

Restoring the Landscape

Time to move to higher ground

—Timothy Kusk, September 200

*If you plant on shoreline,
shrinkage is what you'll get.*

—John Beckman, December 2005

Bienville's Dilemma
A Historical Geography of New Orleans
by Richard Campanella

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Autumn in New Orleans

Heady days in troubled times

Only about one in four New Orleanians remained in their homes in the months following the Hurricane Katrina levee-failure catastrophe. For all the tragedy and uncertainty, life in New Orleans during that poignant and heady autumn of 2005 proved extraordinary.⁶⁹

As the first frost fronts mercifully tempered that year's hyperactive hurricane season, citizens finally had a chance to assess how shockingly their city had changed. Beyond the vast physical wreckage, the society had transformed demographically and economically: once predominantly African-American and working-class or poor, residents were now more likely to be white, better-educated, and professional. Men outnumbered women, elders numbered few, children were practically non-existent, and transient laborers mostly from Latin America seemingly materialized out of nowhere, toiling off tin-plate books from dawn to dusk. Most schools remained closed. Violent crime, once pervasive, had disappeared almost entirely as its perpetrators, drawn disproportionately from the social classes affected most fundamentally by the catastrophe, remained evacuated. Military Humvees filled with M-16-toting soldiers, many fresh from combat in Iraq or Afghanistan, solemnly patrolled streets and enforced curfews—upon American citizens, in an American city.

At once reeling and resilient, the recovering society exhibited the qualities of a bustling frontier village crossed with a dysfunctional Third World city. While mold and a silence enveloped vast acreages of flooded ruins, higher areas buzzed with the sounds of saws and hammers. Locals reclaimed the once touristy French Quarter as a place of importance, where one could conduct business, bank, worship, convene, eat, and shop for groceries, recreate, and reside (albeit temporarily). Magazine Street became the “village’s” bustling new main street, with 16 percent of its businesses reopening within six weeks of the storm and over 50 percent by Christmas.⁷⁰ “Welcome Home” banners draped from eager storefronts, proclamations of perseverance shouted from billboards; scornful graffiti rebuked FEMA and the Army Corps of Engineers; and placards offering house-gutting, shoring, roof repair, and legal services (“Saw Levee Breach? Call Us Now!”) cluttered intersections to such a degree that local governments banned them for public safety. Patrons of local restaurants ordered staples off paper menus for cash only, waited patiently on short stools, and took it in stride when blackouts interrupted their dinners. Housing, and the labor, were scarce, driving up both rent and wages; immigrant laborers had no problem finding work but were forced to sleep in cars and tents for lack of affordable apartments. Flakey utilities, closed service stations, limited hours at scarce grocery stores, picked-over shelves, and other instabilities turned mundane errands into achievements and gave American citizens a sampling of how much of

humanity lives.

Those fortunate enough to return home seemed to realize the history they were both living and making, and moved about with a sense of purpose. Human interaction was electric: emotional reunions erupted in crowded coffee shops, which, along with restaurants and churches, served as important nodes of social and civic engagement. Conversations began with “*So how’d you make out?!*,” continued with war stories and reconstruction visions, and ended with “*Stay safe!*” Strangers sitting at adjacent tables joined in conversations and debates, and left with exchanged phone numbers and e-mail addresses. Patrons pecked away at wireless-enabled laptops—the uncung technological heroes of post-Katrina New Orleans—to reestablish social, educational, and professional networks or fight with insurance adjusters and FEMA. Office-less office workers convened in public spaces to strategize for their organizations’ survival, but adjourned promptly at 4 p.m. to shop for food before unstaffed grocery stores closed for the evening. Every story of determination, courage, and perseverance was matched by one of financial troubles, FEMA red tape, insurance grievances, excessive drinking, or stressed marital relations. Everyone, it seemed, dropped Dickens lines: *a tale of two cities... best of times, worst of times...*

Best of times? In some strange ways, it was. Citizens were intensely engaged with each other toward overcoming tragedy and solving mutual problems they worried about their neighbors and established new bonds with former strangers. Of course, those who lived in that *other city*, and who were suffering the *worst of times*, were largely absent from the inspiring postdiluvian tableau. Their stories played out beyond Orleans parish limits. What passed for good news in their frozen-in-time neighborhoods were the moldy piles of personal possessions heaped unceremoniously in front of gutted houses—a sign, at the very least, of life.

Each dawn during the autumn of 2005 presented exasperating, unpredictable, high-stakes adventures through uncharted waters, and everyone knew only one source could reliably guide the way: a fresh copy of *The Times-Picayune*. The venerable daily, long a target of local adoration as well as disdain, was now everyone’s darling. It heroically covered the apocalypse first-hand (“*We Publish Come Hell AND High Water*”) and reported on the recovery with journalistic objectivity blended with proactive investigation and steadfast demands for accountability. Citizens purchased the “T-P” at vending machines (home delivery was a rare luxury) or navigated the newspaper’s Byzantine web site, and devoured the latest news like the figure in Richard Woodville’s *War News from Mexico*.

The steady stream of new debates and dilemmas seemed to make everyone in New Orleans a policy-wonk, a disaster expert, a geographer, and (above all), an urban planner. Most controversial of all was the so-called “footprint” question: Should the entire city come back? Or should the city redraw its urban footprint, permitting rebuilding on higher ground while allowing low-lying subdivisions to return to nature? If so, what methodology should be used to determine where that “build/no-build line” gets drawn?



