

February 23, 2023

Landmarks Preservation Commission Testimony Before the New York City Council Subcommittee on Landmarks

Good morning, Chair Louis and Subcommittee Members, I am Kate Lemos McHale, Landmarks Preservation Commission Director of Research. Thank you for the opportunity to present these recent designations. The designation reports have been shared with you so I will briefly summarize the history and significance of the buildings, and our record of support for designation. These designations help further LPC's goals of equitable designations through the five boroughs that protect significant architectural character and highlight the city's diversity, and we have had great support for them.

The Lesbian Herstory Archives

484 14th Street in Park Slope, Brooklyn, is culturally significant as the home since 1991 of the Lesbian Herstory Archives, the nation's oldest and largest collection of lesbian-related historical material. The organization's headquarters for over 30 years, this Renaissance Revival style building is where the Archives expanded its collection, grew to national prominence, and continues to serve as a vital educational organization, community space, and center for lesbian history and culture.

The Landmarks Preservation Commission's designated this building an individual landmark on November 22, 2022. We received in-person and written testimony in support from 40 people, including representatives of the Lesbian Herstory Archives, the NYC LGBT Historic Sites Project, the Historic Districts Council, the New-York Historical Society, the Leslie-Lohman Museum of Art, the Alice Austen House, and the NYC Dyke March. There was no opposition to the designation.

The Lesbian Herstory Archives is located within Brooklyn's Park Slope Historic District. This was originally a two-family home designed by Axel Hedman in the Renaissance Revival style and built in 1908 as part of a row of seven similar rowhouses. It contributes to the character of the historic district, but because the district's designation in 1973 predated the Archives' arrival in 1991, there is no mention of the building's LGBTQ+ significance. The designation as an individual landmark recognizes the significance of the Archives and is the first landmark designated for LGBTQ+ significance in Brooklyn.

The Lesbian Herstory Archives is an entirely volunteer-run non-profit organization founded in 1974 by activists Joan Nestle, Deborah Edel, and others, at a time when the LGBTQ+ community faced widespread legal and social discrimination. It was originally housed in Nestle and Edel's apartment on the Upper West Side and began as a grass-roots attempt to end the silence around lesbian history, to share lesbian's stories as an integral piece of American history, and to create a physical archive for study, analysis, and community gathering. The project was intentionally feminist in nature, and inclusive, with women of color among its early supporters and contributors.

By 1991 the collection had outgrown its space and the Archives had raised enough funds to purchase 484 14th Street in Park Slope, which was a center of New York's lesbian community. After more than a year of renovations, the building was transformed into a new headquarters with space for archival storage and display, offices, and community space, with a caretaker's apartment on the top floor. In 1996, the Archives paid off their mortgage, an achievement that held enormous significance: the Archives now had a permanent home that could serve as a direct response to the pervasive homophobia, sexism, and lack of lesbian space the community had experienced.

In its Park Slope home, the Archives has grown to hold a wide variety of materials collected and donated by lesbians themselves. Collections are national in scope and include books and periodicals, files on lesbian activist and community groups, audio-visual materials, oral histories, materials pertaining to issues like lesbian parenthood and marriage equality cases, and personal and professional papers of lesbians from diverse communities, including for example from the African American poet and activist Audre Lorde. The Archives continues to expand their collections and has also greatly increased public access by digitizing many of them.

From this location the community-based organization has broadened its national and international standing, inspired the creation of similar archival collections in other communities, held numerous volunteer-led events and exhibitions, and contributed extensively to important LGBTQ+ exhibitions at larger institutions.

The Archives has diligently maintained the building, working with LPC to make minor alterations such as the addition of a stair lift, to support its use and accessibility as a public institution. The designation highlights its period of significance associated with the Lesbian Herstory Archives, which has played an essential role in telling the story of a mostly unseen community of women who have contributed meaningfully to America's cultural, political, and social history. At the end of 2022 *Time Out New York* listed it among the 15 best things that happened in NYC last year – at number 3!

Samuel Gompers Industrial High School

Located in the Mott Haven section of the South Bronx, Samuel Gompers Industrial High School is a significant civic structure designed in the mid-1920s by William H. Gompert and Walter C. Martin and constructed in 1931-1932. Blending Medieval Revival and Art Deco aesthetics, the arcaded brick facades and richly-ornamented towers make this high school building distinctive among New York City school buildings.

It was designated on December 6, 2022, and the Commission received testimony supporting designation from representatives of the Art Deco Society of New York, Historic Districts Council, Mott Haven Historic Districts Association, and New York Landmarks Conservancy.

This impressive public structure was identified as a priority by LPC staff in surveys of the Bronx and of Art Deco-style school buildings in New York City. It is highly visible and occupies most of the block in an area without many landmark designations.

