



A Little Bit of Heidelberg

BY MELANIE LINN GUTOWSKI

Few observers would connect the stately spires of the Strip District's St. Stanislaus Kostka Church with the quirky warren of houses perched along the hillside, connecting lower and upper Aspinwall. But both were designed by Frederick Sauer, a prolific Pittsburgh architect and native of Heidelberg, Germany.

In his book, *Pittsburgh: A New Portrait*, Franklin Toker notes that the Sauer houses are "one architectural complex [that] breaks out of the mold" of Aspinwall's pleasant, but otherwise not-historically-significant layout.

Sauer's mismatched, yet simultaneously harmonious group of buildings began with the design for his own home in 1898, a rather tame creation made of local Kittanning brick. In the late 1920s, Sauer began puttering in his backyard and built an elaborate chicken coop which he decided to enlarge into what is now known as the Heidelberg apartment house. (This is not to be confused with the Old Heidelberg apartment building in Pittsburgh's Point Breeze neighborhood, which was designed by fellow German architect Frederick Scheibler.) Sauer continued to expand onto the surrounding land, eventually constructing nine buildings, many of them with his own hands.

Sauer literally dug into the hillside, quarrying stone at the site for use in the jagged façades of his creations. He incorporated odd bits and pieces into each structure, including figures of eagles, turkeys and images of Benjamin Franklin and Roman gods.

Architectural historians believe that Sauer had been influenced by the ruins of Heidelberg Castle in his hometown. It would certainly explain the feel of the place. With its copse of tall, shady trees and timeworn driveways of brick, the Sauer complex can seem a world apart.

"Sometimes I look out the back window and think I live in Europe," says Jennifer Cox-Siegel, who lives on Center Avenue with her family.

Upon its nomination to the National Register of Historic Places in 1985, the Pittsburgh History and Landmarks Foundation called the Sauer Buildings Historic District "the eccentric climax of an architectural career." Indeed, it was Sauer's final architectural achievement; he was still building at the time of his death in 1942. ■

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