

1st Spanish United Methodist Church (aka People's Church)

163 East 111th Street, Manhattan
Tax Map Block 1639, Lot 21

Built: 1880-81, altered 1966-67

Architect: Lawrence B. Valk (1880-81), redesigned by an unknown architect (1966-67)

Style: Not Determined

Proposed Action: Proposed for Calendaring, December 12, 2017



1st Spanish United Methodist Church, Lexington Avenue at East 111th Street, Barrett Reiter (LPC), 2017

The 1st Spanish United Methodist Church, also known as People's Church, is strongly associated with the activities, platform, and ideology of the Young Lords. Originally established as a gang in Chicago, the Young Lords became a Puerto Rican civil rights and social justice group with a revolution-minded platform modeled on the Black Panther Party. Forming in the wake of the Civil Rights Movement, the Young Lords were inspired by the discussions of inequality, self-determination, and cultural pride of the 1950s and 1960s. The New York chapter of the Young Lords, established in the summer of 1969, sought to create change through neighborhood empowerment, improving the conditions and treatment of the over 800,000 Puerto Ricans living in New York City. The Young Lords first project, to clean the streets of East Harlem's "El Barrio," highlighted the city's failure to provide adequate services to the area. To force the city to recognize the problem, the Young Lords mounted the "Garbage Offensive," blocking the major avenues with piles of uncollected garbage and disrupting traffic throughout Manhattan, which provided the neighborhood with immediate results.

In the winter of 1969 the Young Lords took over the 1st Spanish United Methodist Church, using the space to provide services to the underserved community. For 11 days, the Young Lords ran a breakfast program for children, offered basic health testing, ran a daycare with Spanish language lessons and taught Puerto Rican history, and held adult events with discussion groups and performances at night. On the 8th of January the Young Lords peacefully evacuated the church and were arrested. They subsequently staged a longer occupation of the church from October to December of 1970, working to call attention to alleged police brutality and the poor conditions of New York City jails. While the Young Lords undertook many activities in East Harlem and the Bronx, their actions at 1st Spanish United Methodist allowed their ideas and platform to reach decision makers not only within their direct community, but throughout the city and state.

Although the activities of the Young Lords in New York City were short-lived (they disbanded in 1973), their ideas around political change and Puerto Rican pride were incorporated into the cultural, artistic, and civic organizations already forming within El Barrio and throughout the city.

Today the church looks much as it did during the events of 1969. Originally built in 1880 for the Lexington Avenue Baptist Church, the building burned in 1964, leaving only fragments of the first floor intact. When the church was rebuilt in 1966-67, these fragments – particularly the entrance portals at the corner – were integrated into a modern design.