

CITY HALL P.12

OUR TOWN

downtown

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Your Neighborhood Is Our Business

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Purveyor of Speed

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PHOTO BY JUSTIN FITCH



Keeping It Real

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A View from the Corner

David Crohn's cover story on the preservation of the character of the South Village got me thinking about neighborhoods and how they change.

If I stand on my corner at 21st and Third and look up Third to 23rd I can see huge construction. I don't usually notice it, huge as it is. I notice

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SQUARE FEET

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PHOTO BY ANDREW SCHWARTZ

INSIDE OUR TOWN downtown



On the cover: Andrew Berman and Melissa Baldock of the Greenwich Village Society for Historic Preservation hope the landmarks commission will recognize buildings they may have overlooked, including 42-46 Carmine Street (below).

Cover Story

When it comes to preserving the South Village, where do you draw the line? | [page 10](#)

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Innovative green buildings and the last day of classes. | [page 6](#)

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Dancing, on the fly; the poetics of sculpture; an early flick about Mick (and friends). | [page 22](#)

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Great Mexican food will cost you some chips. | [page 27](#)

Bar Review

A rainy night can't drown out the spirit of lederhosen, wurst and bier. | [page 26](#)



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Cellar Door

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EDITOR'S NOTE



Keeping It Real

Landmark preservation

comes to the South Village

By David Crohn

It's a familiar story.

The late 18th and early 19th centuries saw the last major influx of immigration into New York City, and especially into Greenwich Village. They were mostly Italians by then, but African-Americans came in great numbers, as did Germans, Irish, Dutch, Polish and Chinese immigrants. Meanwhile, the Village became an enclave for people who didn't fit in elsewhere. Artists and performers found a home here, during a time when theatrical types were dregs who daylighted as pickpockets and prostitutes.

It's a familiar story, but one worth retelling, if only because the legacy is vanishing. But as rents and the price of a cup of coffee rise ever higher, the buildings, for the most part, remain. The bohemian soul vacated long ago, but the body lingers and the vultures are circling.

The working-class communities of Greenwich Village left their mark, its citizens living in simple apartments and row houses they built themselves. Tenements are the primary form here, but they also lived in and built shorter row houses, worshipped in churches built by their own hands, and worked in factories and shopped in storefronts that they built themselves.

It's a familiar theme, but the South Village variation is unique. Today, much

of the area is a kind of little Little Italy, with street names like Carmine and Minetta; old-fashioned cheese shops and butchers and gelaterias; simon-pure Italian restaurants like Pesce Pasta, from where I was nearly ejected after requesting an iced coffee.

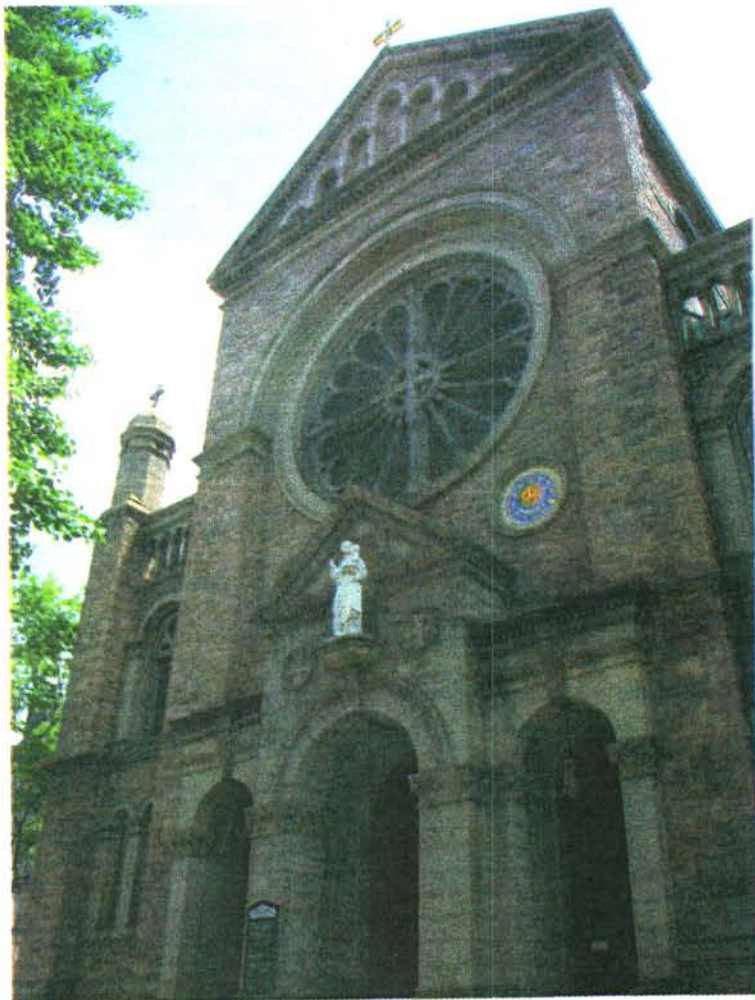
What makes the South Village favored by apartment-hunters, tourists and browsers also attracts developers. It's a funny, very New York paradox that the purity of the area draws builders who would infect it.

