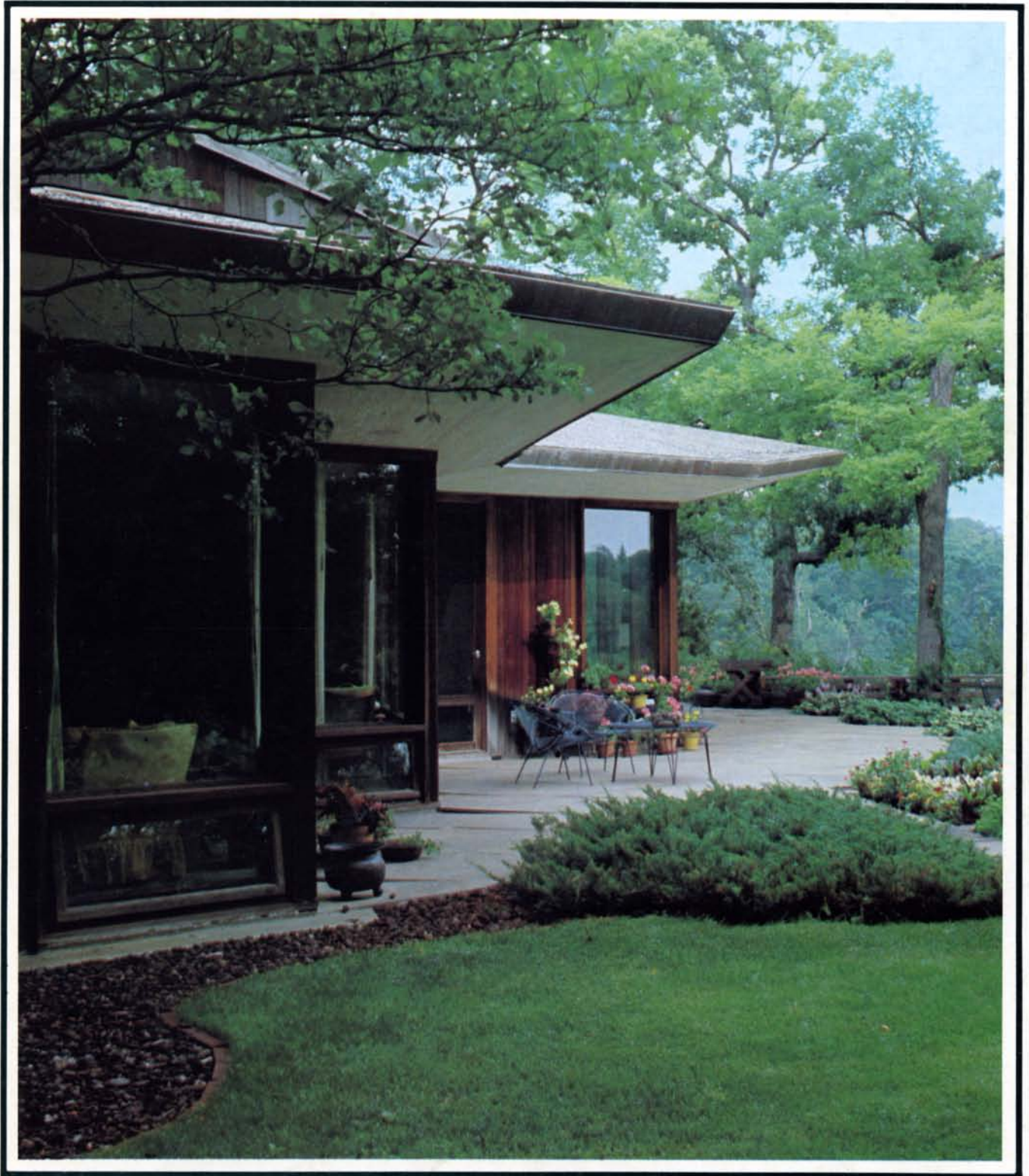


TC

Twin Cities

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Old-fashioned wrought-iron street lamps cast an amber glow along the grassy walkway. It's enclosed by small, look-alike brick cottages, built right up to the sidewalk. Morning glories wind around the pillars of the freshly painted porches, where residents rock in gliders under the gingerbread trim. Against the darkening sky, the line of gabled roofs creates a simple rhythm.

