

City University of New York (CUNY)

## CUNY Academic Works

---

Publications and Research

John Jay College of Criminal Justice

---

2017

### The Preservation Moment: Gentrification Saved New York

Jeffrey A. Kroessler  
*CUNY John Jay College*

[How does access to this work benefit you? Let us know!](#)

More information about this work at: [https://academicworks.cuny.edu/jj\\_pubs/163](https://academicworks.cuny.edu/jj_pubs/163)

Discover additional works at: <https://academicworks.cuny.edu>

---

This work is made publicly available by the City University of New York (CUNY).  
Contact: [AcademicWorks@cuny.edu](mailto:AcademicWorks@cuny.edu)

## **The Preservation Moment: Gentrification Saved New York!**

**Jeffrey A. Kroessler**

**Lloyd Sealy Library**

**John Jay College of Criminal Justice**

In virtually any American city one can find evidence of how historic preservation has contributed to the character of the place and enhanced the quality of life. Preservationists point to their success in turning neighborhoods around, even reinventing urban life. The case of New York City is the story of the recovery of a troubled city. New York's example has inspired and guided many other cities since, though the city is in many ways a unique case.

By 1960, America's older cities were in decline. Urban life, the defining experience of the first half of the Twentieth Century, was yielding to suburbanization. Older industrial cities reached their highest population in 1950, and for most of them the decline continued into the 21<sup>st</sup> century. This was true of Buffalo and Rochester, Cleveland and Cincinnati, Detroit, Philadelphia and St. Louis. In each instance the surrounding metropolitan region grew, but the urban core decayed. Grand urban monuments – train stations, department stores, office buildings, theaters, factories, even churches – were demolished or remained empty for decades.<sup>1</sup> The loss of solid, beautiful structures was stunning; the sheer waste was shameful, but absent economic viability, not surprising.

One reason for the hollowing out of the historic city was the migration of an upwardly mobile middle class to the suburbs. Following their middle-class patrons, retail establishments born downtown relocated to suburban malls. For a long time after, the stores in the central city continued to draw customers and turn a profit, but eventually many closed, and vacant storefronts lined the formerly lively boulevards. In previous generations new arrivals would have occupied the homes vacated by older residents, but European immigration all but ended in the 1920s, and the influx of southern blacks and

---

<sup>1</sup> Camilo Jose Vergara, *American Ruins* (New York: The Monacelli Press, 1999).

Puerto Ricans did not make up the difference in numbers. The nation's racial divide further limited the integration of the newcomers into urban life.

The 1960s was the decade of the urban crisis. Cities always struggled to control crime and address the needs of low income residents, but during the 1960s those endemic problems worsened. Cities also faced new challenges, specifically the flight of manufacturing and housing abandonment. That was an entirely new issue. Historically, cities had to cope with housing shortages and substandard dwellings. Now buildings stood empty for years and vandals tore out anything of value. For an all too brief historical moment, the urban crisis emerged as the paramount political and social issue.

No city was immune, though New York City certainly stands alone in its remarkable recovery and reinvention, perhaps the most dramatic exemplar of urban decline and rebirth and at the same time an anomaly. The clean, safe, and prosperous city of the 21<sup>st</sup> century is a far cry from the New York of the 1960s and 1970s. Its image in popular culture was one of grime and menace, *The French Connection* than *Friends*. In *Annie Hall*, Woody Allen's 1977 valentine to the city when it seemed to have hit bottom, Annie throws the city into Woody's face when he tries to convince her to leave California. "What's so great about New York?" she exclaims. "It's a dying city."

The population New York City as a whole fell by 820,000 in the 1970s, an unprecedented decline. Even during the Great Depression in the 1930s the population grew by half a million. But between 1960 and 1970, Brooklyn lost half a million white residents, and the population declined by about 371,000 in all. Think of that rapid demographic change: minorities and immigrants continued to move into Brooklyn as whites moved out, but not enough to keep the population stable. Overall, Brooklyn had lost about 500,000 residents since 1950 (including my family on both sides). In the 1970s, the Bronx lost 300,000; Queens lost about 94,000; even Manhattan dropped by about 100,000. Staten Island was the only borough to grow.<sup>2</sup> By 2000, however, the city had surpassed the 1950 figure and has not stopped growing since. By contrast, Chicago, the Second City, fell from a peak of 3.6 million in 1950 to 2.7 million in 2010; Philadelphia during that same period fell from 2.1 million to 1.5 million.

