

# NOPI BULLETIN

**THE NEW ORLEANS PLANNING INITIATIVE**  
A program of the Department of City and Regional Planning

## A Cornell Education in New Orleans

John Forester, April 19, 2006

I asked a student from Massachusetts, "After seeing what you've seen down here, what would you want people back home to know?" She looked up and didn't miss a beat, "I'd tell them to get their asses down here!"

We gutted five houses in five days, finding our way at first, working smarter and smoother by the week's end. Ike, the owner of the second house, came back to let us in, survey the damage, and watch us work. "My wife and I left with the clothes on our back," he told us. It had been seven months since the storm, and we carried their water-soaked clothes to the street, along with wall after wall of moldy sheet rock, every door and window frame, their kitchen cabinets, and that dresser in the side room much too heavy to carry all at once—that dresser whose bottom drawer was full of waterlogged religious books and a Bible, whose middle drawer had the family's rolls of gift wrapping paper, scotch tape and ribbons. "Heartbreaking" just scratches the surface here; now multiply by 300,000, roughly the number of those still displaced from New Orleans alone.

Everyone had stories to tell. We heard quickly about renters' issues, real estate speculation, and market pressures: the stock of livable housing had plummeted, rents had soared, and so the many "Help Wanted" signs, others told us, advertised for staff with no place to live. The houses told

stories. A block from the first house we gutted, the garage door to a house up a slight embankment read, "We are still alive." Ike's neighbor had come back, the day after leaving his own house, no longer



Cornell students hard at work gutting a house in New Orleans. Photo by Samantha Bosshart.

to talk to his elderly father about leaving, but to carry him to safety. By the week's end he discovered that his father's sister, who'd also hoped to stay put and had lived in a house just a few blocks away, had been floating on a mattress until she was rescued. The cabbie who took us to the airport told of helping an older East New Orleans man who'd been rescued by helicopter from his attic, but not before his elderly wife had died in that attic a few days before his airlift.

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Cornell University  
College of Architecture,  
Art, and Planning

# NOPI

## A Message from the Coordinator

Jim Dessauer

Congratulations and thanks to the students and faculty who have worked so hard this past year to be of assistance to ACORN and the people of the Ninth Ward in New Orleans. More than 100 Cornell

a platform for continued planning and development work in the Ninth Ward.

This summer's internships and next year's coursework and research projects will move forward from this solid base. As we proceed, it will be critical that we attend carefully to keeping coursework and service and research projects on task. The beginning of this effort is to work with ACORN and Ninth Ward community members to establish desired outcomes that build from the work already completed, and that address key planning and development requirements. Our work must continue to be "with" the people of New Orleans and not "on" them. Careful attention to operating on that basis will place NOPI at the cutting edge of community/university collaborative endeavors.

*Jim Dessauer is the Coordinator for the New Orleans Planning Initiative (NOPI). He has worked extensively in the field of community organizing and community/university collaboration.*

**Our work must continue to be "with" the people of New Orleans and not "on" them.**

students have taken courses and given direct service to the people of New Orleans. I hope you have learned in equal measure. The history of community/university research and service learning projects is replete with stories of mismatched agendas and the production of "reports" that sit on shelves unused. No shelves will hold the New Orleans Planning Initiative student products for very long. Students have produced working documents, options analyses, and computer models that will be used day to day in New Orleans. The engaged scholarship of Cornell students and faculty has built



Above: The various volunteer groups added their own hometown to the directions sign outside the mess hall at the FEMA tent city. Photo by Jon Gunderlach

Below: An example of the desolation in the Ninth Ward. Photo by Samantha Bosshart



## A Community Forum in the Ninth Ward Residents and Students Share Ideas and Hope

Meredith Schmidt, April 23, 2006

The Ninth Ward Community Forum, hosted by ACORN, took place at the end of the joint Historic Preservation Planning and New Orleans Planning Initiative volunteer spring break trip, on March 25, 2006. The purpose of the meeting was to present the work of students from Cornell and Louisiana State University to residents of the Ninth Ward, and to collect feedback. The Forum took place at the Holy Angels Church on St. Claude Avenue, the main commercial corridor spanning the Ninth Ward. The church is one of the only meeting places open for public use since the flood and it is well used by neighborhood groups. The meeting space was booked solid, leaving the presenters a setup time of just one hour.

At 1:00 pm residents, property owners, relatives of community members, and politicians began streaming into the second floor meeting space. Diedra Whittenburg and I joined LSU students in displaying our work. Cornell's Associate Professor Jeff Chusid provided the context of historic preservation for the St. Roch Market rehabilitation, while guest lecturer George Frantz discussed planning issues related to options for green space and rebuilding houses. Downstairs, residents registered with the state to have the cost of demolishing their homes covered by FEMA; the deadline is June 1, 2006.

