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# Is New Orleans a Shrinking City?

Laura Wolf-Powers

Across the globe over the last century, rural-to-urban migration and advances in transportation and construction technology have had a staggering impact on the morphology of urban places and their relation to their hinterlands. But while a greater proportion of the Earth's population today lives in cities than ever before, some cities are contracting.

According to the German Federal Cultural Foundation's Shrinking Cities Project ([www.shrinkingcities.com](http://www.shrinkingcities.com)), 370 cities with populations of 100,000 or more have undergone population losses of greater than 10 percent in the last five decades. Occasionally, population loss has been temporary, but usually it has endured. In a political economy fixated on constant growth, this has presented vexing challenges for those who remain.

Should population loss prompt territorial retrenchment—an actual cinching in of a city's boundaries? Do losses of population and profit-making activity call for massive interventions in social planning and landscape design? Or can incremental responses at the level of the lot, the household, and the neighborhood sometimes soothe the topographic, economic and psychic effects of decline more skillfully? Might decline be an opportunity for innovation and renewal?

## Planned Shrinkage?

Many of these questions are addressed in the German Federal Cultural Foundation's Shrinking Cities exhibition, which appeared at the Pratt Manhattan Gallery and the Van Alen Institute in New York City from December 7, 2006, to February 2, 2007. This important traveling show also provided the backdrop for a January 29 symposium at Pratt titled "Is New Orleans a Shrinking City?" At the symposium, two presentations

and a panel discussion applied questions raised by the exhibition to New Orleans, a city whose current population, estimated at 230,000, is half what it was before Hurricane Katrina forced its evacuation in late August and early September 2005.

Startling images of entire neighborhoods under water after the storm, along with predictions by geologists of both climate change-induced sea-level change and continued local land subsidence (New Orleans is also a "sinking city," currently subsiding by two inches per decade), have caused many to wonder whether deliberate shrinkage might not be a wise policy there. Calls to limit rebuilding to high ground and let certain heavily flooded parts of the city devolve into parks and nature preserves were first heard in the storm's immediate aftermath. They were echoed in recommendations issued by the Urban Land Institute and the Bring New Orleans Back Commission in January 2006.

As symposium participants pointed out, however, even if planned shrinkage may seem to make sense to technicians examining the city from the air, the realities on the ground are considerably more complex. First, while portions of the most storm-damaged territory may lie three feet or more below sea level, their supposed unsuitability for redevelopment is only a matter of degree. The entire city of New Orleans is like a bowl, requiring elaborately engineered pumping stations, levees and canals to keep it dry.

Furthermore, according to panelist James Dart of the New Jersey Institute of Technology, a New Orleans native, "If the eye of Hurricane Katrina had moved toward the northwest instead of the northeast, the biggest flooding impact would have been in low-elevation areas like

Algiers and the west-bank suburbs. If the devastation had concentrated in affluent areas, it seems unlikely that anyone would be talking about not rebuilding."

Meanwhile, as decision-making about recovery proceeded at a molasses-like pace, people simply returned, took stock, and began reconstructing their homes, defying assumptions that damaged communities would remain diasporic.

## "Model Blocks" in Plum Orchard

The first presentation at the January symposium concentrated on work at Pratt Institute and NJIT under a grant from the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development. Through the grant, part of the Universities Revitalizing America Partnerships program, architects and planners at the two schools have been working with ACORN Housing Corporation to help people in a twelve-block area of New Orleans East retrofit their houses and adapt their properties. The architecture in this area, which is part of the Plum Orchard neighborhood, is diverse, ranging from traditional New Orleans "shotgun" houses to more suburban "slab-on-grade" models built during the eastward migration of many New Orleanians in the 1950s and 60s.

While New Orleans East as a whole has only 30 percent of its pre-Katrina population, people have resettled Plum Orchard somewhat more densely. In the process, they have often received support from tight-knit familial and social networks whose graphic expression on GIS maps tells a different story from maps that suggest the neighborhood is doomed to abandonment.

