Ralph Ellison. In 1938, this building became the home of the Boys Department of the Harlem YMCA. In 1947, it was here that Jackie Robinson and his teammate Roy Campanella began coaching and mentoring the children of the 135th Street YMCA, an association that would last the rest of Robinson's life. The building was dedicated to him and renamed the Jackie Robinson YMCA Youth Center in 1976. The YMCA was noted for its ongoing community services, "Salute to the Stars" fundraisers, its educational counseling, veterans' and job programs, and "Black Achievers in the Industry" awards dinners.

The West 135th Street YMCA/Jackie Robinson Youth Center is notable for the significant role it played in shaping the civic and artistic culture of Harlem. Today, the building still plays a critical role in the important civic hub that is 135th Street between Lenox and 7th Avenue, along with the Harlem YMCA Branch across the street and the Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture (both New York City designated landmarks). Accordingly the Landmarks Preservation Commission urges you to affirm this designation. Thank you.

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<sup>i</sup> On November 12, 2015, the Landmarks Preservation Commission held a special public hearing on the Backlog Initiative Items in the Borough of Manhattan, including the Young Men's Christian Association (YMCA), Building, West 135th Street Branch (Item B-Borough of Manhattan B Group 2). The hearing was duly advertised according to the provisions of law. At that hearing four people testified in favor of the proposed designation of the Young Men's Christian Association (YMCA) Building, West 135th Street Branch, including representatives of the Historic Districts Council, the New York Landmarks Conservancy, The Municipal Art Society of New York, and Explore New York. The Commission also received three letters in favor of designation. The property had previously been heard in 1991.

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# HISTORIC DISTRICTS COUNCIL



THE ADVOCATE FOR NEW YORK CITY'S HISTORIC NEIGHBORHOODS

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maintained for years. There was a palpable pride evoked in being stewards of these historic properties and their importance to not only their owners but their communities was mentioned again and again. These were preservationists – not accidental but intentional ones who understood the inherent value of historic buildings. But none of them wanted their buildings to be landmarked.

There was concern about added costs to maintenance, but the real stumbling block seemed to be ideological. All three property owners felt that they were doing the right thing by their buildings and should be allowed to keep doing what they're doing the way they've been doing it. The owner of the Loew's even offered to craft a contract with the City promising to treat the property like a landmark as long as LPC stayed out of the picture (which is a generous but essentially meaningless offer which would need to be enforced by the courts, if at all).

The base issue is that these owners represent that they feel landmark designation is an inherent burden. This is very unfortunate and should be countered, in the long run, with education and incentives. Unfortunately, a City Council hearing is not the proper forum for that kind of conversation. At a Council hearing, the fate of the designation rests in the hands of the Council, whose members - by tradition - vote with the local representative. Council members tend to pay heed to local constituents, which is to be encouraged. However, it is the responsibility of every elected official to understand the purpose and meaning of adopted law.

New York City has a landmarks law which was adopted over 50 years ago by the City Council and has served our city well. It is not perfect, it is an added level of oversight, but it has demonstrably accomplished and continues to achieve its stated goals of strengthening economic activity, educating the public and fostering pride in our city. These are general goals which can seem distant from the specifics of an individual building but they are definite guidelines which should inform the Council's decisions.

Especially when faced with the shoulder-shrugging reason of "I don't wanna," our elected officials must weigh the benefits of guaranteed preservation versus possible demolition in a rational and reasoned manner. The ultimate question is: should the existence of these three buildings be preserved in perpetuity? HDC believes they should. We urge the City Council to uphold all these designations.



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Statement of the Historic Districts Council  
New York City council Landmarks Subcommittee  
March 9, 2017

**“It is the sense of the council that the standing of this city as a worldwide tourist center and world capital of business, culture and government cannot be maintained or enhanced by disregarding the historical and architectural heritage of the city and by countenancing the destruction of such cultural assets.”**

- New York City Council, April 6, 1965

As part of the Backlog95 initiative, the Landmarks Preservation Commission (LPC) went through a vigorous examination of all the properties which had been lingering under consideration for designation for longer than 5 years. After an open public hearing process, LPC deliberately went through each property, discussing each individual merit, where it fit in the agency's priorities, and whether the owner and/or the local council member was in favor of the designation. In the vast majority of cases, this last consideration trumped the first two.