The 1880s streetscape in south Minneapolis was almost levelled in 1970 to make room for new apartments. Aged, neglected, and run down, the two-block inner-city neighborhood, tucked off East Franklin Avenue near the west bank of the Mississippi, was saved by a group of its younger residents who steadfastly fought demolition.

They saw in Milwaukee Avenue a "common person's" neighborhood of historical significance: Most of the two-and-a-half bedroom homes were originally occupied by Scandinavian and East European immigrants, many of them workers for the Milwaukee Railroad whose large switching station was half a mile away.

"Milwaukee Avenue, as an example of workingman's architecture, wasn't that unusual during its own time," says Charles Nelson, historical architect for the State Historic Preservation Office (a division of the Minnesota Historical Society). "I can remember another row of little houses on narrow lots, on 10th and 24th or 26th avenues, just south of Franklin. It was torn down in 1972... and there used to be a row of workers' cottages across from the old City Hall, about where the Grain Exchange is now."

But only Milwaukee Avenue miraculously managed to escape the wrecking ball until a time when the preservation of vernacular architecture came into its own. "Milwaukee Avenue was about the city's last street-sized example of workingman's architecture left by the early 1970s,"

Nelson says. He had to educate his staff to deal with it, he recalls. "We were used to glorious mansions like the Ramsey House, or else little red schoolhouses and log cabins inhabited by rustic pioneers, when we thought of our past, with nothing in between.

"So we were pretty much lone rangers at first, to realize that sites associated with the common people have just as much value as the grand mansions."

"Renewal not Removal" became the theme of the Seward West Project Area Committee (PAC), a group formed in 1970 to represent citizens in the renewal planning process. In 1974, after four years of meetings and negotiations in which Nelson played a pivotal role, Milwaukee Avenue was added to the National Register of Historic Sites, its heritage safeguarded. Soon after, the Minneapolis Housing and Rehabilitation Authority (MHRA) commissioned a site plan for the four-block area including Milwaukee Avenue, with cost estimates for rehabilitation, then helped residents get bank loans to complete restoration.

By the mid-'70s, PAC had managed to redirect the renewal plan from a demolition to rehabilitation emphasis. It took a little more politicking to talk city officials into turning the unusually narrow avenue into a mall, with a small park and playground, closed to motor traffic. The mall was especially welcome because the house lots are about 30 feet wide, much smaller than the standard 50-foot lot. By 1980, a color picture of Milwaukee Avenue at twilight graced the cover of the Minneapolis phone directory.

Today the neighborhood enjoys a renaissance, due mainly to the extraordinary efforts of its residents. Most of the homes have been rehabilitated by people who bought the boarded-up structures from MHRA, then used a low-interest, city-sponsored or federal loan to finance the rehab and long-term mortgages. Many of them were their own designers and general contractors, performing as much of the work as they could, and subcontracting out the rest.

Pioneers in the project are Sid and Lola Berg, who live in one of the

larger dwellings, a gabled red-brick home on a southeastern corner, which dates to 1885. The burgundy bricks at 2125 had been painted so many times the Bergs finally turned all 7,000 inside out, one by one, to reveal the original, richly-colored surface. But first, Sid cleaned the mortar off each brick with a hammer and chisel.

"I had it down to a science," says the genial, white-haired man who works in the customer relations department of the nearby Do-ALL industrial supply. "They used a softer, quarter-inch mortar in the late 19th century, so it wasn't too hard to do.

"If I didn't do 250 an hour, though, I knew I was doing too much talking," he continues, referring to the endless stream of visitors in the restoration's early days. Chatting comes naturally to Berg, who is engagingly informal. He's wearing a blue "Made in Norway" T-shirt, and sneakers like his wife's this spring Saturday morning.

It was 1972 when the couple, then teaching high school in southern Minnesota, first strolled down Milwaukee Avenue during a visit to Sid's parents in Minneapolis. Windows were boarded up, doors nailed shut, roofs sagged; but Lola remembers she was "very impressed with the symmetry of this little street... I said to Sid, 'Someday we're going to live here...'"

