

I have lived in New Orleans all of my life, with the only exception being six years of study in the Northeast and abroad. A descendant of a large family with more than a century of heritage in the region, I am ingrained in a local condition where generation upon generation is rooted in the same place - a condition unfamiliar to not only most Americans, but moreover most American cities.

The people of the New Orleans live amidst a diverse and rich tapestry of both historic and cultural legacy of French, Spanish and Caribbean conquerors and immigrants. Woven into their lives is also the knowledge of their proximity to and hence familiarity with the constant threat of water. Situated between the mouth of the vast Mississippi River and Lake Pontchartrain, which is the second largest salt-water lake in the United States, most of the area in and around New Orleans exists below sea level. Tales of flooding, constant soggy grounds and sinking foundations have made inhabitants accustomed to the circumstances and the expected resilience of the protective levee systems along the shores of river and lake, as well as a reliance upon the city's pumping stations which in the past led have been able to accommodate the flooding ...turns into to a certain lethargy when it came to dealing with the potential danger and downfall of the existing conditions. At the same time, a level of tolerance for patina and imperfection have become a familiar and somewhat loved attribute in response to an increasingly deteriorating place, the wear being justified as an authentic condition of an "aged" place and often rightly considered as an expression of the local 'charm'.

As is the whole region, New Orleans itself is a city of significant architectural heritage - both at the scale of dwelling and urban fabric. The many common historic, repetitive housing types of the area, such as the shotgun, double shotgun, camelback, cottage ...all exemplify a city's ability to grow and prosper with reliance upon inexpensively mass-produced structures of living. Over time, the city's neighborhoods expanded extensively, at first with adherence to and reliance upon the river and its elevated shoreline - higher ground accumulated over centuries of flooding within the river delta. But with the advancement of technology, as the protective levee system was extended and pumps dried out former low-lying swamp areas, the city too grew and was continuously redefined by the new boundaries. The borders, these newly identified edges of the place established to protect the occupants from the threat of flood, also ominously worked to remove the threat from the public mindset. With years passing, the inhabitants of the region started to forget an age-old and very poignant description of place authored by Mark Twain:

The water completely covered the place although the levees had given way but a short time before. The stock had been gathered in a large flat boat, where without food, as we passed, the animals were huddled together, waiting for a boat to tow them off ... but now only broad sheets of water told only where fields were. The top of the protecting levee could be seen here and there, but nearly all of it was submerged.

Life on the Mississippi, Mark Twain

[Practice]

In retrospect I realize now the importance and everlasting influence that Twain's quote has had upon our Studio's work. Since the early beginnings we have attempted to build at an increasing distance from the ground; first in effort to gain access to the surroundings through the establishment of extended views, and second as method to successfully deal with the conditions of a ground that is sometimes more water than soil. This is by far not an inventive direction for construction in the region. In fact, the most common pre-20th Century dwelling structures in the area were lifted in anticipation of flood. Now, after the events of August 29th, 2006, builders of the region may return to reliance upon the means and methods of the past. The city has been struck by a storm that has in fact been anticipated, but never really expected. As a consequence the city was left 80% destroyed, the population reduced by half, and the city's most underprivileged areas barely exist, with neither neighborhood community or any other economic or social foundation in place. Logically it is now of uttermost importance that careful consideration be given to both the physical and cultural qualities of this place - what is worth salvaging, how the integration of old and new might respectfully occur, and finally how might progressive proposals be entertained amidst recognition of past achievements of construction in the region. In pro-active response to forming an approach towards regional remediation, our Studio presents the following projects. All projects have all been influenced by and attempt to address, at varying degree, these issues of salvage, integration and progress.

In the wake of Hurricane Katrina's devastation, the Gulf Coast is left searching for direction. As part of this search, Tulane University School of Architecture has found itself in a position to address and influence thought pertaining to reconstruction and an new program titled 'Urban Build' is in development. This program will address proposals of recovery and revival at both the scale of neighborhood, as well as the scale of individual dwelling. As faculty of the school, two of our Studio members have been involved with the initiation of student work that has posed the following questions:

What is the relationship between the natural and the built environments of New Orleans?

Who are we preparing New Orleans for? Will the population of the City shrink significantly; will the built landscape condense?

How can we take advantage of the Post-Katrina circumstance to investigate Pre-Katrina problems?

Will we rebuild the City with traditional methods? To what degree do we introduce new strategies in anticipation of another severe storm?

Of course, answers to these concerns will be long in solving, but we can currently begin a search for solutions through the presentation of our thoughts represented by both Pre-Katrina and Post-Katrina responses to the needs of a culture struggling with issues of decay, economic shortage and preservation.

