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“In An NYC Stairwell, One of Keith Haring’s Murals May Be In Peril,” *NPR*, September 6, 2016



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ART & DESIGN

In An NYC Stairwell, One Of Keith Haring's Murals May Be In Peril



Celebrated street artist Keith Haring painted this mural in the stairwell of a former convent in the 1980s. Now, the church that owns the Manhattan building — which offered low-cost housing — says it's suffering financial difficulties and has asked its tenants to leave. But two tenants are fighting eviction and raising concerns about the future of the mural.

If you were alive in the 1980s, you've probably seen the art of Keith Haring. His graffiti-inspired images were everywhere: canvases and T-shirts, walls and subway stations.

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Now one of Haring's lesser-known murals in New York is threatened. It's in the stairwell of a former convent called Grace House, on the Upper West Side of Manhattan — a pretty unlikely place, even for Haring. But here are Haring's familiar, cartoonish figures — the radiant baby, the barking dog — dancing up and down three flights of stairs.

"Most of them are very simple, very joyous, very happy," says Robert Savina, who's lived here for two years. "It's sort of a great meditation when you're walking down the steps or up the steps. And, depending on the time of day with the light changing, you know the mural changes. You see different things each time you pass it."

Today the building houses tiny, low-cost apartments, like the one where Savina lives. He discovered Grace House and the mural when he was scouting locations for a film. The work is surprisingly well-preserved for its age.

"You can see the drips of paint, which I think are really pretty amazing," Savina says. "He probably painted it in an hour and a half."

The mural dates back to 1983 or '84. At the time, Grace House was a home for Catholic teenagers. It was apparently their idea to invite Haring to paint in the



Familiar Haring figures, such as the radiant baby, appear on the walls at Grace House. Building resident Robert Savina has been fighting eviction and trying to protect the mural.

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stairwell. By then, Haring was already a star. But he spent every moment he could painting outside on walls or in the subway.

"It's always the most pure situation for someone coming across it or running into it ... " Haring told NPR in 1983. "Not knowing where it came from, or how it got there, or if it's even supposed to be art."

Haring created dozens of public works across the U.S. and Europe, and at least one in Australia. But today, fewer than 30 of these works remain, [according to the Keith Haring Foundation](#).

"The fact that it's survived, and survived where he intended it to be, is a miracle," says Elisabeth Sussman, a curator at the Whitney Museum of American Art.



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"It's the real thing from that era,"

Sussman says. "That represents the art world sort of at its best moment: the energy of Keith Haring, his connecting across kind of the New York class divisions. It's all there in that mural."

Today Haring's paintings are worth millions of dollars, but this mural was largely forgotten. Grace House is still owned by Church of the Ascension, around the corner. But the church, according to tenant Robert Savina, wants to sell it.

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Children complete a jigsaw puzzle of Haring's art during a photocall at Hamleys toy store in London in June 2013.

"In the spring, we got an official letter from the church stating that they were planning on selling the building because they couldn't afford to keep it up," Savina says. "It's not a rich parish."

Most of the tenants moved out by the beginning of August. But Savina stayed. So did Yana Sabeva. She says a local non-profit, the Goddard Riverside Law Project, is backing their effort to remain in their homes.

"We're trying to fight for as much time as possible," Sabeva says.

Both she and Savina concede this is partly about cheap rent. But he insists it's also about the future of the mural, and the legacy of an artist who died of complications from AIDS in 1990.

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"My fear, and I think other peoples' fear, is that if they sell the building that anybody could go in and tear the building down," Savina says. "There didn't seem to be ... any forethought in: How do we preserve the mural?"

I asked Savina if he thinks the building's owner has an obligation to preserve the work.

"It's just such a big question," Savina says. "Because Keith Haring is such a huge part of New York history. He represented so much to so many people. And so much to the gay community. In a time, especially in New York, when so many of our contemporaries were dying. So in that regard, I feel really strongly that it's an essential piece of art history, that should be preserved."

Church of the Ascension declined an interview request for this story. Joseph Zwilling, a spokesman for the Archdiocese of New York, said in an email that "we are aware of the mural, and the concern for its preservation." Zwilling says the church hasn't decided what to do with the building. But the tenants say they've seen a realtor showing Grace House to what appear to be potential buyers.

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A visitor takes in artworks at a Haring exhibition at Musee d'Art Moderne in Paris in April 2013.