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Landmark status is urged for 30 New York City properties

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The neon Pepsi sign on the Queens waterfront, the Bergdorf Goodman department store on Fifth Avenue and parts of the Green-Wood Cemetery in Brooklyn are on their way to becoming New York City landmarks. They are among 30 properties scattered across the five boroughs that the Landmarks Preservation Commission, at a marathon meeting on Tuesday, decided were worthy of protection.

The Manhattan home of President Chester A. Arthur and the Cunard Mansion on Staten Island were among those that did not make the cut.

Officials considered 95 buildings, structures and plots on the commission's docket, some of which had languished in limbo for decades — some as far back as the agency's inception in 1966. While some were notable, others were little-known farmhouses on Staten Island, lesser-known Times Square theaters and humble parish churches. Few, if any, had the resonance of the Empire State Building or Grand Central Terminal, and most faced either owners' or political opposition to their recognition.

The fight over their fates was fierce, dragging on for more than a year, a proxy in the continuing campaign between preservationists and property owners over when, where and whether the city's culturally and architecturally significant structures should be protected.

"The backlog items need to be resolved," the commission's chairwoman, Meenakshi Srinivasan, said at the start of Tuesday's meeting at the Municipal Building. "We made this task a priority, and it's important to introducing good government."

In all, the commission chose to move forward on 12 of 40 properties in Manhattan; seven of 26 on Staten Island; six of seven in Brooklyn; three of 17 in Queens; and two of five in the Bronx. Before they gain full city protections, the 30 properties that the commission is supporting will be considered in another round of hearings and final votes, which the agency has promised to finish by December.

Sites not recommended on Tuesday are now outside the agency's purview, and owners may freely apply to the Department of Buildings to alter or even demolish their properties. The commission stressed that it still reserved the right to reconsider many of these properties in the future.

This emphasis was largely a recognition of the difficult position the commission found itself in. Whether a couple with a modest suburban home or the Roman Catholic Archdiocese of New York, many owners opposed the added oversight that comes with landmark designation, which can dictate changes like the type of windows, color of paint or addition of floors at a property.

Many City Council members have sided with owners in their districts, and because the Council has final say on all commission decisions, Ms. Srinivasan expressed ambivalence about expending resources pursuing lost causes.

"It's one of the realities that the commission grapples with, and it's one of the reasons many of these properties have remained on the backlog, because there's an understanding they will not be successful at the Council," she said.

Each time an item was presented, in addition to facts about the year it was built and who the architect was, the commission staff mentioned whether the property had Council support, an implicit nod to the challenges. As a result, many properties on Staten Island and in Queens were not approved, while most in Brooklyn were. **Notable losses included the former Cunard Mansion, now part of Wagner College,** and an expansion of the Douglaston Historic District in Queens.

A number of commissioners questioned this deference to the Council during their roughly three hours of deliberations, suggesting that they wished they could take a firmer, if ultimately futile, stand on certain properties.

“I think we should vote, even if we know it’s going to get turned down,” Michael Goldblum, one of the commissioners, said. “It sends a message. It puts us on record. Look, we can’t protect it, we can’t protect it, but the mere fact of our having designated it, even if it is reversed, it constitutes a fight.”

Despite the commission’s clearing its backlog, the Council is considering a package of bills to place new restrictions on the agency.

Initially, the commission’s research staff had recommended that 28 items be protected, but during the meeting, commissioners lobbied for two additions: the Lakeman House, a Dutch Colonial home dating from the 1680s on Staten Island that is now part of a flower shop; and the Excelsior Power Company in Manhattan, which has been converted to apartments and considerably modified, though commissioners still found it to be evocative.

The commission rejected some properties outright because they had been so thoroughly altered over the years. The home at 123 Lexington Avenue where President Arthur lived, which was the site of his inauguration in 1881 after the assassination of President James A. Garfield, was rejected because the first two floors had been altered into storefronts, masking its residential character. Structures on two Staten Island properties, one the site of Dorothy Day’s seaside cottage, had been demolished.

An abandoned Art Moderne-style pumping station in Coney Island had been bricked up with cinder blocks, reducing its majesty. Union Square Park had undergone many major renovations, leaving little of its original landscaping intact.

Those two properties, along with Snug Harbor on Staten Island, are also overseen by other city agencies, which commission members said would be responsible stewards for them. A group of seven Times Square theaters along 42nd Street, including the Victory, Lyric and New Apollo, were not protected because they are overseen by a special city commission created during the neighborhood’s redevelopment.

The IRT Powerhouse at 12th Avenue and 59th Street got a nod, even though it is still an active Con Edison facility. The commission will be working closely with the utility to come up with a plan that allows for easier maintenance. The entirety of Green-Wood Cemetery had been up for consideration, but after its stewards argued that it would be impossible to maintain active burials, only the chapel, gatehouse and visitors’ cottage, and not the entire grounds, are to be covered.

Only nine of the 16 church properties up for consideration were approved, many over opposition from their parishes, which argue that they barely have the funds to remain open. The Loew’s Theater on 175th Street, now the United Palace House of Inspiration church, was the one property supported by the commission over the objection of a Council member.

Even the United Nations had challenged protections, opposing the inclusion of the Kaufmann Conference Center, the only example in the city of the celebrated work of the Finnish architect Alvar Aalto. The commission supported it nonetheless.

Dozens of preservationists attended the session, and they were disappointed if unsurprised by the outcome. “I understand the practicality of all this, but that’s not their mission,” said Tara Kelly, director of preservation and design at the Municipal Art Society.

Ms. Srinivasan, in an interview after the meeting, said she felt the commission had struck the right balance. “It was very transparent, very effective and very informative,” she said. “We have 30 properties, they’re stellar ones, and we’re looking forward to moving forward on them.”