

Continuum

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homes with heart

architecture students at the
U create sustainable homes
for underprivileged families

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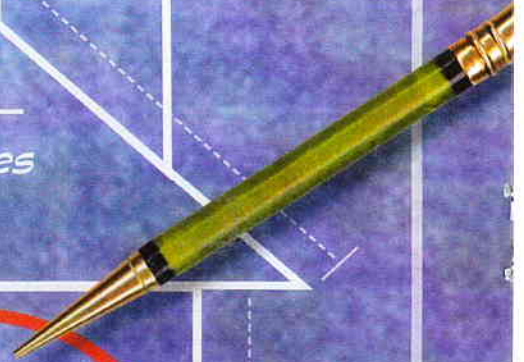
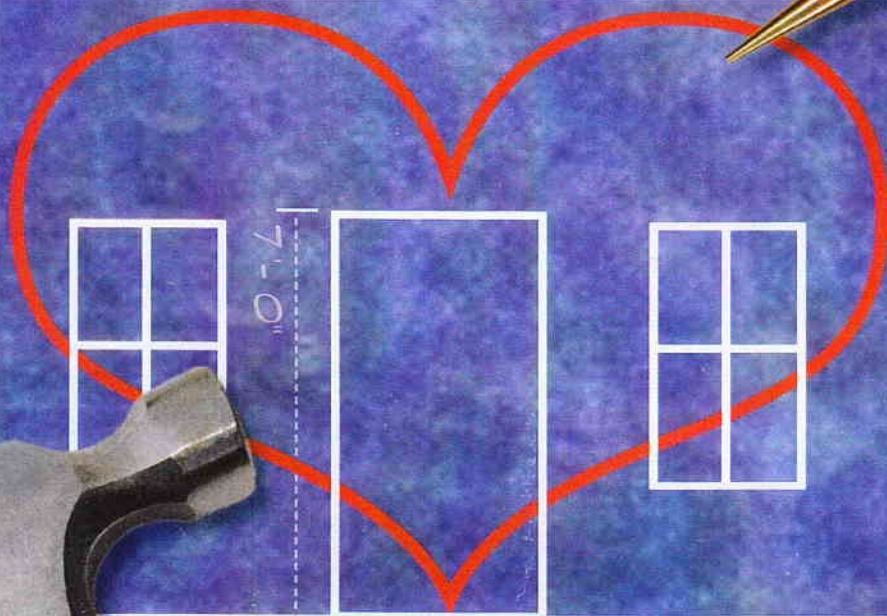
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Homes WITH Heart

by Janine Simons Creager



An innovative program immerses students in the architectural design process—and creates sustainable homes for underprivileged families.



At its basic level, a house comprises walls formed into rooms topped by a roof. But factor people into the equation, including those who design and build the dwelling, and the house develops a beating heart that transcends mere blueprints and mortar.

This is the premise behind DesignBuildBLUFF, an award-winning educational program available to first-year graduate students in the University of Utah's College of Architecture + Planning. The responsibility of an architect, according to the mission statement of the program, is "to realize architecture that nurtures the spirit and improves the lives of all who experience it."

To achieve this goal, DesignBuildBLUFF transplants students to the Navajo Nation bordering the small town of Bluff, in southeastern Utah, a place that Hank Louis MArch'87, adjunct assistant professor and director of the program, describes as "a Third World country on their back doorstep." There, students put into practice what they have learned in the classroom by implementing their design work, assisting with planning and zoning, learning about construction site safety, and working with community agencies and private donors. Since its inception, which grew out of the Design + Build Studio, the program has designed and built four sustainable homes for Navajo families. Because of the popularity of the program, instead of building a home this year, students will expand the on-site facility to include enlarged dormitories, a shop, and a pre-fab building.

While DesignBuildBLUFF focuses on home building on a reservation in

the arid, sagebrush-and-piñon-dotted Four Corners region, the seeds of the program were planted thousands of miles away, in humid, kudzu-covered Alabama.

