

2009 RUDY BRUNER AWARD: Silver Medal Winner
St. Joseph Rebuild Center

New Orleans, Louisiana



This is an excerpt from:

Urban Transformation

2009 RUDY BRUNER AWARD FOR URBAN EXCELLENCE



BRUNER FOUNDATION, INC.

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Courtyard at Rebuild Center

Project At-A-Glance

WHAT IS THE ST. JOSEPH REBUILD CENTER?

- ❖ A day center for homeless people, providing meals, showers, laundry, phone calls, health and mental health care, immigration assistance, and other services
- ❖ A collaboration among four Catholic organizations
- ❖ A new, semi-permanent set of structures, custom-built and fabricated off-site, connected by an integrating system of decks, roofs, and trellises
- ❖ A design by the Detroit Design Collaborative from University of Detroit Mercy in collaboration with Wayne Troyer, a local New Orleans architect. Built, in part, by architecture students.

PROJECT GOALS

- ❖ To provide a dignified, well designed daytime service facility for homeless people
- ❖ To contribute to the urban fabric of New Orleans by transforming a parking lot into a handsome building that relates to the street
- ❖ To meet the most basic needs of homeless people in an environment that is safe and respectful
- ❖ To create the highest quality structure possible with limited funds
- ❖ To serve as a model for providing temporary shelter and services in response to disaster situations



PROJECT CHRONOLOGY

August 29, 2005: Hurricane Katrina devastates New Orleans.

Late 2005: Coalition members hold meetings and decide to cooperate on the Rebuild Center.

May 2006: Detroit Mercy's Collaborative Design Center starts work on the planning. After some delays, design began in earnest in August.

January 2007: Bids received for construction.

March 2007: Demolition and construction begin.

August 2007: Rebuild Center opens August 29 (exactly two years after Katrina) and the dedication ceremony is held September 11.

Summer 2008: Medical facility is constructed.

KEY PARTICIPANTS INTERVIEWED

DAN PITERA, AIA, ACD, Director, Detroit Collaborative Design
Center at University of Detroit Mercy School of Architecture

WAYNE TROYER, AIA, Wayne Troyer Architects, New Orleans
(architect of record for the Rebuild Center)

DON THOMPSON, Executive Director, Harry Tompson Center

SISTERS VERA BUTLER and ENID STORY,
Presentation Sisters' Lantern Light

FATHER PERRY HENRY, Pastor of St. Joseph Church

MARY BAUDOIN, Assistant for Social Ministries, Jesuit Province
of New Orleans (on board of the Harry Tompson Center)

VICKI JUDICE, UNITY of Greater New Orleans (a coalition working to
address homelessness and bring residents back to New Orleans)

JUSTINE DIAMOND, Catholic Charities Archdiocese of
New Orleans' Hispanic Apostolate

Volunteers:

EMMA and BRENDAN (Jesuit Volunteer Corps) and SISTER MAGDALEN

Rebuild Center "Guests":

HOWARD, BRIAN and GLORIA

St. Joseph Rebuild Center



Entrance to Rebuild Center with pedestrian sky bridge and medical center in background

URBAN CONTEXT

The devastation suffered by New Orleans in 2005 has become its *de facto* urban context. Hurricane Katrina flooded over 80% of the city, including the project site, and over 1,500 people died or remain unaccounted for. Still widely considered the “worst civil engineering disaster in American history,” Katrina will forever be associated with images of entire neighborhoods submerged by storm waters, of stranded residents awaiting rescue from their rooftops, and of desperate scenes at the Superdome, only a few blocks from the project site.

Those images stand in stark contrast to the city’s rich cultural and ethnic history, which has been expressed for hundreds of years in festivals like Mardi Gras, world renowned regional cooking, venerable musical traditions (New Orleans is the birthplace of jazz), and an architectural and cultural heritage unique in the country.

The city’s recent history, however, has been dominated by the question of how to rebuild. An estimated 60% of New Orleans’ 437,000 people left at the time of the storms, and some are slowly venturing back. By August 2007 the population had grown back to 273,000, and by March 2009 it had reached the 300,000 mark.

The recovery effort has been riddled with problems, most of which are well known. The federal government failed to support the re-



covery effort in a timely fashion, and ongoing controversy about the form and location of replacement projects has slowed rebuilding. In the past year, however, the rebuilding effort has gained momentum, and the City recently announced that over \$1 billion dollars has been spent, much of that on infrastructure and street and landscape improvements.

NEIGHBORHOOD AND SITE

The project site is a portion of the parking lot of a church located just north of downtown – perhaps a mile up Canal Street from the French Quarter. Several hospitals and related facilities are clustered together; at least one of them is vacant as a result of Katrina. A new cancer research center is under construction on an adjacent property and two new hospitals, Charity and the Veteran’s Administration, are planned for the area. Some of the hospitals are connected by a pedestrian overpass or sky-bridge that spans an adjacent elevated highway and passes directly over one edge of the site.

St. Joseph Church is a large, red brick, almost cathedral-scaled structure. In the past, it served residents of the surrounding neighborhood, but now there are relatively few houses in the

area, and people tend to come to the church by car from a broader area of the city, since Katrina devastated the area around the church. The Superdome is only a few blocks away, and images of the stadium surrounded by water and providing grossly inadequate refuge to thousands were among the most widely broadcast during the disaster.

