

The Unbuilding of Historic Neighbourhoods in Post-Katrina New Orleans

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ABSTRACT *New Orleans's recovery from Hurricane Katrina (2005) remains slow and arduous. Eighty per cent of the city flooded in the hurricane's aftermath. A second catastrophe unfolded in Katrina's aftermath—a pattern of widespread demolition of thousands of 19th- and early-to-mid-20th-century residential dwellings and civic structures across the city. This post-disaster condition involves a complex, bifurcated labyrinth of local, state, and federal agencies and organizations in the governmental and the private sector. Neighbourhood preservation organizations and grassroots activists are fighting to save the city's endangered historic fabric. An overview of historic preservation in New Orleans is outlined, followed by an analysis of the geographic pattern of demolitions in the 2005–2008 period, a significant number of which occurred without proper review by duly authorized city or federal agencies. The analysis illustrates the scope and the ramifications of a public policy of rebuilding frequently through the unbuilding of New Orleans's delicate fabric of historic residential architecture and neighbourhoods at a time when the city continues to experience an acute shortage of affordable housing.*

Introduction

New Orleans continues to rebuild from the devastation caused by Hurricane Katrina in 2005. The widespread destruction and loss of human life was reported globally and this catastrophe ranks as the costliest in United States history. Much work remains. The city's infrastructure and finances remain fragile, and the glacial pace of federal assistance programmes has hamstrung rebuilding. Katrina also revealed multigenerational and deeply rooted social and race-based inequities (Dyson, 2006; Green *et al.*, 2007), and more than 100 000 internally displaced persons continue to reside elsewhere in the country as a result of the diaspora (Nossiter, 2007). The absence of trust along racial divisions has continued to stymie the recovery (Hirsch & Levert, 2009). The dislocational experience of being forcibly torn from one's home, neighbourhood, friends, relatives, and social networks can be profound (Tuan, 2007). This has proven to be the case in Katrina's aftermath.

New Orleans's pre-Second World War neighbourhoods are intimately scaled and afford many amenities to the pedestrian (Jacobs, 1995; Murtagh, 1988). These

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places function as civic stages where the city's many public celebrations unfold, most notably the annual rite of Mardi Gras (Lewis, 2003). By the 1920s, intersections throughout densely in-filled neighbourhoods were punctuated with sno-ball stands, corner bars, mom and pop drugstores, and meat markets (Weinberg, 1979; Sullivan, 2003; Verderber, 2008a). The city's built environment remains an expression of its Spanish, French and, later, American roots (Sublette, 2008). One-story shotguns, double shotguns, camelbacks (a single- or double-shotgun dwelling with a second level built later, to the rear), bungalows, raised bungalows, and variants of the basic Creole cottage lined these streets. Blocks were 'filled out' by structures typically built to the sidewalk edge with zero to narrow setbacks between buildings. The mostly wood-frame dwellings in these neighbourhoods were adorned with front porches, with Greek Revival and Victorian-era ornamentation. This urban fabric was in large part a by-product of land development practices before air-conditioning and modern zoning (Jacobs, 1961; Page & Mason, 2004; Verderber, 2008a). The recent New Urbanism movement drew inspiration from New Orleans (Alexander, 1977; Alexander *et al.*, 1979; Katz, 1993; Duany *et al.*, 2001; Gindroz & Levine, 2003; Feilden, 2003).

From its founding in 1718, New Orleans has coped with its fragile location below sea level, near the mouth of the Mississippi River (Colten, 2001). The city had been losing its population in the four decades before Katrina. Today its population is barely half of the 627 525 residents reported in the 1960 Census. The urban footprint had been expanded outward to the north and east in recent decades onto land below sea level, on land sloping away from the Mississippi River. The percentage of vacant housing units increased from 6% in 1960 to 15% in 2004 to 34% in 2008. The latter figure is the highest among major cities in the United States (Russell, 2008). Meanwhile, critics outside the city persist in arguing the city might not be worth rebuilding, although at the time of the disaster 78% of its residents were native-born (Collison, 2008).

Katrina contributed to a large inventory of already-abandoned structures. Post-Katrina, thousands of demolitions have occurred (McDonald, 2006; Brooks, 2007). Over 1500 structures were demolished since Katrina within the city's historic inner core spanning from Uptown to the Bywater without the review required under city law (Cohen, 2008). The first historic building to be suspiciously demolished took place a mere four weeks after Katrina. It was the 102-year-old former music school known as the Naval Brigade Hall. Just before this demolition Mayor C. Ray Nagin issued a proclamation temporally suspending the authority of the city's Historic District Landmarks Commission (HDLC). The grassroots group Save Our Neighborhoods was formed in immediate response (Foster, 2005). Inhabitants of mostly poor and minority neighbourhoods were routinely left out of the decision-making process regarding a growing wave of improperly reviewed demolition requests (Nossiter & Eaton, 2007; Flaherty, 2008). Preservationists argued the city's list of structures on its hit list was riddled with inaccuracies (Heath, 2007).

Katrina's toxic floodwaters destroyed or significantly damaged 125 000 homes in Orleans Parish. Three years after the disaster it was estimated that the city would be forced to take receivership of as many as 65 000 of these properties plus thousands of empty lots where houses once stood. According to City Hall's own estimate, by March 2008 already 10 541 properties had been demolished since Katrina in Orleans Parish and in the city's view "the extent of blighted buildings in the city presented an enormous challenge to full recovery, particularly, but not

exclusively, in neighborhoods that experienced severe flooding” (Metropolitan Policy Program at Brookings & the Greater New Orleans Community Data Center (GNOCDC), 2008).

Some homeowners with plans to renovate only learned of a demolition by visiting their dwelling to find it had vanished (Krupa & Lolis, 2007; Squandered Heritage, 2008). The following discussion focuses on the demolition epidemic within three bandwidths across the city’s pre-20th-century and its 20th-century neighbourhoods. The first consists of the ‘Sliver by the River’ neighbourhoods—the Vieux Carré, i.e. French Quarter, and, straddling its downriver side, the Marigny, Bywater, and Lower Ninth Wards—and on the upriver side—the CBD/Warehouse District, Lower Garden District, and Uptown. These neighbourhoods are National Historic Districts and constitute the backbone of the city’s world-renowned *tout ensemble* (Stonor, 2006; MacCash, 2007; Verderber, 2008a).

