

# Good Preservation In Harlem

Method Name: *"The Living Manifesto"*

*A Radical Preservation Method for Rethinking  
Architectural Preservation Beyond the Shell*

# Hypothesis

In Harlem, the preservation of historically Black buildings often prioritizes real estate value and the survival of tangible forms only when they are deemed aesthetically “valuable.” This approach can result in lifeless facades—buildings stripped of their social and cultural DNA, while community authorship and identity are erased or displaced. Harlem teaches us that preservation without community participation risks becoming another form of erasure, ultimately clearing space for institutional or commercial interests.

# Site Locations

- 1. **Victoria Theater**
- 2. **Alhambra Ballroom**
- 3. **Small's Paradise**
- 4. **NAMA**
- 5. **Amsterdam News**



# Please, Join Us.

This brochure invites you to explore notable examples of radical preservation. Through these case studies, we encourage you to question, reflect, and form your own position by analyzing how each project engages with Harlem's rapidly changing cultural fabric. We invite you to think with us about what it means to practice good preservation—what happens when it is done thoughtfully, who should benefit, and why it matters for a community like Harlem, as well as for many others across the country.

## **Below you will find our set of goals:**

- Challenge the static, top-down model of “preservation”.
- Encourage the community to define their own heritage.
- Calls to action, educates and serves as living records that evolve with time.
- Recognizes buildings that have the potential to preserve Harlem's historical legacy compared to those that endanger its fabric in an ever- gentrifying environment only driven by economics and aesthetics.
- Place efforts in defining what good architectural preservation is and it's meaning.

# What's at Stake

- Loss of Harlem's sonic, performative, and sociocultural legacy.
- Erasure of lived experiences and community memory.
- Commercial redevelopment flattening cultural significance and displacing smaller business owners.
- Disconnect between physical preservation and cultural survival

