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This is not your average master's project

KU students build state-of-art house

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Nathan Crouch

Typical graduate students prepare for final research papers or master's theses by spending countless hours in front of a computer screen or entombed in campus libraries.

Nathan Couch traded in such traditional educational tools for some real ones.

Couch and the rest of his graduate-level classmates in the University of Kansas' School of Architecture and Urban Design, which is focused on the creation of community-based architecture Studio 804 program, used hammers, hard hats and blueprints to complete their final project.

Five months of real-world study and physical labor have yielded a rarity in eastern Wyandotte County: A state-of-the-art, yet affordable 1,200-square-foot modular home. The house was planned, designed and built in Lawrence and delivered to its new homeowners in the 3800 block of Lloyd Street in Kansas City, Kan.

Couch said he was proud to be a part of the project and glad to play a role through architecture in the urban renewal process.

“It's encouraging to see that it's possible to reinvigorate neighborhoods with lasting architecture,” Crouch, 25, said. “It's just good to know that architecture can improve living standards even at entry-level housing prices. The most satisfying feeling is when I see people respond to the quality of the house and talk about how uplifted it makes them feel.”

So just how did Couch and classmates select Kansas City, Kan., as the site of its latest project?

Like most real estate deals, it was all about location, location, and location.

At the project's onset, the students in the Studio 804 project had the vision, the design plans and the manpower to build a new modular home as part of their final class project. They still needed a developer, some funding and a site for their home to lay down roots once it was completed.

Enter City Vision Ministries and the Rosedale Development Association.

Because the program already had built six new homes in Lawrence through its partnership with a local non-profit group, there wasn't an opportunity to build more homes in the area.

So Studio 804 was invited to submit proposals from Kansas City, Kan., non-profits, said John Harvey, executive director for City Vision Ministries.

City Vision, a non-profit organization that works to revitalize Kansas City's urban core, and the development association, dedicated to revitalizing the Rosedale area of Kansas City, Kan., collaborated to submit the proposal that was selected.

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Harvey was excited to work with students in the Studio 804 project.

“City Vision saw this as a unique opportunity to build on our relationship with KU, whose medical center is a major institution in Rosedale,” Harvey said. “We also were very interested in working with design students to incorporate interesting and unique housing designs for affordable housing applications. It was a chance to produce a home with design features usually reserved for upper-end housing but produced for a low- and moderate-income market.”

With the house finished and sold to a local resident, Harvey lauds the work of the 20 KU architecture students.

“These students, all 20 of them, were highly motivated and took great pride in their work. They were excellent to work with,” Harvey said. “Their coordination and planning of the project were outstanding. We were impressed with their thoughtful ideas and high level of commitment and energy to the project.

“The students took a site with very difficult topography and designed a house that fit the site perfectly. The house itself is beautiful, artistic and highly functional. It's a house that I personally would love to own.”

The new owner is a young and aspiring artist who was interested from the time the project started.

“She has a very modest income and with down-payment assistance from the Unified Government's HOME program, she was able to qualify for the purchase,” Harvey said. “She's very excited and can't believe she's really going to be able to own a home. The home is a perfect match for her since the basement level has been designed to serve as a studio.”

Couch said that he was glad he and his classmates could contribute to the owner's happiness.

“There's nothing else like it,” he said. “This is by far the premiere architectural education at the graduate level in the country. The amount of learning I was able to experience on the design, construction, management, governmental and interpersonal level was astounding.

“No other research paper or master's thesis could come close to that comprehensive a process.”