However, a bandwidth of somewhat more recent neighbourhoods parallels these core neighbourhoods from upriver to downriver, spanning across the city. These include Tremé, immediately behind the Vieux Carré, Lower Gentilly, the Seventh Ward, and the Lower Ninth Ward. Upriver and reaching into the centre of the city’s below-sea-level ‘bowl’, are Central City, Mid-City, Broadmoor, Gert Town, Hollygrove, and Upper Carrollton neighbourhoods (Campanella, 2008). These are often referred to as *second-line neighbourhoods* (borrowing a term from the impromptu second-line dancing which occurs during music-inspired street celebrations). A third bandwidth, the 20th-century neighbourhoods situated to the north toward Lake Pontchartrain, also became prime for demolitions. Here, structures were built in the late 19th to mid-20th centuries and up to the 1970s, and consist of the Lakeview, Gentilly, and New Orleans East. It is arguable that these three bandwidths express the *tout ensemble* nearly as much as the renowned historic core.

Against this backdrop, the following analysis attempts to answer four questions:

- To what extent is the private and public sector preservation apparatus in the city functioning effectively to prevent the loss of historic structures and neighbourhoods following the disaster of Hurricane Katrina?
- To what extent is the historic urban character of the city threatened by the loss of thousands of structures in its historic neighbourhoods?
- Are some sections of the city and/or building types targeted for excessive demolitions more than others?
- To what extent is the federal government, through its Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) and its Section 106 review protocol, functioning effectively to prevent unnecessary demolitions in light of the complex, disjunctive labyrinth of city, state, and federal historic preservation bureaucracies?

A Chorus of Preservationists

Space precludes a detailed critique here of the efficacy of every planning effort or the dozens of professionally produced reports released in the first four years after the disaster. It is possible, however, to delineate an overview of the disparate assortment of primary and secondary actors. This constellation of ‘players’—some

far more vocal than others—is represented in Figure 1. This overview stretches a broad canvas for analysis of an often-disjunctive set of rebuilding initiatives and competing special interests. It is a landscape characterized by four quadrants. The quadrants are defined as a function of two orthogonal axes—with the horizontal axis defined by State/Federal government on one end, and non-governmental grassroots organizations (NGOs) on the other endpoint. Next, a vertical axis is defined on one endpoint as local government/institutions, and non-government organizations (NGOs) on the other.

These axes are bisected diagonally by an additional bipolar construct, Activist-Initiated Engagement (low to high). This is defined as the degree to which a given organization is grassroots based, and the degree to which it has challenged elected politicians in the ongoing discourse over the conservation of historic built environment resources in the city. This diagonal axis is defined by a low-to-high level of a given group’s efforts and activities to save endangered buildings and neighbourhoods. Figure 1 seeks to capture dynamic, dialectical tensions on this ‘playing field’. Many organizations and agencies depicted did not exist before Katrina.

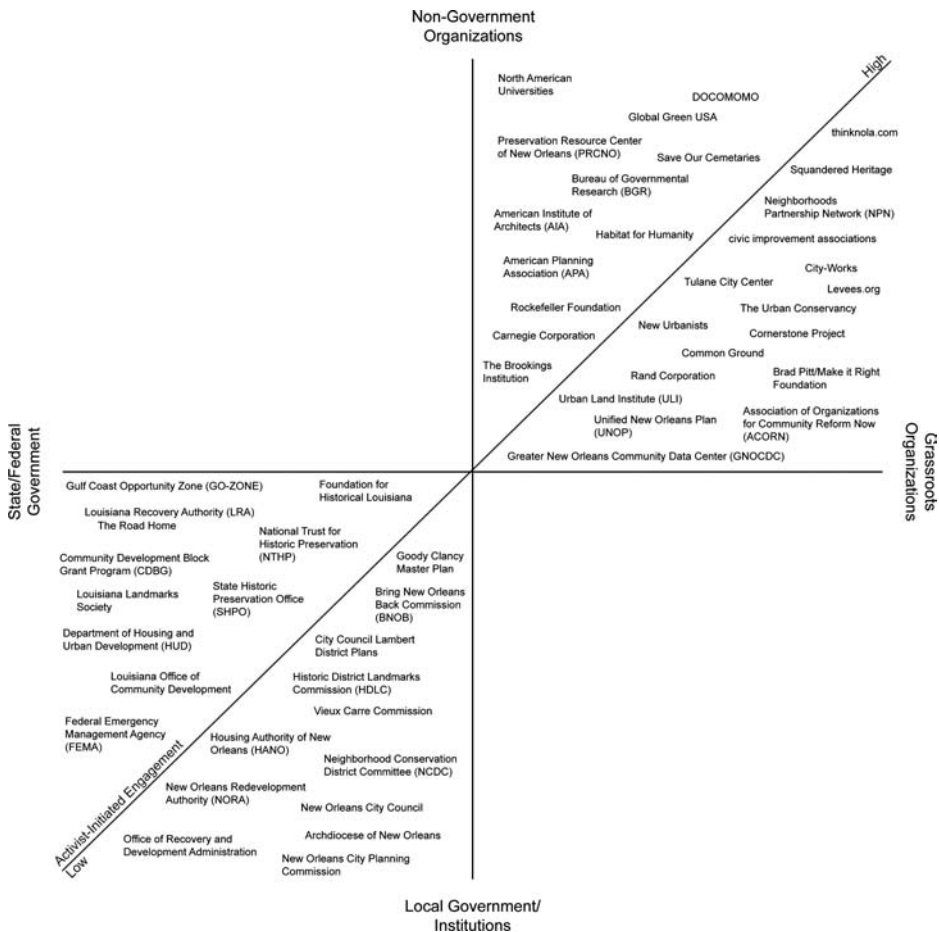


Figure 1. Neighbourhood and building heritage conservation landscape in post-Katrina New Orleans.

Preservation Agencies and Organizations: Federal

At the federal level, organizations that existed before Katrina, and represented in Figure 1, consist of the National Trust for Historic Preservation (NTHP), the Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD), and the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA). The National Trust's Southern Region Office, which is based in Charleston, South Carolina, operates a New Orleans field office. Hundreds of buildings and numerous neighbourhoods in New Orleans are listed on the National Trusts' *National Register of Historic Places*. The New Orleans field office has fought to save historic built resources in Katrina's aftermath, including the battle to save the National Register-worthy modernist St. Frances Cabrini Catholic Church (1963) in Gentilly, near the lakefront (destroyed 2007).

The mission of FEMA is to function as a first-responder agency to provide emergency disaster relief for victims of national disasters and related emergencies. In the context of preservation FEMA is empowered by the US Congress to ensure that any disaster mitigation funds it disperses to organizations and municipalities does not occur in a manner that violates federal policies and mandates. In Katrina's aftermath FEMA opened a large New Orleans field office. FEMA is mandated by Congress to comply with the provisions of the Section 106 Review. As part of the National Historic Preservation Act (NHPA) of 1966, the Section 106 Review is critical as it requires a consideration of historic value in all subsequent reimbursement and mitigation federal actions (Tyler, 2000). The Section 106 Review encourages, but does not mandate, preservation, yet it ensures that preservation factors are factored into federal policy and action. Because of Section 106 Review, all federal agencies must assume responsibility for the consequences of their actions on historic properties and be held publicly accountable (Advisory Council for Historic Preservation, 2002; Irvin, 2003). Although not a preservation initiative *per se*, in Katrina's aftermath in 2005 the US Congress enacted the Gulf Coast Opportunity Zone Act, commonly known as the GO-Zone legislation. This programme will expire at the end of 2010. Sadly, of US\$2.2 billion in Go Zone bonds dedicated for New Orleans's recovery, only US\$55 million in projects had been used by the end of 2008, with only 28% for historic preservation projects (Scott, 2008).

