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Neighborhood Watch

How Baltimore Neighbors Pooled Their Money to Save a Local Landmark

Story by Kim A. O'Connell / May 27, 2005

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On a busy Baltimore street corner one November afternoon in 2003, an auctioneer called out bid after bid, one of which would decide the fate of the threatened commercial building that stood behind him. One bidder was the owner of several parking lots in the area; another remained anonymous, whispering into a cell phone. A third bidder, a group of preservation-minded neighbors, had thrown its hat into the ring as well.

Within half an hour, the somewhat bewildered neighbors found themselves the owners of not just the 1860s Second Empire building, but also the derelict liquor business it housed. They had saved the structure from certain demolition, but the unspoken question of "now what?" hung in the air.

A year and a half after the auction, the neighbors have figured it out, spearheading a rehabilitation of the building that includes a new business, due to open later this year.

Home to the MacGillivray's pharmacy for decades, the four-story brick structure with a decorative mansard roof commands a prominent corner in Baltimore's Mount Vernon historic district. In recent years, however, the building had fallen into disrepair and disuse. Previous alterations had undermined the structural supports for the building, which had begun to lean dangerously toward the street. Furthermore, the liquor store, although a legitimate business, seemed to attract a thriving after-hours drug market outside. With the owner of an adjacent parking lot eyeing the structure and an auction date approaching, the local neighborhood revitalization group, Midtown Development Corporation, knew that time was short.

But the organization had contacts. Since its inception in 2001, Midtown Development has helped nearly 100 people to restore period houses in four historic Baltimore neighborhoods, including Mount Vernon. Within a week, the organization had identified 18 local families that stepped forward to form an investment group to purchase the building, a first step toward its restoration.

"I think it's absolutely amazing to have a neighborhood where people are willing to invest their own money, working together to save an endangered historic building not as a museum or a personal hobby, but as a real statement of commitment to a great historic neighborhood," says Charlie Duff, executive director of



HGTV and the National Trust recently selected MacGillivray's as one of the Restore America sites for 2005. (Kim A. O'Connell)



(Maryland Historical Society)

Midtown Development. "I challenge the people of America to learn from our example. If you've got some great endangered historic building, chaining yourself to it probably won't work, writing letters to the editor probably won't work, but pooling your resources just might."

Organizing themselves as a for-profit entity called MacGillivray's Building, LLC, the 33 members contributed what they could, from just a few thousand dollars to tens of thousands, and raised the \$600,000 it took to buy the building in January 2004. The restoration, however, is estimated at \$2.5 million. To help defray the costs, the project is banking on federal, state, and local rehab tax credits, and this spring it won a \$60,000 grant from HGTV's Restore America program.

Because of the building's location on Charles Street, an up-and-coming commercial corridor, the investment group quickly decided that it should be redeveloped as a mixed-use structure, with ground-level retail and market-rate apartments upstairs. Getting there was another story.

"The vast majority of the neighbors are not versed in real-estate development," says Johns Hopkins, an investor who is also the executive director of Baltimore Heritage, Inc., and a distant relative of the famous philanthropist whose name he shares. "But we realized that, even though no one person had the sophistication for all aspects of it, collectively we had one person who knew liquor sales, one who knew business, one who knew historic buildings, and so on."

As the group sought business proposals from within its ranks and the community at large, it engaged the Baltimore architectural firm of David H. Gleason Associates to oversee the restoration. The first step, according to Richard D. Wagner, AIA, a principal with the firm, entailed the construction of a massive steel girding system to shore up the flagging structure. Because MacGillivray's shares a wall with a smaller but similar building, the structural engineers were not able to connect the new steel beams in a typical H-pattern across the building; instead, the beams are counterweighted and connect downward into an underground grid below the basement.

"What makes this story special is the fact that the neighbors banded together to buy the building," Wagner says, "and that they took the plunge without even knowing the extent of the problems."

As for the store, two neighborhood investors, Vicki Schassler and Michael Hackshaw, came forward with a winning proposal for an upscale wine shop, something the neighborhood lacked. Calling their venture the Spirits of Mount Vernon, Schassler and Hackshaw worked with the architects to restore as much of the store's original details as possible. Workers constructed and installed a new tin ceiling, closely matching the original ceiling that had grown black with grime over the decades. Original doors and windows will be reused wherever possible as well. The store is expected to debut in July, and the apartments will open in November.

"The people of Mount Vernon are not just neighbors but friends," Schassler says. "Walking around Charles Street, you can feel things happening. There's a real change."

Still, the neighborhood is by no means safe from incompatible development, says Paul Warren, co-captain of the investment group and vice president of the local Mount Vernon-Belvedere Association. The problem is not so much the banal parking lots that litter the neighborhood, Warren explains, but the fact that local developers use the lots as a way to keep their properties in a semi-profitable holding pattern, while they seek approval to build outrageously tall and incompatible new structures in their place. With the MacGillivray's restoration, however, Warren hopes that the city will pay more attention to residents' concerns.

"We've sent a loud message to the politicians and the city that we're serious about [protecting] our heights," Warren says, "and that we're willing to put our money where our mouth is."

Kim A. O'Connell, a freelance writer living in Arlington, Va., is working toward a master's degree in historic preservation from Goucher College.