Kean Residence Rejected as Landmark
But preservationists persevere with effort to protect 1880 house

By Patty Lee

A preservation group’s efforts to landmark a Lexington Avenue building may have failed, but the group hasn’t given up hope that the property might be protected.

The building, known as the Kean Residence, was built on the corner of East 65th Street and Lexington Avenue in 1880. Originally two separate homes, the structure was remodeled into a single building in 1922 for writer J. Stewart Barney. His descendants, the Keans, a family of politicians that includes former New Jersey governor Thomas H. Kean, Sr., owned the home until 1995 when Barney’s daughter, Alice, died.

Now, the current owner, well-known jewelry and accessories designer Barry Cord, has filed plans to demolish the building.

Cord’s firm said he was unavailable for comment.

Ironically, Cord was listed as a contributor in the Preservation League of New York’s 2006 Annual Report. The group is dedicated to protecting the state’s historic buildings, districts and landscapes.

The Kean house was evaluated and rejected by the Landmarks Preservation Commission for protection just last week. According to the commission’s director of communications, Elisabeth de Bourbon, the planned demolition had a strong impact on the commission’s decision.

“The Commission is currently surveying the buildings along Lexington Avenue in the 60s and between Park and Third in the 70s for a possible historic district or historic district extension,” said de Bourbon in an email. “That said, we evaluated 863 Lexington Avenue for individual landmark status, and determined it didn’t merit this designation, in part because a permit for changes to its facade had been already issued.”

The residence is on one of the 17 blocks that the preservation group Friends of the Upper East Side Historic Districts requested the city consider for historic status last July.

But even if the area becomes landmarked, it may be too late—work permits filed before landmark status is conferred are valid regardless of any future designations.

Still, supporters are not giving up.

Community Board 8’s Landmarks Committee is scheduled to discuss expansion of the historic district and the Kean Residence demolition on July 21. Friends has also started an online petition targeting the commission. So far, 100 people have signed on.

“People are very concerned because this is an incredibly beautiful block,” said Seri Worden, the group’s executive director. “That block of Lexington has really intact brownstones, which are not differ-

Preservationist Seri Worden has started a petition to keep the Kean Residence, on Lexington Avenue, from being demolished. Commission for protection just last week. According to the commission’s director of communications, Elisabeth de Bourbon, the planned demolition had a strong impact on the commission’s decision.

The Kean Residence from above.

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There commission has no specific timeline for evaluating the historic district expansion request.

“We’re at the point of surveying all the buildings in the area and photographing them and doing preliminary research on them,” de Bourbon said.

For building owners, having a house with landmark status can be cumbersome. Alterations must be approved by the Landmarks Preservation Commission and may be subject to a public hearing.

According to Worden, more and more owners of historic buildings are renovating their properties to avoid landmark status.

“If a building is half torn down,” she said, “it’s hard to argue it’s a landmark.”