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Building on history in Old Highland

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A historic home tour and an online catalogue have a larger goal: Attracting a new generation of Old Highland homeowners.



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Jack and Jean Mangan have lived in the Old Highland neighborhood in north Minneapolis for 24 years.

Photo: Maria Elena Baca, Star Tribune

Residents of Old Highland in north Minneapolis hope that historic architecture will lure a new generation of potential neighbors into the area next weekend, and that a sense of community will reel them in.

A week from Saturday, the neighborhood association, along with Preserve Minneapolis, is hosting a walking tour to showcase the area's many Victorian homes, many of which were built around the turn of the last century.

The neighborhood, bounded by Plymouth Avenue, West Broadway, Aldrich and Girard avenues north, was embraced in the 1970s and '80s by a loose group of current and recent students and outdoors-types who appreciated the character of the vintage houses, said Jack and Jean Mangan, residents of the neighborhood for the past 24 years. Many of them have worked hard to restore the houses' onetime beauty, the Mangans said.

The residents' work got an extra boost last year: A \$7,000 grant from the Minnesota Historical Society and a bequest from neighbor Charlie Nelson allowed neighbors to begin cataloguing Old Highland houses on the website Placeography.org.

96 houses documented

That project led to next weekend's walking tour; the next steps are a downloadable brochure and mobile applications that will allow for self-guided tours. Their work documenting 96 homes also drew recognition from the Minneapolis Preservation Commission in May.

On a noontime walking tour last week, the Mangans pointed out houses with magnificently detailed porches and doors, brilliant gardens whose blooms nodded in the breeze, and domestic projects from conception to completion, including Jean's hanging baskets and Jack's dreams of stripping their Emerson Avenue home to expose its original 1905 wood exterior.

They pointed out the houses that doubled as dentist and insurance offices back when Dupont was a streetcar line, the houses that were relocated from the Broadway Avenue Cub Foods site, and the duplex that once was home to the founder of Schuler Shoes (the Mangans now own it as a renovated rental property).

As many of the homeowners are reaching their 50s and 60s, they are thinking about the future of the neighborhood and how the present will fit into its long history, the Mangans said. Already, they said, the summer porch parties and winter wine-and-cheese parties have gone from adult affairs to multi-generational celebrations.

Kids started sprouting

"All of a sudden, I started looking around and there were all these little ones," said Jean Mangan.

"There's definitely a new generation taking over as we get older," Jack Mangan agreed. "They're buying the houses, many times in better shape."

Foreclosures hurt

Like much of the North Side, Old Highland has been hit hard by the foreclosure crisis. The Mangans expressed heartache for those who lost properties. But relief from the overinflated home price legacy of earlier years in the decade presented a silver lining for people who thought they were priced out of the neighborhood, and certainly would not have had the funds left for needed renovation work.

The new generation is drawn also by proximity to downtown and the river and the opportunity to be part of an urban community.

The work ahead isn't just in renovating and maintaining old houses, though. The Mangans know that they and others are battling a negative perception of the North Side. But they encourage prospective neighbors to drive the neighborhood and attend the parties, then decide for themselves.

Also, the parties and random acts of neighborliness feel great, but they have the added benefit of hooking renters to transition to homeowners and engaging disengaged residents.

Building relationships

"If you have a relationship with somebody, it's much harder to do them wrong," Jean Mangan said.

Close communication among residents, landlords and the police conveys the idea that someone is paying attention.

In many cases, existing homeowners are becoming landlords themselves, purchasing and rehabbing houses and duplexes, and taking interest in who comes into the neighborhood.

"People used to say, 'I need someone to rent my unit,'" Jean Mangan said. "Now they're saying, 'I want someone who will add something to the community.'"

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