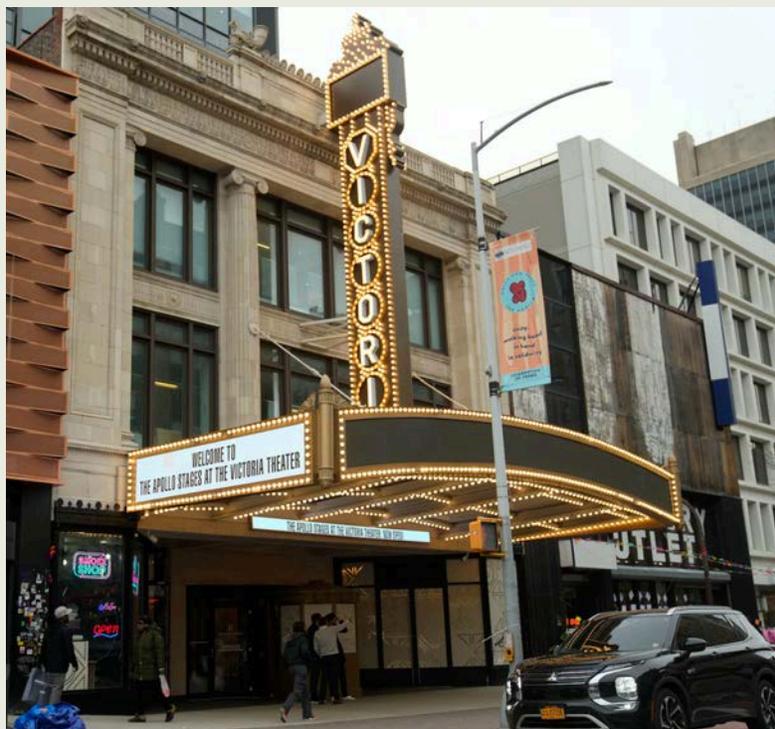
# Themes & Questions

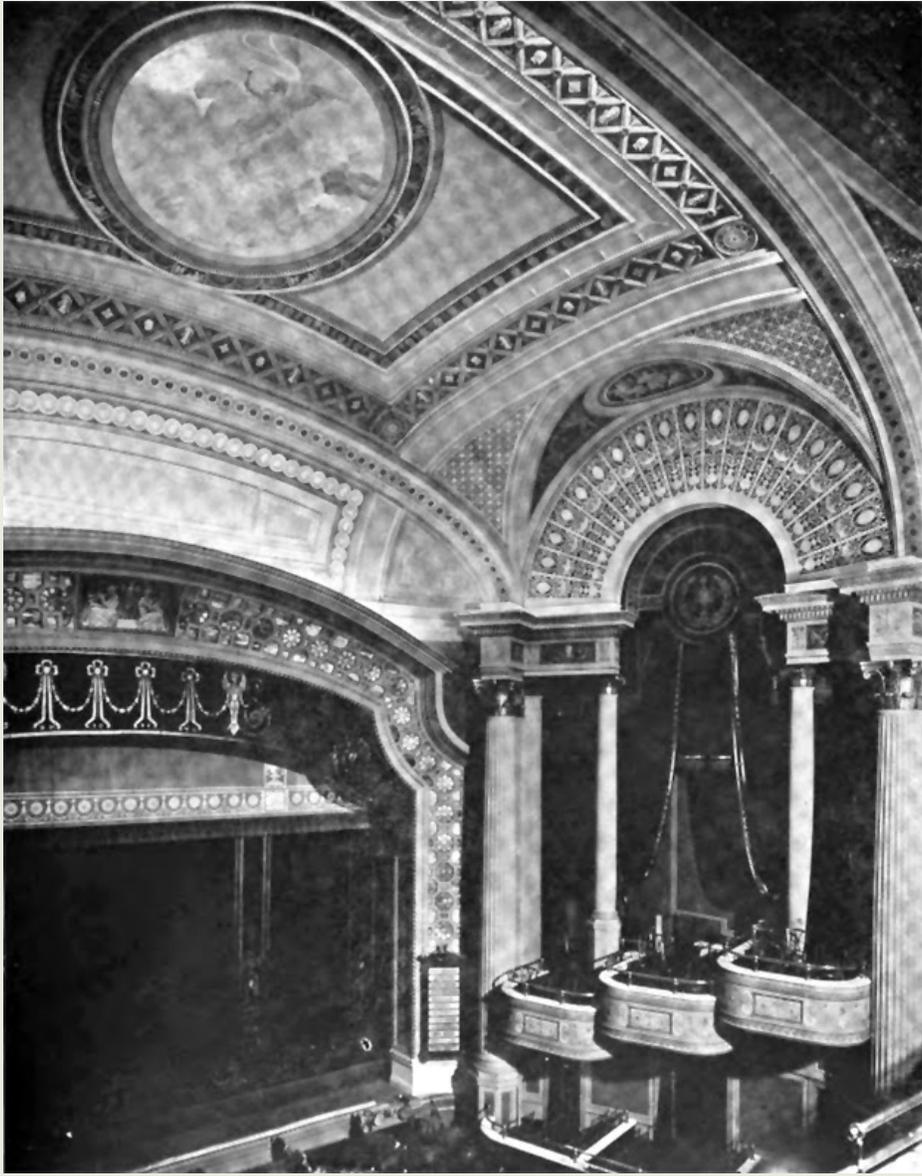
1. When sites like the Alhambra and the Loew's Victoria Theater are preserved primarily as commercial heritage, do they sustain Harlem's cultural survival, or do they convert living memory into marketable history?
2. How much do these types of programs serve the community?
3. How can these historically community defining places be reprogrammed successfully for a long time?