A Proposed Rebuilding Methodology

Balancing urban values when you can't have it all

Note: An edited version of the following proposal appeared as a guest editorial in the Times-Picayune on November 13, 2005, during a time of passionate public debate about the reconfiguration of the post-diluvian city. I previously presented it to the Bring New Orleans Back Commission, the City Planning Commission, and other forums; in 2006, it was published in the Journal for Architectural Education. Although it was never adopted (see next reading, The Great Footprint Debate), the proposed methodology—described as the first publicly proposed plan for determining the safest areas to rebuild¹⁰¹¹—helped frame the public discourse on what was at stake. It appears here in its original form.

The number of commissions, panels, symposia, and workshops convened recently to discuss the rebuilding of New Orleans is exceeded only by the number of proposals offered on how to do it. Should certain neighborhoods be demolished? Should they be rebuilt? If so, how? What if residents want to return, but engineers recommend against it? What if the housing stock is severely damaged, but historically and architecturally significant?

Every New Orleanian, from layperson to professional, has ideas on how to resolve these colossal problems. Most are well worth discussing, and many are downright compelling. What has been lacking is a sound methodology through which these ideas may be passed, to ensure in a *fair, consistent, and repeatable* manner, that all stakeholders and values weigh in toward making the best decisions, and applying them to the right places.

As a geographer and long-time New Orleans historical researcher, I offer the following straightforward rebuilding methodology. It does not address important engineering issues such as levee reinforcement, sea wall installation, canal closures, or coastal restoration, but rather the mending of the city's urban fabric. The methodology is based on one overriding principle—that *the best decisions are based on sound, scientific data rather than emotions or politics*—and tries to balance four fundamental (and sometimes conflicting) values:

1. That all New Orleanians have the right to return to their city, and if at all possible, to their neighborhoods and homes;
2. That homes be structurally safe to re-inhabit;
3. That the historical and architectural character of the neighborhoods be maintained to the utmost degree possible; and
4. That the neighborhoods be environmentally and geographically as safe as possible from future floods, contaminants, and other threats.

Here it is:

Step 1. Determine Who Wants to Return, and to Where—Conduct a scientific survey of residents (both returned and evacuated) regarding their intent to return and remain in New Orleans. Record the respondents' pre-Katrina addresses, and map out the results by census tract. Code to red those with return rates of under 25 percent; code to yellow those with return rates of 25-50 percent, and code to green those with return rates of 50-100 percent.

Step 2. Determine Structural Safety—Conduct an engineering survey of all residential structures regarding their physical damage and salvageability, and map the results by census tract. Code to red those with over 75-percent condemnation rates, yellow those with 50- to 74-percent condemnation, and green those with under 50 percent condemnation.

Step 3. Determine Historical/Architectural Significance—Conduct a historical/architectural survey of all structures, and map the results by census tract. Code to red those deemed to be historically/architecturally less significant, code to yellow those deemed fairly significant, and code to green those deemed highly significant.

Step 4. Determine Environmental Safety—Conduct a survey of elevation, vulnerability to flooding, subsidence, and environmental/human health conditions. Code to red those determined to be well below sea level and highly vulnerable or contaminated; yellow for those near sea level and somewhat vulnerable; and green those above sea level and relatively safe.

Step 5. Tabulate Data—Take the results from all four surveys and map out the patterns. Some areas will be coded all or mostly green; some will be all or mostly red; and some will be mixed. Below are a set of potential recommendations for the most likely combinations:

For those tracts coded "Green" in all four surveys:

- These are safe, historic areas to which residents want to return. They will rebound on their own. The city should re-zone certain blocks to allow for intensified residential development and accommodate a higher population density.

"New Urbanism," using traditional building styles and typologies (and recycled historical building materials), plus a healthy mix of modernism and new ideas, should be encouraged to fill open lots and mend the historical urban fabric.

- Historical structures from devastated areas should be moved here, whenever possible.
- Residents should be involved in all zoning and design decisions.

For those tracts coded "Red" in all four surveys:

- These are dangerous, heavily damaged, non-historic areas to which residents mostly do not want to return. Sad as it is for those few who do, it is not worth

the tremendous societal effort to rebuild in these unsafe areas. They should be bought out, cleared, and returned to forest, to serve as (1) flood-retention areas, (2) green space and wildlife habitat, and (3) Katrina memorial parks. Some may be used for appropriate commerce or industry, possibly as tax-free zones.

- Former residents of these areas who desire to return should have “first crack” at renting or buying parcels in nearby areas.
- Selected houses that survived in reasonable condition should be moved to other areas, to preserve their place in the architectural record.

For those tracts coded “Yellow” or “Green” in the Resident-Return Survey but “Red” in all other surveys:

- The neighborhood should be cleared and then rebuilt, simply because a significant number of residents demand it.
- Experts and community representatives should meet and agree on new construction styles, designs, and typologies.
- All new structures should be raised on piers and reinforced for maximum flood and wind protection. Those few salvageable homes should be saved, to preserve architecture representation.
- Old street networks and names should be maintained in their entirety, but the lowest blocks should be reserved for green space and parks.

For those tracts coded “Yellow” or “Green” in an Architectural/Historical Survey but “Red” in all other surveys:

- The neighborhood should be saved at all costs, regardless of other factors. Historically and architecturally significant neighborhoods are absolutely critical to maintaining the city’s character and tourism economy. Tax credits and other mechanisms should be established to encourage restoration.

Such a methodology offers numerous benefits. It respects and balances four fundamental values. It is easily communicable to the public. It provides a citable, accountable basis for difficult and controversial decisions. It relies on science and engineering, but not at the expense of humanistic, historical, and aesthetic values. The methodology’s details, percentages, and proposed recommendations are all subject to vigorous debate. Perhaps the survey data should be aggregated by blocks, or by the seventy-odd official neighborhoods boundaries, rather than by census tracts. Certain elements are admittedly subjective, time-consuming, costly, susceptible to abuse, and overly simplistic. I offer this “road map” not as *the* methodology, but merely in the hope of convincing the powers-that-be of the need for *a* methodology.



