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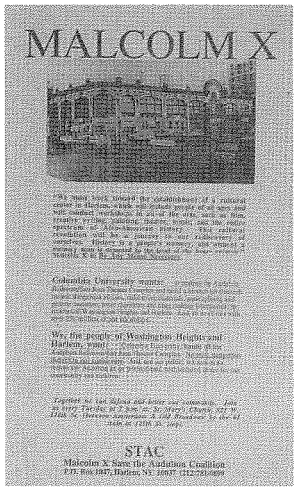
Heritage and the Cultural Politics of Preservation

Ned Kaufman



Citizens contesting plans for the Audubon Ballroom brought various concerns—the impact of a large institution's expansion, the proper way to memorialize a place significant to African-American history, and an opposition to biotech research. (Ned Kaufman)

If a single word could express the dominant social values of historic preservation, it would be *heritage*. As preservationists have expanded their focus from architectural excellence to a widening range of social and cultural values, the concept of heritage has been redefined in new and sometimes more inclusive ways, while avoiding sustained critique.

Themes of social diversity are prompting new demands on preservation — demands to broaden the heritage canon, to empower new groups. Preservation is forging new alliances with community planning, public history, folklore and tourism promotion. Yet much preservation practice continues along traditional lines, which are, as often as not, built upon the concept of heritage.

What does *heritage* mean? *Heritage* is what one inherits, and the word is thereby freighted with familial solidarity, generational connectedness and ownership. Family, inheritance, goods and possession define a profoundly conservative set of values, and when historic preservation rhetoric invokes the word *heritage*, it is also bringing these values to bear.

To speak, for example, of a "national" or even "world" cultural heritage is to assert metaphorically that all Americans, or all people, belong to a single family and share a single cultural inheritance. Family members who disagree in identifying, valuing or apportioning this inheritance — or who challenge the testator's fairness in doing so — risk being accused of unseemly squabbling. This metaphor works therefore to support an essentially conservative ideology of cultural harmony, and whenever historic preservation adopts this metaphor, it is likely to be doing so too.

A great many public heritage policies are based on just such an ideology of cultural harmony, and they frequently encode a heavy measure of class bias. The lists of important heritage sites issued by organizations like the World Monuments Fund typically emphasize royal or princely palaces or major religious complexes. When sites of special relevance to working-class history are included, it is often by virtue of assimilation to other values: association with a war of national liberation (a flour mill near Dover that was used to feed the troops fighting Napoleon) or a movement of national expansion (a frontier mining town), exemplification of upper-class ideals of charity or paternalism (model housing complexes and settlement complexes), esthetic or technological merit (Victorian loft buildings), or conversion into luxury condominiums or marinas (dockside warehouses in Liverpool).

These biases are also reflected in official interpretations. When New York City's Landmarks Preservation Commission declared SoHo, New York's largest surviving ensemble of nineteenth-century cast- iron loft buildings, a historic district, the commission's official report emphasized the buildings' owners, architects, styles and materials. Hardly a word was said about the work that went on in them, and nothing about the economic and class relations that defined that work. A tremendous resource for interpreting New York's labor history and class relations was redefined as a monument to entrepreneurship, technical innovation and aesthetic skill. Nowadays these magnificently gloomy lofts have been reborn as fashionable apartments, art galleries

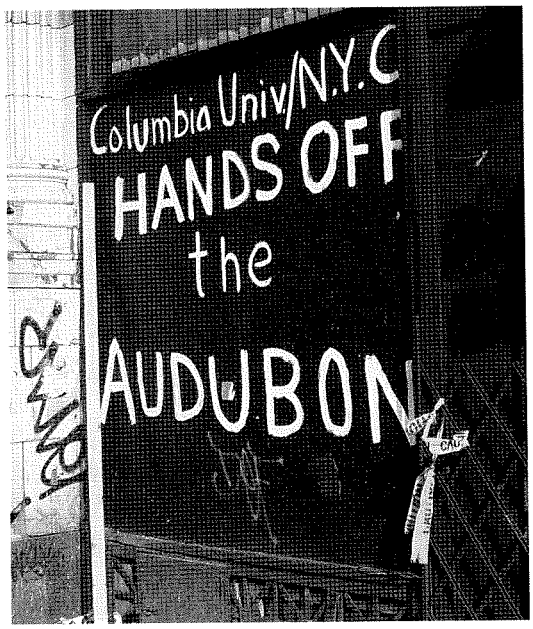
and shops. Their future as architecture has never looked brighter, yet their value as carriers of a working-class cultural heritage has never been more deeply compromised.

