

Ruth Ellis Center Project Report

Graham Sustainability Institute

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Executive Summary

Our Graham Scholars team was guided by Kathryn Berringer, University of Michigan doctoral candidate working with the Ruth Ellis Center (kathryn.berringer@ruthelliscenter.org), to analyze the Ruth Ellis Center's facilities, specifically the newest project, a 44,000 square foot, mixed-use, permanent supportive housing facility. Set to open in January of 2022, this project, called the Ruth Ellis on Clairmont (or REC Center), will provide housing and educational opportunities for LGBTQ people from 13 to 30. Since the plans for the facility were previously finalized (Figure 1.) by a group of key stakeholders including the REC, Landon Bone Baker Architects, Henry Ford Health System, Southwest Solutions, Full Circle Communities, CAM (Coordinated Assessment Model), City of Detroit Housing & Revitalization, SPEC Associates, McGregor Fund, MISHDA (Michigan State Housing Development Authority), and HAND (Homeless Action Network of Detroit), our team focused on providing useful information for creating a sustainability-focused atmosphere post-opening. To do so, we constructed an in-depth historical and current summary, informed by a literature review, of the environmental context in Detroit and Highland Park, where many of the Center's facilities are located. This will provide current and future stakeholders context and insight into the lives of the youth served by the center in order to make informed, place-based decisions. It is our hope that this contextualization will also serve as the foundation for future grant applications. Furthermore, our team carried out interviews, both within the REC and outside, which enabled us to create recommendations for construction and community sustainability implementations, as well as a set of tools to evaluate community health.

Introduction and Background

The Ruth Ellis Center is a Detroit area non-profit serving the needs of runaway, homeless, and at-risk lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender youth. The Center has multiple facilities and services including a Drop-In Center, a street outreach program, licensed foster programs, and an integrated Health and Wellness Center located in Highland Park, Michigan. Notably, the Center's namesake, Ruth Charlotte Ellis, who is regarded as one of the first open lesbians, was a prominent LGBTQ rights activist in the city. Her home served as one of the first refuges for lesbian and gay Detroiters for decades. Now, the Ruth Ellis Center is one of only four agencies within the United States designed specifically to serve homeless LGBTQ people. For the last few years the Center has been planning to add a permanent supportive housing (PSH) facility to its array of services. Ruth Ellis on Clairmont, is Green Communities certified by Enterprise, a national sustainability-focused nonprofit working to address America's affordable housing crisis. It was the team's goal to find ways to support these principles—that fall within five general categories including integrative design, resilience, path to zero energy, healthy living and water— within the lives of residents, visitors, and the surrounding community for decades to come (Enterprise Community Partners). Implementations were formed under the idea that green infrastructure means very little when it's not paired with improvements to education and job opportunities, especially in a city like Detroit, that has faced environmental racism and disproportionate inequity for decades. Community engagement is critical when attempting to improve environmental conditions which is why we have outlined different sustainability practices and resources that REC Center can utilize in spaces such as their edible garden or Entrepreneurship Center.

Methods

First, our team participated in a day-long Sexual Orientation, Gender Identity, and Expression (SOGIE) training. This was informative in order to carry out informed interviews and interaction, as well as contextualized interviews. After conducting preliminary interviews with the Ruth Ellis Housing Director, Youth Advisory Board member, and evaluation team from Spec Associates, we were able to get a better understanding of the current status of the facilities. Following those discussions, we utilized qualitative coding in order to file the numerous recorded hours of pre-existing interviews carried out by our client under relevant tagging systems. The work was conducted using Atlas.ti, which the team was trained on before beginning the process. The tags covered a broad umbrella of topics ranging from temporary housing to transgender issues as well as current Detroit programs like the CAM.

