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To Celebrate a Landmarks Law, Planting Flags in a Tiny New York

By *JAMES BARRON*

David Grainger is walking on the water again. One foot is upstream from the Manhattan Bridge and the other foot is downstream from the Williamsburg Bridge, and he is reaching over the Brooklyn-Queens Expressway to plant a yellow flag at the intersection of Pierrepont Street and Hicks Street in Brooklyn Heights.

His feet are covered in protective blue bootees. The bootees protect the water, which is not water at all but dark-blue paint on wood.

He is standing on the surface of the Queens Museum of Art's [Panorama](#), the 9,335-square-foot diorama of the city built for the 1964 World's Fair. The yellow flag is one of 109 that he is putting in place as part of a project to highlight the city's historic districts and the 50th anniversary of the municipal law that made them possible.

"The flags give some sense of place to viewers, residents and visitors," said Barbaralee Diamonstein-Spielvogel, an author and preservationist who has organized the NYC Landmarks50 Advisory Committee to mark the anniversary of the law in 2015. "The Panorama is all about all of New York. It describes graphically and quickly the reach of the landmarks movement. People might say there are 109 that encompass 30,000 properties. Does that sound like a lot? It represents less than 3 percent of all of the properties in New York City."

The World's Fair straddled two important moments in the history of historic preservation: The demolition of the old Pennsylvania Station in 1963 and the approval of the landmarks law in 1965.

The Landmarks50 Advisory Committee has a long list of members that includes Simeon Bankoff, the executive director of the Historic Districts Council; Kent L. Barwick, a former chair of the landmarks commission and president emeritus of the Municipal Art Society; Peg Breen, president of the private New York Landmarks Conservancy; Vin Cipolla, president of the Municipal Art Society; Andrew S. Dolkart, director of the Historic Preservation Program at Columbia University; the architecture critic Paul Goldberger; and the designer Massimo Vignelli, who created the group's logo.

Ms. Diamonstein-Spielvogel said one of the committee's goals was to highlight the significance of historic preservation in shaping the city since the 1960s.

"I think it reflects the growth and importance of the landmarks movement, which I consider to

be one of the most important national movements after things like human rights, civil rights, gay rights,” she said. “Down that same line is the historic preservation movement. It cuts across all economic lines. There isn’t a neighborhood, certainly not in New York, that doesn’t have a range of organizations public and private devoted to this.”

On the Panorama, there is a one-district, one-flag policy. So there was one flag for the 75 blocks of the Upper West Side/Central Park West district, one flag for the one-block West 71st Street Historic District and one for each of the other districts, which are spread across all five boroughs.

“As the flags go up,” said Mr. Bankoff of the Historic Districts Council, who watched as Mr. Grainger planted the flags, “you see how many historic districts there are compared to how large the city is. On the one hand, there are people who say there’s too much preservation, and on the other, you look around and see how few areas are protected and how much more there is to be done.”

Mr. Bankoff said the district in Brooklyn Heights — the one Mr. Grainger had stretched to reach — was the city’s first, designated in November 1965. Four more districts, all in Manhattan, came into being the next year.

By this time Mr. Grainger, an art installer, hunting for the place to plant the flag for the Fillmore Place Historic District in Williamsburg, was on his knees in the East River.

It is territory Mr. Grainger knows well — he repainted the water several years ago, and lately has been vacuuming off dust that has accumulated since then — and territory that Mr. Bankoff approached with apprehension.

“I’m terrified I’ll trip over the Verrazano,” he said.