

Historic mansions are endangered

by Herb Belanger
Staff Times Bureau

Private Property. No Trespassing.

Walk along Minor Avenue in Seattle and there are the signs you see posted on the unkempt grounds of three dilapidated old buildings sitting side by side between Union and University Streets.

But despite broken windows, sagging porches and crumbled roofs, they still retain some of the traces that many years past made them fitting partners of the elegant Stinson-Green House only a block away.

The Stinson-Green House, Hollywood Farm in Woodville, the Aaron Neely Mansion in Auburn, the R. D. Merrill House in Seattle and a number of other old homes around King County have one thing in common. They are listed in the National Register of Historic Places.

They also are symbols of gracious living in a more leisurely time than that in which we now live. But times and tastes change and the cost of maintenance, inefficient use of space, difficulties in heating them and other considerations have made the old buildings rare.

Few individuals are willing or able to invest them. Many that could have found a place on the national register already have gone the way of the bulldozer with high-rise, high-rent, condominiums or office buildings replacing them.

Some of them, such as the Stinson-Green House, are well maintained, in good or excellent condition, and their future preservation seems assured.

Others, such as the Neely Mansion, are in an advanced stage of deterioration and require attention. The Neely Mansion is undergoing a facelift intended to give it "new" look circa 1900.

Art Skolnik, a Seattle architect whose The Conservation Co. in Seattle specializes in the preservation of old buildings, says each mansion has a land title in its own merits in order to be preserved.

"If it is in private ownership and the owner is sensitive, there is a good chance it will be maintained. If the owner is interested just in speculation on the land, has no interest in restoration, the building usually is left to deteriorate."

The major concerns about old buildings are the costs of restoration and the operating expenses, Skolnik said. Mansions are a liability now. They are too big and require too much care.

One way in which a mansion can be considered an asset is through a donation, much like the tax advantage enjoyed by people who buy art and donate it to a museum. A donation is a write-off, Skolnik said.

Skolnik draws a fine line between the restoration and rehabilitation of an historic building. Restoration returns it to what it was, he says, while rehabilitation makes it habitable, or usable by complying with building codes that didn't exist when it was built.

Rehabilitation can be complex especially when the building must conform to a variety of codes.

As an example, he said, "the laws may say restore and preserve, but when you overlay this with codes, you are in conflict." When the Stinson-Green mansion in Seattle needed a new roof, it was decided that the original plan would be followed with wood shingling replacing shingles.

But the use of a wood roof was restricted in the fire zone and a running battle with the Fire Department developed until a compromise could be reached.

The Green Mansion has had only five owners since it was completed in 1901 by C.D. Stinson, early-day lumber tycoon. The Stinsons lived there until 1914, when Joshua Green, then in the steamship business, bought it. Joshua Green and his wife, Missy, lived in the house until their deaths in 1970.

The Historic Seattle Preservation and Development Authority bought it from the Greens' estate for \$127,000 to save it from demolition. The house now carries covenants protecting it from demolition.

In 1977, the house was sold to three partners, Bette Reilly, Charles Richardson and Keith Murphy, for 240,000 on the condition the exterior of the Tudor-style building and the main floor would not be altered. The group began some restoration work and catered weddings and receptions to raise funds.

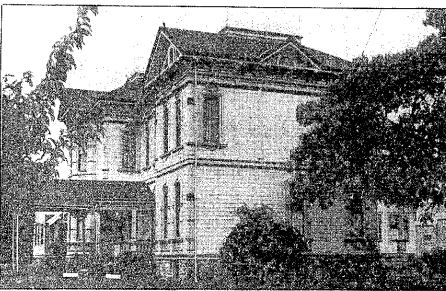
Cleveland & Associates, a Seattle advertising firm, acquired the mansion last spring for \$740,000 and is continuing catered weddings and receptions with conducted tours for groups during the week. Weekend functions at the mansion are booked through March.

The advertising firm has consolidated its offices by moving from a downtown location to the carriage house behind the mansion.



Auburn's Neely Mansion is threatened.

Greg Oliver / Seattle Times



Restoration saved Puyllup's Meeker Mansion.

Bruce Minton / Seattle Times



The gracious Hollywood Farm in Woodville.

Paul Lofas / Seattle Times

sagging, and much refurbishing is needed on the second and third floors of the 35-room house. Priority will be given to repairing the sagging floors, she said. "We take quality first and cosmetic second."

Cleveland & Associates estimates it will take four or five years to bring the building to the condition desired. At present, the first floor is open for receptions and other functions, and a second-floor bedroom, now used by brides and their attendants to dress for weddings, may be made into a bridal suite.

Other possibilities include using some of the rooms for small business meetings and bookend conferences.

The role other notable homes will have in the future is not so clearly defined. Also on the national register, but with no definite use proposed as yet is Hollywood Farm, the former Frederick Stinson summer home at the Ste. Michelle Vineyard in Woodville.

The building is owned by the winery and occasionally is used for meetings and company functions, according to Fay Tucker, but basically the building is vacant. Some gradual remodeling and renovations are being done, she said.

Last May the home was made available to the Woodville Historical Society for a designer showplace and some work was done on the interior.

Stinson, a lumber magnate and brother of C.D. Stinson, began Hollywood Farm in 1910 as a model to demonstrate the commercial feasibility of the advanced, it was fashionable for the wealthy to own summer farms in those days.

Marysorn Farm in Redmond, built by James W. Chen, and also on the national register, was a similar farm estate.

The Stinson farm became a highly successful project and in 1918 the Stinsons moved there permanently. The farmhouse with its carriage house and caretaker's cottage are little changed from when the Stinsons lived there.

One fine estate not on the national register was Woodville.

(Continued on G.3.)

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