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# Now, not soon, is the time to save OTR's historic treasures

Enquirer essay

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Soon is not good enough, Cincinnati.

Now would be a good time to get serious about saving Over-the-Rhine.

And I am not talking about crime there. I'm talking about saving its soul – the building stock that makes it one of the largest urban historic districts in the United States. The crimes are occurring not in the streets, but towering over them.

We are losing a treasure, one building at a time. That is the biggest crime happening in our midst.

Indeed, crime in Over-the-Rhine has come down, although one might not know it if you

listen to suburbanites who foster an illogical fear of "going downtown." At 12th and Vine streets, police calls have gone from hundreds to rare. City leaders, developers and neighborhood residents have partnered to make impressive gains and investments.

Since 2005, hundreds of buildings located south of Liberty Street have benefited from more than \$90 million in new investment under a revitalization effort led by Cincinnati Center City Development Corp. The effort has resulted in the Gateway Quarter – home to more than 200 market-rate condos, new storefronts and office space.

Anyone who has been to Lavomatic or the Know Theatre lately can see how transformative it has been.

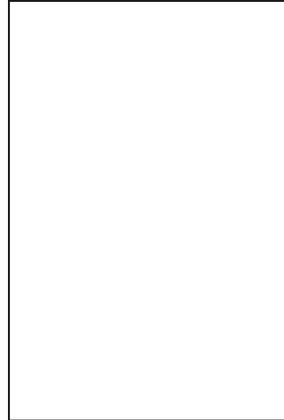
But Gateway is a small gem in what should be the golden pastures of Over-the-Rhine.

And crime – or the absence of it – will not be the singular factor in Over-the-Rhine's success or failure. The loss of its housing stock to outside interests and inside apathy is this magnificent neighborhood's biggest threat.

Now, not soon, was evident a week ago Friday when I attended a lunch meeting. The speaker was Ken Jones, a member of the Over-the-Rhine Historic Conservation Board.

He compared Cincinnati to places like Charleston and New Orleans, which have capitalized on heritage tourism. Slide by slide, he compared our treasures – an unrivaled collection of Italianate,

Tom Callinan is the editor of The Enquirer.



Zoom

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#### COMMON-SENSE IDEAS FOR PRESERVATION

The Over-the-Rhine Foundation has developed what it calls a "holistic, common sense" proposal to make preservation work better in all of Cincinnati's neighborhoods.

Highlights of the plan:

Proposed changes to the Cincinnati Building Code;

Preference for preservation over demolition;

Early, aggressive intervention;

Demolition funds spent to stabilize buildings;

Clarify definitions of economic hardship and reasonable rates of return;

Eliminate nonprofit loophole;

Fund strategic receivership program;

Create special financing;

Provide training for code officers;

Clarify historic guidelines;

Recognize green benefits of preservation;

Change attitudes.

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Queen Anne, and Greek Revival architecture – styles that were in vogue when Over-the-Rhine was built, roughly between the 1830s and early 1900s.

Once one of the two most densely built neighborhoods in America, Over-the-Rhine's scale and mixed-use building stock are unique, Jones said. The neighborhood also is home to Cincinnati's only Urban Mix zoning district, which aspires to combine housing, retail, offices, entertainment and light industrial uses in a walkable urban setting. Largely built before the invention of cars and long before the existence of suburbs, Over-the-Rhine's historic building patterns embody most of what we now consider "green planning" or "new urbanism."

• **Photos: Treasures on Over-the-Rhine streets**

One of the problems is the concentration of absentee ownership. Companies come in, buy the buildings and let them sit on the land they hope will pay off someday. A window gets broken. A drug crowd moves in. A fire starts. And history is gone.

Those around the table agreed. Something must be done. Soon.

Then, in the Q/A, Jones laid out a challenge that I could not ignore. I am not sure if he knew who I was or where I worked.

He said much of the blame for Over-the-Rhine's problems lies at the hands of the media, which perpetuate negative perceptions with abundant reporting about crime and little about good news and advancements. I politely countered that The Enquirer is aware of its responsibility, and we have done many stories about the neighborhood's turnaround. But if his perception is that we feed misperceptions, we should listen.

I gave Jones my card and told him we would invite him – and others interested in the cause – to meet with reporters and the editorial board soon.

Soon was not good enough.

Soon became now less than eight hours later when 85 firefighters responded to a four-alarm fire that heavily damaged the building on Elm Street that used to house the Christian Moerlein bottling plant, one of the country's biggest pre-Prohibition breweries. The 250,000-square-foot building was later home to KD Lamp Co. from 1969 to the late 1990s. The building has been vacant since then.

Think of what just happened. We may have lost a big piece of historical significance. If the building survives, it was at least a close call. A wake-up call for certain.

Christian Moerlein was the brewery that since 1853 anchored Cincinnati's brewery district. In pre-Prohibition years it was the largest of the 32 breweries in town and fourth largest in the United States. Its half-arched, inset windows, portals and doorways represented the best of what is known as Romanesque revival architecture that towers over the neighborhoods.

Just like that, 150-plus years of history can become a pile of Romanesque rubble.

The cause of the fire was listed as undetermined and likely will remain that way. A previous developer tried to turn the property into condominiums several years ago but could not get enough funding. The Enquirer reported that Orton Development Inc. bought the property in 2008 for about \$550,000. Although the company is based in California, owner Eddie Orton is originally from Cincinnati and the renovation project was a way for him to get back to his roots. Plans were under way to fill the space with retail and industrial tenants by March or April, turning the historic building into a second arm of Findlay Market.

March or April – soon – would be too late for the Moerlein bottling plant.

Whatever the motivations or intentions of this owner, the historic building is likely gone. And the neighborhood is being lost at an alarming rate, according to the Over-the-Rhine Foundation. An estimated 500 buildings are vacant, 227 have been ordered to be vacated, 77 are condemned, and it is estimated that the neighborhood is only two buildings away from losing more than 50 percent of its historic building stock.

"Unfortunately, it's very likely that we're going to surpass the 50 percent mark in a matter of two or three months," says Mike Morgan, executive director of the foundation. "We're at the point that we

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can't shrug off any more demolitions. We need to make sure we keep everything we can and that we're doing everything we can to stop the continual decline of this neighborhood."

"It's important to note that sometimes absentee owners are no worse than local owners," Morgan says. "The absence of adequate lending is as much of a problem as negligence."

• **Morgan and Jones: What separates us from New Orleans, Charleston**

Now, not soon, is the time to get the discussion about Over-the-Rhine preservation going. So hours after the damage to the Moerlein building, The Enquirer invited six civic and business leaders to share their views. It is the start of a conversation – and coverage – that we will continue in 2010 in a project we're calling "Vanishing Cincinnati."

Last summer, the Over-the-Rhine Foundation and Cincinnati Preservation Association Historic Preservation recommended measures to City Council to save historic buildings. In October, council passed a resolution of support for the foundation's application for Ohio stimulus dollars and set up a task force to review code changes and explore new financing tools.

Certainly the city needs to step up enforcement of code violations and fund repair projects rather than demolition work. The city and Hamilton County should revamp the local Housing Court to streamline the processing of public-nuisance cases.

But the last bullet point of the foundation's call to action is the most telling:

"Change attitudes."

As the core city goes, so goes the city and what we know as Greater Cincinnati (yes, suburbs and Northern Kentucky, this is important to you, too).

Preservation of the historic core is not just council's job.

It is not about them; it is us.

It is not there; it is here.

It is not soon.

It is now.

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