

Public spaces in New Orleans post-Katrina. Plans and projects as instruments for urban and social revitalization.

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ABSTRACT

The article, that represents the outcome of an integration among a study of recent literature and an on-site enquiry realized at the end of the 2010 at the University of New Orleans and at the Tulane University, reviews the plans and actions for the reconstruction of New Orleans after Hurricane Katrina. The aim is to demonstrate that, though the natural disaster has inflicted tension to city fabric, these projects, analyzing the economic and social contexts, have constituted an opportunity to provide a spread of urban quality and community aggregation, both eliminating present inequities and strengthening the cultural identity and the relationships with the public spaces of everyday life.

INTRODUCTION

Hurricane Katrina, the third strongest hurricane that reached the coasts of the United States, formed on 23 August 2005, hit the Gulf of Mexico between 29 and 31 of the same month covering an area of about 240,000 square kilometers and producing the worst economic disaster in the history of the nation. The hardest stricken area and flooded for 80%, due to the failure of the levees of the Mississippi River, was New Orleans, the most European city of the United States, with an ancient history and vernacular culture and with artistic and organizational expressions important for community development, but also with a distressing social divide, accentuated by the disaster. This situation, in fact, was not generated only by the absence of risk prevention or shortcomings of civil protection, but mainly by the discrimination of low-income populations, not addressed by urban planning. To demonstrate this, the slums, made up mainly of black families, had been built below sea level and were submerged by water.

The American myth of equity, among races and social classes, collapses, exploding in front of the eyes of all, in the events of New Orleans.¹

The debate on the reconstruction of the city has indicated the possible recovery methods characterized by two related but distinct tensions: *speed* and *reflection*² or the *assessments* of professionals and residents about programme priorities. These tensions, accompanied by an unexpected lack of confidence of inhabitants in the government and in the technicians and by the absence of a single organization able to guide the planning process, have slowed the development of an overall revival strategy. Within the climate of extreme uncertainty and dissatisfaction, the *design of public space* has been the *instrument* to critically interpret the physical and social context and the *opportunity* to eliminate vulnerabilities and inequities, simultaneously providing a spread of *urban quality* and *community aggregation*. The article

1 CRP, Cornell University, 2006.

2 Olshansky, 2006.

will review and interpret public space proposals set out within the Plans for Reconstruction and experiments conducted in single devastated areas, to demonstrate their key role in both urban and neighborhood scale.

1. RECONSTRUCTION PLANS FOR REGENERATION OF THE AREA

Defining the agenda for regeneration, the various Plans for Reconstruction that followed the hurricane up to now have been the result of compromise, albeit in different modes and measures, between the will of local government and the needs of the community which, despite being largely delocalized, was informed through websites and involved by means of surveys and meetings. Already analyzed at the territorial level³, they will be here closely examined with respect to the public space project. The *Bring New Orleans Back* (BNOB) Plan has provided, just a month after the tragic event, the first *overarching framework* for the city rebuilding and was elaborated by the *BNOB Commission* that divided its work among several committees focused on city planning, infrastructure, culture, education, health and social services, economic development and government effectiveness. Among them, led by a BNOBC member and supported by volunteers, the *City Planning Committee* was regarded as the most important one and further divided into six subcommittees on land use, housing, infrastructure, historic preservation, sustainability and urban design. It aimed to form a *socially equitable, environmentally safe and economically advanced community*. The purpose was not the reconstruction of the original situation, characterized by persistent poverty for a third of the African-American population, and that would have risked the depopulation of the city, but a *more vibrant vision* able to create better life expectancy and to ensure *desirable neighborhoods*. These were to be enriched with parks and open spaces, public facilities and services and had to be planned with their citizens and connected to the region, preserving their *heritage of culture, landscape and architecture*, thus attracting returning inhabitants and new citizens. An *ecological infrastructures* system favoured people movements and the space for meeting and socializing, integrating *green*

3 Wagner, 2006; Nelson et al., 2007; Olshansky et al., 2008.

areas chosen with citizens' agreement. Moreover, if new roads had to be constructed or the damaged ones repaired, they were to be complemented with *neutral grounds*, large green zones that during the day would be used as the right-of-way for transit and at night they would have become public spaces for activities (fig.1).



Figure 1 – Bring New Orleans Back Plan _Vision

Unfortunately, after several months of activities, since the BNOBC had not funding source, it effectively came to a halt.

