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Onward and Upward: Affording a Future

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Onward and Upward

Affording a Future

bild DESIGN,
Byron Mouton with
Cordula Roser and Julie Charvat

I have lived in New Orleans all my life; 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 circumstance unfamiliar to most Americans, and many American cities.

The people of New Orleans live amidst a diverse and rich tapestry of historic and cultural legacies of French, Spanish, and Caribbean conquerors and immigrants. Woven into their lives is 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, 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 acutely aware of their reliance on the protective levee systems along the shores of river and lake. The people of this region are accustomed to the circumstances surrounding the rise and fall of water, be it normal rain or intimidating storm. Confidence in the levees led residents to dismiss any further threat to the ability of the city's defences. Patina and imperfection was embraced as an attribute of an increasingly deteriorating surrounds, the wear being justified as an authentic condition of an "aged" place

and often considered an expression of "local charm."

Significant architectural heritage abounds throughout the city of New Orleans—both at the scale of urban fabric and dwelling. The repetition of many common historic housing types, such as the shotgun, double shotgun, camelback, and cottage creates a rhythm and reoccurring vernacular pattern, which defines the character and identity of the domestic environment. These housing types allowed the city to grow and prosper sustained by mass-produced structures. Over time, the city's neighborhoods expanded extensively, at first along the river and its elevated shoreline—the resultant higher ground accumulated over centuries of flooding within the river delta as deposited sediment adjacent the waterway. Later, with the advancement of technology, the protective levee system was extended and mechanical pumps dried out former low-lying swamp areas. The city was continuously redefined by new

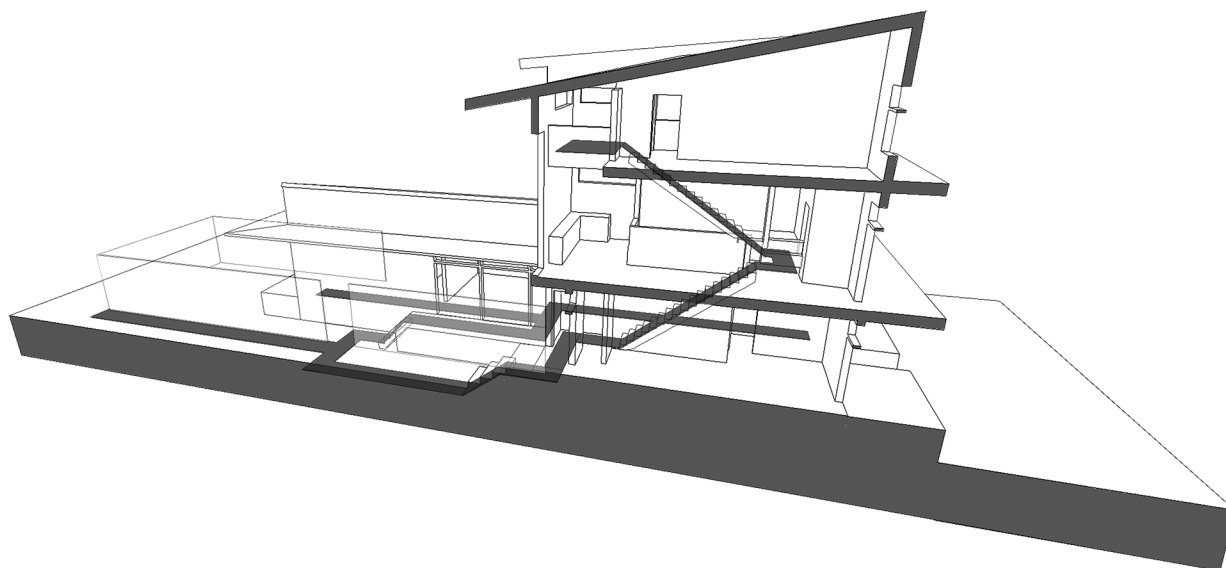
boundaries. As these ever-expanding borders were established to protect the city's occupants from the menace of flood, they also ominously eliminated the threat from the public mind set. With years passing, the inhabitants of the region disregarded a poignant description of Life on the Mississippi, by 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.¹

