

Voluntary Destruction: Historic Preservation in the Lower West Side since September 11, 2001
Washington Street Advocacy Group - September 4, 2020

Nineteen years since September 11, 2001 and over fifteen years after the appeal for a new historic district south of the World Trade Center site, we should review the status of local historic preservation. **The results are disturbing.** Among the thirty-nine non-designated buildings that an emergency coalition of prominent preservation groups advanced for protection after a comprehensive survey in 2003, 35.9% have now been demolished.¹ The NYC Landmarks Preservation Commission only designated 10% of the proposed structures, leaving the remaining twenty-one at risk -- with demolitions of both high- and low-rise buildings continuing apace and with little warning. In addition, a number of the still-standing structures have already been seriously and possibly irrevocably altered since 2001, including rare federal-style row houses from the early American republic and the Hamilton period.

Despite billions of dollars of government money spent toward some of history's most expensive office buildings, shopping centers, and transportation links, nearly all funding to support historic preservation since September 11 has been private and inadequate. The result is that, through tax incentives and subsidized bonds, city, state, and national governments have facilitated the erasure of a section of New York City important to the collective history of post-Revolutionary New York, American immigration, and New York City finance. For the most part, the buildings that have replaced these proposed landmarks have been tourist hotels and condominiums that receive little architectural praise. There is also no prospect of any local, city, or state action that would restrain the seemingly inevitable demolition of all non-protected low-rise buildings in Lower Manhattan, the oldest and most historically rich section of New York City.

This wave of demolition builds on two earlier massive government acts of eminent domain, for Robert Moses' Brooklyn Battery Tunnel (1946) and for the World Trade Center itself (1960s), which already destroyed the great balance of physical reference to the early American republic, the Syrian quarter, and the electronics district of Radio Row. Current trends revive the City Planning Commission's 1966 "Lower Manhattan Plan" to expand on the World Trade Center's development by demolishing nearly all buildings south of the site and building high-rise residential towers. In the last two decades, rejecting incessant pleas from Community Board 1, international and national preservation groups, local politicians, Arab-American organizations, and concerned individuals in New York City and around the world, the Landmarks Preservation Commission has consistently declined to hold a single hearing or to conduct any research regarding the creation of even the most modest historic district in the Lower West Side.

Time seems to be running out, and the approaching twenty-year anniversary of September 11 offers a critical moment to take stock. The voluntary destruction of the physical heritage of Lower Manhattan should be seen as an effect of government policy since September 11, 2001. However, if we

¹ The Lower Manhattan Emergency Preservation Fund's (LMEPF) report identified thirty-six contributing sites for its proposed historic district for "Greenwich Street South." Since this current report is intended to evaluate the concrete status of historic preservation since 2001, its calculations do not include 90 West Street, which had already been designated as a landmark in 1998. We disentangle Block 52, Lot 7501 at 110-112 Liberty to account for four buildings instead of being counted as a single site. We also count as two buildings the properties that composed the Crystal Building at 74-80 Washington Street and 47-49 West Street. Therefore, we assess the proposed district as having recommended forty buildings for preservation, thirty-nine of which had not been landmarked in 2001.

acknowledge the tragedy of the status quo and consider some reasonable recommendations, we can prevent some additional permanent loss of important heritage.

Background

In October 2001, only weeks after the attacks, five leading preservation groups established a joint entity to support grants for immediate repair work and to assess preservation needs. Called the “Lower Manhattan Emergency Preservation Fund,” or LMEPF, the project included the **National Trust for Historic Preservation**, the **Municipal Art Society**, the **New York Landmarks Conservancy**, the **Preservation League of New York State**, and the **World Monuments Fund**. With its launch, John Stubbs, vice president for programs at the World Monuments Fund, stated, “A lot of money is going to be spent rebuilding lower Manhattan, and it will have a ripple effect on historic resources nearby. The voice of New York’s historic community must be at the table when decisions are made.”²

Over the next several years, this coalition, with private funding, distributed \$80,000 of small grants to the owners of historic properties in the broad vicinity of the World Trade Center.³ However, the group also overtly recognized that the proposed “redevelopment” presented risks to the historic fabric of Lower Manhattan, especially in areas around the site. An example of this concern was the fear that the Metropolitan Transportation Authority’s plans for a new Fulton Center Transit Hub would imperil the Corbin Building, a decoratively beautiful 1889 office building at 11 John Street that stood within the transit center’s boundaries. Indeed, the LMEPF preemptively commissioned its own design for the Transit Center in order to prompt discussion about ways that an intact Corbin Building could be incorporated.⁴ Ultimately, despite this fear, the Corbin building was saved, showing how joint advocacy could protect individual properties, and even eventually achieve city-protected landmark status (which was finally granted for the Corbin building years later in 2015).⁵ Similar joint activism achieved protection for a handful of other outstanding individual landmarks in the vicinity of the World Trade Center.⁶

Yet, from the start, the LMEPF coalition recognized that there were entire streetscapes and clusters of historic properties near the World Trade Center site that lacked any protection at all. With the World Monuments Fund declaring Lower Manhattan “arguably the most important cultural site in the United States,” the LMEPF commissioned full surveys of all “landmark-quality” historic structures. Of

² “Five Groups Focus on Lower Manhattan; Joint Effort On Rebuilding,” *New York Times*, October 14, 2001, <https://www.nytimes.com/2001/10/14/realestate/postings-five-groups-focus-on-lower-manhattan-joint-effort-on-rebuilding.html>.

³ “Greatest Accomplishments: Restoration Efforts After September 11th,” New York Landmarks Conservancy. Accessed July 17, 2019, http://www.nylandmarks.org/about_us/greatest_accomplishments/restoration_efforts_after_september_11th/.

⁴ David W. Dunlap, “Here, Preservation Meets Imagination,” *New York Times*, July 23, 2003, p. B3, <https://www.nytimes.com/2003/07/24/nyregion/blocks-here-preservation-meets-imagination.html>.

⁵ Landmarks Preservation Commission, June 23, 2015, Designation List 483, LP-2569, <http://s-media.nyc.gov/agencies/lpc/lp/2569.pdf>.

⁶ One example was the protection of the Dickey House at 67 Greenwich Street. Albert Amateau, “After 38 years, Landmarks decides to designate Federal Style building,” *Downtown Express*, July 14, 2005, <https://www.thevillager.com/2005/07/after-38-years-landmarks-decides-to-designate-federal-style-building/>.

the 300 sites identified on LMEPF’s map, the World Monuments Fund noted that “approximately 75 percent have no protection whatsoever.”⁷ Insisting that preservation principles should extend beyond the World Trade Center complex itself (where there were preservation debates about pieces of wreckage and other structural aspects of the site), in 2004, the World Monuments Fund added Lower Manhattan for a second time to its World Monuments Watch List of the most endangered historic places in the world.⁸ Isolating the most at-risk sections in the district, the LMEPF advanced three key areas, or “corridors of concern,” which they feared development plans could harm and disrupt. These were: the Fulton Street Corridor, the West Street Corridor, and the Greenwich Street Corridor.

LMEPF and World Monuments Fund’s Three “Corridors of Concern”