---

<sup>2</sup> Joseph J. Salvo and Arun Peter Lobo, "population," in Kenneth T. Jackson, editor, *The Encyclopedia of New York City*, 2<sup>nd</sup> edition (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2010), 1018-1020.

Population Change in New York City, 1950-2010 (in thousands)

Date	Manhattan	Brooklyn	Bronx	Queens	Staten Island	Total NYC
1950	1,960 (3.7%)	2,738 (1.5%)	1,451 (4.0%)	1,551 (19.5%)	192 (10.3%)	7,892 (5.9%)
1960	1,698 (-13.4%)	2,627 (-4.0%)	1,425 (-1.8%)	1,810 (16.7%)	222 (15.6%)	7,782 (-1.4%)
1970	1,539 (-9.4%)	2,602 (-1.0%)	1,472 (3.3%)	1,986 (9.7%)	295 (32.9%)	7,895 (1.5%)
1980	1,428 (-7.2%)	2,231 (-14.3%)	1,169 (-20.6%)	1,891 (-4.8%)	352 (19.3%)	7,072 (-10.4%)
1990	1,488 (4.2%)	2,301 (3.1%)	1,204 (3.0%)	1,952 (3.2%)	379 (7.7%)	7,323 (3.5%)
2000	1,537 (3.3%)	2,466 (7.2%)	1,333 (10.7%)	2,229 (14.2%)	444 (17.2%)	8,008 (9.4%)
2010	1,586 (3.2%)	2,505 (1.6%)	1,385 (3.9%)	2,231 (0.1%)	469 (5.6%)	8,175 (2.1%)

The 1970s was also the decade of the fiscal crisis. The city was accustomed to issuing bonds to meet capital expenses and increasingly, operating expenses, but in 1975 the banks refused to purchase any more of the city's paper. Construction on almost all public projects came to a standstill; thousands of municipal workers were laid off; and severe cuts were imposed across the budget.

How did the city respond to this financial and demographic crisis? Writing in the *New York Times Magazine* in 1976, a time when the city's budget was in tatters and real estate abandonment was a fact of life, Roger Starr, Commissioner of the Department of Housing, Preservation and Development in the Beame administration (1974-1977) advocated "Planned Shrinkage." Why not give up on the worst places – the South Bronx, East New York, South Jamaica, East Harlem – and concentrate city services in areas that can thrive? Planned shrinkage offered the perfect justification for reducing municipal responsibilities, a strategic withdrawal from untenable neighborhoods, closing schools, subway stations, police precincts, and fire houses, and cutting hospitals, parks and sanitation. "If the city is to survive with a smaller population," Starr wrote, "the population must be encouraged to concentrate itself in the sections that remain alive. This sort of internal resettlement – the natural flow out of the areas that have lost general

attraction – must be encouraged. ... The time to start planning for a smaller population is now, not after doomsday has come.” He callously concluded, “Better a thriving city of five million than a Calcutta of seven” (today the population is over 8.5 million and rising).<sup>3</sup>

The city did not officially adopt planned shrinkage as a strategy, but it did cut services in neighborhoods across the city. Public safety, transportation, and education all experienced deep budget cuts and workforce reductions, contributing to the palpable decline and almost literally driving New Yorkers out. Planners, politicians, and pundits from across the political spectrum all accepted that New York was on an irreversible downward trajectory. The city was fortunate that preservationists dismissed such pronouncements of doom.

With strong leadership in Albany and, in the words of Mayor Ed Koch, “a lot of pain,” the city returned to financial health.<sup>4</sup> The money returned, investors returned, the people returned, and the neighborhoods returned, transformed in some ways, but they came back. How did that happen? Three factors:

1. Residents in many neighborhoods dug in their heels, saying in effect, thus far and no further. They angrily lobbied elected officials for services, demanding that parks be maintained and that libraries remain open (during the worst of the fiscal crisis, branch libraries in Queens were open two and a half days a week). New community groups fought back and rescued their communities from the brink, grassroots organizations like the People’s Firehouse in Williamsburg, formed in 1975 to prevent the closing of Engine Company 212, and Banana Kelly, formed on Kelly Street in the South Bronx in 1977 (where General Colin Powell grew up in the 1940s and 1950s, incidentally; the building is long gone).

