

James Baldwin Residence

137 West 71st Street, Manhattan
Tax Map Block 1143, Lot 19

Built: 1961 (converted 1890 row house)

Architect: H. Russell Kenyon

Style: Modern

Action: Calendared May 14, 2019; Public Hearing June 4, 2019



James Baldwin Residence, 137 West 71st Street, LPC, 2019

The small apartment house at 137 West 71st Street was the New York residence of the celebrated novelist, essayist, and civil rights activist James Baldwin for the last two decades of his life. Constructed in 1890 as one of a group of four row houses, it was extensively altered in 1961 by architect H. Russell Kenyon, who brought its front facade forward to align with those of its neighboring apartment houses. Its white brick facade, asymmetric fenestration, picture windows, and basement entrance set within a polished granite surround reflect the fashions of the time. It is within the city's Upper West Side/Central Park West Historic District, designated in 1990.

James Baldwin made significant contributions to literary and civil rights history through his writing and activism. He was born in Harlem in 1924, educated in New York City public schools, and gained notice as a book reviewer and essayist before moving to Paris in 1948. In Europe, in 1952, he completed his canonical semi-autobiographical novel *Go Tell It on the Mountain*. Baldwin's essay collections *Notes of a Native Son* (1955) and *Nobody Knows My Name* (1961) established him as one of the foremost critics of American race relations and a leader of the early civil rights movement. Although Baldwin primarily lived in France, he considered himself a "transatlantic commuter" who maintained a New York City apartment from the 1950s on.

Baldwin purchased 137 West 71st Street for his and his family's use in 1965, at a time when the Upper West Side was replacing Greenwich Village as the city's literary center. Although he continued to travel extensively, splitting his time between Europe and the United States, Baldwin kept an apartment in the building, where he worked on plays, screenplays, and novels and corresponded with other prominent literary and cultural figures. Baldwin's mother and two sisters had their own apartments here, and other units were rented out to tenants. In 2013, his niece Aisha Karefa-Smart recalled that whenever Baldwin returned to the building, "the energy and vitality at 137 elevated to a fever pitch as soon as he hit the door. Even before he arrived, the house was ablaze with excitement and anticipation just by the mention of his name."

Major writers and jazz musicians, including Toni Morrison—who briefly lived here—Amiri Baraka, Miles Davis, Dizzy Gillespie, and Max Roach visited the Baldwins here and were considered members of their extended family. Baldwin's fiction was groundbreaking in part for its honest depictions of bisexual and same-sex relationships in works including *Giovanni's Room*, published in 1956, and *Just Above My Head*, published in 1979, during Baldwin's period of association with this building. During his time here, Baldwin participated in several notable New York City events, including an appearance with Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. at Carnegie Hall weeks before King's assassination, in 1968; and a 1982 meeting of the group Black and White Men Together, in which he spoke publicly for the first time about his experiences as a gay African American man.

James Baldwin died in 1987 in Saint-Paul-de-Vence, France. His funeral, held at the Cathedral of St. John the Divine, included eulogies by Baraka, Morrison, and Maya Angelou. Today, the apartment house at 137 West 71st Street is little changed from its time as James Baldwin's New York residence.

