



MAKING IT RIGHT?

A CRITICAL LOOK AT BRAD PITT'S EFFORTS IN
NEW ORLEANS' LOWER NINTH WARD.

—
By Rafael Longoria

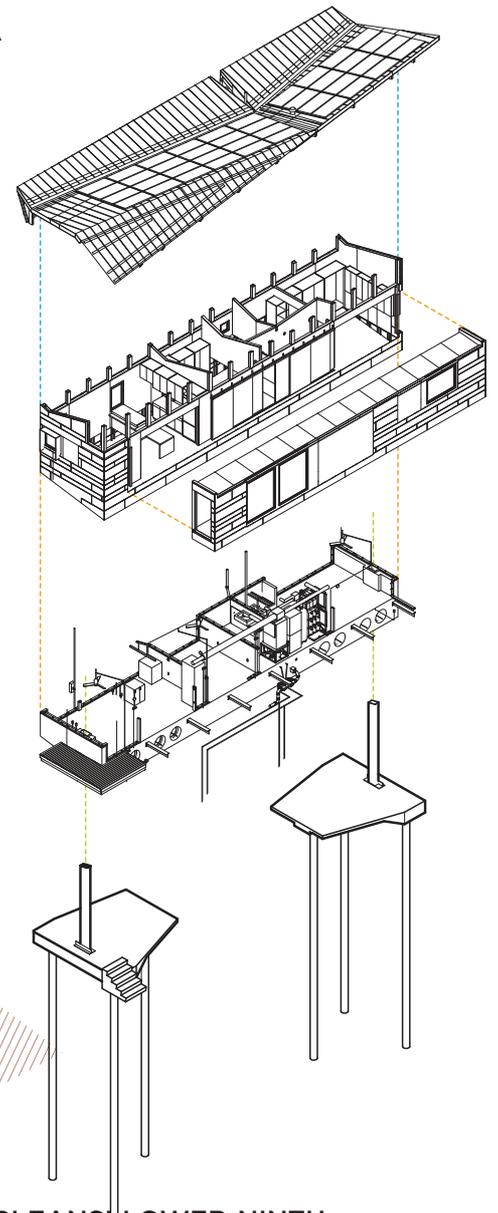


01

MORPHOSIS
SANTA MONICA, CALIFORNIA

LEFT: The FLOAT House by Morphosis with the Claiborne Avenue bridge in the background.

RIGHT: Diagram showing roof with solar panels and rain collector, space enclosures, floating chassis with built-in cisterns, and anchoring piers of FLOAT House.