2. The Immigration and Naturalization Reform Act of 1965 reopened the Golden Door, and thousands upon thousands of newcomers arrived in the city from Eastern Europe, the Caribbean, Central and South America, and Asia. By the 1980s these new residents were remaking old neighborhoods, reversing the wholesale loss of population.

---

<sup>3</sup> Roger Starr, “Making New York Smaller,” *New York Times Magazine*, November 14, 1976.

<sup>4</sup> Ed Koch, Oral History Interview, June 23, 2000 (CSI Oral History Collection, College of Staten Island, Staten Island, New York).

Flatbush became Caribbean, Flushing became Chinese and Korean, Washington Heights became Dominican, and Elmhurst became the entire world.

3. Gentrification. Gentrification saved New York. When popular culture and governments and businesses and the middle class gave up on the city and embraced the suburbs, many individuals returned to the city and in effect redefined urban living. One byproduct of gentrification is historic preservation. Without the dedication of preservationists, New York would be a less vibrant city, and less of a world city.

Gentrification was a potent force in the recovery of New York City, and an important contributor to declining crime rates. One example is Fort Greene in Brooklyn. There was no reason why this handsome, 19<sup>th</sup> century neighborhood could not have succumbed to arson, abandonment, and crime, as many other sections of Brooklyn in fact did. But Fort Greene gentrified. From the mid-1960s into the 1980s, new homeowners moved in. Make no mistake. These were not investors, these were individuals putting their time and resources in property of very little market value, property that had been redlined by the banks, meaning that home improvement loans were very difficult to obtain. The result: in 1978 the Landmarks Preservation Commission designated Fort Greene a historic district.

Now, you might say that designation as a historic district – a very valuable and legitimate tool in protecting property values – led to gentrification. No. By the time of designation, Fort Greene had already been the beneficiary of gentrification. Is that a bad thing? The fact is this neighborhood was largely black and became integrated. It was a place where lower income families, many of them black, could buy homes in the 1950s and 1960s. As the city declined, property values declined. Today homes are priced in the millions of dollars. Is that a bad thing? Those original homeowners who stayed have seen their \$30,000 houses pay great dividends. And the only incentive for them to move would be financial. Imagine the alternative. Continued disinvestment would have taken all value from the properties, and who would that have served?

Spike Lee, on the other hand, doesn't see it that way. Speaking at Pratt Institute in 2014, he went off when a man asked about the other side of gentrification. "Let me just kill you right now," he began: "Here's the thing: I grew up here in Fort Greene [his father bought the house in 1968]. I grew up here in New York. It's changed. And why does it

take an influx of white New Yorkers in the South Bronx, in Harlem, in Bed Stuy, in Crown Heights for the facilities to get better? The garbage wasn't picked up every motherfuckin' day when I was living in 165 Washington Park. P.S. 20 was not good. P.S. 11. Rothschild 294. The police weren't around. When you see white mothers pushing their babies in strollers, three o'clock in the morning on 125th Street, that must tell you something. Have you seen Fort Greene Park in the morning? It's like the motherfucking Westminster Dog Show. There's 20,000 dogs running around. ...I mean, they just move in the neighborhood. You just can't come in the neighborhood. I'm for democracy and letting everybody live but you gotta have some respect. You can't just come in when people have a culture that's been laid down for generations and you come in and now shit gotta change because you're here? Get the fuck outta here. Can't do that!"<sup>5</sup>

But Spike Lee was ranting about the gentrification of the 2000s, not the neighborhood stabilization of the 1970s. His father may have purchased his house in 1968, but in those years it was common for the single-family houses to be subdivided, legally or not, into numerous apartments. Now new owners are turning those houses back to one-family homes, a transformation that highlights the differences in the way gentrification affects owners as opposed to renters.

