

Lauren Oswalt McHale was appointed Executive Director of The L'Enfant Trust in 2015, after serving eight years as the Director of Preservation. Lauren has a B.A. in Art History and Historic Preservation & Community Planning from the College of Charleston and a M.S. in Historic Preservation from the School of the Art Institute of Chicago. She can be reached at lauren@lenfant.org.

DC's First Historic Properties Redevelopment Program

By Lauren Oswalt McHale

The L'Enfant Trust, named to honor the federal city's designer Pierre L'Enfant, was founded in 1978 to preserve and revitalize Washington's historic streetscapes and communities. Over the last 37 years The L'Enfant Trust has promoted historic preservation – most notably through the acquisition of conservation easements on historic properties.

In 2012, The L'Enfant Trust launched a new preservation initiative – the Historic Properties Redevelopment (HPR) Program.

The L'Enfant Trust spearheaded the use of conservation or preservation easements as a tool to protect historic properties in Washington, D.C. A conservation easement donated to the Trust is an enforceable promise made by a property owner and binding on all subsequent owners that no change in the exterior appearance of the building or surrounding open space will be made unless consented to by the Trust. Today The L'Enfant Trust holds and administers 1,134 conservation easements in 27 historic districts within Washington, D.C., the largest single easement portfolio of any preservation organization in the country.

A NEW INITIATIVE

In 2012, The L'Enfant Trust's staff, evaluating ways to extend its reach into historic preservation, proposed the idea of a revolving fund program for historic rehabilitation to the Trust's Board of Trustees. Revolving funds or real estate redevelopment programs are commonly used by historic preservation organizations around the country. Revolving fund programs use a number of methods to save historic buildings and structures, including acquisition and rehabilitation, bricks and mortar loans, and options to purchase. In the acquisition model a historic property is acquired either by purchase or donation, rehabilitated in whole or part, and sold with protective covenants or easements. The proceeds from the sale are recycled or revolved back into the fund.



1326 Valley Place

To help plan and implement a revolving fund program, the Trust sought guidance from a strategic planner specializing in non-profit organizations. The L'Enfant Trust's Board of Trustees and staff participated in a weekend long strategic planning retreat. Invited to the retreat were two directors of successful and long-standing revolving fund programs: Josh Rogers from Historic Macon and Jeff Gonyeau from Historic Boston, Inc. At the end, the Trust's Board of Trustees officially adopted an acquisition revolving fund program later renamed the Historic Properties Redevelopment Program (HPR Program) – the first such program in Washington, D.C.

The L'Enfant Trust's HPR Program was seeded with

capital from its investments and a grant from The 1772 Foundation as it started identifying historic neighborhoods in need and meeting with community members, government entities, and other stakeholders. It took little time to realize the HPR Program would have the greatest impact in the Anacostia Historic District, where there exists a large and concentrated number of vacant, blighted, historic buildings. Five decades of disinvestment in the Anacostia community has taken a huge toll. Anacostia has many historic, rapidly deteriorating houses, some owned by the district government. They sit year after year, barely stabilized. The D.C. historic preservation laws prohibit their demolition – they are truly historic buildings – but doesn't prohibit their neglect. The cost of rehabilitating these build-

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1347 MVP before



1347 MVP after

PASTFORWARD 2015

At the PastForward 2015 National Preservation Conference in Washington, D.C., The L'Enfant Trust will present its Historic Properties Redevelopment Program at the Revolving Fund Convening. The Revolving Fund Convening is a forum for revolving fund directors around the country to discuss best practices and innovative ways for saving historic structures.

The L'Enfant Trust will also co-lead a tour, "East of the Anacostia Rising: Preserving Heritage in Underinvested Areas", during the conference. It is open to all conference attendees and will highlight the history of the Historic Anacostia District, the revitalization efforts of The L'Enfant Trust's Historic Properties Redevelopment Program, and the many historic properties still in need of rehabilitation.

ings far exceeds their market value, so it's not economically feasible for a commercial builder or real estate developer or private homeowner to take on these projects. It falls to the HPR Program and the philanthropic support it can garner, and to the D.C. government, to save these irreplaceable physical pieces of our city's history.

HISTORIC ANACOSTIA

Within its boundaries Anacostia includes the former Uniontown, one of Washington's earliest suburbs (incorporated in 1854), and contains the home of the distinguished abolitionist and statesman Frederick Douglass, often referred to as the

"Sage of Anacostia." In 1877 Douglass purchased part of a large estate, known as Cedar Hill, and resided there with his family until his death in 1895. Cedar Hill is now a National Historic Landmark site that is open to the public for tours and educational programs that interpret the life of Frederick Douglass.