Can a non-traditional preservation practice evade or subvert the underlying ideology of heritage and present a more genuinely inclusive, or even oppositional, cultural inheritance? One way to do so might be to oppose historic preservation's celebratory tendencies by focusing attention on some of the deplorable episodes of injustice in our past. This is something that a responsible public history program must from time to time attempt.

The potential of this approach, important as it is, is limited, partly by the tendency of any object placed on exhibit to incite admiration. People understand very well that work hanging in a museum is there to be admired, and this expectation carries over to work that is placed on display within the streets. It is very hard to counteract this effect of enframement. For example, historians and preservationists have placed the Nazi legacy on display at Auschwitz and elsewhere; such places are preserved for their capacity to arouse outrage and to keep alive the memory of atrocities. Yet their success depends upon maintaining a level of negative interpretation so intense and pervasive that it completely enframes the site and fixes the visitor's attitude long before he or she arrives there.

In everyday public spaces like streets, critical commentary is generally relegated to the margins and is completely unable to compete with the enormous ideological weight of the urban environment.

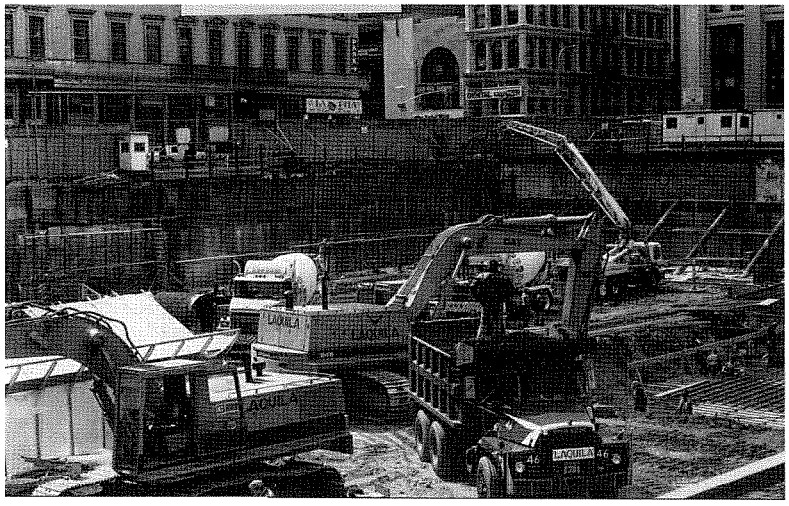
The problem is compounded by the very success with which preservation advocates, seeking to gain and maintain support for the movement, have linked historic preservation with civic celebration. Instinctively accepting this linkage, many people will resist the application of historic preservation in situations where they feel celebration to be inappropriate.



Many New Yorkers, for example, will oppose overt attempts to preserve tenement buildings because they sense instinctively that this would be tantamount to signifying admiration of poverty and overcrowding. (On the other hand, they will enthusiastically support the preservation of tenements where they are part of an architecturally admired streetscape).

The National Trust for Historic Preservation manages Kykuit, a Rockefeller country estate; tour guides celebrate the Rockefellers's taste, philanthropy and family life. Would the trust permit outside groups to lead tours that emphasize the Rockefellers's accumulation of wealth, their relationship with labor unions and the impact of their real estate dealings? Probably not. When powerful social forces are brought to bear on the celebration of heritage, whether through the trust or New York City's preservation movement, truly critical commentary is pushed to the margins. Radically critical interpretations may well be beyond the reach of historic preservation.

Another strategy for evading the ideology of heritage is to co-opt preservation's celebratory tendencies by extending them to new subjects that expand society's cultural inheritance. This is quietly happening in many instances. "Quietly" is the important word here: as long as the historical themes in question do not challenge majoritarian views of what deserves celebration (Duke Ellington, the Underground Railroad), upset the balance of the historical record or threaten impor-



Foundations are laid for the new federal office building, all burials having been cleared from the site, while archaeological excavation proceeds on the annex site under a tent visible at left of photograph. (New York City Landmarks Preservation Commission)

tant political or economic interests, this sort of progress gains the support of preservationists and the general public.

