



Detroit's Crow House – Updating the Urban Settlement House Tradition

GLOBAL IMPACT ARTICLE SERIES

Southwest Detroit is a community with many needs, including access to affordable housing and healthy food. Older homes with a lot of character are the norm across the city, and while one can appreciate arched doorways and stained glass, the challenge with older homes is that many are not well insulated. For Detroiters living in an older home, this means paying high utility bills, unless they can find a house renovated to be energy efficient. A lack of food security and excess of vacant land and buildings also create needs in the community.

There is much interest at the University of Michigan (U-M) in addressing challenges in Detroit, but according to Marlena Hanlon, a student in the U-M School of Social Work, the amount of time faculty, staff and students can consistently contribute is a significant barrier to having an enduring impact in Detroit.

SETTLEMENT HOUSE TRADITION

To address both the need for energy efficient housing and access to healthy food, a University of Michigan (U-M) team of graduate students interested in urban socioecology developed the Crow House project. Inspired in part by the settlement house tradition popular at the turn of the 20th century, students began implementing a plan that focused on creating common ground for community and college collaboration among local activists, agencies, and scholars living in neighborhoods.

A major piece of the team's plan focuses on engaging community members in workshops about green retrofitting techniques to reduce home energy bills, foster self-resiliency, save and reuse water, provide information about green gardening (permaculture), and bee-keeping. The team also identified new grants and community opportunities and created curriculum resources about herbalism and vermiculture (cultivating and using earthworms in composting).

While the team's original ambition included renovating a home located in the Chadsey-Condon neighborhood and turning it into an urban community center, extensive structural damage made this an insurmountable task. Instead, the team has arranged for a long-term lease on the empty lot adjacent to the house and is now focusing on creating a community garden focused on community engagement and education.

URBAN SCHOLARS, ACTIVISTS, AND ARTISTS

It's great news that so many people are working to improve Detroit's social, economic, and environmental sustainability, but Hanlon believes some nonprofit organizations are not coordinating as well as they could, which presents challenges. Hanlon's hoping to change that through Crow House, Inc., a new nonprofit focused on creating community centers to foster a network of urban-centered, scholar-activist collaborations.

Thanks to funding provided by U-M's Dow Distinguished Awards for Interdisciplinary Sustainability competition, Hanlon was able to jumpstart Crow House, Inc. and build upon the original project by purchasing two homes



(structurally sound) located in the Hubbard Farms and Springwell Village neighborhoods. Hanlon is leading renovation efforts for both of these homes, leveraging the same model and resources developed by the original student team. Hanlon has her hands full with graduate studies at U-M, managing green building efforts (retrofitting) to reduce energy costs, and coordinating green gardening in three neighborhoods (Chadsey-Condon, Springwells Village, and Hubbard Farms). It's a tall order, but the financial support provided by the Dow Sustainability Fellows Program helped ease the burden and got the ball rolling at each site in Southwest Detroit.

The plan for the Hubbard Farms house is to host an urban scholar in-residence and an activist in-residence in the duplex, an artist in-residence in an attic loft, and a community space for classes and gatherings on the main floor of the home.

"[In the Hubbard Farms neighborhood] we're installing insulation and radiant floor heating... showing yes, with an old house we can do this." Hanlon will use renovated homes to host classes on gardening, food preparation and nutrition, and other efforts. A long-term goal of Crow House Inc., is to create a network of scholars working in Detroit, using community gathering spaces to foster interactions among faculty, students, Detroit residents, and nonprofits.



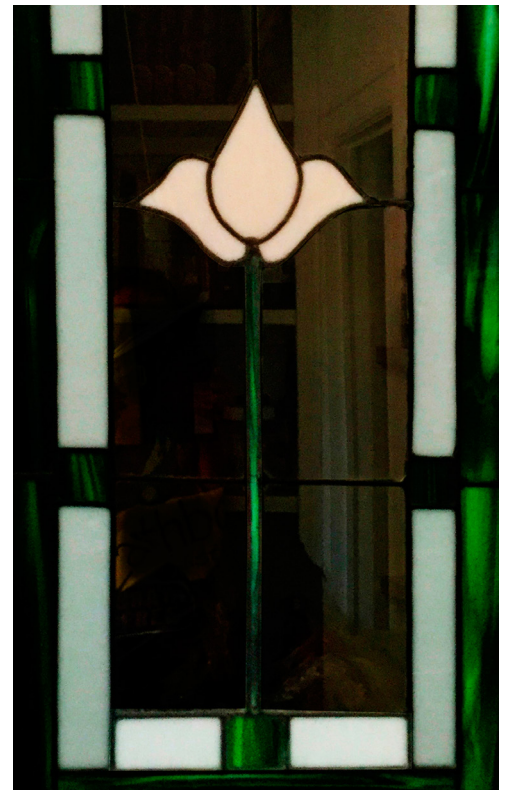
Marlena Hanlon, Distinguished Awardee (left) with Nicole Berg, Graham Education Program, on porch of renovated home

MOVING FORWARD

Addressing challenges in Detroit is "a big enough tent for anything you're studying," Hanlon stated. This is evidenced by the makeup of the original team, which included students from social work, business, urban planning, and natural resources. Those interested in ecology can explore permaculture and how to support urban pollinators (e.g., bees); environmental educators can refine sustainability curriculum; engineers can demonstrate solar panel installations to make older homes more efficient, and social justice advocates can facilitate more collaboration among nonprofits in Detroit. Through the work, Hanlon has also identified other important multi-disciplinary opportunities for community collaboration, including mobile health and dental clinics with public health professionals.

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- Focus: HOPE
- Dow Distinguished Awards Competition
- Dow Global Impact Series



Stained Glass in kitchen of older home, Southwest Detroit



Metal fireplace grate in older home, Southwest Detroit

U-M PROJECT TEAM MEMBERS

- Marlena Hanlon, School of Social Work, Taubman School of Architecture and Urban Planning
- Michael Lin, Taubman School of Architecture and Urban Planning
- Carolina Maestri, Ross School of Business
- Austin Martin, School for Environment and Sustainability (SEAS)

FACULTY ADVISORS

- Joseph Trumpey, Stamps School of Art & Design and SEAS

Made possible by The Dow Chemical Company Foundation, the Dow Sustainability Fellows Program at the University of Michigan supports full-time graduate students and postdoctoral scholars who are committed to finding interdisciplinary, actionable, and meaningful sustainability solutions on local-to-global scales. The program prepares future sustainability leaders to make a positive difference in organizations worldwide. We believe that diversity, equity, and inclusion are key to individual empowerment, and the advancement of sustainability knowledge, learning, and leadership.