

Rebuilding for the Seventh Ward's Cultural Life

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Abstract

This article describes an ongoing collaboration between the University of Kansas School of Architecture and Urban Planning and the Porch 7th Ward Cultural Organization following Hurricane Katrina. The aim of the project is to assist in community rebuilding and empowerment by highlighting the cultural legacy of this historic New Orleans neighborhood. The project also serves as an investigation of new approaches to design assistance and design-build pedagogy.

Introduction

The Seventh Ward neighborhood rebuilding project in New Orleans, led by professors Rob Corser and Nils Gore of the University of Kansas, consists of a series of targeted community design-build projects intended to assist our client, The Porch 7th Ward Cultural Organization (The Porch), a fledgling neighborhood group, in its efforts to build community cohesiveness in the Seventh Ward following the devastation that Hurricane Katrina brought to their community. An ongoing experiment in providing collaborative, community-centered, design-build assistance without the benefit of proximity, the project is in its sixth semester and is expected to continue indefinitely. The design collaboration started as a grassroots effort through a meeting of neighborhood residents and architecture students facilitated by a weekend conference held at the University of Arkansas in December 2005. It is further facilitated by ongoing participation in the CITYbuild Consortium of Schools, which provides local support and coordination. It is funded by student-solicited individual and institutional donations totaling more than \$35,000 to date.

The Seventh Ward maintains significant vestiges of the physical and cultural richness of Creole culture, and, from the start of the university's work with The Porch, neighborhood residents made clear that they wanted to control the destiny of the neighborhood. They wanted additions to the

neighborhood to be contextually relevant, and they explicitly stated that new designs should be cognizant of the African roots of Creole architecture and should celebrate those roots.

The following narrative describes the first community structures built in the neighborhood following the hurricane. They are intended to serve as a tangible presence of The Porch as it reaches out to residents. The following five projects serve as critical infrastructure for building up this community organization:

1. Notice boards: a means by which information can be disseminated throughout the neighborhood.
2. Community garden shade pavilion: a public gathering place for community events.
3. Community garden tool shed: a tool-lending library for promoting gardening activities throughout the neighborhood.
4. Mobile stage: an outreach tool for arts and cultural activities in the neighborhood.
5. Outdoor classroom: a learning space for cultural education.

Context and Design Approach

The Porch focuses on physical rebuilding and sociocultural empowerment in the lower portion of the Seventh Ward. The residents of this district, which is mostly African American (94 percent, according to the 2000 Census), have experienced a history of inadequate education, high unemployment, and disinvestment, which resulted in the presence of numerous blighted properties even before Hurricane Katrina came ashore. According to the 2000 Census, 77 percent of households were renters and the median income was \$12,459. Among adults over age 25, 52 percent did not have a high school diploma. Other preexisting neighborhood conditions included a high crime rate and a lack of community resources. Members of the community expressed new concerns about the possibility of socially disruptive gentrification and a growing lack of community cohesion in the wake of the hurricane.

The community's initial goals focused on the desire to reknit the neighborhood's social fabric, raise its level of self-sufficiency, and increase neighborhood pride. Both the residents and the design team recognized that the Seventh Ward is a neighborhood rich in cultural traditions, including those of jazz music, Creole building crafts, and Mardi Gras Indian tribes. An important aspect of The Porch's and the university's collaborative rebuilding effort is maintaining and promoting these cultural traditions. The design team's preliminary approach was to focus on numerous small structures, strategically seeded throughout the neighborhood, rather than try to develop a central or larger single project. The collaborative group determined that targeted design efforts would be best able to support and promote The Porch's mission of informing and educating residents, harnessing social capital, and improving the neighborhood. As professors of architecture working 1,000 miles away from the site, we knew it was important that the projects be of a scale that students—most of whom had limited building experience—could achieve within the course of a semester. Thus the idea of seeding the neighborhood with small interventions, produced over time and placed according to community need, made sense for both the students and their neighborhood partners.

As teachers, we believe that the idea of reciprocity between the Seventh Ward residents and our students is vitally important. Although university students and faculty are represented as helpers in recovery, the residents are also helping the university's design team members become better architects and learn about how design can support community vitality at a variety of scales. An important aspect of personal and cultural exchange also exists in this ongoing relationship. In addition, the project aims to promote skills in direct social action among the architecture students, who take full responsibility for neighborhood collaboration, fundraising, design, construction, transportation, and long-term performance of their projects. Students and neighborhood residents alike report finding themselves bound in an expanded sense of community.

In the initial phase of building, conducted between January and May 2006, the design team made four separate trips to the neighborhood and completed the installation of a series of public notice boards, a covered gathering space, and a tool storage facility for a community garden. In the fall of 2006, students constructed a mobile stage. In the spring semester of 2007, the students completed an outdoor classroom to support the Neighborhood Housing Services of New Orleans' development of the new 7th Ward Community Center, which includes a permanent home for The Porch Cultural Organization. This open and flexible structure allowed youth programs to be held at the new community center while the building was undergoing renovation. Additional projects completed in the fall of 2007 have focused on furniture and other installations to make the new community center building more useful for programs of all types. In the spring of 2008, another shade pavilion was installed at a new community garden adjacent to the community center to support The Porch's ongoing efforts to reach out to residents of the Seventh Ward.

