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Proposal for the *Seeing Cities* Exhibition
National Building Museum
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Washington, DC 20001

# When two become one

## Unit combinations in the German Village Historic District of Columbus, Ohio

**Matthew Adair, AICP**

Evolutions: How have cities changed over time?

# Welcome to German Village



Just across the interstate from downtown Columbus, Ohio is the thriving historic district of German Village. Constructed largely in the mid-19th century by immigrants from the areas that would become Germany, the neighborhood consists largely of detached brick structures that have been preserved by an architectural commission since 1960.

Over time, its housing stock has evolved to reflect the changing desires of residents. This research highlights, documents, and interrogates the nature of these seen and unseen alterations through the lens of urban planning and historic preservation by expanding our knowledge of how people adapt their surroundings to dynamic expectations.

# How do people adapt historic resources to modern expectations for domestic life?

**Focusing on historic districts, this research shares the story of individual decisions over decades adding up to collective impact at the community scale.**

This exhibit highlights a growing yet largely hidden phenomenon in urban morphology: converting a multi-family dwelling into a single-family dwelling. The cumulative impact of these architectural modifications has considerably reshaped the original built environment in German Village.

German Village has evolved from a disinvested section of Columbus that was proposed for demolition under urban renewal into one of the most revered residential locations in Ohio.

The German Village of 2025, however, has just about half of the population it supported in 1950. One of the reasons for this is the loss of housing stock through unit combinations.





This structure at 793-797 S. Third Street was originally built as a duplex in 1900 and has been converted into a single-family dweling.

# How has this 19th-century village changed over time?

## Based in Ohio's growing capital city of Columbus, this project has been ongoing since 2016.

As a graduate student in City & Regional Planning at The Ohio State University, I partnered with the German Village Society to carefully assess the conversion of dwelling units from multifamily to single-family. Over almost a decade, I have collected data and tracked conversion trends in Columbus and other U.S. cities.

## What are dwelling unit combinations?

Also known as mergers, amalgamations, and consolidations, housing unit combinations allow property owners to increase interior livable space by combining two (or more) existing housing units into one.



This structure at 692-694 Mohawk was originally built as a duplex in 1900.



Built in 1884, this property at 224 Lear Street was converted from a two-unit duplex into a single-unit residence in 2019. Due to strict guidelines, the structure retains separate front stairways and entrances.

## Capturing the evolution of historic housing stock

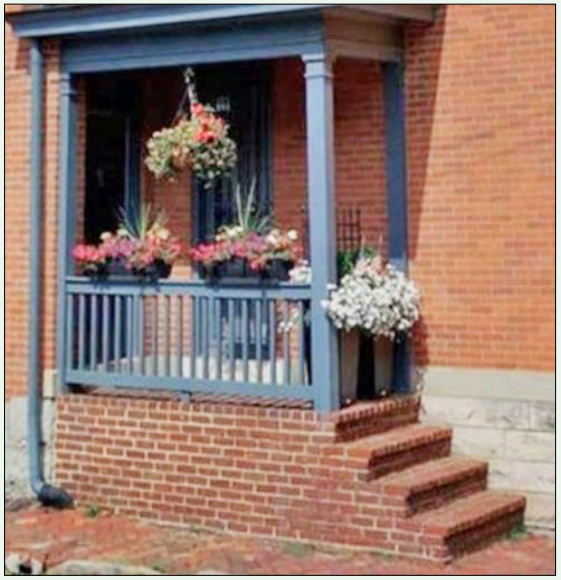
An effectively unstudied phenomenon, the structural changes of combinations impact housing supply, street activity, and interrogate the notion of our shared American cultural inheritance. These renovations have sparked policy measures to prohibit the practice in major cities like Chicago and San Francisco (San Francisco Planning Dept., 2020; Vance, 2024). Since 1950, New York City has lost 104,000 housing units through unit combinations (Brodheim, 2023).

