

URBANbuild and Bethlehem Lutheran Church partner to build affordable housing for New Orleans

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Tulane student Jenna Norton, right, prepares to add a shim to the foundation of a home under construction as student Ryan Harnish, left, assists. Tulane School of Architecture's award-winning design-build program, URBANbuild, is building four ADA-accessible homes in Central City. (Photo by Rusty Costanza)

The [School of Architecture's URBANbuild program](#) and Bethlehem Lutheran Church share a common goal in finding solutions to the lack of affordable housing in New

Orleans. To pursue that goal, they formed a partnership, and on Jan. 9 broke ground on a four-year project that will build four Americans with Disabilities Act-accessible housing units in Central City.

URBANbuild, directed by Byron Mouton, Lacey Senior Professor of Practice at the School of Architecture, is a design/build program in which teams of students to design and construct prototypical, affordable houses around New Orleans. Now in its 17th year of working with community partners, the program offers an unparalleled learning opportunity for students and an invaluable service to the community.

Many of URBANbuild's past projects were completed with Neighborhood Housing Services of New Orleans, including 13 houses built in Central City. Mouton met Bethlehem's pastor, Ben Groth, who is also a PhD student in Tulane's history department, during URBANbuild's 2021 project, which happened to be next to Bethlehem's parking lot.

Founded in Central City in 1889, Bethlehem Lutheran Church is one of the oldest historically Black Lutheran congregations in the United States. An important part of the church's mission focuses on diversity and community service, so Mouton and Groth discussed other ways to serve the community.

"It turns out that they had been looking for a way to initiate an affordable housing program. At one point he (Groth) pointed across the street, and said, 'You know we own that lot. Do you think we could do something on that with housing?' and I said, 'Yeah, of course we can,'" Mouton said.

URBANbuild is now committed to the four-year building project with Bethlehem. Design work and permitting began in fall of 2021; the first building is scheduled to be complete at the end of the spring semester.

URBANbuild is staffed by upper-level undergraduates and graduate students, who do all the construction work except those elements that require a licensed professional. They work at least six days a week from 8 a.m. to sunset.

"The students are really challenged to work together professionally," said Mouton.

Mouton is also excited that the new relationship with Bethlehem has provided an example to the New Orleans City Planning Commission and the New Orleans City Council on the importance of making zoning decisions that support multifamily

affordable housing.

“The City Council voted unanimously to support this project — so now we are having an impact on policy, which is fantastic,” he added.





Architecture students Quinn Kelsey, left, Le'Bryant Bell, center, and Ethan Lewis, right, check a floor plank during construction of a home. (Photo by Rusty Costanza)
Students go over plans for a home under construction with Sara Allen Harper, front left. (Photo by Rusty Costanza)