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Plan Would Make Homes in New Orleans Floatable

The Dallas Morning News from Wire Reports Bob Dart

The next time a hurricane floods New Orleans, whole neighbourhoods might just bob up like corks as the water rises.

Under a proposal by Louisiana State University engineering students, traditional shotgun houses would be attached to "buoyant foundations," essentially big blocks of plastic foam and "telescoped" pilings that grow longer as the water gets deeper.

Once in wide-scale production, it would cost $20,000 to $30,000 to change an existing frame house in, say, the Ninth Ward into a floatable one.

Buoyant houses have already been built in the Netherlands, and hunting and fishing lodges that float when rivers rise are already occupied in Louisiana bayous, said Elizabeth English, a research professor at the LSU Hurricane Center who is overseeing the project by six students.

The plan is considerably more feasible than proposals to raise existing houses atop stilts, Ms. English said during a promotional trip to Washington last week.

"Sitting on the front porches and talking to folks who pass by on the sidewalk is an important part of the culture of these places," she explained. "You lose that with permanent static elevation," the technical term for placing the houses atop poles around 10 feet high.

A floating house "is also a better solution for withstanding hurricane winds" than stilts that would raise the building into the wind stream, she said.

The LSU engineering team has formed the nonprofit Buoyant Foundation and is seeking grants to continue its research. Contractors and construction companies are being solicited for the $150,000 or so that the students think it would cost to build a prototype and flood tank to test it.

Thousands of homeowners in low-lying areas of southern Louisiana are already being required to elevate their houses, usually by about 3 feet. In New Orleans, some homeowners are considering raising their houses even higher—to as much as 12 to

15 feet—because they fear the city's levees will not be improved enough to prevent future flooding.

The LSU solution would, in effect, turn the houses into floating docks or stationary houseboats. The houses would be raised to the required elevation atop the buoyant foundations, with steel frames to distribute the structure's weight to the outside walls. In a flood, the telescoping pilings would let the house and foundation rise, and then gently settle back into place as the water recedes.