



August 2, 2023

Hon. Sarah Carroll, Chair  
Landmarks Preservation Commission  
1 Centre Street, 9th floor  
New York, NY 10007

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**RE: Additional Information Regarding Historic Significance of  
Theatre 80/78-80 St. Mark's Place, Manhattan**

Dear Hon. Sarah Carroll,

I write to share additional information regarding the historic and cultural significance of 78-80 St Mark's Place, which houses Theatre 80, and to strongly urge the Landmarks Preservation Commission to further consider our request for the evaluation of 78-80 St. Mark's Place as an individual landmark.

In our initial request for evaluation of April 25, 2023, we detailed the buildings' origins as a pair of single-family row houses, constructed circa 1845 in the Greek Revival style, converted to multi-family residences in the 19th century to serve incoming waves of immigration in the neighborhood, and subsequently altered at the ground floor to accommodate commercial uses beginning in the early 20th century.

In the response letter from LPC Director of Research Kate Lemos McHale dated July 3, 2023, she noted that the buildings "lack architectural significance and the integrity normally required for consideration as landmarks... [and their] history as a changing cultural venue is similar to many buildings in the East Village including within the designated East Village-Lower East Side Historic District." While we recognize that these buildings were altered in the 20th century, we assert that, in this case, the alterations of approximately a century ago are tied to the buildings' significance and speak to its important history.

As a well-frequented speakeasy during Prohibition, 80 St. Mark's Place is one of the last remaining vestiges of this important era of New York City's history. In 1934, Walter Scheib, who owned the adjacent butchery at 82 St. Mark's Place (which simultaneously served as the hidden entrance to the speakeasy next door), installed a large projecting sign for "Scheib's Bar" at the second floor of the primary facade of 80 St. Mark's Place, announcing one of New York City's first legal bars after the end of Prohibition. His liquor license notification first appeared in the *Irish Advocate* in April 1934.

The original sign, which read “Scheib’s Bar / Dining–Dancing / 3 Shows Every [Night]” is visible in the below circa 1938 photograph. The current “Theatre 80 St Marks” sign is in the same location, demonstrating that there has been similar signage in place at this location along the streetscape for almost 100 years.



*78-80 St. Mark's Pl. circa 1938*



*78-80 St. Mark's Pl. today*

Though the first-floor commercial addition is not yet present at the time of the c. 1938 photograph (note the striped awning in its stead), by circa 1940 the addition had been constructed, per the tax photograph. Acknowledging that the Landmarks Preservation Commission typically values original features, in this case the alteration is meaningful, as the 1940s marked the beginning of this storefront’s continuous use as a significant entertainment venue. While the upper floors of 78-80 St. Mark’s Place retained their original Greek Revival details (and do to this day), both the combining of the two buildings at the interior, and the construction of the addition at the first floor of 80 St. Mark’s Place, facilitated a shift in use: Scheib’s Bar evolved into a full cabaret, and additional space was needed to accommodate the entertainment activities. The circa 1940 alterations remain extant and reflect the buildings’ significance as a cultural venue during this time period and beyond. As elaborated upon in our initial request and below, the notable people who inhabited the space, and famed entertainment ventures that thrived here during the mid-to-late 20<sup>th</sup> century, deem this building worthy of landmark designation.



*1940s tax photograph*

We have confirmed that the abstract expressionist painter Elaine de Kooning (1918-1989) lived and kept a studio on the second floor of 80 St. Mark’s Place in

the late 1950s, during which time she painted her famed work, “Bill at St. Mark’s” (1956), among other pieces. She moved into 80 St. Mark’s Place upon separating from her husband, the artist Willem de Kooning, and her years living alone in this building were among the most fruitful of her career. According to several sources, de Kooning was initially taken aback by the loud music that wafted into her working and living quarters from the cabaret and restaurant below. The Landmarks Preservation Commission is yet to designate or recognize any significant number of sites for their connections to women artists such as Elaine de Kooning.

As we noted previously, by 1959 the Jazz Gallery opened at 78-80 St. Mark’s Place. This music club was owned by brothers Iggy and Joe Termini, who also owned the Five Spot, another renowned East Village jazz club. Musicians who performed at the Jazz Gallery included Harry Belafonte, Thelonious Monk, John Coltrane, Frank Sinatra, and Horace Silver. In 1960 the hipster monologist and performance artist known as Lord Buckley gave his last performance here at the Jazz Gallery, which closed in 1964.

