Urban Renewal in the Norfolk Neighborhoods of Ghent and East Ghent

Started in the 1940s, and continuing into the 1970s, urban renewal swept American cities. Renewal was largely a product of the United States Housing Authority’s initiative to improve the conditions of cities through the eradication of slums and subsequent construction of low-income housing. Housing projects were a part of the broader New Deal ideology promulgated by the Progressives, who argued that poor physical environments had an impact on morality, and that public housing would help to create more upstanding citizens. The Housing Authority provided funding to cities to initiate their own housing reforms under the New Deal banner. Norfolk, VA is an example of a city that was particularly active during urban renewal years. The Norfolk Redevelopment and Housing Authority came to be the deciding body on city renewal, headed up by executive director, Lawrence Cox. Cox was executive director of NRHA for nearly 30 years, retiring in 1969. Under his tutelage, the NRHA undertook numerous projects in the name of slum clearance and urban revitalization. Of particular interest were the renewal projects in the neighborhood of Ghent and its surrounding areas of East, West and North Ghent. This study explores how and why particular areas of Ghent were saved, and others were subject to the might of the Norfolk bulldozer during renewal.

Ghent was a notable neighborhood in the city of Norfolk, a unique example of an upscale, planned community laid out in 1890 by the Norfolk Company, a real estate development company connected to the railroad industry. The Ghent neighborhood is located on Smith’s Creek, just to the northwest of the downtown. The Norfolk Company hired John Graham Jr., a civil engineer out of Philadelphia, to plan the community. Graham’s work included the laying out its distinctive street plan, which involved infilling
the area on Smith’s Creek to create the distinctive curve of Mowbray Arch (fig 1). The area was only one part of a larger integrated landscape plan for the neighborhood. Graham was also responsible for the implementation of infrastructure, such as wide sidewalks, sewers, paved asphaltum streets; it also involved replacing the iconic footbridge across Smith’s Creek with a new steel riveted bridge. Early Ghent was bound by Mowbray Arch on the south, on the east by Botetourt Street, on the west by Orapax Street and on the North by Princess Anne Road, totaling 220 acres. The original homes constructed in Ghent were largely single-family homes and inhabited some of Norfolk’s wealthiest elite. The architectural styles are varied, ranging from the French second empire, colonial revival, Dutch colonial, shingle style, Victorian, and some homes that are a hodgepodge of several styles combined. Among the early residents were members of the Norfolk Company, like the Robert Tunstall, a prominent attorney and Fergus Reid, a cotton merchant. This initial development phase was largely completed by 1905. Subsequent development was kept afloat by the continuation of the streetcar line into Ghent, as well as the availability of more reasonably priced housing. Areas to the north and west of the original development of Ghent began development in 1899, and most was completed between 1910 and 1925; these areas were included in the original 220 acres purchased by the Norfolk Company. Some of these new homes were single family, others were row houses, and a few apartment buildings, namely in North Ghent. At the same time, the area to the east of Ghent, known as the Ribble Farm, had been tied up in an inheritance suit until 1896. East Ghent was developed soon after by J.W Keeling and most of the construction was the work of W.W. Webster. The homes in East Ghent, “were smaller
and almost all were row-type houses.” It was clear that Ghent continued to develop after 1890 was considered a thriving neighborhood up until WWII.

During the war, many of the Ghent homes were converted into boarding houses, and temporary war housing was constructed on the grounds of the Chrysler Museum near Mowbray Arch. Commercial development began to emerge on Olney Road, and Princess Anne Road, which lowered the appeal of Ghent, an entirely residential area up until this point. These changes, in combination with the increased popularity of the automobile stimulated flight to suburbs further away from downtown. During this period, the neighborhood fell into a decline, as many of Ghent’s homes had fell into disrepair.

It was also during the war years, and immediately following, that the Norfolk Redevelopment and Housing Authority begin major projects of urban renewal. When Lawrence Cox was appointed Executive Director of the NRHA in 1941, the U.S. Housing Authority had just granted 21 million dollars for slum clearance in the city of Norfolk. The slum clearance was waylaid with the interference of the war, as the NRHA was preoccupied with providing temporary wartime housing. In the post WWII era, slum-clearance took a backseat to the NRHA’s primary goal of removing the temporary war housing, and in August 1941, announced a nine million dollar plan for this purpose. However, the NRHA still worked to jumpstart slum clearance projects into action as originally planned in the early 40s. In 1948, Norfolk’s slum clearance was put in jeopardy by the housing bill of Senator Joe McCarthy that precludes the possibility for further appropriations for housing. McCarthy, the infamous instigator of the red scare, criticized USHA for having socialist undertones in its promotion of public housing, causing private developers to compete with government-sponsored housing. As a
response to these criticisms, the Taft Ellender Wagner Bill was passed in the Senate in April 1948, which was a concerted effort to delineate boundaries between the private and public sphere of housing. The chairman of the NRHA, Charles L. Kauffman, supported this bill, saying, “social mindedness is the best bulwark against socialism.”

