Bringing Hope to Puerto Rico
Puerto Rico came into view as the plane began its descent. The typically bright green, lush foliage had been stripped, leaving behind a grey-brown landscape—an indication that this trip was taking place in far-from-normal circumstances.

In July 2017, Andrews University graduate architecture students in Urban Design Studio had started work, with two of their professors, Andrew von Maur and Troy Homenchuk, on a Proyecto ENLACE del Caño Martín Peña collaboration. Their goal was to assist with the design of new housing and public spaces in a flood-prone, working class neighborhood of 26,000 in central San Juan, Puerto Rico. Victor Perez Andino, an Andrews student from Puerto Rico, and von Maur, professor of architecture, visited the project site. They presented a proposal and brought feedback to the entire class of 16 students: Erlend Andvik, Nathan Bolkovic, Anna Brown, Keila Creed, Rachelle Dunn, Rebekah Gaines, Kevin Leong, Aaron Montalvo, Wandile Mthiyane, Cecia Munoz, Kevin O’Brien, Victor Perez Andino, José Ramos, Melanie Reed, Resler Jacob and Celeena Seats.

The class worked on preliminary studies in preparation for a scheduled trip to Puerto Rico from September 26 to October 5. They would visit the neighborhood and engage the community in a participatory design process.

But then hurricanes Irma and Maria hit the island, the September 26 flight was cancelled, and the plan was called into question. Should the trip continue or be postponed indefinitely?

The class prayed, and as they discussed options, the focus of the trip began to shift. Instead of just meeting an academic requirement, the group would assist with relief efforts. Because of the potential risks, the trip was changed from mandatory to optional, but all 16 students and both professors felt compelled to go. A flight was booked for October 1, cutting the original length of the trip in half and, as a result, saving a significant amount of money.

The group decided to use the now extra budget to purchase supplies to take to Puerto Rico. They also received donations from online giving set up by the University, personal checks, the local Spanish Seventh-day Adventist Church, and Congressman Fred Upton. The funds were used to buy as many materials as could possibly be transported by the airlines. Thankfully, the airlines did not charge baggage fees for relief supplies through October 1—the group’s exact travel date—so the Andrews group maxed out their baggage weight limit and number of bags.

The plane landed during a rainstorm in Puerto Rico. Water dripped from the ceilings in the airport, and whole gates were closed due to hurricane damage. Rental cars were full of dents from the storms, and only one car in the group’s caravan had a full tank of gas.

The drive from the airport made it painfully clear just how disastrous the hurricanes had been. Power lines were down. Cars would inch out at intersections because there was no electricity to street lights. Most houses were still standing—partially. Many structures had no roofs. Others, constructed of concrete on the bottom and wood on the top were missing the entire wooden half. Trees were down, billboards fallen into homes.

Von Maur notes, “Victor used to work there and was personal friends with the owners. We were supposed to stay there for ten days but something didn’t work out, so we had booked rooms for October 1–5, which turned out to be the exact dates of our new schedule. I think God lined up that particular guest house for us because all the hotels in Puerto Rico refused to take new guests after the storm. The people at
the guest house worked really, really hard to clean up the property. It was safe. We had a really restful place to stay. We had private security at night. We had use of a generator for a couple hours a day. We had running water. I feel God took care of us.”

The guest house was designed to be comfortable without air conditioning, but it was still hot. By 8 a.m., everyone was dripping sweat. Temperatures would rise to 85–95 degrees Fahrenheit, not ideal conditions for physical labor.

The class travelled from their guest house to work in two neighborhoods. They did their best to help with clean-up, separating vegetation from downed metal roofs, picking up garbage and creating tarp roofs.

Melanie Reed recalls that while tarping homes, she got the sense of literally living in mold—the smell was so strong.

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Aaron Montalvo notes how hard he and his classmates worked, saying, “We were cleaning an older gentleman’s house and lifted a whole wall that had fallen into the road.” When necessary, students would climb on top of ladders with axes or use chainsaws to clear debris. Often, they were asked to throw things out but there was nowhere to put the trash.

At times, the group found it best to leave a situation be. Nathan Bolkovic describes a home where a tree, three feet in diameter, fell onto a wall and was held up by a TV stand. “If I cut the tree, the TV stand holding it up would fall and tear the wall down.”

