

Community Conservation: Brooklyn's Second Wave of Historic Districting (2007-2015)

by Emily Goldman

NPC's 18th Birthday Party celebrated the importance of civic involvement and the impact that individuals can have on a place, neighborhood, and city. This article, adapted from Emily Goldman's dissertation, *Preserving the Social Fabric of Community: A Mixed Methods Analysis of Brooklyn's Second Wave of Historic Districting*, seemed a fitting addition to the NPC Newsletter in light of our celebration's theme.

Waves of Preservation

Many of Brooklyn's storied historic districts—Brooklyn Heights, Park Slope, Fort Greene, Prospect Lefferts Gardens, and Prospect Park South, to name a few—were designated during the 1960s and '70s, when historic districting was on the rise in cities across the United States. Nationwide, after the dust had settled from widespread out-migration of cities, individuals and communities began advocating to restore the human-scale historic neighborhoods that remained standing in urban cores. These efforts became known as the Neighborhood Conservation Movement, and often culminated in historic district designation by local landmarks commissions. In Brooklyn, the New York City Landmarks Preservation Commission (LPC) designated 15 historic districts between 1965 and 1982. The pace of designation then tapered almost completely for 25 years, as the following graph portrays.

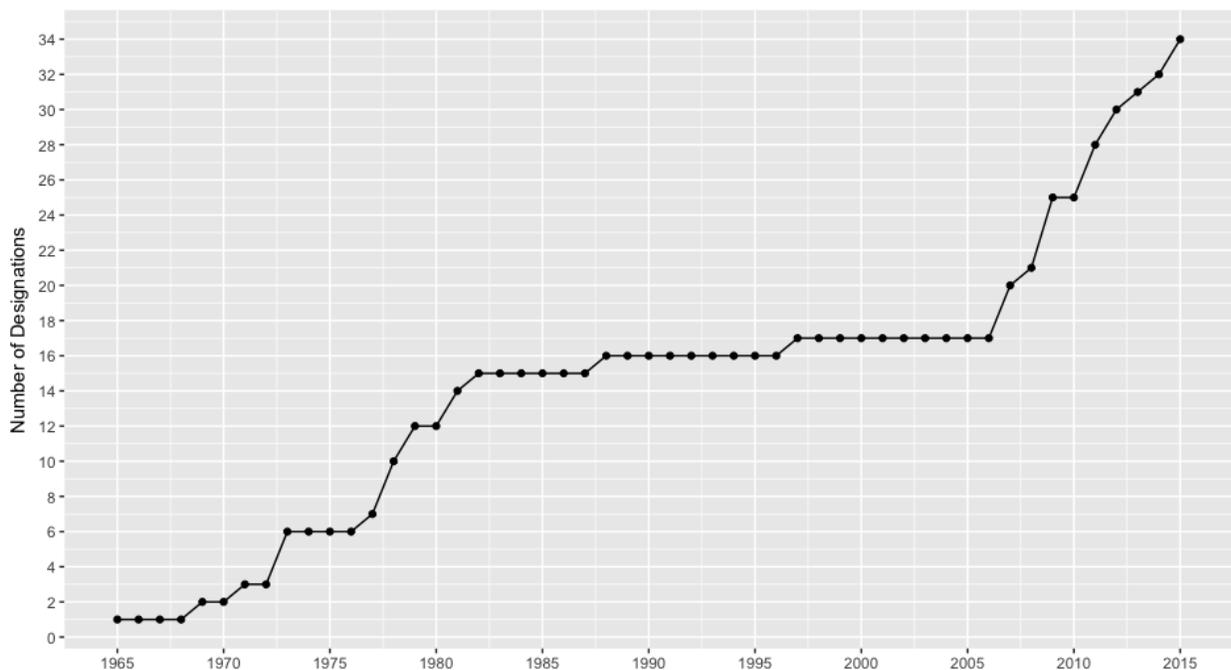


Figure 1: Cumulative designations in Brooklyn, New York (1965-2015); data from NYC Landmarks Preservation Commission on NYC Open data portal.

While the story of post-World War II neglect of urban historic areas, followed by renewed appreciation and reinvestment, serves as a narrative for early historic preservation movements in many cities across the U.S., Brooklyn now has a second chapter to tell. This article describes its exciting second wave of historic districting, which took place between 2007 and 2015, during which 17 new districts were created—more in a shorter period than the first wave.

In telling this story, the article highlights the work of the Crown Heights North Association (CHNA). Discovering a prominent social-consciousness thread throughout both the designation and post-designation processes, this article suggests that Brooklyn's second wave may be aptly understood as *Community Conservation*, a corollary to *Neighborhood Conservation* of the 1970s. Most of the information that follows is a reflection of the activities of the organization from June through December of 2014.

