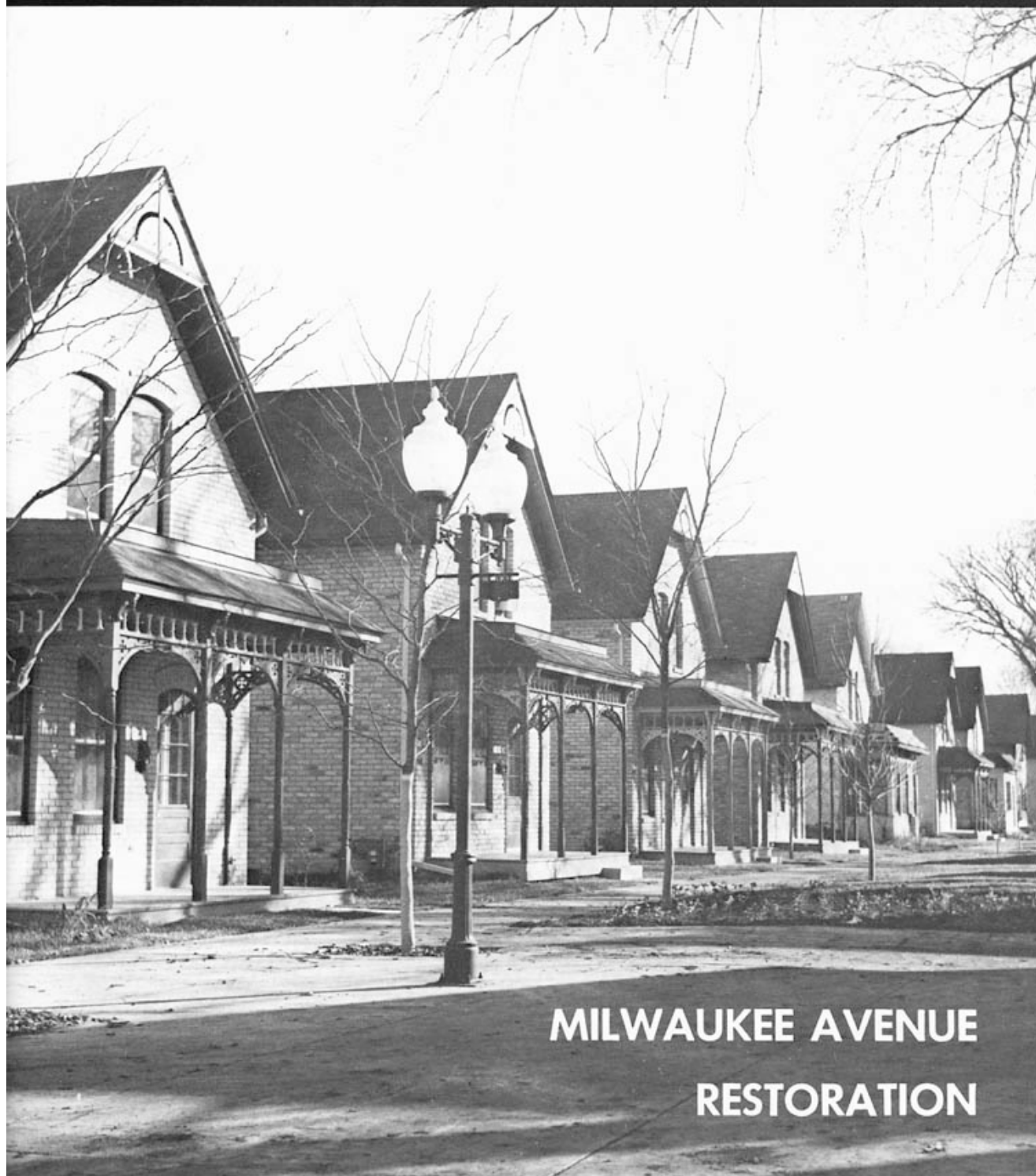


Hennepin County Historical Society

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MILWAUKEE AVENUE
RESTORATION