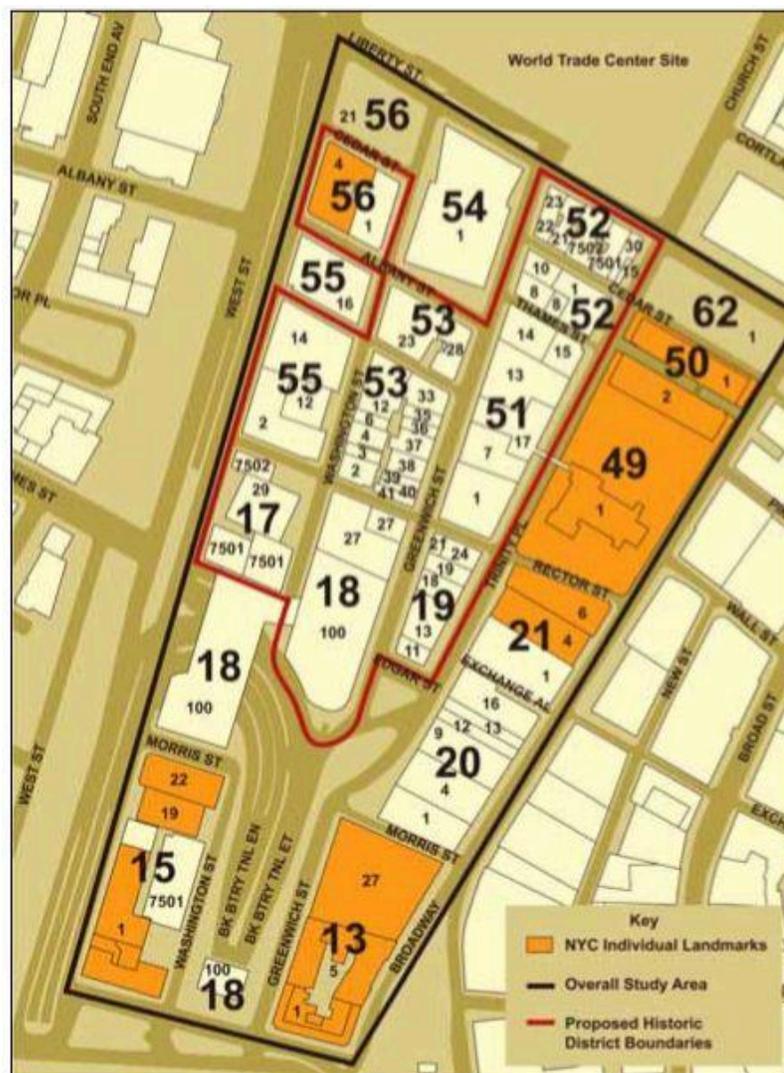
A: Fulton Street Corridor; B: Greenwich Street Corridor; C: West Street Corridor (WMF)

⁷ World Monuments Fund, *New York Reborn*, Spring 2003, <https://www.wmf.org/publication/new-york-reborn>.

⁸ World Monuments Funds, *Historic Lower Manhattan*, n.d., <https://www.wmf.org/project/historic-lower-manhattan>.

The Fulton Street Corridor offered an array of intact, attractive commercial buildings from the nineteenth century. The Greenwich Street Corridor preserved miraculous traces of the “Millionaire’s Row” of the early 1800s, and its collection of low-rise buildings referenced a forgotten neighborhood important to American immigration history, especially critical for Arab-Americans. The West Street Corridor was noted for its commercial buildings with outstanding Gothic and Art Deco details.

After engaging consultants to research 73 sites in the West Street and Greenwich Street corridors, in December 2003, the Lower Manhattan Emergency Preservation Fund completed a preliminary report advocating the creation of a new historic district combining key buildings from the two corridors.⁹ The report counted forty-eight sites to be included in a State and National Register Historic District. Thirty-six of these sites (composed of forty buildings) were considered “contributing” to the proposed historic district’s architecture and history, meeting the National Park Service’s criteria on two levels.



Proposed Historic District (LMEPF)

⁹ *Greenwich Street South Preliminary Historical Documentation*, Lower Manhattan Emergency Preservation Fund, December 2003.

The LMEPF coalition presented their district proposal to the State Historic Preservation Office and Landmarks Preservation Commission, but were rejected.¹⁰ Unfortunately, the proposal was never widely publicized, and, at least in public documents, there does not appear to have been a determined lobbying effort by the LMEPF to achieve this historic district on the state or city level. The initial report had offered the hope that the research would offer “information for the architects, planners, preservationists, government officials, and community residents who are shaping the future of Lower Manhattan.”¹¹ Indirectly, this goal may have been achieved as some of the organizations and individuals (like Mary Dierickx and Ken Lustbader) involved with the report were critical to the eventual successful landmark proposals for buildings like 67 Greenwich Street, 99 Greenwich Street, and 123-133 Greenwich Street. The work did help inform a later grassroots preservation effort, led by people like Joseph Svehlak and Mary Ann DiNapoli, which succeeded in designating the Syrian church at 103 Washington Street and educating many people -- both domestically and internationally -- about the history of the area.

A hopeful belief in collective community and direct citizen involvement in the future of Lower Manhattan was widespread in the first three years after September 11, 2001. As thoroughly documented in David Woods’ book *Democracy Deferred: Civic Leadership after 9/11*, an array of civic organizations (such as *The Civic Alliance to Rebuild Downtown New York*, *New York/New Visions*, *Rebuild Downtown Our Town*, and *Imagine New York*) brought a strong voice to redevelopment planning.¹² In February 2002, *New York/New Visions*, a group of 350 design professionals and civic leaders, published “preliminary recommendations for infrastructure, planning, and design” related to the reconstruction. Within their report, as part of a delineated core principle to “identify, preserve, and restore historic resources,” they noted the large number of unprotected historic structures near the World Trade Center and advocated joint review by state and city governments:

There are many significant but undesignated historic structures adjacent to the World Trade Center. Within the FEMA-secured area of the World Trade Center disaster site, there are nine properties on the National Register, and over 30 other properties that are eligible but currently unregistered. The New York City Landmarks Preservation Commission and the New York State Historic Preservation Office should more aggressively pursue landmark designation for the areas and buildings under consideration.¹³

At first at least, the principles advanced by *New York/New Visions* and other groups were reflected in the planning documents coming from the city and the state. In “Principles and Preliminary Blueprint for the Future of Lower Manhattan,” the Lower Manhattan Development Corporation’s first major document presented in April 2002, one of the eleven principles for the redevelopment was to “preserve

¹⁰ *World Trade Center Memorial and Redevelopment Plan Generic Environmental Impact Statement*, Lower Manhattan Development Corporation, p. 5-38, <http://www.renewnyc.com/content/pdfs/eis/04-12-2004/vol1/05%20Historic%20Resources.pdf>.

¹¹ *Greenwich Street South Preliminary Historical Documentation*, Lower Manhattan Emergency Preservation Fund, December 2003, p. 1.

¹² David Woods, *Democracy Deferred: Civic Leadership After 9/11* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012).

¹³ New York New Visions, *Principles for the Rebuilding of Lower Manhattan*, February 2002, p. 20.

the historic character of Lower Manhattan and the existing civic and cultural values of its cityscape.”¹⁴ At the time, participants noted how closely the government’s official principles matched the comparable principles that *New York/New Visions* had advanced.¹⁵ With respect to historic preservation, the Lower Manhattan Development Corporation elaborated their goal to:

Encourage preservation of outstanding historic structures and the cultural value of the cityscape. Lower Manhattan is where New York City began, and its streets and squares resound with American history. Today’s financial district is still defined by the Dutch colonial street grid, giving it a character unlike anywhere else in the city. Many historic structures survive amid the towers of steel and glass, and future development must preserve, protect and enhance this historic legacy.

Proposals under review that emerged during the listening process:

a. Restore 90 West Street as a commercial or residential building.

b. Provide incentives for the restoration of threatened Lower Manhattan landmarks. [emphasis added]

Impact: Enriched cityscape and increased tourism.

*LMDC will work with the Landmarks Preservation Commission, the State Office of Parks, Recreation and Historic Preservation, the Department of City Planning, the Real Estate Board of New York, and all other involved groups and agencies to come to agreement on a final plan.*¹⁶

Despite this ambitious pledge to work jointly with the real estate lobby group REBNY and the Landmarks Preservation Commission (LPC) on a preservation plan, it is extremely difficult to find any evidence in LMDC documents that further action was taken (outside of the research for the later environmental impact statement for the World Trade Center Project Plan). No final plan for preservation as discussed was ever pursued or published. Although there were some limited funds for owners of historic and landmarked buildings immediately after September 11, no incentive program was ever established to deter the demolition of historic buildings that had not yet been designated. Such an incentive program, using LMDC funds, could have made the needed expansion of landmark designation much easier to advance politically and to gain owner support. In the case of the mere four buildings in the Lower West Side that were designated as landmarks in the years after 2001, owner opposition became a significant issue.¹⁷

¹⁴ *The Lower Manhattan Development Corporation: 2001–2006 Final Report*, http://www.renewnyc.com/content/pdfs/Web_Final_Report.pdf.

¹⁵ Choa, Christopher. 2002. Letter to John Whitehead (LMDC chairman). April 26, cited in Lynne B. Sagalyn, "The Politics of Planning the World's Most Visible Urban Redevelopment Project," p. 68, in John Mollenkopf, *Contentious City: The Politics of Recovery in New York City* (New York: Russell Sage Foundation, 2005).

