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THE FUTURE'S UNCERTAIN AND THE END IS ALWAYS NEAR: Quality housing is critical to Philly's survival. Photo By: Michael T. Regan

Philadelphia needs to better fund the Historical Commission to preserve its heritage.

by Paul Steinke

Ask most Philadelphians to name a historic district and chances are they will mention Independence National Park. That's perhaps as it should be. We are fortunate that so much of the physical setting for the birth of American independence has been so carefully preserved. But too few Philadelphians appreciate how many of the city's other neighborhoods are historic districts in their own right. Moreover, too few grasp how important preserving them is to the city's future as a desirable residential choice.

Philadelphia's future depends in large measure on the willingness of people to live in our neighborhoods. Many variables influence this decision -- jobs, taxes, schools, crime -- and these issues have been receiving encouraging attention by people both inside and outside of city government. However, with the notable exception of the mayor's Neighborhood Transformation Initiative (NTI), the physical character of the city's neighborhoods is largely taken for granted.

In a city of mostly pre-1950 homes, the quality and condition of our housing stock is critical to keeping the city viable. A 1998 study by the Preservation Alliance for Greater Philadelphia found that historic neighborhoods -- those with older homes featuring distinctive architecture -- are more stable and retain more of their population than the city as a whole.

Given the importance of historic neighborhoods, it follows that city government would want to be involved in ensuring their physical integrity and long-term preservation. Through the Philadelphia Historical Commission, it is. Created in 1955, the Historical Commission is charged with protecting the city's historic resources. In fact, Philadelphia was the first major city in the nation to confer historic designation on individual properties, sites and objects. Any proposal for alteration or demolition of a designated property must first come before the Commission for review.

Though the Commission may have been a leader in the '50s, it has fallen woefully behind since. With a staff of five and a budget of \$250,000, the Historical Commission oversees a portfolio of eight historic districts (including Rittenhouse/Fitler, Society Hill, Spring Garden and Girard Estate) and 10,000 designated properties and sites. The Commission is stretched to the limit in reviewing the many building permit applications that come before it. Meanwhile, numerous other historic neighborhoods go without historic designation and the protections it affords. Essentially, the physical condition of one of the city's greatest resources for growth, its historic neighborhoods, is largely unprotected.

Our urban counterparts in the Northeastern U.S. have done a better job. Boston, a city about one-third of Philadelphia's size, has seven historic districts and more than 7,000 designated properties. Baltimore, only a fraction larger than



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City, the Landmarks Commission maintains a staff of 45 and budget
c districts and more than 22,000 designated properties.

stewardship of its eight historic districts has been managed fairly
ing insensitive alterations (think aluminum siding and stucco) has gone
largely unneraided. But its ability to expand its role in protecting the city's vast historic resources is severely
constrained. Perhaps even more disturbing, it has been only tangentially involved in ensuring that preservation is
strategically considered in the massive demolition program envisioned under NTI.

Philadelphia's next local historic district will be Old City, which is well into the approval process. But the Commission has
publicly expressed doubt about whether it can designate any more districts. Consider the fate of poor Spruce Hill in
West Philadelphia: Its neighborhood association first began seeking historic-district status in 1988 and is still waiting.
Meanwhile, the architectural integrity of this incredible Victorian-era community has been undermined, porch rail by
porch rail, cornice by cornice.

Other historic Philadelphia neighborhoods -- Manayunk, East Falls, Germantown, East Oak Lane, Overbrook Farms, Fox
Chase, Powelton Village, Frankford -- haven't even begun the nominating process and remain largely unprotected.

In Philadelphia, a better-staffed, more proactive Historical Commission could not only administer more historic districts,
but might also provide broad-based educational and technical services to homeowners on maintenance practices. As it
stands, a homebuyer who moves into one of the city's few designated historic districts may not even know it, let alone
understand the implications for how the home should be cared for.

Any collection worth having needs to be maintained. This is especially true for Philadelphia's historic neighborhoods,
fragile creations that are critical to the future of the city. That we have devoted so little to protecting them is not only
puzzling, it is something that demands corrective action in the form of expanded resources for historic preservation and
a more activist Historical Commission -- before it's too late. We not only can do better, we must do better so that
Independence Park always has plenty of company among the historic districts of Philadelphia.

Paul Steinke is Board Chairman of the Preservation Alliance for Greater Philadelphia.



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