

LOCAL NEWS

June 6th, 2018

Neighbors seek historic designation for former African Orthodox church



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The St. James African Orthodox Church worshipped at this building for 60 years. Banner Photo

A group of residents in Roxbury's Highland Park neighborhood has launched an all-out effort to save the former St. James African Orthodox Church building from demolition.

On the Web

Online petition

<https://bit.ly/2M3HbJE>

City Realty Group signaled its intent in March to raze the 108-year-old wood-frame church building at [50 Cedar Street](#). The Brighton-based real estate firm

purchased the building in 2015 under the shell corporation 5050 LLC and has since submitted a series of proposals for condo development on the site.

Alarmed community members have organized on several fronts. A neighborhood group launched an [online public petition](#) to save the church, which at press time had some 2,500 signatures, and formulated a detailed petition for the Boston [Landmarks Commission](#) asking that the church building be designated as a Landmark, which would place it under stricter protection.

Community residents, elected officials and historical preservation advocates are dismayed at losing a historic building that they say is part of the neighborhood's character. They cite the building's historic and cultural significance as both a welcoming home base for immigrant groups over more than a century and for its association with Marcus Garvey and the national Civil Rights movement.

"It was the first African Orthodox Church in Boston," said state Rep. Byron Rushing, who is an expert on Roxbury history and has written a [scholarly brief](#) on the origin of the AOC. "I think it's ridiculous to tear down a church building that's been there so long. It would change the whole streetscape."

Alison Frazee, director of advocacy at the nonprofit Boston Preservation Alliance, said, "We think it's very significant. It's significant not only for its own history, but for its role in the community. Anything that's been part of your neighborhood for so long is part of your story – its role in the fabric of the neighborhood is important."

A [hearing](#) is scheduled for June 12, at which time the Commission will determine whether to take up the process of considering a Landmark designation. The demolition currently is held off by a 90-day delay order that expires in July.

Cultural heritage

As a house of worship, the building has a dual history, according to documents submitted to the Landmarks Commission. For its first 45 years it

was occupied by the Norwegian Congregational Church, serving a sizable Norwegian community and operating a settlement house nearby to help new immigrants arriving in Boston. That church developed into the nationwide Evangelical Free Church of America. The original pulpit from its “mother church” on Cedar Street now resides in the national church’s Minneapolis headquarters as a symbol of its origin in Roxbury.

In 1955, the church was sold to the African Orthodox Church, which had been founded in the 1920s by George Alexander McGuire, a priest from Antigua and an associate of Marcus Garvey. In Roxbury, the church primarily served West Indian immigrants, and globally, the AOC was part of the larger Pan-African movement to unite African and diasporan black populations. A statement of significance by Kathleen von Jena, assistant survey director for the Boston Landmarks Commission, notes that “The AOC helped raise a nascent African American consciousness that came to define the Civil Rights movement and the idea of African American autonomy.”

Archbishop Edward James Ford, who served as interim rector of the church in the 1990s, supplied a letter to the Landmarks Commission in support of preserving the building. In addition to describing its religious history, he wrote, “I urge you to give a strong consideration to the fact that at this time in our nation’s history ... that you bear in mind the many and great contributions that are exemplified by the two immigrant groups which have called the church on Cedar Street their home and center of their culture.”

In another letter, Barry Gaither, executive director of the National Center of Afro-American Artists, wrote, “There are few remaining structures that embody the history of struggle, ambition and achievement of organizations such as AOC ... The building is an artifact, a document we don’t want to lose.”

The St. James AOC closed in 2015, and the building was sold for \$1 million to 5050 LLC, a shell corporation of City Realty. The building has remained idle for several years, but retains most of its historical design and features, including large pointed Gothic arch leaded glass windows.

In another twist in the ongoing saga, neighborhood advocates were surprised to see a [for-sale listing](#) for 50 Cedar Street posted this week on Redfin. The

listing includes renderings of a proposed “5-9-family” residential development that does not preserve the church building. The asking price is just shy of \$2 million.

Requests to City Realty and the listing agent for comment had not been answered by Banner press time.

Potential community space

Another stakeholder in the neighborhood is the Nathan Hale School, a 130-student public elementary school across the street from the empty church building. With no gym or auditorium, school parents and Principal Romaine Mills-Teque have been seeking for years to partner with realtors and construction companies and homebuyers in Highland Park to gain use of nearby space to use for dance, music and art activities.

The basement of the church building is one of the spaces that could aid the school, Mills-Teque told the Banner. She said she has attended community meetings about development of the church site and asked the developers to consider keeping some space for school use.

Contemplating the possibility that the church will be demolished and replaced by housing, Mills-Teque said, “It will mean that nobody really cares or listens to people who have the best interest of children and schools at heart. It’s all about the almighty dollar.”

A town hall meeting at the Nathan Hale School was scheduled for Thursday, June 7 at 5:30 p.m., to which District 7 City Councilor Kim Janey was invited to discuss the school’s limited facilities and potential opportunities in the neighborhood for collaborative initiatives.

Preservation challenges

Kathy Kottaridis, executive director of Historic Boston Inc, said that for church congregations and small developers, the expenses of maintaining and renovating historic buildings can be daunting, and the AOC building has likely had little maintenance over the past several decades. In order to recoup

investment, housing development that retains the church building would need to have a certain density, she said. The density that City Realty originally proposed in 2016, however — 39 units and 32 parking spaces — met with [stiff resistance](#) from neighbors and elected officials.