## Conversions in the 'everyday' neighborhoods of yore transform modest homes into showcase properties.

Heritage scholarship recognizes the concept of cultural inheritance in the context of adaptive reuse projects, which can result in a "a rift between the container and the content." Lanz and Pendlebury ask: "Where does the identity and the memory of a building lie? Is it only in its exterior form and style or is it in its lived interiors?" (Lanz and Pendlebury, 2022, p. 456).

Despite this, historic preservation typically focuses on protecting the bricks and sticks of American built heritage. Our cultural heritage, which includes lifeways, domestic legacies, and patterns of dwelling in space, remain largely unconsidered. This sentiment evokes the ancient concept of *genius loci*, described by heritage planner Ron von Oers as the "complex laying of natural, cultural, built, intangible and local heritage, superimposed on and interacting with each other" (van Oers, 2015, p. 565).





Converting this structure to this duplex at 128-130 E. Sycamore resulted in blocking access to the disused front door and porch.





Located at 217-219 E. Beck Street, this structure was originally constructed as a duplex. Notice the door on the right in the bottom photo (current) does not have a doorknob.

## ‘Genius loci’: Preserving more than bricks

Acclaimed theorist Christian Norberg-Schulz argues that without *genius loci*, “the place loses its identity” and contends that architectural modifications are not neutral: “it makes sense to talk about ‘good’ and ‘bad’ changes” (Norberg-Schulz, pp. 180-182).

## ‘The houses of lesser people,’ now combined to house fewer people.

German Village is one of those modest vernacular urban neighborhoods, written about by landscape theorists J.B. Jackson and Grady Clay using terms like “everyday America” and “epitome districts” (Clay, 1991; Jackson, 1984), which are now special exceptions to the prevailing norms of suburban development patterns across the nation (Flint, 2006, p. 35; Teaford, 2020, p. vii).

Distinguished historian and architect Bernard Rudofsky highlighted the importance of these everyday landscapes—calling them “the houses of lesser people” (Rudofsky, 1964, p. 2).

Using *genius loci* as a paradigm through which to investigate how the city evolves, the exhibit will include urban history to provide depth and context.

729 Mohawk



723 Mohawk






These two separate dwellings were combined into one using a recessed corridor in 1999. Located at 723 and 729 Mohawk Street.

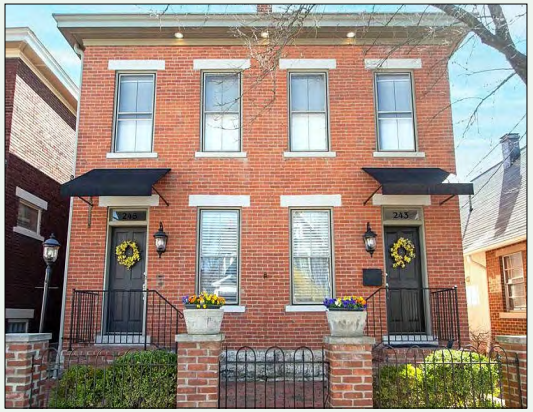
# Visual Content

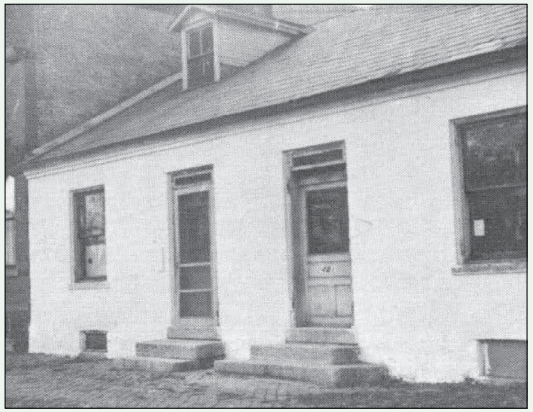
## Component 1:
## Before and after photographs

The essence of a unit conversion is captured first and foremost by *seeing the change*. This is most directly communicated through a before and after visual, illustrating the transformation of a residential structure from one that houses multiple households to just one.

Images help document the original configuration of the structures as multifamily (left) and the result of the conversion into single-family detached housing (right).











