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Early in the morning of July 28, 1983, two men smashed a window of the Southern Poverty Law Center's office in downtown Montgomery, Alabama, and while one stood on the lookout, the other crawled in, doused the offices with gasoline, and set the place on fire...



## Cool Jazz

Mack Scogin and Merrill Elam riff on historic New Orleans architecture in their design for a new dormitory at Tulane University.  
By Lawrence W. Speck

Mack Scogin describes his firm's recent dormitory at Tulane University as a project that needed "to come from within itself"—one wherein the designers made no attempt to "bring in external issues" or "burden the design with concerns that might be 'hot' in architecture currently." Their goal was to draw on a difficult site, a tightly defined program, a venerable institution, and a colorful locale to create a fresh and appropriate building that had the distinctiveness and particularity of other student housing projects the architects admired. Alvar Aalto's Baker House at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology and Eero Saarinen's Morse and Stiles Colleges at Yale served as inspirations, not for their specific configuration or overall architectural image, but for their attitude toward accommodating the fragile and complex life of a college dormitory and its context in an open-minded, responsive manner.

One of the early design issues that demanded this kind of careful response involved a serious conflict between town and gown over the site for the dormitory, a narrow parcel with its long west face backing up to the historic Audubon Boulevard neighborhood. At first, homeowners could not imagine any circumstance under which student housing could reside comfortably across their back fences. But by creating a long, thin building on the western edge of the site,

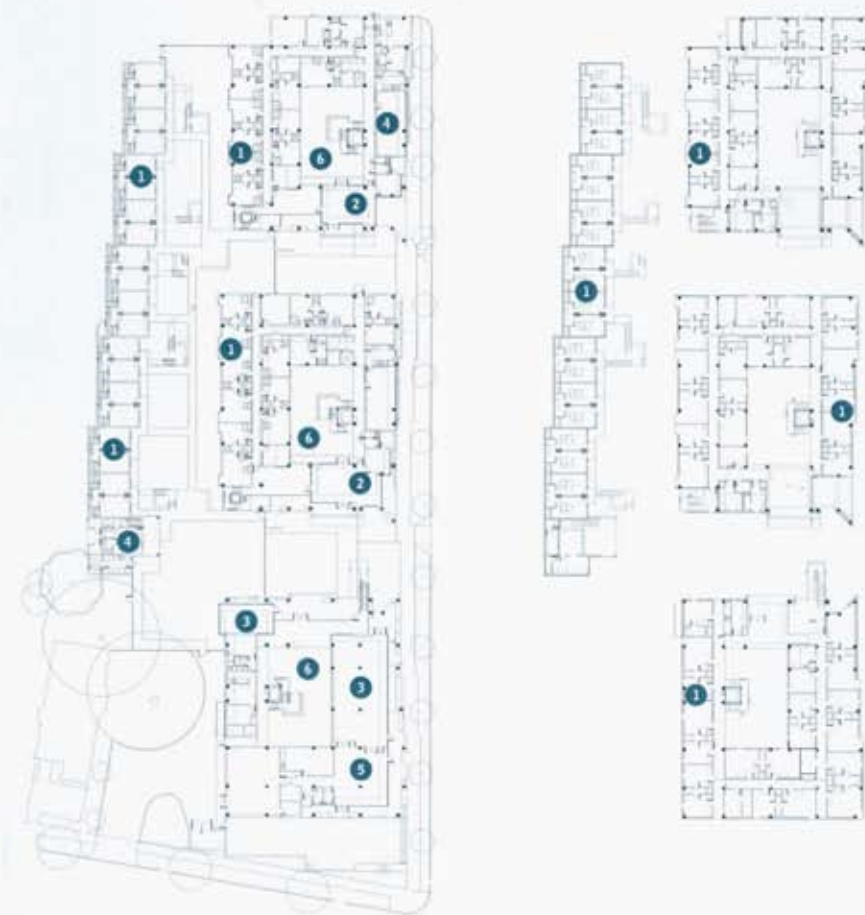


The four buildings that comprise Mack Scogin and Merrill Elam's Willow Street dormitory at Tulane (facing page and preceding pages) are sited in such a way as to create a series of interstitial gardens for the 330 students they house. While there are few windows along the building's perimeter (to minimize the impact on the residential neighborhood just beyond), these façades are by no means monolithic: Detailed brickwork (above right) and articulated corners (above left) add a level of refinement to a building type not known for it.

with its quiet face to the neighborhood and its lively face to the campus, the architects established a boundary condition that satisfied both university and neighborhood interests.

