**What is Historic Preservation in New York City?**

**A Little History**

In 1961, New York City officials announced that the city’s iconic Pennsylvania Station was slated to be torn down. McKim, Mead & White’s massive train station, built in 1910 as an homage to classical Roman architecture and the power of the railroads, had been poorly maintained and was now dirty, rundown and a shade of its former glorious self. The Pennsylvania Railroad didn’t want the responsibility of taking care of it, and the city and developers wanted to build a new Madison Square Garden sports stadium on the site.

There were no landmarks laws then, and despite the massive efforts of preservation groups, politicians and everyday New Yorkers to save it, their plans and pleas fell on deaf ears. Demolition began in 1963, and the site was completely cleared in 1966. Several other important architectural treasures were also on the chopping block or had already been torn down during this period. The first rumblings of plans to do the same to the city’s other iconic train terminal, Grand Central Station, were also being felt.

All this and more prompted the drafting and passage of the New York City Landmarks Law in 1965. The law gave the new Landmarks Preservation Commission authority to designate buildings and neighborhoods as protected NYC landmarks. As such, they could not be altered or torn down without the permission of the commission, which began landmarking some of the city’s most important historic buildings and neighborhoods. Brooklyn Heights was the first landmarked neighborhood.

With similar advocacy across the nation, a year later, Congress passed the National Historic Preservation Act, which created the National Register of Historic Places. The responsibility for preservation was assigned to the National Parks Service, which oversees the individual state offices. Here in NY State, the State Historic Preservation Office (SHPO) is the entity that regulates and designates the National and State Registry of Historic Places.

Grand Central Station was designated an individual city landmark in 1967. But the building’s owner, the NY Central Railroad wanted to either utilize the air rights and build a tower above the terminal, or better yet, tear it down and build a new 80-story skyscraper office building on this lucrative Midtown site.

The new Commission turned them down flat, so the railroad sued the LPC and the city, charging that the new law allowed the LPC to “take their property without just compensation.” The case eventually went to the Supreme Court in 1978, but in the meantime, taking no chances, preservation advocates and ordinary folk alike rallied with more protests and gathered an impressive roster of supporters, many some of the city’s biggest names. Had it not been for high profile advocates like Jacqueline Kennedy Onassis, Grand Central still might have been torn down. But the involvement of the former First Lady made international news and rallied even more supporters.

Fortunately, the Supreme Court ruled that the Landmarks Law had teeth, and was constitutional, as it was preserving historic buildings and their legacy for future generations, and thus was a public benefit. In addition to saving the station, the court’s ruling also paved the way for saving historic buildings in cities across the country which were also threatened by urban renewal and development.

These events happened over fifty years ago, making historic preservation as a profession and as an advocacy relatively new in this country. Europeans have been preserving their historic structures much longer than we have. Of course, they are much older than the US, and frankly, they care more about their architectural legacy than we do. England, for example, passed the Ancient Monuments and Preservation Act way back in 1882. In the UK, it’s a criminal offence to carry out certain actions on listed buildings, including demolition, without necessary permission. They take preservation seriously enough that people have gone to jail or have been heavily fined for ignoring their laws.

Many people think that historic preservation is a club for blue-haired patrician white ladies and gentlemen who only want to save large public buildings and the mansions of the rich. Some preservation efforts across the country may have started that way, and thanks to those blue-hairs, a lot of important homes and other buildings WERE saved, some of them decades before the National Register or local preservation laws. But modern historic preservation is so much more.

**A Little History of How Our Central Brooklyn Neighborhoods Developed**

For some reason, we here in America do not consider our architectural heritage to be more important than the rush to replace anything old with something new and then do it over and over. Some of that is the necessity for growth and the need for new housing and other built structures, but let’s face it, some of it is just power and greed, pure and simple. Real estate speculation is as old as civilization, and here in New York City, it’s been around since the Dutch cheated the Lenape out of their land and began building walls around it to make sure they didn’t come back.

By the late 18th century, large farming landowners like the Lefferts family, the Bergen, Brevoort, Betts and Suydam families ended up owning most of central Brooklyn, which includes today’s Bedford Stuyvesant and Crown Heights North, then all called Bedford. By the Civil War period, these families started selling the farmland off as developable lots.

The Brooklyn Bridge project was approved by the state legislature in 1867. Land speculators realized that the opening of the bridge would bring thousands of potential homeowners to Brooklyn. Since the large area of Bedford was rich in roads and public transportation, it was a logical place to build new middle class and upscale homes, commercial and civic buildings. Areas of Bedford were also carved out for manufacturing and industrial use. The street grid had been laid out when the city incorporated in the 1830s, so it was just a matter of time before houses and other buildings began appearing on the neighborhood’s streets.

The first houses were large suburban villas, with large gardens and grounds, establishing the neighborhood as an upscale one. They were joined by later blocks of rowhouses, the building of which really took off in the 1870s as completion of the bridge approached. After the bridge opened in 1883, Bedford grew even more rapidly, as did neighboring Prospect Heights, Park Slope and Clinton Hill. Blocks upon blocks of upscale homes designed by professional architects were built, and were joined by impressive houses of worship, schools, theaters, banks and other buildings.

