When Disasters "Wipe the Slate Clean"—and When They Do Not

by Richard Campanella, *published August 7, 2015 in the New Orleans Times-Picayune*

It was a metaphor invoked repeatedly ten years ago this autumn, by well-meaning citizen-activists as well as professional planners: while the Katrina flood destroyed so much of what was good, it also "wiped the slate clean" of entrenched problems and offered a valuable opportunity to get things right. Now we could finally rebuild sustainably, diversify the economy and rectify old social wrongs.

Mostly, that did not happen. The grandest recovery plans all flopped, and the boldest visions never got past the envisioning stage. The region's pre-storm shape, form, and infrastructure largely returned, and we've generally resettled into the same geographies, albeit in varying densities.

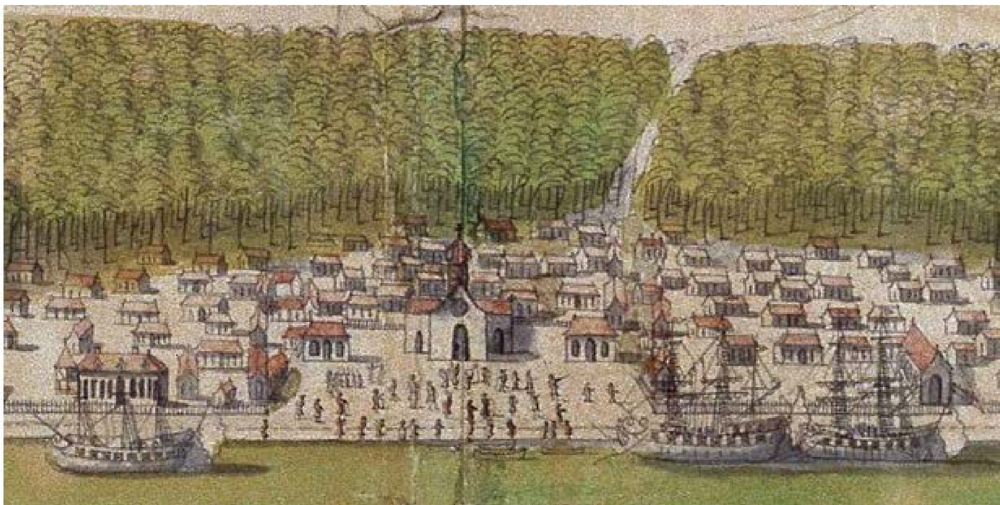
To be sure, much has changed. There are thousands of new faces amongst our smaller population; neighborhoods like Bywater and Freret Street feel markedly different; and reforms have been enacted in everything from levee standards and building codes to tax assessments and public schools.

But the larger metropolitan cityscape—the very element most damaged by the deluge—has endured, so much so that one must zoom in closely to a satellite image of the city before being able to tell if was captured in 2004 versus 2014.

To explain why no fundamental urban reconfigurations occurred, it helps to examine a historical disaster that really did precipitate a radical transformation. Comparing its circumstances to that of the Katrina aftermath sheds light on when disasters wipe the slate clean—and when they do not.

An 18th-Century Hurricane

The year was 1722, and the four-year-old city of New Orleans, in the words of one eye-witness, "made a very contemptible figure: about a hundred forty barracks and a few inconsiderable houses, scattered up and down, without any order or regularity."



An early view of New Orleans by Jean-Pierre Lassus showing the city's haphazard development.

This was not Governor Bienville's original vision; he had attempted to guide early development upon founding the city in 1718 by surveying a baseline about 700 feet from the river, between and parallel to today's Chartres and Royal streets. Running southwest-to-northeast, Bienville's line fronted a sharp river bend and faced approaching ship traffic, as if he expected a fully articulated urban grid and defensive fortification to be forthcoming. Its angle of 37 degrees from cardinal north is precisely the same orientation of today's French Quarter.

That rudimentary baseline, however, failed to prevent early urbanization from occurring in a rather desultory fashion, the result of economic and political uncertainty in France and Louisiana as well as challenging local environmental conditions.

These and other factors persuaded authorities in Paris in 1719 to designate Biloxi and not New Orleans as company headquarters and colony capital. Dutifully, chief engineer Louis-Pierre Le Blond de la Tour proceeded to design plans for the new coastal capital, and later dispatched his assistant Adrien de Pauger to draw up secondary plans for New Orleans.