Like so many urban communities, the 1960s were particularly hard for Anacostia and it started to experience a rapid decline in population and community investment. Despite these challenges, Anacostia was named one of the first local historic districts in 1972 and was listed in the National



2010 14th before



2010 14th after

Register of Historic Places in 1978. The Anacostia Historic District contains approximately 550 historic buildings, mostly small-scale, commercial buildings and single-family houses. Many of the houses are frame houses with sizable lots and views of downtown D.C. – unusual for a city known for its densely packed brick row houses.

Although Anacostia is rich in historic character with particularly deep roots in Washington’s African-American community, many of the neighborhood’s historic resources have been neglected. The presence of vacant and abandoned buildings has contributed to neighborhood blight and limited the potential for new private investment. Similarly, real and perceived safety concerns have limited the neighborhood’s growth and the ability to attract new residents.

FIRST REHABILITATION PROJECTS

In the fall of 2013, the Trust acquired its first two historic properties, long-vacant, single-family houses in the Anacostia Historic District. The acquisition effort itself was time-consuming: we acquired both properties off-market by tracking down a maze of stakeholders and sorting through tangled ownership and tax issues. Prior to purchasing the properties, we created a project team consisting of a local architect, general contractor, and structural engineer that helped us evaluate the integrity of each building and develop cost estimates.

The 1912 Cottage style house at 2010 14th Street, SE had been vacant for years and was badly deteriorated. Filled with trash, drug paraphernalia and bullet casings, it was dragging the neighborhood down with it. The wood frame house retained its original footprint, drop sid-

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ing and other decorative elements. At the time of acquisition, the roof was severely deteriorated, which had caused wood damage and black mold to form throughout the house. The Trust quickly replaced the roof, sistered structural members, reconstructed the original front porch, and restored the exterior wood siding. The fully rehabilitated, three bedroom and one and a half baths house sold in July 2014 to first time buyers. The acquisition and rehabilitation of the property totaled \$515,741 while the house sold for \$377,000 with a funding gap of \$138,741.

The Trust's second rehabilitation project was 1347 Maple View Place, SE, an 1887 Queen-Anne house. When the Trust acquired the property it was on the verge of demolition as a result of neglect. The house was structurally compromised due to a prior owner's removal of the rear exterior wall and some interior load bearing walls. The Trust's work on the building included immediate stabilization of the structure and reconstruction of the rear section of the house. The house retained a high level of architectural integrity with much its original reeded, drop siding and decorative window dressings. The Trust also restored the only original window still left in the house.

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During the course of the rehabilitation project, the Trust's general contractor discovered original cedar shakes under the existing metal standing-seam roof. To recreate the look of the original house, while also providing a high quality and durable roof, the Trust decided to use a composite shake called Enviroshake. The cost to rehabilitate the house, including acquisition, was \$618,746, and it sold for \$390,000 with a funding gap of \$228,746.

The Trust was able to complete turn-key rehabilitation of both properties within six months of their acquisition, and once on the market each



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house took only three days to sell. To ensure ongoing preservation and community stabilization, the Trust placed a perpetual conservation easement and two-year homeownership requirement on each property.

As we expected, the hard and soft costs alone of reclaiming the properties far exceeded their sale price. However, the “uneconomic” restoration of both properties gave a boost not only to the relieved and delighted neighbors but to the entire community. Both projects exemplified the need for the HPR Program in Washington, D.C. While the District today may be experiencing rapid growth and development in some quadrants, it also has a significant number of historic buildings and neighborhoods that have suffered from years of disinvestment and are vulnerable to demolition by neglect or substandard rehabilitations. These types of projects do not attract for-profit developers because the numbers do not pencil out.

The Trust could not have done this work without the support of the Anacostia community, the D.C. Historic Preservation Office, the National Trust for

Historic Preservation, and the financial support of The 1772 Foundation, individual donors, and corporate in-kind donations from Architectural Ceramics, Enviroshake, Fergusons, and Sherwin-Williams to name a few.

PROPERTIES IN NEED

Anacostia has a rich history and its historic district boasts some of Washington’s oldest buildings, but disinvestment in Anacostia over several decades has left many of its historic buildings in very poor shape. They are eyesores in the community, pose safety concerns, serve as magnets for criminal activity and drain city resources. So far there has not been an effective mechanism in place to rehabilitate them and return them to the community, leaving the impression in the community that the city is doing nothing and is purposely allowing the deterioration to get to the point of no return. Our hope is that the L’Enfant Trust’s completion of its first two projects will be an invitation to the city agencies who own or control deteriorating properties in historic Anacostia to join us in taking action to reclaim these historic assets and to honor the protected status that city preservation laws have bestowed on them. ■



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