To be clear, the LPC considered 95 sites as part of this initiative:

- Five (5) were removed due to lack of merit;
- 60 were removed with no action – for reasons including questions regarding their relative significance, alterations that have reduced sites' historical features, and other regulatory controls that could protect them. . .as well as owner and Council opposition, and;
- 30 were prioritized for designation (27 of which were actually designated).

To put it another way – the LPC only positively acted on approximately 28% of the properties which it had been considering for more than 5 years. It would then stand to reason that landmark designation does not seem to be a status which the LPC bestows haphazardly and consequently, the buildings which the agency actually does designate are eminently worthy of designation.

At a previous subcommittee hearing on Monday, February 27<sup>th</sup>, owners and stakeholders from three designated properties objected to designation:

- Lakeman-Cortelyou Taylor House, c. 1684 - 1714
- The Protestant Reformed Dutch Church of Flushing (Bowne Street Community Church), c.1892
- Loew's 175th Street Theatre (United Palace), c. 1929

These objections were based, essentially, on concerns about government oversight. Owners and tenants of all three properties spoke eloquently and passionately about their love of their old buildings and the pride they took in owning and using them. The Lakeman House and the movie theater had both been lovingly and sensitively restored under the current ownership and all three properties have been very well-

March 9, 2017

**STATEMENT OF THE NEW YORK LANDMARKS CONSERVANCY BEFORE THE NEW YORK CITY COUNCIL SUBCOMMITTEE ON LANDMARKS, PUBLIC SITING AND MARITIME USES REGARDING THE DESIGNATION OF THE YMCA, HARLEM BRANCH AT 181 WEST 135TH STREET AS AN INDIVIDUAL LANDMARK**

Good day Chair Koo and Councilmembers. I am Andrea Goldwyn, speaking for the New York Landmarks Conservancy. The Conservancy is pleased to support designation of the Harlem Branch of the Young Men's Christian Association, now also known as the Jackie Robinson YMCA Youth Center, as an individual landmark.

The Harlem branch of the YMCA at 181 West 135<sup>th</sup> Street was built in 1918 to serve the African American community. The building's architect, John F. Jackson, designed over 70 YMCA projects in the early twentieth century. For this site, he designed a six-story neo-Renaissance palazzo-style building clad in buff brick with austere details and a dramatic bracketed cornice. The neo-Renaissance style features include a tall brick base topped by a wide limestone belt course with the inscribed words "Young Men's Christian Association". Above this belt course rises the piano nobile featuring a row of monumental arched windows. Sub-cornices above the third and fifth stories and a larger, projecting building cornice above the sixth story add further grace notes to the composition. The overall massing and details of the building are well preserved.

By the 1920's Harlem's African American population was growing and so were the neighborhood's cultural and artistic institutions. The YMCA was an early venue for lectures, political meetings, dramatic and musical performances, as well as educational courses. The Y was so popular, especially during the period of the Harlem Renaissance, that a second, larger facility was built directly across the street to provide more space for the various programs. Both buildings were referred to as the "Harlem YMCA". The later building is an individual landmark but the earlier one at 181 West 135<sup>th</sup> Street is where it all began.

In the mid-twenties, the area around West 135th Street and Seventh Avenue had become the hub of African American intellectual and social life in New York City, and the YMCA building became the focal point of political and literary activity. Among the notable individuals associated with Harlem YMCA were writers Claude McKay, John Henrik Clarke, Langston Hughes, and Ralph Ellison. Notable organizations that regularly met in the building included the National Coordinating Committee on Civil Rights, the New York Chapter of the Negro Technical Association, and the Harlem Writers' Workshop.

In 1987 the Abyssinian Development Corporation converted the third through sixth floors into 24 apartments, leaving the lower floors for community uses.

Based on its fine architecture and a cultural history linked to the flourishing of New York's African American social and intellectual community, the Conservancy supports the designation of the original Harlem YMCA Building at 181 West 135<sup>th</sup> Street as an individual landmark.

