

# **DESIGN / REBUILD**

[www.design-rebuild.org](http://www.design-rebuild.org)



## PREFACE Helen Liggett

This book presents a photographic overview of Kent State University's design/REbuild project in Cleveland's St. Clair/Superior neighborhood. The essays and home selection flowchart explain the project in terms of its larger social and design context. The photo-documentation section follows the project from Spring of 2014 when students first became involved with redesigning a vacant house until Fall 2015 when that house became a home.

### Notes on Photo-documentation

If the images presented in the documentation section are thought of visual mapping, this section presents some hints about how to follow the map. In contrast to action films that emphasize moving viewers as quickly as possible through a story line, documentary photography arrests action in order to invite interpretation. The

discussion below is meant to encourage this participatory reading approach.

Two forms of interwoven cartography organize the documentation.

1. The overall framework is chronological. It moves readers from design practice through the processes of rebuilding a particular house. Sections identified by season represent movement through time and stages of building.
2. The internal organization is spatial and thematic. The reader is encouraged to see connections of form, content, and color that knit the project and the documentation together.

### Chronology

The documentation is divided into sections. Within each there are one or more sequences of images with a main idea. The

sequences are meant to provoke a feeling for the evolving activities they cover.

*Spring 2014* shows initial conditions of the house and ideas generated during the design progress.

*Summer 2014 First Session* starts with demolition, followed by internal reconfiguration and framing.

*Summer 2014 Second Session* opens with the arrival of a new crew and their work on the second floor railing and bathroom, followed by the deck, the external reconfiguration of the house, internal floor and window work, as well as landscape layout and planting. This section ends with a view of the house as it looked in Fall of 2014.

*Summer 2015* opens with a view of the front of the house with completed deck and new doors. It then presents images of the external and internal reconfiguration, installing

insulation, and a view of the basement.

The second sequence shows the counters, the floor design, and the custom railing.

The third sequence is populated with volunteers from design professions and trades as well as old and new students from Kent State. Patio preparation, electrical work, basement construction, and counter work appear. Construction Management students show how to take down a brick wall.

*Fall 2015* Begins with an external image of the house and landscaped side yard. Dry wall is installed, the bathrooms are tiled and the interior is painted. The second sequence shows a Halloween gathering and an open house, finally the house is complete and occupied.

### **Spatial and Thematic Connections**

Spatial and thematic connections among and between images are woven throughout the sections. Geometric image space was a main selection principle for all the images. These include peoples' movements, the structures of the house itself and the relations among them. In this way the whole

image space constitutes meaning. Within that space intended and unintended and happy coincidences appear, again of form or content or both together.

Certain parts of the house appear in several stages of development throughout the documentation. A rear window appears four times, in various stalls of restoration. Similarly, there are evolving views of the upstairs bedroom, the bathroom, and parts of the first floor. Connections often happen within sequences, which sometimes are a bit cinematic, showing a little story. The left and right images in a spread always relate to each other, in form, content, and color. Sometimes an image in a sequence will cite a previous sequence to tie them together. Sequences have secondary themes, the most common ones being gestures that characterize working by hand, and tools used in building.

Finally, there are images that are pauses in the flow; that may not follow the explicit theme of a sequence, for example a visit by high school students, a neighbor helping take away used pipe, or a joke.

### **Acknowledgments**

I wish to thank Terry Schwarz, CUDC Director, for welcoming the idea and the reality of folding photo-documentation into design/REbuild. The image making only happened because of the constant and warm support of participating faculty and staff, particularly Project Manager Kristen Zeiber and Studio Instructor Chris Maurer.

I have tried to capture how complicated building is and the spirit the participants brought to it. Not everyone who contributed is shown here and some people who would not usually choose to be photographed are. Thank you to all.

Helen Liggett







BETH CONWAY

## CONTENTS

- 00-01 **Introduction**  
Terry Schwarz
- 02-05 **Home Selection Process**  
Kristen Zeiber
- 06-11 **design/REbuild**  
Christopher Maurer
- 12-15 **Design/Rebuilding as Practice**  
Helen Liggett
- 16-147 **Documentation**  
Helen Liggett
- 148-149 **Acknowledgments**





## INTRODUCTION Terry Schwarz

Cleveland has an abundance of vacant and abandoned houses. Vacancy has increased over the years due to population loss, changing household demographics, housing obsolescence, and the lingering effects of the foreclosure crisis. Much of the city's vacant housing will be demolished. These houses, both grand and humble, form the fabric of city neighborhoods. Demolition leaves gaps behind, which may be filled with new development or neighborhood green spaces. But often, vacant sites remain empty and gradually sap away the city's vitality.

The design/REbuild initiative focuses attention on Cleveland's housing—what's been lost and what remains—to see if some of the city's vacant but still viable housing can be re-imagined and re-inhabited. The design/REbuild initiative focused on low-cost design innovations, since housing values are very low in areas where vacancy is prevalent.

We selected a sturdy brick house in Cleveland's St. Clair Superior neighborhood as the first design/REbuild project. Kent State's architecture and interior design students aimed to create a replicable model that might spare some of Cleveland's vernacular housing from the wrecking ball. Following the design process, architecture students, students from Kent State's College of Applied Engineering, Sustainability and Technology, and volunteers completed much of the rehab work.

