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March 11-17, 2004

CITYSPACE

Save Our Structures



Councilwoman Jannie Blackwell is wrong about preservation.

by Joanne Aitken

Chill with The history fit: Homes like these, on Parkside Avenue near 42nd Street, add value to the neighborhood and city. Photo By:

Michael T. Regan

I wish Councilwoman Jannie Blackwell had been present at a panel discussion that I was fortunate to moderate for the American Institute of Architects. Had she heard how those neighborhood activists used historic preservation to revitalize their low-income communities, she may never have authored Bill No. 040003. Although not the intention, this bill would damage preservation efforts in Philadelphia by giving City Council the power to designate local districts. That role is now held by the Historical Commission, where the process is guided by professionals and public discussion is mandated.

Another problem with Blackwell's bill is that by prohibiting designation in "redevelopment" areas, half the city would be deprived of the benefits designation affords. With a renewed interest in city living under way, Philadelphia would be foolish to squander its assets, yet the loss of old buildings will do just that, taking with it our history, our sense of place and housing stock that few places can match. Such losses will hamper our ability to compete with smarter cities that effectively use their historic buildings and distinctive character to attract new residents.

Blackwell's reasoning behind the bill is that historic designation is a burden on poor neighborhoods because it "costs too much to restore" historic properties. That notion was flatly contradicted by the discussion's panelists -- Darren Walker of Abyssinian Community Development in Harlem, Deb Thompson of the Bridge Street Development Corp. in Bedford-Stuyvesant, and Joanne Jackson of Advocate Community Development Corp. in North Philadelphia. They described preservation as the key to neighborhood renewal.

Walker, in particular, eloquently described the transformation of Harlem: a place so desolate that non-residents were afraid to visit; streets lined with "see-throughs" (buildings with missing roofs); the residents' insistence that existing buildings be saved and ornate facades restored; the resulting growth of retail services and jobs; and, finally, an influx of residents attracted by a newly vibrant community.

Changing Places: Rebuilding Community in the Age of Sprawl, a book by Richard Moe and Carter Wilkie, confirms that Harlem and Bed-Stuy aren't anomalies. Consider Carl Westmoreland, of Cincinnati, who led the preservation efforts of residents in Mount Auburn, an African-American neighborhood, who says too many people "mistakenly view preservation as an elitist activity, not as a tool to revitalize inner-city low- to moderate-income neighborhoods." Or Stanley Lowe of Pittsburgh, who developed suburban-style housing in his blighted African-American neighborhood of Manchester until his conversion to preservationist on a visit to Georgetown, one of the wealthiest neighborhoods in Washington, D.C. There he was "shocked to learn that Georgetown looks just like our buildings back home, only we throw this kind of stuff away ." Reflecting on preservation's success in revitalizing Manchester, Pittsburgh's largest historic district, Lowe says, "Fifty percent of the job is just getting people to believe in themselves and the buildings. But once we show people that preservation is economically viable, that it works, it's like old-time religion to them: Give me more."

Locally, a Preservation Alliance study found that Philadelphia's historic neighborhoods are among the city's most racially, economically and educationally diverse communities; are more stable and retain more of their residents than the city as a whole; and attract more new residents from outside the city than other neighborhoods. Economic benefits of preservation favor not only wealthy areas, but also our poorest: Parkside in West Philadelphia, Frankford Avenue in the Northeast, Fifth and Lehigh in North Philadelphia, blocks of Germantown Avenue in Germantown.

As a resident of Blackwell's district, I suspect her bill may be influenced by the misinformation that inflamed discussions about University City's proposed Spruce Hill district, which seems to have divided the community into three groups: homeowners who support; homeowners who oppose, believing that they will be told what color to paint their houses or



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standards (neither is true); and certain real estate interests who
at although designation does place restrictions on property owners, like
odes, these restrictions result in greater benefits collectively. Overall,
h is the cheapest property management strategy in the long run; it
ent and for business owners; and, over time, it promotes
neighborhood livability and value that benefit residents and municipality alike.

Blackwell says her bill will ensure "freedom to decide what you want to do," which sounds good. But, in fact, it is the current process of historic designation that provides a choice, depending as it does on a public process of notification and debate among all affected property owners. Bill No. 040003, however, would deprive many of our citizens -- and predominantly those in the poorest neighborhoods -- of a choice because it would make unavailable to them a tool that has, in many cities, proved pivotal in helping people at every income level improve their communities and their lives.

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