The Great Footprint Debate

The fight for the fate of the flooded region, 2005-2006

High-stakes concerns about flood protection, soil contamination, health, education, residents' right to return, economic recovery, coastal restoration, and other issues drove energized public discourse in the months following Hurricane Katrina.⁶⁷² In preparation, Mayor C. Ray Nagin formed, on September 30, 2005, the Bring New Orleans Back (BNOB) Commission, inside what the *New York Times* described as “the heavily fortified Sheraton Hotel on Canal Street, a building surrounded almost constantly by cleanup crews as well as hefty private security guards armed with weapons.”⁶⁷³ That hotel, as well as the First Baptist Church in one of the few unflooded sections of Lakeview, would host scores of public meetings attended by thousands of concerned citizens in the upcoming months.

Committees and sub-committees tackled a wide range of topics, but one topped the list and inspired the most passionate debate: Should the city's urban footprint, particularly its twentieth-century sprawl into low-lying areas adjacent to surge-prone water bodies, be “shrunk” to keep people out of harm's way? Or should the entire footprint “come back” in the understanding that federal levee failure, not nature, ultimately caused the damage? That fundamental dilemma fell under the domain of the BNOB's Urban Planning Committee.

As a geographer and long-time New Orleans researcher, I pondered the footprint question and sketched out a methodology to try to answer it (see previous reading). The proposal involved measuring four important variables—residents' desire to return, structural safety, historical and architectural significance, and environmental and geographical safety—and mapping out the results, to inform decisions on neighborhoods' futures. Encouraged by a stranger in a coffee-shop conversation—post-Katrina civic engagement in its rawest form—I contributed the proposal to the email circuit. It made its way to the chairman of the BNOB Commission, which yielded an invitation to present it to the Urban Planning Committee and the City Planning Commission, and eventually, through a guest editorial in the *Times-Picayune*. The essay appeared precisely as representatives from the Urban Land Institute (ULI) arrived in town to advise the BNOB Commission on, among other things, the footprint issue.

I later learned that ULI members “hotly debated”⁶⁷⁴ the proposed methodology, but decided not to endorse it because of the difficulty of measuring the first variable (desire to return). The proposal did, they told me, help frame the footprint question as a balancing act between undeniable scientific realities on one hand, and cherished cultural and humanistic values on the other. In other words, a classic dilemma.

Subsequent public meetings with capacity crowds and long lines of testifiers indicated that the balancing act weighed heavily on everyone's mind. “In a city that has

seen a resurgence of civic activism since” Katrina, wrote the *Times-Picayune*,

more than 200 people attended the [ULI] meeting to voice their opinions about what shape New Orleans should take in the future. The resounding refrain: Learn from our history.

Many residents told the 37-member Urban Land Institute panel to use the original footprint of the city—along the Mississippi river and its high ridges—as a model for land use.⁶⁷⁵

Those 200 people, however, mostly resided on those same “high ridges” they recommended for prioritization. Residents of low-lying areas, which mostly flooded, numbered few at the meeting, but nevertheless managed to engage through their political representatives, the internet, and commuting. Their stance (shared by many in higher areas) was firm: the entire city will return, the footprint will remain precisely as before the storm.

When the ULI finally issued its recommendations to the BNOB Commission—via a long PowerPoint presentation that was at once wordy and carefully worded—it gently advocated footprint shrinkage through the allocation of recovery resources first to the highest and least-damaged areas, and only later to the depopulated flooded region. The news hit the front page of the *Times-Picayune* in the form of an intentionally confusing map of three purple-shaded “investment zones,” in which “Investment Zone A,” despite its optimistic label, was recommended for at best, delayed rebuilding, and possibly for conversion to green space.⁶⁷⁶

The wordsmithing and mapsmithing fooled no one. “Don’t Write Us Off, Residents Warn; Urban Land Institute Report Takes a Beating,” scowled the headlines after the recommendation is sunk in. The article continues:

Elected officials and residents from New Orleans’ hardest-hit areas on Monday responded with skepticism and, at times, outright hostility to a controversial proposal to eliminate their neighborhoods from post-Katrina rebuilding efforts.

Even Mayor Ray Nagin said he is reserving judgment on [whether to] abandon [some] low-lying ground.... During the meeting, Nagin reiterated his intention to ultimately “rebuild all of New Orleans.”

[City Council member Cynthia] Willard Lewis spoke with particular disdain for ULI’s “color-coded maps” which divide the city into three “investment zones:” areas to be rehabilitated immediately, areas to be developed partially, or areas to be reevaluated as potential sites for mass layoffs and future green space. Those maps, she said, are “causing people to lose hope,” and others to stay away.⁶⁷⁷

Indicating the reductionist power of maps—a recurring theme in the footprint debate—another local politician, “noting that she was wearing a pink blouse... said sarcastically that she should have worn purple, the map color used by ULI for sections of the city that suffered the worst flood damage.”⁶⁷⁸

Mayor Nagin found himself in a dilemma of his own, since the ULI offered its advice specifically for the benefit of his BNOB Commission. He assured agitated citizens that “once the recommendations are finalized ... it will be up to the commission members and the community to ‘evaluate it, kick the tires, say we like this and we don’t like this’...”

But that is what they did. The ULI report ratcheted up civic engagement in postdileuvian New Orleans. Indeed, it, as well as similar consultation from the Philadelphia-based design firm Wallace, Roberts & Todd (WRT), became gist for further rounds of highly attended and increasingly polemical BNOB meetings during December 2005 and January 2006.

