

Making neighborhoods shine: Layton Boulevard West keeps up homes' history

By JERRY ZIEGLER

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Look no further than the banner on one of the pages on the Layton Boulevard West Neighbors' Web site to see who it welcomes: The greeting is in Hmong, Spanish, German, Irish, Polish and Italian.

Houses in the Layton Boulevard West neighborhood are as diverse as its population. Stately brick homes grace Layton Blvd., while Polish flats, Milwaukee bungalows, Arts and Crafts and assorted frame, brick and stucco houses are scattered along nearby streets.

Residents have made plenty of progress spiffing up their homes' interiors, says Barbara McKillop, community outreach coordinator for the Layton Boulevard West Neighbors group.

Now, the Layton Boulevard West Neighbors' Most Improved House Contest is aimed at inspiring them to freshen up their homes' exteriors.

Central to the neighborhood is the sprawling international headquarters of the School Sisters of St. Francis between S. Layton Blvd., S. 29th St., W. Greenfield Ave. and W. Lapham St. It dates from 1891 but after 100 years has evolved into more than the motherhouse for the sisters.

Not far from the religious complex is a different sort of shrine, which draws pilgrims from around the world to see work of master architect Frank Lloyd Wright.

Early in the 20th century, developer Arthur L. Richards asked Wright to come up with a design for low-cost housing. Wright responded with plans for four duplexes and two single-family homes.

They were built more than 90 years ago and still sit side by side on W. Burnham Ave. east of S. 28th St.

The Arlington Heights Home Project is a more recent, and different, type of experiment. It was completed in 2004 on a site overlooking the Menomonee Valley, along S. 38th and S. 39th streets, once occupied by company houses built by mining company P&H.

There's room for four houses to be added to the cluster of 11 energy-efficient, three-bedroom homes intended for low- and middle-income families.

McKillop notes that the Layton Blvd. neighborhood offers plenty of affordable houses for first-time homeowners.

"LBWN offers \$2,500 for down payment and closing assistance to qualified families who buy a home in the neighborhood," she said. "We offer this in our Home Buyer Education program. We also administer funds for senior homeowners who may need accessibility modifications. This program helps long-time homeowners remain independent in their own homes."

Homes with character

Ben and Katie Liesch have lived on W. Pierce St. since August of 2006. They were married in the 104-year-old house they found and fell in love with.

Liesch, a stay-at-home mom, and her husband, Ben, an artist, came to the Silver City section of the Layton Boulevard West neighborhoods because they had friends who lived in the area and because of the attractive price for their five-bedroom, two-bath house.

"We looked at it and said, 'We can fix that baby up,' she said. "We can't see moving now."

Lyn Eckert moved to S. 30th St. 6½ years ago after living for a long time in Brookfield.

"The home is what brought me to the neighborhood," she said.

Her four-bedroom house was built in 1910 and has a mix of features, drawing from Arts and Crafts and Federal styles, and has a brick and stucco exterior. Eckert loves the broad staircase, the three-season porch and especially the maple floors and oak features in the house.

Its original barn, complete with hayloft, is a vestige of the end of an era when people still had horses as a primary means of transportation.

That blend of past and present is a strong draw for newcomers to the neighborhood, McKillop said. "There's such great architectural detail," she said.

Food and culture

It's not hard to find food anywhere in the neighborhood, from the El Rey store at 3524 W. Burnham Ave., to favorite spots on the south edge of the neighborhood such as the Wild Flour Bakery at 2800 W. Lincoln Ave. and Don's Pub at 3300 W. Lincoln Ave.

And the owner of Barnacle Bud's is refurbishing a building for a new bar and restaurant expected to open this year at S. 37th and W. Becher Street

Eckert, who sells Medicare insurance and other insurance products for a Houston-based firm, said the convenience of the neighborhood is another plus, especially since commercial development sprang up along Miller Park Way.

For Katie Liesch, the blend of cultures in her W. Pierce St. area has been a delight.

"We love how diverse it is," she said. "I like that we're part of the neighborhood."

Most of the people in their area speak Spanish, but that was no impediment. "We were well-received here," she said.

"I like the diversity of the neighborhood," Eckert said.

"I always hoped to make a difference in the world. In the Layton neighborhood, there's always that possibility."

Whole builds on the parts

What does the future hold? Eckert is optimistic. "My guess is that this will become a very fashionable neighborhood in the next 10 years," she said.

Eckert's restoration work on the first floor of her home has been featured in a video promoting the neighborhood.

She also plans to take advantage of the Target Investment Neighborhood program offered by the City of Milwaukee, which offers low-interest loans for work on homes in part of the Layton Blvd. neighborhood.

The strength of the Layton Boulevard West Neighbors group rests on the building blocks of the individual areas within the large neighborhood.

Layton Boulevard West Neighbors has a community outreach program for block clubs and improvement projects, McKillop said.

Those block clubs worked on such things as front-yard gardens for every house on a block or address plaques or additional outside lighting and numbers on the garage side of lots.

Eckert is also active in such neighborhood projects.

"My involvement started because of my garden," she said.

When she moved in, her yard was a blank slate with little growing. Now she has a garden filled with perennials. From there she got involved with neighborhood groups.

"There's not a gray area" in the neighborhood, she said.

"Either people care or they don't care" about the neighborhood.



By: Karen Sherloc

The houses in Layton Boulevard West neighborhoods range from stately brick to Arts and Crafts to Polish flats. There also are these Frank Lloyd Wright homes, which were commissioned by Arthur L. Richards and built around 1916 on W. Burnham Ave. near S. 28th St.



By: Karen Sherloc

Developer Arthur L. Richards asked Frank Lloyd Wright to design affordable homes, and Wright came up with plans for four duplexes and two single-family homes on W. Burnham Street