The team also conducted outside research and generated a literature review, utilizing everything from academic journals to news outlets, outlining the present condition and history of Highland Park. We focused on overall pollution, water quality, access to quality food, and physical infrastructure of the city. Furthermore, we examined Ruth Ellis' plans for the REC Center facility and other projects with similar goals of providing LGBTQ+ youth support services. A few larger themes emerged based on our findings including the lack of access to clean affordable water, the connection between poverty and community exposure to pollution in Highland Park, and the need for local protections when creating infrastructure improvements. Place-based recommendations, as well as evaluations methodology, were also informed by an interview with Soulardarity, an environmental organization in Highland Park. Lastly, we hoped to illustrate these conditions through graphics, such as a mind map (Figure 2.) and timelines (Figure 3.), in order to foster understanding among stakeholders. Many graphics created by our team were used during multiple stakeholder meetings.

Results & Recommendations

The REC Center can meaningfully involve residents in environmental stewardship as a means to promote personal and professional development and community building. Research has established that physical activity and time in green spaces can help reduce symptoms of mental health issues like depression and anxiety; The availability of accessible green spaces like parks are also significantly associated with multiple positive health outcomes among urban residents, including lower weight status, reduced cardiovascular disease and diabetes risk, lower levels of anxiety and depression, reduced stress, and better quality of life (Orstad et al). Programming around the edible garden (Figure 4.) can be modeled after urban gardening programs that have gained traction in large cities such as Chicago, Detroit, Los Angeles, and New York. Rather than conventional science education, like biology concepts, these programs are aimed at creating “an educational environment centered on youth rather than science” whose learning environment hinges on is “driven by youth rather than curriculum and therefore responsive to the needs of youth.” (Rahm). We also saw significant potential for environmental education and career opportunities with the REC Center's Eutrapurial Center, which currently has plans for training opportunities in culinary arts, cosmetology, and social services and advocacy work. We recommend that Ruth Ellis also consider adding green career opportunities, or information on environmental organizations in Highland Park and Detroit. We formulated recommendations regarding possible partnerships for long-term programming and career building. For example,

Soulardarity has expressed interest in partnering with the Ruth Ellis Center. Additionally, Keep Growing Detroit, an organization that assists with seed distribution and education components, could be a rewarding partnership. One of our most important recommendations that should be carried out before the rest, is a focus group with Ruth Ellis Youth or Youth Advisory Board members. Because our team was not able to carry this out, we have created a focus group guide aimed at gauging the interest and feasibility of specific sustainability related ideas.

Anticipated Impact

There are several potential impacts of the work our team accomplished for the Ruth Ellis Center. To start, the Final Report, titled “Ruth Ellis Center’s Permanent Supportive Housing Project as it Relates to Sustainable Community Development,” can be used for a variety of purposes. It can serve as a place-based context for future community-based developments, which are already underway because the report is tailored to the Highland Park infrastructure and community. The report contains relevant scholarly articles and statistics that inform the reader of several environmental and social concerns. This may also provide foundation information for future grant applications, which we also provided specific recommendations for (U-M associated Fred A. and Barbara M. Erb Family Foundation and The Kresge Foundation). Furthermore, the recommendations we formulated can apply to the REC Center, as well as other pre-existing Ruth Ellis facilities. Another positive impact of our work is the solidification of the link between social justice issues and sustainability. Often, our report can catalyze difficult conversations concerning organization-wide, intersectional, sustainable systems change. Furthermore, by providing suggestions for evaluation methods, stemming from both Enterprise and LEED-ND matrices, the changes brought about by our report, and the REC Center project as a whole, are more likely to be long-lasting.

Appendix



Figure 1. A rendering of the Permanent Supportive Housing Project, (REC Center, opening in 2022).

