Biloxi Treehouse Project

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Abstract

When a group of students and designers took on the task of rebuilding Patricia Broussard's East Biloxi home, they knew that building an elevated home to a high standard of quality and sustainability on a very limited budget would require a new approach. The project, known as "the treehouse," became a laboratory for collaboration among students, designers, construction professionals, and volunteers seeking new solutions to these problems. The techniques explored and lessons learned will contribute to a higher standard for rebuilding along the gulf coast.

Trees and grass have begun to overgrow some of the East Biloxi, Mississippi, lots where rows of traditional shotgun houses and Creole cottages once lined the streets. Hurricane Katrina's storm surge, floodwaters, and wind destroyed many of these homes or damaged them beyond repair. Although the debris piles have been cleared, many homeowners have so far been unable to return; others live in trailers while their houses are repaired or rebuilt. On one of these quiet blocks, rising above this transformed landscape among the live oak and poplar trees, is Patricia Broussard's future home—which many local residents have begun to call simply "the tree house."

This house among the trees, elevated 13 feet from grade to floor level (see exhibit 1), draws stares for its height and its unconventional looks, but it is also unusual in ways that are not immediately visible. The project has acted as a laboratory for a number of approaches to coastal rebuilding. First, a collaborative design process drew on the ideas of the homeowner, architects, sustainable design experts, and a diverse body of students and volunteers. Second, its construction combined students' design/build work with contracted work and volunteer labor. (To see photos of the architect, design students, and AmeriCorps volunteers, visit www.huduser.org/periodicals/cityscpe/vol10num3/cs_images.html.) The designers aimed for environmental certification in the pilot Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design (LEED) for Homes program by improving efficiency and durability and minimizing the adverse effects of construction. Finally, the project addressed the challenges of hurricane reconstruction through features intended to increase the longevity and safety of the structure, in ways that typically exceed local standards.

Ms. Broussard's house was built through a collaborative project undertaken by community-based organizations, universities, professionals, and the homeowner. Two organizations initiated the