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ON THE WEB

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## Icon of Harlem's Gay Night Life Gives Way to Wreckers

By DAVID W. DUNLAP

A block in Harlem that once resonated to the sounds of some of America's top musicians has, in recent weeks, heard nothing more than the mournful rasp of hydraulic shears and a hydraulic excavator clawing away the remains of a century-old entertainment complex.

A year and a half from now, if all goes according to plan, the block of Seventh Avenue between West 131st and West 132nd Streets will have gained an eight-story building with 115 new rental apartments, one-fifth of them for lower-income families; a new church and fellowship hall; a new garage and new stores.

But it will also have lost a rich cache of social and cultural history: the former Lafayette Theater and an abutting structure that long ago housed Connie's Inn and the Ubangi Club; places where Louis Armstrong, Bessie Smith, Fats Waller, Ethel Waters, Duke Ellington and Gladys Bentley appeared.

Gladys Bentley?

She was a renowned singer in the 1920s and '30s who cut her hair short, dressed in tailcoats and appeared at the Ubangi Club with a troupe of young men. "If these boys were put into dresses they would be indistinguishable from the chorines," the weekly newspaper, *New York Age*, told its readers. And from uptown to downtown, the patrons simply adored them.

"Gladys Bentley's lesbianism, tuxedo and wicked double-entendre rewrites of popular tunes were definitely part of the draw, along with her backup chorus line of flamboyant black gay men," George Chauncey, the chairman of Yale's history department, said. "It had a more egalitarian and welcoming flavor, in both racial and sexual terms, than the segregated Cotton Club ever did."

James F. Wilson, executive director of the CUNY Center for Lesbian and Gay Studies, said the Ubangi Club, the Lafayette and Connie's were at the epicenter of the cultural and musical scene during the Harlem Renaissance. "The Ubangi Club, in particular, epitomized the raucous energy and devil-may-care attitudes of the musicians, singers, and patrons who went there," he said. "What a relief this club must have offered from the Depression and daily frustrations outside."

The Lafayette opened in 1912, flanked symmetrically by matching neo-Classical pavilions. Connie's Inn, which had a segregated admissions policy, was a tenant in the

south pavilion, followed by the Ubangi Club. The whole blockfront was acquired in 1951 by the Williams Institutional Christian Methodist Episcopal Church, which used the theater as its sanctuary.

The north pavilion was torn down many years ago. The south pavilion was renamed the Bell Center, after Bishop William Yancey Bell, who founded the church in 1919. To the dismay of preservationists, the church stripped the theater of its elaborate original facade in 1990 and replaced it with something more ecclesiastical but far plainer.

When the Rev. Dr. Julius C. Clay was called from Oklahoma City to the pastorate of Williams in 2006, he expected to be a caretaker of a once-vibrant congregation that had fallen on hard times. Just how hard became clear almost immediately. The property went into foreclosure.

From that desperate moment came a deal with the BRP Development Corporation, which acquired the site to develop a 166,000-square-foot building. Designed by Meltzer Mandl Architects, it is to be finished in the winter of 2014. Financing for the \$46 million project has involved the Housing Partnership Development Corporation and the Goldman Sachs Urban Investment Group.

The building, to be called the Lafayette, will include 19,000 square feet for the church, which will have its own entrance on Seventh Avenue, with a large cross to underscore its religious identity. The sanctuary will have a balcony and seat about 700 worshipers, Dr. Clay said. There will also be classrooms, offices and a fellowship hall. The pastor said the church was getting new space worth \$5 million.

“Free of debt,” Dr. Clay said. “That’s the real miracle of the whole thing. I thank God for that.”

For now, the Williams congregation is worshiping at the James Varick Community Center, 151 West 136th Street. “I’m getting a lot of buzz,” Dr. Clay said. “A lot of people are coming up to me on the street and other places, in phone calls and e-mails. People are telling me that once it’s finished, they’re coming. It looks like we’re going to grow as a result of this.”

Still, preservationists like Michael Henry Adams, who has been fighting for Harlem’s architectural patrimony for decades, are dismayed about losing another historical treasure. He faulted the Landmarks Preservation Commission, but a spokeswoman for the agency said it had never received a request for a formal evaluation of the theater building’s eligibility.

“It sounds really cliché to say,” Dr. Wilson said, “but when I used to take students to Harlem’s historical sites, I would point to the facade of the old Lafayette and the Ubangi structure, and say, ‘If only these walls could talk.’ Sadly, I guess we’ll never have the chance to hear what they’d have to say.”