

The State of New York City Preservation

A BRIEF OVERVIEW OF NEW YORK CITY'S LANDMARK LAW

In 1963, preservationists lost the battle to save Pennsylvania Station, a majestic Beaux-Arts building. But in 1965, their continued efforts won the passage of the New York City Landmarks Law. The law aims to protect, enhance and perpetuate architectural features of special character that “represent...the city’s cultural, social, economic, political and architectural history” by preserving landmarks and historic districts.¹ A landmark is an individual building, structure, place, or object, while a historic district is a larger geographic area comprised of multiple buildings. The Landmarks Preservation Commission (LPC) designates new landmarks and historic districts, but anyone may suggest a property or district to the LPC so long as part of the property is at least thirty years old. The LPC evaluates proposed districts and landmarks based on their architectural, historical or cultural significance, their relationship to other City development or improvement plans, and public testimony.² According to the LPC, as of September 16, 2008 the City was home to 1,194 exterior landmarks, 112 interior landmarks, 10 scenic landmarks, and 106 historic districts.³

Where are the City’s Landmarked Buildings?

As shown in **FIGURE 1**, the vast majority of landmarks and historic districts are in Manhattan. **FIGURE 2** shows the share of landmarks in each borough while **FIGURE 3** shows the share of new landmark designations by borough over the past four decades. In every decade, Manhattan received the greatest percentage of landmark designations, but its share has been declining since the 1980s. Preservation activity has been second highest in Brooklyn, which is home to 13% of the City’s landmarks. In contrast, the Bronx, Queens and Staten Island each have less than 10% of the City’s landmarks. Overall, preservation activity peaked in the 1980s. Based on the trends below, it is likely that designations will be fewer in the 2000s than in any prior decade since the Landmarks Law was enacted.

Figure 1: Historic Districts and Landmarks in New York City

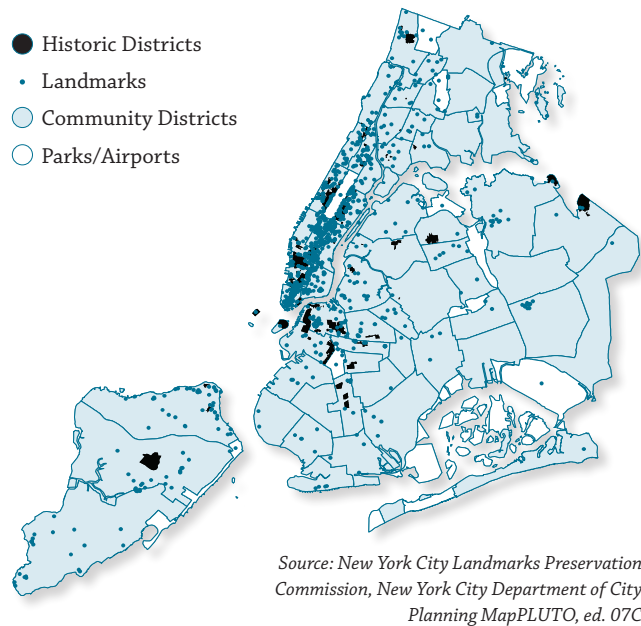


Figure 2: Share of Landmarks by Borough (total as of September 2008)

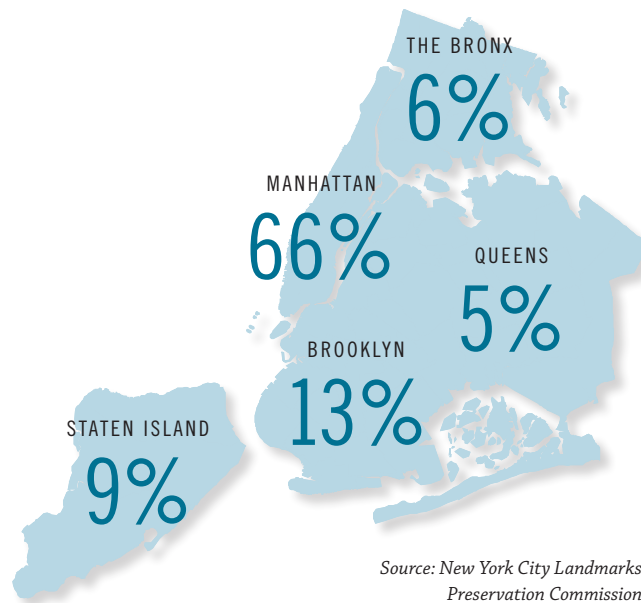
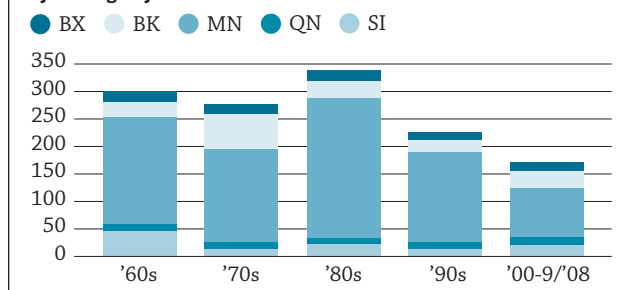


Figure 3: Share of New Landmark Designations by Borough by Decade



Source: New York City Landmarks Preservation Commission

What Kinds of Buildings are Landmarked?

