

Recreating a Neighborhood of Choice for Immigrants: Correcting a Century of Neglect

BY GERALD SHECHTER

After more than 130 years of being home to families and their dreams, the housing stock of our Westside community in Kansas City, Missouri, was rapidly deteriorating. The current stock was not fulfilling our needs—either for current or new residents. Nor was it able to fulfill the hopes of those who years ago left to seek better housing elsewhere but now wish to return home—home to the Westside.

Germans, Greeks, Swedes and Irish—new immigrants—successively put down roots on the western side of the city. For many, the Westside was their first home in their new country. In the 1880s, the area around 17th and Jefferson Streets became known as “Irish Hill,” home to the well-to-do Irish who built imposing brick mansions.

The Westside, in particular “The South End,” has been home to a significant African-American community, who lived in post-Civil War settlements with names such as “Hell’s Half Acre” and “Juniper.” The Westside has been culturally and economically diverse from its beginning.

The New Immigrant Majority

Today the Westside is considered the “heart” of the Latino community. The first Latin ethnic group to permanently settle in Kansas City were Mexicans who made their way to the city working with the railroads, moving up from Texas in the early 1900s. Some moved on to work in the meat-packing plants and in the icehouses before the days of refrigerated boxcars. The earliest immigrants lived in boxcars, since no one would rent to Mexicans.

The Westside continues to be home to new immigrants in a new land and a “coming home” for many families. It is a coming home because many grew up



U.S. Sen. Kit Bond (right) joined the celebrants at the grand opening of Villa del Sol. Courtesy of Westside Housing Organization.



Recreating a neighborhood means turning eyesores into assets. The same building appears in each photo, before (left) and after (below) acquisition and rehab. Courtesy of Westside Housing Organization



on the Westside and return to be close to family members. Latinos make up the majority of the community. Moving back to the Westside reconnects them to their history, offers a connection to their past and makes a commitment to their children and to their children's future.

The Westside residents who founded Westside Housing Organization as a nonprofit in 1973 recognized the importance of preserving the social, cultural and human fabric of their historic neighborhood. Westside Housing's mission—to provide safe, decent and affordable housing and related services in the Westside and affiliated neighborhoods—isn't just about buildings. It's about people, heritage and renewal.

Turning Around Historic Neglect

A 1991, Kansas City Department of Housing and Community Development study found that 80 percent of the area's housing structures urgently needed repairs, and half were in "dilapidated condition." The study estimated repair and renovation costs at \$21.7 million.

The Westside neighborhood has shown how a century of

neglect and disinvestment can be turned around. To this end, Westside Housing has substantially rehabilitated entire blocks of homes. Three out of four of the area's 4,500-plus residents have benefited from Westside Housing's programs. They include home-improvement grants and loans, single-family new construction, affordable rental housing, and community-based planning.

A leader in focusing on home ownership, Westside Housing has built and sold 55 new homes. Virtually all new houses have been pre-sold prior to completion and sold for an average of more than \$90,000. Westside Housing has purchased sufficient parcels of vacant property for development of another 17 houses. Our efforts have contributed significantly to the resurgence of the neighborhood, to rising property values, to the availability of homeowners insurance and to neighborhood stability.

Additionally, Westside Housing has increased neighborhood stability through home ownership by purchasing, rehabbing and reselling more than 35 vacant or blighted houses. One of our latest purchase/rehab activities reclaimed a drug house. In addition, Westside Housing has

provided loans and technical assistance for major rehabilitation to more than 160 homeowners.

More than 280 multifamily units, including such notable developments as Signal Hill Townhomes and Villa del Sol, have been purchased and rehabilitated or newly constructed. Our economic investment in multifamily development has topped \$21.6 million, with more than half from private sources—either as equity or mortgage loans. Westside Housing became a HUD-certified property manager in 1982 in response to problems with absentee landlords. There are currently 287 rental units under our management, including a 61-unit, congregate-living facility for the elderly and physically challenged.

Working With Partners

Much of our program activity is in support of the existing owner-occupant. Support is provided through technical assistance and access to our Tool Lending Library, which has how-to videos, books and manuals. Westside Housing also offers a range of loan and grant opportunities.

In addition to the revolving loan fund initially capitalized by Neighborhood Reinvestment, a number of other sources are utilized. They include the Lutheran Church community, local foundations and deals with private developers. As an example, a private developer had planned to construct an unpopular business development and had received tax abatement from the city. As part of that approval, Westside Housing secured a 25-year source of funds, totaling \$700,000, for repair grants for low-income homeowners.

More than 1,020 grants and small loans averaging \$2,000 for minor and emergency repair projects have been supported by these nontraditional sources.

Planning With the Community

Westside Housing has always been deeply involved in planning with the community. It was integrally involved in the development of a planning guide for the Northend neighbors in the 1980s and has been an integral part of planning efforts in the 1990s for a revised Westside Land Use Plan by the city. Other planning efforts have included joint planning with other Westside nonprofits for collective construction of new office space and a collaborative process with the Metropolitan Energy Center on establishing a long-term, sustainable approach to planning, using pollution prevention and energy conservation as organizing tools.

The Westside neighborhood has a rich and culturally and economically diverse population. While significant economic disinvestment has occurred throughout the 1960s and '70s, it is important to recognize that reinvestment may take equally as long.

Through the efforts of Westside Housing Organization and its partners, the Westside neighborhood has moved up from a neighborhood of last resort and is, again, a neighborhood of choice. ■

Gerald Shechter is executive director of Westside Housing Organization in Kansas City, Missouri.

Going to the top: Inspecting your roof

One good look at the roof of a house will tell a lot about what's going on inside. Many house repair problems have to do with trapped moisture and built-up heat. A roof's eaves, gutters and soffits will reflect any lack of proper ventilation — no matter what the source.

Your roof sheds water and sunlight away from your living space. But, an unventilated roof will hold heat and moisture in the attic.

Trapped moisture can reduce the life of a roof by half. A nonpermeable roof allows loss of granules and curling shingle tips, while wood roofs tend to rot very early.

To keep your whole house healthy, take steps to prevent built-up moisture-laden air. Prevention begins at the foundation by placing black plastic sheeting on the ground, under the house. Install enough shirting studs to equal 1 square foot of venting for every 100-square-foot area of the foundation through times with divided by 150.

In the living areas of the house, remove moist air with operable windows and vented

• Vinyl boards are the trim board at the side edge of the roof from peak to eave, and fascia boards, the trim board at the bottom of the roof. These two types protect the roof's ends and edges from rain and separate the exposed framing joists from water and contact with rotting gutters. Both should last for the life of the house.

• Gutters and downspouts prevent excess rain from damaging the windows, doors, siding and trim. When water is collected even a few feet away from the foundation, it will help prevent water from getting under the house. Splash blocks or storm drains are the best.

Nail It Down

Dave Murnen & Pat Beaty

The Aberdeen Neighborhood Housing Services' construction manager, Dave Murnen and construction specialist, Pat Beaty, regularly contribute a feature article to *The Daily World* (Aberdeen's local paper). Their feature is called "Nailing It Down", and they talk about issues such as "Moisture - it takes a toll on homes". It's simple, promotes a core NWO competency, raises the profile of both the individual line staff and the organization as a whole, markets specific services available, and helps the rehab department grow professionally and feel respected within their community.