Catalogue of Projects Undertaken to Date

The projects illustrated here are all part of an ongoing exploration of a unique approach to design-build pedagogy. In collaboration with The Porch, faculty and students have worked for the past 3 years to develop a form of practice that combines community engagement, design, fabrication and performance in new ways. This work has been described as a form of "guerilla architecture" because it consists of "small-scale interventions in the social and urban landscape...intended as an immediate and inexpensive way of satisfying the needs of a specific group" (Fontenot, 2007: 99). Due in part to the more than 1,000 miles separating the shop and the worksite, we have always focused on lightweight and flexible solutions that can have the widest, and sometimes most unexpected, benefits for the community. What is emerging is a tactical approach, aimed at meshing more productively with the everyday life of neighborhood residents. This commitment to a single neighborhood and community partner inserts students in a rich social milieu and relates their work to that of others in a temporal continuum that challenges the singularity and hermetic focus that is too often the nature of architectural practice and design-build pedagogy.

Notice Boards

The notice board project was the trial run of the university's long-distance design-build experiment (see exhibit 1). The community wanted to have some means to communicate. Pedagogically, the notice board projects provided a good skill-building opportunity and a means for testing initial prefabrication and transportation ideas. The boards were completed in February 2006, and since

Exhibit 1

Notice Board Project



Notice board, freshly installed in the community. Photo credit: Nils Gore.

then the Neighborhood Story Project and the University of New Orleans have developed a series of posters highlighting the creative and cultural contributions of residents of the Seventh Ward for installation on the notice boards. Two of the notice boards have also been moved around the neighborhood to support a mobile art exhibit.

Community Garden

In the spring of 2006, 6 months after Hurricane Katrina wreaked havoc on the neighborhood, a local community garden group, Parkway Partners, offered The Porch use of a derelict site on North Robertson Street. Residents and students focused on making useful structures for gardening, social, and educational activities. A group of third-year students studied and adapted vernacular wood framing and developed a shade pavilion using primarily digital design and computer numerically controlled (CNC) fabrication (see exhibit 2). Concurrently, a group of fourth-year students studied African vernacular and textile precedents as a foundation for their design of a steel-framed, wood-skinned tool shed that they fabricated using a hybrid of digital and manual techniques (see exhibit 3). Both projects were prefabricated and installed in New Orleans in early May 2006. A second version of the shade pavilion was constructed in the spring of 2007, and, after exhibition at the Cooper-Hewitt National Design Museum, it was recently installed in a new community garden in the Seventh Ward.

Exhibit 2

Community Garden Project: Shade Pavilion and Tool Shed



The shade pavilion is in the foreground and the tool shed is beyond it, to the left. Photo credit: Lauren Keefer.

Exhibit 3

Community Garden Project: Tool Shed



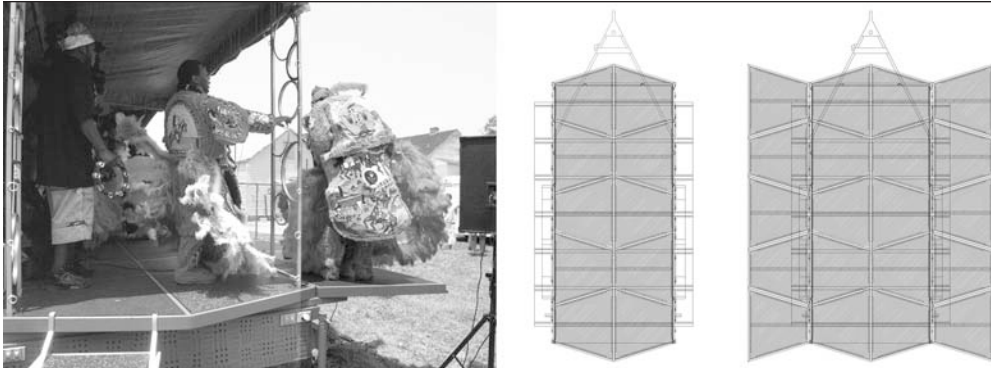
The tool shed roof, with delicately patterned, incised wall panels, inspired by African textiles. Photo credit: Nils Gore.

Mobile Stage

The idea for the mobile stage project grew out of the desire for The Porch to have a venue for public events such as block parties, neighborhood festivals, and parades. Built on the platform of a common 14-foot utility trailer, the stage's 8.5- by 16-foot fixed deck features hinged panels that can open to make a flat stage surface of 13 by 16 feet or can be fixed in a vertical position for parades (see exhibit 4). An overhead frame structure provides support for backdrops and overhead shading in a variety of configurations. Two people can fully deploy the stage in about 10 minutes. Completed by a group of fourth-year students in the fall of 2006, the mobile stage was delivered to New Orleans in January 2007. Since then, The Porch has used the stage for numerous events and has lent it to community organizations in other neighborhoods.