This bill also removed the restriction that public housing must replace slums that have been removed. Executive Director Lawrence Cox asked the General Assembly to pass an act enabling Virginia localities to benefit from this legislation, which was enacted soon after. This bill, in combination with the 1949 National Housing Act, would begin to immediately impact the projects in Norfolk. The National Housing Act really launched the “urban renewal” program that would reshape American cities, providing federal funding to cover the cost of acquiring areas of the city perceived to be “slums.”

The federal government paid 2/3rds of the cost of acquiring the site, called the “write down,” while the local governments paid the remaining 1/3 of the cost. The government approved 25 million dollars for these purposes in Norfolk, where housing conditions were startling.

Slums covered one-twentieth of the city, contained one-seventh of its population, and registered two-thirds of its rapes, and one-third or more of its fires, assaults, robberies, larcenies, homicides, and tuberculosis cases…slum absorbed almost half the cost of city services but paid for barely a fourth. They choked the central downtown business district.

During the early 50s, the Norfolk Redevelopment and Housing Authority was able to complete its first project, which cleared the blighted area bounded by Brambleton Ave. and Monticello Ave. and constructed the low-income developments of Young Park and Tidewater Park in its place. In the May 1950 edition of Architectural Forum, Norfolk’s early slum clearance program was praised for its success.
By 1957, the NRHA was ready for Project 2, and the City Council allotted nine million dollars to the NRHA. This project involved the renewal of the downtown and Atlantic City areas of Norfolk, and was “twice the scope of those of any other American city and ten times larger than Project I; it would raze some five hundred commercial buildings and displace more than twenty thousand people.” In 1959, the NRHA began demolition in Atlantic City, a largely all black area, and did not plan for new public housing. This was the result of Lawrence Cox’s earlier plea to the General Assembly to be able to clear slums without replacing them. Consequentially, residents were dispersed to different areas of Norfolk, and many moved into the adjacent neighborhood of East Ghent. The homes in the area of East Ghent, as in the old section of Ghent, had declined during the wartime, and experienced even more affliction with the added pressure of increased density. This deterioration, in combination with the fact that East Ghent was also an all-black community, furthered fueled white flight from Old Ghent to suburbs further outside town.

While the NRHA continued forward from one slum clearance project to the next, all of Ghent continued to go downhill. The Norfolk mayor, Pretlow Darden, remarked, “We have slums developing the Ghent section where some of our finest homes are located, unless we find some means to deal with the problem, the area will go into slums within a year or so.” In April 1961, the City Council asks NRHA to prepare a Ghent Conservation Plan. The decision was made to conserve the neighborhood of Old Ghent, from Mowbray Arch to Olney road, and included some areas of North Ghent and West Ghent. This renewal project sought rehabilitation of homes rather than demolition.
first of its kind in Norfolk,' and noted that the NRHA has previously been concerned with wholly blighted areas.”

In order to begin the fight against blight in Ghent, the city issued a new minimum housing code. The residents were responsible for making the necessary updates to their homes to meet the new minimum standards. A few of the code's new chief features included: counting each person in a dwelling unit as a whole person, instead of excluding infants in the count, or counting children as half; measuring a building in terms of square feet of floor space instead of cubic feet because the high ceilings in Ghent homes inaccurately reported their livable area when measured in cubic feet; a hot water heater must be in every dwelling, a protective coating on the exterior of dwelling to prevent deterioration, and other provisions for aesthetic concerns like for things like repainting.

The city council also rezoned all of Mowbray Arch areas south of Fairfax Ave., for single-family use to protect the large old homes in the neighborhood. At the time, Ghent was zoned for two-family use, as some of the houses were still being used as rooming houses.

