

Saving History, One House at a Time

By Patricia A. Murray

When some people see old houses, they just see, well, old houses. But people like Carrie Mowry, community development specialist with the Historic Preservation Society of Durham (HPSD), recognize the fact that they're looking at history. Realizing that much of Durham's history resides in its older communities, the HPSD works toward the preservation of historic (50 years old and older) properties.

The type of people who work for and who join the membership of HPSD would consider it a tragedy if older areas were bulldozed to make way for cookie-cutter developments. One way to ensure the integrity of older neighborhoods is to look into having them declared National Register Districts.

The idea behind designating an area a National Register District is to have people recognize the historic value of the homes/buildings within the district. It's nice for the community, because that means that the homes in the area will retain their original charm-and it's nice for people passing through. Folks enjoy looking at homey, tree-lined neighborhoods that have grown graceful with time.

Mowry explains that one of the many things that the HPSD does is to take inventory of the housing throughout the city. In 2004 the HPSD had the North Carolina State Historic Preservation Office come to town to do extensive research in East Durham-asking them to identify the housing styles; tabulate, photograph, and make sketches of the detailing; identify building materials used; and to make note of any outbuildings (sheds, garages, etc).

East Durham actually has the largest number of intact older homes in Durham. Other Durham communities have been regentrified or have had housing torn down to make way for newer homes and stores and to allow for bigger projects including highways, wider streets, and expansion of schools and shopping districts.

After data from the 2004 inventory were compiled and analyzed, the National Park Service declared a sizable chunk of East Durham (50 square blocks, or 226 acres) a National Register District. A certain percentage of homes have to be at least 50 years old for an area to even be considered-plus, the original character of the houses have to be (mostly) intact, which means no extensive modernization/remodeling. Mowry explains that people who buy older homes and then modernize them without considering the building's history could inadvertently be ruining the home's character.

However, if homeowners are more sensitive in restoring an older home by staying true to the home's history, both the state and federal governments can make it worth their while. If a homeowner restores his or her historic home and maintains the house's historic integrity-and when at least \$25,000 is spent on the project within two years-30% can be taken off state property taxes (20% if the property is income-producing). Twenty percent can be knocked off federal income tax. Adjustments can be made for those who want to stretch the five-year tax-break period out to 10 years if the person's income is limited.

Carrie Mowry says that northeast central Durham, where much of the East Durham National Register District falls, used to be a separate town way back when. Because this part of town is often the setting for crime stories in the news, lots of people tend to look down their noses at it. But she counters that underneath that tough image is a cool community with tree-lined streets and interesting houses, many of them built in the late 1800s/early 1900s.

I thought I'd take up her invitation to talk to a couple of people who recently bought a historic home that HPSD rescued from an uncertain fate (more about that later). David Arthur and Rebecca Byrd met at Duke, graduated, got married, and after a few months decided to look for a house to purchase. They were in search of a nice-sized house with space for a garden, and ended up driving around East Durham. David Arthur says, "We liked this area because it has a city atmosphere-it's not suburban or exclusive and it's open to all sorts of people." It was hard not to notice some boarded-up houses and a few questionable-looking characters, but he said for the most part "the neighborhood has character and it's real."

David Arthur and Rebecca Byrd ended up buying a humongous, six-bedroom, late-1800s "farmhouse" with beautiful wood floors on Vale Street. Arthur explains that the deciding points were, "Big house, quiet street, nice yard-it just felt right." There's an apple tree in the backyard, and already the couple has planted carrots, tomatoes, squash, zucchini, peppers, watermelon, corn, and lettuce. They're getting to know their neighbors and realize that they have to use common sense to discourage petty theft (by promptly putting their tools away, etc). So now it's big house, quiet street, nice yard, and new happy neighbors.

The Historic Preservation Society of Durham keeps in constant communication with the Dept of Housing. When they get word that an older home is in danger of being demolished, they go look at the house and the community-and if they determine that the house is worth saving they get in touch with the owner and ask for the option to sell it. (That's an agreement stating that HPSD has the right to buy the house at a certain price at a certain time. By owning the house for a period of time, the HPSD is then able to put a covenant on the house to preserve its historical integrity and character.) Usually, the people who purchase homes through HPSD appreciate the character of older homes (while getting an historic property at a good price, which can also lead them to the huge tax savings mentioned earlier).

Visit www.hpo.dcr.state.nc.us for more information about the NC State Historic Preservation Office; and if you're interested in older homes, go to the HPSD website at www.preservationdurham.org (or call (919)-682-3036). You can take a look at houses they've rescued and put up for sale. While there, take a look at the East Durham Pattern Book, which is

a nice inventory of architectural details that are found in local homes (a valuable resource for homeowners and restorer/renovators). It can be purchased for \$15 or downloaded as a pdf file.

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