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City landmark panel to decide on fate of dilapidated UWS church

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The Landmarks Preservation Commission is expected to soon decide the fate of a dilapidated Upper West Side church, whose owners plan to file — possibly this week — an appeal to revoke the crumbling building's 15-year-old landmark designation.

The tiny congregation of West Park Presbyterian Church at Amsterdam Avenue and West 86th Street wants to demolish the 135-year-old structure so they can sell it to a developer for a new apartment tower that will include modern space for performing arts use.

An earlier drama involving a once-beloved church that needed a miracle holds a lesson for the current one. My first Manhattan job in the 1970s happened to be at a performing arts center inside another decayed, former Presbyterian house of worship — Christ Church at 344 W. 36th St., which, like West Park had lost most of its congregation.



*The West Park Presbyterian Church needs up to \$40 million in repairs.
Steve Cuozzo*

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That century-old building was saved by philanthropist Samuel Rubin, who spent a fortune to fix it up and turn it into an avant-garde performing arts center. The problem for West Park — which is in much worse condition than Christ Church was — is that it's doomed unless another Samuel Rubin comes along. And no such benefactor is anywhere in sight despite years of media attention to the situation.

West Park is estimated to need between \$30 million-\$40 million to restore.

The LPC has done fine work preserving hundreds of truly worthy Upper West Side buildings. It should recognize that West Park CAN'T be saved. Upholding its designation will guarantee it will remain a scaffold-shrouded eyesore forever.

The church, through its West Park Administrative Commission, wants the LPC to revoke its 2010 landmark designation on hardship grounds. It would sell the wreck for \$33.5 million to Alchemy, a respected developer whose projects include a tower at 125 W. 57th St. to incorporate a new home for Calvary Baptist Church.

But West Park's effort to sell the dangerous structure to Alchemy faced blowback from a since-evicted, small performing arts organization called the Center at West Park that was previously based there. Preservation-mad elected officials, such as then-Manhattan Borough president and current City Council member Gale Brewer; and actors Mark Ruffalo, Laurence Fishburne, and Matthew Broderick are howling for the LPC to uphold the building's landmark status.

Some of those seeking to torpedo the development plan have ulterior — or exterior — motives. Four members of the arts group's board live in next-door buildings that overlook the church at 165 W. 86th St. A new tower might well block their views.



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The ground for the current battle was set in 2018, when the church signed a five-year lease with the arts center. The church, needing much more income than it could get from a short-term rental to an arts group, tapped Alchemy to evaluate sale and development options in 2021.

Later that year, the church found that emergency repairs were needed to the south wall of the sanctuary. But there was no money for the work.

In 2022, the desperate church asked the LPC to revoke the landmark designation and later that year, moved to boot the arts group when its lease was up.

However, the CWP claimed the lease gave it renewal rights — which the church contested. The church put its appeal to the LPC on hold while litigation proceeded. A state Supreme Court judge allowed the church to void the arts group's lease in February 2024 and the decision was unanimously upheld in the Appellate Division.



*West Park Administrative Commission head Roger Leaf.
Steve Cuozzo*

After its court victory, the church re-filed its appeal to the LPC. (The CWP subsequently moved to nearby St. Paul and St. Andrew church at 263 W. 86th St.)

Roger Leaf, the head of West Park's administrative arm, said that at the time of 2010 designation, "It stood empty and in disrepair, surrounded by a sidewalk shed for over a decade and owned by a congregation with almost no financial resources to maintain it."

The building has since further deteriorated. A recent visit found treacherously uneven floors, an unstable roof and numerous chinks in its weather-beaten sandstone facade.

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Although the arts center's executive director Debby Hirshman claimed to have raised more than \$5 million for urgently needed repairs, Leaf told Realty Check the group had never documented the claim and that its last financial statement from 2023 showed only \$121,000 in funding.

Neither Hirshman nor anyone else at the CWP responded to our request for comment regarding funds it raised.

<https://nypost.com/2025/09/07/business/city-landmark-panel-to-decide-on-fate-of-dilapidated-uws-church/>