The irony is not lost on David Gruber, who serves on Community Board 2 (CB2), a group of 50 officials appointed by the Manhattan Borough President. The Board's purview includes the South Village.

"It's like [the developers] say, 'Here's something nice, let's destroy it,'" said Gruber, who also heads the Carmine Block Association.

What's Gone Is Gone

Gruber has a point. Since 2003 alone, the South Village has lost the Tunnel Garage and the Sullivan Street Theater. The Circle in the Square Theater on Bleecker Street was "mutilated" and then demolished in 2004. They may not have been tourist attractions, but they were beacons of cultural significance, according to Andrew Dolkart, a professor at Columbia University who is one of



St. Anthony of Padua Church, at 155 Sullivan Street, was the first church built (1886) for an Italian congregation in the United States.

the city's preeminent authorities on local history and preservation.

The stretch along 6th Avenue running from 4th Street to Bleecker is already referred to by some as Coney Island West, with its flashing lights and pervasive neon glare. As Dave Ethan, co-owner of the Gray Dog on Carmine Street, told me, it's not that business owners necessarily mind sharing streets with sex shops and hot dog joints. "The diversity of the Village is what it's all about," Ethan said. "But why shouldn't their stores conform with the look and feel of the rest of the neighborhood?"

And then there's the Poe house. At a CB2 public hearing on April 24, people booed and hissed when New York University's name came up, and the loudest protests came when speaker Andrew Berman mentioned the Poe house, which NYU demolished in 2002. This

reflected how many villagers felt about the loss of the 1830s row house where Edgar Allan Poe lived for six months from 1845 to '46. At 245 Sullivan Street, it's now Furman Hall, a law school building that also displays artifacts from Poe's life. At regular, scheduled times, public viewing is allowed. Since it was just off Washington Square Park, critics add that the new building changes the character of the Park itself.

At the hearing, Berman, who is the Executive Director of the Greenwich Village Society for Historic Preservation, presented a report outlining his group's proposal for a South Village Historic District. The proposal was popularly received and has drawn widespread support. It was also the culmination of four years of work made possible by a grant from the Preservation League of New York State and the New York State Council on the Arts.

If approved and designated by the New York City Landmarks Preservation Commission (NYCLPC), the District will ensure that historic buildings within its 38-block area—a roughly triangular section whose boundaries extend from West Fourth Street to Watts Street and Hudson Street to LaGuardia Place—will be protected from contextually insensitive alterations.

But, Berman said, “You can within a historic district have buildings that are non-contributing. Those can be demolished or altered.”

That makes sense. If every building in an area had to be historic for the area to be designated, preservationists would have a hell of a time getting anything done, and the district boundaries would be unmanageably convoluted. But when non-contributing buildings are demolished, whatever replaces them has to be designed according to proportions that are characteristic of the area. Building materials and other factors are also mandated.

Although landlords and homeowners sometimes resist what they think will create an added level of bureaucracy, opposition, Berman says, is usually based on “fear and misconception.” People think they won’t be able to paint their doors or change their windows. That isn’t the case, Berman said. And, studies have shown that property values tend to improve thanks to landmark designation.

What It Takes

The proposed district’s uneven shape reflects the City’s organic development. In an area between Clarkson and West Houston Streets, for example, the boundary jags south, skipping two square lots immediately to the east and west. On one side sits a future water-tunnel digging site that may one day become a neighborhood park; on the other, there’s a 1930s warehouse

ment and the municipal archives at City Hall four years ago to survey the South Village and determine which buildings meet the criteria for landmark preservation.

Aesthetics are great, but for an area to qualify, staffers must demonstrate that the area has a unified history; a cohesive architectural character; that the boundaries make sense; and that the area is of historic and cultural significance.

The South Village, Berman said, “has all of that in spades. A lot of people are very surprised to learn that it’s not already landmarked, especially since no neighborhood has so many intact vestiges of how life was lived.”

