

GATOR House: A Typology of Resilience

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In the modern era, most buildings in southern Louisiana's wet, hot, humid, and often volatile climate seek to resist the extreme conditions by creating a presumed impenetrable barrier. Since the advent of HVAC, levees, dams, and surge barriers, a construction culture of resistance has permeated the built environment. This has proven less than resilient and has resulted in billions of dollars in remediation and billions more tons of construction debris. Historically, buildings in this subtropical area were forced to employ every manner of passive systems to mediate their physical environment to the greatest extent possible. The GATOR house resists the false choices of historical vs. modern, man vs. nature, active vs. passive, and celebrates the complex interaction of the built, natural, and cultural systems of southern Louisiana.

Geography is the description of how the signs of history have become forms, therefore the architectural project is charged with the task of revealing the essence of the geo-environmental context through the transformation of form. The environment is therefore not a system in which to dissolve architecture. On the contrary, it is the most important material from which to develop the project.

- Vittorio Gregotti ¹

Gregotti's insistence that the built environment should be a result of revealing the geo-environmental condition is in many ways a call for the traditional or vernacular and in southern Louisiana, this call has presence. However, the



Figure 1. Entry to dogtrot porch/living room. Image credit Jim Osborne.



Figure 2. Side gallery porch/hall to kitchen and dining porch. Image credit Jim Osborne.



traditional camp



contemporary camp

Figure 3. Traditional and contemporary camps along False River. Image credit *emerymclure* architecture and False River Realty.

geo-environment is changing rapidly, and the history and technologies of the built environment keep growing. This demands an adjustment to Gregotti's position, where past, present, and maybe most importantly futures transform form. Building should not become an argument between opposing forces and ideals. History has proven that neither is entirely correct. We must resist the false dichotomy of man versus nature, or the impossibly utopian man with nature models. Instead, we should strive for a relationship between human settlement (then, now, and the future) and the natural environment which allows for flexibility and exchange; for a culturally and ecologically resilient architecture which can adapt to changed circumstances while fulfilling its core purpose.² We see this as a hybridization of Gregotti's position with Kenneth Frampton's 'lens of techne,'³ where that which forms the built environment emerges through a critical contemporary tectonic.

The GATOR House is a camp, a southern Louisiana vacation home. Traditionally, the camp typology functioned as a hunting and fishing retreat; minimal, low energy, a little rough, and occupied episodically according to season. Once a rustic shed for storing fishing and hunting gear, it has become a coveted gathering place for families and friends to enjoy the outdoors - camps are part fish cleaning station, part summer home. There is no distinct camp typology, though historically they took the

form of hybrid traditional typologies: dog-trots, shotguns, creole cottages. They commonly privilege the liminal and public spaces; porches, patios, decks.

The GATOR House takes these spatial and organizational cues while allowing the siting and form to emerge from its extreme environmental conditions. It enables social, cultural functionality while celebrating the need to commune with Cfa⁴ nature. Passive strategies are required; durability and water resistance are critical.

It is sited on a 'false river', an oxbow lake left behind when the Mississippi River jumped and snaked across the delta forming Southern Louisiana. The lake is infrastructurally controlled, and therefore predictably fluctuating. First, GATOR house is raised 4' to 8' above the 500-year flood stage to mitigate inundation. It is also constructed with low-maintenance materials that resist water, rot, and insects to not only withstand the humid conditions of the Cfa but also allow the owners to spray off their camp with a hose. Nine metal roll-up doors provide flexible enclosure and protect the camp in the event of extreme weather and while owners are away.

The GATOR House's communion with the natural environment is more than just material. It is social and spatial with almost all



Figure 4. Transverse section. Image credit *emerymclure architecture*.



Figure 5. Open/screened/closed openings. Image credit Jim Osborne.



Figure 6. Dogtrot porch/living room. Image credit Jim Osborne.



Figure 7. Waterfront elevation. Image credit Jim Osborne.

social gathering occurring in the liminal porch and exterior deck spaces. A dogtrot porch, side gallery porch, and screened back porch are the primary living spaces and occupy the majority of the square footage. They line the southern and western facades, and engulf the minimal interior, conditioned spaces. Adjacent to the waterfront porch, stadium seats occupy the interstitial space between “outside” screened porch and “outside” on the waterfront, providing seating for gathering, barbecuing, and cleaning fish. The only spaces that are truly “inside” are the three sleeping rooms, master bath, and small kitchen. Using natural ventilation, industrial-grade fans, and deep shade, heat, humidity, and insects are mitigated to establish human comfort in an infamously uncomfortable environment.

