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Razing Lafitte

Defending Public Housing From a Hostile State

Leigh Graham

In December 2007, as protesters clashed with police outside City Hall, the New Orleans City Council voted to move forward with the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development’s (HUD) proposed demolition of the Big Four public housing projects, Lafitte, C. J. Peete, B. W. Cooper, and St. Bernard, and their replacement with mixed-income developments. Public housing in New Orleans would be reduced by 70% (Browne-Dianis & Sinha, 2008) as part of a broader privatization effort targeting public schools, hospitals, and housing pushed by the federal government after Hurricane Katrina. Local and national resistance to HUD’s plan, announced in June 2006 following the August 2005 hurricane and delayed in part by a class action lawsuit from former tenants, had been immediate, sustained, and multifaceted. Direct action housing activists in New Orleans staged tent cities in protest; nonprofit legislative advocacy coalitions championed federal legislation that would require evidence-based plans for phased redevelopment and one-for-one replacement with physical units or housing vouchers. Yet, the tenant plaintiffs lost, federal legislation stalled in committee, and HUD’s insistence on deconcentrating the pre-hurricane poverty of New Orleans prevailed in the face of severe affordable housing and labor shortages and widespread residential displacement.

In the transformation of New Orleans public housing, nonprofit organizations across the urban policy spectrum have been directly involved in the debates and efforts to preserve, defend, demolish, and rebuild these former public housing sites. The contentious politics surrounding the redevelopment of the Lafitte projects in the historic, African American, central city neighborhood of Tremé, a telling case of the strategic conflicts housing advocates face in public housing transformation, is the focus of this analysis (see the map in the Appendix). The key actors in this study are national and local community development practitioners and their social justice, social service, policy advocacy, labor, academic, and community organizing counterparts who work on the long-term recovery of devastated low-income neighborhoods in New Orleans.

This case reveals how the qualified outcomes of the HOPE VI program and specific institutional and historical circumstances of New Orleans collided in the post-Katrina moment to confound strategic opportunities for these
nonprofit organizations. Broader conflicts over mixed-income housing and the transformation of the nation's public housing stock unfolded in a post-disaster region characterized by hostile government leadership and robust and punitive policies of privatization.

Post-Katrina New Orleans presented an historic moment in which housing, development, and social justice advocates felt they had to step in and direct an original American city’s recovery in the face of willful federal indifference to its survival. Powerful and energized organizational leaders entered New Orleans with pledges and resources to support unprecedented resident organizing and community control of recovery and rebuilding. Yet, instead, an antagonistic federal state intent on privatization as a recovery strategy forced these nonprofits back into familiar, well-worn urban development territory: siloed revitalization efforts narrowly framed around site development. What has emerged as a model public housing revitalization project, Faubourg Lafitte, began as a much-maligned concession prize for a recovery network of organizations committed to a new, transcendent model of urban equitable development.

This analysis is part of a growing body of research interrogating the role of the nonprofit sector in the recovery of New Orleans (see, e.g., Arena, 2012; Bond Graham, 2011; Graham, 2010, 2012; Sinha, 2009). This contribution centers the perspective of the nonprofits working in the community development field and examines the limitations to their practice when the state is the adversary rather than the partner. This is a particularly important inquiry when evaluating the evolving role of public housing in the United States as an affordable housing option for low-income urban communities. Public-private partnerships are at the core of HOPE VI. What strategic options exist for housing and community development nonprofits when the state has abdicated its responsibilities to low-income communities, as was the charge in post-Katrina New Orleans, and civil society is forced to pick up the pieces in its absence?

Data and Methods

This analysis is part of a larger ethnographic project in post-Katrina New Orleans from 2005 to 2009 (see especially Graham, 2010, 2012). I was a participant-observer as a consultant and scholar in a loosely affiliated network of organizations seeking to build a recovery coalition to rebuild the city’s poorest neighborhoods and bring displaced low-income New Orleans home. I worked with just over 60 practitioners, activists, consultants, and philanthropists representing 28 different organizations focusing on New Orleans’ recovery, specifically the redevelopment of low-income, African American neighborhoods and the repatriation of displaced residents. Entities ranged from grassroots, informal (i.e., no 501(c)(3) status) emergency action groups, to the major labor unions, with philanthropy, organizing, and development organizations most common.

