VIII. NEW IMITATES OLD

The Betts House is rescued

The Betts House was one of the buildings purchased by the city as part of Queensgate II and then offered for sale so that it could be privately rehabilitated. In 1988, the William Betts House Restoration Group formed by Betts descendants and supporters, including the National Society of Colonial Dames, submitted a proposal to the city to buy and renovate the building.

By 1990, the rehabilitation was complete and tenants had moved in. In order to qualify for the federal tax credit for historic rehabilitation, the house was converted to two rental apartments for five years. By 1994, the mortgage was paid off, and the Colonial Dames agreed to accept ownership of the house for the purpose of establishing the Betts House Research Center.

City West: Hope VI Housing

In the mid-1990s, there was an extreme shift of thinking in federal housing policy. Based on the recognition that a concentration of poverty was unhealthy, the US Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) created the Hope VI program, which promotes the replacement of traditional public housing projects with mixed housing types for mixed-income residents.

The Cincinnati Metropolitan Housing Authority’s (CMHA) major Hope VI initiative was the demolition of most of Laurel Homes and construction of new public housing, mixed-income rental and homeownership units in the form of attached 2- and 3-story townhouses, flats in “mansion” buildings, and detached single-family homes. Additional infill rental units are planned through the West End.

For a total cost of City West of $90 million, including a $35 million grant from HUD and $9 million from the City, CMHA has produced 606 new homes, 8,000 square feet of new retail space, a new 20,000 square-foot community facilities for child care and self-sufficiency programs. Like Longworth Square and Citirama, the intent of the design was to mirror the architecture, scale and style of private homes in neighboring Betts Longworth Historic District.

Conclusion

The West End is no longer the “city’s worst slum,” but only a portion of the old neighborhood has survived—the areas east of I-75 and north of Liberty, including the Dayton Street Historic District and Brighton—and the Betts Longworth Historic District. It is miraculous that the Betts House still stands after two centuries of change all around it; only a few houses remain from 1804 in the entire region. How is this possible?

In the last century, redevelopment has come full circle, from demolition to rehabilitation, from urban renewal to recreation of historic designs; from narrow streets to “superblocks,” and back again. The Betts House is a perfect example of this cyclical pattern, from its creation as a country house, to abandonment and then to restoration by family descendants and friends. It survives because it was built to last, but also because it holds meaning for the family, for the neighborhood and for all of us.