

The Shifting Landscape of New Orleans

While planners and developers redraw the city map, displaced residents struggle to have a role

By Kenneth M. Reardon

While the weather forecasters emphasized the enormous power of Hurricane Katrina as it headed toward the Gulf Coast, few area residents expected it to ravage their region. In the end, Katrina caused an estimated \$200 to \$300 billion of property damage across a 300-mile stretch of the Gulf. Inflicting twice as much damage as Hurricane Andrew did in Florida in 1992, previously the nation's most destructive tropical storm, Katrina swept away entire communities, destroyed more than 62,000 structures, flooded more than 250,000 homes, halted the operations of some 12,000 businesses and claimed more than 1,200 lives. Displacing more than 1 million Americans over a 92,000 square mile area, the storm triggered the largest emergency relief effort in United States history.

Nowhere were the effects of this horrific storm more visible than in New Orleans, where three major levee failures resulted in serious flooding affecting 80 percent of the city. The storm and its raging floodwaters added an unimaginable burden to a city that was already experiencing serious environmental, economic, social and governmental problems.

In the days following the hurricane, a number of national policy institutes prepared reports describing pre-storm conditions within the city, the impact of the hurricane and the resulting levee failures and possible recovery strategies. Among the most frequently cited of these studies was a preliminary estimate suggesting that only half of the city's former residents would return. It prompted a number of planners and policymakers to advocate a "planned shrinkage" approach to creating a more compact, more efficient and less flood-prone city.

Since then, a number of major planning efforts have been undertaken, with varying degrees of official sponsorship and resident input, to guide the city's recovery and redevelopment efforts. The most significant of these were reports by the Urban Land Institute (ULI), issued in November 2005, and Mayor Ray Nagin's Bring New Orleans Back Commission, released in January. ACORN, the grassroots organizing group, held its own planning forum in November and has incorporated some of the findings from that event into its work in New Orleans.

Former residents, business owners and civic leaders have supported many of the recommendations in these reports, including the need to reinforce the levees, restore municipal services, re-establish the city's economic base, and involve residents in the recovery process. However, the two plans have also been criticized for numerous aspects of their approach to redevelopment. Of particular concern is that neither plan guarantees a right to return for displaced residents, nor does the mayor's commission mandate compensation for residents' losses. Moreover, residents have the burden of preparing plans that prove their

neighborhoods should be restored, though many of these residents have no way to take part in an effective planning process.

A City Already In Trouble

The federal and state governments' investment over the past 50 years in flood control, wetland reclamation and highway construction have led to the rapid growth of the suburbs outside New Orleans, while out-migration by middle class, white families caused the city's population to decline and led to residential segregation previously not seen within the city. Historically it had been among the most mixed cities in the nation in terms of race and income, due largely to the physical barriers to expansion imposed by the wetlands surrounding the city.

Between 1970 and 2000, the city's economy, which had been highly concentrated in the transportation, energy, tourism and retail sectors, experienced negligible growth. A shift in local employment from extractive, production and transportation industries, where jobs tend to have higher wages, to the service sector, where many jobs offer compensation that falls short of a living wage, undermined household incomes. The combination of a stagnant economy and the loss of high-wage production jobs sank the area's median income below all but two of the 50 largest metropolitan regions in the U.S. This made it difficult for the city to retain its best-educated and most entrepreneurial residents.

There was also the problem of the city's unique geographic position. Located in an area similar to a shallow bowl between Lake Pontchartrain and the Mississippi River, New Orleans depends upon a complex system of more than 300 miles of levees, drainage canals and massive pumps to stay dry. The cost of maintaining this system represented a significant financial burden to the residents and businesses of the Crescent City.

Efforts to address these issues were hampered by a highly fragmented governmental system that was, in part, the legacy of a long history of conflict between local and state officials. The city's economic and community revitalization initiatives were further complicated by the federal government devolution of responsibility for basic services, cuts in economic and community development programs and delays in strengthening the city's levees.

The Selective Rebuilding Plan

Many poor and black residents have long perceived that the city's leadership is more interested in supporting the local corporate elite than in solving social problems. That helps explain the reaction of Harvey Bender, a resident of New Orleans East, after Joseph Canizaro, a prominent local developer, unveiled the work of the mayor's commission in January. "I don't know you, but I hate you," Bender said. "You've been in the background scheming to take our land." These feelings were amplified when HUD Secretary Alphonso Jackson was quoted in the media saying that New Orleans was bound to become a much whiter city as a result of Katrina. But many planners have said the mayor's commission is actually being unrealistic by leaving open the possibility of rebuilding the most ravaged neighborhoods at all.

In the first month after Katrina, Mayor Nagin asked the ULI to prepare a strategic plan for rebuilding New Orleans that would guide the work of his recently established commission. ULI sent 40 of its members representing public, private and nonprofit organizations to the city, under the leadership of Marilyn Taylor of Skidmore, Owings and Merrill, a New York architectural firm. Following their review of past planning reports, analysis of past and current U.S. Census data, visual inspection of the city, 300 local interviews and the organization of a town hall meeting attended by 250 citizens, the ULI panel issued its report.

