



Roman Ave Postcard closeups circa 1910 Bob Stonehill collection.



ROMAN AVENUE WASN'T BUILT IN A DAY, BUT IT MAY BE DESTROYED IN ONE.

MEMORY
LANE



Roman Avenue, Forest Hills, N. Y.

Roman Ave. Now 72nd Ave from Austin St. facing north to Queens Blvd. circa 1910 Postcard, Michael Perlman.

You've probably passed these buildings and never even noticed them. I'm referring to the row houses on 72nd Avenue between Austin Street and Queens Blvd. They're set back from the street and are unpretentious of their architectural grandeur. But if you stop and take a good look at them, ignoring recent add-ons you'll notice detailed masonry work of days gone by; the overall curve of the buildings and a detailed head of a lion perched

above one of the front doors. This group of buildings

is flanked by a driveway adjacent to The Irish Cottage, an institution in and of itself, and The Chatham Apartments, an Art Deco architectural gem built in 1938.

The row houses having the addresses 108-17 and 108-15 are currently under contract through Massey Knakal Realty Services. They're listed as being "property-perfect for a developer". To get an idea of what the future may hold look across the street. Where there was once a group of similar row houses is a perfect example of what developers are building, despite numerous stop work orders.

These days, the fate of our fair row houses, lay in the hands of the New York City Landmarks Preservation Commission. The LPC was created in 1965 under Mayor Wagner's administration because of the horrendous destruction of the grand old Pennsylvania Station. Adolph A. Weinman, a sculptor and resident of Forest Hills, designed much of the artwork.

According to the Commission's Director of Communications, Elisabeth de Bourbon, the LPC's current priority is to increase landmark designations outside Manhattan. She added the LPC has designated more buildings in Queens which is more than any other borough under the Bloomberg Administration. But in actuality there are really 55 individual landmarks in Queens and 760 in Brooklyn.

Many believe the commission favors Manhattan and Brooklyn over the other boroughs. David Goldfarb, a preservation activist believes "there is an institutional bias toward landmarks in Manhattan". He added, "They (the LPC) meet in secret. When they deny landmark status, they won't tell us why."

This sentiment is echoed by Jeffrey Kroessler, who is the president of the Queens Borough Preservation League. He questions why the LPC doesn't schedule more public hearings for pending landmark applications.

Preservationists are doubtful that the Commission will boost designations in Queens, even though LPC's Chairman Robert Tierney said so at the City Council Landmarks Oversight Hearing in April 2006. Even though Sunnyside Gardens, one of Queens's oldest neighborhoods, and The Sohmer Piano Factory in Long Island City were recently approved for landmarking, Queens still lags behind other boroughs when it comes to being granted public hearings. The Commission still continues to calendar few Queens's properties and districts for public hearings in comparison to Manhattan. For example, of the twenty items to be discussed at the LPC's public hearing on October 9th, sixteen are for Manhattan, three are for Brooklyn and one is for Queens. Staten Island and the Bronx have no activity.

Michael Perlman, chairman for the Rego-Forest Preservation Counsel, has been very instrumental in getting the ball rolling for landmarking these row houses. In a recent letter to the Landmark Preservation Commission, he wrote

"These rare surviving row houses were erected by the Cord Meyer Development Corporation during the summer & fall of 1906. They were designed by Benjamin Dreisler Jr., and housed Forest Hills' first plumber, electrician, and carpenter"

Perlman believes the row houses "tell a story of the evolution of Forest Hills", urging the Commission to calendar these rare survivors for a public hearing in the shortest time span possible.

Rededication
Ceremony 100th
Anniversary
72nd Ave
Rowhouses
& Forest Hills
Aug. 2006,
Jeff Gottlieb



Within two weeks Michael Perlman's request was denied. As stated in a letter dated July 12, 2007, from the LPC:

At this time, the properties do not appear to meet the criteria for designation and will not be recommended to the full Commission for further consideration or calendaring as a New York City Historic District. The decision not to recommend further consideration is based on a careful assessment of the current condition, architectural integrity and historical qualities of the properties.

The question on everybody's mind at a recent meeting of the Rego-Forest Preservation Council was; "what criteria?" No details were provided in the Commission's reply to Mr. Perlman. What's more, this same text appears in all of LPC's rejection letters. It's as if they created their very own Microsoft Word template. I wonder if the Commission is aware there are other Dreisler designed row houses that are already landmarked?

Councilwoman Melinda Katz also submitted a landmark evaluation request for the same row houses and she too received the standard rejection letter. James McClelland, who works with Melinda Katz, has shown his support by patiently answering anyone's query on the plight of these row houses. He shares the same strategy for seeking landmark distinction as does Michael Perlman and that is to be proactive. McClelland suggests, "instead of waiting till the 11th hour to fill out a Request for Evaluation (RFE) form in the shadow of the wrecking ball, make note of buildings that would be good candidates for landmarking."

Regardless of how the LPC hasn't defined 'acceptable criteria', they still need time to review these forms and follow through with the landmarking process. It took four years for Sunnyside Gardens to be approved. To learn more about the designation process you can contact the LPC at:

Landmarks Preservation Commission
1 Centre Street, 9th Floor North
New York, NY 10007
Phone # 212-669-7801

The quest to save the row houses continues, despite the odds. Michael Perlman will submit another application to the Landmark Preservation Society. He'll also look for preservation-friendly buyers.

And what can you do? We can each request an RFE form from the Commission by downloading it from <http://www.nyc.gov/html/lpc> and submitting it. Writing letters to Melinda Katz's office wouldn't hurt either. If you don't believe me, then let me tell you a story of how one woman improved our neighborhood. This past winter the sidewalks between the Long Island Railroad and the stores on Ascan Avenue were finally repaired after many years and several broken hips. It wasn't like the LIRR woke up one day and said, "I think I'll repair those cracked sidewalks." Instead, this was the result of one long time Forest Hills resident who wrote letter after letter to Melinda Katz's office at:

District Office
104-01 Metropolitan Avenue
Forest Hills New York 11375
Or you can call at 718-544-8800

If one woman can make a difference in our community, think of the difference we can make. As the saying goes; "The pen is mightier then the sword." ■

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