



Rebuilding a Community

Lessons from New Orleans

During hurricanes Katrina and Rita in 2005, the destruction of the New Orleans levees wreaked havoc, and nowhere were the consequences more painfully visible than in the neighborhoods comprising the city's 9th Ward. Seventy-two people died and hundreds more were forced onto their roofs, anxiously awaiting rescue. Even today, the traumatized children, when asked to draw a house, will frequently draw a triangle only: the roof.¹

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What happens to a low-income community after such complete desolation? Can it come back? The story of the 9th Ward since 2005 may offer lessons for other communities.

The First Proposal

A survey conducted by the Brookings Institution in the weeks following Katrina and Rita revealed that approximately 50 percent of survivors planned to return to New Orleans. Real estate and land use experts from the Urban Land Institute (ULI) responsible for developing the city's first recovery strategy based their recommendations on those data.

The ULI plan recommended immediate public investment for infrastructure, housing, and business development in areas that had experienced the least flood-related damage. It also recommended withholding investment from the city's most heavily damaged areas until there were revitalization plans demonstrating significant investor and resident support. The ULI plan suggested there might be sections, such as parts of the historic 9th Ward, where the risk of future flooding was so likely that it might be better to clear the area and use it as an urban park and wetland buffer.

Community response to the ULI plan, which Mayor Ray Nagin initially supported, was harsh, prompting the mayor to withdraw his endorsement. Instead he called for a mayoral task force, the Bring New Orleans Back Commission, to prepare a strategy to assist all former residents who desired to return home. The commission's final report asserted former residents' right to return and called for a comprehensive recovery plan to make it possible.

Taking a New Tack

Lacking the financial and staff resources to create a comprehensive recovery plan, the city secured \$3.5 million from the Rockefeller Foundation, Greater New Orleans Foundation, and the Bush-Clinton Katrina Fund to do so. In July 2006, the city issued a request for qualifications (RFQ) for consultants capable of designing neighborhood and citywide strategies that could be integrated into a comprehensive recovery plan, the United New Orleans Plan (UNOP).

Enter the Association of Community Organizations for Reform Now (ACORN), the nation's largest citizen organization representing poor and working-class families, headquartered in New Orleans since 1978. Several weeks after the RFQ, ACORN staff directed Cornell graduate students working as interns to help in preparing a formal proposal.

Aware of the challenges of developing a comprehensive recovery plan in a post-disaster context and the intense competition they would face, the students worked hard, with the assistance of Cornell faculty, to prepare a proposal on behalf of a community/university partnership they helped establish, the ACORN Housing/University Collaborative (AHUC).² AHUC was subsequently selected from a pool of 69 experienced architecture, engineering, and planning firms to serve as one of five senior consultants to work on the city's comprehensive plan.

In fall 2006, the faculty participating in AHUC recruited more than 80 undergraduate and graduate students to undertake a research program to more accurately determine existing local conditions and to identify the strategies and projects most preferred by residents, business operators, institutional leaders, and elected and appointed officials. The students were enrolled in five different field-based research courses on the Cornell, Columbia, and Illinois campuses between September 1, 2006, and December 15, 2006. The classes undertook the following activities in order to produce an empirically based and resident-supported comprehensive recovery plan for the 9th Ward:

- examination of 29 historic reports, studies, and plans;
- analysis of population, housing, and business trends using the U.S. Census;
- inspection of more than 3,000 buildings to determine their structural integrity;
- surveying of storm drains, roads, and sidewalks to identify those requiring immediate repair;
- interviewing individuals operating busi-

nesses within the 9th Ward's four most intensively used commercial corridors;

- interviewing 200 families who had returned;
- evaluating the physical condition of more than two dozen playgrounds, parks, parkways, and residual open spaces; and
- reviewing best practices from other post-disaster recovery efforts from around the world.

Following each activity, AHUC representatives traveled to the 9th Ward to share their results with the returnees. The research team was thus able to involve a wide range of local stakeholders in analyzing the data and discussing the implications for local recovery efforts. Recurring themes raised during the highly interactive sessions gave the team a clear sense of the preferred recovery scenarios of residents, business leaders, pastors, community activists, and elected officials.