In the end, design ambitions, permitting delays, and the quirks of an old and enigmatic house led to cost over-runs. While work progressed on the house, the neighboring house and two across the street were demolished. However, the design/REbuild house stands today, rehabbed and occupied, as a monument to urban possibilities.

The design/REbuild initiative was made possible through the generous support of the George Gund Foundation. We are also grateful to Sandvick Architects, the Sears-Swetland Foundation, and the Ruth Brown Fund for their support of this project. Our partners Andrea Bruno and Michael Fleming at St. Clair Superior Development Corporation and Rick Semersky at VIP Construction were integral to the success of the project. We're also grateful to 84 Lumber, Moen Inc., and Sherwin Williams for donations of materials and expertise, and to the Cuyahoga Land Reutilization Corporation for landscape improvements to an adjacent vacant property.

Throughout the process, photographer Helen Liggett was on site, documenting the work as it unfolded. This book collects some of her images, which tell the story of the house and those involved in its reinvention.

## HOME SELECTION PROCESS Kristen Zeiber

It's not easy to develop a comprehensive strategy for reclaiming Cleveland's vacant housing. With so many houses in need, where should the work begin?

The design/REbuild house was a collaborative effort aimed at answering this question. But before construction could begin, we had to find the right house. And before *that*, we had to find the right neighborhood, where our work would have impact (i.e., where there was a need), but also have some market viability, so we could sell our first house and do it all over again.

Roughly speaking, the sales price of the home had to equal or exceed the cost of improvements in order for the program to be successful. This was an estimate since we had no way to be certain what the sales price would be for such a unique property.

Over months of viewing vacant houses, our project team evaluated each for viability. The decision-making process was complex and many factors couldn't be quantified numerically. However, for each property surveyed, we asked specific questions and weighed the resulting answers, to determine the suitability of the house in question for our project. Taken individually, very few of these considerations were deal-breakers—we believe some negatives can be overcome if the positive aspects of a house are strong enough. Here, then, is how we chose the house that would become the design/REbuild house and how we envision selecting the next house to re-imagine.

## NEIGHBORHOOD

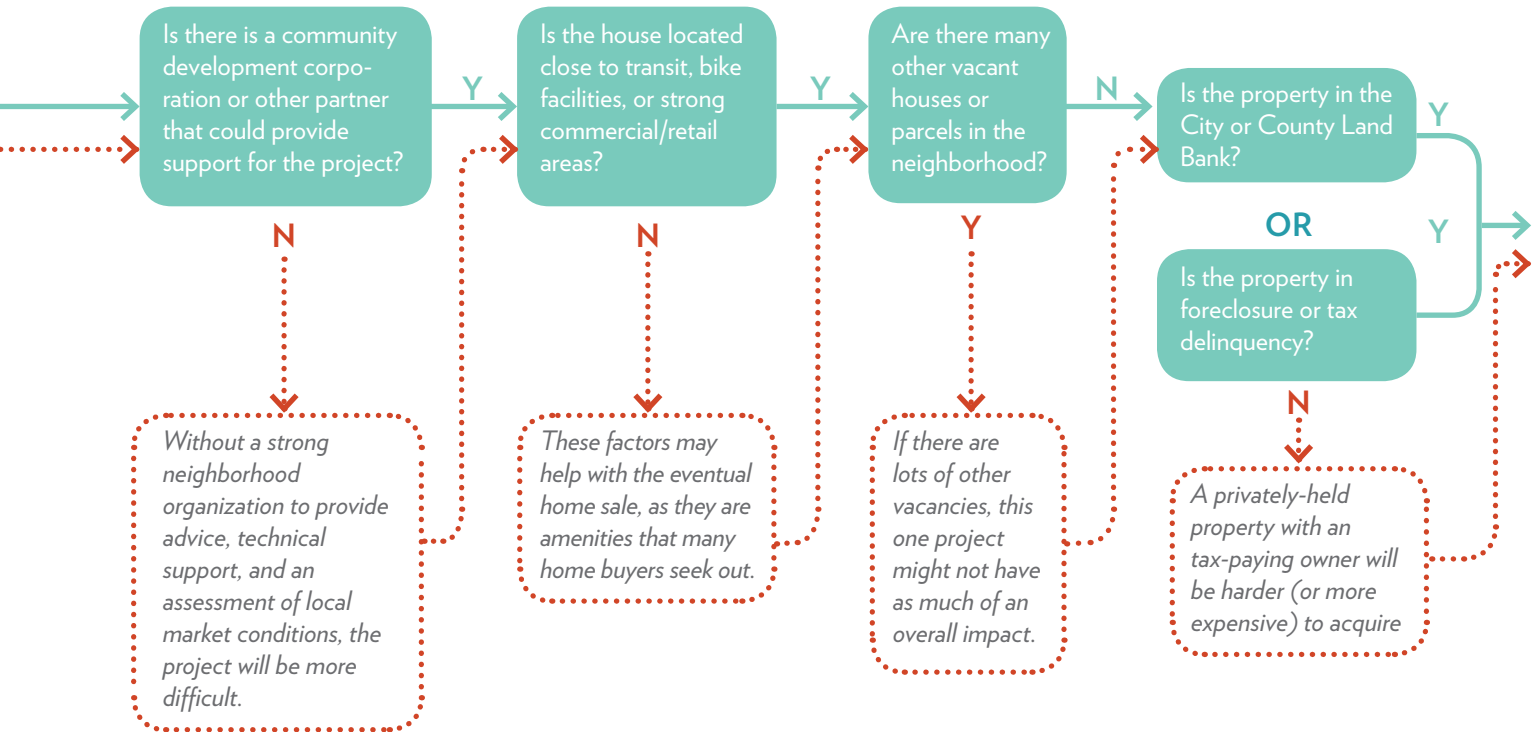
Is the average sales price for a home in the neighborhood high enough to cover the anticipated costs of improvements?

