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**RECOVERY TO RESILIENCE**  
FINDING A TRANSDISCIPLINARY APPROACH TO COMMUNITY-BASED DESIGN

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## KEYWORDS

*Disaster recovery, public interest design, transdisciplinary, community engagement, Hurricane Katrina*

## ABSTRACT

*As the tenth anniversary of New Orleans' and arguably the United States' greatest disaster came and went on August 29<sup>th</sup> this year, it is important to look critically at steps taken towards recovery in order to understand whether the massive efforts undertaken within and outside our community have led to sustainability and resilience, and to inform ongoing and future recovery and revitalization efforts. Our investigation draws from critical urban theory as defined by Brenner: "grounded on an antagonistic relationship not only to inherited urban knowledges, but more generally, to existing urban formations. It insists that another, more democratic, socially just, and sustainable form of urbanization is possible, even if such possibilities are being suppressed through dominant institutional arrangements, practices and ideologies" (Brenner 2012).*

*The anniversary served as a celebration of resilience for local officials anxious to focus on the city's bright future and to let talk of a recovery-based economy lay behind us. On the ground, however, commemoration provided a pivot point in the thinking of local citizens, neighborhood groups, non-profit organizations, and those that serve them. It serves as well as a locus for counter-narratives of inequity and removal, for anger at hospitals closed, schools reordered, and a hundred thousand residents permanently displaced. These challenges are not new or unique to New Orleans, but the crucible of ten years of collaborative recovery work at the level of individuals, blocks, and neighborhoods allows us to organize and practice self-critique in the face of a changing economy, re-invented school system, upended healthcare structure, and other challenges.*


*Our perspective is shaped by witnessing a decade of top-down planning efforts, and by participating in official attempts at community engagement in recovery; some effective, some wildly ineffectual. While this work continues, now is a chance to refocus efforts towards building strong communities with equitable access to economic opportunity. It is a moment to recognize the successes and failures in the means of creating recovery to this point, with a focus on social justice and implementing changes and improvements meant to address broader and deeper problems facing our neighborhoods and the city at large.*

## AUTHOR BIOGRAPHIES

### *Introduction to the authors*

*In the immediate aftermath of Hurricane Katrina, neither of the authors was working for the Tulane City Center. We offer these brief biographies to ground our shared and differential perspectives on our work, as well as to frame our points of entry into the inherently transdisciplinary realm of disaster recovery and rebuilding.*

*Nick Jenisch, slated to begin work as Project Director for the Tulane Regional Urban Design Center (TRUDC) on the day Katrina struck, conducted recovery planning efforts from a number of outposts as Tulane University remained shuttered throughout Fall 2005. Notably, TRUDC collaborated in creating the official recovery plan for St. Bernard Parish, adjacent to New Orleans, and worked closely with mayors and administrators from small to mid-sized cities across the Gulf South Region to coordinate recovery plans, facilitate prioritization, and*



*suggest phased solutions. While many communities were not prepared to make nuanced recovery decisions, and arguably fruitful planning requires more time than federal funding allowed, these early projects at their base were designed to reach out to as many displaced residents as possible, display images of recovery, and provide a positive message of progress.*

***Sue Mobley**, who had recently finished graduate school at the American University in Cairo when Katrina hit, returned to New Orleans in February of 2006 as a family services AmeriCorps for the New Orleans Area Habitat for Humanity, acting as point person for recruitment of families and support for their home ownership process within the Musicians' Village project. While musicians were amongst the most referenced and recruited returnees, in stark contrast to other groups within New Orleans' working-class Black community, they remained subject to many of the same constraints of displacement and disenfranchisement that have left New Orleans with 90,000 fewer Black residents a decade after the storm (Sakakeeny, 2015). With employment uncertain, childcare non-existent, and the school and healthcare systems eviscerated, any focus on the long-term financial investment of home ownership was a secondary consideration, at best, to the urge to come home and get back to normal. For several years, Habitat was the most prolific home construction company working in New Orleans, a role that strained the organization's capacity and traditional process as well as raising the questions continuously posed by Executive Director Jim Pate: Where was the government? Where was everyone else?*

## INTRODUCTION TO THE CENTER

The Tulane City Center is the community design center of the Tulane University School of Architecture. Though conceived before Hurricane Katrina, the storm's aftermath sped the Center's formation and clarified its mission. The Center is oriented toward community-driven design, in which project ideas are generated by community-based organizations, supported by Center staff, and executed in coordination with faculty and students from Tulane School of Architecture. We provide design services to neighborhoods and non-profits on a wide variety of projects from urban farms to skate parks, and in ten years have executed more than 80 projects across the city, including more than 20 design/build efforts that were constructed by our students and staff.