Throughout the process, they repeatedly heard stories of unsanitary conditions. One local resident told them water had been waist-level and had come up out of the toilet.

During the time they were in Puerto Rico, students were asked many times if they were from FEMA. They saw one other Christian relief group. They saw one municipal garbage truck. On the fifth day, they finally saw police presence. They did not see any relief supplies being distributed other than by ENLACE, who organized their team.

Melanie says, “You hear that the tourists are getting FEMA water flown to them and then these neighborhoods are asking where FEMA is. It’s devastating and heartbreaking to hear.”

One woman told the group not to touch anything because FEMA had not yet arrived—she needed to wait to move anything until she could prove to the insurance company that there was damage.

In the midst of their own loss, the people of Puerto Rico demonstrated a beautiful, hospitable spirit. A man opened his shop to let the group use the restrooms.

Elderly citizens would push themselves physically. Those who could not lift things would sweep the streets. An 83-year-old man helped the students with clean-up and would not stop for breaks, even at the insistence of his wife and the students. Another gentleman filled a hole that a student had fallen into the day before.

And still others shared when they really needed to keep the few comforts they had. There was an operating ice cube factory, and the line for ice stretched for blocks and blocks. Some older women who had watched the students work waited for ice cubes, then brought the ice to the students. The women gave away one of the most valuable things they had—an opportunity to escape even briefly from the elements.

The hurricane clean-up is far from over and trouble continues to come. Victor, who stayed longer than his classmates in order to visit family, says that still more rain fell. “Some places that didn’t flood during the hurricane are flooding now because sewers are now plugged.”

Aaron’s grandparents live in the mountains of Puerto Rico. He was not able to see his grandparents because of the distance, the road debris and the lack of gas. But his grandparents did call him the day he arrived to let him know everything was okay, even though everything in the mountains—plantains, oranges—is all gone. They told Aaron, “God is good all the time.” Aaron says, “God always finds a way to provide. But coming back here [to the United States] puts life into perspective. We can sit here with lights and air conditioning and our computers on. But my grandparents are still in the middle of nowhere with no power. It’s heartbreaking, but at the same time I’m grateful for what I do have.”

Melanie says, “It’s one of those experiences you can’t understand until you’re out of it and have a chance to think about it. I was on a different flight home and half of the people on the flight were saying, ‘We escaped Maria. We made it.’ In that moment, I thought, ‘Wow—to be surrounded by people who didn’t know they would make it...’ My house in Florida was fixed in a week, but in Puerto Rico three weeks passed and nothing was fixed. It shows the privilege we do have and what we should do.”
Andrew recalls students handling every last one of a woman’s belongings in order to cover it all with a tarp. He gave the woman some cash. She was crying, but she was happy. “You realize this is all you can do,” he says. “You can bring hope. You can help with what you can and now continue to be faithful and help with the project. I learned that hope is one of the most important things that people need during this time.”

The entire Urban Design Studio class was able to present their architecture project after all. They set up in an open area and taped their plans to a wall. The group hopes to give the local people a vision of how life can continue in their neighborhood.

Victor gave a talk about faith and action. “It was interesting to talk to the community leader,” he says. “It was really good to hear from her that it is a relief to see something like this. Right now, it’s destruction, but they can look at the plans and imagine that there is hope, another future. Things could potentially be different. The rendering/idea was very refreshing. They wanted to know more and collaborate.” Victor adds, “We are faithful and moving forward. We’re going to keep working on the project and keep receiving donations to help the community.”

To contribute toward aid for affected families at Caño Martín Peña, please visit andrews.edu/go/give and choose Puerto Rico Project-AU Architecture or send checks to the School of Architecture & Interior Design, 8435 E Campus Circle Drive, Berrien Springs, MI 49104. All proceeds will go directly to aid.

The architecture class learned that there is a Seventh-day Adventist church and an ADRA center in the same area where they presented their project. They have continued to raise funds for Puerto Rico—$6,000 so far—and have been sending the money to the local ADRA center. The money will be used for food and first necessities.

A return trip to Puerto Rico is in the planning stages, in order to assist with the reconstruction of roofs in their project neighborhood.