Y

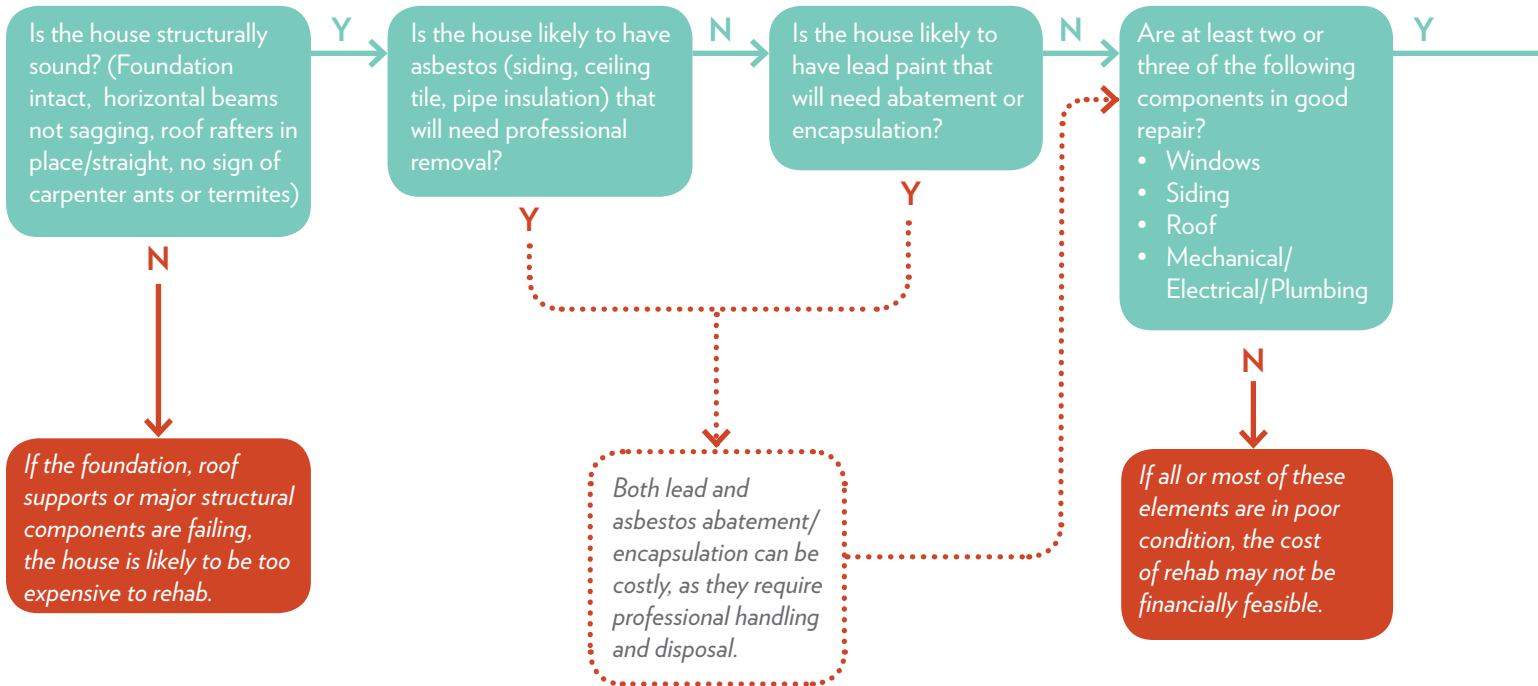
N

*It's hard to predict what the final sales price of a rehabbed home might be, but if the cost of improvements is likely to be significantly higher than what similar houses in the neighborhood sell for, the project may not be financially feasible.*

## PROPERTY



# HOUSE CONDITION



## CHARACTER

## USE

## VERDICT

Are the proportions and overall style of the house interesting and worthy of preserving?

AND/OR

Are there unique architectural details that make this home special?

*Fireplaces, intricate woodwork, large porches, stained glass—as well as architectural style—can make an argument for saving one particular house over others in the area.*

Is the house configuration (single-family, multi-family) the best use of the building?

OR

Could the house be easily reconfigured to accommodate more units or transform it back into one unit, depending on market and personal preference?

*Many homes get modified over time. If the house can't easily be reconfigured for contemporary lifestyles and market demands, it may be harder to sell.*

*The house fits the project goals. Next up: design development, permitting, and construction.*

*The house isn't perfect, but the imperfections may be surmountable—or perhaps can present design opportunities.*



DEREK CHANG

## DESIGN/REBUILD Christopher Maurer

In August 2014, students at Kent State University's College of Architecture and Environmental Design were completing their work at the college's first ever design/REbuild studio. They had taken a blighted and abandoned home on East 67<sup>th</sup> Street in Cleveland's St Clair Superior district and applied their own creative intervention.

