

FROM	NAME & TITLE	CHRIS RYER, DIRECTOR 	CITY of BALTIMORE MEMO	
	AGENCY NAME & ADDRESS	DEPARTMENT OF PLANNING 8 TH FLOOR, 417 EAST FAYETTE STREET		
	SUBJECT	CITY COUNCIL BILL #22-0263 / LANDMARK LIST: EXTERIORS – HARLEM THEATER		

TO

The Honorable President and
Members of the City Council
City Hall, Room 400
100 North Holliday Street

DATE: November 4, 2022

At its regular meeting of November 3, 2022, the Planning Commission considered City Council Bill #22-0263, for the purpose of designating the Harlem Theater, 616 North Gilmor Street (Block 0110, Lot 008), as an historical landmark: exterior.

In its consideration of this Bill, the Planning Commission reviewed the attached staff report, which recommended approval of City Council Bill #22-0263 and adopted the following resolutions, with seven members being present (seven in favor):

RESOLVED, That the Planning Commission concurs with the recommendation of its departmental staff, adopts the findings and equity analysis outlined in the staff report, with consideration for testimony and facts presented in the meeting, and recommends that City Council Bill #22-0263 be **approved** by the City Council.

If you have any questions, please contact Mr. Eric Tiso, Division Chief, Land Use and Urban Design Division at 410-396-8358.

CR/ewt

attachment

cc: Ms. Natasha Mehu, Mayor's Office
Ms. Nina Themelis, Mayor's Office
Mr. Ethan Cohen, Mayor's Office
The Honorable Eric Costello, Council Rep. to Planning Commission
Mr. Matthew Stegman, City Council President's Office
Ms. Nikki Thompson, City Council President's Office
Mr. Colin Tarbert, BDC
Ms. Rebecca Witt, BMZA
Mr. Geoffrey Veale, Zoning Administration
Ms. Stephanie Murdock, DHCD
Ms. Elena DiPietro, Law Dept.
Mr. Francis Burnszynski, PABC
Mr. Liam Davis, DOT
Ms. Natawna Austin, Council Services



Brandon M. Scott
Mayor

PLANNING COMMISSION

Sean D. Davis, Chair; Eric Stephenson, Vice Chair

STAFF REPORT



Chris Ryer
Director

November 3, 2022

REQUEST: City Council Bill #22-0263/ Landmark List: Exteriors – Harlem Theater:
For the purpose of designating the Harlem Theater, 616 North Gilmore Street (Block 0110, Lot 008), as an historical landmark: exterior.

RECOMMENDATION: Approval

STAFF: Lauren Schiszik

INTRODUCED BY: Councilmember Bullock

OWNER: Ajour Real Estate Group, LLC

SITE/GENERAL AREA

Site Conditions: The Harlem Theater, originally constructed as a church, has a commanding presence on N. Gilmore Street, facing Harlem Square. Three stories tall, the 60' wide façade is faced with rusticated granite blocks and marble trim. Designed in the Romanesque style, the five-bay wide façade is a study in projections and recesses, with the middle three bays projecting slightly between heavy columns, the side bays recessed. Each bay features arched doorways at the base; the central bay has been replaced with a modern storefront. In the central bay, Formstone covers the walls, marking where the large marquee had been installed. In the upper stories, the bays feature long arched window openings, surmounted by light-grey marble lintels; originally these opening held stained glass windows. Today, there are smaller windows punched into the openings at regular intervals, and the rest of the window openings are infilled and painted with an ornate gold trellis pattern. Over the middle bays, the building rises with dentilled parapet wall, which was originally topped with a cross, now removed. A photo of the building, circa 1910, shows the handsome stone façade that exists today, though the lower central portion of the façade was altered when it became a theater. On the south and north brick elevations of the building, the outlines of large arched windows are visible, Gothic windows for the church that were bricked up when it became a theater. The rear of the building is a two-story stone building with a flat roof, its window openings infilled with brick.

General Area: This property is located on the west side of the 600 block of North Gilmore Street, in the Harlem Park neighborhood. Immediately across street to the east is the namesake park of the community, Harlem Square. This block is bound by Edmondson Avenue to the south, Harlem Avenue to the north, and Mount Street to the west. Vincent Street, an alley street, runs north to south through the block. The 600 block of N. Gilmore Street is comprised mainly of three-story Italianate brick rowhouses, some of which have been covered with Formstone. There has been

some demolition on the block, resulting in two empty lots on the south end of the block, but overall, this block is largely intact.

HISTORY

There are no previous legislative or Planning Commission actions regarding this site.

