

1-1-2006

## House of Dance and Feathers

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### Recommended Citation

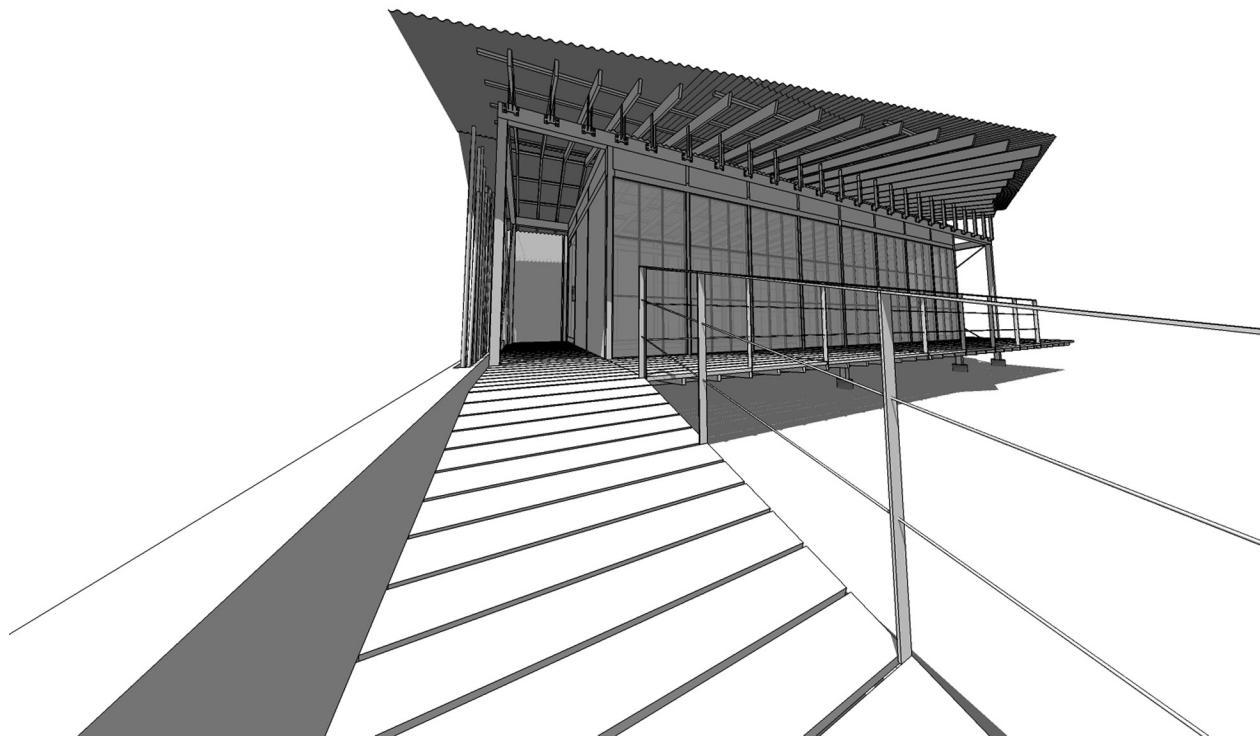
(2006) "House of Dance and Feathers," *Oz*: Vol. 28. <https://doi.org/10.4148/2378-5853.1438>

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## House of Dance and Feathers

Reconnecting a Community

### Project Locus



*After traveling to New Orleans for spring break, it is as though we are here, not just as students to learn about how a building is put together, but to begin understanding people and how their lives interweave with their community. It is then up to our skills and innate talents to reveal how that person fits into a space that is enclosed by a building that understands its context which facilitates community.*

—Caitlin Heckathorn

On August 29th, 2005, Hurricane Katrina made landfall just east of New Orleans,

Louisiana, causing widespread devastation across the Gulf States. It was one of the worst natural disasters in United States history. The hardest hit victims of this tragedy were the poor and disadvantaged, both rural and urban dwellers, one quarter of whom lived below the poverty line in households with a median income of less than eight thousand dollars. Seventy-five percent of the victims from the heart of New Orleans lived in extreme poverty, without electricity and running water in many cases, and lacked the basic transportation necessary to escape the wrath of the storm, in essence,

trapped by their destitution. As the human cost, through loss of life and separation from home, is unimaginably tragic, the economic cost is staggering with some estimates claiming the loss of more than one hundred thousand homes in New Orleans alone.

