

## Epilogue

### *What Future for the Old North?*

**H**aving looked at the Old North's past and present, let me conclude by trying to envision its future.

One way to begin is to visualize *possible* futures. With the possibilities before us, we can then assess which are more likely and which are less likely.

#### **Three Futures**

In my judgment, there are three prime, possible futures for the Old North.

The *first* is continuation of the present. The area hobbles along indefinitely as a combination of continuing decay and spotty renewal. The 53% signature home renters and 33% absentee landlords hold steady.

The *second* possibility is accelerating decline and blight followed by *demolition and replacement*. Homes decayed beyond rehabilitation are demolished and apartments or condominiums are built in their place. The cumulative impact is a new kind of residential area in which the present Old North is only a memory.

This scenario would have several phases that are already underway. Inherited signature homes with exceptionally low taxes under Proposition 13 are held as lucrative ("cash cow") rentals and allowed to decay beyond any feasible point of rehabilitation.

In the face of widespread decline, people who might otherwise buy and rehabilitate the few homes that do come on the market are dissuaded by fears of neighborhood blight.

This becomes a self-perpetuating cycle resulting in an epidemic of dilapidated structures that are, indeed, beyond rehabilitation. This cycle is further fueled by panic-selling among owner-residents who want to get out before they lose more of their now de-valuing equity.

The confluence of these factors creates a real need to demolish dangerous houses. Virtually all 146 of the signature homes are torn down.

The *third* possible future is *preservation and renewal*. For several reasons of public policy and economics, the trends I just described change. Owners of declining signature homes begin to sell them to people who want to live in and rehabilitate them. This stimulates a synergy of neighborhood pride among renters and landlords who arrest and reverse decay and disrepair. With the encouragement of appropriate zoning and new design standards, homes that must be demolished are replaced with structures crafted in the spirit of the historic Old North.

### **An Uncertain Balance Point**

If these are the three main possibilities, what are the probabilities?

I think that the first scenario for a future—continuation of the present—is not a likely possibility. Like cities across America, Davis is virtually built out. The era of rampant suburban expansion is over (Inman, 1997). But the population is growing and there must therefore still be new residential development. For cities like Davis this will, in part, take the form of infill and redevelopment of existing residential and other areas. The pressure will soon be on and the Old North will change in very important ways of *some* kinds. The only real question is: What will these be?

In my assessment, the Old North is at an *uncertain balance point* between the second and third possible futures. There are significant factors or forces pushing the area in *both directions*. I therefore think it still too early to predict which of the two we will see. What various parties do over the next years will determine which becomes reality.

The better to understand these two most likely scenarios, let me enumerate forces and conditions pushing in each direction.

### **Factors Fostering Decline, Demolition, Replacement**

Forces operating in the direction of Old North decay and decline are a mixture of objective physical conditions, attitudes, and statistical trends. Some of these factors can also be thought of as constraints on conservation, preservation, and renewal.

**1. SIGNATURE HOMES ARE SMALL.** Working- and middle-class homes built before 1950 are quite small by current standards. Old North signature homes commonly have one bathroom and two bedrooms. This is a very serious limitation for any project of renewal (and a preservationist solution requires ingenious remodel codes).

**2. SERIOUS UPGRADE WORK NEEDED.** Electrical, plumbing, and insulation standards have risen vastly in only the last few decades, much less in the some 90 years since the first Bowers Addition homes were built. Many Old North homes require upgrading to degrees that are Herculean.

**3. INHERITOR SLUMLORD HOLDING.** The exceptional Proposition 13 tax breaks given children who inherit their parents' old homes encourage them to cash-milk these structures as rentals while allowing them to decline. The percentage of Old North homes used in this fashion is significant and appears to be increasing.

