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Voices from the New Orleans Design and Planning Diaspora

Gary Van Zante

Following the tragic impact of hurricanes Katrina and Rita on the U.S. Gulf Coast in August and September, the Massachusetts Institute of Technology hosted a series of symposia in the Fall of 2005 entitled “Big Questions After Big Hurricanes.” Our intent was to investigate these catastrophic events and discuss issues of recovery.¹

The first session, October 3, empanelled five New Orleans architects and academics to discuss the rebuilding of their city. Organized and moderated by Prof. Lawrence Vale, head of the Department of Urban Studies and Planning, and myself, the session touched on a broad range of urban, architectural, social and political issues, reflecting the complexity of the public response to such disasters.

Panelists were William Barry, Senior Associate, Shepley Bulfinch Richardson & Abbott Architects, Boston; Lawrence Jenkins, Professor of Art History, University of New Orleans; John Klingman, Professor of Architecture, Tulane University, New Orleans; Richard J. Tuttle, Professor of Art History, Tulane University; and Ellen Weiss, Professor of Architecture, Tulane University. The following are some edited highlights of the discussion.

Van Zante: In the spring of 1867 a *crevasse*, or breach in the Mississippi River levee, caused heavy flooding in the New Orleans vicinity—one of forty inundations since the first levees were raised in 1727. In this catastrophe, victims appealed to authorities for aid. “Not only desolation and destruction of property, but death marches along in the track of the swiftly overwhelming flood,” they wrote to the governor. “Now—today—is the time for measures of relief to be put in operation, for tomorrow will be too late.” The

New Orleans *Crescent* editorialized, sounding very much like today: “It is to be regretted that the request for assistance did not elicit a speedier response, for had immediate measures been taken, much misery might have been relieved and much loss averted.”

A hundred years later, in 1965, Louisiana Governor John McKeithen said, “We have spent hundreds of millions of dollars to protect ourselves from the water. We have cut the Mississippi in many places so the water can get faster to the gulf. We have built levees up and down the Mississippi. We feel now we are almost completely protected.” That same year hurricane Betsy struck New Orleans with winds of 170 miles per hour. The levees were breached, sending floodwaters into the city. It was called the worst natural disaster in American history.

Now, in the wake of Katrina, our response to disaster and our ability to prevent it seem hardly to have improved. What can we say about the future of New Orleans as a safe place to live and work?

Tuttle: It is important to understand the history. Historical understanding is equal to the optimistic future-oriented, technological response. Man has for centuries taken that stance, that something can be done physically to make it better. In general it’s worked, as in the case of the Netherlands or the Po River Valley; however, those places maintained strong public commitments.

Jenkins: In New Orleans this notion of an unsafe city is something people live with. From hurricane season to hurricane season we think about what might happen if the “big one” comes, [but] we’ve squandered the opportunity to protect ourselves.

As Katrina was bearing down, the Corps [of Engineers] was saying the Category 3 levees have settled over time, and maybe they now only protect us against a Category 2 storm. There is this culture of living with danger and being relieved when you dodge the “big one”—but the “big one” is always going to come.

Barry: New Orleanians are tenacious, having fought this difficulty throughout the city’s history. You could say New Orleans is unsustainable, [that] “they should rebuild it somewhere else.” However, one of the big messages here is that the city is not gone. New Orleans today is eighty percent intact and twenty percent devastated. There are structures that have been flooded, perhaps by toxic sludge; but even much of that twenty percent may be salvageable.

Jenkins: I wonder if New Orleans is still a tenacious place. I’ve talked to many who have returned to flood-ravaged neighborhoods, who have said “I can’t start fixing until they tell me I can start fixing, or if FEMA tells me they are going to bulldoze or not.”

Klingman: One of the things that is most disturbing in all this is that the rule system we have been living under in New Orleans is broken. It’s hard to understand if zoning issues or building-code issues are going to apply; or what changes there will be in the transportation or utility infrastructure; or if environmental mediation is going to be in the forefront. We hear that billions of dollars are being sent to the city and the region, and no one knows who is going to shepherd that money. Part of the solution is threading back to something that makes sense before it is possible to proceed.

process. Our concern—those of us at the table—is the quality of the city that we have and are afraid of losing entirely. We’re desperate to get that back. The impulse to bulldoze and start from scratch is a solution closely allied with the political process.

Van Zante: Those bulldozers now roaming New Orleans may be accelerating what has been called one of the worst cultural disasters in American history. What do we know about the impact of this catastrophe on New Orleans’ 37,000 historic structures?

Weiss: There are FEMA assessment teams at work, but I worry about the shotgun neighborhoods. The shotgun is a great house form—it was probably invented in New Orleans as an adaptation to local house lots. Everybody has their own house, they have a door right on the street, the streets make neighborhoods, and people sit out on the street. There are not a lot of street cultures left, but New Orleans has a vibrant one. There is an urge now to shrink the city up to the high ground, put everybody in fourteen-story buildings. This is the worst possible solution. We’ve got to recognize that New Orleans is one of the largest historic districts in the world. It’s really the whole city—it’s a carpet, a fabulous urban texture.

Klingman: I think many people will accept this as a goal. But there are people who [will] want to take down old houses that haven’t been lived in for awhile. There is going to be more pressure to say “that looks bad, let’s get rid of it,” when in fact most of these buildings can be repaired and renewed. This is probably true even for buildings under water for a long period. New Orleans is built of cypress. Much of New Orleans was a

cypress swamp, and when the swamp was drained, enormous trees were cut for building. Old-growth cypress is one of the most rot-resistant woods in existence. It seems reasonable to assume these houses can endure and be renewed.

Audience Question: What role can planners and designers have in reshaping the political and economic situation that led to this catastrophe?

Klingman: There is a document out by the AIA which proposes to make school-building the focus of this reconstruction. One of the tragedies of New Orleans was the public education system. Imagine if all of a sudden there were a hundred new schools in the city. Los Angeles, for example, adopted a bond issue to build thirty branch libraries in the neighborhoods. They hired, I think, thirty different architects—a few are rehabs, a few additions, and a lot of them are new construction. You go to the libraries now in L.A. and they’re full. It’s a huge success story. I think the potential of something like that in New Orleans is brilliant. It’s a way of saying “here’s something we can do.” And it shouldn’t be hard to find sites.

Audience Question: Tourism has been the foremost economic development strategy of the city before Katrina. Will there be a change in that strategy?

Barry: Many, if not all, of the tourist attractions survived rather well. It is the fabric of the city not often seen by tourists that will quickly fall to political expediency. [People will say] “we need an area to wipe clean and start over again to show everybody that we can solve this problem with new building.”

Weiss: These areas are the cultural hearth, this is where the jazz comes from. This is also where the minimum—wage workers who support the tourist industry come from.

Audience Comment: I worry that with so many people having left New Orleans and not being able to come back in a timely way, you lose the [local, rejuvenating] dialogue surrounding the very thing that you want to preserve and modernize.

Vale: Empowering local voices [is] the central challenge. We are working with local community groups and unions to see if there might be a way for faculty and students to assist. One big challenge for planners is to help community leaders reconnect severed social networks. If New Orleans is to recover, it will take more than a return of the city’s planners and designers. But surely such leadership will form a vital part of what needs to happen next.

Note

1. The event was hosted by the Department of Urban Studies and Planning’s City Design and Development Forum. I would like to thank Shilpa Mehta, Leslie Myers, Richard Tuttle, and Larry Vale for their assistance.