Finally, on January 11, 2006, the Urban Planning Committee of the BNOB Commission unveiled its final recommendations. Like the ULI, the group (sometimes referred to as the Land Use Committee) communicated its findings again through a hefty PowerPoint presentation, rather than traditional literary methods. Entitled *Action Plan for New Orleans: The New American City*, the sixty-nine page presentation’s dizzying array of proclamations, factoids, bulletized lists, graphics and quantities seemed eager to placate all sides while sacrificing lucidity in the process. Audience members hungry for a clear answer to the footprint question grew agitated at the recommendation of a moratorium on building permits for certain heavily damaged neighborhoods until May 2006. During those four months, residents themselves would have to demonstrate their neighborhood’s “viability”—a requirement that cleverly placed the burden of proving neighborhood wherewithal on the backs of the most vocal full-footprint advocates. Further insight on the BNOB’s position on the footprint question came in the form of a map, half way through the presentation, entitled “Paris and Open Space Plan.” It depicted Orleans Parish with the usual cartographic overlays of street networks and water bodies. At the bottom of its legend was a dashed green line symbol indicating “Areas for Future Parkland,” which corresponded to a series of six large perforated circles sprinkled throughout certain low-lying residential neighborhoods.⁶⁸⁰

The next morning, the *Times-Picayune* featured the map on its front page. The newspaper’s adaptation transformed the dashed circles, which cartographically suggested a certain level of conjecture and abstraction, into semi-opaque green dots labeled as “approximate areas expected to become parks and greenspace.” The green dots spanned so much terrain with such apparent cartographic confidence that many readers interpreted them to represent discrete polygons, rather than dimensionless abstractions merely suggesting the possibility of some new neighborhood parks. *If my house lies within those “green dots,” many readers presumed, it will be “green spaced” into wetlands.*

Just as citizens in November seized upon the ULI’s “purple investment zone” map as the parapraxis of that organization’s underlying footprint philosophy, citizens now clutched what quickly became known as the “Green Dot Map” as the Freudian slip of the BNOB Commission. The response was livid. Said one man to committee chairman Joseph Canizaro, whose day job as a major real estate investor was not viewed as coincidental by skeptical citizens, “Mr. Joe Canizaro, I don’t know you, but I hate you. You’ve been in the background trying to scheme to get our land[!].”⁶⁸¹

"4 MONTHS TO DECIDE," blared the *Times-Picayune* headline; "Nagin panel says hardest hit areas must prove viability; City's footprint may shrink."⁶⁸² The infamous "Green Dot Map" entered the local lexicon, even as it motivated residents of heavily damaged neighborhoods to commence demonstrating "viability" and save their neighborhoods. *Open space*, a benign notion elsewhere in urban America, became a dirty word in postdileuvian New Orleans.

What ensued, starting in late January 2006, was one of the most remarkable episodes of civic engagement in recent American history. Scores of grass-roots neighborhood associations and civic groups formed organically, sans professional expertise and usually with zero funding. Web sites went online; emails circulated; impromptu venues were arranged; signs popped up on once-flooded lawns (*Broadmoor Lives! I Am Coming Home! I Will Rebuild! I Am New Orleans!*). One association in the heavily flooded Lake Bienville neighborhood, lacking a decent venue but not an ounce of determination, demurely asked attendees to "bring their own chairs"⁶⁸³ to the group's next meeting. Despite their tenuous life circumstances and other responsibilities, New Orleansians by the thousands joined forces with their neighbors and volunteered to take stock of their communities; document local history, assets, resources, and problems; and plan solutions for the future.

So many grass-roots neighborhood planning groups formed that umbrella associations arose to coordinate them. One, the Neighborhood Partnership Network, listed at least seventy fully active neighborhood organizations within Orleans Parish alone, while many more in poorer areas strove to coalesce.⁶⁸⁴ Their names formed a veritable *where's where* of famous New Orleans places—*French Quarter Citizens Inc.*, *Audubon Riverside Neighborhood Association*, *Bouigny Improvement Association*, *Faubourg St. Roch Improvement Association*, *Algiers Point Association*—but also included less-famous modern subdivisions more likely to occupy lower ground and suffer higher flood risk—*Lake Bienville Homeowners Association Inc.*, *Venetian Isles Civic and Improvement Association*, *Lake Terrace Neighborhood Property Owners Association*. In some cases, such as the Stellar Broadmoor Improvement Association, professional help arrived from outside (Harvard University) and funding aided the planning process. Many associations eventually produced fine neighborhood plans, and, perhaps more importantly, empowered people to meet their neighbors and learn about their emotions, past, present, and future, to degrees unimaginable a year earlier.

One crude way to measure this civic engagement is to compute the number of times the terms "civic association" or "neighborhood association" appear in *Times-Picayune* articles or announcements, as queried through the Lexis-Nexis news database. Before the storm, when roughly 450,000–455,000 people lived in the city, those key words appeared at a steady pace of forty to forty-five times per month. That rate dropped to zero during the "Lost September" of 2005, but returned to normal rates by early 2006 despite the dramatic drop in population. After January 2006—when the Green Dot Map inadvertently kick-started the grass-roots planning effort—the terms appeared over 100 times per month before stabilizing by summertime to around seventy per month. When normalized for population differences, neighborhood associations were literally "making news" in post-Katrina New Orleans at least four times, and

up to seven times, the rate from prediluvian times—*despite* the new hardships of life in the struggling city.⁶⁸⁵ A statistical sampling of 362 “Meetings” announcements posted in the *Times-Picayune* between November 2005 and April 2007 (from a total population of over a thousand) revealed that fully 48 percent represented neighborhood association meetings, and another 19 percent came from civic groups unaffiliated with specific neighborhoods.⁶⁸⁶

In an editorial on “the Curse of the Green Dot,” *Times-Picayune* columnist Stephanie Grant reflected on the episode. “You know the Green Dot,” she reminded her readers.