### The Physical Context

There are roughly 22,000 vacant homes in Cuyahoga County. Cleveland has a list of 8,000 or so slated for demolition. The EPA estimates that 534 million tons of construction and demolition material enter landfills every year. That is nearly ten pounds per resident produced each day. East 67<sup>th</sup> Street is the embodiment of these statistics. In the time it took the studio to shift from design to [re]build, East 67th between St. Clair and Bliss Avenue lost six homes to demolition. These homes disappear almost



THE DAILY KENT STATER

overnight and are rarely missed. It may be hard to see the value that lays dormant, but it is easy to see the waste pile up in container after container hauling the material to landfill.

### **The Social Context**

St. Clair Superior is a historically Slovenian neighborhood, although the neighborhood is now predominantly African American. The median household income is below \$19,000.

The St. Clair Superior Development Corporation (SCSDC) has done much to inject vitality and economic development in the district including upcycle art initiatives, popular flea markets, and a food hub. East 67<sup>th</sup> is a quiet street - mostly given to fact that so many homes have been removed or remain vacant. The “Mayor of East 67<sup>th</sup>” is a woman named Montana Henderson. Montana can be seen clearing garbage nearly every day with her Nifty Nabber mechanical arm trash grabber. She and other residents are committed to bringing back the neighborhood and regularly joined the students and in the work at the house.

It is easy to see the burden to the community and the city when looking at these abandoned homes, but the industrious amongst us might see Cleveland’s blighted housing stock as a big opportunity rather than a liability.

These abandoned homes can often be acquired for free, or near free, by working with a community development corporation or the land bank, if a viable plan is presented that will save the house from demolition. Demolition typically costs about \$10,000; the value of a vacant homes is well below that.

Through low-cost, high-impact rehab strategies, a fully renovated home could become available for a fraction of the rent of a much smaller apartment downtown, only a five-minute bike ride away. This is the paradigm the studio looked to promote: Can small creative interventions and sweat equity create interest in neighborhoods that are currently being overlooked by prospective buyers?

### **Re-Imagining Blight as Opportunity**

The studio started with SCSDC director, Michael Fleming and Cleveland Urban

Design (CUDC) director Terry Schwarz presenting revitalization efforts currently in the works and goals for creating value in this abandoned home. The CUDC and SCSDC asked the students to create a replicable model for transforming abandoned homes into homes with market appeal using limited resources. The students first experimented with other options for leveraging the home for social impact. The students broke into four groups and researched issues they wished to address.

1. *Refugee Resettlement* looked at matching the need for the resettlement of families fleeing war-torn areas with the need to address vacancy and increase density in Cleveland. The students’ research showed that neighborhoods could be brought back to life through refugee resettlement and included case studies on the educated and entrepreneurial migrants making new homes in Europe.
2. *Homelessness and Vacancy* found that there are seven vacant homes for every



homeless person in Cleveland. Money spent annually to house each homeless person could renovate an entire home, providing a triple benefit: creating secure housing, providing marketable construction skills, and stabilizing the thinning urban fabric.

3. *Food Deserts and Healthy Eating* proposed a community garden and community kitchen to offer cooking demonstrations and for shared resources for cooking. The group's research centered on urban agriculture, diet, and nutrition in low-income areas.
4. *Sustainable Transportation* noted the proximity of the house to a proposed bike thoroughfare, and its convenient location between University Circle and Downtown. The group proposed a bike co-op to serve as a community resource for bike equipment and education. The project also included many other abandoned houses on the block as "follies" for extreme cycling in an Urban Discovery Bike Trail, creating a one-of-a-kind bike experience.

In the end, the students settled on a home suited for any of them. They identified themselves as the target market. As they would soon find out, it took a lot of creativity and a lot of sweat to reclaim this one home, and dozens more were waiting for their attention.

### **REbuild Studio**

When the studio transitioned from design to [re]build, industriousness was again a prized quality. Delays in permitting, cancellations from volunteer contractors, and issues with scheduling students caused initial hurdles.

The demolition was dirty work. But after the semester that saw them complete their first group project, create their first permit set, and work with governing review for the first time, the catharsis afforded to the students was sweet relief. Sledge hammers, picks, and shovels would fly for hours on end. The filth-line around where gloves and masks were later removed was the mark of a hard day's work.

With upcycling as the modus operandi, the students salvaged material from the demolition of the home and from other

abandoned homes on the block also. The students worked with professional salvagers to acquire fixtures and furnishings, earning store credit from their inventory. They also worked with a local wood miller to take salvaged trees felled by utility companies and turn them into beautiful counter-tops.

From demolition to framing, stripping to staining, insulating to cabinet making, welding to tiling, students learned how to do task after task, not one of them afraid to try something new. No task was too big, no task was too small.

Despite the grueling labor, each day students came with positive attitudes, ready to learn and eager to perform. Student after student would comment on how their *Methods and Materials* classes would become much easier now. The biggest lessons in architectural detailing were in sequencing. The students were now seeing their designs go together bit by bit, and were recognizing mistakes they made in the spring design studio. These lessons learned in the field would not be forgotten next year in studio class, nor ten years later in professional practice.

