Would You Buy A House

By Rufus Wells

URBAN HOMESTEADING: A MYTH OR A MIRACLE?

Urban homesteading is sweeping the country. Is it a boon for black city or just another bad dream? Not even the experts can agree on whether a house for one dollar is a bargin.

DAWN Magazine takes a close look at the nation's most exciting—and most controversial housing experiment.

The best buys in today's troubled housing market are the houses being offered for sale to qualified buyers in American cities for one dollar. That's right, one dollar. The program, popularly known as urban homesteading, makes older, abandoned houses available to people who agree to fix the houses up and live in them for a certain period of time.

Already, hundreds of families in Philadelphia, Detroit, Baltimore, St. Louis, Washington, D.C. and some 60 other cities have seen their dreams of home ownership come true, and many other families have applied for the housing bargains and are eagerly awaiting the day when they sign the papers and move into their dream home.

Unfortunately, not everyone can get a house at these bargain basement prices. The demand for the houses far exceeds the supply, and most cities are selling the houses on a lottery basis to assure fair distribution. So your chances of getting one are as good as those of the next qualified would-be buyer.

Urban homesteading is not, as some believe, a program to pacify frustrated inner city blacks. The nation's first urban homesteader was a white DuPont Co. executive whose name was picked in a special drawing in Wilmington, Del.

Previously, he had been commuting to his job in Wilmington from a swank address on Philadelphia's Main Line. The crowd attending the drawing booed when his name and address were announced. A few nights later, the lucky executive was initiated into city life when thieves ripped up and made off with the quaint brick sidewalk in front of his newly-acquired home.

James Mayo, a cab driver, and his wife, Kay, became Washington, D.C.'s first urban homesteaders when their names were drawn in a lottery in the nation's capital. "I'm so happy I don't know what to say," Mrs. Mayo told reporters as her slender frame shook with excitement. "We've wanted a home of our own the whole time we've been married .... 11 years.

Another black couple winning a home in the first Washington lottery was Mr. and Mrs. Marshall Allen. "Oh, I prayed so," said Mrs. Allen. "It was the Lord who gave me that house! It's the first time I ever won anything."

There is an ongoing dispute as to when and where the idea of urban homesteading originated. Aides to Wilmington, Del. Mayor Thomas C. Maloney say the idea came to him out of the blue during his campaign in 1972. But Philadelphia city officials point out that Joseph E. Coleman, a black city councilman, proposed urban homesteading there in 1968. However, Wilmington got into action with its program before Philadelphia and is generally credited with beginning, if not originating, the program.

Urban homesteading got its name from the 1862 Homestead Act that gave new land in the American West to persons who would live on it and farm it. The Homestead Act made it possible for any adult citizen to lay claim to 160 acres of federal land for only $1.25 an acre, plus the stamina to live on the property and improve it for five years.

'If it catches on, we can have the city moving again. . .'

Practically all of the early homesteaders were white, and they succeeded in opening up and settling and taming the West.

Today's homesteaders are city folk, many of them are black, and they face dangers no less frightening than those faced by early Americans in the Wild West. They face violence and sudden death in the crime-ridden ghettoes, where life is every bit as cheap as it was in the Wild West. And lingering around the corner is the prospect of financial ruin in trying to fix a delapidated decaying house into a home.

Urban homesteading has its advantages, and is a boon for many, but it's no panacea. Every city that has tried the novel housing plan has encountered problems, and in some instances, the homesteader's dream of a home of his own has quickly turned into a nightmare.

Financing was a major problem in Philadelphia, where one homesteader, a black longshoreman, turned his house back to the city saying he just "couldn't afford" the cost of repairs. Philadelphia later set up a non-profit corporation, financed by church contributions, to provide loans to its homesteaders.

It also established advisory groups, including skilled workers, to help homesteaders do necessary repairs. Baltimore also set up a loan fund for homesteaders unable to raise money to rehabilitate their newly-acquired homes.

H. R. Crawford, assistant secretary of HUD, for housing management, shown in his Washington office. He believes in homesteading.

Other problems recurring in city after city included the threat of vandalism and difficulty in obtaining insurance for their inner city homes. The rampant vandalism includes the systematic theft of plumbing and other valuable fixtures, a problem alleviated in some cities by the formation of neighborhood protective associations in which homesteaders keep an eye on each other's homes.

Philadelphia's Urban Homesteading Ordinance is the brainchild of Councilman Coleman, who in 1968 while a member of the city planning commission wrote a paper theorizing that "the result of urban homesteading could be no less spectacular than those that followed the Federal Homestead Act of 1862."