In addition to the hospitals, there are many surface parking lots in the neighborhood, including parking lots all around the church. In fact, the church derives some income from renting parking spaces during the week, and it allowed a portion of the lot to be used as the site of the Rebuild Center.

POPULATION SERVED

There are three broad categories of homeless persons served at the Rebuild Center. The first group served is the chronically homeless, who were homeless prior to Katrina.

A second group was made homeless by Katrina after their dwellings were rendered unfit and/or their means of employment or support were destroyed. Some of these people may have had temporary housing, but have lost it more recently. In November 2007, the *Times-Picayune* reported that 550 families living in FEMA trailers were being evicted and were left to face the acute shortage of affordable housing.

Rebuild Center guests enjoying lunch

The third group consists of immigrant workers, who came to New Orleans seeking employment following Katrina, and for one reason or another have not been earning enough money to obtain adequate housing. Most of them came originally from Mexico and other Latin American countries, but may have been in the US prior to Katrina; some are legal residents and some are not. The Hispanic Apostolate estimates that as many as 12,000 Latino workers may have come to New Orleans under these circumstances. They expected well paying jobs related to hurricane cleanup and construction, and many found them. Even for this group, housing is and was scarce and expensive. As a result, many people crowd into small homes and apartments, and some live out of their cars. Others have experienced employment problems, including exploitation, failure to receive wages, and uncompensated job-related injuries, which have left them homeless.

The profile of people served at the Center (based on records kept for a period of time soon after the Center opened) is 90% male, 15% to 20% veterans, 65% to 70% African-American and the balance mostly white. There are not insubstantial numbers of Latinos (but fewer than planners anticipated). There are some, but relatively few, teenagers and mothers with small children, as they are generally directed to other facilities specifically targeted toward meeting their needs.

SERVICES PROVIDED

Each of these groups has somewhat different needs for services beyond the basics of food and hygiene. Chronically homeless individuals often suffer from mental illness and/or substance abuse problems and need counseling and medical care. Many are veterans and are eligible for VA services. They may or may not be interested in permanent or transitional housing, which is by contrast a primary concern of those rendered homeless by Katrina. Displaced workers often need assistance with employment, benefits, workers compensation, or in resolving salary disputes. Any of the groups may need help with establishing or replacing lost identification papers. All these and other services are offered at the Rebuild Center to the people it consistently refers to respectfully as its “guests” (more detail on meal service and assistance with documentation is provided later in this chapter):

- The Center is open five days per week from 8 am till 2:30 pm.
- Meals include lunch and a morning snack two or three days per week. A hot meal is assured for at least 150 people (on other days, guests get sandwiches). On hot meal days the turnout is greater, recently drawing around 235 people, which is essentially the maximum capacity of the Center (slower days might see 170 to 180 guests). Staff members distribute colored tickets that establish the sequence for receiving meals. They randomize the order in which the colors are distributed,

so getting to the Center early assures one of getting a ticket for a meal, but not of being served first. (It is reported that some guests will give their ticket to another guest if they feel that s/he needs the hot meal more than they do – a strikingly generous gesture on the part of people who have next to nothing.)

Other days, the meal may or may not be hot and somewhat fewer people come. Food is provided by a list of donor groups who commit to providing one or more lunch per month. Donors include schools, service clubs, markets, hotels, restaurants, and individuals. Others provide food on occasion or make related donations. There are three dedicated volunteers who make sandwiches every morning using bread supplied from the bakery of a Benedictine monastery.

- Showers include use of a towel and toiletries, as well as sinks with mirrors for shaving and make-up.
- Laundry is offered on a first-come, first-served basis for about 25 people per day. Laundry is done by staff. Hospital-type scrubs are provided to those who have only the clothes they are wearing,
- Telephone calls include both local and long distance, but are limited to 10 minutes if others are waiting.
- Guests can use the Center's address to receive mail.
- Health and mental health care is available several times per week. Health care professionals from local institutions provide walk-in care, assistance with prescriptions and



vouchers to pay for them. TB tests are also given (these are needed in order to be admitted to a shelter).

- Assistance with identification documents, including birth certificates. Once a week, the police run a vanload of up to nine guests from the Center to the DMV to get their IDs. Homeless people may have their IDs lost or stolen, in part because they often are without a secure place to store their possessions. Lack of a proper ID often prevents an individual from being able to work. Obtaining ID contributes to a feeling of identify and integrity; one guest reportedly said, “Now I’m a person,” after reclaiming his ID.
- Other legal and notary services, through lawyers who come once or twice a week to offer *pro bono* assistance. Many cases relate to family law matters such as divorce or child support.

Left: Policies for guests
Right: Guests line up for lunch

- Wage claims assistance for those who are having problems with a current or former employer.
- Housing assistance services for locating affordable rental housing and obtaining HUD vouchers.
- Mortgage readiness classes are offered to first-time homebuyers (who are more likely to be moving from rental housing than directly from homelessness). Tulane Canal Neighborhood Development Corporation and Lantern Light also partner to build new homes for first-time buyers.
- Language interpretation is available to guests who do not speak English (particularly common is Spanish).
- Emergency groceries and financial assistance for neighborhood residents are part of an outreach program run from the Center.
- Referrals are provided to services offered by other agencies in the city.
- Pastoral services are offered on request and without pressure or proselytizing.