Origins of the Second Wave

In 2001, a small group of neighbors began to meet on the stoops of Sterling Place, between Brooklyn and New York Avenues, to discuss the possibility of gaining historic district status for Crown Heights North. Some were long-term residents, others were newer home-owners, but they all felt passionately that the neighborhood was architecturally comparable to long designated districts like Park Slope, and warranted the district status. One of these neighbors presented the group with an official draft historic district report for Crown Heights North written by the LPC in 1978, which was not acted on. As it turns out, the LPC surveyed and wrote draft designation reports for several areas around this time, including Bushwick, Bushwick Avenue, Bedford-Stuyvesant, Sunset Park, and Crown Heights South. They can all be found at the Brooklyn Historical Society library.

The 1978 report for Crown Heights North, which praises the area for its “vast wealth of architectural jewels” and its overall “landmark worthiness,” became an effective rallying point for the group as it sought new members and support from local elected officials. The report also provided the group with a plan, delineating four “phases” or areas to designate over time. Buoyed by this documentation, in 2002 the group founded the Crown Heights North Association as a 501(c)(3), and set out to designate all four.

One of the first strategic steps CHNA took was to partner with the Historic Districts Council (HDC), which could champion and publicize the cause through programs like Six to Celebrate, its website, and active blogging. HDC also pressed upon CHNA the importance of involving as many community members as possible in order to prove a majority of public support to the LPC. At the first open community meeting in 2004, more than 250 residents packed the church that became its headquarters—Saint Gregory's on St. Johns Place and Brooklyn Avenue—around the corner from the stoops on which those first informal meetings were held.

Motivation to Designate

Justice was part of CHNA's motivation—to secure designations 30 years overdue. This sentiment can also be found in an HDC report entitled “Deserving but not Designated.” While justice was a powerful message, CHNA also needed to demonstrate the practical benefits of historic district status for residents. Some were wary, considering the concentrated wealth in several earlier designated districts, that long-term renters and owners would be priced-out; that, in the name of conserving architecture, the neighborhood's character would change.

CHNA board members approached this concern in at least two ways. First, they suggested an important alternate perspective: historic district regulations could protect the built environment and the existing community simultaneously. Nearby Crown Heights West provided a striking

counter-example. There, lacking historic district designation, apartment buildings rose seemingly overnight, with jarring effects to the neighborhood. Crown Heights North, however, could leverage designation to slow its own pace of change. How? First, the construction of new buildings is relatively rare in historic districts; this is because LPC researchers and community members work together to create boundaries that minimize the presence of empty lots and non-contributing buildings, and the remaining buildings are inherently to be preserved. If a new building is approved in a low-rise historic district, it has to be architecturally contextual.

Moreover, since scale is a protected feature of historic buildings, opportunities to expand are significantly reduced. Even small rooftop and rear-yard additions require lengthy review processes with strict regulations.¹ Thus, slowing both new construction and major expansions, historic district designation could help communities in the path of development pressure retain their physical and social character. In having these conversations, CHNA connected the dots between conserving architecture and conserving community.

Second, CHNA also wanted existing residents to be able to take advantage of the home-ownership and commercial tax credits available to property owners in historic districts listed on the State Register of Historic Places.² Alongside their work to designate the districts locally, the organization spent time and resources securing the State designations and used their monthly meetings to discuss the available tax credits, sometimes bringing in experts. CHNA's meetings became educational forums for examining the various impacts of preservation and to help existing residents benefit from historic district status.

Meanwhile, since designation was not an option for the more industrial, less historically intact Crown Heights West, members of the board of CHNA and Brooklyn Community Board 8 began working on rezoning the area.³ They drafted height and bulk restrictions on new developments, whose language resembles historic district rules, and an Inclusionary Zoning Area to incentivize the production of affordable apartments among all the new housing being built. The rezoning was also a strategy to protect the existing community, or what remained of it.

The Designations Roll

After demonstrating majority community support, the first historic district for Crown Heights North was calendared in 2006, and designated in 2007, representing completion of the first phase or area identified in the original 1978 report. While CHNA set out to work on the next two

1

See Rules of the City of New York, Title 63, Chapter 2, Sub-Chapter B, 2-16 and 2-19.

2

Homeowners in many NYS designated historic districts are eligible to apply for 20% tax credits for any approved renovation work they perform on their home; business owners can apply for 20% tax credits for any approved renovation they do on their place of business. In appropriate cases, they can also be combined, totaling 40% of any approved renovation project in the form of a tax credit.