While the Center has always focused on community-based work with the long-term goal of sustainability, the Katrina commemoration provided a shared context in which to reflect on our practices of engagement, means of execution, and long-term impact. Our city has emerged from a decade of uneven struggle to find that many of its steepest challenges remain intact, even as new ones emerge. Looking towards the next decade, we are faced with what Dr. King defined as "the fierce urgency of now," an acknowledgment that this anniversary is not a time for complacency. This recognition compels an expansion of programming to address larger systemic issues through education, graphic advocacy, and planning; it suggests working to expand partners, foster exchange, and engage policymakers towards the creation of vibrant neighborhoods and an equitable, resilient city.

Our approach in this article will be to present a general framework for the conditions and context in four major periods of the decade of New Orleans recovery from Hurricane Katrina. Understanding the progression of this recovery aids in the identification of successful planning and design methods and a recognition of inherent constraints; this will improve future pairing of design resources with community needs, and bring needed focus to the problems yet to be solved. We identify these periods as roughly, and subjectively, reflecting the shifting context of recovery, as well as the range of opportunities and constraints on participation and collaboration that inhere to each time frame. We will then offer a review of a few projects typical of Tulane City Center's work during the period, with a focus on the transdisciplinary and collaborative aspects of each.

For the purposes of this discussion, we define transdisciplinary work as that which engages organizational and individual collaborators from different disciplines, with discipline defined as including academic, professional and social positions, who contribute their unique expertise to shape a project. The Center engages those with expertise appropriate to project-specific design and engagement goals, but also organizes and hosts collaborative sessions and design reviews that invite "outside" voices to critique a project's approach, design, engagement, and presentation. Foundations help shape presentation narratives to improve clarity for projects seeking funding, business experts question pro-

posed development plans and suggest means of operational stability, community leaders remind projects to focus on end-users and plan for long-term maintenance, and elementary and high school students bring a variety of perspectives that equally serve projects aimed at their demographic and those that are not.

### IMMEDIACY OF RECOVERY (2005-06)

Disaster breeds chaos, and plenty of both befell New Orleans and the US Gulf Coast in 2005. While the immediacy of recovery needs predominates all levels of dialogue in the days and weeks following a disaster, soon there is room to assess loss and devise strategies for recovery. Perhaps controversially, those less affected by the storm (including outsiders) and with interest in shaping the redevelopment of New Orleans were least burdened with individual recovery and therefore most able to participate in broad strategic planning sessions aimed at kick-starting the City's recovery.

As is so often the case immediately after a disaster, a flood of outside assistance created impromptu partnerships and provided access to resources but most often resulted in compartmentalized relief efforts and expeditious planning without solid implementation strategies. While many of the actors and organizations involved were transdisciplinary in their assemblage, local knowledge, a key element in shaping the disciplines represented, orientation of assessment, and approaches was all too often lacking in this stage of recovery. As early as December of 2006, social justice organizers and activists in New Orleans drafted an open letter to foundations and funders outlining their frustrations:

“Instead of prioritizing efforts led by people who are from the communities most affected, we have seen millions of dollars...either remain unspent or shuttled to well-placed outsiders with at best, a cursory knowledge of the realities faced by people here. Instead of reflecting local needs and priorities, many projects funded reflect outside perception of what our priorities should be.” (New Orleans-Based activists, 2017)

It is worth noting, if only as a measure of our collective ethos, that many of the signatories were or would be organizational partners for the first decade of Tulane City Center projects. This core group, diverse by any measure, and inherently transdisciplinary in their own approaches, provided the impetus for a variety of early projects that were useful, sometimes impactful and often beautiful, in a city that desperately needed beauty.

Any recovery is plagued with its own immediacy and burdened with memory; things must be restored as they once were or the effort would be seen as a failure. During early planning efforts, outside funders, volunteer experts, and even local representatives questioned the viability of bringing New Orleans back exactly as it once was. Initial plans flirted with an approach that would have reshaped the occupiable footprint of the city overnight, but history, politics, and importantly an effort to treat all neighborhoods

equally meant that resources would be spread across the nearly 200-square-mile city creating outcomes that in the longer-term would be anything but equal.

A generous offering of professional services from planning to architecture and beyond brought hope to a city and region in shock. But ideas that might fundamentally reshape the city fell on the deaf and damaged ears of a bedraggled citizenry simply hoping to return home. While navigating the bureaucracy of recovery, New Orleans' residents were also subject to commentary that felt like threats to home, neighborhood, and identity, like that of former RTA Chair James Reiss, who determined that New Orleans would be rebuilt, "in a completely different way: demographically, geographically and politically." (Cooper, 1990)

Meanwhile, the need for community engagement and collaborative design work became ever clearer to those living in New Orleans in the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina. Before, after, and even during more formalized planning efforts, neighborhoods worked at a grass-roots level to envision their *own* recovery; in some ways, this would be the only scale of work that mattered to the average citizen during the early recovery period.

