Cultural Ecology in the New New Orleans

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This article considers the renewed relationship between architecture, environmentalism and ecology in the context of the post-Katrina rebuilding process of New Orleans. After introducing the city's pre-Katrina architectural history, the analysis examines three interventions at varying levels of scale (single block, larger neighbourhood and entire city). Having concluded this analysis it then argues that the recent trend towards environmental considerations in architectural design runs the risk of remaining cosmetic if fundamental relationships to landscape, place and community are not adequately incorporated into design.

Introduction

Five years after the storm, we are now in the 'New' New Orleans, but the old nickname bestowed nearly forty years ago still wears well: "the impossible but inevitable city." Peirce Lewis' famous characterisation of New Orleans has served to illuminate nearly every aspect about it: its location, its history, its geography, its culture, its governance, in short, its very identity. A city enduring disease, war, coastal erosion, hurricanes, floods, economic depression, segregation, and social unrest: impossible. But a port at the mouth of the largest river on the continent: inevitable. As Paleo[1] has noted, other cities have enjoyed like assessments in the face of challenges presented by their local environments. But unlike other cities which have overcome their respective crises (Prague, Kobe, Florence) this discourse of the unnatural city—this idea of unorthodox settlement, of perilous, tangential existence—continues to define New Orleans, even in the post-Katrina era. With further disasters such as the BP oil spill and the heightened degradation of the coastal wetlands having freshly struck the region, the relevance of the nickname only grows.

This is not to say that New Orleanians feel themselves to be at the mercy of their local environment: on the contrary, a point of local pride is the way in which architects, builders, and craftsmen have adapted over the city's history to live with their environment, rather than against it. Specific features recur throughout New Orleans' built environment, as Colten, Kelman and Kingsley[2] have all detailed: many structures are built on raised foundations to mitigate against potential flood impacts, building materials frequently make use of locally-sourced river cypress to combat moisture absorption, and the historic housing stock often features exceedingly high ceilings and large windows to naturally dissipate the oppressive, semi-permanent heat. In short, the popularised litany of disaster in the city belies the longer and more intricate relationship it bears towards its unique physical landscape and the ways in which architectures have responded to it. Curtis notes that:

> 'New Orleans can offer plenty of lessons in green living, and it could have before the storm, had anyone asked. How to build small and beautiful houses on narrow lots. How to built compact, walk able neighborhoods. How to adapt buildings to the environment, with deep porches and high ceilings and small, leafy yards.'[3]

Such features, he concludes, are "...the things that people loved about New Orleans—and they're the things that architects interested in sustainable design most want to build right now."[4] Curtis' observation, however, is not limited just to the Crescent City. In the wake of global attention to climate

[1] Urbano Fra Paleo, 'Site and Situation: Impossible but Inevitable Cities.' *Space and Culture 9* (1) (2006): 20-22.

[2] Craig Colten, Craig, *Unnatural Metropolis* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2004). Ari Kelman, Ari *A River and Its City: The Nature of Landscape in New Orleans* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003). Kingsley2007 ref?

[3] Wayne Curtis, 'Houses of the Future.' The Atlantic Monthly, November 2009 at: http://www.theatlantic.com/doc/200911/curtis-architecture-new-orleans. [accessed 30 November 2009].

[4] Ibid.

change and the need for communities to develop means of adaptation and mitigation to adverse environmental impacts, the present generation of architectural theory and practice has signalled a renewed interest in green design— even though, as Dummett[5] has argued, those practices in fact have roots in deeply historical, and in some cases, surprising places (for example Le Corbusier). Part of this return has been driven by internal forces within the field, whilst another part has been spurred on by external forces from commerce, industry, and government, such as LEED certifications in the USA, and the 10:10 campaign in the UK, but in either case the shift has been fundamental. It is now inconceivable to propose carbon-intensive (or more accurately put, carbon-insensitive) interventions into the built environment without the surety of a backlash if not outright rejection of the bid.