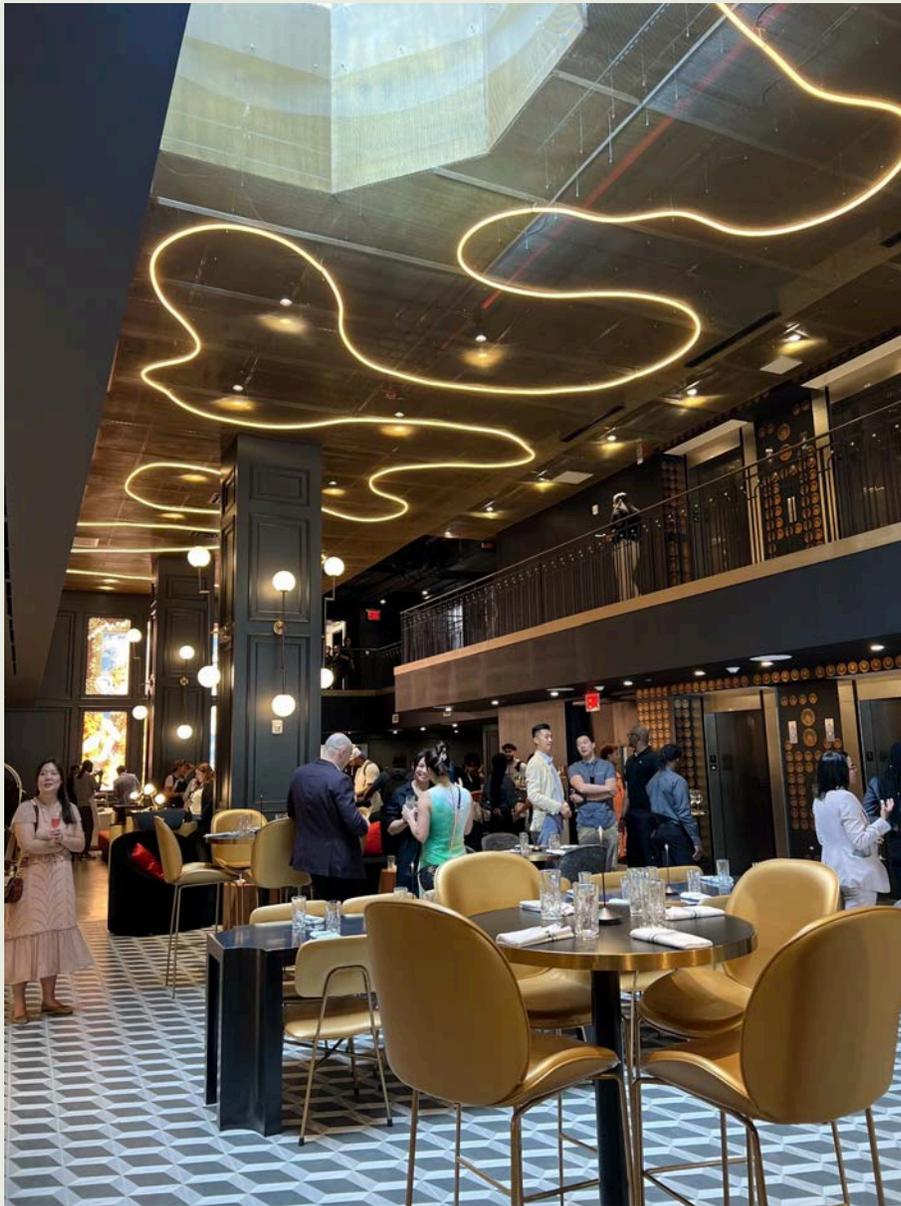
- Tangible vs. Intangible Heritage
- Preservation vs. "Heritage"
- Survival and Commodification
- Cultural Pride and Community Authorship

# **Predatory Conservation**

# Victoria Theater







The Apollo Stages at the Victoria Theater



# Alhambra Theater



- Originally planned as the Auditorium Theatre, the Alhambra Theatre opened on May 15, 1905. The building contained a ballroom. By 1926 it was operated by the B.F. Keith chain.
- It was closed in November 1964 with Elizabeth Taylor in "Cleopatra".



- At this point, the theatre had been gutted internally and used as an office space, a restaurant, and a bowling alley.
- After 1964 the Alhambra fell in serious disrepair until hosting 600-people for a light show by German designer Ingo Maurer on May 22, 2000 called *Harlem Nights: A Night at the Alhambra*.