Surrounded by flood walls and levees, New Orleans has for more than a century successfully kept the dominant feature of its landscape—water—outside its city limits. The bowl-shaped city is separated into highlands (settled primarily by Anglo-Americans, Irish, and German immigrants) and undesirable lowlands,

characterized by frequent flooding and mosquitoes, (populated mainly by African Americans and Southern and Eastern Europeans without other housing options). Entire neighborhoods had formed in these low-lying areas, including the Ninth Ward, the location of this project. When the levees broke in August 2005, the high ground evaded inundation while the lowlands were devastated.

The Ninth Ward is known for its robust commitment to family and community, and strong neighborhood pride, which can be seen at Carver Senior High School football games, Holy Cross Neighborhood Association meetings, and the Nine Times and Big Nine social clubs' second-in-line parades. This community spirit has continued to thrive despite hardships suffered throughout the flooding of Hurricane Betsy, prolonged ethnic transformation, and constant struggles for city services, affordable housing, and environmental justice.

### Social Aid and Pleasure Clubs

The social aid and pleasure club tradition dates back to the late nineteenth century in New Orleans to the Freedmen's Aid Association, which was founded after the Civil War in 1865. The Association's goal was to provide loans, assistance, and a means of education to newly freed slaves. This purpose is where the clubs and groups that followed derived their names. After the Association's demise, other benevolent organizations arose within New Orleans's neighborhoods to



function as mutual aid societies. The social aid clubs of the early twentieth century provided aid to fellow African Americans and insured that club members were provided a proper burial. For the poor, black residents of New Orleans, the clubs became a social safety net. From just before the turn of the century to the dawn of the civil rights era in the mid-1950s, African Americans were prohibited from participating in Mardi Gras and from entering the French Quarter or congregating and parading on the main streets. Social aid and pleasure clubs celebrated Fat Tuesday in their own unique ways and, along with the “Black Indians” and “street bands,” provided the black culture throughout lowland neighborhoods with alternative entertainment, and are attributed with the birth of jazz. Most importantly, the social aid and pleasure clubs served as a mechanism for community self-reliance which, in light of the Urban Land Institute’s report on rebuilding New Orleans, is

significant, since lowland neighborhoods that fail to redevelop sufficiently will most likely shrink or disappear. The restoration of these cultural institutions is the key to the re-emergence of a way of life in impoverished New Orleans neighborhoods.

#### **House of Dance and Feathers**

The House of Dance and Feathers (HODAF) is a small museum that was built in the Lower Ninth Ward in the backyard of a Mardi Gras Indian, Ronald Lewis. Founder of HODAF, and president of the social aid and pleasure club, Lewis built the original museum to serve as a community and education center. Lewis wanted to create a cultural locus that could educate the neighborhood youth. The museum showcased colorful artifacts from many Mardi Gras Indian tribes within the city. Most of the artifacts washed away when Hurricane Katrina hit, but the heart of the museum still remained. The museum was practically

destroyed from the wrath of the storm with nothing remaining inside but some rubble and a few water damaged photos. The museum was the heart of the community, bringing it together in the best and worst of times. The community worked together in creating the long, colorful beaded dresses for eleven months. On Mardi Gras, Ronald and the community would come together to fill the streets with their beaded dresses and costumes. At this time, most families have not returned to the Lower Ninth Ward, which still remains abandoned. Many families have expressed that they are waiting to see if the HODAF comes back. Lewis remains optimistic about the revitalization in the Lower Ninth Ward, “Rebuild the Nine, turn on the lights, and we’ll come back.”

Over Spring Break 2006, a dozen students traveled to New Orleans to begin demolishing the ruins of the existing museum, and gutting Lewis’s family

residence. The students knew, via news, the destruction and desolation of New Orleans, but none were truly prepared to witness the devastation that still remained in and around the Lower Ninth Ward.

