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Small-Scale Developers, Big Dreams



On Massachusetts Avenue, two houses owned by Joseph Galvin, an early microdeveloper.

TONY CENICOLA / THE NEW YORK TIMES

By PENELOPE GREEN

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BUFFALO — It was the proverbial melting pot, festive, aromatic and polyphonic. There were young hipsters (identifiable by their wool caps and archaic facial hair) and local homesteaders, along with settlers from Myanmar, Bhutan, Pakistan and Africa, to name just a few of the cultures represented at this once-blighted city’s annual auction of foreclosed properties. Would-be homeowners and property moguls huddled over the listings for more than 4,300 parcels of vacant lots and houses, their hoped-for choices highlighted and starred.

Bernice Radle and Jason Wilson, both 27, brandished their own sheaf of marked-up listings. They were clearly old hands, hopping up to greet friends and mingling as if at a cocktail party. “Last year was so intense,” Ms. Radle said, “we had to go home and take a nap afterwards.”

This was their second auction; at their first, they bought a vacant lot (\$500) and three century-old houses (\$66,000), holdings to which they later added an 1870s cottage purchased directly from the owner for \$1 after convincing him that it would be cheaper to let them assume his debts and fees (about \$5,000) than to spend triple that amount razing the place.

Passionate and preservation-minded, Ms. Radle and Mr. Wilson both have degrees in urban planning and are emblematic of a particular wave of development here. Buying on a small scale, they and their peers are perhaps best described as microdevelopers, rehabbing derelict properties to rent and perhaps eventually sell in an attempt to save houses from demolition and preserve a neighborhood or two. In so doing, they are attempting to shore up the city's long, slow decline since the population and jobs began leaking away more than a half-century ago. One group, the Farmer Pirates, bought 22 vacant lots that they turned into farmland and a composting station.



Slide Show | Saving Buffalo, Wreck by Wreck In Upstate New York, buyers with activist inclinations are preserving a city, one foreclosed house at a time.

included at the end of this article...

E. Frits Abell, 41, an entrepreneur who has worked in Boston and New York City, has bought three properties on the same street and plans to open a coffee shop and a branding agency. (He has already started a successful art fair called [echo](#).) Countless others are buying one or two properties and wrestling them into a habitable state, no joke when your capital is mostly sweat equity and optimism.

As Mr. Abell said recently: “The rents are too low, and the numbers don’t really add up. It’s a labor of love.”

These activist microdevelopers are different from the slumlords and absentee owners who buy properties in bulk, rent them to vulnerable communities and spend nothing on refurbishment or services, compounding Buffalo’s woes.

The city’s vacancy rate is still above 15 percent, as it was in 2000, the highest in the nation for cities with populations of more than a quarter million, according to the [Partnership for the Public Good](#), extrapolating from the 2010 census. Since 2007, the city has been pursuing a policy of demolishing the thousands of abandoned houses here, nearly 70 percent of which were built before 1940,

making Buffalo's housing stock the oldest in the country. But this barren and still lovely landscape, with its Olmsted-designed parkways and wide, radial streets gapped with lone, crumbling houses, is appealing to young urbanists like Mr. Wilson and Ms. Radle.

Mr. Wilson, who grew up in a suburb nearby and is the director of operations at [Preservation Buffalo Niagara](#), said: "Our generation never saw the decline. We don't remember the old restaurant that used to be on some corner. We see a vacant lot, and we see opportunity."

Ms. Radle added, "We see bocce!"

Bocce is tactical urbanism, she explained to a puzzled reporter: "It introduces people to the neighborhood; it doesn't cost a lot of money or need much infrastructure. It's not too loud." She and Mr. Wilson plan to put a bocce court on the vacant lot they bought last year.

The couple met two years ago, when they were organizing competing events for young professionals during a conference that the National Trust for Historic Preservation held in Buffalo, and discovered in each other a kindred spirit. "Jason said, 'I want to buy houses,'" Ms. Radle recalled. "And I was like, 'I want to buy houses.'"

[Buffalove Development](#) is the name of the limited liability company they've formed as property owners. For fun, they spend weekends with other members of [Buffalo's Young Preservationists](#), a group Mr. Wilson founded a few years ago, doing what they call "board-and-seals" of abandoned properties: boarding up windows and cleaning out refuse, mowing lawns and tar-papering roofs.

They have held workshops and tours in their own properties to illustrate the process by which others can buy abandoned houses. Last month, when Ms. Radle spoke at [TEDxBuffalo](#), she held up a heart-shaped poster that read "Preservation Is Sexy," as she explained the manifesto (preservation as social activism) that drives her and her peers. Perhaps inevitably, they are being courted by the producers of television reality shows.