HBI had looked into purchasing 50 Cedar Street when it was for sale in 2015, but did not have the capacity to take it on at that point, Kottaridis said. Now, HBI is considering again whether they could raise the money to redevelop the building or whether there may be opportunities to partner with someone developing or using the property.

“We will take a look and evaluate whether we could take it on,” she told the Banner. “That’s a neighborhood we care a lot about. But we also have to be prudent about whether we think we can succeed [with it]. ... At the end of the day, these are real estate transactions, and they have to ‘pencil out.’ You have to be able to finance it, raise money for it. We (HBI) can look at it in a more complex nonprofit way. A developer is looking in a different way. ... They get into it to make money, not to preserve buildings.”

Some community residents expressed little patience with profit considerations, especially given the rapidly rising pace of development in the Highland Park area.

“This neighborhood has been under assault by a number of developers who don’t seem to be concerned with our architectural heritage,” said Jon Ellertson, a longtime local resident and current secretary of the Highland Park Neighborhood Coalition. “I’m a business person and understand working for a profit, but I think housing is a special enterprise because it has such long-lasting effects on a neighborhood.”

Ellertson said his group does not want to be seen as obstructionist.

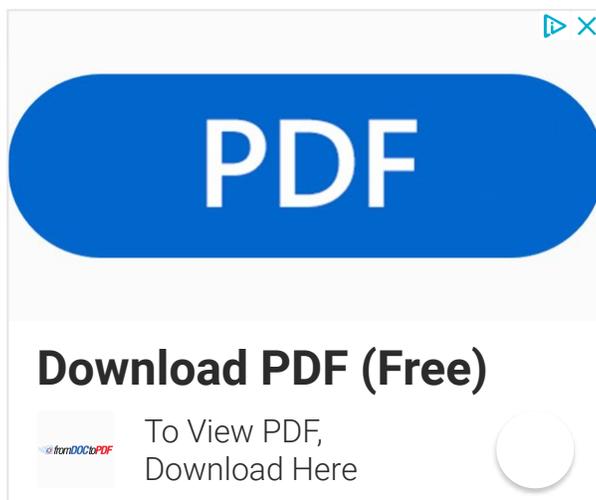
“We’re not opposed to condos in the building. We’re not opposed to other reuse, like an auditorium and performance space for the school,” he said. “We would like to see City Realty come to the negotiating table and talk about how we could save the building and its legacy and serve the immediate community.”

The Landmarks Commission hearing, at which the public can offer testimony, is scheduled for Tuesday, June 12 at 6 p.m. in room 900 of City Hall.

In addition, the Highland Park Neighborhood Coalition has announced plans to host a rally for preservation of the church building on Friday, June 8 at 5:30 p.m. at 88 Lambert Avenue.

'A Note on the Origin of the African Orthodox Church' by B. Rushing – <https://www.jstor.org/stable/2717072>

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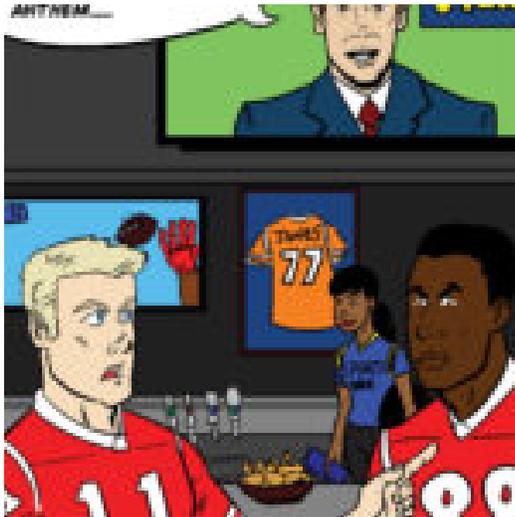
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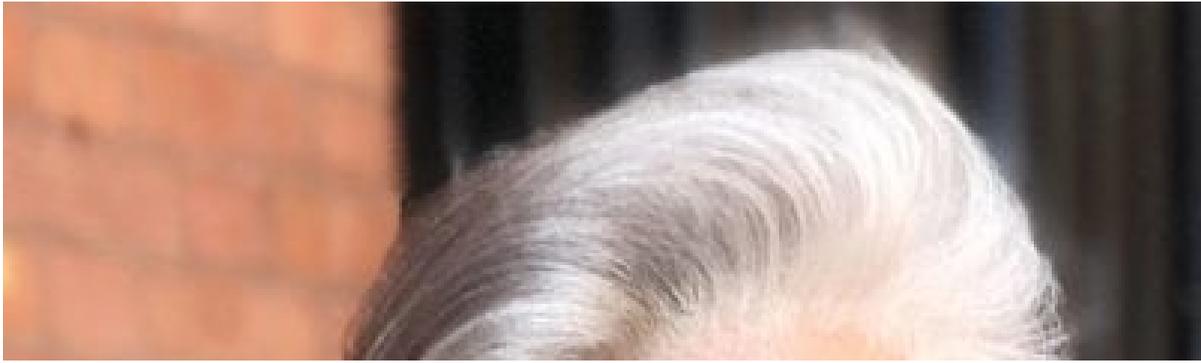


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