



Greenwich
Village
Society for
Historic
Preservation

*Founded in 1980, the
Society fights to protect
the architectural heritage
and cultural history
of the Village.*

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**TESTIMONY OF THE GREENWICH VILLAGE SOCIETY
FOR HISTORIC PRESERVATION
IN SUPPORT OF LANDMARK DESIGNATION
OF THE FORMER P.S. 64, 605 EAST 9TH STREET
MAY 16TH, 2006**

Good morning Commissioners and thank you for the opportunity to testify this morning. On behalf of the Greenwich Village Society for Historic Preservation, I strongly urge you to designate the former P.S. 64 a New York City landmark as quickly as possible, to ensure that this irreplaceable piece of our city's history is preserved.

GVSHP typically focuses on areas just west of the former P.S. 64. However, we feel strongly about the need to designate this building because of its exceptional architectural, historic, cultural, and social significance, and because of the enormously important message we believe the Commission must send to an owner who is clearly seeking to prevent landmarking of this building by destroying it before designation takes place.

Charles B.J. Snyder's architectural and cultural legacy can be felt throughout New York City with his H-plan schools, of which P.S. 64 is an early and particularly distinguished example. While the school's handsome and unusual Baroque Revival details clearly set this building apart, the innovative layout to maximize light and air in a dense city of immigrants is of special significance. The ground-floor auditorium, of which this building also contains an early example, speaks to the desire to make schools a center of learning for the entire community, and was a reflection of the reform-minded initiatives taking root in the City and the country at the time. P.S. 64's early association with figures such as Franklin Roosevelt, Sydney Greenstreet, Joseph Mankiewicz, and Yip Harburg add to the building's historic significance, while its role in the development of educational theories by Elizabeth Irwin and William Grady make it a stand-out among educational sites in the city.

Of course, P.S. 64's era of historic and cultural significance is not limited to its early years. Its later incarnation as the Charas/El Bohio Community Center reflects many layers of cultural significance in New York City's history in the late 20th century – our city's shifting demographics, the crumbling of the public infrastructure, the incredible cultural flowering in the late 1970's and 1980's of downtown and especially the East Village/Lower East Side, urban homesteading, and the revolutionary reclamation by many Lower East Side residents and community groups of vacant lots and abandoned buildings, turning what had been their neighborhood's greatest liabilities into some of its greatest assets. As a community center, Charas/El Bohio attracted figures such as Spike Lee, John Leguizamo, Luis Guzman, and Susan Sarandon, as well as countless

local artists and community leaders who breathed new life into a neighborhood which many others had abandoned.

There is, however, a final chapter of this building's history yet to be written, and it is up to the Commission to decide how it will end. You have quite rightly determined P.S. 64 to be worthy of hearing as a possible New York City landmark. The owner, plainly hostile to the notion, has taken steps clearly calculated to try to prevent designation. Now the question is whether P.S. 64 will become a Penn Station – a cherished city landmark lost because we did not act quickly enough – or a Grand Central Station, where the City held firm and a great landmark was saved and a strong precedent established.

We hope it will be the latter. P.S. 64 is a great building which should be saved, while the significance of its loss would extend well beyond this individual building. I hope the Commission will act while it has the opportunity to do so, and save this wonderful East Village and New York City landmark.