Three years later, when the first "package" of Milwaukee Avenue houses was offered for public sale, the Bergs eagerly applied. They spent the better part of a week preparing the required written statement of their commitment to historic preservation. "It was just like taking an exam," remembers Lola, a friendly woman who recently completed her master's degree in counseling and works in social services at Maple Manor Nursing Home, St. Paul.

After a grilling by a larger committee composed of city officials, the Minnesota Historical Society, and members of the neighborhood group (PAC) who wanted to be sure of the couple's commitment to the project, the Bergs were invited to purchase their home in 1976.

That spring the couple, who planned to do all the unskilled work themselves, rolled up their sleeves and started gutting the house. In what be-

OPPOSITE: Sid and Lola Berg's Milwaukee Avenue home—one of Minneapolis' last streets of 19th century working-class homes, Milwaukee Avenue is now a fashionable address, and its original residents probably couldn't afford to live there today.



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came a Milwaukee Avenue tradition, their neighbors dropped their own work and pitched in for a day-long "gutting party." By sundown, two-thirds of the old plaster, plumbing, wiring, and space heaters had been removed. "You have no idea how much plaster these old houses contain," Lola says, "until you start hauling it all out."

House gutted, the Bergs then called their contractor, Ron Soderberg of St. Paul who specializes in historic restoration, to jack up the house and put in a modern basement. The Milwaukee Avenue houses originally had only simple root cellars and brick cisterns. But it was soon apparent that the worn bricks could not endure the strain of jacking. Since the Bergs wanted to clean them anyway, they decided to remove all 7,000. The couple has an album full of "before" photos showing piles of brick all over their little lot. At last their house, a shell of studs, tar paper, and wood sheeting, was hoisted up, and a cement block basement installed.

Then Sid began the tedious task of cleaning and reversing the original bricks for re-use. He and Lola chose red mortar so as not to interrupt the brick's distinctive tones. "I guess you could say the whole thing was above and beyond the call of duty," Sid says, referring to the easier, "perfectly acceptable" alternative: buying used bricks, as his neighbors did, to replace the original. "We wanted to be as authentic as possible," Lola adds.

Sometimes they couldn't be. The roof had to be replaced and the first floor joists, unprotected by a basement, had rotted beyond repair. The floor plan was a maze of tiny rooms—new walls were probably added as relatives crowded into the house during the financial uncertainty of the 1890s. Census data confirm that the Milwaukee Avenue houses were stretched to their occupancy limits in the late 19th century, often housing 10 or more people.

"We started completely from scratch," says Bob Roscoe, the Bergs'

architect, neighbor, and an original organizer and staff architect for the PAC citizens' group. "Once we realized the walls were continuous-span, so there were no restraints, we started to knock out the extra ones." (Although the architectural review committee of the Milwaukee Avenue Homeowners' Association requires residents to maintain an 1880s exterior, they may do whatever they like with the interior.) Roscoe's plan eliminated several stairways, doors, and cramped, windowless rooms, to create a parlor and a spacious living room, dining room, and kitchen on the first floor.

Here the Bergs' commitment to authenticity is arresting. The wallpaper is consistently Victorian throughout, with hard-to-find vertical flowered patterns, bordered horizontally. An interior design student from the University of Minnesota made the house her senior project and scoured wallpaper shops to find the designs that would most accurately express the period.

The Bergs chose a stylized floral pattern in maroon and cream for the entrance hall, with its pine paneling and stairway wainscoating. One of Lola's elderly friends wove matching cream and maroon stair runners. A handsome candle lamp hangs above the stairs; to the right, a diamond-shaped stained glass window glints ruby in the late afternoon sun. Sid had picked it up years ago in a Minneapolis antique shop, and when the Bergs had a window cut in the front hall wall to display it, they started a trend all along the avenue. "We just kept watching the stained glass windows appear on that south stairwell wall," Lola laughs.

The couple moved to their home on Christmas Eve 1976, after some eight months of work. "Those little final touches took the longest," Lola remembers. She made cream-colored satin, lace-edged curtains for the living room from a 1920s wedding gown she found at the Salvation Army store for \$7; upstairs in the pine-wainscoated bathroom is the old-fashioned, pull-chain, wooden water closet that a plumber friend picked up in New York City for \$70.

