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CITYSPACE

These Old Homes



still standing: Maintaining historic buildings such as this one in Germantown helps preserve the city's culture. Photo By: Michael T. Regan

Encouraging preservation of the city's housing stock.

by Paul Steinke

Philadelphia is a city of old houses. In a very real sense, then, the city's homeowners are the vanguard of historic preservation. But are they prepared to meet the challenge of maintaining and preserving their older homes? This is a policy question that deserves more attention in the discussion about how to ensure a successful future for the city.

Most Philadelphians live in houses that were built before our time. More than half of the houses in Philadelphia were built before 1930, and they feature the fine craftsmanship and expensive-to-maintain materials of a bygone era -- slate roofs, carved porch railings, ornamental pressed tin, etc. On many a rowhouse block, the original builders mixed and matched these features in ways that resulted in picturesque rhythms showcasing a variety of architectural styles, giving these blocks a distinctive, pleasing appearance. The resulting look and feel of these homes has much to do with making densely built rowhouse neighborhoods livable.

Of course, certain blocks have lost the battle against blight and decay. The mayor's Neighborhood Transformation Initiative (NTI) was born out of the reality that there are places around town with such high rates of housing abandonment that large-scale demolition is the only option left. But most neighborhoods remain largely intact, although some are teetering between stability and decline. An important issue in such neighborhoods is how best to prevent them from following the path into abandonment and decay.

The answer, of course, is maintenance and upkeep. Older houses need constant monitoring of critical systems such as roofs and windows. Promoting a sense of appreciation among residents for the original architectural features that make a house and a neighborhood special is another vital ingredient. The city is full of examples of houses whose original charm has been compromised by materials such as aluminum siding and stucco. Each time this happens, the entire block is degraded.

Efforts to give homeowners access to better information about home maintenance can go a long way toward stopping destructive alterations and stemming the forces of decay. One such effort was originated some years back by the University City District (UCD), the West Philadelphia improvement agency. The UCD created a program called PRIMER, or Preservation, Restoration, Improvement, Maintenance and Educational Resources. This program offers area residents seminars conducted by professionals who provide advice on topics such as roofing, painting, porch repair and landscaping. Participants in these seminars emerge with greater knowledge of their home's maintenance needs, and they are better equipped to deal with the thicket of contractors and workers they need to get the job done. This program could be replicated in many parts of the city by neighborhood historical societies.

City government can also be influential in this regard. Just within the last few weeks, funding for NTI was reorganized to include \$1 million for exterior house repairs by low-income homeowners in historic districts. More has been committed to low-interest loans. These steps can be powerful forces in the preservation of neighborhoods and can complement NTI's selective demolition and new construction efforts.

The role of the city's Historical Commission should also not be overlooked. Already, commission staff members counsel a never-ending stream of owners of historically designated homes on recommended maintenance techniques. Their efforts have caused countless ill-conceived renovations to instead be completed in sensitive manner. In addition, every time a local historic district is created, the Historical Commission assembles an "owner's manual" for property owners



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maintenance in keeping with the historical character of the district. g prevents them from having more than a limited impact citywide.

ing role in encouraging neighborhood preservation. State tax credits for en considered, but are not yet in place. However, a bill introduced by state Rep. Thomas Mangretti would provide a 20 percent credit on state income tax to individuals who purchase and restore historic homes or homes in historic residential districts and live in them for five years. The bill has passed the House and awaits Senate approval. In addition, Governor Rendell's proposed budget includes \$11.5 million for tax-credit programs for rehabilitation of historic homes.

Historic preservation is not just about fixing the roof at Independence Hall or remembering the places where important events took place. It is about the future of the city as a place where people want to live in the older houses and neighborhoods that dominate our cityscape. The more ways we can find to give homeowners a better appreciation for the history of their homes and neighborhoods along with the know-how to maintain them, the more likely that this City of Neighborhoods will find a way to thrive and grow without having to sacrifice any more of the historic housing stock that provides its essential character.

Paul Steinke is chairman of the board of the Preservation Alliance for Greater Philadelphia.



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