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Posted: 5:54 a.m. Friday, Oct. 5, 2012

Peachtree mansion offered for free by preservationists

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By Greg Bluestein

Preservationists are finding it's not easy to save an imposing mansion in Buckhead: Even an offer to hand the home to anyone who will move it has gone nowhere.

Some worry that the dire situation for that Peachtree Road building is a symbol of Atlanta's flimsy ties with its past, highlighted by a hit-or-miss history of preservation.

The house, built in 1924 for Thomas Jefferson's great-great grandson, has sat virtually untouched for 25 years on a busy stretch of Peachtree Road near the Peachtree Battle shopping center, in front of a condo development that now wants to tear it down.

Desperate to save the Randolph-Lucas House, the Buckhead Heritage Society this summer offered the home to anyone who can afford the \$350,000 estimated cost to move it to a new location in the neighborhood.

The society put the word out through a website and local media, and got more than a dozen preliminary inquiries. But no takers. The economic downturn isn't helping, preservationists say, and neither is the condo association, which they say isn't yet letting architects and engineers scout the building to determine the fixes it needs.

"It's too much of an unknown on what it's going to cost to fix it up," said Wright Mitchell, a Buckhead attorney leading the effort. "And nobody is going to buy it and move it without looking at it first."

Now the home seems destined for the wrecking ball. Its owner, the 2500 Peachtree Condominium Association, filed an application last week with the Atlanta Urban Design Commission to tear down the house and replace it with an open-air pavilion for the condo's residents. An Oct. 10 hearing is set at City Hall.

Steve Labovitz, the condo association's attorney, said the association is willing to work with potential buyers but only after it gets the demolition permit. He said the owners have little choice but to seek to raze the house due to its rapidly deteriorating condition. Labovitz said it could cost at least \$1 million to fix up, making it hard to sell.

"It's a threat to residents and pedestrians," said Labovitz, a partner with McKenna Long & Aldridge. "If it were to fall a certain way, it could be a hazard to a lot of people."

Boyd Coons, who heads the Atlanta Preservation Center, said the economic downturn is preventing some wealthy patrons from saving the building. So is the daunting prospect of moving a building to save it.

“It needs a fairy god-person,” said Coons.

Designed by the architect who helped build the Fox Theater, the house was built almost 90 years ago for Hollins Randolph, a scion of Thomas Jefferson. It was designed to look like Randolph’s childhood home in Virginia, a Georgian-style house with three windows peeking out of sloping roofs. It was later sold to Arthur Lucas and his wife, Margaret, who lived there until she died in 1987.

It found a second life as a popular wedding venue, and the Atlanta City Council granted it status as a historic building in 1990. When a developer wanted to build a 10-story condo complex on the site seven years later, the council allowed it only if the builder preserved the house.

The Randolph-Lucas House was moved about 40 feet to accommodate the new construction, and the condo association has since tried unsuccessfully to find a buyer for the house.

From afar, it doesn’t look much like a relic. The red-brick mansion cuts an impressive figure on Peachtree, a silent reminder of the bygone era when the street was lined with estates built by wealthy families who wanted to escape the bustle of downtown. It is one of the last of the dozens of single-family mansions that once dotted the streetscape.

“It means so much to generations of people. So many people have seen it and enjoyed it,” said Coons. “This is something beautiful that refreshed the street. It sort of lifts up your experience in the city.”

But a walk around the site reveals a range of flaws, from chipped paint and decaying window shutters to long cables that help shore up the home’s chimneys. Labovitz said shingles falling from the aging roof can present safety risks as well.

“People probably think the building is in worse condition than it actually is,” Coons said. “They wonder why else a condo association would tear down a landmark building that everyone else loves.”

Many metro Atlanta landmarks were flattened during decades of virtually unchecked growth after World War II. But a preservation movement emboldened partly by the effort to save the Fox Theatre from demolition in the 1970s took root with tenuous alliances between developers and preservationists.

The compromises have helped turn a decaying mill into loft space in the city and preserved farmhouses destined for development in the suburbs. The city’s growth has also inevitably led to new flashpoints, such as the ongoing fight over Georgia Tech’s bid to turn a three-story Midtown building dating from the 1920s into a high-tech economic development hub.

Coons and other preservationists aren’t conceding defeat over the Randolph-Lucas house yet. They say they have an agreement with the condo association that would allow the house to be moved even after a demolition permit is issued, and they’re still on a quest for someone willing to take a risk on an aging reminder of Atlanta’s past.

“We all knew it would be an uphill battle to save the house,” said Mitchell, president of Buckhead Heritage Society. “And we knew we were in for a fight.”

The association, meanwhile, is sending signals that it won’t block efforts to save the historic structure.

“If the preservation society believes this house is worth saving, we’re willing to work with them,” Labovitz said. “It’s not our intent to snuff our noses at them.”

The fate of many metro Atlanta buildings has drawn concern from preservation groups. Among them:

Brookwood Station

Atlanta’s only remaining rail passenger station, a 1918 building on Peachtree Street between Buckhead and Midtown, is operated by Amtrak, but Amtrak has said it would like to relocate.

Constitution Building

The structure at Alabama and Forsyth Streets has been vacant since 1972. It is in an area the state transportation department hopes to revitalize around a “multimodal passenger terminal” for MARTA, trains, buses and streetcars. Planning is in preliminary stages.

Crum & Forster Building

Georgia Tech proposes to renovate the 3-story, 1920s building on Spring Street into a “high-performance computing center,” preserving its façade but demolishing the other two-thirds of the building.

Morris Brown College

The future of the campus, with buildings dating from the 19th century, is in doubt because of the financial problems that have overwhelmed the historic college.

