

Strong Fabric

From frayed to refined, community is what keeps a neighborhood together

by Matt Edens



photo by Elton Howard

“The days of getting a house that doesn’t need a lot of work for not a lot of money are over,” says 4th District City Councilman Rob Frost about Fourth and Gill, the historic neighborhood just north of downtown that he calls home.

A few blocks south, the sudden transformation of old Gay Street buildings into luxury lofts may be grabbing most of the headlines, but these days Fourth and Gill has its fair share of well-heeled shoppers buying up quarter-million dollar homes. And the result is a housing boom of bubble proportions, according to realtor Steve Hill.

Hill has been selling homes in the neighborhood for 10 years, during which he estimates that prices have probably tripled. “In ’93 we put an offer on a house for \$60,000, and in ’96 it sold for \$124,000, and today it would list for over \$200,000,” he explains, tracing the trajectory of a single property over the past decade.

Not bad for a neighborhood that, not too long ago, was written off as done for. That was in 1974, according to long-time resident Bill Murrah. The city had just received a substantial chunk of federal Housing and Urban Development dollars and was shopping around for somewhere to spend it. “It was a

triage approach,” says Murrah. “The city determined that the neighborhood was too far gone, and we fought that.”

It was an uphill battle. The neighborhood, a predominantly middle class suburb originally developed from the 1880s to just after the turn of the century, had fallen on hard times. Starting around the Great Depression, most of its homes, particularly the big rambling Victorians and massive Colonial Revival-style mansions, had been cut up into apartments or converted into boarding houses. Some of the houses had simply been abandoned—there are a fair number of broken windows and kudzu covered walls in photographs from the era.

“Probably two-thirds of the neighborhood were renters,” recalls Murrah. “Most of the homeowners were seniors and the neighborhood organization was primarily renters and virtually all low income.” Low income, but well organized. After extensive and, at times, acrimonious lobbying efforts, the Tyree administration agreed to make Fourth and Gill a target area for federal funds, some \$2.2 million dollars worth over the rest of the decade in Murrah’s estimate.

“That’s only 10 or 15 houses’ worth now,” says Murrah, “but

at the time that was a whole lot of money.” Spent primarily on stabilization repairs for elderly homeowners or correcting code violations in rental housing, the federal dollars were the fulcrum that tipped the neighborhood towards revitalization.

Not that success came overnight. Bob Whetsel, the city’s Public Services Director, and his wife Melinda were Knox County schoolteachers when they started shopping in the neighborhood in 1979. Prices back then were certainly affordable, even on a public school teacher’s salary. “In 1980 we bought our house for \$38,000,” recalls Whetsel. “That was the most expensive house in the neighborhood.”

But the neighborhood, at the time, was already on its way up—at least according to the Whetsels’ real estate agent. “Here’s how the realtor described it to us,” says Whetsel. “It’s an area where lots of young couples are moving in and fixing up houses. Well, after we moved in we started looking for all these young couples, and we couldn’t really find any.”

Slowly, over time, that began to change, in part through the efforts of pioneering homeowners like the Whetsels. Once in the neighborhood, he and Melinda began investing in more property—“The second house I bought was for \$6,000,” remembers Whetsel—which they fixed up and either rented or sold. Two things, however, separated the second stage of Fourth and Gill’s revitalization from the first: little subsidy and less emphasis on lower income renters. “There’s been a few rental rehab projects and tax credit projects,” says Whetsel in reference to subsidies available for rental housing. But homegrown developers like the Whetsels were mostly investing their own money and mostly selling to modestly middle-class folks much like themselves. “In the middle ‘80s it was a lot of schoolteachers,” says Whetsel. “There were no doctors and lawyers then.”

Times have changed. Frost, for one, is an attorney. And he’s hardly alone. Asked how many lawyers there are in the neighborhood, Frost chuckles and answers: “A medium-sized Knoxville firm’s worth.” The neighborhood has also grown popular with doctors, accountants and professors. “There’s a whole lot of, call (them) yuppies if you will,” says Frost, “people with not just college degrees, but advanced degrees.”

Knox County School Board member Indya Kincannon and her husband Ben

Barton, who moved into the neighborhood in 2001, are typical of the latest generation of folks who call Fourth and Gill home. Barton is a University of Tennessee law professor, while Kincannon has a master’s in public policy and planning from Princeton. They also came to the neighborhood from out of town, something they also have in common with many of their new neighbors.

“Eighty percent of the people are out-of-town, out-of-state people,” says Hill of the homebuyers he deals with. “Locals have some stigma to overcome,” says Jeff Talman, a Renovation Specialist with Wells Fargo who came to Fourth and Gill from New York in 1991. And, according to Talman, “out-of-towners have been less reluctant to



see the value of proximity to downtown.”

They are also unlikely to have any recollection of the neighborhood’s down-at-the-heel days. “A lot of people who are Knoxville natives may have had grandparents who lived here, but they also recall when the neighborhood was in decline,” says Kincannon. No wonder they’re often appalled by the prices.

“I still have people calling me, saying, ‘I’m not paying that,’” says Hill. “They remember when they were \$50,000. Well, I can remember when Cokes were a nickel, too.”

Nostalgia, unsurprisingly, is a big part of the neighborhood’s appeal, although not in the manner one typically associates with historic houses. Many of the people shopping in Fourth and Gill these days aren’t dedicated renovators or restoration buffs who spend long evenings stripping paint or swapping tips from “This Old House” and *The Old House Journal*. “What

I’m getting now is not people wanting something to fix up,” says Hill of the homebuyers he deals with. “Now it’s professional people who want to buy something already fixed.”

“People want to write that check, rather than lift that hammer,” agrees Frost. Kincannon, for instance, points out that she and Barton “barely own a hammer.”

They appreciate the old homes, to be sure, but many of today’s homeowners have come to Fourth and Gill searching for something besides heart-pine and plaster, something they feel is hard to find in the newer neighborhoods that most of them could easily afford.

“The historic part for us was secondary,” says Kincannon. “I would definitely say the sense of community was more important. I had a newborn, I was going to be a stay-at-home mom and I didn’t want to be isolated. I’ve never known my neighbors as well as I do here. There’s a lot of participation in the neighborhood organization, in the newsletter, Halloween parties.”

Parties, of late, have had to become far more kid friendly. “We’ve had a huge baby boom in the neighborhood,” says Kincannon, who juggles her public service with the demands of raising two daughters. “In a two month period, four new babies were born in a three-block area,” says Frost. One of the new arrivals was his own son, the second he and his wife Erin have had since moving into the neighborhood.

However, like many inner-city neighborhoods, the baby strollers are often followed by moving vans. But their destination, typically, isn’t a cul-de-sac in deep West Knoxville. Often it’s just around the corner. The Frosts, for one, moved to a larger house in the neighborhood not long after the birth of their first child. Talman and the Whetsels, who have raised their families in Fourth and Gill, are also in their second homes in the neighborhood.

It’s something that, as a realtor, Hill has seen repeatedly. “People like the neighborhood well enough that they’ll sell the house they’re in and get one larger,” he says. The people in the houses may be constantly changing, but in Murrah’s mind, that sense of community lives on from the days when dozens of people pitched in to save the neighborhood way back in the ‘70s.

“Neighborhoods aren’t static,” he says. “The economics have changed, but I think Fourth and Gill has maintained a real strong social fabric.”