- The light show attracted investment, including a bowling alley, and the top floor reopened in 2003 as *The Alhambra Ballroom Inc.*, Hosting a variety of social events. It also housed multiple short-lived Tenants on ground level.
- Filed chapter 7 bankruptcy on August 19, 2020 due to Covid



“The alley had 24 lanes, a sports bar, a kitchen, and a smattering of flat-screen televisions, arcade games and party rooms. *“It cost about **\$5 million** to open”*, Ms. Joseph said, adding that she has also spent \$1 million on renovations and maintenance.”

As the economy slowed down in 2008, the loss of money from investors and hardship in obtaining credit, the owner saw herself closing down as she could not financially sustain the alley.



The Alhambra Ballroom poses a **paradox**, once a site of joy, music, performance, and Black cultural self-determination, now houses an IRS tax office, a tool, a striking symbol of bureaucracy, surveillance, and economic regulation.

The internal revenue service (IRS) has existed since the 19<sup>th</sup> century and it has served its purpose accordingly, however, during the 50s-70s it was sometimes used as an institution that interfered and targeted with non-profits of political movements under some administrations which added vulnerability to audits and pressure.

- Scrutinized and investigated Black-led organizations (like the NAACP, SCLC, SNCC) under the guise of “tax compliance.”
- Threatened to revoke nonprofit status for groups engaged in “political” or “protest” activities — a tactic that quietly discouraged or complicated activism.



Alhambra of the Past



Alhambra in the Present

# Claremont Theater



# Claremont Theater

- Built in 1914 as one of Harlem's earliest movie palaces, the theater hosted films, live performances.
- Historically, the theater was a vibrant community hub, where Black audiences gathered for films, live music, and social interaction, shaping Harlem's public culture.

In recent years the theater survives physically, yet its cultural purpose has been commodified — transformed into retail/storage use, losing its function as a community-centered cultural site.

## **Tangible vs. Intangible Heritage**

- **Tangible:** The façade and shell endure as a material link to Harlem's cultural past.
- **Intangible:** The theater's collective creativity is missing, illustrating the fragility of intangible heritage even when buildings survive around economics and when profit become the drive of a "successful" program.

## **Future Possibilities / Critical Reflection:**

Developers and commercial tenants gain from the building's adaptability, while the community loses an accessible space for cultural expression. The lack of a permanent sensitive program may allow for a change that could further thin the Harlem historic fabric.

# Effect ?

**Loss of historical integrity:** Buildings are not just facades. Interiors, spatial layout, histories, acoustics, and scale all matter. When those are removed or drastically altered, much of what made the place historically and socially meaningful is lost.

**Cultural erasure:** Even when physical markers remain, the living culture, the practices, people, & memories may dissipate. The building becomes a backdrop rather than a living site. The projects may accelerate gentrification, displacement, loss of local businesses/culture, under the guise of nostalgia in “restoration” or “revival.”

## **Critical Reflection:**

As in any other capitalistic environment, income must drive these projects; they must be financially sustainable to survive and when smaller business owners do not have enough cushion unforeseen circumstances, they have no option than to close. There needs to be some sort of support.

# **Good Preservation**

# New Amsterdam Musical Association





 **New Amsterdam Musical Association**

## N.A.M.A IS PROUD TO ANNOUNCE:

NAMA was AWARDED an African American Cultural Heritage Action Fund GRANT on 7/18/24 from the National Trust for Historic Preservation!

This funding supports a pivotal milestone in our historic renovations of N.A.M.A's historic facade, doors, windows, and electrical upgrades!



New Amsterdam Musical Association is one of 30 sites to receive a total of \$3 million in grant funding to advance ongoing preservation activities for historic sites, buildings, and landscapes that represent Black cultural heritage. With more than \$140 million raised, the Action Fund is the largest U.S. resource dedicated to the preservation of African American historic places.

To learn more about this program and this year's grant recipients, visit [savingplaces.org/actionfund](https://savingplaces.org/actionfund).  
<https://NamaHarlem.org>



- NAMA is the oldest Black-founded musical organization in the U.S., located in Harlem.
- The building has served as a community support and performance space for Black musicians for over a century.