Preservation Agencies and Organizations: State

At the State level of government, The State of Louisiana operates the State Historic Preservation Office (SHPO) and the Louisiana Landmarks Commission. The former agency is under the auspices the Governor and is housed within and staffed by the Lieutenant Governor's office. In each of the 50 states, the SHPO coordinates the State's historic preservation programme and consults with federal and local agencies during the Section 106 Review process. It issues independent reports and recommendations that are a key component in the Section 106 Review. In the private sector, the Foundation for Historical Louisiana (FHL) is an agency whose aim is to document and preserve Louisiana's historically significant buildings, places, and cultural resources. Although not a preservation organization *per se*, the Louisiana Recovery Authority (LRA) was created in the fall of 2005 to implement Louisiana's official Road Home programme and to administer and disperse US\$13 billion in federal CDBG funds. Another state

agency, the Louisiana Office of Community Development (OCD) has from time to time been involved with preservation activities.

Local Government and Institutions

An assortment of local governmental and quasi-governmental agencies operated in both the pre- and post-Katrina civic milieu. The New Orleans Historic District Landmarks Commission (HDLC) and the Vieux Carré Commission (VCC) are two highly visible agencies funded by taxpayers. The HDLC was created in 1976 to identify and document candidate properties and neighbourhoods and to nominate them for protected status at the local level, a first step to eventual placement on the National Register. The VCC was founded in 1935 and is the oldest continuous operating taxpayer-funded neighbourhood historic preservation and conservation organization in the United States. Some local agencies flip-flopped their roles. The Housing Authority of New Orleans (HANO) is the local counterpart to HUD (see above) and it emerged as an anti-preservationist voice in post-Katrina New Orleans. HANO is (was) charged with the operation of the city's ten public housing projects, many of which were historic. By 2008, HANO had demolished four of the city's largest housing sites.

The New Orleans City Council (NOCC) has an oversight role in land-use policy and has the authority to veto votes put forth by the New Orleans City Planning Commission (NOCCPC). In the arena of preservation the council had a mixed record at best pre-Katrina, and post-Katrina it became dysfunctional and often anti-preservationist. The NOCC funded a set of planning reports that became known as the Lambert Plans (2006). These focused on the most heavily flooded sections of the city, including New Orleans East, Gentilly, and Lakeview. The New Orleans Redevelopment Authority (NORA), yet another city-created entity, is charged with managing the city's inventory of buildings and real estate, including many thousands of abandoned Road Home properties in Orleans Parish.

Post-Katrina, the NOCC and the Mayor's Office authorized the Bring New Orleans Back (BNOB) Planning Process. The BNOB was launched four weeks after Katrina in 2005 to provide a first-responder formal planning vehicle to guide reconstruction. A set of controversial planning initiatives were presented in January 2006 to promote the 'rightsizing' of a new New Orleans urban footprint, precluding a random, haphazard rebuilding of the city. The right size/downsize recommendation was openly attacked by displaced residents in heavily flooded parts of the city, whose homes were targeted for being turned into 'green zones'. Preservation was not addressed, nor what was to become of historic buildings that happened to be situated within the proposed zones of abandonment (see below). The Mayor, from that (by default) *design moment*, rejected outright all footprint reconfiguration proposals.

Six months later, the Mayor's Office of Recovery and Development Administration (ORDA) was created to oversee the inflow of FEMA disaster mitigation funds and LRA funds into the city. It was charged with diagnosing the most acute needs in the reconstruction of public amenities and infrastructure, i.e. libraries, police and fire stations, roads, community centres, and shopping districts, and to inject funding resources appropriately in a multi-year effort to kick-start recovery in those neighbourhoods in most dire need. Seventeen recovery zones across the city were targeted. Meanwhile, the New Orleans City

Council established the Neighborhood Conservation District Committee (NCDC) in 2006 to review demolition permit requests to ensure that only ‘public health threat’ buildings would be demolished. It has been an abject failure (see below). By October 2008, over 12 700 demolition permits (see below) had been filed with the City and the NCDC was authorized to review the vast majority of these. Both the ORDA and the NCDC appeared to view preservation as the option of *last resort* (Figure 2).

In November 2008 New Orleans voters narrowly approved yet another formal master planning process for the thoroughly planning-fatigued city. This latest (US\$2.1 million in cost) planning process was led by Goody Clancy Associates of Boston. The Goody Clancy Master Plan (GCMP) was completed in late 2009. It is the only post-Katrina planning document with any legal authority, although it stood on the shoulders of the Unified New Orleans Plan (see below), completed in 2007. As for other institutional players at the local level, the formidable Archdiocese of New Orleans emerged post-Katrina as a powerful quasi-governmental agency—and decidedly anti-preservationist.

