

**TESTIMONY BEFORE THE LANDMARKS PRESERVATION COMMISSION
JULY 14, 2009**

Council Member Gale A. Brewer, 6th District, West Side of Manhattan

RE: 263 W. 86th Street (West-Park Presbyterian Church)

I thank Chairman Tierney and the Landmarks Preservation Commission members for the opportunity to testify today.

My name is Gale A. Brewer and I represent the residents of the West Side of Manhattan, from West 54 Street to West 96 Street, in the City Council.

The original structure of West Park Presbyterian Church was built in 1882, but was remodeled in 1889 by noted church architect Henry F. Kilburn to accommodate an expanding congregation. The church is a rare, perhaps unique example of the Richardsonian Romanesque style, and has been called “one of New York City’s great architectural treasures” by architect Lee Harris Pomeroy.

Although we in New York are often accused of not looking beyond our borders, I would like to call to the Commission’s attention for a moment to the city of Boston: conjure up the remarkable vista of Copley Square in the heart of old Back Bay, and its pair of famous landmarked Romanesque churches. West Park Presbyterian could easily stand beside them in distinction and scale. It belongs, in other words, to concerns that are larger than those of West Side or New York, and is part of a canon of American church architecture whose ensemble is of value not only here but to our national heritage.

The church’s robust, red sandstone façade, heavy, round arches and distinctive bell tower make it an integral part of the neighborhood’s architectural landscape. While there is no doubt that the building is in dire need of renovations, a 2001 Resource Evaluation by the New York State Office of Parks, Recreation and Historic Preservation noted, “the church maintains an exceptionally high level of integrity of setting, design, materials, craftsmanship feeling and association on both the exterior and interior.” We note that the church also occupies all of its original site, and that because of its corner setting it provides unobstructed full views of the entire sanctuary and its remarkable tower.

In addition to West Park’s architectural grandeur, the building is also of considerable historical significance, as noted by the Office of Parks, Recreation and Historic preservation in its evaluation. A former pastor at the church was responsible for translating Werner Sombart’s writings on socialism into English. In addition, the church was the original home of Joseph Papp’s Shakespeare Festival, and it was the first church in New York City to support gay marriage.

The church building was protected recently from demolition by neighbors and me,

but many years ago it was left out of the West Side/Central Park West historic district designation. Members of the community have been in constant battle to keep this architecturally and culturally significant building from demolition, and, at the same time, retain the sanctuary and the mission of the church.

Unfortunately, structures as beautiful and significant as West Park Presbyterian Church have become scarce in our city. The West Side and the city as a whole cannot afford to see any more of its treasures demolished to make way for more bland, uninteresting residential towers that have encroached on so many blocks in our community. Communities are not enhanced by the destruction and degradation of their built environment, nor do neighborhoods become more livable by removing their aesthetic treasures and physical landmarks.

West Park Presbyterian has been a de facto landmark at its present location, as well as a beloved neighborhood site, since the West Side emerged in the 1880s as the residential community whose architecture and ambience we treasure today. Ironically, as in other city neighborhoods of long-standing, and aesthetic and architectural value, the landmarks that give a neighborhood its physical character and history are often the first things to go when some seek to profit from those neighborhoods by destroying what makes them unique. We cannot allow this to continue, and as you know so well the Landmarks Commission was created to preserve not only an architectural gem here and there, like Grand Central, or St. Bart's, but to ensure that areas like the Upper West Side Historic District and its adjacent structures are not degraded and lost to short-sighted ambition.

I am delighted that the West Park Presbyterian Church is being considered today, and I urge the Commission to designate this historic and treasured building as a landmark. With this building as a landmark, I will work to raise the necessary funds to restore the building.

I would like to thank West Park's Reverend Robert Brashear, and all those throughout the community who have helped to bring us to today's hearing, and, hopefully, to the realization of decades of neighborhood effort on behalf of this remarkable building and its legacy.