Before



After

## Component 2: ‘Ghost Door’ collage

Architectural guidelines state that renovations should “preserve and maintain any older or original door and entrance features...If an entrance will no longer be used, avoid removing the door and filling in the opening. Leave the door in place and fix it shut” (Darbee & German Village Society, 1989, p. 58). This results in lingering “ghost doors.”

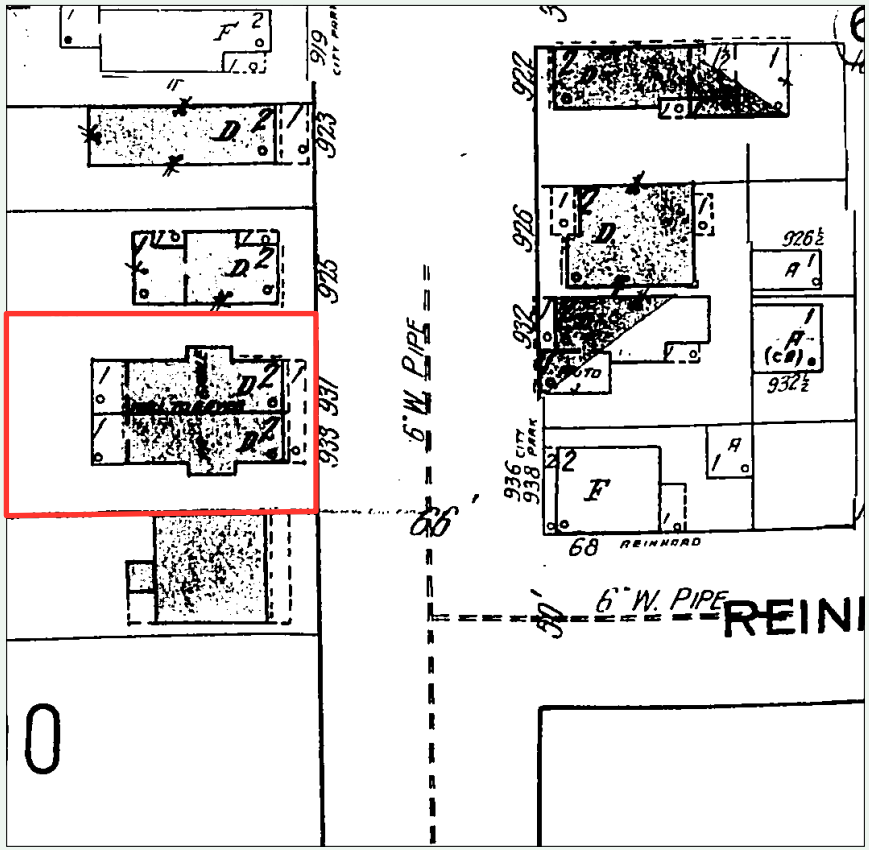
Careful observers will notice flowerpots blocking former entryways as well as stoops leading to doorknob-less front doors. Before guidelines were written (or enforced), some owners replaced doors with full-length windows.



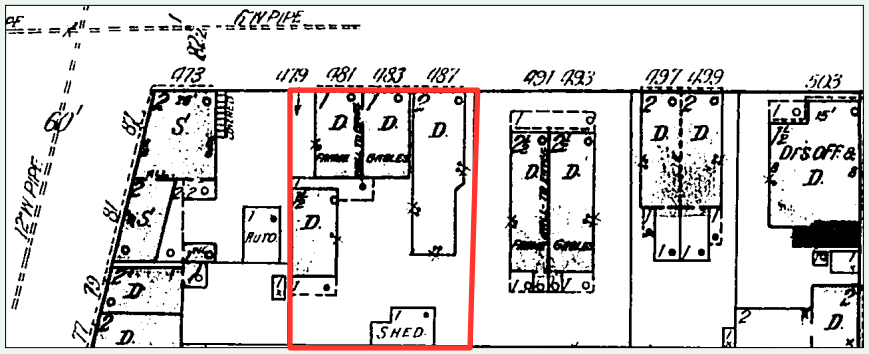
# Component 3: Historic maps showing multiple dwelling units

Sometimes it's difficult to observe if a structure was originally multifamily or single-family. Luckily, historic maps demonstrate the property's previous use. These fire insurance maps published by the Sanborn Map Company help ensure accurate documentation of conversions. Examples (below) provide evidence that these structures were originally built as two-family dwellings. The following page contains a map of select unit conversions as well as post-conversion images of the three structures below.