The neighborhood has mostly working class and industrial buildings, buildings whose understated beauty has only been recognized over time. When they were built, they were made with cheap materials and designs with very few frills. It’s an area that might not manifest its charm immediately, said Robert Riccobono, who serves on CB2’s own Landmarks and Preservation Commission.

“Most people, when they think of preservation, they think of elaborate townhouses like in Brooklyn Heights, but in fact there are other areas in need of protection,” said Riccobono. “It’s not just all fancy brownstones.”

It’s in the Bricks

Professor Dolkart, of Columbia, wrote an 82-page report summarizing the district proposal. Along with offering an in-depth history of Greenwich Village, and especially the South Village, the commissioned work identifies about eight building types in the area.

Most are Pre-, Old-, or New-Law tenements, referring to the set of regulations passed in 1879 that was meant to improve living conditions in these notoriously shoddy and overstuffed apartment buildings. There are also

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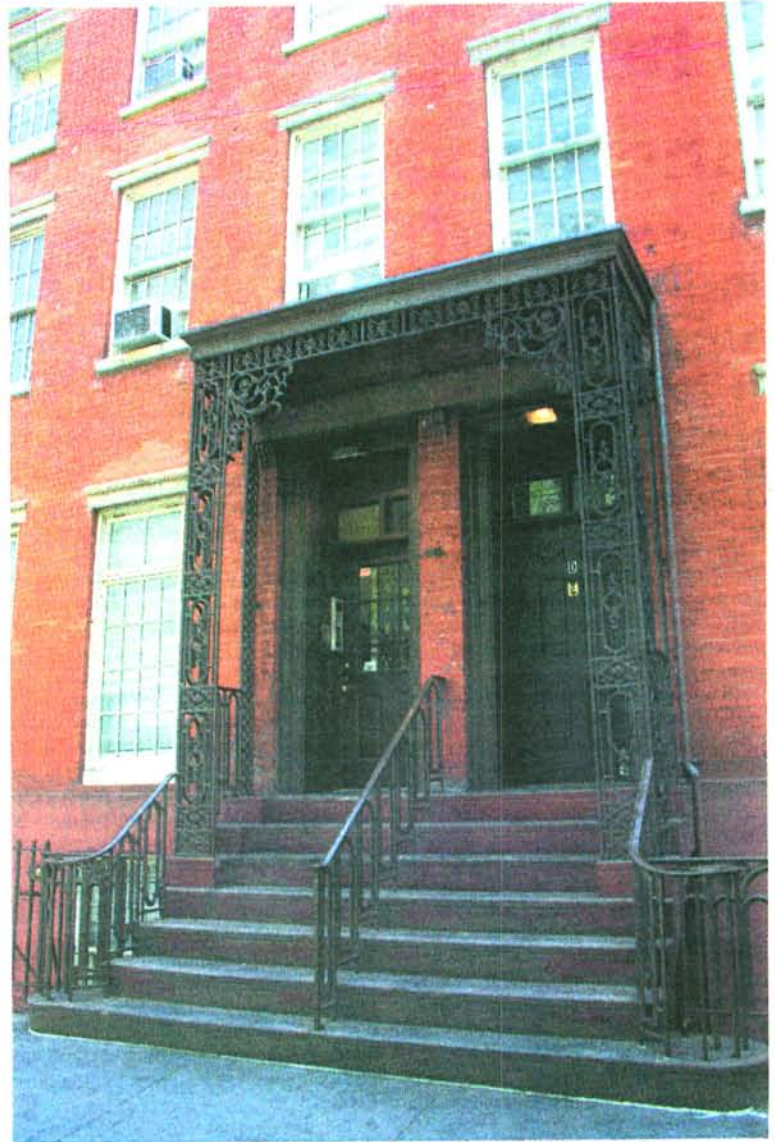
that “no one would knock down if you paid them,” Berman said. Neither qualifies for—or would even require—landmarking.

Berman notes that keeping the proposed area as tight as possible makes it easier for the GVSHP to show the NYCLPC that no building has been chosen haphazardly, that every one has historical, cultural and architectural merit.

With its staff of five, four part-time consultants and an “army” of interns, the Society is the largest organization of its kind in the city. They hit the pave-

ment French Flats, Reform Housing, churches and community and social service buildings. (For those who think that the phenomenon of developers trying to cash in on the artsy image of an area and thus destroying that reputation by raising rents is anything new, witness Vincent Pepe, who did just that in 1914, with his “Bohemian-style” spec homes.)