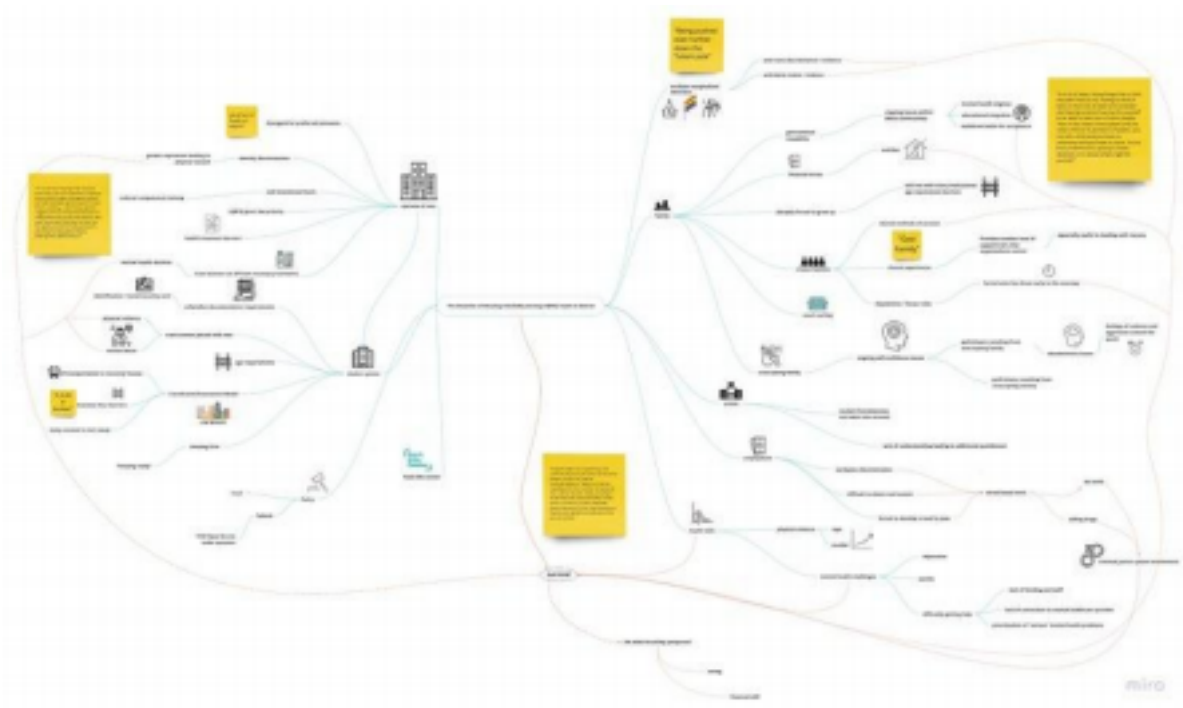


Figure 2. This “mind map” was created as a result of many interviews with Ruth Ellis youth (which were already recorded by our client) in order to illustrate the everyday struggles of homeless LGBTQ youth in Detroit.

