

The House of Dance and Feathers: A Community-Based Design / Build Project in New Orleans' Lower Ninth Ward

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Fig. 1. Entry view

Introduction

Architects have long been the lap dogs for the rich. Architecture, a profession that serves less than two percent of the population of the United States, has been traditionally deficient in its service to the poor and disadvantaged and is not, in the words of Whitney Young, a profession that has distinguished itself by its social and civic contributions but rather by its "thunderous silence and complete irrelevance."¹

However, there is a new paradigm for an emerging generation of young practitioners, a recent trend toward good deeds through design. The authors believe that this alternative form of practice is a necessary direction for the profession to take. We present the work here less for its aesthetic achievements than for its agency in reminding our colleagues that students and faculty can act as citizens, providing example and direction to the broader profession and the society in which all of us work.

The project we present here, the House of Dance and Feathers, was designed and developed in the spring of 2006 by an interdisciplinary, collaborative team of faculty, students, professionals and volunteers. The project was built by an all-volunteer team of faculty, students, and young practitioners during the summer of 2006.

The structure itself is a modest building, comprising less than four hundred square feet (or 37 square meters). In the structure's volume and tectonics, it is not much larger or more complicated than a one-car garage or a toolshed. Indeed for zoning purposes, it is a shed.

But the project described here is no shack. The humility of this back-yard structure belies the breadth of its purpose, the scope of its address, and the potential it has to ameliorate not only the spirit of a neighborhood but the morale of a city.

In August 2006, just weeks before the first anniversary of Hurricane Katrina, the House of Dance and Feathers re-opened its doors. Since its founding in July 2002 by Ronald Lewis, the House of Dance and Feathers has acted as a sort of private museum, serving as a storehouse for historical artifacts representing a wide range of New Orleans' black cultural traditions, including Mardi Gras Indians, Social Aid and Pleasure Clubs and Second Line Parades.

With the project's reconstruction, Ronald Lewis—along with the team of architects, design students and related volunteers who have designed and built the new House of Dance and Feathers—foresees that the museum will continue to serve as an educational and cultural resource for the neighborhood.

More broadly, the project team envisions that the return of a community-leader like Ronald Lewis, accompanied by the re-opening of a local institution with a mission such as the House of Dance of Feathers, promises to initiate the revival of the Lower Ninth Ward, economically one of the poorest and tragically one of the most devastated precincts in the city. The founder himself describes the process he envisions: "Rebuild the Nine, turn on the lights, and we'll come back."



Fig. 2. The Lower Ninth Ward after the hurricane and its aftermath.

A Devastating Storm Ravages an Historic Neighborhood

On August 29th 2005, Hurricane Katrina made landfall just east of New Orleans, Louisiana, causing widespread devastation across the Gulf States. It was one of the worst natural disasters in the history of the United States. The hardest-hit victims of this tragedy were those citizens least capable of fending for themselves, the poor and the disadvantaged, both rural and urban dwellers. One quarter of the storm's victims lived below the poverty line, in households with a median income of less than eight thousand dollars.

In the heart of New Orleans itself, seventy-five percent of the victims lived in extreme poverty, in many cases without electricity and running water. Many lacked the basic transportation necessary to escape the wrath of the storm. They were, in essence, trapped by their own destitution.

The human cost, through loss of life and separation from home, is unimaginably tragic. The economic cost is traumatic: some estimates claim the loss of more than one hundred thousand homes in New Orleans alone.

Surrounded by flood walls and levees, New Orleans has for more than a century successfully kept the dominant feature of its landscape—water—outside its city limits. The bowl-shaped city is separated into highlands (settled primarily by Anglo-Americans, Irish,

and German immigrants) and undesirable lowlands, characterized by frequent flooding and mosquitoes (populated mainly by African-Americans and Southern and Eastern Europeans, most of whom have lacked other housing options). Entire neighborhoods had formed in these low-lying areas, including the Ninth Ward. When the levees broke in August 2005, the high ground evaded inundation while the lowlands were covered in a brackish and toxic waste.

