

Community Renewal in a Crisis: How to Rebuild New Orleans by Denys Candy

As the powers that be debate on how to re-build New Orleans, emerging from the airwaves and print media is a situation currently in flux, with much to play for. Safety is clearly a primary issue. With so much toxic sludge and so many physical structures deemed unstable, the authorities, bowing to the inevitable return of people, have warned that those who re-enter certain areas of the city are coming at their own risk. Yet, safety concerns notwithstanding, we hear that environmental regulations could be relaxed and oil refineries might expand into formerly residential areas. Realtors have announced requests from clients to buy as much residential property as they can gather at prices significantly higher than market values preceding Hurricane Katrina. And the city's political figures are wondering aloud exactly which sections to re-build and which to abandon.

As might be expected, the business of real-estate development—where and how to erect industrial, commercial and residential properties—is seen as the engine that will drive and stimulate the city's rebirth. Toward this end, as reported by Ceci Connolly of The Washington Post, Mayor Ray Nagin is signaling that the Lower Ninth Ward may be gone forever because the neighborhood was constructed on a swamp and, hence, the homes there are considered unsafe. However, similar warnings of proposed demolition have not been sounded for other flood-prone neighborhoods, such as Chantilly and Lakeview. Perhaps Chantilly and Lakeview can be made less vulnerable as the city rebuilds itself, but if so, surely the same could be done for the Ninth Ward. Certainly there were differences among these neighborhoods. Whereas Chantilly and Lakeview residents were middle-class and wealthy, of the 20,000 residents in the Ninth Ward, most were African American and a high percentage were poor. In addition to having lost their homes, surviving residents are now further threatened by the prospect of a decree from powerful people that will revert their neighborhood—their streets and alleys, familiar spots of laughter and shared struggle—to swampland. It would be, reports Connolly, the “largest demolition of a community in modern U.S. history.”

It may be tempting to believe that a city could avoid bringing back its previous social problems if it were to re-engineer its racial and class composition. (Where would those surviving Ninth Ward residents, many still poor, live if their neighborhood is not re-built? Would they simply not return, live indefinitely in temporary housing or on the streets of other cities?) I would like to remind the master planners what we have learned from fifty years of American Urban Renewal Projects, what Pittsburgh and other cities know firsthand—demolition doesn't renew. It destroys communities and devastates people. Ultimately, it weakens a city as a whole, because the repercussions of social and psychological displacement extend far beyond the physical parameters of the demolished site.

Real-Estate Development Alone is not Community Development

During the 1950's Pittsburgh's Mayor David Lawrence (later Governor of Pennsylvania) sought to address the problem of over-crowding in downtown Pittsburgh by envisioning a

“golden triangle” that would stretch from the confluence of rivers at the Point, up through the lower Hill District. Contrary to the fact that the Hill District had a tightly knit community, and streets were closely packed with homes and shops full of the smells of active living and ethnic cooking, the neighborhood was labeled a “blighted” area. Land was taken by eminent domain and cleared, displacing thousands of people, most of them African American.

Having worked as a Consultant over the last decade on several projects for the Hill House Association and the Hill District Consensus Group, I have spoken with many Hill residents who continue to harbor sadness (and anger) at the losses brought about by Urban Renewal—economic opportunities, friends and family, social and cultural vibrancy. And I have spoken with faculty at the University of Pittsburgh and with students, several native to the city, who were surprised and thrilled to learn of the rich cultural history existing two miles from their classrooms. The Hill produced not only August Wilson, but also Lena Horne, Billy Eckstein, Stanley Turrentine, Ahmad Jamal; clubs in the Hill were frequented by Duke Ellington, Count Basie, Dizzy Gillespie, Charlie Parker, Miles Davis, Ella Fitzgerald, Sarah Vaughn—and the list goes on. It was in the Hill that several generations of European immigrants and African Americans got a foothold on their American Dream. The Pittsburgh Courier, the city’s African American newspaper, once distributed nationally, was started in the Hill. So powerful was the community’s artistic energy and entrepreneurial spirit that Harlem Renaissance poet Claud McKay dubbed the Hill, “the crossroads of the world.”