In order to achieve the identity, both technical and phenomenal, of the GATOR House, we attempted to hybridize design strategies. These hybridizations attempt a sustainable habitation both culturally and ecologically. It refuses the either/or design strategy (tradition vs. modern, cultural vs. physical, natural vs. manmade). The both/and approach results in the GATOR house.

“We can no longer afford to ignore what it takes to live in this world.”⁵



Figure 8. Indoor kitchen. Image credit Jim Osborne.

ENDNOTES

1. Dr. Sue Eakin & Manie Culbertson, *Louisiana, The Land and Its People* (Gretna, Louisiana: Pelican Press, 1986), 6.
2. With the tectonic in mind, it is possible to posit a revised account of the history of modern architecture, for when the entire trajectory is reinterpreted through the lens of techne certain patterns emerge and others recede. Seen in this light a tectonic impulse may be traced across the century, uniting diverse works irrespective of their different origins. In this process, hitherto unremarked connections emerge asserting the importance of criteria that lie beyond superficial stylistic differences.
3. Kenneth Frampton, “Rappel à l’Ordre: The Case for the Tectonic,” *labour, work, and architecture* (London: Phaidon Press, 2002), 99.
4. Köppen-Geiger climate classification in south eastern United States
5. Dora P. Crouch and June G. Johnson, *Traditions in Architecture* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), 47.

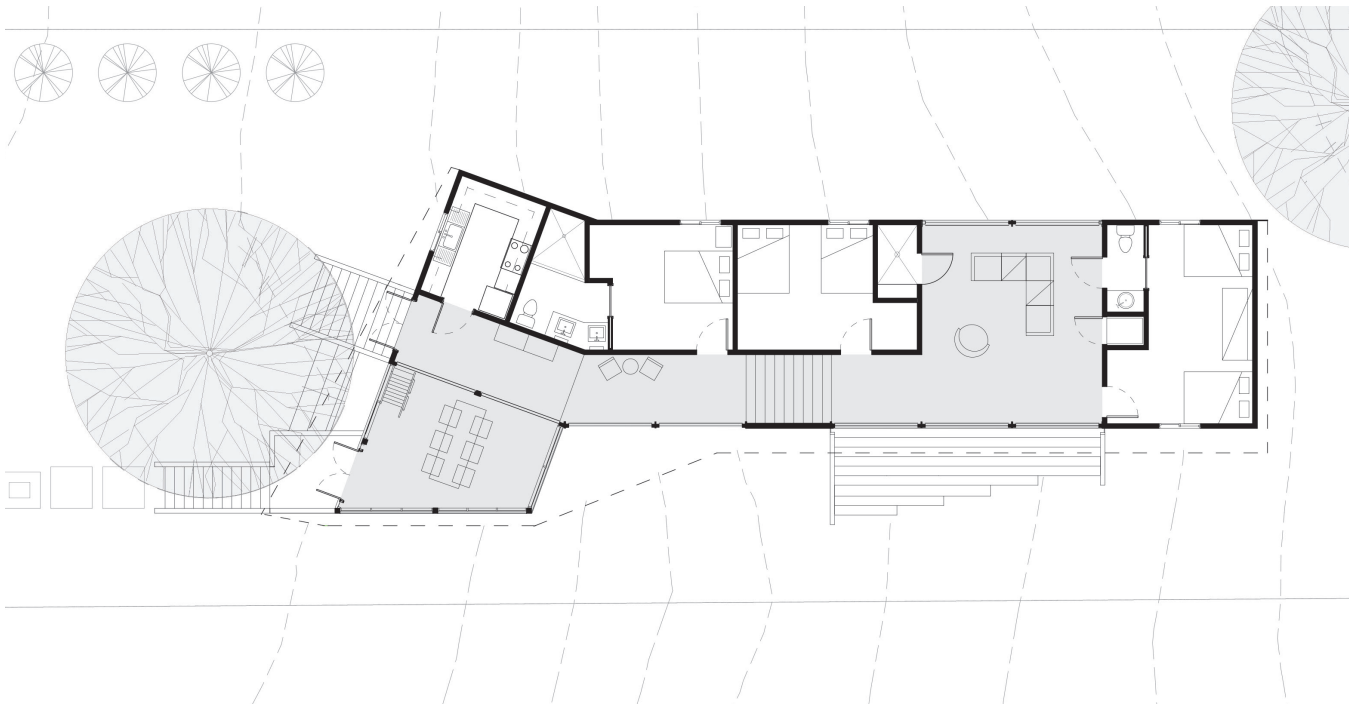


Figure 9. GATOR House plan. Image credit emerymclure architecture.



Figure 10. Angled dining porch to capture prevailing breezes. Image credit Jim Osborne.