

The New Orleans Mission Family Shelter

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INTRODUCTION

New Orleans' housing crisis had been well underway prior to the morning Hurricane Katrina made landfall on the Louisiana coast near the mouth of the Pearl River. It is a widely held misnomer that city's housing crisis was a singular post-Katrina phenomenon. Prior to the unprecedented destruction inflicted by Katrina and its aftermath, when more than 125,000 homes were damaged or destroyed, nearly 16,000 housing units had already sat in varying states of decay and abandonment throughout many sections of the city. This, despite a homeless population that numbered in the thousands. Regardless, in the Katrina Diaspora, nearly 225,000 persons still remained internally displaced within the U.S. as of November 2007. The great irony was that most of these 16,000 units had been considered uninhabitable prior to Katrina (Sturgis, 2006). Many units could have been rehabilitated, however, had the city not been so dysfunctional with regard to its poorly run New Orleans Redevelopment Authority (NORA).

From a peak population of nearly 600,000 persons in 1960, the city's population had shrunk to 470,000 by 2005. This had been the result of the widespread patterns of suburban "white flight" experienced by cities across the U.S. in the post-WWII decades (Schein, 2006). In the case of New Orleans, residents, white and black alike, had abandoned inner urban neighborhoods that had previously been stable centers of commerce and civic life. Additionally, these communities tended to be situated along what has become known in the aftermath of Katrina as the "sliver by the river," the stretch of unflooded land straddling the banks of the Mississippi River and snaking its way in a generally East-West direction through the city. One such neighborhood, Central City, had once been a thriving center of the city's Jewish community. Its main commercial artery, Dryades

Street, was a shopping district that catered to both African American and white residents of the surrounding neighborhood (Campanella, 2006).

This street had been integrated in the 1930s, decades before the integration of the city's main commercial artery, Canal Street in the CBD. Central City had fallen on hard times—many blocks by the 1990s appeared to be "bombed out"—having been stripped nearly bare by utter neglect of their once-exquisite architectural inventory of Victorian shotguns, Creole cottages, and mom and pop businesses. Elegant commercial structures, many replete with gargoyles and terra cotta facades, once lined Dryades Street. Katrina's floodwaters ceased a few blocks shy of Dryades Street and the heart of this once-vital neighborhood. Central City had fallen on hard times in the post-WWII decades, in large part due to inaccess to educational opportunity, jobs, and viable housing, in a pattern endemic to many inner urban communities in large U.S. cities (Sibley, 1995). Just as residents started to return to New Orleans post-Katrina, a major crime epidemic gripped Central City (Nositer, 2006) and faith-based organizations were compelled to act to try to quell the gang-style murders occurring daily and which were attracting national headlines (Silverstein, 2007).

THE RAPID RESPONSE STUDIO

The School of Architecture at Tulane University has made use of New Orleans as a learning laboratory since its inception in 1912. In the aftermath of 9/11, the *Tulane Rapid Response Studio* was initiated in the University's School of Architecture (Verderber, 2003; 2005). Its mission was to create a pedagogical and corresponding curricular structure whereby an upper level design studio could be devoted to (or redirected at the last moment) highly pressing problems in the community or region. This studio, conceived and directed by

this author, had completed prior to Katrina urban interventions including transportable medical facilities for use in disaster mitigation contexts globally, and affordable premanufactured housing prototypes for widespread application in the aftermath of disaster. A project to aid the homeless was formulated and work commenced with a group of fourteen architecture students. From the outset the goals were twofold: to create a design-build studio experience for architecture students in sustainable site planning and design, and second, to provide housing for the city's returning homeless population.

Numerous schools of architecture in recent years undertook similar interventions, although smaller in scale (Dean et al., 2002). These included projects at the University of Arkansas (Hueter, 2005), the University of Newcastle in the UK (Kellett, 2006), and at MIT (Campbell, 2005). Byran Bell's edited book on community engagement in architecture (2003) included case studies based on coursework in schools of architecture. While the aforementioned interventions were small in scale, they symbolized a larger movement that continues to capture the attention of the mainstream American architectural press (Ivy, 2005). This attention was accompanied by the simultaneous appearance of more books on the topic of community engagement (Palleroni and Merkelbach, 2004; Sinclair and Stohr, 2006) and articles appearing in the popular media, including reviews of *Architecture for Humanity* (Hales, 2005). This budding movement counters Sarah Goldhagen's (2003) characterization of only a few years earlier as the schools' and profession's lack of social backbone, training, or commitment in the aftermath of 9/11. Goldhagen's call to arms echoed that of Ernest Boyer and Lee Mitgang in their seminal 1996 report.