¹⁶ "Principles and Preliminary Blueprint for the Future of Lower Manhattan," Lower Manhattan Development Corporation, 2002, p. 11.

¹⁷ The owners of 67 Greenwich and 94 Greenwich vocally opposed landmark designation. The owner of 103 Washington Street ultimately did not support or oppose designation, possibly because of the

The civic drive that compelled the LMDC to include historic preservation as a principle did not last. By 2004, most of the active civic organizations had lost funding and influence, and the LMEPF also appears to have been sunset at around the same time, with its website ceasing to be updated.¹⁸ Because of city-state political infighting, many of the key decisions involving the World Trade Center and its surroundings had still not yet been made. In effect, the delays and the political wrangling gave the government public-private corporations involved, the Port Authority and the Lower Manhattan Development Corporation, and their financially-robust nonprofit partners such as the Alliance for Downtown New York and the World Trade Center Memorial Foundation, near complete control over many key decisions. It is possible that cynicism and demoralization by the public meant that there was much less active participation than one would have anticipated in the initial phase. Decisions also became increasingly opaque as time went on. In this atmosphere, entire foundational LMDC principles such as “historic preservation” could be softened or even abandoned without resistance.

Cycles of Residential Development in so-called “Greenwich South”

The Lower West Side has a peculiar history that long protected its stock of low-rise residential and business buildings in “Wall Street’s backyard.”¹⁹ Established on landfill placed after the Revolutionary War, the Lower West Side is distinct from the old Dutch street grid. In the early 1800s, Greenwich Street became the “Millionaire’s Row” of the post-Revolution merchant elite and was home to major figures like DeWitt Clinton. In the 1830s and 40s, the wealthy shifted north to other residential neighborhoods like Gramercy and the area around what later became Washington Square Park. The row house mansions of Greenwich Street then transformed into subdivided and cramped homes for German and Irish immigrants, and new tenement buildings were built on Washington Street and West Street. Near the rougher piers and eventually segregated from the rest of the financial district by the elevated trains first built in the 1860s, the Lower West Side maintained its status as a working-class immigrant neighborhood for over a century. In the 1880s, migrants from Greater Syria, especially today’s Lebanon, began to settle on Washington Street in particular. The area quickly became the commercial and cultural heart of Arab America. Although the construction of skyscrapers in the 1920s began to transform the area

community importance of *Moran’s* pub and because of the heartfelt outreach of local historians. According to the New York Post, the Landmarks Preservation Commission went forward with the designation of the American Stock Exchange Building at 86 Trinity Place “only after a lot of work with the owner.” David Dunlap, “Downtown, Federal Era Blooms In Hiding,” *New York Times*, June 20, 2003, p. E27; “Owners challenge designation,” *Cityland*, May 15, 2005, <https://www.citylandnyc.org/owners-challenge-designation/>; “Two designations despite owners’ objections,” *Cityland*, July 15, 2005, <https://www.citylandnyc.org/two-designations-despite-owners%E2%80%99-objections/>; Julie Shapiro, “Preservationists say 1 out of 3 ain’t bad on Greenwich,” *Downtown Express*, July 2, 2009, <https://www.thevillager.com/2009/07/preservationists-say-1-out-of-3-aint-bad-on-greenwich/>; “(FORMER) ST. GEORGE’S SYRIAN CATHOLIC CHURCH,” Landmarks Preservation Commission, July 14, 2009, Designation List 416, LP-2167; Steve Cuozzo, “Amex landmark talks,” June 12, 2012, <https://nypost.com/2012/06/12/amex-landmark-talks/>.

¹⁸ Website updates can be observed at the Wayback Machine at <https://archive.org/web/>.

¹⁹ We define the Lower West Side as west of Broadway, east of West Street, south of Chambers, and north of the Battery.

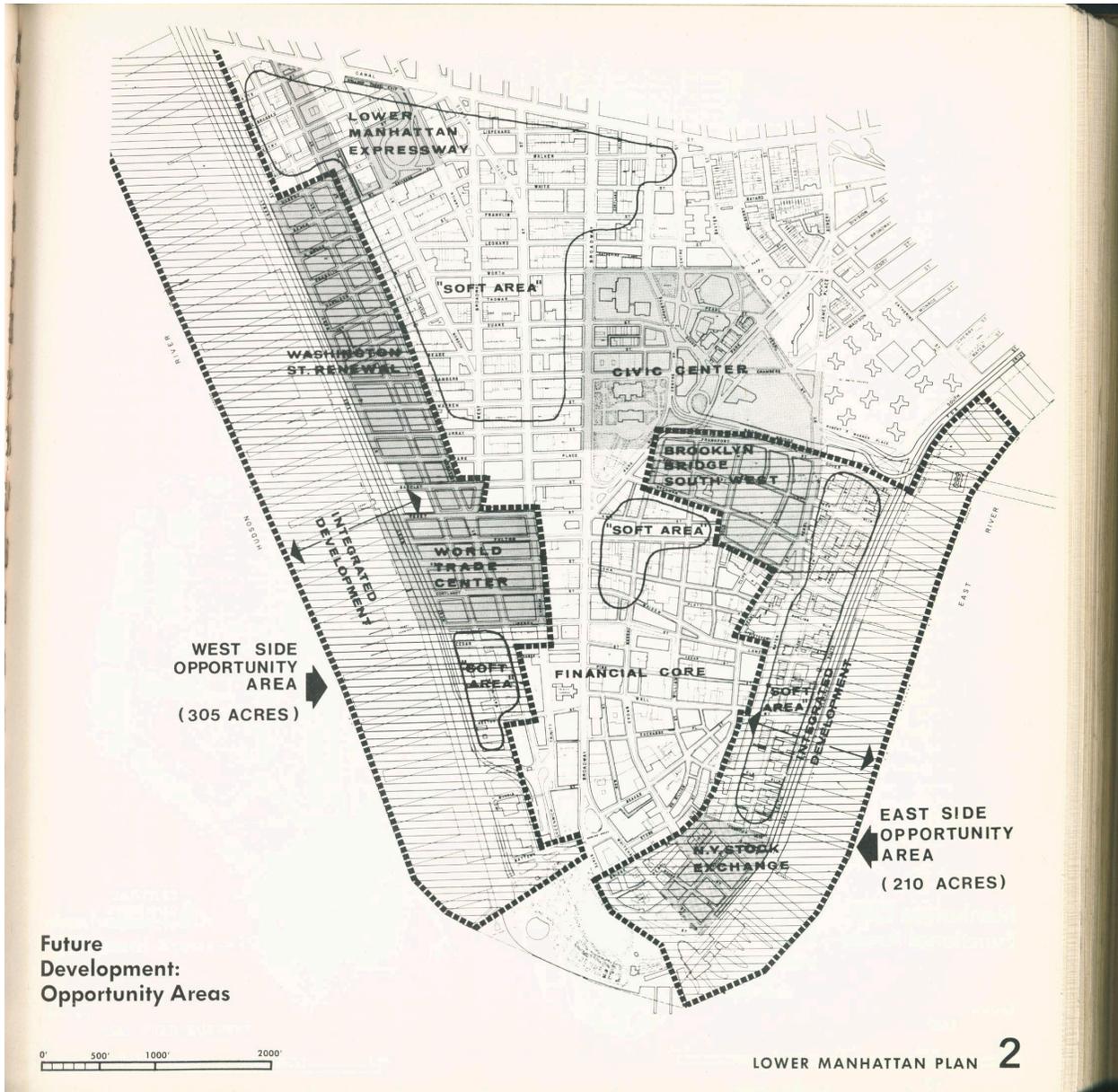
away from its residential foundations, there were still many low-rise buildings in the 1940s, when the entrance ramps for the Brooklyn Battery Tunnel necessitated the demolition of entire blocks of Greenwich and Washington streets.

The losses to the historic fabric of New York caused by the Brooklyn Battery Tunnel (1946) and the World Trade Center (1960s) were dramatic.²⁰ For instance, despite the current public fascination with Alexander Hamilton, New Yorkers have very little physical heritage to imagine what his era was like. In addition, entire American ethnicities, already disconnected from their heritage due to the effects of the immigration restriction of 1924, have almost completely lost their ancestral neighborhoods. The iconic symbolism of immigrant origins in Little Italy and Chinatown shows the value of “place” in ethnic heritage. The destruction of the Radio Row electronics district to build the World Trade Center eliminated all traces of an important part of New York history and destroyed many middle-class businesses. While no full survey has been done of the full historical bill from these earlier waves of demolitions, the pain is still felt in the hearts of people who grew up in the area, or whose family businesses were destroyed by these acts of government.