For descriptive purposes, as proxy for insider-outsider dynamics and the potential power differentials associated with organization size and proximity to centers of power (e.g., Washington, DC),1 organizational headquarters and 2006 assets are briefly summarized here. These 28 organizations were almost evenly split between the New Orleans region and the Northeast.2 Fifteen were based in or around New Orleans. Non-local organizations were on average larger than local entities. Using 2006 net assets as an approximation of organizational resources, the median asset base for a New Orleans organization was $6.9 million, compared with $37 million for Northeast organizations.3

In this analysis, a smaller cohort of organizations plays a central role and their actions are described in detail here. Given that their recovery work is public knowledge, organizational names are unchanged. However, when quoting different actors, I removed organizational affiliations and most identity markers to protect anonymity.

Committing to the “Right to Return” of Displaced New Orleanians

In the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina, the leadership of a range of national nonprofit community development entities, labor unions, policy organizations, and their urban planning and development colleagues in academia began discussing a coordinated response to Hurricane Katrina. Many of these executives led entities with subsidiary 501(c)(3)s in New Orleans and the Gulf Coast that they now were trying to assist, or had been contacted by New Orleans groups or the Louisiana government to provide recovery technical assistance.4

These conversations built on leaders’ long-standing personal and professional relationships. Although these organizations ranged from community development corporations (CDCs) to foundations to civil rights legal teams, their interorganizational and interpersonal relationships constitute a loosely cohered recovery network.5 This network developed what social movement scholars call a shared injustice frame (Benford & Snow, 2000; Gamson, 1992; Goodwin, Jasper, & Polletta, 2001), articulating a demonstrative move by the federal government toward urban privatization and permanent displacement of the urban poor from New Orleans. Hurricane Katrina’s cause and consequences,
that is, the willful federal government indifference to and neglect of a unique American city and its most vulnerable residents, the majority of them Black and poor, leading to their possible permanent displacement and exclusion from recovery processes, was the source of moral outrage for these organizational actors. This extended toward a shared diagnosis that fulfilling the right to return of the displaced should be their primary objective. Indeed, the “right of return’ of displaced New Orleanians was a claim used by a broad range of recovery actors” (Graham, 2012, p. 6); it became “the motto of the reconstruction movement, used widely within and beyond movement circles” (Luft, 2009, p. 516). HUD even incorporated it in its post-Katrina redevelopment plans.

Organizational leaders saw their collective response as nothing short of a social movement, grounded in a mutual desire to reignite their shared activist histories in Black social movements and workers’ and immigrants’ rights campaigns. One executive from a national community development intermediary characterized New Orleans as the site of “the next Civil Rights movement” (personal communication, February 20, 2006). A consultant retained by an international relief organization to advise on funding grassroots recovery and organizing viewed Katrina as “an opportunity to organize a strong movement in the South” (personal communication, October 25, 2005). A radical left activist in New Orleans saw reconstruction as only occurring equitably through a “real, popular, pro-working class, anti-racist… movement developing our own plans, making demands and struggling to implement them” (personal communication, November 6, 2005). A local grassroots coalition, the People’s Hurricane Relief Fund and Oversight Committee (PHRF), saw “movement mobilization nationwide” backing union-community partnerships envisioning “what kind of society we want” as a key ingredient in an equitable recovery response (People’s Hurricane Relief Fund & Oversight Committee, personal communications, September 29, 2005 and October 10, 2005). Many scholars and activists called for a renewed social movement in the aftermath of Katrina (Dawson, 2006; Dreier, 2006a, 2006b; Giroux, 2006; Luft, 2009; Muhammad, 2006; Sanyika, 2009). These organizational leaders, including women and men, African American, White, Asian American, based in New Orleans and nationwide, believed they could heed this call.