This is undoubtedly a step in the right direction but simple approbation is not enough. How, then, to understand this turn to environmentalism in architecture and the impacts that it will have not just on the built environment broadly and individual sites specifically, but on our understanding of ecology and ecological thought? In what follows I take three interventions in New Orleans as cases to consider these questions more closely. I raise issues that, in a century in which increased climatic and environmental changes pose considerable challenges to cities across the world, will characterise not just the impossible cities but the extant and probable ones too. I consider the iciNola development in the Bywater neighbourhood, the Make It Right Foundation houses in the Lower Ninth Ward, and the 'Reinventing the Crescent' suite of interventions across the city, three cases that in their various scales (single block, entire neighbourhood and the whole city) help to further illuminate these issues.

iciNola

The idea, on paper, had much going for it. It was originally billed as a new mixed-use housing and commercial development in the historic Bywater neighbourhood, a neighbourhood east (downriver, in local terms) of the city's famous French Quarter, situated between the Faubourg Marigny and the Lower Ninth Ward. The Bywater was where, as Campanella has noted, many of the early immigrants to New Orleans settled[6] and has traditionally been home to lower-income families and modest local architectural styles: single- and double-shotgun houses and Creole Cottages. Due to its proximity to the levee along the Mississippi River, the natural high ground, it suffered comparatively less during the flood, indeed, the blocks closest to the levee took on no floodwater at all. Despite this lack of major structural damage, the depopulation and the inability of displaced residents to return from distant cities had begun to take its toll.

5   Emma Dummett, 'Green Space and Cosmic Order: Le Corbusier's Understanding of Nature.' Unpublished Ph.D. thesis (Edinburgh: University of Edinburgh, 2008).

6   Campanella 2006

Fig 1 & 2. Undated design rendering of ICInola development, Wayne Troyer Architects.
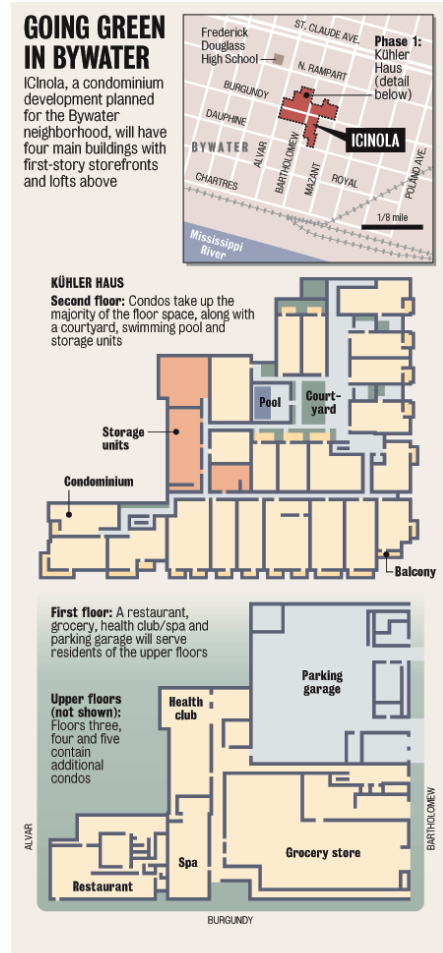

Fig 3. Map of ICInola development. New Orleans Times-Picayune, February 2008. http://blog.nola.com/graphics/2008/02/icinola_development.html

The iciNola development, as it was called, aimed to redress this imbalance, proposing to redevelop four largely vacant city blocks into a unified, sustainably-designed complex featuring loft residences, shops and other small businesses, and a supermarket (Figures 1, 2, 3). Its design elements included such modern green-technological features as solar roofs, green walls, passive lighting and heating elements, and hurricane-proof building standards. But despite these admirable intentions towards low-impact, sustainable dwelling (especially the supermarket, as the Bywater had no adequate local market or point of access to fresh food at that time in early 2007) its designers and developers Shea Embry and Cam Mangham, faced immediate and vociferous resistance. Green-technology alone could not sell the project. Upon the presentation of the design, Bywater residents became furious about the potential impacts on the neighbourhood, such as: dramatically increased property values, disruption of the traditional architectural character, the introduction of moneyed outsiders into a

neighbourhood with which they had no prior connection, and especially, the forced relocation of residents who owned historic homes in the path of the development to elsewhere in the neighbourhood, with no stated mechanism for doing so.[7]