The recent preservation funding grant explicitly notes **safety issues** with the building's façade, windows, and electrical systems, previously posing a direct threat to the physical structure (the tangible) and, by extension, to the intangible cultural practices housed within. This becomes a **compelling** example of Preservation vs. "Heritage," where maintaining the building allows it to continue serving the local Black music community rather than existing only as a symbolic artifact.

# Minton Playhouse (1940)



1940s Hotel Cecil and Minton Playhouse



Louis Armstrong famously played at the original Minton Playhouse



Billie Holiday singing at the Minton

Minton's Playhouse was a legendary jazz club located in Harlem, New York City. Founded in 1938 by tenor saxophonist Henry Minton, it became one of the most important venues in jazz history. During the 1940s, Minton's hosted late-night jam sessions where musicians such as Thelonious Monk, Charlie Parker, Dizzy Gillespie, and Kenny Clarke experimented with new musical ideas, helping to create and shape the bebop movement. Known for its innovative spirit and vibrant atmosphere, Minton's Playhouse symbolized Harlem's central role in the evolution of modern jazz.

# Minton Playhouse (Today)



Hosting a jam session for artist to showcase their talents



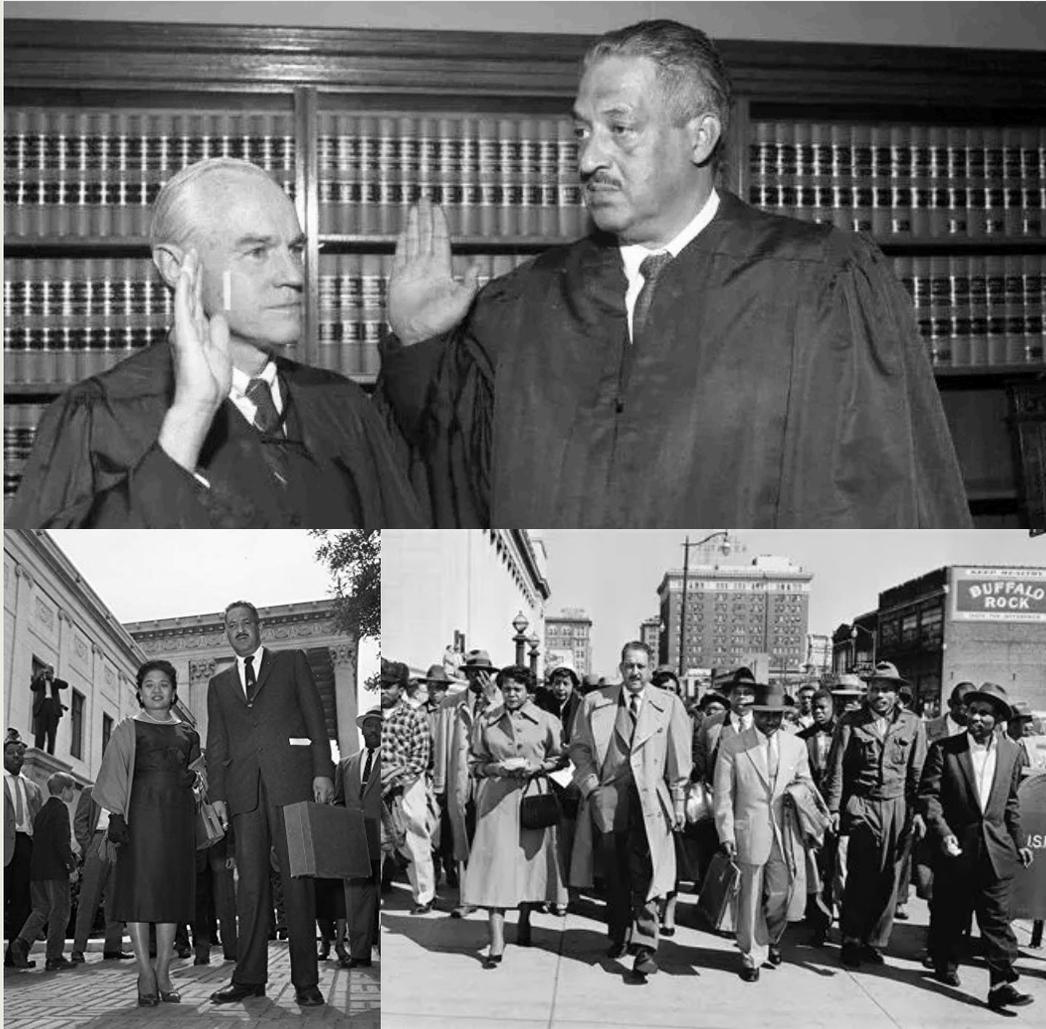
# Small's Paradise



- Opened in 1925, owned by Ed Smalls (an African-American business owner)
- The site has undergone adaptive reuse: the original club closed in the 1980s; the building now houses Thurgood Marshall Academy since 1993. expanded in 2004.
- It shows the tension of **Preservation vs. Heritage**: the façade and location remain, but the meaning has shifted.



- Intangible: What changed? The original social/nightclub functions of the venue (music, dance, nightlife) are no longer present. Instead, it's repurposed as a school-institution. Therefore, while the building is alive, the original intangible cultural practices are shifted or transformed into educational practices.
- This contrast offers a clear example: you have a “heritage” (building) preserved, but intangible memory (nightlife, cultural gathering) shifted.
