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## Emergency Response Studio

PAUL VILLINSKI

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The Rice University Art Gallery has a rich history as a venue where the line between art and architecture is blurred and the two fields effortlessly co-exist. Paul Villinski's Emergency Response Studio (ERS) was no exception. The ERS arrived in Houston in January 2009, landing next to Cram, Goodhue and Crain's formidable Lovett Hall (1912). The juxtaposition of the temporary ERS and the enduring Collegiate Byzantine offered an intriguing introduction to Villinski's installation.

The ERS began as a salvaged thirty-foot Gulfstream Cavalier, a model almost identical to the 50,000 FEMA trailers that were delivered to post-Katrina New Orleans. Though Villinski initially envisioned the studio as a straightforward live/work space for making his own art, it became a deliberate form of community engagement evoking what Villinski calls "the tradition of combat artists who went to war with paints and brushes." The ERS would allow artists to "embed" themselves in a community, living with the residents, responding creatively to events as they unfolded in the aftermath of disaster. Like combat artists depicting war as they experienced it directly, the artists of the ERS would offer first-hand representations of a comparable, domestic trauma.

The ERS arrived in New Orleans in November 2008 as part of the *Prospect.1* New Orleans biennial and moved to different sites in the city, beginning



Paul Villinski, *Emergency Response Studio*, 2008. Installed at Rice University Art Gallery, 2009. (Photos courtesy of Nash Baker © nashbaker.com.)



at the corner of Andry and Douglass streets in the Lower Ninth Ward. Within the specific context of New Orleans, Villinski saw the project as “a symbol of transformation and possibility for the communities of the Gulf Coast.” But the ERS was also part of Villinski’s larger social agenda to deploy artists to disaster sites right alongside traditional emergency and first responder personnel.

In his previous work, Villinski, who is based in New York City and holds a BFA from Cooper Union, focused on recycled materials in order to transform the toxic into the useful. Re-imagining and re-purposing a FEMA trailer, with its well-publicized formaldehyde problems, was a full-scale exploration of earlier ideas. For the ERS, Villinski began his re-presentation by skillfully cutting away at the trailer, inserting elements and extending space in ways that utterly transformed the closed building envelope.

Many of his design strategies are legible inside and out, offering modern interpretations of traditional ideas: a translucent poly-clad bay window that replaces a 13-foot section of the trailer’s aluminum skin expands the interior sight lines; a wall cranks down to into a deck-like front porch that enlarges the useable floor space. Both suggest how the formerly introverted trailer might become more neighborly and literally open to the community. Photovoltaic panels and a small windmill are functional as well as decorative. Even on a cloudy day in Houston, the panels gathered enough energy to power the studio.

Inside, Villinski reveals a variety of metering devices and plexi-clad battery pack systems. Reclaimed wood, bamboo cabinets, floor tiles made from linseed oil, recycled denim insulation and non-toxic paints suggest that sustainable materials belong in temporary housing. A dome extends the low ceiling height and floods the interior with natural light. This intervention is transformational and also personal. Villinski grew up in a house in Maine with a 35-foot geodesic dome in the backyard. Villinski spent six summers trying to

rehabilitate the dome, a relic of the heyday of Buckminster Fuller, to its former glory.

Inside the Rice Gallery the formal and conceptual evolution of the ERS was presented in detail. A full-scale framing model of the typical FEMA trailer revealed what Villinski confronted when he began to remodel: 1 1/8-inch x 1 1/2-inch fir members served as vertical studs, but appeared like flimsy furring strips in need of metal strapping. The weak framing materials seemed emblematic of the missed opportunities in the FEMA response. Even with the open framing, the spaces were confined and tight, offering shelter, but little more. Accompanying the model, a photo essay documented the trailer’s transformation and Villinski’s use of it to reach out to the Ninth Ward and the city as a whole.

Much more than simply a machine for artistic engagement with a community in crisis, Villinski’s repurposed structure is also a prototype for enlightened housing. Many elements of the ERS could be further repurposed to allow a new mobile housing response to emerge: one that is sustainable and neighborly, giving the small and temporary something far more significant than four walls and a roof.

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