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## Once a Rundown District, It's Now Mansion Hill

By JOHN ECKBERG

**NEWPORT, Ky.**— A historic neighborhood of hundreds of Queen Anne, Italianate and Victorian houses here has become an enclave of urban professionals because of its easy access to downtown Cincinnati across the Ohio River and a ready supply of revitalized housing.

Once a blue-collar neighborhood of two- and three-story houses on small city lots, the largely renovated Mansion Hill Historic District now appeals to singles and two-income couples who work at or do business with companies in downtown Cincinnati, less than two miles away. And real estate values are beginning to reflect the neighborhood's growing popularity.

A century ago, the neighborhood was built by the growing number of upper class residents of northern Kentucky. But its tree-lined streets and stately mansions of brick or stone fell into disrepair, and by the 1950's, as Newport became synonymous with vice and corruption, real estate developers invested in suburban subdivisions rather than older city neighborhoods like Mansion Hill.

Still, the Old-World craftsmanship, gables, turrets, carved stone windowsills and Tiffany-quality stained glass windows sprinkled throughout the neighborhood drew some renovators to what had become a run-down collection of houses.

Mansion Hill, which is on the National Register of Historic Places, began to take shape as a neighborhood in the late-1970's, when new homeowners fought a proposed expressway interchange off nearby Interstate 471. They took their fight to City Hall and were surprised when they won. The interchange plans were modified. The next step was to form a lobbying group to urge more local zoning control. They won that battle, too, and in July 1980 Mansion Hill was designated a city historic district.

Since then, real estate values have exploded. A house bought for \$13,000 in 1977 will now fetch \$113,000 or more. Costlier offerings, like a 12-room, 4,000-square-foot house with a two-car garage and, perhaps, a handful of stained-glass windows, will bring \$200,000 to \$250,000.

"Properties are always coming on the market," said Nick Rectin, a longtime homeowner who writes a neighborhood newsletter. "There is a very gradual but constant turnover of properties, and in every case the property has been improved by the turnover." One building in the district, the Hannaford Suites, an upscale extended-stay hotel, has inspired visitors to set down permanent roots and become Mansion Hill homeowners. John Dunning moved into the Hannaford temporarily in 1994 from St. Louis while looking to buy a suburban house. Instead, he bought a Queen Anne bungalow across the street from the Hannaford parking lot.

"Socially the neighborhood is a lot different from what it was five years ago," he said. "A lot of upper- and middle-class people have moved in."

The Hannaford was once the Our Lady of Providence Academy, a Roman Catholic girls' school. The building was converted into an upscale apartment complex in the late 80's. But revenues failed to meet expectations and in 1997 the owner, Jim Schiear, retained Brandy-Wein Hospitality Inc. to develop the building as an extended-stay hotel and manage it.

Designed by Samuel Hannaford, the turn-of-the-century Cincinnati architect responsible for the Music Hall and the Cincinnati City Hall, the Beaux-Arts-style Hannaford has original doors, windows, high ceilings, wide halls and stairwells and refinished brass doorknobs and fixtures throughout.

The building is not caught in a time warp, however. Each of the 60 suites offers dataport telephones, Internet access, a full kitchen and full concierge services.

In Newport, a city of 20,000, the predominant housing is pre-World War I row houses. Its main thoroughfare, the eight-block Monmouth Street, is mostly filled with marginal businesses and eating places. In the 1940's and 50's the town was a mecca for illegal gambling clubs that attracted star performers like Frank Sinatra and Dean Martin. When the casinos moved to Las Vegas in the

mid-50's, strip clubs moved in. Following two years of legal battles, an ordinance banning nude dancing was upheld by the State Supreme Court in 1993 and few strip clubs remain. Now the city is trying to revive the downtown with tax incentives for new merchants.

Despite substantial public efforts aimed at downtown improvement, individual initiative has fueled the resurgence in the Mansion Hill district.

"People realized that the neighborhood had a lot to offer," said Eric Avner, a Newport city planner charged with revitalizing the downtown. "There was a small-town feel with community events, but you could walk to Cincinnati to Cinergy Field to watch a Reds game or walk to the Aronoff Center for a Broadway show.'

When Wallace Dyas, 63, bought his brick mansion at Overton and East Third Streets in 1961, he paid \$24,500 and was promptly told by a relative that the property, whose 6,600 square feet had been broken up into three apartments, was a white elephant. So the first thing Mr. Dyas did was tear down some walls.

One of the attractions of the Romanesque Revival house was the splendid assortment of 16 stained-glass windows. While researching the history of the house, Mr. Dyas learned that it was not unusual for Tiffany craftsmen of the 1880's to break away and form their own glass companies. At the time, Cincinnati, with its Rookwood Pottery, was a magnet for artisans, and many apparently devoted their talents to this house.

One particularly stunning window is 10 feet tall and 32 inches wide with three layers of glass that weigh an estimated 1,000 pounds.

From the outside, viewers can see two sloops, apparently engaged in a race. From the inside, they can see three sailors in one boat who are concealed from the outside by a layer of glass. Mr. Dyas said one stained glass window specialist estimated that six ounces of gold was used to create red hues in just one of the house's windows.

The house also has six Rookwood tile fireplaces, French carved newel posts and ceilings painted with leafy vines or in geometric patterns, all painstakingly repainted by Mr. Dyas or his wife, June. There are 13-foot ceilings throughout the house, except on the third floor, where the ceilings are 10 feet.

"I've been told that I could sell the windows in this place and retire on that alone," said Mr. Dyas, who co-owns a diesel repair shop in Cincinnati and leaves for work each morning in his repairman's uniform as neighbors trudge off in their business suits.

Plans for redeveloping the City of Newport are having unwelcome effects on Mansion Hill. The \$40 million Oceanic Adventures Newport Aquarium opened in May, bringing heavy traffic and, in many cases, unwanted visitors to the quiet streets of the historic district. The aquarium, home to 11,000 aquatic creatures in a million gallons of water, is the first phase of an entertainment complex called Newport on the Levee, which is expected to include a 3-D Imax theater, a 21-screen multiplex theater and restaurants.

That development will be largely north of the historic district, but some residents fear increased traffic and expect that some visitors will seek on-street parking to avoid the cost of parking in a 2,000-car garage that is planned.

"We need to protect a peaceful residential neighborhood," Mr. Rectin said. "How are we going to deal with off-ramps? How will we handle lighting? How will we handle crowds?"

Photos: Houses on Monroe Street in Mansion Hill, above, and Hannaford Suites, an upscale extended-stay hotel in the historic district. (Photographs by Mark Lyons for The New York Times)