Shrinking the occupiable footprint of the city was an impossible, and arguably inappropriate, task within early recovery planning. Most politicians were unwilling to take the unpopular stance that New Orleans might emerge from the country's biggest disaster a changed place. The balkanized past of New Orleans' municipal institutions, stark racial and class divisions, and the simple realities of disaster recovery created a competitive landscape amongst various districts, parishes, and constituencies. Inter-city rail, connecting downtown with the airport, Baton Rouge and beyond; concentrating recovery efforts on high ground; and other large scale proposals would need to wait.

#### ST. BERNARD PARISH CITIZENS' RECOVERY PLAN

Regional governments were required to submit recovery plans, a task entrusted to the Citizens' Recovery Committee in St. Bernard Parish; downriver from New Orleans, its closest neighborhoods sit just 15 minutes from the French Quarter. With more than 90% of the Parish suffering severe flooding, the local government faced the immediate challenges of self-survival, street clearing, and only the beginning of a long struggle to bring back basic services. St. Bernard also faced pressure to reconstitute its industrial behemoths in oil and sugar refining, a source of income, jobs, and community pride. The Parish was not immediately ready to consider site planning for a long-proposed hospital, or the formation of a new walkable shopping district, as several planning charrettes suggested. Neither was it ready to tackle long-term planning, working first to ensure the possibility, if not probability, of repopulation. However, early recovery plans did serve to bring people together, including digital and physical gatherings of the Katrina-scattered diaspora.

Importantly, the plan identified areas of concentration and priority regarding both recovery and long-term sustainability. To the extent possible, the plan identified areas best positioned to recover quickly, services critical to long-term viability, including public safety and health care, and introduced the potential for no-build zones where redevelopment would risk repetitive damage from future storms (this last idea was quickly quashed in St. Bernard, New Orleans, and elsewhere as the fundamental right to return to one's particular neighborhood trumped long-term sustainability concerns).

One key finding that led to further work in the area by collaborators Waggonner & Ball Architects was the critical importance of planning with consideration for water management. Especially while the fate of the compromised levee system remained in question, it was important to propose bold plans that included moving willing residents to new neighborhoods, property swaps and buy-outs, evacuation routes, and improved water management paired with revised building codes and standards.

The St. Bernard Citizens' Recovery Plan was collaborative in the grass-roots sense of the word; with an "all hands on deck" mentality, members supplied legal and engineering expertise while working alongside the effort's architects and planners. Federal, state, and local entities worked concurrently, if not in concert. The longer-term collaborations and funding mechanisms that would bring significant recovery in the subsequent ten years were only wish list items during this early work. However, the spirit of cooperation that led to more intentional transdisciplinary collaborations during later phases of recovery was born in the intense crucible of immediate recovery. Meeting and sweating together in temporary tents to make necessarily blunt decisions about resources and priorities connects in a straight line to the better designed engagement and multidisciplinary projects now in process.

#### ADJUDICATED PROPERTIES RESEARCH

With 3,000 city employees laid off by then Mayor Ray Nagin, there was little capacity on the municipal level to manage more than the core functions of governing; as individual homeowners struggled to negotiate insurance companies and unclear FEMA flood elevation guidelines they also faced an unwieldy municipal permit process with only 6 inspectors, down from 8 pre-storm, to serve the entire rebuilding city. The City of New Orleans sought approaches to distribute properties it owned before the storm as well as what would become 5,000 additional houses acquired through the Road Home process.

Emerging from the ReInhabiting NOLA conference hosted by Tulane School of Architecture and Xavier University in November 2005, the Adjudicated Properties Research project was one of the Center's first forays into a model of convening peer institutions and leveraging design and planning as a coordinating tool. With Fannie Mae providing funding, the Center hosted a summit in February 2006; in attendance were City of New Orleans agency leadership, local professionals, and experts from the National Vacant

Properties Campaign; all of whom contributed to shaping a methodology for the Center to assist the City in mapping and documenting adjudicated properties.

The Adjudicated Properties project team worked to compile data from various City agencies on properties in six key New Orleans neighborhoods; supplementing this core information with photo documentation of each property, any adjacent properties, a description of building condition, and its location on Sanborn maps.