Courtesy of the Hennepin County Historical Society

Milwaukee Avenue

Restoration

*19th Century Neighborhood Rehabilitated by
Historically Minded and Dedicated Residents*

By Jerilee N. Richtman

Milwaukee Avenue is an anomaly in the realm of historic preservation. It has not witnessed any great events, nor has it given birth to any eminent or notorious personages. Its historical message is delivered without fanfare through the quiet dignity of its aged visage. It is the story of the lives of immigrants who came to Minnesota when America was a new world to Europeans, and not yet a "melting pot." Throughout its history Milwaukee Avenue has provided homes for working class families. Its residences served often as temporary homes to immigrants during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. The narrow street with its small, look-alike houses, tucked closely together offers a visual lesson in economic and social history. It serves as a contrast to those artifacts of the aristocracy, which have been the normal fare of historic preservation. Its vision does not entertain romantic notions of the "good old days." The simplicity of the late 19th Century streetscape and its individual elements speaks eloquently of the life style of the common men and women who lived without servants, buggies and grand balls and without those amenities that are taken for granted today.

The reasons for the unique streetscape that formed along Milwaukee Avenue are, the continuity of modest and similar forms; and

the simple rhythm of the gabled roofs of houses built right up to the sidewalk. The first house on Milwaukee Avenue was built in 1884 and most of the other homes were completed by 1890. The street was originally platted for an alley, and until 1906, this alley-street was named 22 1/2 Avenue. Residents of the street had requested the City to change the name because, as they stated in a 1906 petition, "... we find the '1/2' objectionable in speaking of it or writing letters. The giving the impression that we live in an alley." These petitioners asked the City Council to change the name to Woodland Avenue and it is not known why the name Milwaukee Avenue was substituted. The proximity of the street to the "Milwaukee Road" tracks was perhaps the reason for the name selection.

The plot of land which includes Milwaukee Avenue was originally developed by real estate agent, William Ragan. "Ragan's Addition to Minneapolis," as it was originally platted, comprised two full blocks and two three-quarter-size blocks. To increase the development potential of his parcel, Ragan divided the land into four half-blocks. The alley between 22nd and 23rd Avenues was transformed to a street by taking thirty-eight feet from the east-face of the short lots on Blocks 1 and 2 of Ragan's Addition. The lots thus platted, already shortened lengthwise because of the street easement, were then



The late Erik Erickson, a Swedish immigrant purchased his house at 2014 Milwaukee Ave in 1917 and lived in it until his decease in 1976.

measured in widths of only twenty-five feet—about half the normal size of a city lot of the time. As a result of Ragan's intensive use of the land, the forty-six houses which were built along Milwaukee Avenue were extremely close together and had little, if any, setback from the sidewalk. According to building permits that were recorded, William Ragan also acted as the contractor for the construction of many of the houses.

The typical Milwaukee Avenue house the brick-veneer, single-family home with the open front porch, is the design that Ragan repeated on the east side of the street. The social and economic conditions that prevailed at the time complemented, if not stimulated William Ragan's exploitation of the land. During the 1880-1890 decade Minneapolis experienced a 351% population increase—it was boom time, and the

burgeoning population contained increasing numbers of immigrants who needed low cost housing during their first years in Minnesota.

The Milwaukee Avenue houses fulfilled the need for cheap, temporary housing. According to census data tabulated by the State in 1895 and 1905, the residents of 221/2 Avenue can be characterized as Scandinavian in nativity; skilled-manually and non-skilled manually by occupation; and transient by their length of residence. And by and large these immigrant families possessed meager economic resources. Only a tiny proportion owned their own homes, and many families were forced to doubleup and to take in boarders.