The Ninth Ward is known for its robust commitment to family and community and its strong neighborhood pride, which can be seen at Carver Senior High School football games, Holy Cross Neighborhood Association meetings, and the Nine Times and Big Nine social clubs' second in-line parades. This community spirit has continued to thrive despite hardships suffered throughout the flooding of Hurricane Betsy, prolonged ethnic transformations, and constant struggles for city services, affordable housing, and justice, both social and environmental.

An integral component of community life in the Ninth Ward is the social aid and pleasure club, a tradition dating back to the late 19th-century. The groups grew out of African-American communities in New Orleans, particularly from the Freedmen's Aid Association, founded in 1865 at the end of the Civil War. The Association aimed to provide loans, assistance, and a means of education to newly-freed slaves. From this initial purpose, the clubs and groups that followed derived their names.

After the demise of the Freedmen's Aid Association, benevolent organizations arose within New Orleans neighborhoods to function as mutual-aid societies. The Social Aid Clubs of the early 20th-century provided aid to fellow African-Americans and insured that club members were provided a proper burial. For the poor, black residents of New Orleans, the clubs became a social safety net.

From just before the turn of the century to the dawn of the civil rights era, African-Americans were prohibited from participating in Mardi Gras and from entering the French Quarter or congregating and parading on the main streets off the city. Social Aid and Pleasure Clubs celebrated Fat Tuesday in their own unique ways and, along with the "Black Indians" and "street bands", provided the black culture

throughout lowland neighborhoods with alternative entertainment, and are attributed with the birth of Jazz.

Most importantly, the Social Aid and Pleasure Clubs served as a mechanism for community self-reliance which, in light of the Urban Land Institute's report on rebuilding New Orleans², is significant since lowland neighborhoods like the Ninth Ward that fail to redevelop sufficiently will most likely shrink or disappear. The restoration of these cultural institutions is the key to the re-emergence of a way of life in impoverished New Orleans neighborhoods.

The Industrial Canal, whose broken levees wrought such devastation in August 2005, separates the Lower Ninth from the rest of the ward. Prior to the storm and its horrific aftermath, the community here was mostly unknown to people outside South Louisiana. The Lower 9, as it is usually called, has since become one of the most well-known communities in the nation.

Alas for the people of the Lower 9, that fame is a now a sort of notoriety. Across the nation, many have since questioned how and whether the district has a future, forgetting the extremely rich cultural and artistic traditions that reside there.

Ronald and Charlotte Lewis: A Transcendent Commitment to Neighborhood and Place

Ronald and Charlotte Lewis are life-long residents of the Lower 9. Along with their extended family and social networks, they maintain and reshape the neighborhood's cultural traditions. From the historically grounded celebrations of Second Line Parades and Mardi Gras Indians, through to the ongoing reworking of musical and dance styles, the people of the Lower 9 and other predominantly African-American neighborhoods in New Orleans make a contribution so great to the American sense of identity that one would struggle to find their equal.

The House of Dance and Feathers is one of Ronald Lewis' many contributions to the life of his community, which includes the founding of the Big 9 Social and Pleasure Club. After retiring from 32 years of service as a repairman on the celebrated St. Charles Avenue streetcar line, Ronald Lewis, working

with family and friends, converted his simple backyard carport into a small museum dedicated to New Orleans culture, specifically that which has come from the Lower Ninth Ward.

Prior to the storm, the House of Dance and Feathers served as a place where Ronald could pass on beading and sewing skills to the young people who passed down his street. Working together, Ronald and his neighbors would spend up to eleven months making colorful beaded and feathered Mardi Gras Indian costume. Ronald Lewis's collection of photographs and video constitute an important archive of the artifacts of his community, and Ronald was determined to keep this archive in his community. More significantly, he was determined to revitalize the communal traditions from which these products emerge.

Hurricane Katrina did not spare Ronald and Charlotte. The storm wiped away the contents of their home. It emptied the House of Dance and Feathers. Ronald packed away the core of his collection of artifacts when he evacuated before the storm made landfall. Everything left behind was destroyed.



Fig. 3. Student / faculty design forum.

