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Five Points' fresh face

Details from a bygone era meld with modern touches as a historic black neighborhood enters a new age.

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Proof of potential is popping up all over Five Points.

New paint perks up tired Victorians and new trim adorns neglected Italianates.

Elegant new residential buildings that give a nod to the architecture of late 19th- and early 20th-century gems have replaced decrepit squats.

It's all good in the mind of Charles Cousins, a longtime investor in the neighborhood. Family lore places him taking his first steps about 85 years ago, at Washington, Welton, and 27th streets and East 26th Avenue - the crossroads that gives Five Points its name.

"I've seen it up, and I've seen it down," he says.

Today, he keeps a hard hat in his car so he can check out residential construction projects he says are breathing new life into the neighborhood made famous by its world-class jazz clubs and long strip of black-owned businesses, and turned infamous by years of neglect by speculators and slumlords.

Collapsing homes - some left vacant when African-Americans of means moved out after state fair-housing legislation in 1959 and later in 1965 outlawed racial discrimination in home sales - nearly eclipsed the memory of vibrant days gone by.

Days when the finest jazz musicians - think Charlie Parker, Duke Ellington, Ella Fitzgerald and Lionel Hampton - on their way to New York or California stopped over in Denver and performed at Five Points clubs and stayed at the Rossonian Hotel.

Now hammers beat out a new rhythm of potential.

"I can't think of but a couple of people who are not working on their house," says artist Richard Madrid, who is working on the circa 1876 brick Italianate he shares with Sam Biegelsen in the 2400 block of California Street. Biegelsen bought the soaring two-story at the edge of Five Points in 1990. It was his first home. "In the early days of the house, we kept the walls kind of beige," Biegelsen says. "But then one day, we were like, 'We're the ones living here and the ones who want to enjoy it.' If we do want to sell, we can paint it beige again."

Bland beige walls have been covered over with bold, hand-painted finishes: dark charcoal scrawled with silvery scribbles in the dining room, brazen yellow and green squares in the front parlor, all worked around the original, dark walnut trim.

Madrid and Biegelsen practice an ancient form of Japanese Buddhism that asks the faithful to chant - eyes open - twice daily before an altar. The wall behind their shrine was looking ratty, so Madrid conceived the concept of a modernist, checked wall.

"I wanted something that was a metaphor for the discipline of chanting," he says. "The eye really likes to look at something that is rigorous."

The effect is chic, modern and completely unexpected. "My philosophy on these old houses is that I wouldn't tear out the woodwork or the original floors," Biegelsen says. "But I'd like to think that if the person who built this house in 1876 were living today, their tastes would have migrated over the past 130 years."

Next door, behind the frosted glass door at Laura Asay and Jim Kirby's fussy budget Victorian cottage, a wide open space unrolls where there were once many tiny rooms.

Asay and Kirby were living in a Golden Triangle loft when they enrolled in welding lessons. "We moved here because we had no place to do welding," Asay says.

They moved in two years ago, but have welded only twice. Instead, their artistic energy has gone toward marking the house as their own.

They stripped painted brick and pulled up worn parquet floors. They painted in bold colors and installed bamboo flooring. They moved a bathroom from one side of the center hall, opening the line of sight from the living room to the sleek steel-and-concrete kitchen.

The bath was their first major project. It's an expansive space with a large glass shower, wooden pedestal sink and a urinal that Asay describes as "more of an art piece." The walls are covered in a complicated tile wainscoting.

Pendant lights wash the cool space with a warm glow. They're shaped like dollar signs, "because we put so much money into the room," Asay says.

All this investment in the neighborhood pleases Cousins mightily.

He remembers the wreck of a house called Trotter Apartments before it was acquired by developer Todd Hulme in 1999, when real estate values were skyrocketing.

"It was a bad situation," Cousins says of the stately duplex in the 2400 block of Clarkson Street that had been divided into 13 flops.

Hulme was on the roof one day when he looked west and realized that with a little finessing, he could give the top-floor condos full city and Front Range views.

He popped the top, giving the top units in the four-condo project a third-floor master suite. He added industrial chic by installing a glass garage door that rolls up, allowing residents to lay in bed and gaze at the city lights. "It's very romantic," Hulme says.

The roof space was cheap real estate, he says, which is important because he sunk about \$1 million into renovations, including custom millwork, exotic flooring and high-end appliances, fixtures and lighting.

"He did a nice job on that place," Cousins says.

Cousins also keeps an eye on a three-unit project being built by Carl Bourgeois in the 2300 block of Washington Street.

Bourgeois' company, Civil Technology Inc., since 1989 has been working what was considered the most blighted block in Denver. His early projects included rescue of two commercial buildings that house CTI's headquarters, and the Five Points Business Association building across the street.

His new project combines three brick and stucco condos on a three-cornered lot. Long before the building emerged from the ground, Bourgeois cruised the area, picking out architectural details, like oval dormer windows and Victorian rooflines, that could be repeated in his building.

"I am very aware of building in the urban environment, and I wanted to borrow a lot from the past in the design," he says.

Floor plans too harken back to the traditional. His one nod to modern design is a living room with a soaring art wall. "I've been living in a 700-square-foot apartment for 14 years," he says. "I'm looking forward to taking my art out of boxes."

Bourgeois has lived in Denver for 30 years, and the spiraling of the once vital neighborhood troubled him. "It made sense to try and preserve some of the historical relevance of an important era," he says. "But back in the mid-1980s, there was not a lot of confidence in this part of town.

"Now people see the potential. Five Points is close to everything. Now that it's safe, people can see a future here and the great character, and they may be willing to give it a second look."

It didn't take a second look for WB2 News reporter-anchor Tamara Banks to decide she wanted to move to Five Points. She had been sent to the strip to cover Welton Street's revival in 2002, when she had an epiphany. "I told my photographer, I'm going to live down here some day," she says. "I just felt the good energy."

Her aging aunt, old enough to have seen Five Points spiral into ruin and back out again, was skeptical of Banks' plan to buy a narrow chimney of a condo in The Point, a mixed-use building in the heart of the commercial district. Banks recalls her aunt saying, "Oh. Is that something you really want to do?"

"I would encourage African-Americans to come back home to Five Points," says Banks, who hopes to one day open a business in the neighborhood. "I'm happy it's become a multicultural neighborhood, but I don't want it to lose its African-American roots."

Property values reflect the potential that people like Banks and Bourgeois saw years ago. Hulme's condo is priced at \$435,000. Bourgeois says even the fixer-uppers in need of the most repairs sell for more than \$200,000.

Danna Swenson, a Keller Williams Realtor who lives a few blocks east of the Five Points line, kicks herself for letting a broker talk her out of buying a multi-unit building across from The Point a decade ago.

"There is no such thing as a smoking deal in Five Points anymore," she says.

When Cousins stands on Welton Street and looks back toward the city, he sees "nothing but good coming.

"It might be two to five years to get back to where it should be," he says, "but I definitely have confidence in it."

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