CONFORMITY TO PLANS

The designation request came from the owner of the property. The property is within the Harlem Park Project II Urban Renewal Plan, which was originally created in 1960 and most recently amended in 2010. The preservation of the building – and well as the future rehabilitation proposed by the owner – will support the goals of the Urban Renewal Plan. The request also conforms to the goals and objectives of the Baltimore City Comprehensive Master Plan, specifically PLAY Goal 1: Strengthen Stewardship of Historical and Cultural Resources; and LIVE Objective 4: Protect and Enhance the Preservation of Baltimore’s Historic Buildings and Neighborhoods.

ANALYSIS

Background: The Harlem Theater has served as a community anchor in Harlem Park for the majority of its existence. Originally a Romanesque-style church designed by Frank E. Davis for the congregation Harlem Park Methodist Episcopal Church in 1902, the history of this building is reflective of the neighborhood’s history. Originally, it was the spiritual home of many White residents of the neighborhood for several decades. Following the neighborhood’s rapid transition in the 1920s to a Black neighborhood, the church was transformed by architect Theodore Wells Pietsch into an opulent first-run movie theater for Black Baltimoreans. Along with being a movie theater, it was also a venue for theater and concerts, and was an important center of community that operated for four decades, closing its door after desegregation. The Harlem Theater is the sole surviving first-run theater that was built for Black Baltimoreans. In the 1970s, it became a house of worship again, for the Harlem Park Community Baptist Church. The church closed in 2019, and sold the property to a church member. AJOR Real Estate Group, led by Angela Francis, is comprised of residents and church members in Harlem Park, existing under the umbrella organization Baltimore’s Coalition for Positive Change. It is a socially conscious real estate development company created to push back the threat of displacement. They plan to undertake a redevelopment of the Harlem Theater that is intended to be a catalyst for the community and anchor community-driven work on other properties in the neighborhood.

This is the second public hearing for this property as part of the Baltimore City Landmark designation process. The first hearing was the October 11, 2022 hearing of the Commission for Historical and Architectural Preservation (CHAP), during which the Commission reviewed and recommended approval of Landmark designation because it meets criteria 1 and 3 of CHAP’s criteria for designation. The Commission recommended approval of the landmark designation, and made minor recommendations regarding the name of the landmark, proposing “Harlem Theatre” to reflect the name that was used historically, and updating the address to the current legal address of the parcel.

Equity Analysis

1. Short- or long-term impact on surrounding community: The designation of this structure as a Baltimore City Landmark will have a physical impact on the surrounding community, as

landmark designation typically results in the preservation of significant historic sites in perpetuity. The designation of this property as a Baltimore City Landmark also offers a significant impact to the community in that it legally codifies the value that the community places on this building. This is a cherished community landmark, according to Rev. George Nicholson, President of the Harlem Park Neighborhood Council, Inc.

2. Impact on Baltimore's existing patterns of inequity: Two of the three first-run theaters established for Black Baltimoreans during the Jim Crow era – the Royal and the Regent theaters on Pennsylvania Avenue – have been demolished. The loss of these venues, particularly the Royal Theater, are still mourned today by many Baltimoreans. The Harlem Theater is the sole surviving first-run theater established for Black Baltimoreans, and the designation of this property as a Baltimore City Landmark will ensure that there is a public process with opportunity for citizen's input regarding proposed changes to the building, up to and including demolition.
3. Has the community been meaningfully engaged: The Harlem Park Neighborhood Council has been notified of this application as well as this hearing through email communication as well as via postings on the property. They submitted a letter of support for this landmark designation for the September CHAP hearing.
4. How are residents who have been historically excluded from planning processes being authentically included in the planning of the proposed policy or project: Harlem Park is a community that has been historically excluded from planning processes. This designation will ensure that any major proposed alterations to this property, including major additions, significant alterations, or proposed demolition, would require a public hearing in front of the Commission for Historical and Architectural Preservation (CHAP). This hearing would offer an opportunity for public testimony and thus input into any design proposal. There is currently no requirement for public input regarding proposed alterations to this structure.
5. Impact on Internal Operations: The designation of this property as a Baltimore City Landmark will result in historic preservation staff devoting time and effort to design review for all proposed exterior work. This may include advisory discussion sessions prior to the submission of applications, and the reviews themselves may entail public consideration by the Commission for Historical and Architectural Preservation, depending on the magnitude of proposed alterations. The designation will likely also result in staff input regarding potential funding sources, such as historic tax credits, letters of support for grants, etc.

Community Notification: Baltimore Heritage Inc., Baltimore National Heritage Area, Family Survivor Network Inc., Harlem Park Neighborhood Council Inc., and No Boundaries Coalition have been notified of this action. Additionally, the property has been posted in accordance with Planning Commission guidelines.



Chris Ryer
Director