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The Renny Reborn: Radical Preservation for Black Futures

The Renaissance Ballroom and Casino, known as the “Renny”, was more than a building; it was a cultural, political, and social hub for Harlem’s Black community in the early to mid-20th century. Within the 900-seat theatre, six retail stores, and a basketball arena, it hosted dances, basketball games, and civic meetings at a time when Black people were excluded from most mainstream venues in Harlem. The Renny could embody the themes of radical preservation: preserving not just architecture, but the living memory of a site that once served as one of the few spaces where Black people could gather in joy, safety, and self-determination. Radical preservation reframes the Renny’s significance, even though the building has been demolished and replaced by a luxury residential development, by asking how memory, community, and cultural expression can endure beyond physical structures.

What is at stake is nothing less than the embodiment of Harlem’s Black cultural legacy. The demolition of the Renny represents more than the loss of a building; it symbolizes the broader threat of erasure faced by Black communities in cities across the United States. When sites like the Renny disappear, we risk losing tangible reminders of Black achievement, resilience, and social life. Preserving the spirit of the Renny matters because it protects Harlem’s identity, provides historical sustenance for future generations, and challenges the displacement and commodification that come with gentrification. After visiting the now high-end apartment building, only the name serves as a single reminder of what once stood there. It is unfortunate that the building could’ve gained landmark status but failed to do so; now we must honor it in another form. Even the North-African Islamic Moorish architectural connection wasn’t preserved, if there had been any interest in doing so by the developer. Several elements support The Renny’s importance as a case study in radical preservation:

- **Historical Significance**
- **Cultural Practices**
- **Community Memory**
- **Contemporary Resonance**
- **Lost African Architecture**
- **Anticipated Gentrification**

In conclusion, the Renaissance Ballroom and Casino demonstrates how radical preservation can expand our understanding of heritage to include community, culture, and lived experience. While the building no longer stands, the work of preservation can persist through memory projects, community archives, cultural programming, and policies that resist displacement. More broadly, it raises pressing concerns about how cities value culture, who gets to decide what is preserved, and how preservation can serve as a tool for justice rather than erasure. The longer we wait, the more difficult and problematic preserving this significant piece of culture will be, and it will be permanently lost. Unfortunately, we have already lost the opportunity to salvage the North African architecture that the Renny once had. Some of the existing elements that reflected the Moorish architecture principles were the following: terra-cotta decorations, contrasting muquarnas cornice frieze panels of glazed polychrome tiles, and four-tile glazed-ceramic pale blue plaques. A potential effort of radical preservation can include the reimagining of these ornamental features in potential memory projects.