Practice

In retrospect I realize now the importance and everlasting influence that Twain's quote has had upon our Studio's work. Even the early projects suggest

building at an increased distance from the ground, first in effort to gain access to the surroundings through the establishment of extended views, and second as a method to successfully deal with the conditions of ground that are more water than soil. This is not an inventive direction for construction in the region. The most common historic, indigenous dwelling structures in the area were raised in anticipation of flood. After the events of August 29th, 2006, when New Orleans was struck by a storm that was anticipated yet never really expected, builders of the region are forced to reevaluate, and it is likely they will return to utilizing many of the means and methods of the past. In the aftermath, the city has been left 80% destroyed, the population reduced by half, and the city's most underprivileged areas are greatly diminished, with neither neighborhood, community, or any other economic or social foundation in place. It is now of utmost importance to carefully consider both the physical and cultural qualities of this place—what is worth salvaging and



how the integration of old and new might respectfully occur.

In the wake of Hurricane Katrina's devastation, the Gulf Coast is left searching for direction. Some members of our studio teach at the local Tulane University School of Architecture. As The school has found itself in a position to address and influence thought pertaining to reconstruction. A new Tulane program titled "Urban Build" is currently in development and will explore proposals of recovery and revival at both the scale of neighborhood and individual dwelling. As faculty of the school, we 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?

Though answers to these concerns may be long in solving, we as practitioners can and must begin to search for solutions. As contribution to an ongoing dialogue concerning an approach towards regional remediation, our Studio presents the following work and thought, herein represented by both pre-Katrina and post-Katrina responses. All projects have been influenced by and attempt to address, at varying degrees, the needs of a culture struggling with issues of decay, economic shortage, and preservation within a framework of the aforementioned issues of salvage, integration, and progress.

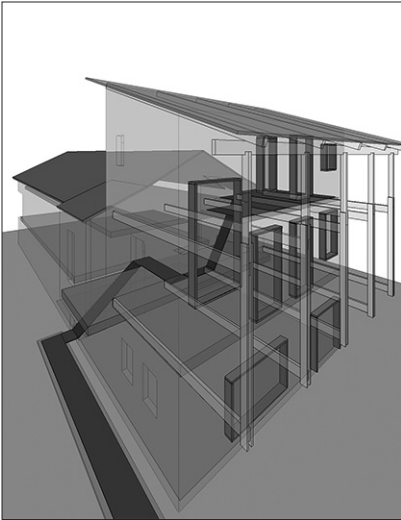
Salvage :
St. Ann Street Residence;
Renovation and Addition

The St. Ann Residence in the Mid-City neighborhood of New Orleans serves as an example of renovation and addi-

tion to one of the region's most familiar housing types: the double shotgun. The project capitalizes upon the physical and social constraints of the spatial separation demanded by regional topography, as well as the resultant vertical expansion unavoidable when dealing with wet ground. Situated on a through-lot that backs one of the city's major avenues, a three-story rear addition creates a new face for the project while also offering more interior living space, an immediate garden courtyard, and views to the extended context. An elongated entry sequence and vertical spatial progression reduces and reframes reliance upon the immediate ground and initiates disjunction from earth and the threat of water. Variation in scale and placement of wall openings offers a multiplicity of viewing options and challenge the perception of both immediate and extended context.

Throughout the spatial experience, awareness occurs simultaneously between the vertical separation and the immediate ground through diagonal movement and views. The additional installation of a screening device on this new façade completes the project. The scrim application unifies the non-traditional order of the assembly, while still preserving variation in view and capturing additional protective thickness in the separation between interior and exterior.

The St. Ann project's budgetary constraints offered opportunity to seek creative solutions to maximize the design, where the collection and assembly of affordable artifacts, such as found windows and doors played a key role in the overall strategy. 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 as desired and is therefore easy to obtain at low cost. In response to the storm, the current abundance in availability of such items combined with the effort to “reclaim” materials justifies such efforts and allows for a design strategy with both conservative economic implications and liberal urban qualities. Through careful reorganization and reuse of such “familiar” elements, the composition of the varied window and door placement is rendered acceptable; the salvaged pieces are allowed to coexist amongst their difference. This strategy offers the opportunity for progressive deviation to occur amidst familiar elements while introducing ideas of vertical expansion away from the ground. The end result of this transformation fuses a common housing type with a collection of “found” artifacts—a useful strategy as New Orleans works toward recovery.