The World Trade Center and Battery Tunnel projects left only a sliver of low-rise buildings on the West Side between the two developments; however, these historic buildings were also not protected from development plans. Whether instigating figures like Robert Moses and Nelson and David Rockefeller should be seen as heroes of economic development or as villains of careless disregard can be endlessly debated, but, after the rise of the preservation movement, New Yorkers mostly collectively agree that there needs to be some limits on large-scale demolitions of entire neighborhoods. The Moses-Rockefeller projects represented the peak of an attitude toward city planning that was about to shift with the movement associated with Jane Jacobs and with the final political downfall of Robert Moses. At this same pinnacle moment, in 1966, with the City’s support for the World Trade Center (a project whose opening would be delayed until 1973), the New York City Department of City Planning produced a remarkable report that foreshadowed further waves of mass demolition in the Lower West Side.

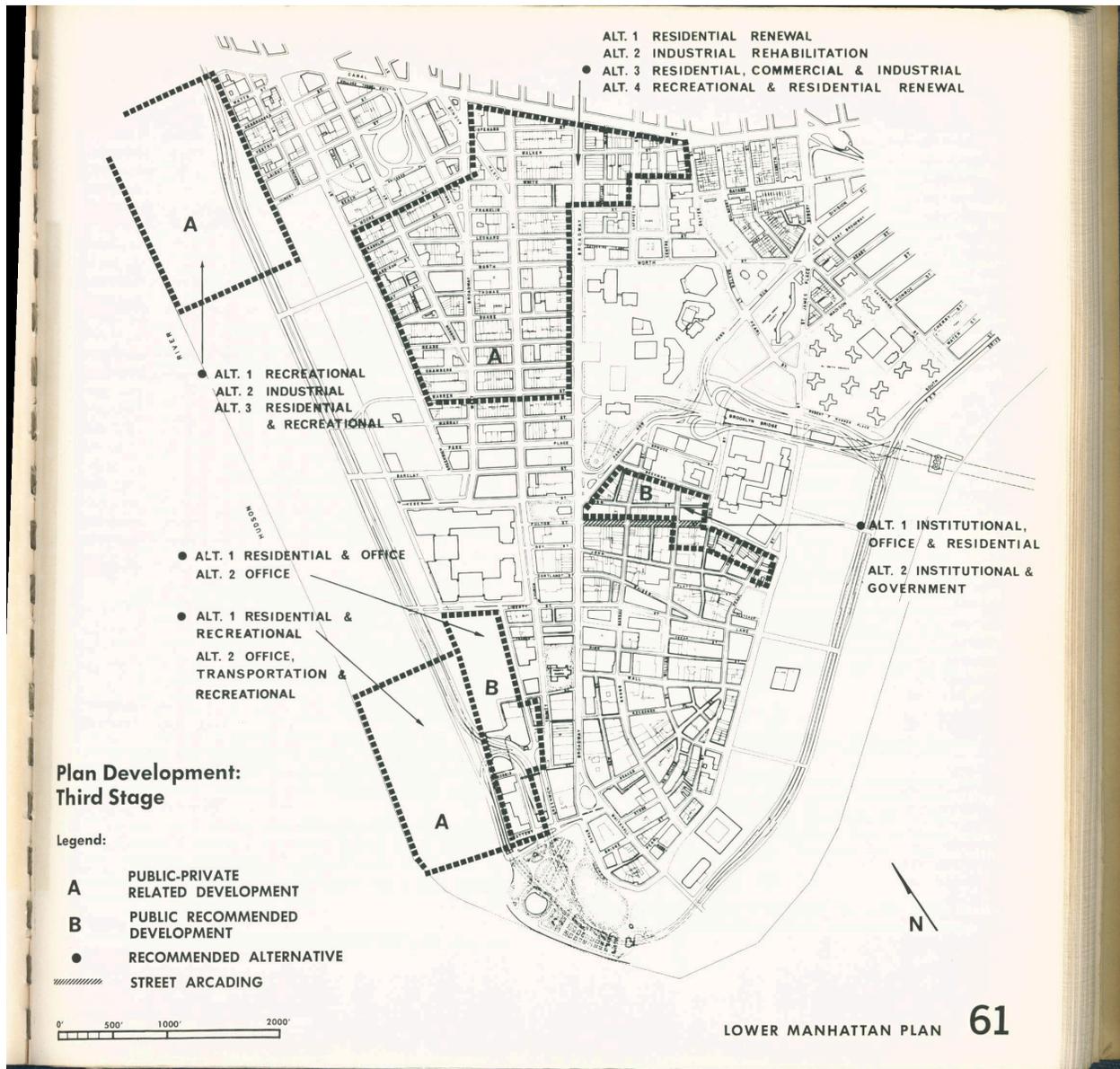
The 1966 *Lower Manhattan Plan* report is considered a classic of technocratic city planning. Assessing areas of Lower Manhattan ready for large-scale demolition and new construction, the plan surveyed all buildings and grouped entire blocks into short-term and long-term “life expectancies,” based on the age of the buildings and upgrades that properties had experienced. According to the report’s inescapable modernist logic, older buildings would, and should, die sooner. Evoking Cold War gendered/colonialist language, the Lower West Side (the area south of the future World Trade Center), along with the Fulton Street Corridor, the South Street Seaport, and Tribeca were labelled “soft areas” distinct from the “hard financial core.” These “soft areas” were seen as receptive to demolitions and large-scale public projects.

²⁰ June 19, 2005, on Page 2 of the National edition with the headline: ART; When a Neighborhood Fell, And Barely Made a Sound.
<https://www.nytimes.com/2005/06/19/arts/design/when-a-neighborhood-fell-and-barely-made-a-sound.html>



“Soft Areas” in the 1966 Lower Manhattan Plan

In the Third Stage of the speculative plan, which the authors acknowledged was highly dependent on the earlier stages, the City Planning Commission proposed that the Lower West Side could be a fully public development involving comprehensive demolitions. In their grandest visions, the plan envisioned the Lower West Side as a massive residential complex, in style much like the World Trade Center, that would house around 20,000 people of middle-class incomes.



Third Stage: Lower West Side as Public Residential/Office Development

The plan did assess historic landmarks throughout Lower Manhattan. Yet, very few landmarks in its survey were identified outside of the “financial core”; later scholars have affirmed that the writers were not a group that promoted the value of expansive historic preservation.²¹ While the plan acknowledged that the Landmarks Preservation Commission and consultant Ada Louise Huxtable had listed the federal

²¹ According to Ann Buttenweiser, “It was only at the last minute, through the efforts of South Street Seaport Museum founder Peter Stanford, that the Schermerhorn Row buildings, standing alone among the renewed waterfront blocks, were included on the plan” Ann Buttenwieser, “Fore and Aft: The Waterfront and Downtown’s Future,” in Carol Willis, ed., *The Lower Manhattan Plan: 1966 Vision for Downtown New York* (New York: Princeton Architectural Press), 24.

mansions at 67 Greenwich Street, 94 Greenwich Street, and 96 Greenwich Street as buildings of “permanent value,” the authors of the Lower Manhattan Plan did not include them in their own list.²²

Although the most ambitious ideas from the Lower Manhattan Plan did not lead to concrete action, its intentions in the Greenwich Street area did cause zoning changes. Called a “direct response to the Lower Manhattan Plan,” in October 1971, the City added a “Special Greenwich Street Development District” to the New York City Zoning Resolution.²³ Its priorities closely matched the Lower Manhattan Plan’s goals of expanding transportation links and integrating the various Lower Manhattan districts, especially through new pedestrian bridges. The district’s most innovative feature was requiring that new office buildings include retail space. Furthermore, developers could gain substantial increases in allowable square footage by including various building elements considered “amenities,” especially those that would facilitate shopping and public congregation. The Bankers Trust Plaza, opened in 1974, was one building that came out of this push for construction south of the World Trade Center and took advantage of these amenities. Interestingly, because of the city’s economic crisis, only a small handful of new buildings south of the World Trade Center were built in the 1970s and 1980s. In 1981, the Milstein group planned to build a new 35-story office building called One World Plaza in an area between Liberty, West, Cedar and Washington streets.²⁴ Even though existing properties, such as the descendent of the Lebanese St. Joseph’s Roman Catholic Church on Cedar Street, were demolished in preparation, the structure was never built and the area became a parking lot. In the late 1990s, the “Special Greenwich Street Development District” was repealed, with “the City’s recognition that the District’s requirements had not worked as planned.”²⁵

