



GARDENSPOT



Top: Looking west on the Unit Block of R St. NW.
Bottom: Rod Terry and Steven Cummings, two of the tulip planting organizers.

The Red Tulip project

A Bloomingdale Block Sets the Pace of Neighborhood Revitalization and Unity

ARTICLE BY DEREK THOMAS, PHOTOS BY ANDREW LIGHTMAN

The neighborhood around North Capital and R St. NW, within sight of the U.S. Capitol, is one of large Victorian row homes notable for their meticulous workmanship and occasionally whimsical design elements. In fact the neighborhoods off North Capital have always been stunning in design detail.

The neighborhoods just off North Capital have had their problems, but this has not stopped the steady migration to Shaw, Le Droit Park, Edgewood, Eckington and Bloomingdale. The fact is that the beauty of a largely Victorian inspired area of the city, built for the most part in the late 1800's, far outweighs the day-to-day hassles of urban life. Residents have relocated to the streets flanking North Capitol for the very essence of city life – the genuine sense of urban living lures many younger residents to these neighborhoods.

Bloomingdale is a vibrant example of the transformation of what was once a neglected part of the city. New residents and old are making these neighborhoods lively with their strollers and coffee shops and organic markets, pushing out loiters and illicit activity. Tree plantings and neighborhood clean ups have replaced the open-air drug trade and occasional vandalism that once plagued this neighborhood. The streets are brighter, cleaner, and more valuable due to a return to old-fashioned community cohesiveness.

The R Street. Restoration Committee

One street that is leading the way to the revitalization of these neighborhoods is the unit block of R St. NW. The R Street Restoration Committee began in 1999 with a vision for an improvement of life and beautification of neighborhood. Their first task was to get nonprofit

status, and once receiving that, the visionaries Rod Terry and Steven Cummings knew just what to do. They set out to lead by example and become a catalyst of change in Bloomingdale and its surrounding neighborhoods. Rod Terry, an attorney, published author, and associate director of the council on Legal Education, is also a visionary who saw an opportunity to transform his block into something of a model of urban revitalization. Mr. Terry says, "it has been a slow and steady process that often times feels like it happened overnight. The change on our block has inspired other blocks to beautify and maintain their streets. And our blocks projects have been a positive uplifting experience for all who participate."

In fact the projects have been numerous. The R St. Restoration Committee has produced banners for their lamp posts, done a tree box revitalization project, and of course the stunning tulips that have been a lure since 2001.

The Projects

When setting out to do a project the committee looks for 40-50% participation. And most things they have sought to do have been overwhelmingly supported by the block. They built custom tree boxes for 25 of the streets 43 tree boxes. The tree box project was one of the first activities that helped to give the block a unified feel through the repeating design of tree boxes on both sides of the street. The committee has produced an annual holiday home tour to show off some of the notable properties on the block and to also serve as a fundraiser for block projects.

While interviewing Mr. Terry, I got a great sense of the allure and elegance of these homes. His home has incredible woodworking throughout, vaulted ceilings and grand Victorian workmanship from front formal turret to the quaint

workman style kitchen. And the block contains 80 grand dames just like his. The committee has hosted a address placard drive to give the block a formal unifying detail that does make a difference in the overall appearance on the block. They hosted a tree planting of dogwoods and crape myrtles in the early part of this decade which has added color and character to the block in spring and summer. One of the major projects that the committee has tackled is petitioning the city to take out the cement sidewalks and replace them with traditional brick sidewalks, an architectural element that is instantly noticed. Mr. Terry says, "it was a tedious process to petition and then follow up with the city but the end project was well worth it. The sidewalks helped to unify the block in many wondrous ways, and brought neighbors together to achieve our common goal."

The Tulips

Washington DC, and tulips all go seamlessly together. We marvel each year at the grand drifts of riotous color that only a tulip bed can achieve. So when Mr. Terry and committee decided on red tulips in 2001, there were no negative comments. Who could say no to a street filled with red tulips? Now the show is over 5000 tulips strong each spring. In fact several years ago the show "The District" used R Street to film a segment of their series that is set in DC. Mr. Terry says, "The tulips makes everyone happy."

Debbie Moutrie, the proprietor of Nouveau Fleur Florist and a resident of R Street, says "the tulips fill all of our hearts with hope and renewal as we transition from the dark days of winter to the warmth of spring." I would say that the red tulip project has been one of the most positive analogies of a neighborhood that has risen from dark days to become a glowing example of modern day renaissance revivalism. The tulips are for the unit block of R Street, a glowing example of how unity can inspire change.

Derek Thomas is a regular garden writer for DC North, His Company, Thomas Landscapes, has regularly contributed to HGTV's Curb Appeal and Get It Sold. He can be reached at www.thomas-landscapes.com or 301.642.5182. ★

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