



On December 4, 2008 the final check was written to the Michigan Architectural Foundation and the mortgage on the Beaubien House was paid off. Like proud homeowners everywhere, Michigan's architects held a "burn the mortgage" ceremony in front of the house during their annual holiday party.

The home of the American Institute of Architects Michigan, AIA Detroit and the Michigan Architectural Foundation is one of the oldest remaining houses in Detroit. It gives us an idea of middle-class life in the midst of the nineteenth century. The land on which it sits is truly historic. It is a piece of one of the original "strip farms" that ran back from the river in the days before the English replaced the French settlers. The site is that of Antoine Beaubien's farm. It had a quarter of a mile frontage on the river, but ran back from the water nearly three miles. It was almost 337 acres in size. Beaubien was a Colonel in the Detroit Militia. He received the patent certificate for his land in 1810.

The Beaubien Estate was dissipated rapidly after 1831. Some Historians speculate that the wife of Antoine Beaubien, Jr. (Monique Labadie) was overly generous in her gifts to the church and other educational and charitable institutions.

Early in 1841, Antoine and Monica Beaubien sold to Bishop LeFevre, for the sum of one dollar, the land at St. Antoine and Croghan streets (now Monroe) to be used as the site of the new St. Mary's Church. The cornerstone for the First Church, built on the same site as the present one, was laid on the feast of corpus Christi, June 19, 1841. The tower's four bells were donated by

Antoine Beaubien and his wife.

A more likely explanation is that a large part of the farm was sold to the family's own attorney, and paid for in railroad stocks which proved to have little value. Needless to say, there is no record of the attorney suggesting that the deal be renegotiated.

Just before his death, Antoine sold Lot 8, on the north side of Jefferson Avenue, to Charles J. Trombley for the sum of \$2000 in June of 1850. Trombley was a cousin of Beaubien's and a graduate of Georgetown College in Washington, D.C. Historians feel that the present house was built sometime during 1851 for the use of Trombley and his new bride. The house was not a custom-built one of a kind residence, since there is some evidence that there were 15 similar residences in the area, all of the same Italianate Townhouse Style popular in the 1850's. Many of these survived until the 1950's, when they were torn down to provide more parking lots. As an aside, the 1950's must be one of the blackest decades for Detroit's architectural historians. Hundreds of important buildings were demolished just before public interest and concern were mobilized for their preservation.

The Trombley House exterior is brick (although whether or not it is local brick is unknown). It is supported on fieldstone foundation walls at least one foot thick. Wall studs are two by six and the ceiling joists are two by twelve on twelve inch centers. The structure is more than adequate even under today's building code requirements. As a result, there has been little settling of the house, the floors are level and all doors swing freely. The plaster walls are on wood lath, with two layers of plaster reinforced with hair.

The plan for the house is essentially simple. Over a full basement is the first floor, consisting of a front parlor, complete with marble mantled fireplace and two smaller rooms one of which must have been a dining room. The usual kitchen in those days was an attached structure on the rear of the house. There are 22 steps to the second floor which held a bedroom and sitting room, and the third floor had two rooms probably used by children or servants. It does not have the special rooms, such as a library or conservatory, that the larger homes had. It was always a modest dwelling, not a mansion.

For the next two decades, the house was owned or rented by many different families, including some of the city's oldest and most familiar names; McClelland, Cicotte, Whipple, Chapoton, Campion and Beecher, among others. In 1872 the house was sold to John F. Antisdel and it entered its longest period of ownership by one family. Antisdel was a New York Stater in the hotel business, eventually owning hotels in Milwaukee, Bay City and Kingsville, Ontario, plus three large establishments in downtown Detroit. As a businessman, Mr. Antisdel was aware of the importance of maximizing his capital, and sold the house on three occasions, although he continued to occupy it as a tenant during these short spans, until he sold it in 1887 (the same year AIA was established in Detroit).

A Dutch born artist, William H. Machen, lived in the home for the next five years and built up a national reputation for his paintings, even exhibited in the Detroit Museum of Art. But in 1894, John F. Antisdel bought the house for the second time, and it then

remained in his family through his son, John Parshall Antisdell, until 1943. There then follows some very obscure years in the life of the house, owing to the sporadic issuance of city directories during World War II and the 1950s.

Compiling the chronology of a building sometimes must depend on serendipity. Just such a happy chance dropped into the Beaubien House in September of 2008 in the person of Thomas A. Ridley. It turns out that Mr. Ridley is the nephew of Della Ridley Bellaimey. He brought a photograph of a chandelier (now hanging in his dining room in Romeo) that his aunt said came from the Beaubien House. Her husband, James Edward Bellaimey, was also a well known painter and had an exhibition of his work at the Detroit Institute of Arts in March of 1950. The introduction to his retrospective exhibition, written by Edgar Preston Richardson, contains some interesting tidbits about the house. Richardson was director of the DIA from 1945 until 1962 when he left to head the Winterthur Museum in Delaware.

