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WHAT'S NEXT FOR NEW ORLEANS?

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New Orleans has suffered two major crises: The first, Hurricane Katrina; the second, the failure of any government entity to make significant progress in rebuilding the city. Sixteen months after the natural disaster, there is still massive devastation. Much of New Orleans is still without basic city services; an estimated 200,000 people, close to half of the city's former population, are in effect refugees, and many of them are still living in emergency housing trailer parks. Over 900 projects are in the pipeline, but an estimated 50 percent of the tens of billions of dollars promised by the federal government failed to materialize and some of the planning efforts appear to have stalled.

What's gone wrong? And what are the current prospects for the city's recovery? *New Orleans Now*, a conference organized by the AIA New York Chapter's Disaster Preparedness Task Force and held at the Center for Architecture, provided some answers. At the oversubscribed event, attendees heard from a panel of seven architects and planners who are involved in various planning efforts in New Orleans. The conversation was moderated by Jed Horne, editor of the *Times-Picayune*, the main New Orleans daily.

The conference was held several days before the final public meeting in New Orleans for the Unified New Orleans Plan (UNOP), a unique if somewhat diffuse document that is attempting to mesh many different visions for the city's future. The UNOP has broad objectives, such as rebuilding every city neighborhood and ensuring the right of displaced persons to return home. It also draws from plans developed by local neighborhoods and city planning districts with the assistance of architects and planners from throughout the country. In addition, the UNOP seeks to reconcile the various projects and competing agendas of the many different government and independent planning initiatives that have taken form since the hurricane, including the state's Louisiana Speaks plan, the Federal Emergency Management Agency's ESF #14 plan, and the city-backed Bring New Orleans Back Commission plan.

New Orleans-based architect Steven Bingler, who is coordinating the UNOP, said that the experience has transformed his approach to design. "The most important lesson I have learned is the power of deliberative democracy," he said, adding, "It is not about architecture I grew up with or 'the vision thing.' It about staying alive, getting systems functioning again."

Some panelists blamed the rebuilding delays on the political tug of war that took place between the different powerbrokers at the federal, state, and city levels over the city's future, prior to the UNOP initiative. "Fundamentally, what happened is that six trains were trying to make it onto a single track," said Horne, referring to the competing visions offered by the various officials and their plans.

Another major problem with previous planning efforts is that "some of the initiatives were clumsy and top-downish," said Horne, citing several examples that riled up New Orleans residents. One economic redevelopment plan by New Orleans Mayor Ray Nagin that outraged preservationists called for building casinos along Canal Street, a major thoroughfare that runs past the historic French Quarter. The Bring New Orleans Back Commission created further consternation when it released color-coded maps with green dots that identified many areas as being too vulnerable to flooding to rebuild. According to Horne, many **continued on page 22**

WHEN SILENCE IS BETRAYAL

It's difficult to say anything truly new about post-Katrina New Orleans, but to quote Martin Luther King, Jr., as I write on his birthday, "A time comes when silence is betrayal." Numerous writers and artists, such as Spike Lee, Mike Davis, Robert Polidori, and Eugenie Birch, have produced powerful, thought-provoking pieces about the place, the storm, and the response. Yet nothing could have prepared me for the visit to New Orleans that I undertook with my family over New Year's weekend, which forced me to rethink everything I thought I knew about a city's development, destruction, and rebirth. A friend and recent Manhattan transplant said to me before our arrival, "The parts of the city that were hardest hit are so much worse than 9/11—people just don't understand the scale of it." Indeed, the massive expanse of horizontal devastation that lay unaddressed in New Orleans a full 16 months after the storm is the most nauseating abdication of public responsibility I have ever witnessed in this country.

As many have noted, most of the central city—the French Quarter, the Garden District, Audubon Park—has returned to some sense of normalcy. This reminded me of the eerie days of working in Lower Manhattan after 9/11 as the rest of the city returned to its daily pace. But when Lower Manhattan was attacked, it was the nation's third largest business district, and as such, its fate was intertwined with that of hundreds of thousands of individuals of all races, creeds, and means. New Orleans' ruin is out of our nation's sight and mind, even for tourists who opt not to take the "destruction tour" in an air-conditioned bus. Unlike 9/11, there was no terrorist act in New Orleans to spark lasting national outrage. Instead, the city's tragedy, after short-lived infamy as breaking news, remains mainly local, afflicting poor and middle-class neighborhoods alike, well removed from view.

While visiting, we didn't see a single heavy construction vehicle, only the occasional pick-up carrying plywood and 2-by-4s. Boarded-up homes, or in some cases just foundations, extend miles into the horizon. Other than the admirable but ad hoc efforts of individuals or NGOs, there is no visible reconstruction effort.