Begun as a design-build project, the Rapid Response Studio team met in the pre-design phase with the administration of the New Orleans Mission, with day-to-day personnel responsible for its operation, and with a group of homeless persons who had been in residence at the Mission at the time. A new structure was to house homeless mothers and their children. The pre-design phase resulted in a detailed space program and site master plan for the campus, taking cognizance of precursors within the building type (Davis, 2004). The campus consisted of a former store and warehouse on Dryades that had been converted in the 1970s to a 180-bed shelter for men. On the other side of the same block, fronting Baronne Street was a shelter for homeless women (without children due to space limits). On a side street on

the same block, on Clio Street, was a dilapidated frame structure that once housed a private residence but had been used variously over the years as a flophouse.

The Central City neighborhood contained a number of spot zoning designations of historic structures that by consequence fell under the umbrella of the city's Historic District Landmarks Commission (HDLC). These sites were scattered throughout the area. In recent decades the zoning in Central City had been converted to light industrial, thereby causing a wave of unfortunate buildings to be built near the site, including a tire repair shop. By contrast, immediately across the street from the men's building sat the majestic St. John the Baptist Catholic Church (1843). Its gleaming gold leafed spire atop its steeple functioned as a landmark and at once signified the transitional gateway between Central City and the CBD. Besides the church, this transition was signified by the blunt-force visual impact of an adjacent 1950s-era expressway leading to the bridge across the Mississippi to the city's West Bank. In addition, a number of vacant, dilapidated structures surrounded the site, interspersed with a few buildings that were in the process of being resuscitated. The former flophouse was chosen for rehabilitation and while of little historic merit itself, the students initially strived to retain this structure.

The project was a collaborative effort between a university-based school of architecture design studio, a local A/E team consisting of representatives of four architectural and engineering firms working in tandem on a largely *pro bono* basis, a local not-for-profit provider of social services, and a national not-for profit sponsor of housing for the homeless.

In October of 2005, four weeks after the hurricane, HomeAid, a not-for profit (NFP) based in Newport Beach, California, became a partner in the project, joining forces with the New Orleans Homeless Mission. HomeAid pledged to provide funding to construct the architecture students' vision for the homeless family shelter. The scope of the project had been significantly expanded and transformed, as the city's housing needs increased exponentially in Katrina's aftermath. It now was essential for a professional contractor to build the facility, with Tulane students now assisting on a volunteer basis.

In December the team assembled to commence work. The team, in addition to the Rapid Response Studio, consisted of the professional A/E team that volunteered its services. The Tulane team

was led by this author and by Breeze Glazer, a student in the studio (now a Tulane graduate). Perez Architects, New Orleans, agreed to serve as the Architect of Record. Rodney Dionisio, also a Tulane graduate, represented the firm of Favrot and Shane. Structural engineering, and MEP services were provided by Shrenk and Peterson, P.E., and D. Kanter Engineering, respectively. HomeAid dispatched a full-time project manager to New Orleans, Diane Dempcy, for general administrative guidance and to provide fiduciary oversight of the project from start to finish. Ms. Dempcy worked tirelessly to ensure the projects' successful completion. The General Contractor was J-Roy Construction of Kenner, Louisiana. Its Director, Ronald Gonzalez, and his staff represented the New Orleans Homeless Mission.

The team met each Tuesday morning for eighteen months. The completed two level shelter is 4,400 square feet, and contains 38 beds, full food service support facilities, a dining room, childrens' activity room, administrative offices, storage, and an apartment. The apartment is occupied by the housemother on a 24/7 basis. Figure 1 illustrates the key site planning and design concepts embedded in the architectural vocabulary of the shelter. The 38 beds are deployed throughout six suites on the second level, with an ADA-compliant suite provided on the first level. Each bedroom suite contains four to five beds (two bunk beds plus one or two single beds) and is equipped with its own "private" bathroom/shower. The second level suites open onto an open-air terrace that doubles as a space for social interaction among residents. This space contains a seating area and is semi-enclosed. To the rear are a large yard and a side yard that contain a walking path and a garden. The kitchen includes an island and counter seating designed to allow for informal meals. This realm of the shelter also contains a walk-in pantry, stainless steel appliance and counters, tile floors, and track lighting. A laundry room is to the rear of the kitchen/food prep /pantry realm, as is a rear deck, also semi-enclosed.

