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The House of Dance and Feathers Mardi Gras Indian Museum—New Orleans, LA

Project Locus: Patrick Rhodes, Executive Director

In the months following Hurricane Katrina the forces of nature seemed to have defeated New Orleans. Professionals questioned the wisdom of rebuilding a city lying largely below sea level on a storm-prone coast, and government officials seemed helpless in organizing the cleanup and beginning a rebuilding process. As recovery plans got under way elsewhere on the Gulf Coast, it seemed New Orleans, and especially its poor, largely African-American districts, would remain forever in ruin.

Some residents, however, refused to accept this prospect. For them, New Orleans was not a “disaster waiting to happen again”—a possible trap—but rather home to a vibrant community with a rich cultural heritage. One of these was a community activist, Ronald Lewis. In the Lower Ninth Ward, Lewis was known as the founder and curator of the House of Dance and Feathers Mardi Gras Indian Museum. Housed in a garage alongside his home, the museum had contained an extensive collection of relics celebrating the city’s African-American heritage, including costumes from its largely forgotten “second-line” Mardi Gras festivities.

Like most structures in the Lower Ninth Ward, the museum was destroyed by the flooding that followed the storm. But its redesign and reconstruction eloquently express the importance of rebuilding New Orleans as a living city, rather than a tourist site. At the core of the effort was an activist collaboration between Lewis and the architect and educator Patrick Rhodes, but it also involved countless hours of volunteer work by students, professionals, and community residents, aided by a significant grant from the Charles Engelhard Foundation.

Despite its small size, the project’s design sophistication and timeliness won the jury’s admiration. Its impact on the community and the lives of those who worked on it was also evident. During the summer of 2006 it was the only ongoing “public” reconstruction project in its area. And in the absence of larger institutional or government support, it demonstrated the power of small organizations and communities to respond to crisis using local design-build strategies.

Above and opposite: The rebuilt House of Dance and Feathers in the backyard of the Lewis home. Jurors praised the project for its sophisticated design on a minimal budget, and for leveraging the commitment of a diverse group of contributors to produce a demonstration of hope during a time of crisis and indecision in New Orleans. Typifying an “architecture of front-porch sitting,” the project includes a patio linking the house and the museum that can serve as a place for barbecues and live music performance. Photos by Patrick Rhodes.



Action

According to Rhodes, the story of the “Mardi Gras Indians” illustrates the struggle of a fringe culture to become integrated into mainstream society. “When blacks were not permitted to celebrate Mardi Gras with whites, they invented their own Mardi Gras,” he explains. “Their feather costumes and American Indian regalia were meant to honor those who helped them, hosted them as run-aways, and accepted them as part of their families.” Until the 1950s, this second-line event existed in parallel to the city’s main celebration.¹

Before the storm, Lewis’s House of Dance and Feathers had made great headway in reconciling the black and white cultures and educating the public about the beautiful traditions of the Mardi Gras Indians. But following the failure of New Orleans’ levees, in the last days of August 2005, Lewis was forced to evacuate his family to



rural Thibodaux, a 45-minute drive away. Fortunately, he was able to save most of his collection by packing it into large suitcases as he was evacuating. But weeks later, when the floodwaters were finally pumped out of the city, he realized the effort might have been in vain. Without a place to present this collection to the community, and without the community to which it belonged, the purpose of this heritage and its preservation were in jeopardy.

Nevertheless, Lewis met the challenge head on. He told everyone he met that he planned to rebuild, despite a present lack of resources, and he encouraged all his neighbors to do the same. However, because there was neither a support network nor commitment from the government to protect low-lying areas of New Orleans from another flood, few had the courage or wherewithal to begin the process. In search of outside professional support for the museum, Lewis turned to the anthropolo-

gist Rachel Breunlin, director of the Neighborhood Story Project, for help.²

Whether New Orleans should or should not be rebuilt was likewise never a question for Rhodes. A great lover of the city, at the time of the storm he was teaching at Kansas State University. As the executive director of Project Locus, a nonprofit dedicated to building community structures in areas of need, he knew full well that losses from the flooding involved not just a physical city but also a living community.

As time passed without government action, Rhodes came to believe that only individual activism would bring policy change. To jump-start the city-wide rebuilding process, he organized a pair of conferences with Dan Etheridge, the assistant director of Tulane City Center.³ The first, "Reinhabiting NOLA," was an information-gathering session, addressing what was needed in the short



and long term to move toward recovery. The second, at the University of Arkansas, brought together design professionals interested in immediate action.

One outcome of the second conference was the establishment of CITYBuild, a national consortium of colleges and universities focused on ameliorating social, economic, and environmental conditions through architectural, development, and research responses to the New Orleans crisis. Attendees at the second conference also committed to engaging immediately in design-build projects that would send a message to the world about the future of New Orleans.