An initial snapshot of Center use was taken eight weeks after the opening. In that time, 5,429 people used the Center and received the following levels of service:



- 2,393 took showers
- 1,447 received toiletry kits
- 958 had their laundry done
- 7,000 phone calls were made
- 4,895 meals were served
- 116 obtained their ID or copies of birth certificates
- 233 families from the neighborhood received groceries
- 134 received counsel from attorneys and notaries
- 324 visited with a physicians assistant and the mobile medical team
- 85 received mental health case management services
- 55 Latino workers were counseled on employment, documentation, immigration and health care.

Sinks for washing and shaving located in semi-outdoor space

Though it is not likely apparent to the guests, the collaborating agencies divide up the services based, in part, on their experience and expertise (e.g., the Harry Tompson Center provides showers, laundry and telephone access; the Presentation Sisters take responsibility for meals and IDs, the Hispanic Apostolate offers wage claim assistance, and Lantern Light provides emergency groceries and mail service). As extensive as they are, services are limited by available resources of people, time and funding.

On the other hand, it is important to see the Center as part of a continuum of care for the homeless. We met with Vicki Judice of UNITY, which coordinates services including outreach, supportive services, and a variety of transitional and permanent housing programs. In their outreach work, UNITY staff members seek out people who need assistance wherever they may be – including on the street. In this way, the Center is remarkably useful to other agencies as a place where homeless people can be found and matched to available services or benefits. The Center reduces the agencies' need to search for the homeless on the streets in order to provide services.



Guests visiting over lunch

PROJECT HISTORY: COMING TOGETHER IN COLLABORATION

This project is the result of several threads coming together following Hurricane Katrina. One thread involves the **Harry Tompson Center**. Before the storms, the homeless population in central New Orleans was served by the Harry Tompson Center, a service ministry operated by Immaculate Conception Church and the New Orleans Jesuits. At that time, the Tompson Center offered daytime services including showers and laundry – much as it does today through its partnership with St. Joseph Rebuild Center. In 2005, Katrina flooded the building that housed the Harry Tompson Center. The landlord was reportedly uninterested in cooperating with the Tompson Center to make repairs and reopen – which the organization badly wanted to do, as its services were needed more desperately than ever. In the interim, Don Thompson (note the different spelling), the Tompson Center's executive director, moved his family to the mid-West following the storm, so that one of his children could get needed services no longer available in New Orleans. However, the Tompson Center continued to search for ways to reopen.

The second thread concerns the **Presentation Sisters** of the Blessed Virgin Mary, an order of nuns formed in Ireland to serve the poor. Looking for a focal project, their North American conference selected New Orleans based on the recommendation of their Sister Vera Butler, who was already working in New Orleans with their Lantern Light organization. When Katrina hit, the delegation of

four other Sisters was actually en route to New Orleans, and had to operate out of highly provisional and unsatisfactory facilities. Still, they managed to start a feeding program and offered other services from a trailer on the St. Joseph Church site. In addition to services listed in the prior section, they also build houses in the neighborhood for first-time buyers. The Sisters have built seven houses so far, of which five have been sold at highly subsidized prices (up to \$65,000).

The third thread involves the **Hispanic Apostolate** Community Services of the Catholic Charities, Archdiocese of New Orleans, a ministry oriented toward meeting the needs of the Spanish-speaking population, and particularly of the recent immigrants described above. The Hispanic Apostolate was the third agency to join the Rebuild Center and has the smallest presence, typically one staff member.

As these groups struggled to find a way to offer their services, the **St. Joseph Church** of the Congregation of the Mission/Vincentians and its pastor, Father Perry, hosted discussions about how the groups might work together to create a facility where they would accomplish more together than they could individually. This would also foster the Church's services to the poor in its immediately surrounding area.

As the groups defined their roles and the overall purpose of the Rebuild Center, they developed the following mission statement.

“...to provide a setting, resources, and opportunities for collaboration among Catholic and other faith-based organizations in the City of New Orleans. The Center will work with needy and displaced residents to rebuild their lives and repopulate this neighborhood. We will be a Center of hope for this community.”

The collaboration among the groups is a strong one, but it required a great deal of effort to develop. Each agency was operating independently before Katrina, and some of the services they provided overlapped. As plans for the Rebuild Center coalesced, the agencies had to compromise and each had to give up certain functions. Agencies were required to agree on what services would be added and who would do what. They also had to develop a new identity for the Center that was not aligned with any one of the agencies – especially St. Joseph Church, since it is right there on the site.

A memorandum of understanding among the parties governs their relationships, and leaders of each group meet regularly as an executive committee (now once every two weeks) to identify and resolve issues and to ensure coordination. This cooperation generates some very positive synergies. For example, the Sisters, who are older, enjoy the vitality of the young volunteers at the Tompson Center. The volunteers, in turn, benefit from the Sisters' wisdom and calmness. Still, concerns remain on the part of some partners about “loss or confusion of identity,” particularly for the



Tompson Center, which had operated independently for many years prior to joining the Rebuild Center. Mary Baudouin, who works for the Social Ministries and is a board member of the Harry Tompson Center, notes that “Once it became a member of the St. Joseph Rebuild Center,” the Harry Tompson Center “does not get the credit it needs for work that they do as an individual non-profit.”