The issue swiftly metastasised, with proponents and opponents taking to the local news and media outlets in force to voice advocacy and objections, raise amendments and counter-proposals, and lambaste overaggressive protectionism or the thinly veiled onset of gentrification. One local writer summed up the debate by noting that:

> 'To opponents, it's an unsightly, out-of-scale behemoth that would wreak havoc on Bywater's traffic, parking and drainage and threaten the neighborhood's somewhat raffish, unconventional character. To supporters, it's an environmentally sensitive, neighborhood-friendly engine for economic development that could be the catalyst for a dying district's rebirth.'[8]

Part of the controversy stemmed from local contestation over the ownership of history, this debate raised the question of what constituted acceptable New Orleans architecture. Embry and Mangham had hired respected local firms to execute the designs, and had insisted in their advertisements and printed ephemera that at no point were the proposed structures seeking to replicate historic New Orleans styles. On the contrary, they argued "Designing for conformity does not respect historic architecture, and indeed decreases the social and architectural value of structures that are actually historic, as opposed to just appearing to be so."[9] Yet the designs for the residential complexes failed on other grounds: they exceeded the height of the majority of the housing stock in the neighbourhood (primarily single and double shotguns), drawing fire from residents and preservationists, and the lack of iconic local features such as stoops, galleries, balconies and shutters suggested that there was little New Orleanian about the project, despite the designation of French, German, Italian and Spanish names for the buildings.[10] (Interestingly, Caribbean, West African, or Native American names—names which would have also paid homage to local history—did not appear in the design.)

[7]   Helen Krieger, 'BNA Letter to HDLC re: ICInola project.' Bywater News 33 (4) (2007): 6-7 at: http://www.bywaternola.com/ [accessed 23 July 2007].

[8]   Bruce Eggler, 'Planning panel backs Bywater condos.' New Orleans Times-Picayune, 9 May 2007: B1-B3.

[9]   iciNola. Design outline and schematics document, distributed 20 April 2007 at: http://www.ICInola.com. [accessed 22 April 2007].

[10]   Sue Hobbs, 'Developers and Residents Grapple Over Future of Bywater.' Preservation in Print 34 (3) (2007): 29-30.

Fig 4. Icky-nola campaign poster, Bywater neighbourhood, 9 July 2007. Photo by author.

While revised designs presented at charrettes in the spring of 2007 did allay some residents' fears, a committed core of opponents nevertheless severed itself from the Bywater Neighborhood Association to form the Bywater Civic Association, a rival community organisation that took defeating the iciNola project as its chief aim (Fig 4.). Ultimately, however, these efforts proved unfruitful: citing the potential positive long-term economic impacts on the neighbourhood, the City Planning Commission voted to approve the project in May 2007. While construction has begun on the first phase, it has since been delayed in part due to the national recession still extant as of this writing.[11] The first two building complexes, the 'Kuhler Haus' (formerly the historic Frey warehouse, dating to 1865) and the 'Maison du Soleil', are presently under construction, whereas the second phase of the 'Casa Verde' and 'Casa del Viento' buildings await groundbreaking—for how long, it remains to be seen.

Make It Right

At the same time, east of the Bywater and the iciNola development, across the Industrial Canal another vision for a transformed, revitalised neighbourhood was taking shape. In early 2008, commuters driving across the Claiborne Avenue bridge to the Lower Ninth Ward, one of the most devastated neighbourhoods in the city, began to see an unusual

[11] Kate Moran and Katy Reckdahl, 'Credit crisis squeezes local developments.' New Orleans Times-Picayune, 19 September 2008: C8-C10.

sight: hundreds of enormous pink cubes and triangles strewn across the ravaged city blocks, some lying by themselves and others placed in odd juxtapositions to one another, still more forming the stylised semblances of houses, with square fronts and triangular pitched roofs, as in a child's drawing (Figures 5, 6) When viewed at night, when the frames were lit from within, it appeared as though an entire fleet of ghostly, ethereal homes had suddenly repopulated the ruined neighbourhood.

Figures 5 & 6: Make It Right Foundation "Pink Project", Lower Ninth Ward. 22 December 2007. Photos by author.