What happens when one of these conditions is not met? A comparison between two recent campaigns in New York is instructive.

New York's eighteenth-century African Burial Ground, located just north of City Hall, originally covered about five acres and held perhaps 20,000 burials, mostly of slave and free blacks. In 1989, planners for a new 34-story federal office tower first came across the historical evidence of its existence. That the burial ground had been there during the eighteenth century was beyond dispute the question was, had it survived under Lower Manhattan's heavily disturbed surface? If it had, it would be a unique archeological and cultural find.

The federal government made a less than painstaking investigation and found nothing. Site work proceeded. In summer 1991, excavators began to uncover well-preserved skeletons: by December, 95 had been removed and opposition to the construction project was mounting. The government persisted, ultimately removing well over 200 skeletons. Against this juggernaut, protest seemed hopeless.

The coalition to save the burial ground began with a few local politicians, archeologists and black activists. It attracted civic and professional organizations dedicated to minority issues, the Landmarks Preservation Commission, a few celebrities and a small number of white-shoe civic organizations like the Municipal Art Society of New York.[1] Eventually it expanded to include virtually every local politician from Mayor David N. Dinkins on down (most of major national politicians stayed away until very late in the game) and much of New York's civic establishment.

This broad coalition voiced several consistent themes, most notably the desire of the African-American community to be included in the picture of history. Public hearings and meetings provided many opportunities for black community leaders to speak eloquently on this subject, and they regularly cited both the rightness of inclusion as well as its beneficial effect on disaffected young people and society as a whole. White liberals and progressives had no difficulty accepting these arguments or the undertones of guilt that frequently accompanied them. Yet the federal government continued digging and building.

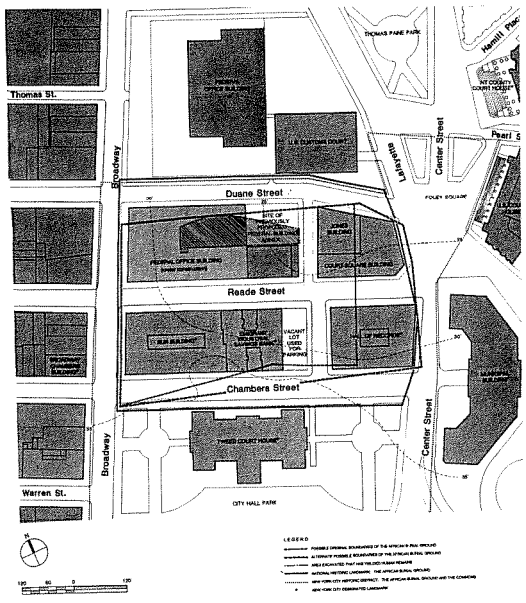
Help finally came from an unexpected quarter. A lame-duck black congressman from Illinois, Gus Savage, headed the committee that oversees the federal agency responsible for the project. He held a hearing and subsequently made clear to the General Services Administration that its funding would be in jeopardy if it persisted in violating the burial ground. Work stopped.

By this time, however, a large part of the site had been cleared, and the tower was on its way up. Only the adjacent annex site remained incompletely excavated. This was filled and leveled with clean soil, planted in grass and fenced; the annex was canceled and the remaining skeletons were left to rest underground. The federal government promised to install an interpretive center and artwork in the adjacent office building and to build a permanent memorial on the annex site.[2]

In the meantime, the site — indeed the entire precinct of the original burial ground, covering several blocks — has been declared both a city historic district and a National Historic Landmark.

The human remains, as well as associated artifacts, have been shipped to the anthropological research facilities at Howard University. An educational office has been established in New York and is actively interpreting the site and its archeological remains. The site has become a place of study, pilgrimage and the observance of various traditional religious and cultural rituals.

Lifted as it was by the urgency of struggle, the burial ground's rediscovery has had a profound impact on the way people think about New York's history. The African and African-American presence in that story is both bigger and clearer, among white as well as black people, than before. The African contribution to Dutch New York has been described and discussed, as have African-Indian relations. The debate over slavery in New York's past has sharpened. The bones and artifacts are yielding archaeological information of national interest about African cultural traditions and living conditions in eighteenth century America. The fact that this part of Manhattan, once known as Little Africa, is now the city's official civic center has made this historical reinstatement all the more meaningful.