*The Ninth Ward section of New Orleans was a level of devastation that I had never seen before. Not only were houses blocks away from their foundation sitting on cars, it was a ghost town. The places that people had called home were no longer. However, while volunteering for Ronald Lewis, who couldn’t have been a more thankful individual, I started to see what our volunteering for this man was doing for this community. The floodwaters may have leveled the buildings, but they couldn’t erase a community.*

—Eric Wittman

The area looked as if Katrina had hit ground just weeks before. Cars still upturned under highways and houses



torn apart, covered in debris from neighboring structures. Visible markings on the houses where water had been submerged up to the roof, and the infamous “X” by the front door, which told the search crews the house had been searched and how many bodies were found.

The design intent was to re-connect the community, by giving it back its museum to begin a trend of revitalization in an area that was slated to become a large greenway. While remaining sensitive to the surrounding architecture, we wanted to create a project that would stand out as a beacon of life and exhibit the museum’s importance to the community. The new HODAF is to remain in Lewis’s backyard, but is rotated ninety degrees so that it stretches across the lot. We felt that it was important to keep the museum visually and physically connected to the community, therefore a trellised entrance ramp leads from the museum to the street. At the end of the walkway there is a “community board” that will display bulletins, notices, and letters from citizens of the Lower Ninth Ward. The hope is that they can use this area to communicate with each other while they are filtering back into the community. The “work area” faces the street so people crossing the street could view Ronald and others working on the dresses. The basic shape of the museum is a 500 square foot rectangle, which is raised 2 feet above the site. The facades consist of polycarbonate panels that pivot up to become an overhang, allowing the entire museum to be open to the outside. This not only connects the inside and outside, but also allows for cross-ventilation, which will reduce energy usage. The museum has two roofs, the first being a semi-transparent panel system to allow light to filter in, while providing stack ventilation. The second roof is standing-seam metal used to shed water and serve as protection. The second roof is pitched to resemble the existing vernacular architecture, but

it is contoured to be more dynamic, separating the museum from the standard housing. A deck wraps around the museum then connects back to the Lewis family house. This deck allows Lewis to easily go between museum and house and also provides an area for entertaining guests.

Lewis made it clear that without his house there was no life. We felt it was crucial to not only rebuild the museum, but to remodel his house as well. The structure and roof of the house was re-used, while the inside was gutted. The intent was to open up the foyer, kitchen, and back living quarters to make the space feel larger. There will be new partitions, wood floors, and appliances. Before the end of the summer Lewis and his family will be able to move back home.

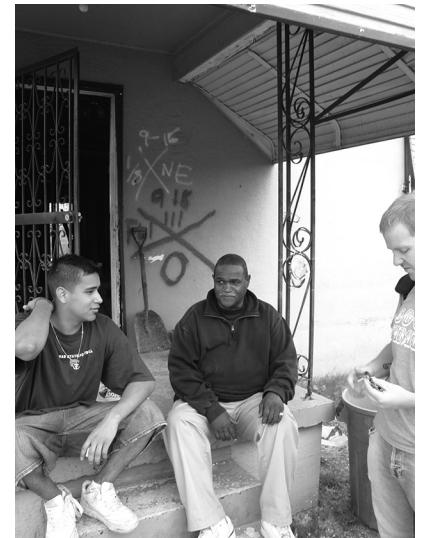
Lewis is an extremely grateful, humble man. His stories are uplifting, and they remind us that we are not working only for him, but that this project will benefit an entire community. While the rest of the nation go on with their normal lives, there is still a struggle to bring New Orleans back to the cultural epicenter it once was. Our experience at the House and Dance and Feathers reminds us that a great city will come back proving that the heart of a community can pull through the adversity put in its path.

*...The first few months post Katrina, the media was overwhelmed with news of the hurricane and the massive disaster response, appearing as if the situation was being handled...so life went on. Eventually the media faded from the topic and with it America’s concern...I honor and value those who push on regardless, despite constant distraction and peer reluctance, those who act without obligation, those who are willing serve the less fortunate without reward.*