This is not to disregard the well-intentioned efforts, many sponsored by national design and development organiza-

tions, to plan for rebuilding even in the face of unforgivable state and municipal ineffectiveness. Yet despite good intentions, these efforts seem to have paralyzed decision-making by suggesting that New Orleans should retreat to the higher ground of its pre-World War II boundaries in order to get development out of harm's way. Places like the Lower Ninth Ward should not be rebuilt, so the argument goes, because at 2 feet below sea level, the land is simply too vulnerable to future storms, particularly in light of global climate change. While this is somewhat rational, it doesn't stand up in the face of its social and racial implications.

Last month, *The New York Times* reported on yet another so-called natural disaster in Malibu, California: a fire that destroyed five homes, including that of actress Suzanne Somers. Three hundred firefighters doused the fire in three hours. The article closed by stating, "Malibu, where the rich and famous live along choice beaches and rugged hills, has periodic disastrous fires, floods, and mudslides."

Similarly, when I moved to Berkeley for graduate school in 1992, the Oakland hills were rapidly recovering from the 1991 firestorm that scorched 1,500 acres, destroying more than 2,500 homes. A scant 11 months later the rebuilding had begun in earnest. Several of my professors had commissions to replace enormous homes on precipitous hillsides, leaving me to question who subsidized the irrational water, emergency response, and roadway infrastructure required to make such development possible (answer: the folks in the flatlands). By 1993, as reported by *The New York Times*, "About 1,000 Oakland homeowners...received retroactive full coverage for the cost of replacing or repairing their homes, in a move that both industry and government officials described as 'unprecedented.'" Mainly wealthy and white, the residents used their political leverage to pressure the flow of insurance proceeds, and will no doubt do so again. The June 1995 issue of *Planning* magazine stated that "the Oakland-Berkeley hills have burned 14 times in the last 70 years."

Two wrongs don't make a right, and it would be incorrect to state that flood-prone areas of the Gulf Coast should be rebuilt exactly as before simply because wealthy Californians wield the clout to do the same. However, to blithely tell poor black communities (particularly in the Lower Ninth, which featured as much as 50 percent home ownership) that they can't rebuild on their environmentally vulnerable land while not telling wealthy white communities the same is unconscionable. To uphold such standards fairly, marginal coastal areas from the Hamptons to Miami Beach would become uninhabitable through public decree, and lawsuits would be

filed that would make the *Kelo v. New London* eminent domain case look like a schoolyard spat.

Furthermore, to look at Katrina's devastation as a purely natural disaster is to miss essential elements of the story. The Lower Ninth was decimated by a storm surge that broke through a levee on a man-made canal. Much of the damage to St. Bernard Parish occurred because of "MR-GO," the Mississippi River-Gulf Outlet, a shipping canal from New Orleans to the Gulf that local communities have raised concerns about for years. A Louisiana State University report stated that the canal formed "a funnel" for the storm surge, "making it 20 percent higher and 100 to 200 percent faster as it crashed into the city."

Much of the devastation could have been avoided through proper canal and levee design, and much could be done in the future within the context of widespread rebuilding, even in low-lying areas, to protect the residents and culture of New Orleans. My home state of West Bengal, India, and neighboring Bangladesh are densely populated, soil-rich river deltas that experience periodic but not necessarily devastating flooding. Age-old strategies like building homes on piers are ubiquitous in such places. A quarter of the Netherlands is below sea level, yet the nation is protected by a highly sophisticated system of dikes and levees. In New Orleans, a state-of-the-art levee system (current levees have essentially been rebuilt to pre-Katrina protection levels), combined with high-tech stilt housing such as SYSTEMArchitects' prefabricated "Burst" homes—each costing little more than a FEMA trailer—could create a safe new environment that would catalyze the return of New Orleans' lost communities.

Everything about post-Katrina New Orleans is big; nothing about it is easy. Enormous problems persist beyond the physical challenges, in realms such as schools, crime, and governmental capability. Yet the wonders of the Crescent City, from its food to its music to its warmth, remain.

Like New York, New Orleans is both part of and transcendent of the national consciousness. Yet it seems to be a city that America has forgotten: When we departed on the peak travel day of January 1, the gates of the international airport were two thirds empty. Consider one last resolution for 2007: to go to New Orleans. One of the simplest ways to help is to enjoy the two and a half hours on JetBlue, and when you arrive, eat well, tip well, and leave the tourist areas. Donate to a good nonprofit. Look. Listen. And when the time comes to speak, speak out.