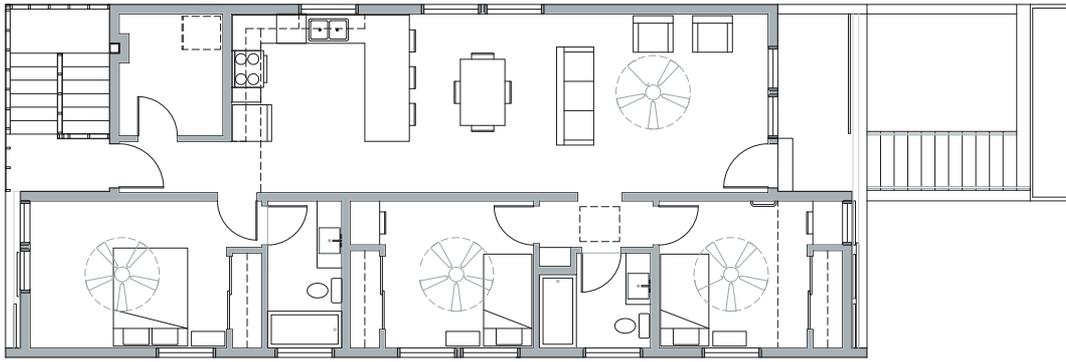


ARCHITECTS HAVE BECOME SUCH A COMMON SIGHT IN NEW ORLEANS' LOWER NINTH WARD THAT NEIGHBORHOOD CHILDREN CAN SPOT THEM RIGHT AWAY. ON ONE VISIT, I WAS GREETED BY A CUTE NINE-YEAR-OLD GIRL CARRYING A CAMERA AND A PHOTO ALBUM. "ARE YOU ARCHITECTS?" SHE ASKED. UNDER THE GAZE OF HER NEARBY MOTHER, SHE EAGERLY SHOWED US THE PHOTOGRAPHS MOUNTED IN HER ALBUM—AN IMPRESSIVE COLLECTION THAT INCLUDED PORTRAITS NEXT TO BILL CLINTON, BRAD PITT, ANGELINA JOLIE, AND OTHER NOTABLES FROM WASHINGTON AND HOLLYWOOD. HER COLLECTION ALSO FEATURED GROUP PORTRAITS OF VISITING ARCHITECTURE STUDIOS

FROM ALL OVER THE COUNTRY, AND WE HAPPILY POSED WITH THE GIRL AND HER MOTHER, WHO WERE ABOUT TO TAKE POSSESSION OF A BRAND NEW HOUSE BUILT BY MAKE IT RIGHT (MIR)—BETTER KNOWN AS BRAD PITT'S FOUNDATION. MEANWHILE, A STEADY STREAM OF TOUR BUSES CIRCLED THE NEIGHBORHOOD.

The Lower Ninth Ward is downriver from the French Quarter, separated from the Upper Ninth Ward and the more prosperous parts of the city by the Industrial Canal—a man-made waterway completed in 1923. Two retractable bridges connect the Lower Ninth Ward with the rest of the city. Saint Claude and Claiborne Avenues, where the bridges are located, used to be thriving commercial arteries running parallel to the Mississippi River. Once a multiethnic enclave of working class immigrants, the Lower Ninth Ward is now solidly African-American and famous for its unique Mardi Gras traditions.

In New Orleans, as in Galveston and other coastal communities, topography can be a matter of life and death. Holy Cross, the portion of the Lower Ninth occupying the higher ground along the banks of the Mississippi River, was largely spared by Hurricane Katrina and still boasts a remarkable collection of 19th-century houses. But the area north of Claiborne Avenue (where the MIR projects are located) was almost completely destroyed on the night of August 29, 2005, when the levees that line the Industrial Canal failed, and a torrent of water inundated this neighborhood, which, like many other parts of New Orleans, is below the level of the



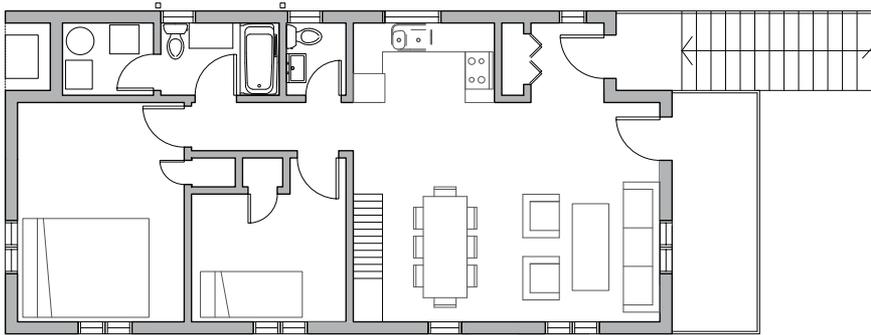
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02

ESKEW + DUMEZ + RIPPLE
NEW ORLEANS, LOUISIANA

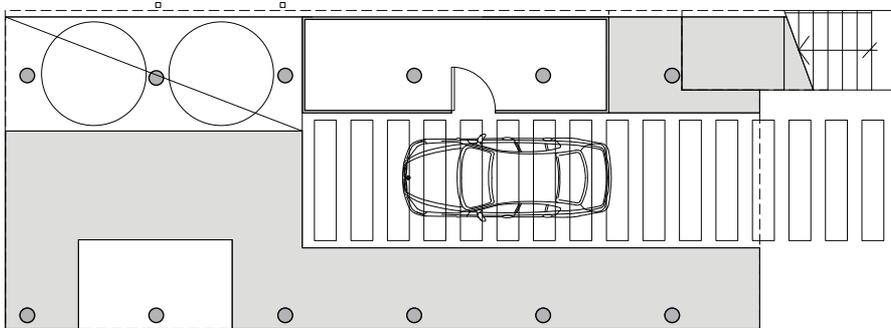
TOP: EDR floorplan.
FAR LEFT: Rendering showing perforated screens for front facade and entry stoop.
LEFT: One of the finished EDR houses.



