Two Worlds, One Home

Living on the Navajo Reservation

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There’s a reason that round houses are so rare—the mathematics are a lot more complicated to build than the square angles of more conventional buildings. So when the aspiring architects of a University of Utah program called Design-BuildBLUFF took on the challenge of building a home for Carolyn Lameman and her daughter, Audrey, on the Navajo Reservation, they knew they were in for a challenge. Not only did they have to determine the math needed to integrate a round form with a square Anglo-style structure, they had to build on a windswept, tract of desert without grid power or running water.

Lameman, who was born and raised on the Navajo reservation, also lived for some time in Denver, so when she and her daughter decided to return home to be close to extended family, they wanted to have a foot in both worlds. When they consulted with DBB architects, they made it clear they wanted a bright, efficient floor plan typical of a contemporary Anglo residence, as well as organic elements more customary in Native American culture. “I didn’t want it closed off. I wanted an open type of thing, and I wanted it to be as natural as possible. I also wanted a little bit of tradition…that’s what the round part is,” says Lameman. “It came out better than I ever thought it could.”

The traditional part of the home, the round part, is representative of the traditional Navajo dwelling called a hogan. Steeped in ritual and belief, the hogan still plays a role in the sacred lives of Navajo families. An ancient chant ceremony called the Blessingway describes the hogan’s five triangular faces, which form a circle, and the fire built in its center. According to the Blessingway, Coyote built the original hogan with the help of the beavers for the first man and woman. Precious stones, beads and shells are placed on the frames of hogans, along with reeds, symbolic because they carried the first humans as they emerged from the worlds below.

The round part of Lameman’s home is entered from a long corridor to the

Home on the Navajo Reservation Mixes Tradition With Modernity

BY D. DION
PHOTOS BY ERIN RALEY
‘I Do and I Understand’
An architect practicing in Park City, Utah, Hank Louis conceived the DesignBuildBLUFF program as a way to get aspiring architects into the field for hands-on experience. He based his idea for the program on Rural Studio, a University of Auburn program, created by Samuel “Sambo” Mockbee, where architecture graduate students design and build homes, community centers and churches for Alabama’s rural poor.

In the semester-long program at the University of Utah, students design and build a home for a Navajo family. “DesignBuildBLUFF aspires to grow a student’s comfort zone, immerse them in an unfamiliar culture, twist the scales of tolerance, open ears, and hence minds…” Louis writes in his Founder’s Letter. “As Sambo mentioned, it’s not about your greatness, but your goodness, it’s not about your passion, but your compassion… What I hope to impart is the veracity of the old Chinese proverb:


Reclaiming and Recycling
Like many homes on the reservation, the Lamemans’ is not connected to the power grid, so in building the house the design team relied on electricity generated by solar power and a few backup generators. The lack of power also drove the design. In addition to warming the house, the south-facing windows allow natural light to spill into the open floor plan of the home and over the three-quarter tall walls of the bedrooms. Thus most of the house is lit by natural light. Recessed skylights illuminate the family room and kitchen and wood finishes are light-colored, making the interior bright and fresh even without electric lights.

When sunlight is limited by the short days of winter, a fat-bellied black iron woodstove in the middle of the living room, reminiscent of the fire in a hogan, provides additional heat.

Like the early Navajo, DBB students scavenged many materials for the home from the site itself. “Down here, the resource is the earth,” says Louis. “That’s where we begin to think about everything we build.”

The students plucked auburn-colored reeds from the banks of the San Juan River that ambles through Bluff and used them ornamentally. Reeds were woven into decorative mats to decorate the doors, and used to create a dropped ceiling in the bathroom that offers privacy while still allowing in light. In addition to being culturally significant, the stalks were abundant and free.

Another plentiful resource – rocks. Huge pale brown and pink rocks shed from the sandstone buttes and spires were collected and cemented in place to create a beautiful floor. The students also imitated traditional Navajo techniques for covering hogans in a protective and permanent mud coat; shoveling sand and clay from the site, they mixed it with water, batch by careful batch, to make the interior earthen wall.

The open floor plan and shortened walls allow natural light to suffuse the house (above left and right). Reeds collected near the building site were woven into decorative mats (above right).
Contemporary As Well

With a strong nod to tradition, the Navajo house fits in skillfully on its site, but several modern touches also distinguish it from its surroundings. A gutter catchment system recycles the precious desert rainfall into greywater, which is used for flushing a toilet or watering a garden. There is on-demand hot water for bathing and washing. The walls are made of an eco-friendly material called flexcrete, created from the waste fly ash spewed from a coal-fired power plant in nearby Page, Arizona. Flexcrete has a high insulation value, minimizing the amount of energy needed to heat or cool a space. The bathroom vanity, some of the flooring and the kitchen countertops are concrete, polished into a smooth and contemporary-looking finish.

Forming a Bond

DesignBuildBLUFF students do more than build a house—they become extended members of the Navajo family for whom the house is built. After selecting an applicant, the students work closely to design the home, budget for it and ultimately build it, spending an entire semester with a family. It’s a long process, and in that time, they learn more than just the practical side of architecture.

“There’s a love affair between the family that gets picked and the students who do the work,” says Louis. “There’s this incredible bond.”

Louis’s original intent for the design-build program was “to build a better architect who understands better how things get put together in the field.” What he couldn’t have foreseen was the other ways the program would blossom, into a cultural exchange between the families and students, and into a philanthropic endeavor that subsidizes housing for underprivileged families.

“It’s been a little bit serendipitous on my part. I can’t say I knew this all would happen,” says Louis. “The fact that somebody gets a house is a great byproduct of all of this.”

For more information on DesignBuildBLUFF and photos of other projects, visit www.designbuildbluff.org.