Yet, even though the comprehensive modernist visions of the Lower Manhattan Plan did not materialize and the Greenwich Street district was not remade as envisioned, Lower Manhattan did transform, and it certainly did not die off as planners had fearfully evoked. The World Trade Center was opened eventually in 1973, Battery Park City was established and finally built up in the 1980s, and a significant residential population, although of different economic status, did return to Manhattan below Chambers Street. Many people have given credit to David Rockefeller for building the new Chase Manhattan headquarters in Lower Manhattan as an element in its revival as a favored place.²⁶ Nevertheless, what occurred was certainly not the dream of the 1966 plan, which anticipated a web of utopian, subterranean-connected World Trade Center-like residential complexes that would house 85,000 people.²⁷

In 1993, the administration of David Dinkins overtly referenced the 1966 plan and published a new “Plan for Lower Manhattan.” Although begun after the 1987 stock market crash and written during the 1992 recession, the new planning document recognized that, overall, the 1966 plan had correctly assessed the demand for residential development downtown. The plan cited the remarkable population

²² *The Lower Manhattan Plan: 1966 Vision for Downtown New York*, Appendix I.

²³ Carol Shen Glass, “Special Greenwich Street Development District,” Massachusetts Institute of Technology Dept. of Architecture Thesis, 1971. p. 15.

²⁴ “Office Building Planned South of Trade Center,” *New York Times*, February 20, 1981, p. B3, <https://www.nytimes.com/1981/02/20/nyregion/office-building-planned-south-of-trade-center.html>.

²⁵ Jerold S. Kayden, The New York City Department of City Planning, The Municipal Art Society of New York, *Privately Owned Public Space: The New York City Experience* (New York: John Wiley & Sons, 2000), 99-100.

²⁶ Carol Willis, “Introduction” in *The Lower Manhattan Plan: 1966 Vision for Downtown New York*, 10.

²⁷ Ann Buttenwieser, “Fore and Aft: The Waterfront and Downtown’s Future,” 24.

growth from 833 people living in the area in 1970 to 14,000 people by 1993.²⁸ In particular, the report approvingly noted the trend of office-to-residential loft conversions, although it did express some anxiety that this push could not continue indefinitely “without jeopardizing the future of the office core itself.”²⁹ The plan recommended that City Planning undertake surveys of buildings to facilitate appropriate office conversions.³⁰

Showing the impact of Jane Jacobs and the preservation movement, the 1993 plan had a very different perspective on landmarks and historical context than the 1966 plan. The 1993 document emphasized the value of historical tourism for Lower Manhattan and actually listed as one of its recommendations that “the Landmarks Preservation Commission ... undertake survey efforts that would identify priorities for landmarks designations.”³¹ This plan showed that the goal of the 1966 plan for a government-propelled residential shift was still present, but the scale of proposed development was tempered by economic realities and by new sensibilities. Residential growth continued in the Lower West Side, but large-scale demolitions were not pursued and preservation was an important consideration.

One of the first major land use actions of the Giuliani administration in 1994 was to establish a task force, led by deputy mayors Fran Reiter and John Dyson, to find actionable ways to promote growth and reduce vacancies in Lower Manhattan. With the support of the Downtown-Lower Manhattan Association (DLMA), in 1995, the City passed the recommendations as legislation under the “Lower Manhattan Revitalization Plan,” including zoning changes for residential development and increased building heights, a variety of tax abatements and exemptions, and energy charge abatements through Con Edison. The willingness to reduce tax revenue, especially to encourage luxury housing in a single neighborhood, while the city’s fiscal situation was still uncertain indicated the strength of the Downtown real estate lobby. Alongside the plan’s announcement, Giuliani affirmed that “about 20 buildings should be designated for landmark status and protected from alteration.”³² Giuliani’s new Landmarks Preservation Commission chair Jennifer Raab had already signalled that a primary focus of her tenure would be Lower Manhattan, making sure that residential promotion could be achieved without the mass demolitions of historic skyscrapers.³³ Landmarking was further incentivized by offering to extend the tax exemptions and abatements for landmarked buildings by an additional year.³⁴

While the attention to preservation was fortunate, the framework established under Raab and Giuliani meant that, with the quite notable and admirable exception of 1996’s Stone Street Historic District, the Landmarks Preservation Commission almost exclusively looked at skyscrapers during a blitz of designations in the mid-1990s. Just looking west of Broadway, new designations during Jennifer

²⁸ Ann Buttenwieser, “Fore and Aft: The Waterfront and Downtown’s Future,” in *The Lower Manhattan Plan: 1966 Vision for Downtown New York* (New York: Princeton Architectural Press), [Carol Willis, ed.], 27.

²⁹ *Plan for Lower Manhattan*, Prepared by the Dept. of City Planning with the support of the New York City Economic Development Corporation and the Downtown-Lower Manhattan Association (New York, 1993), 39.

³⁰ *Ibid.*

³¹ *Ibid.*, 49, 27-36.

³² Thomas J. Lueck, “Giuliani Plans Inducements To Revive Wall Street Area,” *The New York Times*, p. A1.

³³ David Dunlap, “New Head of Landmarks Panel Looks to Future,” *New York Times*, July 25, 1994, p. B3.

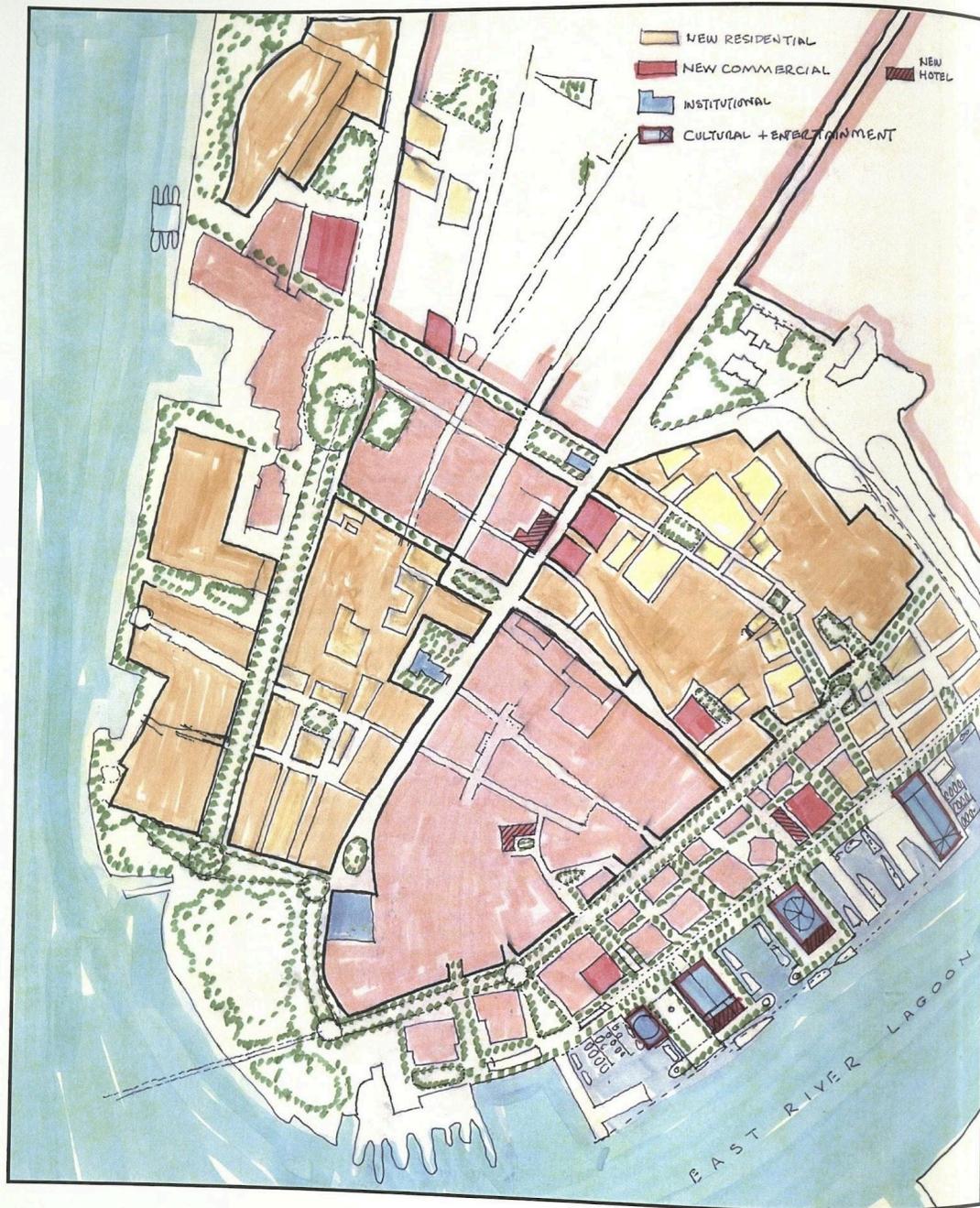
³⁴ City of New York, “Summary Lower Manhattan Residential Conversion Program,” cited in John E. Lodge, *An Analysis of the Lower Manhattan Revitalization Plan*, MIT Master’s Thesis, September 1996, <https://dspace.mit.edu/bitstream/handle/1721.1/68320/36161308-MIT.pdf?sequence=2>.