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- Posted by Ifarleyheart at 7:25 a.m. Oct. 5, 2012
- Report Abuse

People who destroy Atlanta's history for profit are carpetbaggers.



- Posted by Buzzed at 8:02 a.m. Oct. 5, 2012
- Report Abuse

People should remember that this house was pictured on the cover of Anne Rivers Siddon's book, Peachtree Road - a story of Atlanta society in the early 20th century.



- Posted by JDinMarietta at 8:12 a.m. Oct. 5, 2012
- Report Abuse

Why destroy it? Why not let a company or two salvage the valuable architectural materials before completely demolishing it? At least parts of the house would live on somewhere else. As someone who has renovated many old homes over the years I guarantee this home has a ton of beautiful mantels, woodwork, staircases, hardwoods that can be reused in someone else's home...what a shame to bulldoze this gorgeous home!



- Posted by SallyBow at 8:24 a.m. Oct. 5, 2012
- Report Abuse

That house needs to stay exactly where it is. It is the only reminder of what the area was when it was built.



- Posted by BULLSEYE57 at 8:42 a.m. Oct. 5, 2012
- Report Abuse

Save the FOX!!!



- Posted by druidhills at 8:58 a.m. Oct. 5, 2012
- Report Abuse

Buzzed, I was thinking the same thing. "Peachtree Road" is a really good book and the house plays prominently in it. When they moved it a few years back I was worried.



- Posted by cw1960 at 9:03 a.m. Oct. 5, 2012
- Report Abuse

The real eyesore is the garish faux-Italianate monstrosity that was built behind the house. That people would pay millions of dollars for a condo in that grotesque ode to excess is appalling.



- Posted by chasviv at 9:04 a.m. Oct. 5, 2012
- Report Abuse

That condo building is extremely ugly...what a total waste of a great piece of land. How about tearing down the condo building and expending the resources to restore the Jefferson building. If Atlanta wants to truly become a great city as it so often claims, then it needs to start strengthening its historic preservation efforts. Until then, it is just another generic steel, glass, and concrete city in the sunbelt.



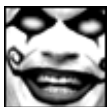
- Posted by kwhurstatl at 9:11 a.m. Oct. 5, 2012
- Report Abuse

"When a developer wanted to build a 10-story condo complex on the site seven years later, the [Atlanta] council allowed it only if the builder preserved the house." If the condo was built with this provision, why allow the agreement to be broken. Tear down the condo and move somewhere else. The mansion was there first.



- Posted by Smokyboy at 9:32 a.m. Oct. 5, 2012
- Report Abuse

I have a lot on Lake Forrest Dr by Chastain Park you can put it on.



- Posted by highaltitudes at 10:06 a.m. Oct. 5, 2012
- Report Abuse

I say LEAVE the mansion and TEAR DOWN the incredibly ugly and out of touch monstrosity behind it!



- Posted by rustyrosey at 10:10 a.m. Oct. 5, 2012
- Report Abuse

Sigh.....Just add it to the list of beautiful and historic buildings City of Atlanta leaders have been tearing down since the 1960's. They went wild in the 1960's. My father took me to see a few of them before they were demolished.



- Posted by Peggynorthlake at 10:13 a.m. Oct. 5, 2012
- Report Abuse

I want it! I would replace my house with it. 350K to move it seems a bit unrealistic. How far can you move a mansion for that amount?

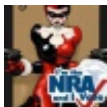
No cutes. No works.



- Posted by MANGLER at 10:13 a.m. Oct. 5, 2012
- Report Abuse

Why was it never incorporated as a clubhouse or functional part of the development behind it? How hard would it have been to design with it and not next to it?

I think it boils down to residents on the first 4 levels behind it are tired of looking at it from their balconies. If the condo association would like to replace it with something, then perhaps they should anti up and pay to move it. It would save a lot of face for them.



- Posted by TrishaDoherty at 10:27 a.m. Oct. 5, 2012
- Report Abuse

At the risk of being the b*tch yet again, might I suggest ..strike a match?

There is a long history of this in the ATL..the Loew's grand was torched to make way for the G-P tower back before I was even born. Arson cuts thru the historical preservationists red tape unlike any other solution.



- Posted by Historyfan at 10:29 a.m. Oct. 5, 2012
- Report Abuse

Yes, tear down the monstrosity (or let Christo drape it) and leave the mansion where it is. Surely there must be some socially responsible company from another part of the country or the world willing to fund the restoration, as Daimler did with Margaret Mitchell's house, when no Atlanta company was willing to touch it.



- Posted by jarvis1975 at 10:43 a.m. Oct. 5, 2012
- Report Abuse

@trish, brick doesn't burn genius.



- Posted by SixFive at 11:30 a.m. Oct. 5, 2012
- Report Abuse

I love the way that house sits there in the "middle" of everything that is Peachtree. It would be a horrendous mistake to move it or tear it down.



- Posted by TrishaDoherty at 12:02 p.m. Oct. 5, 2012
- Report Abuse

@the_real_jarvis

Everything inside the brick shell would burn, thus making the brick shell unstable and a having to be condemned..just like the brick loew's grand theater..or 2/3 of the city circa 1864

and yes, I am a genius



- Posted by PreserveAtlanta at 12:07 p.m. Oct. 5, 2012
- Report Abuse

JDinMarietta: Unfortunately most everything of value has already been stripped from the house.

Even if the substantial historical aspect of the house is ignored, a demolition permit should be denied and the association should be forced to honor their obligation to maintain the structure. The zoning to build The Monstrosity was only approved because the association DID agree to those terms. What meaning will zoning have in the future if an owner can change it to suit their needs down the road.

I don't feel sorry for the current condo owners. The house is not hiding behind a tree-its right out front and obviously part of the property. If they didn't have the desire or funds to maintain the house, maybe they should have purchased in another community.

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