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Sunnyside Fights Over What to Preserve

by Tom Angotti

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Residents in Sunnyside, Queens are facing off against each other over how best to preserve the historic Sunnyside Gardens housing development. And the fight may be more about who will be able to live in Sunnyside than the buildings that those people will live in.

On April 17, the New York City Landmarks Preservation Commission will hold a public hearing on its proposal to create an historic district including 16 city blocks and 610 buildings in what would be the largest historic district in Queens. The townhouses and apartment buildings in the district were built in the 1920s and 1930s by architects Clarence Stein and Henry Wright, following the precepts of British planner Ebenezer Howard. Howard proposed building "Garden Cities" with abundant open space to provide housing for working class households in a communitarian environment. They were intended as an alternative to congested industrial cities. The Garden City idea is influential, but Sunnyside is one of only a few examples actually built in New York City or anywhere in the nation.

The Preservation District

Sunnyside is already protected from redevelopment pressures by a Special Planned Community Preservation District. In this district, created in 1974, anyone who wants to take down or build any structure, enclose a porch, enlarge a home or put in a garage, driveway or curb cut must obtain a special permit. It also protects Sunnyside's unique common areas and gardens; permission is required to remove a tree.

To obtain these special permits, the property owner must apply to the Department of City Planning and prepare an environmental assessment. The application then goes through the city's Uniform Land Use Review Procedure, requiring public hearings and votes by the local community board, borough president, City Planning Commission and City Council. Some property owners have complained that the process is too time consuming and costly. So, for the last several years, the local community board had been working with the Queens city planning Office to address these concerns.

A Landmark District

Some residents of Sunnyside believe the zoning district has proved successful. "The zoning district has worked to protect the most significant element of the neighborhood, the open space," said Hunter College professor Susan Turner-Meiklejohn, who live in Sunnyside and opposes the landmarks designation. "The key goals of the Garden City were not architectural but social," said Turner-Meiklejohn who has done extensive research on the community. And in any event, she said, Sunnyside is "not an architectural masterpiece."

But the Sunnyside Gardens Preservation Alliance, which backs the landmarks proposal, believes that the historic district would provide additional protection for the area. Jeffrey Kroessler, a landmark proponent, complains that the current zoning district "doesn't protect the aesthetic qualities of the buildings." Some supporters also feel the landmarks procedures would be less cumbersome than those in the special zoning district.

Kroessler, who is also a founder of the Queensboro Preservation League and a recent Sunnyside arrival, sees another advantage to the landmarking: It would move the landmarks commission away from its Manhattan-centric focus. Queens now has only six designated historic districts, a mere fraction of the city's total.

But the Preserve Sunnyside Gardens Coalition, which opposes the landmarks designation, worries about the costs landmarks regulations would place on building owners. Coalition member Ira Greenberg told [the Queens Tribune](#) that replacing a slate roof as required by Landmarks would cost him some \$45,000, over 10 times the usual cost.

What to Preserve?

The dispute in Sunnyside Gardens is in many respects a debate over what aspect of a community deserves protection. Those opposing the landmarking argue that it would preserve architectural details such as roofs, windows, doors and facades times but would make the housing there unaffordable to the moderate-income working class population that is at the core of the Garden City concept. Affordability, they say, is what most deserves to be preserved.

In a heated exchange on WNYC radio's [Brian Lehrer show](#) with landmarks proponent Kroessler, Turner-Meiklejohn asserted that recent demographic changes in the neighborhood have a lot to do with the landmarks proposal. With over 50 percent of the population foreign-born, the non-Hispanic white population is now only around 40 percent, and the social base for new restrictions is in that minority of "old-timers."

But Kroessler denies that ethnicity or race has anything to do with the matter. He says that housing prices have already been going up in the neighborhood and that has nothing to do with the proposed historic district designation. (Studies have shown that property values tend to be higher in landmark districts).

However, Kroessler did tell the Queens Tribune, "Over the past few years there have been individuals who have done illegal work on their homes and have 'uglified' their property."

The argument in Sunnyside reflects a debate taking place throughout Queens, where some resident blame working class immigrants for changes in the urban landscape. Justified concerns about out-of-context building conversions often get mixed with disdain for new foreign-born residents. Crackdowns on building violations and demands for downzoning sometimes target the new populations instead of trying to accommodate them and go after the violators.

While it is a good idea to have strict but sensible regulations that promote good design and aesthetically pleasing neighborhoods, there is a fascination and a value in the immense variety of ways that people alter and decorate their homes. Some of these efforts are beautiful, others are mediocre, and still others are incredibly ugly. The shapes, colors and textures go from glorious to garish. But that is what makes a walk down a New York street exciting.

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