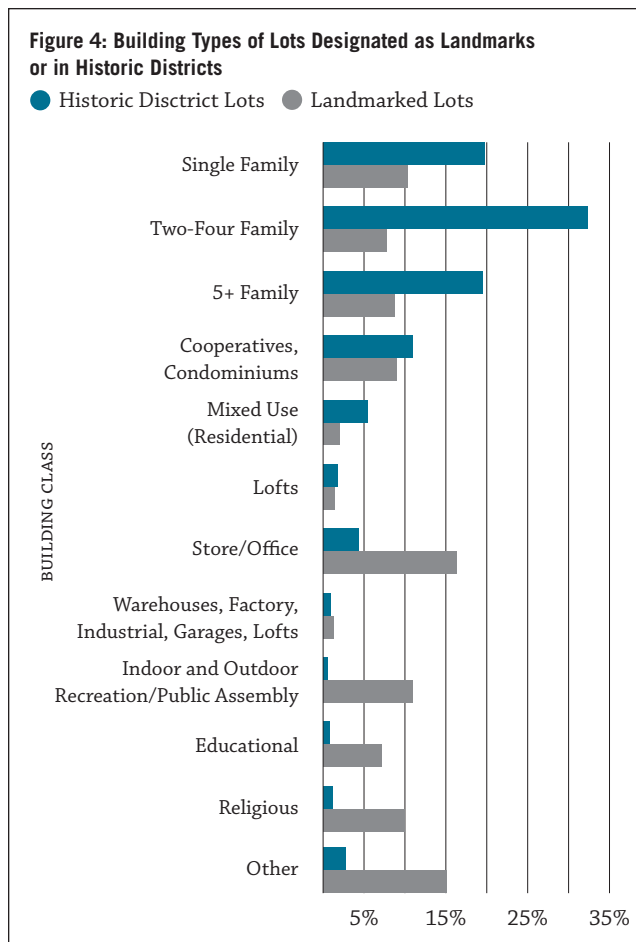
Historic districts are largely comprised of residential properties; more than 80% of the buildings in these districts are residential, and more than half are one- to four-family properties. In contrast, landmarked sites tend to represent a wider variety of buildings types; religious buildings, public assembly and recreation facilities, commercial buildings, and single-family properties each account for at least 10% of landmarked sites. **FIGURE 4** illustrates the composition of landmarks and historic districts by building type.

TABLE 1 ranks the ten neighborhoods with the highest share of residential units in a historic district. This share attempts to normalize the effects of the LPC’s preservation efforts. For example, although the geographic area covered by historic districts in Jackson Heights is far smaller than in the Upper East Side, a residential unit is much more likely to be in a historic district in Jackson Heights.⁴ Despite this standardization, Manhattan neighborhoods still dominate the top 10 with the highest rates of preserved residential housing stock.

For up-to-date information on proposed landmark and historic district designations or applications for alterations to already designated buildings currently before the LPC, visit www.plannyc.com. Present issues include the expansion of St. Vincent’s Hospital in the Greenwich Village Historic District, a proposed Prospect Heights Historic District, and generally, the preservation of religious structures.

CD	Neighborhood	Percentage of Units	Rank
302	Greenwich Village/Soho (MN)	45.8%	1
202	Fort Greene/Brooklyn Heights (BK)	41.4%	2
307	Upper West Side (MN)	31.3%	3
206	Park Slope/Carroll Gardens (BK)	22.5%	4
403	Jackson Heights (QN)	15.6%	5
301	Financial District (MN)	12.2%	6
309	Morningside Hts/Hamilton Hts (MN)	11.4%	7
308	Upper East Side (MN)	9.8%	8
305	Midtown (MN)	8.5%	9
208	Crown Heights/Prospect Heights (BK)	6.0%	10

Source: New York City Department of City Planning MapPLUTO, ed. 07C



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 Note: The “other” category includes cemeteries, miscellaneous government buildings, hotels, theatres, etc. Unlike the LPC, PLUTO only assigns one landmark designation for each tax lot. Therefore, buildings with both exterior and interior landmarks are counted only once in this data set.

¹ NYC, Admin. Code § 25-301.

² Property owners are obligated to keep designated sites in good repair and apply for permits prior to making alterations, reconstructions, demolitions, or improvements to the location. Owners failing to abide by these rules receive warning letters and an opportunity to address violations, but enforcement can ultimately include criminal or civil penalties. Id. §§ 25-305, 311, 317. The LPC explains that enforcement is used mainly as a deterrent for violations, and violators are given two opportunities to correct the problem before any fine is imposed. Penalties for first time serious violations are up to \$5000 and for lesser infractions up to \$500.

³ This total number of historic districts includes extensions of previously designated districts. LPC reports interior and exterior landmarks separately even if they are on the same building or structure.

⁴ Using GIS and the LPC’s address file of all preserved lots, we determined that Jackson Heights has about 126 acres of historic districts while the Upper East Side has about 226 acres.