

Featured Story

## A love letter, or how to find your place in Cincinnati

By: Margy Waller, 12/16/2008



In mid-2008, following ten years of living "away" in large and dense east-coast cities, I started seriously considering moving back to my hometown of Cincinnati – something I had said was impossible a few mere months earlier. However, returning to work on a campaign in February to what a political-columnist friend calls "the rising progressive state of Ohio," I found myself recalling life here with surprising wistfulness.

When I heard about a dreamy job at the new Arts & Culture Partnership at the Fine Arts Fund, I had to take my reverie about the place I grew up more seriously.

At the top of the list of considerations to moving back was the question of where to live? I was determined not to give up the walkable neighborhood lifestyle I had come to appreciate in Washington, D.C. There, I lived in a wonderful, old apartment building near the zoo -- high-ceilinged and filled with interesting architectural details characteristic of the art-deco era. My apartment sat within a block of an appealing business district containing all the basics, plus some bohemian independent stores.

Could I find the same appealing characteristics in one of Cincinnati's many neighborhoods? I decided before buying I was better off renting in an area I thought I might want to live. But where's a new girl in town to start?

Interestingly, one of the first virtual places I discovered to help answer this question was Soapbox. Here I discovered just how much my hometown had changed -- particularly in Over-the-Rhine, where the Italianate architecture is now filling up with new businesses and redeveloped apartments for sale and rent.

Thinking about OTR as a possible home, I could imagine myself eating brunch at Lavomatic and shopping at Findlay Market, stopping at Shadeau Breads for fresh baked items and visiting Iris Bookcafe for ice cream.

The other neighborhood that I felt drawn to was Clifton. Even before leaving for the East Coast, I had been enamored with Ludlow's gas lamps and lively and eclectic business district. It offers everything my D.C. neighborhood did: a post office, library, independent grocery store, coffee shop, movie theater, plus one thing you can only find in Cincinnati -- Graeter's ice cream.

In my quest for a neighborhood and apartment to love, I conducted a significant amount of research including combing through Craigslist, CityBeat, and roaming around the city on foot. Cincinnati lacks the kind of one-stop shop where a newcomer, such as myself, might pay a service to find a fabulous rental (business opportunity alert). Here, I offer a few tips that could be useful to others seeking information on how and where to go to rent before you buy. I should mention this is also a love letter to everyone who helped in my hunt for the place to call home as well as the artists who developed and redeveloped the spaces I visited.

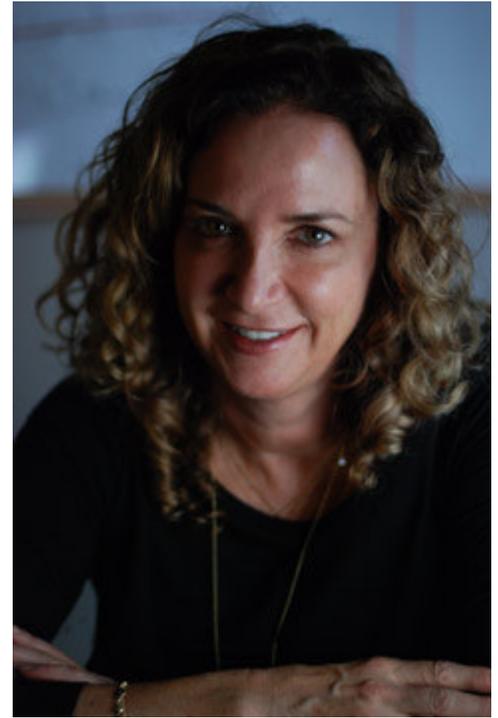
In Over-the-Rhine, Jim Moll is the man to know. He's been in the mix of development and revitalization for many years, and knows a lot about the history of the neighborhood.



Jim connected me with a short-term furnished place at Vernon's Corner, a series of older buildings lovingly renovated at Liberty and Main which would serve as my home base during my search. When I first arrived, campaign offices filled the retail spaces downstairs. Following the election, the owners decorated the street lamps, storefronts, and terrace with seasonal items ensuring that I always had a festive and urban view from my large loft-space windows. Mark Bernhardt is an incredibly accommodating owner and also offers unfurnished, long term rentals.

Even before I found Jim, Kris Sommer of Urban Sites provided me a complete tour of the long established property management company's rentals in OTR. Bill Baum, owner of Urban Sites, has developed units in OTR for over twenty years and continues at a break-neck pace with a terrific mix of units for sale and rent.

Both Jim and Kris are lovers of old spaces and OTR. They know a lot of the area's history and pretty much all of the current neighborhood gossip. Kris writes an occasional email to his listserv about what's going on in OTR and the latest on Urban Sites' rental options.



In Clifton, I received help from Sandra Wilger a real estate agent who works with both buyers and renters. Sandra knows Clifton inside and out after working and living in the neighborhood for years. She is currently co-located with Gaslight Properties, another source for area rentals. She generously offered to help me going to great lengths to identify well-maintained, older rentals in the gas-light district. She was mostly patient with my indecisiveness, yet pushy at just the right moment.

At some point in my search, I got worried that I would not be able to find an apartment of just-the-right-size, with the features that I have-to-have -- all hardwood floors and a little bit of outdoor space.

After having more than one person tell me I should try looking in East Walnut Hills, O'Bryonville, and Hyde Park for the kind of older, spacious apartment with details like glass doorknobs and original woodwork, I did branch out a bit beyond Clifton and OTR.

One morning, I noticed a "for rent" sign in front of The Kendall building on Madison Road near Hyde Park Square. I could see that the building was well cared for and had private porches. Missy Fox from Paradrome Square gave me a tour of the building that same day as well as two other finds in East Walnut Hills: The Clermont and The Grandview. Paradrome is doing good while doing good business through investing in and maintaining important old spaces. All three of these buildings have apartments with hardwood floors, porches, and fireplaces.

Finally, just as I was feeling real pressure and nearing a decision, I met Maggie Hull of Grandin Properties where they specialize in historic buildings. She took me to the San Carlos near O'Bryonville. Apartments there feature great, old details including solarium-style porches and large wood-framed medicine cabinets. For people who need a short-term furnished option, Grandin offers these in the San Carlos.



It was easy to imagine living here within walking distance of favorite places like BonBonerie for cookies, What's for Dinner? for takeout, and Chateau Pomije for Tim Shumrick's wine recommendations.

Next, she took me to an amazing property on Michigan Avenue just blocks away from the shops and eateries of Hyde Park Square. Weston Flats, built in the late 1800s has 14' ceilings, balconies, hardwood floors, fireplaces, pocket doors, and incredible views.

Cincinnati and the people I found provided me with multiple options, any which could have been right for me. In the end, I chose place over space – picking the neighborhood location that made me feel most "at home" when I arrived. The building isn't

quite as old as the turn-of-the-century structures that tend to be my favorites, but it has kitschy forties-decade features. The owners are terrific and I figure I'll look for the high ceilings when I'm ready to buy my home.

The search turned out to be a reminder of the joy available equally to all of us, every day. My tour of places provides just a few examples of the art in architecture and design we experience in Cincinnati. These builders and developers are artists and we get to enjoy their imagination and creativity any time we like - just by looking up. We must value, protect, nurture, and support this inspiration.

*To receive Soapbox free every week click here.*

Photography by Scott Beseler

*Urban Sites key chain*

*Margy Waller*

*Jim Mull*

*Kris Sommer*

*Margy Waller*