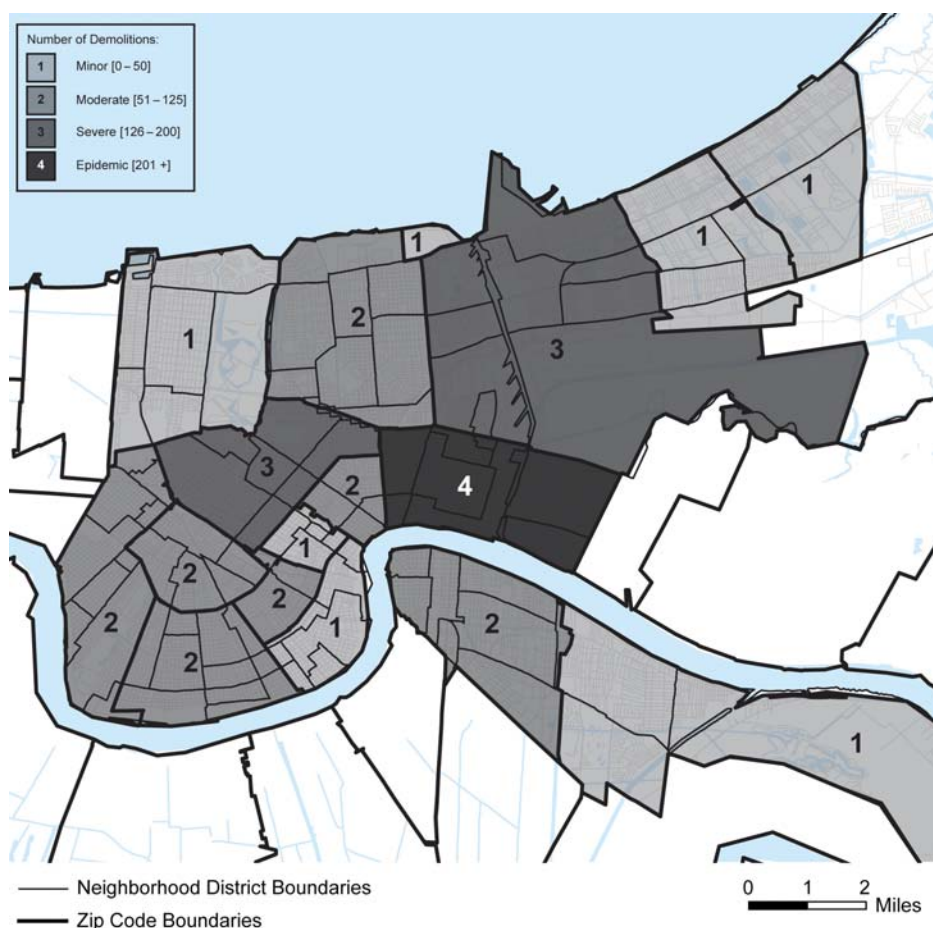


Figure 2. Demolitions post-Katrina New Orleans (January 2006–August 2008).

Non-governmental Organizations

These organizations were of two types: non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and grassroots non-governmental organizations (GNOs). The NGOs were mainstream organizations, and the GNOs were not, as they tended to be highly critical of publicly funded rebuilding programmes at all levels of government and were therefore relegated to 'outsider' status. The American Institute of Architects' (AIA) national office in Washington, DC, and its New Orleans Chapter, and the American Planning Association (APA) were active NGO players. As for private philanthropic foundations, many NGOs, including the Rockefeller Brothers Fund, the Carnegie Corporation, the aforementioned quasi-public National Trust, America Speaks, the American Society of Civil Engineers, and the Annie E. Casey Foundation all funded studies and sponsored events.

Habitat for Humanity constructed more than 125 single-family houses in historic areas of Orleans Parish since Katrina. Global Green USA advocated sustainable planning, design, and construction in new and in restored historic buildings. The Bureau of Governmental Research (BGR), founded in 1930, was an NGO dedicated to the most effective use of public tax dollars in the New Orleans metropolitan area. City-Works was created in 2006 as a freestanding NGO affiliated with the New Orleans Chapter of the AIA to promote sustainable rebuilding/conservation.

The Congress for the New Urbanism (CNU), whose members and advocates are widely referred to as New Urbanists, arrived to the city in early 2006. Its ambitious reports and renderings, produced in charrettes, remain unrealized due to public apathy (including among preservationists), a lack of funding, and a lack of public- or private-sector support among developers. Another national NGO, the Urban Land Institute (ULI), founded in 1936 and based in Washington, DC, sought to promote leadership in the sustainable reuse of land. The ULI released its aforementioned and ill-fated BNOB rightsizing/downsizing report in January 2006. The International Working Party for Documentation and Conservation of Building Sites and Neighborhoods of the Modern Movement (DOCOMOMO) set up a New Orleans chapter two years after Katrina.

Two national NGOs, not preservationist *per se*, the Brookings Institution, based in Washington, DC, and the Rand Corporation, based in Los Angeles, closely monitored the Katrina diaspora and its impact on those who remained living elsewhere. Each has issued periodic reports on the dilemma of unaffordable housing and the glacial pace of rebuilding. In addition, the aforementioned Rockefeller Brothers Fund donated US\$3.4 million to the Greater New Orleans Foundation (GNOF) to implement the aforementioned Unified New Orleans Plan (UNOP) (The Greater New Orleans Foundation, 2007). The UNOP final report carried a price tag of more than US\$13 billion and remains unfunded.

The group Save Our Cemeteries (SOC) was founded in New Orleans in 1974 to advocate the preservation and conservation of the iconic aboveground cemeteries in historic neighbourhoods across the city—cities of the dead. The Preservation Resource Center of New Orleans (PRCNO) was founded in 1974 and provides leadership in the revitalization of neighbourhoods geographically nearest the river and therefore situated on the highest ground. Post-Katrina, the PRCNO has assisted more than 5000 families in restoring their homes. Its Operation Comeback Program, begun in 1987, assists first-time homeowners (Miller, 2008).

Many neighbourhood-based NGO civic improvement associations existed before the catastrophe, although as mentioned, dozens of new groups sprang up virtually overnight after Katrina. By December 2005 more than two dozen 'bootstraps' neighbourhood groups formed without any assistance whatsoever from city government. These were centred on self-preservation, on monitoring the inflow of returnees, and the condition of abandoned houses, schools, churches, libraries, playgrounds, city services, and the like. The Greater New Orleans Community Data Center (GNOCDC), founded in 2000, posts data on its website useful to grassroots preservationists (Metropolitan Policy Program at Brookings and GNOCDC, 2008).

The Tulane City Center, founded after Katrina in 2005, was housed in the School of Architecture at Tulane University. The School's URBANbuild Program, which at the time of writing has completed four new single-family homes in historic neighbourhoods, is a design/build programme. A parallel effort, the CITYbuild Consortium of North American Universities with Schools of Architecture, worked in the city on a variety of preservation and new construction projects after Katrina, as did the NOLA Design Collaborative, in conjunction with Neighborhood Housing Services of New Orleans.

Grassroots Community Organizations: Local

Post-Katrina, Common Ground sponsored the gutting of hundreds of flooded homes and businesses in the Lower Ninth Ward and nearby areas. The Association of Organizations for Community Reform Now (ACORN) was active in the cause to renovate historic housing and neighbourhoods in the poorest neighbourhoods. The Urban Conservancy, post-Katrina, co-sponsored an urban design report on the Lafitte Greenway heritage conservation plan, a linear greenbelt corridor linking the Vieux Carré with Bayou St. John and Lake Pontchartrain (Friends of Lafitte Corridor & Brown + Danos Land Design, Inc., 2007). Numerous *outsider* preservationist groups were formed in the weeks and months following the hurricane. The Neighborhoods Partnership Network (NPN) is a city-wide coalition comprised of grassroots community leaders. The Make It Right Foundation (MIR), founded by actor Brad Pitt in 2006, symbolizes a *design moment* lesson in sustainability in its goal to construct 150 new homes in the devastated Lower Ninth Ward. Working with Global Green USA, MIR Foundation homes are built ten feet above grade on concrete piers. At the city-region scale of rebuilding and conservation, thinknola.com and levees.org were blogs founded in 2006 as watchdogs focused on the city's poor management of the rebuilding process, and the US Army Corps of Engineers' attempts to repair/upgrade its federal levee system in New Orleans.