Exhibit 4

Mobile Stage Project



Mardi Gras Indians performing on mobile stage. Photo credit: Nils Gore. Mobile stage plan drawings, closed (left) and open (right).

Outdoor Classroom

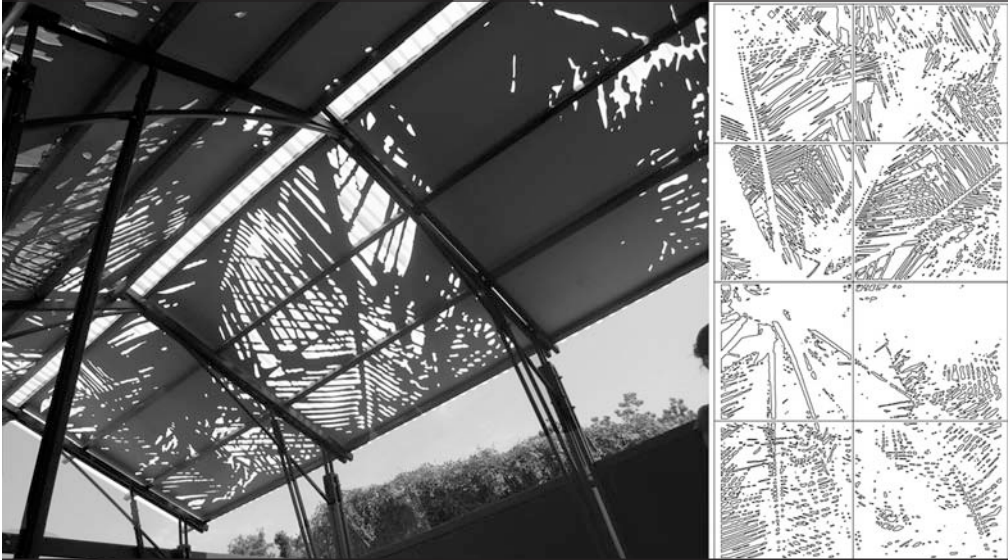
The outdoor classroom is the first new permanent construction at the site of the 7th Ward Community Center. The building will be shared by The Porch 7th Ward Cultural Organization and the Neighborhood Housing Services of New Orleans. The classroom encloses a space of about 10 by 20 feet and consists of five steel structural frames covered with a roof constructed of wood purlins and a perforated layer of CNC-cut palm frond patterns beneath a top layer of corrugated polycarbonate panels (see exhibit 5). Walls feature fold-out benches, chalkboards, patterned metal mesh panels, and rolling gates. Fourth-year students designed and built the classroom and installed it in May 2007. The community center began to use it immediately for a summer children's art program.

Challenges

The major challenge for the university in facilitating these projects has been working with a neighborhood group across a tremendous physical distance. Although the interaction is primarily by e-mail and telephone, university participants take a series of trips to the neighborhood each semester. Both designers and neighborhood residents prepare thoroughly for these encounters,

Exhibit 5

Outdoor Classroom Project



View looking up into the outdoor classroom roof. Photo credit: Nils Gore.

Note: The drawings are computer-generated abstractions derived from a photograph looking up into a palm tree. Those drawings direct a computer-controlled router to cut the patterns in the roof.

because they are limited both in number and duration. During these meetings, participants establish a general understanding of the current project parameters. Following initial meetings in New Orleans, the design team returns to the university to begin work on design and construction ideas. During the design process, the team sends drawings and images to the neighborhood clients for review and feedback. They also publish the drawings and images on an open-source “Wiki” site, which is a repository for project and neighborhood images, project data, text, and links to useful information from other websites. This site has become the public face of the project. It is the primary means of sharing the team’s experiences with the Seventh Ward and the university’s relationship to the wider academic and design community in the context of Gulf Coast redevelopment and disaster recovery.

One of the key programmatic activities of all the projects undertaken thus far is communication. The notice boards were intended to facilitate immediate communication after the storm; the community garden is a place for neighbors to gather for conversation and other meetings; the mobile stage brings the words and sounds of the Seventh Ward’s artists to various locations; and the outdoor classroom houses instructional communication. Further, the structures themselves are designed to communicate subtle messages ranging from the visual sturdiness of the shade pavilion to the delicate imagery, inspired by African textiles, that is incised in the tool shed’s wall panels. Each element of these ongoing projects embodies some form of patterning or visual message that speaks about New Orleans, the Seventh Ward, and our client, The Porch 7th Ward Cultural Organization.

Conclusions

The Seventh Ward neighborhood rebuilding projects in New Orleans, led by the University of Kansas, consist of a series of targeted community design-build projects that test the viability of remotely collaborating with a neighborhood group by leveraging digital design, communication, and fabrication in conjunction with other, more standard, approaches, including the facilitation of CITYbuild. Another area of investigation, not explored in this profile, is the development of intelligent construction systems that combine digital and manual fabrication techniques to explore new approaches to “flat-pack” construction. In this ongoing pedagogical experiment, students and neighborhood residents are exploring and extending their own horizons in terms of collaboration, design, and construction through the social and cultural dimensions of community-based design.

Acknowledgments

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Reference

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