### **A Call for Equitable Design**

At end of the studio, the students had learned many valuable lessons about architecture, their world, their communities, and themselves. Students discussed their place in the world with each other and found opportunities to advocate for issues where they could make an impactful contribution.

After earning their degrees, many students count their participation in the design/REbuild program as the most formative experiences in their architectural pedagogy. Not necessarily for the construction education it afforded them, but for the social connections they found with local professionals and the residents of East 67<sup>th</sup> Street. These connections enabled students to better recognize the disparities all around and offered an understanding of how listening and sharing resources, particularly in an overlooked and under-invested neighborhood, can develop and authenticate cross-cultural relationships.



DEREK CHANG



## DESIGN/REBUILDING AS PRACTICE Helen Liggett

*All design is re-design*<sup>1</sup>

Design/REbuild addresses urban distress by targeting vacant houses at the neighborhood level. Seemingly straightforward, the approach also embodies radical ideas such as approaching the city as a generative process; valuing creative construction over routine destruction; and believing in the power of small-scale direct action to foster change.

As a practice design/REbuild project focused on a modest brick house at 1045 E. 67th Street in Cleveland's St. Clair Superior neighborhood. The project began with a design studio in Spring of 2014 and continued until the house was transformed and put on the market in late summer, 2015.

This essay offers reflections on design/REbuild as a practice. It is linked to my work documenting the project as I sought

to understand and develop a mode of representing it. During the process, I was continually struck by how the simple narrative of design, plan, and execute that frames any project is only a bare outline of the actual complexities of a work in process. The practices of design/REbuild were characterized by a much broader scope of activities, highlighted below.

*We would like to create a space that would make people come back to Cleveland*<sup>2</sup>

In Spring 2014, Design Studio students working in four groups developed four initial concepts for the house. These included: An urban garden house with a teaching kitchen, housing for the homeless, a home for Syrian refugees, and a bicycle co-op and skate board park. They shaped these ideas in the context of background research about the

social dynamics and policies surrounding the situation each addressed. The students were cognizant of existing residents, identified by one student as “those who choose to remain” and also of the potential for attracting new residents. Urban policy can be stymied by narrow discursive habits and lack of political commitment. Students’ ideas represented the opposite: openness to addressing problems and a willingness to leap into the unknown.

After the plans were combined into a single proposal students presented it to community members and other stakeholders. During this review they were introduced to serious discussion about the tensions inherent in designing a house that is appealing on the conceptual level while also fulfilling a commitment to building a workable dwelling in a real neighborhood.

*Abduction...drawn in by the situation, captured by it...*<sup>3</sup>

The physical work of design/REbuild began in Summer of 2014. From the beginning it required the formation and reformation of functioning units across a range of skills. How this happened in the context of a messy, loud, physically demanding environment is not clear, but it was a major achievement of the design/REbuild process.

Students cleared out what was left inside the house, removing broken appliances and taking the house down to joists and studs, revealing the basic geometry of the house. The first session crew had been involved in the design stages and made a seamless transition from classroom to home destruction. Their commitment to the project laid the groundwork for those who followed. The basic geometric container the students revealed began to function as a place at this point.

Students arriving for the second session walked in as separate individuals needing training in carpentry, construction math skills, and job site safety.

Building and learning evolved as group process. The second session students quickly developed gestural and non-verbal visual communication patterns that made it possible for them to do physical work together. They learned to rely on each other and to move in progression to accomplish tasks.

The building process was characterized by unfolding contingencies, from structural surprises to regulatory limitations. Participants learned to deal with unforeseen circumstances. The joint activities of rebuilding produced moving geometries as together students negotiated with the physical realities of the space.

Negotiation was social as well as physical. Preferences for a particular look confronted function and patterns of everyday life in the kitchen. Here everyone had an opinion. Design/REbuild made space in which each participant had a share in considering how to live in a place and what that means for design. Participants learned design as an evolving process, developing and letting go of opinions, inventing jointly on the spot.

During summer of 2015, the house progressed with the participation of experienced and inexperienced students, seasoned faculty, and practicing professionals. This alliance produced a unique pedagogy. Ongoing commitment from the mix of participants created a palpable spirit that fostered new innovations not originally part of the plan. The loft railing and stairs are excellent examples, as is the flooring pattern at the base of the stairs. Both go well beyond a simple decision to incorporate recycled materials. What Brian Massumi calls “a certain incompleteness” produced an environment of potential. “Why don’t we?” led to the creation of the unique placeness of the house as it neared completion.

*Keep your feet on the street*<sup>4</sup>

An interactive component of the project was not planned; however, encounters occurred as students were there on a daily basis. They used local facilities and had interactions with neighbors. Sometimes this was quasi-professional and sometimes casual depending on who stopped by to see what was going on. A neighbor commented one

day that it was good to see the students making the neighborhood better.

One day a group of elderly gentlemen sat on the front deck, critiquing the design—a Greek chorus. Another day a resident stopped by and asked if he could take away the used pipe. He explained his request by pointing out that, “Closed mouths don’t eat.”