Students and Faculty Respond to the Crisis

Immediately after the Katrina catastrophe, the project organizers set to work. The first initiative, prepared entirely without support of their home institution, was a conference in Fayetteville, Arkansas, in November 2005. The Arkansas Summit gathered together architects and community leaders to troubleshoot how and whether university-affiliated groups might

contribute to the design and reconstruction of one of America's most unique and yet most imperiled cities.

From that initial summit, several projects emerged. At first, the team attempted a more modest effort than the one you see described here, to be realized in the few short weeks of an academic semester break.

But their college has no legacy of successful design/build projects, no established course work in the curriculum, no procedures for sussing out the budgeting, financing, and expense issues, no means for addressing the legal and fiduciary liabilities that come with the realization of any building project of any size. Moreover, no tenured members of their faculty were involved in the project.

If work was going to happen in New Orleans, it had to happen parallel to, and yet not be a part of, the structure of the university. Fortunately, passion and a viable non-profit can help the architect working on community-oriented design/build projects to get around such obstacles.

The project team faced numerous procedural snafus, not least of which was the fact that one of them was scheduled to teach abroad during the spring semester. The remaining faculty member, a visitor to his department, proved to be both stalwart and intrepid. Despite initial delays and the attendant administrative wranglings, he persisted. In the spring semester, he organized an "Alternative Spring Break," leading students by caravan from remote rural Kansas to the former swamplands of FEMA's Camp Algiers, arranging for them to sleep and to eat; addressing their needs for liability protection by sourcing short-term insurance policies; co-coordinating meetings with neighborhood leaders and community representatives; scheduling tasks and activities; procuring funding and financing; and securing donations of labor and material.

Over spring break 2006, a dozen students drove down to New Orleans, where they began to demolish the ruins of the existing museum and gut the Lewis family's home.

From press and first-person accounts, students knew of the destruction and desolation of the city, but none were truly prepared to witness

the devastation that still remained in and around the Lower Ninth Ward.

The area looked as though Katrina had hit ground just weeks before. Students witnessed harrowing sights: cars still upturned under highways and homes torn apart, covered in debris from their neighbors. Students gazed at houses where water had risen to the roof and at buildings with the infamous “X” by the front door, indicating the structure had been searched and whether (and how many) bodies had been found.

During that the initial trip and in the months that followed, the project team endeavored to address specific needs within the community, while reconstructing a sense of history and identity, and serving as a catalyst for future development.

On their return from New Orleans, the project team initiated an intensive and collaborative process. Students designed the museum using asset-based development: each proposed an initial scheme from which the group could draw the most successful elements. The project managers, a collaboration of two professors and a student, initiated and facilitated the design process. They maintained communication between students and community members—both in the university and in the Lower 9. They strove to insure that the student’s response was appropriate to the needs of the community and the environment

In May 2006, students traveled back to New Orleans. Working from a base first at Camp Algiers, and later from a donated residence just outside the French Quarter, the students began their paired efforts: the reconstruction of the Lewis residence and the ‘ground up’ construction of a new, larger House of Dance and Feathers.

Since the project lacked institutional support from the faculty and students’ home institution, the team worked tirelessly in the heat of the southern summer sun for no pay and no credit; the project and its managers had nothing to offer them. Students covered their own travel and food expenses. Without their help the House of Dance and Feathers could not have been rebuilt. The project ultimately belongs to them and to the community they so tirelessly served.

The House of Dance and Feathers

Design Intent

The design aims to re-connect the community by giving them back their museum. The entire team hopes to begin a trend of revitalization in an area that was slated to become a large greenway. While remaining sensitive to the surrounding architecture, the project team wanted to create a design that would stand out as a beacon of life and become a flagship in the community as it rebuilds.

Siting

Two structures share the site: the existing Lewis home, which students extensively remodeled, and the new House of Dance and Feathers. The House of Dance and Feathers remains in Lewis’s backyard, but it is rotated ninety degrees so that it stretches across the width of the property. Future phases include a trellis leading from the sidewalk and a “community board” which will display bulletins, notices, and letters from Lower 9 neighbors, an especially useful community service as residents filter back into the community.

A deck wraps around the museum and leads back to the house, allowing Lewis to move easily between museum and house and providing an area for entertaining guests.

The “work area” faces the street so people can view Ronald and others working on the headdresses, costumes and outfits.