I collected feedback from residents through surveys prepared by groups in the Re-visioning the Ninth Ward: Ecology, Open Space, and

Disaster Resistance in Post-Katrina New Orleans workshop. Surveys addressed open space, development guidelines, predicting returning residents, and evacuation plans in the Ninth Ward. I only had the opportunity to talk to a couple

the restoration of their community. Although many of the rebuilding questions remained unanswered, the meeting offered some hope of community members being able to return to their neighborhood.



Attendance was heavy at the Ninth Ward Community Forum at Holy Angels Church. Photo by Meredith Schmidt

of residents. These residents responded positively to the ideas presented.

With total attendees numbering over 200, the meeting served its purpose, and more. It was a place where community members could collect information on what the possibilities are for rebuilding. It brought together residents to participate in the first steps of a planning process aimed at

*Meredith Schmidt is a graduate student in the Department of City and Regional Planning. Her interests include affordable housing and community organizing in inner-city neighborhoods.*

# NOPI

## Cornell in New Orleans: Spring Break 2006

Kevin Waskelis

From Saturday, March 18 to Saturday, March 25, a group of about thirty students, mostly masters students with the Department of City and Regional Planning (CRP), volunteered their spring break to participate in the annual Historic Preservation Planning (HPP) "Work Weekend." Organized by HPP students, Work Weekend is an annual event that allows students, faculty, and staff to participate in the rehabilitation process of a historic structure. This year, in response to the Hurricane Katrina tragedy, Work Weekend was expanded to encompass the entire spring break period

the help of faculty from the Historic Preservation Program, produced a series of measured drawings, condition assessment reports, and a large-scale photograph. The output produced by the students will be part of a historic structures report that will assist the future owners in rehabilitating the market to be a catalyst for community revitalization. The restoration of St. Roch market is part of the broader effort to encourage and facilitate the return of displaced residents by making fresh food available when they move back.

In the neighborhood directly around the market, students

more comprehensive architectural survey for the entire district.

In addition to the work centered on the St. Roch market,

### Television images simply do not do justice to the scale of the tragedy that occurred in New Orleans.

participants helped to clean out and gut storm-damaged houses, and also supported the Ninth Ward community forum that was held on the 25th. These projects were undertaken to assist ACORN, the Association of Community Organizations for Reform Now, a non-profit organization focused on representing the interests of poor and working class people.

An important component of the trip was to witness the immensity of the damage caused by Hurricane Katrina. Television images simply do not do justice to the scale of the tragedy that occurred in New Orleans. By seeing the city first hand and talking to local residents, students came to a better understanding of both the immense rebuilding task that remains, and the commitment demonstrated by residents who wish to continue to call New Orleans home.

*Kevin Waskelis is a graduate student in the MRP program. His interests include European Union regional policy, economic development in Central and Eastern Europe, and critical planning theory.*



A view of the exterior of the St. Roch Market. Photo by Samantha Bosshart

and took place in New Orleans. The focus of this trip was on the St. Roch market, a historic 19th century marketplace located in the New Marigny Historic District. Students, with

performed an architectural survey to assess and document the types of housing styles prevalent in the immediate area. It is hoped that this work ultimately will be part of a



Participants in the HPP work weekend pause for a moment while undertaking an architectural survey around the St. Roch Market. Photo by Jon Gunderlach

## Saving the City From House-Gutting to Measured Drawing

Emily Goldman

The devastation of New Orleans by Hurricane Katrina left residents with a form of amnesia, a yearning for a recognizable city, community, block, or home. It made us all realize how valuable the structures that surround and support us are to our sense of place, history, memory, family, community, the present moment, and the moments to come. And it made us get down there to work on structures, whether old or new, that needed to be preserved for the families who wanted to return but had nothing recognizable to call home. Every-

where were houses caved in or whisked away, cars in living rooms, trees smashing roofs, porches wrenched off, piles of possessions as large as the lots themselves—these are ruins, not homes. The first-year HPP students went down in January to help out with the initial phase of rebuilding—gutting houses. Destroying as a means for preservation took some getting used to—knocking out now-toxic dry wall, pulling up rotting floors, yanking down moldy ceilings—it seemed callous, until we stepped away at the end of the day to see the shell of a house ready for

reuse, and, if we were lucky, residents smiling, even if through tears.

