Beauregard Town revival called restoration of real neighborhood

By J. TAYLOR RUSHING
Advocate staff writer

Rick Carraway’s home in Beauregard Town didn’t have a front door when he first saw it. The 80-year-old house had raccoons as tenants and a city demolition notice on a front wall.

It was 1997, and Carraway, an architect, was looking for a home to buy and rebuild. His Realtor told him about a house on Maximilian Street.

“I wanted to make an appointment, but she said I didn’t need one,” Carraway said. “I asked, ‘Don’t I need a key for the front door?’ She said, ‘You don’t understand...’”

“My first thought was, ‘I can save it.’” Carraway paid $18,000 for the 1,200-square-foot home two years ago, then gutted and rebuilt half of it. It was recently appraised at more than $100,000, he said.

Katie Higdon was 27 and looking for her first house. She was tired of years of apartment living, but still took a while to warm to a house on Mayflower Street.

The 75-year-old structure needed a new kitchen, new plumbing and new wiring. The walls and the floor were the only salvageable parts.

In May, Higdon took a break and plunked down $35,000 for the home and another $65,000 for renovations. She moved in over Thanksgiving weekend.

“I was spurred on by what everybody else had done,” she said. “A lot of people just want a brand new house, but I would rather save something old. That’s the common bond in this neighborhood — people appreciate what’s here. This area is on its way, and I wanted to be a part of that.”

Frank McMains, the 25-year-old president of the Beauregard Town Civic Association, is restoring a house on St. Joseph Street.

Sawdust sprinkles the living room floor, which has been restored to its original hardwood. At one end of

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the room sat as an original brick fireplace near a vintage steel spiral staircase.

People used to think I was nuts, but now they’re realizing there is a lot of value to these neighborhoods,” McManus said. “These areas aren’t too far out of the radar screen. There are probably 30 or 40 houses in the area, and the property values are rising rapidly.”

McManus is renovating seven houses in Beaufort Township. He calls it “a real neighborhood.”

The suburbs are so-called neighborhoods in name only,” he said. “People don’t know each other, there’s no place to meet people living next to someone for 20 years without knowing their name.”

People like to have good neighbors who are involved in the community because these areas are far enough away from downtown, but they want to be part of a neighborhood. People are moving from the suburbs to the city, he said, because they are more committed and willing to make the area better.

Beaufort Township was founded in 1809, but still a work in progress. In fact, Baton Rouge’s second-oldest neighborhood is now one of its most active.

“Areas such as Spanish Town or the Garden District are already going strong,” says Constance Campbell, past president of the Beaufort Township Civic Association, as Beaufort Township is now known.

Suzanne Turner, a professor emeritus of landscape architecture at LSU, said the 1960s was the last time the neighborhood was attractive as it is now.

“Two things happen simultaneously that make it a good time to take a risk,” said Turner, who still owns property in the area. “And I think you see that with all the renovation, especially on the south side.”

Some time between 1979 and 1986, Captain Elgin Beaufort and French engineer Arsenio LeTourneur designed Beaufort Town right down to the width of the streets. The district was built around a crescent-shaped public square with public buildings such as a town hall, a police station, and a hospital.

As the city grew toward the Mississippi River, the town was built along with it.

Today Beaufort Town contains almost 70 square blocks bounded by North Boulevard, East Louisiana Avenue, and the Mississippi River. U.S. Census figures from 1990 show the neighborhood’s population was 30,622 at the time and among 270 households.

Homes dominate the landscape; they accounted for 186 of the 247 occupied units in 1990. Now many people in the area say renters and owners are roughly equal in number.

The trend in the area is not a new construction, but a wave of renovations that is booming the area’s property values. Realtor says homes were selling for $20 to $22 per square foot in 1990, compared to the $75 to $75 per square foot today for a renovated home.

But Beaufort Town also contains contradictions as quickly as its diagonal, European-flavored streets. City Police headquarters sits inside the neighborhood on Mayflower Street, but the area is still dealing with a reputation for crime.

Census figures show median household income was only $19,152 in 1989, yet it is considered one of the most profitable areas for developers, who have built 200 lots in the area during the past two years or so.

One of Beaufort Township’s biggest developments: 184 of the 328 total housing units were built before 1939.

A good case in point is Mayflower Street and East Boulevard.

Sam Coleman, a 27-year-old Southern University Law School student, recently bought the 1,400 square foot home on a corner lot in a new porch, an expanded bathroom in the basement.

“There’s so much character and craftsmanship in a house like this,” he said. “There’s a slate roof, and those last forever. There’s so much

place of drywall, the hardwood floors are nice and warm, and it has lots of natural light, which looks like history, and those are bigger, rounder and heavier.”

Darryl Gissell of B.B. Taylor Realtors said older homes are sometimes more convenient.

“If you were in the Kenilworth area, the up and for a home is about $75 to $90 a square foot,” he said. “That’s about what a home in Beaufort Town would cost after renovation. So the fact is that today sometimes you can do better in an older neighborhood than in a modern one.”

But many believe that message isn’t getting out. Turner, for example, says the area’s architecture and atmosphere are strengths largely unknown elsewhere in Baton Rouge.

“I’ve been a landlord of about five units for 15 years, and most of the people interested in this are from out of town or out of state,” she said. “For some reason, people in Baton Rouge think only New Orleans has great architecture.”

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