On February 12, 1962, the so-called Spot-Blight bill died in the Virginia General Assembly House committee on counties, cities and towns. It was a Norfolk supported bill that would have allowed spot-bligh demolition in conservation areas. This bill presented a considerable setback in the minds of the NRHA and of Ghent citizens, hoping that the demolition of “blight” would hasten progress of neighborhood improvements. In response to this decision, residents banded together to form the Ghent Neighborhood League. This body eventually grew to a membership of around five hundred, and was instrumental in neighborhood beautification. The Ghent Neighborhood League was essentially the equivalent of neighborhood civic society, initiating self-imposed
neighborhood standards. These standards focused more on aesthetic concerns, like trashcans had to be kept in the back of the houses, and you must maintain a groomed yard. This differed with the city codes, which emphasized health concerns. In general, progress in Ghent rehabilitation was slow moving until 1964, at which point the NRHA declared Ghent an official conservation area. This meant that residents were now eligible for insured loans through the Federal Housing Administration for the purposes of rehabilitating existing structures. This was the first area in Norfolk to be renovated under these provisions. The NRHA hired a Ghent Neighborhood Conservation Manager, Bud Sherrill, to assist and guide resident in their revitalization efforts. Sherrill suggested contractors, helped explain minimum housing codes, and aided in the process of acquiring FHA backed loans.

The changes made in Ghent had less to do with “conservation” or “preservation” of the physical fabric of the neighborhood and more to do with neighborhood beautification. Many of the projects reported in newspapers were actually full-scale remodels. A popular architect, Towne Properties, Inc., run by President Lee David Cohen completed many of the renovations. One of the projects by Towne Properties was at 520 West Olney Road in Old Ghent (fig 3). These detached homes were gutted and transformed into eight apartments. Cohen said that they are meant to have “Georgetown exteriors and modern conveniences inside.” The original houses had all brick facades, French mansard roofs, and recessed entryways. The renovations eliminated the recessed doorways, and added a stucco façade with shutters. One can see the same treatment in the renovation of the townhouse located at 707 Raleigh Ave. A new stucco façade with shutters were applied to the exterior, and the interior was ripped out and remodeled with
modern appliances and fixtures (fig 4). The changes included: a full reframing of the interior to accommodate three apartments, with new plaster, gutters, cornices, cabinets, hardware, and fixtures. The owner was so pleased with the results that she commented, “This new apartment came right out of a fairytale.” While the changes to the exterior were sometimes markedly different from their original exteriors, changes to the interior were perhaps even more drastic. The Washington family, featured in the Family Life section of the Ledger Star, completely remodeled their three-story house in Ghent (fig 5). When they bought the house it had already been fitted to accommodate four apartments. They changed the homes eight fireplaces down to four, and knocked off the front porch. Jim Washington, an architect, said of his home, “Some older houses have beautiful detail work that can be saved and taken advantage of, our house was never beautiful to begin with.” The Washingtons gradually remodeled the interior, moving room to room; preserving only the hardwood floors. Jim Washington’s wife, Emily, an interior designer, felt that a “good design is ageless,” which in this design, meant royal blue carpeting and track lighting (fig. 6). Other opinions in the newspapers were similarly optimistic about the reforms.

The result of the rehabilitation is more than an attractive town house resurrected from near-slums. It is a pilot project which has made the way easier for Norfolkians to enjoy their comforts and conveniences of inner-city living through rehabilitating old residences in the Ghent conservation area.

It was clear that what the Ghent Project was really “conserving” was not the buildings per se, but rather conserving the idea of Ghent as an upscale in-town residential enclave for the upper and middle classes.

In February 1964, the Senate approved the spot blight-bill, which made it possible to remove blighted homes from conservation areas, like in Ghent. This transformed the
Ghent Conservation Project into a full-scale undertaking by the NRHA. In July 1965, the Urban Renewal Administration granted 160,000 for planning of the 7.5 million dollar Ghent Conservation Project. The objective of the NRHA at this time was to retain the bulk of the homes in Ghent, and to enhance their setting through a combination of public improvements and enforcement of rehabilitation standards. Included in this Ghent Conservation Project was the addition of the Norfolk Area Medical Center in the center of West Ghent (fig.7). This would essentially compromise 17 acres of homes in Ghent. The result of the Medical Center Project, in combination with the newly approved spot blight bill would cause the demolition of about 200 homes in Ghent over the next five years. On September 22, 1966, Ghent property owners announce their opposition to the expansion of the medical center in Ghent, but five days later on September 27, 1966, the Ghent Neighborhood League supports the medical center at a public hearing. Those residents impacted by the Medical Center were unable to present enough opposition to NRHA’s project goals to change the plans. Similarly, West Ghent residents could not break the Ghent Neighborhood League’s loyalties to NRHA, or rather, to NRHA funding, and they were unsuccessful in attempts to save their homes.