This was precisely the point. In late 2006, the actor Brad Pitt had announced the work of the Make It Right Foundation, a non-profit institution dedicated to rebuilding homes for homeowners in the Lower Ninth Ward who had lost everything during the storm. The Pink Project, as it was called, remained in place for approximately one month and was the first signifier of this work: simultaneously a publicity stunt and an argument, a protest against what had been allowed to happen, and a form of visual promise-making to those individuals with whom it was in contract. "Right now there are scattered blocks, like they were scattered like fate's hand, symbolic of the aftermath of the storm," Pitt said. "But we will be flipping the homes, essentially righting the wrong."[12]

[12]   Brad Pitt quoted in Michelle Krupa, 'Brad Pitt wants effort to go beyond the Lower 9.' New Orleans Times-Picayune, 3 December 2007: A1-A7.

Fig 7. , 8. & 9. Digital renderings of design sketch for Make It Right Foundation house. Images from Architectural Record magazine. http://archrecord.construction.com/news/daily/archives/071210Pitt/1.asp.

Unlike the iciNola development, the vision put forth by the Make It Right Foundation received immediate and lasting approbation. Two aspects have conditioned the difference: firstly, the Make It Right Foundation's focus on homeowner restitution and social justice rather than profit making (the iciNola enterprise was a private enterprise, owned and operated by Embry and Mangham, and was widely seen to profit them more than any other entity). Secondly, the scale of its ambition put paid to its focus—the Foundation aimed to restore an entire neighbourhood, rather than just one building or suite of buildings. The Lower Ninth Ward had been a cultural epicentre in New Orleans prior to Katrina and was a known incubator neighbourhood of many of the city's most celebrated traditions. That the return of residents to that neighbourhood would catalyse cultural recovery in the city, only bolstered the welcome reception that the Foundation received.

A central dimension of the new houses' construction—each of which was estimated to cost about $150,000, financed partly by the Foundation and partly by other public and private donors—was the emphasis on sustainable and renewable materials and design elements (Figures 7, 8, 9). Each of the 150 homes (designed by different local, national and international architectural firms) was designed to reduce energy consumption, invoke passive features such as natural lighting and ventilation, and respect the morphology of the landscape by building with the floodplain, on elevated foundations, rather than against it. The designs thus acknowledged the inevitable risk of another flood event, but had already adapted to it. In an extreme form, the proposal by Thom Mayne of Morphosis (the firm which had designed the proposed National Jazz Center in the Central Business District, never executed), for instance, called for the house to be built on a floating foundation tethered to two piers. "It's a boat," he said.[13]

Though not all of the house designs have received equal praise among observers and critics, the debate about what constituted traditional New Orleans architecture did not ignite as it had over iciNola. The iciNola project was demonised not just for its infidelity in local architectural terms, but more importantly because it would have displaced the residents of the Bywater through the slow, intangible process of gentrification, as well as the neighbourhood feel which gives it its character (the subsequent economic arguments about increased rent, cost of living, and property taxes notwithstanding—entry-level costs for a loft in the iciNola development began around $250,000-300,000, or at the time, roughly £125,000-150,000).

By contrast, the Make It Right Foundation had instructed architects to author their designs with an underlying respect for the local culture in mind, wherein the material aspect of the homes was understood to dwell in the service of a larger purpose. The architects—and Pitt—were widely

13   Thom Mayne quoted in Robin Pogrebin, 'Brad Pitt Commissions Designs for New Orleans.' New York Times, 3 December 2007 at: http://www.nytimes.com/2007/12/03/arts/design/03pitt.html. [accessed 5 December 2007].

understood to be rebuilding an intangible culture and way of life, which spoke louder than any individual cornice, shingle, or (in this case) solar panel. Illustrating the perpetual adaptability of New Orleans architecture thus entailed allowing, rather than forcing, its evolution into a new ecological paradigm and a ground-level process of recapitulation. Whereas iciNola had assumed that style could be imposed independently of local culture, the Make It Right Foundation had assumed from the start that style was achieved in concert with a culture that could not be found in a pattern book or design encyclopaedia. By late 2010, nearly one-third of the 150 homes had been completed.

