



## Creating New Meaning at Westminster Hall

Michelle Leach

ARCHA4510 Studio 1: Building Significance Study

Professors: Andrew Dolkart, Kate Regev, and Claudia Kavenagh

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In the block between 113<sup>th</sup> and 114<sup>th</sup> on Lenox Avenue (also known as Malcom X Boulevard) in South Harlem is a three-story building with a light blue facade. It is smaller than its neighbors, but it makes up for it with its elegance. 73-75 Lenox Avenue has one of the few remaining cast-iron facades in South Harlem. Built in 1903, Westminster Hall has had many uses and its changes often reflected the progression of Harlem over the last century. Today it has many common features of cast-iron architecture. These include large windows and repetitive crisp details on its columns and friezes. While the historical color of the building is unknown, the building is currently painted a light blue, standing out from its surroundings. This building is significant for its architecture as well as its important role serving south Harlem as the area developed and evolved.

When it was built in 1903, the *Real Estate Record and Builder's Guide* listed 73 Lenox Avenue as a two-story brick store built for John D. Thees. There was no evidence of Thees being a prominent developer, and very little information was found about him. The architects listed were Neville & Bagge.<sup>1</sup> This listing is full of oddities. While there are no photos found for this building before 1940, the 1940 tax photo (figure 1) shows a three-story building. The alterations listed between 1903 and 1940 include the addition of “stairs & stoop to a 3-story brick building” in 1910 and the



Figure 1: 1940 tax Photo of 73 Lenox Ave, Courtesy of the NYC Municipal Archives

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1) *Real Estate Record and Builder's Guide*, “Projected Buildings.” 72, no. 1850 (August 23, 1903).

addition of “a dumbwaiter and toilet” in 1918.<sup>2</sup> Along with atlas information listing a three-story building, it seems unlikely that the building was ever two stories, and that the *The Real estate Record Builder’s Guide* could be wrong, or the plans for the building changed along the way.

The other strange piece of this building is the architect. Neville & Bagge were prominent architects for the Upper East Side, Upper West Side, and Harlem. They often designed row houses and apartment buildings. While many of their buildings included stores on the first floor like this one, very few of them were this small.<sup>3</sup>

Neville & Bagge were more well known for their residential architecture rather than commercial space or halls such as 73 Lenox Ave. Most of the buildings Neville & Bagge designed with store fronts are much taller (5-6 stories) with apartments on the upper floors. This building type was not commonly built with cast-iron facades. They also were not known for cast-iron architecture, which is a major component of this building. While it is not clear through these listed alterations, it would be uncommon for a cast-iron building to have the varying types of store fronts seen in the 1940 tax photo. They may have been later additions or changes rather than being original to the



Figure 2: Detail of cast iron columns. Frieze is a likely replacement with a composite material (not magnetic).

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2) *Real Estate Record and Builder's Guide*, “Alterations.” 85, no. 2205 (June 18, 1910). and *Real Estate Record and Builder's Guide*, “Alterations” 102, no. 2625 (July 6, 1918).

3) Comparative survey of Neville & Bagge buildings done through Metro History, narrowing the search by specifying the types of buildings as “store” to reflect building of a similar use to 73 Lenox Ave.

building.

Westminster Hall is defined by its cast-iron architecture. This gives the façade its character defining features such as its repetitive columns and large windows. The building was identified as cast iron not only because of its visual appearance, but with a magnet. At ground level, some of the columns are magnetic, indicating that this is cast iron rather than another type of pressed metal. Some of the columns are not magnetic, indicating that they could be replacements made with some type of composite material. As mentioned before, the scale of this building is smaller than its surroundings, but because of its patterned friezes and cast-iron columns, it still stands out. The cast-iron facade for this building is significant because of its date. Cast-iron peaked in popularity in New York City from 1850 to 1870, shaping the appearance of areas such as SoHo and NoHo. Cast-iron in these areas of the city were usually used for industrial loft type buildings. By 1900, cast-iron facades had decreased in popularity and the use of structural cast-iron had been limited by the fire code of 1882.<sup>4</sup> This decreased the use of cast-iron and made it a less prevalent material when developing uptown New York.

