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# City moves to preserve iconic three-deckers

March 24, 2012 | By Martine Powers

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For Arthur J. Krim, a professor of historic preservation at Boston Architectural College, Boston's three-deckers - with their light wooden frames, flat or pitched roofs, and stacked porches - are as iconic to Boston as New England clam chowder.



The city is trying to preserve three-deckers such as those along Navillus... (ERIK JACOBS FOR THE BOSTON GLOBE)

"If you're going to maintain the character of Boston," Krim said, "you basically need to preserve these three-deckers."

In recent years, many of these houses have been foreclosed or left to disrepair. Now, city officials are launching a \$3 million initiative to restore Boston's three-deckers to their former glory.

The "3D Campaign," which will be announced Saturday at the Boston Home Center Housing Expo in Dorchester, will provide loans and grants to help residents buy three-decker houses or renovate their properties. City officials have also joined with local banks, who have pledged to provide \$74 million in mortgages to potential buyers.

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Mayor Thomas M. Menino said the housing units are precious, not only for their architectural value, but also because building codes and zoning laws prevent new three-decker houses from being built.

"If you drive down Washington Street in Roslindale, aesthetically these houses are very similar, and they have a very distinct design," Menino said. "They're not like an apartment building or row housing. No other city has this."

Three-deckers, also known as triple-deckers, cropped up in the 1880s and 1890s and became a sign of upward mobility for Irish, Italian, and Jewish immigrants seeking an escape from crowded tenements, Krim said. The houses maximized space, but allowed residents to have windows on all four sides of the house.

Owners were able to live in one unit and rent out the others to defray the cost of home ownership. Or, they used all three units for their family, housing senior members of the family on the top floor and giving the bottom unit to newly married sons and daughters.

But starting in the 1950s, as Boston's well-to-do fled to the suburbs, many three-deckers fell into disrepair. Krim said he recalls that in the 1970s, Mayor Kevin H. White distributed brochures urging owners to keep up with repairs on their homes.

Now, the foreclosure rate for three-family homes in Boston is more than twice the rate of foreclosures on single-family homes or condominiums, said Sheila Dillon, the mayor's housing adviser.

The \$3 million in the 3D Campaign comes from a mix of funding from the federal Community Development Block Grant Program and the Boston Redevelopment Authority.

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