The resulting study provided a critical tool for the non-profit housing developers who had been offered City-owned property, but needed support in developing proposals to acquire a minimum package of 50 lots to meet the program requirements. Ongoing coordination, collaboration, and engagement helped to level the playing field for organizations serving New Orleans' low-income population in an overall context where only 15% of the CDBG funding channeled through Road Home was allocated for rebuilding affordable housing, including rental units which accounted for 40% of the housing stock destroyed by the storm (Davida 2008).

### FILLING THE GAPS (2007-08)

After a rocky start, federal recovery funding began to flow through state entities that coalesced into the Louisiana Recovery Authority (LRA), and was quickly tied to requirements for planning and outreach. This tactic provided realistic goals but in application was disparately punitive to the hardest hit neighborhoods, hard-pressed to gather public input from a still-scattered population and to prove viability and recovery potential with insurance settlements and rebuilding funds yet undecided.

Much of the city struggled to re-establish neighborhood networks, identity, and associated political strength. The LRA created a funding mechanism which tied rebuilding awards to the pre-storm value of homes rather than the costs required to rebuild. Inevitably, this led to lesser awards in poorer and less "market valuable" neighborhoods; particularly in communities of color where recovery reproduced the effects of historic and current discriminatory practices.<sup>1</sup> In these areas, fewer were able to rebuild due to inflated post-recovery labor and materials costs (Gotham 2014).

Still, some well-organized and other well-funded neighborhoods and populations were able to express a vision of recovery and brand and promote their return (e.g. "Broadmoor lives!"). Such efforts included grass-roots activism, political advocacy, volunteers, and pro bono design services. Notably, an alliance between the Broadmoor Improvement Association (BIA) and Harvard's Kennedy School, alongside additional help from the Business School and Graduate School of Design, helped guide a strategic recovery plan focused on making a return to the neighborhood as easy as possible (Wooten 2012).

These collaborations were made necessary by local and regional governments overloaded with widely dispersed recovery needs. Because recovery funding programs are



not standardized, governments and residents must create and then wade through new systems of distribution and accountability. The institutional ‘alphabet soup’ one could be exposed to in accessing recovery funds was daunting; neighborhood groups and non-profits forged collaborations to interpret rules, share information, dispel rumors, and guide overall recovery. The complicated landscape of resources was such that a recovery-based economy emerged, including groups set up to simply organize the flow of volunteers and donations from provider to recipient.

Since the influx of large numbers of Vietnamese immigrants to New Orleans in the 1970s, a far-flung neighborhood called Village de L’Est has been known as a close-knit community. Having already tackled a number of recovery initiatives by 2007, including a successful mobilization to block a landfill for storm debris in their neighborhood, their local CDC called upon the Tulane City Center to help create a vision for expanded farmland and market space, building upon a long tradition of local food production.

#### VIET VILLAGE URBAN FARM

The Vietnamese-American community in New Orleans East has maintained an extensive network of community gardens since the 1970s. These gardens produced food not readily available in the area at the time, and were used by the growers to feed their families. For nearly as long, the community has hosted an informal farmers’ market each Saturday morning where residents gather not only to buy and sell food but to maintain the rich cultural practices brought with their community from Vietnam.

The Center worked with the Mary Queen of Vietnam Community Development Corporation (MQVNCDC) to develop a strategy for the implementation of a 28-acre urban farm and farmers market in Village de L’Est. Partnering with LSU’s Robert Reich School of Landscape Architecture and the University of Montana’s Environmental Studies program, the Center collaborated with community leaders to design expanded small-scale commercial farming, community garden plots, a chicken farm, lagoon, and children’s play area.

Even in this early recovery period, such a visioning exercise and design project was possible because of the strength of the partner organization, their precedent of community input and participation, and longstanding cultural traditions that made up the project’s proposed programmatic elements. Nonetheless, with other recovery needs still pressing, funding and implementation remained elusive.

#### IDEA VILLAGE

Drawing on a local history of small formal and informal businesses, as well as the national context of an extant neoliberal consensus that is broad enough to embrace both micro-finance to support neighborhood vendors and tech start-ups as social investment, New Orleans has framed much of its “rebirth” with a decidedly entrepreneurial slant. Post Katrina, non-profit and public-private enterprises such as Propeller, Good Work Net-

work, The New Orleans Start-Up Fund, New Orleans Business Alliance, as well as new or expanded programs at area colleges and universities reflect a dedication to drawing and retaining a creative class of entrepreneurs; however, efforts to provide the support and funding needed to engage those from or serving low income communities are noticeably absent.

To address the physical and resource issues faced by recovering businesses in New Orleans, the Idea Village, a local non-profit organization with goals to support New Orleans entrepreneurs, sought to develop a network of community Business Innovation Centers. Intended as a catalyst to redevelop robust and neighborhood-specific commercial corridors, the Business Innovation Center provided access to retail, technology, technical assistance, financial services, and other essential resources to support innovation and investment throughout the community.

