

Landmarking the Empire State Dairy continued...

I told **Susan Tunick**, the founder of "Friends of Terra Cotta" (FOTC), about the murals, and she took photos that showed markings on the obverse of one tile. We deciphered the markings which said "Made by the American Encaustic Tiling Co." and gave its address. Later, I discovered that ceramics designer and colorist, Leon Solon, had been hired in 1912 as the Art Director of AET. (He would later decorate the facade of the AET building at 16 East 41st Street, Manhattan entirely with AET tiles and faience. These were completely ripped off the facade in the 2000s to prevent the building from being landmarked.) Solon would have supervised the designing and making of the dairy murals, and may have designed them, himself.

In 1999 and 2000 I sent letters to the NYC Landmarks Preservation Commission (LPC) asking that they consider the building and murals for landmark status. The LPC was not interested in the building and murals until the current mayor promoted business and residential development in the outer areas of the borough. This, however, angered many residents who saw this as a give-away to real estate developers and a prelude to gentrification and a loss of the area's architectural history. East New York residents, mostly working class and poor people, were usually neglected by various city administrations. Also, while most areas of Brooklyn had landmarked historic buildings, East New York had NO landmarked buildings. In 2015 a group of residents formed "Preserve East New York" (PENY) to address the loss of their architectural history.

Over the years Susan Tunick and I tried, unsuccessfully, to have the Empire State Dairy landmarked. It wasn't until the city administration's plan to rezone East New York for commercial development clashed with the community trying to protect its historic architecture that the LPC began to hold hearings to consider landmark status for the dairy complex. After the owner of the plastics company died in 2012, the complex was purchased by another party who flipped it to a developer. The latest owner wanted to raze the five-building complex because it would be less expensive to complete a toxic waste remediation on the site if there were no buildings. The developer might have been able to raze the buildings without LPC approval if the community hadn't become aware of their historic value through PENY and its founder, Zulmilena Then.

The LPC decision landmarked two of five buildings in the complex--the first buildings in East New York to obtain individual landmark status. The first building was designed by the architects Theobald Engelhardt and Otto Strack in 1907. Both men were well-known--Engelhardt in Brooklyn where he designed many factories, breweries, churches and residences; and Strack who was from Milwaukee and designed many breweries and residences there. The other building was designed by Strack in 1913 and was completed by 1915. The tile murals complimented the dairy business of the complex, even after the Borden Dairy Company bought the buildings in 1924.

Editor's note: A special Tile Heritage salute to **Michael Padwee** and **Susan Tunick** for their sustained dedication over these many years and to the foresight of the commissioners on the **NYC Landmarks Preservation Commission** to save the historic American Encaustic murals. And to all those who at strategic moments along the way made their voices heard, thank you!