

Project: Alley Flat Initiative

Location: Austin, Texas

Key Players: Steven A. Moore, Barbara Brown Wilson, Sergio Palleroni, Mark Rogers, Sarah Gamble, and Michael Gatto

Major Themes: Low, local, nature in the city; Connected open-space systems; Adaptive reuse: buildings and infrastructure; Walkability and bike-ability; Creative entrepreneurship; Collaborative teams; Co-creation with stakeholders; Community engagement; Conversations about urbanism

By Nan Ellin with Jennifer J. Johnson

Neighbors gather along the well-tended narrow street in East Austin, once a neglected back alley. The streets flanking the alley have deep lots, which host their original houses as well as the new 500-850 square-foot “alley flats” built to be as beautiful as they are sustainable, as inexpensive as they are gracious. Alley flats are homes, perhaps, to elegantly age in place, migrating from the larger to smaller dwelling. Or possibly to house extended families, operate small businesses, or earn additional income for owners.



Mark Rogers, a graduate student who moved to Austin in 1986 to pursue a PhD in Art History at University of Texas, was integral to envisioning this possibility and rallying resources to realize it. Part of the “first gentrifying pioneers of students and architects” to the East Austin area, Rogers explains, he couldn’t refuse when Sister Amalia Rios of the Guadalupe Neighborhood Development Corporation (GNDC) (<http://guadalupendc.org/>) asked him to oversee rehabilitation of 16 units of housing they had built in the neighborhood in 1984. Over time, Rogers became more deeply involved, eventually becoming executive director of GNDC, operating throughout several square miles of East Austin.

On these lots small secondary dwellings had been built, without permits, sometimes up to three per lot. Although they have largely disappeared, Rogers regards them as “part of the DNA of the neighborhood” (Rogers 2012). To make a small dent in the pent-up demand for affordable housing (the GNDC phone message warns there is a 3-5 year wait) and leverage this underutilized land, Rogers embarked upon the “incredibly painful process” of getting the first one built in 1999, requiring half a dozen meetings with the Austin Planning Department and two with the Planning Commission and City Council for a zoning change in the suburban-oriented land-development code that prohibited accessory units. Luckily, the land-use code changed in 2001 when the city, inspired by developments in Portland (OR), adopted a “secondary apartment infill option.” With this enabling policy and financial support from the City’s Housing Department, Rogers built eight affordable secondary dwellings over the next few years that were also sustainable, earning three-star Green Builder ratings from the City of Austin. Also in 2001, GNDC built the city’s first single-family home in the newly established SMART© (Safe, Mixed-Income, Accessible, Responsibly priced, and Transit-oriented) Housing Program.

Nearby, at the University of Texas at Austin, a studio taught by architect and urbanist Steven A. Moore (<http://www.soa.utexas.edu/csd/>) and environmental philosopher

Andrew Light in 2003 engaged students and local community activists in evaluating the potential for architecture and planning to improve low-income areas of Austin. When one of the participants asked, “Why aren’t you doing this ‘for real’ in the community rather than as a learning exercise?” (Barnes 2009), Moore shifted gears and within two years obtained a grant from the Henry Luce Foundation (<http://www.hluce.org/home.aspx>) to fund a “real” project. To assist with this process, he partnered with the Austin Community Design and Development Center (ACDDC) (<http://www.acddc.org/>), founded by Barbara Brown Wilson, then a doctoral candidate in Community and Regional Planning, now a faculty member and Director of the University of Texas at Austin’s Center for Sustainable Development, and Michael Gatto, then a graduate student and Rose Fellow, currently Director of ACDDC.

In search of a community partner, the team consulted a list of Austin communities comprised of at least thirty percent low-income residents, seeking a neighborhood that demonstrated need as well as willingness to engage in the project (Wilson 2011b). After interviewing several, they selected the GNDC, since that area was undergoing rapid gentrification and Rogers welcomed assistance from the university with multiplying the alley flats and making them more attractive and green.

Moore founded the Alley Flat Initiative (AFI), a partnership between the University of Texas Center for Sustainable Development (CSD), ACDDC, and GNDC. To catalyze broader ongoing transformation, “the long-term objective of the Alley Flat Initiative is to create an adaptive and self-perpetuating delivery system for sustainable and affordable housing in Austin. The ‘delivery system’ would include not only efficient housing designs constructed with sustainable technologies, but also innovative methods of financing and home ownership that benefit all neighborhoods in Austin” (<http://www.acddc.org>).