The Tulane City Center partnered with CCWIV Architects to provide schematic design services to Idea Village which had acquired a building in the 9th ward to develop the first Business Innovation Center along the North Galvez street commercial corridor. Through an additional partnership with the New Orleans Area Habitat for Humanity and with the support of students from Brown University and Wellesley College, door-to-door surveying of 9th ward residents and focus groups of Habitat homeowners helped to identify community priorities for new businesses, as well as spread awareness of the incubator as a resource.

The Center's role in this project was limited in scope, a model for intervention that we embrace in directing our services to their most effective application and encouraging collaboration with partners who will step in to apply their services in the same light. Idea Village built the Business Innovation Center with the help of Habitat for Humanity and eventually partnered with the Urban League for its ongoing programming. In 2014, the building was donated to the Urban League and remains in use as a workforce development center.

## **TARGETED NEIGHBORHOOD PROJECTS AND STABILIZATION (2008-12)**

By 2008, New Orleans had entered a period of relative stabilization, with over 70% of the population returned by the end of that year (Fussel et al., 2010), and the initial phases of recovery on a municipal level receding. On the ground, a deeply uneven recovery was well underway, due to flawed funding models, pre-existing inequities, and other factors. While uneven, federal dollars had a clear impact on the city. New Orleans and the region had not experienced soaring house prices at the level of many other US cities and states, and as a result did not suffer as severe economic consequences due to the burst housing bubble of 2008. In addition, the presence of federal recovery money (alongside high energy prices that benefitted energy-rich Louisiana (O'Donoghue, 2015)) buoyed the local economy as that of the nation and the world sputtered.

The Center continued to conduct community-based visioning and design-build projects throughout New Orleans. Requests for assistance remained varied, yet funders and partner organizations alike continued to take stock of their overall recovery, and some were well-positioned to consider broader impact initiatives addressing emerging challenges such as food access, neighborhood connectivity, cultural interpretation, and more. Such projects began to stretch the Center's model, but building upon all of its prior recovery work, we partnered with subject area experts, neighborhood leaders and other stakeholders to define and address these broader issues.

#### CIRCLE FOODS

Some of the most iconic pictures of Hurricane Katrina's flooding feature the bare tops of white arches and red tile roof of this historic building. The Circle Food Store has been serving the 7th ward and downtown community for over a century; initially as the St. Bernard market, one of a series of public markets throughout the city, and after 1938 as the city's first African-American-owned grocery store. Its loss in 2005 was no minor blow, for years after the storm, the 7th ward and much of downtown New Orleans lacked a supermarket, forcing residents to find groceries at convenience stores or travel several miles by bus or car (Rose et al., 2011).

This project reflected a significant shift in the Center's organizational model; while we typically provided services to non-profit and neighborhood-based organizations, partner organization Neighborhood Housing Services' 7th Ward Neighborhood Center approached us to help realize the comeback of this real asset in the neighborhood. The revitalization of the iconic *commercial* grocery fit the needs of the community and broadly aligned with strategic planning goals regarding health tied to food access. In a city of food deserts, the return of Circle Foods would signal the neighborhood's vitality, serving as a community center through its primary draw, as well as by providing additional services.

The Center worked with owner Dwayne Boudreaux to map out and make a case for the rebirth of his historic grocery. In Fall 2009, the Center produced a pre-design booklet, used as a tool to build support, awareness, and funding for the project. Critically, the team collaborated with Tulane's A.B. Freeman School of Business to supplement completed schematic designs and structural analysis with a viable business plan for the store. With community, political, and financial support secured, the store would undergo an intense restoration followed by its reopening in January 2014. Beyond Tulane's interdisciplinary approach, the success of the project is owed to the owner's determination and the coalition of residents, organizations, and political allies he built to help him realize the \$7 million renovation and re-establishment of 66 local jobs.

#### HOLLYGROVE GREENLINE

The Greenline is a former rail line that bisects New Orleans' Hollygrove neighborhood; fenced off and inaccessible, the land provides important underground storm water drain-

age, but represents a visual barrier and physical divider. Tied to the Center's prior food access work in the neighborhood, the initiative began in recognition of the need for additional urban farming land for use by local residents. Through further collaboration, research, and a student design studio, the project expanded to include the additional goals of water management, recreation, and historic interpretation.