Reinventing the Crescent

As Oliver-Smith has noted, any natural disaster prompts a widespread reassessment of the specific landscape feature, set of features or practice of use that gives rise to it.[14] Whether after a volcano, an earthquake, or a landslide, communities that recover from disaster re-evaluate their relationship with their environment as part of the adaptation process to that revised environment. In New Orleans, the primary element subject to that reappraisal has been water. Since Katrina the surrounding natural environment, the Mississippi River, the lakes surrounding the city (Lake Pontchartrain and Lake Borgne), the coastal wetlands and the Gulf of Mexico itself have been re-examined with a view towards strengthening civil defence infrastructure as well as decision-making about the extent of future urban layouts. The Mississippi River in particular, for which the 'Crescent City' takes its name, has been the site of special consideration, becoming (or rather re-becoming, after Kelman[15]) simultaneously a continuous physical site used for recreational, commercial, and aesthetic purposes, and a distributed symbolic site sharing multiple meanings for multiple stakeholders across lines of race, class, occupation and use. It has also become a site for development: a site of potential capital and a resource to be exploited, as plans unveiled by the New Orleans Building Corporation (NOBC) in late 2006 began to reveal.

Shortly after the one-year anniversary of Katrina the NOBC announced a competition open to teams of national and international architectural firms to submit proposals for projects entertaining new visions for the Mississippi River. Called 'Reinventing the Crescent,' the competition was intended, as NOBC head Sean Cummings frequently put it at planning charrettes, to 'invite New Orleans and New Orleanians to reinvent their relationship to the river.' In its original incarnation (Figures 10, 11), the framework envisioned as many as seventeen potential interlinked 'interventions' along the Mississippi River, from Jackson Avenue uptown in the Garden District to Caffin Avenue in the Lower Ninth Ward. The interventions' unifying themes would be to achieve five goals: to celebrate 'places of distinct character and civic energy at the river's edge,' to 'break

14   Anthony Oliver-Smith, The Martyred City: Death and Rebirth in the Andes. (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1986)

15   Ari Kelman, A River and Its City: The Nature of Landscape in New Orleans. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003).

down barriers and gain access to the river's edge,' to ensure 'continuous access along a great public open space network,' to promote 'building and sustaining great places to live near the water's edge,' and finally to create 'new icons and social landmarks at the water's edge.'[16] The designs of five different teams of architects were short listed, and the winning team of five local, national, and internationally represented architects for the first phase of the project was announced in May 2008.
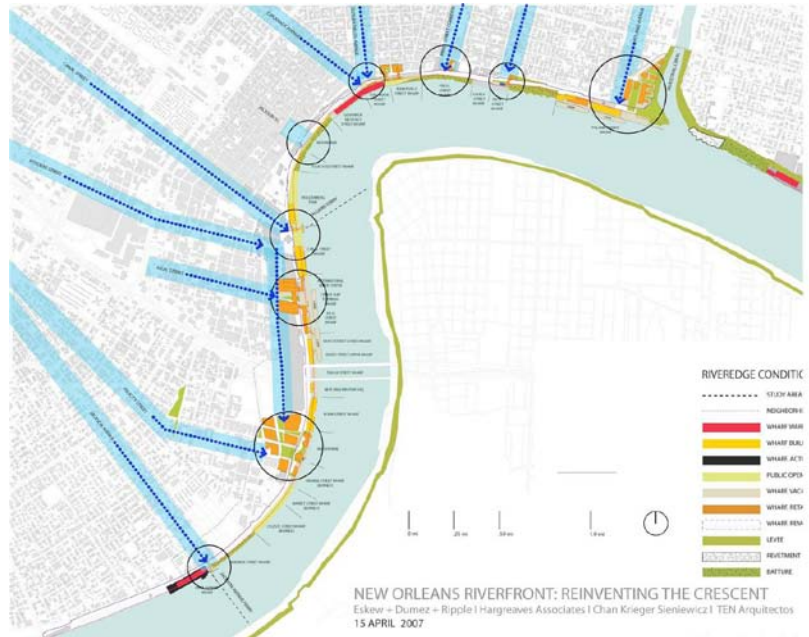
[16] New Orleans Building Corporation (NOBC). New Orleans Riverfront: Reinventing the Crescent. Preliminary Framework and Concepts. 2007. Originally available (since removed): http://www.neworiverfront.com. [accessed 29 June 2007].

