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## Design Steps Up in Disaster's Wake

By ALLISON ARIEFF

AFTER Hurricane Katrina destroyed Karen Parker's house on Division Street two summers ago, her first instinct was to leave her storm-ravaged hometown of Biloxi, Miss., behind. But she couldn't bring herself to abandon two generations of extended family there, any more than she could see living indefinitely with her six children in their 10-foot-wide FEMA trailer. So, a few weeks after the storm, Ms. Parker decided to rebuild on her street.

She struggled for months to navigate the sluggish bureaucracy of government agencies in search of help, but was stymied, she said, until she met with a representative of Architecture for Humanity, a nonprofit organization that specializes in post-disaster reconstruction. The group's approach to her problems was more comprehensive and more personal, Ms. Parker said, than those of other organizations she had spoken with, and for the first time she felt hopeful about building a new house on Division Street.

On Aug. 15, Ms. Parker, a 43-year-old single mother and a day care worker at Keesler Air Force Base, will move into that house with her children. Designed by Brett Zamore, an architect in Houston, it has four bedrooms and stands exactly where her previous home did. It is the first of seven houses being built in the area as part of the architecture group's Biloxi Model Home Program, a pilot effort that it hopes will lead to dozens more.

Given that thousands of Katrina victims remain homeless, Ms. Parker is well aware that she is among the lucky few.

"I followed the path" laid out by Architecture for Humanity, she said, "and it just got better and better." The organization, which began life eight years ago with a design competition for housing in post-war Kosovo, has always been concerned with increasing the role of design in disaster relief. Cameron Sinclair, who was then a New York architect, founded the group with his wife, Kate Stohr, then a magazine editor, because they were "frustrated by the lack of opportunity for architects involved in humani-



Lee Celano for The New York Times

tarian projects," Mr. Sinclair said.

By 2002, the group they had founded was a full-time occupation for both Mr. Sinclair and Ms. Stohr. They organized more architectural competitions, like one for a mobile health clinic for AIDS patients in Africa that drew 1,400 submissions. After the Asian tsunami in 2004, the group had 4,665 volunteer designers in 104 countries, and was one of the few architectural nonprofits with people on the ground in India and Sri Lanka.

Today the organization, based in San Francisco, has 10 full-time employees and a \$1.9 million budget paid for by foundations and individual and corporate contributions.

The Biloxi Model Home Program is focusing on the low-income neighborhood of East Biloxi, where Ms. Parker lives and where the need for permanent housing was particularly dire because of the loss of 3,500 homes in a community of 12,000 residents.

There were various private and governmental programs in place to help, mostly through grants and loans, when the architecture group got involved a few weeks after the hurricane, but lack of coordination among them and contractors and architects presented problems — particularly given challenges like the need to rebuild above flood level, at heights exceeding 12 feet in some areas, and to determine which building materials would be not only safe but also insurer-approved.

"Everyone was trying to serve the residents with just one piece of the puzzle," said Sherry-

Lea Bloodworth, the Gulf Coast development director of Architecture for Humanity. "If you send someone out the door with a loan but nothing else, they are completely lost."

So the group approached things differently, setting up a partnership with the East Biloxi Coordination, Relief and Redevelopment Agency, with which it established a loan fund that the agency will administer over the next 10 years.

The agency, meanwhile, established a community board to identify the neediest families and determine which of them would qualify for the Biloxi home program. Architecture for Humanity, after sending representatives out to canvass door to door and surveyors out to document every property in eastern Biloxi, took the lead in coordinating design efforts.

When Ms. Bloodworth met Ms. Parker in her FEMA trailer in November 2005 while canvassing the neighborhood, it was immediately clear that she was an ideal candidate for the program, given her family situation and limited income. Ms. Bloodworth's description of how Architecture for Humanity could get Ms. Parker the home she wanted, where she wanted it, "sounded too good to be true," she recalled, "except she kept calling and coming back to see me." Ms. Bloodworth championed Ms. Parker's cause with the reviewing board for the housing program.

In the spring of 2006, Architecture for Humanity invited 26 architects, chosen on the basis of geographical proximity and reputation, to design houses that were affordable and could conform to a labyrinthine set of structural

requirements. The architects were to be given a stipend for expenses but provide their design services for free. Thirteen responded, and last August they presented their designs to the seven families and the town of Biloxi at an Architecture for Humanity-sponsored house fair held downtown in a Salvation Army Quonset hut. Each family was allowed to choose its architect (even if another family had chosen the same one), a highly unusual form of client empowerment in this kind of housing competition.

“It was like an architectural flea market,” said Marlon Blackwell, an architect from Fayetteville, Ark., whose design was chosen by Richard Tyler, a single father with two children. “We were essentially singing for our supper, promoting the virtues of our respective schemes.”

Ms. Parker and her children were drawn to the “Blox,” a design by Brett Zamore that reminded them of their old neighborhood, lost to the storm. “It looked cozy and comfortable, like something that would fit right into Biloxi,” Ms. Parker said. “And the porches! I’m an outside person. I love the porches.”

Later, when Mr. Zamore and Ms. Parker met to talk about how the design could be adapted to her particular site and situation, she was finally able to visualize moving out of the FEMA trailer and into a home, she said. During the course of their conversation, it emerged that Ms. Parker’s “main concern was the narrowness of the home — 16 feet,” Mr. Zamore said. “Living in a space that is 10 feet wide for over two years has been painful, and she didn’t want to feel as if she was still living in a FEMA trailer.”

“I promised her that this would not be the case,” he added, although “it was only during the construction that she realized her trust in me was worth it — her needs were first and foremost to me.”

Mr. Zamore’s simple design cost \$115,000 to build, a figure covered by a loan from Architecture for Humanity in partnership with the East Biloxi Coordination, Relief and Redevelopment Agency that will be forgiven if Ms. Parker lives there for 10 years.

Unlike many post-Katrina rebuilding proposals that have focused on reproducing historical styles, Mr. Zamore’s design, which came out of a kit-house concept he had been working on for several years, evoked the past without resorting to nostalgia.

Its updated vernacular style recalls two Southern typologies — the shotgun, a narrow one-story dwelling with rooms lined up single file, and the dogtrot, two rooms linked by a covered breezeway — both of which allow ventilation and help the house adapt to the Gulf Coast

climate, Mr. Zamore said.

By last October, Mr. Zamore had finished working with Ms. Parker on the plan; groundbreaking took place in February. The process of seeing her peak-roofed, light-filled house take shape and then go up over the last seven months has been “like watching a dream,” Ms. Parker said. Now it’s just a matter of finalizing details like tile work and the installation of interior doors before she and her family move in on Aug. 15.

She will not be alone in the neighborhood. Most of the houses on her street were only partially destroyed, and many have been rebuilt by residents aided by more than a dozen different charitable organizations. A block away, one of two Architecture for Humanity homes designed by the Houston firm of MC2 is nearing completion.

Last week, Mr. Blackwell’s “Porchdog,” designed for Mr. Tyler, broke ground. The remaining three Biloxi pilot-program houses are at various stages of development, and Architecture for Humanity is working with other groups and the state of Mississippi to get financing to build 40 to 60 more over the next three to five years.

“I’m glad I stayed around — things couldn’t have gotten any worse,” Ms. Parker said. “Knowing that you can deal with anything that happens to you is for the good.”