The first studio that examined the alley flats was taught in 2005 by Sergio Palleroni, an architect specializing in community engagement (Interior Design 2011) and founder of the University of Washington-initiated BaSiC (Building Sustainable Communities) Initiative (<http://www.basicinitiative.org/>) “that involved transdisciplinary approaches to design education through immersion in a community while collaboratively designing and building a community identified project” (Wilson 2011a: 18). Palleroni was familiar with similar efforts in Santa Cruz and Portland, Oregon and understood the potential for alleys to become streets, densifying the neighborhood while increasing its affordable housing options and enhancing its charm. Over the next three years, corresponding studios and seminars each fall and spring focused on the AFI.



AFI students met with community leaders to better understand the character of the area and its existing assets. As Wilson explains, “each student took a variety of photographs, making postcards out of the most provocative shots taken. Once the collage of photos was assembled, a beautiful quilt of moments formed...What students were learning to see was not the abstract visual patterns typically valued in the studio, but local patterns of living valued by the community” (Wilson 2011a: 18). Students also conducted a geographic information systems analysis of Austin neighborhoods, mapping the

preponderance of deep lots and identifying potential for about 3,000 alley flats (Morgan 2010).

Throughout the process, students engaged residents in a two-way exchange of mutual learning and participated in neighborhood alley improvement efforts. As one resident remarked, the “really good thing about the workshop was the availability for the students to meet with the community in the community” (cited by Wilson 2011a: 21).



Lydia Street Alley Flat. Image Credit: Sam Gelfand

Through historical research, students learned Austin was one of the first freed-slave communities west of the Mississippi River after the Civil War and had neighborhoods of minorities dispersed throughout the city. This began to change in the early 1900s, as the 1928 Austin City Plan effectively relocated minorities to Austin’s East-side neighborhoods

(<http://diversearts.microassistdemo.com/sites/default/files/cityofaustinplan.pdf>): “With the stated interest of preventing slums, Austin’s 1928 City Plan proposed the creation of ‘a negro district,’ which pushed minorities to the area east of East Avenue where they would be offered utilities, schools, play grounds, etc. The subtext of the plan was that minority populations would no longer be offered utilities, paved streets, schools, etc. if they lived in other parts of the city” (Wilson, 2011a, 2).

These neighborhoods grew, as Wilson chronicles, into “enclaves of strength, creativity and resilience” (Wilson 2011a, 5) and in the early 1990s, organized to restore brownfields in the area, remnants from their former industrial neighbors. While successful, the payoff was bittersweet as property taxes rose 123 percent from 1998-2004 (Wilson 2011a, 10-11). Residents who had endured segregation could no longer afford to live in the neighborhoods they worked so hard to improve.

The students explored historical precedents for intrablock housing, such as London’s mews, and for secondary dwellings such as carriage houses and granny flats. They also researched similar contemporary efforts around the US—physical design as well as zoning mechanisms for these accessory dwelling units—including the backyard cottages and garage apartments of Portland, Seattle, Denver, Santa Cruz

(<http://www.cityofsantacruz.com/index.aspx?page=1150>), and Faribault, Minnesota (Keen 2010).



Striving to avoid the economic displacement that had occurred on the west side of Austin, students aimed to provide affordable auxiliary units for new residents as well as additional rental income for current residents. To accomplish this, they transformed alleys into secondary streetscapes that would be clean, attractive, and community-oriented. The Alley Flat Initiative was also intent on being green: “Alley Flats are designed to minimize the consumption of resources, both in construction and in long-term use, thereby reducing energy costs and our impact on the earth. They are built from sustainable materials and utilize energy-saving technologies. Their efficient design yields very low operational costs—averaging 60% less per square foot than traditional construction” (<http://www.acddc.org>).

Learning from policy precedents, students also worked to understand Austin’s zoning code and work within it or recommend adjustments to facilitate broader implementation. “This was not just about designing homes,” Wilson recalls, “but figuring out how to navigate the [city’s] infill tool process so that people could build affordable infill housing” (Wilson 2011b).