"You can really tell how committed someone is to historic preservation when you look in their bathrooms," Sid jokes. He haunted antique shops

to find a marble sink with nickel-plated brass fixtures (\$70). The turn-of-the-century ball and clawfoot bathtub was a gift from Milwaukee Avenue neighbors who discovered it amid the rubble of restoration.

The Bergs are having more bookshelves installed in their upstairs den, but otherwise they're finished with the house. The next step is their out-of-doors. Through the Park Board's Committee on Urban Environment, several landscapers have volunteered their services to the Bergs and four other Milwaukee Avenue homeowners as part of last May's first Environmental Preservation Week. To attract urban wildlife—birds and butterflies—together they are selecting such plants as Virginia creeper, and trees such as sugar maple, blackcherry, and flowering crabapple.

"It's quite an investment," Lola says about the ever-increasing value of their home. They bought the house and lot for \$1,080, including a 20 percent fee for paperwork. Since they hung wallpaper, painted, and oiled the woodwork themselves, their contractor's fee was reduced to \$55,000; they spent about \$5,000 for paint, wallpaper, and other materials. With a \$12,000 grant from the Minnesota Historical Society, they figure their total cost for the house was \$48,500.

Local realtors tell them they could command a price of \$80,000 or more if they wanted to sell. But that's the last thing on the couple's mind. "Last December 24 made five years that we've been here," Lola says. "Someone called us 'pillars of the community.' Gee, that made us feel good."

"Our next move is six feet under," Sid jokes.

"There's a real neighborly spirit here," continues Sid, who serves on the board of directors of the Milwaukee Avenue Homeowners' Association, formed by the residents to oversee their common property. "Lola and I have met the parents and sometimes the grandparents, of everyone on Milwaukee Avenue. And every spring, we get together and rake the mall—it's an annual event."

Their across-the-street neighbor Terry Beleanne agrees. Even though she missed out on the camaraderie of common restoration work,

OPPOSITE: "Would you believe this was originally a duplex, with four little rooms on the first floor?" asks Earl Craig. Unlike most of his neighbors' homes, Craig's Milwaukee Avenue home has a contemporary interior.



Terry Beane loved the neighborhood and didn't want to leave, though she needed more room for entertaining. Last year she moved into this newly built 1880s-style townhouse nearby.

she senses a "special spirit" in the two blocks. "Everyone knows everybody. It's unique because there aren't many real neighborhoods left like this anymore. We have lots of families with kids on the block now and we're excited about the prospect of watching them grow up."

Terry, a 20-year employee and executive assistant at Marigold Foods in Minneapolis, first moved to Milwaukee Avenue about four years ago when she bought the rehabilitated

house at 2015. "I loved living in a historic house, but I've always loved to entertain and I found I needed more room," she says. Last January, she sold her house and moved up the street to 2112, one of the new 1880s-style townhouses designed by Roger Erickson of AEI Design, St. Paul, to replace vintage homes fire-damaged beyond repair.

"I loved the neighborhood, and I didn't want to leave, so I was thrilled when the chance came," Terry says.

"And I really liked the way the townhouse fit in with the rest of the street."

Not that there weren't initial design difficulties. "The first drawing tried too hard to integrate the house with the rest of the street, and it had four steep-pitched peaks," Terry says. "It looked like mountains—or maybe the House of the Seven Gables.

"But Roger Erickson was very good working with us (the architectural review committee)." He came up with



Marge Miller's home was featured on the cover of the 1980 Minneapolis phone book. Inside the mood is nostalgic with the help of modest Victorian era furnishings.

a 32-foot-high Queen Anne townhouse with five levels that are remarkably spacious and private. When 70 people were inside during a recent open house, "you'd have hardly known they were all there, they were so spread out," Terry says.

Many have lingered in Terry's living room, which is a masterful blending of Victorian and Oriental styles. Cream-colored walls and rug set off the Chinese silkscreen of blue peacocks that hangs over the blue-and-

cream-striped sofa. Two tall, beige Queen Anne chairs rest opposite the fireplace which is enclosed by brass-edged glass doors. Low glass tables and a magnificent green fern complete the atmosphere of subdued elegance.

