A Neighborhood Is Not a Still Life

On Greystone, Rock Creek Club, and the curious business of preserving community

I came away from Monday evening's ANC meeting on Rock Creek Club thinking about a rather peculiar interpretation of neighborhood stewardship: that the best way to protect a community is to prevent it from doing anything new.

It's an interesting philosophy, particularly in Cleveland Park, a neighborhood whose very existence is the product of considerable change.

Take Greystone, the historic property at the center of the controversy. Its story reaches back to Joshua Peirce's Linnaean Hill, established in 1823 as a nursery and horticultural estate. Over the following century, the surrounding landscape was cultivated, transformed, and eventually incorporated into the evolving fabric of Washington. The creation of Rock Creek Park, the arrival of the streetcar, and the development of Cleveland Park all fundamentally changed how people experienced this extraordinary corner of the city.

Greystone itself, built in 1913 by architect Waddy Wood, incorporated stone salvaged from an earlier barn on the estate. Even the house is made, quite literally, from the materials of change. None of this diminishes its historical importance. Quite the opposite. But it does suggest that preservation and adaptation have been getting along rather well here for more than a century. Which brings us to the present disagreement.

I listened to the concerns expressed by homeowners immediately adjacent to the proposed Club. Traffic, noise, parking, and the preservation of historic character are legitimate issues. I would expect anyone living next door to take them seriously. I certainly would.

But there is a meaningful difference between protecting a neighborhood from genuine adverse impacts and protecting it from the possibility of change. And somewhere in that distinction lies the heart of this debate. What struck me most was the suggestion, sometimes explicit and sometimes implied, that those living closest to the property should have a uniquely authoritative voice in determining its future.

Their interests unquestionably deserve particular consideration. But proximity is not a deed to the public interest. A neighborhood belongs, in the civic sense, to everyone who lives in it, not simply to those who happen to share a property line with the matter under discussion.

My wife and I are raising our two children, Conrad and Esmé, in Cleveland Park – a mere 8 minute bike ride away from Greystone. We spend a great deal of time biking, walking the Klingle Valley Trail, and exploring Rock Creek Park. I can think of few better places to raise a family. But the things we love most about living here aren't confined to the natural beauty or the lovely old houses.

They're the people. The friendships our children are making. The neighbors we run into on walks. The spontaneous afternoons that turn into dinners because someone had the good sense to invite another family over. These are the things that make a neighborhood a community, rather than simply a very attractive collection of real estate.

Board of Zoning Adjustment
District of Columbia
CASE NO. 21510
EXHIBIT NO. 123

Jane Jacobs understood this distinction. Her great insight into urban life was that community emerges from the countless ordinary interactions between people. Trust, familiarity, and belonging aren't bestowed by zoning designations. They're built, slowly and imperfectly, by people actually spending time together.

William H. Whyte, the wonderful observer of urban behavior, put it more succinctly: "What attracts people most, it would appear, is other people." A deceptively simple idea. And one apparently capable of causing considerable alarm when those people might arrive with children.

I'm being a little unfair, perhaps. Children make noise. Swimming pools make noise. So do tennis courts, dinner parties, leaf blowers, and any number of other things that accompany life in a city. There are reasonable limits to all of them, and the proposed Club should be held to those limits.

But we shouldn't confuse the ordinary sounds of community with evidence of its deterioration.

Nor should we confuse the pursuit of further studies with an inherently more thoughtful position. Studies are useful when they answer questions and help solve problems. Less so when the central question has already been answered and the objective becomes finding new reasons not to make a decision. **At some point, process needs to produce something other than more process**.

What interests me most, though, is the larger question of stewardship.

We tend to think of stewardship in terms of preservation: protecting trees, maintaining historic buildings, safeguarding the character of a place. These are worthy obligations, particularly somewhere as beautiful as Cleveland Park. But I think stewardship asks something more of us.

It means recognizing that we are temporary custodians of places that existed long before we arrived and will, with any luck, continue long after we're gone. We inherit their beauty, but we also inherit a responsibility to make them meaningful to the generations that follow.

Thoreau understood the essential relationship between people and the natural world. He believed that wildness was not some pleasant decorative feature of civilization, but something fundamental to human well-being. In *Walking*, he observed that cities would import it at almost any price.

We are extraordinarily fortunate to have Rock Creek Park in our backyard. But surely the purpose of that inheritance extends beyond admiring it from a comfortable distance.

Children develop an affection for the natural world by inhabiting it. By getting muddy, climbing trees, swimming, exploring, making friends, and occasionally being told to keep the noise down. Those experiences create memories and attachments that eventually become an instinct to protect the place itself. I think that's an important part of what Rock Creek Club offers.

To be clear, this is a proposed membership-based club, not a new public park. Membership has a cost, and access is limited. But the opportunity for more neighborhood families to enjoy recreation and build relationships in a setting that was previously a private estate is still meaningful.

And there is something deeply appealing about the idea that a property which has witnessed two centuries of changes in how Washingtonians live might find another useful chapter in its history.

That doesn't absolve the Club of its obligations to the neighbors. The proposed restrictions on noise, operating hours, traffic, parking, and landscaping matter. They should be enforceable, and the Club should be expected to honor them. But accommodation is a two-way street. It cannot mean that one group must accommodate every concern while another is asked to accommodate nothing at all.

I suspect most of us want essentially the same things: a beautiful neighborhood, peaceful homes, thriving families, and a strong sense of community. The disagreement is over how much room we're willing to make for one another in pursuing them.

We should be careful not to become so devoted to preserving the physical character of our neighborhood that we neglect the human character that gives it meaning. **A neighborhood cannot live entirely on the memories of those who already call it home. It has to make room for new ones.** That seems to me a perfectly reasonable ambition for Cleveland Park. It is, after all, a neighborhood that has been reinventing itself for more than a century.

And it would be a shame if, after all that history, we decided its finest achievement was simply to stop.



Robert Gilbane
3218 Woodley Rd, NW, Washington, DC