What the Ghent Neighborhood League must have realized is that it was more beneficial to agree to an NRHA sponsored, quasi-conservation project, than to be on the other end of urban renewal, full-scale demolition. While the Ghent Conservation Project was progressing in Old Ghent, North Ghent and West Ghent, East Ghent was on another path. It appears as though the names for “East Ghent,” “West Ghent,” and “North Ghent” come from their geographic location relative to the original part of Ghent, but also labeled as separate areas because they were developed in later years. East Ghent first
appears on the 1910 Sanborn Fire Insurance Map, confirming that West, North and East Ghent were all being developed around the same time. East Ghent is bound by Olney Road on the South, Colonial Ave on the West, Granby Street on the East and 21st street on the North. The plots in East Ghent were generally closer together than those in its western counterpart across Colonial Ave, and houses are not as large. A map of the existing site shows that the neighborhood does have a variety of housing, and of note are the larger homes that appear on Debree Avenue near Maury High School (fig. 8). These original differences between East Ghent and Old Ghent were not as marked during the early part of the 19th century, as East Ghent was predominately a white middle class neighborhood. By the 1960s, however, there were many noted distinctions between Ghent and East Ghent. A map from the Department of City Planning in 1966 reveals that East Ghent was categorized as an area with over 53% of its structures labeled substandard, compared its neighbors in the other areas of Ghent, which contained only 3% substandard housing (fig 9). A similar map would reveal that differences in race fall along this same dividing line between East Ghent, a predominately black neighborhood and Ghent, a predominately white neighborhood. Additionally, more of the residents owned their homes in Ghent, where as in East Ghent most of the residents were renters.

There were some similar efforts in the East Ghent to initiate active resident participation in the renewal of their neighborhood as their had been in Ghent. The first attempt was in December 1962, when the Norfolk Health Department worked to force improvements using the city’s then minimum housing code. This was supported by the neighborhood fix-up campaigns like the East Ghent Civic League. The goal of this body was to motivate the landlords to find a renewed interest in their properties.
However, efforts were in vain, because few landlords responded to the campaign and East Ghent conditions did not improve. The Southeastern Tidewater Opportunity Project or STOP, a federally sponsored project to stave off poverty, but was limited to encouraging local initiative. Early attempts at neighborhood improvements were largely ineffective.

By 1968, East Ghent had made little progress. “East Ghent area was the last parcel of land in the city suitable for development as a mid to upper income neighborhood” said Jack Shiver, successor to Lawrence Cox as Executive Director of NRHA. A study was conducted by Vismor, McGill and Bell, which explored the feasibility of leveling and marketing a planned, higher income residential community in East Ghent.” Beginning in 1969, the Federal Government, the City of Norfolk, and the NRHA entered into partnership with the Department of Planning called the East Ghent Project North and South (fig 10). The East Ghent area, by 1970 was at the heart of Norfolk’s Model City program, one of the most extensive federal programs that the city became involved in during the 1960s. The basic objective of the Model City initiative was to improve the quality of life for people residing within the cities corporate boundary. The Model City program was a part of President Johnson’s war of poverty campaign of 1968. It involved comprehensive planning and rehabilitation, in combination with new construction. The federal government put up funds to fight blight and underscored a social service requirement in the cities. On November 13, 1969, Norfolk’s City Council approved the five model city neighborhood programs, which included East Ghent. Soon after, the NRHA announced its plan for the 75,000-dollar study to show how sections of East Ghent should be developed. Included in this plan,
was a map of the existing conditions in 1969. Of the 972 structures surveyed in East Ghent, 901 of them had considerable deficiencies, or around 92%. It was concluded that the best course of action was to raze the entire neighborhood of East Ghent and replace it with a project called Ghent Square North and South. With such a high percentage of so-called “deficient buildings,” the 72 odd buildings without deficiencies were slated for demolition with the rest.

