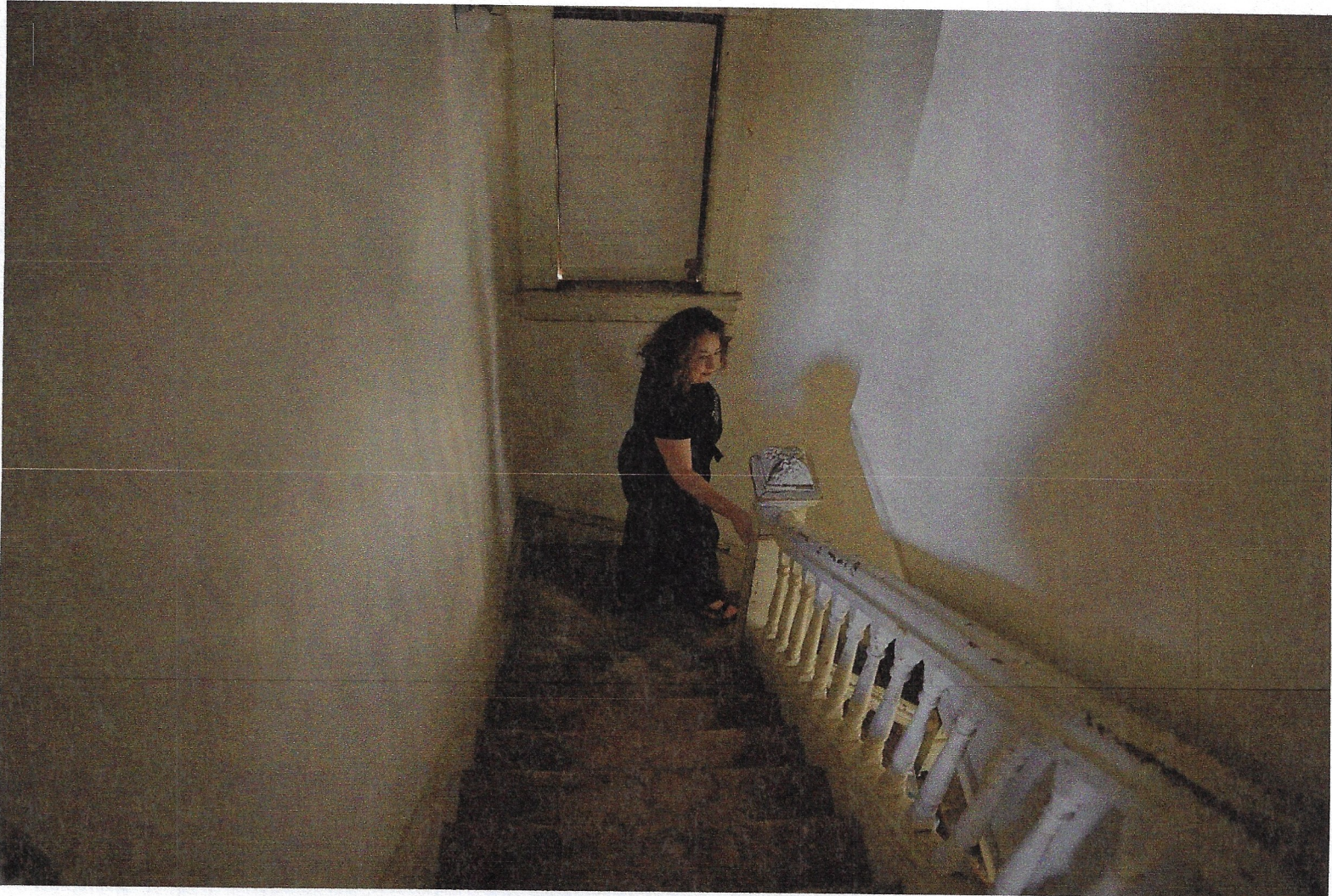


Investor has been targeting Denver's neglected properties

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Some owners and neighbors question his selections and tactics



Justine Sandoval walks through her family home in Denver's Curtis Park neighborhood on Tuesday. The house, which is listed on the city's neglected and derelict building list, has been owned by her family since the 1940s. Sandoval has been working to fix it up and get it off the list. PHOTOS BY HYOUNG CHANG — THE DENVER POST



Renovations are underway Tuesday at the Sandoval family's home.



John Sandoval, left, and daughter Justine pose for a portrait in front of their family home in Denver's Curtis Park neighborhood on Tuesday. It was purchased by an ancestor in the 1940s. HYOUNG CHANG — THE DENVER POST

BY SAM TABACHNIK

STABACHNIK@DENVERPOST.COM

Justine Sandoval's family traces its lineage in Denver's Curtis Park neighborhood back four generations.

Her great-grandmother purchased the two-story house on Curtis Street for \$10 in the 1940s as part of an agreement to swap homes with a neighbor.

But the house fell into disrepair after a relative moved in the early 2000s, Sandoval said. Amid substance abuse, she stripped out the plumbing and tagged the walls with graffiti, leading Denver eventually to condemn the house.

About 10 years ago, the city added 2825 Curtis St. to its neglected and derelict building list, a roster of properties deemed unsafe or uninhabitable.

Many of these buildings have absentee or deceased owners who have no dealings with their investments, spurring repeated complaints from neighbors concerned about blight tanking their property values or safety hazards affecting their well-being.

In the absence of robust city enforcement, a local investor has been taking on these projects himself, using creative legal maneuvers to pry these houses from their owners — while making a profit along the way.

