

Glendale Town Houses: Considerations for Local Historic Designation

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Heritage Preservation Commission Findings

On March 3, 2020, the Minneapolis Heritage Preservation Commission approved the local designation of the Glendale Town Houses Historic District based on three findings:

1. The historic district maintains its integrity of location and setting with an intact landscape pattern inclusive of its street and sidewalk layout.
2. The district is significant for its development pattern inclusive of its greenspace vs. hardscape and its relationship to the building forms.
3. The buildings are uniform in their brick veneer exteriors, fenestration pattern, entryway placement and overall massing, which are the character defining features of the buildings in this historic district.

These findings support local designation under Designation Criterion 5 for exemplifying a landscape pattern distinguished by innovation, rareness, uniqueness, and quality of design. While the findings appropriately highlight the property's landscape and aesthetic characteristics, additional areas of significance and other factors should be considered as well.

Additional Areas of Significance

Property Type

Properties having architectural merit are readily visible to a passerby, while those with historical significance are often identified only after extensive research on the property and its context. Fanciful Victorian-era houses, for example, are more obvious candidates for designation than vernacular ranch houses from the mid-1950s. If research reveals that the 1950s houses were part of an initiative to desegregate South Minneapolis, though, their significance is evident. Such was the case with the Tilsenbilt homes, now a local historic district. The preservation field is working to rectify its early architectural bias by looking at property types that were previously ignored such as vernacular houses, factories, highway corridors—and public housing complexes.

Glendale was an innovative development in a city that lagged behind the nation in public housing. According to a 1959 report, Minneapolis had only 648 of the country's 242,000 units of public housing. The city's cohort was in two complexes. Sumner Field, completed in 1938 and demolished in the late twentieth century, was the sole pre-World War II example, while Glendale was the first in the post-war period. The latter was developed by the city's newly minted Housing and Redevelopment Authority (HRA), created in 1947. Soon after Glendale was built, the HRA shifted its approach, favoring dense, high-rise apartment buildings. Glendale is an early product of the HRA and a rare example of its townhouse design. As such, the Glendale Town

Houses meet Designation Criterion 4 for embodying the distinctive characteristics of an architectural type.¹

Significant Historical Events/Patterns

The Glendale Town House complex also meets Designation Criterion 1 for exemplifying broad patterns of cultural, political, economic, and social history.

Veterans coming back from World War II were eager to put the conflict behind them and start families, but housing was in short supply. A number of factors made the issue more acute. At the beginning of the twentieth century, much of the country's older housing stock lacked modern conveniences and was deteriorating. The situation only got worse during the Great Depression, when little housing was built. A study of Minneapolis's residential units in the 1930s found 46.4 percent in good condition, 38.7 percent needing minor repairs, 13.2 percent requiring major repairs, and 1.6 percent "unfit for use."² After Pearl Harbor, materials and transportation systems were dedicated to defense and residential construction virtually stopped. When the war wound down, the lack of housing became a crisis as frustrated veterans organized protests around the country. Congress soon introduced programs to address the problem and, at the same time, help the country's economy transition from war to peace. Vacant factories, no longer needed to make tanks and bullets, could be repurposed to produce refrigerators and stoves.

The Glendale Town House project was a product of this important period. Minneapolis entered the post-war era led by a new mayor, Hubert H. Humphrey, who had made the housing shortage a central issue in his campaign. Even before being sworn in on July 2, 1945, he met with federal officials and looked at other major cities to learn how they were addressing the crisis. A biographer observed, "Few metropolitan mayors were more energetic, more creative, or more visible than Humphrey in the struggle to solve the postwar housing crisis, and his actions gained him national attention as a 'can-do' political leader of tremendous promise." Humphrey retained a strong interest in Minneapolis's affairs after joining the U.S. Senate in 1949 and was a featured speaker at Glendale's dedication in 1952.³

A contemporary article in the *Minneapolis Star* explained that Glendale was "the city's first step in a postwar program to provide homes for low income families and reclaim blighted areas." The paper included a photograph of one of the first tenants—"a disabled veteran who stays home and takes care of the children and some of the housework while his wife . . . works as a telephone operator." The family's previous residence was "a third-floor flat . . . where they shared a second-floor bathroom with 10 other persons." A couple in their seventies moved into one of Glendale's units from "a dark two-room flat . . . where water from the bath they shared with 27 others often leaked down on them." They were delighted with the well-behaved children in their new neighborhood. "Where we used to live, it seems the kids were always doing something they shouldn't. Fighting, and making too much noise. But they had just the alleys to play in." Glendale, in contrast, provided ample outdoor space for children and their parents to enjoy.⁴

¹ "More Public Housing?" *Minneapolis Star*, August 20, 1959.

