

From two old houses, volunteers create one new home

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By: Cory Golden, Davis Enterprise

The two old houses that made their way across town one summer day in 2010 are now the Cornucopia Corner Co-op.

Or, for their eight residents, “home.”

The Solar Community Housing Association, a local nonprofit, marshaled the efforts of some 300 volunteers, including dozens of UC Davis engineering students, over the past year to renovate the two houses as affordable housing.

The association hosted an open house Saturday to show off the results.

More than a year ago, trucks hauled the houses eight blocks along Third Street, from B Street to J Street. That cleared space for new townhomes across from Central Park and gave an Old East Davis empty lot houses with 1930s-era architecture.

“I think the most incredible the thing to think about is how many pairs of hands contributed to the project,” said project director Ben Pearl. “It’s phenomenal to think about how many people feel like they had an active part in the project.

“That community ownership is so important to a nonprofit and community housing organization like us.”

The association, with 23 total residents, also operates the Sunwise Co-op, in Village Homes, and J Street Co-op, at 234 J St.

Among the green features already installed or planned for the Cornucopia houses are solar panels, solar water heaters, energy-efficient windows, passive solar overhangs and a system for reusing rainwater. Better than seven inches of recycled cellulose insulate the walls and 14 inches in the ceilings.

Inside, the walls are covered in a nontoxic clay. High-efficiency gas stoves will provide heat in winter.

The south house, which is wheelchair-accessible, with ramps and wide doorways, boasts a mosaic tile shower created by volunteers and an original built-in wooden niche placed back into the hallway.

The two houses, which will be run by residents as a single joint household, are joined by a wide deck. The southernmost includes a good-sized dining room for group meals — and an even bigger kitchen.

That's resident Molly Reagh's favorite spot.

"The kitchen is just such an amazing space to cook with people in. It's just phenomenal," said Reagh, 24, who works at Sprouts Child Care. "It's so spacious and easy to move around. It's a great community kitchen. It has two sinks and the great stove. It's great."

Those who live in the houses earn less than 80 percent of Yolo County's median income.

Association board members said the neighborhood embraced the project. In turn, they hope to be a hub of activity, perhaps by holding regular community dinners and hosting compost collection.

Village Harvest, a local nonprofit that picks fruit from backyard trees for the needy, plans to set up shop in the co-op's garage.

The volunteers who smashed old walls, tiled the roof and other tasks were led by a group of local contractors and craftsmen that included Dave Tipton, Josh Sonner, Cody Lane, Bill Thomas, Mark Rivera, Mark Reddick, Dave Pearl, Paul Ferris and Brian Barbier.

Other key players included the city of Davis Redevelopment Agency, Davis Energy Group, Yolo Federal Credit Union, Sherman Construction, Johnson Design, the Davis Historical Commission and the Old East Davis Neighborhood Association. A number of local businesses donated supplies for the project or sold them at reduced cost.

Reagh said she enjoyed “coming home to a house full of life and energy, kind of the makeshift family that’s happened, and coming home to people that you really feel connected with. Just having someone asking how your day’s been and having that kind of home feeling.”

As a City Council member, Don Saylor supported the co-op project and even donated some items from his own kitchen renovation. He was all smiles on Saturday, saying the work “far exceeded” his expectations.

He also noted that the very spot on which the co-op sits was the site of another historic house which, when demolished more than a decade ago, shocked neighbors, sparked new requirements for historic preservation and led to the creation of neighborhood associations across the city.

“To be able to have a win on this site, it’s awesome,” Saylor said. “It’s really cool.”

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