Other issues relate to a lack of clarity about liability, authority, and responsibility, particularly since legal and medical services are offered. Liability appears to fall mainly to the Vincentians, since the Center is on their property, but issues of authority and responsibility are still evolving. At the time of the site visit, the Center was in the process of forming a 501(c)(3) non-profit corporation and was planning to appoint an executive director who would be mission-driven, not drawn from the partner groups, and would provide coordination and focus on fund-raising for the Center. Each of the partners intended to contract with the corporation to provide its services and the Center planned to formalize a lease on the ground from the Church.

THE REBUILD CENTER’S PEOPLE

Talking with Guests

We spoke with three guests at some length (they were selected by the Center, presumably with the expectation that they would be at least generally positive).

Gloria is a single, middle-aged woman, local to New Orleans, who lived through Katrina. Her rent tripled, she “hit a brick wall” and wound up on the streets. She finds the Center to be a “life-saver” with compassionate staff (in contrast to the shelters where she finds staff to be abusive). When not staying with friends she prefers to be on the street and, at those times, comes to the Center for showers, laundry, meals and companionship. She describes herself as “houseless” and is on a list to get into permanent, subsidized housing.

Brian, a Caucasian electrician with 30 years experience, came from California to New Orleans looking for construction work after Katrina. He found work, but in his second year here his wallet was stolen, and he could not get work without his ID. The Center helped him to reapply for identification, and finally, after 11 months, he has received it. He is now looking for work again. In the meantime, he lives alone in an abandoned house about four blocks from the Center with no water, power, or locks on the door – but it does have a roof. He hides his stuff to keep it from being stolen. He is upbeat about getting work, but referred to the Center as a “great necessity” for him in his time of need.

Left: Gloria, a guest of the Rebuild Center
Right: Brian, a guest of the Rebuild Center

Howard is an older African American man with serious health problems. He lives in a truck parked where he used to work on the other side of the river. He does have water and bathroom access, but he only sleeps and leaves his things there. He prefers the truck to the shelters, which are “bad” and which you must leave early, taking your things with you. He rides the bus to the Center, arriving a little after it opens, receives his mail, eats the meals and uses the phone service, medical treatment and referrals. When he speaks of the Center, he uses the word “we,” indicating his sense of belonging, and calls it his “lifeline.” He feels welcome here and states that there are no color barriers. On the weekends, when the Center is closed, Howard “suffers.” (We were told, however, that keeping the Center open on weekends would add about 40% to its budget and staffing needs and is infeasible at this time.)

All three guests had only good things to say about the Center, praising its services as unique (offered only there) and of special quality. They found the Center to be relaxing and the food to be good. When asked about what might be improved, the main suggestions were for expanded days and hours of service, longer phone calls, more showers, and the provision of hair dryers. Lockers for storing possessions were also proposed, for reasons of security and to assist in looking for employment, since having to carry around your belongings can seriously interfere with looking for work.



Talking with Staff and Volunteers

Don Thompson is the executive director of the Harry Tompson Center and was our principal contact at the Rebuild Center. Don spent some time as a seminarian and has always worked in the ministries. As noted in the Project History section, Don led the Tompson Center for the five years prior to Katrina but had to move his family out of state following the storms. However, he continued to visit New Orleans and participated in the discussions about forming the Rebuild Center. By the time planning was under way, Don had moved back to New Orleans and played a very active role, particularly during design and construction. He had never built a project before, but he became the *de facto* clients’ representative.

Left: Rebuild Center Director Don Thompson
 Right top: Howard, a Rebuild Center guest
 Right bottom: Sister Vera Butler of Presentation Sisters Lantern Light

As involved as Dan was in the details of planning for the Center, he is still surprised at how wonderful the Center and its spaces are. He has come to recognize the extent to which the Rebuild Center's design contributes to the way services are provided and the message of hope that the Center conveys. Don told us that they would still have been able to offer services in a lesser setting, but it would not have been as conducive to the way the Center wants to operate. Don learned that design was critical to the more subtle aspects of the Center's mission: helping people feel better about themselves and their prospects.

The Presentation Sisters. We spoke with Sisters Vera and Enid. As described in the Project History section, their order had committed to a project in New Orleans just before Katrina. Sister Vera was already there, but the other four Sisters were on their way when the storm hit. Initially, they had to commute three hours from Alabama, and on several occasions had to depend on the generosity of friends for lodging, experiencing their own "houseless-ness" before finding a place. They worked out of a trailer on the St. Joseph Church site, since the church was condemned after the storm due to a lack of basic services such as power, plumbing, and air conditioning.