It is a well-known phenomenon that immigrants, in the first years after arrival, tended to form ethnic clusters to ameliorate

the tensions and strains of cultural dislocation. Milwaukee Avenue was just such an ethnic clustering and it was part of an area which was solidly Scandinavian. The neighborhood which contained Milwaukee Avenue was apparently the physical extension of the somewhat older Scandinavian settlement to the north, which is now called the Cedar-Riverside area. The names of the churches in the Milwaukee Avenue area attest to the ethnicity of the area: the Norwegian-Lutheran, the Danish-American and the Swedish Methodist churches on 24th Street were all within walking distance of Milwaukee Avenue. Although Milwaukee Avenue was visibly ethnic, internally the population was highly fluid. The turn-over rate was high, especially in the late 19th and early 20th Centuries. Milwaukee Avenue provided the immigrant with a temporary home. It was a stopping-off place for those who had not yet attained enough wealth to become assimilated into the larger and more affluent society.

Ninety years had taken their toll on Milwaukee Avenue when the City of Minneapolis designated it for total demolition in 1970. The street's visage had become decrepit. The brick veneer was cracked and loosened; the once-decorative porches had long since been removed or enclosed; and all the homes contained major code violations.

The area was undesirable in terms of homeownership and had gained a poor social reputation. The Urban Renewal Plan called for acquisition and demolition of all properties. Ragan's Addition would then be replatted to form two large parcels and sold for development of apartments.

Many of those living in the affected area were not convinced that such massive clearance was the best approach. The Milwaukee Avenue area had suffered a fate similar to



Clapboard siding house as it appeared in 1971 before restoration.

countless inner-city neighborhoods. Increasing mobility rendered the old sense of neighborhood meaningless in social and economic terms. As the young families abandoned the city they took with them the resources needed to maintain the neighborhood's stability. The people who remained were older long-term residents and the renters of increasing numbers of absentee-owned properties. But Milwaukee Avenue and its surrounding neighborhood were not to suffer the same fate as many other urban renewal clearance projects.

While the Minneapolis Housing & Redevelopment Authority (MHRA) began efforts to obtain federal funding for acquisition, clearance and relocation, residents in opposition to the urban renewal plan began organizing the neighborhood. In

the Spring of 1971, the Seward West Project Area Committee (PAC) was formed and began to negotiate vigorously with the MHRA for rehabilitation of more buildings, including those on Milwaukee Avenue. (Seward West is the larger urban renewal area of which Milwaukee Avenue is a central part.) After many months of controversy, the MHRA agreed to revise its acquisition policy. The new policy contained a provision to resurvey nearly two hundred buildings in Seward West, originally marked for demolition. Excluding eleven houses, which the PAC agreed should be demolished, Milwaukee Avenue was to be studied for rehabilitation and to be considered as a separate planning unit under the new agreement.

One year later the PAC and the Minneapolis HRA took their first parallel step by forming a joint planning committee called the Milwaukee Avenue Planning Team.

Comprised of two appointees each from the PAC and MHRA, the Planning Team met weekly, and with the assistance of an architectural consultant, studied the condition of each house on Milwaukee Avenue.

The Team also compiled market data and construction cost estimates. Team members recognized two major problems inherent in redevelopment of Milwaukee Avenue. The site itself was congested - minimal yard space

Front porch of the typical brick-veneer, single-family residence on Milwaukee Avenue, reveals the advanced degree of deterioration of wood trim and brick walls



Courtesy of the Hennepin County Historical Society



Deterioration of the original stone foundation required replacement with contemporary cement block basements.

and a two-foot setback from the narrow one-way street made the houses unmarketable by FHA standards. Secondly, since eleven buildings would be demolished, new housing would have to be designed to blend with the original buildings.

The final recommendations of the Planning Team offered a radical departure from the official urban renewal plan. The Team advocated rehabilitation of most of the structures, construction of townhouses, and the conversion of the street to a pedestrian walkway. Furthermore, team members recommended that the entire Milwaukee Avenue Four-Block Area, as it came to be called, be converted to a Planned Residential Development in order to obtain variances from lot-size requirements and to provide an ownership mechanism for the pedestrian

walkway, or mall. The Planning Team's proposals stimulated a controversy inside and outside of the neighborhood. And, it seemed that major components of the plan would be exceedingly difficult to implement.

