

LET'S SAVE UNIVERSITY CITY TOWNHOMES (AND PROTECT THEIR RESIDENTS)

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In July, the owners of the 70-unit Section 8 subsidized housing site at 40th and Market Streets known as “University City Townhomes” notified HUD that they will not be renewing their agreement after 39 years, clearing the way for either market rate rent increases, or, more likely, the sale of the property for redevelopment. Either way, there will be no place for the current residents unless something is done. There are many projects in Philadelphia and other cities where similar HUD contracts are expiring, and the potential loss of moderate cost housing is profoundly serious.

The Design Advocacy Group (DAG), believes that the City of Philadelphia and neighboring West Philadelphia institutions need to step up to address this problem now, before the residents lose their stable community.

The award-winning project, completed in 1983, was the result of an architect/developer competition organized by John Gallery, the first director of the Office of Housing and Community Development. It broke with the prevalent pattern of aggregating subsidized projects in certain neighborhoods, which increased isolation and racial segregation. University City Townhouses was viewed as a small but positive compensation for the destruction of the “Black Bottom” community twenty years earlier, through Urban Renewal clearance for the University City Science Center. At that time five thousand residents lost their lively and well-loved urban neighborhood.

Fostering a sense of community, gathered around traditional neighborhood streets, was at the forefront of the thinking of those who created the University City Townhouses, as described by one of the designers, Don Matzkin of FRIDAY Architects:

“The courtyards are sized to the dimensions of typical Philadelphia neighborhood streets... where the houses front each other, [and] the result is a strong sense of community, intimacy, and friendliness. In a situation that offered, on its face, no opportunity for these kinds of relationships, it was incumbent upon us to create them.”

“A ‘street’ connecting the two parking areas runs in front of this row, [the buildings along Ludlow St] providing a traditional place to pull up to unload groceries or wax the car, play bottle-tops or romp in the spray from the centrally located fire hydrant.”

To destroy this successful and carefully crafted neighborhood would be an act of vandalism that would not only disrupt the lives of the residents, many of whom have lived here since it opened, but also impact the neighborhood by reducing diversity and undermining local institutions such as the schools that are heavily invested in providing opportunities for the students from this neighborhood.

How can this project be saved? DAG supports these three related steps:

(1) Government action sets the goals

West Philadelphia councilwoman Jamie Gauthier, herself a planner, has a bill in Council—the *Affordable Housing Preservation Overlay District*, which would alter the zoning for the site. It would prohibit demolition for twelve months and require that new housing be affordable. The preamble to this bill is an extraordinary recital of the tragic history of the redevelopment of the neighborhood, which evicted many people of color.

This bill is a first step to address this problem.

(2) The institutional beneficiaries of the original clearance must take action

It is time for the beneficiaries of the original land clearance--Penn, Drexel, and the University City Science Center--to contribute to a solution. Handouts are neither required nor appropriate, but there is a need for thoughtful involvement accompanied by action -- soft assistance on planning and policy and hard assistance in the form of loan guarantees and joint development agreements. These institutions have urban think tanks capable of addressing this problem.

(3) Increase density without displacement through urban design

Fortunately, the site has a large undeveloped area at its western edge along 40th Street-- the point of greatest urban engagement adjacent to a new, nine-story building to the south. A building here could be profitable for the owner *without displacing current residents and without altering the original buildings*. This would provide valuable retail and office space adjacent to the subway station. Of course, this is just one of many possible ways to preserve the existing housing while providing opportunities for development, if we move from the “clearance” school of thought, following instead the notion of “careful renewal” that has been demonstrated in many other cities worldwide. On a pivotal site like this, it would mean making designs that involve the neighboring institutions, the neighborhood, and the residents.

Let’s get started on making this happen.



University City Townhomes looking west toward 40th St. Note Street like pedestrian courtyards and long driveway parallel to Ludlow St on the left. Illustration shows new building on 40th St frontage of property that could be erected without altering the project. (Photo credit Andrew Stein of Clafien Associates)



Street level view of University Townhomes looking west along Market Street from 39th St, showing possible new building at 40th St. (Photo credit: Andrew Stein of Clafien Associates)