Building a Recovery Coalition in Post-Katrina New Orleans

Institutional missions, expertise, cultures, and histories shaped the specific strategies national and local organizations aimed to employ in post-Katrina New Orleans. Yet, a broadly defined, multifaceted goal united organizations and encouraged their collaboration: to empower the voices of low-income, African American New Orleanians most likely to be displaced and left out of post-disaster recovery processes, and to rebuild their communities in a more equitable, more inclusive, more participatory way. Organizational leaders envisioned sustainable citizen political and economic empowerment, by organizing residents to participate in recovery planning processes as well as in the physical rebuilding process through job training, job placement, and ownership investments in community assets. Citizen empowerment would necessarily follow from carefully designed planning and rebuilding processes that provided good jobs, high wages, asset building, and citizen decision making and control over their communities’ recovery. The potential organizational resources available to this endeavor included philanthropic funds, labor union pension funds, union organizing and construction skills, union apprenticeship programs, community development finance and housing production expertise, policy expertise and legislative access, and grassroots ties to New Orleans neighborhoods that centered Black political power and leadership and built on communities’ cultural assets and histories.

A major rationale for coalition building was to overcome the fractious ethno-racial, class, and neighborhood politics among community-based groups in New Orleans and instead project one loud, demonstrative, and powerful voice speaking for the displaced poor (Thompson, 2009). Representatives from national and local organizations envisioned exerting political power to become a major actor in rebuilding on behalf of low-income communities of color (personal communication, n.d.). At one coalition-building effort in Washington, DC, in the fall of 2005, labor unions, progressive funders, social movement organizations, planning faculty, and grassroots groups debated whether they could find a demonstration block to test organizing-driven physical redevelopment and meet workforce development objectives (personal communication, November 11, 2005).

Defending Tremé

Coalition building was driven in part by an abstract fear of rampant speculation, land grabs, and backroom deals to buy up property in New Orleans that would lead to gentrification and permanent displacement (personal communication, February 20, 2006). The entire footprint of New Orleans seemed up for grabs, considering the
financial and leadership bankruptcy of the city encouraged a recovery strategy of “rebuild at your own risk” (Gelinas, 2008) that was particularly welcoming to private-sector development. Explained one African American community activist and lawyer during a visit from one of the national unions, organizers had a responsibility to orient themselves and others to “get beyond that every group wants to claim” the city and to focus on developing New Orleans “the way it could look,” because people did not want to come home to what it looked like after Katrina (personal communication, February 20, 2006).

These fears, as well as the desire to have a “stake in the ground” (personal communication, n.d.) around which resident-led reconstruction would unfold, privileged land acquisition as a strategy within the coalition. Moderately damaged and geographically central low-income African American neighborhoods seemed particularly at risk for speculation and gentrification. Their proximity to downtown, moderate hurricane damage, and position on the higher ground of the city also made them desirable sites for resident-led, equitable development strategies. Tremé stood out as the site for a demonstration or model initiative, following the recommendation in November 2005 of a local CDC leader advising national organizations about their entrance to New Orleans (personal communication, n.d.). From an initial site visit in New Orleans, one planning colleague wrote:

Tremé has access to a large number of services, abuts the French Quarter, and is facing severe pressure for gentrification. It is bisected by a freeway entrance that separates what is now called Back of Town from the section currently known as Tremé though both are historically part of the area. The back of town area had a great deal of potential for targeted redevelopment. Really nice architecture, significant flood damage, strong historical presence (birthplace of jazz), etc. This is an area that could be well served as a model and will be almost immediately reknit into the city’s fabric. If we can figure out how to do something there, it could then be transferred to some of the other neighborhoods that are not as well connected, like the lower 9th…All in all, from a real estate perspective, the Central City and the Tremé make a great deal of sense as focused areas for redevelopment. (personal communication, November 3, 2005)

Tremé is one of the most historic Black neighborhoods in the United States, home to the first free people of color in the United States. It is home to the largest Black Catholic congregation in the United States and is the historic heart of the Creole community in New Orleans. It was also cut in half by highway construction (I-10) in the era of Urban Renewal, losing its vibrant Black business corridor and suffering from economic and urban decline in the decades that followed. Given its historical significance, relative damage, and geographic location, the opportunity to redevelop Tremé in partnership with residents seemed highly symbolic and important to national and local organizations as the recovery process unfolded. Tremé was “the community to organize,” explained one national community development leader, as the “easiest quick win” and as a priority neighborhood in the plan put forth by Mayor Ray Nagin’s recovery planning body, the Bring New Orleans Back (BNOB) Commission (personal communication, February 20, 2006; March 7, 2006).