In a move that will go down as one of the great miscalculations of post-Katrina planning [the ULI and BNOB Commission] designated the off-limit areas with green dots.

Around town, people picked up the paper that morning and saw, for the first time, that their neighborhoods could be slated for demolition. To say they didn't take the news well is an understatement.

‘People felt threatened when they saw the green dot,’ LaToya Cantrell, president of the Broadmoor Improvement Association, would say months later. ‘It all fell broke loose’....

City Councilwoman Cynthia Willard-Lewis, who represents the hard-hit Lower 9th Ward and Eastern New Orleans, said the green dots made many of her African-American constituents flip back to the civil rights era, thinking they would need to fight for equal access all over again. *The maps*, she said soon after they were unveiled, ‘are causing people to lose hope’.⁶⁸⁷

Ironically, the very recommendations that motivated grass-roots associations to form—the Green Dot Map, the permit moratorium, and the threat of “green spacing” if neighborhood viability were not demonstrated by May 2006—ended up torpedoing the very commission that issued them. Mayor Nagin, embroiled in a nationally watched re-election campaign, rejected the politically volatile advice of his own BNOB Commission. Fatally undermined despite its worthwhile contributions beyond the footprint issue, the Commission disbanded unceremoniously. Footprint shrinkage became a radioactive topic among the mayoral candidates; anyone who supported the concept risked losing the votes of tens of thousands of flood victims. Engaged citizens and their representatives had, for better or worse, yelled the footprint debate off the table.

After Mayor Nagin cinched re-election in the mayoral campaign, the great footprint debate largely disappeared from public discourse. His *laissez-faire* repopulation and rebuilding stance, which was more of a default position than an articulated strategy, answered the footprint question by saying, in essence, *let people return and rebuild as they can and as they wish, and we'll act on the patterns as they fall in place*. Federal complicity bore responsibility as well: FEMA's updated Advisory Base Flood Elevation maps—which drive flood insurance availability and rates—turned out to be largely the

same as the old 1984 maps thus seemingly communicating federal endorsement (as well as actuarial encouragement) to homeowners deliberating on whether to rebuild in low-lying areas. Road Home monies imparted no special incentive to do otherwise, and no federal compensation fund awaited those homeowners and businesses that would have been affected by a hypothetical footprint shrinkage decision.

The entire city *could* come back, but what that city would look and function like still remained an open question. Additional planning efforts, by the City Council-sponsored Miami-based Lambert/Danzev consultants and by the foundation-supported Unified New Orleans Plan (UNOP), provoked more civic engagement from weary New Orleanians during late 2006. UNOP's *Citywide Strategic Recovery and Rebuilding Plan* plus numerous district plans hit the streets in draft form in early 2007, about the same time that Mayor Nagin appointed renowned disaster-recovery expert Dr. Edward Blakely as chief of the city's Office of Recovery Management. In March 2007, "Recovery Czar" Blakely unveiled yet another plan—of seventeen "re-build," "re-develop," and "re-new" nodes throughout the city, marking spots for intensive infrastructure investment. Strikingly more modest and focused than the grandiose and sometimes radical visions of earlier plans, Blakely's plan aimed

to encourage commercial investment—and with it stabilize neighborhoods—rather than defining areas that are off-limits to rebuilding. One such previous plan, advanced in early 2006 by Mayor Ray Nagin's Bring New Orleans Back Commission and backed by the widely respected Urban Land Institute, drew howls from residents who found their neighborhoods represented on maps by green dots that denoted redevelopment as perpetual green space.⁶⁸

Once again, citizens convened to discuss and debate this latest proposal and how it may or may not relate to the earlier plans of UNOP, Lambert/Danzev, the numerous neighborhood associations, the BNOB Commission, WRT, and the ULI. Some wags described the parallel, overlapping, and sometimes competing planning efforts as "plandemonium." Citizens grew cynical, not because of lack of commitment, but because too many soft promises and uncoordinated efforts chased too little of the hard resources and inspirational leadership needed for genuine problem-solving.

Despite their noble intentions and the heroic civic engagement demonstrated by the thoughtful and intelligent New Orleanians during a very busy and stressful era, the myriad public planning efforts of postdiluvian New Orleans face daunting odds of ever fully coming to fruition.⁶⁹ History indicates that, in the wake of urban disasters, the most ambitious and revolutionary rebuilding plans usually suffer the greatest likelihood of failure. Footprint negotiation represented the most radical plan of all, and despite its compelling logic, suffered resounding rejection. The reason why can be found throughout this book, specifically in two words in the subtitle: *historical geography*.

The intricate layers of structures, infrastructures, legalities, economics, and social networks that form when humans cluster together for long periods all develop a great momentum which predisposes them to persist. Wars, changes of government,

even revolutionary regime changes usually fail in erasing the importance of “past place” in the geography of the present and future. This urban momentum from the past explains why we have modern streets in uptown New Orleans that still limn the geometry of 300-year-old French surveying systems. It explains why we see certain ancient architectural styles in certain places, why certain industries cluster in certain locales, and why certain social groups reside in certain areas. It also explains why Louisiana has a mixed legal jurisdiction entailing elements of Napoleonic law, despite over two centuries of American domination. It is axiomatic: *the past matters*. Patterns and precedents established in historical times become inscribed into the city and its society, and help create wealth—sometimes financial, sometimes humanistic—which people are inclined to maintain and protect. Thus they influence the present and future.

