

# Old houses, new history

*Preservation Durham is focusing its efforts on revitalizing the East Durham Neighborhood.*

**By Elizabeth Byrum**

Durham VOICE Arts Editor

No matter how big or small, there's a story to be told behind the door of every old house in a neighborhood.

"All my life I have always liked old houses," said Denise Harrison, a Durham homeowner and board member of Preservation Durham, a historical preservation society.

Her affinity for houses is clear: Harrison has rehabilitated four residential properties in the East Durham neighborhood.

As a result of her commitment to the neighborhood and her rehabilitation of properties on Vale St. and Carden Alley, Harrison was a recipient of one of Preservation Durham's 2012 Neighborhood Conservation Awards.

But Harrison isn't alone in her quest to rehabilitate the historic parts of Durham. Since 1974, Preservation Durham has committed itself to protecting Durham's historic assets as well as worked to stabilize and revitalize neighborhoods throughout the city. The organization was founded in response to demolition that was occurring in Durham during the urban renewal movement of the 1970s, said Wendy Hillis, executive director of Preservation Durham.

Hillis said one of Preservation Durham's current goals is to diversify its membership to cover all ages, races and areas of Durham. As the city sees an increasing population of young residents, the organization hopes to reach out to them and convey the importance of historical preservation.

"We're not a historical society of little old ladies having tea; we're all about how you reuse what you have to make really cool sustainable places," Hillis added.

Hillis said that there is evidence of the spread of awareness of preservation and Durham is well on the way to successfully reusing what it has. While historic preservation is not a process that is reserved for

the wealthy, and can be done with a modest budget, both Hillis and Harrison stressed the importance that it is done well.

"To rehab you really need someone who is conscientious and cares about it or someone who cares about buying it," Harrison said.

## The art of preservation

Preservation Durham, a nonprofit organization, relies on a three-part method: action, advocacy and education.

Their action items include creating new National Historic Register Districts and expanding the Endangered Properties Fund. When it comes to advocacy, the organization creates "Places in Peril,"

a yearly list of properties in danger that are considered to be culturally or historically significant, and seeks to create arrangements with other preservationists in order to continue conversation about historic rehabilitation.

"There are still some preservation discussions to be had," Hillis said. "How do we regulate new construction without being historic mimicry? How do you promote really good architecture?"

Historical preservation is also based on creating partnerships with other community organizations early on in the process, as these partnerships can play a key role in community economic development, Hillis said. She added that Durham is a great case study for how historical preservation leads to a resurrection of a city.

"One of the great things of old buildings is that they can be shells for all kinds of things," said Myers Sugg, a member of Preservation Durham. He emphasized that historical preservation has a place in communities for more than economic reasons.

"Just from the environmental standpoints, people don't look at it that way," he said. "They think 'old house, old building.' It takes a different eye to understand it."

For Harrison, the rehabilitation of properties is a learning process and mistakes should be expected. However, for her the end result is often gratifying and a testament to the original value of historic homes.

"Usually, you are really happy with it in the end, because you've made it yours,"

Harrison said. "You've selected the tile, the paint colors, the light fixtures, and it really feels like your personality."

## Revitalizing East Durham

In collaboration with Preservation North Carolina, Preservation Durham has focused some of its preservation efforts specifically on Project RED, or Revitalize East Durham. For more than five years, this project has worked to not only rehabilitate some of the area's historic homes, but also to open up more affordable housing and to increase house ownership in the area.

In 2004, East Durham became a National Register Historic District. However, since that time it has suffered from "slumlords," abandoned and absentee-owned homes, demolition, and ultimately, a lack of a connected community.

"To bring back these neighborhoods, you have to have a certain amount of cohesiveness," Harrison said.

Cathleen Turner, regional director of Preservation North Carolina, said that East Durham's location and proximity to employment opportunities makes it an ideal place for the focus of historical preservation. However, one the challenges with revitalizing the neighborhood is its size.

"East Durham is such a large neighborhood and its boundaries change depending on who is talking," Turner said. As a result the primary focus of Project RED is near Driver Street and the area surrounding the Holton Career & Resource Center.

Already, three houses have been completed through Project RED and two more projects are set to launch. Turner stressed that increasing home ownership is one of the project's goals. Currently, only 15 percent of houses in the neighborhood are owner-occupied homes.

"We can still roll up our sleeves and provide somebody with a quality home that retains its value over time," Turner said.

East Durham has a rapid rate of renter turnover, as well as many group homes, both problems that Harrison hoped would be addressed as a result of the revitalization work.

"If you have a lot of frequent turnover from renters and the group homes, you have a lot of problems," Harrison said.

### 2012 Places in Peril:

Duke Park  
Duke Beltline  
Fendel Bevers House  
Liberty Warehouse  
Fidelity Bank East Durham Branch  
1203 Worth Street

In January 2013, a local ordinance was passed that limits the “clustering of group homes in low-wealth neighborhoods,” ultimately requiring group homes to be separated 1,250 feet away from each other.

“Group homes are unregulated,” Harrison said. “Someone can just open a family care home, five or six people, and you don’t have to say anything and all of sudden you have random people on the porch.”

Despite these challenges, Turner acknowledges the immense progress that has been made with Project RED, which will continue to renovate and ultimately sell historic houses in the neighborhood. These houses are sold with protective covenants and eligible for several financial incentives, helping to keep them affordable for a variety of community members.

“It’s all just created this wonderful large conversation, so that we are not doing things in a vacuum but we are responding directly to the needs of the community, specifically the abandoned houses,” Turner said.

### **Educating communities, fostering change**

Preservation Durham works hard to provide information to the community about the benefits of historic preservation. An important advantage of preservation is the historic tax credits that are opened up for developers and homeowners.

“For people who are buying houses and rehabbing them to rent, a National Register means they can get 20 percent federal tax credits and 20 percent state tax credits,” Hillis said. “However much money you spend rehabbing it, you’re getting 20 percent back in a tax credit.”

For people living in historic properties, there is no federal tax credit, but there is a 30 percent state tax credit. Overall, the credits provide large financial incentives.

“We just did a tax credit workshop to sort of help homeowners figure out if they are in a historic district and how to do renovations,” said Liz Sappenfield, vice president of Preservation Durham’s board of directors.

Part of the education process is to get public officials on board with historic preservation. Since its beginning, Durham City Council member Eugene Brown has supported the work of organizations like Preservation Durham and Preservation North Carolina, which have created positive change in Durham, particularly the East Durham neighborhood.

“Durham’s a huge consumer of preservation tax credits,” said Ellen Dagenhart, a real estate professional and former

Preservation Durham board member.

But these tax credits are just one incentive. The preservation work in many of Durham’s neighborhoods has helped to sustain the residential architectural heritage, and also the availability affordable housing, which as a result, has led to greater neighborhood diversity. It is an ongoing process, but so far Turner has witnessed amazing changes.

“Historic preservation is the conduit for maintaining that,” Turner said. “It is not the end of that, it is just the beginning.”

**For a calendar of Preservation  
Durham’s upcoming events, visit:  
[http://preservationdurham.org/  
news/calendar/](http://preservationdurham.org/news/calendar/)**