

To heck with affordable housing. I want adorable housing. Turns out I can have both, in the form of a Katrina Cottage.



Katrina Cottages, tiny but tough, were designed for use on the Gulf Coast in the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina. Initially they were intended to be an attractive alternative to dismal FEMA campers.

These cute little Southern-style cottages offered a lot of possibilities for hurricane-ravaged neighborhoods. They could be considered temporary, then moved to another location. They could be built as permanent residences in front yards, leaving room for eventual expansion to the rear. Or they could be built in the back yard, occupied by the owners while their regular house was under construction, then used as guest cottages.

Turns out that has been a bit of a mess, because, as usual, there are all kinds of political realities that prevent good ideas from being implemented. For example, FEMA won't pay for a nice \$35,000 Katrina Cottage because it could be considered permanent, and because they won't pay for something that a private citizen ends up owning. They will, however, pay for temporary shelter, even if it's a crappy \$70,000 camper trailer that people end up living in for years, but can't really settle into because they are by law prevented from buying it.

Another problem has been local ordinances that restrict the construction of small houses. Most towns have limits on how small a house can be. And this is a shame, because Katrina Cottages have captured the fancy of a lot of people across the United States. Their mass-market appeal is so great, in fact, that Lowe's has begun to sell the cottages. Not just the plans, but the materials, too.

At first Lowe's sold plans and materials packaged only in the Gulf Coast communities that were desperate for housing solutions. They promised to expand the product line to the rest of the nation in Spring 2007. They were running way behind schedule, what with all the demand on the Gulf Coast, I imagine, but as of July 1, they came through on their promise. Now you can go to the Lowe's web site and order a set of plans for \$700. You'll get a \$700 credit towards a materials package, too, so it's kind of like getting free house plans.

You can also, for \$2 plus shipping and handling, order a 35-page, full color Katrina Cottage Plan Book. The first section of the book contains plans for the four original Lowe's Katrina Cottage models. These are the ones you can buy materials packages for. Their sizes range from 544 square feet to 936 square feet.

The materials package includes everything from ceiling fans to refrigerator. All you have to provide is a foundation, piers, and HVAC system. Speaking of piers, you'll have to use your imagination to consider what some of these houses will look like in Beaufort. If you're on good high ground, the cottage might look much as it does in the pictures. But if you are in a low lying area, you'll need to think about how it will look up on stilts.

There are ten more cottage plans, too. There's not a materials package for any of them, but they provide some good options. The smallest is 308 square feet, and the largest is 1175 square feet.

The cottages, including a couple designed by Eric Moser of Beaufort, are hurricane resistant. They feature wood framing, a metal roof, and laminate flooring. The Hardieplank siding is termite and rot resistant, and is rated for 140 mph wind gusts. The interior wallboard is mold and mildew resistant. I don't know if this is true, but I've heard that if the cottage gets flooded, pretty much all you have to do is hose it out.

These cottages would be so perfect for the Lowcountry. They are aesthetically pleasing, and the designs, inspired by the vernacular architecture of the Gulf Coast, would fit right in to most of our pre-1950 neighborhoods. I wouldn't expect them to crop up in places like Palmetto Dunes or Spanish Point, but it's easy to imagine them tucked away on tiny parcels in downtown Beaufort and Port Royal's Old Village.

As for affordability, the estimate is around \$50 per square foot. You can't beat that unless you buy a tent. And it's not just for poor people.

As popular culture swerves away from the ostentation of the late 20th century, and embraces the simplicity movement of the 21st century, there's going to be more demand for houses like Katrina Cottages. McMansions, already objects of amusement and embarrassment, much to the chagrin of their ambitious owners, will continue their fall from grace on the American streetscape. It seems counterintuitive, but desire is a strange thing, and our collective desire for conspicuous consumption is being usurped by desire for conspicuous self restraint.

For more information on Lowe's Katrina Cottages, visit www.lowes.com search with the keyword "Katrina." You can also see and buy more Katrina Cottage plans, including some from Beaufort architect Bill Allison, at a New Urban Guild site, www.katrinacottages.com