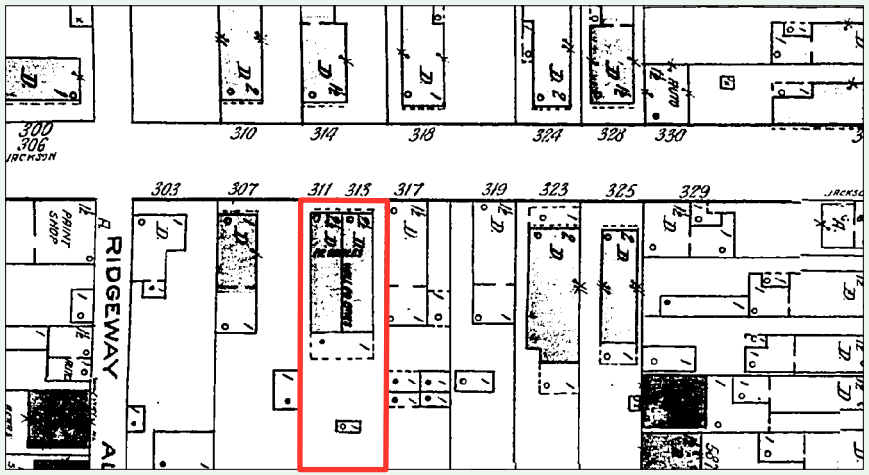
931-933 City Park Avenue

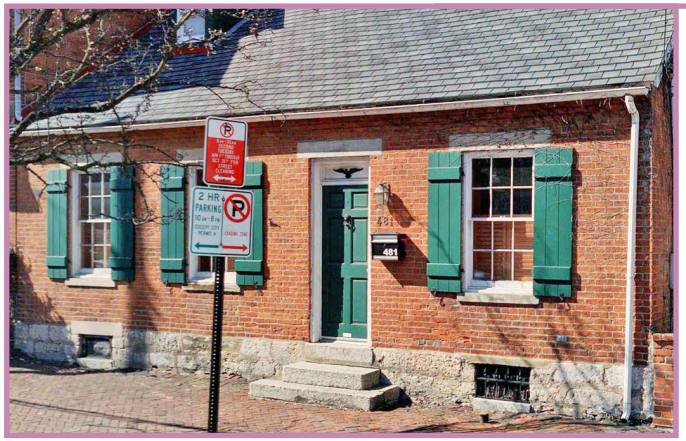



481-483 S. Third Street




311-313 Jackson Street





481-483 S. Third Street



311-313 Jackson Street



931-933 City Park Avenue

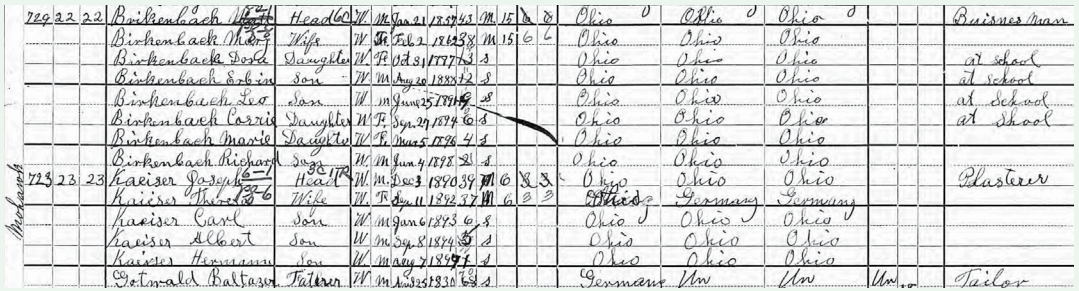


# Component 4: Quantitative and Archival Data

U.S. Census records illustrate household sizes in German Village have declined. The properties at 723 and 729 Mohawk were home to 14 people in 1900, and today they house just two. More recent parcel data demonstrates a decline in the number of multifamily structures as the number of single-family dwellings increased among buildings constructed before 1940.

