



Testimony of the Municipal Art Society
Before the Landmarks Preservation Commission
By Beth Bingham, Historic Preservation Intern
Proposed Designation of the Ridgewood North Historic District
December 16, 2008

I am Beth Bingham, Historic Preservation Intern, speaking in support of the Ridgewood North Historic District designation on behalf of the Municipal Art Society's Preservation Committee. The Municipal Art Society is a private, non-profit membership organization that fights for intelligent urban planning, design, and preservation through education, dialogue and advocacy.

The proposed Ridgewood North Historic District is comprised of the earliest examples of "Mathews Model Flats," built by speculative developer Gustave X. Mathews and designed by architect Louis Allmendinger between 1908 and 1911. Considered to be some of the most innovative housing in New York City, these "new law" tenements were designed with more space and better sanitation than their overcrowded 19th Century counterparts. By making use of generous lot sizes, introducing wide air shafts to provide improved air and light quality, including bathrooms in each unit, and controlling occupancy, Mathews established a new housing paradigm that was a welcome departure from the congested, polluted slums of the Lower East Side. The three story apartment buildings were simple, sturdy, and relatively cheap to construct, and therefore became the standard for subsequent tenement house construction. Exhibited at the 1915 Panama Pacific Fair in San Francisco, the Mathews Model Flats were heralded as an exceptional achievement in affordable housing.

In keeping with Ridgewood's 1905 fire code, these attached row buildings were composed of load-bearing masonry walls, and constructed out of Kreisler brick. Though every block appears the same at first glance, each row was artfully designed with its own intricate corbelling pattern made from variations of light and dark yellow brick. In another attempt to distinguish one block from another, the houses boast a variety of elaborate Romanesque or Renaissance Revival details in the lintels, cornices and iron railings.

A unified assemblage of speculative tenement housing, the Proposed Ridgewood North Historic District is significant for both its social importance to the development of New York City housing, as well as for its superior architectural integrity. We thank the LPC for its recognition of this neighborhood in Queens, a generally underserved borough. We urge that you move forward with the designation of this district.