[SALVAGE] St. Ann Street Residence; Renovation and Addition

The St. Ann Residence in the Mid-City neighborhood of New Orleans serves as an example of a renovation and addition to one of the region's most familiar housing types: the shotgun double. A renovation proposal facing a limited budget, affordable artifacts were collected and assembled, such as found windows and doors. In New Orleans it is common for builders to purchase and reuse matched salvaged sets of opening types, but due to its singularity the sole, stand-alone salvaged unit is not desired much, and therefore easy to obtain at low cost, especially within the situation after the storm. The current abundance in availability of such items combined with the effort to 'reclaim' rather than 'newly purchase' justifies such efforts. This allows for a design strategy with both conservative economic implications and liberal urban qualities. The pieces coexist amongst difference; at the same time reorganization and reuse of the "familiar" components renders the varied window and door placement acceptable. Uniting vertical separation and diagonal connection through the multiplicity of viewing options, the found artifact's explicit placement reintroduces the garden and ground and initiates an elongated entry sequences through the experience of restructured progression and space. This transformation fuses a common housing type with a collection of "found" artifacts. Where non-traditional order applies to the placement of the artifacts, the diagonal movement's internal variation and landings are emphasized, and simultaneously reconnect the interior occupant to the exterior public ground. This method offers the opportunity for progressive deviation to occur amidst familiar elements while introducing the ideas of vertical expansion away from the ground.

The St. Ann Street project capitalizes upon the physical and social constraints of the spatial separation demanded by the region and the vertical expansion unavoidable when dealing with wet ground. Extended vertical division and constantly changing viewpoints simultaneously reduce and reframe reliance upon the immediate ground and initiate disjunction from earth and the threat of water. Variation in scale and placement of wall openings challenges our perception of context, both immediate and extended, by the proximity of viewer to aperture. The additional installation of a screening device on the south façade completes the project. The scrim application unifies the assembly, while still preserving variation in view and capturing additional protective thickness in the separation between interior and exterior.

...how might we conclude this paragraph in reference to the introduction and in anticipation of the conclusion...what does this have to do with the storm, affordability...

[INTEGRATION] Zimple Street Residence; New Construction

As a continuation of the investigations and strategies introduced by the St. Ann Residence, the Zimple Street project also challenges the content and qualities of the familiar shotgun while also introducing reference to the region's 'camelback' house type – the area's earliest example of vertical growth. This project is located amidst one of the city's under-privileged older neighborhoods, adding a level of sensitivity to a progressive venture. However, this site's proximity to the Mississippi River offers opportunity to establish immediate response to neighborhood and reestablish extended relationship to the river – our proximity to water is emphasized.

The proposal unities physical vertical separation and visual horizontal extension, which results in the development of a structure that simultaneously capitalizes upon immediate and extended ground. The program necessitates the provision of three living units. Two of the units are developed with direct relationship to adjacent garden areas. The third unit is developed in reference to the camelback type; it is physically removed from the immediate ground to be rejoined through diagonal views. The project's siting also offers an opportunity to take advantage of the extended ground, visually reconnecting to the levee and the river

beyond through, once again, carefully placed aperture. The proposal unites physical vertical separation and visual horizontal extension, which results in the development of a complex that simultaneously capitalizes upon immediate and extended ground.

The Zimple Street strategy relies upon an extended entry from the street to the center of the site. Establishing a shared, narrow entry forecourt allows all occupants to access the site at the same point. The occupants are then reintroduced to the site by specific passage into and through the structure of each unit. The threshold thickens, and again prolongs the journey from outside to inside, back to outside. Through this extended sequence, the careful allocation, sizing and placement of openings exposes multiple viewing options to the outside. The locations of opening vary dependent upon specific opportunities of the site. The relationship of the vertical unit to the immediate garden necessitates a large vertical opening from floor to roof, to visually articulate diagonal access to the garden below. Furthermore, a "scissor roof" is introduced in effort to drop the eave toward the ground thus reducing the scale of the tall unit.

Adjacent the building's large vertical opening, a contrasting, slender horizontal opening punctures the southwest corner of the tall camelback unit in celebration of the horizon and view to the river. The introduction and placement of this slender window traverses the levee system; domestic dwelling once again views the river and hence establishes a relationship with both context and history. By deliberately contrasting the placement and sizing of these two adjacent apertures, both immediate and extended grounds reunite. Domesticity and its industrial river heritage are reconnected. It is through variation in physical form, sequence and space that new associations are reminiscent of a past condition. The city's levee system has influenced a domestic adherence to the ground; that protective boundary is now both honored and overcome through this "grounded" vertical extension. Immediate neighborhood and extended region coexist, the occupant regionally informed through simultaneous access to and awareness of both.

The vertical development of the Zimple Street Residence affords unique extended visual access beyond the limits of the city's levee system and provides a necessary separation from wet ground. In return, the project is also now visible from the levee itself. As a modern statement within an older, often overlooked part of the city, the Zimple project initiates a heightened awareness of such a contextual opportunity and a reinterpretation of construction methods. It stimulates explorations about the possibility of a new type that a desire to overcome the limitations of the levee system with response to topographic condition. This extended access to the region can also occur amidst the preservation of the immediate neighborhood culture. In response to the threat of high water and flooding, neighborhoods adjacent the river's edge may offer occasion for developing a vertically thickened domestic zone.