A number of projects constructed in the city in the first eighteen months after the hurricane were conceived as a result of the Arkansas conference. But, perhaps most important, when Rachel Breunlin presented the story of Lewis's museum there, Rhodes realized its reconstruction would be a perfect project for his own Project Locus to take on.

Above and opposite: Construction details and interior views of the rebuilt museum. Jurors noted how the project's use of movable panels, ordinary materials, and simple but expressive structural details was reminiscent of Auburn University's design-build Rural Studio. Founded in 1993 by the architect Samuel Mockbee, it produced well-constructed and inspirational homes and buildings for poor communities in rural Alabama. The museum, housing cultural artifacts related to the history of New Orleans' largely African American Ninth Ward, was formerly housed in a garage on the Lewis property. Photos by Patrick Rhodes.

"We viewed the House of Dance and Feathers as an immediate response in one of the most devastated areas and a catalyst for rebuilding," he says.

Realization

The project officially began when Rhodes and a group of students from Kansas State University traveled to New Orleans during spring break, in March 2006, to conduct research, hold a community design charrette, and produce a schematic design. At first, the idea was to rebuild only the museum; but because the overall goal was to rebuild a living city, it soon became apparent that Lewis's house would need to be reconstructed as well.

The decision to move ahead without delay involved both risk and controversy. Not only was the double design-build effort larger than any Project Locus had yet been involved in but it also drew criticism from other professionals and academics.

"[They] believed that what we were doing was irresponsible, putting people back in harm's way," Rhodes says. But he points out that residents of other cities prone to natural disasters are not told whether they can rebuild or not.

"They are landowners, and are allowed to make their own choices. Ronald Lewis is not a child. He is a landowner, and should be free to make his own choices. Ronald understands that the Lower Ninth is about water, and always will be. These issues can be addressed through good design."



He adds: “If our society really felt concerned for the welfare of the residents of the Lower Ninth Ward they wouldn’t have relegated them to snake, alligator and malarial mosquito-infested swampland two hundred years ago.” For now this is the only land they have. Furthermore, for families like the Lewises, moving to the city had once been a huge step up from life in the sugarcane fields.

Following the charrette, the students developed construction documents and budgets. And in April, the Charles Engelhard Foundation offered a \$50,000 grant for construction, the result of fundraising efforts by the University of Montana’s Department of Environmental Studies.

In addition to the gutting and rehabilitation of Lewis’s house, the project consists of a new 384-square-foot

museum in his backyard. Its design incorporates two cultural concepts. One is the masking of space, manifest in prefabricated screens made of recycled materials, which can move and change to accommodate various exhibition configurations. The other is front-porch sitting, provided for on a patio that links the museum to the residence and creates open space for accessory activities like barbecues and live music performances.

Actual construction of the new buildings began in May 2006. Though much of the work was carried out by students from Kansas State, they were joined by students from Harvard, Tulane, UC Berkeley and IIT, among other schools. Project Locus is part of a small national network for those interested in this type of pro bono work.

Sample Juror Comments—House of Dance and Feathers

Roberta Feldman: I found the whole story moving and the design really very strong. Granted, I am responding to the crisis, and all these people moving through, and the community interaction, which I imagine probably would only have happened in times of a disaster. But the fact that it did happen, that the process was clearly able to be sustained, and that they could produce a good building at the end that the community appreciated. Gee! If you could replicate that!

Buzz Yudell: Wasn’t that on a thirty- to forty-thousand-dollar budget?

Roberta Feldman: It was phenomenal!

Buzz Yudell: I also thought it was great that they started right after Katrina.

Roberta Feldman: And that it was in a minority community that even today is not getting attention. Pretty much those communities are being abandoned.

Buzz Yudell: It is a very sophisticated design and a lot

of research. It’s very nuanced. They didn’t want it to be overly fussy. There should be a roughness. Yet there is this relevance about the process.

Roberta Feldman: And it is not frivolous design where you do a form just for the sake of a form. There are reasons for each of the moves.

Ann Forsyth: And it doesn’t stand out too much. At the moment everyone wants to stand out, particularly students. I was a little worried that it was just one



Thus, when the New Orleans project became a reality, Rhodes had only to put out a call for volunteers. “Like students everywhere they were hungry for an opportunity to build, to help, to be able to use their skills to make a difference,” he says.

Nevertheless, because of student schedules, the logistics were difficult, and successful completion was sometimes in doubt. None of the students received pay or academic credit. And most could work on the project only during vacations from summer jobs. Five or six students did remain on site over the summer, but a detailed schedule was needed to maintain a construction crew of ten to twelve over the entire construction phase.

“The team did it all,” Rhodes says. “All I did was

drive around in my truck picking up materials and writing checks.”

The project was also affected by the need to use low-cost materials and fabrication methods that did not require advanced skills. Rhodes claims, however, that these very qualities complement the hand-crafted costumes that will be displayed, since great emphasis was placed on thoughtful composition and careful detailing.

