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Groups working to save Queens buildings from wrecking ball



Local Queens residents are working to preserve their architectural history. This unit at 33-81 161st Street Block 5246 Lot 1t is one of the many buildings that locals are trying to preserve without the help or support of the Landmark Commission which often overlooks residential units in the outer-boroughs. (Simeon Bankoff, Newsday / February 25, 2008)



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It's too late for the 19th-century parsonage at St. Saviour's Episcopal Church -- it was leveled in December -- and Long Island City's Hackett Building, a Flatiron-like structure that was built in 1884, that was torn down last year to make room for condos.

Before any more of Queens' history disappears, a group of activists and preservationists is organizing to save what's left.

The Queens Civic Congress, an umbrella organization of more than 100 civic groups, will host a workshop tonight in Glendale to build interest in landmarking in a borough whose protected sites number less than 20 percent of Manhattan's.

"We need to get the landmarks commission to pay the same attention to Queens that they pay elsewhere," said Corey Bearak, president of the organization. "We have a history that goes way back and we have places that merit protection before the wrecking ball comes. If we were our own city we would have that kind of attention for our historic structures."

After a funding infusion from the City Council during the past two years, the Landmarks Preservation Commission has made a greater effort to protect sites in the outer boroughs after what many feel has been decades of neglect.

In Queens, Sunnyside Gardens, a planned community of residential brick row houses dating back to 1924, was designated a historic district last year.

Earlier this month, the Jamaica Savings Bank and the Congregation Tifereth Israel in Corona were both landmarked.

"Since 2003, we have granted landmark status to more buildings in Queens than in any other borough in the City, and are currently reviewing a survey of more than 12,000 buildings there, which will enable us to designate even more," said commission Chairman Robert B. Tierney in a statement.

Simeon Bankoff, executive director of the Historic Districts Council, said Queens has historically lacked "a strong community call for preservation." "But now with development pressure being what it is, they are waking up to it."

He said that many of the older areas of Queens, such as Sunnyside Gardens and Broadway Flushing, are not the kind of sites that, until recently, many preservationists thought of as worthy of protection.

Additionally, elected officials in Queens have historically resisted landmark protection. The City Council must approve landmarking designations by the commission, and since 1965, the Council or the now defunct Board of Estimate have reversed eight such designations in Queens, more than any other borough.

It's an achievement preservationists in the borough believe can be overcome with a little outreach.

"Elected officials are generally pretty in touch with what their constituents want," said Jessica Lappin, (D-Manhattan) chair of the Subcommittee on Landmarking. "It's got to come from the community, and in Queens they are very organized, and very focused and have felt neglected and feel now that this is their time."

If you go:

The meeting is at 7:30 p.m. Tuesday, Atlas Park Community Room, The Shops at Atlas Park, 80-00 Cooper Ave., Glendale.