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LOCAL NEWS

WEDNESDAY • July 25, 2001

Houses, lifestyles divided

Side-by-side homes in Lake Claire reflect neighborhood conflict

Stacy Shelton - Staff

Wednesday, July 25, 2001

There is a house on Gordon Avenue, the picture of chic-but-homey decor. It's featured in the current editions of Southern Living and Atlanta Homes and Lifestyles with color photographs of its remodeled kitchen and Carrara marble bathroom.

There is another house on Gordon Avenue, the portrait of neglect. This house has been written up, too, but for numerous housing code violations. Pictures of it will be shown in court today, where the owner has to answer for the home's dilapidated condition.

Since 1915, the two Lake Claire houses have sat next to each other, within earshot of the CSX freight trains running next to DeKalb Avenue. A decade ago, they were both rotting when the Internal Revenue Service sold them in auctions to their current owners. Now they represent the extremes in an intown neighborhood being pulled apart.

In the feud over the deteriorating shape of 312 Gordon Ave., neighbors have been drawn into camps some describe as the hippies vs. the yuppies. Neighbors aren't talking to each other, and ugly gossip is keeping people up at night.

The dispute is at the heart of Lake Claire's internal struggle over identity as it changes from funky to fashionable. Some of it is about property values. It's also about lifestyles.

For years the community has been home to artists and free spirits. Musician Shawn Mullins lives on Gordon Avenue. A few streets away is a modern-day commune, where a dozen families own their own homes but share garden space and a community building.

Over time, as housing prices have increased, so has the number of white-collar professionals moving in. BMWs are replacing Buicks as home prices reach into the \$400,000 range and beyond. In that setting, what's OK to do with one's own property is changing, too.

The same debates are going on across property lines all over Atlanta. But unlike many neighborhood struggles where the battleground is gentrification,

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this one isn't racial. Since McLendon Gardens, a low-income housing complex, was razed last year to make room for upscale homes, the community of 1,100 homes is almost entirely white and middle class.

"It used to be more diverse," said Teri Stewart, an artist and master gardener who has lived on Gordon Avenue for 22 years.

"People should not be able to dictate the color of your house or what kind of plants they choose to have or what kind of art they choose to have."

Stewart, 47, is part of the "hippie" faction that supports Lee Martin in his court fight to avoid fines and save his home.

They're of the live-and-let-live mindset. More than a dozen neighbors and friends have participated in two cleanup days to help Martin paint, rip out his porch and trim hedges.

Other residents say enough is enough. It's been more than 10 years since Martin's home was first cited for problems, and not much has changed. Each time the city got close to hauling Martin into court, the inspectors backed off. The most recent code report describes "conditions conducive to rodent infestation."

Many are particularly sympathetic to Martin's next-door neighbors, Warner and Allison McConaughy.

Until recently, a car engine hung from a tree in Martin's yard, which also is covered with various tools and appliances.

"We don't want this to become Dunwoody in the city," said Allison McConaughy, 32, an interior designer who decorated their showpiece home. They worry that Martin's house is a fire hazard.

Martin, 50, says the feud started when he outbid McConaughy for the biggest house on the street. "It's a personal thing," he said, a charge the McConaughys deny. It stopped being personal when the city got involved, called in by the Lake Claire Association president.

That was too late for Alice Alexander. She moved to Druid Hills not long after Martin moved in part because she was convinced the house would never get better. "We got darned tired of looking at this great, big ugly fortress," she said. "It's a creepy thing to look at."

Martin has sympathizers, too. He was in a near-fatal motorcycle accident in 1996, and receives disability payments for a head injury that he says still causes memory loss and an inability to focus.

"This whole house needed a whole lot more work than I anticipated," he said.

McConaughy, who owns a renovation business, said he just wants his neighbor to comply with the law. "This is the hardest thing I've ever gone through," Warner McConaughy said. "How is it morally right to complain? But how is it morally right to let it happen?"

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