

Neighborhood revival builds

McKinney: Historic district's character a major draw for many

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By MIKE JACKSON / The Dallas Morning News

McKINNEY – After a while, the suburban neighborhoods started to look the same to Susan Carty.

Sprawling developments contained houses that were nearly indistinguishable. Town centers consisted of intersections with a couple of strip shopping malls.

Uninspired by it all, Ms. Carty and her husband, Cliff, needed a change, she said.

A year ago they moved to McKinney's historic district, a neighborhood anchored by a square with shops and restaurants and an old-fashioned Texas courthouse that will soon reopen as a performing arts center.

There, the Cartys found the charm and sense of community they longed for.

"It was a dream of mine to buy an old home and restore it," said Ms. Carty, who runs a cotton shipping business with her husband. "I quickly fell in love."

Longtime residents and city officials say they've heard similar stories over and over.

The historic area has been drawing newcomers steadily over the past five years.

"People move to McKinney for the small-town feel," said Julie Vargo, a founding member of the McKinney Historic Neighborhood Association. "Living here means walking to the square for a cup of coffee, and you walk by somebody who says, 'Good morning, Julie.' "

The district's revitalization, while a blessing for some, could become a bane to others, officials say.

"To some degree, it's a gentrification issue," planning director Brian James said. "When home values go up, taxes go up."

What's definitely going up are requests for construction and renovation permits for projects typically done by new homeowners.

Since 2001, there have been 136 requests to refurbish house exteriors, build garages or build new houses that resemble older ones.

Requests grew annually from 14 in 2001 to 38 in 2005.

"It might not sound like a great deal, but given that the district has been built out for a number of years, it's a pretty nice pace," said Barry Shelton, a senior planner for the city.

The area isn't attracting only people looking to restore old homes.

Jered Custom Homes, a family-run company in McKinney, has built 40 houses in the district. The company must adhere to rules calling for new houses to mimic the historic buildings.

"Everybody told us not to do it because we wouldn't be able to sell," said Ed Boughtin, a Jered co-owner who started building in 1997. "I'm shocked that we're doing so well."

"It's a pretty cool place to build," said Mr. Boughtin's partner, Jerry Carlton. "That's why we're here."

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Some of the homes date to 1865, according to city literature. A few of the youngest houses were built during the 1950s. The mix of



Photos by BRIAN HARKIN/DMN
Cindy Wilborn follows real estate agent Nan Riederer into a house for sale in McKinney's historic district. Ms. Wilborn plans to move from Waco to the district. 'I want to scale down,' Ms. Wilborn says. 'I'd love to have the cottage feel.'

architectural styles includes Arts and Crafts, ranch, Queen Anne, Tudor and Victorian.

Large homes with sprawling yards and wraparound porches often sit beside smaller, more modest frame houses.

The area struggled the most between 1986 and 1992.

"There were a lot of boarded-up buildings," said Guy Giersch, the city's historic preservation officer.

Then in 1989, the McKinney Residential Historic District was formed to protect houses in the area, Mr. Giersch said.

The district, which is listed on the National Register of Historic Places, contains about 1,100 buildings. Property owners doing work on houses are bound by a strict set of rules that require them to conform to historic architectural styles.

"Preserving history is not just about the large houses," Mr. Giersch said. "The smaller, wood-frame houses are also significant. They tell us something about history.

"We sometimes forget that the bank presidents and founding fathers had people who worked for them who helped make it a community," he said.

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Ms. Carty and her sister, Cindy Wilborn, who both have grown children, recently toured 11 houses in the district. Attracted to the community like her sister, Ms. Wilborn intends to move here from Waco.

"I want to scale down," Ms. Wilborn said. "I'd love to have the cottage feel."

Their real estate agent, Nan Riederer, said she sees many interested buyers like the Cartys and Wilborns, who like the proximity to Dallas but want McKinney's friendliness.

"They want a big-city atmosphere, but they want a small-town feel," she said.

Andrew Harris, a theater professor at the University of North Texas, wanted to be able to walk from home to downtown. He found what he was looking for when he moved here in 1999 and renovated his home.

Mr. Harris lives on Hunt Street, less than a three-block stroll to the square for some coffee, he said.

"I walk my dogs down there most every day," he said. "We go up past the Heard Craig House, which is now a museum. And then we turn down Kentucky Street, which goes past the municipal complex. Then I'm there."

The old courthouse is scheduled to reopen as a performing arts center in April. It's surrounded by a bustling downtown of shops, restaurants and small businesses.

Mr. Harris not only found a home, he also started a side business. He has renovated 13 houses in the district.

The district attracts all kinds of people, from empty nesters to families and young couples with no children, he said.

"I think there is a changing of the guard," Mr. Harris said.

Rob McDonald, 23, and his fiancée, Kari Carr, are renting a home from Mr. Harris. The house, an Arts and Crafts structure built in the 1920s, sat empty for 14 years before Mr. Harris bought it and fixed it up.

"More people need to take interest in preserving these kinds of places," said Mr. McDonald, a software engineer. "That's not a principle people have these days. The people who are doing it are doing society a favor."

E-mail mjackson@dallasnews.com

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