The paper was widely ignored at the time, but today with urban homesteading sweeping

(Continued on Page 7)

Novel housing plan patterned after 1862 Homestead Act

For $1?

(Continued from Page 6)

the country, scores of cities involved in the experiment and city planners from other nations are beating a path to the City of Brotherly Love to study Coleman's plan.

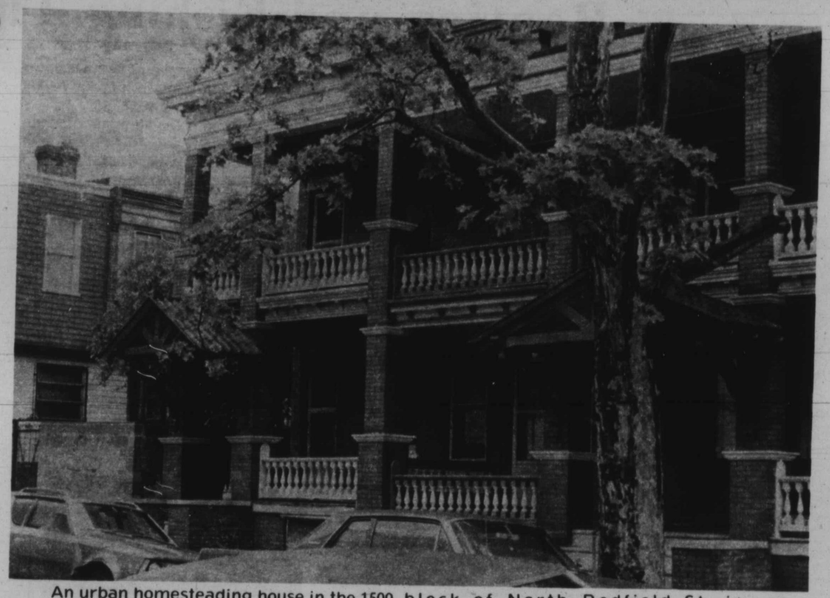
Coleman, who comes from a long line of Mississippi preachers, and is both a chemist and a lawyer, waxes eloquently when he speaks of urban homesteading. "I know that it isn't a total answer to our immense problems of blight, but urban homesteading is a major weapon. Conceivably, thousands of people would settle on the urban frontiers and thousands of properties would be eventually returned to the tax rolls."

Numerous skeptics say this is unlikely, but Coleman calls them "prophets of doom," adding: "This program could give us a re-birth of self-reliance, of individualism, of self-dependence. This is very important because for years we have been having things done for us.

"Self-reliance. You can't buy that. That alone would be worth it. It could set a new tone. If it catches on, we can have the city moving again."

In every city the demand for low cost homes has been fantastic. Detroit's Mayor Coleman Young was swamped with telephone calls when he announced the plan in that city. In Philadelphia, Councilman Coleman received many calls and visitors the first day. "They wanted to know where they could go to pick out their property," he recalled.

Ask two housing experts about the future of urban homesteading and you'll probably get two conflicting views. A group of experts met in Chicago recently and concluded that the experiment is not what it's cracked up to be. They said the program's liabilities, in the long run, may outweigh its assets, and that the whole project could be scrapped along with other "pie-in-the-sky social schemes that didn't work."



An urban homesteading house in the 1500 block of North Redfield St. in Philadelphia, Pa.

Dempsey J. Travis, a highly-regarded black executive of Sivert Mortgage Corp., told the panelist:

"One dollar cannot buy anything in the real estate market but a bad dream, and that is exactly what many of the recent buyers purchased.

"Urban homesteading is a very romantic idea in an unromantic time. Many unsophisticated individuals who feel that homesteading is a method for creating an estate, such as those that were created as a result of the original homesteading in 1862, are in for a rude awakening . . ."

On the other hand, Mrs. Nadine Winter, a Washington, D.C. city council member who directs homesteading in the U.S. capital, says urban homesteading offers "the struggling poor a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity to get a house that they normally would not be able to own."

A chief supporter of homesteading is H. R. Crawford, assistant secretary of the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development, who envisions the program being able to "stabilize neighborhoods, increase tax revenues and curtail the relatively new trend of middle-income minority group members fleeing to the suburbs."

Bankers and builders, real estate people and others who make money selling homes are generally against homesteading.

U.S. Sen. Joseph R. Biden Jr., an author of urban

(Continued on Page 9)

Washington, D.C. Mayor Walter E. Washington, facing camera at right, tours urban homesteading project. Councilwomen Polly Shackleton and Nadine Winter, immediately behind the Mayor, a firm supporter of urban homesteading.