The Sisters started by helping local families until the homeless started to filter back into the area. At first they provided food from the trailer, with no place to sit in the parking lot. The Sisters worked with the other organizations to develop the vision of a one-stop service center

for the homeless. They describe their approach to operating the feeding program as a combination of joyful and fun on the one hand (there was live music one day we visited), while intentionally firm and orderly on the other (to keep things calm). According to the Sisters, the Center is "a place of beauty" that is safe and peaceful. Possible improvements are more counter space and equipment for food handling, and more shelter from wind and rain.

Justine Diamond graduated from Loyola University in New Orleans with a strong interest in community action. She interned with, and now works for, the Hispanic Apostolate at the Center. She focuses on services to Spanish-speaking guests, including translation and referrals to other agencies, but also assists them and others directly, especially with worker's rights issues. She says that many workers, and especially immigrants, are exploited by employers (offered a certain wage and then paid less or not at all) or "thrown away" (allowed to work in unsafe conditions, injured and then fired). It is precisely these types of experiences that contribute to a person being at risk for becoming homeless.

Father Perry Henry is the pastor of St. Joseph Church and the "effective" overall director of the Rebuild Center. He described the chaotic situation following Katrina. Though his church sits high off the ground, it was surrounded by two feet of water. Electricity and air conditioning were disabled and their pantry for feeding the homeless was wrecked. The church suffered limited but not



insignificant damage, with broken windows, a damaged roof and some mold; it cost \$1.5 million to repair. Father Henry was approached by the Harry Tompson Center and the Presentation Sisters about creating a day service center, and they later brought in the diocese and the Hispanic Apostolate. Henry was active in the planning phase but had little sense of how well it would come out. For example, he doubted that the landscaping was worth the cost and feared it would get trashed, but has found that guests are attentive and respectful because of the quality of the place. One change he would make would be to fully enclose the multipurpose room so it can be heated and cooled, making it more useful.

Volunteers

Emma is a graduate of Catholic University and came to New Orleans to do a year of service through the Jesuit Volunteer Service. She was concerned about coming to the area in the heat of summer,

but immediately found the Center to be “beautiful” and an amazing experience. She especially values the personal connections to guests and their stories. Emma recounted one man’s experience of losing his family to Katrina, and how moved she was to track his recovery from post-traumatic stress disorder and depression with the assistance of a mental health referral from the Center.

Brandon is a recent graduate of Fordham in the Bronx. For him, a year of service was an opportunity for spiritual and emotional growth, and a chance to travel. While the work is demanding, he appreciates the non-judgmental quality of the services and the opportunity to engage with the guests. He described one man who is mentally ill but has shown some progress over time, to the point where he offered his razor to another guest who had run out of them, saying, “That’s my neighbor.” Brandon was also moved by the generosity of some guests who offer their own meal to other, more needy guests who arrive late and have no meal ticket.

Sister Magdalen is trained as a nurse and has long worked with the poor. She finds the experience of working at the Center to be “wonderful.” While a few guests may be disgruntled, most are grateful, and she enjoys getting to know them.

Volunteers agreed that added services could include haircuts and programs to motivate homeless people to get off the streets. Facility improvements could include adding a room with tables for services

Father Perry Henry, St. Joseph Church

such as counseling on veterans' benefits or alcohol abuse. More indoor space in addition to the multipurpose room would also be useful, so that guests have a space to congregate when it rains. There were also some comments about the rigidity and regimentation of services offered by other agencies, although the relationship among them was described as one of mutual respect.

DESIGN AND CONSTRUCTION

As the coalition of organizations formed and thoughts turned toward construction of the Center, the idea of a very quick solution using trailers was put forward. However, the functional program was not well defined and there was not yet a clear sense of what was needed. One of the Jesuits suggested inviting assistance from the only Jesuit community design center in the country, the Detroit Collaborative Design Center of the University of Detroit Mercy (UDM), led by Dan Pitera. Based on his experience elsewhere, Dan realized that he would need a strong local collaborator who knew local codes and conditions and could serve as architect of record. An initial candidate who had worked with St. Joseph Church turned out not to be a good choice and Dan worked through Tulane's City Build group to identify Wayne Troyer as a collaborator.

While the allocation of responsibilities between UDM and Troyer is at first glance clear-cut, the relationship was in fact highly collaborative, with both parties contributing design ideas and

sending drawings back and forth between their offices. In general, Troyer was responsible for designing the utilities, walks, trellises and roofs, while UDM was responsible for the in-fill buildings. Trailers were still used, but not the FEMA types originally considered. The fees were very modest, with Troyer being paid \$25,000 (half of which went to the structural engineer) and UDM getting \$10,000 for master planning and design, plus additional compensation for construction work.

Three initial planning workshops were led by Pitera, using techniques for programming that have effectively helped other clients to identify core values, images and functions. As the design evolved, models were built to help the clients visualize each space. Some of the key design goals and challenges included:

- Short construction time so the facility could open as soon as possible, given the pressing level of need
- Meeting a very limited budget
- New hurricane-related structural criteria, including resisting 130 mph wind loads
- Touching the ground lightly and using materials and assemblies that could be disassembled, removed and reused or recycled
- Integrating the trailers but avoiding a design that would look like a trailer park

- Creating a “place of dignity” that respects of the needs of the guests and, to the extent possible, allows for privacy and a sense of personal space
- Integrating the landscaping and open space to make a garden

As planning progressed, the scope of the project – and its costs – increased. Scope “creep” was largely due to two factors; first, expansion and integration of program services; and second, making the structure more than just a collection of trailers. This posed budgetary challenges, since funders had started the project with a very low number in mind (on the order of \$250,000). However, they rose to the challenge and were able to obtain what was needed. It was reportedly a good thing that the “scope creep” and cost escalation were gradual, since all involved parties had committed to the concept by the time the cost increases occurred and it was too late to turn back.