- The educational Facility helps “immortalize” the site’s history as long as its accessibility to schooling in this rebranded place remains for the community.



- In 2004 Mayor Bloomberg along with chancellor Klein joined the Abyssinian Development Corporation, and other notable individuals to open the first school in 50 years honoring its name to Thurgood Marshall, one of Harlem's most eminent residents. *"A champion for freedom"*
  - Thurgood Marshall had historically won the **Brown vs. Board of Education** case in dedication to make the nation just. He was an Architect of Equality, setting the foundation for desegregation in schools.
- Harlem was at his core, shaping him and later serving as his headquarters for strategy and spirit during his career. This school serves as extension of his mission.
- The educational Facility helps immortalize the site's history while strengthening the rebranding that honors a man whose values and dedication change the country for good, a school dedicated in the next chapters by new generations

## Student Demographics

Female	<b>44%</b>	Male	<b>56%</b>
White	<b>2.0%</b>	Black or African American	<b>63.1%</b>
Hispanic/Latino	<b>30.1%</b>	American Indian or Alaska Native	<b>2.6%</b>
Two or more races	<b>0.9%</b>	Asian or Asian/Pacific Islander	<b>0.7%</b>
Native Hawaiian or Other Pacific Islander	<b>0.7%</b>		
<small>Not Specified is not included in this breakdown due to an enrollment of 0%.</small>			
Economically Disadvantaged Students at Thurgood Marshall Academy for Learning & Social Change	<b>90%</b>		

- The school is committed to centering Harlem’s rich history in its curriculum, to build student engagement, and pride.
- There is an emphasis in literacy and social studies lessons centering on local cultural heritage, the Harlem renaissance, civil rights, civil rights, and black history.

### What Happens When Good Preservation Occurs?

- A program like this sustains Harlem’s community over time by educating its youth, fostering local pride, and transforming a historic site into a space of opportunity. It ensures that the legacy of the building continues not only as architecture, but as a living fabric, in this case, an institution where learning and belonging reinforces Harlem’s cultural identity.