In the Beginning

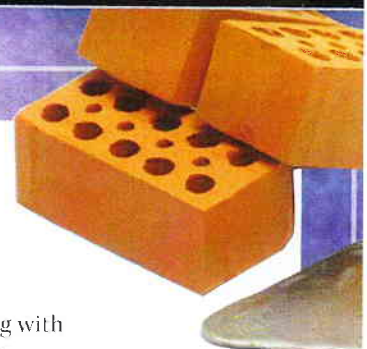
Hank Louis pursued architecture at the U after living in the jungle of Costa Rica, where he designed and built his own home. But once he graduated in 1987, it wasn't long before he became disillusioned, harboring a feeling of disconnect with the building process. In the mid-1990s, he became aware of Samuel Mockbee's Rural Studio at Auburn University, which would change the direction of his career and his academic outlook forever.

"[Mockbee] had students designing and building charity homes for people in Hale County [Alabama, one of the poorest areas in the country]," Louis explains. "I thought what they were doing was really remarkable and beautiful."

Louis visited Mockbee in Alabama, and later invited him to the U to share the vision of such a program with University officials. But even with this combined enthusiasm, Louis initially found the deal a hard sell. Thanks to his powers of persuasion and persistence, his efforts finally paid off, and the Design + Build Studio was born. That's when a problem in Park City turned into opportunity for Louis and his students.

Although known for its summer open-air

music, by 1999 the town of Park City was grappling with complaints from some residents about the noise generated by the concerts. Louis, whose architectural firm, Gigaplex, is located there, was approached about building bandstands that would direct the noise away from residential areas. He turned the project over to his students to design and build a bandstand that would effectively redirect the sound while at the same time reflect the mining history of the region. Their success with this challenge eventually led to the studio's construction of the Urban Treehouse, an outdoor classroom located at the Lowell Bennion Community Service Center's Bend-in-the-River project next to the Jordan River in Salt Lake City, and then to the first home for the DesignBuild Studio: the Kunga House, the first permitted straw bale home to be built in the city.



The award-winning Rosie Joe House in Bluff, Utah, designed and built by U of U graduate students in architecture.

With the help of the Community Development Corporation (CDC), which purchased the land, Louis and his graduate students designed and built the five-bedroom home for a nine-member Tibetan refugee family in 2002. Working on a traditional studio schedule, three hours a day, three days a week, the project took 15 months. With a total of two hours spent each day to set up and tear down, the schedule resulted in only three hours of actual construction work each week. "I did that by design," explains Louis. "[to show] that that wasn't going to work. We needed immersion."

Going South

Although the Kunga House project took longer than expected, the results were successful and eventually led Louis to Bluff.

"It was serendipitous," says Louis of the decision to head south. Previously, while serving as the chairman of the Utah Humanities Council, Louis had attended an annual retreat in Bluff. What he saw convinced him that he had found a home for his project.

"I wanted to be far enough away so that the students couldn't run home every night," he explains. "Second, [Bluff] had a year-round building season, and third, the land was available." Another benefit, he explains, is the lack of a formal building department on the Navajo reservation,

allowing the students to experiment with various building designs and processes, yet without violating code issues. "We are able to mess around and not have an inspector looking over our shoulder every other day."

In 2002-03, Louis' graduate students' project began with "Studio Squared," a mobile apartment-workspace that was constructed in a U of U campus parking lot and then moved to Bluff, where he also purchased a building formerly owned by polygamists ("It had lots of bedrooms," he notes) to serve as a dormitory for students.

"People had no money, but they had land," says Louis of the decision to approach members of the Navajo Nation about the possibility of building homes for them. "We thought maybe it would work that way [on the reservation]."

Making the move to San Juan County provided more than just an opportunity for Louis' graduate students to build homes for deserving families; it also provided them with a socioeconomic and cultural experience that could take place only in the field.

The schedule set up that first year has continued much the same in the years since. During Fall Semester, the first-year graduate students make three trips to the reservation, where they interview prospective families and weigh the pros and cons of



building a home based on location, the family's needs, and available resources. Once a family and a site are selected, the students then design the home before moving to Bluff the following January to begin the construction phase. The students then work on a three-week rotation: two weeks on-site, one week off. The schedule is intense, and students are expected to keep up with their bookwork and prepare for exams while transitioning back and forth to Salt Lake City. But when students are asked their thoughts on the program, their response is overwhelmingly positive.

People Will Talk

Mitch McComb BS'03 MArch'05 worked on the first DesignBuildBLUFF project, known as the Rosie Joe House after the woman for whom it was built, during his first year of graduate school in 2003-04.

"[The program] had an almost progressive quality about it," he recalls. "Hank was offering an education away from the school, the ability to leave the U and get educated out of the classroom. [That] really interested a lot of us."

