Building Shirley's Dream House

"It was a dream come true . . ."

Fifty-seven-year-old Norman resident Shirley Wynne still has trouble talking about it without crying a few tears of joy.

"It was the work of the Lord. . . . It was a miracle."

Those words are probably not the kind one ordinarily would hear in praise of an OU academic project. But to Wynne, who then was sustaining herself on three-quarter-time employment as a housekeeper, a recent effort by the College of Architecture to give its students a hands-on learning experience turned out to be miraculous indeed.

BY MICHAEL WATERS
photos by Robert Taylor and Mike Mitscher
OU student architects drew the plans, cleared the site and built a home that was both academic exercise and community service.

Wynne recently moved into a new home built by OU architectural faculty and students in a cooperative effort with the City of Norman and Moore-Norman Vo-Tech Center. The OU team designed her "dream house," a decorative, functional, one-bedroom dwelling boasting such special touches as vaulted ceilings and stained glass.

The OU students and faculty also demolished her dilapidated $8,200 home, which had been deemed beyond rehabilitation by city officials, and did the bulk of the work in erecting its place the new, custom-designed 925-square-foot house.

Wynne still cannot believe that the fruits of the nine-month project are really hers.

"It's been so exciting," she says. "Sometimes I wake up in the morning and wonder, 'Did I dream it?' I don't think I'll ever be able to thank these people enough."

The real-life experience of designing and building a house has been an exciting affair as well for the more than 50 OU student architects involved in the effort. Becky Baggett, a fifth-year architecture student, describes the contrast between classroom learning and working on the Wynne house project as "the difference between watching a movie and actually living it."

The widely praised effort all began with a visitor's helpful suggestion.

Architecture administrators pinpoint the project's origins in a challenge made at the beginning of the fall 1995 semester by Samuel Mockbee, the college's 1993 Bruce Alonzo Goff Professor of Creative Architecture. Mockbee, a professor at Auburn University, operates a rural design studio in Alabama, from which Auburn students build and remodel houses for low-income rural Alabamians. He proposed that OU students do the same for a low-income Oklahoman.

But Mockbee is quick to add, "I was just a facilitator and a conduit." He credits the prestige of the Goff professorship—a privately endowed position named for the renowned former OU architecture director—with giving his suggestion high visibility within the college.

According to Joel Dietrich, the college's director of architecture, Mockbee's idea was met with excitement from the college's architecture division faculty, but also with some apprehension over the liability issues.

"So I was directed to find out if the legal problems would be a stumbling block," Dietrich says. Before contacting the OU legal counsel, Dietrich worried he would meet with "the normal attorney reaction of, 'No, no, we can't do this; somebody will hit us with a hammer and sue us.'"

"I talked to (legal counsel) Fred Gipson," Dietrich says, "and about halfway through my explanation of the project, he cut me off and said, 'This is a great project. Let's do it.' So instead of finding roadblocks, we found people here who understood the educational benefits."

The next step was locating a suitable low-income client. Bill Bauman, the associate professor of architecture who oversaw much of the project, contacted City of Norman official Linda Price to ask if the city kept a waiting list of residents who had applied for new housing or for housing rehabilitation.

Price, assistant director of planning and community development for the city's revitalization division, had a list of low-income people who had applied for housing rehabilitation assistance but whose houses did not qualify structurally to be rehabilitated. From that list, she explains, came Shirley Wynne.

"When they told me," Wynne recalls, "I couldn't believe it. I cried."

Working with Price and other city officials, architecture administrators set up a cooperative effort to build Wynne's new home, funded with $30,440 through the HOME Partnership Program of the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development.

Price, who holds a master's degree in regional and city planning from OU, says the partnership with the University was a natural fit.

"Our department has a lot of communication with the College of Architecture because Regional and City Planning is now a part of the College of Architecture," Price says. "The majority of us in planning at the administrative level all graduated with degrees from there. We've stayed in close contact as alumni."