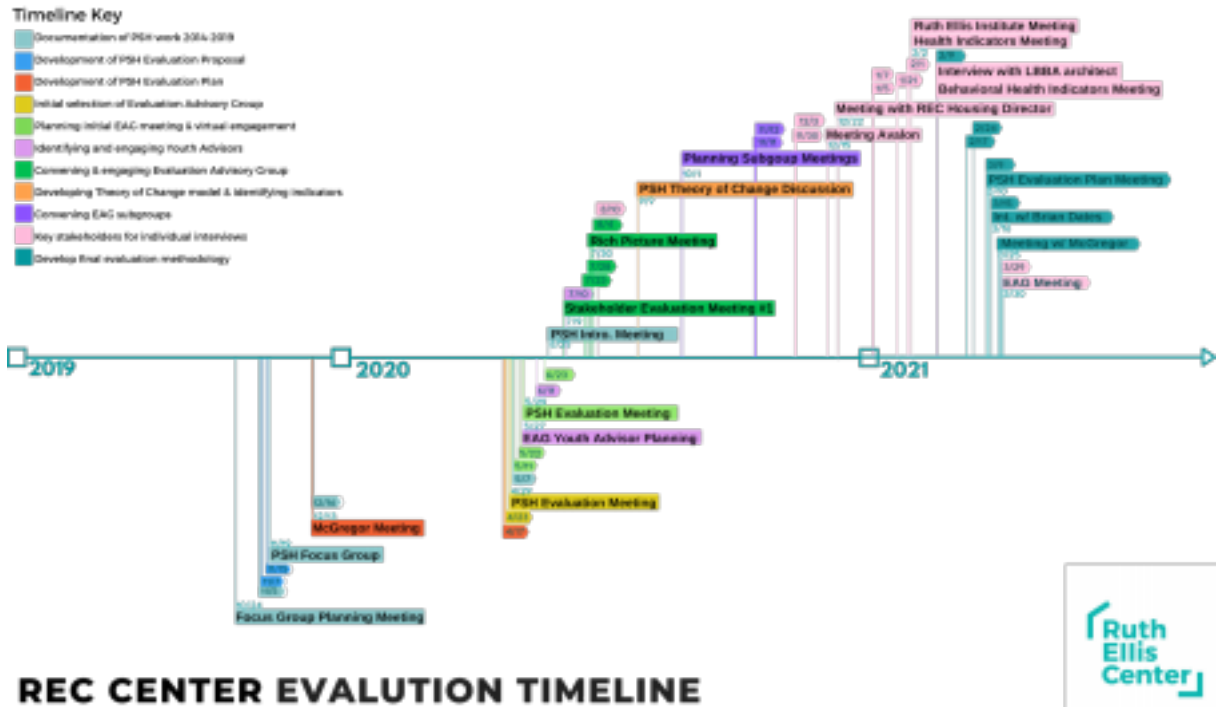


Figure 3. This is representation of the process in creating the REC Center, starting from the first brainstorming session to the most recent stakeholders meeting.

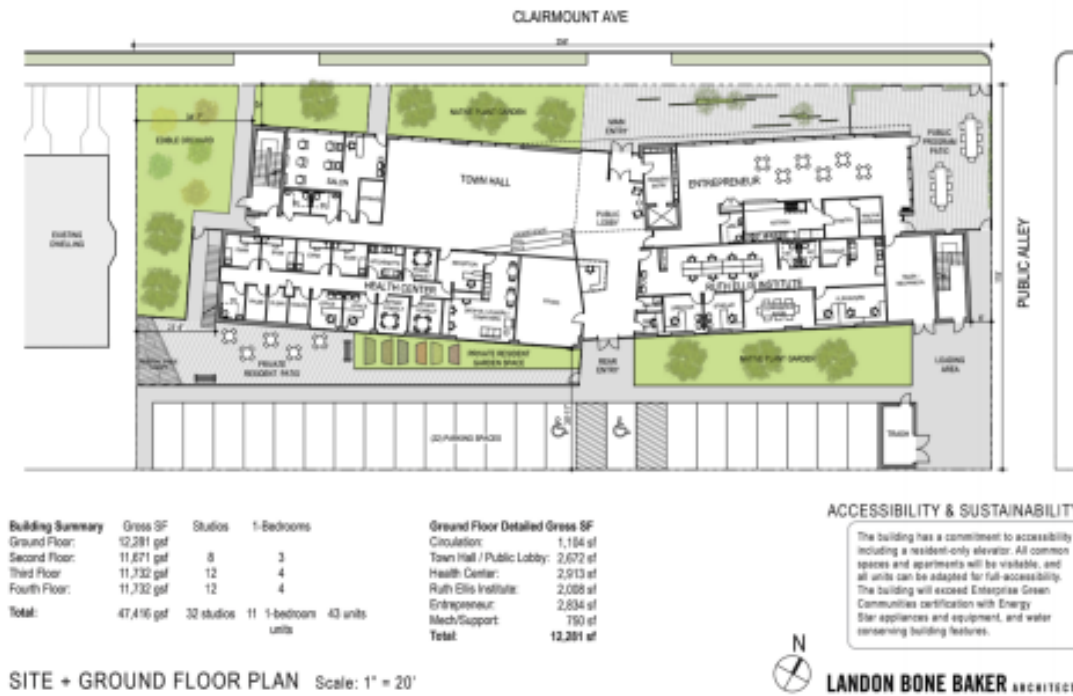


Figure 4. This layout shows many of the open, green spaces that are included in the facility's plans.

References

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