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Preservation Primer, Part III: The Landmarking of Brooklyn Heights

The post-World War II years birthed a different New York City. Robert Moses, New York's "Master Builder,"—who held as many as 14 different public service jobs and had tremendous control over public works projects—was hard at work shaping the future New York City of his dreams. While many of his projects such as parks, highways and urban renewal were both

desirable and necessary, the way he went about them left many irked or outraged. And he famously prized the automobile over any public transportation.

Another phenomenon was transforming the makeup of New York: a rush to suburbia. Vast numbers of the middle class were moving to the new suburban towns being built on Long Island and elsewhere, exchanging apartments and homes in the city for a piece of the good life in a house with a yard, far from the crowded urban ills. Their commute to the city was aided by Robert Moses' new highways and roads, and the age of the automobile was in full swing.

Back in Brooklyn, a new crop of young professionals and their families were discovering the beauty and convenience of Brooklyn Heights. Creative professionals, writers, architects, lawyers, media, and financial people found that Brooklyn Heights' 19th century streetscapes, spacious homes, neighborhood shops and stores, spectacular view and proximity to Manhattan made it the ideal place to put down roots.

Not that there wasn't plenty of work to do, both inside the homes and in the community itself. This was far from today's Brooklyn Heights.

Many of the Heights' beautiful streets had long been the home to a wealthy enclave of residents, who lived in an increasingly diverse neighborhood. Many of these residents were members of the Brooklyn Heights Association, the city's oldest neighborhood organization, founded in 1910. It was the BHA that successfully fought Moses' attempts to cut the



Columbia Heights, 1830s. Flickr/CHN



The BQE. Flickr/Crown Heights North

Brooklyn-Queens Expressway straight through the Heights in the 1940s, which would have devastated the community in the same way such action negatively affected Red Hook and Sunset Park. Their organized and well-connected influence helped them to divert the highway to the waterfront's edge and save many more houses than originally planned. This also led to the creation of the Promenade, still a masterpiece of urban landscaping. Many of the new residents were eager to join in the fight to protect the neighborhood and advocate for better schools, more services and protection for historic buildings. Many of those were being razed for bland apartment buildings or stripped of their architectural detail, inside and out for quicky "renovations" into SRO's and small apartments.

In greater New York, a preservation movement was gaining steam. Organizations such as the Municipal Arts Society (MAS) and other groups were advocating saving our architectural treasures. The loss of such masterpieces such as Penn Station, the narrowly averted loss of Greenwich Village to Robert Moses' highway plans and the last minute save of the Jefferson Market Courthouse, among others, was lending a sense of urgency for laws to protect our architectural heritage and neighborhoods. For preservationists, there was nothing like the figure of Robert Moses to galvanize a movement.



Pearsall map. Flickr/Crown Heights North

After being forced to change his Heights/BQE plans, Moses was determined to alter the face of Brooklyn Heights. He was now focusing on "slum clearance" through the Title One program, which would facilitate the razing of old neighborhoods for new housing. His area of choice was Willowtown, a working class section of the Heights near the Riverside Apartments, and Cadman Plaza, a vast area of land stretching along Fulton Street from City Hall almost to the Brooklyn Bridge. His plan there was to replace the working class neighborhood with tall towers of luxury studio and one-bedroom apartments, and effectively walling off much of the Heights from downtown and the rest of Brooklyn. But this plan would not go down well with the BHA and the vitalized homeowners of Brooklyn Heights.

They successfully fought the Willowtown development and forced Moses to take it off the list, leaving only Cadman Plaza. By 1959, The BHA and a new organization called the Community Conservation and Improvement Council (CCIC) (with lawyer, architecture and history buff Otis Pearsall as co-chair) joined forces to present a united front of opposition to Moses and the city. Part and parcel of their fight was to advocate for the creation of historic zoning for Brooklyn Heights. A dozen architects were mobilized to do a building-by-building inventory of the 50 blocks that made up the Heights. Under the leadership of Malcolm Chesney, an economist for Brooklyn Union Gas and Heights resident, the first comprehensive mapping of the Heights was done in conjunction with architect Herbert Kaufman, who chaired the group. They created maps that showed the age, condition, architectural style, absentee or resident landlord of every building in the Heights, a powerful weapon in the effort to show



Cadman Plaza West

the city that conservation, not destruction of the Heights, was in the best interest of the city and the neighborhood.

Months of meetings with city officials, real estate developers, the community-at-large and elected officials finally persuaded Moses to scale down his project, and further negotiations would get him to build co-operative family-sized apartments for middle income people to encourage long term neighborhood stability, not just transient luxury rentals for singles. The battle for Cadman Plaza would go on for another two years. In the end the Brooklyn Heights community won, with the city deciding that “urban renewal is not simply a program to improve land values, it is first of all, a program to improve living values.” The compromise would be the four towers that stand today, with the two story townhouses along the park side, adding traditional scale to the neighborhood, all designed for families and middle income people.