03

KIERAN TIMBERLAKE
PHILADELPHIA, PENNSYLVANIA

LEFT: Main floorplan of Kieran Timberlake House.
BELOW LEFT: Ground floor plan showing cisterns, storage, and covered parking.
BELOW: The façades of the Kieran Timberlake House reflects the pattern of its structural insulated panel system.



0 8' 16'

Mississippi. The “before and after” figure-ground maps of the Lower Ninth Ward clearly illustrate the devastation. Whatever was not destroyed by the impact of the rushing torrent was rendered unsalvageable by sitting underwater during the many days that it took for the concave ground to be drained.

It is easy to understand why Brad Pitt chose the Lower Ninth Ward as the focus of his philanthropic work in New Orleans. The human and material devastation in this neighborhood was overwhelming, as graphically illustrated in the media. And to make matters worse, the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) seemed unable to aid a population largely composed of uninsured residents who could not afford to rebuild without outside help. Pitt assembled a group of architectural advisors that included former University of Virginia Architecture Dean William McDonough, former Tulane University Architecture Dean Reed Kroloff, the Los Angeles/Berlin/Beijing-based architecture firm GRAFT, and New Orleans architect John C. Williams, who would become the “executive architect” for many of the built projects. As handsomely documented in the just-published book *Architecture in Times of Need*, McDonough and GRAFT laid out the conceptual guidelines for the MIR architectural efforts. The “cradle to cradle” concepts developed by McDonough and Michael Braungart in the book of the same name formed the basis for the sustainability agenda that now permeates the entire MIR enterprise. GRAFT conducted preliminary research, coordinated community involvement, and prepared the architectural program, in addition to designing several houses. GRAFT also contributed the temporary pink structures whose installation inaugurated the MIR program with a publicity barrage that caused many, myself included, to question the seriousness of these efforts.

An important debate is taking place in New Orleans about the wisdom of rebuilding in areas that are so vulnerable to natural disasters. The debate can be summarized as rational planning versus cultural and historical continuity. MIR chose to side with the residents who wish to stay in the community where they have always lived. MIR has raised more than \$32 million and made a commitment to build 150 houses by the end of 2010. Financing for the individual projects for families who already own a lot in the neighborhood is a combination of public and private disaster recovery funds, owner contributions, and conventional mortgages, with MIR filling the “funding gap” to ensure that house payments (including property taxes and insurance) do not exceed one-third of the household’s gross monthly income.

A carefully chosen initial group of local, national, and international architects agreed to design prototype houses “as a donation to the residents of the Lower Ninth Ward and society as a whole.”⁽¹⁾ Selection criteria for the architects included knowledge of New Orleans or disaster-relief design, familiarity with sustainability, experience with residential work, and a record of innovation with low-budget projects.

A gallery exhibition of house prototypes by the MIR architects was installed for qualified homeowners to view before choosing their preferred design. The published “base construction costs were identified at \$200 per square foot for the first prototype and \$130 per square foot for all replicable models thereafter.”⁽²⁾ However, this targeted base cost figure does not include active sustainability features (such as cisterns, solar or geothermal equipment) or site preparation costs. The national/international groups and the local

THE ARCHITECTS

ROUND ONE FIRMS AND NUMBER OF HOUSES BUILT OR UNDER CONSTRUCTION

(AS OF JANUARY 2010)

INTERNATIONAL

| | |
|-----------------------------------|---|
| Adjaye Associates, London | 2 |
| Constructs, Accra, Ghana | 3 |
| GRAFT, Los Angeles/Berlin/Beijing | 5 |
| MVRDV, Rotterdam | 0 |
| Shigeru Ban Architects, Tokyo | 1 |

