

The Oregonian

Architects: 'We made a difference'

Katrina - A Portland team goes to Mississippi to assess home damage -- and to just listen

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Portland architect Cynthia "Thia" Bankey last month led a team from the Oregon chapter of Architects Without Borders to the Mississippi Gulf Coast at the behest of the American Institute of Architects. The team, which included architect John Perry, provided free assessments to homeowners whose houses had been damaged by Hurricane Katrina. Recently, Bankey and Perry talked about rebuilding efforts there and how the community is coping three months after the hurricane.

What kind of mood did you find among the homeowners?

Bankey: It seemed like the people who were really emotional about it were those who hadn't been back for very long or who had lived in the house for a long time and were going to have to say goodbye to it.

I remember when we started, the volunteer coordinator told us, "The assessments of the homes are important, but it's also really important to just listen to people's stories and talk to them." So every hour, we'd listen to a new story from different people. It was very personal, a lot of social work, really. And it took its toll on us. We really couldn't do more than six a day. And in the evening, we'd just collapse.

Perry: In terms of the psychological health of the people that have been through this, I think this period, about three months afterward, is in some ways the hardest. The adrenaline has worn off. . . . People there talk about a honeymoon, which is a strange term. But when there's an emergency like Katrina, people get pumped up to deal with it. Now the emergency is gone, and these people find themselves without a house and a job, but they still have house payments to make.

What surprised you?

Bankey: I didn't fully expect to see the boomtown side of the city that's developed overnight. There are all these young men coming down there to work on reconstruction, and at night they want to go out and meet the young women from the area. All of a sudden, they have two new Hooters franchises. And in the evenings, we actually found ourselves in some pretty bad traffic.

I was also surprised by how much debris is still just sitting there after three months. When we were doing our home assessments, people would pick things up inside their houses and say, "None of this is mine. I don't know where it came from."

Perry: Or you'd go into the backyard of somebody's house, and they had taken all of their dishes and silverware, all their pots and pans, and stacked them on the lawn. Because with a lot of these houses, that's the safest place.

Can you guess at how much of the area is destroyed?

Perry: It's really hard to gauge. Maybe 20 percent (of homes) are destroyed and 50 percent need a new roof or other work. But then there are these pockets where the damage is total and irreparable. And anything within a half-mile of the gulf -- you can just forget it.

Bankey: Looking at that area right along the coast, I think you have to ask: Should you build it back? I'm not so sure. But land is incredibly cheap, and there are a lot of people out there who want to make money on it. I've heard that there's a lot of interest in condo building all along the Gulf Coast.

How would you rate the level of planning going on there after the hurricane?

Bankey: They did have a big planning charrette that involved some of the big "new urbanist" people (including five Portland-area planners). But it's hard to gauge what that will lead to. . . . I think people truly believe in doing the right thing, but at the same time, there's an attitude of, "As long as I don't get hurt." And frankly, I think the predominant mentality in the South that government is a bad thing will work against them. Because you really do need strong government involvement to make this work.

Were there many historic homes or other buildings you saw destroyed?

Bankey: I know that there were a number of antebellum homes near the coast that were completely destroyed. Before the hurricane, my friend was going to have her daughter's wedding reception in one of them. But now it's just . . . gone.

With so many buildings destroyed, how much of the materials from there could be recycled?

Bankey: I know The ReBuilding Center went down to New Orleans to talk with FEMA about it. . . . Unfortunately, though, there aren't that many places of its kind in the country that recycle construction materials, at least the bare-bones stuff like wood. It's amazing how far behind Portland so many cities are when it comes to that kind of thinking.

Aside from the hurricane, how does that region's built environment differ the most from Portland's?

Perry: I kept looking for what we would consider a neighborhood, and it was very hard to find. They don't build with densities like we have here. Houses are typically on half an acre. Everything is so scattered, and there's a lot of driving. One of the people we stayed with said he puts 74,000 miles a year on his truck! The area is also pretty poor, and with a lot of segregation, in both cases much more than we're used to in Portland.

Were you involved with Architects Without Borders before Katrina?

Bankey: I didn't even know it existed. But the chapter had put together some training in September resulting from the Asian tsunami. And after Katrina, they announced that they had money to send people down there, but they didn't have a plan. I got in touch with the chapter, and they said they'd be willing to send us down there with a team to try and figure out what could be done. At the same time, Mississippi was trying to assess just how to go organize and go forward. So the work we did was really part of that process.

Would you do it again?

Perry: I'd definitely do it again. Considering the immensity of the job, we barely put a dent in it. But I think we made a difference, and because of that, I got a lot out of it.

Bankey: I thought it was good because out of the six people that went, we had two architectural interns, two midcareer people and two senior architects. It was just really good to have a mix of experience. For me, it was hard financially as a sole practitioner. That said, I would love to do it again.

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