

September 20, 2022

Landmarks Preservation Commission Testimony Before the New York City Council Subcommittee on Landmarks, Public Sitings, and Dispositions

LU 0108-2022: Cambria Heights 222nd Street Historic District

LU 0109-2022: Cambria Heights 227th Street Historic District

Good morning, Chair Louis and Subcommittee members. I'm Kate Lemos McHale, Director of Research at the Landmarks Preservation Commission. Thank you for the opportunity to present the Cambria Heights 222nd Street and 227th Street Historic Districts, Designated on June 28, 2022. (ULURP N23007HKQ/LU-0108-2022, ULURP N23008HKQ/LU-0109-2022 respectively). Both districts comprise remarkably cohesive and intact groups of Storybook-style row houses incorporating Tudor-style elements, built in 1931 in the Cambria Heights neighborhood of southeastern Queens.

The Cambria Heights - 222nd Street Historic District contains 46 row houses between 115th Road and 116th Avenue. It was developed by a company called Selective Homes Inc. and designed by the Queens architectural firm of Monda & Bertolazzi. Five blocks away, the Cambria Heights - 227th Street Historic District contains 50 houses between 116th Avenue and Linden Boulevard. It was developed by the Queens firm Wolosoff Brothers.

These districts are architecturally distinctive and fit within LPC's equity framework, as we seek to increase designations in communities not well represented by Landmarks, and to better tell the story of all New Yorkers. A predominantly African American and Afro-Caribbean community, Cambria Heights has no designated landmarks and is within a large section of eastern Queens with few landmarks or historic districts. These blocks were identified as part of a 2019 survey of Queens row house developments of the 1920s and '30s, many of which were designed in the Tudor Revival Style, to better understand what makes some developments stand out as more meritorious architecturally. Due to the creative application of the Storybook Style, which I'll describe, these blocks stood out in comparison to other examples of this type in Queens, and within their neighborhood in general. The surrounding blocks do not share their architectural distinctiveness, integrity, and strong sense of place.

Public Testimony and Community Engagement

In public testimony, LPC received support for designation of the historic districts from Council Member I. Daneek Miller, the New York Landmarks Conservancy, the Four Borough

Neighborhood Preservation Alliance, and individual property owners (four on 227th Street and three on 222nd Street). Two residents of the Cambria Heights - 227th Street opposed designation, and at the public hearing two people raised questions about designation and regulation.

In the course of proposing and designating these historic districts, LPC staff did a great deal of outreach and had conversations with property owners to provide information about working with LPC and the benefits and responsibilities of historic district designation. This included both virtual meetings prior to calendaring the districts, and, after hearing questions at the public hearing, and an in-person meeting in a community garden just outside the 227th Street district, open office hours on zoom with LPC staff to answer questions one-on-one with property owners, and continuing conversations with individuals. We also partnered with the Landmarks Conservancy to offer a workshop for homeowners in the historic districts to learn more about repair methods and resources.

Historical Overview

Located in southeastern Queens, the Cambria Heights neighborhood is on the border of Nassau County and remained rural and mostly farmland well into the 20th century as you can see in this 1924 image. Until the 1890s it was part of Jamaica, and then described as part of St. Albans or Springfield until the 1917 purchase of 80 acres of farmland by Pennsylvania’s Cambria Title Savings and Trust Company.

As infrastructure investment shifted away from railroads and streetcars toward highways and automobiles by the late 1920s, Robert Moses’ extensive Long Island parkway network, including the Southern State Parkway leading east from Cambria Heights, began to take shape. By 1930, work had begun on the the Triborough (now Robert F. Kennedy) Bridge—and a new parkway network was underway in Queens, part of the proposed “Metropolitan Loop” shown on the right. Despite the Depression, thousands of homes were under construction in southeastern Queens at that time. A developer at the time noted this growth was “simply an expression on the part of the people of New York City that they still love trees and lawns and sunshine.”

Architectural Design and Development History

The Tudor Revival Style, which began to appear in row house design by the early 1910s in Queens and Brooklyn (including in the Chester Court Historic District shown on the left), was often a style of choice in these growing suburban neighborhoods in the 1920s and 30s. On 222nd and 227th Streets, the architects incorporated elements of the Tudor Revival style with what has come to be known, in recent years, as the Storybook style. Originating in California in the 1920s,

this style took root after the Tudor Revival, and merged similar medieval precedents with fairytale illustrations and the aesthetics of Hollywood. The fanciful adaptation of traditional Tudor elements, use of bright colors and exaggerated, curving forms, and ornament with a playfully pasted-on appearance are all characteristic of the Storybook style.

Both historic districts feature distinctive rows of expressive facades designed in the Storybook style, with a “stage-set” quality of a Hollywood backdrop or fairytale illustration come to life. On 227th Street, the vertically stretched entrance vestibules with flared eaves, half timbering, diamond-pane windows, stucco fields with randomly laid brick and stone accents, and multicolored slate singles are characteristic of the style. Storybook features of the 222nd Street houses include their Tudor-arched window openings, brightly colored terra-cotta roofs and windows, brick facades with random stone accents, and whimsically decorated chimneys with patterned brick and stucco panels.

In planning 222nd and 227th Streets, builders adapted a model first widely used in the mid-1920s in Jackson Heights. Driveways behind the houses provide access to rear garages, relegating automobiles to the interior of the block and allowing for the continuous, landscaped front gardens, which add to the character and special sense of place of the districts.

Both the 222nd and 227th Street developments were started in the spring of 1931 and began selling by the fall, marketed along with other developments nearby as “Parkway Homes of St. Albans.” 227th Street was also promoted individually in the Brooklyn Eagle and other local newspapers. Advertisements noted the houses’ 8 rooms and brick construction, and their location “on the gateway to the Southern State Parkway.”

Initially, residents of both 222nd and 227th Streets were white middle-class families. Black families began moving to Cambria Heights by the 1950s, often overcoming opposition, even overt hostility, from some white residents and real-estate brokers. By the 1980s, they were joined by immigrant families from Caribbean countries such as Jamaica, Haiti, Trinidad and Tobago, Guyana, and Barbados. Today, Cambria Heights remains one of several prosperous predominantly Black residential communities in Southeastern Queens.

Analysis

The 222nd Street Historic District is remarkably cohesive, with buildings constructed in 1931 in the Storybook style. The rows on either side of the street are composed of a pattern of façade types and essentially mirror each other, and the historic character remains exceptionally well preserved. Although almost all the front gardens remain intact and landscaped, about a quarter

have brick and iron fences similar to those on the right, which slightly break up their continuity and visibility from the street. Even with these changes, this street stands out among Queens row houses of this era for its unusually whimsical design, especially visible in its brick and stucco chimneys, no two of which are alike. The 227th Street Street Historic District is also very cohesive and intact, with buildings constructed in 1931 in the Storybook style. Here the mirrored pattern of facades is even more consistent than on 222nd Street, and the uninterrupted front lawns add to the character of the district.

Conclusion

With their fanciful Storybook-style designs, these well-preserved historic blocks are among the architectural highlights of the Cambria Heights neighborhood and southeastern Queens. The property owners have been excellent stewards of these historic buildings, and LPC is pleased to add the Cambria Heights 222nd Street and 227th Street historic districts to the city's significant collection of designated places. Thank you.