Neighborhood Historical Preservation: Sunset Park, Brooklyn

Background

Sunset Park is a highly diverse, working-class neighborhood located in the western section of Brooklyn, New York. It is currently home to mostly immigrants from China, Mexico, the Spanish-speaking Caribbean and the Middle East; more than 57% of the population is foreign born. In recent years, Sunset Park has experienced rapid population growth which has placed pressure on housing, real estate prices and development. Between 2000 and 2010, the population particularly in the eastern section of the neighborhood increased by 9.5%; whereas NYC’s population as a whole increased by just 2.1%.

Sunset Park is comprised of mostly one & two family and multi-family houses that are both historically and architecturally significant. Over 3,000 row houses and brownstones were built in the late 19th and early 20th centuries.

In 1988, a large majority of the neighborhood received designation by the National Register of Historic Places. The list is comprised of places worthy of preservation but it does not prevent alterations to a building’s façade or demolition.

The goal of my project was to provide maps to a community group ‘The Sunset Park Landmarks Committee’ made up of residents who want to receive landmark status for several areas in the neighborhood by the New York City Landmarks Preservation Commission. The group is concerned with recent ‘historically insensitive’ development changes that has resulted in brownstones and row houses demolished or the exteriors majorly modified. Historical designation by the NYC Landmarks Commission will protect existing building exteriors and prevent out-of-scale redevelopment. The ultimate goal is to preserve the neighborhood’s history and distinct “sense of place.”

Methodology

The goal of my project was to provide information to the Sunset Park Landmarks Committee with characteristics of the areas that they have proposed as historic districts. The process of historic designation requires substantial community involvement. I hope this background may better support their outreach and advocacy efforts. I analyzed residential housing stock, age of the buildings, population density, demographics and occupancy status.

My data was drawn from the U.S. Census (2010) and NYC Map Pluto which provided detailed tax lot information up until the year 2006. The ‘potential NYC Landmarks Districts’ were provided by the Sunset Park committee as areas where the buildings have most of their original exterior architectural character intact and are contiguous. The pictures below illustrate historically preserved brownstones and row houses in Sunset Park.

Results

My maps illustrated several points that should be useful to the Sunset Park Landmarks Committee. The demographic and occupancy study found that the areas they have proposed as first priority for designation are predominately in Hispanic/Latino and renters.

The housing stock analysis for residential type and year built illustrates that the first priority for designation is comprised of mostly one & two family buildings that were built between 1800—1916. Finally, the population density map shows that the second and third priority for designation are in some of the most dense areas of the neighborhood.