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Radical Preservation

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From our last class, and a visit to the historically rich Amsterdam news building, I was left with a few questions about my chosen site of study; located at the corner of Adam Clayton Powell Jr. Boulevard and 126th Street in Harlem stands a building whose facade betrays little of its layered past: the Harlem Alhambra opened in 1905 as a theater, designed by John Bailey McElfatrick as part of the vaudeville circuit, which, from the beginning, imposed a racial problematic. Although not always known by name, the Alhambra has long been a site of convergence for culture, resistance, and Black futurity.

Unlike other celebrated Harlem landmarks such as the famous Apollo Theater, the Alhambra has lived many lives: a ballroom, a movie house, a roller rink, and now, a multi-use event space. This fluidity isn't a sign of dilution but rather a reflection of Harlem's survival tactics: adaptability as resistance. For radical preservationists, in my view, the Alhambra invites a different question, not "What was preserved?" but "What was allowed to persist despite decades in neglect?"

What sets the Alhambra apart from other historic theaters is its marginal visibility in dominant narratives of Harlem's cultural renaissance. Its partial erasure speaks volumes. Preservation, when framed within a logic of capital or aesthetics alone, tends to flatten sites into monuments, dead spaces for other types of consumption. But the Alhambra resists this fate. It has refused to become a mausoleum for Black culture. Instead, it has shape-shifted Harlem's needs: a modern ballroom for jazz-age gatherings, a nightclub for hip-hop rise, and a roller rink for youth escapism during crisis. This elasticity is not accidental; it is a testament to an intangible heritage, to community ownership that cares for its historical value and that has pushed its relevance into the arts and entertainment.

Radical preservation must engage with places like the Alhambra not as static artifacts but as active participants in a living archive. Its history is not always glamorous, but it is communal and improvisational, two traits essential to Black survival in a city bent on gentrification and forgetting.

To radically preserve the Alhambra ballroom is not to restore it to a "former glory" imagined through whitewashed nostalgia and glamour. It is to honor the site's improvisational strategies for living. This means centering oral histories, ephemeral events, and the memories of those who danced, gathered, and survived within its walls. It means resisting the market-driven logic that preserves only what can be commodified.



*The Alhambra today: the unassuming facade hiding a layered past. (Photo: sergio bossa)*