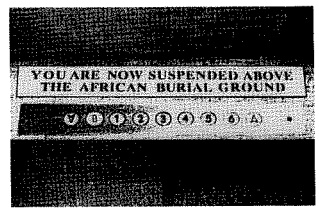


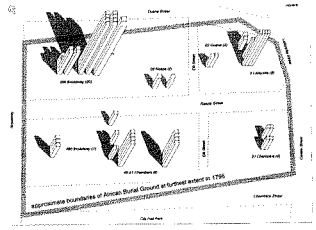
The African Burial Ground and Vicinity
site plan showing current conditions

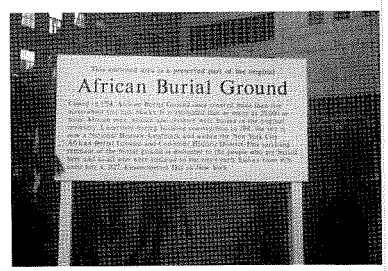
Preservation's celebratory power has worked well at the African Burial Ground to reinsert a forgotten piece of history into the canon. But the lessons can be more complex, as the case of the Audubon Ballroom shows. The Audubon Ballroom and Theater, located in Washington Heights, a poor neighborhood north of Harlem, would have qualified for an all-out preservation effort on almost any grounds. The building's Broadway facade is a masterpiece of early terra cotta decoration. The vast, ornate theater was one of the earliest designed expressly for film. The ballroom was once the largest dance floor in New York and was a powerful social magnet for decades; it was where Mike Quill organized the Transit Workers Union. But the historical event that galvanized people was the assassination of Malcolm X, which took place in the ballroom.

The fate of the ballroom became a public issue in 1989, when New York City, which owned the building, announced that it had reached an agreement with Columbia University to demolish the building and replace it with a center for commercial biotech research. Both the city and the politically powerful Port Authority would contribute public funds to the project, which was was heralded as essential for New York to retain its leadership in this field. Even if the center failed, this would be a marvelous deal for Columbia, which would gain five square blocks of free and rezoned land directly opposite its vast, overcrowded medical complex. At the time, the ballroom had been largely vacant for almost two decades and wasn't much to look at. Yet every valuable architectural and historical element was still in place and there was little doubt that the facades and ballroom could be restored and reused.

The strategic issues raised by the campaign to save the Audubon were complex. Many







Above: Annex site. (U.S. General Services Administration) top: "Fifty-three Elevators." Proposal by C. Neville for an African Burial Ground memorial. First place winner in competition sponsored by a coalition of civic and preservation groups. (African Burial Ground Coalition, Committee for Fifty-Three Elevators) Left: Boundaries of burial ground and local and national historic districts. (African Burial Ground Coalition)

Audubon Ballroom before development of the research building. (Ned Kaufman)

community residents opposed the biotech project not only for historic preservation but also for health and environmental reasons. They also resented what they saw as Columbia's imperialistic attitude, remembering other, often notorious fights with Columbia. This faction opted for a strategy of uncompromising opposition.

Others, meanwhile, were counseled by political pragmatism, which suggested that uncompromising opposition would be futile and that winning something would be preferable to winning nothing. The Municipal Art Society was in this group, along with some Harlem politicians and preservation groups. The members of this group accepted (some with great reluctance) the inevitability of the biotech project yet opposed the demolition of the ballroom to accommodate it.

Problems soon developed within the latter group. The Municipal Art Society assembled a pro-bono architectural team and put forth a proposal that would restore the ballroom and the terra cotta facades while consigning the theater to demolition. The group showed how Columbia's biotech project, as well as various promised public services, could be accommodated through a combination of adaptive reuse and new construction, arguably better and more economically than in Columbia's own proposal. Within its own terms it was an intelligent scheme, yet it ignored the opposition of much of the community to biotech research (and to Columbia), and while it saved the ballroom it sacrificed the theater.

Columbia's opponents, properly insisting on the integrity of the historic space, also opened the question of just what that space was. Though Malcolm X had never been associated with the theater, it was an architecturally distinct portion of the building, and it became difficult to hold the moral high ground while allowing the theater's destruction. Some who had initially supported the society's pragmatic proposal later backed away from it. "They want to carve it up like a Thanksgiving turkey," remarked one disappointed former supporter.