Massing

The basic shape of the museum is a 500-square-foot rectangle raised three feet above the site. The facades consist of polycarbonate panels that rotate up to become an overhang, allowing the entire museum to be open to the exterior. The panels also allow for cross ventilation, which will lighten energy loads.

The museum has two roofs. The first is a semi-transparent paneled system which allows light to filter in, while allowing for stack ventilation. The second roof is lapped sheets of corrugated metal (donated by a neighbor), used to shed water and serve as thermal and moisture protection. The second roof is pitched to resemble the existing vernacular architecture,

but it is contoured to be more dynamic, separating the museum from the normative and signaling a more public condition.

Renovations

Lewis made it clear that without his house there could be no viable re-opening of the House of Dance and Feathers. The design team felt it was crucial to not only build him a museum, but to remodel his house as well. The structure and roof of the house were salvaged, while the rest of the inside was gutted. The volunteers opened up the foyer, kitchen, and rear living quarters. They installed new partitions, wood floors, and appliances. In August 2006, Lewis and his family moved back home.

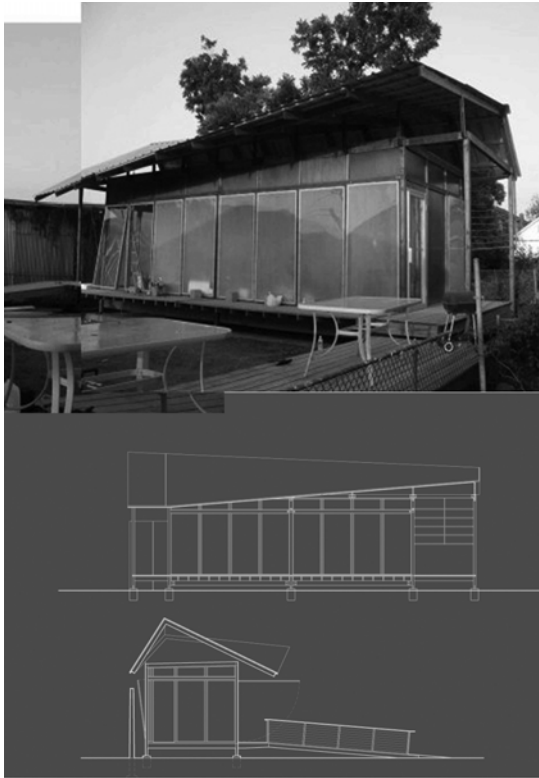


Fig. 4. View from Deck (above), elevation (center) and short section (bottom).

An Appraisal: Moving Forward from Catastrophe

"How did you go bankrupt?" Bill asked.

"Two ways," Mike said. "Gradually and then suddenly."

-Ernest Hemingway, *The Sun Also Rises*

The realization of this project is like that: gradual and then all of a sudden.

Often, critics and tastemakers, when they look at a building project, look at and for the sudden: the bold new form, the provocative angle, the sexy lead. But the focus here might be on more gradual aspects of the work, things more intractable, more nuanced and more difficult to ascribe to personal talent, artistic hubris, or creative genius.

The House of Dance and Feathers demonstrates that, in realizing community-based design/build projects, architects apply a host of skills: marshaling energies, organizing funds, gathering up resources, identifying needs, applying effort, skill and talent, so that as a profession we might better address social, cultural and humanitarian enterprises.

The team faced numerous obstacles. The project was built by relatively unskilled students and other volunteers, within the timetable established by the academic calendar and within the parameters of curriculum and administration. Moreover, the project was realized despite shortfalls in funding and resources, without the backing or support of the home institution, and where opportunities for profit or personal gain did not readily exist.

The project team has designed and built a structure with aspirations towards the art of architecture; such desires, however, are dwarfed by the significance of the history and culture housed in this structure, and its role in the reclaiming of a neighborhood that has contributed so much to the cultural development of our country

The student and faculty volunteers, the local community, Ronald and Charlotte Lewis themselves, all seem to like the way the building looks and are encouraged by its siting, its massing and its tectonics.

And yet the authors believe that the architectural community should look beyond the way the thing looks.

We should focus on how it performs.

