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Howard U. in Washington Looks to Its Neighbors

By JAMES R. HARDCASTLE

WASHINGTON— A COOPERATIVE effort by Howard University and the Fannie Mae mortgage-financing agency is bringing new life to Le Droit Park, a neighborhood rich in architecture and African American history, but full of boarded-up town houses left vacant by the exodus of the black middle class from the inner city.

Fannie Mae, the nation's largest provider of home mortgage financing, agreed in 1997 to join Howard in revitalizing the area surrounding the university. The new partners agreed that their first task would be to renovate houses owned by the university and building new ones on Howard's vacant lots. The Fannie Mae Foundation, an independent nonprofit group specializing in housing problems that draws its sole support from its namesake, invested \$1 million in studies of land use, streetscapes and commercial development needed to support the initiative.

Recently, two university employees moved into freshly renovated turn-of-the-century town houses south of the Howard campus that they had purchased from the university. A third buyer will be joining them soon.

The residences that the employees purchased are among 14 virtually identical narrow town houses on one side of Oakdale Place facing a parking garage on the edge of the main campus. For more than 10 years, only one person, Lillie Robinson, lived on the otherwise boarded-up block of town houses. Now, all but two of the units Howard owns on the street have been renovated. "Mrs. Robinson did something very few people accomplish," said H. Patrick Swygert, Howard's president. "She outwaited an institution."

In a report last year, Concord Partners, a consultant commissioned by the Fannie Mae Foundation to study the area, called the amount of vacant and abandoned housing surrounding the university "staggering." Of the five neighborhoods near the historically black university, the report said, the worst problem is in the Le Droit Park area to the south of the school, where 90 buildings, or 18 percent of all residential properties there, are vacant or abandoned. Concord identified Howard as by far the largest owner of vacant homes in the area.

Howard's properties in the Le Droit Park neighborhood, most of which is on the National Register of Historic Places, include the 12 narrow town houses on both sides of Mrs. Robinson's house, 15 larger town houses and an equal number of vacant town-house lots acquired in the 1970s and 1980s to accommodate future expansion of Howard's health facilities.

The threat to the neighborhood posed by the university's proposed expansion and the impact its boarded up properties had on its neighbors severely strained relations between Howard and Le Droit Park residents and preservationists, said Mr. Swygert.

Shortly after Mr. Swygert became president of the university in 1995, plans to expand the campus into the Le Droit Park community were dropped. To help revitalize the community and rebuild Howard's relations with its neighbors, the university began to open facilities along the commercial Georgia Avenue corridor to its west.

In 1996 and 1997, Howard moved its data center into the top two floors of an old Wonder Bread factory, and opened a community association center in a former convenience store and a joint Howard University Security/Metropolitan Police Department station in what had been a liquor store.

So far, 24 people have signed contracts to buy town houses the university is rehabilitating or building anew. Contract purchasers range from members of the university's cleaning staff to medical doctors, said C. Peter Behringer, a development consultant retained by Howard.

The renovated units range from the 12-foot-wide town houses built around the turn of the century to a 1,680 square-foot Victorian with ornamental brick detailing selling for \$173,000. The new units, which use several different styles to fit in with the eclectic architecture of the neighborhood, range in size from 1,300 to 1,680 square feet and sell for \$140,000 to \$175,000.

Suman Sorg, an architect retained by Howard for its renovation project, said it was a challenge to lay out rooms in the 12-foot-wide town houses so that beds and sofas would fit. But all of them have two bedrooms, a modern kitchen, a first floor powder room and a high-tech wiring system to each room connected to fiberoptic cable installed in the alley by Bell Atlantic, the Howard/Fannie Mae venture's technology partner. The wiring system gives homeowners high-speed access to university computers and the Internet.

The low price of the narrow town houses -- \$89,500 -- makes them available to college instructors and support staff members, said Hassan Minor Jr., a university vice president.

EMPLOYEES can make a down payment as low as 3 percent because Howard gives them a 7 percent subsidy. The university also gives the subsidy to policemen, firefighters and teachers in District of Columbia schools who are willing to live in the homes for five years.

Fannie Mae is making below market rate 30-year financing at 5.9 percent available to new Le Droit Park homeowners by purchasing special mortgage revenue bonds issued by the District of Columbia Housing Finance Agency.

Ms. Sorg, the architect, said the the new homes the university will build in the Le Droit Park neighborhood will have the same exterior features as houses she is designing for a project in Georgetown that will sell for \$750,000 to \$1.4 million.

One major reason for the low price of the renovated houses is that it only reflects the cost of rehabilitating the properties. Howard University is writing off its cost to acquire and carry the properties to attract the families needed to bring new life to the community, Dr. Minor said. In addition, design, construction and management costs are lower because Fannie Mae made low-cost flexible financing available to the university.

From the beginning, Howard University and Le Droit Park have been inextricably bound. In 1873, six years after Howard University was founded primarily to educate young blacks, Amzi L. Barber, a university trustee, resigned his post and purchased 40 acres from the university.

He hired James H. McGill, an architect and engraver, to develop a subdivision he named Le Droit Park (after the given name of his father-in-law, Le Droit Langdon). The whites-only subdivision emphasized seclusion, fine houses and proximity to downtown Washington. A brick and iron fence was installed at the front of Le Droit Park and a high board fence was built to separate it from a black settlement called Howard Town.

By 1877, 41 new houses, all designed by McGill, had been built, using a number of styles, including Italian villa, Gothic Revival, Queen Anne, Second Empire and Italianate. A number of these homes are still in existence.

Nearby black residents soon tired of walking around the gated community. In July 1888, they tore down the board fence in protest, according to a brochure published by the District of Columbia Historic Preservation Office. By 1891, the fence was abandoned. Soon afterward, the district government took over the streets and opened them to public access and remaining lots were sold to speculators who began to develop Queen Anne row houses.

In 1893, a black barber in the Capitol moved his family to Le Droit Park. The next year a second couple, Robert Terrell, a Harvard-educated lawyer who was the first black municipal court judge in the district, and his wife, Mary, a foreign-languages teacher and women's activist, moved in.

Notable African Americans who made Le Droit Park their home in the first half of the century include Senator Edward Brooke of Massachusetts; Ralph Bunche, the United Nations official who was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize in 1950 for negotiating armistices between Israel and the Arab countries after the 1948 war; Gen. Benjamin O. Davis Sr., the nation's first black general, and Walter Washington, the first black mayor of Washington, who has lived at the same home on T Street since 1941.

Photo: Rehabilitated town houses on Oakdale Place. A 19th-century mansion in the Le Droit Park historic district. (Photographs by Michael Geissinger for The New York Times) Map of Washington, D.C., highlighting LeDroit Park Historic District.