

# Igniting a Spark: How the Preservation Resource Center Changed the Face of New Orleans

By Jennifer Farwell

For owners of New Orleans' closely spaced historic homes, the phrase "igniting a spark" might evoke dire images of destruction. However, anyone who lives in a rejuvenated neighborhood knows that the spark from a PRC renovation is usually followed by a blaze of private investment and exciting images of reconstruction.

In 1976 PRC first tested its theory that neighborhood revitalization is created by the ripple effect — one renovation begets another and another until eventually deserted streets and blighted buildings turn into vibrant and livable communities with small businesses emerging to serve the needs of more and more residents. That year PRC purchased a derelict row house, one of the so-called Thirteen Sisters (circa 1830s) in the 600 block of Julia Street. After mounting a campaign to raise funds for the work and receiving four grants from the State Historic Preservation Office, the PRC completed the restoration and moved into the townhouse in 1981. "The PRC performed the first thorough renovation in this area of a historic building for daily commercial enterprise," says Julie McCollam, past PRC board member, *Preservation in Print* editor and Julia Row investor. "That sparked other people to do the same thing. It didn't happen right away, but it really was a spark."

McCollam, who purchased her Julia Street property in 1985, says that the PRC's work encouraged galleries to relocate there, which in turn brought new visitors to the area. "After people saw how beautiful these buildings could be, it grew to be the kind of opportunity that was attractive to other investors in a way that we never thought. We all thought this area was going to be revitalized as residential and there would be infill grocery stores and such," says McCollam. "Instead, it was a residential idea that blossomed into a fully realized art district."

Jack Stewart, president of the Lafayette Square Neighborhood Association and a restoration contractor who has worked on seven Julia Row buildings, says the PRC fanned the spark by creating a presence in the neighborhood. "Having their resource center on Julia Street really showed the neighborhood it was preservation central," says Stewart. "It was a big benefit to the neighborhood — one of the factors that helped break the back of skid row."

Artist and long-time Julia Row resi-

dent George Schmidt, whose studio is filled with history paintings often featuring local characters, offers yet another take. "Artists are always sent in to soften things up for the timid classes. The PRC has been right there. The major positive changes in this area and others have been because of preservation, and not because of anything else."



**In 2000 — on time and under budget — PRC moved into its newly renovated headquarters in the Leeds Building at 923 Tchoupitoulas St. This move proved crucial after Hurricane Katrina when PRC expanded its operations to become the top-producing home renovator.**

## WORKING MAGIC

Camille Strachan, a founding member of the Coliseum Square Neighborhood Association, refers to the work of the PRC in her area as "magic." Strachan, who with her late husband Duncan purchased a Coliseum Square home in 1971, hasn't just watched the Lower Garden District history unfold — she's made it happen. Strachan and others successfully advocated against placing the second Mississippi River Bridge at Felicity Street in the early 1970s,



**PRC started its Operation Comeback program in 1988 with a focus on the Lower Garden District. Around thanks to OC's marketing, financing and renovation assistance.**

and they were instrumental in getting National Register listing for the Lower Garden District in 1972.

"The other side of Magazine — between Magazine and the river — was the first target area for Christmas in October," says Strachan. The program, now called Rebuilding Together, began in 1988 with the improvement of 10 homes in the Lower Garden District. More than 300 volunteers from all walks of life worked on the properties, owned by elderly or handicapped residents.

"Originally, the effort was just cosmetic, but PRC quickly realized that they were applying lipstick when these houses needed plastic surgery," says Strachan. "As my friends in Alabama say, 'They didn't just whiten the sepulcher.' They put their money where their mouth was. The effort is terrific because it involves people who don't think of themselves as preservationists," says Strachan. "People come into a neighborhood, feel good about what they are doing, and learn to appreciate and respect the city's architecture as a result of it." John Andrews, a historic rehabilitation contractor who has worked on PRC projects, has also seen the results first-hand. "The PRC brings in 20 to 30 volunteers, and they realize, 'Wow, I had no idea these neighborhoods were so cool.'"

Strachan says the PRC was also instrumental in finding people to buy neglected homes and helping them finance the renovations. "PRC was encouraged by Lee Adler who had been doing revolving fund work in Savannah for some time. He thought the opportunity was limitless here," she adds.

"There was a derelict stretch in the 1400 block of Magazine Street where many of the houses had been vacant for a long time," says Howard Schmalz, realtor and long-time Lower Garden District resident and activist. "I approached Patty

Gay in 1986 about redeveloping the block like PRC had done on Julia Street. The idea expanded into the whole neighborhood, and that's how Operation Comeback started." At that time there were no mortgage programs for properties in need of major renovation.



**The neighborhood around PRC's headquarters at the intersection of Tchoupitoulas and Diamond streets has seen the spread of residential and commercial rehabs, including excellent restaurants, between the time the top picture was taken in 2003 and today.**

Operation Comeback, in cooperation with the Whitney Bank and the New Orleans Home Mortgage Authority, provided the financing. The PRC program also marketed the houses through its Live in a Landmark plan and Operation Comeback staff assisted the homebuyers through the entire search, acquisition and renovation.

