Alexandria neighborhood could make historic list

BY CYNTHIA D. JARDON
The Town Talk
ALEXANDRIA - The Garden District is the only neighborhood in Alexandria on the National Register of Historic Places, but if local preservationists are successful, the city could soon add a second historic district to the list.

This one, a group of mid-century modern homes, would be the first of its kind in the state, according to Paul Smith, a local preservationist and preservation tax credit consultant.

"Suddenly all this 'new' stuff is old, at least as far as historic preservation is concerned," Smith said. The homes built during the modernist movement are more than 50 years old and now qualify as historic structures.

The Garden District, noted for its Craftsman/bungalow, Colonial revival and Tudor revival homes, was placed on Louisiana's National Register of Historic Places in April 2001. The district is bounded roughly by Marye Street, Bolton Avenue, White Street and Bayou Hynson.

Neighbors and preservationists are working to get this second area in the city, known currently as the Mattie O. Ball neighborhood, recognized as a historic district for its mid-century modern homes.

Dr. Robert Freedman and his wife Nydia Freedman live in a mid-century home on Kimball Avenue in Alexandria. Freedman said she was interested in the neighborhood on the historic register. "We'd love to help in any way we can. It's kind of cool."

The neighborhood, which extends roughly from Elliott Street to Darby Street and from Kimball Avenue to Texas Avenue, already has been surveyed by preservation experts from Baton Rouge.

"They found somewhere around 100 mid-century modern structures," said Joe Betty Sterkx, president of the Alexandria Historical Preservation Commission and a local Realtor.

Sterkx said she referred to the area as the Mattie O. Ball neighborhood now because that is who owned a lot of the land and developed it. City maps also refer to the area as Petrus Heights and Mimosa Place.

"We need a name," Lord said. "And we'd like the homeowners to help decide on one."

Freedman said she was intrigued by the idea of thinking about what to name the neighborhood.

The city's Historic Preservation Commission was holding an informational meeting to discuss the National Register nomination.

There's no monetary benefit from having the area placed on the National Register of Historic Places, Smith said.

Most of Alexandria is already included in a development opportunity area where certain residential, commercial and industrial structures may qualify for federal and/or state rehabilitation tax credits, Lord said.

"It's an honorarium, really," Smith said. "But it would be the first mid-century modern district in Louisiana, and it generally creates pride in the neighborhood. It also often helps with revitalization."

It can, in other words, get people excited about preserving these historical structures. That's what Sterkx, Smith and Lord would like to see.

The journey to recognize this area was initiated by Smith, Sterkx, the Historic Preservation Commission and the Historical Association, Lord said.

The typical mid-century modern home was built in the mid-1950s to early 1960s.

It is distinctive in style and generally stands out because of its linear modern look characterized by flat roofs, large glass windows and open space. They are most-often built from brick, glass and wood panels with a design that draws the eye horizontally rather than vertically.

The homes, in their original glory, were full of clean lines with little outer adornments. You'll find no Victorian gingerbread on these modernist structures.

The neighborhoods are working to get this second area in the city, known currently as the Mattie O. Ball neighborhood, recognized as a historic district for its mid-century modern homes.

"We bought it 30 years ago," Nydia Freedman said. "My husband loves contemporary architecture. We knew about it because his parents lived right next door."

"We are excited," she said about the prospect of getting the neighborhood on the historic register. "We'd love to help in any way we can. It's kind of cool."

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Why preservation matters

- Our built environment is a physical reminder of our history and culture. Once a building is demolished and the generation that remembers it has also passed, the stories and events that are tied to that building fade from memory as well.

- Older buildings are architecturally valuable. Elements of architectural design often represent the values of a well-known architect, a region or a period of history.

- Preserving historic buildings is good for the environment. Generally, historic structures are better constructed than modern ones in terms of construction technique and quality of material. They were built by craftsmen who saw their specific trades as art forms. Even when the interior needs to be gutted, using the shell of a historic building saves materials from the dump and ensures better-quality construction.

- It simply makes economic sense to restore rather than rebuild, especially in Louisiana. State and federal tax credits for historic preservation can be combined for a 45 percent return on the project. In addition, the money that goes back into the local economy from associated costs makes preservation a smart investment on many levels.

Source: Megan Lord, director of Alexandria Historic Preservation Commission