



Home, sweet home

Oakland U. researchers try to identify historical homes



ANN DTRACY

Oakland University art students Lynn Workman (left) of Birmingham and Joyce Himes of Utica study Oakland County maps before heading into a neighborhood for their historic survey. They are now wrapping up the four-year project to identify, document and evaluate architectural sites and districts in this area.

By Kathy Parrish
staff writer

TO YOU, home, sweet home may be just a bungalow. But a team of Oakland University researchers might call it a historic structure.

For the past four years, OU art students have been surveying Oakland County's architectural resources for the Department of State's Michigan History Division.

Going up and down every street in communities like Avon Township, Birmingham and Southfield, the survey team photographs buildings put up before 1939. The researchers then determine whether the houses could qualify for either the National or State Registers of Historic Places.

"Sometimes we find nothing — sometimes a lot," said Professor John Cameron, who is overseeing the project with fellow art historian Janice Schimmelman.

"Southeastern Michigan has so much wonderful stuff. People think they've got to go to Europe or out east to see beautiful architecture. But it's right here."

Started in 1979 by OU anthropology professor Richard Stamp, the project is funded by the university and National Register grants from the Michigan History Division. This year the grant is \$21,400, and OU matches that amount with professors' salaries, facilities and resources.

THE SURVEY covers almost all of Oakland County except Pontiac, Holly, Milford and Farmington, which have historical societies doing similar work. Wixom chose not to take part.

Other such surveys are being conducted throughout the state for the Michigan History Division. The findings go to Lansing, where they serve as a resource for communities, historical organizations and individuals interested in nominating monuments or sites to the registers.

Such recognition could protect the structures from being altered or destroyed and open the way to state and federal restoration funds.

"We are attempting to have the entire state surveyed, but it's piecemeal," architectural coordinator Brian Conway said. The state department employee uses the results when reviewing federal projects that could result in houses being torn down.

"Oakland County is one of the more difficult because of the concentration of population and structures. And it's important to complete soon because there is such rapid growth," he said.

Working first as interns, then research associates and researchers, the college art students drive down each main road in townships and walk along city and village streets.

They estimate the age of houses by looking at clues like foundation types, narrow windows, steep roofs or materials

like cobblestone not used after World War I. "What's impressive to me is how well the students can eyeball structures. Their art history education stands them in good stead," said Cameron, adding that the only real problem comes when the house was rebuilt onto an older foundation.

"THAT TRIPS us up sometimes."

In neighborhoods, the students carry information about the project so curious residents will know what they are doing — and to head off fears that they are assessing the property to raise taxes or casing the neighborhood before breaking into a house.

Researcher Joyce Himes, though, finds most homeowners eager to talk once they know what is happening.

"Some get very upset, but when they find out what we are doing they calm down," the Utica resident said.

"Everyone is interested in telling you about their homes." Results vary widely from community to community. In Novi, the researchers only took six pictures. But communities like Birmingham, West Bloomfield and Southfield yielded more than they hoped.

"We have a whole book of just Birmingham," said researcher Lynn Workman, who lives there. "It's a huge residential area, populated early, and there was lots of construction."

But Cameron has been disappointed at the findings. This year, researchers turned up about 2,000 houses built before 1939.

"I thought we had more, but so much has been destroyed in the past 10-15 years. We just don't have a national mechanism for preserving things. There's been a real wave of destruction."

There is a small percentage of 19th century homes, mostly 1840-1880 Italianates and some Queen Anne, Greek Revival and Romanesque architecture. Most of the 20th century findings are bungalows.

While the cut-off date for the historic structures is 1939, the researchers got permission to take photos of some unusual modern structures.

"Southfield is so exceptional we wanted to include a few newer buildings. Some of the high-rises there are just magnificent," Cameron said. The university personnel do sometimes advise historic preservationists, but their role in the project is not to do historic research. "We're not funded for it. This is just a photographic survey," said Cameron, who sends everything on to Lansing for further study.

Also working on the project this year are Anne Burns of Rochester and Carol Chalton of West Bloomfield.

The final leg of the four-year survey will be completed by fall. It will focus on the communities of Pontiac Township, part of West Bloomfield, Commerce and Novi townships and the city of Southfield.



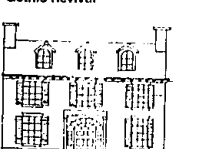
Italian Villa



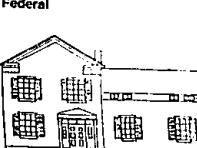
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