It took five years for the NRHA clear the East Ghent neighborhood, and by 1974, the area bound by 20th Street, Granby, Olney and Colonial was empty land (fig 11). Included in the demolition were mostly single-family homes, but had since been divided to accommodate multiple families. There were a number of commercial and civic buildings located in East Ghent, including Maury High School, established in 1911, the old Omohundra School from 1901. Existing photographs of the neighborhood show that at one time, the homes in East Ghent, while close together, had carefully groomed lawns, were two-stories, and constructed out of all wood (fig 12). In terms of style, the homes are what a modest Victorian cottages, with one-story columned front porches, with shingle or wood clapboard siding, and front gabled roofs. One example of an East Ghent home included in the demolition was the Michael Joseph Cannon House (fig 13). The house was built in 1911, and could be considered Victorian with its decorative front gable window, ornamental rounded shingles, and projecting window bays. Mr. Cannon was a notable Norfolk figure, as the city’s first Health Department official, the Chief Sanitary Inspector. If only Mr. Cannon knew that 55 years later, his successors at the Health Department would come through his neighborhood to record its numerous sanitation violations. Some of the homes along Debree Ave, and the east side of Colonial Ave were
larger, some frame homes, some in brick. These homes were more similar to those found just across the street in Ghent with two-story classical front porches, and ornamental details (fig 14). There were also apartment buildings included in the demolition of the neighborhood, an example located at 222 19th street. This three-story apartment building had large two-story brick piers with wooden balustrades that supported an all-wooden porch on the third story (fig. 15). The apartment had a few Classical Revival details like the wide emphasized cornice line and prominent entryway complete with sidelights and a fanlight above the door. This apartment is similar to those constructed in the areas of North Ghent between 1910 and 1925. These few photographs demonstrate that East Ghent did contain some noteworthy buildings. Granted, the homes had fallen into disrepair, but not to a greater extent than those rehabilitated in the Ghent Conservation Project.

The NRHA decided not to include Maury High School in their plans for demolition, and expanded the grounds. Even though this school was located in the East Ghent section, those living in the old Ghent section attended it. The wrecking ball was also stopped for the Stovall House, located on West 11th Street in East Ghent (fig 16).55 The exact date on construction date was unknown, but it was sometime between 1800 and 1837. Architecturally, the style was referred to as “a fine example of the Early Federal Agrarian school.”56 Historically, the land had been used for farming, and was said to have been in the Llewellyn and Omohundro families for the past 300 years. The NRHA said that they wanted to move the house because “standing alone, it does not fit in with plan to rebuild the area.”57 The house went up for sale for one dollar, and the NRHA offered to help in moving the house. If it could not be sold, the Stovall House was would
be cleared with the rest of its neighbors. Efforts to track down the Stovall House have been in vain, and evidence that it was purchased and moved remains to be seen.

What replaced the old East Ghent neighborhood was the new, fully planned neighborhood, Ghent Square. The NRHA purchased the properties and cleared it using funds from the model cities programs, but then sold it for private development. One such buyer was Henry C. Hofheimer II, a developer and businessman of Norfolk, who was actually a resident of in the old section of Ghent.58 He was responsible for 38 townhouses and eight carriage style houses built in Ghent Square.59 Other developers included the National Realty Corporation and the Hall Development Corporation, contributing 69 more Ghent Square townhouses.60 Ghent Square included plans for new homes, but also new infrastructure, utilities and amenities like a pool and tennis courts. The streets were laid out in a different pattern, and renamed so that the numbered streets were changed to a series of courts, like North Mowbray Arch Court, and North Botetourt Court. The streets names now related more directly to the streets in Ghent like Mowbray Arch and Botetourt Street. Even the new name for the community, “Ghent Square” tries to include itself with Ghent, no longer making the geographic distinction of “East.” The land was broken up into 500 lots, about 25 feet by 100 feet in size.61 The homes were single-family detached and townhouses for the middle to upper class (fig 17, 18). Along with the new homes, was an integrated landscape plan, since many trees were included with the houses in the demolition of East Ghent. As a part of the landscape plan, and what came to be the nucleus of the new planned community, was Botetourt Gardens, a long stretch of green space meant to evoke Ghent’s Stockley Gardens.62 At the apex of the green, space was the reconstructed downtown ferry terminal, which had been removed
during NRHA renewal of downtown (fig 19). Instead of demolish it, the decision was made to number each part and store it in a warehouse until they found a use for it. Literature on new projects in Norfolk says, “What more appropriate centerpiece could there be for a new neighborhood near Victorian-inspired Old Ghent than the ferry terminal? Its style was uniquely its own and it would help create an architectural link between the new and the old.” They named the site, “Terminal on the Square,” to supposedly tie the area into one identifiable community.