The effort represents a comprehensive interdisciplinary team-building approach which, through three built phases, has taken advantage of the various capacities and skill sets of professionals and non-professionals alike. With landscape and water systems design by Dana Brown Landscape Architects, surveying and water management assessment by Engineers Without Borders, architecture and design by the Tulane City Center, native plant expertise and rain barrel demonstrations by Longue Vue House and Gardens, financial support, land lease, and programming by the Sewerage & Water Board, assistance from community powerhouse Trinity Christian Communities, community gathering facilitation by AARP, countless volunteers, and direct partnership with the Carrollton-Hollygrove Community Development Corporation, the project is a dynamic interdisciplinary pilot, though not without significant challenges and shortfalls.

Even in community-based design, in which altruistic intentions can create a congenial working environment that promotes problem-solving and the hurdling of political obstacles, project leaders must ensure design roles are clear to minimize conflicting styles and approaches amongst designers. Such projects can also suffer from sporadic funding and human resources; critical to success is a clear timeline to make best use of available talent, maintaining community interest and participation, and making transparent the expected pace of work. Collaborators providing pro bono services, though working with good intentions, are sometimes unable to produce at the same level as in their private sector work. This can lead to a diminished reputation for collaborative work and public interest design in general. Such shortfalls can set the starting line further back in subsequent efforts and erode trust amongst designers and community partners.

With a team of collaborators, each experienced in recovery planning and design and now focused on the broader issues facing New Orleans, the challenge of determining roles and responsibilities is greatly expanded. Just as a flood of outside help in the aftermath of Katrina proved necessary yet disorganized, clear commitments from all parties and long-term dedication of a core team is required for success and sustainability. Engagement is increasingly difficult and necessary; broader project goals must be tailored to provide needed services and programmatic uses, and loftier intentions aimed at *form* and *issue-based impact* cannot subsume more immediate and site-specific needs such as *shade* or *seating*.

Finally, clear definition of scope is critical for projects drawn from the same broad strategies, issues, and goals which can overwhelm them. Over more than 3 years, the Greenline has been rethought and redesigned countless times to reflect funding, community desires, best practices in sustainability, and neighborhood commitment. As the

political and funding landscapes change, elements of the design to be implemented will continue to follow suit.

## EXPANSION (2012-15)

Approaching the present, New Orleans has seen a level of public investment unparalleled since the early days of federal urban aid. Many of the projects are contentious, such as Reinventing the Crescent, a \$294 million riverside park development that connects the French Quarter to a planned \$30 million cruise ship terminal abutting the residential Bywater neighborhood.<sup>2</sup> Questions of priorities and populations served have also surrounded federal funds designated for major road and drainage work in Uptown neighborhoods and an expansion of the streetcar system through downtown tourist areas while overall public transit remains at 35% of its pre-Katrina levels.<sup>3</sup>

In 2013, New Orleans' role as host city for the Super Bowl prompted \$1.2 billion in public and private investment, including upgrades to the airport, the renovation of the Convention Center as well as street repairs in the French Quarter. Significant private investments in new construction and building conversion also emerged in the central business district and surrounding areas. Meanwhile the City continued to attract educated and relatively wealthy newcomers, now far beyond the first wave of "rebuilders" prompting concerns about gentrification and displacement in an urban context with no institutional memory of growth.

With a commitment to tackling larger issues without losing the impact of small and targeted visioning and built projects, the Center recognized an even greater need for continued partnership with neighborhood organizations and leaders, and *expanded* partnerships with municipal authorities and other institutions, ultimately allowing for projects with broad audiences and those that address strategic issues facing the City. This shift required additional professional staff and moving to a centralized location closer to many of its partner organizations. It has also required identifying and establishing working relationships with new collaborators to provide in depth area knowledge and new perspectives on projects.

As funding for recovery initiatives lessened greatly, municipal partnerships allowed the Center to help shape the focus and use of important funding streams aimed at economic development, cultural and architectural preservation, and placemaking. The Center was compelled to balance the limits of municipal bureaucracy with the promise of sustainable progress. Breaking the rules was almost a necessity in the face of liability constraints, while collaboration led to the rewriting of rules, legitimization of fringe groups and projects, and ultimately a shift in the conversation, edging ever closer to *doing* and *implementation*.

## PARISITE SKATE PARK

Parisite Skate Park (named after its proximity to Paris Ave.) was started by a group of skaters who took advantage of the vacant, under-utilized space beneath a highway overpass, transforming it into a makeshift skatepark. With growing popularity, this informal public space drew the attention of city officials who questioned the legal implications of operating such a recreational space. While the skaters formed a non-profit corporation called Transitional Spaces and began negotiations with City Hall to save the park, the Center worked with the group to expand and improve the skatepark. Recognizing the need for legitimization, negotiations between Tulane University and the City of New Orleans slowly made legal room for the project, completed in 2014.