As the months passed and strategic planning and coalition building continued, the American Federation of Labor and Congress of Industrial Organizations (AFL-CIO) and the national community development intermediary Enterprise Community Partners were both moving forward in their efforts to make a long-term and deep commitment to New Orleans. Enterprise had partnered with the New Orleans-based Catholic Charities, the largest social service provider in the region that was rebounding rapidly in the face of tremendous need. The AFL-CIO and Enterprise and Catholic Charities both hoped to build in New Orleans new organizational and housing production capacity, new affordable housing, and a stronger, more empowered workforce and neighborhoods. For Enterprise and Catholic Charities, “no net loss of affordable housing” (personal communication, n.d.) in rebuilding was a professional and moral imperative. Enterprise and Catholic Charities together launched Providence Community Housing, a citywide nonprofit community development corporation to carry out housing redevelopment activities. The AFL-CIO planned to incorporate community-based organizations into a proposed billion-dollar economic development initiative.

To Raze or Re-Open Lafitte?

When Katrina struck, the Housing Authority of New Orleans (HANO) was under federal receivership, making HUD the primary local agency responsible for public housing in the city. Since Katrina, local and national groups had watched HUD’s actions and inactions around public housing carefully and with growing anger. Rumors abounded about HUD’s plans for the city’s public housing, especially at the four sites the agency boarded up and fenced off in December 2005, including the Lafitte development in Tremé (see Figure 1).
HUD’s decision to seal off select projects was described by one CDC leader in New Orleans as “criminal” and “effectively preventing any public housing resident from returning to NOLA.” This person hoped that “there is a group of lawyers who are taking this issue on” (personal communication, December 7, 2005). (At the time, attorneys from the Loyola Law Clinic were fielding calls from displaced tenants about if and when they would be able to come home.) Similarly, following a housing subcommittee meeting of the BNOB Commission in early November, a colleague reported that “there was an interesting discussion that centered on people [angered] by the notion that mixed-income neighborhoods were intended to replace poor neighborhoods, and that poor people were not going to get the same proportion of units in the rebuilt New Orleans as they had pre-Katrina” (personal communication, November 4, 2005). Some organizations in this recovery coalition believed that HUD would pursue rehabilitation or modest redevelopment to public housing, including Lafitte, and that private-sector partners for planning, redevelopment, and organizing would be needed and welcome. But, for the most part, in the post-disaster climate of a reticent and impassive federal state, with asymmetries of information and innuendo and confusion, most private-sector organizations were trying to devise recovery strategies based on little or unconfirmed information.

Summer 2006 saw a series of high-profile announcements and plans that effectively signed off recovery control for Tremé/Lafitte to a national–local coalition of nonprofits. Over a series of meetings unfolding in the spring of 2006, the AFL-CIO, Enterprise, Providence, MIT urban planning faculty and students, Tulane architecture faculty, Ujamaa CDC in Tremé, and other organizations had...
developed a cohesive vision for a coalition-led neighborhood redevelopment process in Tremé that integrated resident organizing, community planning, and the acquisition of blighted and adjudicated properties (Brown, 2006). During this strategic planning phase, it was still unclear what might happen to Lafitte.

Two major initiatives were disclosed on June 14, 2006. The AFL-CIO announced a $1 billion “housing and economic development” commitment to New Orleans, its Gulf Coast Revitalization Program, “…the first major infusion of private capital into the Gulf Coast since [the 2005] hurricanes. In the absence of meaningful help from the federal government, the AFL-CIO project is expected to open the door for other substantial investments in rebuilding the area” (Parks, 2006). The program launched in Tremé with a proposed partnership with the newly formed Providence Community Housing, MIT, and others to redevelop 196 adjudicated and blighted properties there. On that same day, HUD announced its plans to “use a mix of federal public housing funding HANO receives annually, as well as bond funds and Low Income Housing Tax Credits to redevelop C.J. Peete, B.W. Cooper, Lafitte and St. Bernard, which endured moderate to severe damage. The units will be demolished to make way for a mixture of public housing, affordable rental housing and single-family homes” (White, 2006). The 896 units in Lafitte would face the wrecking ball, to be replaced by mixed-income properties. Combined with the almost 200 properties the AFL-CIO and Providence proposed to redevelop, the residential built environment of Tremé/Lafitte would be substantially transformed.