**4. HIGH PERCENT RENTALS AND LANDLORD INDIFFERENCE.** Although no longer economically feasible, in the 1970s and early 1980s some Old North homes were bought by parents to house children in college and then kept as rentals. Others were simply acquired for rental purposes. Taken together with the Proposition 13-encouraged rentals just indicated, 53% percent of Old North signature homes are rentals. I have no trend statistics, but my impression is that this percentage is increasing. As is well known, rental homes are less likely to be maintained.

**5. SIGNIFICANT PERCENT OF ABSENTEE LANDLORDS.** It is helpful to distinguish among landlords in terms of how far they live, physically, from the properties they rent. The suggestion is that the farther away, the less the oversight of tenant use of that property. In the Old North, 33% of signature home landlords have addresses outside of Davis.

**6. DECAYING BUILDINGS.** Aside from needs for construction upgrades (item number 2), there are buildings on every street—some signature homes, some not—that are in clear states of serious decay and disrepair. This is "housing blight" in the classic and narrow sense. Unchecked and combined with other factors, this is the start of a slippery slope.

**7. THE NEIGHBORHOOD EFFECT.** Neighborhood conditions such as I describe in factors three through six have long drawn the attention of urban economists, who have analyzed what they call "the neighborhood effect."

"In an urban context, individuals pursuing their own interests and reacting to market practices will systematically tend to under-invest in the maintenance of their properties. Since this

process is dynamic, it will tend to generate competitive underinvestment by neighbors, which will reduce the life of buildings.

“Consequently, this form of dynamic market failure will lead to the progressive deterioration of the whole urban environment. Slum areas will come into existence because no owners will find it worthwhile to renovate their properties.

“This comes about . . . because of the interdependence of the value of a house on that of its neighbors. Although expenditure on maintenance and upkeep, other things being equal, increases the value of a specific house, it also increases the value of neighboring properties. It follows that neglect of a property reduces the value of neighboring dwellings. Rational property owners wishing to maximize profits over time will adopt a strategy of under-maintaining their property relative to neighboring properties” (Allison et al 1996, 7, summarizing Davis and Whinston 1961).

*This* is the classic dynamic of slum formation and the one we see afoot in the Old North.

**8. BLIGHTED YARDS AND ALLEYS.** Shifting our attention from buildings to the grounds around them, we do not need to look hard to see shabby landscaping, especially in the form of unkept lawns and untrimmed shrubbery. In the alleys, we find piles of trash, lumber in disarray, other surplus building materials, decayed cuttings from yards, and disabled automobiles with debris collected around them.

**9. HIGH FENCES AND YARD ENCLOSURES.** One key historic streetscape feature of the Old North is its open expanses of yards and backyards. Times and tastes have changed and there is an increasing trend toward high fences in both front and back yards, a process that dims the Old North ambiance.

**10. DISRESPECT FOR PUBLIC SPACE.** The streets, alleys and spaces between the sidewalks and streets (the planting strips) are *public* space. As a social matter, these spaces belong to the neighborhood collectively and are, as such, the responsibility of everyone and, hopefully, the pride of everyone. For a great many people, though, the streets are merely locations in which to store (cobwebbed and leaf-strewn) cars and other objects; sidewalks are spaces to block with parked vehicles and overgrown shrubbery; and, alleys are places to stack unsightly miscellaneous objects (Fig. E.1). The planting strips between the sidewalks and curbs are too often ill maintained.

**11. RESIDENT INDIFFERENCE.** I infer from the objective, structural facts of blight and the like just enumerated that a portion of both Old North owner-occupants and renters are

indifferent to their neighborhood surroundings and perhaps even contemptuous of their neighbors and the neighborhood.

Indeed, successive groups of students renting at least one Old North home in the 1980s and 1990s developed a culture and tradition of rowdiness and rudeness to neighbors. This house happened to be the rental property of an absentee landlord whose attention was hard to get and city action was required to achieve a change in this owner's lax rental practices.

Such attitudes and situations can catalyze despair and foster flight among Old North owner-occupants who might otherwise hang on and wait for better times.

