

LOUISIANA BUILDER

Volume 18, Issue 4 Summer 2010

**Oil Spill Spells
Building Woes**

**Technology
Aids Builders in
Communication
& Efficiency**

**The
Look of
Change**

**NOLA Builders
Work to Meet
Demands for
Affordable
Housing**

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On the cover: A not-for-profit organization, Build Now is working to meet New Orleans' ongoing demand for new, affordable homes that can stand up to storms.



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A mantra of the New Orleans' faithful, it's the name of a nonprofit organization that erects affordable, hurricane-proof homes...



Build Now model house.

Sarah Essex

BUILD NOW

If you've motored past brand-new, pastel-colored shotguns in New Orleans and thought that the Ninth Ward or Gentilly streets that they're located on look more inviting than before, it may be the work of Build Now. Founded in 2007, the non-profit group is a licensed, residential contractor, erecting sturdy, affordable homes for low- and middle-income dwellers displaced by Katrina.

Families with houses that were too damaged to renovate have turned to Build Now to put new structures on their old lots—using government and private financing and the buyers' insurance money.

Tess Monaghan, Build Now's executive director, said "nowhere else in the country has there been an equivalent devastation of a city's single-family housing stock." Five years after Katrina, New Orleans still has more blighted homes than other U.S. metropolises.

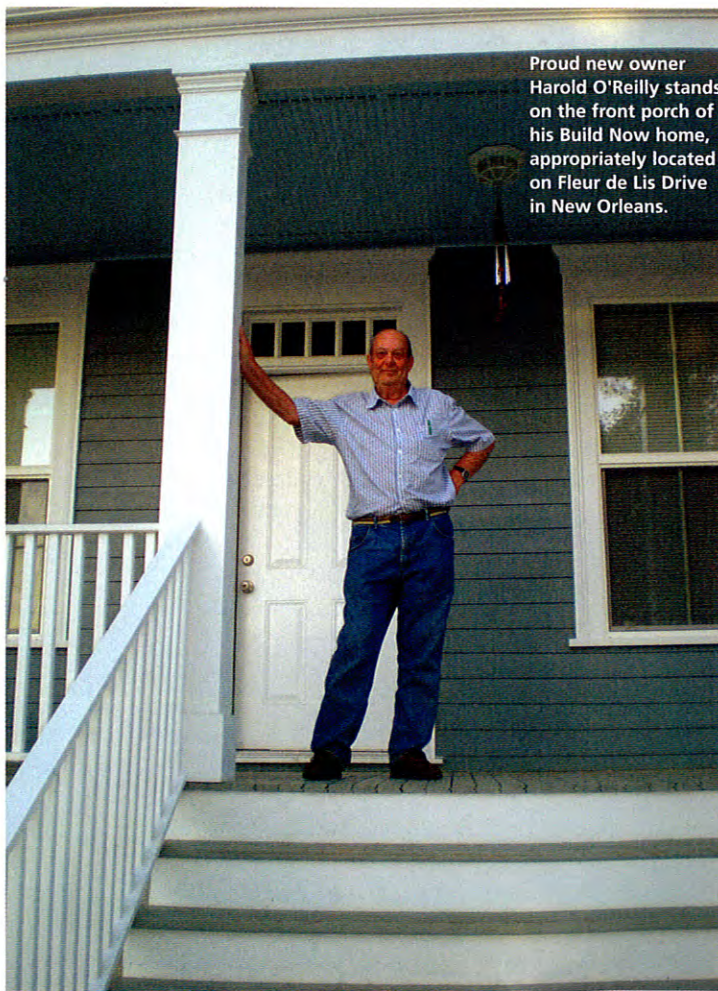
Dotting nearly every Crescent City neighborhood are debilitated structures that look like places where "The Addams Family" characters would have felt at home. These former domiciles are often covered with vines, and their fronts display post-Katrina "X codes"—left over from inspections by Federal Emergency Management Agency in late 2005.

Three years ago, Tess's father, architect William Monaghan, started Build Now because he was worried about the city's slow recovery pace. The group is supported by a foundation, charitable donations and fees paid by home buyers.