In the Sixties, there was a very real question as to whether America's cities could come back, and not a few experts thought they could not. In the September 1964 issue of *Fortune*, Richard J. Whalen published an angry essay about his home town: "A City Destroying Itself." The next year he expanded it into a book-length jeremiad subtitled *An Angry View of New York*. Looking at his city he saw only "tragic deprivation and massive failure." Because New York was and remains "the fullest expression – for good or for ill – of our urban culture," a "macrocosm of every city's problems and aspirations," what happens there is a matter of interest to the entire nation. Crime, of course, was for Whalen a "fundamental cause" of the city's decline. To say that crime was rising was not an irrational interpretation of racial change. Crime really did rise, and the sense of fear in many urban neighborhoods was ever present. "In any city," writes Whalen, "someone

---

<sup>5</sup> Joe Coscarelli, "Spike Lee's Amazing Rant Against Gentrification: 'We've Been Here,'" *New York Magazine*, Feb. 25, 2014 [<http://nymag.com/daily/intelligencer/2014/02/spike-lee-amazing-rant-against-gentrification.html>].

who goes looking for trouble will usually find it; in New York, the most prudent citizen runs the risk of falling victim to sudden, often senseless violence. Indeed, the most distinctive characteristic of crime in New York may be its random, unprovoked savagery.”<sup>6</sup>



The cover of *Fortune*, September 1964.

Literature professor Morris Dickstein lived on the liberal and literate Upper West Side in the mid-1960s, and he remembers the “palpable tension that could flare up at any moment into a menacing incident. I recall walking babysitters home at 2 a.m. with my fingers curled around my keys – to do maximum damage if I had to defend myself. I remember being relieved of the contents of my wallet by three young toughs in front of my building one June evening....”<sup>7</sup>

---

<sup>6</sup> Richard J. Whalen, *A City Destroying Itself: An Angry View of New York* (New York: William Morrow & Co., 1965), 13-14, 16, 21; see Barry Latzer, *The Rise and Fall of Violent Crime in America* (New York: Encounter, 2016).

<sup>7</sup> Morris Dickstein, “Neighborhoods,” *Dissent*, Fall 1987, 602-607.



Crime, chronic congestion, inefficiency, noise, and filth all contributed to a city “on the way to destroying itself.” But Whalen saw in the social and spiritual costs of such a depressing environment a deeper problem. He bewailed the uglification of the city. “New York exists only in the present tense,” he observed. “Just as there is no sense of obligation to the future, so there is no feeling of pride in the past.” Park Avenue, “long synonymous with elegance,” was now lined with banal office buildings that rendered it “as coldly functional as Central Filing.” He quotes approvingly an essay by architect James Watterson in the *Journal of the American Institute of Architects*, lamenting the loss of the historic city: “New York, and all cities, have taken too many steps backward because any building newer than the one it replaced was considered better. It is inescapable that old buildings must be torn down, sometimes. But it is inexcusable that what replaces them should be poorer architecture. If the newer building is not better in every way than the one it is replacing, it has no justification whatsoever.”<sup>8</sup>

For generations New Yorkers criticized the new construction that replaced familiar buildings, but for the first time Whalen linked those unthinking losses to the decline in the quality of life in the city. True, high land prices in Manhattan mandated high densities, but, “Is it necessary for compactness to be so ugly? Compactness could become a virtue if builders cared about the appearance of what they built.”<sup>9</sup>

To lose a landmark is to wound the soul of a city and to leave a hole in the hearts of its citizens. Against that unquantifiable yet undeniable sentiment was the argument of the development community. “Construction has long been considered synonymous with ‘progress,’” wrote Whalen, “and myth-makers tell us that frenzied demolition and rebuilding somehow expresses the ‘spirit’ of New York, its restless energy and passion for novelty.” When the landmarks law was proposed, the Real Estate Board of New York predictably argued that historic preservation would “seriously impede the modern expansion and progress of the city.”<sup>10</sup>

Those battle lines have changed little in the half century since Mayor Robert F. Wagner signed the law creating the Landmarks Preservation Commission in 1965. At a

---

<sup>8</sup> Whalen, 52-54, 60.

<sup>9</sup> Whalen, 36-37.

<sup>10</sup> Whalen, 37, 61-62.

breakfast sponsored by *Crain's New York Business* in the spring of 2014, historian Kenneth T. Jackson of Columbia University remarked, "New York is about change and energy and not about charm and graciousness and contextual aspects." "History," he proclaimed, "is for losers."<sup>11</sup> In a purely economic sense, that may be true. Cities with nothing to offer but history are not usually economic engines. Jackson cited as examples Venice, Charleston, and, less convincingly, Paris. But it is undeniable that only cities with a strong historical dimension are winners.