Thank you for the opportunity to present the Conservancy's views.



**Mount Morris Park Community Improvement Association**  
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City Council  
250 Broadway, 16<sup>th</sup> Fl  
New York, NY

March 9, 2017

Re: YMCA Jackie Robinson Youth Center  
181 West 135<sup>th</sup> St

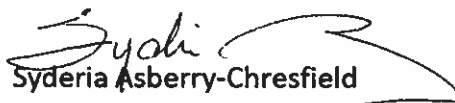
Good afternoon,

The YMCA, located at 181 West 135th Street between Adam Clayton Powell and Malcolm X Boulevards, is important to the cultural history of Harlem. It became a focal point of the neighborhood in the 1920s as Harlem evolved into the center of New York's African-American community seeking new economic and artistic opportunities. This was the beginning of the Harlem Renaissance and musicians, writers and artists converged on Harlem, living and working together, and they developed a thriving artistic scene. People like Paul Robeson, Dr George Washington Carver, Langston Hughes and Claude McKay, just to name a few, strolled the halls of the YMCA and left their mark.

The Harlem YMCA played a critical role during segregation when blacks were barred from other Y.M.C.A.'s and has historically acted as an educational and cultural center where people met to exchange political views of importance over the years.

Even now, the Jackie Robinson Youth Center is churning out the new leaders of today with their Black Achievers' in Industry Award Corporate Scholarship Program to supplement the education of our future leaders. My daughter, who attended several summer programs at the Center, was a recipient of the scholarship for her four years at Vanderbilt University and she is currently working for Deloitte as a Consultant in Virginia.

So, looking back and moving forward, I see the preservation of the YMCA as an integral part of history that has been and will continue to be, shared throughout the years.

  
Syderia Asberry-Chresfield

President, Mount Morris Park Community Improvement Association

**Young Men's Christian Association (YMCA) Building, Harlem Branch**

Block: 1920 Lot: 7

Address: 181 West 135th Street

Constructed: 1918

181 West 135th Street is now part of the Harlem YMCA complex and was first built for African-American New Yorkers who moved to the Harlem area in the early 20th century. The branch was a focus of Harlem social and intellectual life, housing theatrical events, lectures, and classes. The writers Claude McKay, Langston Hughes, John Henrik Clarke, and Ralph Ellison were all associated with the branch. The National Coordinating Committee on Civil Rights, Harlem Writers' Workshop, and the New York Chapter of the Negro Technical Association all had their headquarters here. The YMCA was partially funded by Julius Rosenwald and is one of the group of YMCA's and rural schools for African Americans funded by the philanthropist.

135th Street was the focus of the Harlem Renaissance. The YMCA, along with the 135th Street branch of the New York Public Library across the street (now the Schomburg, a designated New York City landmark), drew people to the block and provided space for meetings and discussions. The branch became so popular that the YMCA built a new branch across the street at 180 West 135th Street. Designed by James C. Mackenzie and built in 1931-32, this is also a designated individual landmark.

The building is a 6-story buff-brick neo-Renaissance style palazzo with limestone trim. The largely intact façade is broken up by a dentillated ground floor cornice and a molded limestone cornice at the 5th story and is topped by a modillioned cornice. The alternating arched and rectangular windows are characteristic of the style, as is the austerity of ornament.

The architect John F. Jackson (1867-1948) was a noted YMCA architect and designed more than 70 of the buildings in the northeast US and Canada. Trained in Buffalo, he moved to New York City in 1901 and practiced for 40 years as John F Jackson Architect and with Jackson & Rosencrans and others. Jackson's other New York City YMCA buildings include the Bedford, Prospect Park, Highland Park, and Seamen's Branch buildings in Brooklyn. He designed the Central Branch in Rochester, NY (1919), the Bergen Avenue branch in Jersey City (1924), and branches in Watertown, NY, Montreal, and Winnipeg. Jackson designed the Downtown Community House in Lower Manhattan in 1925-26 as well as homes, churches and public buildings, including the Samaritan Home for the Aged at 440 East 89th Street in 1929, the Boys Club of NY at 321 East 111th Street, the Calvary Baptist Church in Westfield, NJ and the Congregational Church in Brookfield, Mass.