## Census Records: 723 and 729 Mohawk Street

1900 **NUMBER OF PEOPLE LIVING AT** **723 Mohawk: 6 people** **729 Mohawk: 8 people**



1930 **NUMBER OF PEOPLE LIVING AT** **723 Mohawk: 4 people** **729 Mohawk: 4 people**



### Welcome to the Kaiser Family Cottage at 723 Mohawk

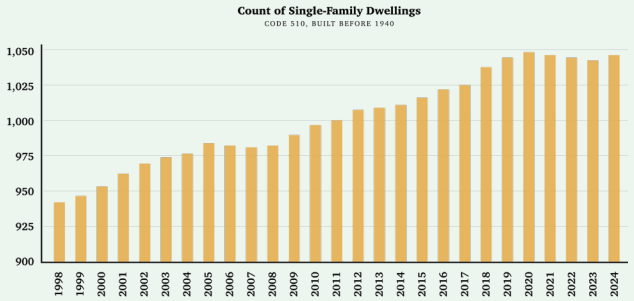
| | | | |
|---|---|---|---|
| Herman J. Kaiser | Head | White | 31 |
| Louna A. Kaiser | Wife | White | 33 |
| Herman J. Kaiser, Jr. | Son | White | 6 |
| Robert E. Kaiser | Son | White | ~4 |

In 1930, the Kaiser Family paid $20 per month to live in a modest brick cottage located at 723 Mohawk.

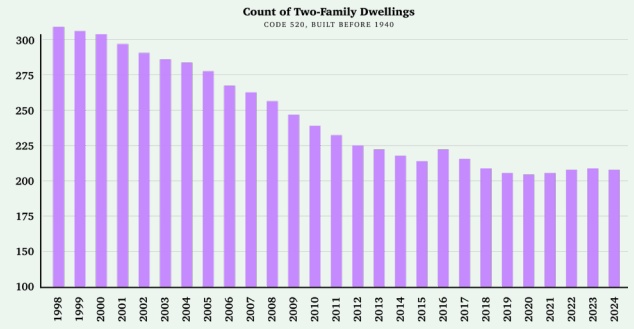
Herman worked on Chevys as an auto mechanic, while his wife Louna stayed home raising Herman Jr. and Robert. Both Herman and Louna's mothers were born in Germany. Herman, who is also listed on the 1900 record, grew up in the home with his father Joseph, a plasterer.

2025 **NUMBER OF PEOPLE LIVING AT** **723 + 729 Mohawk: 2 people**

## Building change over time, since 1998




Over the past three decades, the number of single-family dwellings has increased significantly among buildings built before 1940.




Likewise, the number of two-family dwellings in German Village has decreased over the past three decades.

# Component 5: Examples of unit conversions in other cities

Conversions are not limited to German Village. There are examples of the practice in cities around the country.

Two cities with a higher number of unit conversions include New Orleans, Louisiana and St. Louis, Missouri. Both of these cities had a strong French influence, while the architecture in Columbus' German Village was largely modeled on the vernacular styles of rural Germany.

Including examples of other cities helps add context to the Columbus experience and puts these cities in architectural dialogue.

## New Orleans







## St. Louis







Image souce: Zillow

# Biography

## Matthew Adair, AICP



Matthew Adair is a scholar and certified planner from Columbus, Ohio with more than a decade of professional experience in community planning, higher education, and legislative affairs. His interdisciplinary interests include post-industrial Rust Belt places, planning history, and neighborhood change. Grounded in historical context, Matthew's approach often considers the transformation of the U.S. from a nation of cities by the 1920s to one dominated by suburban built form a century later.

He holds a Bachelor's in history and a Master's in City & Regional Planning from The Ohio State University and is currently completing a PhD in Urban Planning, Policy, and Design.

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