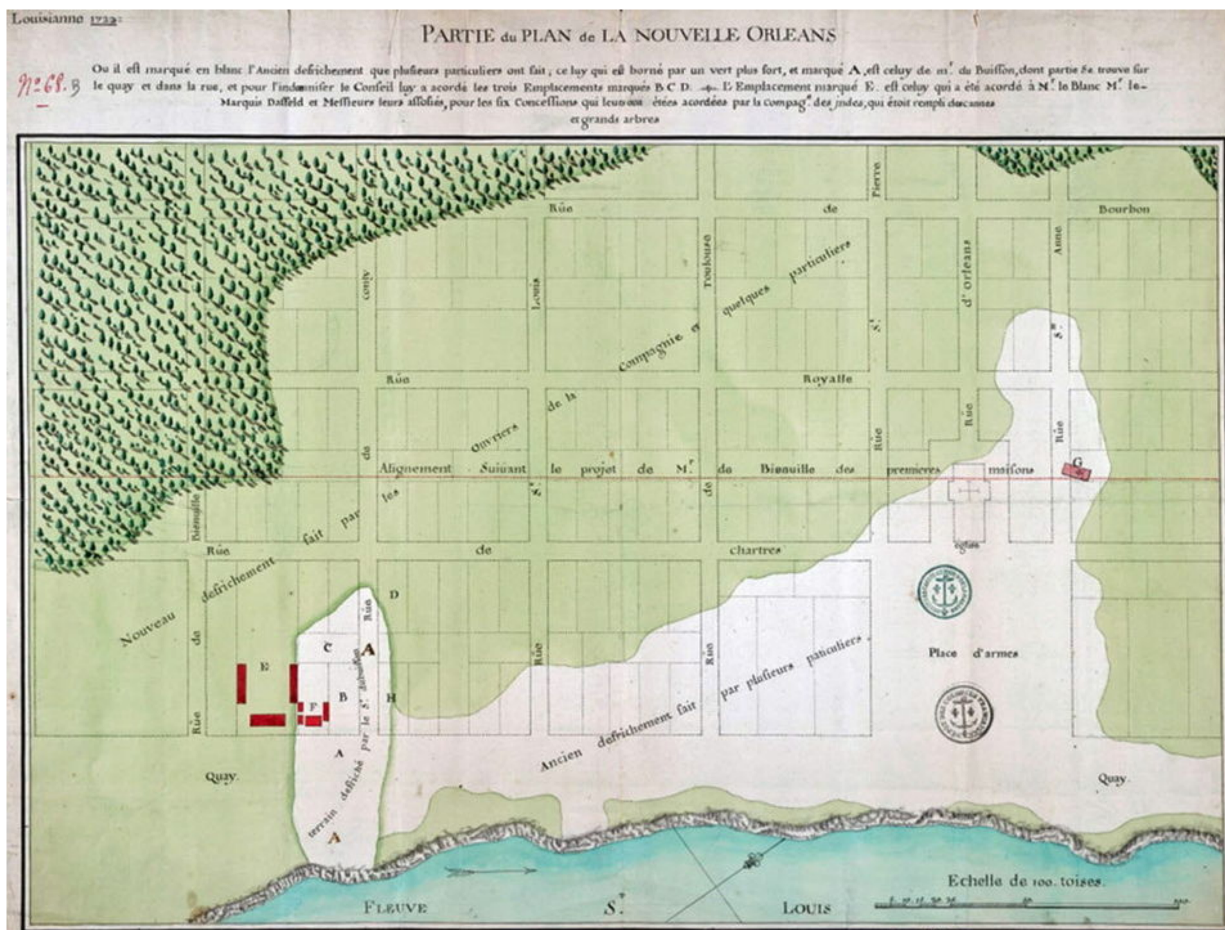
Pauger arrived at New Orleans in March 1721 and proceeded to study the terrain. He soon came to realize that Bienville's baseline, set so far back from the river, needlessly squandered valuable high ground and proposed to move it to today's Decatur Street. Inspired by Le Blond de la Tour's plan for Biloxi, Pauger next proceeded to sketch a beautiful six-by-eleven-block orthogonal grid. Its centerpiece was the place d'armes fronted by institutions of church and state, which we now know as Jackson Square.

