

# FEMA trailers on display, on trial

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In another life, the trailer represented leisure, the freedom to pick up and go.

But after lives were shattered along the Gulf Coast by Hurricane Katrina, it emerged as another emblem of post-storm failings.

The FEMA trailer: The roughly 8-by-31-foot boxes were at once refuges and, some say, living hells.

As plaintiffs and defendants settled into a New Orleans courtroom last week in the first lawsuit to make it to trial over formaldehyde levels and fumes in some of the government-issued trailers, a similar movable shelter took up temporary residence on the campus of Wesleyan University in Middletown.

Along the Gulf Coast, the trailer served as a habitat. In Connecticut, it is reimagined as art — an exercise in exploring alternatives and political statement. One glance at the coach parked on a patch of green in Middletown reveals this is no longer your factory-issue FEMA trailer.

Artist Paul Villinski reconstructed this one, originally manufactured by Gulf Stream Coach Inc., one of two defendants in the ongoing civil case. The suit, highly watched in advance of others, was filed by a New Orleans woman who claims her young son's asthma was aggravated living in a Gulf Stream-produced, government-issued trailer.

A key element revolves around 2006 findings by the company that the units produced elevated levels of formaldehyde, a carcinogenic chemical common in construction products. The company, the suit says, did not issue warnings about exposure hazards.

In testimony before the House Committee on Oversight and Government Reform last summer, Gulf Stream's chairman defended his company as a family-run, heartland-based manufacturer committed to

## IF YOU GO

Artist Paul Villinski and curator Nina Felshin will discuss and tour the Emergency Response Studio on Nov. 7 at 3 p.m. in the Zilkha Gallery on the Wesleyan University campus in Middletown. The ERS will be on display at the gallery through Nov. 8. For information, visit [wesleyan.edu/cfa](http://wesleyan.edu/cfa) or call (860) 685-3355.

"safe and quality products ... travel trailers sold to FEMA were no exception."

He extolled his company's quality and safety record while expressing "concern" about health issues faced by Katrina victims. Short production time did not allow for a typical, initial "airing out" of trailers, he said, adding that FEMA instructed the company not to contact trailer occupants after an initial complaint and investigation.

Around the same time that trailer makers ramped up production to meet billion-dollar — and in some cases no-bid — contracts to provide more than 200,000 trailers and mobile homes to hurricane victims, Villinski's project began to germinate.

## Scavenging artist

A New York-based artist who works frequently with found materials, Villinski longed to head to the Big Easy after Katrina. He wanted to pack up his studio, "to make work that was an appropriate response." In December 2006, a New Orleans gallery invited him for an exhibition. Months had passed since the hurricane, but Villinski found himself dumbfounded in the aftermath of disaster.

"I felt just real agony," he said, describing how he spent a week in one of the city's hardest-hit wards. What might have been pay dirt for an artist who works with reclaimed items was tinged with sadness. The contents of entire houses sat curbside. Villinski pilfered pieces from the cast-off collec-

tions. He shipped items back to New York: a Radio Flyer children's wagon he turned into a fantasy escape vehicle, water- and sun-warped LPs and their covers that transformed into a flock of butterflies. Along the way, he imagined a mobile artist studio to house displaced painters and sculptors and dreamers, a place where an artist could literally live amid, and react to, disaster. What resulted was the Emergency Response Studio, made from a former FEMA trailer, which debuted in 2008 as part of a large-scale New Orleans art project.

"Life would have been much easier if I had just started from scratch," said Villinski, who in April 2008 paid \$5,015 to the General Accountability Office for a cast-off trailer like the ones that he estimated the government had paid \$85,000 per unit to produce hastily after Katrina. "It was stapled together. It was the most poorly put together thing I had ever seen."

## Trailer transformed

Villinski bought sight unseen the 2001 Cavalier (not one of the bunch manufactured in the post-Katrina flurry, but the same model). He towed it to Socrates Sculpture Park in Long Island City, N.Y. There, Villinski attacked the hulking structure with power tools, transforming it from something resembling an extremely cramped, cheap motel room to a mod, spacious studio replete with green technology.

Photographs chronicle the metamorphosis through deconstruction and reconstruction. Early images show mold outside, and on particle board that supported the bed. A sticker listed a contact number for a case worker, leading Villinski to believe the trailer served in some previous disaster.

To reoutfit the big box, Villinski raised \$85,000, much in in-kind labor and design. He cut holes in the side and the floor and the roof, trying to "make it feel expansive." He installed insulation made from scraps of denim. He built

kitchen cabinets out of plywood — a bamboo-based, replenishable resource. He mounted a 1.6-kilowatt solar energy system on the trailer and rebuilt one wall so that it could fold open and outward, creating a platform that added square footage and let light flood in. More light came from a roof-mounted geodesic dome skylight. Adorning the front: a decorative butterfly, a symbol of transformation and of flight, which the sailplane and paragliding enthusiast cites as inspiration.

Last fall, Villinski's Emergency Response Studio sat on display for a month in New Orleans' Lower Ninth Ward, in sight of two FEMA trailers still housing families. The greatest affirmation of his work came, Villinski recounted, when occupants of the nearby trailers visited the so-called ERS.

"Their eyes would light up," said Villinski.

At Wesleyan's Zilkha Gallery, a few yards from the parked ERS, Villinski's creation is juxtaposed against two large-scale works. First is a wall-sized photograph superimposed on a sheet. The photo shows a haggard house in New Orleans with a big "No Bulldozing" sign. Spray painted on its front: "Donation to rebuild" and a phone number followed by "Please help."

A few feet away lurks a life-size skeleton of the trailer's layout before it became the ERS. The wood structure resembles a Tinkertoy creation. A bar of soap rested where once a bathroom was, a teddy bear in the space of two tiny bunks. The structure creaked with every step.

While Villinski envisioned the ERS as a real studio, he now considers this one a prototype — of green technology, smart space use and a cockeyed space for "embedded" artists. The only artist to work in the ERS aside from himself, Villinski said, was his painter girlfriend.

"I keep waiting for FEMA to call me up," he said of his eco-friendly, airy and modern trailer. "That hasn't happened yet."



## DAYTRIP: MIDDLETOWN



Artist Paul Villinski reconstructed this FEMA trailer, on display at the campus of Wesleyan University.

CONTRIBUTED