While the merits of the new proposals were being debated, the Minnesota Historical Society was formally invited to consider the historic merits of Milwaukee Avenue. Several Milwaukee Avenue residents were enlisted to research the origins of the Street. With this and other documentation, the Society began application proceedings for historic designation. Milwaukee Avenue was officially added to the National Register of Historic Sites in May, 1974. This action removed the immediate threat of demolition. At this time only one house, at 2008 Milwaukee Avenue, had been demolished. The Minneapolis

Housing and Redevelopment Authority now stood to lose its federal funding if, in the face of neighborhood opposition, it demolished a building in the Milwaukee Avenue Historic District. At this juncture the recommendations of the Planning Team became practical rather than theoretical.

In 1974, programs to fund major renovation projects did not exist in Minneapolis. Although Milwaukee Avenue was now protected from demolition, its redevelopment was by no means guaranteed. The Seward West PAC went back to the planning table and with the guidance and leadership of its president, Tony Scallon, initiated two major actions. First, it negotiated successfully with the Minneapolis HRA to obtain a Community Development grant for rehabilitation. Secondly, it created a non-profit corporation called Milwaukee Avenue Community Corporation (MACC) to oversee the planning and implementation of all redevelopment in the Milwaukee Avenue Four-Block Area.

A process for rehabilitation was then devised using the resources and functions of several public and private agencies, most notably the Greater Minneapolis Metropolitan Housing Corporation (GMMHC) which purchased the houses from the MHRA; contracted with private firms for the restoration, and finally acted as the marketing agent. Bob Roscoe, staff architect for the Seward West PAC, provided the working drawings and specifications and acted as the project manager and expeditor.

In the Fall of 1975, rehabilitation in this manner began on three Milwaukee Avenue houses. Reconstruction work was substantial and costs were higher than expected. When the earth was removed at the base of the first house it was discovered that the foundation had structurally deteriorated. The brick wall appeared to stand from force of habit alone



First floor joists, sill-plates and rough flooring were badly rotted or warped and required costly replacements.

because, as it was discovered, the original limestone brick ledge had almost completely eroded. The contractor recommended that the houses be raised; the original foundations be removed; and that the old brick cisterns and root cellars be replaced by concrete-block basements.

Although retention of the original brickwork had been planned, it now became necessary to remove and replace the old brick walls which could not withstand the upheaval required for basement excavation. Thus, major structural work was added to the extraordinary amount of interior reconstruction. The condition of the houses required complete gutting of all interior walls; the installation of new mechanical systems and insulation, and the replacement of all windows and doors. Because a substantial portion of the houses had to be replaced, City Building Codes required that the houses be brought into compliance with new house construction standards. The Milwaukee Avenue project had become one of reconstruction rather than restoration.

Although a major portion of the reconstructed typical Milwaukee Avenue house was to be comprised of new materials, care was taken to maintain its basic qualities. Only one of the houses had retained the original porch configuration and decorative "gingerbread." This was removed in sections

and used to make a pattern from which replicas could be constructed. Because the common brick used in the original masonry was no longer being manufactured, used brick that most closely resembled the original was

purchased from a local brick company, which salvaged brick from demolition sites. And in some cases new brick, selected to match the old was used. Inside, new pine woodwork, milled in a simple fashion reminiscent of the original configuration, replaced the old pine trim which had deteriorated.

During reconstruction of the first three houses it was realized that the costs of labor prohibited detailed restoration. For example, it was found to cost less to completely replace the interior woodwork than to

Only 12 of the 46 houses, including these, have been demolished. Construction of replicas has been proposed.



remove, recondition, and re-install it. The badly damaged first floor of one of the houses was completely removed (joists and all) and reconstructed at less cost than the more labor-intensive method of repairing the rotted joists and warped floor boards. At this nascent stage the project was considered to be an experiment. The completed houses would have to sell at a price that would establish a respected market value to stabilize the neighborhood. Yet, because funds were limited, the rehab costs had to be kept close to what the projected sales price would be.