To see how the demolition of the Lower Hill was damaging to Pittsburgh as a whole, we could begin by asking ourselves why, when thousands of visitors have flocked to Graceland over the years, few have come to a city that gave rise to so many great artists. People from all over the Western Pennsylvania region tell stories of going to Wylie Avenue in the old days, but younger generations and newcomers to Pittsburgh perceive the Hill only as an area troubled by crime and drugs.

Imagine a different scenario. What if the Lower Hill hadn’t been demolished, its community not uprooted and scattered? What if the social fabric of the neighborhood and its previous ties to other neighborhoods were still intact? How might Pittsburgh’s recent history as a city be different today? What image might the world have of us? What image might we have of ourselves? And, who knows—would the city be facing such tremendous financial difficulties as it is facing now?

One mustn’t deny that in recent years, things have improved in the Hill District. Several new commercial buildings grace Centre Avenue, and Crawford Square has brought about new housing units. These can be considered successes in real-estate development, but for some long-term Hill residents, Crawford Square, for example, evokes no connection to the rest of the Hill District—past or present. Their experience is a common one. Contemporary urban development tends to take place on parcels of land, designed with minimal relation to the surrounding environment. In spite of good intentions to build well, we cite costs and time constraints in our rationale for constructing buildings fast, rather than building communities well.

I am concerned because there is tremendous urgency in New Orleans to build fast. One might argue that the Lower Ninth Ward was not the Hill of bygone days. But it was home to 20,000 residents. It produced part of the city’s music and was part of its social

fabric, and making a permanent tear anywhere in the stunning weave of New Orleans should not be taken lightly.

Community Renewal in and throughout the Planning Process

It is a challenge to follow the advice of famed architect Christopher Alexander and his colleagues, who urge us to design and build a place not “in isolation” but in ways that “repair the world around it, and within it, so that the larger world at that one place becomes more coherent, and more whole.” Yet, it is not impossibly difficult to compose a vision that relates to the deeper essence of a place, to its history and to a larger vision for the wider area. And the rewards of such a practice are immense, and immediate.

This practice is already underway in Pittsburgh. Since 2002, the *Find the Rivers!* initiative has forged a multi-organizational partnership among Hill District residents and civic leaders to work together to support revitalizing the Hill by re-making connections to the rivers. Residents have participated actively in the planning process from the very start, and the current project of the partnership—a new design plan for Kirkpatrick Street that builds on elements of water, lighting, art and history—arose out of residents’ cherished memories and lived experiences in the Hill. When a design plan is drafted this way, the site of development bears an air of intimacy that visitors will feel, because the plan will carry the visual signs of a beloved place. And the practice gives residents a sense of ownership, so that they are drawn to become stewards of both the design plan and the site.

Residents and planners can then work together to build well, and to find the most efficient, sustainable solutions to any problems that impede the process.

Find the Rivers! has five main principles, which the partnership has honed through trial and error. All can be adapted for the re-building of New Orleans. As the partnership’s convener, I define them thus:

Uncover the Essence of the Place—from all available sources. Gather people’s histories and lived experiences. (This is especially important when demolition is being considered. It always makes more sense to demolish a building or a community when one is looking from the outside. Think of the value of the place from the perspectives of those on the inside, irrespective of their political power. Even if some sort of demolition must proceed, “essence” can be preserved if it is first acknowledged and collected.)

Explore the Natural Environment as an Economic Asset. See its beauty from the get go and make it a foundational aspect of building plans, not a cosmetic after-thought.

Learn Organic Partnering skills—what I call “Organic Partnering” requires urban professionals in management and organizational development to re-make conventional habits in partnering. Organic Partnering embraces serendipity and measures a project’s success in terms of its process as well as its final expected outcome.

Be a Steward of Land, Buildings and People.

Remember that Economic, Physiological and Cultural Health are Interrelated. All across the United States, Urban Renewal contributed to higher rates of ill health

for everyone in affected communities. (The Hill lost its jazz clubs. Let's imagine how the triumphant return of New Orleans' musicians could affect not only residents of the city, but people watching from throughout the country and around the world. The return of musicians can be made part of the re-building plans.)