Valuable support for the proposal came from one of New York's most consistently progressive politicians, Manhattan Borough President Ruth Messinger, who endorsed the scheme and fought hard for it. Incurring bitter attacks from the mainstream press, overpowered and out-maneuvered by the formidable bureaucratic powers at her opponents disposal, Messinger was nonetheless able to negotiate a brave, though somewhat unsatisfying, compromise: some 60 per cent of the terra cotta facades and 40 per cent of the ballroom itself would be saved and incorporated into a redesigned biotech facility. A community health clinic and Malcolm X exhibit would be installed in the building.[3]

At the time, Messinger's solution pleased few people. It did violence to the building. It mocked history. It reeked of political compromise. And it offered nothing to biotech opponents. Yet in the real world, it was all that a courageous politician could win. Looking at the result now, it is possible to feel that even the partial preservation of the Audubon's facades and ballroom is so far preferable to their complete loss that the result constituted an important victory.

The solution reached at the Audubon Ballroom is strikingly similar to that achieved at the

African Burial Ground: partial destruction of the historic site, partial restoration, and the installation of public art memorials and interpretive exhibits. But while many advocates of the burial ground left that battle with a feeling of uplift and accomplishment, advocates of the ballroom left feeling bitter and defeated.

The civic establishment and local governmental hierarchy enthusiastically joined the movement for the African Burial Ground. Reporters covered it avidly. It became virtually impossible to be against the Burial Ground. By contrast, the civic establishment largely stayed away from the Audubon Ballroom, Mayor Dinkins (along with much of the local political establishment) sided with Columbia, press was unfavorable, no savior rose up from Illinois and even some prominent African-American voices opposed the ballroom's preservation. Why these divergent responses?

The symbolism of the two campaigns was partly responsible. Twenty years after his assassination, Malcolm X was still deeply troubling to many white New Yorkers, and to some black ones as well. Even some of his admirers questioned whether he could best be remembered at the site of his martyrdom. These were challenging issues that split the community.

The African Burial Ground, by contrast, was rather unproblematic. The eighteenth century was a long time ago, and more than any particular political stance, the burial ground stood for the simple "thereness" of black people. One could concede this without in the least endangering the stability of current political and economic arrangements, and in the 1990s, a great many white New Yorkers were prepared to admit African Americans to the historical picture on these terms. Moreover, while the Burial Ground stirred up potentially troubling themes of guilt and recompense, it also offered a relatively painless way to address them. These

Audubon Research Building. Davis Brody Bond. (© Peter Aarons/Esto)

themes thus served on a sentimental level to unify, rather than divide.

The contrast in the line-up of opponents is also revealing. At the burial ground, the federal government — a distant, faceless bureaucracy that inspired little love locally — offered an excellent target for attack, one that could unify New Yorkers of many different stripes. At the Audubon, by contrast, the mayor, Columbia University and the Port Authority together commanded an extensive network of local allegiances within the power elite; they were much more difficult to attack. Also, they had very substantial political and economic interests at stake. Thus while the federal government ultimately folded, the mayor and the university fought for every inch.

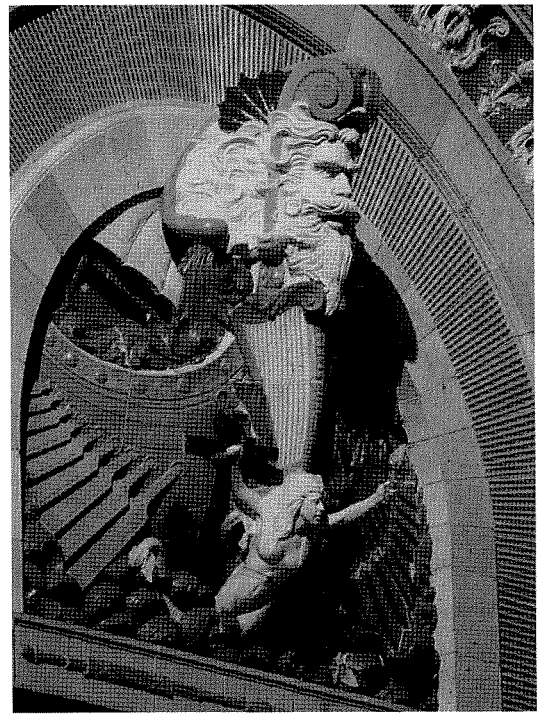
The communities of Washington Heights and Harlem are not rich or powerful, and the politics of money and power were not favorable to their cause — another important difference between the two campaigns. At the burial ground, where few compelling local interests were threatened, the heritage canon opened to include the celebration of new material, and proponents went away feeling empowered. At the ballroom, where the financial, political and ideological stakes were high and where the preservation coalition was fragmented and relatively weak, the coalition's power was inadequate to open the canon, and advocates went away feeling defeated.