Fig 10. New Orleans Building Corporation schema, "Reinventing the Crescent," 15 April 2007.
http://www.noriverfront.com. Accessed 20 July 2007. (now http://www.reinventingthecrescent.org.)

Fig 11. Photograph of maquette of 'Reinventing the Crescent', 28 July 2007. Photo by author.

17   Bruce Eggler, 'Reinventing the
      crescent.' New Orleans Times-
      Picayune, 13 November 2006: A1-A4.

The concept, generally welcomed within the larger narrative of ongoing rebuilding efforts, quickly ran aground of two complications.[17] The first was local public reaction at the planning charrettes held across the city, which—while warm to less intrusive interventions, such as expanding public access at selected sites in the French Quarter (Woldenberg Park and the Moonwalk)—for the more ambitious designs was mixed at best and openly hostile at worst. The conversion of Bywater Point (Figures L,M) was one of the most hotly contested. The original design proposed the refurbishment of the block, the expansion of the streets, the construction of new hotels and a luxury high-rise condominium (unsurprising, given Cummings' other career as a hotelier), and the development of a secondary cruise ship terminal downriver from the primary terminal near the Convention Center in the Central Business District. These were all interventions that would spoil the traditional character of the neighbourhood (the same criticisms were made against the iciNola project earlier that month, as I detailed earlier in this paper). As the report of one charrette in the Bywater noted, omitting the obscenities that frequently graced public discussion of the 'Point Park',

Fig 12. Digital rendering of design for proposed conversion of Bywater Point, "Reinventing the Crescent." Hargreaves Architects. http://www.hargreaves.com/projects/Waterfronts/NOLACrescent/ NOLA_1.jpg

Fig 13. Photograph of original design specification for Bywater Point, 28 July 2007. Photo by author.

'The question/answer session was lively. Many questions involved the traffic congestion that would be created by Reinventing the Crescent developments coupled with cruise ship activity. There were no real answers. ... In general, the public seemed pleased at the idea of being able to access the river, but extremely concerned about problems of traffic, density, and the 'touristification' of the neighborhood.'[18]

This particular intervention was eventually scaled down, but it remains exemplary of the facility with which corporate interests were able to inflame a community that already enjoyed a relationship with the Mississippi River scarcely in need of revision or reinvention. As one Bywater resident complained, "We've got people from all over the world deciding what should happen to the New Orleans riverfront"[19] Behind these protests, however, was the recognition of a heritage of control of the riverfront not by insiders or by outsiders per se, but instead by a class of elites. As Kelman argued, prior to Katrina the river has long been a site of economic development as much as symbolic or aesthetic appreciation: "New Orleanians have used history, scrubbed of its unseemly elements, as an anchor store in a preservation mall. In this way the waterfront again has become what the city's commercial elites have always wanted: a landscape of power, order, and discipline, a tableau of progress."[20]

[18] Julie Jones, 'Reinventing the Crescent: Meeting with Downriver Districts.' Bywater News 33 (4) (2007): 4 at: http://www.bywaternola.com/. [accessed 23 July 2007].

[19] (Eggler 2007b, MacCash 2007).

[20] Ari Kelman, A River and Its City: The Nature of Landscape in New Orleans. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003), p.216.

This description of a 'tableau of progress' mirrors the language used for the contemporary vision of the 'Reinventing the Crescent' programme. Not all of the interventions (like the development of Bywater Point) have survived their encounters with the public, wholly or partially. Nor have they survived the second complication signalled above, financing the project, an effort that has required a wide variety of local, state, federal, and private sources, and which since has met resistance from other stakeholders such as the Port of New Orleans.[21] But the vision nevertheless still draws on a specific, selective vision of the culture of New Orleans in order to advance its agenda. "While cherishing its past and remaining protective of its heritage," they argue,

> New Orleans can only prosper by embracing a future with the same passion it has always brought to innovations in music, literature, cuisine, the arts and maritime industry. As New Orleans rebuilds its neighborhoods, the opportunity to add to the variety of environments, institutions, and dwelling places that will characterize the next New Orleans lie primarily near the river's edge.[22]