On the next level, Terry's dining room is completely traditional, dominated by a family heirloom dining set of red mahogany with Gothic tracery. On the top level, in her small den, Terry expresses her love of color

with bright white wicker and strong limes and yellows for cushions and accents. Looking out the den's unique circular window on the avenue below, Terry says, "It's impossible to stay depressed up here."

Now that she's finished the interior decorating, Terry has great plans for the exterior. The architectural review committee requires that residents stick to old-fashioned colonial colors,

(Continued on page 111)

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"And when someone participates in a music experience, everything is right. The therapist can structure it so everything is good, everything is a success. And everyone wants to succeed. If a child succeeds in something, they're going to like it more; they're going to want to do it again. That spiral effect—that's what you want."

TC

Milwaukee Avenue

(Continued from page 69)

and so Terry visited some of the older houses in the Ashland area of St. Paul. "I was a stickler for the right colors," she says, and on Portland, near Dale, she finally found something she loved. Her next-door neighbor Alex Bracewell agreed, and soon the double townhouse will be painted blue-gray, with blue-gray trim, cream-colored window trim, and burgundy doors.

Neighbor Carla Ramstad at 2116 Milwaukee Avenue has volunteered her green thumb to design Terry's elevated front garden. Soon grape-

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vines, honeysuckle, daylilies and hostas (leafy plants with tiny blue flowers) sloped right to the mall.

Down the street at 2009, Terry's friend Marge Miller has created a nostalgic, vernacular Victorian atmosphere, starting with the old-time wind-up doorbell at the front door. Built in 1885, her house was once owned by Princeton University, which was surprised to receive it as a bequest in the 1880s. Marge's is the house featured on the 1980 Minneapolis phone book cover. "I took the whole book home to my mother (in western New York) that Christmas," she says. "She thought I was crazy.

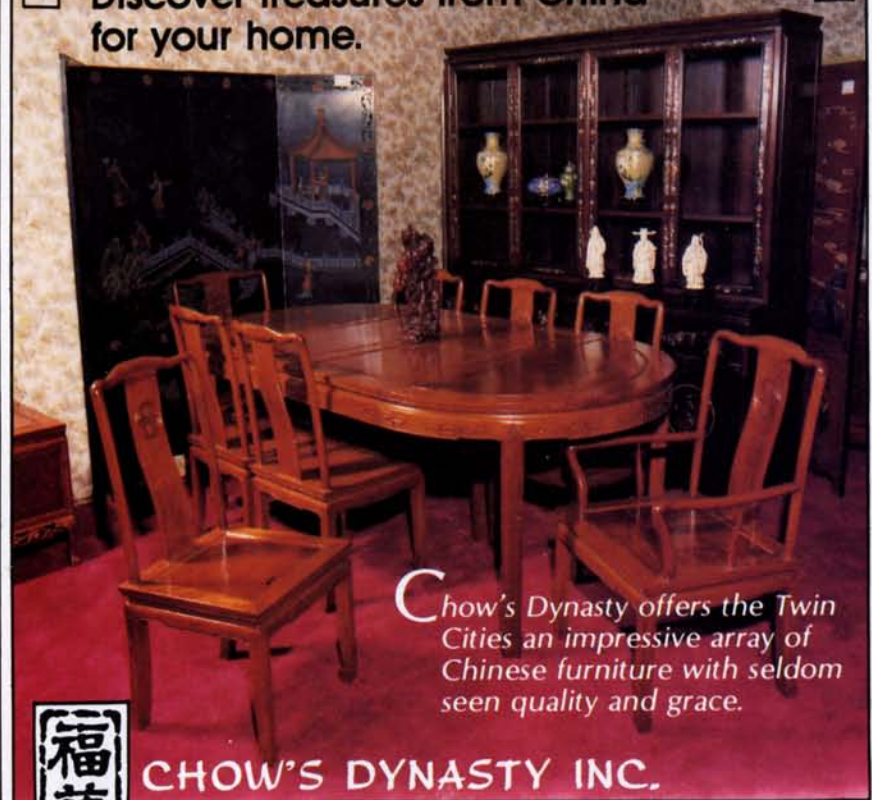
"Monumental Victorian furniture and marble tops would be just too rah-de-doo-dah for this little house," says Marge, a real estate appraiser for First Federal Savings, Minneapolis. When she bought the house already rehabbed in 1976, she ripped out the shag carpeting to reveal the broad-boarded fir floors.