"We build simple, elevated houses, using practices that have been tested and proven in the region over time," Tess Monaghan said. Other non-profits are building for families who lost their homes, but we are unique in our commitment to construct energy-efficient, affordable houses on a homeowner's property in a traditional New Orleans style," she said. "While many new technologies exist, we use basic building practices to withstand hurricanes. Our homes range in price from \$100,000 to \$180,000."

Those prices are reasonable in a city where new and existing homes are widely viewed as expensive and out of reach for many returning residents and would-be buyers. The city's home values were already on the rise before Katrina and continued to escalate after the hurricane reduced housing stock.

Build Now has completed eighteen houses that



Proud new owner Harold O'Reilly stands on the front porch of his Build Now home, appropriately located on Fleur de Lis Drive in New Orleans.



K. Morgan Sasser

are inhabited by families, and is working on another twenty—scattered through the upper and lower Ninth Ward, Gentilly, Lakeview and Arabi.

Floors and Rafters Well Tied To Prevent Weak Links

To create a hurricane-resistant structure, “we designed the wind-load design in-house, and it was reviewed by David R. O’Reilly Engineering Consultants” in New Orleans, Monaghan said. “To prevent a house from being washed or blown away, we start with a continuous, unified foundation system,” she explained. “Rafters and floors are all tied together with hurricane fasteners and straps in an integrated framing system.” Homes are built to have no weak links, and roofs and walls can withstand 130-mile winds, which are far greater than the blasts that New Orleans felt in Katrina. While flooding caused the vast majority of the destruction, wind-damaged roofs that leaked during the hurricane also did substantial damage to houses, she noted.

Monaghan said pressure-treated, wood pilings are used to make a sturdy foundation in the unstable ground of New Orleans. Piling foundations are designed to be environmentally sound. In the foundation system, pilings are cut off at the height desired for

the house, and then tied together with double, 2-inch by 12-inch wood girders, and topped with the first floor joists and deck. Wood girders are pressure-treated to resist termites and moisture damage.

In Build Now homes, floor joists are connected to girders with steel hurricane ties to ensure a connection between house and earth, Monaghan said. Walls and roof rafters are connected to floor joists with exterior, structural sheathing that runs the height of the side of the building. Structural members tie the center of the roof to the center walls of the home to prevent uplift.

“Our engineered, wall designs incorporate panels that form sheer walls that will resist 130-mile-per-hour winds, with no damage to the structure of the house,” Monaghan said.

Build Now houses are also designed to address the flooding that was a horror for city dwellers who stayed during Katrina. At that time, floodwater floated many houses off of their foundations and destroyed the structures, Monaghan noted. Her firm attaches its houses to pilings extending as far as 24 feet into the earth, depending on soil conditions at each site.

“Our houses are elevated higher than FEMA-mandated Base Flood Elevations to protect them from future flooding,” Monaghan said. “Floodwater during Katrina ruined many of the elements—electrical, heat-

ing and air conditioning systems, along with sheet rock, flooring, cabinetry and finishes—that constitute up to 90% of a house's cost," she said. "We erect our houses up to eight feet above grade, at no extra cost to buyers, to protect them against future flooding."

Build Now houses "have no bells and whistles," but do have cost-saving, environmentally sustainable features like good cross-ventilation and maximum, natural lighting use, said Monaghan. Structures are classic and local in style, and range from Creole cottages to shotgun and larger homes with porches. Build Now provides a sidewalk, driveway and landscaping at no extra cost.

On its staff, Build Now has a construction manager, home-loan specialist and sales director, and the office handles insurance, permits, surveying and engineering paper work. Under the contractor's guaranteed-pricing policy, the buyer's cost to build stays at the contracted price.

"Most of our homeowners probably wouldn't have been able to return to their pre-storm properties without our program," Monaghan said. "One of our owners was living out of his car for awhile before he bought his Build Now house."