As a building from 1903, this is one of the few late cast-iron buildings in New York City. Because of the restrictions on cast-iron structures, there are some limitations on this building. By 1903, horizontal cast-iron pieces could not be used to carry vertical loads because they were weak in tension but good in compression. This means that there are two options for this structure. It is possible that the cast-iron façade only holds the weight of itself and that all other loads are carried by the brick party walls and interior framing. This was common for cast-iron structures of all periods but was the rule as the laws regarding structural cast iron became stricter. At this time, interior beams could be wood or steel. Because the inside of the building could not be

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4) Information gathered from email discussion with Richard Pieper on December 10<sup>th</sup>

studied and records from the Department of Buildings did not provide clear plans before 1990, it is unclear what the beam and column structure look like. In 1903, the building still could have had cast-iron columns on the interior. If this were the case, it could be one of the latest buildings with cast-iron columns in New York City because they were outlawed in 1904.<sup>5</sup> The other possibility is that the building has four masonry bearing walls with interior framing of wood or steel, and the cast-iron façade is tied to the brick in a purely decorative fashion. In both these cases, the cast iron would carry the weight of itself but would not bear the weight of the building structure.

Because there was little information about the structure of the building, it is hard to definitively say that it has unique engineering, but because it is an example of late cast iron, a further exploration of the structure would be helpful in guaranteeing its significance. From only the cast iron facade and the buildings date, it is somewhat rare in this area and within New York City. At the time of a 2005 survey, there were sixteen cast-iron buildings built after 1882 that were not landmarked. Of these, only two were built after 1900.<sup>6</sup> South of 125<sup>th</sup> st., most of the original cast-iron architecture was grouped along the 125<sup>th</sup> st. corridor, but very little of it remains.<sup>7</sup> This makes 73 Lenox Ave. unique within South Harlem and New York City.

For much of its history, this building had multiple spaces that worked separately from one another. This included the hall space that was likely on one of the upper floors and two shops on the ground floor. The building also has a basement, but its use was unclear until it was

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5) GSAPP Traditional Building Technology lecture given on October 26, 2021.

6) Andrew S. Dolkart "Survey of Undesignated Cast-Iron Buildings in New York City" (New York: Victorian Society Metropolitan Chapter, 2005).

7) This statement is based on a building's material identification from *Insurance Maps of New York City, New York Volume Seven North*. New York City: Sanborn Map Co., 1912. and comparison to its visual character today.

identified as a cabaret space in the 1950's. Through atlases and city directories, a few of the shop uses have been identified. These included a candy shop, bakery, florist, caterers, handkerchief store, handyman's shop, and later a restaurant and cabaret.<sup>8</sup> The hall was used as rental space for a variety of activities. Some of these activities could be gathered from articles from the *New York Times*, *Hebrew Standard*, and the *New York Amsterdam News*. The rental space was advertised in the 1910s in the *Hebrew Standard* as an event space with associated catering. All the catering ads specifically listed the catering as being kosher and overseen by Rabbis from the surrounding area (Figure 3).<sup>9</sup> This connected the hall with synagogues in South Harlem. Lenox Avenue once held multiple synagogues, hall spaces, and entertainment areas that served the Jewish community. The halls would have been rented out for events such as weddings and Bar Mitzvas and used for overflow for services on Jewish holidays.



Figure 3: Ad for Westminster Hall in the *Hebrew Standard*

Despite this religious connection, the hall was not only used for religious purposes. In one very colorful *New York Times* article, there was a report of a police raid in 1915 stopping a pool room battle at Westminster Hall. The tag line for the article claims that the “hall used mornings for worship, afternoon for gambling, and nights for tango.” Police officers arrested

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8) These uses were found from the 1912 Sanborn Map Co. and *Address Telephone Directories, New York City, Manhattan* from various years. For more complete citations, see bibliography.