And so, after this experience, where else to carry out the work weekend than in New Orleans? Choosing a specific site was more difficult, but the St. Roch Market, severely damaged by the storm and a potential catalyst for community revitalization because of its iconic image and its ability to supply fresh food to workers and returning residents, seemed ideal. A detailed description of HPP Work Week 2006, is on the facing page, but we would like

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## A Cornell Education in New Orleans

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But the larger story seemed to be told by silence. We drove mile after mile without seeing children, without seeing street life, without seeing stoplights. We drove mile after mile past trees fallen on houses, windows blown out, neighborhood after neighborhood of emptied houses. "Post apocalyptic," one student put it, and he wasn't exaggerating. Children's toys, bicycles, televisions lay here and there in piles of debris where residents had returned and begun to clean up their houses. But our first impression, 7 months after the storm, was not just of the overwhelming scale of the devastation—miles of empty neighborhoods, affluent as well as poor, recently built as well as old, tens of thousands of abandoned cars—but of the silence, the lack of concerted response, the lack of a federal

presence, of national leadership. The story of silence the media has reported involves the hundreds of thousands of New Orleans and Gulf Coast residents spread in a Diaspora around the U.S. But the story that's harder to tell is the tale of the hypocrisy of a national government preaching family values and compassionate conservatism, and yet nowhere to be found, as if family values meant "out of sight, out of mind," children and families be damned.

As we waited for tools one morning before gutting our next house, I asked a slight young student from Massachusetts, "After seeing what you've seen down here, what would you want people back home to know?" She looked up and didn't miss a beat, "I'd tell them to get their asses down here!"

We were fortunate to go, fortunate to do good work together, lucky to have homes to return to, fortunate to be able to tell everyone we know: we need to rebuild the Gulf Coast smarter and safer; we need to respond to this national disaster, not only with university and local church volunteers, but with national political will and leadership; and we should all press every legislator we can, every national community-oriented non-profit that we can, to send our tax dollars and our sweat and our brains to the Gulf Coast, to "get our asses down there."

*John Forester is professor of City and Regional Planning at Cornell University. His work focuses on participatory planning, dispute resolution, and oral histories of planning practitioners.*

## Saving the City

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to convey, through this brief article, our commitment to the preservation of New Orleans, by whatever means necessary. The emptiness of the most ravaged areas is eerie: at least it is clear why the residents are not yet back, but how to explain why the federal government still has not stepped in? Preservation takes dedication and consistent work; without a comprehensive plan and the resolve to execute, it will not happen on its own. Let's all join the effort, then, in any way we can, to restore and strengthen New Orleans by lending technical assistance to the people who need to resuscitate their city; they have extraordinary will, and we can help with the way.

*Emily Goldman is a graduate student in Historic Preservation Planning. Her goal is to use historic preservation as a tool for community uplift.*

## What is NOPI?

The New Orleans Planning Initiative (NOPI) is a collaborative partnership between the Department of City and Regional Planning at Cornell University and the Association of Community Organizations for Reform Now (ACORN). NOPI provides academic research and resources to assist ACORN's community-based planning and redevelopment

efforts in the Ninth Ward of New Orleans. Through engaged scholarship, NOPI seeks to enhance the participation of Ninth Ward community members in the redevelopment process, and to provide resources that will assist in the creation of a comprehensive, community-based redevelopment plan.

## NOPI Staff

Coordinator: Jim Dessauer  
(jmd228@cornell.edu)

Organizers: Andrew Rumbach  
and Shigeru Tanaka

Graduate Research Specialists: Tanya Paglia and Kevin Waskelis

Graphic Design: Leda Black  
(leda@elucid8design.com)

## Contact NOPI

Write to the address below.

Telephone: 607.254.8001

Fax: 607.254.1971

Email: NOPI\_INFO@cornell.edu

Visit us on the web at: [www.crp.cornell.edu/outreach/nopi](http://www.crp.cornell.edu/outreach/nopi)

NEW ORLEANS PLANNING  
INITIATIVE (NOPI)  
Department of City and  
Regional Planning  
106 West Sibley Hall  
Cornell University  
Ithaca, NY 14853-6701



**OUR 70TH ANNIVERSARY** In 1935, Cornell University offered its first certificate program in city and regional planning. In the late 1940s this small program was transformed into a Masters of Regional Planning degree program. During the past seventy years, more than fifteen hundred individuals have received graduate degrees in regional planning, historic preservation, and regional science from the Department of City and Regional Planning. During the next five years, CRP is planning a variety of celebrations designed to focus attention on issues related to equity and participation in planning. During our 75th Anniversary year, CRP will hold an international conference entitled, "Promoting Equity Planning and Participatory Policy-Making at Home and Abroad."

# PLANNING