



Floating an Idea: Prof Goes with the Flow to Protect Homes from Floods

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Elizabeth English loves her job as an architecture professor at the University of Waterloo, but her heart remains in Louisiana. That's where her passion for preserving the culture and character of New Orleans has led her, to challenge the conventional wisdom about how to protect homes from flood damage.

The U.S. government is pushing homeowners in flood-prone areas to elevate their houses, sometimes by more than 10 feet. But that's expensive and separates people from their neighbourhood. English has a simple idea that she says will allow Louisianans to keep their homes at ground level: Instead of fighting floods, go with the flow. Allow homes to float on the water.700

The professor designed a home that sits on top of big blocks of styrofoam. When the water rises, so does the house. The building is connected to four metal posts to keep it from floating away. "They work with the water instead of going against the water," English says. "It doesn't matter if it's a four-foot flood or a 14-foot flood."

The idea isn't new. Residents of a rural hamlet on the Mississippi River have built buoyant homes for decades. Floating houses are also popular in the watery Netherlands.

English first heard about buoyant homes at a conference after Hurricane Katrina. In 2006, English, then at Louisiana State University, built a test home with some mechanical design students.

She now splits her time between UW's School of Architecture in Cambridge and Louisiana, where she is trying to raise money to build a full-scale prototype.

She hopes to demonstrate to American authorities that buoyant houses should be eligible for flood insurance. The government has been reluctant to go along so far, English says. “When I started at this, people told me I was nuts,” she says. “The idea of a floating house is just too strange.”

But nothing less than the unique culture of New Orleans is at stake, she says. “A whole way of life ... in New Orleans is being destroyed,” she says. “This is actually something for people to come back to and restart their lives as much as possible as they were before.”