Conceived as part of a \$25 million building program, Samuel Gompers Industrial High School was originally planned as Bronx Vocational High School. William H. Gompert, the Board of Education's architect and building superintendent, designed the school in a distinctive Medieval Revival style in 1924-25. The architect Walter C. Martin, who succeeded Gompert in 1928, revised the design: changing the color of the brick from red to brown and adding elaborate Art Deco style ornament to the towers and entrances. The Board of Education began naming schools for inspiring individuals at the end of the 1920s, and Bronx Vocational High School was renamed for Samuel Gompers, the first and longest serving president of the American Federation of Labor.

Martin's design reflected the school's innovative curriculum, which had evolved to focus exclusively on the study of electricity. It was the first school of this type in New York City and described as "a model of its kind." The building has a square plan with a center courtyard, and two striking towers. Decoration of the towers features inscriptions and terracotta reliefs that illustrate the various trades that depend on expertise in electricity, including architecture, aviation, drafting, lighting, mechanics, motors, science, wiring, and woodwork. Above the three main entrances, large relief panels proclaim the structure's original purpose.

Samuel Gompers Industrial High School for Boys opened in September 1935. The Wall Street Journal reported that it had "one of the most extensive complements of electrical laboratory ever provided for an institution of this kind" and the New York Times praised its course in neon lighting which taught the principles of the "Great White Way," as Broadway was known. Most of the early students were from The Bronx and Upper Manhattan, and a small number from Queens and Brooklyn. By the early 1970s most students were Black and Latino. One of its more famous graduates was Grand Master Flash. Girls were first admitted in the early 1980s. The school closed in 2012 and was converted to an educational campus containing three independent secondary schools.

With its striking architecture and innovative curriculum serving a diverse student body, Samuel Gompers Industrial High School is among the city's most distinctive public high school buildings.

Julius' Bar Building

The Julius' Bar Building is New York City's most significant site of pre-Stonewall LGBTQ+ activism. In 1966, gay rights activists staged a demonstration at Julius' to protest the closure of bars by city and state authorities simply for serving gay people. The event, known ever since as the "Sip-In," exemplified the movement's new eagerness to confront society's persecution of LGBTQ+ people head-on, embracing

direct action modeled on the Civil Rights movement and anticipating the activism of Stonewall and the Gay Liberation movement.

The designation on December 6, 2022, received widespread support in testimony, including from Julius' Bar owner Helen Buford, "Sip-In" witness Randy Wicker who referred to the event as "gay people's Declaration of Independence", New York State Assemblymember Deborah Glick, State Senator Brad Hoylman, organizations including the NYC LGBT Historic Sites Project and Village Preservation, and more than 200 letters and emails.

Julius' is located at West 10th Street and Waverly Place in the Greenwich Village Historic District. As with the 2015 designation of Stonewall Inn, designating the Julius' Bar Building as an individual landmark officially recognizes its centrality to the history of the city's gay-rights movement and cements the moment of a crucial protest as its period of significance.

The building evolved into its current form over the 19th and early 20th centuries and today appears much as it did at the time of the Sip-In. A saloon was operating there by 1900, and Julius' Bar and Restaurant opened by 1930. It soon became known as a gathering place for artists, writers, and journalists, and was the founding location of the Village Voice in 1955.

At the time of the "Sip In" the LGBTQ+ community faced restrictive laws and legal and social discrimination across the country. Gay men were targeted as criminals in New York City, and entrapment by plain clothes police officers was common. The State Liquor Authority viewed the mere presence of LGBTQ+ people on a premises as inherently disorderly, and revoked licenses from bars that served gay patrons. This practice could destroy the personal and professional lives of LGBTQ+ individuals, as well as shut down the places where they were able to meet freely. In 1965, the Mattachine Society of New York, the country's largest gay-rights organization, was determined to stop the closures and secure the rights of gay men and lesbians to gather openly in public. These efforts were led by Mattachine's new president, Dick Leitsch, who joined fellow activists Randy Wicker and Craig Rodwell at the organization.

The Mattachine Society planned a public action to document the discrimination and force the State Liquor Authority to answer for its policies. Three conservatively dressed men, followed by the press, would present a letter telling a bar manager they were gay, and ask to be served. Though clearly not disorderly, they expected to be denied service since bar managers understood serving a known gay patron to be illegal. The action was carried out by Leitsch, Rodwell, and John Timmons, on April 21, 1966.

After a few attempts, it was at Julius', which at the time attracted both gay and straight patrons, where the three men, joined by Randy Wicker as a witness, received their denial and were able to document it publicly. As Leitsch later recalled, the bartender covered the glass and said, "I can't serve you if you're gay, you know that. You're with the Mattachine Society. You know it's against the law to serve

homosexuals. We got busted last week.” Village Voice photographer Fred W. McDarrah’s photo capturing the moment is one of the iconic images of the early LGBTQ+ rights movement.

Media coverage included a sympathetic article in the *Village Voice*, and the *New York Times*—using derogatory language typical of the time—called the event a “noon-time ‘sip-in,’” apparently coining the term. A few days later in the *Times*, William H. Booth, former head of the New York State NAACP and the city’s new commissioner of human rights, stated his support for Mattachine’s goals, and his opposition to the “denial of bar service to a homosexual, simply for that reason.” This was the strongest statement in favor of LGBTQ+ rights by a major New York City official up to that time.

