



Best Old House Neighborhoods 2009: Editors' Picks

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Elgin, Illinois

Not for one second did Brenda Hennessey imagine herself living in Elgin, Illinois. Growing up in nearby Schaumburg in the 1980s, she'd heard the city had a reputation for being grungy, rundown—even a bit dangerous. A few years ago she made a pit stop here while riding the Fox River Bike Trail, which runs 33 miles through the Chicago suburbs. It was then she realized that either Elgin's nefarious image was greatly exaggerated or things here had changed dramatically for the better. In the market for a house, Brenda did some research and discovered she could get more bang for her buck in Elgin than in other Chicago-area towns. She soon snatched up a late-19th-century brownstone in the Gifford Park neighborhood for \$198,000. "Elgin is

beautiful," she says. "It's walkable and safe, with plenty of bike paths." Brenda, now pregnant, and her husband, Evan, are looking for a larger house, hopefully one of the city's cherished Queen Annes, which start at \$100,000. That's the great thing about Elgin, says Brenda. You can buy a starter home, upgrade to a virtual mansion to raise your kids, then empty-nest it down to a bungalow when you retire.

The Houses

Some of the city's most handsome Queen Anne, Tudor, and Gothic Revival homes are found in the Northeast neighborhood, which borders downtown and contains two historic districts, most notably Elgin's oldest neighborhood, Spring-Douglas, a National Historic District. Here, a 2,000-square-foot Queen Anne can be had for \$150,000 to \$500,000, depending on its condition.

Why Buy Now?

The best reason is summed up by Elgin resident Fran Cella: "No one really knows about us yet." Property values in the historic districts remain steady, thanks in part to the city's proximity to Chicago. The city is offering grants to help buyers restore single family homes that were broken up into multifamily units.

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