In addition to creating a master plan for growth, as well as a plan for capacity building of the non-profit, the Center facilitated connections to legal, engineering, and other professional support necessary to grow Parisite into a fully operational public space. Working with city and state agencies (LA-DOT, the City's Design Advisory Committee, Capital Projects, City Attorney, and Tulane University) became a complex and time-consuming proposition, yet the acceptance and sustainability of the project hinged on just such collaborative support.

## GROW DAT YOUTH FARM

Incubated at Tulane University, Grow Dat Youth Farm is an education initiative based on a dynamic urban farm in New Orleans' City Park. Carved out of one of the heavily flooded park's public golf courses, the farm educates young people in all aspects of produce cultivation, production, food preparation, and marketing, supporting itself with produce sales while giving away nearly half of its harvests to program participants and those in need. The project builds upon the Center's prior food access projects, adding education, health, and skill-building in enhancing the project's impact and sustainability.

## NEW ORLEANS REDEVELOPMENT AUTHORITY (NORA) – FAÇADE RENEW &amp; PLACEMAKING

A partnership with NORA emerged from a desire to provide concentrated resources to several critical commercial corridors across the city. Intersecting culture, community, and commerce, the project aims to support existing business owners, bring vacant and blighted buildings back into commerce, and research and celebrate the history and culture of each targeted corridor. Collaboration in the implementation of this important work has expanded to include the City of New Orleans, corridor community groups and business associations, and private preservation experts capable of bringing each historic building back to life. The Center's challenge in this work and future efforts towards economic development is the critical market-making potential of such improvements. While the goal is to spur such investment, retaining long-time owners, maintaining affordabil-

ity for nearby residents, providing public spaces and encouraging private businesses that serve a diverse range of customers remain primary concerns.

#### MARDI GRAS INDIAN CULTURAL CAMPUS

The Mardi Gras Indian Council, Tulane City Center, LSU Robert Reich School of Landscape Architecture, and the Foundation for Louisiana partnered to create a community-driven development plan for a new and innovative cultural anchor drawn from New Orleans' historic neighborhoods and the culture bearers who live there. The plan was created to guide future economic development decisions for the campus and LaSalle Street corridor so that they embody the rich artistic and spiritual traditions, and deeply ingrained community values of the Mardi Gras Indians, Social Aid and Pleasure Club organizations.

The project explores strategies for equitable economic development on multiple infill sites and includes the feasibility of property and land acquisition, appropriate and respectful cultural tourism anchors, affordable housing opportunities, small business incubation, wholesale business opportunities, and public realm and infrastructure improvements. As with the NORA collaboration outlined above, this project must carefully balance the hopeful with the possible. Transforming available property into the headquarters of one of New Orleans' most recognizable cultural entities is infused with broader aims such as economic equity, and yet must be grounded in its specific location and programming.

#### FORWARDS FOCUS (2015-)

Ten years after Hurricane Katrina, successes and failures have been tallied, intense outside attention returned to account for recovery dollars spent, and new modes of work are being shaped and targeted towards a sustainable future for New Orleans. As external funding declines, the need for collaboration and strategic coordination of knowledge and resources will increase out of necessity. New challenges, such as holding together a coalition of disparate interests and shifting actors through the lengthy process of policy change are central to the work of addressing multifarious issues such as those at the intersection of education, workforce development, crime and policing practices. As the Center works with non-profit and neighborhood organizations to conduct targeted planning, visioning, and built projects, it also recognizes a need to convene and support broader discussions about equity within recovery, affordability, access to services, and development-driven change in our neighborhoods.

Organizations across New Orleans have honed their skills and refined their services through each stage of recovery. The city has become known as a hub for entrepreneurship, where ground-up initiatives find ample opportunity for incubation and eventual launch. Longer-established organizations, alternately, have adapted to real and perceived needs in the community, and should strive to develop projects directly from needs, as voiced

by neighborhood residents. Recognition of broader problems within the city has driven development of new project streams to help address these strategic, planning, access, and equity-based challenges facing New Orleans. The Center has endeavored to use graphic advocacy to explain municipal systems, larger scale neighborhood planning and corridor analysis, and is piloting public conversations tied to the projects and issues we approach. These efforts are needed at the Center and across New Orleans to move from the final phase of recovery towards work that addresses current and future challenges.

The role of a design center, convener, and member of the academic community will always be limited; constructing a robust interdisciplinary team is critical to reaching our goals. Internal collaboration is based on a range of professional staff expertise including planning, construction, architecture, landscape architecture, advocacy and engagement. The value derived from this diversity, along with the varied perspectives of our students and faculty only underscores the need to collaborate outside our own spheres and continue to challenge the initial assumptions of any project or problem.