**Strong Potential**

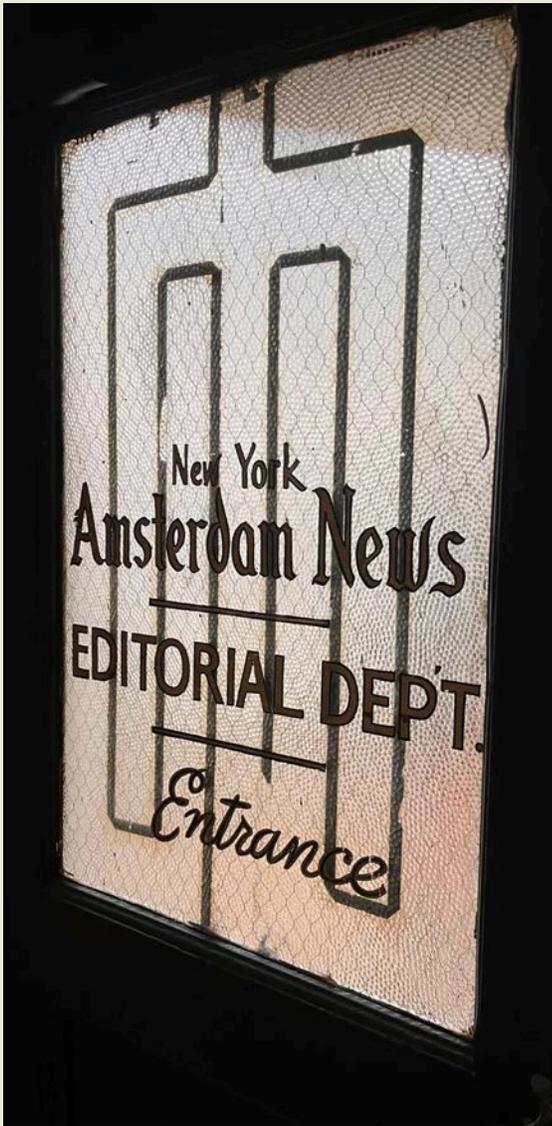
# The Amsterdam News Building



- **The Amsterdam News, founded in 1909**, was one of the nation's earliest and most influential Black-owned newspapers. *It gave voice to Harlem's political, social, and cultural movements, reporting on issues of segregation, housing, and Black empowerment.*

## **Tangible vs. Intangible Heritage**

- Tangible: The building and its façade remain part of the boulevard's historic fabric.
- Intangible: The Amsterdam News headquartered here has long been a platform for Black political debate, cultural coverage, and community advocacy
  - Publishing voices that shaped local and national conversations on civil rights, housing, and Black cultural life.



## History & Facts

- By the 1930s its success made it the second official black newspaper after (Chicago defender) it was after its expansion that it relocated to where it stands now.
- During the Civil Rights Movement of the 50s-60s the paper gave full support notably publishing strong figures as: W.E.B Du Bois, Roy Wilkins, Adam Clayton Powell Jr. and the first to recognize Malcom X as a powerful voice.