The drawings were completed and Don Thompson was able to obtain a building permit over the counter (partly because the project was viewed as having a temporary character). Bids were solicited, but the situation was chaotic in terms of availability of supplies and busy contractors; only three bids were received. There was concern about accepting the low bid (\$481,000) because it was so much lower than the other two, which were close to each other (at \$627,000 and \$657,000). The fear was that the low bidder was not charging enough money to allow him to complete the project or

ITEM	COST
Detroit Mercy Community Design Center (fees and construction labor)	\$85,932.00
Fees & Permits	34,053.54
Site Construction (incl. decks & roofs)	548,884.48
Building Units (trailers)	234,999.43
Furniture & Equipment - Indoor	43,242.41
Furniture & Equipment - Outdoor	1,596.92
Art/Mural Project	20,288.17
Parking Lot	47,624.00
Contingency	4,526.29
Total	\$1,021,147.24

provide the expected moderate level of quality. The final cost, with changes, for this part of the construction was \$521,000 including driveways and fences (with “real” change orders amounting to only about \$21,000). The construction costs break down as follows:

The medical building, constructed later, cost approximately \$93,000 to build and furnish.

The total spent is essentially equal to the total raised. Substantial donations were received from almost 30 different sources. Those who

gave over \$25,000 include Catholic Charities of New Orleans, Congregation of the Mission, Daughters of Charity, the Harry Tompson Center (Jesuits), the McClure Fund, a private individual, the Marist Society, Rotary International, the St. Vincent De Paul Society, the United Church of Christ, the Vincentian Systemic Change Fund, and St. Joseph Church (and the donations it received).

Construction proceeded in a very atypical way, with the general contractor and the Detroit Mercy students working on site at the same time. This happened because the overall framework of decks, roofs and trellises, which was built by the contractor, was not completed prior to the arrival of the students who needed to construct certain buildings within that framework. This led to some tensions that were eventually resolved, largely through the students and their highly experienced supervisor gaining the grudging respect of the contractor's superintendent.