Dubbed the "ranges" after the second tier of buildings off the lawn at the University of Virginia, this oddly configured combination of private flats and two-story lofts with exterior access demonstrates how constraints have generated an appealing idiosyncrasy throughout the project.

Indeed, a circumstantial quirkiness seemed to the architects to be very much in the spirit of New Orleans, which Scogin describes as being all about mystery. Though clear enough in plan, the dormitory's ensemble of buildings—the "ranges," plus three larger, donut-shaped "houses"—generates an enigmatic series of in-between courts, gardens, patios, and terraces that provoke the kind of surprise and discovery for which the Crescent City is famous. Each of the three buildings strung along the east side of the site centers on a tall, top-lit garden lushly planted with palms and aspidistra to resemble the "secret" courts of the French Quarter. The soft Louisiana St. Joe brick, tall windows with interior wood shutters, generous balconies, and careful metalwork details also root the complex firmly in its locale.



- 1 dormitory units
- 2 lobby
- 3 offices/classrooms
- 4 lounge
- 5 café
- 6 open space

Ground-floor plan 151' A

Second-floor plan



Details like open stairways, internal wooden shutters, and metal railings (both pages) evoke some of New Orleans's most famous traditional architecture, that of the French Quarter. Most of the dormitory's windows and lounges face in toward the courtyards.

- 1 dormitory units
- 2 lounge



East-west section



North-south section 142'





The domestic scale of the “ranges,” the long, thin buildings that act as a buffer between an adjacent neighborhood and the larger dorm buildings, carries through to the interior, where there are duplex units with spiral staircases and a common room (above left and right). While the ranges are reserved for honors students, the gardens (facing page) are open to all, hidden away though they may seem.

**WILLOW STREET STUDENT HOUSING, NEW ORLEANS**

**CLIENT:** Tulane University, New Orleans—Anthony Lorino (senior vice president, Finance and Operations)  
**ARCHITECT:** Mack Scogin Merrill Elam Architects (formerly Scogin Elam and Bray Architects), Atlanta—Mack Scogin, Merrill Elam, Lloyd Bray (principals); Martha Henderson Bennett, Ned Frazer, Allison Reeves, Beth Morris, Dustin Lindblad, Juan Du, Denise Dumais, Tim Harrison, Kathy Wright, David Yocum, Kevin Cannon (project team) **ASSOCIATE ARCHITECT:** Wayne Troyer Architects, New Orleans—Wayne Troyer (principal) **ENGINEER:** Kulkarni Consultants (structural); Moses Engineers (mechanical/electrical/HVAC); Krebs, LaSalle, LeMieux Consultants (civil) **CONSULTANTS:** MPC Associates (construction management); Ramon Luminance Design (lighting); **GENERAL CONTRACTOR:** Gootee Construction **COST:** \$12 million  
**PHOTOGRAPHER:** Timothy Hursley

The life that occurs here has the distinctive flavor and feel of New Orleans as well. Students sunbathe and read on the grassy lawns in front of the ranges and barbecue in the spacious courts between the buildings. Brian Jones, who operated the dormitory in its first year for the university’s Office of Residential Life, applauds the project’s abundant outdoor spaces, noting, “There are always people out on the balconies. A third of our students are from the Northeast, and they really enjoy a 75-degree January day.”

Jones is equally enthusiastic about the way the dormitory’s design accomplishes the client’s goals in terms of facilitating a sense of community inside the buildings. The three primary buildings accommodate about 100 students each and are currently programmed to house interdisciplinary living/learning units. Each floor of 25–30 students has a kitchen, lounge, laundry, study room, and terrace clustered together to encourage casual encounters at a more intimate scale. Generous private rooms with 10-foot exposed concrete ceilings and custom movable furniture vary widely in shape, size, and arrangement to emphasize individual identity within the larger whole.

Mack Scogin and Merrill Elam, along with former partner Lloyd Bray and local associate Wayne Troyer, have created a remarkably livable and endearing little jewel out of a building type that is generally characterized by crudeness and over-systemization. By superimposing a simple vocabulary of brick and stucco walls punctuated by taut glass onto an idiosyncratic set of volumes, they achieve strong visual interest with an economy of means. They do so in a context that has a rich tradition of taking a solid melody and improvising with riffs and flourishes to generate richness and complexity. The design process has resulted in a fresh and sophisticated architectural expression that makes magic out of the constraints of its program and place. ■

