

LAND USE COMMITTEE – MEETING MINUTES

October 7, 2015

Committee Members Present

Wayne Benjamin, Chair
Anita Barberis
James Berlin
Isaiah Obie Bing
Osi Kaminer
Andrea Kornbluth
Martin Restituyo, Asst. Chair
Steve Simon

Committee Members Absent

Jonathan Reyes

Board Members Present

Public Member(s) Present

Vivian Ducat

Public Member(s) Absent

Staff: Debra Blow

Guests: Bishop Xavier Eikerenkoetter-United Palace, Charles Rice, United Palace, Sara A. Fisher, Pat Courtney, Annice Alt, Juan Reyes, Tristan Jackson, Chris, Rita Gorman, Shyla Espejo, Tekla Szymanski, Joel Yoffie, Robert Jackson, Bettina Damian

1. The meeting of the Land Use Committee (“Land Use” or the “Committee”) was called to order at approximately 7:15 PM.
2. The Committee discussed the Landmarks Preservation Commission’s (“LPC”) Backlog Initiative. By way of background, the LPC has developed a plan to address the backlog of 95 properties that were under consideration for designation, but were not designated or acted upon. The plan allows public notice/comment on backlog properties and an efficient public hearing process that will ensure decisions on the backlog items. The backlog includes properties that were placed on the Commission’s calendar prior to 2010 and are currently inactive, 85 percent of which were calendared 20 or more years ago. The plan is composed of three phases, which are described in detail below: (1) Public Review Period, (2) Special Hearings Dedicated to Backlog Items, and (3) Subsequent Decisions.

LPC is currently engaged in the Public Review Period; the Loew’s 175th Street Theater, currently known as the United Palace, is one of the properties for which the LPC has invited public comment at a hearing on November 12. Afterwards the LPC will either: 1) commence the landmarks process, 2) determine not to commence the landmarks process, or 3) remove this proposal from the calendar of backlogged items by voting “no action.”

Brief History:

The Loews 175th Street Theater occupies an entire city block, bounded by West 175th and 176th Streets, Broadway and Wadsworth Avenue (4140 Broadway, Block 2145/Lot 0001). It was built as one of the Loew’s Wonder Theaters. The Loew’s theater chain had five such extravagant and spacious flagships throughout the New York City area. The 175th Street Theater seated over 3,000 people and opened on February 22, 1930. The first program included the MGM film *Their Own Desire*, starring Norma Shearer, and *Pearls*, a live musical stage revue starring vaudevillians Shaw and Lee (Al Shaw and Sam Lee). Loew’s closed the theater 39 years later in March 1969 with a showing of *2001: A Space Odyssey*.

In 1969, as the era of grand movie palaces was coming to an end, the theater was purchased by televangelist Rev. Frederick J. Eikerenkoetter II, best known as "Rev. Ike." It then became the headquarters of the United Christian Evangelistic Association ("UCEA") and was renamed the United Palace. As a successful "prosperity preacher," Rev. Ike was able to restore the theater as his following grew through syndicated radio and television shows.

The church's congregation is now called The United Palace House of Inspiration (UPHI), and is a non-denominational spiritual community led by Xavier Eikerenkoetter, the son of Reverend Ike, who took over when his father died and renamed the congregation. It offers a Sunday service every week, community classes, a neighborhood fellowship that includes a choir and dance ministry, outreach and youth programs and a volunteer ministry.

The non-profit United Palace of Cultural Arts (UPCA) was founded by Eikerenkoetter in 2012 and functions as a community arts center. It presents performing arts events and screenings of classic movies.

Architectural Design:

The building was designed by noted theater architect Thomas W. Lamb in 1930, and its lavishly eclectic interior decor was supervised by Harold Rambusch.

The architectural style of the terra-cotta-faced theater has been described as "Byzantine-Romanesque-Indo-Hindu-Sino-Moorish-Persian-Eclectic-Rococo-Deco" by David W. Dunlap of *The New York Times*, who wrote that Lamb borrowed from "the Alhambra in Spain, the Kailasa rock-cut shrine in India, and the Wat Phra Keo temple in Thailand, adding Buddhas, bodhisattvas, elephants, and honeycomb stonework in an Islamic pattern known as muqarnas." The AIA Guide to New York City calls it "Cambodian neo-Classical" and invites a comparison to Lamb's Loew's Pitkin Theatre in Brownsville, Brooklyn, while New York Times reporter Nathaniel Adams called it simply a "kitchen-sink masterpiece." Lamb himself wrote that "exotic ornaments, colors and scenes are particularly effective in creating an atmosphere in which the mind is free to frolic and becomes receptive to entertainment."

The interior of the building features a "palatial" staircase, and reflects the western obsession with exotic lands and cultures that was fashionable in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. The interior is decorated with filigreed walls and ceilings, illuminated with indirect, recessed lighting from within and behind the walls. The rich decor is enhanced by the addition of authentic Louis XV and XVI furnishings and a collection of other works of art.

