

Value-added in demolition...

The name “Duck Island” refers to an obscure corner of the Tremont neighborhood, made up of a 100 or so houses at the western end of the Lorain-Carnegie Bridge. From what most can figure, it was a place where bootleggers could “duck in” and hide from the cops during prohibition. And given the geography around it, the Cuyahoga River and railroad tracks and various bridges, it has been an island of sorts through its history, close to downtown and Ohio City, but separated from them as well.

Real estate developers love location, and Duck Island certainly has had that over the years. But the isolation was always a problem. The area had become run down with absentee landlords who owned homes that had little architectural or historic value. It was difficult to do development one lot at a time.

“People would drive in to look at a home they might want to move into and refurbish, but turn right around because the rest of the housing stock was so bad,” says Matt Berges, one of the principals in the Duck Island Development Collaborative.

“This neighborhood is a great example of the value-added in demolition,” Berges says. “It isn’t about gentrification or moving poor people out. It is about landlords who owned older homes and wanted to get out from under it, but we couldn’t do it unless we did the whole neighborhood.”

Berges, 38, a home builder contractor by trade, bought a small apartment in Duck Island about five years ago. It came with two vacant parcels on either side, and Berges figured he could redo the apartment for his own family’s residence, and then build new homes on the side lots to pay for it all. He figured the proximity to Ohio City and Tremont would make these side lots valuable. But that was slow to happen and the banks weren’t enamored with investing in this neighborhood one house at a time. Because of its isolation, a small city park was a haven for drug dealers, crime was rampant, and Berges found it was a place where registered sex offenders were living. Even with Ohio City blowing up just a few blocks away, Duck Island was hidden from view and that is a problem in the development game.

He acquired about 60 properties and has torn down most of them. “We worked with the local block club, the community development organization, and other groups to do this right,” he says of the anti-gentrification argument some have raised. “We approached the owners of these houses and most were landlords who wanted a fair price to get out. I’ve employed many of the people who had been renting and helped them find new places to live.”

The newer homes can range from \$300,000 to \$600,000. Some have pristine views of the Cleveland downtown skyline from their third floor decks. The new residents (including Berges’ in-laws from Geauga County) are two blocks from the RTA Ohio City Rapid station, a few blocks from the West Side Market and Ohio City bars and restaurants, and a bike ride across the Lorain-Carnegie Bridge from downtown.

“What has attracted buyers is the volume of homes we have to offer in an urban setting,” Berges says. “We are creating a real neighborhood. My three kids couldn’t go to the park when we moved here. It was very dangerous. Now they can and I don’t worry about them. I’m proud that we have been a part in changing that.”

MATT BERGES