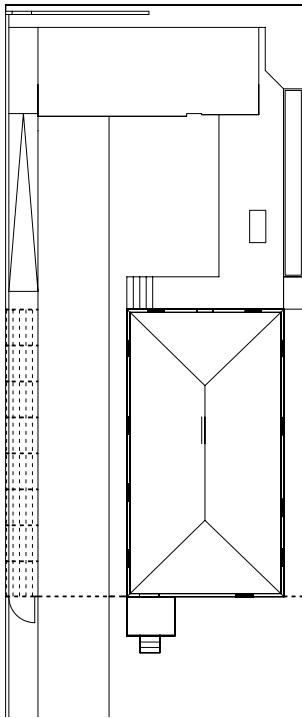
—Scott Newland



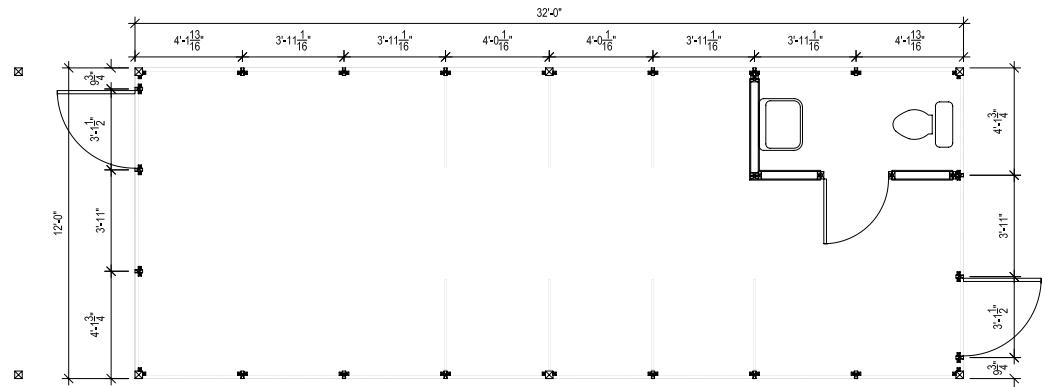
Ronald Lewis



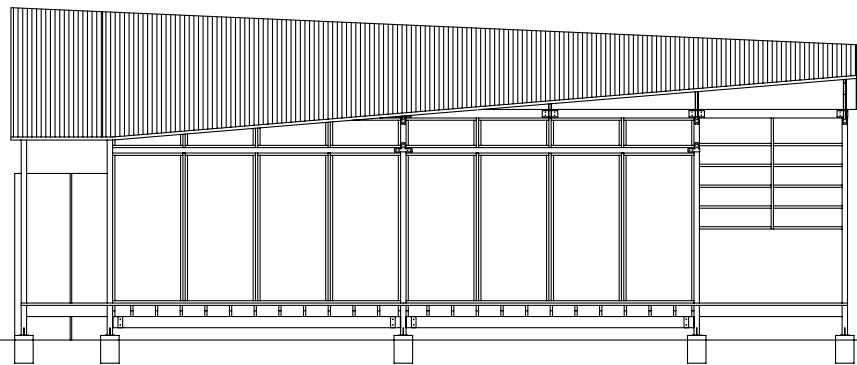
Beadwork from HODAF collection



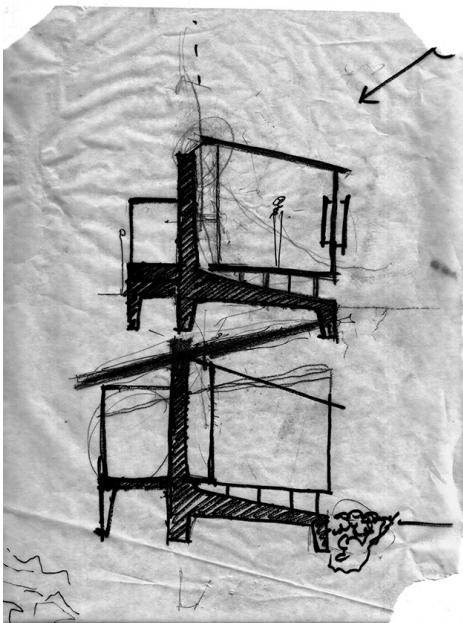
Site plan showing museum at top and house at bottom of drawing