9) "Advertisements Column 3." *The Hebrew Standard* (New York City), April 28, 1911.

multiple gamblers for “disturbing the peace” after a fight broke out over the payment of gambling debts. While comedic, this article also showed the span of events that took place in Westminster Hall.<sup>10</sup> This is also a great example of the hall’s varied use.

When placing this building into a larger context, it becomes clear that Westminster Hall was not the only establishment with entertainment use in the area. While 125<sup>th</sup> st. was known for being an entertainment and commercial corridor, Lenox Avenue was very similar. The Bernheimer Building, Lenox Casino, Lenox Theater, and other halls had similar uses that paralleled Westminster Hall. These buildings are displayed on a map in figure 5 along with two synagogues on Lenox Ave. The uses for buildings on the map were identified using atlases. This is not an exhaustive list, but it exemplifies how Westminster Hall was connected to the surrounding community.

## POLICE RAID STOPS POOLROOM BATTLE

Squad Arrives in Midst of Rough-  
and-Tumble Fight Over  
Payment of Bets.

## VISIT TWO HARLEM RESORTS

Hall Used Mornings for Worship,  
Afternoons for Gambling, and  
Nights for Tango.

Figure 5: Headline from the New York Times



Figure 4: Map of Lenox Avenue displaying entertainment locations and synagogues. Base map is the Sanborn Fire Insurance Map from 1912.

10) "Police Raid Stops Poolroom Battle." *The New York Times*, June 22, 1915. Proquest Historical Newspapers.

Through the late 1920's, the Jewish community moved out of Harlem and was replaced by a more diverse community of African Americans and immigrants from the Caribbean and Latin America. By 1930, the advertisements for Westminster Hall's rental space shifted from the *Hebrew Standard* and into the *New York Amsterdam News*,<sup>11</sup> a historic news source for the Black community and one of the oldest newspapers geared toward African Americans in America. There is less known about the types of events held in the hall space in the 1930's and 1940's. *The New York Amsterdam News* reported in 1931 that "The Colored Women's Auxiliary of the Owasco Democratic Club gave a dance and fashion review" at Westminster Hall.<sup>12</sup> Someone who works at the building today mentioned that they believed this was also a speak easy during prohibition, but it would be difficult to corroborate this use through any kind of documentation. While this single article does not give us much information, it can provide a hint of the community that Westminster Hall served as the demographics of South Harlem shifted.

Because the telephone directories do not distinguish the spaces, it is often difficult to understand what took place on different floors of the building or what happened in the event spaces versus the ground floor shops. In both 1935 and 1945, the Campoamor restaurant was listed at 75 Lenox Ave., but by 1950, it turned into the Lenox Rendezvous.<sup>13</sup> The Lenox Rendezvous was a restaurant and cabaret that would serve South Harlem for the next twenty plus

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11) "Classified Advertisement 5." *New York Amsterdam News*, November 26, 1930. Proquest Historical Newspapers.

12) "Sponsors Debut." *The New York Amsterdam News*, November 11, 1931. Proquest Historical Newspapers.

13) New York Telephone Company. *New York City Telephone Directories. Manhattan. Address Telephone Directory*. New York: New York : New York Telephone Co., April 1950.



years. Its opening was marked with swing musicians and dancing.<sup>14</sup> Many events were listed with a Rhumba band. Rhumba is a type of music and dance invented by Afro-Cubans in west Cuba in the nineteenth century.<sup>15</sup> It was likely brought to south Harlem with the new immigrant population. In a 1955 advertisement, the Lenox Rendezvous

Figure 6: Add for the Lenox Rendezvous for its New Year celebration in 1956. Published in the *New York Amsterdam News*.

was being advertised as the “Mambo Place of Harlem.” The Mambo too was created by a Cuban musician in the 1940’s as a mix between Son, a Cuban dance, and Swing, which had originated in Harlem in the 1920s within the black community.<sup>16</sup> All these dance forms show the increased diversity in Harlem that would have affected the entertainment scene. The Lenox Rendezvous was often advertised in the “Tavern Topics” section in the *New York Amsterdam News* and its New Year’s event seemed to be a longstanding tradition.<sup>17</sup> In 1953 the writer of the column, George Palmer mourned the night life previously prevalent in Harlem. The column lists the Rendezvous as still having performances on

14) "Display Advertisement 114." *New York Amsterdam News*, November 10, 1945. Proquest Historical Newspapers.