NATIONAL

| | |
|-----------------------------------------|---|
| BNIM, Houston/Kansas City | 4 |
| KieranTimberlake, Philadelphia | 2 |
| Morphosis, Santa Monica, California | 1 |
| Pugh + Scarpa, Santa Monica, California | 2 |

LOCAL

| | |
|-------------------------------------------|---|
| Billes Architecture, New Orleans | 4 |
| Concordia, New Orleans | 1 |
| Eskew + Dumez + Ripple, New Orleans | 4 |
| Trahan Architects, Baton Rouge, Louisiana | 2 |
| John C. Williams Architects, New Orleans | * |

* EXECUTIVE ARCHITECT

total: 31

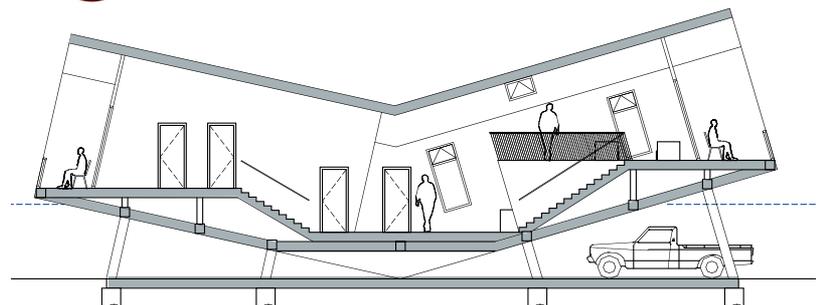
group are following two distinct paths to build the houses. Architects from the national/international groups turn their schematic designs in to John C. Williams Architects for value engineering, production of working drawings, and construction supervision. Local architects can follow their projects through construction, allowing them to make the painful, but crucial cost-cutting choices themselves.



04

MVRDV
ROTTERDAM
THE NETHERLANDS

TOP AND BELOW: Rendering and longitudinal section illustrating the only one of the round one houses not selected by any residents.





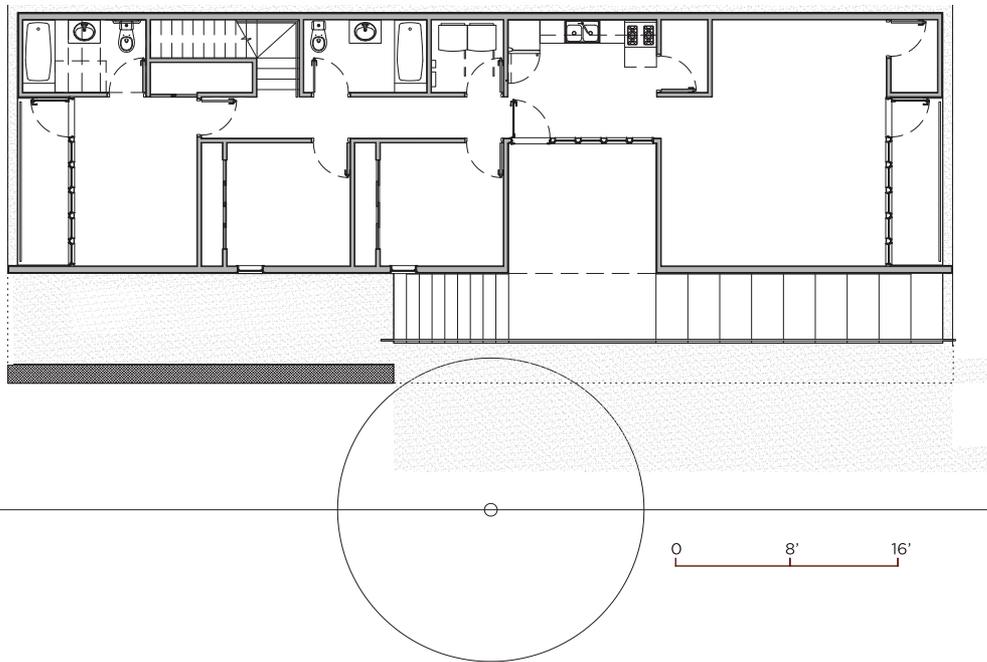
05

TRAHAN ARCHITECTS
PHILADELPHIA, PENNSYLVANIA

LEFT: View of Trahan Architects sensuous side porch.