"The style of this house is just more 'oak' and 'fir,' than 'walnut,'" she continues. "So I've tried to stick to small-scale, modest period pieces." Aided by her mother, "an antique collector from the year one," Marge has found gas and Tiffany lamps, quilts, a walnut rocker, and other treasures from Victorian times at auction and estate sales. Old blue, green, and turquoise signal glasses from the Milwaukee Railroad grace her parlor windowsills, edged by lace curtains and wooden shutters. Two mannerly cats tread softly under the ferns.

Taking a cue from the Bergs, Marge had a clear, beveled, diamond-shaped window installed in the south stairwell wall.

In her kitchen, tall maple cupboards make the most of the high ceiling, with a dish ridge all around the top. An avid do-it-yourselfer, Marge sewed the green-and-white-checked gingham curtains, then stenciled a harmonious stylized flower pattern she found in a book of Victorian stencils, all around the ceiling. Light blue Ball jars are her canisters, and in one corner hang all the antique cooking tools—eggbeaters, graters, whisks—she has collected over the years. "I like relics that are really useful," she

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says, pointing to an old-fashioned folding wall clothes dryer she found on one of her forays. The "Perfection" clothes rack, patented in 1887 in Miles Grove, Pennsylvania, folds neatly against the wall next to the back door when she's not using it.

Across the street at 2100, Earl Craig, head of the Minneapolis Urban Coalition, is one of the few in the project who favors a completely contemporary interior. The chair of the Black Caucus of the Democratic National Committee from 1973 to 1975, Earl was once a professor of political science at the University of Minnesota; he has also served as chair of the Minnesota Commission on the Future. And "futuristic" is the word his neighbors most often use to describe his decor.

Earl's house, a larger hip-roofed structure built in 1884, has the same gingerbread front porch and weathered brick exterior as the others. Inside, he has given his desire for open space free rein, even knocking out part of the second story to properly accommodate the grand piano he is teaching himself to play.

"Would you believe this was originally a duplex, with four little rooms on the first floor?" Earl asks. "Well, I just opened it all up." Today, stark white walls set off his extensive modern art collection. Plastic, glass, chrome, and wicker furniture and hardwood floors all lend an angular look. It's a simple, clean, consistent design.

"Oh, I know some people wonder why I didn't just go traditional like everyone else," Craig says with a smile, "but this is what I really like, inside."

It took Earl, one of the first three or four on the block, about 15 months to make the house livable; like his neighbors, he gutted it, stripped the bricks on the outside, and had the contractor jack it up and install a modern foundation. Earl also helped paint the interior. He has yet to add the finishing touches to the design of the second floor, which houses his study, and the skylighted attic, his bedroom. Like the first floor, they are contemporary, spacious, sparsely furnished.

"One of the things I like about the Milwaukee Avenue project is that it



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CRAIG BARTON/PHOTOGRAPHER

accommodates so many different tastes," says Bob Roscoe, one of its originators. "Most people have chosen more traditional styles, but there's plenty of room for those who don't."

As chief organizer and then architect for PAC, the neighborhood group that saved the street from the bulldozers, Roscoe has been associated with Milwaukee Avenue for over 12 years. He, his wife Sally, a floral designer, and two children lived a block away in 1968-70 when Bob was an architecture student at the University of Minnesota.

"Rent was cheap in our duplex," he remembers. "We used to joke to our friends who'd visit, 'we sit and watch the neighborhood fall apart.'" By 1970 Bob had started working with PAC to oppose the Housing Authority's demolition plan. "We were a mixture of younger people and older residents who'd lived there all their lives. The older people gave it credibility and legitimacy," he says. "People saw that it wasn't just another counter-culture binge."

