



**Greenwich
Village
Society for
Historic
Preservation**

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October 14, 2008

Hon. Michael Bloomberg, Mayor
City of New York
City Hall
New York, NY 10007

Re: Increasing Loss of Theaters in Greenwich Village

Dear Mayor Bloomberg,

This morning all New Yorkers read in the New York Times that four more theaters in Greenwich Village are in danger of losing their homes (see attached). This would be disturbing enough, except that this follows a steady loss of theaters in this neighborhood over the last several years. This has included some of the most important and iconic theaters downtown, including the Circle in the Square, the Sullivan Street Playhouse, the Village Gate, and the Variety Arts Theater.

The Village has long served as a vital home to Off- and Off-Off-Broadway Theater, and as one of the worldwide centers of theater production and innovation. In fact, scholars agree that modern theater, and the entire Off-Broadway movement, was invented in Greenwich Village by the Provincetown Players at the Provincetown Playhouse – a theater which now largely exists in name only.

The production of new and innovative theater is vital to New York City's cultural prominence. But it is also an essential element of what makes the Village a uniquely vibrant, culturally active, quintessentially urban neighborhood. The increasing difficulty theaters have in trying to remain in the Village poses a real threat to the character and culture of New York City as a whole, and of Greenwich Village in particular.

The Greenwich Village Society for Historic Preservation has reached out to your office in the past to raise this issue and to seek assistance from the City in addressing this issue. With this latest news we again ask that you work with us and other concerned groups and individuals to help find a way to address this growing problem. We must ensure that the Village and New York City remain the vibrant and vital home to theatrical innovation and production that they have for generations.

Sincerely,

Andrew Berman
Executive Director

Cc: Deputy Mayor Patricia Harris
NYC Department of Cultural Affairs Commissioner Kate Levin
NYC Economic Development Corporation President Seth Pinsky

October 14, 2008

Village Nonprofit Groups Say They Are Surprised by a Steep Rise in Rents

By DAN LEVIN

The [Federal Archive Building](#), a sprawling Romanesque Revival structure near the waterfront in the West Village, has played many roles since it was built in 1899. For decades it was a fortress where government documents gathered dust, before becoming a post office and then falling vacant.

In the early 1980s, when the western edge of the Village was rather forlorn, the hulking building was reincarnated as a habitat for the wealthy and a haven for nonprofit cultural groups and social service providers.

Most of the 10-story building, which was transferred to state ownership from the federal government in the 1970s, was converted into 479 luxury apartments, as well as commercial space. Part of three floors and the basement were leased at below-market rents to four small theater groups and to four organizations helping drug addicts, the elderly, small literary publishers and advocating for gay rights.

But now, some of those organizations, which helped revitalize the neighborhood, are facing huge rent increases that could force them not only from the building but from the neighborhood.

The neighborhood is much nicer than when the nonprofit tenants moved into the raw spaces in the archive building, on Christopher Street between Greenwich and Washington Streets. Gleaming high-rise buildings line the once-decayed waterfront, and gentrification has long since pushed out many of the neighborhood's artists, musicians and playwrights.

Celebrities walk tiny pedigreed dogs past the D'Agostino supermarket in the building's southern end, while office workers head to yoga classes at the Crunch gym in the building's northern end.

Some residents complain that the loss of four theater companies would further deplete the West Village's cultural heritage. "We've seen over and over again that the pioneers who made the Village the Village end up being forced out," said Andrew Berman, the executive director of the [Greenwich Village Society for Historic Preservation](#). "There is a certain unease in the neighborhood about our western edge being turned into the condo coast. While it may be great for real estate values, it's not great for making a community."

In the early 1980s, state officials gave the Rockrose Development Corporation permission to convert the vacant red-brick building into luxury apartments, but with a condition: The company would have to set aside 54,000 square feet for local nonprofit groups whose rent would be 80 percent of the market rate .

The lease that those tenants signed with Rockrose was for 25 years, and it expires at the end of this month. During the summer, Rockrose informed the nonprofit tenants that their annual rents would increase by as much as 500 percent, according to a statement by the developer at a recent meeting of the local community

board's zoning and housing committee.

The announcement sent many of the tenants into a panic.

"We and Rockrose live in different universes," said Jeffery Corrick, the artistic director of [Wings Theater](#), which has produced new plays on its small basement stage for 18 years. Mr. Corrick said Rockrose told his organization that its monthly rent would increase to \$7,500 from \$1,500.

That translates to an annual rent of \$90,000, while the group's annual budget is \$100,000. "What's reasonable to them would, in effect, drive us out of business," Mr. Corrick said.

Other tenants also said they were surprised by the size of the increase. Jeffrey Horowitz, the founder of [Theater for a New Audience](#), which runs a drama program that introduces [Shakespeare](#) into city public schools, said Rockrose told the group in July that starting this month, its annual rent would rise to \$70,000 from \$22,000. "There was no warning," he said. "It takes a year to raise funds for fiscal budgets, and even then it would be impossible. They're doing this in a way that is frankly brutal."

Patricia Dunphy, a vice president of Rockrose, said the nonprofit organizations knew an increase was coming because they were warned that their rents would be raised once the leases expired. "This was not a big surprise," she said.

Local elected officials have become involved in the dispute, hoping to find a way to allow the nonprofits to keep their spaces. The community board is pressuring the Empire State Development Corporation, which owns the property, to work out a compromise.

"These not-for-profits perform a lot of important services, and now they're being priced out of the neighborhood they helped found," said Brad Hoylman, the chairman of Community Board 2, which covers the area.

The development corporation and the City Council speaker, [Christine C. Quinn](#), have said they are meeting with both sides to find a solution. But it is unclear how much state officials can do, because Rockrose signed a 99-year lease with the state on the building in 1982, making the company the effective landlord.

Some of the nonprofit organizations, including [Heritage of Pride](#), a gay advocacy group, and the Village Center for Care, a health services agency that receives government financing, said they had reached a verbal understanding with Rockrose on an increase they could afford.

They are waiting to see what the negotiations might yield. "We're a microcosm of what's happening to nonprofits all across the city: the costs of rent, transportation and health care make it really tough to stay in New York," said Arthur Webb, the chief executive of Village Care. "But Rockrose made it very clear they wanted us as a tenant."

Some of the nonprofits noted that the increase came at an especially inopportune time for fund-raising. "Foundation giving is tied to a foundation's stock portfolio," said Jeffrey Lependorf, the executive director of the [Council of Literary Magazines and Presses](#), a tenant since 1991. "To find new money in this terrible economic climate will make this very difficult. We need time so we aren't forced out and made homeless."