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ONE BUILDING AT A TIME

By Catherine Young

Mention the destroyed Frank Lloyd Wright Larkin administrative building or other long-gone Buffalo landmarks and preservationists and cultural tourism advocates alike will shake their heads with regret, wishing they could go back in time to prevent the irrevocable damage to the cityscape.

But in Buffalo, one need not only fret about past destruction. There are architectural treasures all around us in tenuous states ranging from disrepair to near-collapse. Living and working downtown, I've become accustomed to the sight of a crumbling façade of once-brilliant orange brick or blown out windows patched with tape. I often daydream about being able to swoop down with cash and restoration know-how and save entire blocks of Main Street. But where would I get this cash and this know-how? One might expect that the only person truly able to swoop in and save the architectural day would be a generous-minded developer with an appreciation of history or a preservation activist willing to invest plenty of personal capital and sue negligent property owners or the government. If you can imagine this savior, the person is probably older, with some standing in the community and some means.



Nickel City Co-op members on the perch of the Granger mansion: l-r, Mike Prisco, Rachel Taylor, Lindsay Sampson, Emily Ng, Matt Dore, Kevin O' Sullivan, Val Lee, Lois Wang, and Timothy Bardo.

Photo by Jim Bush.

The story of the Granger Mansion at 208 North Street involves no such character; its preservation and gradual restoration is the result of an experiment in property ownership never before attempted in Buffalo. Towering over the corner of North and Elmwood in Allentown, the imposing crimson brick mansion was designed by E. B. Green and built for Edmund Granger in 1885. For several years in the late twentieth century it was zoned as office space and was unoccupied, falling into worsening disrepair. Just in time, the building's saviors appeared to rescue the historic structure. Unlike the rescue of the H.H. Richardson complex or the Delaware Asbury Methodist

Church, 208 North was not saved with public hoopla and extravagant civic actions. It was saved by the astounding good faith and determination of a fistful of young graduates from the University at Buffalo who decided to bid on the crumbling property and turn it into a cooperative living space known as the Nickel City Co-op. That was nearly two years ago.

One evening I ventured to the former mansion to check it out and meet with its residents. I had been passing its somewhat menacing façade and wondering about the improvements of the past year and a half. As I approached the building, a yellow lab named Sammy greeted me. Comfortable couches and a coffee table were set up on the porch for maximum lounging potential and a few of the Co-op's residents were taking advantage of the nice day. They directed me inside. The wide French doors were in good shape, with just one square panel missing and replaced with a small mirror (perfect for checking your teeth before meeting strangers!). Upon entering the house, a decadent wooden wrap staircase was imposing but beautiful, missing surprisingly few of its many spindles considering the neglect the house suffered while vacant. Besides the foyer, there was an office with large windows facing the street. The office, it became apparent, was devoted mainly to sorting fourteen sets of mail but it also held couches and a shared computer. There was also a television room (or living room, if someone isn't into television) and a dining room. These are the common areas. Each co-op member has a bedroom of their own.

Once everyone figured out who I was and why I was there, I was invited to dinner and introduced to Kevin O'Sullivan, one of the founders of the Nickel City Co-op and an excellent spokesperson for the global movement in co-op living (another of the co-founders, Emily Ng, was unfortunately asleep upstairs). While I enjoyed a dinner of red lentil stew, pesto pasta, fabulous maple-glazed carrots, and slightly sticky vegan cornbread, I peppered O'Sullivan with questions about how the pie-in-the-sky idea of recent college graduates taking on an architectural behemoth threatened with demolition and turning it into one of the most exciting stories of Buffalo's urban rejuvenation came to fruition. With an earnest but in no way naive demeanor, O'Sullivan detailed the arduous process from initial inspiration to implementation.