The People's Plan

By the end of the fall 2006 semester, AHUC students had completed a first draft of *The People's Plan for Overcoming the Hurricane Katrina Blues: A Comprehensive Strategy for Building a More Vibrant, Equitable and Just 9th Ward*. A few students gave up their winter holidays to transform the somewhat rambling, 400-page study into a tightly written and lavishly illustrated document.³

The People's Plan contained critical research findings that contradicted widely held beliefs. The following were among the new insights:

- 8 of 10 buildings within the 9th Ward were structurally sound and, therefore, candidates for cost-effective rehabilitation;
- a much higher percentage of former residents than previously thought had returned and were actively engaged in rehabilitating their properties (25 percent of residents have now returned to parts of the Upper 9th Ward);
- more than three-quarters of the returnees who were restoring their homes were us-



public investment in 17 areas.⁴ Among the targeted redevelopment areas is a significant section of the Lower 9th Ward that *The People's Plan* had recommended for immediate renewal.

Looking Ahead

Encouraged by the inclusion of an important segment of their community in the city's new investment strategy and guided by the recommendations contained within their own plan, 9th Ward residents are working hard to capitalize on the attention and resources they have received to restore and enhance the quality of life available to current and future residents.

The 9th Ward story is the story of one community in extraordinary times. But any devastated community, whether it has suffered a sudden natural disaster or years of neglect, can learn something from the inclusive approach to decisions on rebuilding. The best plans have the broadest buy-in.

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Endnotes

1 Shaila Dewan, "Using crayons to exorcise Katrina," *The New York Times*, Monday, September 17, 2007, p. B1.

2 The partnership included ACORN, its housing production affiliate, ACORN Housing, Cornell University's Department of City and Regional Planning, Columbia University's Earth Institute, and the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign's Department of Urban and Regional Planning.

3 See <http://www.rebuildingtheninth.org>.

4 Adam Nossiter, "New Orleans Proposes to Invest in 17 Areas," *The New York Times*, March 30, 2007.

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ing their own resources and/or charitable donations to do so because insurance and federal reimbursements were slow in arriving;

- many returnees were anxious about not having access to high-quality building design and construction advice and, as a result, feared they were making costly errors that might compromise their plans to return; and
- most were in daily contact with family members, neighbors, and friends hoping to return but concerned about public safety, educational quality, primary health-care services, availability of job training, and access to living-wage jobs.

The findings prompted the team to adopt a development goal designed to transform, rather than simply restore, the environmental, economic, and social conditions that had existed within the nine historic neighborhoods comprising the 9th Ward. The 26 recovery proposals of *The People's Plan* go beyond reestablishing functioning local infrastructure systems. Almost without exception, residents and would-be returnees expressed concerns about quality-of-life issues—public safety, quality neighborhood school buildings and education, and access to primary health-care services. So the "Field of Dreams" proposals of many past recovery plans ("if you build it,

they will come") were rejected. *The People's Plan* took a more holistic approach to community development, one that gives equal attention to the physical and social dimensions of community revitalization.

In early 2007, eight students and faculty members representing AHUC summarized the major elements of *The People's Plan* for a group of more than 50 local officials and 150 residents at the Holy Angels Roman Catholic Church. The community's response was overwhelmingly positive. Oliver Thomas, then the president of the New Orleans City Council, requested that the team submit the plan as an amendment to the comprehensive plan being finalized by the UNOP planners.

An Associated Press story describing the plan's enthusiastic reception was subsequently carried by more than 175 news outlets under the headline "Planners Say 9th Ward Can be Rebuilt." As a result of the coverage and ACORN's organizing efforts, the New Orleans City Planning Commission and City Council unanimously passed resolutions directing local planners to incorporate the major elements of *The People's Plan* into the comprehensive plan.

Not long after, Edward J. Blakely, New Orleans recovery director, outlined a \$1.1 billion capital improvement plan designed to accelerate the city's recovery by focusing