Which, if any, of the remaining interventions will be executed remains to be seen. The estimated completion date of the proposals is the tercentenary of the founding of the city in 2018. In what form they ultimately appear and the impacts they make upon their local sites and neighbourhoods must also await examination. But the extent of these impacts cannot be ignored. The reshaping of the environment specifically for economic development will bring an estimated impact of $1.6b in spending, $526m in earnings, approximately 24,000 new jobs, and $34.8m in state tax revenues.[23] Yet it remains unclear how this vision for reinvention will respect local character, urban density and form, and the use of public space, much less mitigate against the gentrification and 'Disneyfication' that local residents now routinely expect as a by-product of architectural interventions post-Katrina. If individuals and communities are priced out of the market by rising real estate costs due to artificially inflated property values (an intangible wrecking ball swung by developers rather than demolishers), the impacts on the city's culture will be far greater than any dollar sign could measure.

Cultural Ecology in the New New Orleans

These proposals illustrate a range of lessons about architecture and ecology, the most important of which is seen most clearly in the tensions nurtured and given form over the course of the rebuilding process. The technological developments that have served to make the rebuilding process in New Orleans 'greener' are, without a doubt, to be lauded, especially if they raise awareness about the wider environmental issues

21   Bruce Eggler, 'Reclaiming the River.' New Orleans Times-Picayune, 6 April 2008: A1-A10.

22   New Orleans Building Corporation New Orleans Riverfront: Reinventing the Crescent. Development Plan 2008 at http://www.reinventingthecrescent.org/. [accessed 1 October 2009]. p.7.

23   New Orleans Building Corporation New Orleans Riverfront: Reinventing the Crescent. Development Plan 2008 at http://www.reinventingthecrescent.org/. [accessed 1 October 2009]. p.62.

at stake throughout the region: the combined impacts of coastal land loss and rising sea levels especially. All politics begins at home: my next-door neighbour has just finished installing solar panels on his roof, an undeniably welcome sign, and made possible in part by progressive tax incentives promoted by city and state leaders.

But solar panels alone are insufficient to establish an environmentally engaged architecture: the truest form of architecture is found in mindsets, ways of life, deep, rooted histories and in communities where knowledge and understanding are shared within and across generations. The case of iciNola illustrates this point by showing us the wrong way to approach the subject—by making it difficult, if not impossible, for those communities to live in their own neighbourhood. The case of the Make It Right Foundation shows us, if not the best way, at the very least a way to start— by bringing those communities back to that neighbourhood, even if its loss was near-total. Ecologically sensitive architecture does not necessarily establish a sensitive architectural ecology: architectural ecology, and cultural ecology more broadly, is located within the dwelling, not as it. If all politics begins at home, then all architectural sensibility does as well, in the context of heightened opportunities to educate members of one's family, local community and social groups to develop a sense of deep history and rootedness, a sense of concomitant memory and identity that, when disaster strikes, can be drawn upon as an aid in rebuilding and reconstruction.

Two other proposals deserve brief mention in the context of future developments that have the potential to advance just this kind of ecological thought. The first is a proposal entitled "Dutch Dialogues" by the firm of Waggoner and Ball[24], calling for the gradual reintroduction of water into the cityscape. The proposal claims that the exclusion and forced containment of the major bodies of water in the city has led not only to a debilitated civic relation to the very idea of natural elements, but has led to needless complications in city planning and zoning. Other cities in similar physical landscapes such as Rotterdam and Venice, the proposal argues, have successfully integrated water into their urban form. For a city that is surrounded by water on three sides, it is surprising that we have not yet learned the lessons of caging an untameable element, as opposed to learning to live with it. (Some of these lessons may be heeded by the 'Reinventing the Crescent' program, but again, it is too soon to say.)

[24]   Waggoner & Ball Architects. 'Dutch Dialogues' at http://www.wbarchitects.com/research/dutch_dialogues/ [accessed 1 September 2010].

Fig 15. & 16. Waggoner & Ball, "Dutch Dialogues" project: outfall canals widened when possible to create public space and water storage.

