

NYU and the demolition of the Edgar Allan Poe House

In 2000, NYU announced plans to build a new building for the law school on West Third Street between Sullivan and Thompson. The site was home to the Poe House, where Edgar Allan Poe had lived during an important period of his life. The construction of the new building required the demolition of Poe's former home, and residents of the Village protested against NYU's plans. Ultimately, NYU compromised with the residents and agreed to preserve the façade of the house, but when the building was done, "some local residents were horrified by what they saw."¹

History of Poe House

During the years 1844-1845, Edgar Allen Poe lived in a small, red brick house at 85 West 3rd St. in Greenwich Village.² While residing there with his ailing wife,³ the hitherto unsuccessful Poe⁴ began one of his most significant works – The Cask of Amontillado,⁵ and published one of his most enduring works – The Raven.⁶ Additionally, "Poe published his first substantial compilation of poetry, achieved his lifelong dream of acquiring his own literary magazine and worked on at least three important short stories," says a petition signed by over 70 scholars to save the house.⁷

Neighborhood residents have long expressed a strong connection to the building,

¹ Denny Lee, "The Poe House, and its Mask of Red Bricks," *New York Times*, October 19, 2003.

² Nadine Brozan, "Furman Hall, Nine Stories on Sullivan Street; New Law Building Opens at N.Y.U.," *New York Times*, Jan. 18, 2004.

³ Denny Lee, "Neighborhood Report: Greenwich Village – Update; the Fall of the Poe House (Unless Scholars Prevail)," *New York Times*, July 2, 2000.

⁴ Nina Siegal, "Rapping on Poe's Door, A Hint of Nevermore; Anger in the Village Over NYU Tower Plan," *New York Times*, July 19, 2000.

⁵ Denny Lee, "The Poe House, and its Mask of Red Bricks," *New York Times*, October 19, 2003.

⁶ Nina Siegal, "Rapping on Poe's Door, A Hint of Nevermore; Anger in the Village Over NYU Tower Plan," *New York Times*, July 19, 2000.

⁷ Denny Lee, "Neighborhood Report: Greenwich Village – Update; the Fall of the Poe House (Unless Scholars Prevail)," *New York Times*, July 2, 2000.

both for its historical value, and for its architectural value as three story, free-standing, early 19th century dwelling.⁸ David Garrard Lowe, an architectural historian who wrote "Stanford White's New York" (Watson-Guptill, 1992), said the house is a "perfect example of colonial revival, the architectural style that the novelist Edith Wharton admired in her writings about the Village."⁹

The building has also been acknowledged for its broader importance as an historic site.¹⁰ "Scholars across this country have been enormously anguished about losing this house," said Burton R. Pollin, a professor emeritus of City University who has written 12 books on Poe.¹¹

NYU and Poe House

Professor Pollin expressed his anguish at New York University's plans, now fully carried out, to demolish the Poe House in order to expand the NYU law school facilities through the building of Furman Hall.

Upon announcing its decision to demolish Poe House in 2000, NYU faced resistance from both residents and preservationists.¹² At one rally in December of 2000, a speaker read Poe's "The Raven" through a hand-held microphone to over 100 village residents. The speaker was arrested for violating the city's noise permit system.¹³

⁸ Denny Lee, "Neighborhood Report: Greenwich Village – Update; the Fall of the Poe House (Unless Scholars Prevail)," *New York Times*, July 2, 2000.

⁹ Nina Siegal, "Rapping on Poe's Door, A Hint of Nevermore; Anger in the Village Over NYU Tower Plan," *New York Times*, July 19, 2000.

¹⁰ Nina Siegal, "Rapping on Poe's Door, A Hint of Nevermore; Anger in the Village Over NYU Tower Plan," *New York Times*, July 19, 2000.

¹¹ Nina Siegal, "Rapping on Poe's Door, A Hint of Nevermore; Anger in the Village Over NYU Tower Plan," *New York Times*, July 19, 2000.

¹² Nina Siegal, "Rapping on Poe's Door, A Hint of Nevermore; Anger in the Village Over NYU Tower Plan," *New York Times*, July 19, 2000.

¹³ Steve Strunsky, "Metro Briefing," *New York Times*, Dec. 18, 2000.

New York City preservation groups, such as the Municipal Arts Society and the Landmarks Conservancy, as well as the Mystery Writers of America, wrote to the law school, “pleading with administrators to reconsider their plans.”¹⁴ The Municipal Art Society further stated that NYU’s plans “would radically alter the area.”¹⁵ “They're transforming Washington Square and changing the neighborhood's character by constructing buildings that are huge," said Aubrey Lees, a member of the Committee to Save Washington Square, a neighborhood group.¹⁶

The musician Lou Reed, made note of the cultural import of NYU’s actions:

The habit of the United States to ignore its native artists has always been appalling, demonstrating a lack of respect for history and culture. This is nowhere more manifest than in New York University's desire to destroy the Edgar Allan Poe house to construct a law school building.”¹⁷

Or, as put by the historical novelist, village resident, and NYU faculty member E.L. Doctorow, “The Poe house is one of the few still remaining [buildings] of a literary cultural parcel that exists more in time than in space.”¹⁸

In response to the impending demolition in 2000, Poe scholars asked the city's Landmarks Preservation Commission to designate the Poe house as a landmark, but after considering the documentation, the agency declined to hold a hearing. The New York State Office of Historic Preservation announced that it had determined that the Judson House, an adjacent building also slotted for demolition by the NYU project, was eligible for listing in the state and national registers of historic places. But such a designation

¹⁴ Nina Siegal, “Rapping on Poe’s Door, A Hint of Nevermore; Anger in the Village Over NYU Tower Plan,” *New York Times*, July 19, 2000.

