

Saving the abandoned house

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It had been standing vacant in Olneyville for about three weeks, after the last tenant had moved out. Then one day a half-dozen young people came and ripped, smashed and generally tore it apart — the windows, doors and even the aluminum siding. Although the police were called, the vandals got away, and another house became a victim to city living.

Housing abandonment and destruction is a major problem in Providence and other American cities, one which few cities have been able to handle with any degree of success. Across this nation of

The destroyed or abandoned house is a major problem in Providence and other cities

ours, but especially in the older, declining cities of the Northeast and Midwest, thousands of structurally sound, vacant buildings await a similar fate, destruction by vandals and fire by arsonists.

Probably in no other country of the world does one find such a problem, for only in a rich nation can owners of property walk away from such a major capital investment. In other countries abandoned buildings are reoccupied, rehabilitated or put to some other use. In London, for example, thousands of homeless squatters look for such buildings to occupy because of the extreme shortage of housing. The government recognizes the problem and, under certain conditions, allows this practice of occupying vacant buildings to continue.

Abandonment of housing, a relatively new phenomenon occurring primarily in the past three decades, is partly a natural consequence resulting from cities losing their population. Since 1950 Providence has lost nearly 100,000 residents; put another way, more than 3,000 residents annually, on average, for the past 30 years have abandoned Providence. This has had a marked impact on housing. During the decade of the 60's when Providence lost 28,000 residents, nearly 5,000 housing units also were lost, although most were demolished through interstate highway construction and urban renewal, projects which encouraged people to leave the city.

Preliminary census figures for 1980 indicate a continuation of the same pattern. From 1970 to 1980 the city lost an additional 28,000 residents, and the 67,600 housing units represent a loss of approximately 500 units from 1970. It must be remembered that many more units than this were torn down because construction of new units, primarily subsidized apartments for low income families and elderly, was going on at the same time. For example, in the period from 1970 to 1978, building permits for 4,148 new units in the capital city were issued, yet even with this new construction there was still a net loss of housing for the 10 year period.

The problem is becoming more acute. There were 210 abandoned houses in

June of 1975, according to building inspector's records, and in June of this year there were 494 in the city. And if Providence continues to lose population, it is quite likely that further abandonment will take place.

Although more housing abandonment can be expected, every effort should be made to prevent this from occurring. Abandoned houses have a devastating impact on neighborhoods for these structures act as focal points for neighborhood decay, and constitute a physical and psychological hazard to neighborhood residents. These buildings are indicators also of poor investment opportunities and, as a result, less money is put into the neighborhood. The end product is further abandonment and decline.

In Providence the Building Inspector claims that the problem is so vast that he is unable to control it. This is why the City Council must step in to help: first, by gathering more information and data; and, second, by formulating policies and strategies to attack the problem.

The General Accounting Office did a study on housing abandonment two years ago in which 113 respondent cities acknowledged the problem (Providence did not respond to the questionnaire) and 63 of these cities indicated that strategies had been adopted to mitigate the situation.

Each city must find its own solutions, but various strategies have been devised, some controversial, and these ought to be investigated to determine their applicability to Providence. As recounted in the GAO study, such actions may include the following: 1. preventing further disinvestment in neighborhoods with abandoned houses, and to include a temporary moratorium on mortgage foreclosures; 2. testing new forms of home ownership, including cooperatives, condominiums, and ownership by community organizations and public agencies; 3. reducing and restructuring property taxes to increase investment attractiveness and reward rather than penalizing, through higher taxes, owners who improve their property; 4. working out agreements between unions and contractors to rehabilitate vacant houses at wages below union scale; 5. using young people and unemployed in the construction trades for repairing abandoned houses; 6. allocating greatest resources to neighborhoods where deterioration is just beginning; and 7. expanding resources to save some neighborhoods while encouraging the abandonment of others.

Community development funding and Stop Wasting Abandoned Property (SWAP) have helped to save houses from abandonment but when the number of such houses increases, as it has, then more needs to be done.

It is ironic that at a time when poor people in Providence have indicated that their greatest problem is adequate housing, the city is plagued with an inordinately large number of abandoned houses. A well devised city strategy that could save abandoned houses could also help the poor of the city. Saving these houses is a measure to which the Providence City Council should give the highest priority.

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