Raab's tenure included: 1 Broadway / The International Mercantile Marine Company (1995); 5-11 Broadway / Bowling Green Offices Building (1995); 25 Broadway / Cunard Building (1995); 65 Broadway / American Express Company Building (1995); 71 Broadway / Empire Building (1996); 90 West Street / West Street Building (1998); 21 West Street (1998); 19 West Street / the Downtown Athletic Club Building (2000); and 17 Battery Place / Whitehall Building (2000). Despite the zoning changes that theoretically enabled taller construction, not a single lowrise building in the Lower West Side was designated during the Giuliani administration, leaving the area's Landmarks Law protections almost exclusively dedicated to 20th-century skyscrapers.

Although the Giuliani administration had successfully increased residential conversions in the Lower West Side through a battery of policy incentives, the attacks of September 11 revived the bold planning impulse of old. With billions of dollars of promised federal money and a commitment from Wall Street to support rebuilding, ambitious planning ideas, often overtly referencing the famous 1966 plan, seemed possible again. In early 2002, the state and the city established the Lower Manhattan Development Corporation, with significant powers, to administer federal grants and to compel action. From the beginning, the desire for new high-rise residential development in the Lower West Side was part of the agenda. For example, the RFP for architects and designers to create an initial site plan for the new World Trade Center site included rough drawings that showed the Lower West Side as the favored location for new residential construction.³⁵ Proposals for the site plan were overtly asked to incorporate the LMDC's vision of the Lower West Side as a new "24-hour" neighborhood zoned for skyscraper residential buildings.

³⁵ Lower Manhattan Development Corporation, "A vision for Lower Manhattan: context and program for the Innovative Design Study," October 11, 2002 (New York, NY : LMDC, [2002]).

Framework for World Trade Center site



Under the assumption that massive federal funds would be available, in December 2002, Mayor Michael Bloomberg released an ambitious “Vision for Lower Manhattan.”³⁶ This document, directly based on a speech by the Mayor, proposed key infrastructure projects to facilitate new construction in an

³⁶ Michael R. Bloomberg, “New York City’s vision for Lower Manhattan” (New York: Lower Manhattan Development Corporation, 2003).

attractive “new neighborhood” south of the World Trade Center. The ideas included direct airport transportation links from Lower Manhattan, converting West Street into a grand promenade like “the Champs-Élysées,” and installing decking over the Battery Tunnel to create a grand, new park called “Greenwich Square.” Bloomberg also proposed demolishing the Battery Tunnel parking garage to create new space for skyscraper construction. Proposing “the creation of two exciting new neighborhoods,” the areas south of the site and around Fulton Street, Bloomberg’s “vision” recalled the 1966 plan with its bold and expensive ideas. However, no mention of historic preservation was made in the December 2002 speech or in the planning document, and no mention of the lost immigrant history of the area explored why these “new neighborhoods” had become possible.

For a number of reasons, the prospects for Bloomberg’s “vision” became quite cloudy. Given Governor George Pataki’s successful power plays at the Lower Manhattan Development Corporation and given the unfathomable funds that were swallowed by the various projects within the World Trade Center site itself, the Mayor’s 10-billion-dollar budget evaporated before any of his more ambitious proposals could even be considered. Eighteen years after his speech, Bloomberg’s new park, the airport linkages, and the West Street plans are rarely even discussed. Eventually, the Mayor’s attention veered toward facilitating development at Hudson Yards instead, and even in the 2002 “vision” the Mayor was careful to emphasize that this plan did not distract from goals for the western railyards near the Javits Center.

Nevertheless, the LMDC and the Rockefeller-founded Alliance for Downtown New York were committed to transforming Lower Manhattan outside of the World Trade Center site itself. Citing the Mayor’s 2002 refrain of building “new neighborhoods,” in 2005, three entities -- LMDC, the Downtown Alliance, and the City Planning Commission -- published an initial blueprint called “The Greenwich South Redevelopment Study: Creating New Neighborhoods Downtown.”³⁷ To support the study, they had hired a Who’s Who of leading architectural firms including H3 Hardy Collaboration; Olin Partnership; URS Corporation; Weisz+Yoes Studio; Hanscomb Faithful & Gould; and Hamilton, Rabinovitz & Alschuler. Not explaining how past government actions had dismembered this sliver of the historic Lower West Side, the study began from the premise that the area was “forlorn” and “under-performing.”³⁸ The document hoped that LMDC funds could be used in various ways to facilitate ambitious projects, especially if the land over the Battery Tunnel ramps could be reclaimed. Hoping that the Mayor’s fading proposal to reclaim land over the tunnel ramps for a park still might actually take place, the LMDC and the Alliance for Downtown New York proposed that the new “air rights” that would be printed out of thin air by this decking project could be sold to help finance development in the new “Greenwich South.”

While the black hole of the World Trade Center continued to stall all of these ideas, the Alliance for Downtown New York, in particular, did not give up. Desiring to create excitement about a marketable, “Work-Live-Play” neighborhood under the name “Greenwich South,” they funded and commissioned an expanded, imaginative study of the area’s potential. In 2009, the Alliance published “Five Principles for Greenwich South: A New Model for Lower Manhattan.”³⁹ The participants in the design charrettes were called a “dream team” of architects and included the Architecture Research Office (ARO); Beyer Blinder Belle Architects & Planners; Coen + Partners; DeWitt Godfrey; Iwamoto Scott Architecture; Jorge

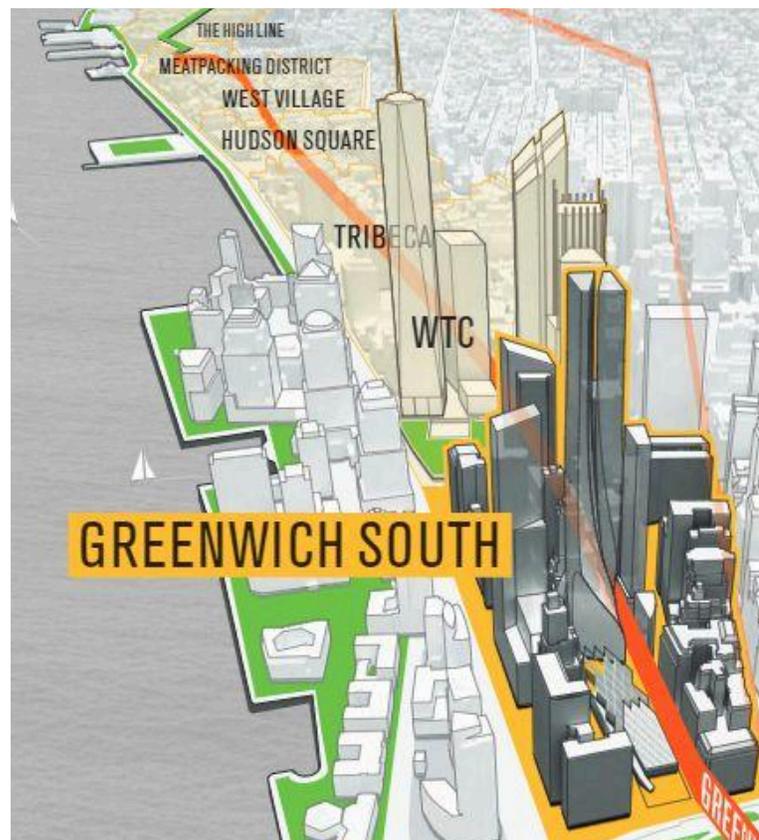
³⁷ The Greenwich South Redevelopment Study: Creating New Neighborhoods Downtown, March 2005, http://www.renewnyc.com/content/pdfs/Greenwich_Street_South.pdf

³⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 1.