**12. AMBIGUOUS SOCIAL BASE.** Recall that from its founding the Old North was a residential area of families with children. These children grew up in the 1930s, 1940s and 1950s. As such, virtually all of the "classic" Old North families had completed the family process by the 1980s and 1990s.

In one prominent pattern, children left the home, the father died, and the mother lived on alone in the home. Eventually, she had to be relocated because she could no longer live alone, or she died.

This means that the Old North as a whole was, in the 1970s, 1980s and 1990s, at the end of a deep and broad process of generational succession and change.

Changes in American family life and in other areas meant, though, that families of the sort who settled the neighborhood in the '20s through the '40s were not repopulating Old North homes in the 1970s, '80s and '90s.

Although there were a *few* such families, other important "living group" patterns included professional couples with few or no children and the conversion of family homes to student or general rental.

The point to be made about the future is that the market for Old North homes has changed and the new market is not clear. This ambiguity favors developers of demolitionist dispositions.

## **Factors Fostering Conservation and Renewal**

As dismal as the above picture is, the situation also contains features that point to the possibility of a different future, one of neighborhood conservation and renewal.

### **1. STRONG DEMAND FOR OLD NORTH HOMES.**

Curiously enough in view of the negative features just listed, Old North homes on the market do not beg for potential buyers. Ironically, knowledge of the demand for Old North homes prompts owners to over-price them and thereby to slow down the rate at which they move in the market. (This demand rests on the

anti-suburban sentiments I describe in Ch. 1. The Old North has a nostalgic appeal to people of many ages.)

**2. SOME RENOVATION AND UPGRADING.** Although blight and decay are widespread, here and there owner-occupants have undertaken some renovations and upgradings.

Aside from the activities of owner-occupants, of particular note in the last decade and more has been the quiet, one-man renovation enterprise of Bruce Clark. Guided by hobbyist, preservationist, and investment motives, Clark has bought, renovated and sold to owner-occupants a number of Old North properties, including 601 E, 611 E, 616 E, 516 E, and 619 Sixth. Indeed, a property as old as 516 E, whose wooden foundation had laboriously to be replaced with cement, would likely not exist without Clark's devoted rehabilitation efforts.

Happily, persons of Bruce Clark's persuasion are only infrequent rather than rare or unique. They turn up with surprising frequency in historic neighborhoods in the United States and in other countries. The Old North may yet see more people of the Bruce Clark type.

**3. BROAD CONSERVATIONIST SENTIMENT.** Both at the levels of the public-at-large and city policy, there is the feeling that the Old North and other such areas in Davis are historical resources that must be treated wisely.

Thus, a 1993 "state of the city" report prepared to assist with a general plan update refers to the Old North as an historical resource in the form of a "well-preserved" neighborhood of "cottages and bungalows typical in the early twentieth century. While individual structures are not of great architectural significance, the neighborhood is a fine example of its type" (Community Development Department, City of Davis 1993, 80).

The *City of Davis General Plan Update* of 1996 provides for the possibility of establishing "historic districts where [a] significant number of . . . historical resources are grouped together. Areas to consider for such districts include . . . Bowers Addition [and] . . . the area between 5th and 8th Streets" (Design, Community & Environment 1996, 282).

The point of creating an appropriately configured conservation district would be to halt and *reverse* the slum-making dynamic of the narrow profit-maximizing rationality of some landlords—a rationality that is irrational from the point of view of overall neighborhood property values. "The problem of market failure that conservation has to solve is a simple one stemming from the interdependence of decision-making for owners of neighboring properties. What is in the collective interest of all the group together is not in the interest of any owner in isolation . . .

Accordingly, . . . public intervention may be justified in order to secure the maintenance of [real estate] values" (Allison et al 1996, 4, 7).