*The power to affect and be affected*<sup>5</sup>

Gutting the house revealed the simple geometry that held it together. Next, complexities of rebuilding unfolded daily: What is the relation between a good idea and something that works? What can be negotiated and what can’t? What drops into place and what takes some doing? What could we do here? In addressing these issues, the participants in design/REbuild created a moving geometry that restored the house to life. The goal of documentation was to arrest those moving lines and make them visible.

## NOTES

1. Christoph Meinel and Larry Leifer, HPR- Stanford Design Thinking Program
2. design/REbuild presentation
3. Brian Massumi, “Navigating Movements” in *Politics of Affect* (Cambridge: Polity Press) 2015, p.10
4. Overheard, 21 Jan 2017 during the Women’s March on Washington
5. Definition of Affect, Benedict de Spinoza

# **DOCUMENTATION** Helen Liggett





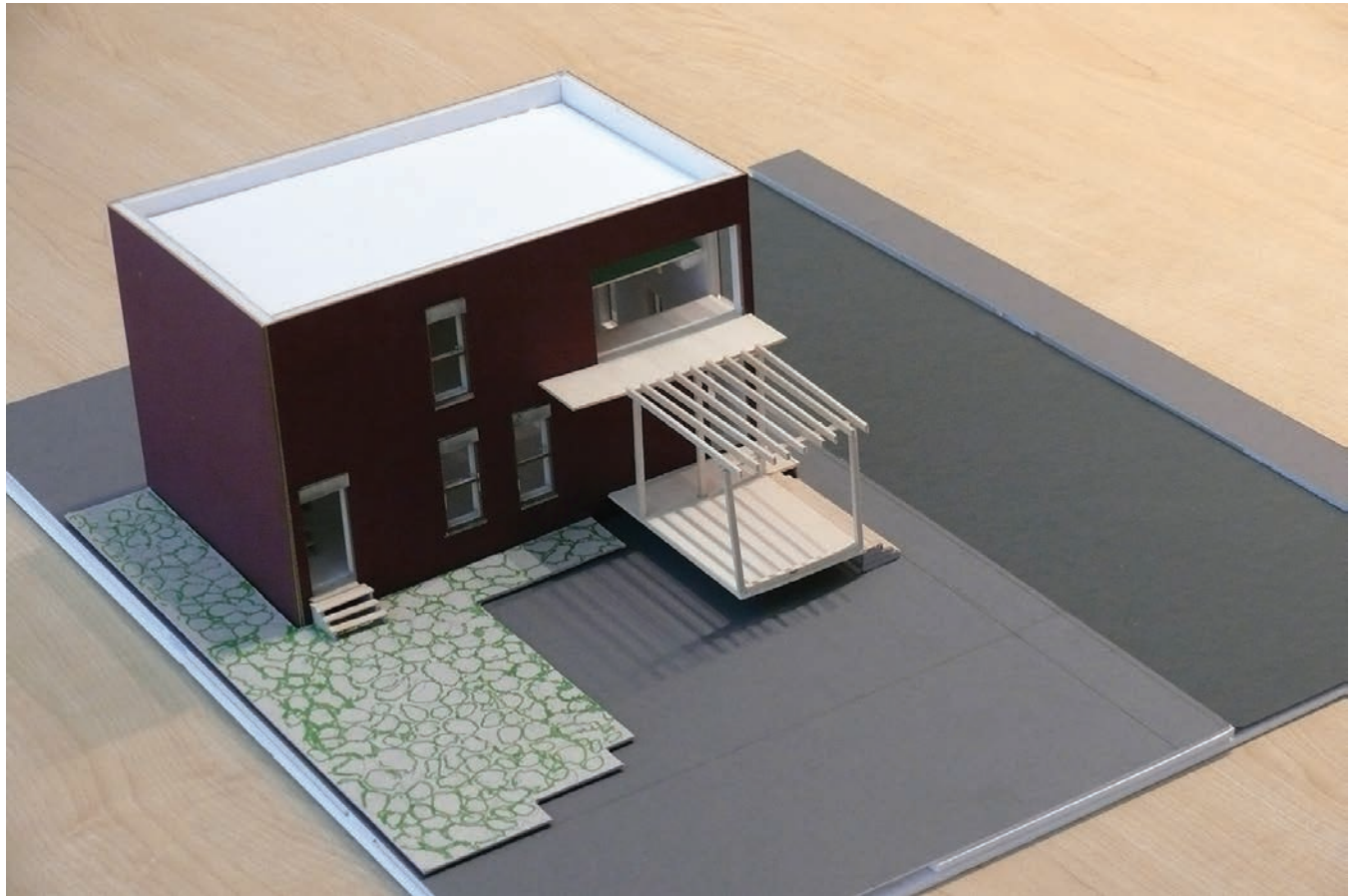


















**SUMMER 2014** First Session

































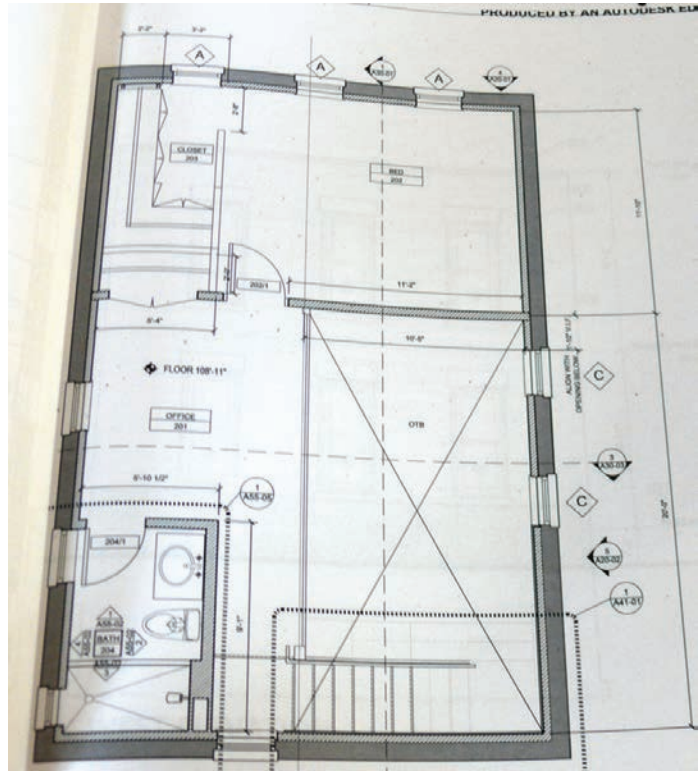






**SUMMER 2014** Second Session





























































**SUMMER 2015**

















































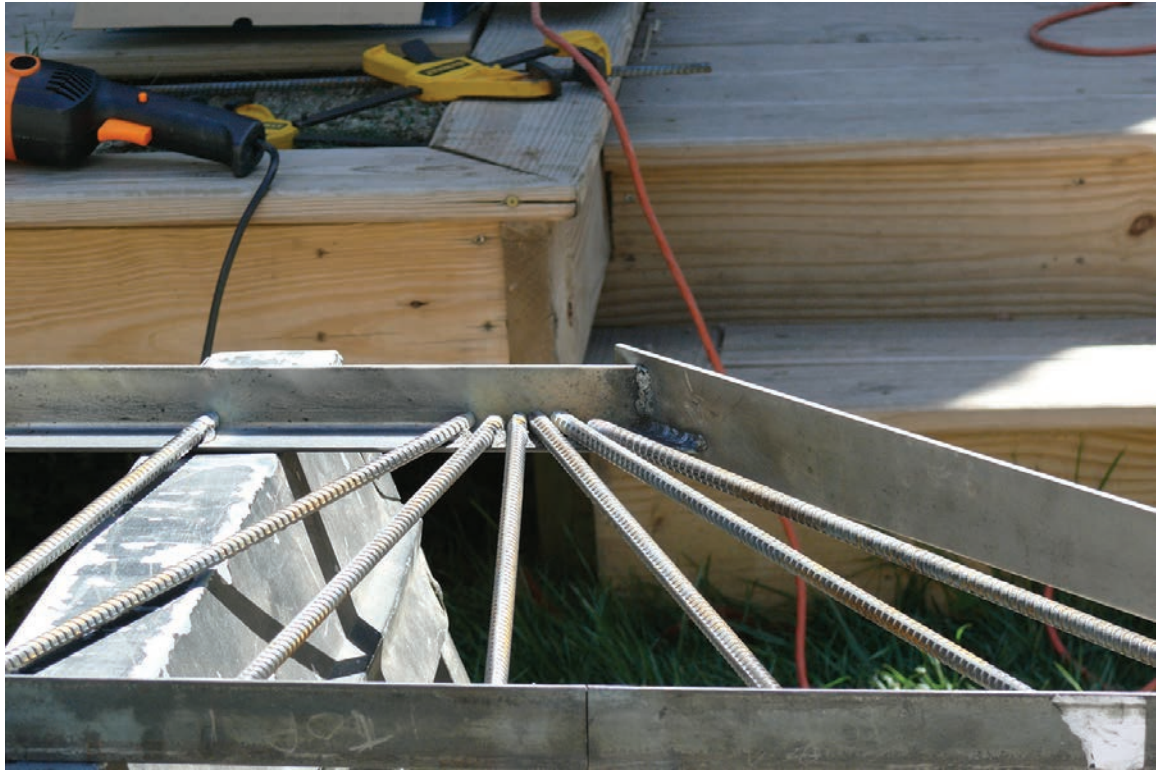






















































