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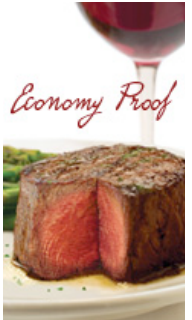
Where the Wild

Things Are

By: Mike Dominelli

Built in the streamlined, austere classical style popular in the 1930s, the Scottish Rite Masonic Center on North Charles Street looks more like a library or a museum than the event space it now is. Monumental marble stairs lead from the street up to a double-height portico. Its strict symmetry and neoclassical facade stand in stark contrast with its Tuscany-Canterbury neighbors, the Modernist-style Highfield House and other apartment high-rises. And about a year ago, the building was in danger of being destroyed.

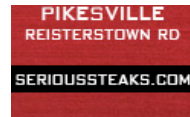
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The ornate building sits on a large piece of densely developable land in an affluent residential neighborhood. When rumors that the Masons were planning to sell began to circulate, neighbors feared possible demolition and redevelopment. Preservationists and neighborhood activists spent the summer of 2007 lobbying the owners and the city, and they were able to save the building through a process called landmarking.

Landmarking is meant to preserve buildings of historical and cultural significance by protecting them from demolition or historically inaccurate alteration. Although more than 8,000 buildings are within Baltimore's Commission for Historical and Architectural Preservation (CHAP) historic districts or are individual landmarks, a surprising number of significant buildings and neighborhoods are not protected. Roland Park, for instance, has only the very limited protection of National Register designation, which can prevent buildings inside its boundaries from being knocked down by the government, but doesn't necessarily keep a homeowner from painting his grand English Tudor-style house pink, or tearing it down completely.

Landmarking is a quietly bureaucratic process that doesn't possess the drama or the pageantry of waving protest signs at advancing bulldozers. But many city neighborhoods are learning that it can be the best way to preserve their history. And it's becoming easier to achieve. Until about four years ago, landmarks were only designated with the property owner's consent, and usually at the owner's request. But in recent years there have been more landmark designations made at the behest of the surrounding community—occasionally over the protest of property owners.

The increase in community-inspired landmarking is partly due to the changes at CHAP. In 2004, CHAP merged with the city planning department, providing the commission with more staff people with experience in the field; in 2006, a new troupe of commissioners—including Tyler Gearhart, executive director of Preservation Maryland, and historian Philip J. Merrill, who specializes in African American history—was installed. "Our current commissioners have been more proactive on designation," says Edward Leon, a city planner in the preservation division.

The increase in community-based landmarking also reflects changes in public attitude, both in Baltimore and elsewhere. "Now is an exciting time for preservation. It's becoming more mainstream, and more embraced by the public," says local preservationist Eric L. Holcomb, author of the 2005 book *The City as Suburb: A History of Northeast Baltimore Since 1660*.

Citizens need to discuss which structures need protection, before demolition or redevelopment becomes an issue. If a group or neighborhood association feels a building is significant enough to preserve, it has to write letters to the mayor, the district's City Council representative, and to CHAP requesting landmark designation. CHAP will then research the building, hold a public hearing, and vote on the suggestion. Finally, the planning commission, the city council, and the mayor have to sign off on the bill. The whole process takes several months, but it can be effective: "In all but the most unusual of circumstances, local landmark designation prevents demolition," says Leon.

Should the main Pratt Library on Cathedral Street be a landmark? It's not. How about the domed Johns Hopkins Hospital on Broadway? It's not. These are obvious candidates, though. What about the buildings that may be under the radar of the city as a whole, but are essential features of their communities? What about that great old building with the odd history or beautiful architecture right around the corner from your house? Now's the time to ask.

—Mike Dominelli, an engineer for the Baltimore firm Kennedy, Porter & Associates, wrote about the architectural value of pre-war public housing in the *March* issue.

**FULL PHOTO CAPTIONS:**

- 1- Not a Landmark: The baroque-Italian-style St. Mary's Seminary (5400 Roland Ave.) is the oldest seminary in the United States; it moved to its current location from the west side in 1927 and was completed in 1954. The site comprises almost fifty-nine acres of developable land in Roland Park and is valued at more than \$32 million.
- 2- Protected: The classical-style Scottish Rite Masonic Center (3800 N. Charles St.) was almost sold to developers. At the community's request, CHAP has voted to add the building to the landmark rolls, which would likely prevent demolition or inaccurate alteration of the building. It should be officially added to the roster by fall.
- 3- Not a Landmark: School 33 Art Center (1427 Light St.) has provided artist exhibition and education space for more than twenty years at the southern end of Federal Hill. The city doesn't have many 19th century schoolhouses left, but they all seem to have similar imposing, turreted facades. The programs here are funded by the city, which also owns the building. It is valued at about \$700,000, and Baltimore is facing budget deficits.
- 4- Not a Landmark: Atomic Books (1100 W. 36th St.) is a rare bit of high-style Georgian Revival in the middle of Hampden. Built in the early 1900s as a bank, its multi-paned windows, cupola, and thick brick walls contrast with its diminutive size. Zoning allows additional stories to be built on top of it as-of-right, with no public input.

Landmark status would most likely prevent this.

5- Not a Landmark: The former Patterson Park Junior High School (101 S. Ellwood Ave.), just east of Patterson Park, might be the best Art Deco building in the city. It was built in 1933 and takes up a full city block. Its seven stories of Bauhaus-inspired industrialism tower over the surrounding two-story rowhouses, but its bulk feels more monumental than overwhelming, and its size is softened by the warm, multicolored brick banding and large steel windows that stripe its facade. Used until 2006 as Highlandtown Middle School, the now-vacant structure is valued at \$23 million and has been offered up to developers.

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**PAST ISSUES**

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