Residents are able to stay for up to ninety days. At that point the expectation is for families to relocate to more long term housing in the city as it becomes available. As for the case study itself, many building products were donated to the cause, as it was a case study in sustainable housing. Donors were recognized in all public relations activities during and subsequent to the facility's completion. The New Orleans Mission Family Shelter was first occupied in late 2007. The facility cost \$1.2 million.

From the outset, the Tulane architecture students were compelled to design a "green" building. Designing for sustainability was, in theory, a highly worthwhile and achievable goal. Case studies were receiving considerable national attention, largely due to the efforts of the U.S. Green Building Council's (USGBC) Program in *Leadership Through Energy Efficient Environmental Design* (LEED). They soon learned that the translation from theory to practice in this rapidly evolving facet of architecture is no small task, and requires a fairly steep learning curve. The LEED certification process itself required an intensive effort (USGBC, 2007). Despite many obstacles, the New Orleans Mission Family Shelter qualified for LEED certification at the silver level. The project features many "green" components and building systems. The architecture students enrolled in the Rapid Response Studio completed all site prep work, including the demolition of the former flophouse structure on the site, and LEED application preliminary preparation. A LEED certified specialist, John Anderson, was brought on board to see this aspect through to completion (Figure 1).



Figure 1: Site Preparation



Figure 2: Construction Phase

A hierarchical administrative framework was established and adhered to throughout the project. Construction commenced in the fall of 2005 and on-site work was expedited. Every construction project in the city was plagued by myriad uncertainties—including labor and material shortages, dramatically escalating costs of building materials, labor costs, skyrocketing insurance costs, and at times seemingly insurmountable regulatory hurdles. Not surprisingly, this facility was the only new construction-taking place in the entire neighborhood. Figure 2 depicts the shelter during the framing process. Serialized construction sequence photos were shot from pre-set camera angles over a five-month period in 2005-2006. The project was beset with periodic weather delays and work stoppages, and five different project superinten-

dents were on site during the project. Suffice to say, quality control is difficult to maintain in such circumstances. These challenges were to a large extent overcome, however, due to the aforementioned weekly project team meetings—and the sponsor's due diligence (HomeAid), the client's support (New Orleans Homeless Mission), the A/E team, the contractor, and the Tulane team's perseverance.

From the expressway the structure blends into its site context, and principally the adjacent men's dormitory structure (Figure 3) and adjacent 16-bed shelter for single women. To the right the Family Shelter is shown, and to the right. At far right is the aforementioned historic landmark Catholic Church.

The main arrival is inviting and consists of a staircase and adjoining access ramp. The entire facility is centered on universal design concepts, whereby all features can be readily accessed by children, midlife adults, and the aged, as well as spaces specially suited to persons with physical limitations, including wheelchair restrictiveness. Figure 4 depicts the main entry sequence and the stainless steel exterior handrail system in part donated by Foms+Surfaces, Inc. It is the first-time installation of this product in New Orleans. The exterior cladding on the first level is fiber composite wood siding; on the second level unpainted (albeit weather treated) corrugated metal cladding refer-



Figure 3: Urban Context



Figure 4: Main Entry

ences the vocabulary on the exterior of the men's shelter. From the bedrooms, large picture windows afford full views of the CBD and the nearby landmark church to the north of the site. Windows are operable in the bedrooms and throughout every social-activity area.

The kitchen and laundry room is situated on the main level. Above these spaces is situated the dormitory, consisting of five bedrooms and their bathrooms. The roof is a highly reflective color to minimize solar gain within the building envelope. The glazing on the commercial storefront curtain wall system on the main level is comprised of color tinted low-E tempered glass inset panels, creating a mosaic pattern activated by natural daylight. The corrugated cladding wraps around the second level of the dormitory wing. In order to make maximum use of every square foot of assignable space, the underside of the stair landing houses trash receptacles and a bike rack. A commercial grade kitchen is equipped to provide three meals per day for the 16-bed women's shelter next door as well as the 38-bed family shelter. All appliances



Figure 5: Typical Dormitory Bedroom

are high quality stainless steel, with stainless steel countertops and high-grade cabinetry (appliances were donated by General Electric).

