

New homes rise in Greater Greenmount

Once abandoned properties give way to fine-looking rowhouses

Jacques Kelly

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Grace Willis sat in her front parlor and told me that her neighborhood, sometimes called Barclay or Greater Greenmount, is "just a wonderful place to live." She would know, since she has lived at the corner of 22nd and Barclay for most of her life. She is known to her neighbors as the woman who likes to walk.

On a walk, she showed me one of the reasons her neighborhood is the place she wants it to be.

In the past few weeks, as promised, a fine-looking row of homes has risen on 20th Street. They stretch from Greenmount to Barclay and nicely mimic the Victorian architecture of the neighborhood. The change is bold and dramatic, particularly if you have a memory of the abandoned houses that once sat here.

The block is designed as 69 affordable rental units. On adjoining blocks, renovation construction recently began on 15 three-story rowhouses. They will range in price from \$175,000 to \$285,000 and will be sold to owner-occupants.

People who do not share Grace Willis' sense of optimism and hope might disparage this neighborhood as another Baltimore lost cause. But this summer, block after block near Barclay Street and Guilford Avenue is changing. I saw signs promising Calvert Green houses for sale — renovated 1890s rowhouses.

What I saw on my walk through Greater Greenmount is not an isolated renewal phenomenon. All through a corridor from Pennsylvania Station ([Station North](#)) through the Old Goucher and Barclay Street communities, I observed cleaner streets and evidence of repairs. Once-bleak homes are now looking decent. I also see people walking about and obviously enjoying their neighborhoods.

Willis, a retired elementary school master teacher, is also patient. For decades, she and her neighbors have asked the city to help with the issue of the vacant and abandoned houses along the streets that intersect Greenmount Avenue in a stretch generally north of Green Mount Cemetery.

"I saw it happen so many times. The parents lived here for many years, but their children moved away to other neighborhoods," she said.

Her requests, and those of her tenacious neighbors, began to be addressed when a small organization, People's Homesteading Group, started renovations. People's Homesteading follows a sensible strategy: Before an entire row of homes is irredeemable, save the most blighted property. Lovingly fix it up. Work house by house.

I began visiting this neighborhood about five years ago. At that time, signs of hope were present, but the specter of so much abandonment seemed overwhelming. People's Homesteading did its surgical interventions on very troubled individual properties. Willis and her fellow residents won the approval of the city's Commission for Historic and Architectural Preservation to grant historic status to East 22nd Street, which includes the landmark St. Ann's Roman Catholic Church.

Then Ravens owner Steve Bisciotti and other philanthropists put money into reopening a closed parochial school. It reopened as the Mother Seton Academy and seemed to send a good message, in the same way that the dramatically renovated new city Design School at Oliver Street near Greenmount Avenue does.

Willis never lost faith in East 22nd Street. She fought back with her immaculate flower garden created in a vacant lot along Barclay.

The years of hope and patience gave rise to action. Telesis Corp., the developer, was chosen by the city to take on the massive job of 268 parcels of property and 94 vacant lots.

The process of reclaiming Greater Greenmount — and let's add in Calvert, Barclay and Old Goucher — is underway. To date, there are 20 new homeowners living in top-to-bottom renovated properties.

"We have more work to do," said Catherine Stokes, director of Telesis' Baltimore office. "We are more than halfway there."

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