**Integration:
Zimple Street Residence;
New Construction**

Continuing the investigations and strategies introduced by the St. Ann project, the Zimple Street Residence further challenges the content and qualities of the familiar shotgun while also introducing reference to the regional “camelback” house type—the area’s earliest example of domestic vertical growth. The project is located amidst one of the city’s older under-privileged neighborhoods, which adds a level of sensitivity to a progressive venture. While at the same time, the site’s proximity to the Mississippi River offers opportunity to re-establish an extended contextual relationship with the water—where historically the industrial activity of the river sustained the city’s domestic culture.

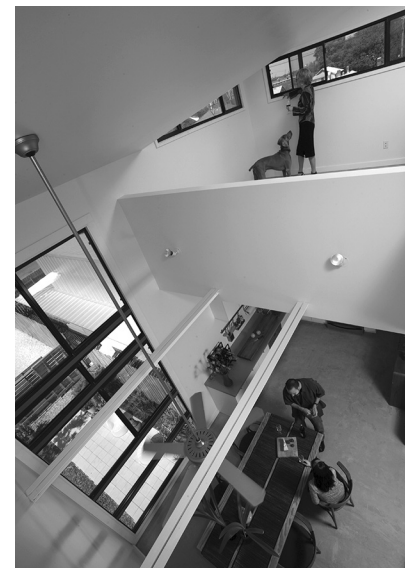
Requiring three separate living units, the strategy for the Zimple residence extends entry from the street to the center of the site, where a shared

narrow forecourt allows all occupants to access the complex at the same point. Then, following specific passage into and through the structure of each unit, occupants are reintroduced to the context through a variety of viewing options. The careful placement of apertures is once again key to the success of the design. Two of the units are developed with direct relationship to adjacent garden areas. The third unit, an interpretation of the camelback, is physically removed from the immediate ground to be rejoined with both adjacent and extended ground through diagonal and horizontal views. The locations of openings vary dependent upon specific opportunities of the site. The relationship of the tall “camelback” unit to the garden necessitates a large vertical opening from floor to roof providing visual access to below. To reduce the scale of this façade, a “scissor roof” is introduced that drops the eave toward the ground. Adjacent the large opening, a contrasting, slender horizontal opening punctures the southwest corner in celebration of the horizon and view to the river. The introduction and placement of this window traverses the levee system beyond; 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. Multiple viewing options unite physical vertical separation with visual horizontal extension by simultaneously reconnecting the occupants to both bordering garden and the river beyond.

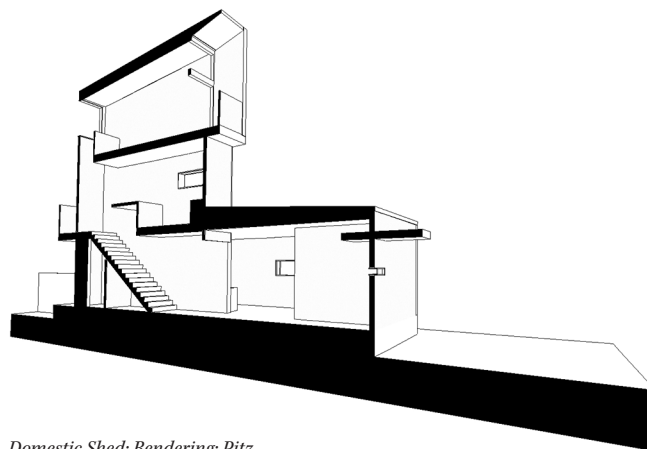
It is through variation in physical form, spatial sequence, and viewing options that new associations are reminiscent of a past condition. The vertical development of the Zimple Street Residence affords unique extended visual access beyond the limits of the city’s levee system, occurs amidst the preservation of the immediate neighborhood culture, and provides a