The truth is, in the mid-1960s the older city was breaking apart and new urban forms were emerging. Where one generation left the city for the suburbs, the next returned to reinvent it. To say that the departure of the urban middle class was "white flight" is to diminish their decisions. With the city's population at its peak, young families found it very hard to find housing. More than that, many found the suburbs attractive – new homes, new schools, new communities. Suburbia offered upward mobility, and many, many people wanted to live there.

The break with one urban trajectory simultaneously offered the possibility of another. Ironically, the combination of population loss, rising crime, housing abandonment, and fiscal uncertainty presented an opportunity to reinvent the city. In this New York led the way, and proved the most successful. As other cities continued their downward spiral, New York recovered, and the city became a national model for the economic revitalization of an older city. Morris Dickstein experienced on the Upper West Side a "common culture" of "cosmopolitanism, political liberalism, professionalism, some involvement with books and the arts, an unusual degree of civic mindedness, a sense of having seceded from the cruder aspects of the American Dream... Once most of these people would have been bound for the suburbs; now, with wives working as well as husbands, the city attracts them in ever-greater numbers."<sup>12</sup> (Let us leave aside Dickstein's dismissal of life beyond Manhattan as exemplifying "the cruder aspects of the American Dream.")

---

<sup>11</sup>Raanan Geberer, "Opinion: In praise of landmark districts," *The Brooklyn Eagle*, June 6, 2014, <http://www.brooklyneagle.com/articles/2014/6/6/opinion-praise-landmark-districts> ; Catherine Yang, "Landmarking in New York City Increasingly Polarized, Political, Say Experts," *Epoch Times*, May 20, 2014, <http://www.theepochtimes.com/n3/685967-landmarking-in-nyc-increasingly-polarized-political-say-experts/>.

<sup>12</sup> Dickstein, "Neighborhoods."

Into this void came the movement to preserve the city's historic neighborhoods. Older buildings in older neighborhoods, abandoned or nearly so, were more affordable than new urban or suburban construction. Older uses – manufacturing, distribution, sales – faded but made way for the possibility of new ones. Once fashionable precincts lost their allure.

One such example is Fiske Terrace-Midwood Park in Brooklyn, an area of about 150 large, single family homes. Developed in the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries as a suburban alternative to older row house neighborhoods, its future was far from assured in the 1970s. “When I bought this house in 1979 this neighborhood was considered kind of risky,” said Fred Baer, former president of the Fiske Terrace Association. Crime in the surrounding areas was high, the public schools were crowded and sometimes dangerous, and there were no guarantees that the environment would improve in the near future.<sup>13</sup> It took courage as well as vision to buy in such neighborhoods, no matter how attractive and affordable the houses were. Not until 2008 did the LPC finally designate the Fiske Terrace-Midwood Park Historic District.<sup>14</sup>

Above all, there emerged a popular awareness that there is much to value in older cities, and that much of value was being lost. This sea-change began with the publication of *The Death and Life of Great American Cities* in 1961. In that conversation-changing volume, Jane Jacobs made the case for urban living and offered a biting critique of urban renewal, highway construction, and planning in general, while laying out her prescription for the revitalization of our dying cities. Paramount among her ideas was a conviction that cities need their older building stock, because those buildings anchor neighborhoods, support small businesses, and provide homes and economic opportunity to newcomers. She famously wrote, “Old ideas can sometimes use new buildings. New ideas must use old buildings.”<sup>15</sup> As if to prove her assertion, Google did not occupy one of the new glass office towers rising in midtown for its New York headquarters, but in 2010 purchased the 1932 Port of New York Authority Building; while not a designated landmark, the

---

<sup>13</sup> Melanie Lefkowitz, “Enclave in Flatbush Offers a Taste of Suburbia,” *Wall Street Journal*, December 27-28, 2014.

<sup>14</sup> Landmarks Preservation Commission, *Fiske Terrace – Midwood Park Historic District Designation Report* (New York: 2008).