In a 1721 letter, Pauger described "the changes I have been obliged to make because of the situation of the terrain, which being higher on the river bank, I have brought the town site...closer to it, so as to profit from the proximity of the landing place as well as to have more air from the breezes that come from it."

Assistant engineer Adrien de Pauger, arrived at New Orleans in March 1721, soon came to realize that Bienville's original baseline, set so far back from the river, needlessly squandered valuable high ground, and proposed to move it to today's Decatur Street. *Graphic by Richard Campanella.*

It was an enlightened design all around, and it gained official momentum when authorities in France changed their minds in December 1721 and shifted the capital from Biloxi to New Orleans.

Yet Pauger met with resistance from local residents who, for the prior four years, had been erecting houses willy-nilly, many of which obstructed his projected grid. He huffed at the insolence of one man who "wanted to build as he saw fit, without regularity and without plan," and nearly came to blows with an enraged housewife—and narrowly escaped a duel with her husband—when his straight streets intersected her irregular lot. Pauger went so far as to produce a map illustrating the conflicts to complain to his superiors.



This map of colonial New Orleans shows a house (center right) conflicting with Pauger's proposed street grid. Note Bienville's original baseline: thin red line at horizontal center. *Library of Congress*

Then, on the morning of September 11, 1722, nature resolved Pauger's problem.

"A great wind" swept the settlement, Pauger wrote, "followed an hour later by the most terrible tempest and hurricane that could ever be seen." "With this impetuous wind came such torrents of rain," wrote a colonist named Dumont, "that you could not step out a moment without risk of being drowned; it rooted up the largest trees, and the birds, unable to keep up, fell in the streets."

New Orleans' first hurricane destroyed one- quarter of the city's structures, plus all ships, cargo, and most infrastructure—a disaster by anyone's definition.

But it also represented a golden opportunity for Pauger. "All these buildings were old and provisionally built, and not a single one in the alignment of the new city," he wrote, "and thus would have had to be demolished without any great misfortune...except that we must act to put all the people in shelter."

Pauger got to work executing his vision. Dumont later recalled how, over the next few months, the engineers "cleared a pretty long and wide strip (now Decatur Street) along the river, to put in execution the plan, tracing on the ground the streets and quarters which were to form the new town." The original city of New Orleans—today's French Quarter—was born, and it was after 1722, according to Dumont, that "New Orleans began to assume the appearance of a city."

A Brief and Mediocre Past

What can we learn from the disasters of 1722 and 2005 and our relationship to this place we call home?

The 1722 disaster really did wipe the slate clean, figuratively speaking, because the four preceding years of place making proved too brief a period of time for residents to invest substantial economic or psychological value into this forbidding swamp. A few dozen damaged or destroyed hovels were hardly worth fighting to rebuild identically, and any loss of economic value would have been likely offset by that which a better-designed new city would generate. The promise of a better future, in short, trumped reversion to a brief and mediocre past.

Contrast this with the experience after Hurricane Katrina, by which time nearly three hundred years of prior investment had created a vast wellspring of place-based value. That value took fiscal and economic forms—home equity, jobs, institutions, infrastructure, priceless art and architecture—but it also took the form of culture, social relationships, historical memory and, perhaps most importantly, the sort of emotional attachments that geographer Yi-Fu Tuan described as "topophilia," or love of place.

In a rustic outpost only four years old, a single morning of gusting rain proved enough to wipe all this away and pave the way for a major urban overhaul. But in 2005, in a metropolis 287 years old, even ten feet of fast-moving seawater could not wash away this repository of civic wealth. Once those fatal waters were pumped out, centuries' worth of inscribed values blossomed back to life.

The parallels, of course, are imperfect. Early French colonial New Orleans was a project of a private company backed by an imperial monarchy, not to mention a slave society, and while citizen resistance could be outspoken at times, authority generally prevailed. After Pauger had a house demolished because it "was not in alignment of the street," for example, the angry owner sought indemnification. Instead, "Mr. Pauger sent to find him and, after having regaled him with a volley of blows with a stick, had him put in prison, with irons on his feet."

That's not the sort of civic engagement we aspire to today, as officials are compelled to hear out the citizens who elect them. In the momentous autumn and winter of 2005-2006, those citizens voiced their views and stated their values—and, easily withstanding Katrina's surging waters, those place-based values triumphed.

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