James Edward Bellaimey was a descendant of the Trombly family on his mother's side and could trace his history in Detroit back eight generations. He earned a Master's degree in education from Wayne University in 1941, studied painting at the Wicker

Schools of Arts, taught in the Detroit Public Schools and in 1943 married Della Ridley. According to Richardson, "they settled in an old house of the 1860's on East Jefferson Avenue, which he transformed into another most interesting and characteristic creation." Richardson went on to write, "He liked to work on the decoration of his house, to refinish old furniture, to draw, to paint, to model, to express all his interests."

The Bellaimey's lived in the house, with their son, until James' sudden death in November of 1949. Della stayed on in the house for several years.

The DIA exhibited 41 pieces of Bellaimey's work in 1950, including two illustrated children's books. Seventeen of the paintings were set in the Detroit area. "He loved the city and his pictures of it were the expression of his powers as an observer, his skill as a painter and his affection for the place," said Richardson.

In 1956, the house was rented by freelance photographer Fred A. Plofchan, who bought the house in 1965. During his occupancy, the plumbing lines were extended to the upper levels, and then rented as studio apartments. For some time, the house was a combination of office and residential use, with a firm of attorneys, Grubbs & Bledsoe, on the first floor.

When AIA Michigan/AIA Detroit leased the building, a group of volunteers from various downtown firms helped the staff paint and refurbish the entire three floors. A feasibility study of the house was prepared by the Beaubien House Committee and it was determined that it could be renovated.

The Beaubien-Trombly-Antisdell House is one of the last remaining residences on what was once the premier residential street in Detroit. A little further east is the Moross House, the oldest authenticated house in the city. The Chene House (Little Harry's Restaurant) was standing when the Beaubien House was renovated. Alas, preservationists lost the fight to save it and a pancake house now occupies the site. A few mansions remain converted to commercial or institutional use, as well as the fast disappearing big homes near Indian Village. Unfortunately, Detroit has used up and destroyed much of this heritage and it is significant that Michigan's architects choose to save a bit of Detroit's past glory.

AIA AND THE BEAUBIEN HOUSE

The Michigan Architectural Foundation, AIA Detroit and AIA Michigan began looking for a new headquarters in 1960. During the search process the Beaubien House was identified as a possible new home. The location of the house, across from the Renaissance Center and its historic significance made it very attractive. A five-year lease with an option to purchase was signed in May of 1977. Cosmetic improvements were made with volunteer help. The furniture was lent or donated.

Numerous consultants visited the site to determine the condition of the building systems. Measured drawings were prepared, record photographs were taken of both the interior and the exterior, a paint analysis performed and historic research undertaken to determine the original design of the structure.





Based on these studies and the recommendations of a series of committees, the Michigan Architectural Foundation purchased the house in 1982, and initiated the process to achieve designation for the house on the National Register of Historic Places.

In 1984, six architectural firms submitted proposals for the renovation/restoration. The firm of Osler-Milling from Ann Arbor was commissioned and the design proceeded.

The ten-year effort culminated in the fall of 1987, the one hundredth anniversary of AIA in Michigan, when the building was re-occupied.

REBIRTH OF A NATIONAL REGISTER PROPERTY

The total construction cost exceeded \$500,000, not including donated materials, labor and furnishings. Funding was obtained from AIA members, interested nonmembers and a mortgage. Their names are enshrined on a plaque that hangs on the second floor outside the board room. In the end, it was the dedicated effort of countless volunteers that made the Beaubien House renovation a reality.

EXTERIOR RENOVATION

A number of anachronistic elements were removed and replaced by elements of historical design during the exterior renovation in 1985.

The standing seam canopy and stoop at the front entrance were removed and returned to their original appearance. The original entry doors and frames were replicated. The grade elevation, fence and landscape treatment along Jefferson Avenue were restored. The rooftop flagpole was replaced by a reconstruction of the original, mounted on the Jefferson Avenue façade.

The courtyard wall was badly deteriorating and was replaced by a wall of historical design. All material and labor for the wall were donated by the Masonry Institute of Michigan. The landscape design was prepared by Schervish, Vogel, Merz, P.C. who donated the labor for the installation.

All of the windows were replaced. The brick exterior required extensive repointing and removal of plant material.

The original cornice had been removed and physical evidence could not be found to reveal the original design. The new cornice design was based on cornices of similar houses.

The original intention was to renovate the low addition at the rear of the house. Upon further investigation, its condition proved to be poor enough to warrant demolition and replacement. A new air-conditioning unit was placed on the new roof.

INTERIOR RENOVATION

The mechanical and electrical systems were entirely replaced.

The front parlor with its gaslight fixture and marble fireplace were restored. The remainder of the first floor was gutted and remodeled into a reception area, library and refreshment center. A gallery now occupies the front parlor. Exhibits are held there from time to time and photographs of award winning designs by Michigan architects are on prominent display.

The second floor sitting room with its marble fireplace was restored and now serves as a conference/board room. The stair was restored but the rest of the second and third floors did not contain any important historical features and these areas were remodeled for offices.

CONCLUSION

The preservation and adaptive reuse of the Beaubien House was appropriate to reinforce our profession's leadership role in the preservation movement. Today, the Beaubien House serves as a specific model of a careful, sympathetic and innovative approach to maintain, rehabilitate and conserve our historic resources.

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