

Feeling safe at home in Old Highland

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Angie Nelson, front, and Jean Mangan are landlords who not only own homes in the neighborhood — it's their neighborhood, too.
Photo: Steve Brandt, Star Tribune

The late **Charlie Nelson** was the Minnesota Historical Society's historical architect, so it's understandable that he had his heart set on a Queen Anne-style, Victorian-era house when he and his wife, Angie, went shopping for a home back in 1971.

Angie Nelson can still remember leafing through a Minneapolis listing book with a real estate agent, with Charlie rejecting homes left and right until the agent reluctantly told them: "There are places in north Minneapolis. You probably wouldn't like it."

The agent made sure they'd driven the neighborhood, which abutted Plymouth Avenue where riots had occurred only four years earlier, before he showed them the house.

But as soon as they walked in, Angie recalls, "Charlie said, 'This is it!'"

The Nelsons paid \$14,000 for their 1898 three-story frame house with twin spires on Dupont Avenue N. In doing so, they pioneered a renaissance of a neighborhood in which some homes like theirs were still owned by the children of the original owners, many of whom were merchants on nearby Broadway or Washington avenues.

Word of mouth about the neighborhood's richly detailed homes, with lavish wood inside and ornamentation abounding outside, slowly drew a critical mass of buyers, many of them young professionals holding the same sort of values as the Nelsons regarding what they wanted in housing. They concentrated between Plymouth and Broadway, west of Lyndale Avenue. By 1974, they'd formed a mini-neighborhood within the Near North neighborhood, branding their 30-block area as Old Highland, with the catchphrase, "A small town in a big city."

But some new residents didn't stop there. Some became landlords, usually buying places just down the street. About one in every seven rental properties in the neighborhood is owned by a neighborhood resident. Nelson, for example, owns four. Two of them are neighboring houses to the south that she's rehabbed. One was documented by Charlie Nelson as the oldest surviving house on the North Side, dating to the late 1860s. It was moved off Broadway for a strip mall.

Jean Mangan is another resident landlord. She and her husband, **Jack**, own a duplex three doors around the corner from the Emerson Avenue N. duplex they rehabbed. The brick duplex was built in 1905 for **Vincent Schuler**, who opened a shoe store in 1889 at Washington and Broadway, launching a chain that's still in the family three generations later.

Sometimes they snapped up houses because the city had begun demolishing the area's older housing stock, inserting modern housing that didn't fit the neighborhood. "Those of us who live here care deeply about these houses," Nelson said.

Others were bought as defensive measures when residents worried that an absentee landlord would fill them up without screening who moved in. "If you want to control your block, buy the property next to you," Mangan said. "When you have a good property, it's a good influence on the neighborhood."

Mangan spent long weeks stripping wallpaper and melting paint off of old wood. She chased out raccoons and feral cats that were freeloading in the soffits. Her next door neighbor, **Brian Bushay**, handled contracting chores, as he has for numerous rehabs in the area.

"This is a big piece of my retirement," said the 55-year-old physical therapist, after investing in both building systems and furnishings. She admits that there are other investments that might make better economic sense, but she enjoys her tenants.

Some tenants move on to buy into the neighborhood. **Tom Sis** moved into one of Nelson's rentals in 1981 with a friend, living there five years before leaving the neighborhood. When a foreclosed house came on the market for \$35,000 in 1991, the chance at the 1907 foursquare lured him back. "It was

inexpensive and I love older houses -- the bang for the buck," he said.

Part of the reason that Mangan, Nelson and others have put down roots and stayed is the neighborliness their efforts have fostered. There are frequent porch parties in the summer and wine-and-cheese gatherings in the winter. At least half a dozen garages have been erected in all-day events at which neighbors show up to work under Bushay's supervision.

There are ordinary folks in Old Highland and there's Congressman **Keith Ellison**, who owns an Italianate place on Bryant, built in 1882. Or state Sen. **Linda Higgins**, who's married to Bushay. Insight News is housed in a 1903 place with a second-story wrought-iron balcony that some call "Tara" for its resemblance to the fictional house in "Gone With the Wind."

The pride neighbors feel for their neighborhood was evident in the walking tours residents developed in the 1980s. Now it's being updated for the digital age, thanks to a \$7,000 Legacy Fund grant made through the Minnesota Historical Society. A first phase identified 92 properties with architectural or historical significance. That's been refined to 66 properties after a second look. The next phase will be to develop a downloadable updated walking tour, along with a printed version. Some of the area's most notable properties can be viewed at tinyurl.com/27zckh5.

The North Side gets a bad rep because it's had more homicides than the rest of the city combined. But Nelson points out the simple truth that any part of the city has its good and bad neighborhoods, something that's evident to anyone who spends much time roaming the North Side. Her area is great for convenience to downtown and the freeway system. Buyers get more house for the money. People can walk to the nearby Cub store on Broadway.

Crime incident maps show Old Highland is way different from the troubled pockets of the North Side, Mangan asserts. That's because she and her neighbors aren't shy about calling for city help to deal with a landlord who rents to problematic tenants. She's willing to take anyone on a walking tour of her neighborhood to prove that they'll feel safe.

One of her tenants hails from the exurban city of Jordan. She's a college student who found Mangan's duplex offered more space for the money than Bryn Mawr, where she'd been living. Before she moved in, her father pulled crime maps and then drove Old Highland.

"He said to her, 'You're moving to a *good* part of north Minneapolis.'"

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