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Religious Life



At the heart of the effort to grant landmark status to the one-time Visitation Academy and Monastery is the spirit of the Visitation of Holy Mary sisters, here memorialized by a banner of late teachers who taught at the academy. (GSR photo/Chris Herlinger)



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Community activists in the New York City borough of Brooklyn who hope to preserve grounds and buildings that once housed an all-girls Catholic academy and a monastery say their activism is inspired by the example of the Visitation of Holy Mary sisters who taught and lived there.

The passion displayed by activists — including leading a recent public rally and demonstration that drew as many as 600 people outside the property — "comes from gratitude for all the sisters gave us, and from knowing that this is our time to stand beside them," Caroline Cardillo, the founder and chairwoman of the Visitation Academy & Monastery Landmark Initiative, told GSR.

"It was never just a school," she said in an interview several days before the rally, held Nov. 14.

Activists are asking the New York City Landmarks Preservation Commission to designate the property as a historic site in hopes of preserving the two-square block area known as Monastery Square.

Cardillo said she and other activists are not opposed to some kind of limited development on the property, including possible construction of low-income or senior housing. But, she said, they are opposed to any development that would demolish the historic buildings and perhaps result in a massive high-rise that would alter the residential character of Bay Ridge, an ethnically diverse and working-class neighborhood in southwest Brooklyn.

At the rally, Cardillo, a Visitation Academy alum, and other speakers implored supporters to continue their efforts to preserve the 7.5-acre property.

"We cannot bring back Visitation, but we can work to preserve its history," Cardillo said.

Noting that "the sisters of Visitation were always sustained" by Visitation alumni, students, parents and members of the surrounding community, Cardillo warned that if the campus buildings and grounds are demolished to make way for development,

as many fear, a valuable community asset will be irrevocably lost.

"Once she is gone, she is gone," Cardillo said at the weekend rally. "No plaque, no memory, will be enough" to sustain the Visitation legacy in Bay Ridge.

Among the Visitation alumni were Maryknoll Sr. Ita Ford, one of four American churchwomen who were martyred in El Salvador in 1980.

And in other ways, the academy looked beyond Brooklyn, with Cardillo noting that St. Teresa of Calcutta came to the Visitation Monastery in January 1986 during a private visit, affirming that Visitation "was a home of prayer, and a place where people and their needs mattered."

Sisters grateful for recognition of their ministry

Visitation sisters first arrived in Brooklyn in 1855 and in 1903 bought the grounds that eventually became the site of the Visitation Academy and Monastery. The property already had one landmark: the county "Inebriates' Home," which was a forerunner of treatment centers for those struggling with chemical addiction.

That building, built in 1869, eventually became the sisters' monastery. The building that would eventually house the academy was constructed in 1888.

Thousands of students attended the academy throughout the 20th century and into the 21st but declining enrollments and dwindling numbers of sisters forced the closure of the academy in 2024.

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Though the academy still had 92 students then, only two sisters resided at the monastery. The sisters later moved to a Visitation monastery in Rockville, Virginia.

The proposed sale to developers was approved in August by New York Attorney General Letitia James, though the sale has not been finalized. According to state records, the sale price of the property is $42,250,000.

A local Brooklyn newspaper, the Brooklyn Paper, reported Aug. 17 that one of the proposed buyers is the recently founded 1137 91 LLC, co-owned by Stephen Palmese, who heads a private New York-based equity group in New York called

Integritas Capital. Also involved in the sale, the paper reported, are several members of a Brooklyn-based investment and development firm called Heights Advisors.

The paper reported that the developers "have not yet revealed their plans for the property," and that no permits had yet been filed.

Neither Integritas or Heights Advisors replied to a request for comment.

One group that did comment were Visitation sisters. A statement released to GSR Nov. 18 on behalf of the Brooklyn sisters by the Second Federation of the Visitation of Holy Mary, based in Minneapolis, said that the sisters understand that efforts to landmark the property stem "out of love for Catholic education and for the Sisters." The statement said the sisters appreciate that as supporters at the rally noted, "the Brooklyn Visitation Monastery stands for more than one hundred years of Catholic faith and service to the surrounding community. The Sisters are deeply grateful to have served for so long."

The Brooklyn Diocese had no role in the property or the sale, and a diocesan spokesman told GSR on Nov. 17 that it would have no comment on the matter. A spokesperson for the New York City Landmarks Preservation Commission did not respond for a comment.

Activists want city to heed community's call

Cardillo said she and other activists sprang into action when they heard of the proposed sale in August. While they realize the proposed sale cannot be reversed, they are looking for ways to work with the developers to ensure that the historic buildings can be preserved.

In May 2024, the landmark commission told community members that Visitation could merit landmark designation, Cardillo said. On Nov. 19, she told GSR her group is initiating a letter-writing campaign, hoping to deliver 1,500 letters of support to the Landmarks Preservation Commission.

Kayla Santosuosso, who represents Bay Ridge on the New York City Council, said at the rally she does not believe that the developers "should be able to do whatever they want," and wants the commission to "calendar" the issue for future consideration though it has yet to do so.

"They do not hear us. They have not heard us. And I am so happy that we are all gathered here today because they are going to hear us now," Santosuosso said to loud cheers.

Being granted landmark status does not necessarily mean a building cannot be demolished. But, according to the commission, it does mean that a building "has special historical, cultural, or aesthetic value to the City of New York, state or nation, is an important part of the City's heritage and that [the commission] must approve in advance any alteration, reconstruction, demolition, or new construction affecting the designated building."

Like Cardillo, Santosuosso rebutted potential arguments that landmark designation would prevent any development of the property. "This is 7 acres of land. Seven acres of land with historic properties of enormous value to all of us."

"Do not be greedy. Heed the community's call. Understand that once this is gone, it cannot be brought back."

Fears of high-rise construction — particularly for high-end rentals and condominiums — are increasingly common in New York City, with the character of a number of neighborhoods in the city changing dramatically in the last decade, something Santosuosso noted.

"Institutions like this are disappearing across the city because of developer greed," she said at the rally. "Greed should not win over a community's values."