For Ms. Radle is nearly irresistible. She is now a project manager at Buffalo Energy, a green-energy consulting firm, but one day she hopes to run for mayor. "I'm determined as hell," she said.

Mr. Wilson shook his head. "I never thought I'd fall in love with a politician."

Speaking at an energy conference last year, Ms. Radle so impressed Martin Dunn, a developer of affordable housing in New York City, that he lent her and Mr. Wilson the money they needed to rehab their properties, about \$60,000.

(The catch with Buffalo's derelict housing, particularly if you buy at auction, is that no bank will give you a mortgage.)

Mr. Dunn said: "I encouraged them to be more ambitious. To think more broadly of how they could pick a neighborhood and get some economies of scale and have a broader impact."

This year's auction was held in the [Buffalo Niagara Convention Center](#), in a garishly lighted room redolent with the scent of the attendees' breakfast choices and punctuated by the whirl of the currency counters. Winning bidders paid 20 percent of a property's price in cash or certified check. The balance is due in December, and they should receive the deeds in March — a schedule that had severe consequences last year, Mr. Wilson said. "The owner turned the power off in one of the houses we bought, but not the water, so the pipes froze and burst. There were mushrooms. It was horrible."

This year, he and Ms. Radle were tentatively interested in a few properties, if they stayed below \$25,000, which they didn't. Prices seemed to be up by a third over last year, Mr. Wilson estimated. But mostly they were there to buy the vacant lot next to their cottage, which they hoped to make their home. Happily, the lot was unchallenged, and they won it quickly for \$500.

It was time for a tour. On Massachusetts Avenue near Chenango Street, there were the meticulous properties of Push Buffalo, a community organization that creates affordable sustainable housing. Across the street were spiffy clapboard houses painted in bright pink and yellow, one sprouting an elaborate Victorian porch that had been salvaged from a house lost to arson in another neighborhood.

Joseph Galvin owns these and seven other properties. Mr. Galvin, who is 57, was one of the first to start rehabbing in this neighborhood. It was more than 25 years ago that he bought his first property, the yellow house on Massachusetts, which was then a boarded-up wreck owned by a bank, for \$13,600. "At first it was necessity — I just wanted a place to live," he said. "There were a lot of drugs and prostitutes and criminal elements. We'd call the police, and they'd arrest someone, and then there'd be someone else to take their place. What I decided to do was to buy these houses and renovate them and try and save a neighborhood that was in decline."

He added: "I was a lone soldier for a long time, dodging bullets and drug dealers and baloney. Lo and behold, now I have nine properties. We missed the whole rust-belt revival that cities like Cleveland had. Now it's our turn. Now the young kids like Jason and Bernice are just coming out of the woodwork."

On Chenango, Mark Legeza's front yard was still a riot of greenery, with

Japanese wisteria climbing up the porch. Mr. Legeza, 29, is a health physicist for the Army Corps of Engineers. (He is overseeing the cleanup of radioactive materials from the Manhattan Project, not a job you hear about every day.) In 2009, he bought his house for \$70,000. It was in good shape, though it had been neglected. But his block had its challenges, including two rowdy drug houses, he said, which he bought in 2011 for \$30,000 and \$25,000, using a home-equity loan for the first, and a high-interest loan for the second. The renovation, which cost about \$36,000, he did himself.

“The cops were there all the time,” he said, “and the only way I could figure out how to get rid of these people was to find the owners and buy the houses.”

Now he rents them out. Ms. Radle, who helped him scour one of the houses of its debris and cockroaches, has been a tenant. The taxes Mr. Legeza pays on all three properties amount to \$1,000.

Back on Massachusetts, Ms. Radle and Mr. Wilson’s houses were two skinny clapboards sitting side by side, with a third behind them. Mr. Wilson chose the paint colors: raspberry, orange and teal. He recalled the brutal cleanup after the pipes burst, which they were able to do with help from 15 or so friends, a familiar crew with whom the couple has stabilized other properties during weekend board-and-seals.

Recently, Mr. Abell, who grew up in Buffalo but left after high school, recalled what brought him home a few years ago and has kept him enthralled. “What’s drawn me in deeper,” he said, “is the D.I.Y., roll-up-your-sleeves community-building ethos that has taken over the entire city. Everyone has three charities they’re working on. I’ve never seen a group of people who give more of themselves.”

Describing a board-and-seal at an old factory building, Mr. Wilson said: “There is strength in numbers. The consequence of preservation is you get addicted. There’s a cascading waterfall effect of doing one good deed and then another.”