Although several neighbors previously told The Denver Post that they appreciated the investor, John Crays, taking the initiative to deal with these problem properties, others are now expressing concern with some of his tactics.

Several homes on the city's list have active owners who say they're pouring everything they have into rehabilitating their properties. Others say they've fallen on hard times or suffered from poor health, preventing them from finishing house projects. They're not neglectful, these owners say. They simply don't have the money to fix them up overnight.

"Some people think it's a house nobody wants," said Sandoval, an organizer who is running for Colorado House District 5 in Denver. "It means everything for our family."

'Didn't tell the truth'

Denver's neglected and derelict property list, updated last month, contains 310 buildings across the city's 11 City Council districts.

For a property to be declared a "neglected and derelict building," it generally must be an unoccupied building that city inspectors have identified as unsafe, a nuisance, habitually in violation of city codes or at least one year behind in property taxes.

Denver can issue fines if property owners don't submit remedial plans or don't comply with registration requirements. And yet, the same properties continue to remain on the city's list year after year.

As the city struggles to handle these problem properties, Crays has stepped in, The Post reported last month.

He has been convincing discontented neighbors to assign him their private rights of action as neighboring landowners — effectively allowing Crays to take the problems off their hands.

Crays, in at least a dozen cases, has sued owners of these neglected homes in an attempt to get a court-ordered caretaker appointed and for the houses to be put up for auction. The investor also has been collecting damages awarded by judges, and, in at least one case, acquired a property at auction for a steep discount.

Several neighbors told The Post that they are thankful someone finally has decided to act on these blighted homes. But others say they're troubled by the methods being used.

Nate Boyer had firsthand experience living near one of these houses in Denver's Berkeley neighborhood. He recalled pulling squatters out of the house's windows after police said they couldn't enter the home. At one point, the house on Winona Court caught fire, threatening to engulf neighboring properties.

Crays and his attorney, Christopher Conant, approached Boyer in 2024 about signing over his rights as a neighbor, he said. Boyer, though, said he would hire his own lawyer.

In May 2024, a limited liability company sued the neglected house's owner, alleging the property had attracted squatters and had become the site of drug use and other criminal activity. The company said it held a lease for an accessory dwelling unit in the backyard of a neighboring house on Winona Court, giving it the right to sue as an affected neighbor.

The people behind the LLC remain murky. BSIACS LLC, the company that filed the lawsuit, lists its office address as the ADU. The registered agent: Hatch Ray Olsen Conant, the law firm Crays has used for his court actions.

Boyer said he walked back to the ADU with a city inspector after the lawsuit was filed and saw that nobody was living at the listed address. The way these investors approached this property didn't feel appropriate, he said.

"My thought was, 'You're not an affected neighbor,'" Boyer said. "They certainly didn't tell the truth about their involvement."

Crays told The Post that he wasn't the leaseholder listed in the lawsuit and that he has "no affiliation with that LLC." Conant said there was a lease for the ADU and someone did reside there, although he did not reveal their identity. The owner of the home with the ADU didn't respond to calls and messages left by the Post.

Ultimately, a judge appointed a caretaker, known as a receiver, to take over the property. Last year, the court approved a sale to Boyer and his neighbor for \$531,000 after they intervened in the lawsuit. BSIACS LLC, as part of a settlement agreement, received \$7,500.

A \$100,000 fight

Other people with properties on the city's list say they feel targeted by Crays and Conant's entrepreneurship.

The pair in June 2025 sued an LLC registered to Ira Wertenteil, alleging his house near City Park has been abandoned and taken over by squatters.

Wertenteil wasn't an absentee owner — he was simply sick.

"I have three terminal diseases that are fighting to see which can kill me first," Wertenteil said in an interview.

The 66-year-old owns a small construction company specializing in rehabbing dilapidated houses. One of his projects — a \$3 million renovation of a haunted Capitol Hill mansion — earned him and his wife a series of positive news stories.

But the illnesses have strained Wertenteil's ability to complete his projects.

"I have permits and plans for every one of my distressed properties," he said. "I have the money; I just don't have the time."

Crays' lawsuit cost him \$100,000, Wertenteil said — and he would have needed another six figures to keep the fight going. The parties ended up settling out of court, with Wertenteil paying Crays \$15,000 and agreeing to sell the property or fix it up in a timely manner.

He wonders how these lawsuits benefit the community. To him, if city officials have a problem with his properties, they should settle it themselves.

"What John does, is it good for the city? It's good for John," Wertenteil said.

Crays said he "wished we were more successful" with Wertenteil's property.

"It's not doing anything to benefit the community whatsoever," he said.

Fighting for a family heirloom

Sandoval desperately has been trying to get her Curtis Park house off the neglected and derelict list.

Her parents have spent hundreds of thousands of dollars to pay off liens and fines they've accrued over the years from the city. But every new fine makes it harder for the family to get the house back into good shape.

"We're trying," Sandoval said. "I don't have the capital to do it all at once."

The family has been diligent in paying property taxes, even as the house fell into disrepair.

Sandoval makes sure to shovel the sidewalk and mow the lawn. She and her father, who co-own the house, recently installed a new water heater and a fresh roof. Sandoval has plowed her life savings into this house, she said, planning to one day make it her home.

The prospect of an investor showing up to try and take it is terrifying, she said.

"I'm a fourth-generation Curtis Park resident," she said. "It's not gonna go down like that. I'm gonna fight for that property."