ULI's most controversial proposal was for a selective rebuilding plan through which areas that had sustained minimal storm damage would benefit from immediate public and private reinvestment. Areas that experienced extensive storm and flood-related damage would be evaluated to determine whether reinvestment was feasible, given the potential threats to the health and safety of the residents of each neighborhood.

The panel placed neighborhoods in three categories based on the extent of their hurricane damage.

Category A neighborhoods are those clustered along Lake Pontchartrain and the eastern border of the city, which experienced the most significant flood damage and would not be rebuilt. These areas, where many of the city's poor and working class people of color lived and have homes, would be bulldozed and transformed into a combination of restored wetlands and urban parks.

Category B areas are neighborhoods that experienced intermediate levels of damage. Their residents would have to demonstrate the viability of their neighborhoods by returning in large numbers and working with local business owners, institutional leaders and elected officials to produce workable redevelopment plans.

Only **Category C** areas, which experienced little storm and flood-related damage, would be eligible for immediate public and private investment.

In addition, ULI argued for fair compensation, at pre-Katrina values, for all property owners whose parcels were located in Category A and B areas, where damages are determined to be too extensive and future storm risks too high to warrant redevelopment. Formulas used to determine how much money to give displaced residents would be similar to those used to set post-9/11 compensation in New York.

Unlike the ULI report, the mayor's commission report, issued in January, did not say certain neighborhoods should not be rebuilt. Instead, it recommended creating neighborhood planning teams to produce restoration plans by May 20. The city would do outreach to displaced residents to involve them in this work, and would provide help from professional planners. Neighborhoods that fail to attract a critical mass of returning residents by May or are located in flood-prone areas would then be consolidated to permit the delivery of municipal services. The city would tear down the remaining housing in neighborhoods without a critical mass of residents, and convert these areas to

parkland or new development. The commission argued that, “[healthy] neighborhoods require sufficient population to support equitable and efficient provision of public facilities and services.” The plan requires neighborhoods to have public schools, cultural and community facilities, places of worship, health facilities, open spaces, retail and public transit.

The commission recommended denying building permits in heavily damaged areas until new flood maps are issued, neighborhood plans are complete and basic utility and municipal services are again available. The commission also recommended that Congress pass a bill sponsored by Rep. Richard Baker (R-LA) to provide funds for homeowners who wish to rebuild, and compensation for those who do not. His bill would pay at least 60 percent of the equity in residents’ homes and would pay off their mortgages. The Bush administration has been unwilling to support the bill, putting a dampening effect on recovery efforts and undermining the confidence of homeowners and other investors in the city’s redevelopment prospects.

The uncertainty of the proposed neighborhood planning process, and the lack of a guarantee that displaced residents can move back permanently, has discouraged many from returning. They couldn’t fail to notice the media’s daily barrage of negative images of the city’s neighborhoods, the excruciatingly slow progress in restoring basic services, the attempts to bulldoze homes in the Lower 9th Ward and the failure of the city’s housing authority and HUD to re-open public housing complexes that were unaffected by the storm. Many residents of the 9th Ward, Gentilly and New Orleans East neighborhoods are still without electricity and sewer service.

Without these essential services, FEMA will not provide families with trailers to enable them to return, rebuild and take part in the community renewal process. And the ULI and the mayor’s commission reports do not explicitly address the financial and human resources required to prepare detailed neighborhood plans. This is particularly troubling, given the draconian cuts the city’s planning department has endured since 2004.

Instead of enabling New Orleans residents to work together to chart their collective future, the reports call for individual compensation for people who suffered significant property losses. Compensating them at pre-Katrina property values would leave most displaced property owners with few resettlement options.

The residents of the most storm-ravaged neighborhoods should be the beneficiaries of the most energetic revitalization efforts. They should not be required to demonstrate their worthiness by returning to neighborhoods without basic services to undertake Herculean planning initiatives. That is not to say that those living in areas subject to flooding should be encouraged to rebuild. Residents of these areas should be provided with the best engineering, architectural and planning assistance to evaluate the future safety of their areas and to explore, if necessary, alternative locations for their communities.

In the months following the devastating Upper Mississippi River flood of 1993, several communities that had been subjected to recurring flooding were given the opportunity to relocate their communities, and they chose to do so. Similar support provided to residents of the most devastated sections of New Orleans could enable them to stay in the city in a new location.

While the mayor's commission may have the political muscle to decide which neighborhoods should be saved, other groups are working to influence those decisions. ACORN is now working with residents and more than a dozen university planning schools to develop comprehensive revitalization strategies for the Gulf Coast. Building on an idea voiced at the group's November forum, ACORN has helped hundreds of New Orleans homeowners in removing debris and mold-damaged interior walls. The idea is to save enough homes that the city cannot declare the surrounding neighborhoods a lost cause.