Construction of the Rebuild Center with trailers in foreground

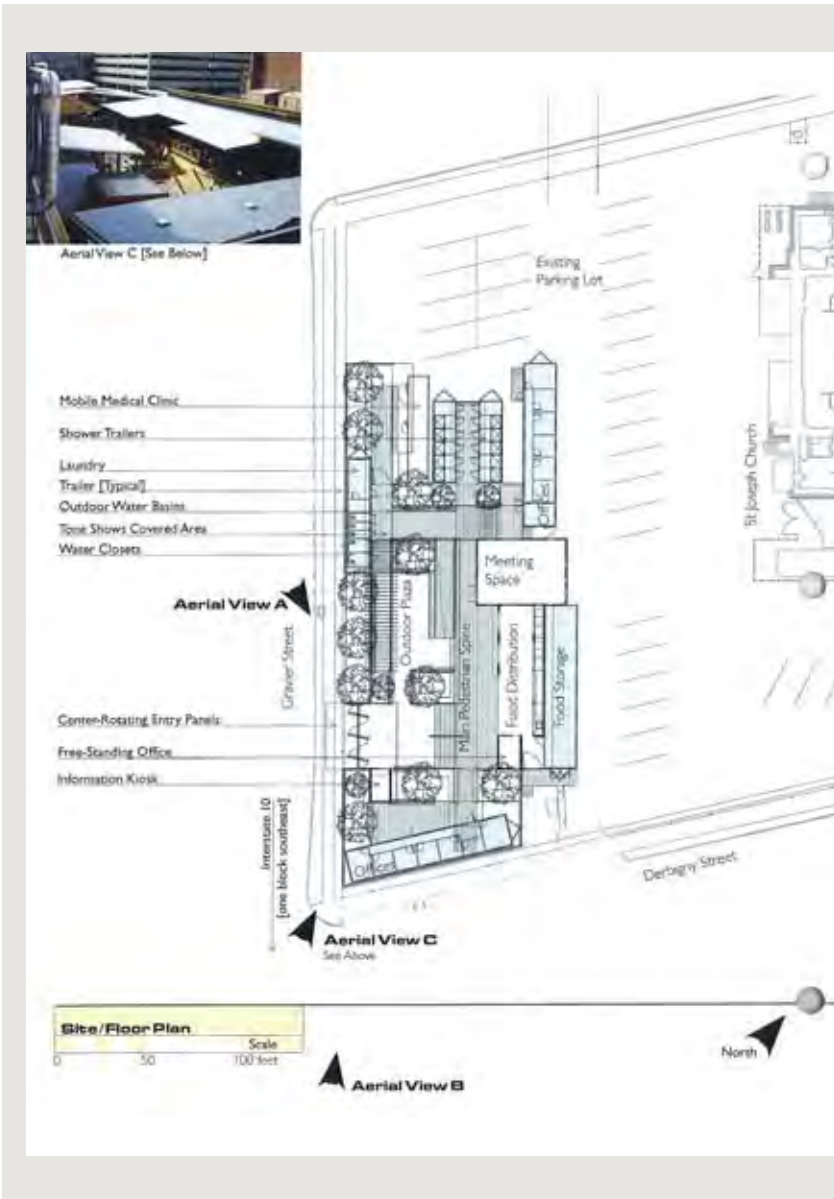
ARCHITECTURE

The design of the Rebuild Center is an unusual combination of four elements. These include six trailers that were specially manufactured for the project; a number of small buildings or rooms constructed on site; a “framework” of walkways, decks, floating roofs and trellises which tie together the trailers and other buildings; and the landscaping, which is also inserted into the framework.

This design approach enabled very rapid completion of the facility (which was desperately needed) and lets the Center sit lightly on the parking lot site, which might need to be reclaimed for other uses in the mid-term future.

The trailers house specific functions that benefited from the technology and speed of off-site construction. Three trailers are plumbing-intensive: one accommodates toilets and laundry, and the other two house showers. Two more trailers are subdivided into small offices, and the last trailer stores food and other supplies (placed in a trailer because it required air conditioning).

Several parts of the project were built on-site for specific purposes: an entry check-in kiosk, food service, and a multi-purpose room. Some of their surfaces are covered in durable, attractive hardwood (*Angel's Heart*, *Hymenolobium petraeum*). The medical area was built later as an infill (it had been the intent that mobile medical units would pull in, but not all providers had them and some of the



ones that did not fit into the allotted space). All these were designed by the Detroit Collaborative Design Center and constructed by students from Detroit Mercy who worked as paid interns under an experienced construction superintendent.

These buildings sit under independently supported roofs that float above them. All of the decks, walkways, roofs and trellises were designed by the local architect and built by the contractor, along with power, lighting and plumbing for these areas and site utility hook-ups. The benches and stairs provide many places for people to sit. The trellises, roofs and decks tie together the other structures. They sit lightly on the ground, almost floating above the parking lot paving (which shows through in places, including the yellow stripes) and resting on piers or shallow foundations. The plan allows for cross-breezes, especially important during hot weather.

Finally, the landscaping is integrated into the design with substantial planted areas at the perimeter and interior. It incorporates many tropical and sub-tropical specimens that thrive in New Orleans, including palms, bamboo, jasmine, and many others. With most of two years' growth, the landscaping is lush and has a major and very positive impact on the appearance of the facility.

The facility is organized with its main entry along Gravier Street, under the pedestrian sky-bridge and opposite a small Asian restaurant and a parking lot. There are three large pivoting doors, each with

Floor Plan of Rebuild Center with aerial view, courtesy of Detroit Mercy Design Collaborative



a strong graphic symbol; there is also a considerable landscaped bed with vines growing up the wall. Upon entering, guests check in with a volunteer who records their name and the services they are requesting (showers, laundry and phone use are first-come, first-served). There is a paved area with well-utilized bike racks and a number of benches along the lower terrace. There is also a wooden ramp and set of stairs that lead up to the main level, raised to protect it from possible future flooding.

At the south end is a trailer that houses the Presentation Sisters/Lantern Light offices, with a large deck and seating in front of it. Facing the entry gates is the food service facility, with a six-panel mural depicting biblical water themes at one end, and the multi-purpose meeting room at the other. The food service counter is



closed off with sliding panels, which are opened when food is available during the morning snack and lunch service. Toward the north end are a number of outdoor sinks (three large troughs with a total of nine faucets and mirrors) and access to the phone room, showers and toilets, the medical area and other offices. There is also a more tranquil courtyard that serves as a waiting room for those seeking medical services. The facility is walled off from the street – on two edges of the corner by the trailers and polycarbonate plastic fencing, which provides a translucent visual screen. At the rear, the parking lot gives access for deliveries and staff.

Placing so much of the facility outdoors, even under cover, could only be contemplated in a mild climate such as New Orleans. Even here, there are times when it is very hot or when wind or wind-driven rain make it difficult to fully utilize all areas – a trade-off that the operators were quite willing to make, and for which design modifications are being explored (added screening in certain areas to reduce the wind, possibly added trellising or roofing). On the other hand, the substantial outdoor space was reported to be particularly comfortable for some of the homeless guests who tend to feel confined and even claustrophobic when indoors.

View of Rebuild Center courtyard

Left: Gravier Street entrance doors

Right: Gravier Street entrance elevation with sky bridge overhead



With its timber decks, trellises and roof structures, and verdant landscaping, the character of the Center was described as a campground or an Asian spa. In terms both of functional support and quality of environment, the design achieves substantial effect with very limited means. Guests and staff alike appreciate the design quality. Don Thompson finds the setting to be “restorative” and to contribute to the guests’ sense of self-esteem.