Performance, of course, can imply the bald quotidian functionality of the thing. But it can mean more. When we look at the House of

Dance and Feathers, we can see how even a small building might perform: as an emblem of personal conviction, as an inspiration to a community, or even as a symbol of human fortitude.

As a profession, architects need to look here in order to find the true value of their productive efforts. Otherwise, we will find ourselves as a profession in the guise of one of Hemingway's hapless characters: we will be squandering our cultural legacy, only to wake up one morning and find that our misdirected pursuit of aesthetic fancy has resulted in architecture vacant of worth.



Fig. 5. Interior view

Conclusion: From Turbulent Waters to a Halcyon Calm

The authors believe the students were impassioned by their travels to a broken city to help rebuild a home and museum. They thought they were in New Orleans to help restore a community only to realize that the lives they were enriching were their own.

The story of the House of Dance and Feathers is not a building process, primarily, but a social one. During the spring and summer of 2006, students and faculty discovered in Ronald Lewis a partner, mentor and friend. The entire team has found, in the vacuum of the Lower Ninth Ward, an open and inviting community. They came to make a building and have made a life.

Ronald Lewis is an extremely grateful, humble man. His stories are uplifting, and they remind us that the work shown here is not being designed and built just for him; this project stands to benefit an entire community. While the rest of the nation goes on with their normal lives, there is still a struggle to bring New Orleans back as a cultural epicenter.

Ronald Lewis is committed to demonstrating to his community that the Lower 9 can bounce back from the devastation of this event. Ronald claimed that people will watch him rebuild and become motivated to restart their own lives; he seems to have been right. It is essential to follow the lead of people like Ronald and Charlotte Lewis if we are to recover a New Orleans anywhere near as rich and joyful as the one the world celebrated up until August 29th 2005.

There is yet hope that the House of Dance and Feathers will continue to pass down beautiful traditions to younger generations, the Lower Ninth will rebuild, and the city of New Orleans will survive. And although the work here may soon be forgotten, the students and young volunteers are apt to retain vivid memories: of late-night community barbeques, and of later nights in the Quarter. Of quiet walks through the desolate streets of the Lower 9, with the happy outcome of lunch at the little trailer selling pulled pork sandwiches. Of sitting on the deck they built, talking about nothing much of anything (but a lot about everything) with Yacky and Shorty.

And we are fairly certain that they will remember forever that first bite of Charlotte Lewis's alligator sausage gumbo.

For us, the reconstruction of The House of Dance and Feathers invokes memories of the myth of the kingfisher, that old Greek tale of forlorn lovers. Alcyone, daughter of the Wind, witnesses her husband lost at shipwreck and in her grief tosses herself into the sea. The lovers

are resurrected as halycons, or kingfishers, destined to roam the water and mate on the open sea. When they nest on the ocean's surface, skies clear and seas calm; the waves' fury and the winds' assault abate, and a new generation emerges amidst the quietude.

So amidst even a storms' fury, the power of love and devotion initiate new life. The tale seems apt not merely as metaphor for the place of the House of Dance and Feathers in the Lower Ninth Ward, or indeed in the city of New Orleans, following the devastation wrought by last year's Katrina catastrophe. It also speaks to the tireless efforts of the students and other volunteers to give their efforts over to the betterment of their fellow citizens. Students have a knack for giving, and a small-scale community-service-oriented design/build project like the one shown here gives voice and vehicle to the finest aspirations of our emerging architects.

They amplify in our own experience the promise of the halcyon, Shakespeare's "bird of dawning," and they initiate in us a hope that storms may not yet dim our future:

Some say that ever 'gainst that season comes
Wherein our Saviour's birth is celebrated,
The bird of dawning singeth all night long;
And then, they say, no spirit can walk abroad;
The nights are wholesome; then no planets
strike,
No fairy takes, nor witch hath power to
charm,
So hallow'd and so gracious is the time.

Hamlet, I, i 157

Endnotes

¹ From Whitney M. Young Jr's remarks at the American Institute of Architects national convention in 1968.

² From November 12 through 18 2005, The Urban Land Institute brought together a panel of forty specialists who produced a provocative and challenging report, *New Orleans: a Strategy for Rebuilding*.