

Phoenix Rising

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On a cold Sunday afternoon in December 1976, more than two thousand people from all over Middle Tennessee lined up in the rain for the opportunity to go inside two houses and three churches in an East Nashville neighborhood. We had not been sure anyone would come. The east side of the river was perceived to be crime-ridden and derelict, a place to avoid. Indeed, many Nashvillians from other parts of town went from birth to death without ever venturing across the Cumberland into the residential areas there. But the Victorian-era buildings on tour that day, and the stories of the people associated with them, had captured the attention of the media, and people crossed the river.

Identified in a 1975 Metropolitan Historical Commission study of neighborhoods as a top priority because of its concentration of Victorian and early twentieth century architecture, Edgefield had just been nominated to the National Register of Historic Places. A neighborhood association was organizing, choosing the phoenix rising from the ashes as its symbol. By 1978, Edgefield had become the city's first historic zoning district, choosing to abide by restrictions to the treatment of building exteriors in exchange for the halting of demolitions and guidance in the design of restoration and new construction.

The Edgefield model of listing in the National Register, marketing itself as a historic neighborhood, and raising awareness of that identity through the media and a public event quickly became a revitalization strategy for numerous other areas. Richland-West End was the next to host a tour and to be listed in the National Register; Germantown followed with its Oktoberfest. The early eighties brought the listing of seven more residential neighborhoods, and one of those, Woodland in Waverly, became the second historic zoning district. In 1985, Nashville became the first city in the nation to create conservation zoning as a less strict standard than that of historic zoning to protect historic neighborhoods; Lockeland Springs, with more than 1200 properties, was the first to apply. Now eight conservation zoning districts have been designated, and neighborhoods continue to be added to the National Register. Long-time residents in the urban districts credit the zoning overlays with saving their neighborhoods. At no time was the value of overlays more

dramatically evident than in the wake of the 1998 tornado, when East Nashville's historic architecture was protected throughout the restoration and rehabilitation efforts.

While the saving of landmarks such as the Ryman and Union Station first comes to the public mind as our greatest preservation victories, it is the preservation of neighborhoods that has had the most far-reaching impact here in Nashville. The recounting of the listings and designations, though, makes it sound deceptively simple. As recently as the 1970s, the city center was in danger of being ringed by slums; housing stock for all income levels was rapidly being lost; city and business resources were focused on new growth in the suburbs. Long-time owners who hung on and buyers who made major investments were going against the tide of decades of government and business policies. A survey of historic neighborhood residents by our office in 1984 identified their issues: absentee landlords, zoning and code violations, lack of neighborhood services, crime, and the inflexible lending policies of banks headed the list.

Interestingly, "historic preservation" was rarely mentioned by respondents. That survey made it blindingly clear to us that merely saving the buildings is not enough. True neighborhood preservation happens only when the entire environment is healthy; and that health comes through the tenacity and creativity of owners, flexibility and cooperation of the business sector, and the collaboration of government. Nashville has tapped all of those resources, literally bringing old neighborhoods back to life. And the city is infinitely richer for it.

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