The Community Development funds slated for Milwaukee Avenue were intended for "write-down" -- that is, the difference between the costs and sales price.

Administration costs for the MHRA and GMMHC were also charged to this fund. But the less each house cost, or the less the write-down the greater the number of houses that could be renovated in this manner. So, when choices were made between methods of restoration, greater weight was usually given to the less expensive alternative. Moreover, because the historical character of Milwaukee Avenue is found in the overall impact of the scale and form of the streetscape, authenticity of each detail of construction was considered a luxury.

By the time that work began on the first three houses, Milwaukee Avenue had become an abandoned street; most of the houses were vacant and boarded-up because

its residents had been relocated as required by the Urban Renewal Plan. PAC members and those residents remaining witnessed the accelerated deterioration of the houses through vandalism and exposure to the weather. The Seward West PAC urged the MHRA to permit individuals to buy the vacant houses for home-owner initiated rehabilitation, to avert the increasing decline in the area.



Some of the ornamental wood trim was unbelievably intricate and, therefore, expensive to reproduce.

After negotiating with HUD for approval of its proposal, the MHRA offered a program in Seward West whereby individuals could purchase houses for the cost of the land, and borrow money through its own low-interest mortgage program, which it financed through bond sales. Community Development funds were also set aside for grants to individual buyers for historical restoration. These grants would offer an incentive to potential buyers who would have to consider the costs of restoring the facades in compliance with standards set by the Minneapolis Heritage Preservation Commission which has designated the street a historic district in 1976.

Although the restoration standards of the Heritage Preservation Commission are general and flexible and do not involve costly restorative work, they did mandate that the porches be replaced and that the original building materials be duplicated as closely as possible. The Minnesota Historical Society also made grants available for facade work to individual homeowners. But although many buyers were selected and work was started on an increasing number of homes, it soon became apparent that major legal problems

had developed which prohibited transfer of the titles to any house on Milwaukee Avenue.

Milwaukee Avenue was being re-zoned as a Planned Residential Development which required that the lots be re-platted and that restrictive covenants be attached to every deed. Although the houses along Milwaukee Avenue were now being rehabilitated at an accelerated pace, for nearly a year they could not be legally transferred to their new owners. Clarifying title and re-platting lots in an area as old as Milwaukee Avenue was more complex and difficult than expected. Project Manager, Bob Roscoe, often remarked that the legal work seemed more excruciating than the reconstruction work itself. And it certainly was more time consuming.

But in spite of the setbacks, the momentum that had been building since the project began continued to grow. Many had become interested in the still-experimental project. So many qualified buyers applied for each house offered for sale that the MHRA began holding public lotteries to select buyers. Eventually the selected buyers and individual rehabbers formed their own organization to represent themselves in the development process. In the Spring of 1978 an agreement was reached and the MHRA began conveying titles to the selected buyers, most of whom

Both new and used brick has been used to match the originals as closely as possible. This scene is at 2017 Milwaukee





Strong community spirit prevailed throughout the restoration. Mary Jensen helped paint her neighbor's porch.

had been making mortgage and insurance payments for properties which they could legally call their own.

The original developer, William Ragan, platted Milwaukee Avenue in the particular manner he did in response to economic and demographics pressures. Nearly one-hundred years later, economics and demographics once again favored Milwaukee Avenue. People living in the urban renewal area did not want their affordable housing replaced with high-rent apartments. Rising energy costs attracted city workers and others who wanted to settle in the city. And the intimate scale of Milwaukee Avenue and its harmonious facade offered a humane alternative to the sprawl of suburban development, which had for a time, contributed to the decline of established city neighborhoods, like Seward West.

