

Building Opportunity: A Canvas for Learning

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This project presentation chronicles the ongoing efforts of the author and an interdisciplinary group of students (architecture, landscape architecture and planning) to rehabilitate, reinvent and re-engage a building in this town's town. Propelled by the opportunity (an old building), the documentary *If You Build It* (chronicling the year long efforts of Studio H to share lessons and joys of design and making with high school students) and the belief that small slow steps of physical doing can string together into a meaningful event, this is an on-going search into how consistent efforts at simply addressing the needs of an old building will teach us about architecture, building and community. This project reminds us that a real application of our discipline, knowledge, effort and interests can humbly yet poignantly occur next door.

Our opportunity was an old building on the main street of a mid-western city that fights the same battles as many other small downtowns: main street here oscillates between boom and bust, between having once been a destination to now being a few historic buildings pushing back at an ever expanding parking lot. Its general trajectory is fade, but the energy of involved community members interested in the downtown continually seems to defy that path. In 2003 a local businessman (who grew up in the upstairs of this two-story commercial street front property) gave the building to the college. Initially it was used. Then, despite a few waves of activity, the building sat mostly vacant (except as a storage facility) especially over the last eight years.

Given the opportunity by college administrators (who were contemplating getting rid of the building) to try something/anything there, the author gathered an interdisciplinary crew of students this past spring semester 2014. Planning students facilitated meetings with downtown organizations, landscape architecture students considered the courtyard behind the building, architecture students worked on restoring the restroom; all of us ground away at bringing the space back to life and designing/building a series of self-directed installations that would be exhibited at the city's "first Thursday" arts walk in April. We worked to discover what the place was and what it could become. Supported by the university, the Provost's office, the college, and community members (a floor finisher shared his trade lessons/tools, an interior designer initiated discussions on paint colors, a contractor provided used plumbing fixtures) the building was re-opened in April; the opening celebrated its current rendition as a gallery for students, faculty and community. The success of that effort will now be leveraged into more support to continue the renovation next year as the back masonry wall currently performs like a perforated screen and the upstairs is un-wired and needs heat. Student interest and engagement is strong. The potential for interdisciplinary learning is huge. The community is interested. Work on the building is ongoing. This project describes the first steps in a journey, but the lessons about building and building opportunities for community are immediate and resonant.