A few months after the previous Plan, the *Mayor C. Ray Nagin*, the *City Council* and the *City Planning Commission* promoted the *New Orleans Neighborhoods Rebuilding Plan* or *Lambert Plan* to meet the recovery needs of the individual flooded neighborhoods with the objective of bringing them back to the condition *ex ante* the hurricane, ensuring rebuilding of infrastructure and business and reopening of school facilities. The project was managed by Lambert and Sheila Danzey's firm, SHEDO, which dispatched seven neighborhood planning consultants to 49 flooded neighborhoods in 10 of the city's districts. Among them, the *district Five⁴ Plan* is representative of the *revitalization process*, with the participation of a strong community and the New Orleans University components because of

4 It includes the neighborhoods of *City Park*, *Country Club Gardens*, *Lakeshore*, *Lake Vista*, *Lakeview*, *Lakewood e Parkview*.

the campus location nearby. It had to follow urban plan and organization of the existing neighborhoods, retaining their individual uniqueness and historic qualities, but enhancing their residential, commercial and civic areas and the infrastructure system, providing attractive opportunities and community centers. Moreover it had to implement beautiful parks and squares not only to address the damage caused by the Hurricane, but also to turn them into the *community assets* that these public spaces were or could become, so advocating *social reconstruction* too (fig.2). Indeed several factors showed that this district would have been repopulated at an increasingly faster rate as time progressed: the community faith and the continuous commitment of the residents; pre-Hurricane indicators of home ownership, income distribution and property values that provided a clear indication of the place attractiveness; homeowners' economic assistance programmes⁵ that would have been a catalyst for private reconstruction; the district geographical position linked to the city's traditional urban grid and the major expressway access routes serving the region.



Figure 2 – New Orleans Neighborhoods Rebuilding Plan or Lambert Plan _ Project of a neighborhood public space

5 Louisiana's Recovery Authority Road Home Program and FEMA's Increased Cost of Construction financial grants program for mitigation.

Anyway, even if this Plan gave a highly valuable contribution at the neighborhood level and helped to empower residents in the rebuilding effort, by early November 2006, it ended because Lambert and the City Council did not agree to subsume it under the *Unified New Orleans Plan (UNOP)*. This latter, *always established by Mayor C. Ray Nagin, the City Council and the City Planning Commission*, recognized the goals of the *Lambert Plan*, but provided a more *comprehensive parishwide plan*: it aimed to foreshadow a *safer city* with greater economic opportunities and a higher quality of life through the provision of accessible collective spaces, green areas and pedestrian zones, to transform neighborhood parks and playgrounds into public amenities, both to provide recreational facilities for the residents and to revitalize the surrounding community, and to preserve the culture and the historical architecture, with a view to a possible increase in local tourism (fig.3).



Figure 3 – *Unified New Orleans Plan* _ Project of a collective space between neighborhoods

Twenty-two months after Katrina, this Plan was approved but not adopted. Finally, on August 2010, the *City Council*, after extensive public participation and the unanimous approval of the *City Planning Commission*, officially adopted the *Plan for the 21st Century: New Orleans 2030, the Masterplan*, based on the previous plans. It recognizes New Orleans' many identities and aims to carry the city into the future, providing vibrant *neighborhoods* and *lively commercial districts* able to facilitate socialization,

designed by integrating public spaces, parks and historic streets with creativity traditions. It proposes areas and tree-lined streets to promote not only walking but also animated farmers markets, arts festivals and performance venues with spin-offs for other parts of the country (fig.4). Much still remains to be done and many improvements are needed for about four or five years, but this planning phase has been fundamental to lay the foundation for new opportunities, making New Orleans a leading world city and a sustainable community building an exciting future for all its residents, all the while continuing to preserve and nurture the physical and cultural legacy of the past.



Figure 4 – Plan for the 21st Century: New Orleans 2030 _ Project of a public space used as a farmer's market

2. PROJECTS IN DISASTER AREAS FOR THE COMMUNITY REVIVAL

In parallel with the *Reconstruction Plans*, the implementation of individual projects in the areas most affected by Hurricane highlights the role of collective spaces both as places shared by the different ethnic, cultural and religious background communities, and as temporary and extemporary spaces for art and performance activities. In this perspective, *participatory design* methods were explored, together with the activation of applied courses, which provided opportunities for faculty, students and architects to

approach the reconstruction problems and participate in the life of the city. Over fifty projects for the redevelopment of public and private spaces within areas struck by Hurricane Katrina were completed by the *Tulane City Center (TCC)*, a not-for-profit organization inside the *Tulane School of Architecture* conceived in the 2004 but officially come into being during the tumultuous months after the Hurricane when the importance of social engagement became ever more pressing. Under the leadership of the former Director Scott Bernhard⁶, Associate Director Dan Etheridge and Senior Program Coordinator Emilie Taylor, the TCC has seen tremendous growth with its involvement in community outreach under Kenneth Schwartz, new Dean of the School of Architecture. These projects, that ranged in scale from small mobile neighborhood communication devices to urban scale planning processes, aimed to transform abandoned spaces into *interconnected social and ecological places* where people could meet, discuss and share experiences, (re)building neighbourly relations and restoring an urban way of life lost due to the disaster. Along with their primary collaborator the *Tulane/Xavier Center for Bioenvironmental Research*, the TCC enjoyed a broad range of partnerships with numerous *off-campus community-based organizations* and each of them created occasions for faculty and students to engage real issues in the society.

