

Homes with history: Explore 3 old Detroit neighborhoods

Michael H. Hodges / Detroit News Arts Writer



Those looking to buy houses often ignore Detroit, picturing little but the standard images of decay and abandonment.

But the city boasts a number of districts with rock-bottom prices and old houses full of the sort of architectural detailing that's either unavailable in the suburbs or costs a small fortune.

The Boston-Edison Historic District, of course, hogs the limelight in the great-house department. But three handsome west-side neighborhoods with more modest homes -- Corktown, Rosedale Park and the University District -- have done a good job of fending off blight and are well worth a look.

For all the virtues of new construction, it's hard to beat homes built before World War II.

"To be honest," says Karen Nagher, Preservation Wayne's executive director, "houses like the ones in these three neighborhoods just aren't going to happen again."

Corktown



As the signs proudly proclaim, Corktown is Detroit's oldest surviving neighborhood -- once the landing spot for Irish immigrants, many of whom came from County Cork.

Situated on the south side of Michigan Avenue near Tiger Stadium, Corktown suffered for years from that proximity. All too often, houses tumbled to make room for parking lots, the bane of urban life.

Still, much of the original fabric remains intact, from one-story, New Orleans-style shotgun cottages with pointy Gothic window molding to larger Queen Annes with their turrets and wraparound porches.

"I love the neighborhood," says Ryan Cooley, who lives in Corktown and owns O'Connor Realty nearby. "It's so close to a major downtown, but still feels like this tiny neighborhood. You know your neighbors, and everybody looks out for one another."

Indeed, stroll the blocks near Bagley and Brooklyn streets and see if "intimate" doesn't come to mind.

As for crime, architect Brian Hurrtenne -- who lives atop a small brick commercial building -- calls it petty stuff. "Corktown has an advantage in that it's somewhat isolated and cut off from bad neighborhoods," he says.

Cooley says houses on the market range from one with "heavy termite damage" for \$20,000 to a nicely renovated home on Church Street priced at \$199,000.

Rosedale Park



Rosedale Park and its fancier sister, North Rosedale Park, straddle Grand River just west of the Southfield Expressway. The district was built up mostly in the 1920s and '30s -- what some call the golden age of American homebuilding.

North Rosedale Park is characterized by winding, suburban-style streets with the sorts of imposing houses in spacious yards you'd expect to see in older parts of the Grosse Pointes or in Birmingham.

Houses south of Grand River are generally less palatial, but still boast a level of architectural detailing -- from elaborate stonework, instead of brick, to English-style, half-timbered upper stories -- rarely seen in modest homes.

Like much of residential Detroit, the area is heavy with English Tudor Revival houses -- the ones with the pointed, arched rooflines, often framing the front door -- as well as stone-and-clapboard Colonial Revival and craftsman bungalows with their low-slung front porches.

Underlining an overall sense of graciousness are streets that often divide around large, grassy medians planted with mature trees.

Artist Charles McGee has lived in Rosedale Park since 1977, and calls it "this little utopia."

"To me," he says, "Rosedale Park looks like an eclectic beautiful piece of art. No two homes are alike. And there's definitely a neighborhood feeling. Every summer, each block has its own party, and each block has its own captain to help with problems."

Most desirable, says Robert LaBute at Real Estate Management Specialists, are houses built by the late contractor George Duke, famed for their detailing and workmanship. Curious whether it's a Duke home or not? Look for the tell-tale brass plaque in the vestibule.

Right now, houses on the market range from an asking price of \$19,000 to \$100,000. All the same, LaBute adds, "99 percent of my sales these days are in foreclosures."

University District



Homes in the University District, right across Six Mile from the University of Detroit Mercy's Spanish Revival campus, bear considerable resemblance to those in North Rosedale Park -- no surprise, since the two developments went up at about the same time.

This neighborhood, which stretches to Seven Mile between Livernois and the Detroit Golf Club, features large homes on tree-lined streets that were built in a riot of architectural styles. You can take your pick of Tudor Revival, Spanish Mission with red-tile roofs, and manor-like French Provincial brick homes with large shutters and steep rooflines.

Houses currently on the market, says Lolita Haley at Prime Financial Plus Realty, range from \$30,000 to a four-bedroom with four baths for \$175,000. As for crime, Haley points out that the U-District -- like Palmer Woods and other nearby neighborhoods -- employs a private security service.

Christina Heximer, associate director of the U-D Mercy's Design Center, says she's always been impressed by the housing stock in the district. "The homes aren't cookie-cutter," she says. "They're very solid and picturesque."

In general, adds LaBute in a remark that applies to both Rosedale Park and the U-District, "You're just not going to find the quality and workmanship in the suburbs that you'll find here. In the 1920s and '30s, the money was in Detroit, not Ferndale and Royal Oak."