

March 9, 2026
The Real Deal

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Epic fight on Upper West Side pits preservationists against realists

By: Erik Engquist



West Park Administrative Commission Roger Leaf, HSF Kramer's Valerie Campbell, Alchemy Group's Kenneth Horn, actors Mark Ruffalo, Laurence Fishburne and Matthew Broderick, Hiller PC's Michael Hiller and City Council member Gale Brewer with 165 West 86th Street (LinkedIn, Herbert Smith Freehills Kramer, Alchemy Group, Hiller, PC, Getty, Google Maps)

If the fate of West Park Presbyterian Church were up to the Landmarks Demolition Commission, the decision would be obvious: tear down the decrepit structure and build anew.

The church signed a deal in 2022 with developer Kenneth Horn of [Alchemy Properties](#) to do exactly that. Alchemy would pay \$33.4 million for the site and build a tower — likely a condominium — that includes a 10,000-square-foot white box space for the church and \$9 million for the congregation to build it out.

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Needless to say, the city has no demolition commission — only a Landmarks Preservation Commission. The panel lived up to its name, as it almost always does, when it designated the church at [165 West 86th Street](#) as historic in 2010.

How did that work out?

Since then:

- The 135-year-old building has remained shrouded by plywood to protect passersby from the crumbling stone, which has formed a reddish beach on the shed below.
- The church's congregation dwindled to 12 members and had to fire its pastor to save money.
- The nonprofit organization created in 2016 to manage the property and restore its facade instead spent seven years focused on its arts programming while the price tag for a proper renovation soared to as much as \$40 million.
- The organization was evicted last summer after a long, costly battle against the church it was supposed to save.
- Preservationists, celebrities, politicians and residents of the ugly buildings next to the church have continued fighting to save it — and their views.

The church's fate is now back in front of Landmarks. On Tuesday, commission members will hear the church's case for demolition in a case being closely watched by the real estate industry.

The preservationists, who have hired wily lawyer Michael Hiller and received moral and possibly financial support from actors [Mark Ruffalo, Laurence Fishburne and Matthew Broderick](#), made their arguments at a tense hearing last fall.

Still with them is City Council member Gale Brewer. According to Roger Leaf, a volunteer spearheading the church's demolition effort, Brewer was instrumental in winning the landmark designation 15 years ago by pledging to raise enough money to restore it.

"The minute the building was landmarked, she disappeared," Leaf, a retired finance executive, told *The Real Deal*. Brewer has publicly apologized several times for her failure but insists she will follow through this time, Leaf claims.

The evicted nonprofit, founded in 2016 and still called the Center at West Park, has relocated to another church two blocks away and seems to be doing well there; in 2024 it had \$1.25 million in assets and paid executive director Debra Hirshman [\\$335,000](#). But it wants to return to its former space and preserve the views for four board members who live next door.

Hiller argues that the church's hardship application has met none of the criteria

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required for demolition of a landmark. The opponents say the church created its own hardship by blocking repairs in late 2024 and failing to market its air rights — as if every Manhattan developer and investment sales broker doesn't know that Upper West Side churches have air rights. And this one has received extensive publicity.

I've known Gale Brewer for a long time and Hiller, too. They are good souls, and as a former history major, I don't blame them or Community Board 7 or 11,000 petition signers for wanting to save a building that from the outside looks historic, and a lot older than its 135 years.

But the church didn't create its own hardship. Nature and Father Time did.

Maintaining such a structure and bringing it up to code is an enormously expensive undertaking. The \$11.6 million in "commitments" that its would-be saviors claim to have would not be nearly enough, and they have no legal rights to the property anyway.

Besides, they had their chance. The next one should go to Alchemy.