The preservation-based grassroots-based NGO garnering the most attention since Katrina has been Squandered Heritage (squanderedheritage.com). It is an Internet blog founded in 2006 to draw public attention to the housing demolition epidemic throughout the flood zone as well as in non-flooded neighbourhoods. A team has documented illegal demolitions by scouring the streets and neighbourhoods block by block, painstakingly documenting salvageable buildings slated for demolition and before/after conditions: vacant lots where such buildings had cavalierly been destroyed without proper review or permit (Figures 3 and 4):



Figure 3. Pre-demolition.



Figure 4. Post-demolition.

Drive through some of the 80 percent of New Orleans that was inundated by floodwaters after Hurricane Katrina, and you'll notice life is slowly ebbing back, one house at a time, one neighborhood at a time ... but (some citizens) are becoming alarmed that so many of the city's homes in historic districts are being torn down, often with flood damage used as a pretext. It's as if New Orleans is now at risk of being ravaged by another flood—that of demolitions. (Curtis, 2007)

Squandered Heritage has steadfastly monitored the city's sporadic enforcement of its own zoning laws and ordinances since Katrina. Inspired by *squanderedheritage.com*, the Cornerstone Project was launched in 2007 at the School of Architecture at Tulane University to collaborate with the New Orleans chapter of DOCOMOMO to document local mid-20th century modernist landmarks already lost, post-Katrina, or threatened with destruction.

Mapping the Demolition Epidemic

In early 2008 the city passed an ordinance amending Chapter 26 of the Code of the City New Orleans and added new 'Section 26-264, Condemnation of Public Safety and Welfare'. In effect, this amendment allowed the city to demolish any structure deemed an 'imminent health threat' 30 business days after the posting of the notice on the structure (Krupa, 2008a). Property owners began fervently to post bold, brightly coloured signs and notices on their doors with such proclamations as 'DO NOT DEMOLISH', 'KEEP THE BULLDOZERS AWAY', and 'SAVE OUR HISTORIC HOUSING' in order to hold off the bulldozers.

The demolitions taking place in New Orleans post-Katrina were (are) paradoxical and highly bifurcated in nature. Three types of demolitions were occurring simultaneously: 50-plus-year-old structures in historic sections that had fallen into disrepair before the disaster, 50-plus-year-old structures previously in good condition yet damaged in the disaster, and structures under 50 years of age that sustained damage in Katrina. The first two groups of structures were largely wood-frame 19th- and early 20th-century houses. The third group was largely comprised of modernist landmarks, i.e. schools, churches, and commercial buildings. Many of these buildings were architectural landmarks, such as the previously mentioned Cabrini Church.

The city administration frequently saw fit to side-step its own laws in order to award demolition permits without proper review. By January 2008 a wave of opportunistic demolition accelerated with more than 12 700 demolition permits filed with the city. The tear-down process was abetted and fuelled by five factors:

- General public confusion over the permitting process.
- A lack of transparency on the part of the city combined with overwhelmed and incompetent city personnel in the permitting and code enforcement offices.
- Public officials' ignorance of the city's own laws on the issue.
- Property owners' eagerness to side-step regulations.
- Widespread public mistrust and apprehension.

As mentioned, FEMA was paying private contractors a fee up to 100% of the expense of all demolitions during the first three years post-Katrina. By January 2008 hundreds of homes were falling victim monthly to the demolition epidemic. This is based on data posted on the thinknola.com website that listed all demolitions in Orleans Parish (Gutierrez, 2008a). The city, two-and-a-half years after the disaster, still did not have any coordinated list of prior demolitions. The maps were created by activists through the use of Geographic Information System (GIS Visualizer) with Edit-Grid software (Gutierrez, 2008b).

All city-initiated FEMA-funded demolitions are reported according to zip code (Figure 4). This map depicts nearly 1500 demolitions depicted as of January 2008. By the end of 2008 this number had grown to more than 1800 city-sanctioned and FEMA-funded demolitions plus as many as 900 additional illegal demolitions, i.e. those that had been improperly reviewed and permitted within Orleans Parish. This map, because of the city's own unreliable records, remains inconclusive, although it revealed a number of worrisome trends. The highest concentrations mapped were in the bandwidth that ran adjacent to and parallel with the 'sliver by the river neighbourhoods' bandwidth from Carrollton and Hollygrove through the Mid-City and the Lower Gentilly neighbourhoods (Zone 3: 361 demolitions), with the highest concentration in the Upper and Lower Ninth Ward (Zone 4: 365 demolitions). Collectively the bandwidths represented the majority of all demolitions. However, this map illustrates that demolitions were also occurring in all heavily flooded neighbourhoods, including the Lakeview, Gentilly, and New Orleans East bandwidth. Even minimally flooded and unflooded neighbourhoods near the river had experienced a rash of recent demolitions with each destroyed structure representing a permanent loss to the city's *tout ensemble*.

As was the case with the Archdiocese, the opportunistic Recovery School District (RSD) also saw Katrina as an excuse to downsize its network of neighbourhood schools though a combination of closure, consolidation, and demolition. The Cornerstone Project, at Tulane, using the same Edit Grid software combined with Google Earth maps, documented and mapped dozens of landmark schools, including many modernist gems, suddenly threatened with destruction (Stock, 2008a, 2008b).

By September 2008 the situation worsened further in the aftermath of Hurricane Gustav. Gustav was a Category 2 storm that had largely bypassed New Orleans. It made landfall south of Baton Rouge and caused major damage in South Central Louisiana. In Gustav's aftermath the Mayor, invoking his

emergency powers, issued an executive order immediately suspending demolition review by the NCDC. This action triggered the issuance of nearly 200 additional demolition permits within a two-week period, all without NCDC review. These permits are reported in Figure 5. In fact, preservationists were publicly reprimanded yet again (Gallas, 2008). In this new wave of renegade permitting, the highest concentrations were in the same bandwidth as reported above, although higher in concentration than before Gustav (Zone 4: 124 permits issued). Property owners quickly moved to demolish their properties (*New Orleans City Business*, 2008).

