

# Building structures, rebuilding lives

Boulder Associates Architects collaborates with EarthLinks to provide a space for Earth-centered programs that battle homelessness and poverty.



At age 13, Roy tried to end his life by overdosing on pills. Instead of taking him to a hospital, his family put him in a closet which is where he woke up three days later. This was only the beginning of Roy's long path of self-loathing and self-destruction. Finally, at age 59, Roy decided enough was enough; it was time to turn his life around.

EarthLinks, a Denver-based non-profit, played a crucial role in Roy's journey towards healing. Since 1996, this organization has helped countless adults who struggle with addiction, homelessness, and poverty. Their mission? To foster a sense of community while supporting sustainable practices. Through their workshop program, EarthLinks pays participants an hourly stipend to create Earth-friendly products: candles, cards, and jewelry. The program empowers participants by allowing them to earn a modest income to pay for housing, groceries, transportation, and medical care.

In 2014, increased rent and neighborhood gentrification led the non-profit to search for a new, permanent location. After a lengthy process and countless visits to potential sites, EarthLinks purchased half an acre of land in the Sun Valley neighborhood of Denver. But before they could move in, the site needed some love.

After hearing of the non-profit's renovation needs through a longtime friend and colleague, Boulder Associates Architects' Principal, Nick Rehnberg, offered his firm's services. "We honestly weren't familiar with EarthLinks when they first contacted us," recalls Nick. "But once we toured their existing facility, learned about their mission, and met their staff, it was really clear that this was an organization we wanted to get behind."

The opportunity was a unique (and timely) project for the Colorado architecture firm. Every year, Boulder Associates selects professional

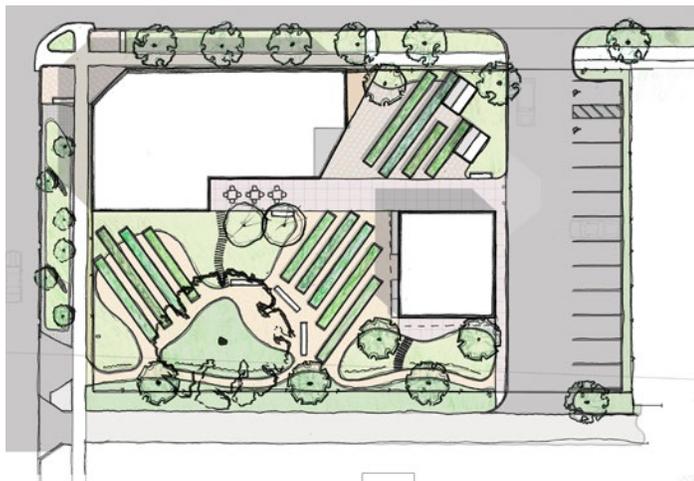
architecture degree students from across the country to spend a summer as a fellow in one of the firm's five nationwide offices. Under the direction of Principal Kristi Ennis, Cole Giesler (MArch Kansas) and Morgan Stackman (BS Architecture/UVA) took the lead on the project.

The duo developed a master plan that provided EarthLinks with ideas on how to grow their future site. The design features a garden and four buildings that will house business offices, a store-front shop, workshop space, storage, and two kitchens. The garden serves as the heart of the organization; planter boxes radiate from a large, central tree that provides a shaded, social area.

An existing workshop garage will be converted into a common area where natural light and ample space will allow for daily activities to take place. Two kitchens provide separate work spaces for food preparation and product manufacturing.

Due to budget constraints, the project was broken into a series of phases. With a fast approaching move-out date for their existing space, phase one involved renovating the large corner building so the non-profit could move in as soon as possible.

With poorly insulated walls, asbestos, and a failing roof, the 100-year-old building needed a makeover. "We didn't consider taking down the building," remembers Kathleen Cronan, Executive Director of EarthLinks. "In keeping with the goal of our organization, we wanted to rehabilitate it."



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With a bit of creativity and some help from local companies, renovation costs were kept low and many sustainable design elements were incorporated into the project. Earth friendly materials – such as linoleum made from pine tree rosin, wood flour, cork, and jute – were substituted for finite resources. "We definitely wanted to be conscious of our materials and systems selections, as sustainability is an important focus of both our organizations," said Kristi. "Building materials were strategically selected to be both durable and washable; thereby, reducing the need to replace them in a year," added Morgan.

With the help of engineering firm CCRD, low-water plumbing fixtures were installed to conserve water, and electricity costs were reduced through the installation of LED light fixtures, tubular skylights, a high efficiency furnace, and increased insulation.

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To reduce the use of virgin resources, Annie Lewis from the Boulder Associates' interior design team, asked the rest of the firm to be on the look-out for reusable materials. While working on a medical office remodel project, Associate Darin Hendrixson noticed the carpet slated to be removed was in good condition. With the permission of



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the landlord, Fleisher Smyth Brokaw, Boulder Associates recovered the carpet and brought it to EarthLinks' facility to be installed by the contractors. The rest of the flooring needed for the project was acquired through the help of Meg Sims from Forbo, who donated the Earth-friendly linoleum flooring. The tile for the restroom was donated by Daltile with the help of Lisa Pasquale, who was happy to offer extra stock of discontinued tiles so they could be used for a good cause. "All of this was a team effort," says Annie. "Everyone came together to help achieve a common goal. It was amazing to see the spirit of generosity in each person involved in this project as well as the donation of time, labor, and materials that made it possible."

An unexpected discovery resulted in the rehabilitation of the building's historical tin ceiling. "When we removed the lay ceiling, we were very surprised to find a beautiful tin ceiling," recalls Morgan. "EarthLinks wanted to stay connected to the history of the building so we focused our efforts on restoring it." "Though the ceiling was high, the space lacked sufficient natural light and felt cramped," added Annie. "We chose to paint it white to create a lighter, airier feeling and a more inviting atmosphere."

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After months of hard work, EarthLinks unveiled their new home at their August open house. Guests toured the new facility while enjoy-



*Local community members are welcome in EarthLinks' garden and can purchase fresh fruits and vegetables.*

ing light refreshments and snacks. "We are so proud to have been part of this project," said Cole, who attended the event with Morgan. "It was an amazing experience for us to be part of something so special to the community." "For the first time in our eighteen year history, we are actually putting down permanent roots in one of Denver's most underserved communities," beamed Kathleen.

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So, where is the project now? "We are definitely using all the space on the site," says Kathleen. "However, there is more work to be done." EarthLinks currently conducts business out of the corner building which houses their in-house store, workshop area, and business offices. A smaller, adjacent building is used for storage. Markers in the soil reveal the early developments of the garden.

Dependent on future funding, EarthLinks hopes to continue with the subsequent phases of the renovations which include demolishing the smaller buildings and renovating the workshop garage. Until then, the non-profit continues to thrive in their new home, rebuilding lives like Roy's. "We believe that all of us are part of the whole community," says Kathleen. "When we invite those who have been discarded from mainstream society back into our community, we can then see how much we can all share and learn from one another."



*Soil markers reveal the early developments of the new garden.*