3

After years of work, the Department of City Planning adopted the rezoning in September 2013. One CHNA board member referred to the rezoning as a “stop gap measure substituted for the expansion of [the Crown Heights North] historic district.”

phases, communities nearby were already organizing for designation. Concerns about Atlantic Yards spurred the Prospect Heights Neighborhood Development Council (PHNDC) to partner with the Municipal Art Society to pursue designation in 2006; they secured a large Prospect Heights Historic District, composed of more than 800 buildings, in 2009. Joined by HDC, community groups in Bedford-Stuyvesant also began organizing—for both an expansion of the 1971 Stuyvesant Heights Historic District and a non-contiguous district to the east, called Bedford. By 2015, Crown Heights North and Bedford-Stuyvesant each had three large historic districts. Four small districts were also designated in their vicinity: Alice and Agate Court (2009), Ocean on the Park (2009), Park Place (2012), and Chester Court (2014). As of 2015 the wave has subsided, but CHNA continues to work on the fourth and final area identified for designation, the subject of its 2017 Town Hall meeting held at the Brooklyn Children’s Museum.

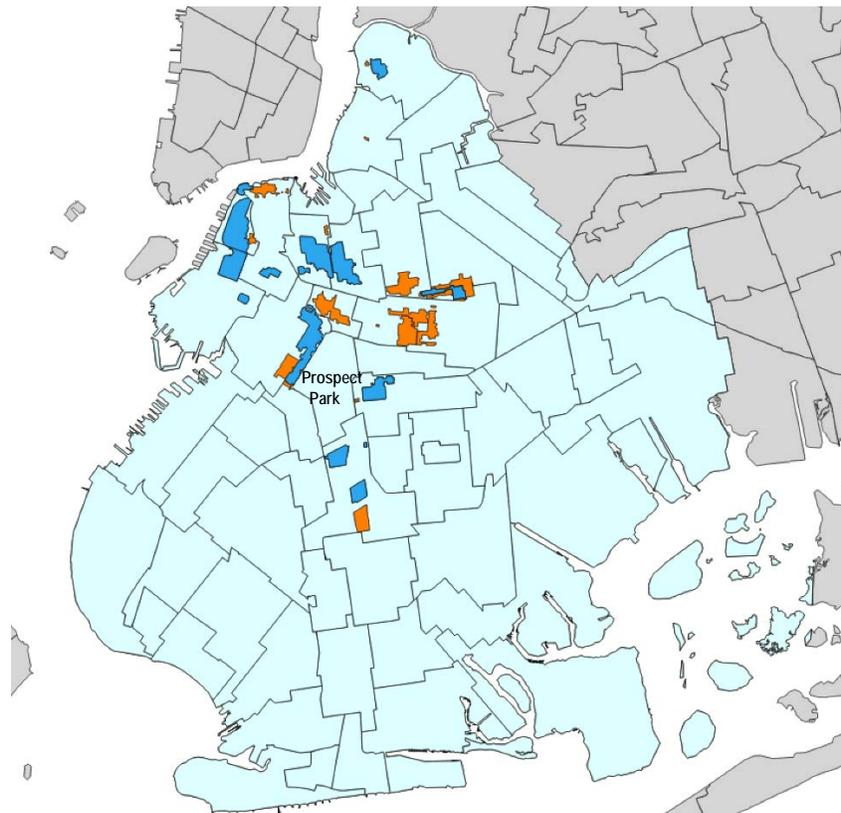


Figure 2: Map of Brooklyn, its neighborhoods shaded in light blue. Early-designated historic districts shaded in bright blue, later-designated historic districts in orange. Data from DCP and LPC on Open data portal.

As shown in Figure 2, Brooklyn’s 34 historic districts exist in 15 major neighborhoods (a.k.a. Neighborhood Tabulation Areas, delineated by the Department of City Planning). While the later-designated districts exist in 14 of these 15, the cluster of orange, just north and east of Prospect Park, is not to be missed.

Conclusion

Returning to the graph in Figure 1, showing the two waves of landmark designation, how can we succinctly frame their differences? Amid the Neighborhood Conservation Movement of the

1960s and '70s, the first wave is said to have been about restoring historic neighborhoods and forging new community identities. During the second wave, however, preservation was oriented toward protecting long-standing community identities in the path of development pressures. While the buildings in both waves are of the same vintage, the Community Conservation Movement uses the built environment to protect the existing community. Together, one reinforces the other.

About the Author:

Emily currently co-directs the Civic Innovation Fellowship, a joint program of the Manhattan Borough President's Office, the City University of New York, and BetaNYC which aims to strengthen community boards across NYC, particularly through developments in data and technology. This article is adapted from her dissertation, *Preserving the Social Fabric of Community: A Mixed Methods Analysis of Brooklyn's Second Wave of Historic Districting*, which she completed in January 2017 from Cornell University. Her work at the NYC Landmarks Preservation Commission from 2007 – 2011, with the special desk of Sunnyside Gardens, inspired her to research the community and human impacts of preservation more deeply during her PhD. In addition to historic neighborhoods, she also loves Brooklyn's newest mall!

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