On the Necessity of a Unified Front

The various special interests within the preservation community were now engaged in a war with multiple battlefronts. Grassroots preservation activists proclaimed the Mayor the 'king of the wrecking balls' because to them it was clear the city was hell-bent on rebuilding the city by first tearing much of it down. As it turned out the executive order suspending the NCDC had the consequence

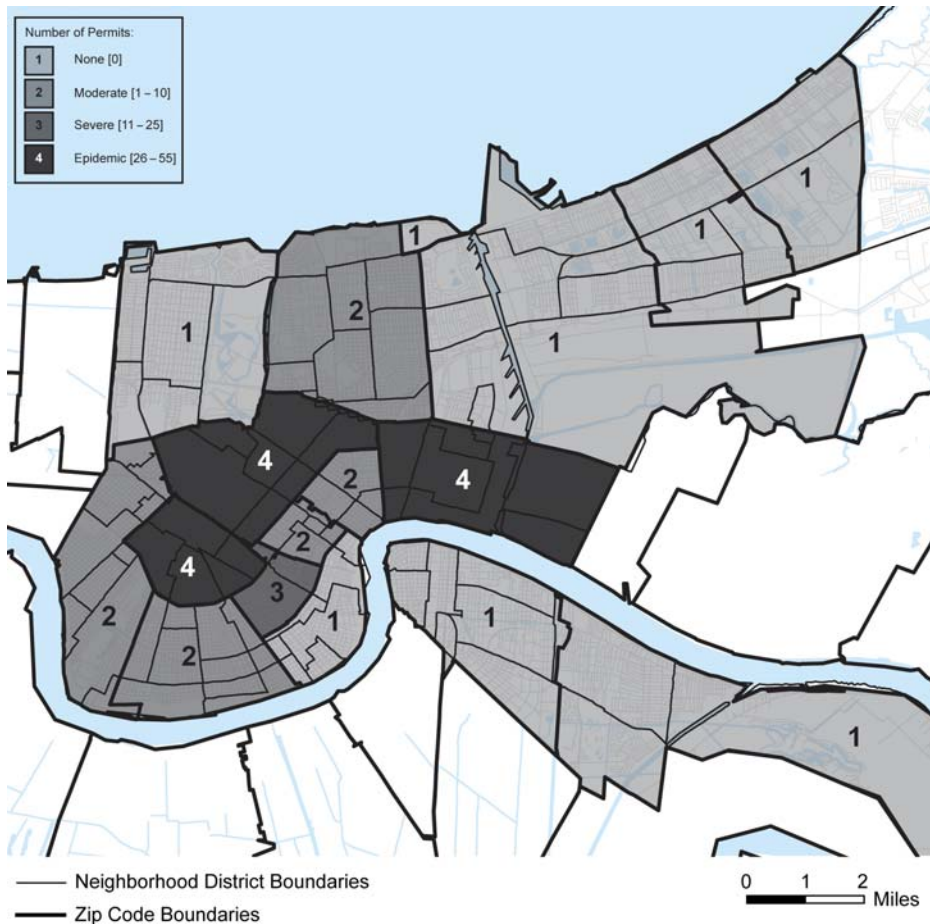


Figure 5. Demolition permits granted without review: post-Gustav New Orleans (September 2008).

of owners skirting the review process for properties that would likely have been denied demolition permits (preservationnation.org, 2008). Preservationists and the local media launched a rash of condemnations of the Mayor's action. This led to the hurried reestablishment of the NCDC three weeks later and yet the Mayor blithely continued to assert publicly that the hundreds of permits issued post-Gustav had been issued only to 'imminent health threat' structures (Farwell, 2008; Krupa, 2008b).

FEMA's website proclaimed that any 'disaster damaged' structure was eligible for a free demolition to eliminate an immediate threat to lives, public health, and safety (Curtis, 2007). It was as if FEMA, through its US\$51.8 million mitigation programme in New Orleans, was hell-bent on tearing down as many flood-damaged and non-flood damaged buildings as possible (so it would not have to invest future massive payouts in the aftermath of a future disaster). An article titled 'How many ways can a city violate its own laws' was posted at thinknola.com (McBride, 2008). The opaqueness of the process was stunning, as hundreds of properties (many historic) suddenly appeared on lists at the end of meetings and were randomly reviewed behind closed doors, then mysteriously granted demolition permits.

A unified framework for action can help give a unified voice to the preservation community. This framework (Figure 6) expresses a set of interdependent, interlocking apertures, concerns, values, collective goals, and aspirations. From bottom to top it is premised on the engagement of grassroots citizen watchdog groups working in tandem with public- and private-sector mainstream organizations. Commitment, perseverance, and the ability to visualize a positive outcome are prerequisites (Figure 6). Mainstream and non-mainstream groups can rise together to the enormous challenge, assuming political and turf battles can be overcome.

When the prerequisite layers of cooperative dialogue and mutual support are in place, it is then possible to articulate a unified vision and course of action. This brings into play the uppermost, or aspirational, regions of the diagram (Figure 6). These consist of four core ingredients: implementation, mutual trust, receptivity, and collaboration. First, *implementation* certifies that all parties have already agreed to collaborate towards a shared goal and vision. Second, *trust* is essential to work together toward these common goals. Third, *receptivity* denotes the ability to be open-minded. Fourth, *collaboration* can open many new possibilities that are sorely lacking within the preservation and conservation landscape in post-Katrina New Orleans. The four diagonal axes, which intersect within this operative framework, represent: 1, Housing; 2, Civic Institutions; 3, Commercial Zones; and 4, Recreational and Pageantry Zones. These are the four core realms—corresponding to specific *places*—within the city where nearly all the ongoing battles to save and restore specific historic buildings and neighbourhoods continue to occur.

Last but not most important in this model is the importance of mutual trust and the social capital that this can accrue (Green *et al.*, 2007). Meanwhile, the losses mount (Figure 7). This model of preservationism in New Orleans calls for field research, a commitment of adequate fiscal resources, clearly stated goals, and dogged follow through. The constituent parts of this operative model are co-dependent. Such a strategy, however, will require the full participation of all stakeholders who are affected. Historically, the city's African-American residents were not among the city's most ardent preservationists. The reasons for this are complex, beyond the scope of the present discussion.

