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Preservation Magazine, Spring 2016

West Side Story: Covington's Shotgun Houses

A row of rehabbed shotgun houses in Covington, Kentucky, fosters a sense of community.

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It's a sunny Saturday morning on the west side of Covington, Kentucky, and the kids are feeding leftover Brussels sprouts to a flock of chickens at a community garden. Several neighbors stop by for cartons of eggs; others pick the last of the hot peppers from the half-acre space. Mothers push baby carriages along the sidewalk and pause to chat. Across the street, Stephen Huss stands outside his

circa-1890s shotgun-style home and shakes his head in wonder. If you had told Huss just 10 years ago that there would be a chicken coop—a *chicken coop!*—and vegetable plots across the road, he wouldn't have believed it.

“Oh, this was the worst neighborhood,” says Huss, a 69-year-old Covington native. A self-proclaimed “picker” who specializes in finding and re-selling antique lamps and lighting, Huss says he stuck it out because his house was cheap when he bought it in the early 1980s, and convenient to the interstate. He and his wife, Sue, raised their daughter here. “I kept to myself, but I used to have to come out and pick up rocks from the street because I didn't want them thrown through my windows.”

Back then, Orchard Street was a haven for prostitutes and gang members. Ramshackle houses, standing where the chickens now roam, were home to a notorious clan of drug dealers, and the five other wood-frame shotgun homes adjacent to the Huss residence, all in various stages of decay, accommodated an ever-changing assortment of tenants, squatters, or no one at all. One house was so leaky, recalls Huss, that someone was living out of a tent inside.

What surprises Huss even more than the chickens is that those five homes next to his—now touted by Covington city planners, along with his own house, as Shotgun Row—have been completely rehabilitated, with gingerbread cornices restored; new cement-board siding painted a cheery white; and interiors modernized, some with hardwood floors, granite countertops, and dangling halogen lamps.

He says the revitalization of these houses—and the exterior of his own—by the nonprofit Center for Great Neighborhoods has helped spur the transformation of the entire community. “Without fixing them up, you wouldn't have had this,” says Huss, gesturing to the kids scattering chicken feed across the lane. “Since

rehabbing these houses, things have been so much better.”

For the Center for Great Neighborhoods, it’s all part of the plan. The Center was founded as a community services group back in the 1970s, but since 2006 part of the organization’s mission has been to acquire, rehabilitate, and sell derelict or seriously dilapidated historic buildings on the west side of Covington, a working-class enclave across the Ohio River from Cincinnati. The idea is that when these old properties are fixed up, public safety improves, the housing market stabilizes, and people feel optimistic about their neighborhoods. “It gives residents hope,” says Sarah Thompson Allan, program director for the Center. “These old buildings can have life in them, and restoring them can bring life into a community, as well.”

The Center has completed more than 30 projects in Covington in recent years, but Shotgun Row, for which it received a state historic preservation award, might be its crown jewel. “These houses were so far gone, people questioned why we would even want to save them,” says Allan, who spearheaded the development. “But with this project we were leveraging so much more than just a single building. We basically took the worst block and helped transform it. People look at Shotgun Row now and don’t even see the [individual] houses. It’s like its own beautiful entity. It was definitely the most transformative project we’ve ever done.”

It was sometime around 1890 that Henry G. Haver, a foreman at the local wire works, bought a parcel of land along Orchard Street and built seven shotgun-style homes, one room wide by three or four rooms deep. (One of the houses burned down in the 1990s.) They were more ornate than the typical shotgun, with basements, high ceilings, Italianate cornices, and two tall windows on the street-facing side. Haver moved his family into one and sold the others, likely to laborers either at the wire works or at the nearby lumber mill, rope works, or Bavarian brewery.

At the time, Covington was the industrial hub of Northern Kentucky, and it

remained that way until the economy collapsed during the Great Depression. During the ensuing years, migrants from Appalachia flooded the city looking for work that often wasn't there, and during the next several decades many of the city's grand homes were divided into apartments. By the 1960s and '70s, urban flight left many buildings vacant, particularly in the city's Westside neighborhood. Crime skyrocketed, and during the mid-2000s, the police were averaging almost 1,500 calls for service to the neighborhood every year. Orchard Street, which was the scene of two murders in 2004, was practically its epicenter. But the block was part of the Lee-Holman Historic District—one of 17 protected areas in Covington—and had its share of historic structures, including Haver's unique row of shotgun homes.

Enter the Center for Great Neighborhoods and Sarah Thompson Allan. Allan, an energetic 41-year-old with an MBA in economic development, has a knack for seeing the potential in woebegone structures. While working for a community development corporation in Philadelphia, she had helped successfully revamp a 19th-century textile mill into space for artists. She and her husband had even completed their own historic resurrection: transforming a dreary 1930s former brake shop into a retro-cool home. While working with the Center to restore other buildings around Orchard Street, she says it was hard to ignore this "eyesore block in the middle of everything." But it was the longest row of shotguns in the entire city—something worth preserving—and the homes might just appeal to young, creative types willing to take a chance on a struggling neighborhood.

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—Sarah Thompson Allan

In 2012, the Center received a grant from the Kresge Foundation to transform the structures into live-work spaces for artists. (“Artist” in this case is defined as anyone involved in a creative pursuit.) Over the course of the following year, the Center purchased three of the vacant houses from the city and two from private owners. The Husses wanted to stay, so Allan and her colleagues agreed to furnish a new roof and matching siding in order to preserve the visual continuity of the row.

And then the heavy lifting began. When staff from the Center finally had the chance to assess the buildings, they realized they looked just as bad—if not worse—from the inside as they did from the outside.