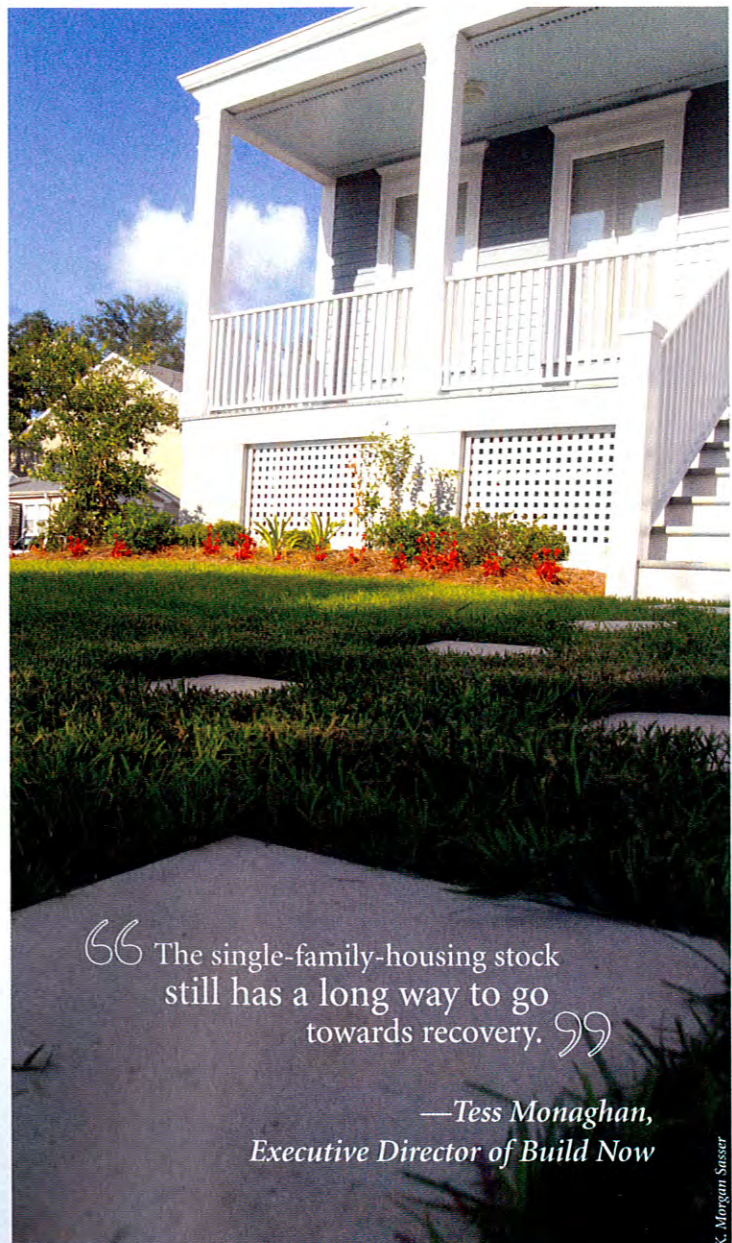
In the city's formerly flooded neighborhoods, "the single-family-housing stock still has a long way to go towards recovery," Monaghan said. "Most families did not receive enough money from Road Home and their insurance companies to rebuild. Many families have not yet been able to rebuild."

Road Home, the biggest, single U.S. housing recovery program ever, was intended to help Gulf residents hurt by Katrina and Rita return to their homes. According to the state, Louisiana has received \$10.3 billion in Road Home money from the federal government, and has spent \$9.5 billion—with \$880 million remaining. The U.S. House of Representatives recently voted to re-designate \$400 million of Louisiana's Road Home funds to emergency spending however, mainly for the oil spill. Louisiana's housing industry is waiting for a U.S. Senate vote on whether that money will be shifted.

In his July 8 "State of the City" address, New Orleans Mayor Mitch Landrieu said that 27% of metropolitan, residential addresses are still unoccupied, hurting surrounding property values and fostering crime. Landrieu cited figures from the Greater New Orleans Community Data Center showing that over 55,000 blighted properties dot the city. And he said that providing affordable housing is key to the urban region's recovery. ■



K. Morgan Susser



“ The single-family-housing stock still has a long way to go towards recovery. ”

—Tess Monaghan,
Executive Director of Build Now

K. Morgan Susser