

Architecture students get more to work with in Bluff service project

By: Jessica Blake

U graduate architecture students will now have expanded living arrangements for the DesignBuildBLUFF program, which allows students to build and design houses for American Indians with poor living conditions in Bluff, Utah.

For the past eight years, first-year graduate students in the College of Architecture and Planning's Master of Architecture program have traveled to southeastern Utah for DesignBuildBLUFF, organized by architecture professor Hank Louis in 2000 to give graduate students more hands-on experience.

On the Navajo Indian Reservation in Bluff, students would stay in a two-bedroom, one-bathroom house for two weeks at a time before taking one week off to go home and complete other schoolwork. The program has grown significantly since its inception, and soon students needed more room to work.

"Six people could fit comfortably (in the original house), but after the first year we had to rent additional housing because there was only one bathroom," said Karena Rogers, director of development and public relations for the School of Architecture.

Louis and participating students are building a shop this year for future students to stay and work, and it's coming at the right time.

The program, which originally included eight graduate students, has expanded to include 13 of the 25 first-year graduate students available to participate. Students travel down to Bluff every semester to interview 10 families and choose one that would benefit the most from their work. Students develop potential blueprints for a 1-acre house and then try to add Navajo culture in their designs, with similarities to the traditional Hogan houses. A Hogan is a typical Navajo Indian-style house made with earth or branches and covered with mud.

Brad Brinton, U graduate architecture student who participated in the program last



Media Credit: Brian Carlisle
Casey Sinner and Dave Edwards, first year March students at the College of Architecture & planning, work on a new house for the Architecture graduate students who work and live in Bluff Utah.

semester, said there's a huge opportunity for exploration. "The best part is having the freedom to explore what you want to (in the design)," he said.

The students in the program also have to consider their small budget when designing the house. The program uses about \$250,000 every year. Louis donates an extra \$25,000 to help cover tools, supplies, food and fuel. Students work hard to keep costs for construction materials down to \$50,000.

The Rosie Joe House students designed and built three years ago won an honor award from The American Institute of Architects Western Mountain Region. Students working on the house designed it so the home would provide electricity and water through solar panels and an inverted roof.

Since its beginning, students in the program have designed and built four sustainable homes for families. Architecture students also work around varied weather conditions in Utah while working 10- to 12-hour shifts throughout the Spring Semester, Louis said. After two weeks of work, students can travel back to the U for a week to see their families.

Despite the hard work, students participate for the experience of transferring their work from blueprint to a building. "You get a little less pay (than in an architecture firm), but the value of the physical (work) is something I wouldn't learn in an office," Brinton said.

Despite the weather, graduate student Brian Carlisle and five other students decided to stay for the summer as interns. "The heat is bad, but having no contact with families is the hardest," Carlisle said.

Louis said he thinks the program will expand even more by bringing in international students. He said the architecture department is interested in recruiting students from Europe in the next few years.

"The French, Italian and Chinese are really in love with the American Southwest," Louis said. "This next year, we will be trying to use Arizona State as a model to see how credits and other things transfer between schools."

For more information on the program, visit www.designbuildbluff.blogspot.com.

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