### **Survival and Commodification**

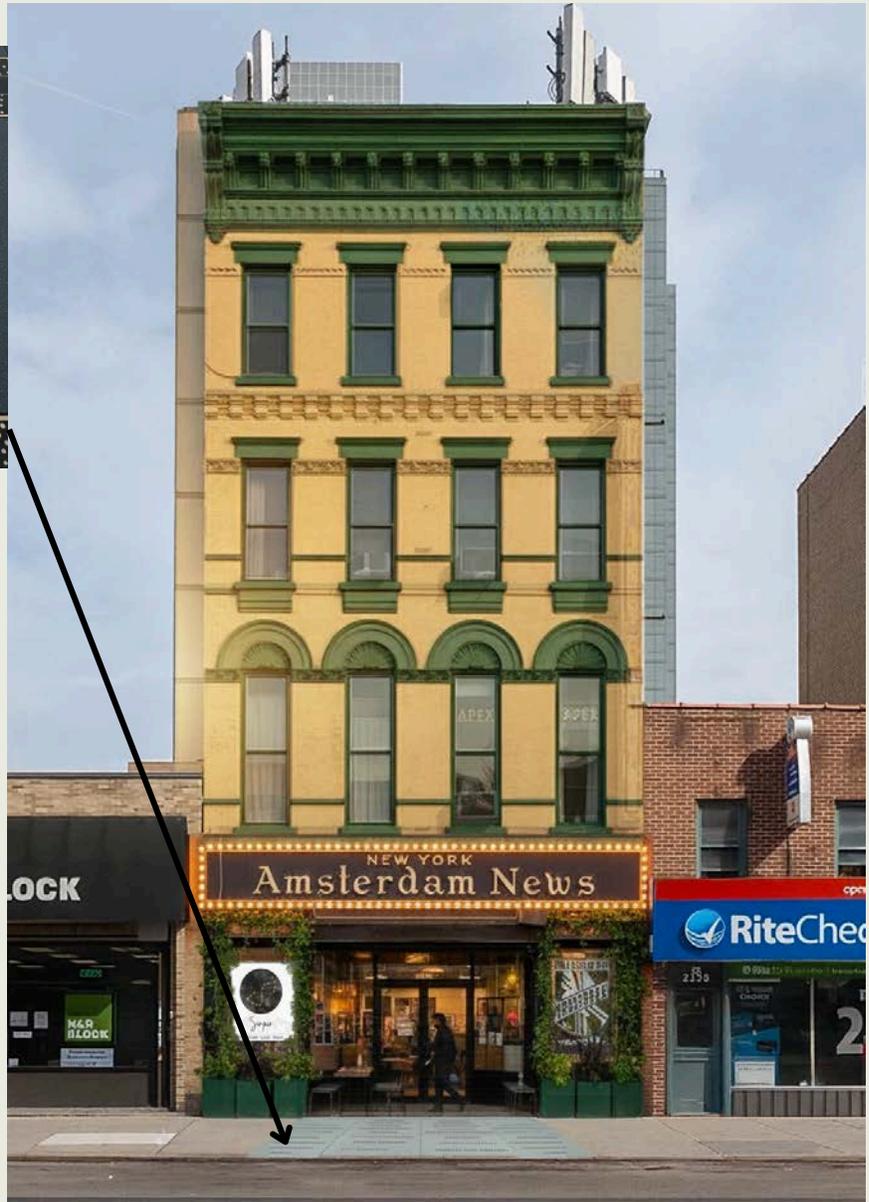
- The paper's continued tenancy demonstrates survival through institutional continuity within a rapidly changing corridor, yet it remains vulnerable without sufficient resources and programming support to center community needs.

### **Future possibilities**

- To strengthen the link between tangible and intangible heritage, proposals have included an on-site public reading room and archive of Amsterdam News back issues; youth journalism workshops connected to local schools; rotating exhibitions; and spaces for public debate, including the possibility of a podcast studio to engage younger generations through social media. These interventions would ensure that preservation efforts support living cultural practices rather than passive commemoration.



- Black historical figures and Writers adding a few inviting features to the building to attract visitors.
- A digital news board displaying weather, advertisements, local updates, and historic facts would further reinforce its identity as a living information center. Similar to older Newspaper Ads.



# Other Practices Preservation Should Include



## Archival Recovery

Photographs, architectural drawings, sound recordings, and newspapers tracing the site's evolution.

## Oral Histories

Interviews with Harlem residents to surface untold stories and emotional connections.

## Soundscapes

Reintroduction of music once performed in these places, layered into immersive audio installations.

## Mixed Media Installation

Murals, projections, and interactive archives that blend tangible and intangible heritage.

## Pop-Up Stages

Temporary performance spaces that activate public memory and cultural pride in everyday life.

# How to Go About It



- Partner with local historians, artists, and community members to co-create the archive.
- Use multimedia tools (AR, audio, projection mapping) to transform the ballroom for example and surrounding spaces into living memory zones.
- Install pop-up stages and sound installations in public areas to democratize access to Harlem's cultural legacy.
- Design community workshops to gather stories, remix archival materials, and foster intergenerational dialogue.

# Sources

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- Happy Birthday Thurgood Marshall: Harlem's Architect of Equality - Harlem America.
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- Harlem's Historic Amsterdam News Building Faces Uncertain Future - New York Almanack.
- A Harlem Icon At Risk: The Fight To Preserve The Amsterdam News Legacy.
- About - New York Amsterdam News.

**THANK YOU!**