A NEIGHBORHOOD FIGHTS BACK

by Mark Kaplan & David Hann

Stirred by the renewed onslaught of apartment builders, residents of the "student ghetto" and hill-area neighborhood chose May as the time to formally organize a new neighborhood association for Lawrence. Commonly known as the "Oread" neighborhood, the area stretches from 9th to 19th Street, West, to Massachusetts Street on the East. For the present, the association will concentrate on the East and Northeast portions, where problems of deterioration, refuse, traffic, and crime are the most severe.

12th & Ohio--painting and minor structural repair in progress...

A large part of the neighborhood is located in the boundaries of the original townsite of Lawrence, layed out in 1854. A number of homes between Vermont and Louisiana Streets date to the immediate post-Civil War years, although organized home building didn't begin there until the late 1880's. The end of the century witnessed the construction of the many fine 2½ storey frame dwellings now lining the steeets, and the planting of hundreds of American Elm trees along the parkways.

Long a haven for student rooming houses and fraternity houses, the 1960's brought increasing "white flight" up and out of the nieghborhood. Dutch Elm disease damaged many of the old elms and, as the shade died away, paint began to dry and crack on the old homes. Manor chieftains, such as Daniel Ling and Fred Hageman landed on the neighborhood with both feet, buying up the old two and three-story houses. So many homes were purchased that the landlords couldn't begin to keep their property in sound, safe condition. Content to collect rent from students while allowing their property to deteriorate, landlords, not all, but enough, have contributed to the growing housing shortage in the City of Lawrence.

Neglected by landlord and tenant alike, the neighborhood quickly gained a reputation as a "hippie haven" populated by the type of derelicts that simply opened windows to dispose of garbage. In no short supply were the demands from more respectable townspeople to "clear them all out of there." The neighborhood was nearly brought to its knees by the Summer of 1970, and the ferment created by the war in Asia. There were confrontations with police and National Guard troops, one student, Nick Rice, was killed. There were numerous arson attempts, the University purge of Oread Avenue--the bulldozing of many houses there and along Louisiana Street.

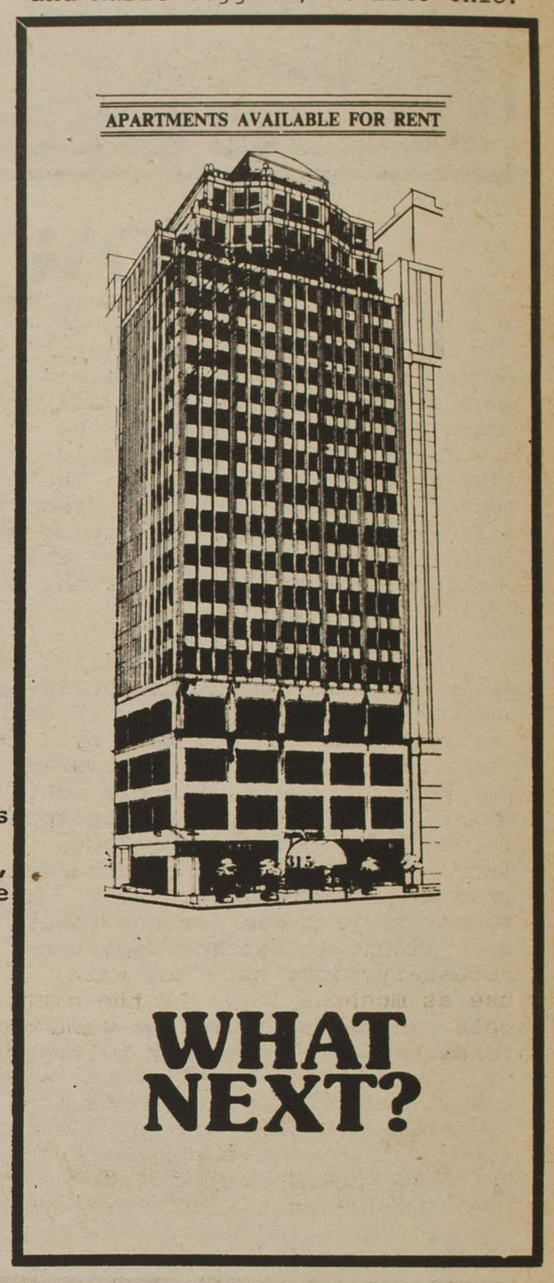
Things looked pretty bleak.

