

## From Blight to Brilliant

Olde Uptown was saddled with decay. Then WCI moved in.

Lawrance Binda



A neighborhood transformed: a view of the corner of Muench and Green streets.

There's an old city trash can near the corner of Muench and Green streets that, to Dave Butcher, serves as a reminder of bad days gone by.

On the receptacle, in fading letters, graffiti reads, "MST." That stands for Muench Street Thugs, and it's a gang tag.

Indeed, this corner used to be turf for two rival gangs and violence was not uncommon. As were loitering and drug dealing and general intimidation of residents.

"We purposely didn't paint over the graffiti to remind us of what used to be here," said Butcher, president of WCI Partners, a company formed specifically to rebuild and rebrand the heart of a neighborhood now known as "Olde Uptown."

What a difference a few years has made. The transformation



WCI partner Alex Hartzler (left) and President Dave Butcher flank Kristine Werley of KW Design, inside one of the many houses she has designed for them.

is nothing short of remarkable, as a clean, pleasant, welcoming community has risen in a place once marred by the ills of urban blight.

The neighborhood renaissance is testimony to what can be accomplished when three critical elements—determination, planning and money—are deployed in sufficient quantities. Since forming in 2005, WCI has driven a wholesale

turnaround of these blocks, buying entire rows of attached homes and restoring the beautiful, century-old houses, while adding modern amenities; razing and rebuilding from scratch when necessary.

"We have a philosophy that change has to be holistic," said Alex Hartzler, a WCI founder and principal. "You won't get anywhere if you just fix up a house here or there. The neighborhood has to change."

The history of Olde Uptown mirrors that of so much of Harrisburg. The area was developed in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, the decorative Victorian rowhouses occupied by shopowners and factory workers, often immigrants, who formed a close-knit urban community. Then came post-war de-industrialization, which drove many families into the suburbs, and the devastating 1972 flood, which drove away many more.

Before long, slumlords moved in, buying houses for next-to-nothing from desperate sellers, then renting them cheaply. The out-of-town owners typically cared little about what happened to the area or even to their properties, as long as the rent checks

cleared. Decay and crime, already rising, became the norm.

Where others saw hopelessness, WCI saw opportunity. The company formed in 2005, seeded with money from the sale of a tech venture called Webclients.net, partially owned by Hartzler, who already had rehabbed some houses in Harrisburg. He then read about a Los Angeles neighborhood that had been radically transformed by large-scale residential redevelopment. The newly formed company decided to try the same strategy here.

WCI identified this dilapidated, yet historic area as a prime candidate for the approach, as it was situated just to the north of the rapidly reviving core of Midtown. Hartzler moved into a house on Muench and, despite threats from gangs—including a rock tossed through his window—persisted.

To date, WCI, sometimes with Green Street Properties, has restored or built about 100 properties in an area around Muench, Green, Peffer, Susquehanna and Penn streets. The construction continues, as does WCI's efforts to convince the city to extend the expiring 10-year property tax abatement program, which it believes is critical for continued progress there.

Standing at the corner of Muench and Green today, it's hard to imagine that the block ever was ruled by violent gangs. The street is lined with gorgeous homes, the air quiet except for the occasional thud of a hammer from the continuing construction. Nearby, diners are seated at tables outside of Alvaro Bread & Pastry Shoppe, basking in a glorious spring day while digging into plates of pasta, salad and pizza.

"This area is now healthy and sustainable," said Hartzler. "Through our homeowner's association, we have a strong social engagement, which is what urban life is all about."

"Intersections" is an occasional feature profiling street corners, corridors and the people who live there.



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