

Fighting to Preserve West End Avenue

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By David Xia

It is not the most exalted avenue in [New](#) York, nor the most scenic. But residents who live on West End Avenue and historic preservationists want to make sure that the street doesn't lose its character to demolition and [new](#) development.

Parts of West End Avenue, including a stretch from 87th to 94th street, are already part of a historic district. But the neighborhood is on the brink of a much larger change. Next year, the city's Landmark Preservation Commission is expected to vote on whether all of West End Avenue from 70th street to 107th should be designated an historic district.



On Thursday night roughly 70 people gathered at a meeting of the West End Preservation Society (WEPS) in the newly renovated auditorium of PS 75 Emily Dickinson School to [continue](#) to put pressure on city officials to support the designation, and to discuss ideas to improve their neighborhood once it becomes a historic district.

WEPS President Richard Emery told the attendants that the Landmarks Preservation Commission was surveying side streets and had scheduled the designation for next year. He confidently described the future designation of West End Avenue from 70th to 107th Street as "an open secret."

No one at the meeting voiced any opposition. The audience instead applauded frequently and were outspoken in their eagerness to see the designation project come to fruition.

"We are counting our chickens...knock on wood" said Emery before he kneeled down and rapped the wooden stage with his knuckles.

"I'm a bit more Irish, I guess, than you are," said [New](#) York Landmarks Conservancy President Peg Breen, "so I don't count my chickens before they hatch."

West End Avenue, which is now made up mostly of mid-size limestone apartment buildings and row houses, was mostly farmland until 1879, when the Ninth Avenue elevated train began to transform the neighborhood. Non-profit community group [Landmark West](#) calls West End Avenue "a strikingly consistent streetwall of uniform cornice heights, harmonious materials and creative interpretations of historical styles, including Arts and Crafts, Beaux Arts and Art Deco." Of course, that uniformity strikes some as boring. In his 1979 [book](#) "The City Observed," architecture critic Paul Goldberger called the avenue "a dull, proper sort of street, the urban equivalent of the banal middle-class suburbs of Long Island."

Supporters of historic designation say the neighborhood represents the city's longest stretch of pre-war apartment buildings, including structures designed by notable turn-of-the-century architects.

There are, of course, arguments against historic preservation in general. Critics of historic preservation oppose excessive restrictions on owners' property rights and the fact that designation for historic districts may include unworthy structures. Other arguments include the impairment of a property's economic potential and a tendency towards urban sprawl.

Breen repeatedly urged those at the meeting to push LPC to act quickly and not let the concern of additional side street



designations bog down their main goal.

“The threat is real, the threat is here,” Breen said about West End Avenue’s brownstones that are unprotected from commercial development. “It’s up to you to keep this at the top of all their [LPC’s] agendas.”



Noni Connor, an associate broker with Prudential Douglas Elliman Real Estate and a longtime West End Avenue resident, asked whether there were sources of funding for “smaller buildings around here that may incur some expenses by trying to abide by this designation.” Breen responded that sources were very limited but that maintenance now will pay off in the form of higher property values in the future. Prudential Douglas Elliman owns many housing cooperative and condominium units in the proposed historic district.

The LPC designates historic districts based on an area’s historic or aesthetic interest. Becoming a historic district does not mean that a neighborhood is frozen in time, but rather that [new](#) developments will be placed under more scrutiny.

The Commission reviews proposed changes based on their suitability to the “scale and character” of the surrounding historic district. Although the LPC cannot initiate alterations, it does require owners “ensure that the outside portions of the building do not become deteriorated or dilapidated.”

Changes, excluding regular maintenance, made to the exterior of a building in a historic district require its approval beforehand. An LPC permit is required for interior changes when the work needs a Buildings Department permit, affects the exterior, or when the interior itself has been designated as a landmark.

[WEPS](#) was formed a little more than two years ago to keep four buildings on West End Avenue from being demolished. At Thursday’s meeting, WEPS encouraged the audience to send letters to Mayor Bloomberg urging him to join the list of city officials who have given their support.

The issue of enforcing the no-commercial vehicles rule for West End Avenue was also raised. Members of the audience suggested placing more signs on the street and adding curb extensions to slow traffic speed. (photos by Avi)

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