## LIVE IN A LANDMARK

Kristen Palmer, director of PRC's Rebuilding Together, says the marketing



Photo by Susam Gandolfo



The 1400 block of Magazine Street was turned



Courtesy of the PRC



Photo by Mary Fitzpatrick

**PRC bought a derelict row house at 604 Julia St. in 1976 and encouraged other buyers to renovate the Thirteen Sisters built in 1832. The effect has been to change skid row into a vibrant 24/7 neighborhood full of residences, art galleries, shops and small businesses.**

moving out,” Andrews says. “The PRC began mostly by painting houses, sometimes in areas where you wouldn’t want to live. All of a sudden, someone’s house is bright and colorful and has a fresh coat of paint. The house looks better, and the block looks better, and eventually you do enough that the whole neighborhood looks better. People driving into the neighborhood are saying, ‘Somebody obviously cares about this house.’”

“They must have done some 30 buildings in Bywater. At this time, people were still moving to the suburbs. The PRC was one of the factors that turned these neighborhoods around so people coming to New Orleans didn’t say, ‘I want to live in Metairie or Chalmette.’ They said, ‘I like the history, the ambiance. the architecture. These neighborhoods are worthy of living in, and you are crazy not to live here.’”

**GAINING MOMENTUM**

Meg Lousteau, former assistant director of Operation Comeback, credits the PRC with the revitalization of a riverside section of Uptown. It was there, on General Taylor Street, that the PRC

gained title to an entire block of blighted properties and took on the mammoth task of renovating them all. “Here, we had eight properties in a row, and we knew if we could just get someone to buy and renovate them, it would have an incredible impact on the neighborhood,” says Lousteau. “We tried to get people to do it, but it was just too risky. [Former OC Director] Stephanie Bruno said, ‘We could take this on. We don’t have the profit-margin requirements.’ There was some hesitancy, because the PRC had never attempted such an ambitious project [on its own], and the block was the vortex for blight for that entire neighborhood.

“That odyssey became the most rewarding individual project I worked on at the PRC. Two years later, we counted 80 renovations in the neighborhood. We figured, at an average of \$50,000 per renovation, there had been millions of dollars in impact, and the General Taylor Street project started it all. Captain Louis Dabdoub, the Second District commander for the NOPD, told us that project had done more to reduce crime in the Second District than anything else.”

**THE BIGGER PICTURE**

These are only a few of the thousands of PRC success stories that echo across New Orleans’ historic landscape, from restoring jazz musicians’ houses in Central City and Algiers Point to repairing or fully renovating more than 150 homes

in the Holy Cross neighborhood alone. “The PRC is a tremendous force for the community,” says 29-year Holy Cross resident and neighborhood association President Charles Allen.

“New Orleans is a fabulous city for historic preservation,” PRC Executive Director Patty Gay says. “We still have the heart of our city and surrounding neighborhoods and out to the bayou, so we have a lot to work with. The momentum for the PRC started with a Friends of the Cabildo architectural reference book on the Lower Garden District,” which led to “Building Watchers Tours.” But we knew we couldn’t just have a tour. We had to have an organization to bring back these buildings and get people back into these neighborhoods. We cannot touch every building, that’s for sure, so we also focus on education, advocacy and outreach.”

“PRC sold [the idea of] historic preservation to the city of New Orleans. They gave it a value in the city as a whole, not just in the French Quarter and the Garden District,” sums up land-use attorney Bill Borah, who was instrumental in stopping an elevated expressway through the French Quarter in 1969. “Prior to the PRC, preservationists here were a very isolated group. Now, to be a preservationist has become something important. Their absolute strength is selling the value of historic preservation in this city, not just here, but to the country and the world.”



Photo by Operation Comeback



Photo by Operation Comeback

**In 1998, PRC’s Operation Comeback program expropriated, renovated and sold eight formerly blighted and vacant shotgun houses in the 600 block of General Taylor Street Uptown. Within two years there were 80 private renovations in the immediate area. Captain Louis Dabdoub, the Second District commander for the NOPD, told Operation Comeback that that project had done more to reduce crime in the Second District than anything else.**

program effort led to the revitalization of her neighborhood, Algiers Point: “One of the most successful things the PRC has done is Live in a Landmark. We worked with the community to contact owners of vacant properties and asked if they were willing to sell them. Then, we’d put eight or so of these properties on a one-day tour.”

Dione Harmon, former PRC board member and an avid preservationist, says the response to the program was astounding. “Algiers Point was the first neighborhood [after the Lower Garden District] to do Operation Comeback,” says Harmon. “When we joined efforts with the PRC for Live in a Landmark, we took it to the hilt. The first tour, 150 people got off the Algiers ferry from Canal Street. From then on, we had tours every two or three months. We would show homes that needed to be renovated, and we also showed renovated properties so people could see what could be done. A lot of people had never been across the river and they were astounded at how much beautiful architecture there was.”

“With a tour, people will come in groups into neighborhoods that they might not be comfortable visiting by themselves,” says Palmer. “They view houses they would not otherwise be able to see. It’s hard to interest real estate agents in listing these houses, because there’s not much money to be made on them. From the time I moved to Algiers Point in 1993 to the present, we have seen a radical decrease in blighted houses because of that program.”

**HOUSE-BY-HOUSE BECOMES BLOCK-BY-BLOCK**

John Andrews, who came from Connecticut in 1970, says he has watched PRC’s efforts in the Bywater go from a spark to a blaze of glory. “I moved into the Bywater when a lot of people were still