O'Sullivan and his friends were looking for alternatives to the landlord/renter relationship. None were native Buffalonians, but all had decided to stay in town after attending UB. On a visit to Cornell they were able to check out a co-op, and the notion of bringing co-op housing to Buffalo began to take form. The next step was finding a place to reimagine as their future home. They set their sights on the Granger mansion because it was large, vacant, and affordable. They scrounged up \$16,000 to put in a bid of \$60,000 when the building went up for auction. They got it. The next steps were getting the zoning changed and securing funding to finance the purchase and restoration. This was a precarious

moment in the trajectory of the plan. They had put their own money into the dilapidated building without knowing if they would actually be able to do anything with it. All local banks “looked at us like we had two heads when we approached them,” O’Sullivan commented. It just didn’t seem like a worthy risk for typical lenders because the co-op’s plans did not fit the banks’ concepts of property ownership. A collective called the North American Students of Cooperation (NASCO) helped them secure a \$100,000 loan to make 208 North a viable residence. (NASCO is an excellent resource for people trying to deal with the complex logistics of founding a successful co-op.)

That, in an abridged nutshell, is how fourteen twenty-somethings came to live in a fantastic architectural landmark that was well on its way to a date with the wrecking ball. The first group moved in in March 2003, with a few more trickling in each month. By July there were twelve residents. “When we first move in, it was like camping,” says O’Sullivan. “There was barely a roof and everything was water-damaged. We thought it would take three months to finish the work. Eighteen months later, we’re still working on it.”

As O’Sullivan continued to talk, other members interjected, explaining Nickel City’s system. There is a careful screening process and everyone has to approve of a new member. Each person is responsible for two weekly chores and there is a weekly meeting to go over issues. Meals are always vegetarian with a vegan option. Dinner is the only meal that residents are expected to take part in. Co-op members rotate cooking duty every two weeks, with each person chipping in \$100 a month for food. Not bad considering they are fed every night but only have to cook about twice a month. The co-op has been doing just fine with a make-shift cooking area, but they are putting the finishing touches on a kitchen that looks like it should be profiled in *Architectural Digest*. A large stainless steel refrigerator and six-burner stove were both acquired second hand. The centerpiece of the room is a shiny, L-shaped wooden countertop that was a bowling alley in its former life. One of the members salvaged it from work.

Co-op residents are reusing materials and rebuilding the mansion to make it a livable space. Some rooms are complete while others are just having their insulation put in. The ingenuity and resourcefulness of the group is at the center of why this housing experiment is going so well. Their balance of creativity and thoughtful planning is remarkable. O’Sullivan explained that they did not have to start from scratch once the decision to create the co-op was made. The global co-op movement has generated enough momentum that O’Sullivan and his friends were able to do internet research, read handbooks and guides, and attend conferences before the exact structure of Nickel City was established.

The boisterousness of having so many young people under one roof, albeit a

very large roof, does promote the feeling of a dorm room. But the meticulously ordered mail-sorting system, well stocked community magazine rack, and tidy interior suggest anything but. I brought up the question of diversity to O'Sullivan, who quickly commented they would like to have a more racially diverse group but that those who apply are usually white. (This then turned to a larger discussion of segregation in Buffalo and the isolated diversity of UB; familiar topics to all.) I also brought up the question of age. Did he think this was exclusively a young person's scene? Would it work if a significantly older person wanted to join? It begged a few questions. Does a person's ability to deal with other people in one's personal space automatically wane with age (and increased income and possible family responsibilities)? Does capitalism train us to fend strictly for ourselves and loved ones as we move past our twenties? O'Sullivan conceded that there was a youthful tone to the whole project; everyone is just a few years out of college and no one in the co-op has children. But, again, he said there was not an intentional age barrier and they would welcome anyone who was a good fit with the group.

As every aspect of community living was detailed for me, including a handbook for dealing with conflict issues such as guests and pets, I was truly bowled over by the thoroughness of this endeavor. "We're not just a bunch of hippies who thought it would be cool to live together," O'Sullivan said at one point, pointing out the balance between managing the needs of everyday life with a broader agenda for a reconception of community living. Here are a group of young people who committed themselves to Buffalo by investing not only their scant personal capital, but their energy, time, and vision, taking it upon themselves to reinvent a concept of community and property in the heart of the city. For Western New Yorkers who care about revitalizing the region, we could all take a page from the Nickel City Co-op handbook.

For more information about the Nickel City Co-op or NASCO, the collective that assists with establishing co-ops, see www.nickelcity.org and www.umich.edu/~nasco.

Catherine Young is a writer and artist living in Allentown.

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