

Simple cottage seen as big fix for Gulf Coast

by Emmet Pierce

In a whirlwind, life-changing year, Marianne Cusato has gone from an anonymous young designer to a key figure in the effort to resolve the regional housing crisis caused by hurricanes Katrina and Rita.

Cusato's "Katrina Cottage," a back-to-basics design for replacing homes destroyed by Gulf Coast storms, captured the Smithsonian Institution's first People's Design Award in October. In December, Cusato was named by Builder magazine as one of the nation's 50 most influential people in the housing industry. She placed fourth, just ahead of President George W. Bush.

COTTAGE INDUSTRY - Designer Marianne Cusato's 'Katrina Cottage,' a back-to-basics design for replacing homes destroyed by Gulf Coast storms, captured the Smithsonian Institution's first People's Design Award in October. CNS Photo.

Lowe's Home Improvement has recognized the commercial potential of small, inexpensive homes that can be assembled in stages and later expanded. In December, Lowe's finalized a licensing agreement with Cusato to sell the plans and related building materials needed to construct Katrina Cottages. Lowe's is following a trail blazed by Sears, Roebuck and Co.'s catalog homes sold in the early 20th century.

"It is a tremendous honor to be recognized," said Cusato, 32. "To be ranked fourth (by Builder magazine) is a great honor. It is amazing to look back at the number of people who have gotten behind the idea. I think I have been a catalyst."

Cusato's cottage came to national attention at the International Builders Show in Orlando in January 2006. Architect Sarah Susanka, a leader in the small-house movement and author of several books on the virtues of downsizing, has watched the New York designer's progress with interest.

"I think it is wonderful," Susanka said. "What really happened with Marianne is you have to be in the right place in the right time with the right idea. She has a vision of affordable and useful and compact housing. She has an incredible spirit. She is really a visionary. She has a missionary zeal."

Ranging in size from 544 to 936 square feet, Lowe's two-bedroom cottages will be delivered in phases to buyers. Lowe's plan is to take the kits to the Gulf Coast, where they are needed most, then expand distribution nationwide, Cusato said.

Ken Meinert, who is leading Habitat for Humanity's home-building efforts in Gulf Coast states, said Cusato's design has drawn attention to the critical need for replacement shelter.

"She has brought a tremendous amount of interest and attention to the housing needs of the Gulf Coast, particularly the need for quick transition housing and long-term housing solutions," he said.

If the past year's success has gone to Cusato's head, it doesn't show. The designer is quick to share credit for her concept.

The idea grew out of an October 2005 meeting of architects in Biloxi, Miss., organized by Andres Duany, a Miami-based architect. The group was seeking practical solutions for replacing thousands of homes lost to Gulf Coast storms. Cusato's cottage was designed to withstand hurricane force winds.

"We have had to think about new models and create new ideas that are applicable all over the nation," Cusato said. "We are able to take this horrible thing that happened and create new efficiencies in building."

A last-minute addition to International Builders Show, the 308-square-foot demonstration house caused a stir among building professionals. The tiny yellow dwelling commanded attention because it lacked the high-tech gadgetry and opulent furnishings offered by other homes at the show. Stripped down to the necessities, the prototype featured one large room, a bunk-bed sleeping area, a bathroom and a small kitchen. It had an estimated cost of \$35,000, not counting land acquisition.

LONG-TERM SOLUTION

The simple cottage was offered as an alternative to temporary Federal Emergency Management Agency trailers that often dot the landscape following natural disasters. Unlike the cottage, FEMA trailers are not designed to be permanent. Even so, they often remain in use for years.

Characterized by large front porches, Cusato's structures resemble English-style cottages of the 17th century. She describes the look as "Gulf Coast vernacular architecture."

After the show, Cusato was contacted by potential home buyers from Florida to Alaska. Some envisioned the cottage as a granny flat or a vacation home. Others viewed it as an inexpensive alternative to conventional housing.

"It was really something we needed, and the market was ready for it," she said. "It is something people can

identify with.

Jeffrey P. Rosenfeld, an expert on designs for the elderly, views the low-cost cottages as ideal for seniors. Paul Warwick Thompson, director of the Smithsonian's Cooper-Hewitt National Design Museum, has called Cusato's cottage "a dignified alternative to conventional temporary housing."

"Marianne Cusato's design offers a long-term solution for displaced families, and I'm thrilled that so many people voted for a socially conscious design that could help thousands in need in the Gulf Coast region," he said in a prepared statement.

Cusato is a graduate of the University of Notre Dame School of Architecture. She is the principal of Marianne Cusato Associates, a New York-based architectural design firm, and the founder of CusatoCottages, LLC.

In seeking candidates for the design award, the Cooper-Hewitt Web site received hundreds of nominations and more than 100,000 visitors. Nominees ranged from everyday objects to architectural icons. Cusato's design competed with everything from the iPod to the Empire State Building.

Moving from the drawing board to the marketplace, four Katrina Cottage designs are set to be marketed soon by Lowe's in 30 stores throughout Mississippi and Louisiana.

The cost of materials for the homes has been estimated at between \$45 and \$55 per square foot. The cottages can be delivered and assembled in phases.

MOVING MOUNTAINS

The Katrina Cottage concept builds on history. After the 1906 San Francisco earthquake, the government built 5,610 "cottages" for 20,000 displaced people. Not intended for permanent use, some were as small as 140 square feet. Even so, many residents were reluctant to part with their temporary homes. They purchased them and moved them to permanent sites as San Francisco began to rebound from the earthquake.

With global warming producing more extreme weather conditions, the need for replacement housing could grow in the U.S. Cusato now is participating in FEMA's Alternative Housing Pilot Program. Working with Cypress Cottage Partners of Louisiana, she is part of a team that is seeking federal funds to address home damage caused by the 2005 hurricane season.

"We are in the process of detailing our application and resubmitting to FEMA," she said. "At this point we have been awarded up to \$74.5 million to build Katrina Cottages and Carpet Cottages," a multiple-unit design by Duany.

The award was funded through the \$400 million Alternative Housing Pilot Program created by Congress last June, Cusato said. Susanka said Cusato is bringing passion to her work.

"She is pretty young, but she knows what she wants and she knows how to stay focused," the architect said. "That kind of passion and willpower moves mountains. Doors opened for her. When you are doing something you love with your heart and soul, providence provides. Things shift to accommodate that vision."

DESIGNER MARIANNE CUSATO

- Birthplace: Anchorage, Alaska, June 26, 1974.

- Education: Bachelor of Architecture degree from the University of Notre Dame.

HONORS

- 2006 winner of the first People's Design Award from the Smithsonian Institution's Cooper-Hewitt National Design Museum for the Katrina Cottage.

- Named the fourth most influential person in the housing industry by Builder magazine in December.

KEY PROJECTS

- Lowe's Katrina Cottage, a program to sell building plans and materials packages for small, basic homes. Sales of the housing kits are expected to begin in Gulf Coast stores by spring.

- A participant in the FEMA Alternative Housing Pilot Program. Working with Cypress Cottage Partners, she is part of a team that has been awarded up to \$74.5 million in federal funding to address ongoing housing challenges created by the 2005 hurricane season in Gulf Coast region states.

- Co-author of the forthcoming book "Get Your House Right, Architectural Elements to Use and Avoid - An Illustrated Guide to Traditional Design," with Ben Pentreath, Richard Sammons and Leon Krier.

WEB SITE

- www.cusatocottages.com

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