

The Delayed Promise of the Renovation of PS 64

A two decade tale of political obstruction and bureaucratic denial of one man's property rights

PS 64, located on 9th Street in the East Village has been vacant for two decades and the building is an eyesore that mars the rapidly changing development of the surrounding neighborhood.

There is only one reason why the building remains vacant: political obstruction by elected officials whose interest in preventing the building's renovation conflicts with the overwhelming desire of the neighboring community to see the structure put to a positive use that will fit seamlessly with the evolving character of the revitalized neighborhood.

That is why hundreds of neighborhood residents have signed a petition that basically says; "Enough, is enough." The roadblocks are all political-the last gasp of the anti-gentrification movement-and the locals would welcome a dorm that would generate \$17 million a year to the city; and that doesn't include disposable income from students that would boost area retailers.

The political obstruction has been characterized by misrepresentation and the use of strong armed tactics designed to force owner Gregg Singer to relinquish his property so that it can be converted to a "community use." In fact, CM Rosie Mendez has rejected every effort by Singer to negotiate a settlement that would provide significant benefits to the area's community based organizations. In her meetings she made it clear that her only objective was "getting the building back."

Roadblocks over the years

From the very beginning of Singer's ownership the local elected officials and a few community activists have been putting significant roadblocks in front of any redevelopment of the property. After all, how many other property owners have found their building landmarked **after** they purchased the building?

Undaunted, Singer adopted his development plans to the landmark restriction and contemplated using the building for dormitory space for local area schools-space that it was soon clear was heavily in demand. Many schools, however, were warned off committing to the site by fear of reprisal from local elected officials who had control over their own land use projects going forward.

Local activists loudly proclaimed that this was all a ruse-that Singer would be unable to get colleges to commit and then he would claim hardship in order to get what he really wanted: luxury apartments. But clearly, the landmark status of the property made this allegation spurious. When it became evident that Singer was actually going to use the property as a

dormitory the local activists shifted their opposition, claiming that it was the “wrong kind” of dormitory.

Unsatisfied-and reacting to aggressive political pressure-the Buildings Department threw an additional monkey wrench into Singer’s plans when it required him to have signed tenants before it would grant him a building permit. Under this kind of precedent-as then REBNY head Steven Spinola pointed out-the department could hold off granting all residential building permits until a developer had signed leases for the property.

Singer did, however, get Adelphi University to commit to a portion of the building for its students. As Adelphi’s Timothy Burton, the school’s Executive Vice President of Finance and Administration said in a letter to Mayor de Blasio, the school has agreed to be the building’s anchor tenant and asked that the mayor intercede with the DOB since the issuance of a building permit has been stymied for over a year by interceding-and obstructing-local electeds.

In fact, these interminable bureaucratic delays and bad faith sleight of hands is the closest thing we have come to in NYC to the effective confiscation of private property that, if allowed to be put to use, could make a nice contribution to the neighborhood’s-and the city’s-economy.

Neighborhood Support Undermines Political Opposition

While it is undeniable that local elected officials do in principle represent the community’s interest, in the case of PS 64 their unbridled emotional opposition to Singer’s project can no longer be said to represent the larger community interest-and more and more business owners and neighborhood residents are becoming aware of the widening gap between political self interest and the community’s overall well being.

One of those community leaders is restaurant owner Jorge de Yarza. De Yarza has collected hundreds of signatures for neighborhood supporters of the project and has been pushing the DOB to stop its obstructionism. In a letter to the Department procrastinators he attached over 1200 signatures in support of allowing the Singer dorm project to go forward. As he said:

“I am writing these words on behalf of a very frustrated local community who cannot understand why a build permit approval for a landmarked building so in need of restoration has taken an unprecedented 230 plus days and still counting.

In addition, we have zero indication from DOB as to why exactly this delay of approval persists while we local residents continue to suffer in the interim. I must remind you that we are talking about a very large building that has been vacant for a very long time. We truly need to see this one through in order to preserve this building according to its landmarking and finally breathe

some much awaited life into the immediate area surrounding it which has only been a haven for loitering and crime during these years of delays.”

Mr. de Yarza is joined in support of moving forward by other community residents-many of who live contiguous to what has become an unsightly and dangerous site. Their frustration is exacerbated by the confusing and marionette-like actions of the DOB.

The agency’s approval and disapproval actions seem to lack any relationship to any rational oversight process-and seem more likely to correlate with the level of community pressure at any given moment. What is clear, however, is that this building has been vacant too long and there is no legal or rational reason why the city should be dragging its feet.

The community’s mantra is, “Enough, is enough!”

What needs to be done

The Department of Buildings needs to remove all of the current impediments to developing PS 64. If the building permit is granted, there would be a line out the door of schools looking to utilize Singer’s dormitory for its students. All they are awaiting is the city’s green light. Adelphi has led the way, but it won’t be the last tenant to utilize the wonderful opportunity of a redeveloped PS 64.