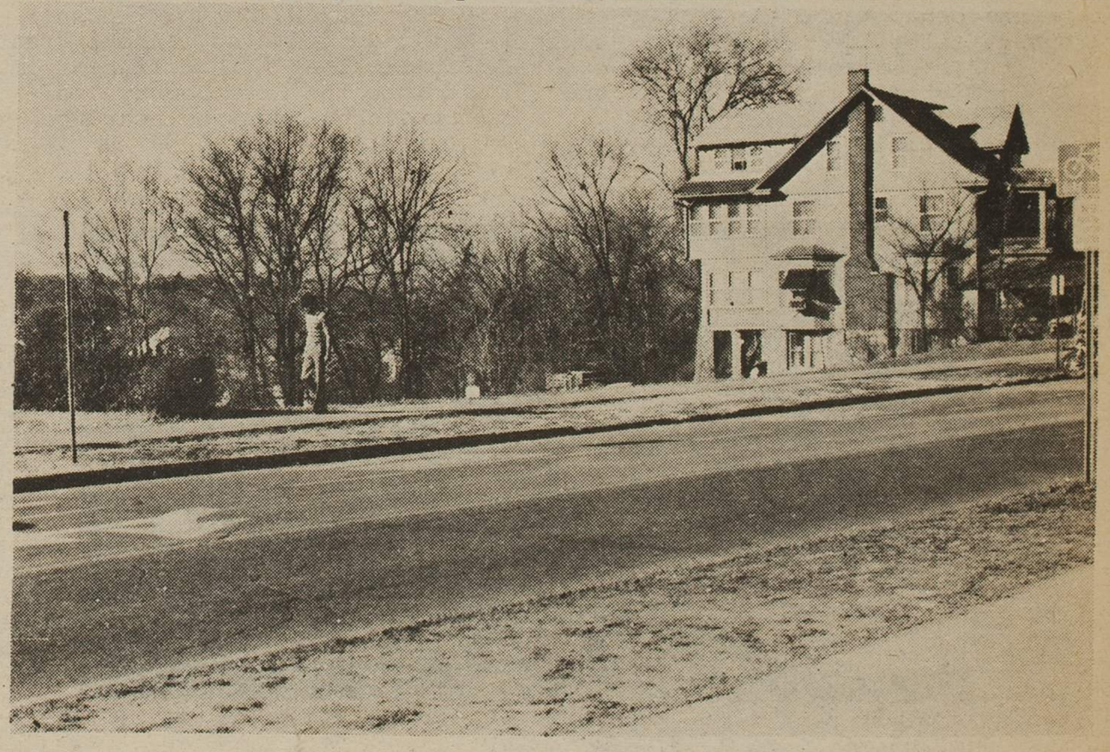
Seven years later, the whole area is definitely on the rebound. Though a number of slumlords still haunt alleyways, many other properties have been purchased by former students and faculty--with the intent of restoring the homes for single family or apartment use. New trees are being planted, sidewalks repaired, shingles replaced, and more importantly residents, both old and new, owners and renters, are organizing.

The apparent intent of the organizers is three-fold. Initial stirrings came last Fall when women in the neighborhood banded together to protect themselves from the increasing incidence of rape on area streets. Protective efforts centered on Ohio Street, where Community Development money from the Federal government was obtained for street lighting. The second battle line is to be drawn with the developers, and their allies in City Hall, who from time to time take an old house by surprise and replace it with tacky and expensive rentals of the 4 or 8-plex variety. Thirdly, and not to be taken lightly, is the expansionist policy of the University of Kansas and the Endowment Association. Many a night's sleep has been lost by Oread residents whose dreams have been invaded by K.U.'s 'secret' plans for parking lots and low-rise dormatories along the East slope of the Hill.

One can see that the action of Oread residents in organizing to preserve and protect their neighborhood is timely indeed. Already this Spring, builders are drooling over another annual "housing crunch" brought on by the Fall return of 15,000 people looking for a place to live. Apartment buildings currently under construction at 9th and Illinois and 11th and Mississippi advertised for rentals months before ground was even broken. The City Commission has approved a monstrosity of a structure for the Southwest corner of 13th and Ohio Streets, with 21 living units, which will give rise to parking and traffic problems.

Though treated kindly in their premier appearance at City Hall on May 17th, the new Oread Neighborhood Improvemnt Association will have a hard row to hoe these next few years. The most important request from the Oread Association was denied - to declare a moratorium on approving more site plans until a neighborhood plan was developed. The residents, City Hall, and developers know this could give a neighborhood time and leverage to develop a plan of presevation and revitalization. Existing neighborhood groups in Lawrence have had a pretty poor track record in contests with builders and developers in the past. City Hall has been slow in making good on promises of "neighborhood plans" and protective zoning policies. Instead of responding favorably to a request for a moratorium on building site plans, commissioners asked the Oread group if they would like a more vigorous enforcement of the minimum structures code. This is an old dodge, frequently used by the commission and City Hall to change the subject and put individuals and neighborhood associations on the defensive. A discussion of minimum housing standards followed but the Oread residents persisted in their request for a moratorium on site plan approvals, to no avail. The residents of the Oread area will need all the aid and support we can give them. Let's give generously. If you are interested, get in touch with Richard Eisner, of the School of Architecture at K.U., or George and Marie Coggins, at 1145 Ohio.





Only seven years ago, the 1200 block of Oread Ave. was a fine tree-shaded lane, lined by nice old homes sheltering a variety of people. Today, only two of those homes still stand, in the wake of University offensive against against the turbulent '60's.

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