BELOW LEFT: Trahan Architects floor plan with side entry.

BELOW: Clients and architects pose on the porch.
BOTTOM: Façade from street.



The 31 houses built or under construction as 2010 begins include at least one by each architect on the initial list with the notable exception of MVRDV. The famous Dutch firm chose a frivolous approach to its designs, a curious choice in the context of so much suffering. **See figure 4.** MVRDV's designs for New Orleans are less houses than metaphors of destruction: one house appears to have been bent in half, and another replicates the way that some buildings landed on top of one another after the flood. Although great effort and ingenuity went into making workable units out of these concepts, and the results are interesting at a certain level, they have not attracted any local customers. Like most home buyers, the MIR families are more concerned with the number of bedrooms and bathrooms and the amount of storage space than they are with aesthetic subtleties.

I visited one of the houses by Eskew + Dumez + Ripple, a distinguished New Orleans firm whose design has proven to be very popular with the neighborhood clients. **See figure 2.** A family of four had just moved in. The family was delighted with the

sparkling new house and the fact that each child had her very own room. Like most of the other MIR projects, this house is elevated in the manner of a beach house to avoid future floods and to qualify for insurance. It has a simple plan divided longitudinally by a wall—reminiscent of a double shotgun cottage that has been converted to a single-family dwelling. One side contains an open, all-purpose family room, while the other side is divided into three bedrooms and two bathrooms that open to the common room. A practical utility room occupies a space behind the kitchen. The straightforward design is energized by a long sloping roof that provides the common room with a pleasant double-height space and a surreal third-floor balcony. The building is well proportioned and its windows are carefully placed for maximum effect. The renderings for this house proffered an array of laser-cut screens for the front facades (owners could choose anything from floral patterns to a pixilated portrait of Fats Domino), but it seems that to date none of the residents who chose this popular model has been willing to venture that far.

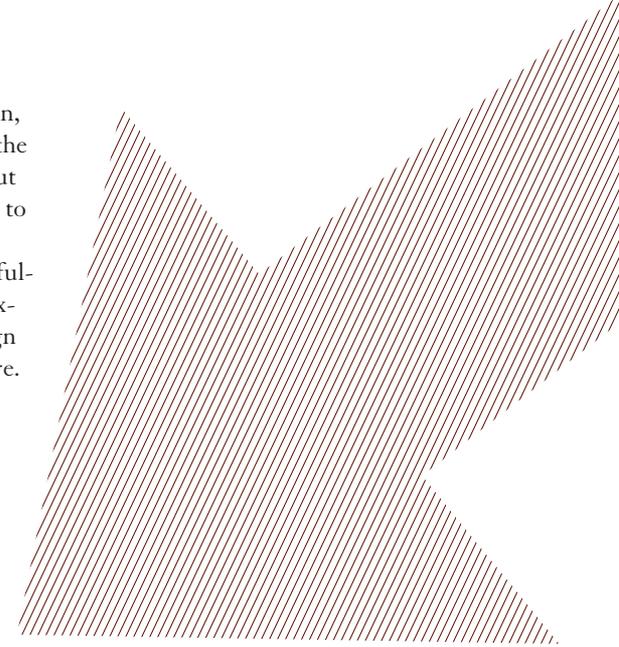
The eye-catching house designed by Kieran Timberlake, a Philadelphia firm famous for its innovative research, uses filigreed railings and a trellis to envelop the building (on the south side and top) to provide shading and privacy. See figure 3. The screens are modern adaptations of the traditional decorated balconies and porches of New Orleans, something that the MIR organizers encouraged participating architects to evoke. Renderings show the trellises covered with vines, which would add a welcome dimension in this neighborhood where older vegetation has not yet returned to its former splendor. True to their Philadelphia heritage, Kieran Timberlake designed a disciplined house organized along a service bay where utilities are bundled. Instead of simply offering a fixed floor plan, they provided a system of interchangeable programmatic elements and finishes from which the various owners can choose. At a recent lecture in New Orleans, firm principal James Timberlake expressed hope that MIR will move from “stick-built” homes to more reproducible prefabricated systems.