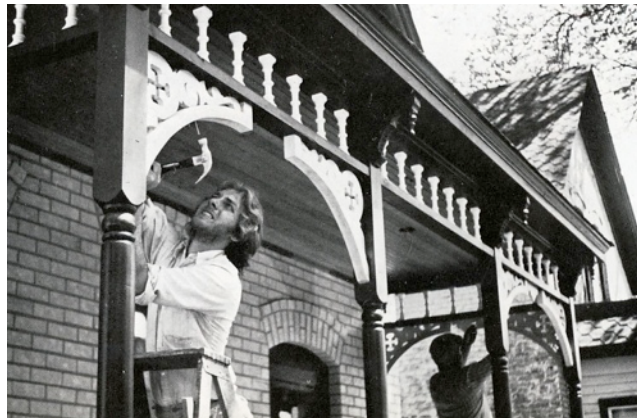
The Milwaukee Avenue project was a success, in spite of official opposition, because it offered affordable housing, in a neighborhood, which through its residents' organization had maintained a strong identity and cohesiveness. This was not a "turn-key" housing project; it was not suburban anonymity. Through frequently organized social activities and publicity events, such as "gutting parties"; vacant house patrols; an open house for bankers; and a mayor's tour; in addition to the plethora of committees and meetings, residents and newcomers worked together to improve and gain acceptance for their community. And because the project demanded a commitment of time and effort from buyers to obtain their new housing, strong community ties developed, which imbued the neighborhood with a distinct identity and sense of purpose.

From the beginning, PAC members had insisted that the needs of the residents be served rather than the planners' plans or the developers' strategies. Many of the original, long-term residents (given a selection priority for all houses sold in Seward West) were able to stay. They contributed their own fervor and knowledge of the neighborhood's history to the redevelopment process.

Milwaukee Avenue has never been considered a purely historical restoration project. The overriding concern of the Seward West PAC was to preserve the neighborhood; to keep its history alive, and to do it in a way that would not inadvertently repudiate the past. Costs were kept to a minimum in the construction of the pedestrian walkway, for example. Although the City eventually embellished it, the "mall" plan as developed by the residents was modest and straightforward; designed by Bob Roscoe to complement the late-19th century streetscape. It was an ironic meeting when the residents and city met to discuss the final mall plan: the residents wanted many amenities such as kiosks and iron tree-grates eliminated, and the Housing Authority staff promoted its more elaborate, and more expensive plan.

The Milwaukee Avenue project has exacted a great amount of commitment and work from

New clapboard siding and window trim were installed and painted at 2108 Milwaukee Avenue.



A neighborhood crew restores typical front porch gingerbread.

those involved, especially those who rehabilitated their own homes. Before rehab, the houses were not habitable. Buyers lived elsewhere while restoring their "homes-to-be" and thus had to make double house payments. Because most of the rehabbers did not have the affordability for total construction financing, "sweat equity" became a way of life along the street, with owners performing a substantial proportion of the work themselves. In addition to the financial and physical burden, many homeowners worked on the planning and political aspects of a project that demanded intense and constant community involvement. Without the participation of the residents and the responsiveness of the City and the MHRA, the project probably would have been permanently deterred by any one of the numerous obstacles along the way.

It is a telling comment on the "urban renewal" industry that the impetus for the restoration of Milwaukee Avenue and the surrounding neighborhood, which resulted in the circumvention of the original clearance plan, came from the residents. Most of the inspiration and "elbow grease" came from those who were directly affected by the government's intervention. The Seward West PAC was able to represent the needs of the residents, and to garner their active support,



In 1975 the Seward West Project Area Committee invited the public and city officials to tour the project.

largely through a policy of broad and open participation in planning and policy making, and by maintaining a communications system which kept neighborhood people informed through a newspaper, frequent public meetings, and door-to-door contact-PAC staff members knew every address, plat and parcel number, and owner's name of each lot in Seward West).

It was the residents who established policy (for example, the PAC established the historic restoration guidelines eventually adopted by the Heritage Preservation Commission), and carried out the day-to-day project activities. The PAC had its own

relocation workers who assisted residents with all aspects of relocation, and its own architectural staff, which did everything from selecting bricks and millwork to drawing plans and writing specifications for the renovation work.

It was the intense and profound involvement of the residents which more than anything else saved Milwaukee Avenue from the wrecking ball.