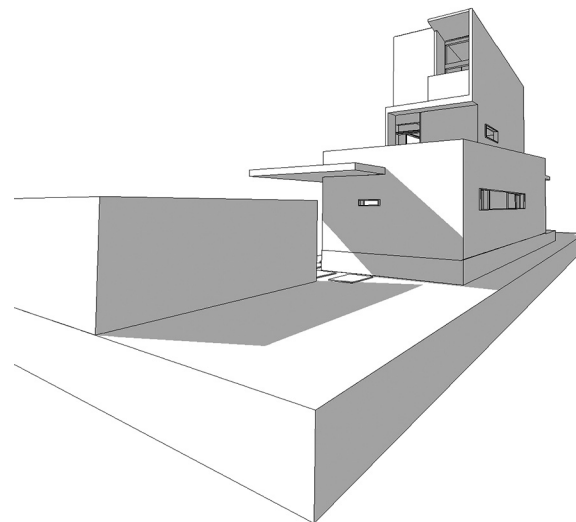
Zimple Street Residence; Photo: Neil Alexander



necessary physical separation from the unstable ground. The project is also, in turn, seen 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 a contextual opportunity. As an active response to the threat of high water and flooding, it stimulates explorations about the possibility of a new type developing in response to topographic conditions so that neighborhoods adjacent the river's edge may offer occasion for developing a vertically thickened domestic zone.



Domestic Shed; Rendering: Pitz



Progress: Domestic Shed; New Construction

Pushing explorations instigated by earlier work, the Domestic Shed aims at producing a pattern for progressive affordable housing in the city's urban perimeter zones. Specifically located in an area of the city often neglected due to fear and discomfort in its proximity to Mississippi River's edge and associated industrial activity, this venture also attempts to address concerns raised in the current dialogue regarding the expansion (or contraction) of domestic fabric, and how a wet unstable ground and the threat of water might be handled.



Again, the Domestic Shed developed with an increasing reliance upon diagonal movement, section, and view. Vertical occupation of a single dwelling attempts to claim immediate and extended context by restructuring sequence and space. As with the previous work, the project supports the activities of immediate context alongside a physical awareness of the extended vicinity. Yet in comparison to the St. Ann and Zimple Street houses, the figuration of this scheme capitalizes upon and celebrates a desire to frame its view of the river—allowing for the comparison of immediate context and extended region, and offering the occupant a broader understanding of and involvement in the “place.”

Building amidst a greater mix of domestic and industrial activity allowed our Studio to challenge expectations of both form and material with the Domestic Shed project. In response to the previous agenda(s) of salvage and integration, this work dares to suggest progressive opportunity through a heightened reliance upon an industrial rather than domestic vernacular. Solutions of cladding, fenestration, railing, and garden enclosure are not only made in search of aesthetic opportunity, but also to address questions of affordability, modularity, and maintenance. The project's physical content is based upon the mixed programmatic elements of



this city's thick battle zone between river and domestic activities. Positioning the use of an industrial language and its associated materials as authentic to the activities of the river region, this project attempts to overcome the challenging limitations of a nostalgic heritage with a productive rather than responsive built form.

Response: Post-Katrina Proposals

The preceding projects demonstrate our response to both context and culture—both historic and present. The variety of schemes all stem from reliance upon vertical extension as valid response to wet ground. 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 react to recent events through both re-evaluation of our work and a progressive commitment to future endeavors.

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. In addition, 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 "reawakened" awareness of the local topography's existence below sea level forces us to increase our search for a "higher ground."

Prototypes "A" and "K" are developed with greater reliance upon a raised private domain. However, it is recognized that with the establishment of an

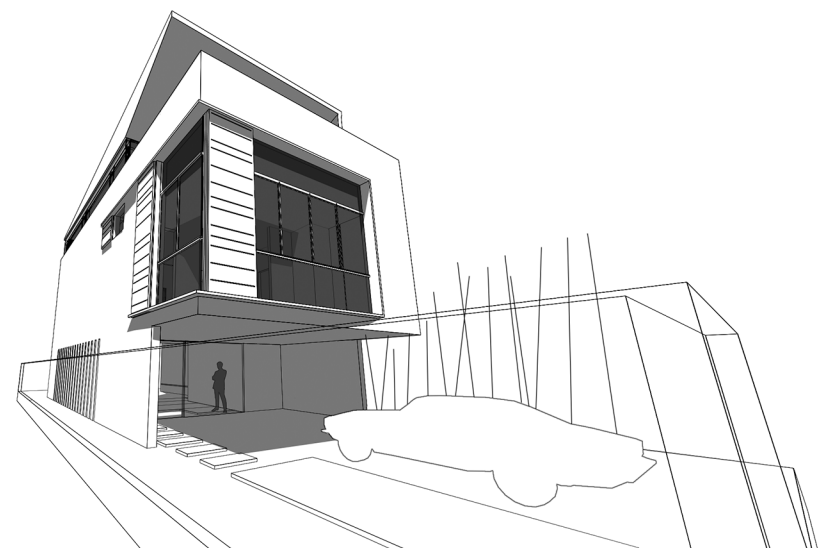
elevated domesticity the programming of space between street and dwelling becomes crucial. Might it be developed as extended threshold between neighborhood and home reminiscent of the historic carriageway? Although there is need to remove the physical presence of the dwelling from the earth, there is an attempt to maintain the cultural presence of the resident, the family unit, at the level of shared public ground.