Despite its devastation, Hurricane Katrina's flood did not, by any means, “wipe the slate clean.” The antecedent urban layers in the flooded zone (including land title, property value, commercial investment, social networks, and personal attachment) were in fact inscribed deeply and survived easily. In the absence of generous and immediate compensation for the loss of all those prior investments, many flooded homeowners—who understandably worried about *tomorrow*, not the distant and theoretical future—naturally gravitated to the default option of simply rebuilding in place. Local politicians, unable to guarantee an alternative and fearful of retribution if the polls if they proposed one, heard the keep-the-footprint consensus loud and clear and acted accordingly. Anti-shrinkage advocates cinched their victory by pointing, reminding critics that federal levee failure, not Hurricane Katrina *per se*, caused (or more accurately, failed to prevent) the flooding. What they ignored was the inconvenient geological truth: beyond, and beneath, those levee walls.

In most cases, momentum from the past is good for landscapes and cityscapes. It creates value, generates wealth, and makes places distinctive and interesting: witness New Orleans' colonial street names, pedestrian-scale neighborhoods, and vast inventory of historical structures. But occasionally that momentum leads a community down a troubled path—in this case toward geological and environmental unsustainability.

The footprint controversy represented a genuine dilemma. Dilemmas demand decisions—difficult choices that yield unpleasant consequences—else they persist, and usually worsen. The Great Footprint Debate concluded when officials and society at large decided not to make the difficult decision of urban shrinkage. As often happens, the aftermath of this catastrophe may become the prelude to the next.



The Build/No-Build Line

Mapping out the philosophies on the future land use of New Orleans

Various philosophies have emerged on the rebuilding of New Orleans, each with its own logic, passion, experts, and dogma.⁶⁸ But all can be boiled down to a simple line on a map, separating areas recommended for rebuilding from those deemed best returned to nature. Where people locate their build/no-build line says as much about them—and how they view and weigh science, economic, social, and humanistic values—as it says about the geographical future of New Orleans.

One philosophy recommends the total abandonment of the metropolis. Its advocates essentially draw the build/no-build line at the metropolis' upper boundary, so nowhere between rural St. Charles Parish and urban and Jefferson Parish, or above Lake Pontchartrain's northern shore. St. Louis University geologist Timothy M. Kusky first voiced the "abandonist" philosophy in a *Boston Globe* editorial entitled "Time to Move to Higher Ground," which later earned him a national audience on *CBS 60 Minutes*. He readily acknowledged:

New Orleans is one of America's great historic cities, and our *emotional response* to the disaster is to rebuild it grander and greater than before. However this may not be the *most rational or scientifically sound* response and could lead to *even greater human catastrophe and financial loss* in the future.⁶⁹

Abandonists like Kusky tend to be pragmatic and fiscally conservative; for them it is a rational question of hard science, hard dollars, and body counts. In making their case, they cite only the gloomiest scientific data on subsidence, coastal erosion, and sea-level rise, and dismiss humanistic or cultural arguments as "emotional" or "nostalgic." Abandonists almost always have nothing to lose personally if the city does disappear, and feel no obligation to propose financial compensation plans for those who do. They are loathed in New Orleans, but occupy a seat at the table in the national discourse.

At the opposite end are those who advocate maintaining the urban footprint at all costs. Unlike abandonists, "maintainers" see this as primarily a humanist and cultural question, rather than a scientific or engineering one. To be against maintaining all neighborhoods is to be against people and against culture—worse yet, against *certain* peoples and *certain* cultures.

Maintainers tend to be passionate, oftentimes angry, and for good reason: many are flood victims and have everything to lose if the build/no-build line crosses their homes. If a levee can be built well enough to protect *them*, they reason, why not extend it around *us*? Among the most outspoken maintainers are social activists who interpret any postdisaster adjustment to the urban perimeter as a conspiracy of "politi-

cally conservative, economically neoliberal power elites” who “are doing everything in their power to prevent [working-class African-Americans] from returning.”⁶⁹² Ignoring scientific data and fiscal constraints, maintainers push the build/no-build line beyond the rural fringes of St. Bernard Parish, even all the way to the Gulf of Mexico.

In between fall the “concessionists,” usually aficionados of the city, particularly its historical heart, and other residents of its unincorporated sections. Concessionists struggle to balance enabling scientific data with treasured social and cultural resources. Their answer: concede certain low-lying modern subdivisions to nature—areas which, incidentally, they never found structurally appealing in the first place—and increase population density and flood protection in the higher, historically significant areas. Concessionists argue that, in the long run, this would reduce costs, minimize grief, protect the environment, and save lives. Concessionists sometimes failed to recognize, however, that footprint shrinkage itself costs money, in the form of fair and immediate compensation to homeowners.

Sensitive to accusations of elitism, concessionists soften their message with careful wordmithing and confusing maps (see *The Great Footprint Debate*). They place their build/no-build line somewhere between those of the abandonists and the maintainers—sometimes near the Industrial Canal, sometimes between the Metairie/Gentilly Ridge and the lakefront, usually to the exclusion of the distant, harmless, low-lying subdivisions of New Orleans East. Concessionists enjoy widespread support among many educated professionals who live on high ground, but encounter fierce resistance among maintainers, who often accuse them being, at best, unrealistic utopian dreamers, and at worst, elitist, classist, racist land-grabbers.

Reports that rural, isolated lower Plaquemines Parish—home to only 14,000 people, or 2 percent of the region’s population—may not receive full funding for levee maintenance seems to have spawned a fourth philosophy: push the build/no-build line down just past Belle Chasse, the only major community in upper Plaquemines Parish that adjoins the metropolitan area. Advocates include city dwellers, both concessionists and maintainers, who stand to benefit from the abandonment of lower Plaquemines because it would clear the path for aggressive coastal restoration while reducing the price tag on their own protection. Let the sediment-laden waters of the Mississippi River replenish those eroding marshes, they might contend; we need to restore them to buffer the metropolis against storm surges. What about the rural peoples who have called those marshes home for over a century? Well, as geologist Kusky put it in his now-famous abandonist editorial, it’s “time to move to higher ground.”⁶⁹³

Thus, social, cultural, and humanistic values, plus a sense of personal investment, tend to push the build/no-build line in a downriver direction, while scientific and financial values nudge the line upriver. What to make of all that?