15) Gustavo Perez-Firmat, "Rumba". In *Obo in Latino Studies*, <https://www.oxfordbibliographies.com/view/document/obo-9780199913701/obo-9780199913701-0078.xml> (accessed 17 Dec. 2021), modified February 22, 2018.

16) S.H. Levinson and Franklin W. Knight.. "Cuba." *Encyclopedia Britannica*, April 29, 2021. <https://www.britannica.com/place/Cuba>.

17) "Display Advertisement 114." *New York Amsterdam News*, December 31, 1955. Proquest Historical Newspapers.

the weekend, but that there were few remaining locations that held shows all week long.<sup>18</sup>

The Lenox Rendezvous was listed in the 1975 telephone directory but not in the 1980 directory.<sup>19</sup> This is not surprising when viewing the 1980 tax photo (Figure 7). In the image, the Lenox Rendezvous sign can still be seen, but the building has fallen into disrepair. There are missing windows, missing frieze elements, and the cornice seems to sag. Many changes had been made since the 1940s, including changing the windows, altering the store fronts, and removing the balustrade. Vacancies and economic struggles were widespread across New York City in the 1970's, 1980's, and even the 1990's. The city of New York filed for Bankruptcy in 1975 and large swaths of the city like Harlem had many vacant and abandoned buildings. Westminster

Hall was purchased by the state of New York in 1990, and they partnered with Create Incorporated to rehabilitate the building to be used as a center for people with substance abuse problems. The project included dividing the 1<sup>st</sup>, 2<sup>nd</sup>, and 3<sup>rd</sup>, floors into offices and individual rooms to meet with patients. The basement was converted from the cabaret into a kitchen and cafeteria.<sup>20</sup>



*Figure 7: 1980 Tax photo courtesy of the NYC Municipal Archive*

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18) George Palmer. "Tavern Topics: The Changing Scene." *New York Amsterdam News*, November 7, 1953. Proquest Historical Newspapers.

19) New York Telephone Company. *New York City Telephone Directories. Manhattan. Address Telephone Directory.* New York: New York : New York Telephone Co., June 1975 and July 1980.

20) New York Department of Buildings Files for Block 1823, Lot 34, 73 Lenox Avenue.

Create runs a food pantry and a hot lunch program for members of the community out of this space. The rehabilitation also included changing the exterior. According to the first floor demolition plans, the work would include “removing the entire store front, shed roof, and north shack after structural steel [was] in place.”<sup>21</sup> During this rehabilitation is also when the windows were likely replaced with the glass block ones we see today and the cast-iron was painted.

The rehabilitation in the 1990’s was clearly a step up from the run-down facade seen in the 1980 tax photo and gave the building new life, but it did affect the historical character of the building. The most obvious feature introduced in this rehabilitation was glass block windows on the first floor and in the center bay of windows. These were probably chosen because they were cost effective and provide more privacy for the first floor of the building, but they are likely poor at insulating and take away from the original design. The other windows on the building are not as jarring as the glass block windows, but they have also been changed from the historical windows. The new, possibly aluminum, divisions in the windows reflect the window layout in the 1940 tax photo, but they lack the more refined nature that the original, slender cast-iron gave the building. While a piece of the Westminster Hall sign still



Figure 8: Westminster Hall Today

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21) Ibid.

exists, many of its details were removed in 2005. This was likely done because the top portion was too corroded to keep, and it was cheaper to just remove the piece rather than replace it. I believe that these changes do not detract from the building's significance, but using the National Register of Historic Places, they do detract from the building's "authenticity." It would be easy to restore more of the historic character by replacing the glass block windows with more historically accurate windows.