For prose that is meant to serve a primarily bureaucratic function, Dolkart’s report is surprisingly rich. What binds the disparate architectural styles of the



130 MacDougal Street, a Greek Revival row house built circa 1845. A disputed legend has it that Louisa May Alcott wrote “Little Women” here.

South Village—from Neo-Grecian to Neo-Federal—is brick, Dolkart writes: “hand-made and mass produced; headers, stretchers, and Roman bricks; red, yellow, black, glazed white, and other hues. The brick is ornamented with varied stones, cast iron, terra cotta, and other materials.”

A “Fever Pitch”?

Everyone I interviewed is in favor of landmark designation for the South Village. At the public hearing I went to, villagers lined up to express their support, and cheered Berman after his presentation (he is a minor celebrity for people who love Greenwich Village). Elected officials from New York State Senator Tom Duane to Manhattan Borough President Scott Stringer and U.S. Senator Chuck Schumer have written enthusiastic letters of support to the NYCLPC. The State and National Register of Historic Places deemed the area eligible for listing.

In the words of Shaan Khan, a Stringer spokesman, “preservation fever has reached a fever pitch.”

Everyone is “on board,” it seems,

except NYU. Which doesn’t really matter, since there’s not much the school can do to obstruct the process, although four years ago, when the Society began publicizing their new project, the University did volunteer its support. It was, Berman conjectures, an attempt to clean up an image that had been tarnished by the destruction of the Poe house and the megadorm the school is pushing for 12th Street.

“They quite willingly said, ‘These boundaries, we can support them, we will be behind this,’” Berman said. “And for the past four years it’s probably the only thing NYU and the community has agreed upon. Their support for this has been widely touted in the community.”

Once the final proposal was drafted and formally submitted to the City on Dec. 29, 2006—all 40 binders of it—the Society sent copies of the report to everyone who supported the plan and “everybody immediately stepped up.” Except NYU.

“They said, ‘Wait a minute, we can’t

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Built in 1873, 52 Carmine Street is a characteristic pre-Law tenement. It was originally built with no air shafts or side windows, although it was given elaborate cornices that remain intact.

Landmark

CONTINUED FROM PAGE 11

support this, we need to study it first," said Berman, referring to a chilly letter exchange between the Society, along with local block associations and business leaders, and NYU Associate Vice President Alicia Hurley.

But nothing had changed since the proposal's inception. "And they not only didn't come through on their promise but they sent letters to the LPC undercutting the proposal."

Copies of the letters NYU sent to the NYCLPC weren't available, but I did see the March 9 letter Hurley sent to the GVSHP in which she writes that the report "does not necessarily demonstrate that the entire area weaves together as a single cohesive historic district. The proposed historic district abuts three existing districts and subsumes one existing district."

No one from NYU returned phone calls seeking their side of the story, but Berman has inferred from the "three existing districts" comment that Hurley and NYU were suggesting that the Society instead focus its efforts on expanding the SoHo Cast Iron Historic District, among others.

They also suggested expanding the MacDougal Sullivan Gardens, which are 24 houses that comprise one of the smallest historic districts in the city. "But the Gardens are within the South Village proposed district anyway," Berman said.

Were Berman and his colleagues accusing NYU of choosing to talk about the SoHo and MacDougal Districts arbitrarily? Was it an

attempt to shift the focus away from the Village and into an area downtown that would never pique NYU's expansion interests?

Yes, Berman says, it was a fig leaf. "[Increasing the SoHo District] makes no sense, because it is exclusively about cast iron architecture and mid-nineteenth-century lofts. That building type ends at SoHo's boundaries. It was a way to cover up the fact that they weren't following through on their pledge. It was a red herring to say, 'Oh there's a different way you could do it.'"

A "Bread and Butter" Issue

When the GVSHP got the Meatpacking District and the Far West Village landmarked, they broke records by getting it done in three, and one and a half years, respectively.

The City has the proposal in hand, but that's how long it usually takes, especially with many other New York City neighborhoods queued up and the NYCLPC's staffing shortage.

Although he remains cheerfully optimistic about the protection of the South Village and would love to see this one designated in record time, it's not about breaking records, Berman said. It's about preserving history.

"I think that for folks in the Village preserving neighborhood character is as bread and butter of an issue as safe streets and good schools in other areas," Berman said. "The small apartments and the high rents and all the other things that people are up against are balanced by the fact that they live in an area with a palpable character that you love and that's not like anyplace else."

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