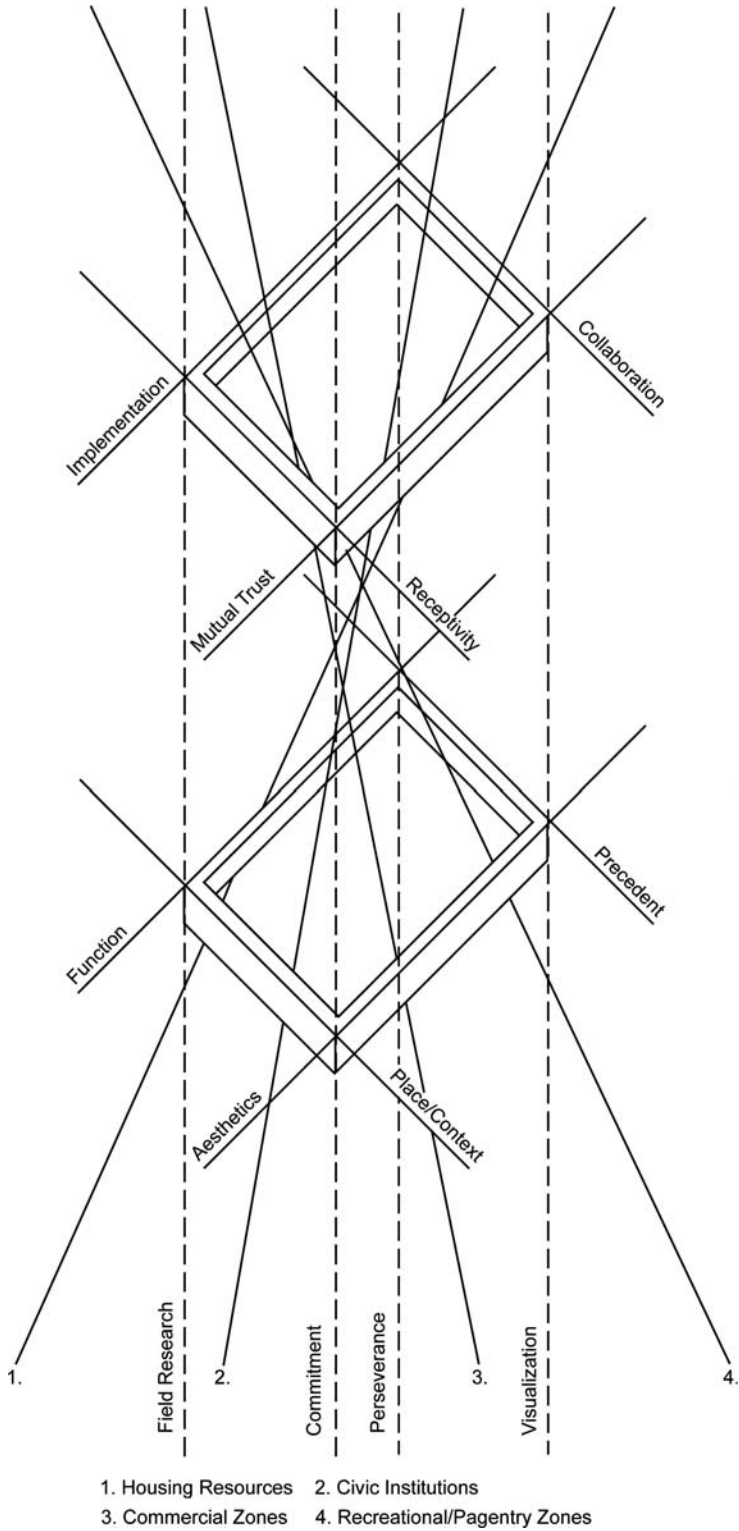


Figure 6. Dimensions of historic resource conservation in Post-Katrina New Orleans. Recommended operational strategy.



Figure 7. Unauthorized demolition in historic district, 2008.

In the case of renovating Charity Hospital and thereby saving a nearby historic neighbourhood and more than 150 historic buildings, it is a battle perhaps well worth waging (Moran, 2008a, 2008b). This battle centred on the site chosen for the construction of new replacement hospitals for the Department of Veterans Affairs (DVA) and the Louisiana State University (LSU) Health Sciences Center. A 74-acre tract in Mid City, adjacent to the central business district was chosen in 2008. Neighbourhood residents, African-American, by and large, had been dismissed throughout the mandated Section 106 Review. The National Trust, the Foundation for Historical Louisiana (FHL) and grassroots preservationists countered. The FHL commissioned the Philadelphia firm RMJM Hillier. It produced a 150-page report proving the sustainability of a reborn historic Charity Hospital in its original shell, a strategy requiring the demolition of *not one* historic building (Moran, 2008a, 2008b; Nossiter, 2008; Verderber, 2008b). By spring 2009, 38 preservation and grassroots organizations had signed on to save 'Big Charity' and the Lower Mid City neighbourhood targeted for clean slating. This is an excellent example of this operative framework in action. Here, the National Trust and the FHL took the lead.

Unfortunately, a unified preservationist voice did not emerge in time in the battle waged over the lack of affordable HUD-sponsored public housing for the city's returning population (Reckdahl, 2008). Preservationists were divided into two camps: those advocating full preservation of all units, and those advocating preservation and renovation of a subset (500–1000) of units (Gonzales, 2008). The United Nations weighed in, calling the demolitions of the four largest public housing projects in the city an act of racial discrimination and an international human rights violation (United Nations, 2008; Hammer, 2008a).

The demolition epidemic can be traced to three conundrums:

- *Dilemma 1. A lack of vision among elected officials.* Demolition should be the last option, not the first. Unfortunately, buildings do not vote. Mayor C. Ray Nagin and the City Council frequently capitulated to anti-preservationist special interests (Nolan, 2008; Hammer, 2008c). Albeit, City Hall was overwhelmed by the catastrophe. In the aftermath of the layoff of more than 3000 city employees post-Katrina, the functions of City Hall became a Byzantine tangle (Hammer, 2008b). Paradoxically, at the urging of neighbourhood housing activists, the city launched an ill-fated programme in 2007 dubbed The Good Neighbor Program. This database was posted online, yet no action was taken on any of the more than 17 000 'blighted' properties reported (Krupa, 2008c).
- *Dilemma 2. Communication dysfunctions.* Communication remains fragmented and opaque, where too many public transactions with taxpayer monies remain far from full public view. The inability for these 'official' oversight bodies in the public and private sector to communicate with one another remains a paradox. Sadly, and tragically, this conundrum remains a classic case of the old adage of the right hand being unaware of the left hand's actions. Yet in this case a more vivid analogy might be to the tentacles of an octopus, each feebly attempting to reach the same virtuous goal, yet hopelessly intertangled.
- *Dilemma 3. Overwhelmed neighbourhood activists and preservation organizations.* It takes committed citizens to rebuild a city that has experienced such a panoramic, profound event as Katrina. Since the 1960 US Census, when the city's population peaked at more than 600 000, the population gradually shrank to 484 000 by 2005. There may now be simply too few *foot soldiers* working in the streets to carry the torch to save the city's historic architectural and urban design fabric.

