

They Hammer In The Morning, They Hammer In The Evening

Tom Condon

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It seems impossible. It seems like the happy cacophony of hammers and saws just started, but Hartford Area Habitat for Humanity just celebrated its 15th anniversary. The nonprofit group has finished 107 dwelling units.

At the party a week ago, Habitat officials shredded a mortgage document in symbolic recognition that Gail Martin, one of the first Habitat homeowners, had paid off her home loan. I've never had this experience; I can only imagine the light-headed joy.

Looking ahead, Habitat hopes to build its most ambitious project to date: 44 new, owner-occupied homes, singles and duplexes, in a three-block area in the North End near the intersection of Garden and Risley streets.

The project is still being fine-tuned and must be approved by the city. I hope it moves ahead. Hartford needs it and Habitat will do it the right way.

Building a solid, basic house for a family that needs one is a good thing. Getting volunteers to donate land and materials and build the houses is terrific. Where the local Habitat chapter wins the gold medal, at least from your favorite columnist, is in making the houses fit the neighborhood. This effort began in the mid-1990s, when Habitat ran into surprising opposition.

Neighborhood leaders in Asylum Hill brought Habitat in to build two homes on the north end of Huntington Street. Habitat was going to use its basic, Model-T design, a square, boxy house.

The neighbors said no thanks. They wanted a design that fit an area of mature shade trees and comfortable Victorian-era homes.

Though objecting to a Habitat project may have seemed like heresy, an attack on mom, baseball and expensive coffee, the neighbors were right. How the street looks is important.

As neighborhood activist Ginny Seeley put it, a building that's soundly constructed, aesthetically pleasing and compatible with the neighborhood isn't going to be boarded up in 10 years.

To Habitat's everlasting credit, they agreed. Official surveyed the other 1,400 U.S. Habitat chapters in search of a Victorian design, and found one in Cleveland.

The two Huntington Street homes were built in 1999 with steep pointed roofs, wide porches, extra windows and fancy trim. They are indistinguishable from the homes around them, and are well-maintained today.

That inclination to be both flexible and imaginative has served Habitat and the city well. The largest project to date is a row of six homes on Capen Street, and these, too, look like they were always in the neighborhood. Police say the new homes and owner-families have had a calming effect on the neighborhood, and have inspired neighbors to improve their properties.

Habitat has come back to south end of Huntington Street, on land provided by the activist Asylum Hill Congregational Church, to fill what had mostly been a parking lot with three new homes. What a difference.

"I just can't believe it. This place was a mess. Then boom, it all changed," said Lawrence Simpini. Simpini, a native of Togo in West Africa, and his wife and four children will be one of the new owners on Huntington Street.

New owners have to attend 15 workshops on a variety of topics and contribute at least 150 hours of sweat equity to the project. Simpini, a security guard, is well past his 150 hours on his new house and still working hard, said Habitat executive director Mike Stockman.

That's the essence of why this works, and why Mayor Eddie Perez wants more homeowners in the city. If you own it, you are more invested in it and more willing to get involved in the neighborhood. If the neighborhood improves, the value of the house goes up. You've got equity, a nest egg. You're in.

Among other things, multi-generational poverty kills confidence. Many people who can afford a modest home, don't believe they can even fill out the paperwork to buy it, never mind arrange the financing, insurance and myriad other details. Habitat teaches them how to do it, and stays in touch afterward, with a variety of services. "It's not just hammers and nails, it's family services and jobs," said Don Shaw, Habitat's board chairman. In the 107 houses and condominiums Habitat has built and sold, mostly in the city, there've been only two foreclosures.

Across the next 15 years, Habitat is looking for new ways to do what it does. They're talking about converting "perfect sixes" into one or two-unit structures, as has been done in Frog Hollow. They're looking at what can be done with other kinds of buildings, and considering partnerships with other organizations to resurrect entire neighborhoods.

The key to Habitat's success? Around 10,000 volunteers, from city and suburb and all walks of life, have worked on the Hartford area projects in the past 15 years. Others have donated money, materials and even land and houses. I look forward to the next 15 years.

Tom Condon is the editor of Place. He can be reached at condon@courant.com.

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