

Should Walt Whitman's House Be Landmarked? It's Complicated

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ABSTRACT (ENGLISH)

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FULL TEXT

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Only a smattering of people showed up on a recent rainy evening for the dedication of a Walt Whitman-themed art installation at 375 Pearl Street, better known as the Verizon building, in Lower Manhattan.

Huddled under umbrellas, they watched as lights came on behind 15-foot panels of stainless steel incised with text from "Leaves of Grass."

To the three members of the Walt Whitman Initiative who attended the dedication, it was yet another welcome tribute to the father of free verse this year, the bicentennial of his birth.

But it fell far short of their major goal: the landmarking of Whitman's former home in Clinton Hill, Brooklyn.

"A lot happened this year, but not the big thing we had hoped to do," said Karen Karbiener, the president of the group.

Ms. Karbiener, who is a professor at New York University, said that there was a sense of urgency around protecting the building in question, 99 Ryerson Street, especially since Clinton Hill has gentrified and is drawing the attention of developers.

But the New York City Landmarks Preservation Commission does not think the house warrants designation. Nor does the building's current occupant, who is unhappy about the attention his home is getting.

And then there is the matter of whether Whitman, whose verse in "Leaves of Grass" has for so long been seen as radically inclusive, was actually a racist later in life who does not deserve to be celebrated in a neighborhood as diverse as Clinton Hill.

Few argue that 99 Ryerson is architecturally worthy of being designated a landmark. An unprepossessing wood-frame rowhouse from the 1850s, it is now covered in aluminum siding; a third floor has been added since Whitman lived here with his parents and four of his brothers.

Rather, it's the house's connection with the poet, they contend, that makes the building deserving of official recognition. Its humble character, and perhaps even its less-than-immaculate appearance, reflects who Whitman was: the son of a carpenter with little education who exalted everyday people and places.

It is a potent reminder, some preservationists say, that literary greatness can spring from extremely modest beginnings.

Although his stay here was brief—his family owned the house for only six months in 1855 and possibly stayed there through part of 1856—it was a literary turning point for Whitman, then in his mid-30s. It was here that he published the first edition of "Leaves of Grass." It was also here that he received a visit from Ralph Waldo Emerson, who searched him out to pay his respects to an emerging talent.

And of the 30 or so buildings the peripatetic Whitman lived in during his time in New York City, 99 Ryerson is the only

one left standing.

“The site he was born in is on Long Island, the site he died in is in Camden, N.J.,” said Brad Vogel, a preservationist who heads the Coalition to Save Walt Whitman’s House. “This is the house most closely related to his work.” In any other city, Ms. Karbiener said, landmarking Whitman’s onetime home “would be a no-brainer.” In 2017, however, the New York City Landmarks Preservation Commission declined to consider the house for landmarking, citing how briefly Whitman lived there and how much it has changed since the 1850s.

“The building has been substantially altered, to be almost unrecognizable,” said Lisa Kersavage, the commission’s executive director. “It has neither the historic appearance nor fabric that was present when Walt Whitman lived there.”

The current owner, the Horacio Downs Living Trust, has also opposed landmarking. And its current occupant, a grandson of Horacio Downs, who did not want his name published because he fears being harassed, said that he wants nothing to do with the venture. Whitman admirers who make pilgrimages to his home, he said, stare at it from the street and sometimes climb his steps and knock on the door.

Some have even taken souvenir plant cuttings from the vines intertwined with the wrought-iron fence in front of the house. A woman stole an old metal trash can, leaving behind a note with her phone number, he said. (The bin was later returned.)

People leading Whitman tours congregate outside 99 Ryerson, the onetime owner’s grandson said, sometimes making it difficult for family members and tenants to come and go. He said that five generations of the Downs family have occupied the house over three decades.

He was taken aback by a lack of respect visitors showed. He is an African-American, and was shocked when he looked up Whitman online and discovered that the poet who extolled egalitarianism had also once compared black people to “baboons.”

Whitman scholars say that the poet’s attitudes toward race were not so different from the views of many other white Northerners at the time, but recent revelations have caused a recalibration in parts of the academy.

“His poetry has some remarkably resonant and really humanistic portrayals of black Americans,” said Ivy Wilson, a professor of English at Northwestern University and the author of “Whitman Noir: Black America and the Good Gray Poet.”

He added: “But his prose has some very unseemly expressions.”

So what is to be done with a building that is someone’s home but that others lay claim to—a house that is, in a sense, contested turf?

The landmarks commission has designated buildings over owners’ objections many times before.

The apartment house on the Upper West Side of Manhattan where the author James Baldwin lived was designated this year, despite its owner’s opposition. It is one of six new landmark buildings of significance to the L.G.B.T.Q. community.

Preservationists point to the designation of such buildings—on the basis of cultural and social importance, not architectural flawlessness—as “reason to be hopeful” that 99 Ryerson will one day make the cut, said Jay Shockley, a founder and a director of the NYC LGBT Historic Sites Project, which supports landmarking Whitman’s house. Whitman depicted men loving men in his poetry, which was revolutionary in his time.

If 99 Ryerson does receive landmark status, any owner, now or in the future, would have to obtain approval from the commission to make changes to the building.

But “determining appropriate alterations” to a building that has been remodeled to the extent that 99 Ryerson has would be “challenging,” Ms. Kersavage said.

Without designation, however, the building could be demolished at the discretion of its owner. And with Clinton Hill seeing new development—a new condo building is going up down the block from 99 Ryerson—preservationists fear that possibility.

So they press on. In August they met with staff of the landmarks commission to present their case. Earlier this month,

the Coalition to Save Walt Whitman's House sent a letter to the commission regarding the "integrity" of the building, saying, among other things, that the placement of windows, entrance and stoop remain unchanged since Whitman's day.

There are over 7,000 signatures in an online petition in support of landmarking. Martin Scorsese, the film director, and Robert Pinsky, the former poet laureate of the United States, have written letters.

Whitman has been honored with countless tributes during his bicentennial year, including a United States Postal Service stamp with his portrait on it. In July, the New York City Council voted to name the intersection of DeKalb Avenue and Ryerson Street Walt Whitman Way, and in November a street sign bearing the name was unveiled on the corner, which is about three avenues from 99 Ryerson.

Brad Vogel of the coalition expressed regret over the indignities that Mr. Downs's descendants have endured. "In no way is it our desire to inconvenience," he said. "But this is that important for the future."

DETAILS

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