The following five steps are recommended:

- *Streamline the preservation bureaucracy.* As has been pointed out above, the preservation and conservation apparatus in post-Katrina New Orleans remains a disconnected confederation of special interests. Dialogue is needed. Competing agendas are counterintuitive and ultimately counterproductive. In the public sector as well as the private sector, a super ordinate umbrella organization—speaking with a single voice—is critically needed. This voice must speak for the entire city, not just certain sections while ignoring others—from the 19th-century Holy Cross neighbourhood next to the Mississippi River to the post-Second World War Lakeview and Gentilly sections that border Lake Pontchartrain.
- *Adopt a block/adopt a house programme.* The most damaged parts of the city have experienced economic disinvestment in Katrina's aftermath although many of these same areas were experiencing significant population and economic decline before 2005. This trend, as mentioned above, over the past three decades resulted in thousands of abandoned structures. Reinvestment is acutely needed in Katrina's aftermath. Some neighbourhoods have had success in matching donors with homeowners who lack restoration funds (Abramson, 2008). Reinvestment incentives can be provided to invest in a neighbourhood through the purchase, or adoption, of a building, or block.
- *Economic and federal tax incentives for property exchange.* Tax incentives for land swapping can help spur preservation activity in New Orleans's most threatened neighbourhoods. This was proposed right after Katrina but quickly was lost in the bureaucratic morass, whereby a landowner is able to exchange his or her

property for a property in another neighbourhood. The federal Stafford Act, which determines FEMA disaster mitigation policy, needs to be amended to incorporate this provision because existing local land use laws were proven ineffective in the face of a disaster the scope of Katrina (Green *et al.*, 2007; Duany, 2007; Hammer, 2008b; Morgan *et al.*, 2008).

- *Reduce crime through preservation.* Pre-Katrina, there were 30 000 derelict properties in the city; post-Katrina, this number grew to 98 000 based on the city's own estimates. These places are breeding grounds for crime. The reclamation of these vacant and abandoned structures can have an exponentially positive effect on a neighbourhood. This will require that law enforcement work together with preservationists and grassroots neighbourhood leaders—something that has not happened to date.
- *Improve public education in preservation.* Many buildings could possibly have been spared from destruction post-Katrina had the general public been more knowledgeable about the importance of historic conservation and preservation of the city's built heritage. It is not too late to launch public awareness campaigns via the print and electronic media, and in classrooms throughout the metro area. Local and national architects and planners can provide their services on a *pro bono* basis to promote greater public skill sets and appreciation in this arena.

Summary

This analysis has addressed four fundamental questions concerning New Orleans's recovery in the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina. First, a vast array of public and private-sector organizations focused on the preservation and conservation of the built environment have cancelled out one another in many cases. Second, it has been shown that the historic urban character of the city is being undermined by the unwarranted demolition of thousands of structures in historic pre- and post-Second World War neighbourhoods. It is a preservation and conservation landscape characterized by mistrust, apprehension, and antipathy between grassroots civic groups and elected officials at all levels of government. It is a condition deeply rooted at the local level in racial and class-based inequalities (Hirsch & Levert, 2009). Third, it has been shown that certain sections of the city are being unduly targeted. Fourth, the federal government, and FEMA in particular through its Section 106 Review, is nearly dysfunctional in the face of a catastrophe of Katrina's magnitude, as in the case of the Cabrini Church controversy in 2007.

Louisiana lost 4.1% of its population from April 2000 to July 2006, while the population of the United States grew by 6.4% (United States Census Bureau, 2008). Katrina has obviously been a factor. In Orleans Parish during this same period the population decreased by 53.9%. With a declining population how will New Orleans be able to reclaim its abandoned inventory of historic homes and neighbourhoods? Resettlement is the only way this will occur. New homesteaders need to move into these dwellings and in turn the surrounding neighbourhoods can be resuscitated. At this moment, the retention of the city's *tout ensemble* is of critical importance (Weinberg, 1979).

By 2008 the inventory of unsold homes in the New Orleans area reached a record high, with more than 8000 single-family dwellings listed. Hundreds

of US\$300 000-plus homes sat vacant in the suburbs three years after Katrina and nearly every national homebuilder abandoned the area (Cohen, 2008). This included the nation's largest homebuilder, KB Homes, based in Los Angeles. Ironically, the housing industry was building unaffordable *housing* in the suburbs surrounding New Orleans because that was where the greatest profits were. This represented a major *disinvestment* in the future of the city's historic urban core, especially with so few federal GO Zone projects in the pipeline for Orleans Parish (Mowbray, 2007).

Nearly four years after Katrina, rebuilding efforts remained fragmented and a single unified preservationist voice was yet to emerge from either the public or the private sector. Hundreds of planning meetings took place in the interim (Farley, 2007). Returnees typically vented anger, frustration, and growing outrage at the glacial pace of 'recovery' in their neighbourhood. Controversy even swirled around the definition of the term 'recovery' itself. To some, it implied 'Wild West' deregulation whereby, now, any 'marginal' structure could be taken down, a loss of yet another component of the city's delicate *tout ensemble* (Hammer, 2008a). Often, the competing agendas of preservationist and anti-preservation forces become intertwined and gridlocked with efforts actually to *save* structures in the most fragile and highly endangered neighbourhoods lost in the clamour. It is a tragic conundrum.

Worse, Katrina gave rise to a new industry focused solely on the lucrative economics of disaster recovery (Klein, 2007). The federal Stafford Act, and FEMA's historic preservation Section 106 Review process, was proven to be utterly ineffective. Meanwhile, the US Army Corps of Engineers alone tore down 4387 buildings in the city in the first twelve months after Katrina (Krupa, 2008b, 2008c). Thousands of additional properties remain threatened with demolition (McBride, 2008). This number could rise to as high as 7000 as the New Orleans Redevelopment Authority takes possession of as many as 8000 flood-damaged Louisiana Recovery Authority (LRA) 'Road Home' homes bought-out from owners who opted not to rebuild or who had already torn down their home. The majority of these properties lie within the sweeping bandwidth cutting across the swath of neighbourhoods bordering the 'Sliver by the River'.

The future of the New Orleans's *tout ensemble* depends on the retention of its stock of structures, which constitute the city's *second-line* historic core and the more recent neighbourhoods beyond. The Vieux Carré, specifically, would have been destroyed by an ill-conceived, highly intrusive riverfront expressway that was never built (Weinberg, 1979; Baumbach & Borah, 1980). Beyond, the city's second-line neighbourhoods were where the social aid and pleasure clubs and Mardi Gras Indian organizations flourished for more than a century (Sublette, 2006). In the local rap-brass band Soul Rebels' piece *Free Yo' Mind* (2003), each housing project is called out one by one as if each were a city onto itself. Sadly, future generations cannot benefit from a policy of *addition by subtraction*. On a positive note, the new wave of cyber-preservationists and grassroots neighbourhood organizers are having some success (Fontana, 2008).

Today, New Orleans ranks 58th in population among American cities. In 1858 the city was the third largest in the United States, behind only New York and Baltimore. Yet beyond questions of population size, mounting scientific evidence places in question the long-term viability of New Orleans as a major American urban centre (Cable, 1984; Bourne, 2007; Russell, 2008). Without question, much hard work lies ahead in the rebuilding of this extraordinary American city.

Acknowledgements

The author is indebted to the experience and dedicated work of Karen Gadbois, Francine Stock, Matt McBride, Eugene Cizek, Jacob Wagner, and Lindsay Todd.

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