“The water damage was so severe; there were sections of the houses you couldn’t even walk on,” says Adam Rockel, the Center’s program manager for real estate development, who oversaw the project day to day. “Things were so rotted, I could tear out wood with my bare hands. You had fungi growing in the basement that were unlike anything I had ever seen.”

“[From the outside], all the gingerbread and fish scale was so covered up that people thought they were trailers,” says Program Director for Community Development Rachel Hastings. “As we were continuing to do all this rehab, people would ask, ‘What’s happening over there? When are the trailers going to go away?’”

For Kevin Kluender, an architect with the Cincinnati firm Drawing Dept., trying to re-create the homes’ original Victorian-era facades was like assembling a jigsaw puzzle. “There wasn’t a single building that was 100 percent intact, but if one was 75 percent intact, another would have the lacking 25 percent, so we could kind of mash things together,” he says.

And while the facades could be restored to their original designs, the interiors were simply too far gone. Construction crews were able to preserve the brick fireplaces in three of the five homes, but the decision was made to update

everything else, both because of the interior conditions and in hopes of appealing to contemporary tastes.

Kluender created two basic designs: one with a curving front-to-back hallway, and another with dual hallways running all the way through the roughly 70-foot-long structures. “We thought it was important that, being small houses, they had the ability to have long vistas,” says Kluender, who positioned studios at the front and living areas in the middle and back. “The idea is that when you’re in the front, you don’t feel like you’re in a different building than in the back, and vice versa. We also tried to keep as wide open a floor plan as possible.”



Adam Rockel and Sarah Thompson Allan of the Center for Great Neighborhoods review project plans in their under-construction headquarters.



Peggy Munson leads a yoga class in her home's front-room studio space.

By the summer of 2014, the model house at 323 Orchard St. was ready to be shown. And then two unexpected things happened: First, the homes, which started at \$90,000 each, were all pre-sold within a matter of months—long before construction had even been completed. Second, instead of young creative types snatching up the properties, all but one went to buyers who are over 50.

“It was not at all what we predicted,” says realtor Rebecca Weber. “We predicted young artsy people and we didn’t get that. But I think it speaks volumes to the demand for one-floor living in urban environments, and not just in Covington. People want to get away from big houses and feel like they’re in a vibrant area where they can walk, get involved, and have stuff to do.”

For Peggy Munson, who moved in with her dog, Ginger, in November 2014, Shotgun Row was the perfect fit. Munson wanted to downsize from a much larger

rental on Covington's east side. She says her friends and family were surprised, at least initially, by her choice of location. "I told my ex-husband I'm buying a house, and then I told him where and he said, 'What?!'"

But Munson, who lives next door to the Husses, liked the neighborhood's up-and-coming vibe and the house's 1,088-square-foot size. "It's small, but that's what I wanted," says the snowy-haired yoga teacher, who decorated the side of her home with an expansive rock garden. "Moving to a smaller home, your brain has to change its way of thinking. I like old stuff, which is big and clunky, but in a house this size, you can't have big and clunky."

Her neighbor, Melanie Goble, a metalsmith, also liked the manageable size and Covington's location close to Cincinnati, where her husband, Dale Emminger, works as a lighting professional. The fact that the neighborhood was still under the radar appealed to her. "It's quiet," Goble says. "I like being able to walk to the local pub and market, or get on a bike and go downtown. It's only 12 blocks from the river."

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—Rebecca Weber

Mary Pat Noll and her husband, Tony, moved into the house next to Goble and Emminger last summer, and loved joining neighbors on lawn chairs while passing out Halloween candy in the fall. "We had 150 kids here!" she says. "That was really encouraging to see. This may not have been a street they included in the past."

Allan says the project's success proves there's a market for the oft-maligned

shotgun house, a narrow, linear design that hasn't been in favor since the Hoover administration. (Some believe the name originated from the fact that a bullet fired from a shotgun could travel straight through the house from front to back, while others attribute it to the evolution of the African term "to-gun," which means "place of assembly.") "Our hope is that shotguns can be repurposed in a way that they become an option for people who want to age in place," says Allan. She notes that the one-floor structures are also perfect for people who, like two of Shotgun Row's current residents, have mobility challenges.

Weber already sees that Shotgun Row has had a positive impact on neighborhood property values, and says people have been asking her for similar houses. "I told the Center, 'If you built me 25 more, I could sell them.' There's no doubt in my mind."

[Link:]

Meanwhile, the area around Shotgun Row continues to revitalize. Mark Young and his wife, Holly, who oversee a neighborhood association called the Westside Action Coalition, are working to preserve more of the green space adjacent to the community gardens. "It's amazing how dramatically things have changed," says Young, who rehabbed his own historic house a couple of blocks away and recalls being propositioned multiple times by prostitutes along Orchard Street just a few years ago. "If the Center hadn't done this, these homes would have continued to exist as they were, and deteriorated to the point where they would have had to be demolished. Fixing them up, they stabilized the neighborhood."

Young has noticed a drop in crime rates neighborhood-wide, a result of police working more closely with community members and efforts by the city and the Center over the past 10 years to manage the area's most troublesome properties. "We haven't heard about any problems in months," he says. "No shots fired. No

major drug busts. People feel safe. There are people out walking all the time, and this project has been absolutely critical to that.”

It’s all been an unexpected—but welcome—change for Stephen Huss. “Oh, I love it now,” says Huss in a lilting Kentucky accent. “The neighborhood is really coming back. I see good things for the future.”

And, he adds, “I really like the chickens.”



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Joe Sugarman lives in Baltimore and is a frequent contributor to Preservation magazine.