Floor plan of museum



Elevation of museum



Schematic section of museum design

### Project Leader

Patrick Rhodes

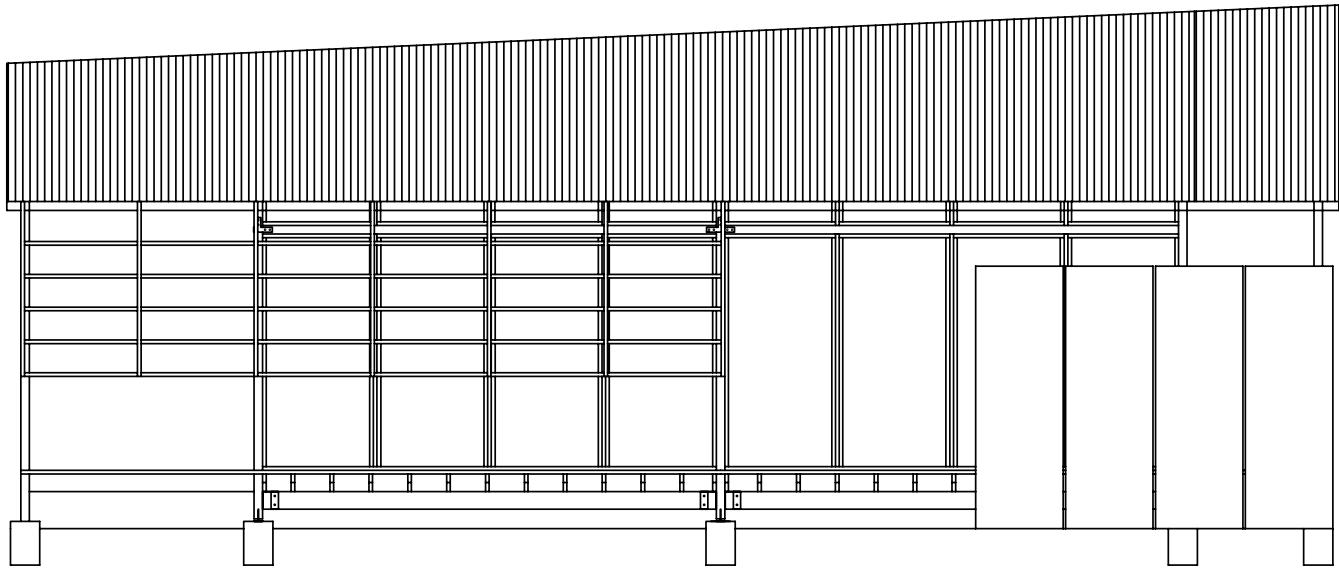
### Design Team/Volunteers

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 Caitlin Heckathorn  
 Clemente Jaquez-Herra  
 Kristyne Filipkova  
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 Tomas Martinek  
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 Scott Newland  
 Tanner Pikop  
 Aaron Schump  
 Kyle Wedel  
 Eric Wittman  
 Joe Vessell

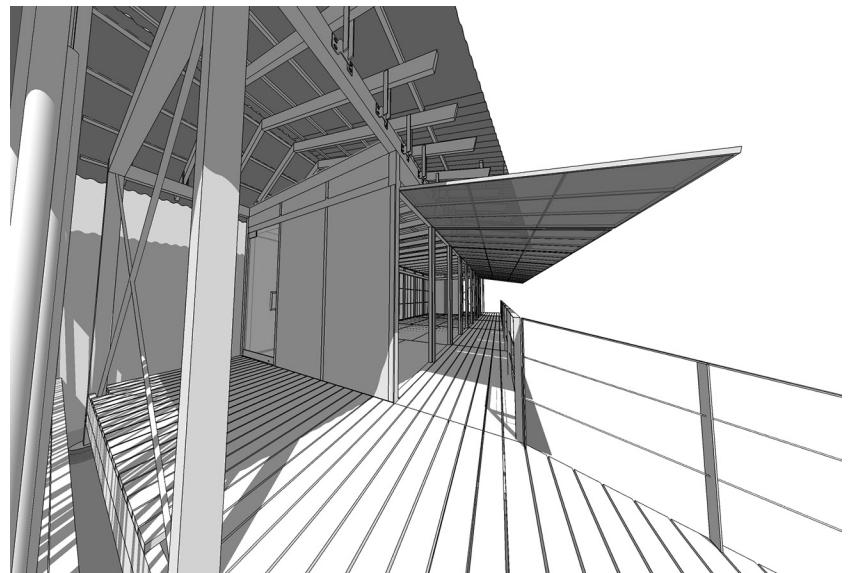
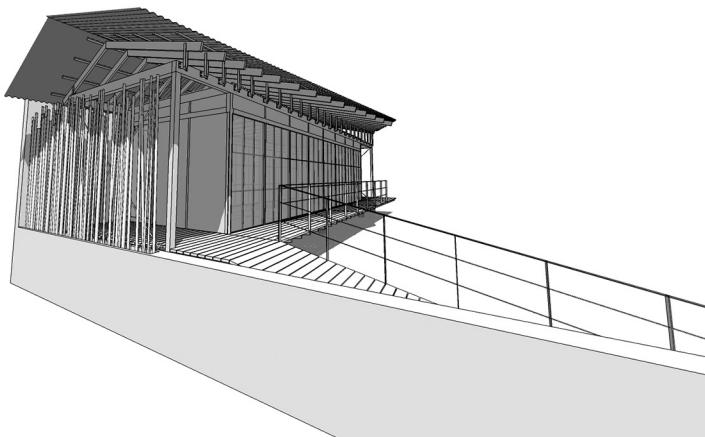