New Orleans holds a grand heritage of festival events and shared activities of community. It is a sub-tropic garden city in which activities often focus on the communal congregation of neighbors. The age-old tradition of occupying the street stoop, or front porch, cannot be abandoned in pursuit of higher ground. Rather, these thresholds or "in-between" zones, be it carriageway, stoop, or porch invite redevelopment in anticipation of the threat of flood. The threshold, a thickened and prolonged entryway, could be developed as an opportunity to celebrate shared social activities and garden-scape, as well as in anticipation of the ever-present threat of water.

The people of this region are already familiar with unreliable ground, for they often live among elevated constructions. Our studio's responses simply propose that the increased elevation of home constitutes a "re-programming" of the zone between land and house. Developments of domestic physical form might accept variation in sequences of entry and public space in order to preserve communal life. 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 of course an oxymoron, but it is one with which this culture has grown quite comfortable. It is not acceptable to discredit the physical existence of this society and its people in the face of tragedy. Rather, we are attempting to further

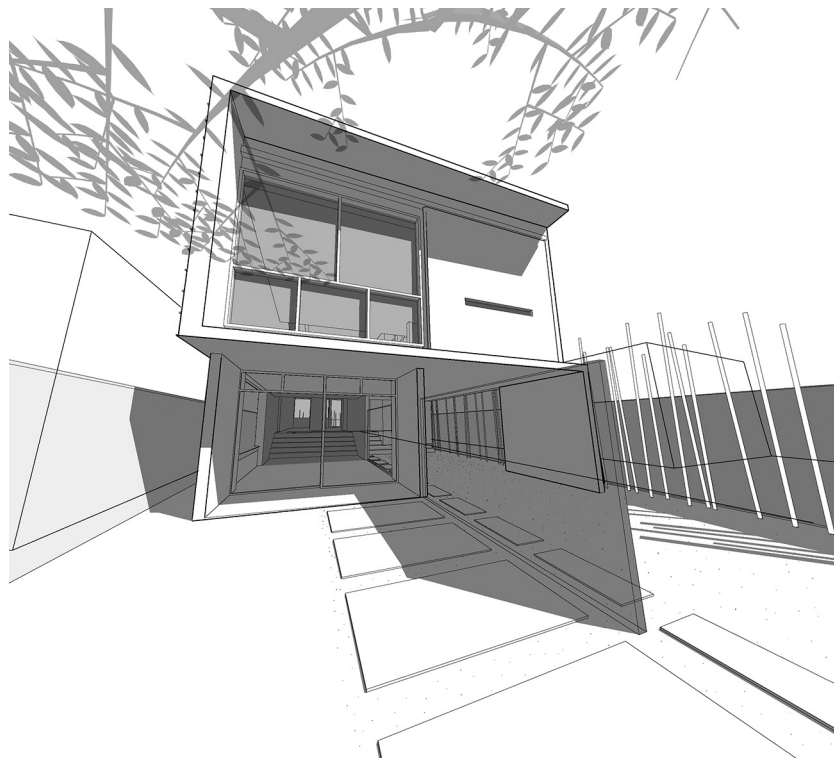


Prototype "A"; Rendering: Noah Marble





Prototype "K"; Rendering: Noah Marble



enhance and support this way of life through investment and belief in the 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 and diversion from the traditional, new associations stimulate growth and reunite lost connections. Constraint challenges contemporary thought to find ways to restructure and reframe the urban assembly, both physically and socially, to contrast the status quo.

Notes

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

For More Information

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