

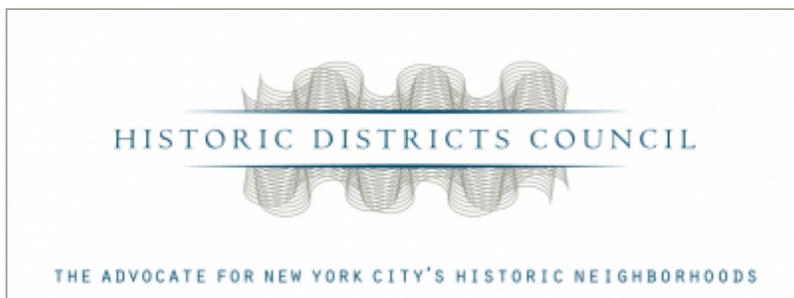
Institute of History, Archaeology, and Education (IHARE)

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Historic Preservation: The New York City Experience

March 4, 2018

by Peter Feinman



On Saturday, March 3, I attended the 24th annual Preservation Conference run by the Historic Districts Council (HDC). According to its website:

Our mission is to ensure the preservation of significant historic neighborhoods, buildings and public spaces in New York City, uphold the integrity of New York City's Landmarks Law, and further the preservation ethic.

We work directly with people who care about our city's historic neighborhoods and buildings, and represent a constituency of over 500 local community organizations across all five boroughs.

The website refers to the HDC as an “advocate” for achieving this vision. As will be seen, the issue of advocacy proved to be an important one during the conference.

Unfortunately, I missed the opening remarks. I arrived in time to hear Simeon Bankoff, Executive Director of HDC, outline the program. In addition he announced a new initiative which was included in the handout each participant received. It is called **Borough Committees**. The intention is to create 5 such committees which will serve as the network to exchange information about local issues and disseminate information about community campaigns. The goal is to empower individuals to connect with a large network of civic activists to amplify their voices on behalf of historic preservation. Meetings will be held in each borough (think county) and will bring together neighborhood groups (think village, town, and city historical societies) working on similar issues to share information and generate action. Based on this foundation, a legislative agenda will be formulated and advocacy for it at the city level will occur. This initiative may sound familiar to exactly what does not occur at the state-level for the history community. The initiative is being “generously supported” by the New York Community Trust. I look forward to the success of this endeavor.

The first of the three breakout sessions I attended was on funding. Gregory Dietrich of Gregory Dietrich Preservation Consulting (and Morningside Heights) presented on the various funding opportunities available to history preservation organizations. His focus was on New York City. He provided the names of several organizations and their criteria for different types of funding. The New York State Environmental Protection Fund was emphasized. It has the really big bucks. Also it includes in the criteria for applying the organization’s focus on engaging the community, education, and tourism. These criteria are important because as will be seen, historic preservation can become bogged down in the minutia of architectural detail as if buildings exist in isolation from people.

The second breakout session I attended on Little Syria highlighted this very concern (not that it was necessarily planned that way). The presentation was by The Friends of the Lower West Side, The area is defined as west of Broadway to the Hudson River and from the Battery at the southern tip of Manhattan north to Liberty Street. Beginning in the 1880s, a variety of people from the eastern Mediterranean and Middle East began settling there. By the 1920s, the population consisted of about 8000 people (like many villages and towns) including 27 ethnicities. The Syrians, it should be noted, along with Lebanese, were Christians. At the time, these tenements were located near the docks and that is where the residents worked. Thanks to the construction of the Brooklyn-Battery Tunnel and the World Trade Center, almost all of Little Syria has been destroyed.

Two overlapping groups, The Friends of the Lower West Side and The Washington Street Historical Society have arisen to preserve the history of the area. The former St. George's Melkite Church (aka the Syrian Church) has been saved but not as a church. A nearby tenement house continues to be occupied including by one of the presenters. In addition, by the church is the vacant Downtown Community House, owned by a father and son developers who are suing each other. Since 9/11 there has been enormous development of largescale buildings in the area. Collectively, the church, the tenement house, and the community house show a slice of life of the once former Little Syria. The efforts of these organizations apparently are well-known in the Arabic community in parts of the Middle East where it has received media coverage. In New York, the story is quite different. It was during this session when my Spidey sense detected that even the mere mention of the New York City Landmarks Preservation Commission generates a hostile reaction. It was a preview of the final plenary session.