Seeking to move quickly, the facilitators of the ULI and mayor's commission plans concentrated their outreach efforts on key institutional leaders who were present in New Orleans in the weeks following the hurricane. A limited effort was made to provide evacuees living in other cities with the opportunity to have input.

ACORN has been more aggressive in its outreach to displaced residents. Soon after Katrina, it held town hall-style meetings in 35 U.S. cities with people displaced from the Gulf Coast, as well as political and religious leaders. These meetings built support for ACORN's initial recovery plan, which called for a voice for survivors, affordable housing, living wage jobs and restored public services in a rebuilt New Orleans and Gulf Coast. ACORN also held a forum in Baton Rouge in November that involved many evacuees and planning professionals. The forum put particular focus on the challenges facing the neighborhoods that were hard hit by the storm and subsequent flooding. The event was webcast to 30 cities where dispersed members gathered to watch on big screens and participate in real time via phone and e-mail.

Pressure on the Levees

Besides the question of whether to save certain neighborhoods, ULI and the mayor's commission also had to address the levees. The mayor's commission recommended rebuilding the levees that protect New Orleans and made a vague call for coastal wetland restoration to reduce the ferocity of future storm surges. It suggested repairing the levees by June and redesigning them to withstand a Category 5 hurricane by 2007. A single board would be responsible for the levees, and the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers would build flood and storm water management facilities under the independent oversight of a group of nationally recognized engineering practitioners.

But neither ULI nor the commission called for enacting more serious land use regulations in suburbs up the Mississippi River to reduce the flow of stormwater run-off, or a system to permit floodwaters to spread over upstream land to reduce pressure on the city's levees. The plans also lack concrete

strategies to reverse the long-term erosion of coastal wetlands, which have in the past provided a needed buffer against major storms.

The concentration of the city's poor in low-lying areas along the lake and the eastern border of Orleans Parish, where the worst storm damage occurred, had extraordinary economic and emotional consequences for residents of these neighborhoods. Residents were, in part, victimized by the past policies of the Army Corps of Engineers, whose poor oversight of the levees and stormwater management placed residents in harm's way. The unfinished nature of state and federal disaster plans revealed the significant risk faced by residents of these neighborhoods.

The Bush administration's decisions to defer levee repairs further compromised residents' health and safety. To now adopt a redevelopment strategy that would withhold assistance to those who suffered the most grievous storm-related losses, as a result of the failures of multiple levels of government to protect them, is ethically bankrupt.

The Army Corps of Engineers is racing to restore the levees to the condition they were in prior to Katrina by June, the start of the next hurricane season.

Restoring the Economy

Beyond restoring neighborhoods, New Orleans must bring its economy back to life. ULI's report calls for a strategic economic development plan that emphasizes developing businesses in emerging service sectors that offer living wages.

In the meantime, the ULI and mayor's commission reports call for restoring gaming, tourism and other businesses that tend to produce jobs at less than a living wage. But as residents look to the future, they should explore alternative economic development strategies that lead to jobs with good wages, income security and decent benefits. The challenge facing local officials is not simply to rebuild the economic base but to transform it in a manner that provides more residents with a path out of persistent poverty. Otherwise, many families will leave the region permanently for metropolitan regions with growing economies.

Models From Past Disasters

Planners seeking to assist the city in devising a recovery and redevelopment plan must resist the temptation to return the community to its historic form and function. Instead, they must accept President Bush's call to create a "better New Orleans," recognizing the fundamental inequities that nearly a third of the city's population, disproportionately people of color, were forced to endure as they struggled to survive in grinding poverty just beyond the music and glitter of the Riverwalk and French Quarter. What New Orleans residents need and deserve is not simply a blueprint to restore the city to its former status, but a visionary plan to transform it into a more vibrant, sustainable and equitable city – one that reflects Jefferson's aspirations for the premier city of the vast region that he acquired from the French in 1803.

Creating such a plan for a city whose residents, business owners and civic leaders have been relocated to more than 40 states represents a formidable challenge that few planning and design professionals have confronted. However, recent post-disaster planning processes that took place in Northridge, California and Kobe, Japan after earthquakes devastated these areas can provide valuable lessons. The experience of these communities emphasizes the importance of actively involving the residents affected by these events, along with the community-based organizations representing them, as equal partners with local elected officials and professional planners at each step in the planning and redevelopment process.

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RESOURCES

Post-disaster planning in Kobe, Northridge and other places
www.eeri.org/news/meetings/7usjpw/program.html (Click on Laurie Johnson's presentation)

The Times-Picayune Special Edition: Ruin and Recovery
www.nola.com/speced/ruinandrecovery

Bringing New Orleans Back Commission report
www.bringneworleansback.org

ACORN planning webcast
www.acorn.org/index.php?id=9825

Mississippi Renewal Forum
www.mississippirenewal.com