¹⁵ Nina Siegal, “Rapping on Poe’s Door, A Hint of Nevermore; Anger in the Village Over NYU Tower Plan,” *New York Times*, July 19, 2000.

¹⁶ Nina Siegal, “Rapping on Poe’s Door, A Hint of Nevermore; Anger in the Village Over NYU Tower Plan,” *New York Times*, July 19, 2000.

¹⁷ Lou Reed, “Letter to the Editor,” *New York Times*, Oct. 6, 2000.

¹⁸ E.L. Doctorow, “Letter to the Editor,” *New York Times*, July 25, 2000.

would not necessarily protect the house from demolition.¹⁹

Referring to West Third Street, F. Anthony Zunino, president of the Greenwich Village Society for Historic Preservation said, “That whole street has become institutionalized all the way from Broadway to the end of the park, except this one block. They are destroying the scale of the neighborhood every time they tear down part of the Village.”²⁰

Residents and preservationists also attempted to block NYU’s expansion and demolition by filing a lawsuit in state court. The court halted NYU’s building plans through a restraining order, which were set to begin in August of 2000, in order to consider the merits of the suit. On Sept. 29, the court lifted the restraining order and dismissed the suit, holding that the court lacked the legal authority necessary to stop the project. Nonetheless, the court’s written opinion spoke strongly against NYU’s action, urging the University to preserve Poe House of its own accord, citing NYU’s responsibility as an academic institution. As the court wrote in its opinion: “From a historical, cultural and literary point of view, Poe House should stand. Unfortunately, not even academia will champion its preservation.”²¹

Compromise

After attempting to bulldoze the Poe House structure, NYU reached an agreement with community residents and preservationists in 2001, whereby the new building would preserve original bricks from the Poe House and incorporate them into the new façade of

¹⁹ Nina Siegal, “Rapping on Poe’s Door, A Hint of Nevermore; Anger in the Village Over NYU Tower Plan,” *New York Times*, July 19, 2000.

²⁰ Nina Siegal, “Rapping on Poe’s Door, A Hint of Nevermore; Anger in the Village Over NYU Tower Plan,” *New York Times*, July 19, 2000.

²¹ “Judge Allows School To Raze Poe’s House,” *New York Times*, Oct. 4, 2000.

Furman Hall at the Poe House site. This agreement, however, did not represent the only option that NYU could have chosen. As E.L. Doctorow wrote in a letter to the *New York Times*, “The Poe house is quite small and very suggestive of the writer's perpetually straitened circumstances. I wonder why plans can't be drawn to build the school around, above and behind it. This sort of thing has been done elsewhere when architects have been faced with a historic but inconvenient structure.”²²

On Sept, 28, 2001, New York University School of Law broke ground for the 98 million dollar building. Though enrollment numbers have remained steady at the law school, the new building increased the school's occupied space by almost 50%.²³ “Today, N.Y.U. is looked at as the enemy by anyone who lives in the Village,” said Barry Lewis, an architectural historian who lectures at the New York School of Interior Design.²⁴

Today: Furman Hall

In building Furman Hall and honoring the Poe House compromise, NYU moved the new façade half a block away from the original location, and surrounded the new façade on all sides and vertically by nine-storied, 170,000-square-foot modernist architecture.²⁵ Moreover, NYU failed to use any of the original salmon-colored bricks in the new structure.²⁶ “Walking by, you would never know this was supposed to be the actual remnant of a 19th-century house,” said Andrew Berman, executive director of the

²² E.L. Doctorow, “Letter to the Editor,” *New York Times*, July 25, 2000.

²³ Nadine Brozan, “Furman Hall, Nine Stories on Sullivan Street; New Law Building Opens at N.Y.U.,” *New York Times*, Jan. 18, 2004.

²⁴ Karen Arenson, “The Villain of the Village?; As N.Y.U. Edges Out and Up, Neighbors Put Up a Fight,” *New York Times*, April 19, 2001.

²⁵ Nadine Brozan, “Furman Hall, Nine Stories on Sullivan Street; New Law Building Opens at N.Y.U.,” *New York Times*, Jan. 18, 2004.

²⁶ Denny Lee, “The Poe House, and its Mask of Red Bricks,” *New York Times*, October 19, 2003.

Greenwich Village Society for Historic Preservation. "It looks tacked on. It's a facade, literally and figuratively."²⁷

²⁷ Denny Lee, "The Poe House, and its Mask of Red Bricks," *New York Times*, October 19, 2003.