The results of all this development are the architecturally fine neighborhoods that were created by the beginning of the first World War. Even as the years of the Great Depression rolled in, the Central Brooklyn neighborhoods were primarily middle class, with a largely white ethnic population, the children and grandchildren of Jewish, Irish, Scandinavian and Italian immigrants, along with growing African American and Hispanic communities, as well. But this would change as the Depression worsened and World War II began.

Half of Brooklyn, including Crown Heights North and neighboring Bedford Stuyvesant on into Williamsburg and Bushwick was redlined and written off in the late 1930s. This disinvestment prompted those who could afford to leave to do so. Many moved to the southernmost neighborhoods like Marine Park, Bay Ridge and Canarsie, where Fred Trump and others built hundreds of modest rows of single family housing. The end of the war brought the GI Bill and other aid to veterans, but those benefits were generally denied to African Americans.

White flight to the new suburbs of Long Island, New Jersey and Westchester followed, leaving the older rowhouse neighborhoods as the only places that African Americans, Caribbean immigrants and Spanish-speaking people could buy into. Banks would not grant mortgages or investment loans in redlined areas, and the economic toll was high. Industry in the area disappeared, leaving a working class with no jobs, a deteriorating housing stock with many absentee landlords and a lack of municipal attention. Property owners and residents alike were left to fend for themselves. By the late 1960s, Central Brooklyn was labeled by the press as “the largest ghetto in America.”

While some parts of Bed Stuy and Crown Heights suffered greatly during those years, other parts, especially in Crown Heights were held intact by owner-occupants, mostly Caribbean American, who saw owning property as the culmination of the American Dream, and wealth creators for family, now and down the line. They got high interest loans from private lenders, subdivided their homes to hold as many lodgers as possible and worked multiple jobs in order to buy property. Consequently, much of Crown Heights North remained owner-occupied, even as more people fled to the suburbs in the 1950s and 60s a large neighborhood of intact blocks with fine architecture.

In the mid-1970s, the LPC began conducting architectural surveys of different neighborhoods in Brooklyn, seeking neighborhoods worthy of landmarking. They identified Clinton Hill, Bedford and Stuyvesant Heights, as well as what they were calling Crown Heights North, and Crown Heights South, which were separated by Eastern Parkway. All were deemed more than worthy, but the decision was made to shelve the Crown Heights and Beford reports, as these neighborhoods had economic challenges that were more dire than landmarked protection at that time. They designated parts of Stuyvesant Heights and Clinton Hill and shelved the reports.

As the years went by, Brooklyn began rising in desirability and popularity. Park Slope and Prospect Heights were rapidly gentrifying and development was starting to look eastward. It was only a matter of time before developers reached Washington Avenue, on over to Franklin, Nostrand and on east. The Crown Heights North Association (CHNA) was formed in 2002 by Sterling Place neighbors to advocate for landmark protection in those Crown Heights North areas that had already been a part of the 1970s survey. One of CHNA’s founders had been a student volunteer when the surveys were conducted.

These homeowners and friends loved their neighborhood, appreciated the architectural beauty of its streets and had worked hard to buy property. They wanted to make sure developers could not destroy that beauty and history with cheap infill housing and populate it with the condo-boxes that were popping up all over brownstone Brooklyn. Landmarking would protect the majority of the neighborhood’s streetscapes, a remarkably intact late 19th century neighborhood built for the upper-middle classes and the rich, a neighborhood with some of Brooklyn’s finest residential, sacred and civic architecture on its streets.

CHNA not only wanted to protect the buildings, its members wanted to protect the rich cultural heritage of the neighborhood, a mixture of various Caribbean cultures and African American traditions. It was most certainly not a group of patrician blue-hairs. The organization was headed and populated primarily by black women. It still is. Through CHNA’s efforts and those of community volunteers and CB8, most of Crown Heights North was landmarked in three phases over the course of ten years. Several years after that, the landmarked blocks were placed on the State and National Register of Historic places.

In the process, CHNA became the poster child for modern landmarking in New York City – black homeowners embracing the tenets of historic preservation to protect the built environment. The racially diverse board showed that the blue-hairs were not the only ones interested in historic preservation. Landmarking benefits those who are not white, not rich, and not in “good” neighborhoods. We all have much to preserve, no matter where we are.

The neighborhoods of Central Brooklyn are some of the hottest real estate areas in the entire city. Rapid gentrification has brought newcomers to the neighborhood, many of whom are not familiar with the histories or cultures that are here and thriving. Real estate developers, large and small have descended on Bedford Stuyvesant, Crown Heights North and South and the area between Washington and Nostrand avenues which they labeled “ProCro,” a trendy acronym designed to be more appealing to the new demographic.

Some call this neighborhood “Crow Hill.” Others want to call it something else, but no matter what it’s called, it’s ground zero for more new buildings than any other neighborhood in Brooklyn, except for downtown.

What makes a building, or a street or a neighborhood landmark worthy? What buildings, what streets in the Crow Hill neighborhood are worthy of landmarking? What makes them special, unique or justifies leaving them alone and protecting them through landmarking? Those topics will be discussed in a series of articles on this website. Crow Hill is a treasure, let us tell you where, how and why.

Stay tuned.