Indeed, British Conservative and Labor governments alike have long subscribed to the view that, because of the "neighborhood effect," what they call "conservation areas" must be created in order economically to turn around districts of historical importance. They justify such interventions by taking "neighborhood effect" analysis a next logical step, which then puts it into reverse: "If the value of a property is negatively affected by the physical characteristics of the surrounding buildings, then it also follows that the value of surrounding buildings may be positively affected by the physical characteristics of a property or properties. Thus if conservation results in an improvement of the physical characteristics of a building, this may be a partial trigger for urban regeneration" (Allison et al 1996, 7).

I report all this about the British as background to saying that one key factor in determining the future of the Old North is the degree to which Davis city officials and citizens undertake to engage in the kinds of policy ideas and actions so long and successfully practiced in countries like Britain—as well as in the United States, although less so proportionately than in Britain and some other countries. (Datel and Dingemans 1988, provide multi-country comparisons.)

**4. CONSERVATION ENTHUSIASTS.** Beyond broad sentiment and official policy, there are Davis residents with active interests in Davis history per se. Often involved with the City of Davis Historical Resources Management Commission, this is a constituency that, in the late 1990s, began to focus on the possibility of protective zoning or conservation areas, of which the Old North is often included as a possibility.

The actions of these conservation enthusiasts will be pivotal in determining whether or not the Old North has a conserved and renewed future.

**5. OLD NORTH ENTHUSIASTS.** Only slightly overlapping with conservation enthusiasts, a number of Old North residents think of the area as an area, identify positively with it, and have worked on its behalf at times in the past.

As we have seen, circumstances eliciting resident collective action have included inadequate street lighting; the lack of a grocery store after Safeway closed in the 1980s; and, a plan to pave the alleys in 1991.

While few in number, such episodes do suggest that Old North residents are capable of collective action on neighborhood matters and that they are sometimes successful.

One key factor determining which of the two futures will come to pass is the degree to which Old North residents organize on their own behalf to make one or the other happen. Should they fail collectively to act to make a future of preservation and renewal, I think that destruction and replacement of the Old North is virtually certain (cf. Duchscherer and Keister 1995, 33-35, on citizen action in “bungalow districts” and Robin 1990, on such action in historic neighborhoods more generally).

**6. SCARCITY OF DAVIS HISTORICAL RESOURCES.** The geographical smallness of the historical core around which contemporary Davis has been constructed bodes well for the Old North’s future.

Quantitatively and geographically, Davis has little history it can possibly save. Therefore, if it is to preserve any, it must pay attention to what little it has. The Old North is a major part of all there is.



Charles Dickens opens *A Tale of Two Cities* with the sentence “It was the best of times, it was the worst of times.” This declaration is renowned and often-quoted for the good reason that it is often-apt—as in the case of the Old North.

The turn of the millennium is a terrible time for a rapidly decaying Old North *and* a very hopeful time. The area is possibly close to the dawn of a conserving, renewing, and revitalizing period—as well as on the threshold of its possible demise.

So: the present contains the seeds of two futures. Which one will grow depends on which we decide to cultivate, or—to mix metaphors—to forge and to construct.







E.1. Collage of examples of rudeness, indifference, disrepair and junk in the Old North, 1998.

## Acknowledgments, Sources, Limits

The materials I report on the Old North come from three kinds of sources: personal observation, archival and record-keeping organizations, and Old North residents and enthusiasts.

**1. PERSONAL OBSERVATION.** I have been a resident of the Old North since 1974, but I began to pay concerted attention to the area only in the last few years. My attention was prompted by what I perceived to be a growing number of properties in decline, especially student rentals.

This attention was initially confined to E Street and focused on such matters as property ownership and the years in which homes were constructed. My interest would likely have remained narrow and sporadic without a turning point event in the spring of 1996: The City of Davis Historical Resources Management Commission conducted a survey of city historical/cultural resources.

Responding to a newspaper story recruiting volunteer surveyors, I was one of some three dozen residents who made a house-to-house inventory of such resources that spring (the results were published by the Architectural Resources Group, 1996).

