South Central Construction magazine introduces its first **Top Owner of the Year***, Dillard University of New Orleans. The university was selected from numerous nominated owners based on its work volume, commitment to the community, innovation/vision, sustainability initiatives and reputation. Following Katrina, Dillard doggedly pursued sustainable design after it was tasked with the nearly total reconstruction of the university's campus.*

By Angelle Bergeron

After less than two months on the job, Dillard University President Dr. Marvalene Hughes had to deal with the total destruction of the New Orleans campus and a faculty and student body that were scattered across the nation. Not quite four years later, Hughes has accomplished what seemed impossible – an almost total reconstruction of the university's campus with a construction and planning focus on sustainable design, including two new LEED®* registered buildings that are slated for completion in 2010. Hughes' efforts were the salvation of a 140-year-old academic and cultural cornerstone.

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Hughes began her tenure at Dillard July 1, 2005, becoming the university's first female elected president after having served as president of California State University at Stanislaus for 11 years. Hurricane Katrina made landfall east of New Orleans Aug. 29, 2005. Levee failures after Katrina flooded the entire campus with 4 to 8 ft of water, damaging all buildings, some so badly they were eventually demolished.

"After Katrina, the only choice to be made was to return to California or stay," Hughes says. "I would not disappoint an entire university by taking the easy way out. Besides, there is something contagious about this place."

However, the president didn't realize how difficult it would be to rebuildthe physical campus while trying to reunitestudents and faculty and resume studies. "Many universities have had disasters, but none has been totally destroyed," Hughes says. "There is not a university president in the United States who has had the challenge of trying to rebuild the university while trying to manage the entire university community as well."

When it was clear that Katrina was headed toward New Orleans, Hughes ordered the evacuation of the entire student body to Centenary College in Shreveport, La. After the devastation, Hughes struggled to find a place to house students and faculty in Dillard's hometown, fighting those who sought to permanently relocate the university.

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"New Orleans is the birth home for Dillard," she says. "Why would you take them anywhere else?" By January 2006, Hughes had set up a temporary campus at the Hilton New Orleans Riverside to house and educate the 54% returning students.

"By getting the students back to the Hilton, she managed to keep it all together," says Ian Thompson, principal of Sizeler Thompson Brown Architects of New Orleans, which nominated Hughes for Owner of the Year recognition. "Running a whole campus is a massive managerial job. That was a challenge for us as well, keeping it all together and getting it done very quickly."

As architects for the campus renovation since 1997, Sizeler Thompson Brown had master-plan drawings that proved invaluable to the university's speedy damage assessment and $73-million, fast-track rehabilitation of 35 buildings performed by Carl E. Woodward LLC of New Orleans.

"After the storm, we basically got them back up and running," says Chris Michel, project manager for Woodward Design+Build, a division of CEW. "We went into every building that was damaged due to flood and hurricane, gutted it, got all electrical back up and running and cleaned any mold. We basically allowed the university to become operational."

By May, CEW will have completed the last of the restoration projects.

Woodward Design+Build has teamed up with Sizeler Thompson Brown on one of the new LEED registered buildings on campus. Construction on the design-build, $38-million, three-story, 130,000-sq-ft Professional Schools Building began in November and is scheduled for completion in January.

Michel says that achieving LEED gold certification will require the university to do certain things (like landscaping) that are outside of Woodward's contract. "It has been President Hughes' ambition to have this project be LEED gold certified," Michel adds. "She continually reminds us that she wants us to try and get the gold."

The new Student Center, being built by Landis Construction Co. of New Orleans, is also on track to be certified LEED gold.

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"Sustainability has always been important to me," says Hughes, who, during her tenure in California, headed construction of a LEED-certified science building. "I wish I had the capacity here to do more research on sustainability. I think I would be out of step with the current environmental rhythm if I didn't do this.

"When I think about Katrina and other disaster areas and universities, disasters are much more prevalent than they used to be. I've always felt that we were not protecting the Earth in the manner we should. Sustainability is an important lesson for students to learn, and they are grasping it."

The new Professional Schools Building will also help to fulfill one of Hughes' other goals, to expand the curriculum to provide more professional skills to the African-American community, another reason Sizeler Thompson Brown nominated her for Owner of the Year.
"Dillard was founded by slaves and abolitionists who knew education was an important component of the cultural development of black people," Hughes says. "That was the aegis of Dillard and it has been advanced by generations of families."

Currently, students at Dillard earn bachelor of science and bachelor of arts degrees in business, natural sciences, public health, humanities, social sciences, educational and psychological studies and nursing. Established in 1942, Dillard's bachelor of science in nursing degree is the oldest accredited nursing program in Louisiana.

Hughes says she wants to broaden the curriculum to move toward more advanced degrees.

"Some fields are moving toward higher certifications and many of our students have indicated they would stay for a higher degree program if we would offer it," she adds. "I think it is bringing the university more into alignment with the 21st Century and the demands of the corporate business world."

The new Professional Schools Building will include a 400-seat auditorium, four 70-seat lecture halls, nursing simulation labs with mannequins that simulate a wide range of health issues, faculty space and chemistry and physics labs. "It will support their nursing curriculum as well as allow them to expand their math and business departments," Michel says.

Both of the LEED registered buildings also support Hughes' commitment to help restore the largely devastated, Gentilly community that is home to Dillard. "She has formed a Community Development Corp. dedicated to rebuilding the Gentilly community and bringing the community onto the Dillard campus through a wide range of programs and activities—from health care to theater," Thompson says.

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The new Student Center will be a multipurpose building that includes a community health clinic, conference center and gymnasium that will be open to the public. In close proximity to that building is a New Orleans public library, which will be demolished and rebuilt.

"Within the library, Dr. Hughes wants to establish a cyber café, bookstore and a printing facility," Thompson says. "It would still be called the Norman Mayer Library, but both of those buildings would be shared by the university and community."

Additionally, the Professional Schools Building would offer public services such as tax preparation assistance by business students and health screenings by nursing students.

In the Owner of the Year nomination, Sizeler Thompson Brown cited Hughes' persistence in capturing funds to bring the university back to life.

"We had $400 million worth of damage for which, technically, we were insured," Hughes says. "However, the insurance company has only delivered $111 million in reconstruction. We filed a suit and hopefully our case will be heard in June."

In the meantime, Hughes has worked tirelessly with the university development officer to garner foundation and government funds.

"The university encountered the same pace with the federal government that the city did," she says.

**(LEED is a trademark owned by the U.S. Green Building Council.)*