



## COMMUNITY BOARD ELEVEN

BOROUGH OF MANHATTAN  
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Nilsa Orama  
*Chair*

Angel D. Mescaín  
*District Manager*

July 10, 2019

Melanie La Rocca  
Commissioner  
NYC Department of Buildings  
280 Broadway, 7th Floor  
New York, NY 10007

Dear Commissioner La Rocca,

Community Board 11 echoes the concerns of Borough President Brewer regarding the building demolition permits approved on January 4, 2019 by the Department of Buildings (DOB) for Metropolitan Community United Methodist Church, located at 1975 Madison Avenue, New York, NY 10035, along with the adjoining parish house to its north (1981 Madison Avenue) and a brownstone to its east (45 East 126th Street), the latter which served as a community center and soup kitchen. We oppose the demolition of these properties and request that DOB rescind or withdraw its approval of the demolition permits.

The Metropolitan Community United Methodist Church, originally the St. James Methodist Episcopal Church, has anchored the corner of 126th street and Madison Avenue for 147 years. Construction of the church began in 1869 and the parish officially opened to its congregation on May 14, 1871. This edifice is one of the oldest surviving churches in Harlem. The original congregation was established in 1855 and the current congregation has been in place since 1942.

As such, on May 21, 2019 Manhattan Community Board 11 voted against the demolition permit issued by the DOB. In addition, members of Landmark East Harlem, a non-profit grassroots volunteer organization that seeks to preserve the neighborhood's unique architecture and historic places, continue to meet with the State Historic Preservation Office (SHPO) to advocate for a proposed state historic district designation named the "North East Harlem Historic District."

We urge the DOB to stop the approved demolition permit for the Metropolitan Community United Methodist Church and the two adjacent properties.

If you have any questions regarding our recommendations, please contact Angel Mescaín, District Manager at 212-831-8929 or amescain@cb11m.org.

Sincerely,

Nilsa Orama  
Board Chair

Cc: Hon. Gale A. Brewer, Manhattan Borough President  
Hon. Diana Ayala, New York City Council  
Hon. Bill Perkins, New York City Council  
Patrick A. Wehle, Assistant Commissioner for External Affairs, Department of Buildings  
Ahmed Tigani, Chief of Staff, Department of Buildings  
Carey King, Uptown Grand Central  
Chris Cirillo, Landmark East Harlem  
Steven Villanueva, Community Board 11  
Judith Febbraro, Community Board 11



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**Gale A. Brewer, Borough President**

July 10, 2019

Melanie La Rocca  
Commissioner  
NYC Department of Buildings  
280 Broadway, 7<sup>th</sup> Floor  
New York, NY 10007

Dear Commissioner La Rocca,

I am greatly concerned by the building demolition permits approved on January 4, 2019 by the Department of Buildings (DOB) for the esteemed Metropolitan Community United Methodist Church (1975 Madison Avenue), along with the adjoining parish house to its north (1981 Madison Avenue) and a brownstone to its east (45 East 126<sup>th</sup> Street), the latter which served as a community center and soup kitchen. I request that DOB rescind or withdraw its approval of the demolition permits and apply a higher standard of scrutiny to applications for demolition or alterations to houses of worship. This follows at the heels of a previous letter that we sent on March 14, 2019 and that the DOB answered on March 20, 2019 regarding the demolition of houses of worship. More specifically, I am requesting a moratorium on demolition permits for houses of worship that are within districts that are currently under consideration by the State Historic Preservation Office (SHPO) for a historic district designation.

The Metropolitan Community United Methodist Church, originally the St. James Methodist Episcopal Church, has anchored the corner of 126<sup>th</sup> street and Madison Avenue for 147 years. Construction of the church began in 1869 and the parish officially opened to its congregation on May 14, 1871. This edifice is one of the oldest surviving churches in Harlem. The original congregation was established in 1855 and the current congregation has been in place since 1942.

The church and parish house were designed by Rembrandt Lockwood, who began his career as a painter of religious art, and created murals for church interiors in New York City and the region. Columbia University's archives reveal that Lockwood erected churches in New York City, as well as Jersey City; Matteawan; Newburgh; Middletown; Ossining; Peekskill; New Haven, Connecticut and other places. Lockwood's Fourth Universalist Church, located at 40 Green Avenue in Brooklyn, which was completed in 1863 is a designated NYC landmark. The Metropolitan United Methodist Church in Harlem is representative of Lockwood's later works, and is handsomely executed with shallow buttresses and intricate tracery. The adjoining parish house was completed in the French Second Empire style, the most fashionable for this era, and features a mansard roof complete with remarkable surviving crestings and finials. The structures are currently threatened with a sale of the building and demolition, a severe blow to Harlem's built environment and history. Landmark designation would ensure that the expansive complex could be adaptively reused, as are many religious structures.

As such, on May 21, 2019 Manhattan Community Board 11 voted against the demolition permit issued by the DOB. In addition, members of Landmark East Harlem, a non-profit grassroots volunteer organization that seeks to preserve the neighborhood's unique architecture and historic places, continue to meet with

the SHPO to advocate for a proposed state historic district designation named the “North East Harlem Historic District.” In light of the community’s ongoing efforts, I urge the DOB to immediately rescind or withdraw its approval of the demolition permits for these three lots until further consideration and review by the SHPO for a historic district designation.

In addition, I urge the DOB to apply a higher standard when reviewing demolition permits regarding houses of worship, especially those that are in the advanced stages of determination of landmark designation by the SHPO. Houses of worship, such as churches and synagogues, compose the social and urban fabric of communities and are key components of historic districts nation-wide. Preserving these sites is vital to maintaining the architectural and cultural character of neighborhoods, exemplified by the Metropolitan Community United Methodist Church and its social service contributions to the community of East Harlem.

I hope you will join me in support of protecting and honoring the legacy of historic buildings and historic districts city-wide by developing processes that adhere to the spirit and intent of preservation. As such, I urge the DOB to stop the approved demolition permit for the Metropolitan Community United Methodist Church and the two adjacent properties in support of a fair, community-based process for historic district analysis initiated by the SHPO.

Sincerely,

Gale A. Brewer  
Manhattan Borough President

cc: Patrick A. Wehle, Assistant Commissioner for External Affairs, DOB  
Ahmed Tigani, Chief of Staff, DOB  
Honorable Diana Ayala, NYC Councilmember, District 8  
Honorable Bill Perkins, NYC Councilmember, District 9  
Nilsa Orama, Board Chair, Manhattan Community Board 11  
Angel D. Mescaín, District Manager, Manhattan Community Board 11  
Carey King, Uptown Grand Central  
Chris Cirillo, Landmark East Harlem