

Preservationists look to Harlem to safeguard NY estate of trailblazing African-American entrepreneur Madam C.J. Walker

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Manhattan

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Villa Lewaro, the sprawling estate of Madam C.J. Walker in Irvington, N.Y., is pictured here during a convention in 1924. (A'Lelia Bundles/Madam Walker Family Archives)

The legacy of a trailblazing African-American entrepreneur regarded as the country's first self-made female millionaire could lie in Harlem's hands.

Villa Lewaro, the sprawling estate of Madam C.J. Walker in Irvington, N.Y., may soon be on the market.

In the era of Prohibition, the grandiose Italianate-style villa served as a gathering place for notable leaders of the Harlem Renaissance.

Now, preservationists are looking to Harlem's contemporary cultural vanguard to help ensure its long-term wellbeing.

"We want to enhance the public appreciation of Madam Walker's life and contributions, and engage people from all walks of life," said Brent Leggs of the National Trust for Historic Preservation.

Walker, who made it big with a line of beauty and hair care products for black women, commissioned New York State's first black licensed architect, Vertner Tandy, to design the country home, which cost \$250,000 to build, in 1917.

Her daughter, A'Lelia Walker, became a noted patron of the arts.

She lived in Harlem, but hosted lavish parties for artists, musicians and other luminaries of the ragtime era at Villa Lewaro.

The historic haven played host to such political and creative luminaries as Langston Hughes, W.E.B. Dubois and blues legend Alberta Hunter before A'Lelia Walker's death, in 1931.

But its current owner, Ambassador Harold Doley, hopes to sell the 20,000-square-foot mansion after caring for it for more than 20 years.



Madame C.J. Walker, regarded as the country's first self-made female millionaire, made it big with a line of beauty and hair care products for black women.

He has said he hopes the estate will be used for some cultural, historic or educational purpose, but there is little to guarantee its preservation.

The estate is listed on the National Register of Historic Places and was designated a National Historic Landmark in 1976, but it has no legal protections to prevent major changes to the property, including a complete leveling.

Preservationists have joined with Walker's descendants to argue that the estate's future is connected to Harlem.

"It's important that Harlem have these tangible reminders of its past even as it moves into a future that is multiethnic and multicultural," said A'Lelia Bundles, Walker's great-great granddaughter.


The National Trust for Historic Preservation is taking an active role in the estate's transition, encouraging its sale to a buyer that would safeguard the property and agree to an easement that would guarantee the preservation of the facade.

Ideas for the estate's use include converting it into a health and wellness spa or a corporate venue for conferences, a bed-and-breakfast or a youth technology training center.

Leggs has worked to alert Harlemites to the estate's plight and attract members of the community — the same way the site did almost 100 years ago — to help preserve its vitality as a cultural and historical beacon.

"The current revitalization in Harlem can help this project," Leggs said. "It helps us reach a broader audience, since Harlem is culturally diverse."

Apollo Theater's festival highlights Harlem's South African connection

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The APOLLO Theatre in Harlem adjusts its marquee to reflect the passing of former South African President Nelson Mandela at the age of 95 on December 5, 2013. (photo by Sam Costanza) (Sam Costanza)

Harlem's roots run as wide as they are deep.

The Apollo Theater is producing a four-day festival this weekend to highlight the neighborhood's longstanding affinity with the motherland.

The event, which kicked off Thursday, will run in conjunction with a citywide celebration of the 20th anniversary of Nelson Mandela's historic inauguration as South Africa's first black president.

The legendary freedom fighter, who died last year at the age of 95, likened Harlem's bond to South Africa to "...an umbilical cord that ties us together," and praised the neighborhood's legacy of battling for civil rights behind the likes of Sojourner Truth, Marcus Garvey and Malcolm X.



Former mayor David Dinkins with the late South African leader Nelson Mandela during Mandela's 1990 visit to Harlem. A float saluting Mandela (r.) during 1991 Harlem Day parade. (ADAM ROUNTREE/AP)

Mandela, who led the fight against apartheid and then encouraged reconciliation as his country's president, made a special visit to Harlem in 1990 — shortly after his release from the South African prison in which he spent 27 years.

