



CITY PLANNING COMMISSION

August 23, 2023 / Calendar No. 6

N 240022 HIM

IN THE MATTER OF a communication dated July 6, 2023, from the Executive Director of the Landmarks Preservation Commission regarding the landmark designation of 935 St. Nicholas Avenue Building, 935 St. Nicholas Avenue (Block 2107, Lot 72) by the Landmarks Preservation Commission on June 27, 2023 (List No. 534/LP No. 2670), Borough of Manhattan, Community District 12.

Pursuant to Section 3020.8(b) of the City Charter, the City Planning Commission shall submit to the City Council a report with respect to the relation of any designation by the Landmarks Preservation Commission, whether of a historic district or a landmark, to the Zoning Resolution, projected public improvements, and any plans for the development, growth, improvement, or renewal of the area involved.

On June 27, 2023, the Landmarks Preservation Commission (LPC) designated 935 St. Nicholas Avenue Building as a New York City Landmark. The site is located at 935 St. Nicholas Avenue (Block 2107, Lot 72) on the corner of West 157th Street and St. Nicholas Avenue in Washington Heights, Manhattan Community Board 12. (Alternate addresses include 929-939 St. Nicholas Avenue and 462-466 West 157th Street.)

Designed by Gronenberg & Leuchtag and constructed in 1915 for the Lehigh Building Corporation, the six-story brick, limestone, and terracotta 935 St. Nicholas Avenue Building is an architecturally distinct early 20th-century Gothic Revival–style apartment house. The façade facing St. Nicholas Avenue is clad in blonde brick, rusticated at the first story, and divided by continuous brick and/or terra-cotta cornices above the first, fifth, and sixth stories. Ornamented with Gothic and Tudor design elements, the building’s eight bays are skillfully grouped to create the appearance of five bays. The West 157th Street facade is like the St. Nicholas Avenue façade, although it is more simply ornamented at the first and second stories of the center bay.

Located in an R7-2 district, the building is surrounded by mid-rise residential buildings and small retail stores along adjacent major avenues. Concentrated in Upper Manhattan, areas zoned

R7-2 are medium-density apartment house districts with FARs that range from 0.87 to 3.44, if following height factor regulations. Although 935 St. Nicholas Avenue sits within a single zoning district, the lot is adjacent to a C2-4 commercial overlay district along Amsterdam Avenue. Commercial overlays are mapped within residential districts to serve local retail needs. The landmark is in a Transit Zone and a FRESH Zone, as well.

In addition to its exemplary design, 935 St. Nicholas Avenue is historically and culturally significant as the onetime home of Edward Kennedy “Duke” Ellington and Noble Lee Sissle, two pioneers of jazz music who were among the most prolific composers, musicians, and bandleaders in American history.

Duke Ellington, the first internationally acclaimed jazz composer, once noted that, as a musician, “you have to go to New York to be recognized.” In 1927, Ellington began his tenure at the legendary Cotton Club where radio broadcasts provided him with a national audience, a first for a Black band leader. In 1939, Ellington moved to a fourth-floor apartment at 935 St. Nicholas Avenue. While living there with his family, he continued to gain national significance and influence for his musical suites that depicted African American life. Here, he penned some of his most popular and memorable compositions, including American jazz standards such as “Sophisticated Lady,” “Satin Doll,” and “Don’t Get Around Much Anymore.” Ellington lived in the building from 1939 to 1961, the height of his career.

Well into his tenure at 935 St. Nicholas Avenue, Ellington was joined by Noble Lee Sissle, a fellow jazz pioneer and an important figure of the Harlem Renaissance. Alongside Eubie Blake, in 1921 Sissle produced *Shuffle Along*, a Broadway musical that featured the first all-Black cast on the “Great White Way,” as Broadway was then known. Several songs from that musical became hits, “I’m Just Wild about Harry,” which would in 1948 be the campaign song for President Harry S. Truman. Their second successful Broadway musical, *Chocolate Dandies*, opened at the New Colonial Theatre in 1924-1925 and featured the young Josephine Baker.

Alongside his work as a jazz musician and composer, Sissle founded the Negro Actors Guild of America (NAG) and remained involved in this significant endeavor while he lived at 935 St. Nicholas Avenue. NAG assisted Black actors and entertainers and supported Black actors in contract negotiations. The organization also tried to eliminate the stereotyping of African

Americans in theatrical and cinematic performances. Sissle lived at 935 St. Nicholas Avenue from 1950 to 1972.

Pursuant to Section 74-79 of the Zoning Resolution, a landmark building may transfer its unused development rights to a contiguous lot or a lot that is across the street and opposite the landmark's zoning lot. If the landmark sits on a corner lot, its unused development rights may be transferred to a lot that fronts the same street intersection as the lot occupied by the landmark. In this case, the lot occupied by 935 St. Nicholas Avenue Building is overbuilt relative to the existing zoning district designation, so it does not have any unused development rights available for transfer.

The subject landmark does not conflict with the Zoning Resolution. The Commission is not aware of any conflicts between the subject landmark designation and projected public improvements or any plans for development, growth, improvement, or renewal in the vicinity of the landmark.

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