

Neighborhood Revitalization: Be a Part of It

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In 2011, my family bought a house on the fringe of the Cleveland Holloway (CH) neighborhood, behind the downtown Durham library. Though upstanding residents have lived here for over 50 years, slumlords have owned homes here for at least that long, and, as CH resident Matt Dudek explained, 'Properties would get traded like trading cards'. The beautifully renovated historic homes lining Mallard Street demonstrate the renaissance that's slowly occurring here, thanks largely to CH resident, realtor and renovator Ken Gasch, who has concentrated on the area since 2007.

The work that remains is evidenced by the large number of boarded-up, uninhabitable houses, some of which are owned by investors who are sitting on the properties, hoping to make profits once their hard-working neighbors revitalize the surrounds.

Problem is, these negligent investors are slowing that revitalization to a crawl. Their boarded-up homes attract drug users and dealers and deter prospective homebuyers.

Bill Anderson—passionate friend, neighborhood activist and watchman extraordinaire—recently became a realtor primarily to revitalize Durham neighborhoods *House by House, Block by Block* (as espoused in Alexander von Hoffman's book). Bill told me about this cute, 1910's house that, without an owner who truly intended to renovate, would face demolition. As we inspected the interior, a car parked in front of the house, and the driver and passenger popped the trunk, extracted a pipe, and began smoking crack right there on the street. Bill called the cops, who arrived quickly but not before the culprits realized they'd been spotted and left. Needless to say, my husband was wary.

It helped that Jeff Ensminger's nonprofit organization, NEEM (which turns urban lots into local vegetable gardens), had recently installed beautiful gardens on two sides of the corner where the house is located. Giant sunflowers were already blooming. I love sunflowers.

Bill invited Rick Hester, Durham's Housing Code Administrator and assistant director of Neighborhood Improvement Services (NIS) to the house to discuss a viable plan forward. Faith Gardner, Manager of the Code Enforcement Division of NIS, joined him. We discussed the MOU (Memorandum of Understanding) that outlined the current homeowner's commitments to NIS (which likely pushed him to sell) and the MOU we needed to file to outline our redevelopment plans and timeline.

We made clear that this project would take 3-5 years or more, depending on the conditions of the surrounding neighborhood and our finances. We'd never rent a property that we wouldn't live in, ourselves, and we certainly wouldn't feel comfortable living there at present. The idea is for others to invest in surrounding properties with the intention of renovating when enough neglected homes are bought. Then everyone renovates around the same time. The neighborhood conditions are improved overnight, and everyone wins, including responsible long-time homeowners in the area.

With Hester and Gardner's approval, I was ready to sign the papers. As we talked, a few women with young children walked by, and a pit-bull, tied outside the neglected house next door, barked with feigned (but no less intimidating) ferocity. I wanted to invest in this house and this neighborhood for them as well as for me. But my husband was still skeptical. He knew that I would at least improve the exterior of the property in the short term, and he worried about my safety (and the kids).

Bill told us the city would soon likely pass the `Proactive Rental Inspection Program (PRIP)`, designed to `proactively identify and remediate rental housing that does not meet the Minimum Housing Code and related ordinances`—in other words, to push out slumlords and long-term investor-owners of dilapidated properties. The first component, `designated area inspections`, targets areas for improvements and schedules proactive inspections that result in repairs being required of homeowners. If they don't comply or sell their properties to people who will, the city can demolish the homes. There are 7 downtown target areas, and the first contains our house. My husband caved.

The first day I worked in the yard, a neighbor jogged across the street to greet me, his smile literally glowing with benevolence. He said he'd look out for the house and for me. We pay him to mow the lawn and make repairs, but his watchfulness, goodwill and friendship are priceless. No one sets foot on that property without being greeted (and inspected) by this new friend.

It wasn't long before the pit-bull next door disappeared, and new tenants moved in. I learned that they were paying \$300/month, that there was no plumbing, and that a `do not enter` sign decorated one of the doors, beyond which vegetation grew through the floor. But, having been homeless, these tenants were just happy to have a roof over their heads.

There soon was trouble, in more ways than one. Though one might ignore the plethora of men going in and out of that house daily, no plumbing meant no toilet, and these folks had to go somewhere. At first it was in their backyard. Then it was in our backyard. And eventually, after breaking the rear window (twice), it was in our vacant house. When NIS began looking into the matter, the landlord illegally replaced the old tenants with a family that apparently included at least one small child.

Fortunately, the second component of the PRIP (now passed) came into play. `Reasonable cause inspections` are conducted when 1) a rental property has ≥ 3 verified violations of the Minimum Housing Code or related ordinances within a 12-month period; 2) there are complaints regarding substandard conditions within the building or requests that the building be inspected; 3) NIS has actual knowledge of unsafe conditions within the building; or 4) Violations of the Minimum Housing Code or related codes are visible from outside the property.

After increasing communication with Hester and NIS, and no cooperation from the next-door landlord, the case was brought before the HAB (Housing Appeals Board, which hears appeals on Housing Code and Building Code Condemnation Cases). Bill and I testified, but the landlord didn't even show. The HAB voted to demolish the house if the owner failed to address all violations within 30 days. I asked NIS to inspect all houses this slumlord owns (and he owns many) and treat them in similar fashion.

I want everyone to know about the great things (and people) that are in place to revitalize downtown neighborhoods, offering tremendous potential for responsible investors and current and future residents, and I want to invite other Durham residents to invest in the revitalization areas currently being targeted by NIS and PRIP. To those who `married Durham` under Reverend Kenney in 2011, it's time to start investing in that marriage. It will benefit Durham as well as yourselves, financially and in so many other ways. A couple websites to get you started:

Cleveland-Holloway historic district:

<http://preservationdurham.org/about-durham/historic-neighborhoods/cleveland-holloway/>

Other areas being targeted by PRIP:

<http://durhamnc.gov/ich/cb/nis/Documents/PRIP%20Documents/web%20PRIP%20Overview%206-15-2012.pdf>