These projects did not only implement the physical infrastructure but created also the economic infrastructure and the social and cultural relationships throughout the city. This kind of engagement of the architecture to work with non-traditional and unknown clients, has allowed them to not compete with the profession and to broaden the relevance and value of actions relating to spatial organization.

Among the realized projects, the *Viet Village Cooperative urban farm*, winner of the *Professional Award of the American Society of Landscape Architects* in 2008, is particularly significant. It was carried out in the Vietnamese neighborhood *Village de l'Est* in agreement with the *Mary Queen of Vietnam Community Development Corporation* which restores urban farms and agricultural markets destroyed by the floodwaters of Hurricane Katrina. The *community gardens* were their main economic and

6 He was the director until 2012 while now the director is Maurice Cox.

cultural activity since the migration of the Vietnamese population in the 1970's. They produced typical food not readily available in the region and were used by the growers to feed their families and gave birth to informal agricultural markets to sell the *surplus* production. The project intends therefore to recover a fundamental ethnic aspect of their lifestyle formalizing activities in a single site in order to maximize the productivity and create welcoming public spaces for residents, able to encourage the involvement of children, parents and grandparents in the same activities and allowing traditional practices of their culture to be passed on. The construction of a central meeting place for the largest Vietnamese community in the Gulf Coast and of areas for sports represents the intention for the farm to act as a social centre, so that it has become the focal point for the reconstruction of *New Orleans East* and for local tourism (fig.5).



Figure 5 – Tulane City Center, Viet Village Cooperative urban farm _ Render

Developed in the *Hollygrove* neighborhood with the participation of the *Carrollton Hollygrove Community development corporation* and the *New Orleans Food and Farm* network two more projects have been built after the hurricane had destroyed most of the crop and dispersed the population. *Hollygrove Greenline* transforms the great infrastructural corridor that divides the neighborhood, unused since the beginning of the century and by then inaccessible, into an attractive and productive public space for social activities and urban farming, redeveloping the site as a *livable community*. In

the design process, residents and neighborhood organizations were actively involved as beneficiaries of the project, helping to guarantee the final result. A survey within an information pamphlet and a *community engagement map* established the needs of the people regarding the use of that space, in order to arrive at a *shared drawing* (fig.6).



Figure 6 – Tulane City Center, Hollygrove Greenline _ Render

Hollygrove Growers Market and Farm stimulates the local economy by providing locally grown, affordable fresh produce and *green jobs* certification programmes in urban agriculture. It promotes healthy lifestyles and contributes significantly to the neighborhood revitalization as a catalyst for future citywide innovations. It implements the existing infrastructures and services using ecological equipment including a rainwater collection system, solar panels and green roofs. A pavilion in front of this space is an example of *environmental, economic and social conscious architecture*: it uses either natural or recycled materials, minimizes construction waste and filters rainwater to irrigate the training gardens; it is run by faculty members and students of the *Tulane School of Architecture* with simple construction techniques and cost effective materials; it offers a shaded and multifunctional place, made inviting to residents via an arbor connected with the road (fig.7). Mobile modular units facilitate communication amongst the neighborhood inhabitants by creating flexible areas used as work, storage and teaching spaces. The project, built in phases, reached a great success as the frequent meetings between the *Tulane City Center*, activist societies, future store operators and *partners* developed an understanding of the needs of the neighbourhood, meeting the emerging demands.



Figure 7 – Tulane City Center, Hollygrove Growers Market and Farm _ Arbor connected with the road | Photo of the author

Another important realized example is the Hope Haven Campus that, partnered with *Catholic Charities Archdioceses*, aims to reactivate the Campus itself, integrating three programmes. A care centre provides temporary shelter for homeless people by helping them to reintegrate in society. A restaurant serves as a social entrepreneurship business model by offering job skills for at risk youth, while an urban farm develops a sustainable biodiversity farming model to promote initiatives to produce and purchase local products. They act as a collaborative platform for community activities (herb farm, market, seating, learning - teaching) as they are in continuous interaction with visitors, workers and people involved in the structure (fig.8).