Taking the First Step: A Network of Deep Listening

“Deep listening” is a term I borrow from Zen Master Thich Nhat Hanh. It is a contemplative practice that requires one party to sit quietly, relax and simply “receive” the other person (resisting temptations to interrupt or offer suggestions). Deep listening can happen in pairs or large groups. It can take place in person, at events, over the phone or over the internet. It is an essential first step to uncovering the collective essence of New Orleans and involving surviving residents in the city's rebirth.

Here's how a network of deep listening might look. Hundreds of people arrive at convention centers or other gathering places set up for this purpose—churches, temples, schools, libraries, playgrounds, sports complexes, and so on. All residents, young and old alike, should be offered the right to participate actively in the question: What kind of New Orleans do you want to return to? (Some may choose not to return, wishing instead to move on—they, too, deserve our compassion and support. Others may be unable to travel to the “listening centers” and can participate by phone or via the internet.) These listening centers can be arranged in any region presently hosting New Orleans residents, and residents of the host regions should be invited to participate.

Booths can be set up to provide basic necessities or information regarding food, shelter and clothing, but the main purpose of these centers is to collect the memories and lived experiences of New Orleans residents. People can be assigned to pairs or groups of a dozen or so for deep listening. A one-page guide to deep listening can be distributed to facilitators. (People already experienced in deep listening, including folks from the Hill, can be invited to participate as facilitators) These people can be found in corporations, universities, meditation groups, mindfulness centers, churches, temples, schools and many neighborhoods. A half-day orientation session preceding the main event can be held for facilitators.)

In pairs or groups, New Orleans residents are asked a few simple questions: “What was your neighborhood like? What was your home like? What was your daily routine? Who are your friends and neighbors?” As each resident tells his or her story, the facilitator and others in the group practice deep listening. It is important for everyone first to just bear witness to the experiences of our displaced neighbors. Witnessing, in itself, genuinely practiced—not faked—can help a lot, even when all parties to the interaction feel helpless.

An effective way to document people's stories is through “perceptual mapping.” Perceptual mapping was crafted by Shalini Vajjhala at Carnegie Mellon University to document displaced people's perceptions of their home places, which could then be fed into a computer software program and used in architectural site maps. In perceptual mapping, people draw their own maps of those places that were of importance to them. At the listening centers, these maps can be displayed, enhanced by photos or other images or objects that New Orleans residents may have with them. All groups can thus share their stories and celebrate the city they knew and loved. With so much tragedy

following Hurricane Katrina, it is important for people to remember and have faith in their capacity for joy. (In Dublin, Ireland, where I have worked with communities undergoing re-development, residents in a public housing project known for high levels of crime and drugs organized activities aimed at making people smile and laugh because, they told me, “We don’t laugh around here anymore.” They designed a Laughing Wall, a giant collage of photos taken at the activities, showing a myriad of laughing faces.) After sharing their maps and stories, people return to their groups. They are now asked, “What kind of New Orleans do you want to return to?” and the facilitator guides the group in a creative project that captures core “livable qualities.”

Data can be gathered quickly from these conversations, maps and creative projects, and sent directly to Federal, State and Local leaders coordinating re-building plans for the city.

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My experience in the Hill District, in Dublin, and elsewhere, has shown me how healing it is for residents to be actively involved in re-building their communities and neighborhoods. There are resources and technologies available to achieve such involvement on a large scale. The question is: Do we have the political will?

For better or for worse, the shock wave created by this nation’s failure to protect one of its most beloved cities has the world watching our every move. New Orleans could become a global model for how displaced people participate in re-building their home place. It could say to the world: This is how a city heals itself without causing further displacement. Then, imagine it: Led by re-congregated members of the 60-Plus Social Aid and Pleasure Clubs (who made the Ninth Ward and other districts famous for their parades), surviving residents go marching into their rejuvenated city, its soul and magic intact.

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