<sup>15</sup> Jane Jacobs, *The Death and Life of Great American Cities* (New York: Random House, 1961), chapter 10.

massive building is situated between the Greenwich Village Historic District and the Chelsea Historic District.<sup>16</sup> And while preservationists like to claim Jane Jacobs as one of their own, her argument for the value of older buildings was essentially economic, not aesthetic or historic.

To some degree, the great shift in how New Yorkers looked at their city and what they expected from the city's leaders occurred with the end of the administration of three-term mayor Robert F. Wagner and the arrival of John V. Lindsay in 1965. It was a shift from black-and-white to living color. Robert Wagner may have signed the landmarks law, but the Lindsay administration made the decisions about how the law would be applied. Crucially, Lindsay and the reform-minded individuals he attracted embraced a decidedly different approach to urban life than did the veterans of the Wagner years. In short, design mattered, the urban environment mattered.<sup>17</sup> After decades of urban renewal and the wanton destruction of historic structures, the city was primed for a counter-revolution. Seemingly obsolete buildings would be repurposed, not demolished.

More than individual landmarks, it was the designation of historic districts that anchored the city's recovery. Beginning with Brooklyn Heights in 1965, the Landmarks Preservation Commission designated 54 historic districts by the end of the Koch administration in 1989: Gramercy Park, Hunters Point, Greenwich Village, Mott Haven, and Cobble Hill, Chelsea, Mount Morris and Stuyvesant Heights, Park Slope, Carroll Gardens, Boerum Hill, and SoHo, Carnegie Hill and Hamilton Heights, Fort Greene, Longwood, the Upper East Side, and more. Designation rewarded the courage, commitment, and resiliency of the residents who stayed and invested.

Some of those places could have gone either way; designation assured their future. Saying that was not panic-induced hyperbole. The South Bronx was in fact being reduced to rubble as landlords walked away from unprofitable buildings; handsome limestone-faced row houses on Eastern Parkway in Brooklyn were abandoned shells. Buildings in the Mott Haven and 1969) Longwood Historic districts, designated in 1969

---

<sup>16</sup> Sam Gustin, "Google: the New Port Authority," *Village Voice*, September 5, 2006

<sup>17</sup> Jonathan Barnett, *Urban Design as Public Policy: Practical Methods for Improving Cities* (New York: Architectural Record, 1974).

and 1980, respectively, do not look terribly different than buildings in other Bronx neighborhoods that suffered from arson and abandonment.

The almost derelict area that became SoHo is a case in point. In 1969, Mayor Lindsay finally killed the Lower Manhattan Expressway. First proposed as a depressed highway in the 1920s, and then as an elevated highway fed by a network of approach roads by Robert Moses in 1940, the road would have cut across Manhattan from the Williamsburg Bridge to the Holland Tunnel. Decades of uncertainty – will a building be condemned for the highway or not – fostered widespread disinvestment. In the late 1960s, the fire commissioner called the area of vacant and dilapidated loft buildings “Hell’s Hundred Acres.” With manufacturing fleeing – New York lost half a million manufacturing jobs from the 1950s to the 1980s – landlords were desperate for tenants and willingly rented to artists, legally or not. The raw space and large open floors were ideal for studio-residences. There was no such animal as “loft living” before SoHo. Soon galleries sprouted along the gritty streets. In 1970, *Gallery Guide* listed three in SoHo; in 1973 there were 40, and in 1976 more than 70. This was precisely when the city was hemorrhaging population and at the precipice of bankruptcy.

Lindsay’s decision came after many years of opposition to the highway from residents, including the small but growing community of artists, and urban critics, Jane Jacobs among them. But no one was more influential in this battle than Margot Gayle. In 1969 she founded “Friends of Cast Iron Architecture” to foster appreciation for the beauty of a form and style long out of fashion and found only in older parts of Manhattan. Her passion was rewarded in 1973 when the Landmarks Preservation Commission designated the SoHo Historic District. The next year she published *Cast-Iron Architecture in New York*. When the Landmarks Commission designated the SoHo Historic District, a cast iron building at the corner of Broome and Wooster could be had for \$90,000.<sup>18</sup> Designation created value and demand where there had been little. To support the organic transformation already underway, the city offered tax incentives for

---

<sup>18</sup> Margot Gayle and Edmund V. Gillon, Jr., *Cast-Iron Architecture in New York: A Photographic Survey* (New York: Dover Publications, Inc., 1974), 54.

the conversion of industrial buildings into residences, and the new Loft Law protected tenants who had illegally converted raw industrial space.<sup>19</sup>

Only a hopeless romantic (or an investor musing “Had I known then...”) would wish for a return to the city of the late 1960s. Characterized by housing abandonment and population loss, those years were an anomaly. One might say that the preservation movement grew out of the declining city, and it enjoyed its earliest successes at a time when the real estate market was stagnant. If that is indeed the case, what role should preservation play in the now prosperous city?