In this process, I was introduced to the overlapping but distinct intellectual worlds of local history and historical preservation. Heartened by the new (to me) knowledge that my private curiosity and concern about a neighborhood was not merely idiosyncratic and therefore futile, but had, instead, achieved local, state, national and indeed international organized expression, I decided a volume of the present kind might help the Old North.

Combined with and guided by data I obtained from archival sources, in middle and late 1996 and in 1997 I observed, photographed, and made notes on every structure on every privately-owned property in the Old North. A large portion of the neighborhood is public property and equally important to study,

especially as regards upkeep, and I have also extensively photographed and made notes on these areas. (All the photographs in this book not otherwise credited were taken by me in this process.)

**2. ARCHIVES AND RECORDS OFFICES.** Although I had talked to several old time residents about Old North history, I thought that archival searches needed to precede any concerted effort to collect materials from residents.

In all, I searched 16 archives and record organizations. My thanks to the:

- Bancroft Library, UC Berkeley for access to varied maps and documents.
- Craig Armstrong Library and to Ruth Nichols of the Davis Senior High School for guidance in searching early school publications.
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Robin Datel and Dennis Dingemans are also students of the Old North and I thank them for so generously sharing their research materials and observations with me.

Unhappily, I must also apologize for limitations of length that have not allowed me to include all the wonderful materials people have shared.

In an effort to get the Old North story and its expression right, I circulated some 60 copies of the first draft and several copies of the second draft. Richard Berteaux, Dennis Dingemans, Mary Ellen Dolcini, Elisabeth Sherwin, and Marion Tuttle critiqued one draft or the other and rescued me from many spelling, grammatical, "attitude," and factual errors. Susie Boyd, Robert Campbell, Lyn Lofland, and Norman Riley were truly heroic in doing page-by-page critiques of *both* drafts, likewise saving me from many public embarrassments. I am deeply in the debt of all these reviewers.

This book is much, much better than it would otherwise be because of the editorial and other help of the Yolo County Historical Society and, in particular, the work of the members of its Publications Committee—Richard Berteaux, Robert Campbell, Dennis Dingemans, and Marion Tuttle. As committee chair, Bob Campbell skillfully shepherded the publication process and I thank him very much for his diligent and effective labors.

The largest and most important of my debts are those owed Lyn H. Lofland—spouse, friend, colleague. Her faith in the value of this project has sustained me in this research. Once again, Lyn, my deepest thanks.

I have tried to make this book as accurate as possible. However, it may contain mistakes in both typography and content. Therefore, it should not be taken as the sole and/or ultimate source on the topics treated.

Moreover, I am sharply aware that this volume addresses only a small proportion of the very large number of pertinent aspects of the Old North that could be treated. Even the aspects I do treat could be dealt with in greater depth and breadth. Constraints on time and resources explain these limitations.

However, at the same time, these limitations offer challenges and opportunities. I have only started the history and sociology of the Old North. A vast terrain remains for future researchers. Hopefully, broader and deeper new research will soon supersede this modest beginning.

Indeed, I view this book as marking the start of the second phase of my own inquiries. In anticipation of a second edition and a public Old North archive someday, I very much hope that readers who have Old North pictures and stories will be in touch with me. My postal address is the Department of Sociology, University of California, One Shields Avenue, Davis, California 95616 and my e-mail address is [jflofland@ucdavis.edu](mailto:jflofland@ucdavis.edu).







## Sources

This is a list of written and pictorial sources that can be located in publicly accessible libraries, archives, and collections. It does not include conversations, interviews, or ephemera.

The names of the people with whom I have talked about the Old North are given in "Acknowledgments, Sources, Limits."

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He grew up in Bridgeville, Delaware, was educated at Swarthmore College, and did graduate work at Columbia University (M.A.) and the University of California, Berkeley (Ph.D.).

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