As originally envisioned, Ghent Square was to be a mixed neighborhood, providing improved housing for people like former East Ghent residents. However, what developed in East Ghent was primarily high-end housing, including the luxury apartments called Ghent on the Square. The one concession the NRHA made to these goals of a mixed neighborhood was the construction of the John Knox Home for the Elderly on the corner of Colonial and West Princess Anne Road (fig. 20). One former resident of East Ghent voice her opinion saying, “They promised us the privilege of being the first to move back in…but then they built it back with homes they knew we couldn’t afford.” Another former East Ghent resident recalls that she was hired by the city to tell East Ghent neighbors they’d be allowed to return when affordable homes were built, she says, “They trained us in a class to say that. They sent us door to door. That was my first job.” Former East Ghent residents gathered in a 2001 reunion, organized by Barbara Case, to reminisce about the times they used to have while living in East Ghent. They want to recall the feelings of togetherness they felt while living there that, “We were poor but we had nice families, food to eat and so many nice people in your life. It was like a blanket of security.” In a recent interview with Barbara Case, she admits that the houses
in East Ghent were in need of some repairs, and that the landlords were unwilling to provide maintenance. When asked what the reasoning behind the demolition of her neighborhood, she says, “It was a racial thing.”

It was true that there had always been racial tensions in Norfolk, and it was fueled during this time period with the elimination of black neighborhoods and school desegregation. In 1958, the U.S District Court ordered the Norfolk school board to allow 151 black students to attend white schools. However, in Virginia massive resistance was the policy, and any school that integrated black and white students was to be closed and moved from the public school system. As a result, six all white schools had to be closed, including Maury High School in Ghent. Mayor, Fred Duckworth, and the city council insisted that the majority of the public opposed school desegregation. When the mayor was blamed for unfair school segregation and the closings, he responded by saying, Norfolk is the “best city in Virginia in regard to its colored population. Blacks make up 75 percent of the city’s jail population but pay less than 5 percent of its taxes,” meaning to suggest that blacks were ungrateful. The schools were reopened eight months later, but there were still tensions in the community. It has been suggested that, “Communities where blacks had begun to acquire homes and white flight was occurring were hardest hit by NRHA bulldozers. It could be argued that the new projects were aimed at clear separation between white and black communities to forestall court-ordered integration.” This could certainly be relevant in Ghent, where only a few years after Maury High School had been integrated, the East Ghent neighborhood was slated for demolition.
While the issue of race cannot be underestimated in this situation, but there were certainly other factors that influenced the decision to conserve the old section of Ghent and demolish East Ghent. Part of Ghent’s success as a conservation area was hinged on the ability of the residents to receive FDA low-interest loans and hire their own contractors and architects to do the work. However, this was only made possible by the NRHA’s official recognition of Ghent has a conservation area. If East Ghent had been declared a conservation area, it would have also been eligible for low-interest loans. But the renters in East Ghent were in no financial position to fix up their own homes, and the landlords were unable or unwilling to make the necessary renovations. The success of the Ghent Neighborhood League in Ghent’s renewal compares to the failure of any neighborhood civic league to catch on in East Ghent. The issue of resident involvement is definitely one area of departure between the two neighborhoods.

Related to resident involvement is the social status of the residents who were living there. While many prominent residents of Ghent had moved to suburbs further outside town during WWII, members from the upper class in positions of authority like attorneys, judges and politicians still lived in Ghent. In East Ghent, many of the residents were laborers, and may not have had the sway of the Ghent residents to affect decisions about their neighborhood.

Another factor is the caliber of architecture. While East Ghent certainly had notable architecture that was worth preserving, it was in the precarious situation of being directly next door to the old section of Ghent, where the some of the most prominent homes in Norfolk were built. By comparison, East Ghent homes were perceived as a lesser version of what you could find in Old Ghent. If East Ghent had been in another
area of Norfolk, perhaps the architecture would have been perceived as more valuable. Even former East Ghent resident, Barbara Case, believed that East Ghent homes were “less historic” than those in Ghent.\(^74\) This belief persisted despite the fact that East Ghent homes were built within ten or twenty years of the oldest homes in Ghent, and possibly at the same time as those in West Ghent or North Ghent. There were clear distinctions in what was considered valuable, in the case of Ghent, and what was disposable, in the case of East Ghent.

