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Should All of 125th Street Be Declared Historic?

By TIMOTHY WILLIAMS

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A real estate lawyer has proposed that 125th Street become the "Harlem Historic Zone," a step he believes would help to protect older buildings along the thoroughfare. (Photo: Hiroko Masuike for The New York Times)

Adam Leitman Bailey, a lawyer who was born in Queens and grew up in New Jersey, has devised a novel way to halt gentrification in Harlem. Mr. Bailey, 37, has proposed having 125th Street, from river to river, declared the "Harlem Historic Zone," which he believes would make it more difficult to tear down the neighborhood's old buildings and replace them with new ones.

And though Mr. Bailey has become a strong advocate for historic preservation along 125th Street, he is not a disinterested party: He represents a group of Harlem business owners who are in the process of being evicted to make way for a shopping mall.

Mr. Bailey, who the New York Real Estate Journal wrote in 2005 was "one of New York's best real estate attorneys," talks quickly, and he is adept at multitasking. He says he receives 30 to 40 e-mail messages each business hour.

He equates the historic value of the building he has been hired to save with the homes of the Founding Fathers.

"When the Brooklyn Bridge was built, they tore down George Washington's house," Mr. Bailey said by telephone this afternoon, speaking rapidly. "Was that a good idea?"

The businesses Mr. Bailey represents are not George Washington's house, but five small businesses located in a building at the corner of 125th Street and Frederick Douglass Boulevard. The establishments include House of Seafood, Manna's Restaurant and Million Nail Salon.

“Where do these people go?” he asked. “They’re not Starbucks. They’re not Nike. They’re not Sears.”

And, said Mr. Bailey, by tearing down the building, history will be forever lost, including the site of W.E.B. Du Bois’s first office space, and the backdrop for some of the speeches of Malcolm X (who was assassinated 43 years ago today at the Audubon Ballroom in Harlem). In addition, his clients have leases and some of them had recently invested hundreds of thousands of dollars each by doing extensive remodeling work to their shops before the building was sold last summer. The city’s proposed rezoning plan for 125th Street is also likely to accelerate further the rapid redevelopment in Harlem.

Because Mr. Bailey realizes that the historic district idea is likely a long shot, he has also done what lawyers do: Filed a lawsuit in State Supreme Court in Manhattan, challenging the evictions. On Jan. 30, he won a temporary injunction against demolition. The next court date, is next week.

If he fails to get the area declared a historic site, he said he would settle for an agreement in which at least 20 percent of all new residential developments in the area would be devoted to low-income residents of Harlem, and a similar percentage of new retail space set aside for residents as well.

Mr. Bailey, who is white, said he was greeted with skepticism when he first spoke to a group of mostly African American residents at a meeting in Harlem last summer.

“They asked me, ‘Why should we hire a white man, someone who doesn’t understand what black people are going through?’” he said.

Mr. Bailey said he responded by invoking the names of Abraham Lincoln and Branch Rickey, the Dodgers executive who signed Jackie Robinson, making him Major League Baseball’s first African American player.

“Just because I’m not black doesn’t mean I’m not a good advocate and I can’t understand what you’re going through,” he said he told the group.

He received a rousing ovation, was eventually hired, and thrust into a battle rife with a symbolism that is not lost on him. Besides, Mr. Bailey said his grandfather, a taxi driver, grew up in the neighborhood before it became an African-American mecca.

“This is Harlem’s last stand,” said Mr. Bailey. “I don’t think you can ever recreate it. If you are black, you feel proud to be there.”