The interior is also adorned with a "Wonder Morton" pipe organ manufactured by the Robert Morton Organ Company of Van Nuys, California. The organ features a four-manual console and 23 ranks of pipes. The organ in the United Palace was restored in 1970 after almost 25 years of disuse and was utilized by the church in its services.

Moreover, the theater still looks very much as it did when it first opened; the only major change that Rev. Ike made was adding in the 1970s a cupola or prayer tower on the building's northeast corner, at Wadsworth Avenue and West 176th Street, topped by a "Miracle Star of Faith," visible from the George Washington Bridge and New Jersey.

Committee Considerations:

In determining its recommendation to the LPC, the Committee took into consideration the history and architectural value of the theater and heard public comment. The overwhelming majority of the comments from the community, including a resident who is a board member of the Historic Districts

Council (“HDC”), was that the theater had significant historical and architectural merit to be designated as a landmark. Moreover, there were many impassioned arguments suggesting that this building is one of the few cultural legacies left in northern Manhattan that the community would like to see preserved for future generations.

Among the members of the audience were Bishop Eikerenkoetter and his attorney Juan Reyes, who, while understanding the public’s desire to have this property landmarked, expressed some concerns regarding the costs they believe are associated with being landmarked. Specifically, they expressed a hesitation to being landmarked because they are concerned that the designation would make exterior repairs more expensive (by requiring the use of more expensive construction materials) and that it would delay such repairs by adding an extra layer of review.

Mr. Reyes also addressed the church’s objections historic designation, stating that landmark designation would impose a significant financial and regulatory burden on UCEA and that designation would negatively impact both the congregation’s religious worship and its ability to use the theater as a commercial concert hall. However, when asked to elaborate on these negative impacts, he was unable to provide any specific examples.

Everyone was very complimentary of the stewardship of the building by Bishop Eikerenkoetter and the congregation and expressed tremendous gratitude to Bishop Eikerenkoetter for his family’s preservation of the exterior and interior of the building to such an extent where the consideration of landmark designation is even possible. In addition, while everyone expressed faith in the current leadership of the United Palace, there is some concern that in the future things may change. Thus, the community strongly recommended that the Committee make a positive recommendation to the LPC suggesting that this property be landmarked.

For his part, Bishop Eikerenkoetter was very receptive to the community’s concerns but expressed certain lack of knowledge regarding the impacts and benefits of landmark designation. Without knowing the actual benefits, and only seeing the potential pitfalls, he was concerned that designation of the theater may have a negative impact. Chairman Benjamin, and other members of the community, did their best to explain that landmark designation would not create an unbearable burden on the stewards of the property. Indeed, all renovations require Buildings Department approval anyway, and while landmark status would require an extra step, designation would not prevent alterations to the property and the LPC staff works with property owners to explore options for architecturally appropriate alteration and do not dictate required changes. Moreover, if no renovations are being contemplated, then nothing has to be done. LPC does not require the owner of a property to make any alterations, but rather to make architecturally appropriate alterations if and when they are to be undertaken.

Finally, some members of the Committee and the public expressed a desire to have the interior of the building also designated as a landmark. This discussion, however, was set aside given the fact that its use as a church precludes the possibility of LPC considering it for designation.

After further discussion and a resolution moved and seconded the Committee voted (9 Yes, 0 No, 0 Abstain) to recommend that the LPC designate the Loew’s 175th Street Theater as a historic landmark. No other Board members were present. The members of the public voted as follows: 11 Yes, 0 No, 3 Abstain.

3. The Committee intended to have a follow-up discussion on in the zoning compliance as it pertains to the proposed commercial use of Columbia University’s Baker Field by a professional soccer team. Unfortunately, the Borough President’s representative, who was supposed to address this issue, was at the last minute unable to attend tonight’s meeting and only able to sent summary information, i.e.:

extracts from the Zoning Resolution without any explanation regarding its application to the situation at hand. The Committee agreed to table the discussion until such time as we could get further information and/or a presentation from the Borough President's office.

4. New Business: Community members requested that the Committee get an update from the EDC regarding the proposed Inwood rezoning. The Committee was advised by thee community members that they attended a recent workshop and are concerned by the lack of substance in the discussions and the presentations. They also expressed concern with the outreach being done by the EDC. Chair Benjamin noted that Land Use has not been involved by EDC in the planning process for the Inwood rezoning to any meaningful degree and indicated that EDC will be requested to provide a detailed update. .
5. Old Business: Assistant Chair Restituyo explained the status of the resolution passed by the Committee at its September 2015 meeting regarding proposed additions to 432 West 162 Street. The building is located in the Jumel Terrace Historic District; the additions require LPC's approval. Prior to the September 2015 CB 12-M General Meeting, the applicant requested that the Land Use resolution rejecting the proposed alterations to the property be removed from consideration for the full Board. The applicant assured that it would seek to modify its plans and present a new design to the Committee at tonight's meeting. However, the applicant subsequently informed us that it had changed his mind and would not modify the proposed design. Therefore, the resolution passed by the Committee in September stands and will be placed on the agenda of the board's General Meeting in October.

After further discussion, the meeting was adjourned at 9:20 PM.

Respectfully submitted by Martin E. Restituyo