First, even the most ardent lovers of New Orleans should refrain from loathing the abandonists. After all, concessionists (and those maintainers willing to sacrifice lower Plaquemines) are essentially making the same abandonment arguments that earned Kusky the enduring hatred of many New Orleanians. They’re just applying them below different lines on the map.

Second, we should probably only pencil-in whatever build/no-build lines we

draw, because we may well wish to change them if the going gets rough. Others have. Illinois Republican Rep. J. Dennis Hastert was among the first to hint at abandonment when he said rebuilding New Orleans “doesn’t make sense to me. And it’s a question that certainly we should ask.” Shaken by angry responses, he later clarified his statement: “I am not advocating that the city be abandoned or relocated....”⁶⁹⁴ Wallace, Robert & Todd, a design firm hired to advise the BNOB Commission, at first professed a bold maintainer philosophy (“If you plan on shrinkage, shrinkage is what you’ll get”⁶⁹⁵) but ended up recommending concessions in their final report to the Commission. Even Kushly softened his abandonmentist advice and suggested the possibility of “newer, higher, stronger seawalls” for “the business and historic parts of the city.”⁶⁹⁶

I, too, as a geographer with both physical and cultural interests, have grappled with my concessionist recommendations when confronted by the tragic personal stories of individuals who desperately want to maintain the world they once knew and loved. Should another hurricane of the magnitude of Katrina strike New Orleans, we may see build/no-build lines erased and redrawn *en masse*: maintainers may become concessionists, concessionists may be willing to concede more, and abandonmentists will increase their ranks.

Finally, beware of those who claim to speak solely “for science,” or “for the people.” This is a complicated interdisciplinary dilemma. The social scientist needs to be at the table as much as the physical scientist; the humanist deserves a voice as much as the economist; the poor owner of a shotgun house should be heard as much as the rich owner of a mansion. We should acknowledge that a tangle of personal, cultural, financial, nostalgic, emotional, practical, and scientific factors underlie which philosophy—abandon, maintain, or concede—we uphold for the future of New Orleans, and that *this is OK; this is acceptable*.



Postscript: Who prevailed?

Mayor Nagin, supported by most flooded homeowners and a vociferous cadre of local officials, opted for a politically safe *laissez-faire* repopulation and rebuilding policy. Abetting their victory, more through passivity than active support, was the federal government: FEMA’s revised Advisory Base Flood Elevation maps, released in 2006, continued to make flood insurance available to heavily flooded areas, thus encouraging their rebuilding. And no federal buy-out plan promised compensation to homeowners and business owners who would be forced off their land in a concessionist (eminent domain) mandate coming from city, state, or federal levels. No sane person “concedes” his or her major life investment without fair compensation.

The apparent outcome: *Let people return and rebuild as they can and as they wish, and we’ll act on the patterns as they fall in place*. The maintainers prevailed in drawing the build/no-build line along the existing, pre-Katrina urban edge (though the possibility of a lower-Plaquemines concession remains). Whether that line gets erased and redrawn again—by concessionists or by abandonmentists—will be determined by the

insurance industry, by mortgage companies, by property values, by federal intervention, by disappointed residents forced to re-address their initial post-Katrina rebuilding stance, and ultimately, by nature.



Analyzing New Orleans' New Human Geography

Two years later, the patterns begin to fall in place

Note: An edited version of the following essay appeared as a guest editorial in the Times-Picayune on the second anniversary of Hurricane Katrina. Presented here in its original form, it offers a perspective on New Orleans' post-flooding repopulation patterns as of August 29, 2007.

In autumn 2005, citizens of New Orleans engaged in what historians might someday call “the Great Footprint Debate.” Should the city shrink its urban footprint and rebuild on higher ground? Or should the entire city come back? The Urban Land Institute proposed its purple “investment zone” map; the Bring New Orleans Back Commission suggested its “green dot map;” I myself proposed a methodology on this editorial page.

By spring 2006, the matter was settled by default more so than by decisiveness: the entire urban footprint would be allowed to rebuild. With new population data recently released by CCR & Associates, Katrina's second anniversary is a good time to assess how New Orleanians are reinhabiting that urban footprint.

Mapping the “population centroid”—the theoretical center of balance among the distribution of households—is one way to do so. It's a little tricky to compute due to the coarse nature of the data, but there is no doubt that East Bank Orleans is currently reside slightly more westward and closer to the river than before Katrina.

The 2000 East Bank population centroid was located in the central Seventh Ward. That is, residents were distributed evenly lakeside, riverside, west, and east of that locale. By August 2007, the centroid moved a mile to the southwest to the central Sixth Ward. The westward movement mostly reflects the slower return rates east of the Industrial Canal, while the southward movement signifies the much higher return rates of the unflooded “sliver by the river.”

Residents are not flocking to higher ground in massive numbers. However, a higher percentage of New Orleanians are now living above sea level than in the past half-century. In 1910, over 90 percent of city residents lived above sea level. That percentage dropped to 48 percent in 1960 and 38 percent in 2000. Today, it's back up to 50 percent. That means that both New Orleans' population and its urbanized land surface now straddle the level of the sea—half above, half below.