Ms. Radle added, half teasing, “We want an empire.”

Aaron Bartley, the executive director of [Push Buffalo](#), is guardedly supportive of small developers like Mr. Abell, Ms. Radle and Mr. Wilson. But he worried, he said, about gentrification and waning opportunities for other communities that have also helped to stabilize the city.

“There are a multitude of microdevelopers operating throughout the city of Buffalo and coming at it from totally different angles and experiences,” he said, ticking off a few of the communities that have put down roots: Bhutanese, Burmese, Caribbean, Puerto Rican and African. “On the west side of Buffalo, we

have these very fragile communities, refugees from some of the most war-torn parts of the world. In some places, you can hear 42 languages. It's hard to talk about diversity and not sound like a cliché, but the beauty of microdevelopment is that it is something people from different walks of life can enter into, and we want to keep it that way. So many have struggled here for so long. We want them to keep being part of this transformative process.”

Mr. Dunn — Ms. Radle and Mr. Wilson’s mentor — has built affordable housing for some of New York City’s most challenged neighborhoods, including East New York. That’s the one, he said, that Buffalo most reminded him of. And he concurred with Mr. Bartley, up to a point.

“Having lived in Greenpoint and seen what happened there,” he said of the Brooklyn neighborhood, “I’m sensitive to it. But in Buffalo, I think a little gentrification would be a blessing.”

[See the slide show 'Saving Buffalo, Wreck by Wreck' that accompanied this NYT article below...](#)

Small-Scale Developers, Big Dreams Saving Buffalo, Wreck by Wreck



Bernice Radle and Jason Wilson bought a skinny clapboard, its neighbor and a house behind for \$66,000. They are rehabbing all three.

Small-Scale Developers, Big Dreams Saving Buffalo, Wreck by Wreck



Ms. Radle and Mr. Wilson, both 27, have degrees in urban planning and are emblematic of a wave of microdevelopers in Buffalo who see preservation as social activism.

Small-Scale Developers, Big Dreams Saving Buffalo, Wreck by Wreck



Before they took possession of the house, the pipes froze and burst, and mushrooms sprouted, Mr. Wilson said. Also, the house was stuffed with debris. They cleaned it out with help from friends in Buffalo's Young Preservationists, a group Mr. Wilson started a few years ago. They spend weekends doing "board-and-seals" of the city's abandoned properties: cleaning out refuse, boarding up windows, tar-papering roofs and mowing lawns.

Small-Scale Developers, Big Dreams Saving Buffalo, Wreck by Wreck



All of the windows will be replaced.

Small-Scale Developers, Big Dreams Saving Buffalo, Wreck by Wreck



A fireplace was discovered hidden behind a wall.

Small-Scale Developers, Big Dreams Saving Buffalo, Wreck by Wreck



Nearly 70 percent of Buffalo's houses were built before 1940, making its housing stock the oldest in the country.

Small-Scale Developers, Big Dreams Saving Buffalo, Wreck by Wreck



Ms. Radle and Mr. Wilson were excited to find this pocket door.

Small-Scale Developers, Big Dreams Saving Buffalo, Wreck by Wreck



E. Frits Abell, an entrepreneur who has worked in Boston and New York City, bought this house for \$18,500. He grew up in Buffalo, but left after high school. “I kept reading about all the preservation in Buffalo,” he said, “and pining to be a part of it.”

Small-Scale Developers, Big Dreams Saving Buffalo, Wreck by Wreck



Mr. Abell bought this cottage and two other properties on Rhode Island Avenue.

Small-Scale Developers, Big Dreams Saving Buffalo, Wreck by Wreck



Mr. Abell is planning to open a coffee shop on the ground floor of this building.

Small-Scale Developers, Big Dreams Saving Buffalo, Wreck by Wreck



Mark Legeza's house was in fairly good shape when he bought it in 2009 for \$70,000. In 2011, he bought two more houses on the same block, rescuing them from drug dealers. He tracked down their owners, who lived outside of Buffalo, buying one property with a home-equity loan and the other with a high-interest loan. He did the renovations himself, turning them into rental properties.

Small-Scale Developers, Big Dreams Saving Buffalo, Wreck by Wreck



On Massachusetts Avenue are two houses owned by Joseph Galvin, an early microdeveloper in the neighborhood. He bought the yellow one more than 25 years ago, when it was boarded up and owned by a bank, for \$13,600. The Victorian porch on the pink house was salvaged from a house in another neighborhood that had been destroyed by arson. “I was a lone soldier for a long time,” he said. “Now the young kids like Jason and Bernice are just coming out of the woodwork.”