At the symposium, Pratt architect Deborah Gans showed student and

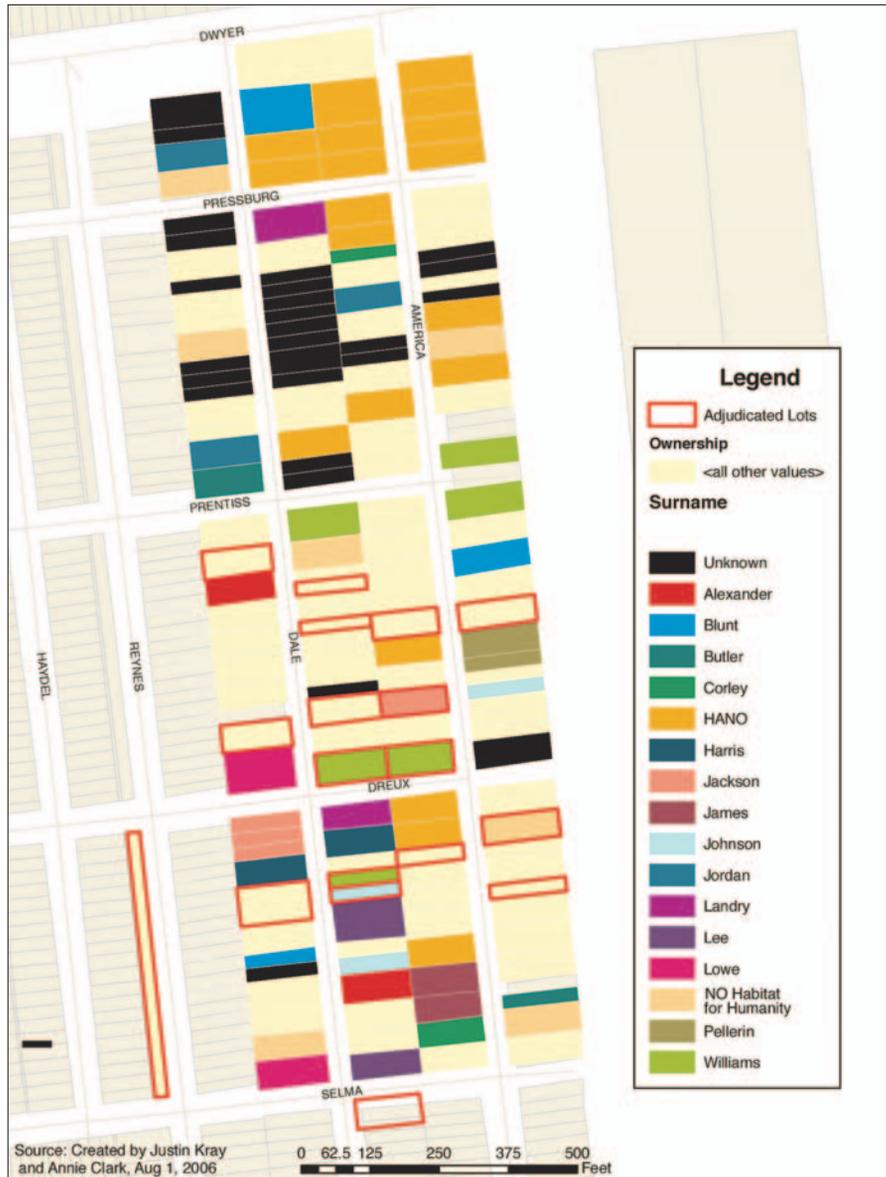
faculty work from the twelve “model blocks” in Plum Orchard. Gans said that the work, in addition to demonstrating architectural innovations that make houses less vulnerable to wind and water, argued for “new landscape practices that can be executed on the scale of the individual lot as part of rebuilding and clean up.” Such practices, which include the planting of absorptive vegetation, improving drainage systems, and making connections to enhanced stormwater-management infrastructure would demonstrate “that the environmental good does not require the mass destruction of a neighborhood.”

Echoing a major theme of the Shrinking Cities exhibition, Gans also asserted the value of incremental, individual interventions—gestures that “over time...take on the outline and force of a master plan.” If promised levee repairs by the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers are not forthcoming, however, much of Plum Orchard will be underwater again in the next storm, she said.