The house designed by Trahan Architects of Baton Rouge, Louisiana, was built next to a beautiful live oak, one of the few mature trees to survive in this part of the neighborhood. See figure 5. A sensuous curvilinear trellis on the south of the house bends to the shape of the live oak’s canopy as it creates a side porch and marks the entrance. The louvers were intended to contain integrated photovoltaic and water heating features, but it does not appear that these ideas survived the MIR “value engineering” process. Worse yet, in their second house built by MIR, the trellis disappeared altogether.

The house by Tokyo-based Shigeru Ban is disappointing—particularly when you consider the magnificent houses and paper-tube emergency relief designs that have made him one of the world’s foremost architects. See figure 6. The elevated courtyard is an intriguing idea, but the final product with its lonely patch of planted roof is highly compromised, and its unfortunate proportions ignore the elegant local traditions. Ban’s design is based on the structural furniture idea that he brilliantly executed in two

widely published houses in Japan, where storage cabinets become the building’s columns and walls, but much was lost in the translation to local construction practices.

Morphosis’s FLOAT House fulfills MIR’s promise to provide examples of great innovative design for flood-prone areas everywhere. See figure 1. Morphosis—the Santa Monica, California, firm headed by Pritzker Prize-winner Thom Mayne—designed an amphibian house, grounded by concrete piers, that simply rises with the water in the event of a flood. In addition



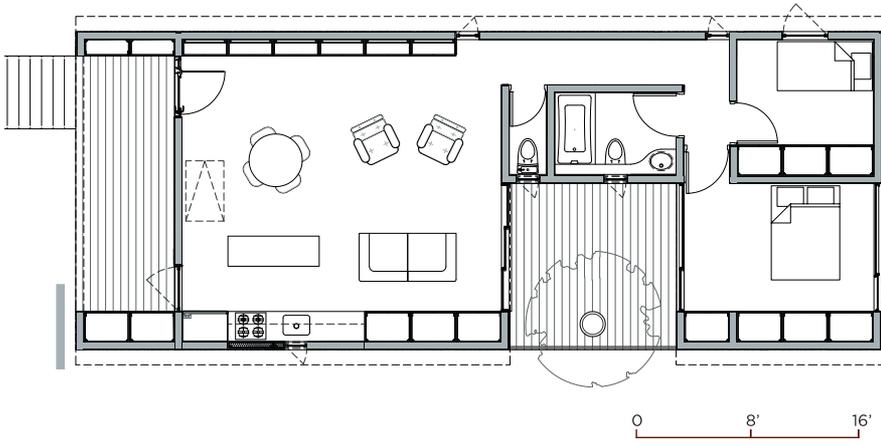
LIKE MOST HOME BUYERS, THE MIR FAMILIES ARE MORE CONCERNED WITH THE NUMBER OF BEDROOMS AND BATHROOMS, AND THE AMOUNT OF STORAGE SPACE THAN THEY ARE WITH AESTHETIC SUBTLITIES.

to displaying the firm’s characteristic formal virtuosity, the house promises greater urban cohesion by having a more traditional relationship to the ground—as well as avoiding the accessibility problems with raised houses that have generated many complaints from disabled residents. Buildings like the FLOAT House exist in the Netherlands, but according to publicity material, this is the first amphibian house to get a building permit in the United States. Morphosis partnered with the UCLA architecture program to develop and prefabricate elements of FLOAT House, thus avoiding the handover of control required of the other out-of-town architects. The high-performance chassis—essentially a sliding barge—built out of polystyrene foam coated in fiber-reinforced concrete, can accommodate a variety of house plans.

“Make It Right: From Concept to Community,” an exhibition held at the Contemporary Arts Center in New Orleans in Fall

Aerial view drawing of Make It Right projects.





