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Atlanta mansion could be doomed if no buyer found

by Greg Bluestein, [The Atlanta Journal-Constitution](#)

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ATLANTA (AP) — 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.



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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."

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