As students were generating designs for alley flats, the ACDDC was refining some of these into construction documents. The next step was building two prototype alley flats “that would showcase both the innovative design and environmental sustainability features of the alley flat designs” (<http://www.thealleyflatinitiative.org/>). All the partners played “a part in finding potential land for an alley flat, contracting a pro-bono designer, and managing the construction of the unit as well as monitoring its success after completion” (Morgan 2010).



Willow Street Alley Flat designed by UTSOA Studio Spring 2009.
Image Credit: 3D Models and Renderings by Lydia Guarino and Brittany Cooper.



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The first prototype was built in 2008 for the sister of a property owner and featured “solar panels, a tankless hot water heater, rainwater barrels, and an energy-efficient heating and cooling system, among other sustainable technologies” (Morgan 2010). Moore and Palleroni conducted a studio that evaluated the prototype’s energy and economic efficiency and value engineered it for the second prototype in 2009, this one wheelchair-accessible for a long-time resident of the neighborhood. They engaged an interdisciplinary team, including a community engagement expert and landscape architects along with a contractor to help with developing cost estimates for student designs at each stage of their designs. When carefully constructed to be efficient consumers as well as producers of energy, it was found that maintenance costs for the houses run sixty percent less than those of traditionally built houses.



Explaining the larger goals of AFI, Sarah Gamble maintained, “We’re trying to influence the comprehensive planning process that the city is working on, and trying to get more public dialogue about affordable housing to promote this as one of many options” (cited by Morgan 2010). To broaden the conversation, CSD hosted an exhibition at Austin City Hall in Spring 2010 (<http://www.thealleyflatinitiative.org/2010afiexhibit>), along with a keynote address by Jon Peterson, founder and president of Public Architecture, who discussed a range of secondary housing initiatives around the U.S. (Quintero 2010). CSD also conducted a series of focus groups and interviews to obtain feedback from practitioners and the larger public about AFI. Students produced a how-to guide including financial options and a digital pattern book, posting these on the website as tools for residents seeking to build alley flats themselves.



The seven Alley Flats that have been completed or are under construction have lowered in production cost over time, as the methods were refined, from approximately \$123,000 to \$105,000. Creatively providing affordable green housing and protecting communities, AFI has been awarded “Best Practices in Green Education” from the United States Green Building Council, “Community Stewardship Award for Redevelopment” from Envision Central Texas, and five out of five stars from the City of Austin’s Energy Green construction program. The ACDDC is currently overseeing project management and educational outreach efforts to further the development of green and affordable alley flats in Austin and was invited to work with the City of Austin’s Sustainability and Public Works Departments on another alley regeneration project, this time converting the alley into an integrated system of infrastructure to sequester and cleanse storm water, grow produce, and display community art, all contributing to improve public safety while enhancing community pride. The GNDC, currently developing a 100-unit subdivision, is also dedicating its efforts to working on the next bond initiative in order to obtain the crucial financing to build more housing, including alley flats.

Through these efforts, AFI contributed to refine and lend credibility to community engagement for designers. As Wilson maintains, “if designers hope to help citizens . . . , they need to connect with residents, listen to their stories, and collaborate in the co-creation of new development strategies that address the economic, ecological, and cultural concerns of the residents” (2011a, 11). Along with Bryan Bell’s Design Corps and Social Economic Environmental Design (SEED) metric for proactively engaging in community-based design (<http://www.designcorps.org/>; <http://www.seed-network.org/>), Wilson is leading Public Interest Design (PID) studios and workshops (<http://soa.utexas.edu/csd/PID>) to assist students and professionals with discovering and applying these approaches.

AFI has helped restore hope to a community at risk of being displaced by offering tools for preserving and enhancing neighborhoods. From the perspective of GNDC, the involvement of CSD and ACDDC helped raise the design bar, ramp up the green quotient of the homes, provide free design services, bring publicity along with financial resources to the project, break down the university-neighborhood divide, and provide mutual learning experiences for residents and students alike. Awarded his PhD in 1996, with a focus on Italian Renaissance art, Rogers has been invited to teach at several universities, but politely defers, recognizing he’s found his calling in building homes and community.

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