The protection of historic parts of the city is not a quaint idea with no value in the present. Some property owners may chafe at the regulations, but there is not one instance where property values declined after designation. The economic impact of preservation has often fueled fears of gentrification. In the mid-1980s when residents of Sunnyside Gardens organized the Sunnyside Foundation to restore the historic features of the planned community, not all neighbors were pleased. “They’re out to gentrify the neighborhood” said one man, accusing them of being interested only in increasing property values. Defending their efforts, the head of the foundation explained, “We’re not highbrow preservationists.” Their only interest was in restoration of the plan and restoration of a sense of community.<sup>20</sup> Here was a conflict between competing progressive values. On the one hand there was a fear that preservation meant gentrification and that meant rising rents, as was happening in Manhattan and Brooklyn; on the other stood property owners and yes, tenants, seeking to stabilize and restore their historic neighborhood.

Neighborhoods continue to seek protection under the landmarks law to maintain the architectural integrity of older streetscapes, to improve the quality of design for new construction, and to preclude the possibility of out of character and over-scaled buildings being plopped into their midst. Ultimately, it is an affirmative stance, not a negative one.

In enacting the Landmarks Law in 1965, the City Council stated that the intent was to “stabilize and improve property value; protect and enhance the city's attractions to

---

<sup>19</sup> New York City Loft Board, <http://www.nyc.gov/html/loft/html/home/home.shtml>.

<sup>20</sup> Franklin Havelick and Michael Kwartler, “Sunnyside Gardens: Whose Land Is It Anyway?” *New York Affairs*, Vol. 7, no. 2 (1982), 65-80; Tom Robbins, “The Democratic Vision of Sunnyside Gardens,” *City Limits*, Vol. X, no. 3 (March 1985), 16-19.

tourists and visitors and the support and stimulus to business and industry thereby provided; and strengthen the economy of the city.” Over half a century, the landmarks law has done all that and more.

Today, the generation that advanced historic preservation – and saved New York – is fading, and with them passes an urban consensus that appreciated the central role landmarking played in the city’s recovery. The city takes for granted the benefits of preservation while refusing to embrace it, and voices critical of preservation are finding a more receptive audience in both city government and among the general public. A recent study by the NYU Furman Center concluded that the residents of the city’s historic districts were more highly educated, wealthier, and whiter than the city at large, a finding the Real Estate Board of New York touted as evidence of designation’s negative impact on neighborhoods.<sup>21</sup> The result is an odd alliance of interests favoring untrammelled development and progressives seeking to use government to advance desired social ends. Preservationists, once recognized as saviors of the city, are today chastised as gentrifiers and impediments to the realization of progressive goals.

---

<sup>21</sup> Ellen, Ingrid Gould, Brian McCabe, and Eric Stern, *Fifty years of Historic Preservation in New York City* (New York: NYU Furman Center, 2016), <http://furmancenter.org/thestoop/entry/fifty-years-of-historic-preservation-in-new-york-city>.

Historic Districts, 1965-1989

	<u>1965-1989</u>	<u>1990-2017</u>	<u>Total</u>
Manhattan	32	40	72
Brooklyn	16	17	33
Bronx	4	7	11
Queens	1	10	11
Staten Island	1	2	3
Total	54	77	131

