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CATHARINE KAVANAUGH
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Local couple takes special home delivery

Art project opens door to dialogue about urban decay, renewal

PLEASANT RIDGE — The smallest house on Oakdale Boulevard sticks out like a really sore thumb with its missing shingles, chipped paint and dented gutter on a street lined with stately Tudors and colonials.

Tom Kirby and his wife, Mary McGeehan, are "deed holders" of the humble adobe built from parts of abandoned Detroit houses by Hamtramck artist Clint Snider. "It could be a Halloween decoration," Kirby said. But it isn't.

The couple will host the house for a month, make a few improvements, and then pass it on to the next host, who lives in Royal Oak. For a year, the installation art project called House 365 will travel the metro Detroit area and undergo a rehabilitation that will be documented on a blog.

"Unfortunately, right now it looks like a condemned dollhouse but that's how I want it in the beginning so the transformation can be seen," Snider, 39, said. "I like the idea that the community will caress it little by little."

Hazel Park businessman Peter Hilzinger gave the wooden shack tender loving care for 20 days after his neighbor, TANK Gallery owner Rick Gage, helped launch the project. The landscape architect gave House 365 a prominent spot in front of Sketch, 505 W. Nine Mile, until it moved to Pleasant Ridge on Friday.

Hilzinger planted hydrangeas, asters, coral-bells and Japanese silver grass around House 365 and added a Michigan State University flag and some children's books. For the art opening, he even grilled cocktail sausage on a small barbecue near it.

The Royal Oak resident also kept up the house chores. He watered the plants, fixed some cedar shake, painted the steps and picked up litter left by loiterers. He also admired it on clear evenings. "The sun set behind it and the light was so beautiful," Hilzinger said. "It looked like color tile because the wood is so old and has so many different layers of paint." On his last day, Hilzinger sat on the front porch and ate his lunch.

"I'll miss it. I looked forward to taking care of it," he said.

Kirby and his wife will live with House 365 before making any changes. After it arrived on a flatbed trailer and was set on their front lawn, he noticed the quality of the construction materials. The wood smells of pine and cedar. He can imagine the parts once in good condition like the well-kept dwellings around him.

"I was struck by the contrast of the old Detroit house parts and my neighborhood," Kirby said. "I

thought about the prosperity that used to be in Detroit that is now in the suburbs and how in general the flight to the suburbs is responsible for the decay of Detroit."

Hilzinger passed along a diary he started of his experience with House 365. Kirby and McGeehan will add to it, describing the reaction to House 365 being in Pleasant Ridge and the updates they give it. "It has a life of its own now," Kirby said.

That's just what Snider had in mind for House 365. Primarily a painter and sculptor, the artist collected boards and siding while working on other projects in Detroit. He sees beauty and character in what he describes as neighborhoods of the post-industrial city poised between oblivion and renewal. "I want to show people the jewel underneath it," Snider said. Gage is using House 365 to teach other artists about installation projects.

"You don't want to preset someone's mind; you want the dialogue to morph," he said. "Every community will have its own criticisms and witticisms. When it was in Hazel Park, I thought about TARP funds. I saw hope and rehabilitation. That's my perspective but I expect everyone to see something different."

Hilzinger expects most deed holders to share some feelings about the project. "Everyone who hosts the house is part of a community, a wonderful family experience," he said.

House 365 is booked through June 2010. To find out more about being a "deed holder," call the Richard Gage Design Studio at (248) 547-1114 or e-mail tank425@gmail.com. For more information about the project, go to www.tank425 and click on events. Contact Catherine Kavanaugh at cathy.kavanaugh@dailytribune.com or (586) 783-0216.