The second proposal advanced by the Claiborne Corridor Improvement Coalition, calls for the demolition of the raised I-10 expressway through downtown New Orleans and the reconfiguration of public transport to surface streets. The construction of this interstate in the late 1960's destroyed the historic Claiborne Avenue, a hub of the African-American community and one of the most vibrant and beautiful streets in the city. Over subsequent years it has displaced residents and businesses across its entire path.[25] The areas underneath the overpass have suffered from severe social and economic decline, a condition that the coalition seeks to redress by the removal of the overpass and the rehabilitation of the urban corridor. Though still in the planning phases, the proposal has received support from private citizens and public officials alike. It has been incorporated into the city's master plan and has the potential to knit back together a social and physical fabric torn by the forces of economic development and race- and class-based control (the Interstate was built over Claiborne Avenue in order to spare the predominantly white, affluent French Quarter).

These two initiatives—despite being some years away from completion—point to the kind of architectural thought that the city has increasingly embraced after Hurricane Katrina, and the kind that has the potential to shift public understanding of the natural environment away from an adversarial, confrontational relationship with it to a more integrated and fluid one. This shift has the potential in turn to reawaken a public consciousness of the fragility of the landscape; a reawakening whose impacts would do well to extend far past the city's borders. Katrina is now a touchstone, like so many other disasters, for a renewed relationship to the natural world and a harbinger and an omen of what could and will happen elsewhere. As Curtis noted, "The past here has much to inform the future, not just for New Orleans, but for an entire country that needs to rethink the way it designs cities and homes."[26]

25   Robert Baumbach, Robert and William Borah,. The Second Battle of New Orleans: A History of the Vieux Carré Riverfront Expressway. (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 1981).

Lolis Eric Elie , Lolis Eric and Dawn Logsdon,. Faubourg Tremé: The Untold Story of Black New Orleans. DVD film. 68 minutes. Serendipity Films, 2008.

26   Wayne Curtis, 'Houses of the Future.' The Atlantic Monthly, November 2009 at: http://www.theatlantic. com/doc/200911/curtis-architecture-new-orleans. [accessed 30 November 2009].

Whether this intangible process of reconsideration or indeed any of the tangible interventions detailed above would have occurred had the levees not failed and the flood not come—whether the city would have simply shrugged off yet another hurricane and continued on its way on 29 August 2005—is a tantalising question, and belongs as much to the realm of counterfactual history as it does the ways in which we now articulate sustainability in the 21st century. We now live in the 'new' New Orleans, but what would the old New Orleans left uninterrupted have looked like? To ask this question is to see the ways in which ecology informs not just architectural theory and practice, but historical thought as well. If ecology is understood as an approach whereby webs and fabrics of relationships are better illuminated, then it may be used productively to investigate the modes of thought we use to investigate those relationships just as much as those relationships themselves. As a mode, ecological thinking enables us to re-examine the fields, texts, grounds, buildings and sites with a view both towards maintaining sustainable ecologies—the natural environments themselves—and to the social and cultural networks in and around which they adhere. Considering these networks more fully, and their futures well within our envisioning and our grasp, will thus provide the ground for a continued reinvention of the city, ensuring and securing its impossibility for years to come.

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Highway 90 (to Waveland)

from the Mississippi Highway Sonnets

Tell me what you know of north and south.
I've never heard of any other road
but me, connecting the dark tannin mouth
of the Pascagoula to the darker wood
of Bois Sauvage to the west. Or so they say.
All I see is water, anymore. Water foaming in
forty feet tall, blending the noonday
beach into a filthy gumbo of roof tin,
light pole, drywall, corpses later found
spiked with nails and rebar, and the bridge
over the bay fallen like a matchstick house.
The gifts of latitude: a broken ridge
of salted bones of the coast's live oaks,
concrete slabs of homes, my compass, smoke.

The Lost Road

You could have seen rubies in the grass,
gold in the gutters, or jade upon the roofs.
Men could have stood bleeding out the ass
and lawyers could have been telling the truth.
The sun could have stopped off for a drink
and the moon could have taken its place;
the river could have run red with ink
and kids could have laughed without a face.
Tell me. Did any of these things happen
this morning on your walk into work?
You wouldn't know—so lost in thought,
so lost upon the way you like to take,
you didn't leave the path, you left the map.
And solved your little problem—but for what?