



Testimony of the Municipal Art Society  
Before the Landmarks Preservation Commission  
By Lisa Kersavage, Municipal Art Society  
Regarding the Designation of the Renaissance Theater and Casino  
2341-2349 Adam Clayton Powell, Jr. Boulevard  
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The Municipal Art Society is a private, non-profit membership organization whose mission is to promote a more livable city. Since 1893, the Society has worked to advocate excellence in urban design and planning, contemporary architecture, historic preservation and public art.

I am Lisa Kersavage, speaking on behalf of the Municipal Art Society. The preservation committee reviewed the proposed designation of the Renaissance Ballroom and Casino and the Abyssinian Development Corporation's concept design for the site.

The question before the Commission today is whether these buildings are eligible for designation as landmarks, and clearly they are. As one committee member put it, these buildings comprise one of the "dearest sites in Harlem," and are a cultural touchstone for Harlem.

In 1995, Reverend Calvin O. Butts, in a *New York Times* article about the restoration of the Renaissance Ballroom, perfectly described why these buildings should be preserved. He said "With all of this development, there's no place for a young girl to have a sweet 16, for a young couple to get married, for old-timers to do the Lindy Hop. A community is more than housing, it's more than business. It's culture. People have got to have a place to laugh, sing and dance."

We couldn't have said it better. Both the Ballroom and Casino played an important role in the Harlem Renaissance. Owned and operated by African-American entrepreneurs, they were Harlem's first entertainment complex where movies, theater, dancing, and sports could be enjoyed. Major films featuring all African-American casts, banquets, award ceremonies, major musical talent, and the Renaissance Five basketball team, all contributed to the reputation of the complex into the 1960s. In short, the buildings are eligible for designation based on their cultural and historical significance.

The question put forth to MAS' Preservation Committee by the Abyssinian Development Corporation was whether the committee would recommend approval of their concept plan, which as we understand retains the facades of the two buildings, and includes a residential tower addition on the Renaissance Casino. While the facades of both buildings are retained, the corporation prefers the Casino, or perhaps both buildings, not be designated.

The committee was divided on this issue. All agreed that these are important buildings, but some were also positive about the proposed development. Some committee members believed there could be thoughtful development on the site in conjunction with designation. While there is concern about setting precedent for a "tower on a landmark," some believed that since these buildings would be designated for their cultural and historical significance, as opposed to their architectural, that there could be more flexibility for change. That being said, those same committee members believed that what is critical to preserve are the spaces that relate to the building's cultural associations, in this case the interior public spaces, particularly the ballroom. The committee had discussed an interior designation, but we have subsequently learned that the interior is not intact enough to be eligible. While it may not be eligible for designation, if the proposed development moves forward, Abyssinian ought to renovate the interior to preserve the ballroom and other significant interior spaces. From the schematic plans we saw, it did not appear that they were planning to do so.

These buildings are the one of the most visible places where the culture of Harlem was nourished, and we ought to find a way to let them play that role in Harlem's future. The Commission should vote to protect the buildings, but many from the preservation committee would urge the commission to also allow for Abyssinian's development on the site to move forward. This should be a project that is exemplary in terms of synthesizing preservation and community development.