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THE KEY WEST CITIZEN ♦ Sunday, July 17, 2016

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## CAUSE FOR CELEBRATION



A view from the street shows the beautiful 're-imagined' house at 920 Eisenhower Drive.

Photo courtesy by Tim Pedigo

## David Wolkowsky's big birthday cake project



New exterior stairs gracefully connect the elevated house to the ground.

Contributed photo

BY KATIE TRUAX ALEXANDER

At 97, David Wolkowsky calls himself a "visionary" rather than a developer, and has built or rebuilt about 200 homes and 15 major commercial properties in Key West including the Pier House. When asked if he would do 920 Eisenhower all over again he says "No!" But he fell in love with its potential, according to friend and designer Dean Carlson who, along with his partner Paul Hayes, helped Wolkowsky achieve his vision.

Some would have been bankrupted by the unforeseen problems that lead to re-imagining the 1928 house of "Sloppy Joe" Russell, famous barkeep and pal of Ernest Hemingway. Already immersed with Carlson/Hayes in a Johnson Street project in 2014 Wolkowsky simultaneously took on the chickens, 100 resident cats and layers of deteriorated tile and wood floors of 920 Eisenhower, which had literally sunk from structural damage done by tidal waters washing under the house from the bay across the street.

Extensive evaluation resulted in a collaboration between Meridian Engineering's Rick Milelli, architect Dennis Beebe, designer Carlson, Bella Construction, contractor Wayne Garcia and Jamison Brownie,

whose company elevated the house. Ordinarily a building's floor structure is included in a lift, but 920 Eisenhower's rotted and uneven floors required something different, according to Niels Hubbell of Bella Construction. Rooms were first measured for height consistency, then wall braces allowed steel beams to pierce through walls instead of under the floor and the beams were gradually "cranked up" with Brownie's special equipment until the floor sat about eight feet off the ground. The structure was then balanced on railroad-tie cages and the old floor was cut away. A new foundation was achieved by digging down to crushed limestone and creating a continuous concrete spread-footer on top of it. The original house was then lowered to its new height, 3 1/2 feet above where it had been, a foot above floodplain. Raising and lowering it alone cost \$75,000-\$100,000 with all other construction costs in addition.

Instead of the original warren of small rooms, white contemporary interiors are now light-filled with pale wood floors and open plan kitchen/living area, balconies and verandas that wrap-around three sides. Exterior stairways gracefully bridge the height difference between newly elevated floor and ground and seem to have always been there. The main house plus two grandfathered ground-level guest cottages totals 2,440 square feet with five bedrooms and five and a half bathrooms. Pool, grounds and buildings are stunning. Most everything is brand new though the original 1928 exterior look is retained through artful salvaging, replicating, adding and blending everything together.

This was the last project to be granted a variance before Historic Architectural Review Commission voted to allow such structures to be elevated beyond height restrictions. The main house at 920 Eisenhower now sits three feet higher than the



Photo by Tim Pedigo



920 Eisenhower is photographed prior to renovation.

Contributed photo

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City's previous maximum height restriction.

Contributing historic structures such as 920 Eisenhower are not required to be raised above floodplain but flood insurance can be too costly for some existing properties unless they are elevated. Scott Fraser, FEMA coordinator and floodplain administrator, states "the thing that will drive elevation will be the flood insurance market." The cost of an elevation certificate starts at about \$400, determines a home's elevation relative to its floodplain "zone" and hence the cost of flood insurance. Homes built after 1974 were required to be built above the floodplain. Much of Old

Town is above floodplain in the "X" zone, but 71 percent of all Key West homes are inside the floodplain and incur high insurance rates, which are higher still for certain "severe repetitive loss" properties. Designated by dollar amounts and frequencies of losses, those properties were excluded from 2014 "fixes" to the Biggert/Waters Act of 2013, and can incur flood insurance costs so high that elevating or tearing down a house may be the only options. "Repetitive loss areas" can be viewed on a map by going to <http://www.keywestcity.com/flood> under "Topics of Interest/Flood Maps/Historical Flooding" and scrolling down.

Wolkowsky voluntarily elevated and saved a grand old landmark, but it took a lot of help to bring 920 Eisenhower alive again. For the past year the proj-

ect's coordinator has been his friend Tim Pedigo, himself a developer with an extensive resume overseeing the completion of "7 Houses in 7 Days" for TV's "Extreme Makeover" show and his "Boom Blaster" invention, which cleaned up Gulf oil after the 2012 BP disaster.

Renovating houses is not for faint-hearted types whether or not elevating is the only answer. Wolkowsky says it's "like a big birthday cake" when he starts a new project. Vision helps. Friends help. Money is essential. It's lucky for Key West there are people like Wolkowsky with all the above.

More articles will follow about FEMA-related topics.

Katie Truax Alexander is a house re-builder, graphic artist and metal sculptor in Key West.