That year, Howard Otway (1920-1994) purchased the houses from Scheib, and with architect Miller Breslin converted the ground floor space into a theater (retaining the 1840s facades and 1940s addition and exterior features). Known as Theatre 80, this Off-Off Broadway venue premiered and ran the musical *You’re a Good Man Charlie Brown* for a remarkable 1,597 performances. In the summer of 1971, building on the success of *Charlie Brown*, Otway pivoted to exclusively showing old musical films, at a time when revival theaters were just starting to come into vogue. The decision proved to be a hugely successful one, and Theatre 80 became renowned as a revival movie house, with ticket lines sometimes extending down the block all the way to Second Avenue. The 199-seat movie theater was one of the last



Mini “walk of fame” at 78-80 St. Mark’s Pl. sidewalk

revival theaters to close in New York City, holding out until 1994 (at which point Howard’s son Lorcan Otway re-opened it as a live theater venue). It was the city’s first and longest-running dedicated revival movie house, and is one of only a few such theaters in Lower Manhattan that remains almost entirely physically intact (due largely to its successful and seamless reversion to a live theater in the 1990s).

Howard Otway invited the famed actress and producer Gloria Swanson to host a grand celebration for the

inaugural movie musical revival series in August 1971, during which the mini “walk of fame” was first installed at the sidewalk, a feature that [LPC may have previously indicated interest in landmarking](#) in 1999, according to an article in *The New York Times* (it was denied consideration for designation at the

time due to the installation not yet being 30 years old). By year's end, others had come by to add their autographs to the paving, including Joan Crawford, Joan Blondell, Ruby Keeler, and Myrna Loy. The significance of the sidewalk is certainly worthy of revisiting by the Commission.

Over the years, Otway diversified his library to include films beyond musicals, but continued to show his most popular musicals annually. Otway would also purchase the rights to films whose copyrights had expired, and he dabbled in film restoration, often restoring deleted or particularly fragile segments of the 16mm filmstrips. 78-80 St. Mark's Place remains a relic of this important film theater history.

Regarding the contention that the alterations to the building disqualify it for consideration for landmark designation, the LPC has repeatedly shown that buildings may be designated due to their cultural significance, in spite of, or in deference to, later alterations. This should be the case for 78-80 St. Mark's Place, whose early 20th-century alterations occurred prior to its transformation into a celebrated theater, and whose amalgamation of original 1840s features and a 1940s first-floor addition reflect the significance of its change in use.

Take, for example, the [Louis Armstrong House \(LP-1555\)](#), which was designated as an individual landmark in 1988 for its significance as the home of Louis Armstrong for 28 years. The LPC designation report notes that the house at 34-56 107th Street was originally a "two-family, two-story frame structure with a flat roof," and that later alterations included the addition of a garage, a first-floor addition that obstructs the original projecting bay, aluminum sheathing at the exterior (subsequently covered with brick cladding), and a third story with a peaked roof that appears to have been added by the Armstrongs. While the "appearance of the house today is essentially the same as when the Armstrongs lived there" beginning in 1943, it is markedly different from its original design of 1910. Similarly to 80 St. Mark's Place, 34-56 107th Street retains its original cornice, but the modifications to the facade are otherwise much more extreme. Despite considerable architectural alterations, the house was considered worthy of landmark designation by the Commission for its cultural significance.

Additional buildings designated in recent years for their cultural import, conspicuous architectural changes notwithstanding, include [Julius' Bar Building \(LP-2663\)](#), originally built in 1826 and altered in 1868, 1874, c. 1893-95, c. 1911-16, c. 1920-30, and 1982; and the [James Baldwin Residence \(LP-2636\)](#), built in 1890 with the current facade dating to a 1961 alteration, among others. These buildings were designated for the significance of the people who inhabited them and/or the cultural events that took place inside. Similarly, 78-80 St. Mark's Place deserves status as an individual landmark for the many ways in which the buildings contributed to the shaping of cultural history in the East Village and in New York City and beyond. It would be contradictory for LPC to disregard 78-80 St Mark's Place's merit as a worthy individual landmark on the basis that the buildings "lack architectural significance and the integrity normally required for consideration as landmarks."

Thank you for your further consideration of this critical piece of the East Village and New York City's rich and diverse history. We urge you to act as soon as possible, as Theatre 80 has been sold at auction, and this valuable cultural and architectural heritage is under immediate threat.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in blue ink, appearing to read "Andrew Berman". The signature is fluid and cursive, with the first name "Andrew" written in a larger, more prominent script than the last name "Berman".

Andrew Berman  
Executive Director

Cc:     Preservation League of New York State  
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          New York Landmarks Conservancy  
          Historic Districts Council  
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