So passionately were Bob and Sally involved in the struggle to save Milwaukee Avenue that their landlady, who supported the demolition faction, evicted them from their duplex. They moved to St. Paul, but the couple remained as involved as ever in the neighborhood. "I just felt the original residents should be allowed to remain in their houses if they wanted to. I had sympathy for them," Bob says.

In 1974 Bob and another young resident, Jerilee Richtman, secretly did research on the four-block area including Milwaukee Avenue for the Minnesota Historical Society. Tracing each lot in the area back to its beginnings, Jerilee, a historian, investigated deeds at the Hennepin County Courthouse, building permits, and plat maps and bird's-eye maps.

She found that most of the Milwaukee Avenue houses were built in 1884-85 by William Ragan, a real estate entrepreneur. The 1895 state census listed Milwaukee Avenue residents as railroad workers, coopers, laborers, butter makers, carpenters, butchers, shoemakers, artists, blacksmiths, machine switchmen, glaziers, printers, milliners, shopkeepers. It

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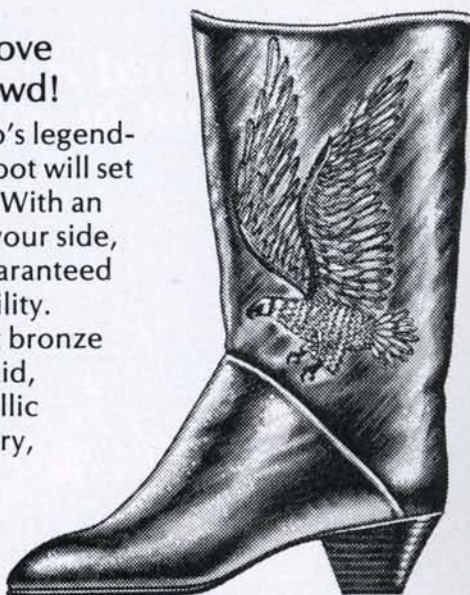


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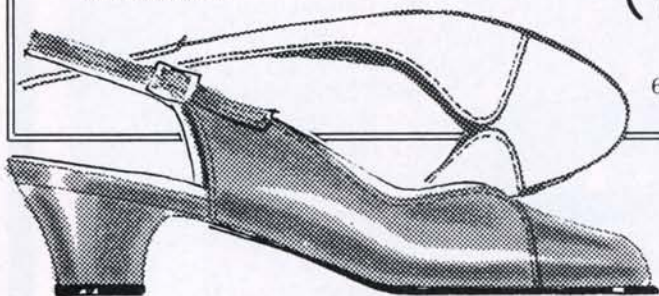
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was surely one of the few truly common person's neighborhoods still available for preservation.

At last, the Minnesota Historical Society forwarded the necessary documents to Washington, D.C., to proclaim the street a National Historic Site, and the danger of demolition was past.

As PAC architect in 1974, Bob Roscoe came to know many of the Milwaukee Avenue houses intimately. "These older homes provide not just a structure but a psychic framework," he says. "Most buildings that have survived troubles and trials into the 20th century were really built well, with a structural stamina that is remarkable. They have a grace and beauty about them that should be respected."

"I know I'll never have an ulcer," he continues, "because I would have had one by the time the project was underway. . . . The administrative and legal hassles were extraordinary. Something like this had never been done before in the city."

Eventually Bob and Sally moved back into the neighborhood, restoring a rambling Italianate Victorian house they moved from its original site about a mile away. Their home is an intriguing mixture of the Victorian that Sally likes and the more contemporary Scandinavian that Bob favors. Now they are less than a block away from the street they helped save.

Today, the Milwaukee Avenue Bob and Sally Roscoe walk down is far different from the tumbled-down, decaying inner-city neighborhood of only 10 years ago. Most of the houses on the northern end of the two-block



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area have been restored to their 1885 appearance, with a few new townhouses, Victorian style, going up to replace vintage homes damaged beyond repair. Like all the houses on Milwaukee Avenue, they are subject to the approval of the architectural review committee, to preserve the older character of the neighborhood.

On the south end, larger Victorian duplexes are being restored by young families who work feverishly on evenings and weekends. Bit by bit, the neighborhood is renewed.