One especially positive aspect of the project, Price said, was that "it involved so many different groups. Students from Moore-Norman Vo-Tech provided skilled work requiring a license, such as installation of plumbing, electrical fixtures, and heating and air conditioning equipment. Norman merchants donated supplies such as bricks, steel and windows to help lower the construction cost.

Also important, according to the college's director of development, Hermann Gruenwald, was "the support and advice we got from the community, especially from the Board of Visitors," an advisory group to the college composed of architectural professionals.

After Wynne was chosen as the client, about 20 fourth-year, fifth-year and graduate students in the college's Goff Studio came up with individual designs for the house. It quickly became clear, as students and faculty sought Wynne's input at every turn,
The architects incorporated bits and pieces of Wynne’s demolished house into the new one, such as using the bricks salvaged from the old chimney to create a sidewalk leading from the back door to the carport.

that the project was directed at providing not only a functional dwelling but also an attractive, individually styled home—in Mockbee’s words, a “shelter for the soul.”

Bill Ashworth, a May graduate who was involved in the design group and the construction crew, described the finished design as having been put together from several designs chosen in part by Wynne. The basic house came from one design, the yard from another and the floor tile from a third.

“It was fun for her, and it was fun for us,” he says.

“It was a lot of fun,” Wynne agrees. “They included me in it from day one. It’s been, ‘Do you like this, Shirley? Do you like that?’ They’ve never made me feel like an outsider, and that feels really good.”

Once the design was finalized, students and faculty became a construction crew, determined to turn drawings into reality. From February through July, with Bauman’s oversight and tireless participation, some 30 students worked at one time or another on demolishing Wynne’s old house and erecting the new structure in its place.

“We started at the beginning of February,” Bauman says, “and the windows were installed around the first week of April. We had the sheetrock in around the middle of May.”

Dietrich lauds Bauman’s role as indispensable to the success of the project. “Professor Bauman spent six days a week at the job site, sometimes 12 hours a day. He worked not only like a job foreman but as a member of the construction team. I can’t say enough about how great his effort was.”

“He deserves a medal,” Mockbee adds.

Wynne, who stayed with her mother some five blocks away from the site, felt her spirits warmed with the late spring weather as she saw the cherished house plan transformed into a three-dimensional structure. Visiting the site nearly every day as the summer months approached, she found student volunteers engaged in tasks such as sealing the tile, sawing wood, installing handles on the kitchen cabinets and hanging the wallpaper borders.

The students continued to be deferential to Wynne’s wishes. “At one point a student planned to put striped wallpaper in there, and I said, ‘No way am I going to have striped wallpaper in my house.’”

But some on-the-spot student suggestions were incorporated in the final design, such as a wallpaper-like effect on one wall, consisting of swirling patterns of semi-gloss blue paint over a matte white paint. An enterprising interior design and architecture major, Chris Ellis, created the blue swirls using a feather duster.

In the midst of the hammering and sawing, Dietrich was utilizing a few higher-tech tools to publicize the project. He took photos every few days with a digital camera and posted them as a kind of construction diary on the college’s World Wide Web site (http://www.uoknor.edu/architecture/cap).

“Part of this is for recruiting purposes,” Dietrich explains. “It’s letting a prospective student get a feel for
OU student architect Jason Wenzel, top, gets a helping hand from Nick Collins, a British student visiting the University who stopped by the construction site.

Architecture student Cherl Gates paints the molding in the front bedroom of Shirley Wynne's house.

Steve Badenes, left, and his wife visit the construction site with Sam Mockbee, who originally suggested the low-income housing project to OU architects. At right are students Gary Armbruster and Mike Mitscher. Badenes and Mockbee were 1995-96 visiting faculty members as Bruce Alonzo Goff Professors of Creative Architecture.

What we do.” The remarkably detailed study, which eventually comprised over 400 photos of the project’s progress, drew attention and feedback from Internet users across the nation and abroad.

What the photographic study shows is the rise of a cozy structure with 925 square feet of living space, made more expansive in appearance by the vaulted ceilings. The living space consists of one 10-foot by 12-foot bedroom, a study, a 16-foot by 18-foot living area that opens on a galley kitchen, and a bath-

OU student architect Jason Wenzel, top, gets a helping hand from Nick Collins, a British student visiting the University who stopped by the construction site.
room with a broken-mosaic tile floor.