## CONCLUSIONS

Pathways to systemic change require transdisciplinary study, independent collaboratives, highly localized knowledge, international information exchange with like and unlike parties, and a combination of confrontation and partnership with municipal leadership and regional authorities. New Orleans will continue to build on a decade of post-recovery experience. The Center and like organizations must now pivot to approach existing challenges through increased engagement, participatory iterative design, and contextual study; to undertake broader analysis and connect the dots between disparate efforts across our city and region; to listen and lead in the discussion of lessons learned and mistakes made; and to raise engagement as primary in design while still celebrating the role of designers.

In the context of pivoting towards an approach that recognizes systemic problems and challenges, it is equally important to continue to celebrate the impact of small and targeted works:

“In working with scrappy non-profits and grassroots community groups on individual projects that they identify, our commitment to depth over breadth is radical. We partner with those groups that are small but whose work is powerful. These projects and their impacts are small in relationship to the city, and to the devastation left in the wake of Katrina, but they are tangible and meaningful, and their influence is deep in the lives of the stakeholders.” (Etheridge, Dan, and Emilie Taylor, 2013)

Layering the small with the tall, public interest design should investigate its mistakes, innovate, collaborate, and try again.

Planning and design in the context of major urban recovery is complex and particular to region and locale. However, broad patterns of confusion, collaboration, and cohesion



emerged in the decade since Hurricane Katrina. Part of transdisciplinary collaboration in community-centered design is the exchange of information, tactics, stories, and truths. This outline of selected TCC projects attempts to meet that primary goal.

## CREDITS

*St. Bernard Parish Citizens' Recovery Plan* designed in collaboration with the St. Bernard Parish Citizens' Recovery Committee, Tulane Regional Urban Design Center, and Waggonner & Ball Architects. Sponsored by the St. Bernard Parish Citizens' Recovery Committee.

*Adjudicated Properties Research* completed in collaboration with the City of New Orleans, National Vacant Properties Campaign, and Tulane City Center. Sponsored by Fannie Mae.

*Viet Village Urban Farm* master plan designed in collaboration with Mary Queen of Vietnam Community Development Corporation, LSU Robert Reich School of Landscape Architecture, the University of Montana Environmental Studies Program, Tulane City Center, and Tulane School of Architecture students. Sponsored by Blue Moon Foundation New Orleans Food & Farm Network.

*Idea Village* schematic architectural plans and community surveying in collaboration with CCWIV Architects, Tulane City Center, and students from Brown University, Wellesley College, and the Tulane School of Architecture. Sponsored by Idea Village.

*Circle Foods* schematic designs and business plan completed in collaboration with Circle Foods, the Tulane University A.B. Freeman School of Business, Tulane City Center, and Tulane School of Architecture students.

*Hollygrove Greenline* park master plan and implementation led by Judith Kinnard, FAIA, in collaboration with the Carrollton-Hollygrove Community Development Corporation, Trinity Christian Communities, Twin Shores Landscape & Construction Service, Dana Brown Landscape Architects, Tulane City Center, and Tulane School of Architecture students. Sponsored by the Surdna Foundation.

*Parisite Skate Park* design and implementation in collaboration with Transitional Spaces, Dana Brown Landscape Architects, Tulane City Center, and Tulane School of Architecture students. Sponsored by the Surdna Foundation & Johnson Controls, Inc.

*Grow Dat Youth Farm* design and implementation led by Scott Bernhard, AIA, in collaboration with Grow Dat, Tulane City Center, and Tulane School of Architecture students. Sponsored by Johnson Controls, Inc. & private donors.

*Façade Renew & Placemaking* historic research, architectural preservation plans, and schematic designs conducted in collaboration with the New Orleans Redevelopment Authority, Clio Associates, Tulane City Center, and Tulane School of Architecture students. Sponsored by the New Orleans Redevelopment Authority.

*Mardi Gras Indian Cultural Campus* corridor study and campus plan led by Maurice Cox in collaboration with the Mardi Gras Indian Council, LSU Robert Reich School of Landscape Architecture, Tulane City Center, and Tulane School of Architecture students. Sponsored by the Foundation for Louisiana.

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## NOTES

- 1 Greater New Orleans Fair Housing Action Center et al v. U.S. Dep't of Housing and Urban Development and Paul Rainwater, District Court for District of Columbia, Case No. CV-01938
- 2 [http://www.louisianaspeaks-parishplans.org/SecureSite/View\\_LTRForm1.cfm?ProjID=1278](http://www.louisianaspeaks-parishplans.org/SecureSite/View_LTRForm1.cfm?ProjID=1278)
- 3 *The State of Transit in New Orleans: Ten Years After Katrina*. New Orleans: RIDE New Orleans, 2015. <http://rideneworleans.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/08/sots2015new.pdf>