06

SHIGERU BAN
TOKYO, JAPAN

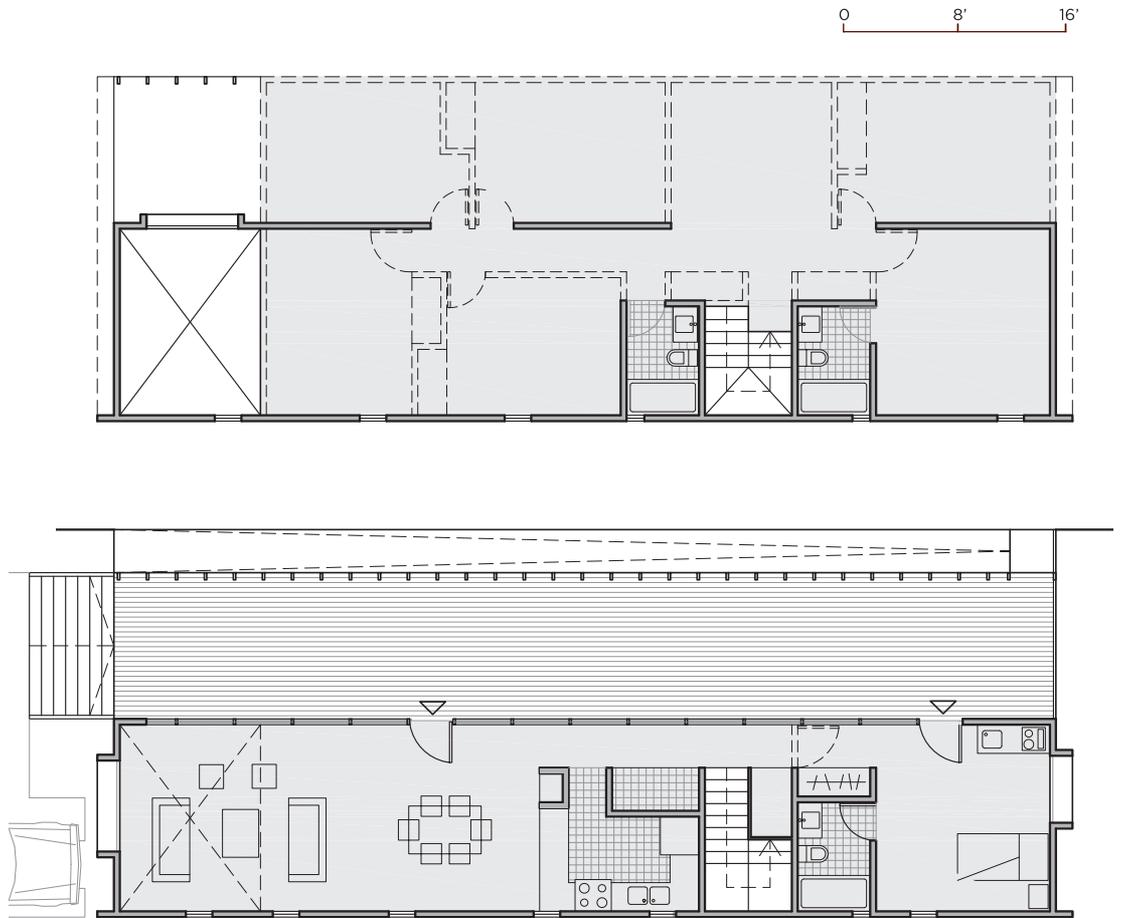
TOP LEFT: Shigeru Ban's first floor plan.
ABOVE: Street façade of finished house.
LEFT: View of elevated courtyard.



07

ELEMENTAL
SANTIAGO, CHILE

RIGHT: Elemental's second floor plan and first floor plan. Note the kitchenette that allows the first floor bedroom to be rented out as a studio apartment.
ABOVE: Elemental rendering highlights its flexible double-height side porch.





