

Smith: Aren't students supposed to live in dingy hovels?

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Susan Lampert Smith Wisconsin State Journal

At an unusual garage sale this week, the musty smell of old wood and sight of truly ugly plaid upholstery took me right back to my student apartment days.

Five old homes that have housed generations of students are going the way of horses and buggies. So Sonya Newenhouse and her Madison Environmental Group were hired by Great Dane Development to hold a "deconstruction sale" in the 400 block of West Gorham Street.

Starting Monday, bulldozers will level three 1890s homes; two others will be hauled away. In their place, the 12-story Equinox will rise, joining other sparkling high-rise palaces with hoity-toity names: The Embassy, The Palisades, La Ville, The Aberdeen and La Ciel.

What happened to student poverty?

We were proud of our student hovels. The scurrying cockroaches and clanking radiators were signs we had temporarily escaped our boring suburban upbringings.

Now, students have to have high-speed Internet and cable access, tiled gourmet kitchens, and top-grain leather furniture.

Are they spoiled or what?

These were my dark thoughts as I poked through the sale items. Madison Environmental saved a small mountain of junk from going to the landfill: 22 dressers, 17 desks, and 31 kitchen cabinets. The group even found someone to take the mustard-yellow vinyl siding.

Meanwhile, Habitat for Humanity volunteers sawed and pried to remove 6,500 pounds of floorboards, newel posts, pocket doors, stained glass windows, and other historic items, which will be for sale at the Habitat ReStore, 208 Cottage Grove Road.

I sighed as I watched it go.

Students in the 115 Equinox apartments will never know all the "character" they missed.

But just as I was losing hope in the youth of today, Rebecca Thorman, of Madison Environmental, offered to introduce me to the last tenants. We knocked on the door at 421 W. Gorham, and despite the fact most of the seven

roommates were still asleep at noon, Jared Rosenbloom and Jon Schwartz graciously welcomed me in.

As my eyes adjusted to the gloom, my spirits rose. I saw old parlors converted to bedrooms, ancient radiators and something that looked like a hookah on the kitchen table. This was true student squalor in all of its splendor. I plowed a hole in the stuff piled on the sofa, and plopped down to hear how much they loved their home.

"We found this place freshman year, and we planned to stay here for the next three years," Schwartz said. "Our friends in apartments are over here all the time."

Oh, the parties they've had. With a front porch for people watching, a back porch for grilling, and a location a block from State Street, they've had a very social year. After their Halloween party, a puddle filled with floating costumes covered the kitchen floor. Their last big blast was a pre-Mifflin Street block party mimosa party.

Next fall, the friends will be split between two apartments in The Aberdeen.

They're not going happily.

"You have to stand in the elevator with other people," said Schwartz, with a shiver. "There's that awkward 10 seconds of silence."

Rosenbloom also worries.

"I'll be sad," he said. "We'll have our kids in the car, we'll be driving around Madison and we'll say, 'That's where our house . . . *used to be.*' And they'll say, 'Dad, you're so old.'"

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