It wasn't just the opportunity for hands-on experience that intrigued McComb, but also the chance to use architecture to serve others. After



graduation, he worked with Hank Louis in his Park City architectural firm, but his experience with DesignBuildBLUFF continued to have a profound hold on him. McComb eventually took on a supervisory role in the program, overseeing the students and acting as a liaison between Louis and the on-site general contractor. After months of driving back and forth between Bluff and Salt Lake City, McComb chose to relocate to Bluff, where he now resides.

"I've considered myself a facilitator," he says. "Things are on the right track. Having lived down here, I now have my own interests in the community. You do start to make friends. It is good [for the program] to have someone down here who has that constant contact."

Camille Coons HBS'06, who is just finishing her second year of graduate school, participated in the Benally House project last year.

"It was really one of the best experiences of my life, of my educational career," she says. "It was a great opportunity to use all we had learned in the classroom, designing a house for this Navajo couple in need."

While Coons recognizes the value of book learning offered in the classroom, after spending a year in the program, she maintains that no one can really know how to build a house until "you get your hands in the concrete. You learn so much from both sides," she says. "It was an all-encompassing, amazing experience."

Benefits and Challenges

For all the philanthropic aspects of DesignBuildBLUFF, Louis feels that the way in which the program affects and transforms the students is of equal importance. With only five percent of architecture graduates becoming what he terms "starchitects," the program offers participating students a richer

and more well-rounded experience on the whole.

Louis feels that the greatest benefit of the program is "the relationship with the students after living with them—seeing them change, seeing the families change, seeing them getting their houses, seeing their attitudes change. That's why I feel it is such a valuable project for the school."

According to McComb, "It is a great benefit to the people who receive a house, but the program is here for the students."

Louis' efforts have also been noticed by the American Institute of Architects Utah (AIA Utah), which has awarded the project with various honors: The Rosie Joe House won a merit award in the 2004 AIA Utah design competition and an award from the AIA Western Mountain Region the following year. The subsequent Sweet Caroline House won the People's Choice Award from AIA Utah and honorable mention in the Association of Collegiate Schools of Architecture's 2005-06 student design competition. Yet, even with all the benefits and accolades, there are also challenges: Funding is near the top of the list. Financial backing for the Rosie Joe House was, says Louis, "cobbled together," with funds coming from friends and family, "green-conscious" manufacturers, and even credit card advances. Fortunately, the following year, the program received a one-time three-year grant of \$76,000 per year from the CDC to cover the homes built in 2005, 2006, and 2007.



The 2008 team of DesignBuildBLUFF students breaking ground for student housing and a workshop.



With no funding for a 2007-08 project, though, the focus of this year's work changed: No families were interviewed, and no home was built. Besides expanding Bluff facilities for future students, the work has been all about "grant writing, and sending out tons of letters of inquiry, targeting everybody," says Karena Rogers, director of development and public relations for the program. Those efforts have brought in tens of thousands of dollars from a variety of donors. The funds received for the current project are even more significant because no home is being built this year. Yet, notes Rogers, these donors "realize it's more of a big picture thing." With an expanded on-site campus in Bluff, she says, the program might even be able to build two houses in 2009. In addition to the flurry of grant writing, program administrators are putting on "road shows" seeking sponsorship and volunteers from national architectural firms.

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But keeping the bank accounts full is only one of the challenges. Louis' greater concern goes back to the main focus of the program: the students, and helping them attain the course work and the experience they need to graduate.

"The biggest challenge is really trying to get it all worked out credit-wise at the school," he says. If students spend a year involved with the DesignBuildBLUFF program, he explains, that leaves only one more year to finish up other coursework, a schedule that other schools may see as a theoretical disadvantage.

"We're trying to grow this thing in the right way," he says.

In the meantime, Louis, who

feels he learns more than his students, is committed heart and soul to the design/build process, and even spent several weeks in Uganda in late 2007 scoping out potential humanitarian projects in that country.

"I think the reason I say that [I am the greatest student] is that I'm a big proponent of lifelong learning," says Louis. "The whole program is designed to set students up for a lifetime of learning."

"I truly believe that," adds McComb. "The beauty of Hank's approach is that the students are allowed to explore and learn what they want to explore and learn. Each student, and each group, comes away with something different." **U**

—Janine Simons Creager is a freelance writer based in Farmington, Utah.

