

Hudson's Corner: Preserving architectural integrity is Roland Park's historic opportunity

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Posted 3/09/10

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Roland Park is listed on the register of the National Trust for Historic Preservation, but that doesn't mean much. There's little safeguarding of the historic neighborhood's architectural integrity, protection from the wrecking ball, or even beauty. Think of the increasingly ugly commercial area north of Cold Spring Lane and Falls Road -- all within the National Trust district.

The Roland Park Shopping Center -- the country's oldest and listed by the city as a local landmark after nearly being torn down in the 1970s -- is the only site in Roland Park protected from demolition and subject to the architectural standards of the city Commission for Historical and Architectural Preservation.

That's why a lot of hands went up when the Roland Park Civic League, at its March meeting, asked how many members would be interested in further exploring the ramifications of CHAP designating Roland Park as a historic district.

Thirty-three communities in Baltimore are CHAP districts, including Mount Vernon, Bolton Hill, Fells Point and nearby Wyndhurst. Roland Park is one of the most intact garden suburbs of the late 19th century, so it is perplexing why the neighborhood does not already have CHAP status.

Roland Park badly needs more modern and more uniform architectural guidelines. Many properties are not under covenant and owners of houses that are sometimes feel penalized, because they must obtain approval from Roland Park Roads and Maintenance for any exterior changes, while other neighbors do all sorts of remodeling without permission -- some inconsistent with surrounding architecture.

The exquisite Greiner home at 106 Ridgewood Road had been torn down many years ago for reasons no one remembers. Now that lot is part of 108 Ridgewood. A Tudor mansion on Roland Avenue was torn down in the late 1950s or early 60s after a fire and replaced with an out-of-place, one-story brick building.

Near our house, more than a half-dozen structures have been razed in my lifetime: a huge brick Georgian house at the southwest corner of Roland Avenue and Cold Spring Lane, a stone toll house and two other houses on Cold Spring Lane, the Victorian mansion which used to be the St. Mary's orphanage on Roland Avenue, one of the original community stables on Evans Chapel Road, and most recently a historic, shingled tennis house at the Baltimore Country Club and the old Marianist building on Roland Avenue. The Georgian house and the Cold Spring Lane houses were torn down to widen Cold Spring. This still confounds me, because Cold Spring retains its old, two-lane footprint east of Roland Avenue. Had Roland Park been on the National Register in the early 1960s, or a CHAP district, the community and the homeowners would have had more recourse.

Roland Park Place has proposed tearing down the stone church at the corner of 40th Street and Roland Avenue for a parking lot. This, after it wanted to raze a house it owns in the middle of a nearby block. That area, while not technically in Roland Park, is an example of the preservation issues this residential community could easily face.

While it seems unthinkable that suddenly homes or historic institutions would be torn down, one-at-a-time demolitions could erode overall residential quality, design integrity and landscape.

Until I went to the Civic League meeting, I was on the fence about whether or not the community should further explore the idea of Roland Park being a CHAP district. Now I feel that homeowners need to know more.

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