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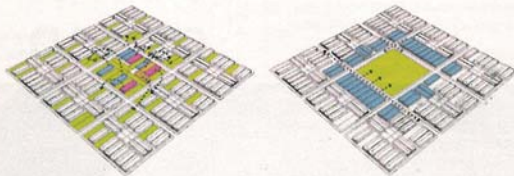
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African-American residents from the flood-prone areas read the color-coded maps as a conspiracy against them.

However, by engaging local communities, the UNOP, which is privately funded by the Rockefeller Fund, the Greater New Orleans Foundation, and the Bush-Clinton Katrina Fund, is attempting to bring all of the various communities and power brokers together. A draft version of the plan was presented for review at New Orleans' City Hall on January 30 and is available at www.unifiedneworleansplan.com. After a period of review and modification, it will be presented to the Louisiana Recovery Authority for funding.

Michael Sorkin, director of the City College of New York's Graduate Urban Design Program, praised the grassroots nature of the UNOP but said that it needed to take clear positions on a number of key issues. Sorkin, who is director of Project New Orleans, a nationwide initiative of the design community to help the city rebuild, listed his concerns, which include: Who is going to represent the 200,000 residents who have been displaced? What will prevent old-style backroom political dealing from taking place once the final plan begins being implemented? And given that the UNOP is being developed outside the official process, what is its legal standing?

Of all the topics discussed at the conference, the future of public housing in New Orleans, which accounted for one tenth of the city's pre-Katrina population, ignited the most passionate debate. In flood-damaged areas, the Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) mandates the redevelopment of damaged public housing projects to be mixed-income, and calls for population density in the new projects to be reduced by two thirds. According to New York-based architect Frederic Schwartz, who is overseeing two district plans in an area of



Frederic Schwartz Architects' New Orleans "greenblock" scheme consolidates private yards with a common green.

the city that accounted for 43 percent of the city's pre-Katrina population, the federal government's mandates would reduce available public housing in his districts to one ninth of what it was before the hurricane. "HUD's philosophy is that density breeds poverty," said Schwartz, adding that he adamantly rejects the federal government's premise.

"The right of return" is a key objective of the UNOP. Further, bringing low-income residents back to New Orleans is viewed as being critical to the city's economic recovery, said Paul Lambert, who served as co-project director for the Independent Neighborhoods Rebuilding Plan. "New Orleans was a predominantly low-wage city," said Lambert. "The challenge is getting the housing back so you can get the employment base back."

Despite the uncertainty about the UNOP and the city's future, one thing is clear: New Orleans appears to be one of the most exciting places in the country to practice architecture. "New Orleans is kind of a red hot place to get a job," said Horne. "There is a new bohemia not seen since people discovered Seattle." **ALEX ULAM IS A MANHATTAN-BASED JOURNALIST WHO WRITES ABOUT ARCHITECTURE AND URBAN PLANNING.**

RESOURCES

OPEN: Luceplan Showroom (p. 5): General contracting by Carlos Arturo Contracting, 42-07 204th St., Bayside, NY 11361, 718-724-4453. Wood panels and boxes fabricated by Piros Furniture, 25-36 31st St., Astoria, NY 11102, 718-932-9512. Cashier's desk and mobile room fabricated by Jonathan Locke at Timehri Studios, 43-50 11th St., Long Island City, NY 11101, 718-784-8614, www.timehristudios.com.

IN DETAIL: School of American Ballet (p. 9): Liquid-crystal glass manufactured by SPD Systems, 950 South Pine Island Rd., Plantation, FL 33321, 800-932-8110, www.spd-systems.com. Sprung wood floors by Haywood-Berk Floor Company, 414 West Broadway, New York, NY 10012, 212-242-0047. Orange resin panels in entry area by 3form, 2300 South 2300 West, Ste. B, Salt Lake City, UT 84119, 801-649-2500, www.3-form.com. Mezzanine furniture by Schiavello, 1 Sharps Rd., Tullamarine, Victoria, Australia, www.schiavello.com.

OPEN: Pod Hotel (p. 7): Custom stainless steel bunk beds and vanities fabricated by Neo-Metro, 15125 Proctor Ave., City of Industry, CA 91746, 800-591-9050, www.neo-metro.com. Laminate material used to make modular furniture from Trespa North America Ltd., 12267 Crosthwaite Circle, Poway, CA 92064, 800-487-3772, www.trespa.com. Carpet tile from Interfacefloor, 404 Park Ave. South, New York, 212-686-3284, www.interfacefloor.com. Fabric for bedspreads and backrests by Swavelle / Mill Creek Fabrics, 15 East 26th St., New York, NY 10016, 212-532-8670.