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Neighborhood is getting its backbone back

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Architect Theron Potter Healy built 14 of the 24 homes on the block bordered by 2nd and 3rd Aves. and 31st and 32nd Sts. in south Minneapolis, a once-stylish neighborhood peopled by the likes of J.B. Hudson and Healy himself.

Marjory Holly's home was built by Healy in 1891. It has 15 rooms, counting the original bathroom and a three-season porch, with lots of stained-glass windows, antique fixtures, two fireplaces, built-in buffets of fumed oak, dazzling parlor spindlework and nooks and crannies everywhere.

The three things it doesn't have are location.

In recent years, commuters on Interstate Hwy. 35W could

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Staff Photo by Richard Sennott

Healy Block homeowner Marjory Holly: She hounds prostitutes, gets after people who neglect their houses, scolds anyone who litters and "has fits" in politicians' offices.

Journal/ She gives neighborhood improvements a foot in the door

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see the collapsing porches, boarded windows and other signs of decline on Healy Block, decline caused by crime, drugs, prostitution — and the freeway itself, just yards away from the oak and stained glass.

Now the commuters are seeing something new: scaffolding.

"I can't tell you how many times people who drive along the freeway have commented on the historic homes there," said City Council President Sharon Sayles Belton, whose Eighth Ward includes Healy Block.

"They've watched those homes deteriorate over the years," she said. "We've gone up and down there, but we're at a good point right now. I think it's highly likely we have the momentum to get the block under renovation.

"Healy is our front door. People get their impression of our neighborhood when they drive past on the freeway. When those houses get restored to their original beauty and prestige, that's going to make a major difference."



Staff Photo by Richard Sennott

A row of architect Theron Potter Healy's homes in the 3100 block of 2nd Av. S. in Minneapolis.

"I was surprised at his alley," she said. "Overflowing dumpsters."

It would be nice, Holly said, if the freeway were somewhere else. But she can tolerate the tumult; the massive old house shuts it out nicely.

Crack dealing down the street is another matter. So is prostitution.

The block hit bottom five years ago. It had become more retail than residential: four crack houses, two rooming houses for prostitutes. Holly and others saw women serving customers on front lawns.

It affected how people looked at her, she said. "People see you here and assume, if you are female, that you're a prostitute. If you are male, you

must be a pimp or a crack dealer."

So why does she stay?

"I like houses that talk and have stories to tell," she said. "I grew up in new houses; that's what my parents liked. But I want a house that squeaks, creaks and has a history."

It also has a long to-do list, from porch skirting that needs repair to an upstairs bedroom wall that cracked, she said, when the freeway was dynamited through the neighborhood.

"You can't ever wake up and say there's nothing to do," Holly said. "It needs a lot of work."

And a lot of advocacy.

"'Agitator' would be a good word for me," Holly said, smiling. "I'm not very popular in some places."

Sayles Belton said that she would choose other words to describe Holly.

"Margie is relentless," she said. "She is tenacious. She is a woman with a vision and she's not going to let anyone detract her from that."

Mary Walsh, who owns a home on 3rd Av. S., could call Holly something else: a newcomer.

"I've lived here for 81 years," she said. "I was born upstairs in the front bedroom.

"Growing up here was fun. We had wonderful neighbors and lots of children to play with. We knew the families; there was visiting, and you knew what they were like and what they did for a living."

In recent years, her home has been broken into twice, "once when I was in the front yard cutting the grass." And it's difficult to keep the front yard looking nice.

"You go out to a florist and buy some plants and put them in," she said. "Maybe you spend \$35. And the kids just pull them out."

Why does she stay?

"It's the only place I've ever lived."

She was credit manager for a hardware wholesaler for 34 years, but she had to retire at 60. Now she cares for an ailing sister and tends to the house and yard. In the late afternoon, she likes to sit on her front porch and read the newspaper.

"It used to be more relaxing," she said. "Now you have to watch all the [prostitution] pickups. The girls come sashaying along. . . . One girl especially; she props herself up and looks into all the cars as they come by. Some of the cars slow down, and pretty soon she gets into one.

"Once I watched a cop pull a man and a woman right out of the car. I guess he had the evidence he needed. Oh, I was excited!"

But she doesn't confront the street hookers the way Holly does?

"Oh, no," she said, turning to her neighbor. "You're bolder than I am. I don't have the confidence anymore."

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In October, the Healy Block residents won an award from the Minneapolis Heritage Preservation Commission: the If At First You Don't Succeed award. And this spring, the Minneapolis Community Development Agency, which owns three of the houses, provided \$17,000 for housing development assistance.

Several homeowners also received

grants of a few thousand dollars each from Honeywell for roofing, painting and other exterior projects. First Bank officers have talked with residents about a rehabilitation loan program.

The city and corporate investments are vital, according to Holly.

"That gives us legitimacy," she said. "It says, 'You can do decent things in an area that's been described as a high-crime area.'"

One house, at 3116 3rd Av. S., has been placed on the National Register of Historic Places. The rest of the block has a local historic designation, and the homeowners are working with a preservation planner.

"Street lighting would be nice," Holly said, making a mental wish list. "Fencing, painting, restoration.

"It spreads," she said. "Just like crime."

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