While the new museum looks fresh and provocative, it combines elements that are old, allowing it to seem as if it had been there for some time—as if it belongs. Even though the building takes advantage of modern technologies, it also draws on Southern architectural vernacular in a manner reminiscent of projects by Sam Mockbee’s Rural Studio.

Sample Juror Comments—House of Dance and Feathers

building, and a fairly modest one.

Roberta Feldman: But it was a very significant building. It wasn’t *just* a building. It maintained artifacts and images that were very important to the community.

Buzz Yudell: I think it was powerful on many levels, starting with the process. They were able to harness the energies of many people from multiple universities, people in the community, the owners of the property and the museum, people living in the city, and

somehow move this project ahead very expeditiously in a very short time and get some money for it. And they leveraged a very tight budget into a very thoughtful rethinking of the museum and the house. I thought the way they respected the uniqueness of that place while still being inventive with the materials and the way it was constructed was really amazing.

Anne Whiston Spirn: What they managed to do with that budget! It’s really a very beautiful and simple

building, very nicely detailed. Quite a nice space for such an extraordinary tiny budget.

Roberta Feldman: It tells a compelling story about the culture of the Ninth Ward. Its residents were able to develop a museum to put their culture on display. And then they were able to develop and maintain this process [to replace it] under circumstances that were so difficult. And you can’t forget the caretaker. The program changed once people became involved and

“It is vibrant and bold and not afraid to celebrate loudly,” Rhodes now says. “Just as New Orleans does, it celebrates life and death.”

It reminds Lewis of an old Creole cottage.

Pride of Preservation

Rhodes notes that this small, first step toward rebuilding New Orleans was conducted despite devastation, lack of resources, basic services, and an architectural profession that is rarely committed to helping the poor and is slow to respond in times of crisis.

In a statement accompanying the award submission, he noted, “Our intention was to promote design as a tool for affecting positive community change, to generate public awareness and encourage community involvement, to preserve the history of the community and to help reconstruct the shattered social networks of the Lower Ninth Ward and New Orleans. Also, we wanted to bring a family home.”

He now adds: “During the summer hundreds of people stopped by, and even a few said that they were coming back because Ronald had. But there will never be any way to gauge the effect it has had or will have.”

The importance of the project for the design profession, claims Rhodes, lies mostly in the way the students learned to approach the community and their exposure to building as a social process. Learning from Lewis about the Lower Ninth Ward and the rich culture of New Orleans was also an end in itself.

As volunteers for Project Locus, the students were not supported by Kansas State. They received no college credit, and participated at their own expense, some for more than twelve weeks.

After its completion, the project was exhibited at the

Venice Biennale and published in the Italian design magazine *Domus*. As a case study consulted by other organizations working on community-based design-build projects, it will serve as a model for future projects.

For the students who took part in realizing the project, says the architect Larry Bowne of Kansas State University, this experience was one of commitment and a sense of belonging that turned them from youth to confident adults.

—*Yael Allweil*

Notes

1. A smaller second-line Mardi Gras exists even now. Alongside the event on Bourbon Street involving mostly white revelers, there is another, only a few blocks away, under the I-10 bridge at Claiborne Avenue, whose participants are almost entirely black.
2. A New Orleans-based nonprofit that publishes books of photographs and stories by community members.
3. The Tulane City Center houses the urban research and outreach programs of Tulane University’s School of Architecture.

Opposite left: Student volunteers at the building site. A key feature of the project was its ability to offer a learning experience to young people. The students paid their own way, but benefited from on-the-ground construction and design experience, and also learned to view building as a social process.

Opposite right: Ronald Lewis with a Second-Line Mardi Gras artifact. Many of the museum’s artifacts celebrate the historic connection between African American and Native American cultures. Photos by Aubrey Edwards.

realized that you could not rebuild the museum without also rebuilding his home. So there was a learning process in which the participants adjusted their goals to meet some real needs.

Anne Whiston Spirn: But, you wonder, how much does it contribute to the public realm? This *is* a public building, and I became convinced that it provides the community with a place to focus.

Roberta Feldman: This is done a lot like in the Rural

Studio. Imagine taking that same process with more schools involved, under the circumstances of this horrendous environmental as well as political and economic devastation, and pull it off. And produce quite an interesting building that considers a lot of important architectural issues.

Anne Whiston Spirn: And what was impressive about the submission were all the letters of support that talked about the importance of the building and how it

was transformed so people would understand it.

Buzz Yudell: What really caught my attention was that this was the only project to physically have work done on it that whole summer in the Ninth Ward.

Anne Whiston Spirn: The symbolic support.

Buzz Yudell: The sense of hope. When the entire region was paralyzed up to the federal government, this was an expression of posterity.