³⁹ Downtown Alliance, “Five Principles for Greenwich South: A New Model for Lower Manhattan,” p. 11, <http://www.downtownny.com/sites/default/files/Five%20Principles%20%28smaller%29.pdf>.

Colombo; Morphosis; Lewis.Tsurumaki.Lewis (LTL); Open; Raphael Lozano-Hemmer; Transsolar Climate Engineering; and WORKac. Building on the 2005 analysis, this study included many dramatic and speculative drawings of a new district of skyscrapers. The report was based on the assumption that Greenwich Street would become a major thoroughfare through the World Trade Center that would extend up to Midtown. In another creative idea to facilitate high density, the plan proposed that air rights from other locations in the City, including from historic landmarks, be transferred to “Greenwich South.”⁴⁰

Two years before “Occupy Wall Street,” the Downtown Alliance constructed an outside exhibition in Zuccotti Park with the images from their report.⁴¹ Despite this enthusiastic effort, the report did not seem to capture public imagination outside of real estate circles. Commentators generally dismissed this cynical invention of a new neighborhood with a new name. And despite the large amounts written by each design study participant, little or no mention was ever made of the area’s history, associated with immigration or with the post-Revolution elite. This failure to connect with identity and history, as many other real estate ventures have attempted, might have contributed to the marketing weakness. In 2019, high vacancy rates, that have even led to one prominent foreclosure, raised questions about the viability of the Downtown condo boom, and COVID-19 possibly further jeopardized both the condos and the mass hotel construction linked to assumptions about tourism and business meetings.



Downtown Alliance Mock-Up of a Built-up “Lower West Side”

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 24. This idea of making the Lower West Side a transferable zone for “air rights” from other locations was later explored during fights about skyscraper construction in the South Street Seaport.

⁴¹ Joey Arak, “Introducing Greenwich South, Next Great Imaginary ‘Hood!,” *Curbed*, September 29, 2009, <https://ny.curbed.com/2009/9/29/10531860/introducing-greenwich-south-next-great-imaginary-hood>.

Despite the mixed success of the government pieces of the new planning documents, they still reveal the ethos of the current period of city planning, now driven substantially by private interests. As after the 1966 Plan, the residential shift after 2001 did continue steadily, even if the mega-projects designed to encourage it were not funded. Historic buildings were demolished one-by-one rather than due to mass demolitions from eminent domain. In this environment of needed vigilance, it increasingly became the burden on volunteer local historians and advocates to track the impact of the residential and hotel construction.

Community Advocacy and a Mini-Historic District

By the middle of the decade, advocacy for historic preservation in the “Greenwich Street Corridor” shifted to grassroots community activists. In 2003, tour guide Joseph Svehlak, whose Moravian grandmother had grown up in the neighborhood, wrote a manifesto arguing that three connected buildings from 103 to 109 Washington Street should be protected as city landmarks. With a Syrian church, a settlement house for immigrants, and a rare remaining tenement, he argued that this “trilogy” of buildings constituted a coherent streetscape that told an important story of one of the nation’s most important and diverse immigrant neighborhoods. Initially, he and other activist colleagues hoped that these structures could be incorporated into some kind of “mini-historic district.”



103 to 109 Washington Street (Daily News)

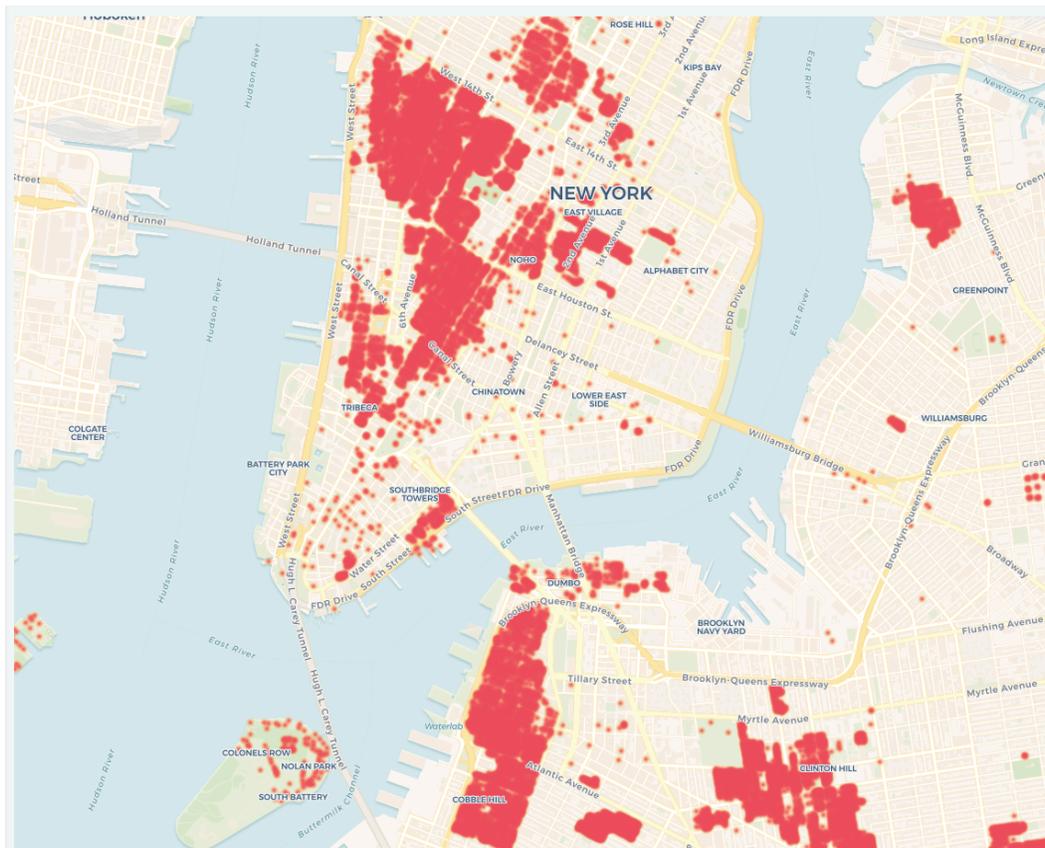
However, the Landmarks Preservation Commission insisted on reviewing these buildings as individual landmarks. While St. George’s Syrian Catholic Church was designated as a City landmark in 2009 after six years of determined advocacy, the Landmarks Preservation Commission declined to hold a hearing about the Downtown Community House at 105-107 Washington Street or the tenement at 109 Washington Street.

From 2003 until the present, Svehlak and a growing collection of community advocates in a group known as the “Friends of the Lower West Side,” coordinated incessant grassroots lobbying,

engaging politicians, neighbors, and media. Despite the dozens of historic buildings still at risk, these activists largely focused on the single coherent story that could be told by these three buildings after hundreds and hundreds of others had been demolished by acts of government. Yet, the Landmarks Preservation Commission offered constantly shifting assessments of why these last remaining traces of “Little Syria” or of the Lower West Side immigrant district lacked the architectural and cultural importance to be evaluated as individual landmarks.

The burden of having to justify a treasured site as an individual landmark becomes quite difficult for a grassroots preservation group. This problem compounds in Downtown Manhattan, a part of the city that has few historic districts (the Stone Street Historic District and Fraunces Tavern Block Historic District being notable exceptions), despite being the oldest and on balance most historically significant section. While there are some methodological issues with this approach (with the footprint of skyscrapers being larger than residential buildings), this heat map reveals the basic bias against Lower Manhattan, and in favor of fashionable and wealthy residential neighborhoods like Greenwich Village and Cobble Hill. The Lower West Side and the Lower East Side, both important in American immigration history, have self-evidently very little protection proportionally. Without the ability to establish or expand a historic district, advocates are forced to make enormous efforts over decades to save even a single potential landmark.