The third breakout session I attend was about the proposed Prospect Heights Apartment House District in Brooklyn, a neighborhood of 8000 plus residents (again, think village or town historical society). The presenters chronicled the development of the region from farmland to town houses to apartments post-Civil War. The development occurred in conjunction with the plans to create Prospect Park shortly after the creation of Central Park in Manhattan. The park drew cultural institutions along Eastern Parkway. New housing developed in both areas originally set aside for the park and then removed from the proposed park and also in surrounding areas. A Prospects Heights Historic District had been created in 2009.

Much of the presentation detailed the efforts required at the community level to make it so. Once again the mere mention of the New York City Landmarks Preservation Committee generated a negative vibe. In effect, the proponents of this proposed historic district have to operate within a community just as an historical society would do in an upstate community. The challenge here is compounded by the different government levels involved. There are local councils, borough councils, and city councils and commissions. Given the size of New York City, it is almost as if everything in an upstate community had to be approved by the state.

The final session was a plenary session. I am a firm believer in ending a conference, especially a one-day conference, not in drips and drabs as people wander out, but in a group session. This session was entitled "Losing Its Way: The Landmarks Preservation Commission in Our Time" led by Jeff Kroessler John Jay College of Criminal Justice, CUNY, with an expertise in historic preservation and New York City history. He had been involved in identifying sites for the Path through History project, is on my email distribution list, and has been following the saga recounted in my posts on the demise of the New York State Historical Association. Additional speakers included Tony Wood of the New York Preservation Archive Project whom coincidentally I had meet at lunch and Chris Gough, author (?) of "Undoing Historic Districts: A Report from The Society for the Architecture of the City" (2017), a booklet I picked up as I was leaving the conference. The title of the booklet anticipated the attitude of the attendees towards the commission responsible for designating the historic districts.

The session can be divided into two parts. One part was gripes about the New York City Landmarks Preservation Committee. The consensus by the audience was that it should be renamed the Landmarks Prevention Committee. The consensus was that if someone had an affinity for, experience with, or even a passing familiarity with historic preservation, that you were automatically DISQUALIFIED from serving on the commission and especially from serving as the chair. The Mayor came in for repeated denunciations by everyone in the room or at least anyone who spoke with numerous examples being provided by people who evidently had been in the trenches fighting for historic preservation for a long time. Transparency, public comment, the fixation on architectural details, and the race to match Shanghai all were mentioned.

The second part of the session revolved about what to do about it. Here the discussion became more political and at times legal. There is a need for advocacy, for turning out the vote, for attending the relevant meetings, for getting publicity, for organizing. If the rewriting of the rules to partially repeal the current law was going on by the powers that be, then it was incumbent of history preservation community to become active to oppose, to call out candidates, to ask elected officials to take a stand.

As all this was being said on Saturday, I was thinking on Monday, when this post would be distributed, I would be in Albany for Parks Advocacy Day. About 75 people from around the state will gather to lobby elected officials about the upcoming budget. As part of this process there are specific "asks." In other words, we are not there to have a philosophical discussion about the importance of parks to the social fabric and the well-being of the residents of the state. We are there to ask legislators to vote yay or nay or specific issues. There is an agenda, an agenda that history community in the state does not have and that the historic preservation community in New York City is taking steps to develop.

The New York State Office of Parks, Recreation, and Historic Preservation (NYSOPRHP) has historic preservation in its title but this advocacy day is all about the parks and recreation. There needs to be another one for historic preservation. There is a state wide preservation conference scheduled for April in Albany but the schedule is not yet available. It will be instructive to examine the advocacy efforts in that conference.

In the meantime, I suggest following the example of the National Park Service (NPS). The NPS recently staged an event at Federal Hall with Manhattan Borough President Gale Brewer. The goal was to call attention to the need for funding to repair and maintain the NPS historic sites in New York State (many in Manhattan). There is a huge backlog in repair. Previously I have written a series of posts about the state of history within the NPS but did not directly address the maintenance of historic sites.

Historic preservationists in New York City should follow the example provided by the NPS. Pick one historic site in each of the five boroughs. Pick a day. On that day in each of the five boroughs, hold rallies on behalf of historic preservation. Invite your local representatives from the borough, city, state, and national government. Have display tables for all the organizations. Do it on a nice spring day.