

Preserve Your Historic Neighborhood

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Find Out How To Get Your Neighborhood Recognized

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Some of the hottest and priciest neighborhoods have not always been that way. Glam South Beach was once filled with boarded-up vacant art deco hotels. Now it has celebrity-owned restaurants and luxury high-rise condominiums with oceanfront views.

My Home

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Old City in Philadelphia, with its combination of restaurants, pristine colonial brownstones and cobblestone streets, melds American history with trendy nightspots and galleries, making a scenic backdrop for a night on the town.

Years ago, the Philadelphia Redevelopment Authority acquired historic colonial homes in the Old City's Society Hill section and sold them to people under the condition that they would be restored, resulting in the renovation of 600 historic homes, according to the Independence Hall Association Web site.

Revitalizing neighborhoods or districts is a balance between preserving the character that puts the place on the map while breathing new life into an area that may have been considered stagnant or untapped for many years.

If you think your neighborhood might be a good fit for a preservation effort, here are some steps to take, as recommended by the [New York City Historic District Council](#)

- Get support from neighborhood residents.
- Request an evaluation through the local preservation society.
- Once the district is approved, wait for it to be scheduled for a public hearing.
- Attend public hearing.
- Wait for review by the city planning commission and city council.

Once the neighborhood is designated as worthy, residents are informed of restrictions on exterior alterations, but they are also eligible to state and federal funding to help maintain the quality and historical significance of the home.

The New York City Historical District Council said that several factors go into whether a neighborhood is designated as worthy. They include qualities of community interest, political climate, the level of endangerment in the neighborhood and the amount of staff time a neighborhood will require.

Sabina Deitrick, an associate professor at the University of Pittsburgh, said neighborhoods that are approved for renovation usually have a location, architectural features or something else that makes them attractive to others.

What Does A Historic Neighborhood Look Like?

One such community is Manayunk, which is located about seven miles west of Center City Philadelphia. The 19th-century textile mill town has its own transportation canal that still stands today. In 1983, the area was designated a historic district.

Remnants of its mill roots are mixed with Main Street's boutiques, restaurants and home design shops.

"It had been a tough working-class neighborhood. That doesn't mean slum," said resident Keith Newman of the

community's history.

Eight years ago, Newman moved with his wife from a high rise in Philadelphia to a Manayunk row home that they renovated.

"Our criteria were safety and affordability," he said.

Newman said one of the best things about living in Manayunk is its location.

"You're 15 minutes from Center City. You can get anywhere. If the Schuylkill (Expressway) is busy, I just go up to the turnpike," he said.

"The neighborhood is safe. It's clean," he said. "You don't even feel like you're living in the city. At nighttime, you see the skyline."

As part of the Newman's row home renovation, they put in a new kitchen. He said they had Performance Kitchens on Main Street do the job. He added that there's a large group of professional plumbers and carpenters in the area.

"Everybody you hire lives in the neighborhood, because everyone knows everybody, so they do great work," he said. "It has a very small-town feel. It's an honest place. Your neighbors look out for each other."

Get Involved

Newman said that since moving to Manayunk, their property value has quadrupled. But getting there and keeping it that way takes hands-on community involvement.

"We want to maintain our character and integrity. We want Manayunk to have an identity," he said.

He said residents go to the zoning commission meetings, they meet with developers and review plans. "If it's done right, it can enhance the property value," he said.

Newman said various builders are trying to add as many residents as possible and that they are changing the area to make it like a strip mall, which Newman and his neighbors are fighting.

"There's definitely work to do. It's a constant battle. You never stop. We've won a few and we've lost a few. The neighborhood is definitely better off with the (Manayunk Neighborhood Council) doing the work that it does," Newman said.

Many historic buildings and homes that give a community character and style face demolition as new development moves into a hot market.

The victims of this type of demolition are called "teardowns" -- historic homes that are demolished to make way for new structures out of scale with the historic surroundings in the neighborhood, according to the National Trust for Historic Preservation.

The National Trust has a resource guide to help communities take steps to reduce teardowns and preserve the historic nature of the area. They also have a [feedback form](#) for people to share local teardown experiences.

It also keeps track the [teardown trends](#) across the country by listing communities that are facing the problem.

Keeping Neighborhoods Affordable

The other issue that up-and-coming neighborhoods can face is that lower-income residents can be priced out of the area.

Deitrick said people are forced out because they can't find an apartment in the same neighborhood, so they can't afford to stay there.

"They are forced out because they are renters. They don't have ownership of the land," she said.

She said cities generally like when property values go up because tax revenues go up, too.

Policy Link, a nonprofit research and advocacy group, provides an Equitable Development Toolkit to help areas work to keep residents of different income levels and make sure affordable housing is distributed in metropolitan areas.

More Resources

- [Put Your Home In The History Books](#)

- [Independence Hall Association](#)
- [Teardown Trends And Prevention](#)
- [Policy Link](#)
- [Development Toolkit](#)
- [Neighborhood Preservation Center](#)
- [Historic District Council](#)

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