[PROGRESS] Domestic Shed; New Construction

The Domestic Shed "prototype" currently evolves in attempt to further explore the ideas, qualities and content instigated by the St. Ann Street and Zimple Street projects. This effort aims at introducing a progressive affordable housing type to the urban perimeter zone. At the same time it tries to answer concerns raised in the current dialogue about wet ground and the threat of water. This specific neighborhood zone has often been neglected due to fear and discomfort in its proximity to fluctuations in the terrain and edge of the Mississippi River and the associated industrial activity. The Domestic Shed attempts to simultaneously support the existing social agenda of neighborhood, while also admit to reliance upon regional industrialization. Again, immediate ground, indicative of neighborhood garden and social culture, is addressed alongside a physical awareness of the extended vicinity. Vertical occupation of a single dwelling attempts to claim immediate and extended context by restructuring sequence and space. The physical form accommodates variation in internal movement; horizontal access to immediate ground will be transferred vertically through a sequence of extended entry and access. Again, these spatial experiences allow for the comparison of immediate context and extended region, and offer the occupant a broader understanding of and involvement in the "place."

The Domestic Shed developed with an increasing reliance upon diagonal movement, section, and view. In comparison to the St. Ann and Zimple Street projects, the figuration of this scheme capitalizes upon and celebrates a desire to recapture and frame its view of the river. Building amidst a greater mix of domestic and industrial activity allowed our Studio to challenge expectations of both form and material. In response to the previous agenda(s) of salvage and integration, this work dares to suggest progressive opportunity through a heightened reliance upon industrial familiarity rather than domestic familiarity. Proposals of cladding, fenestration, railing, and garden enclosure are not only made in search of aesthetic opportunity, but are made in answer to questions of affordability, modularity, and maintenance. Reliance upon an industrial language and the use of associated materials is viewed as authentic to the activities of the river region. The physical content of this proposal is reliant upon the mixed programmatic content of this city's thick batture zone between river and domestic activities. This proposal attempts to overcome the challenging limitations of nostalgia and stylistic heritage with a productive rather than responsive built form.

[RESPONSE] Post-Katrina; Proposals

Preceding projects demonstrate response to both context and culture – both historic and present. The schemes grew reliant upon vertical extension in response to a wet ground, but they also developed in pursuit of extended visual access and connection to a distant context. Unfortunately our region has recently witnessed one of the Nation's greatest natural disasters; and that occurrence has challenged our profession to carefully reconsider regional options for the construction of dwelling and neighborhood. Our Studio now has the opportunity and responsibility to respond to recent events through both re-evaluation of our work and a progressive reliance upon it.

Investing further in already tested strategies of vertical separation from ground, new responses are in development. They are attempting to address current urgent concerns regarding the re-building efforts of lower-lying areas of the city, but the proposals are developed with an optimistic willingness to maintain investment in the region. Post-Katrina, the region's "ground" has decreased in reliability and validity. This new awareness of the local topography's existence below sea level forces us to increase our search for a "higher ground."

Prototype A is developed with greater reliance upon an elevated private domain. However, it is recognized that with the establishment of an elevated domesticity the programming of space between street and dwelling might develop as extended threshold between neighborhood and home. Although there is need to remove the physical presence of the dwelling from the earth, there is an attempt to maintain the cultural presence of the resident, family unit, at the level of shared public ground. The underside of the home might be proposed as a re-establishment of the historically familiar carriageway of the 21st Century.

New Orleans is a city reliant upon a heritage of festival and shared activities of domestic terrain. It is a sub-tropic garden city in which activities often depend upon the communal congregation of neighbors. The heritage of the occupied street stoop, or front porch, cannot be abandoned in the pursuit of higher ground. Rather, it is proposed that the zone of stoop, the zone of carriageway, be re-developed in anticipation of the threat of flood. Might the threshold, the thickened and prolonged entryway be developed as celebration of the shared horizontal activities of the garden scape but in anticipation of the sometimes-present water?

The occupants of the region are already familiar with the need to exist "away" from the ground, for they already live amidst elevated constructions with dependence upon raised pier construction. Simply, it is proposed that the increased raising of home instigate a "re-programming" of the zone between earth and residence in effort to justify and preserve investment in this community. We believe it is possible to be both dependent upon and removed from the terrain of place. Building with dependence upon an unreliable ground is in fact an oxymoron, but it is one this culture is comfortable with. It is not acceptable to discredit the physical existence of the culture in the face of tragedy. Rather, we are attempting to further justify its existence through investment and belief in community; developments of domestic physical form might tolerate variations in public space and sequences of entry in preservation of community.

Building upon unreliable ground, these explorations search for new meaning in both experience and occupation as related to the domestic culture of New Orleans. Applying tolerance to physical form, space and sequence, amidst an air of familiarity in type and element, provides opportunity for the development of progressive urban context. Through active discovery of qualities in variation or diversion from the traditional, new associations support and stimulate growth, as well as offer occasion to reunite lost connections. Through the challenge of constraint, contemporary thought finds way to restructure and reframe the urban assembly, both physically and socially, to contrast the status quo. The search for higher ground reveals just the beginning.

[Sources]

Mark Twain, *Life on the Mississippi* (New York: Viking Penguin Inc., 1986).

[For More Information on our Studio]

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