It has spread to the surrounding streets, too; the whole Seward West neighborhood is characterized by restoration and rehabilitation of homes that, in the 1870s and 1880s, housed the immigrants who came to labor in Minneapolis' rapidly growing warehouses, factories and railroad yards.

None of the original owners or their descendants now live on Milwaukee Avenue, however. It's a younger crowd of small families, singles, some architects, contractors, who tend to be highly educated. The townhouses, especially, have brought in a new, wealthier crowd of attorneys, business executives, government employees (including a woman in the diplomatic corps).

"We worry about the houses becoming over-priced," laments Bob Roscoe. "Milwaukee Avenue has become a *smart* address, like Georgetown did; it's fashionable. And it's true, Joe America—the original residents—just couldn't afford to live here today."

Gentrification—that's the biggest issue posed by Milwaukee Avenue. No matter what other problems people talk about, they always get back to this issue.

"We're not turning this into condos," Marge Miller maintains. "A lot of people are unfair and harsh if they're judging us as 'those terrible gentrifiers.' We really sweat blood for this neighborhood... A lot of the people who did their own rehabbing found some pretty crazy stuff: unevenly spaced framing; walls that were badly racked—cockeyed; second floor joists built the wrong way—spans that were not wise. We had a standing joke whenever we'd eye a

Would Bogey order veal piccata for Bergman?

Perhaps. Of course, she might like to reminisce over some Linguini al Pesto. Or maybe she would find another specialty at *Sorrel's*, our Northern Italian restaurant, utterly irresistible. Both Bergman and Bogey would go for *Sorrel's* Casablanca-like atmosphere, informal yet elegant with lattice work and ceiling fans. We think you will share their enthusiasm. As a matter of fact, you might find yourself humming, *As Time Goes By*... after making reservations.

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task: Figure how long it should take, and multiply by five."

Marge recalls the muddy spring of 1977, when she briefly had what she jokingly called lakefront property. "We've been through a lot together."

"This project gave a lot of young families an opportunity, if they were willing to work hard, to acquire a house they couldn't acquire any other way. We're a segment of the population that needed help to buy a house. And we've done well by the opportunity. We should have no apologies to make."

"What's the alternative?" asks Terry Belean. "We could have just left the place like it was—a dump."

Is it true that the Milwaukee Avenue rehabbers forced out the original residents? Not at all, says Sally Roscoe, who served on the PAC committee that dealt with the original residents. "I tried to persuade people to stay. They would have none of it; they wanted to better themselves, to go elsewhere."

"They wanted three-bedroom ramblers," Bob Roscoe interjects. So PAC gave them the fair market value of their house, plus a relocation allowance of up to \$15,000.

"Our attitude finally became, well, it's highly unlikely that we could save Milwaukee Avenue specifically for the lower middle class, for workers, as it once was," Bob says. "So we just tried to save the houses."

The Roscoes say they are pleased with today's Milwaukee Avenue. Still, they agree that the neighborhood is perhaps too pristine today. "It wouldn't have looked that way for long," Bob says. "It's too tidy, too clean. . . . The notion that it was once a workingman's neighborhood is becoming more and more absent."

"Not that we should go back to the mud streets with the boardwalks, with the cisterns instead of real basements," he continues. "But most people see the houses as what they weren't—architectural gems in themselves, little dollhouses. They seem to forget that it's the whole streetscape that's important, not the individual perfection of the houses. So the architectural review committee spends too much time trying to determine if the gingerbread is exactly correct, or whether to use iron or picket fences. I

think that maybe they're overly stringent, even nearsighted, getting bogged down in insignificant details.

"You could say the project was too successful—not that you should be ashamed of what you accomplish. I guess gentrification is just inevitable," he concludes. "The houses are up to code, the neighborhood is safer. That's good."

If Milwaukee Avenue today is not quite true to its social origins, it is at

least in spirit. Even before renewal, the neighborhood had an unusually cohesive sense of community—people who made it a friendly place to live. And throughout the noise and rubble of reconstruction, the sense of neighborhood has been strengthened and preserved. It was the efforts of its residents, after all, that saved Milwaukee Avenue from the wrecking ball and created a real neighborhood smack in the inner city. TC

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