

The Boston Globe

A brand new look for Uphams Corner

Attention, appreciation of history turning things around



With Pilgrim Church in the background, a person walked in Uphams Corner recently. (Jonathan Wiggs/ Globe Staff)

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By Meghan E. Irons, Globe Staff | October 22, 2009

Bundled in coats and hats, a group of history buffs braved the morning chill for an up-close view of Uphams Corner.

During a three-hour excursion into the neighborhood, the sightseers stood on the grand stage of the newly restored Strand Theatre, sat in the old pews in the small sanctuary at aging Pilgrim Church, and got a crash course on the old Dorchester North Burying Ground.

“I’ve lived here since 1985, and I’ve never seen anything like this,” said Nancy Conrad, who joined preservationists and other local residents on a historic tour of her Dorchester community. “Uphams Corner has long been one of those neighborhoods that have been ignored.”

Known more for its congestion and bursts of crime than its bustling enterprises, Uphams Corner is not the sort of place where people typically tour historic sites. But lately, the neighborhood, home of the \$6 million newly renovated Strand Theatre, has been getting some much-needed attention.

The Salvation Army recently chose this slice of Dorchester to build the \$115 million Kroc Corps Community Center, which will provide educational, athletic, wellness and other services for local residents. Earlier this year, neighborhood residents were able to begin doing their food shopping locally for the first time in three years, after Brother’s Supermarket II opened a store on Dudley Street.

And this month, the Boston Preservation Alliance, an education and advocacy group based downtown, has made Uphams Corner a stopping ground in its new initiative that aims to extend its historic field services to Boston neighborhoods through workshops, planning, and one-on-one assistance. The Alliance has teamed with Historic Boston Inc., the National Trust for Historic Preservation, and Uphams Corner Main Streets and is working with businesses, residents, and community-based groups to better target and preserve historic buildings and to restore underserved neighborhoods to their rightful place in local history.

“We’ve worked in every neighborhood in this city,” said Sarah Kelly, executive director of the Alliance, which seeks to preserve Boston’s unique architectural heritage. “However, the neighborhoods that we tend to hear from the most are those that already have historic districts in places such as Back Bay, South End, and Beacon Hill.”

Recently, the Alliance has ventured into such areas as East Boston, Charlestown, Roxbury, and Dorchester, holding tours and workshops for neighborhood residents and businesses in commercial centers, while seeking to learn about each community’s preservation needs.

Though it has not decided whether it will hold more walking tours in Uphams Corner, the Alliance is already focusing on another Boston community: Allston Village.

Zach Cohen, who heads Uphams Corner Main Streets, said his nonprofit plans to hold similar tours in Uphams Corner.

“I think people don’t necessarily know what to expect about Uphams Corner if they haven’t been here in a long time,” Cohen said. “But they are pleasantly surprised when they visit the neighborhood.”

Indeed, the neighborhood move is slowly gaining steam in other areas, as local groups work to change the stigma associated with communities often linked to crime and blight.

Roxbury is now a cultural destination thanks to Discover Roxbury, a nonprofit group that offers

historical tours. Allston has a neighborhood museum courtesy of its historical society. And Jamaica Plain, Hyde Park, and other areas now have fewer empty historic buildings because nonprofits are restoring them and making them home.

Kathy Kottaridis, who heads Historic Boston Inc., said the new neighborhood push parallels the rise of local historical societies, whose methods of chronicling people, places, and events have become more technologically sophisticated over the years.

“Everyone is feeling that folks are active on all fronts,” she said.

Kottaridis should know. Historic Boston Inc. decided to shed its longtime downtown digs earlier this year to renovate the old Eustis Street Firehouse in Roxbury as its new headquarters, a \$2 million project.

Joanne Tuller, a member of the Uphams Corner West Side Neighborhood Association, said the sharing of ideas among preservation groups, residents, and businesses is welcome in her neighborhood.

“We certainly can use the attention and help,” said Tuller.

At Brothers Supermarket II yesterday, shoppers browsed the wide aisles for cabbage, apples, and meat. The grocer, which replaced the American Food Basket on Dudley Street, said it picked Uphams Corner because it sensed a quiet renewal there. It is one of six new businesses that have opened in Uphams Corner this year.

“It’s a neighborhood that is slowly changing,” said Anbioris Fernandez, the store manager. “There are a lot of upgrades and revitalization. And we wanted to be part of that.”

On the tour last Saturday, Nancy Conrad seemed amazed her neighborhood is finally getting some attention.

“If you look back at what this neighborhood was at one time, you can see the incredible beauty that used to be here,” she said. “But if in some way, building by building, we can draw attention to it, maybe get historic designation, then that can help elevate a sense of community.”

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