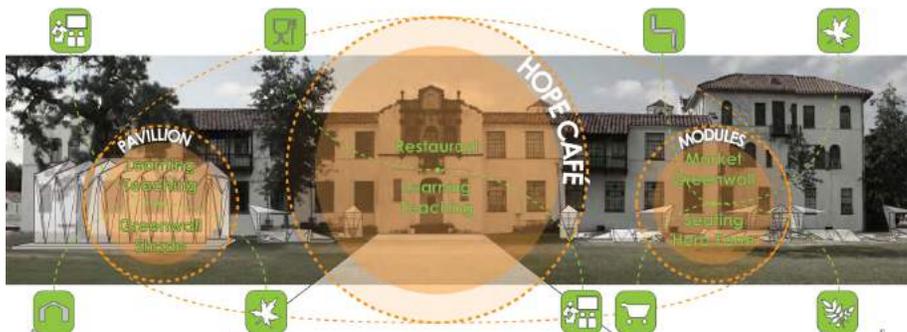


Figure 8 – Tulane City Center, Hope Haven Campus _ Photomontage

Quite different is the *Project Sprout*, a Pilot Project that, partnered with the *New Orleans Food and Farm Network* and the *New Orleans Redevelopment Authority Limitless Vistas*, consist in a strategy for productive stabilization that transforms many marginal properties devastated by the flooding into *nodes of urban and social redevelopment*. Bio-energy gardens, taking advantage of the sunflowers that remediate soil, produce bio-fuel, provide green-collar job training and create public meeting spaces (fig.9).



Figure 9 – Tulane City Center, Project Sprout _ Bio-energy gardens

The *Abandoned contentious border zones*⁷ is, on the contrary, a simple proposal but represent for the *Concordia Architects*⁸ the opportunity to transform the areas devastated by the hurricane and located at a critical intersection of historically and culturally rich communities in *socially dynamic and physically accessible to everybody urban spaces* (fig.10). The project reshapes the borderland with ruptures and undulations so obtaining underground spaces in which it is possible to develop *Border food programs* that include markets, urban agriculture forms, culinary learning center and informal activities supervision. The markets provide a *sociopolitical infrastructure* that attracts residents and eliminates social barriers, transforming contested sites into *border-node hybrids*, where a diverse yet high quality culture of food becomes a shared value (fig.11).

7 Areas close to the train tracks, the highway and industrial parks.

8 Community centered planning + design.



Figure 10 – Concordia Architects, Abandoned contentious border zone turned into a dynamic socially space in which Ruffins Kermit performs _ Photomontage



Figure 11 – Concordia Architects, Abandoned contentious border zone used as a market _ Photomontage

Urban agriculture promotes *ecologically integrated communities and healthy lifestyles*, creating spaces where people can grow their products and participate in the site design. The learning culinary centre offers classes related to planting, harvesting and preparing food. Spatial flexibility helps support a wide range of events, from theoretical teaching activities to practical demonstrations during the gastronomic events. A shaded area will be used in the *Carnival Season* by means of *festivals and jazz funeral promenade*⁹ encouraging interaction and *social equality*.

In the past, the construction of the *U.S. Interstate 10* in 1965 had destroyed the famous *second line*¹⁰ known for processions and funeral parades. The Afro-American Community, trying to reclaim the thoroughfare for the *Zulu parades* and other festivities, had protested weaving brightly colored strings

9 They combine the traditional funeral procession with the parades of wind instruments bands.

10 Brass bands traditional parade. The main line is made up of the city circle members. The second line simply follows the band to listen to music.

over the highway (fig.12).

The underutilized border, reactivated through these *progressive rebuilding* strategies, could become the backbone of the city creating a public space integrated with the coexistence of different ethnic cultures.



Figure 12 – Zulu Parade over the U.S. Interstate 10 _ Photomontage

CONCLUSIONS

Seven years after Hurricane Katrina, more than the 80 percent of the residents is back home and New Orleans, thanks to the good quality of reconstruction, within a few years has attracted investment and new residents, moving from a traditional economy, mostly based on agriculture, to be one of the reference centers for the American society.

Indeed some relevant conclusions can be drawn from these experiences.

The *Reconstruction Plans* have shown how important the design of *safe public spaces* is for the urban, social and economic regeneration process. Parks, open spaces, recreational activities and public services are, as well as in Europe, the necessary conditions for the recovery of neighborhoods and key components for life in the community.

The *projects* carried out by the *Tulane City Center* and by the *Concordia Architects* have then focused on the need for *flexible and relational spaces* that combine land use with the expressions of the community to become fulcrums of urban and social renaissance. Used by residents to create occasions of public life and by artists to set up workshops and laboratories, the appointed areas has found the maximum strength in the specific

characteristics of the ethnic groups, in the recovery of traditions and in the search for ecologically integrated models, with benefits in the long term and throughout the territory.

At the end of this collection of experiences after Hurricane Katrina, it is possible to see how the tension suffered by the city fabric has been sublimated into *organizational and propulsive opportunities* for all the phenomena of economic development and social aggregation to ensure the strengthening of cultural identity.

In this perspective *architectural landmarks*, such as the *Superdome*¹¹, has played a central role. Used as a shelter after the hurricane and restored in time to start the fall season of Football, it allowed recovering social continuity, enhancing aesthetic creativity and ensuring progress.

11 New Orleans stadium.

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