

NCSHA 2009 Award Entry Description

HFA: Iowa Finance Authority
Nominee: A Partnership for Rebuilding Oakhill Jackson
Category: Homeownership, Encouraging New Production

Entry Description

Iowa State University's nationally acclaimed The Bridge Studio program is an interdisciplinary elective studio class for advanced undergraduate and graduate students. Students who participate in the program work in collaborative teams as interns for local design firms, consulting practitioners and a range of building industry professionals to develop projects for organizations and communities not normally served by the design professions. Students meet with clients, present to neighborhood groups, estimate project costs and create construction documents.

Professor Nadia Anderson has taught The Bridge Studio since 2007. To date, 50 students from architecture, landscape architecture and interior design have participated.

During the first two semesters, students worked with the nonprofit Community Housing Development Corporation (CHDC) in Des Moines to help integrate sustainable systems into the organization's single-family affordable homes. A home designed by students in the spring 2008 class is under construction.

In the fall of 2008, students worked with the Iowa Finance Authority (IFA) and the Oakhill Jackson Neighborhood of Cedar Rapids, Iowa, to develop prototype modular housing options for people whose homes were badly damaged or destroyed by massive flood.

Rebuilding Oakhill Jackson

Historic flooding devastated the city of Cedar Rapids in June 2008, when the Cedar River – which runs through the heart of town – crested at 31.12 feet, 11.12 feet higher than the previous record crest of 20 feet. The massive rush of water consumed 10 square miles or 14 percent of the city, impacting an estimated 18,600 people and nearly 5,400 residential parcels. (Cedar Rapids's population is approximately 128,000.)

“It's named *The Bridge Studio* because it builds bridges between education and practice, architecture and community, and sustainability and affordability.”

*Nadia Anderson
Professor
Iowa State University*

Oakhill Jackson was among the neighborhoods that suffered the greatest loss of housing. A working-class neighborhood near downtown, hundreds of residents – if not all – lost their homes to the swift floodwater or incurred some level of damage.

From tragedy, an opportunity

Oakhill Jackson's misfortune, however, established the opportunity to create an innovative learning laboratory for The Bridge Studio students. Shortly after the floods an idea was born: Take The Bridge Studio students to Cedar Rapids to witness the devastation in Oakhill Jackson first-hand. With the knowledge they gained from their visit, and from meetings with Cedar Rapids neighborhood and city planners, the students worked in teams to create architectural plans that the city of Cedar Rapids could use to rebuild the Oakhill Jackson neighborhood. Students were tasked with creating plans for affordable, sustainable and energy efficient single-family modular homes that could be built at Oakhill Jackson to replace those that were lost or damaged.

The Iowa Finance Authority came on board as a sponsor of the program, providing a \$7,500 cash prize for the student(s) who created the best affordable housing design. A panel of judges reviewed each student's work.

Lessons Learned

The experience of working with the rebuilding of the Oakhill Jackson neighborhood was invaluable for The Bridge Studio students. It provided them with real-life exposure to the devastation of an unexpected natural disaster. It helped them gain unique knowledge about the benefits of disaster planning and the challenges of disaster recovery. And it introduced them to the housing needs of low- and moderate-income Iowans.

For the residents of Oakhill Jackson and the city of Cedar Rapids, The Bridge Studio partnership means that a repository of outstanding architectural plans are at the ready as the community works its way through federal buy-outs and insurance settlements and makes plans to rebuild.

IFA also benefited from this unusual partnership. As a sponsor of the program, IFA can take pride in supporting an initiative that both assisted our state's flood recovery efforts but also influenced the lives of young design students who will become tomorrow's affordable housing advocates. Given the students' exposure to the housing needs of working-class Iowans, they have a better understanding of housing policy and the demand for affordable housing across the state.