

students

Tiny House

Philanthropy drives architecture students' creation

Photography by Doug Dugas

On an overcast morning in late August, architecture graduate student Ana Azizi stood in an exterior courtyard at Fletcher Hall. She and her classmates were putting the final touches on MODESTEhouse, the School of Architecture and Design's 216-square-foot "tiny house."

Occasionally, the sun broke through the clouds, reheating an already balmy day. Its rays bounced off MODESTEhouse's corrugated metal siding and roof.

Azizi was in a reflective mood. When construction began in March, she helped assemble each of the 15 ribs that offer support inside the curved, stressed skin that serves as MODESTEhouse's primary wall and roof.

The structure is anchored on one end to a 24-foot wheeled trailer and bracketed on the other to a 10-foot wall that features 70 storage cubbies. Its exterior is glazed with a translucent insulative polycarbonate developed by NASA for use on its space shuttles.

"Look at it. It's beautiful," she said.

More than 50 UL Lafayette architecture, interior design and industrial design students worked on MODESTEhouse over 10 months that spanned three semesters. Planning began in January and construction concluded in early October.

The average American home has 2,600 square feet. The maximum size of most tiny homes is 500 square feet. Many of the petite structures are built on trailers, which makes them easy to move.

Architecture professor Geoff Gjertson, who directs the UL Lafayette Building Institute and oversaw the project, did not want MODESTEhouse to be an as-seen-on TV project. That's

why he and the students chose the name MODESTEhouse. The French word "modeste" means unassuming or humble.

"We had a responsibility to produce something innovative and experimental. We could throw together a tiny house like you see on HGTV without even designing it. We could just start building it. It's not that they aren't good. They are just very conventional and very traditional," Gjertson said.

In one key area, however, MODESTEhouse is typical of most "tiny houses" – its emphasis is on sustainability. Its composting toilet, for example, does away with wastewater sent into sewage systems.

Solar panels mounted on its roof provide power to its full kitchen and LED lighting, which during the day is almost unnecessary, thanks to the translucent exterior wall.

Other features include rigid and spray-on foam insulation.

Two factors set MODESTEhouse apart: its appearance and its purpose.

The house was built in conjunction with Lafayette Habitat for Humanity. In October, during a ceremony at Fletcher Hall, MODESTEhouse's keys were turned over to a New Iberia, Louisiana, resident who lost his mobile home during the August 2016 floods. He is purchasing the house for \$25,000.

For Azizi and fellow graduate student Blair Begnaud, MODESTEhouse – and the reason behind its construction – offered catharsis. Begnaud's home took on three feet of water when an extension of the Vermilion River overflowed its banks. The Azizi home was a total loss when the river inundated two retention ponds in her neighborhood, holding the water in place for nearly a week.



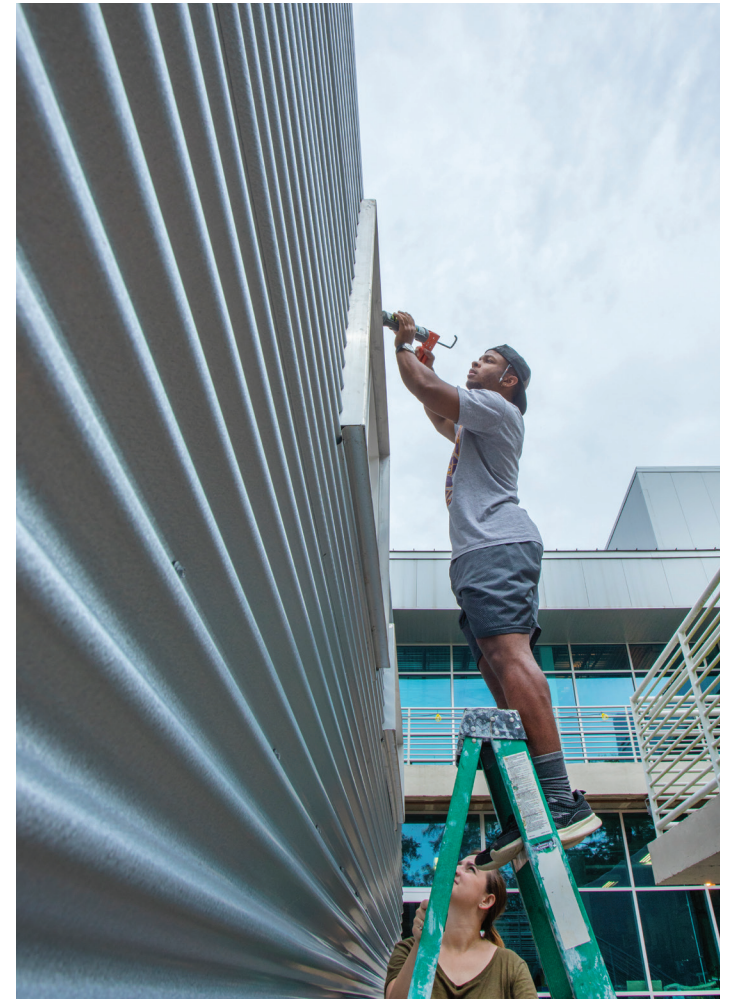
From left: David Hebert, Alexandra Carr, Professor Geoff Gjertson and Francisco Ferrara



Cassandra Gatlin



David Hebert



Darrell Landry, on ladder, and Blair Begnaud



"When something like that happens, you lose your sense of safety," Azizi said. "It made me feel a lot more vulnerable because I thought my house could protect me – and it couldn't."

She used her architectural training to help her family design their new home, which is elevated five feet. The design includes a half basement that opens into a pool area and faces the Vermilion.

It might look like a welcoming space to loll away a summer's afternoon, but it actually serves as a catchment. Should water flood beneath the house, it will be funneled into several drains.

It's been tested already. "Our property flooded again during the building process. It flooded two feet. It drew water away from our garage, which is usually the first thing to flood. All we had to do was wash down the concrete and that was it," Azizi recalled.

The rebuilding process for Begnaud's family wasn't as extensive. Lower cabinets required restoring. They replaced baseboards, the floor and some of the walls.

"We were super lucky," Begnaud said. "Not everybody was."

As MODESTEhouse was being designed, and during the early stages of construction, Begnaud accompanied Gjertson to Habitat for Humanity meetings, where its board of directors studied case files of potential homeowners. Gjertson is president of Habitat's board.

Begnaud considered all their stories. She could empathize with their need for housing.

"It would be nice to help all of Lafayette and any other area but you can only do small bits for everyone. MODESTEhouse feels like we are doing a big bit for one person," she said.