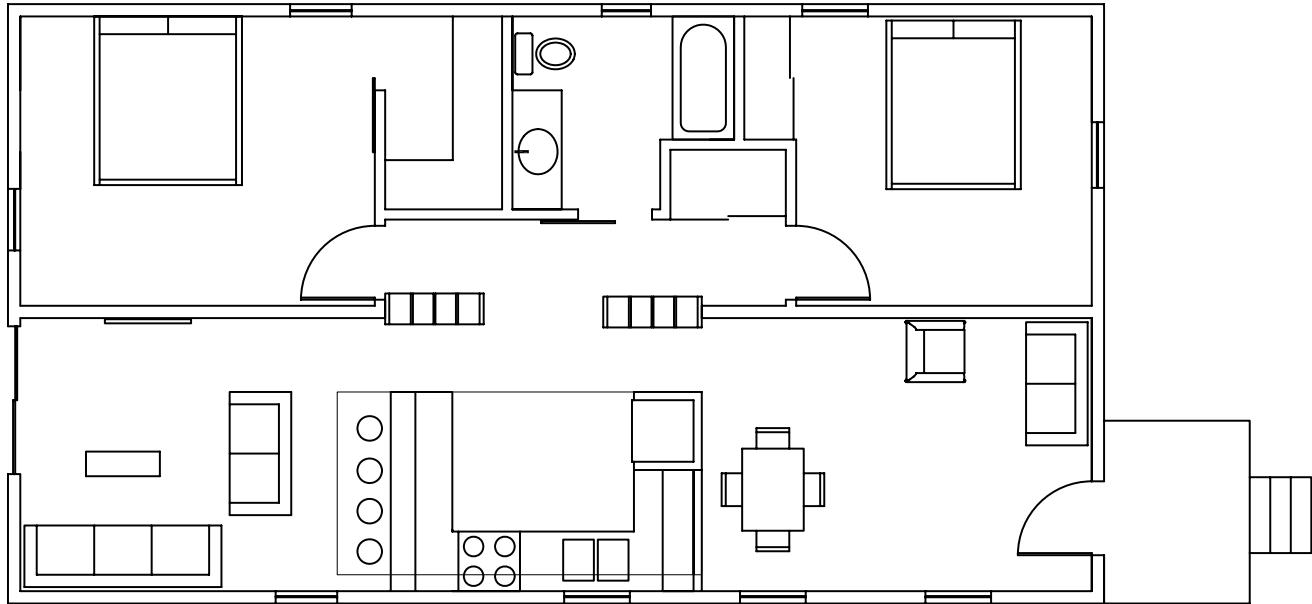
### Special Thanks to

ACORN  
 Nathan Howe  
 New Orleans University  
 Tulane University  
 Tulane City Center  
 Dan Etheridge, The Center for  
 Bioenvironmental Research  
 University of Montana



*Museum elevation*





*Lewis House floor plan*