A bay window on the east side of the living room offers a view of an elementary school playground across the street. The bedroom and the study possess wall-to-wall carpeting, while a ceramic tile floor covers the remainder of the house.

Bauman said the student designers “stuck bits and pieces” of Wynne’s demolished dwelling into their plans. A trio of decorative windows separating the living area from the open-space kitchen was lifted intact from the old house. The bricks in a sidewalk leading from the cottage’s back door to the carport were salvaged from the old house’s chimney.

Also, Bauman says, “on the back step there’s a flat stone we incorporated in the porch stoop. That’s our foundation stone — it was part of the foundation of the existing house.”

Just above and to one side of the front door, a visitor finds an 80-square-foot loft, added for decorative purposes, which will also, with the addition of a ladder and railing, serve as a haven for Wynne’s two five-year-old grandchildren, Bauman says. Wynne adds, “They’ve told me they’re planning on sleeping up there, but they’re not!”

While there may be differences of opinion with the grandkids, one aspect of the project with which everyone seems to agree is the unique educational experience it offered architecture students.

Bauman says, “Students don’t really know what a wall section looks like and don’t know what a wall section is actually supposed to do. This way, they find out what architecture really is. They get a much better appreciation of what the consequences of their design decisions are.”

“Doing it is just totally different from seeing it done, or drawing it on a piece of paper,” Dietrich adds. “Drawing a section through a footing is nothing like digging a footing and pouring the concrete.”

Mockbee takes a longer view. “In a public service course like this, not only do you have the result at the end of one year, but the experience students get from doing public service will feed back into the community when these students are working in the profession 20 years from now.”

Students find different aspects of the project to appreciate, but all agree as to its value. Cherl Gates, a May graduate who stayed on through the summer to help with the interior work, believes “a lot of architectural students learn better visually.”

Julia Yoon, a fifth-year student, notes that in learning-by-doing students had the opportunity to make design changes as the project went along. “It makes us more practical as designers,” she says.

Chris Ellis adds, “You learn to appreciate your help and the cost of labor in building a house. And then, you learn how to do some things for yourself.”

“You can see it come together, working with the code officials, working with the client, the neighborhood people — everything you have to deal with in real life,” Becky Baggett says. “When you’re sitting in a studio drawing, you don’t have to deal with those things. It gives us more confidence and more sympathy with the contractor.”

Given the rave reviews by faculty and students alike, it is not surprising that College of Architecture administrators hope to repeat the project annually.

Deborah Dalton, dean of the college, says, “As we head toward the next millennium, we’re trying to rework our educational offerings to be both ‘high touch and high tech.’ To have students actually putting together a building is an absolutely critical part of ‘high touch.’

“For me it also means getting our students out in the community, doing low-income or non-profit work,” she adds. “It’s important for the design field to be involved in the community.”

“The push from Professor Mockbee to do this has given us a bit of an edge on a lot of universities that would love to be doing the same kind of thing,” Dietrich says. “It’s a good feeling that there are now other programs that would like to model themselves after us.”

Dietrich expects future projects to be “cleaner” in terms of delays, since the start-up lessons learned this time
Architecture major Phil Hayes built the porch swing for Shirley Wynne, seated at left with students Becky Baggett and Chris Ellis.

And Dalton says that, while the college's architecture division took the lead in this project, "Our future desire is to have the architecture, interior design and landscape architecture divisions involved in the design aspects and construction science involved in the cost-estimating and construction management side."

Overall for faculty and students, the college's plans mean more days spent amid nails, wood and concrete, discovering what goes into turning a plan on paper into a three-dimensional building.

And, perhaps more importantly, for low-income residents who are looking for a miracle, it means more dreams will come true.

Rory Carlisle, left, pours the front porch with fellow construction science major Greg Mohr. Carlisle, who has considerable construction experience, was in charge of the concrete work for the Wynne house.