

Building Great Places

MARIANNE CUSATO

Designer

In 2005, after Hurricane Katrina devastated the Gulf Coast, Marianne Cusato was among a small group of designers and architects summoned to Louisiana. Their charge: design an alternative to the trailers provided as temporary housing to disaster-stricken communities. In 2006, her 308-square-foot Katrina Cottage won the Smithsonian Cooper-Hewitt Design Museum's People's Choice Award. A graduate of the University of Notre Dame School of Architecture, Cusato is the author of two books, *Get Your House Right: Architectural Elements to Use and Avoid* and *The Value of Design*. She is now writing a third book to help people decide where to move, as well as working on a new series of houses called New Economy Homes.



Grade-school architect

Even as a kid in grade school, I was very interested in buildings. I'm from Alaska, and my family would always visit my grandmother in California over spring break. My parents were planning to retire there, so they took us when they looked at houses they were considering. That's when I started drawing up little plans of condos on golf courses. It was fun, and I kept at it over the years.

When I was in junior high, my parents gave me the floor plans for our house so I could see the wall thicknesses and what sizes different elements were in a home. That same year for Christmas, I got a T-square set with a scale and triangles. It was at this time,

when I was in seventh grade, that I decided I wanted to be an architect. I'm very fortunate that I've always known what I was interested in doing.

The heart of architecture

What I really loved about Notre Dame was that they teach traditional architecture and urbanism; it's one of

the very few schools that teaches about forms and cities as they relate to pedestrians and a mix of uses and all the things that make great thriving places. They teach about designing community. For me, that is the heart of architecture.

It's amazing to see the social benefits that come from building a great place: people walking, eating at sidewalk cafes, engaging, meeting others. Great places create the framework of great communities and great societies.

Training into practice

My first job was at a very small firm called Greenfell Architecture in Charlotte, North Carolina. I chose a firm where I knew I would be able to work on everything. A lot of times, the young person out of school gets sent off to draw the bathrooms and all the other stuff that no one wants to do. But because I was in a small firm, I was able to go to all the client meetings with my boss. I saw how everything happens and was involved in all of it.

That firm also did consulting work for Duany Plater-Zyberk & Company, a Miami-based firm that did urban planning and traditional town plans. They would have "charettes," big workshops where they bring in architecture planners, traffic consultants—everybody that you would need to do a master plan for a new neighborhood or a town. So for my regular job, I got to design buildings; and through our consulting work, I helped design communities.

Disaster and opportunity

Later, in New York, I worked for Fairfax & Sammons, a firm that does exclusively high-end single-family residential designs. They were meticulously crafted projects that took years from conceptual design to full-scale drawings to building. It was beautiful work, but my heart wasn't in it. I've always had an interest in affordable housing, so after learning all the principles that were applied to multi-million-dollar homes, I wanted to apply them to affordable houses.

In the beginning of 2005, I started my own business. One of my first phone calls was to Andr s Duany, the planner I'd worked with in Charlotte, and he started sending some of his developers my way. Then, in August of 2005, Hurricane Katrina hit.

I was among 200 people who Duany invited to a big

The first Katrina Cottage measured 308 square feet and could be built for significantly less than a FEMA trailer.

charette to work on rebuilding the Gulf Coast. We were divided into teams, and I was on the architecture team. He sent our assignment by e-mail: design an alternative to the FEMA [Federal Emergency Management Agency] trailer. I knew immediately that this project was made for me.

Built to last

FEMA trailers were very small—between 200 and 400 square feet—because they were supposed to be temporary. Our idea was to design cottages that were the same size as FEMA trailers, could be built just as fast, and cost the same or less to build. The only difference was that the cottage wouldn't have to be taken away at the end.

They would be designed in one of three ways. You could put a cottage in the back of the property to free up the footprint of the house while you rebuild your house. Then when you move into the rebuilt house, you have guest quarters or a studio, and you can rent it out to offset your mortgage. Others were designed to be the first piece of the house, so over time the house would grow around the cottage. The third way to use them was to build them in little villages and cottage courts. For each of these uses, we could build for the same amount of money or less than FEMA was planning to spend in communities, and the structures would be durable and safe, meeting the same building codes as permanent houses.

Universal appeal

The most important quality of the cottages is the proportioning. Windows are the size of windows, not portholes. We proportioned the porches so they were usable instead of making them three feet deep. Proportion doesn't cost more. A house doesn't have to be expensive to work well and look great.

We were focusing on the Gulf Coast, but we started hearing from people from all over the country. Every now and then, people still send me photos of the Katrina Cottages they've built—in Washington and the Carolinas and many other places. People write to thank me, and it feels great to realize that I made an impact on the lives of people I've never even met.

Adaptable housing

There has been a lot of shifting in these uncertain economic times. The idea for New Economy Homes



came from looking at the effects of the recent financial disaster on the average American. These homes are designed to be adaptable, to accommodate elderly parents or boomerang kids, or even rented out. There is an adaptable master suite that can be closed off from the rest of the house, and upstairs there is another master suite and a couple of other bedrooms. The house can be adapted so you can live in it in different ways, depending on your personal economy.

A better future, by design

This economy has presented an opportunity to question the default settings of where and how we live. In this economy, we've seen some of the results of the "drive until you qualify" way of thinking—the idea that land is cheaper the farther out you drive, so just keep driving and put your house out there. People were driving huge distances to live in a house that didn't really meet their needs and that in the end they couldn't afford. As we know, a lot of people lost homes to foreclosure, but I think the losses were a lot deeper than that.

Driving huge distances to get home and then driving the kids from here to here to here because no two activities are in the same place has become the lifestyle of the American middle class. Hopefully *Imagine's* readers and the upcoming generations will question this. We need other options.

Maybe there are ways to retrofit some of the sprawl we've created with real mixed-use communities where people can meet their daily needs, have more free time, and use less oil. We need to look at how our cities are planned and create great places that people want to be in. We need to make it more rewarding to drive less.

Young people have the potential to change the course of how we do things. The opportunity is there for a much more meaningful existence by improving the triple bottom line: our lifestyles, our finances, and our planet. **i**

Learn more about Marianne Cusato's work at <http://cusatocottages.com>.