

LOW-COST DESIGN

IN FIFTH WARD AND FOR HABITAT, BEING CREATIVE ON A BUDGET

SOME VISITORS to DiverseWork's 1998 exhibit *16 Houses: Owning a House in the City* were frankly skeptical that the houses on display would ever be built. Though the stated purpose of the show, a collaboration between DiverseWorks, the Fifth Ward Community Redevelopment Corporation, and the Rice University School of Architecture, was to come up with innovative designs for affordable houses that would fit into the existing fabric of Houston's Fifth Ward, it was clear that some of the participants were more interested in critiquing the idea of low-cost housing than in creating something that could actually be built.

Still, tucked in among the more fantastical notions were some practical ones, and early in the fall of 2000 ground was broken for one of them, architect Deborah Morris' garden house, the first of what will be seven *16 Houses* houses to take root in Fifth Ward. Moving from exhibition room to construction site wasn't easy; the Fifth Ward CRC had originally hoped to start building in 1999, but permitting problems caused some delays. Trying to get the houses to come in on budget caused others. At first, the desire had been for the houses to cost between \$36,000 and \$82,550 — the price range of single-family homes the CRC was already building — but it soon became clear that giving life to the architects' ideas would require more money.

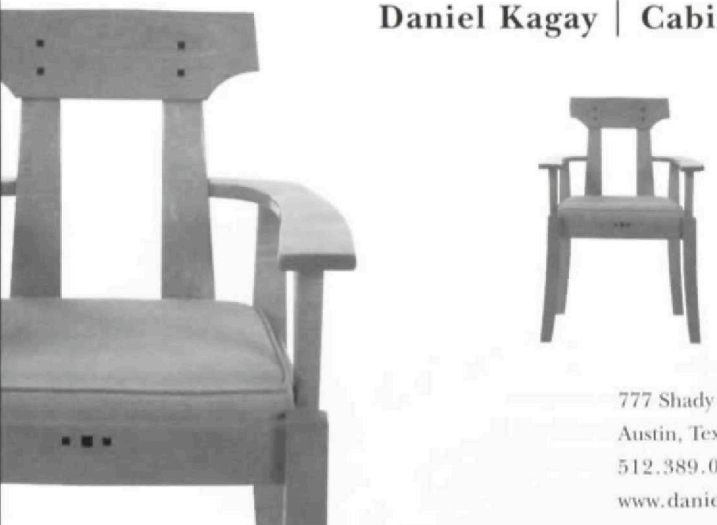
Since the purpose behind the project

was to mix affordability and creativity, that created a dilemma. Ultimately, the allowable selling price was increased to \$103,000, a level set by government restrictions on what does and does not constitute affordable housing. At least two of the houses will probably cost more than that, moving outside the official realm of "affordable," if still modestly priced by broader standards.

Even despite the loosened purse strings, certain amenities were lost. Keith Krumwiede had to shave a rectangular extension off his design; Lindy Roy's exuberantly thrust-forward roof had to be scaled back; Studio Works gave up the wheeled furniture that had been part of its InSideOutSide House. But if originality sometimes had to take a back seat to expense, the *16 Houses* houses slated for the Fifth Ward will still stand out in their neighborhoods, evidence that while coming up with interesting ideas on a budget is hard, it's not impossible.

The crunch between cost and creativity is something the architects at Gensler's Houston office had to face as well when they were invited to develop new housing prototypes for the Houston chapter of Habitat for Humanity. The invitation was part of an in-house competition titled "Home 2000"; as a community service project, Gensler had decided not to simply build a house with Habitat, but to develop plans and working drawings that could be added to Habitat's design book.

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Courtesy Deborah Morris

Carlos Jiménez's house (below) is planned for 2915 Gillespie; William Williams' and Archie Pizzini's Flip-Flop House (below middle) will be next door at 2917 Gillespie. The location of Michael Bell's Glass House @2 Degrees (bottom) hasn't been settled. It may end up containing offices.



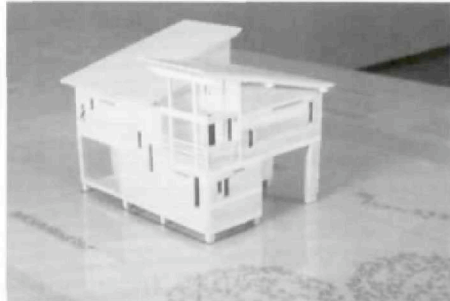
Courtesy Lindy Roy



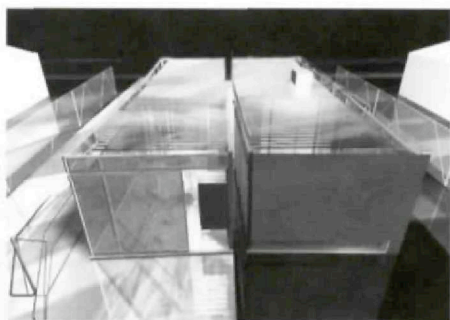
Courtesy Carlos Jiménez



Courtesy Keith Krumwiede



Courtesy Williams/Pizzini



Courtesy Michael Bell

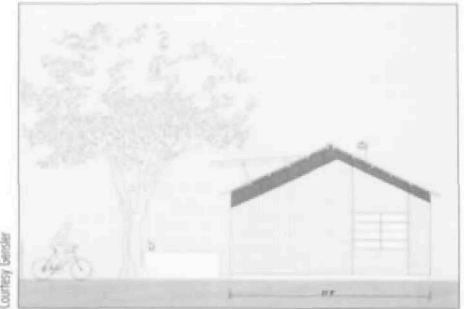
Studio Works' InSideOutSide House (opposite page) is to be built in the Fifth Ward at 709 Schwartz Street. Its neighbors will be Keith Krumwiede's Domestic Topographic Package (above) at 711 Schwartz and Lindy Roy's house (above center) at 707 Schwartz. Deborah Morris' garden house (above top) will be built at 4909 Pickfair.

Such design donations are among the ways that Habitat expands the variety of housing it can offer its low-income customers. Not that they're particularly common; the national Habitat design book has only 17 different designs, while according to Milby Hart, executive director of Houston Habitat, the local chapter's book has only seven plans. The Gensler competition promised to increase that number by half again or more.

To come up with those designs, though, meant working with a budget less than half that available to the architects working on the Fifth Ward project; it also meant having to take into consideration that the house would be built by volunteer labor. Within those constraints, the Gensler staff developed 11 proposals, then selected the three that seemed to best fit Habitat's needs. Designed by Son Ma, Laurence Krupa, and Paul Homeyer, plans for the three houses have been donated to Habitat, which will select one that Gensler employees will then help build sometime in the spring of 2001. Meanwhile, some Gensler architects whose designs didn't make the competition's final cut have offered their plans and working drawings for Habitat's future use. As a result, notes Habitat's Hart, the one Gensler house the firm itself helps build is unlikely to be the last Gensler Habitat house raised in Houston. — MJS Shields



Courtesy Gensler



Courtesy Gensler



Courtesy Gensler

The three finalists in Gensler's Habitat for Humanity competition were, from top to bottom, houses by Paul Homeyer, Laurence Krupa, and Son Ma.

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