

North Point's riches are time-tested

Milwaukee Journal Sentinel - Sunday, October 17, 1999

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Ask residents of the North Point neighborhood on Milwaukee's east side what's so special about living in this leafy, lakefront enclave and you get an effusive litany:

Magnificent old houses, no two alike. Panoramic views of the waterfront. Proximity to downtown, Lake Park, the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee and the thriving Downer Ave. shopping district, with everything from restaurants, a bookstore and an art-house movie theater to a gourmet grocery and a hardware store. A rich history and strong sense of place.

"As long as you're living in Milwaukee, I can't imagine you'd want to live anywhere else," says downtown gallery owner Katie Gingrass, who has been a North Point resident for almost a decade and loves the area so much that she and her husband, Charles Bray, have bought a second home there -- a condo -- for when they retire.

"It's unique. How many other areas are so intact and this close to the center of things?" muses Jill Heavenrich, a 38-year veteran of the neighborhood, which is bordered roughly by Lake Park on the east, Lafayette Place on the south, N. Lake Drive and N. Downer Ave. on the west and E. Park Place on the north.

Its cohesiveness, walkability and eclectic architecture, including an 1873 Victorian Gothic water tower at the east end of North Ave., make this one of the city's most sought-after neighborhoods -- "a jewel, tucked out of the way enough that living here rivals the north shore suburbs," says 20-year resident Matt Flynn, a prominent attorney.

Homes here don't stay on the market for long; many sell by word-of-mouth -- and for more than the asking price, according to Jim Christenson and Molly Abrohams, brokers with Federated Realty. The average assessed value, as of 1998, is just under \$253,000. But the average selling price, Christenson says, is closer to \$500,000; a house on E. Bradford Ave. sold recently for nearly \$800,000.

"The demand by far outstrips the supply right now," says Abrohams, a North Point resident for 27 years. "It's an area that has continued to blossom."

It sprang from unlikely roots. In the 1850s, the city turned over chunks of this bluff-lined bulge in the Lake Michigan shoreline to a string of charitable institutions: an almshouse, an orphan asylum, a hospital (St. Mary's) and even a "pesthouse" to quarantine people with contagious diseases.

In 1890, the city's park commission hired Frederick Law Olmsted's firm to design what would become Lake Park on 120 acres overlooking the lake. The park, in turn, helped fuel a residential boom. Between 1895 and 1915, many of Milwaukee's movers and shakers -- Pabsts, Blatzes, Vogels, Brumders and Trostels, to name but a few -- built mansions in the southern end of North Point. A second flurry, between 1890 and 1930, filled in the northern section.

The houses reflect a dizzying range of styles: Queen Anne, Colonial Revival, Tudor Revival and German, Flemish and English Renaissance Revival.

With their scrolled gables, imposing columns and corbeled chimneys, these are some of the most distinctive homes in Milwaukee. The architects included Alexander Eschweiler, Ferry & Clas, Crane & Barkhausen and even Frank Lloyd Wright.

"The area became a magnet for a lot of business leaders who originally lived on the west side," notes Carlen Hatala, a planner with the city's Historic Preservation Commission, which named North Point a historic district in the wake of hospital expansion in the 1970s and other threats to the area's integrity.

The designation, with its protections against demolition and insensitive exterior alterations, is considered crucial to the area's stability. Most of the neighborhood is also listed in the National Register of Historic Places, enabling owner-

occupants to take advantage of tax credits for restoring their properties.

Today, North Point is home to doctors, lawyers, cultural leaders, UWM faculty members and other professionals. The population is largely white and college-educated. There are very few families with young children.

That relative lack of diversity is a sore point for some; they fret privately that North Point is a little too close-knit.

But there is some disagreement: The plan by a local preservation group to restore the North Point lighthouse (1879) in Lake Park and turn an adjacent keeper's quarters into exhibit space for marine artifacts; and the ongoing restoration of a Tuscan garden behind Villa Terrace, a county-owned decorative arts museum at 2220 N. Terrace Ave.

Proponents see both projects as ways to inject new life into treasured landmarks. But some residents fear added traffic.

"Where are all these visitors going to park?" asks Barbara Elsner, herself a tireless preservation activist who has lived since 1955 in a Wright-designed house on N. Terrace Ave.

Chris Smocke, whose handsome, red-brick mansion is directly across from Villa Terrace, says traffic and parking are always a concern, especially on weekends. But he can live with the garden project, he says, because it will focus activity on the lake side of the museum, rather than the street.

"People here don't always agree on every issue," he adds, "but we always respect each other's opinions because we have the same goal: preserving the neighborhood."

Smocke, whose company provides owner services for the Milwaukee Art Museum expansion and other construction projects, says it's that shared commitment that keeps the area vibrant.

"Those of us who live here know that these houses have a style and ambience that can never be re-created," he says. "We're preserving a slice of life that once was."

Caption: Map JODY MITORI Journal Sentinel North Point Photo color 1 GARY PORTER STAFF PHOTOGRAPHER Many fine older homes, with no two alike, grace the North Point neighborhood. The demand for real estate there is far greater than the supply. Photo color 2 Milwaukee County Parks Department worker Anne Fitzgerald picks up flowers past their prime in the boulevard garden in Lake Park, adjacent to the North Point neighborhood. Photo color 3 GARY PORTER STAFF PHOTOGRAPHER Jim Adair of Centaur Restorations works on a chimney on Bradford Ave. in the North Point neighborhood. Many of the fine older homes are being restored.

Memo: For graphic see microfilm or bound file

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Column: Neighborhood of the Week

Record Number: MWS10170270

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