Heat Map of Landmark-Protected Structures



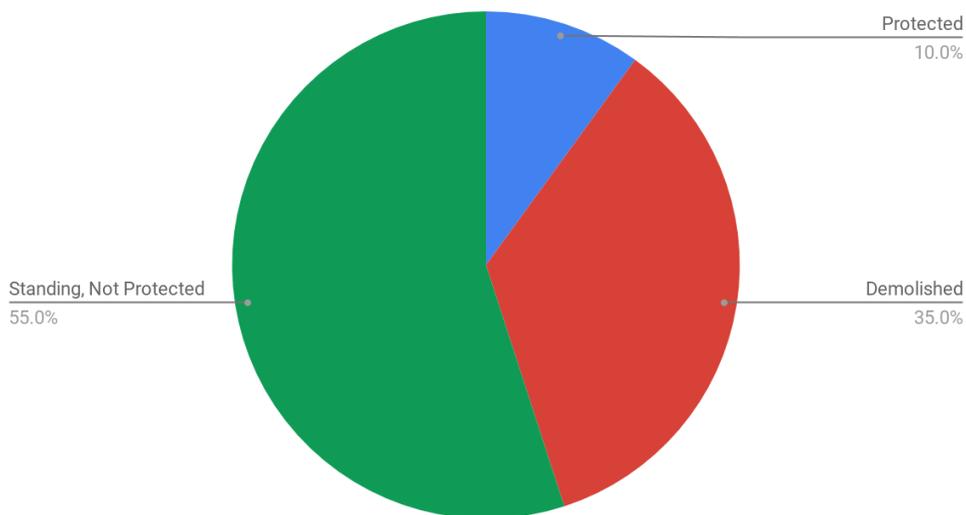
Noting this bias, in 2018, the Friends of the Lower West Side, supported by a Historic Districts Council grant as part of its annual *Six to Celebrate* program, applied to the Landmarks Preservation Commission for a new historic district on Washington Street and Greenwich Street. Unlike the 2003 LMEPF proposal, which included 48 total sites, this proposed district included only 5, also including two low-rise sites on Greenwich Street. Still, however, the Landmarks Preservation Commission refused to have a meeting, to hold a hearing, or to do any additional research. This result contributed to a deep sense of frustration among historians (as well as the desire of this report to explore the systemic factors blocking LPC action).

Review of Status of LMFDC Proposed Historic District

This historical review of the progression of preservation advocacy in the Lower West Side since 2001 leads to a retrospective review of the fate of the 2003 proposed historic district. Since community advocates have only been able to focus on a handful of sites that they consider most essential, other important historic structures once thought worthy of preservation by the LMEPF have been demolished without any substantial pushback. Furthermore, the attraction of new residents to the area, in new construction and in conversions, also arguably creates a local population that has little sense of historic context and place. There are feedback effects in the destruction of context and the sense of place. As the neighborhood is dismembered and extinguished, the idea that only fifteen years ago that the LMPEF could have proposed a historic district becomes increasingly difficult to imagine.

This chart assesses the status of structures from the 2003 report:

Status of Proposed Contributing Buildings in Greenwich District



Map of Historic Sites Affected

Since 2003, fourteen of the forty contributing structures have now been demolished, while only four have been landmarked. Both low-rise and high-rise structures have been demolished.



Demolished Buildings (red); Buildings Designated As Landmarks (Blue)

Demolished Buildings (red)

1. 4-12 Albany a/k/a 3-13 Carlisle a/ka/ 123 Washington Streets (National Surety Co.)
2. 21-23 Thames Street
3. 32-42 Trinity Place a/k/a 69-79 Greenwich Street (former Adams Express Stables)
4. 47-49 West Street
5. 74-80 Washington Street
6. 50-52 Trinity Place (originally United States Express Company)
7. 68 Trinity Place a/k/a 103-107 Greenwich Street (orig. Horn & Hardart Automat)
8. 70-76 Trinity Place a/k/a 109 Greenwich Street
9. 98-100 Greenwich Street
10. 125 Greenwich Street (former Western Electric Factory)
11. 133-135 Greenwich Street (Thames Building) [not considered “contributing” in 2003 report]
12. 110 Liberty Street
13. 112 Liberty Street

14. 113-115 Cedar Street

15. 117 Cedar Street

Buildings Designated As Landmarks (Blue)

1. 67 Greenwich Street

2. 99 Greenwich Street

3. 123-133 Greenwich Street

4. 76-86 Trinity Place a/k/a 113-123 Greenwich Street (American Stock Exchange)

**4-12 Albany a/k/a 3-13 Carlisle a/ka/ 123 Washington Streets (National Surety Co.)
Architect (Date): Arthur C. Jackson (1922)**



(LMEPF Report; New York Times (1921); Municipal Archives)

The LMEPF report described this building as architecturally significant due to its Neo-classical design and as important to the history of the area due to its connection with financial district businesses. Its architect, Arthur C. Jackson (1866-1941), had worked with Carriere and Hastings, where he worked on the New York Public Library, and with LaFarge and Morris. After 1911, he worked independently.

21-23 Thames Street

Architect (Date): John Lerscher (1872)



(LMEPF Report; Municipal Archives)

The LMEPF report called this 1872 building a “tenacious survivor” as one of the area’s last “old law” tenements. Its details, including its proportions, street placement, iron cornice, molded lintels, and two-over-two sash, projected a “nineteenth century character.”

**32-42 Trinity Place a/k/a 69-79 Greenwich Street (former Adams Express Stables)
Architect (Date): Unknown (circa 1869) with 1913 alteration by Francis H. Kimball**



(LMEPF Report)

The LMEPF report described this building as both architecturally significant and historically important to the development of the neighborhood. In the 1860s, it was first built as a large brick stable for horses, yet in 1913 well-esteemed architect Francis H. Kimball (of the Corbin building) converted it into offices for the Adams Express Company. Between 1920 and 1966, it was used as the employees' club, with a dining room, clubroom, and roof garden, for Chase Bank.

47-49 West Street and 74-80 Washington Street



(LMEPF Report and Municipal Archives)

The LMEPF report assessed the two buildings that composed the “Crystal Building” as important due to their original connection to the massive B.T. Babbitt’s soap manufacturing complex that was once the chief enterprise on the West Side. Babbitt was historically significant as the first manufacturer to sell soap bars inside of paper wrappers. In 1911, the two buildings were converted into one grand apartment complex by the B. Crystal & Son. Designers George and Edward Blum created the mansard roof on the West Street side and the distinctive cornice on the Washington Street side.

50-52 Trinity Place (originally United States Express Company)



(LMEPF Report)

50-52 Trinity Place was cited as architecturally significant due to its decorative terra-cotta in a design by prolific and distinctive architectural firm Clinton & Russell.

68 Trinity Place a/k/a 103-107 Greenwich Street (orig. Horn & Hardart Automat)



Once holding an “Automat” fast food service, the LMEPF report valued 68 Trinity Place due to its cultural legacy and significance as one of the last remaining buildings by the Horn & Handart company that designed the New York Athletic Club.

70-76 Trinity Place a/k/a 109 Greenwich Street



The LMEPF report valued this Art Deco skyscraper due to its “decorative terra cotta, bronze spandrel panels, and characteristic vertical piers ending in a stepped facade.”

98-100 Greenwich Street



The LMEPF report valued this warehouse as one of the last pre-Civil War buildings in the area and as significant due to its contribution to the “history, character, and scale of the neighborhood,” especially as a commercial center.

125 Greenwich Street (former Western Electric Factory)



The LMEPF saw this structure, the former Western Electric Factory, as a rare surviving factory in Lower Manhattan and as a recognized “good example” of an early skyscraper, which was praised at the time. It was architecturally significant as a “Romanesque Revival style brick building with sandstone trim,” especially interesting given the architectural care shown to the design of a factory. Its architect, Cyrus L.W. Eidlitz, was also a leader and quite significant.

110-112 Liberty Street a/k/a 113-117 Cedar Street



Although altered, these buildings from the 1850s (Liberty) and the 1910s (Cedar) were cited as important as some of the few older structures that survived the World Trade Center construction. Their connection and placement on the street preserved the extinguishing streetscape.