HOUSES BUILT SO FAR BY MIR RANGE FROM EXTRAORDINARY TO INCONSEQUENTIAL, BUT ARE HARDLY REPRODUCIBLE MODELS OUTSIDE THE CONFINES OF A CHARISMATIC CHARITY.

2009, both presented the projects-in-progress and introduced a second round of designs focused on duplex houses. Additional architects invited for the second round of houses included Atelier Hitoshi Abe, Sendai/Los Angeles; Bild Design, New Orleans; buildingstudio, New Orleans; ELEMENTAL, Santiago, Chile; Gehry Partners, Los Angeles; Waggoner & Ball, New Orleans; and William McDonough+Partners, Charlottesville/San Francisco.

The houses built so far by MIR range from extraordinary to inconsequential, but are hardly reproducible models outside the confines of a charismatic charity. In order to be truly sustainable, affordable housing must work within the realities of the market without relying on donated design, materials, or labor. The project designed by the Chilean firm ELEMENTAL for MIR's second round provides an excellent example of how to do affordable housing in the Gulf Coast while recognizing that sustainability also has economic and social dimensions. See figure 7. Alejandro Aravena, ELEMENTAL's principal and a superbly talented architect, developed a highly successful model for low-income housing in Chile that is being reproduced in thousands of units around the world. The key to his approach is struc-

RIGHT: Neighborhood site rebuilt without MIR help. **BELOW:** Residents and guests inside EDR house.



turing buildings that can easily be modified to grow with the occupants's changing needs. In Latin America he builds mostly in brick and reinforced concrete. For the Lower Ninth Ward he designed a simple wood-frame house with a generous side porch that occupies half the length of the building. In its initial configuration, the side porch provides a versatile social space suitable for this climate; but it also invites owners to add as many as seven rooms under this roofed space and possibly even generate rental income within this compact structure.

MIR is not the only organization building sustainable houses in the region or in the Lower Ninth Ward neighborhood. Global Green USA, the American arm of an environmental organization created by Mikhail Gorbachev, has completed three well-crafted sustainable houses in nearby Holy Cross, where it is also planning a mixed-use complex near the river. Tulane's School of Architecture has a remarkable collection of design-build projects not far from their campus; they have received national attention on the Sundance Channel reality show "Architecture School." Cameron Sinclair's Architecture for Humanity also invited a group of distinguished architects to design houses, but it chose to focus its reconstruction efforts on the even more devastated Mississippi Gulf Coast.

It must be noted that not everyone in the neighborhood has sought help from private groups. I visited Valeria Schexnayder, a lifelong Lower Ninth resident whose recently rebuilt house is surrounded by MIR projects. This formidable lady declined to participate in the MIR program and instead used her disaster relief funds to purchase a double-wide prefabricated house. The immaculately kept neo-traditional house looks like what you would find in a new median-income neighborhood anywhere in the U.S. The house was delivered on-time and on-budget and she and her family could not be happier. The only thing she requested from MIR was a pair of bald cypresses to be planted in her front yard.

Numerous publications from around the world have followed Brad Pitt's architectural initiative with the attention they usually devote to his personal life. French fashion magazine *Marie Claire* labeled him "*le batisseur*" (the builder), while *Metropolis* called him "Saint Brad" and speculated he may become the most important architectural patron of our age. The first time I saw the MIR buildings under construction, they seemed awkwardly out of place—a sort of architectural petting zoo on a beach-like landscape. But on a later visit, after hundreds of bald cypresses had been planted along the new pervious-concrete sidewalks, I decided the neighborhood will survive this and much more. Trees have a way of rescuing architects at the same time that they remind us great architecture is not enough to make great neighborhoods. The Lower Ninth Ward still needs a balanced mix of commerce, recreation, education, and culture in order to become vibrant again. Nevertheless, I applaud Brad Pitt for using his power of convocation to channel resources and energy to help the remarkable people of this extraordinary place, while giving a very good group of architects a chance to make a difference. **c**

NOTES:

(1) Kristin Feireiss, ed., *Architecture in Times of Need* (Munich, London, New York: Prestel Verlag, 2009), 129.

(2) *Ibid.*, 123.