The YMCA building is a fine, early 20th century neo-Renaissance style institutional building designed by a prominent YMCA architect. Although a tangible reminder of our history of segregation, the building has major cultural significance in black literary and social history and is thus MAS finds it worthy of individual landmark designation. This designation on West 135th Street will add to the celebration of the Harlem Renaissance and the Civil Rights Movement.

**THE COUNCIL  
THE CITY OF NEW YORK**

Appearance Card

[ ]

I intend to appear and speak on Int. No. \_\_\_\_\_ Res. No. \_\_\_\_\_

Harlem  in favor  in opposition

Date: 9/ Mar 2017

(PLEASE PRINT)

Name: Leslie Jill Hanson

Address: 280 Alexander Ave Bx. NY

I represent: Save Harlem Now

Address: NY NY

**THE COUNCIL  
THE CITY OF NEW YORK**

Appearance Card

[ ]

I intend to appear and speak on Int. No. \_\_\_\_\_ Res. No. \_\_\_\_\_

in favor  in opposition

Date: 3/9/17

(PLEASE PRINT)

Name: Katerina McHale

Address: \_\_\_\_\_

I represent: Landmarks Preservation Commission

Address: 1 Centre Street

**THE COUNCIL  
THE CITY OF NEW YORK**

Appearance Card

[ ]

I intend to appear and speak on Int. No. \_\_\_\_\_ Res. No. \_\_\_\_\_

in favor  in opposition

Date: \_\_\_\_\_

(PLEASE PRINT)

Name: K Suburban Homes for Rent

Address: 109 West 123 St NYC

I represent: Mount Pleasant Park Community Improvement Assn

Address: \_\_\_\_\_



**THE COUNCIL  
THE CITY OF NEW YORK**

Appearance Card

I intend to appear and speak on Int. No. \_\_\_\_\_ Res. No. YMCA

in favor  in opposition

Date: 3/9/2017

(PLEASE PRINT)

Name: LISA B. JONES

Address: 181 W. 135th Street NY, NY 10030

I represent: TENANTS ASSOCIATION

Address: 181 W. 135th Street NY, NY 10030  
REV CT WALKER HDC

**THE COUNCIL  
THE CITY OF NEW YORK**

Appearance Card

I intend to appear and speak on Int. No. HARLEM Res. No. \_\_\_\_\_

in favor  in opposition

Date: 3/9/17

(PLEASE PRINT)

Name: SIMON BAKKOH

Address: \_\_\_\_\_

I represent: HDC

Address: 237 E 11 St NY 10003

**THE COUNCIL  
THE CITY OF NEW YORK**

Appearance Card

I intend to appear and speak on Int. No. W 0579-217 Res. No. \_\_\_\_\_

in favor  in opposition

Date: March 9

(PLEASE PRINT)

Name: Marcel Noyre

Address: 483 Madisen Ave

I represent: Municipal Art Society

Address: \_\_\_\_\_

Please complete this card and return to the Sergeant-at-Arms

**THE COUNCIL  
THE CITY OF NEW YORK**

Appearance Card

I intend to appear and speak on Int. No. \_\_\_\_\_ Res. No. \_\_\_\_\_

in favor  in opposition

Date: 3/9/17

(PLEASE PRINT)

Name: Mark S. Sberman

Address: \_\_\_\_\_

I represent: Landmarks Preservation Comm.

Address: \_\_\_\_\_

Please complete this card and return to the Sergeant-at-Arms

**THE COUNCIL  
THE CITY OF NEW YORK**

Appearance Card

I intend to appear and speak on Int. No. \_\_\_\_\_ Res. No. \_\_\_\_\_

in favor  in opposition

Date: 3/5/17

(PLEASE PRINT)

Name: Andrew Goldwyn

Address: \_\_\_\_\_

I represent: NY Landmarks Conservancy

Address: Whitwell St.

Please complete this card and return to the Sergeant-at-Arms