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NEWS

Students find opportunity in 'quad' house



Dan Stripp (left) and Paul Dudkowski stand near "Quad Space," the renovated West Side house that served as their master's thesis. Photo: DOUGLAS LEVERE

By CHARLOTTE HSU

Published: November 11, 2009

A year ago, the small house at 139 Howell St. in Buffalo's Black Rock neighborhood stood vacant, just one more derelict property up for auction in a city with many abandoned buildings. As one neighbor later commented to The Buffalo News, the two-story structure "was crumbling." It languished as an eyesore, its fate uncertain.

Where others saw blight, four UB architecture students saw opportunity. And today, the home on Howell Street, long ago a brick beauty on a tree-lined road, is again full of life. At the hands of Michael-John Bailie, Paul Dudkowski, Ernest Ng and Dan Stripp, the house has undergone a metamorphosis, emerging from a yearlong renovation as an architectural gem.

In October 2008, the four friends, then entering their second and final year in UB's master's program in architecture, purchased the castaway—their thesis project—for \$6,500 at a public auction. They gutted the building, demolished a wood-frame addition that was in poor shape, and began remodeling.

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SLIDESHOW: Take a walk through "Quad Space." [View slideshow](#)



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"For the School of Architecture and Planning and the students, hopefully we are starting something that will get other students to interact with the community," Dudkowski says. While architecture students often draw and model their ideas, he adds, "We wanted to make a house that could actually be used."

"We're putting energy into a community," Stripp says.

The finished product, "Quad Space," makes a statement. With less than 700 square feet of floor area, the dwelling includes a bathroom with a claw-foot tub, a kitchenette with a handmade sink cabinet, a cozy parlor and four bedrooms, one of which doubles as a lounge. Each of the private quarters consists largely of a 7-by-7-by-7.5 foot space, conforming to New York's minimum requirements for the width, length and height of bedrooms. The "cubes," constructed using a warm-toned wood, jut out partway from the building's original brick exterior, their sleek geometry adding a whimsical touch to an otherwise nondescript facade.

In all, the students' tribute to minimalist living cost them \$36,000. To save money, they bought fixtures, including the tub and kitchen sink, from Buffalo ReUse, a nonprofit that sells items stripped from homes during demolition. Local businesses, among them Alp Steel Corporation, CIR Electrical Construction Corporation and J.W. Danforth, donated labor and supplies.

Bailie, Dudkowski, Ng and Stripp chose materials that, while inexpensive, endow the house with an elegant feel. They used steel, painted black, to craft window frames and the backbone of an 11-step staircase. A slate-colored varnish gives oak hardwood floors in public spaces on the lower level a silvery sheen. In winter, a system of tubes carrying hot water and running under the floors will provide inexpensive heating. High ceilings and an open floor plan downstairs, along with 7-foot-long rectangular windows, make the home seem surprisingly spacious.

"These students have a sophisticated architectural sensibility," says Mehrdad Hadighi, chair of UB's architecture department and one of four thesis advisors on Quad Space. "It usually takes people a good 10 to 15 years after school and being in practice to be able to figure these things out. Everything was done in a very cost-conscious manner, but you wouldn't know it when you go there. When you first see it you're not thinking, 'Oh, this house was done really cheaply.' You say, 'Wow, that is an amazingly beautiful space.'"

"I appreciated, in a kind of strange way, how brave the students were, in that they initiated this project, they did all of the leg work," Hadighi says. "They went to the city, they went to the auctions, dug up information about buildings, essentially laid their own finances on the line with this and worked extremely hard on this project for a year in order to make a point, and their point is that young, industrious people should and can live in the city and live in a really comfortable house and contribute to the city in a very productive way."

Prior to completing the home renovation, each of the four partners had applied their skills to other full-scale projects, demonstrating their commitment to using their time in school to not only learn, but to create something useful. Bailie, Ng and Stripp remodeled UB's Architecture and Planning Library, building shelving and a circulation desk. Stripp and Dudkowski designed cabinetry for a recent exhibit in the university's Anderson Gallery.

The Howell Street renovation will have lasting impact. Dudkowski and Stripp say a group of three UB architecture students has contacted them, expressing interest in completing a similar project. Faculty, students,

family, friends and others attended an open house in late October, marveling at the transformation the friends had wrought on a building that, not long ago, stood as one more sad symbol of a struggling economy.

Though two of the four members on the thesis team have left Buffalo—Baillie for New York City, where he is seeking work, and Ng for Mississippi State University, where he landed a faculty position—Dudkowski and Stripp have stayed behind. Once the city completes building inspections, the friends will move into the Howell Street home with Stripp's dog, Cosmo, a black Labrador mix. Both plan to stick around, applying for jobs at local architecture firms and joining a growing population of young professionals working to revitalize Buffalo.

Reader Comments

Mary Greenberg says:

I am downright impressed on the initiative and drive that these guys had to create an improvement to the community, and art all at once. I would love to see more of the inside! It also makes me wonder if we can take a hint from these four and extreme home makeover that was just in town, and possibly use the school of architecture to hold fundraisers and create similar projects in the community... In any case, nice job guys!

Posted by Mary Greenberg, Masters student - Higher Education Administration (UB), 2 days ago

Melanie Donofrio says:

Really interesting that you guys were able to make so much from so little. I'd definitely like to see more pictures though, to see all the interior work described in the article.

Posted by Melanie Donofrio, Can we see more?, 3 days ago

Kevin Thompson says:

Congratulations to these industrious architecture students. Hopefully Paul learned some of his construction skills from his time he spent working in our office. Maybe this will serve as a pilot project for other architecture students to pursue the rebirth of our city. Well done fellas.

Posted by Kevin Thompson, Director, Facilities Planning & Design (UB), 7 days ago

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