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Iowa Architect: Promoters and believers usher transformation for trade and inhabited areas around Iowa

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Advocacy

Promoters and believers usher transformation for trade and inhabited areas around Iowa.

Regardless of economic circumstances, each of us seeks to feel comfortable in our environment. Whether we spend time in new, old or up-and-coming neighborhoods or in areas that have fallen on trade and industry hard times, we want to feel at ease where we spend the majority of our day. For most, that time is spent at home or at work.

It is the purpose of numerous, dedicated individuals involved with groups like Neighborhood Development Corporation, Community Housing Development Corporation and Central Iowa Habitat for Humanity to build up that which has been run down, replace that which has become outdated and build refuge for someone who needs a hand.

Renovation and addition to the Wherry Building (c. 1887) located along the Sixth Avenue corridor in Des Moines.

Architect: Jeffrey Morgan
Architecture Studio
The Neighborhood Development Corporation is invested in profitable progress.

The Neighborhood Development Corporation (NDC), which was established in 1999, has a combined mission of retail and housing. The NDC has been involved in varying commercial development projects, which include multifamily rental housing development, hotel development and retail and business development. Connection to these projects varies and can range from assembling land or complete development, including ongoing supervision of commercial development projects. Plans have included a mix of new construction and transformation of existing, often historic, buildings.

According to Matthew Anderson, Economic Development Coordinator for the City of Des Moines, the NDC is financed through an agreement with the City of Des Moines with a $1 million budget; $900,000 is set aside for development and $100,000 is for operational expenses.

To date, the developed and managed projects are retail storefront projects, some of which include apartments on the second level. Another layer of occupancy is provided as retail interacts with the tenants of the apartments above.

"There are pockets around town that can use a jump start in terms of economic development."

— Matthew Anderson
Economic Development Coordinator
The Community Housing Development Corporation seeks out housing projects, which benefit the neighborhood

The Community Housing Development Corporation (CDHC), an allied organization of the NDC, was established in 1994. Housing projects are located in the Enterprise Community area of Des Moines, which currently includes five neighborhoods north of the downtown. Over 100 new single-family homes have been built, which provide affordable homeownership opportunities. Two rental projects in the same area for low-income seniors have been developed. One of these is River Trace on Sixth Avenue and the other is the Forest Avenue Townhomes.

CHDC and NDC houses and rental units are available to households that meet low income guidelines for Polk County. Prospective homeowners must not earn more than 80 percent of the area median income and provide proof of this as they secure their own financing, according to Karen Jeske, executive director of NDC and CHDC.

Depending on the market and need, the CHDC secures grant funds from the City of Des Moines if there is a difference in the cost to build the home and what the prospective owner can afford. The result is that the house is sold at an affordable price, lower than what it cost to build, and the city retains a lien on the property for a set number of years. Once the lien is removed, the house can be sold at market rate to any qualifying family, according to Jeske.

The NDC, along with the City of Des Moines, works closely to pursue projects in neighborhoods that are part of the city’s broader neighborhood revitalization effort. Ultimately, the NDC Board of Directors selects the project site placement within the community.

The CHDC also coordinates its projects in areas of need. Through its network with other affordable housing providers and the City of Des Moines, the CHDC selects projects to suit public needs. For the most part, the revitalization has taken place in low to modest income areas.

Habitat For Humanity has improved lives one at a time for decades.

Similar to the CHDC and NDC, Habitat for Humanity (HFH) strives to provide housing for those who have endured economic hardship. HFH, a faith-based organization, seeks to enhance the lives of those in great need of a place to call home. The projects are built with volunteer labor and donated materials. The end result is a residence for a family and in many cases a renewed sense of pride.

In Iowa, 36 building affiliates exist to serve 62 counties. Central Iowa Habitat for Humanity serves Story, Hamilton and Hardin counties. In 2006, Habitat for Humanity of Iowa built 70 homes and built 65 in 2005. Habitat serves families that live on 25 to 50 percent of the area median income. Families
Habitat for Humanity is More than Houses

"Habitat’s approach to affordable housing also improves neighborhoods and communities. Habitat for Humanity’s program strengthens community spirit, increases the tax base, and builds better citizens through the cooperative efforts involved in Habitat construction."

— Habitat for Humanity of Central Iowa

are accepted based on three criteria: the ability to repay a zero percent interest loan, the need for safe, decent and affordable housing and a willingness to partner with not only sweat equity but also credit management education.

John Lott, AIA, of Benjamin Design in Ames, and a group of community members formed a steering committee, which formed the affiliate known as Habitat for Humanity of Central Iowa in 1995. The Central Iowa HFH affiliate has completed 27 homes; of Benjamin Design has been involved with 25 of them. Working alongside partner families, the architects involved with Habitat projects act as guides in the decision-making process. Architects function as facilitators and work to find a design solution that supports the family’s habits.

Leading a process that offers choice, opportunity and participation is a benefit to the progression, which begins long before the home is “designed” with the architect’s involvement. Partner families and the affiliate select the sites and receive, a “home building manual,” a Habitat parameter document that outlines the details of a typical Habitat home. This document is based on methods to allow for the home building process to proceed economically.

In a concentrated discussion, commonly referred to in the design discipline as a “charrette,” all members of the family and their advocates are involved. Discourse begins on patterns of living. Questions about activities and spaces make for passionate conversations. Partner families are asked to envision their ideal space, what that space would look like and what they would do in the space.

Depending on circumstances and resources, it can take from one week to a year to build a Habitat home. Numerous volunteers participate in the development of these residences; it is a community event from start to finish and beyond. In this sense, it is a community-based design and benefits far more people than just the owner, architect and builder, as is traditionally the case.

The need for revitalization exists in many areas, like the placement of current projects of the NDC and CHDC. Success might be measured by seeing private developers—with a communal-based mindset—follow after these groups into the same locales.

—M. Monica Gillen lives and works in Ames.

NDC’s revitalization of the East Grand Commercial corridor in Des Moines includes both renovation and new infill development including the project above, which responds to the prevailing cultural demographics of the neighborhood.

Architect: Jeffrey Morgan Architecture Studio