In his fight against apartheid, Mandela drew on America's civil rights movement and the Pan-African movement led by Garvey, who founded the Universal Negro Improvement Association in Harlem in the 1920s.

"For South Africans, this black world in Harlem gave them hope that there was a road and possibility for them as well," said Harlem historian John Reddick.



9/15/91 HARLEM DAY PARADE-FLOAT "SALUTE TO NELSON MANDELA"

The festival will conclude with an "Uptown Hall" panel on Sunday, which will feature former Mayor David Dinkins, actor and activist Harry Belafonte, Black Star News publisher Milton Allimadi, National Black Theatre CEO Sade Lythcott, South African Consul General George Monyemangene and Voza Rivers, whose New Heritage Theatre produced a groundbreaking series of plays in the 1980s — including "Woza Albert!," "Asinamli!" and "Sarafina!" that educated Harlemites about the apartheid struggle.

"These shows were able to raise the consciousness of what was happening in South Africa," recalled Rivers. "It motivated us to want to do more, be active or write checks to assist the movement."

Visit www.apollotheater.org for a full Africa Now! South Africa festival schedule.

Harlem artists are decorating storefront windows with dazzling displays to lure holiday tourists

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A holiday window display by Tijana Bjelajac at Land Yoga in Harlem (Photo courtesy Greg Routt)

This is much more than window dressing.

A cadre of local artists commissioned to help make Harlem a destination for bedazzling holiday storefront displays will unveil their handiworks this month at eight eateries and shops including The Cecil, Land Yoga and Vinateria.

"Traditionally in other parts of the city such as downtown, the holiday window dressings are a great tourism attraction for people. For Harlem to be able to do that and attract those people can be a plus," said Valerie Wilson, board member and spokeswoman for the Harlem Tourism Board, one of several neighborhood groups that worked with Taste Harlem Food and Cultural Tours to produce the project.

The windows provide the wayposts for a festive stroll through south Harlem, starting at Seasoned Vegan (55 St. Nicholas Ave. at 113th St.), and snaking its way to Frederick Douglass Blvd., 118th St. and Lenox Ave.

The displays, curated by Omo Misha, were inspired by Daniel Carlton's original story about an 11-year-old boy who travels through seven decades of Harlem history on a magical horse.





A holiday window display at by Laura Gadson at Vinateria in Harlem (Photo courtesy Greg Routt)

Artists including Laura Gadson, Carrie Mae Weems and Christopher Trujillo convey the tale with paper dolls, illustration, large-scale ornaments and text including quotes from noted Harlem literary luminaries such as Langston Hughes and Zora Neale Hurston.

The merchants, of course, hope the buzz puts patrons in the holiday spirit, while the artists are just happy to showcase their creativity.

"There are so many amazing artists in Harlem that need the exposure and this will provide that opportunity," said Trujillo, whose installation can be viewed at Cohen's Fashion Optical, 86 W. 125th St. at Lenox Ave.

The community effort forms a bridge between Harlem's past and its current resurgence, organizers said.



A holiday window display by Laura Gadson at Vinateria in Harlem (Photo courtesy Greg Routt)

"The collaborative efforts of organizations to produce the Harlem holiday windows is a great example of the synergies between the culture, art and literature that represents Harlem's first renaissance and the commercial growth that represents Harlem's second renaissance," said

Susannah Koteen, co-president of Frederick Douglass Boulevard Alliance, and owner of Lido Restaurant, 2168 Frederick Douglass Blvd. at 117th St.

The kick-off (moved back one week due to severe storms predicted for Tuesday) will be held on Dec. 16 at 6:30 p.m., during a tree lighting ceremony at 110th St. and Frederick Douglass Blvd. The lights will burn through Jan. 5.

A free guided tour to participating sites will follow, with a special reading by Carlton. Ticketed and free self-guided tours are also available through TasteHarlem.com.