This point of architectural caliber is not unrelated to the status of historic preservation in Norfolk during these years. In 1965, the Department of City Planning was only beginning to establish its historic preservation guidelines. It was still operating under the policy of preserving architecture for its aesthetics or affiliations with historical figures.\(^75\) Buildings from the 20\(^{th}\) century were often overlooked, as structures of 18\(^{th}\) and early 19\(^{th}\) century were the focus of preservationists. A major problem of historic preservation up until this point was that the city did not have an inventory of the city’s historic structures, so many were demolished under the radar.\(^76\) Preservationists did not have much power to control policy, in fact, it was clearly the NRHA that had all the decision-making power. “Mayor Duckworth was to serve six terms as mayor, during which epoch no councilman would ever vote against an NRHA proposal…Lawrence Cox had the power of eminent domain to devour virtually everything in his course.”\(^77\) With no firm historic preservation policy, or power to influence decisions, preservationists were unable to stop the demolition in many areas of Norfolk. This also might begin to explain the tendency towards a full-scale remodel in the Ghent Conservation Project, as opposed to a more concerted effort to preserve the original fabric.
The prestige associated with earlier Norfolk renewal projects was further motivation to continue demolishing neighborhoods and rebuilding. Lawrence Cox, and the NRHA received national and state recognition for their efforts in renewal Projects 1 and 2, and their work on the Ghent Conservation Project. In 1957, Norfolk was awarded the Community Home Achievement Award by Look Magazine, and got additional recognition in Newsweek. The city was awarded the National Municipal League’s All-American City award for its improvements. In 1966, Norfolk’s work in preserving historic buildings, especially in Ghent, was cited in “Preserving Historic America,” published by the U.S Department of Housing and Urban Development. The NRHA had no reason to change the formula of slum removal or its standards for historic preservation if past projects had been noted for their exemplary success.

There are certainly political factors that influenced the decisions as well. The National Housing Act of 1949 funded the earlier slum clearance projects, including the costs of rebuilding public housing. In the late 1960s and 70s, the government was no longer providing substantial funds for the purposes of rebuilding low-income housing. Within the model cities program, money was given for the buying property and clearing land, but then sold to private developers. There was no longer the incentive to follow through building low-income housing when it was a better financial decision to sell to private developers.

While there was many factors were involved in the demolition of East Ghent, economic reasons seemed to be the driving force, and almost an extension of gentrification of old Ghent. The NRHA stated that the downtown Norfolk redevelopment hinged on the success of the retention of Ghent because it was a part of the back-to-town
trend and a reaction to commuter inconvenience. Similarly, the new upscale housing in East Ghent would support the restoration in Ghent, and they would both help to bring money to the retail section downtown. Another economic benefit of the expensive townhouses and single family homes in East Ghent was the subsequent increased property valued that would produce considerably more taxes for than city than low-income apartments. This also explains why Ghent Square was purposefully trying to associate with Ghent, because each neighborhood ultimately had the same economic aspirations.82

In some ways, the so-called “bulldozer mentality” is still prevalent in Norfolk today. Last year, the remainder of Atlantic City was demolished, and the Kirn Memorial Library is slated for demolition in upcoming months. Christ and Saint Luke’s Episcopal Church has plans to demolish part of 1905 Caldwell Hardy House on Ghent’s Stockley Gardens to make room for a new extension. Similarly, Ghent and Ghent Square continue to be marketed as chic in-town living, convenient to the downtown, supporting the same economic goals as during renewal. This just goes to show that history comes to inform the present, and in the case of Norfolk, has shaped they city they live in and the way they understand their material and cultural heritage.
Notes

2. Ibid.
3. Ibid.
4. Yarsinske, 14.
5. Yarsinske, 104.
6. Yarsinske, 83.
7. Ibid.
8. Ibid.
9. Yarsinske, 144.
11. Ibid.
12. Ibid.
13. Ibid.
15. “Timeline of NRHA.”
17. “History of NRHA.”
18. “Timeline of NRHA.”
20. “History of NRHA.”
22. Yarsinske, 159.
23. “Timeline of NRHA.”
29. Yarsinske, 159.
31. “Timeline of NRHA.”
37. Ibid.
40. Ibid.
41. Ibid.
43. Yarsinske, 159.
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