² Calvin Schmit, *Social Saga of Two Cities: An Ecological and Statistical Study of Social Trends in Minneapolis and St. Paul* (Minneapolis: Bureau of Social Research, Minneapolis Council of Social Agencies, 1937), 213.

³ Gary W. Reichard, "Mayor Hubert H. Humphrey," *Minnesota History*, Summer 1998, 50–67.

⁴ George Rice, "Dad, Mom, Children—All Like Glen-Dale," *Minneapolis Star*, October 10, 1952.

Glendale’s location and design fostered community activism and innovation. Tenants launched a campaign in 1958 to “pressure the city to put poor people on the board of its Housing and Redevelopment Authority.” Specifically, they wanted “three of the five commissioners [to] be from housing projects or other low-income areas.” While the effort was apparently not successful—an HRA spokesman asserted that “the commission had to be ‘qualified businessmen first’ because of the amount of money they handle”—it foreshadowed later pressures that the agency would face. Around the same time, residents and others from the surrounding neighborhood organized a cooperative grocery in Glendale’s community center. In the following decade, the center hosted the city’s first year-round privately funded Head Start program.⁵

Finally, Glendale should be recognized as a precursor to the major urban renewal campaign that the city undertook in subsequent years. Following on the heels of Glendale, the city embarked on the Glenwood redevelopment project in Near North Minneapolis, which anticipated clearing fifty-one acres for new light industry and fifty acres for multifamily housing for 1,400 families. The next target was downtown, in decline as businesses and shoppers gravitated to suburbia. Plans proposed demolition of some 40 percent of downtown’s building stock, and the effort ultimately produced the Nicollet Mall and a string of new and renovated commercial buildings. As at Glendale, the goal was to replace blight with new development that would revitalize the area. Glendale’s success gave planners confidence that this could be done on a larger scale.

Equity

Catalyzed by the events of the past year, preservationists are examining the preservation infrastructure, a product of the culture that has dominated our country since the colonial era. Not surprisingly, the existing system has led to a preponderance of properties considered historically significant for their association with people who are white, male, Christian, straight, and prosperous. Likewise, aesthetics weigh heavily on evaluations of significance, favoring high-style buildings or vernacular properties with pristine features. These biases devalue properties that have, like the people associated with them, experienced different and sometimes difficult realities and expressed standards of beauty not conforming to “mainstream” parameters. Often unacknowledged, these people and properties have played significant roles in our nation’s history. With thoughtful adjustments in how regulations are interpreted and programs are implemented, the preservation infrastructure seems flexible enough to accommodate the diversity of America’s history. That said, the recalibration process is complex and challenging and progress can be slow.

The issue of “historic integrity” is a case in point. Many properties fall in gray zones where more than one interpretation of the same condition can be justified by the seven “aspects of integrity” outlined in National Register bulletins, so it is not surprising when preservationists reach opposing conclusions. Going forward, alterations resulting from pragmatic maintenance efforts or from aesthetic preferences not embraced by the dominant culture should not be simply shrugged off as diminishing a property’s authenticity. The alterations could, instead, be valued as

⁵ “Housing, Redevelopment: Poor People Want Places on Board,” *Minneapolis Tribune*, August 1, 1958; Maurice Hobbs, “Little Co-op Store Planning to Expand,” *Minneapolis Star*, November 6, 1967; “First Private Head Start Program Begins,” *Minneapolis Star*, March 11, 1969.

another chapter of a property's history, or the impact of these changes could be inconsequential given the nature of the property's significance.

Climate Change

The greenest building is one that is already built. Preserving existing buildings supports the Minneapolis 2040 Plan's environmental goals. These buildings hold the imbedded energy that produced their brick, wood, and other materials and was expended on their construction. Demolition can recapture a fraction of this energy, at best, and creates waste that must be disposed of somehow, somewhere. New construction starts the cycle again.

Design Guidelines

The best way to preserve historic properties is to keep them in use and make sensitive modifications to meet current needs. With this perspective, as part of the designation process the Heritage Preservation Commission—together with the property owner and residents—will develop design guidelines tailored to the unique characteristics of the Glendale Town Houses. The guidelines will focus on exterior features (e.g., building facades, landscape). Interior changes are not covered by the guidelines and can be done without Heritage Preservation Commission review as long as they do not affect the exterior. The guidelines will be based on standards established by the U.S. Secretary of the Interior and the National Park Service that provide best practices for maintaining historic properties. The standards allow necessary alterations while avoiding changes that would compromise a property's historic features. There are usually many ways to address a problem or need. While some solutions might not meet the standards, others will. Preservation is about being thoughtful custodians of cultural resources, not about freezing a property at a point in time.