

## Portland Architecture Blog

### Keeping the Delta House dream alive - as a Living Building



Image courtesy Nye Architecture

If you're like me, when you hear the phrase "Delta House," you think John Belushi, toga parties and food fights. But the [June Key Delta House](#) project is something very different.

As reported in an excellent February 4 [Oregonian](#) story by Larry Bingham (which, curiously, the paper also separately lists as an [Associated Press story by Thomas Boyd](#)), the June Key Delta House project in North Portland is a remodeling of an old gas station began in North Portland. The client is a small group of African American women in the Delta Sigma Theta sorority, who first began planning this home and community center two decades ago.

After a dozen of the sorority sisters donated \$100 each to start a fund, the project inched closer to reality when member June Key purchased an old ARCO gas station at the corner of Albina Avenue and Ainsworth Street in 1992, with the understanding the sorority would pay her back.

"The site across from Peninsula Park had been declared a brownfield -- a property possibly polluted by the gas station's underground tanks -- though an Environmental Protection Agency review found no contamination," Bingham writes. "Because of its status, the property was going cheap."

Budget is a concern not only because of the grassroots effort behind Delta House, but also because the project follows the strictures of the [Living Building Challenge](#), which was created by our own [Cascadia chapter](#) of the US Green Building Council and is arguably the most stringent green building standard in the world.

"Like many of the 50 or so current active members, these women endured the same kind of discrimination that led to the founding of their national sorority at Howard University in 1913. They wanted a home to locate their community outreach projects, such as health and education programs, to fulfill the sorority's mission. They wanted to stop schlepping their meetings to whatever union hall or church basement would have them. They had outgrown each other's homes."

The now-defunct [Sienna Architecture Company](#) was the original architect for the Delta House project, with [Mark Nye](#) as project architect and [Greg Acker](#) as principal in charge. When Sienna folded last year, Nye took over the project under his own banner as a sole practitioner (Acker has since left Portland to work in Abu Dhabi). Many younger former Sienna employees assisted Nye in the design. "There was a little bit of tension, of saying, 'Is this a good idea or not?'" Nye told me in a recent phone conversation. "But I find you end up with a much better product that way."



Photo by Thomas Boyd for *The Oregonian*

A key partner for Nye was general contractor [Colas Construction](#), who worked with the architect throughout the design process to keep the budget as low as possible. What's more, Nye says, "Colas is an African American owned firm with long and deep roots in the neighborhood." "They were developing properties in the neighborhood in the early '90s with their own money and are really dedicated to their community."

[Incidentally, the family that owns Colas Construction has ties to Haiti and has started a relief fund in partnership with the Oregon Community Foundation. [Go here](#) to assist or find out more about this laudable effort.]

Over the years, many local companies have also made helping the sorority sisters move closer to their dream a part of their pro-bono or charitable efforts. For example, Neil Kelly, the construction company with a showroom just a few blocks away from the Delta House site, donated survey work and created a blueprint in 1992. Benson Industries LLC donated \$57,000 worth of glass in 2007. Demolition was provided free earlier this year courtesy of the International Brotherhood of Electrical Workers as a Martin Luther King Jr. Day holiday service project. The Portland Bureau of Planning and Sustainability's Green Investment Fund also provided a grant of more than \$119,000 for using boxcar-sized salvaged cargo containers.



Image courtesy Nye Architecture

Nye, the architect, was raised just across the Columbia River in Vancouver, Washington. After several years on the east coast earning a bachelor's degree at Bennington College, a master's of architecture degree from Columbia University and working in New York for the firm [Rogers Marvel](#), he returned to Portland in 2005.

"I was really impacted by the sort of [Kenneth Frampton](#) tectonic ideas," Ny adds, citing the British architect known for advocating regional modernism. "It's really about using a deep technical understanding to manage design, to sort of design with that understanding. The idea is to try to achieve a higher performance building. The tectonic of sustainability is it's a much higher game we need to be playing, and the technical aspects need to be brought into line to make the aesthetic work."

Meeting the Living Building Challenge specs means that The June Key Delta House will have to generate its own renewable energy (via solar panels) and treat its own water. The community center will use rainwater for toilets and divert storm water to bioswales.

Meanwhile, though, even with grants and savings, the Delta House still has \$455,000 to raise towards the estimated \$755,000 needed for the project going forward. So if you or your company are looking to make a positive community impact, remember that (if I may bastardize The Eurhythmics) these sisters aren't doin' it for themselves - or by themselves.

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