Manhattan

- 1966 Charlton-King-Vandam Streets  
Gramercy Park (extension 1988)  
Sniffin Court  
Turtle Bay Gardens
- 1967 MacDougal-Sullivan Gardens  
St. Nicholas  
Treadwell Farm
- 1969 Greenwich Village  
St. Mark's Place (extension 1984)
- 1970 Chelsea (extension 1981)  
Jumel Terrace
- 1971 Mount Morris Park
- 1973 Riverside Drive, West 105<sup>th</sup> Street  
SoHo-Cast Iron
- 1974 Carnegie Hill (extension 1993)  
Hamilton Heights
- 1975 Stuyvesant Square
- 1976 Central Park West, West 76<sup>th</sup> Street
- 1977 Central Park West, West 73<sup>rd</sup> and 74<sup>th</sup> Streets  
Metropolitan Museum  
South Street Seaport (extension 1989)
- 1978 Fraunces Tavern Block
- 1981 Upper East Side
- 1984 West End-Collegiate
- 1985 Riverside Drive, West 80<sup>th</sup>-81<sup>st</sup> Streets
- 1988 Tudor City
- 1989 Ladies Mile  
West 71<sup>st</sup> Street

Brooklyn

- 1965 Brooklyn Heights
- 1969 Cobble Hill (extension 1988)



- 1971 Stuyvesant Heights
- 1973 Boerum Hill  
Carroll Gardens  
Park Slope (extension 2012)
- 1977 Fulton Ferry
- 1978 Albermarle-Kenmore Terraces  
Brooklyn Academy of Music  
Fort Greene
- 1979 Prospect-Lefferts Gardens  
Prospect Park South
- 1981 Clinton Hill  
Ditmas Park
- 1982 Greenpoint

#### Bronx

- 1969 Mott Haven
- 1980 Longwood (extension 1983)
- 1982 Morris High School

#### Queens

- 1968 Hunters Point

#### Staten Island

- 1985 New York City Farm Colony and Seaview Hospital

#### Historic District Designations by Year, 1965-1989

- 1965 Brooklyn Heights (Brooklyn)
- 1966 Charlton-King-Vandam Streets (Manhattan)  
Gramercy Park (extension 1988) (Manhattan)  
Sniffin Court (Manhattan)  
Turtle Bay Gardens (Manhattan)
- 1967 MacDougal-Sullivan Gardens (Manhattan)  
St. Nicholas (Manhattan)  
Treadwell Farm (Manhattan)
- 1968 Hunters Point (Queens)
- 1969 Cobble Hill (extension 1988) (Brooklyn)  
Greenwich Village (Manhattan)  
Mott Haven (Bronx)  
St. Mark's Place (extension 1984) (Manhattan)
- 1970 Chelsea (extension 1981) (Manhattan)  
Jumel Terrace (Manhattan)
- 1971 Stuyvesant Heights (Brooklyn)

- Mount Morris Park (Manhattan)
- 1973 Boerum Hill (Brooklyn)
  - Carroll Gardens (Brooklyn)
  - Park Slope (Brooklyn)
  - Riverside Drive, West 105<sup>th</sup> Street (Manhattan)
  - SoHo-Cast Iron (Manhattan)
- 1974 Carnegie Hill (extension 1993) (Manhattan)
  - Hamilton Heights (Manhattan)
- 1975 Stuyvesant Square (Manhattan)
- 1976 Central Park West, West 76<sup>th</sup> Street (Manhattan)
- 1977 Fulton Ferry (Brooklyn)
  - Central Park West, West 73<sup>rd</sup> and 74<sup>th</sup> Streets (Manhattan)
  - Metropolitan Museum (Manhattan)
  - South Street Seaport (extension 1989) (Manhattan)
- 1978 Albermarle-Kenmore Terraces (Brooklyn)
  - Brooklyn Academy of Music (Brooklyn)
  - Fort Greene (Brooklyn)
  - Fraunces Tavern Block (Manhattan)
- 1979 Prospect-Lefferts Gardens (Brooklyn)
  - Prospect Park South (Brooklyn)
- 1980 Longwood (extension 1983) (Bronx)
- 1981 Clinton Hill (Brooklyn)
  - Ditmas Park (Brooklyn)
  - Upper East Side (Manhattan)
- 1982 Greenpoint (Brooklyn)
  - Morris High School (Bronx)
- 1984 West End-Collegiate (Manhattan)
- 1985 New York City Farm Colony and Seaview Hospital (Staten Island)
  - Riverside Drive, West 80<sup>th</sup>-81<sup>st</sup> Streets (Manhattan)
- 1986 Morris Avenue (Bronx)
- 1988 Tudor City (Manhattan)
- 1989 Ladies Mile (Manhattan)
  - West 71<sup>st</sup> Street (Manhattan)