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Director's Notes for "A COTTAGE, PERHAPS" 131 - 137 Leslie St.

Like a play or movie the building of a house is a story that begins with an idea. Someone thinks a play/house should be produced. There are hundreds of complicated reasons for this impulse which I will leave for another article. Anyway a plan/script is found or created from scratch. A cast of talented actors/tradespeople are assembled into a team. Rehearsal/construction that will last for months, (or years in my case) begins. Opportunities to refine the details of the script/plan appear daily. The play/house is mostly finished when critics/inspectors appear and attempt to edit the final product. Finally the play/house is finished. Audiences/customers come to see it. They either like what they see or wonder why anyone would put so much time and effort into such a mediocre result. If the play/house delights it may stand for years well cared for and enjoyed by its audience. If its crap it will shortly be cancelled or torn down so something "better" can take its place.

The story of how 131 and 137 Leslie came to be built here starts in 1999. That year I bought 124 Regent (1 block over) and after 5 years of on and off renovation I moved into the house with my wife and two sons. Over the past 12 years I was able to purchase five adjoining houses and renovate them into high quality rentals. Three pieces of adjoining vacant property were purchased around 2008 and added to this site. Currently known as Cottage Lane the site consists of 9 individual parcels that add up to just over an acre of land. The plan is to combine all the land and buildings into one master deed and create Cottage Lane Condominiums.

Keep in mind that it took all these years to assemble this property because each parcel was an individual negotiation and purchase. Some were purchased for more than their market value and some I was lucky enough to buy at a decent price because they were foreclosure properties. I didn't move to 124 Regent St. with the grand idea that I would buy up property and build cottages. I moved here because I love the house and I love living on the eastside of Lansing Michigan. Once the idea formed however I gently but persistently pursued these properties as they came on the market. I am extremely lucky to have been able to put together this size piece of property in a neighborhood like this.

In April of 2007 I invited some smart people I know, most living on or connected with the eastside, to a design charrette at the Foster Community Center. My friend Jarl Nischan facilitated the event and I was thrilled that about 20 people gave up their Saturday

morning to help design this eastside project. I had the land but I wanted to see what a project would look like that was actually designed by the community. Lots of excellent ideas came out of this effort but I think it was a few days later one of the attendees, my friend Kate Koskinen, said something like “I think you should build cottages.”

The building of these cottages was easy compared to all the work required to rezone to a slightly higher density, and the process of requesting a variance to allow parking in the front (where it logically belongs). And even those efforts pale compared to the challenge of creating a site plan this big in an existing neighborhood that the city will accept. Engineer Brett Stockhill crafted a beautiful site plan the details of which had to be negotiated with and approved by nine different departments of the city. There are good people working for the city who want to protect the city’s interest while trying not to squelch development. However the process is a marathon not a sprint, be prepared.

You have to keep telling yourself, “I have to go through this because at the end I will finally get to build something... a cottage perhaps.”

In the winter of 2012 I had a small office in the back room of 139 Leslie. I spent most of January and February in this room doing the pencil drawings for the 7 new cottages I planned to build.

I am a builder not an architect but I do enjoy putting pencil to paper and designing buildings and spaces. My process for the design of these cottages was pretty simple. First they should probably look like they fit with the existing architecture on the street. To me that means a 24’ x 26’ two story box with an 8-12 pitch roof, painted clapboard siding, with simple but substantial window and door trim. Double hung windows, dark colored painted wood screens, and a little galvanized metal help connect the present with the past.

A most important part of the design is how the building relates to the site. I was able on nice days to take my drawing board right out on the site and sit where the house would sit. I could see the views, feel the wind blow, and see how the sun peeked around buildings and trees during different parts of the day. Window placement especially was informed by this exercise. Each building while very similar in design is still tuned to just that spot where it will be built.

I have had a ten year romance with a place called Bay View Michigan which is just north of Petoskey. Carrie, the boys and I have stayed near there for a few days every year just so I could walk around and study the buildings. Bay View is a resort community with about 400 exceptionally maintained cottages most of them 100 years old. I get two feelings when I am around these cottages. First is I’m not so sure I’m welcome here. I definitely feel like the outsider that I am. The second is utter enchantment with the color, detail, and the proximity the buildings have to each other. It is this second quality that I

aim to create here in Lansing. My walks around Bay View have probably informed as much of the aesthetics of cottage lane as anything.

While all this talk about the building process and aesthetics is enlightening what really makes Cottage Lane interesting to most people is its location. The eastside of Lansing is an old urban neighborhood with its share of abandoned and dilapidated houses, uneven sidewalks, and the usual social problems that plague all cities. This ain't no Whitehills.

Until recently most people who had enough money to have wide housing choices would not choose to live on Leslie St. based on a drive through the neighborhood. But change is afoot. The state capitol is about one mile away, the ever expanding Sparrow Hospital is just down the road, MSU and the Wharton Center are an easy bus ride away, and the millennials are coming to the eastside in droves. There is incredible diversity, social capital, and networking opportunities. The Allen Neighborhood Center is just down the road for crying out loud.

These cottages are being built with the belief that these local assets along with trends in our society that indicate more people want to live in cities like ours will make these cottages very desirable. Eventually the market value may even rise enough so the builder can make a profit. But that probably won't happen soon.

I am always curious about what buildings cost and I bet you are too. So here are the actual numbers for these two homes. The lots were purchased in 2008 for \$12,500. The cost of the site engineering and running utilities to each of the sites works out to about \$18,350 per building. So almost \$31,000 per building was spent just to get a piece of dirt ready to build on. The amount paid for labor and material for each of the new builds you see today was \$127,000. \$127,000 plus \$31,000 is \$158,000. During the course of planning and construction that went on for about two years the value of my labor and some profit has to equate out to at least \$50,000 per building. So \$208,000 would be a reasonable sales price for this house. Of course no one is going to pay \$208,000 for a house on Leslie St. in Lansing Michigan...yet.

Before you judge me a complete fool realize that these new highly efficient cottages will rent for around \$1500 per month. That is a lot of money for rent but compared to what is being built these days and what's available of this quality \$1500 is right in the ballpark (pun intended). \$1500 is a decent return on investment if I don't count my labor. This amount of rent will pay off the debt in 10 years or so.

This might be a very hard project to duplicate given that most rational developers have to see a fairly quick certain return on their investments, and rightfully so. Sometimes however, in order to move the needle toward more creative solutions someone has to take a risk. Of course, I stand to gain or lose the most in this endeavor now known as Cottage Lane. But the eastside neighborhood and my neighbors on Leslie and Regent streets have

taken a risk also. Even though there are elements of this site design that are not what they are used to, including houses inside the block and front of building parking, my neighbors' almost unanimous support of this project is what allowed it to happen. I am grateful and humbled by that fact.

I am pleased you are here today joining the Allen Neighborhood Center and me for "A Cottage, Perhaps", produced and directed by residents of the eastside of Lansing, Michigan. Enjoy the show!

Dave Muylle  
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