Considering the somewhat temporary nature of the construction and the very intensive level of use, the Center is holding up quite well. Some of the benches require repair, the outdoor ceiling fans had to be removed, and a number of relatively small modifications have been suggested (as mentioned throughout this chapter). The Detroit Community Design Center is planning to return during the summer of 2009 to make repairs and construct improvements. This arrangement, at Don’s suggestion, will ensure the integrity of the design concept. Though the normally anticipated useful life of the trailers and other structures might only be in the range of five to ten years, it is possible that adequate maintenance might extend that considerably – if the program endures.

FINANCES

Budgets for the Rebuild Center are difficult to interpret, since what is likely their main cost item, staffing, seems to be off-line (in other words, it appears that staff are provided by the agencies that participate and are not in the Center’s budget; these off-line staffing costs amount to approximately \$90,000 per year). Other off-line costs include the money spent by the Sisters for food and related supplies. Each agency raises money to pay for the services they provide, and contribute proportionately to overall operational costs. That said the Rebuild Center’s operating budget is as follows:

The operations costs are split three ways by Harry Thompson Center, Lantern Light, and Catholic Charities, except in the case of electricity and water costs, 60% of which are covered by the Harry Thompson Center, and 20% each by Lantern Light and Catholic Charities. This results in the Thompson Center paying just over \$33,000 per year, while the other two organizations pay just over \$20,000 each.

Views of Rebuild Center courtyard

REBUILD CENTER BUDGET

Operations 2008-2009	Cost (\$)	
Janitorial	15,000	grant pays \$12,500
Electricity	21,000	
Water	10,000	
Cable (internet)	3,600	
Phone	4,920	
Office Supplies / Printing	2,500	
Professional Fees	2,500	
Repairs / Maintenance	7,500	
Property & Casualty Insurance	10,000	
Contracted Services (garbage, etc.)	5,300	St. Joseph pays \$500
Miscellaneous	5,000	
Total	87,320	

IMPACTS

Overall, the Center appears to be achieving its intended impacts. The services it offers are very much in demand, and are highly appreciated by its guests who tell poignant stories about how important the Center is to them and how well they are treated there. The Center is for day use only (and thus can only be expected to have a limited impact on people's lives), but it is part of a local continuum of services for the homeless that includes longer-term solutions related to education, job training and placement, and transitional and permanent housing.

From a design perspective, the facilities are very supportive of their functions and provide a remarkably attractive setting. Physically, the Center is a positive element in the urban streetscape, with generous landscaping and screening, offering relief from the otherwise hard and mostly impersonally scaled surroundings.

Assessing Project Success

SUCCESS IN MEETING PROJECT GOALS

1. To provide a dignified, well-designed daytime service facility for homeless people. To meet the most basic needs of homeless people in an environment that is safe and respectful.

The Center appears to have fully achieved this goal. It is perceived by guests and staff to be dignified, relaxing, and attractive. Guests treat the facility and staff with respect, express a strong sense of appreciation and identification with the Center, and understand that it was designed and built specifically to meet their needs.

2. To contribute to the urban fabric of the city by transforming a parking lot into a handsome building that relates to the street.

The Center is successful in meeting the street and presenting itself to its guests and the public. Where there are trailers at the street, they are mostly masked by translucent screens. In addition, there

are attractive gates and a substantial landscaped planter including vines that climb up a trellis. The rear of the facility is mainly utilitarian, with the trailers exposed and accessed by staff and service vehicles from a paved parking lot.

3. To create the highest quality structure possible with limited funds.

The Center achieves a very impressive level of quality with extremely limited means. It makes use of inexpensive, structural wood and landscaping to create a pleasant environment. Where “extra” money was spent on optional items (landscaping, detailing, art works) they contribute greatly to the positive impact – and are felt by the Center’s frugal leaders to have been well worth the cost.

4. To create a model for providing temporary shelter and services in response to disaster situations.

It is difficult to assess this project as a model, partly because it responds to very particular circumstances and is operated by a special set of faith-based charitable agencies. While it was designed and built relatively quickly, and the use of trailers contributed to the speed of realization, it still took about a year – so it was far from instant. However, the design does respond to its potentially temporary longevity by touching the ground lightly, using removable trailers, and employing structural connections that can be unbolted or unscrewed for possible dismantling.

SELECTION COMMITTEE COMMENTS

The 2009 Selection Committee saw St. Joseph Rebuild Center as a significant project that deals effectively with several important issues: creating well-designed temporary space in disaster situations; providing humane and effective services for the homeless; creating a sense of place on the edge of industrial downtowns. The Committee noted that there are a growing number of people across this country whose basic survival needs are unmet, and that St. Joseph responds to this problem with a structure that is elegant and inexpensive, and with programs that have proven successful over time. This was considered to be a very important accomplishment that provides a national model both for disaster relief, and for homeless services that are not disaster-related.

St. Joseph Rebuild Center was also commended for its architectural quality. The Center is built with very simple and inexpensive materials, yet is extremely effective in creating a welcoming oasis for its clients. The natural materials (such as wood), economy of architectural gestures, and generous landscaping all combine to create an environment that offers welcome relief from the barren industrial environment of the neighborhood and the social ills faced by many of the guests. The Committee felt the project strongly demonstrated the way in which quality of design can impact everyday experience, and that this was a particularly important concept for the students who helped design and build the project. 🐦

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Detail of outdoor basins
Right: Trailer entries with covered hallway