

GIFFORD PARK ASSOCIATION: THREE DECADES OF GRASSROOTS PRESERVATION SUCCESS

By Fran Cella

Note: The Gifford Park Association received the National Trust's Trustees Award for Organizational Excellence at the 2008 National Preservation Conference in Tulsa.

The neighborhood story is a familiar one. The oldest neighborhood in Elgin, Ill.—platted between 1842 and 1859 by James T. Gifford—once offered a diverse array of 19th- and early-20th-century architecture for people of all social classes. During the “urban renewal” of the 1960s and ’70s many homes were razed and their lots subdivided. Manorly estates were replaced by utilitarian apartment buildings, and homes were divided into multi-family units. As the neighborhood’s architectural history and character vanished, its population density, rental property ratio, and crime rate rapidly increased.

In 1979 a small group of neighbors gathered on a porch overlooking Gifford Park. The city’s oldest park had become a street-gang hangout. They strategized about how to combat the loss of old buildings and slow the growth of residential density and crime. A first step was the creation of the Gifford Park Association (GPA).

GPA’s early leaders knew the importance of increasing public interest in Elgin’s history and architecture. In 1981 GPA hosted its first Historic House Tour—financed entirely on the credit card of a GPA member. Now in its 27th year, the tour has generated an enduring interest in old Elgin houses. The Annual Historic Elgin House Tour draws visitors from the greater Chicago area and adjacent states—some of whom subsequently purchase old homes in Elgin.

GPA leaders had the vision to see the necessity of a City-sanctioned infrastructure for preserving Elgin’s history. When GPA’s grassroots movement for preservation began, many City officials were as much in need of education about Elgin’s historic resources as the general public. The early efforts of GPA were often in conflict with the goals of the City. Over three decades, GPA successfully lobbied for and actively participated in the

development of preservation policy and programs. Between 1981 and 2007, Elgin designated four historic districts (Gifford Park was the first, also in the National Register); established a local historic preservation ordinance, commission, and design guidelines; and hired a full-time preservation specialist/officer. GPA also collaborated with the Elgin Police on strategies to reduce crime.

In addition, GPA took steps to help old-house lovers gain the skills, knowledge, and financial resources needed to survive owning one. In 1980 GPA, the City, and local lending institutions took advantage of a national program and partnered to create Neighborhood Housing Services (NHS). Through NHS, neighbors had access to low-interest home improvement loans, free paint, and a large tool lending library (to which GPA made donations). In 1984 NHS and GPA partnered on a dramatic rehab that served both as a neighborhood inspiration and as a workshop for teaching rehab/restoration skills.

Since 1983 GPA has hosted 60+ architectural salvages throughout the city. Salvages make available authentic and hard-to-find restoration materials and reinforce the value of recycling old house parts.

Since 1987 GPA’s Purchase/Rehab Program has used House Tour proceeds, City grants, and bank loans to purchase problem properties on challenged streets. Volunteers and licensed subcontractors “de-convert” subdivided houses to their original single-family use and do historically appropriate rehabs. GPA has completed seven such projects to date—three with NHS.

In 1997 GPA instituted a “Great Unveiling” Program, inspired by a similar program in Rock Island, Ill. To encourage owners to remove inappropriate siding and undertake other facade restoration, GPA offered volunteer labor and \$1,000 to help with painting and/or repair. Impressed by the results, the City now funds this program and offers \$4,000 “unveiling” rewards.



GPA’s Purchase/Rehab Program, instituted in 1987, turns problem properties back into architecturally appropriate historic homes that enhance the whole neighborhood and inspire other homeowners. Photos courtesy of GPA.

Inspired by GPA’s efforts, the City has initiated progressive preservation programs city-wide. These include a “Residential Acquisition Program” through which the City purchases dilapidated older homes and uses local contractors to rehab them; rewards for “unveiling” commercial structures; grant programs for “de-converting” rental properties back to single-family homes; and grants for exterior rehabs of historic homes.

Almost 30 years later, when all of the founding and most of the early GPA members are “retired,” why are GPA’s volunteer efforts still working? These things matter. Preservation ordinances and guidelines have been institutionalized. The City of Elgin continues to provide incentives for restoration and preservation. There is a passionate core of GPA members and others who continue to remember that preservation is a process and the need for refinement, improvement, and vigilance is never ending. ■

Fran Cella is a board member and past president of the Gifford Park Association. For more information visit www.gifford-park-assoc.org.