### New Infrastructure for Central New Orleans

The symposium’s second presentation was by architect Frederic Schwartz, who served as a district planner in the Rockefeller Foundation-funded Unified New Orleans Plan process. During that time he helped develop a recovery plan for District 4, a diverse set of predominantly African-American neighborhoods, several with as much low ground as Plum Orchard, located to the immediate north and northwest of

**Above:** GIS mapping helped reveal overlapping ownership patterns, often related to family networks, in New Orleans’ Plum Orchard neighborhood. Image by Andrea Clark and Justin Kray.



the Central Business District.

The plan for District 4 proposed a vast array of recovery projects to be undertaken through governmental and philanthropic initiative. They included revitalization efforts along major commercial corridors, new mixed-used development in the Mid-City, Gert Town, and Tulane areas,

open space connected by bike paths, and interim use strategies for currently underutilized public facilities. Another bold proposal contained in the plan was the removal of the I-10 expressway above Claiborne Avenue, which Schwartz said had represented “a tremendous loss of cultural heritage” for African-Americans when it



was constructed in the 1960s.

District 4 includes a majority of New Orleans' public housing units, and Schwartz also discussed his involvement in ongoing efforts to reverse a federal decision to demolish more than 5,000 of them even as housing scarcity represents a huge barrier to the return of evacuees. The District 4 plan he helped develop had proposed renovation rather than demolition for most public housing, along with the construction of new infill housing in adjacent areas.

For low-income New Orleanians displaced by Katrina, time is running out, said panelist Steven Kest of the Association of Community

Organizations for Reform Now, a national membership organization of low-income families (and Pratt and NJIT's partner in their New Orleans East work). The deplorable track record of FEMA and local government in providing replacement housing and school facilities has led to discouragement, frustration, and—increasingly—resignation among many ACORN members.

While some evacuees have found that they prefer to remain in places like Houston and Atlanta, Kest said, many people who want to come back have been stymied in their efforts, primarily because of the affordable housing shortage. In this regard,

impolitic but revealing remarks by public officials to the effect that Katrina “cleansed” New Orleans of its undesirable residents—i.e., the poor—have brought to light a “shrinking city” agenda that looks more like a purge.

#### **Top-Down vs. Bottom-Up**

Other panelists included urban designer Brian McGrath, coastal biologist Amy Lesen, and Philipp Oswald,

**Above:** Volunteers from Pratt and NJIT, working with ACORN Housing Corporation, have helped retrofit and adapt houses in hard-hit New Orleans East. Photo courtesy of Eleni Glekas.

director of the German Federal Cultural Foundation's Shrinking Cities Project.

Lesen reminded the audience that coastal populations around the world, including in New York City, are increasingly vulnerable to hurricanes. She argued that plans to reduce the greenhouse gas emissions that scientists acknowledge are responsible for rising sea levels and severe weather must become part of master plans for all cities.

In his comments, McGrath contrasted the approaches of the two presentations, citing the difference between the "bottom-up," lot-by-lot route taken by Dart, Gans, and their students and Schwartz's synoptic planning stance and advocacy for relatively large-scale interventions.

Oswalt identified this "top-down/bottom-up" distinction as a key finding of the Shrinking Cities Project. He noted that in cities like Detroit, MI, and Halle-Neustadt in the former East Germany, the absence of interest in real property by either private investors or the state opened up opportunities for creativity and freedom that would otherwise not have presented themselves. At the same time, the accomplishments of incremental planning will be limited in scope if not supported by some larger governmental framework. How thoroughly the fates of low-lying New Orleans neighborhoods like Plum Orchard and Mid-City become intertwined with official planning efforts—and what the implications of this are for their residents' safety and well-being—are today questions that loom large in the city's future.

More information on the District 4 plan may be found at <http://unifiedneworleansplan.com/home2/districts/4/>. An important ACORN document may be found at [http://www.acorn.org/fileadmin/KatrinaRelief/report/Planning\\_Principles.pdf](http://www.acorn.org/fileadmin/KatrinaRelief/report/Planning_Principles.pdf).

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In addition, look for an article that reports on the convention panel and discussion in *Places*, Volume 19 Issue 3.

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