The dormitory rooms are equipped with high quality bunk beds and large armoires. The rooms are designed to accommodate multiple bed furnishing layouts, as occupancy needs change. The bedrooms have cathedral ceilings, evoking an increased perception of spaciousness to residents (Figure 5). The students conducted considerable prior research on homeless shelter bedroom configuration options when designing the dormitory spaces, and with respect to all exterior spaces, circulation, social activity spaces, and spaces for personal hygiene.

ON REBUILDING—POST-KATRINA NEW ORLEANS

Pedagogical objectives were balanced with the needs of the client and client sponsor. With this said, even prior to Katrina it was a serious challenge to build anything new in New Orleans. The

city had accumulated over three centuries many layers of tedious, Byzantine approval processes, oversight agencies, and review committees. This was particularly the case in the city's oldest neighborhoods, including Central City. In the case of this unflooded site, and considering the rather derelict condition of the neighborhood, the project team encountered no insurmountable roadblocks. Regardless, even the minutest attempt to accelerate any facet in the building code and inspection approval process required maddening paperwork and tedious waiting periods for inspection approvals from City Hall's Department of Safety and Permits.

Added to these delays were complications caused by the contractor, who navigated through a chronic turnover of skilled workers, a lack of prior experience in sustainable architecture and building methods, and difficulty in dealing with the erratic practices of its elusive subcontractors. Collectively, these factors caused the project to require twice as long to complete, and the students' role in the actual construction, especially in the latter stages, became episodic. It had become a greatly modified version of the classic *design-build studio* model. In other words, what would have in "normal" conditions pre-Katrina been a six month construction timetable, with major construction assists from the students, became a nearly fourteen month undertaking. While building "green" remains a challenge anywhere in the U.S. (Sheehan, 2007; Jones, 2007), the situation in New Orleans remains uniquely challenging. This struggle was aptly put by the former Mayor of Pittsburgh, Tom Murphy in an essay in the journal *Urban Land* (2007): "Nothing gets built in New Orleans post-Katrina unless it is *willed* from the ground up." In this case study, the students can take great pride in the fact that it was *their* design that was built nearly verbatim.

The lessons learned in this collaboration are applicable to other rebuilding situations in New Orleans and beyond. The New Orleans Mission Family Shelter is the collective product of a University-based school of architecture in partnership with a civic-oriented A/E team, a local not for profit provider of shelter and occupational and life training for the homeless, and a national not-for-profit. Upon its opening there was a two-year waiting list of mothers-with-children urgently seeking to return to the city.

The difficulty in constructing the Family Shelter is not to be overlooked in a city painfully rebuilding from the most costly disaster in U.S. history. At \$48 billion and running, Katrina's aftermath will

be felt for decades. It was a wake up call of the profundities of global warming, the critical importance of protecting America's disappearing wetlands, the persistence of deep rooted social and racial inequities in America, and the need to strive as a nation to rebuild one of America's most extraordinary cities. It will perhaps provide some small amount of inspiration to other schools of architecture, as well as allied professional organizations including the *American Institute of Architects* (AIA). Partnerships linking public and the private sectors can provide housing that promotes human dignity, opportunity, and self-empowerment. It is this spirit which underscores the call to arms for a greater commitment to social engagement in architecture (Boyer and Mitgang, 1996).

Homelessness remains an international social concern (Laurence, 2007). The American architectural profession has an ethical responsibility to improve living conditions for the poor and this certainly rings true in the case of post-Katrina New Orleans, where the deplorable living conditions of the city's poor were exposed to the eyes of the world. ACORN, a New Orleans-based activist organization, has made it its sole mission to expose these deeply rooted class and race-based inequities. It assists in efforts to rebuild the Lower Ninth Ward and in other devastated neighborhoods (James, et al., 2007). Meanwhile, day-to-day life for the city's burgeoning homeless population continues to worsen (Goldberg, 2006; Philbin, 2007). Many opportunities exist for innovative affordable housing partnerships in the coming decade as New Orleans and other communities along the ravaged Gulf Coast struggle to rebuild, against the odds.

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