

NEIGHBORHOOD REPORT: NEW YORK LANDMARKS;
The Lower East Side Seeks Honor for Humble Tenements

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Byline: By DENNY LEE

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Body

Landmark designations typically reflect history's grandest aspirations: Grand Central Terminal, the Chrysler Building and Trinity Church are but a few examples.

But now several groups are **seeking** to bestow the honorific on the **Lower East Side**, an area better known for **tenements** that housed waves of working-class immigrants.

The proposed historic district would include the narrow corridor between Allen and Essex Streets from **East** Houston to Canal Streets. The district would also extend five blocks along **East** Broadway and include parts of Seward Park and its adjoining library. In total, it would encompass 31 blocks comprising more than 500 buildings, the oldest of which date back to around 1827.

The district already includes several official **landmarks**, including the Orthodox Eldridge Street Synagogue, built in 1887. But most of the structures are nondescript **tenements** from the late 19th and early 20th centuries, often built without private toilets.

The **Lower East Side** Business Improvement District, which submitted the proposal, says the designation is a way to **honor** the area's rich history and boost its economy.

"So many groups got their start here," said Andrew Flamm, the organization's executive director. "It was their first stronghold on American soil. Whether it's Park Avenue or this area, it is important to recognize that history."

Protestant families first developed the **neighborhood** in the 1820's, followed by German and Jewish immigrants from Eastern Europe. By the early 1900's, the area was considered the world's largest Jewish community. The district began to diversify in the 1920's as tides of Italians, Sephardic Jews and others settled into the **tenements** and took over the shops.

Renee Epps, vice president of the **Lower East Side Tenement** Museum, said that the area has continued to attract **new** immigrants, and today included recent arrivals from China, Malaysia, Russia, Puerto Rico and India.

Some community groups, however, expressed concern that the historic status could cause problems for current immigrants.

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"Would it hinder the area or benefit growth?" asked Huey-Min Chuang, director of business outreach for the Chinatown Manpower Project. "I'm in favor of historical value, but I'm more interested in how it will help the area grow."

In response, Mr. Flamm pointed out that his group was not seeking designation as a city landmark, which would require approval for building changes, but rather recognition under the National and State Registers of Historic Places. It is "another means for us to promote this whole area," he said.

The proposal has the support of State Assembly Speaker Sheldon Silver and several groups interested in New York history. Others, including Community Board 3 and Councilwoman Kathryn E. Freed, remain undecided.

"Now that the area is becoming prosperous, many of the old stores are getting kicked out," Ms. Freed said. "This could guarantee more of the same. In one sense, you are keeping the facade but changing the tenants." DENNY LEE

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Graphic

Photo: Most of the buildings in the proposed historic district are tenements, like this one at Grand and Ludlow Streets. (Barbara Alper for The New York Times)

Chart: "LOWER EAST SIDE"

Blocks: 31

Buildings: 508 (445 of them considered historically significant)

Highlights: Several national landmarks, including the Henry Street Settlement (265 Henry Street), the Eldridge Street Synagogue (12 Eldridge Street), and the Jewish Daily Forward building (173-175 East Broadway). The area's oldest building is a Federal-style rowhouse at 183-187 East Broadway, erected around 1827.

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