When we divide up East Bank neighborhoods by their August 2007 return

rates, we see the following patterns:

- 22,300 people live in areas in which less than one-third of residents have returned. With a mean elevation of three feet below sea level, these areas suffered flood depths averaging over five feet and structural damages averaging 49 on a 0-to-100 scale, in which 100 means total destruction. City records show that more building permits have been issued for these areas, relative to their current population, than anywhere else, indicating that many more intend to return.
- Areas that are currently one-third to two-thirds repopulated are home to over 107,200 residents—a substantial voting block. Located slightly higher than less-repopulated areas but still below sea level, these folks suffered three feet of flooding on average, and damage assessments of about 35/100. They have requested the most building permits in absolute numbers, again implying further repopulation. Many of these areas are historically significant: nearly six square miles of National Historic Register districts occur here.
- Areas over two-thirds repopulated are home to over 83,000 people on the East Bank and more than 50,000 on the West Bank. Those on the East Bank reside at over three feet above sea level on average, suffered less than a foot of water if they flooded at all, and had damage assessments around 12/100. These areas comprise nearly eight square miles of National Historic Register districts.⁶⁹⁷

To what degree, then, is New Orleans “back?”

If we look at population, 60 to 65 percent of Orleans, 36 percent of St. Bernard, and nearly 100 percent of Jefferson and St. Tammany parishes have returned.

If we look at New Orleans’ economic indicators such as labor force, employers, and tax revenues, return rates vary around three-quarters to four-fifths.

If we look at social and public-sector indicators like childcare and school enrollment, they’re about one-quarter to two-fifths, where they should be.

Consider all these metrics together, and a case can be made that New Orleans is roughly two-thirds back. When asked a year ago, I estimated it at half.

However, the notion of New Orleans “returning” implies that we can go back in time and recover the city we once knew. We can’t. A new New Orleans will emerge, once Poarch Home monies are fully distributed, public housing issues are addressed, numerous other unknowns become known, and flood victims make their final residential decisions.

Assuming, of course, another hurricane does not strike—and force us to reopen the Great Footprint Debate.



A Curious Town It Is”

*New Orleans' complex and conflicted relationship
with the United States of America*

I began to understand the town a little... and a curious town it is.⁶⁹⁸

—Benjamin Henry Boneval Latrobe, 1719

Interpreters of New Orleans' history generally fall into two camps. Both, I've come to understand, play relevant roles in the city's future.

The “exceptionalists” see in New Orleans an enduring uniqueness, dating back to its colonial origins and very much alive today. While they allow that some distinctiveness has disappeared—the French language, for example—exceptionalists view modern New Orleans as a place with its heart still in the Franco-Caro-Caribbean world from which it spawned, resigned only reluctantly to its American fate. This group sees evidence for New Orleans' uniqueness in everything from music and food to attitudes, race relations, linguistics, architecture, and politics. Exceptionalism is practically an article of faith among most New Orleans *aficionados* and city advocates, including many lifelong local historical researchers. It forms the bedrock of local civic pride, and merely questioning it can earn responses of consternation and reproach. Exceptionalists' predisposition toward perceiving distinctiveness in all things related to New Orleans continually reinforces their stance that the city is axiomatically *sui generis*.

Nonsense, say the “assimilationists” (also known as “Americanists”). This camp argues that two centuries of American domination have enveloped New Orleans almost entirely into the national fold, leaving only vestiges of distinction in such realms as historical architecture, civic rituals such as Mardi Gras and second-line parades, and in a smattering of linguistic and culinary traits. They point out that modern-day New Orleanians in overwhelming numbers speak English, indulge in national popular culture, shop at big-box chains, and interact socially and economically with other Americans and the world on a daily basis. Assimilationists view the exceptionalists' insistence of cultural uniqueness as an appealing mantra drummed up first by “local color” writers in the late 1800s, and today by the industrial tourism machine.

Wherever the truth lies, one thing is certain: the prevailing narrative about New Orleans communicated world wide after Hurricane Katrina was that of the exceptionalists, and we should all be grateful for that. Their “uniqueness mantra” may well have saved the city: allusions to cultural distinction played critical roles in persuading the nation to invest taxpayer dollars in a place threatened with eroding coasts, sinking soils, rising seas, and increasingly intense storms. If New Orleans were perceived as interchangeable with any other American city, the pragmatic response of metropolitan abandonment (see *The Build/No-Build Line*) might have won the day.

But the task of actually saving the city puts the exceptionalists in a philosophical dilemma, because the factors that they claim rendered New Orleans distinctive and charming also seem to have made it parochial, inefficient—and dangerous. This logical disconnect appears to be lost on many people. I've listened to countless speakers and panelists at post-Katrina conferences who commence their presentations with emotional tributes to New Orleans' cultural uniqueness, heterogeneity, and quirky independence, only to conclude them with strident calls for standardization, homogenization, and efficiency. *Can we really have it both ways?* Noble efforts to adopt national "green architecture" standards, build sustainable communities, unify parochial levee boards, consolidate rival port authorities, eliminate redundant tax assessors (a system unique in the nation), merge civil and criminal courts (one of few cities with separate systems), dispense with the state's insurance regulatory panel (only one in the country), and even to ban cock-fighting (last state in the union to do so) are in any outright rejections of exceptionalism in favor of national assimilation, even though most advocates of such measures purport to embrace the former and disdain the latter.

I grappled with this dilemma, sensing that a thoughtful person simply cannot walk on this one rope in two directions. But eventually I began to appreciate that both interpretations—regardless of their historical accuracy—have played important, complementary roles in the city's recovery. The exceptionalist interpretation helped persuade the nation to invest in rebuilding New Orleans, by rightfully portraying the city as an irreplaceable treasure. The assimilationist interpretation will guide actually saving it, by rightfully addressing the problems of inefficiency, parochialism, and unsustainability which, if left unchecked, would eventually destroy it.

May all New Orleans' dilemmas end as judiciously.