Create Inc. has a longer connection with the Harlem community than its stay in Westminster Hall. Create was started in the 1970's by Ralph Perez and Father Benedict Taylor, who was associated with the Franciscan Friars. Create Inc was meant to combat heroin addiction in the Harlem area. Their programs were meant to be something more than previous shelters and substance abuse programs. They sought to change their surrounding community. Part of this process was creating a place where people felt at home coming for help or just for a hot meal.<sup>22</sup> Another portion of this mission lead to Create rehabbing other buildings in the area. Westminster Hall is the central location for Create that provides medically supervised outpatient treatment, but they also have three other residential programs focused on those with substance dependencies, youth transitional housing, and other permanent supportive housing.<sup>23</sup> They were featured in a *New York Times* article in 2017 for their work providing transitional housing for young men. At the time, they were one of the only groups with a facility specialized to help this demographic group.<sup>24</sup> From briefly speaking to employees at Create, one expressed to me the way that COVID-19 has affected their mission. For an extended period during the pandemic,

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22) "History." Create Inc. <http://www.createinc.org/index-history.asp>.

23) "Services." Create Inc.. <http://www.createinc.org/index-services.asp>.

24) Palmer, Emily. "In Harlem, a Shelter That Gives Young Men the Tools to Succeed." *The New York Times*, December 13, 2017. <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/12/13/nyregion/in-harlem-a-shelter-that-gives-young-men-the-tools-to-succeed.html>.

Create Inc. was unable to have in person appointments, which is a large part of their mission. Create also serves individuals who are court mandated to seek their services, so when the court system was hindered by the pandemic, they were also affected. They have been able to resume their appointments especially since courts in New York City reopened, and the food pantry has reopened, but they are still unable to resume their hot lunch program. This has made it more difficult to encourage community engagement.

The work that Create Inc. does for the Harlem community is quite inspiring, and they have shown great pride in running their program out of Westminster Hall. This means that any further preservation intervention or efforts (such as landmarking) should be done with their engagement and participation. Their building will need perpetual care (as does any building), but the needs of cast-iron can be unique. The best way to upkeep cast-iron is to always keep a protective layer of paint over it. When the coating starts to show signs of wear, such as cracking or peeling, it is important to begin the process of repainting. Loss of the protective layer would allow for corrosion of the cast-iron underneath. In the event of repainting, it is important that the surface be prepared properly. This would include removing any flaking paint, rust, and dirt through mechanical or chemical methods before applying a new coat.<sup>25</sup> It is also important to inspect cast-iron often to ensure that there are no cracks or gaps that would allow water to be trapped within the cast-iron. This could quicken the corrosion of the facade.<sup>26</sup> It would be ideal to keep the cast-iron in good enough condition to avoid having to dismantle it for further preservation. Proper maintenance could avoid costly repairs and restorations in the future.

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25) Waite, John G., and Margot Gayle. "Preservation Brief 27: The Maintenance and Repair of Architectural." The National Parks Service: Technical Preservation Services. Last modified October , 1991. <https://www.nps.gov/tps/how-to-preserve/briefs/27-cast-iron.htm#repair>.

26) Information from a conversation with Claudia Kavenagh on December 7, 2021.

Between the architectural significance of the cast-iron façade, the building's use as community space reflecting the changes of South Harlem over time, and the important work being done in the building today, Westminster Hall is significant. It was built at a shifting time in architecture and engineering where New York City was moving away from cast-iron and toward steel. The hall was witness to the changes of Harlem, perpetually serving the people in the neighborhood, and the building has constantly been tied to other aspects of the built environment. First this included the surrounding synagogues and Jewish community and the other entertainment locations around Westminster Hall. This relationship progressed as the Lenox Rendezvous became a vibrant part of the night life in Harlem, serving the new diverse community that included African Americans and immigrants from the Caribbean. The use of Westminster Hall today has changed drastically compared to any of these former tenants. To some, it may seem like it has been closed off from the community due to the sensitive nature of Create Inc's resources. It is no longer a space open to anyone, but it is still serving the people of Harlem. Through Create, the purpose of the building is to help the community, and it is still tied to other features of the built environment through Create's rehabilitation of other buildings. For all these reasons, Westminster Hall is significant and should continue to be preserved.

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