Correcting the historical record has its own rightness and is an important goal. Yet these two contrasting stories should give pause to those who argue that being included in the picture equates with empowerment. Heritage victories, unless accompanied by significant victories in the area of property values and political power, are likely to be essentially symbolic. When a preservation victory not only opens up the canon of heritage celebration but also changes the balance of wealth and power (even in a small way), then heritage politics will have achieved a real measure of empowerment.

Unfortunately, the heritage concept is problematic within the politics of empowerment, for it is an intrinsically conservative force — not only when it is used to mask and defuse societal differences, but also when it is used to highlight distinct traditions and values. This is so in two ways. First, by emphasizing inter-generational and family ties of property and belief, the heritage concept enforces continuity with the past: those fighting for recognition now are in some essential way the same as their historical forebears. Yet we are not necessarily what our great grandparents or even our parents were, and to imply that we are, under the guise of an admirable solicitude to tradition, is to risk reinforcing stereotypes and diminishing important opportunities for personal betterment and social change.

A second threat is the divisive effect heritage politics can have when the emphasis on specific ethnic or racial experiences masks shared historical experiences — and shared interests in social change — that could unite disparate groups. There is perhaps no better way to promote the continuance of the status quo than by dividing those who might otherwise unite to change it. In times when progress on economic and social issues is at best slow and difficult, heritage battles may provide an attractive outlet for frustrated energies. But is a shift from economic and social issues to symbolic ones the best way to move forward, or does it weaken the movement for social change?

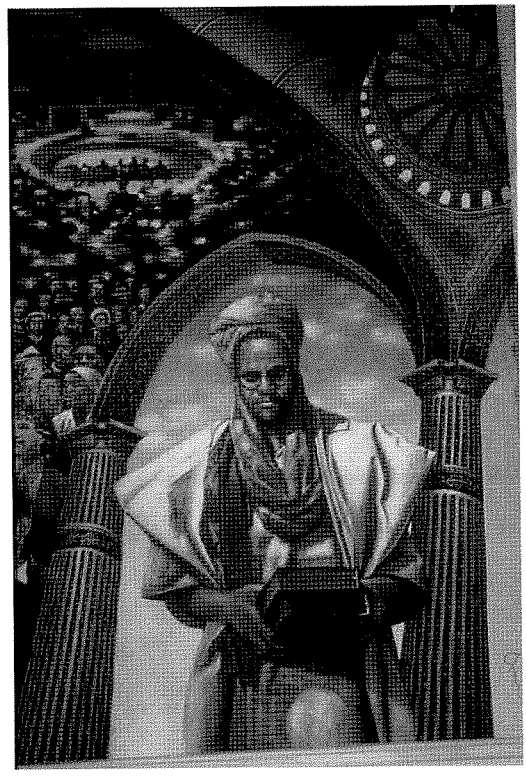
The effort to correct the historical record is intellectually right in its own terms, shifts public awareness and may provide valuable underpinnings for future social change. It must be recognized, however, that heritage politics rarely offer a direct route to social, economic or political change; victory in the fight for historical inclusion rarely leads directly to economic or political empowerment. If anything, the levers are more likely to work in the opposite direction: economic and political empowerment will lead directly to greater and more meaningful victories in the arena of heritage politics.



Restored ornamentation on ballroom facade. (Davis Brody Bond)

Notes

1. I was involved in this issue, and in the debate over the Audubon Ballroom, as an employee of the Municipal Art Society and continue to work for that organization.
2. As of 1997, the on-site interpretive center, memorial and art projects have not been completed.
3. As of 1997, the biotech facility is up and running; the historical elements of the ballroom and facade have been restored and incorporated. The community health facility is operating and several artworks on the subject of Malcolm X have been installed in the building. The historical exhibit, however, has been stalled for various reasons.



Left and below: "Homage to Malcolm X," Daniel Galvez, 1997. Mural recently installed in Audubon Ballroom. (New York City Department of Cultural Affairs, Percent for Art Program)