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[Hearing Held on Potential Designation of Northern Manhattan Historic District](#)

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Proposed Morningside Heights Historic District. Image Credit: LPC.

Designation of 115-property district widely supported by community and elected officials, though Columbia University and religious organizations opposed the inclusion of their properties within boundaries. On December 6, 2016, Landmarks held a hearing on the potential designation of the Morningside Heights Historic District. The potential district consists of 115 properties and is bounded by Riverside drive to the west, with 119th Street and 109th Street as its rough northern and southern boundaries. [Landmarks officially added](#) the potential historic district to its calendar at its September 13, 2016, meeting.

The area was a latecomer in Manhattan's history of residential development. In the 19th century, the future neighborhood was dominated by two large institutions, the Leake and Watts Orphan Asylum and New York Hospital's Bloomingdale Insane Asylum. Residential development was further hindered by the lack of public transportation, and its location on a rocky plateau surrounded by steep cliffs.

The area grew rapidly after the closing of the two institutions in the 1890s, and the extension of the IRT to the area in 1904, with 64 percent of structures in the area built in the decade between 1900 and 1910. The proposed district is largely comprised of apartment buildings, with some rows of speculatively built townhouses. The buildings exhibit architectural styles popular in the time period, such as Tudor-, Renaissance-, Colonial-, Federal- and Georgian-Revival. Prominent architects of the era worked in the district, including George & Edward Blum, also designers of the [Hotel Theresa](#).

The proposed district remains a largely intact collection of high-quality early 20th century residential architecture, with some associated institutional buildings.

Council Member [Mark Levine](#) testified that Morningside Heights possessed a "coherent fabric of architecturally impressive apartment buildings," and that its "unique identity is under threat like never before." A representative of Congressman [Jerrold Nadler](#) urged Landmarks to preserve the community's "unique historical and architectural qualities." A representative of Assembly Member [Daniel O'Donnell](#) said the official had received "a deluge" of communications in support of designation, and asked Landmarks to swiftly designate the district to prevent its "piecemeal destruction." A representative of Borough President [Gale Brewer](#) also lent her "resounding support."

Gail Beltrone, speaking for Barnard College, which owns four buildings in the proposed district, said the college was "delighted" to contribute to the architecture and history of the district, and endorsed designation. Columbia Professor [Andrew Dolkart](#), author of [a book](#) about Morningside Heights' architectural history, said the neighborhood was entirely unique in the story of development in Manhattan. Dolkart noted that its residential environment was created through speculative development, largely by immigrant developers and architects, and demonstrates the type of housing desired by the middle class in the early twentieth century. [Gregory Dietrich](#), speaking as a neighborhood resident, testified that the proposed district "captures the prevailing architectural style and building typology of the early twentieth century apartment house," as well as concurrent ecclesiastical development.

Robert Stern of the [Morningside Heights Community Coalition](#) said historic district designation was necessary to prevent luxury housing development from destroying the material and social fabric of the community.

Multiple other community residents attended the hearing to voice their support for designation, many citing development pressures and the threat of out-of-scale construction.

Daniel Victor, speaking for [Congregation Ramath Orah](#), opposed the synagogue's inclusion in any historic district, saying landmarking would impose costs the congregation could not sustain. Chris Shelton, Pastor of [Broadway Presbyterian Church](#), said the congregation had no desire to alter the building's appearance, but the church already faced funding challenges that would be made more difficult by landmarking, and further testified that the church had no relationship to the area's residential architecture. One resident said designation would violate property owners' Fifth Amendment rights, and hinder the creation of new housing stock.

Victoria Mason-Ailey spoke representing Columbia University, which owns a row of buildings from 604 to 616 114th Street. Mason-Ailey said the buildings lacked distinguished features, and the University had intended to redevelop the lots as housing. She requested that Landmarks relocate the district's boundary to exclude the university's properties.

The [Real Estate Board of New York's](#) Paimaan Lodhi spoke in conditional support of designation, and praised Landmarks for acting transparently. Lodhi said Landmarks should remove all non-contributing buildings and vacant lots from the proposed district, and possibly consider creating non-contiguous boundaries to "only capture buildings truly worthy of protection and preservation."

Chair Meenakshi Srinivasan closed the hearing without establishing a date for a vote on designation.

LPC: Morningside Heights Historic District, Manhattan (LP-2584) (Dec. 6, 2016).

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