In recent years, the legacy of the Sip-In has increasingly come into focus. Dick Leitsch, Randy Wicker, and Craig Rodwell are considered pioneers and major figures in the city’s gay-rights movement. The Sip-In itself represents the ascendancy of a new militancy and fearlessness without which the 1969 Stonewall Rebellion might not have happened. As the site of the Sip-In, this building shines a light onto this activism and remains a place of active LGBTQ+ history commemoration. Mayor Adams and local Council member Eric Bottcher celebrated the designation at Julius’, and among news and social media coverage the designation was also listed among Time Out New York’s 15 best things to happen in 2022 (at number 6).

Melrose Parkside Historic District

The Melrose Parkside Historic District is a cohesive group of 38 architecturally significant single- and two-family duplex row houses designed by two prolific Brooklyn architects, Benjamin Driesler and Axel S. Hedman, and built between 1909 and 1915. It has a strong sense of place from its intact historic character and contains likely the largest and most distinctive collection in the city of a house type unique to Brooklyn, known as Kinko houses.

The historic district is located on Parkside Avenue between Flatbush and Bedford avenues in the Flatbush neighborhood of Brooklyn. It was identified through surveys and in response to requests from property owners to evaluate it, accompanied by a petition and letters of support. LPC staff determined that it stands out for its highly intact architectural quality and historic character. The remainder of the block and adjacent blocks do not share the same quality or cohesiveness, so the historic district includes just the historic row houses.

Outreach and engagement with property owners began before the pandemic and continued through many conversations and two virtual meetings in 2021 and 2022 to explain what designation means and to build understanding of our processes and support for the district. We heard substantial support at our public hearing in October last year and in letters, including from some lifelong residents. We also heard from some people who were concerned about regulation and opposed designation, all of which is included in the designation report.

The name “Melrose Parkside” reflects the early history of the block, where an 18th century manor house called Melrose Hall was once located and became the namesake for a planned suburban development called Melrose Park in the late 19th century. This ultimately was unrealized, and the property was sold to a wealthy brewer whose son, William Arthur Alexander Brown, began developing it with single- and two-family houses in the early 20th century. The houses were constructed in a short timeframe, between 1909 and 1915.

The dominant house type within the district is an unusual type of two-family duplex apparently unique to Brooklyn. The Kings & Westchester Land Company first developed houses of this type in 1905 and marketed them as “Kinko” houses. They were designed to offer greater privacy than conventional two-family brownstones, with separate entrances. Brown envisioned Parkside Avenue as an “exclusive” neighborhood and marketed his duplex houses as “the most perfect houses ever built for two families” yet with “the privacy of a one-family house.”

The architect Benjamin Driesler composed six distinct alternating designs in the classical vocabulary to create what the Brooklyn Eagle described as “the latest type of modern house-building,” with “artistic and varied fronts of fine architectural design.” The two rows of these houses in the historic district are the largest and most distinctive collection of the Kinko house type we know of in the city.

In 1912 Brown again turned to Benjamin Driesler to design a row of eight single-family houses which he marketed as “easy housekeeping, no basement houses.” With deep, open areaways, the row features full-width terraces and an eclectic combination of classically-inspired design elements.

In 1913, Eli H. Bishop & Son purchased a parcel on the north side of Parkside Avenue and built a row of 10 “American basement” plan single-family houses in 1914-1915, designed in the Neoclassical style by Axel S. Hedman. These elegant houses feature prominent central entrances.

Early residents of the historic district were white and predominately born in the United States. By the mid-20th century, Flatbush saw a large increase in African American and Afro-Caribbean residents. Central Brooklyn soon became the center of the city’s growing Afro-Caribbean community. Today, this vibrant block of Parkside Avenue continues to reflect the diversity of greater Flatbush. The block association is active and the community’s excellent stewardship of these buildings contributes to its special character and strong sense of place.

With its distinctive variety of rowhouses, united by classically-inspired design elements and uniformly deep front areaways, the Melrose Parkside Historic District has highly intact historic character a strong sense of place that distinguishes it within the larger Flatbush area. LPC Commissioners voted unanimously to designate the district, and I am happy to answer any questions you may have. Thank you.

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THE CITY OF NEW YORK**

Appearance Card

I intend to appear and speak on Int. No. _____ Res. No. _____

in favor in opposition

Date: 2/23/23

(PLEASE PRINT)

Name: Kate Lemos Mc Hale

Address: _____

I represent: NYC Landmarks Preservation Commission

Address: _____

◆ Please complete this card and return to the Sergeant-at-Arms ◆

**THE COUNCIL
THE CITY OF NEW YORK**

Appearance Card

I intend to appear and speak on Int. No. _____ Res. No. _____

in favor in opposition

Date: 2/23/23

(PLEASE PRINT)

Name: Scott Guler

Address: _____

I represent: NYC Landmarks Preservation Commission

Address: _____

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