
Radical Preservation at the Lincoln Theater

The Lincoln Theater, located at 58 W 135th Street near Lenox Avenue in Harlem, tells a layered story about culture, memory, and preservation. Opened in 1915, it was the first theater in Harlem built specifically for Black audiences at a time when most major theaters excluded or restricted them. This made the Lincoln an essential gathering space and one of the earliest cultural anchors in the neighbourhood.

The theater began its life as the Nিকেlette, a nickelodeon established in 1909. It was later purchased by Maria C. Downs, who expanded it to 850 seats and reopened it as the Lincoln Theater. During its golden years, the theater hosted legendary performers like Bessie Smith, Florence Mills, Ma Rainey (this was the only New York stage she ever performed on), Ethel Waters, and a young Fats Waller, who played the organ at just 15. The Anita Bush Stock Company also performed there, making the Lincoln a true hub for Black artistic expression and performance.

By the late 1920s, the Lincoln shifted into cinema under Frank Schiffman, and ownership changed again in the 1930s. It closed as a theater in 1952 and was later converted into the Metropolitan A.M.E. Church. While its exterior was remodelled with a modern façade in the 1960s, much of its original interior architecture still survives today. Inside, the Mayan Revival proscenium, sloping floors, and box seating preserve a sense of its theater past, even as the building functions in a very different way.

The Lincoln theater raises important questions about what we choose to preserve and how. From the outside, its architectural identity as a theater has been erased, but inside, traces of cultural memory remain. This tension captures the spirit of what some call “radical preservation” it’s not just about keeping bricks and stone intact, but about safeguarding the stories, voices, and communities tied to a space. The Lincoln is both tangible history (the preserved interior) and intangible history (the performances, memories, and cultural production that once filled the theater).

For Harlem, the Lincoln Theater’s legacy is more than a building. It represents resilience, creativity, and a determination to carve out spaces of belonging. Even though it now serves as a church, its adaptive reuse shows how cultural memory can survive through transformation. In this way, the Lincoln is not just a reminder of the past but an example of how communities negotiate change while holding on to identity.

The Lincoln theater reminds us that preservation is never just about saving a building. It’s about protecting the heritage of the people who shaped it and making sure their stories remain visible, even when the façade has changed.