**FALL 2015**













































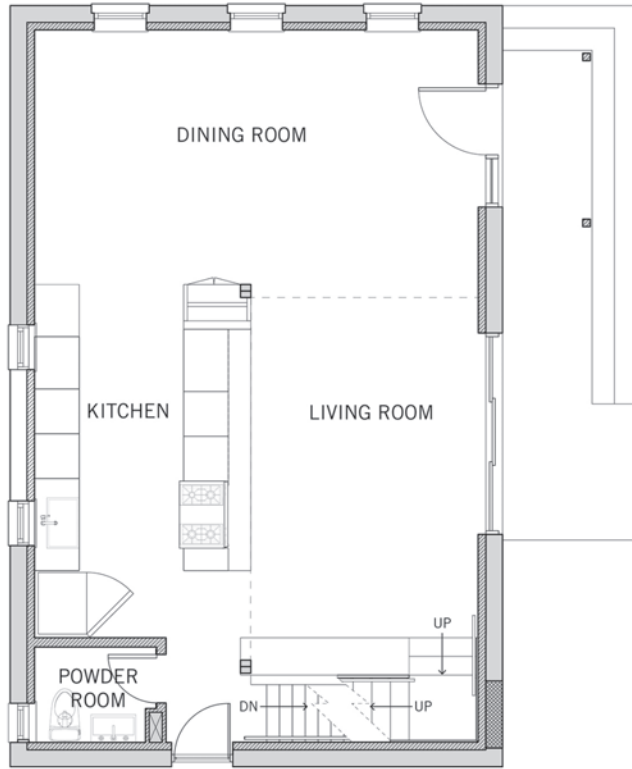




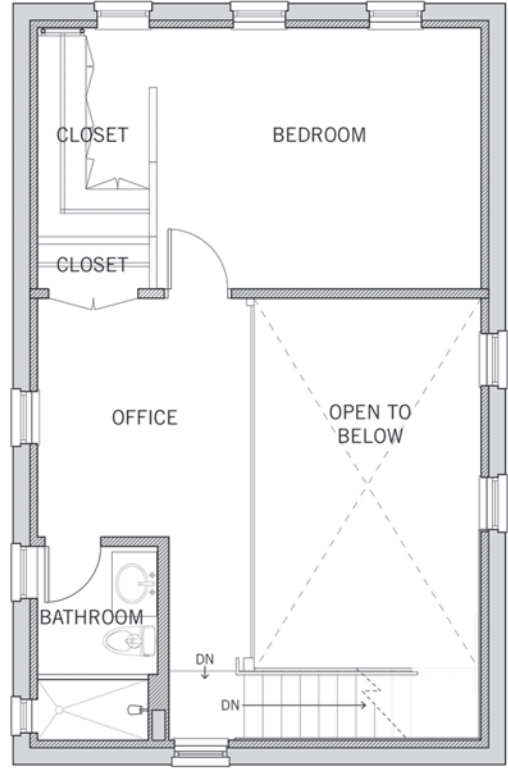




FIRST FLOOR



SECOND FLOOR



KRISTEN ZEIBER



BETH CONWAY



BETH CONWAY





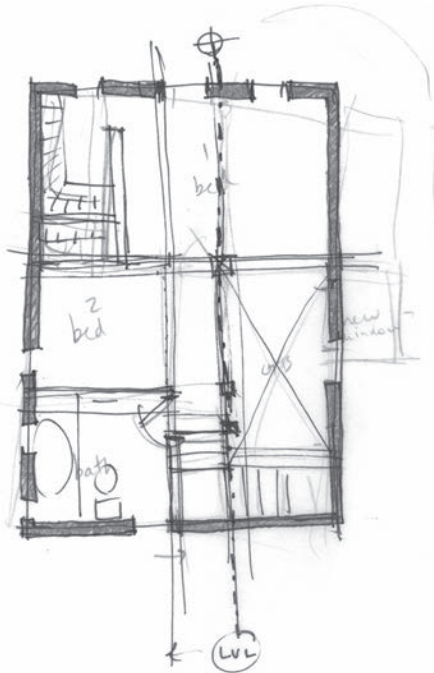
BETH CONWAY



BETH CONWAY



BETH CONWAY



## PROJECT TEAM

**Andrea Bruno** Housing Manager  
St. Clair Superior Development Corporation

**Beth Conway** Marketing & Communications Manager  
Cleveland Urban Design Collaborative, Kent State University

**Michael Fleming** Executive Director  
St. Clair Superior Development Corporation

**Helen Liggett** Project Photographer  
Maxine Goodman Levin College of Urban Affairs, Cleveland State University

**Chris Maurer** Studio Instructor and Project Architect  
redhouse studio [www.redhousearchitecture.org](http://www.redhousearchitecture.org)

**Ellen Schneider** Office Manager  
Cleveland Urban Design Collaborative, Kent State University

**Terry Schwarz** Director  
Cleveland Urban Design Collaborative, Kent State University

**David Sharkey** Real Estate Agent  
Progressive Urban Real Estate

**Kristen Zeiber** Project Manager  
Cleveland Urban Design Collaborative, Kent State University

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Major Funding Provided By **The George Gund Foundation**

With Additional Support From

**Sandvick Architects, Inc. | The Sears-Swetland Foundation | The Ruth Brown Fund**

Project Partners

**St. Clair Superior Development Corporation**

**VIP Construction | Rooswork | Cuyahoga County Land Reutilization Corporation**

**Construction Management Student Society | AIA Cleveland**

Donations of Materials & Expertise

**84 Lumber | Sherwin Williams | Moen Inc. | Bialosky + Partners Architects**

Special Thanks

**George Bigham** Lecturer and Construction Management Program Coordinator, College of Applied Engineering, Sustainability and Technology, Kent State University

**Pamela Evans PhD** Director and Professor, Interior Design Program, Kent State University College of Architecture & Environmental Design

**Joseph Ferut** Assistant Professor, Kent State University College of Architecture & Environmental Design

**Bill Willoughby** Associate Dean and Associate Professor, Kent State University College of Architecture & Environmental Design





KEVIN CRONIN