By tying housing, schools and historic preservation together, Otis Pearsall was able to galvanize the entire community, not just the landed gentry. He and his wife Nancy, who coordinated all of the information coming in, were amassing a vast amount of historical and architectural data to be used in the creation of an historic district. Pearsall was familiar with Boston's Beacon Hill district, protected in 1956, and used that model for Brooklyn Heights. He discovered that New York State had passed the Bard law in that same year, which encouraged cities to adopt regulations to protect “places, buildings, structures, works of art, and other objects having a special character or special historical or aesthetic interest or value.” This was just what he needed, and time was of the essence. The Jehovah's Witnesses were tearing down parts of Willow Street and Orange St. for new dormitories. Historic commercial buildings on Montague and Pierrepont Streets were slated for destruction, and across the Heights landlords were “modernizing” facades, taking down stoops and architectural detail and replacing them with cheap brick facing and aluminum canopies.



The Promenade. Flickr/Crown Heights North

That year, Pearsall met with Heights’ grand dame Gladys Underwood James, heir to the Underwood typewriter fortune and patron saint of Willowtown. It was her money and influence that had been crucial to stopping Robert Moses from tearing down that neighborhood. She hosted a meeting with representatives of the influential Municipal Arts Society, including architectural historians Alan Burnham and Henry Hope Reed. Reed was a giant in NY City's preservation movement; his groundbreaking walking tours of New York were responsible for a new appreciation of the city's architectural legacy. The author of the Bard Law, 92-year-old Albert Bard, was also present, and Pearsall would leave that meeting with a renewed sense of mission, saying that he had a “euphoric sense that we were onto an idea that was truly meant to be.”

One suggestion that came out of that meeting was that Pearsall speak to the eminent and well-published architectural historian Clay Lancaster, who lived on Cranberry Street. He wrote Lancaster a letter, asking if he was interested in doing a survey that would aid the neighborhood's zoning efforts. Lancaster was more than ready, and had been thinking about doing not just a study, but a book, with photographs on Brooklyn Heights. He threw himself into the project, and in under two years, published his groundbreaking

Old Brooklyn Heights: New York's First Suburb, in October of 1961. The book would eventually have six printings, including the Dover edition, which also contains a history of Brooklyn Heights' preservation efforts.

Things really started to roll in 1959. Otis Pearsall enlisted the entire community to support the stoppage of the wrecking ball entirely by proposing a Heights Historic District at a packed meeting in the Bossert Hotel on April 21, 1959. Over the next few years, preservation efforts across the city prompted the powers that be to finally take notice. In 1961, Mayor Robert Wagner created the Committee for the Preservation of Structures of Historic and Aesthetic Importance. A year later, the Landmarks Preservation Commission was created, and the laborious process of crafting laws and policy for the new agency was begun. In 1963 and '64, legislation crept through the City Council. Grand Central Station and Carnegie Hall were threatened with demolition, and entire neighborhoods of low-rise housing were being replaced by tall apartment buildings. In Brooklyn, the "slum clearance" of Cadman Plaza had begun. Pearsall and others arranged for permission to explore the now empty houses and tag salvageable items to be saved. Followed around by the New York Times, he marked mantles and pier mirrors, doorways and hardware to be saved, and later sold cheaply to renovators in the Heights and Cobble Hill. This may have been Brooklyn's first architectural salvage operation. The original houses of the Cadman Plaza project could not be saved, but the rest of the neighborhood had a chance.

Meanwhile, in 1965, the New York Times would write that the laws on landmarking were exceedingly complex and urged prompt action because "treasured buildings have steadily hit the dust." At last, on April 19th, 1965, the Landmarks Law was signed into effect by Mayor Wagner. The recommendations for the first historic district were Greenwich Village, Brooklyn Heights and Soho's Cast Iron District. Due to the Heights' documentation by Clay Lancaster, Malcolm Chesney, Otis and Nancy Pearsall, and all of the other workers and volunteers in the Brooklyn Heights project, on November 23, 1965, Brooklyn Heights became New York City's very first Historic District. In 1993, the Historic Districts Council awarded Otis Pearsall its Landmark Lion award, recognizing his tireless work for Brooklyn Heights and for historic preservation. In 2005 he helped celebrate the 40th anniversary of the Landmarks Law and the designation of the Brooklyn Heights Historic District. Today, he is still active on the preservation front, still working to preserve our architectural and historic heritage.