

Katrina cottages create opportunities for entrepreneurs

Royce Swayze, The Clarion-Ledger

Published 9:26 p.m. ET Aug. 21, 2015 | Updated 6:51 p.m. ET Aug. 28, 2015



(Photo: Joe Ellis/The Clarion-Ledger)

From Gulfport to Gautier to Ocean Springs, Bobby Windham has crisscrossed the Mississippi Gulf Coast living in Katrina cottages.

He loves their durability. The cottages, built as an alternative to FEMA emergency housing for those left homeless by Katrina, are small, compact, insulated and, according to Windham, “tight, like a vacuum.”

“I’d much rather live in this than a trailer,” he says. “They’ll last forever.”

The cottages came from the Mississippi Renewal Forum, as a sturdier, potentially permanent alternative to tiny FEMA trailers wheeled in after major disasters. They were a welcome relief for families cramped in the trailers, and some lived in the cottages for years after the storm.

“I’ve become sort of an evangelist, the preacher for the future of Katrina cottages and the promise they have for affordable housing,” said Ben Brown, on the team of New Urbanist planners who came after Katrina to help plan for “renewal” rather than rebuilding. “The FEMA trailers weren’t designed for long term ... We wanted to encourage real housing, that could be wheeled in on trailers, but then taken off and put on foundations, to seed new neighborhoods, with houses built better for future storms ... Small-scale houses, 400 to 1,200 square foot, can work at a density that almost achieves that of small apartment complexes, but look good even alongside historic neighborhoods.”

Since Katrina, the cottages have become a highly popular housing alternative.

People seek them out.

“They’re hard to find anymore,” says Windham, who recently sold the one he is currently occupying. Mississippi received approximately 2,800 of these small houses after Katrina.

STORY FROM LENDINGTREE

Reverse mortgages: Are they working?

(<https://ck.lendingtree.com/?α=396&c=1706&p=r&sl=>)

There has been an increased demand for the cottages, and several of them have been moved out of the state, regrouped into housing complexes, or even turned into small businesses.

Although many of the original residents don’t live in them any longer, the cottages have been assembled for rental in small neighborhoods. One prominent example is in Ocean Springs at the Cottages at Second Street and Oak Park.

But, perhaps, the most innovative use has been with places like Anchor Square in Pascagoula, which has turned several cottages into shops.

Anchor Square opened in 2011 as a business incubator downtown with 16 pastel-colored cottages grouped together. The city formed it as a way of jump-starting several businesses to “anchor” the economy of its downtown area.

ADVERTISING



The cottages' colors — bright pink, blue and yellow — have attracted many passers-by. The center, connected by a boardwalk built by Habitat for Humanity, allows customers to shop at several places at once. The businesses profit by sharing customers.

Aspiring business owners have been able to utilize these cottages to test the waters. LaLinda Grace, who manages Anchor Square, says the cottages are available at an inexpensive price.

Anne Pitre, public relations spokeswoman for Pascagoula, said many are grateful to the city "for coming up with the concept, without which many wouldn't have taken the step out."

Sharon Stennis, a hair stylist who has been with Anchor Square since its inception, started her Community Hair Salon after she became tired of working in a barber shop mainly for men. Her lady customers followed her to her new location, and she has picked up more clientele. In fact, her business has performed so well she has upgraded from one of the smaller cottages to a larger one. She now has room to take on a new stylist.

Katrina was a heartache for all of us, but there were definitely blessings that came out of it," Stennis said. "And this (business) is one of them."

Trina Mitchell-Harris, who is new to Anchor Square, just finished painting the outside of her pastry shop. Describing herself as nervous and excited about her new business, she so far has done well, especially with her personal invention, the non-shareable "cake-in-a-jar".

When Katrina hit the Coast, Mitchell-Harris says she and her family lost everything, but she has been making a comeback with her baking business, which she started from her home. She received so many customers she expanded the business to Anchor Square.

Tracy Jackson Wilson barely had her custom-made toy store open a year before it outgrew its incubator location. Whimsy Books and Toys will now offer children's birthday parties at its new location down the street.

Then-Gov. Haley Barbour and the Mississippi Renewal Forum recruited Marianne Cusato, a key designer behind the cottages, to construct new housing on the Coast. She said the cottages played a lead role in launching her career because she received national attention.

The "shacks" assembled after the 1906 San Francisco earthquake inspired her design, and she assisted on the Coast with the construction of the cottages

Cusato describes the process as deeply meaningful because it was an investment in the lives of others. She says it's amazing to see how the cottages have evolved.

She is concerned with housing in America and future preparations for natural disasters.

Cusato believes funding for emergency responses should be faster to accommodate those affected by the next storm.

"We know it 's coming," Cusato said. "We just don't know when."

Political editor Geoff Pender contributed to this report.

Follow Royce Swayze @royce_swayze on Twitter.

WIN A TRIP TO SCOTTSDALE, AZ

Register with USA TODAY for a chance to win a trip to the azcentral.com Food & Wine Experience featuring Martha Stewart and presented by Cadillac. Includes airfare, hotel, VIP tickets and more. Enter now through September 11.

See official rules for details.

ENTER NOW
(https://login.usatoday.com/USAT-GUP-CONTESTENTRY/authenticate/?cookies=&from-state=method-select&bypass-returning-user=true&requested-state=create-account&success-url=https://www.usatoday.com/story/travel/2017/08/07/win-trip-scottsdale/545698001/&gps-source=beazusatregdd&utm_medium=agilityzone&utm_source=bounce-exchange&utm_campaign=usatregswEEPstakes&utm_content=directanddedicat)

Read or Share this story: <http://on.thec-l.com/1F4kxpt>