Two weeks later, The Advancement Project, a national civil rights advocacy organization, and a team of local attorneys, including those at Loyola Law Clinic who had been previously organizing displaced tenants, filed a class action lawsuit against HUD and HANO on behalf of public housing tenants, citing U.S. housing policy, constitutional rights, and international human rights law as grounds for residents’ right to return to their homes and the right to participate in recovery efforts (Anderson v. Jackson, 2006). Six weeks later, in early August 2006, the AFL-CIO and Providence-led organizational team was awarded the 196 adjudicated and blighted properties for redevelopment in Tremé and the Tulane/Gravier neighborhood. Shortly before the first anniversary of Hurricane Katrina, in late August, Enterprise Community Partners and Providence Community Housing (hereafter Providence/Enterprise, per their materials) were revealed as the nonprofit redevelopment team to transform Lafitte. Providence/Enterprise, despite HUD’s wishes, committed to one-for-one replacement that would ensure one physical unit built for each one that was demolished.

**Fulfilling the Right to Return for Lafitte Tenants**

The responses to HUD’s demolition plans by The Advancement Project and its civil rights colleagues versus Providence/Enterprise reflected competing approaches to fulfilling displaced tenants’ right to return to New Orleans. Both strategies began from the perspective that the state was willfully discriminating against low-income Black New Orleanians by refusing to reopen structurally sound, moderately damaged, public housing. Both approaches built on the belief that civil society organizations must step in to repatriate displaced New Orleanians and help them rebuild their lives, in effect acting as a “quasi-government” (personal communication, n.d.) since the Bush Administration had demonstrably abdicated its responsibilities to the most vulnerable Katrina survivors.

These convictions and associated strategic actions have multiple foundations, for the legal team, the U.S. Fair Housing Act, the U.S. Housing Act of 1937, international law, and the 5th and 14th amendments to the U.S. Constitution all mandate HUD and HANO repair and reopen public housing so that “internally displaced” tenants may come home and “rebuild their lives” (Anderson v. Jackson, 2006). HUD and HANO’s intent to demolish and shrink the public housing stock was discriminatory, in violation of tenants’ right to equal protection under the Constitution, and in violation of the state’s responsibility to rehouse “internally displaced persons” under international law (Anderson v. Jackson, 2006). For the nonprofit housing development team, contracting with HUD to redevelop Lafitte was the most pragmatic way to ensure that the most residents had the right to return in the foreseeable future, in part by making an irreducible commitment to one-for-one unit replacement and resident participation.

To these developers skilled in mixed-income redevelopment, affordable housing production, and community development finance, the right of return was “empty rhetoric” without available physical units, and affordable housing would be the pragmatic, just, and ultimately empowering means for fulfilling this right (personal communication, n.d.). Indeed, Providence/Enterprise made clear in their press materials that they were not involved in HUD and HANO’s “decision to demolish Lafitte,” but that they “got involved to ensure that residents have a voice in the rebuilding of their community” (“Providence/Enterprise Plan,” 2008). Tenants now had absolute opportunity to return to Tremé and New Orleans, if desired (“Providence/Enterprise Partnership,” n.d.). In conjunction with the adjudicated properties awarded for redevelopment, the Lafitte contract gave Providence and its partners substantial control over the
housing stock in Tremé/Lafitte, whose redevelopment this coalition viewed as the best path toward the “equitable, affordable and sustainable” community that would now flourish in post-Katrina Tremé (“Providence/Enterprise Plan,” 2008).

Despite the shared injustice frame initially held by this recovery network, these competing strategies of legal action versus redevelopment opened up deep rifts among these loosely cohered organizations. The legal team and the nonprofit developers both asserted that they were honoring residents’ desires and intent. Challenging HUD and HANO in court reflected the justifiable mistrust of local public housing residents that the housing agencies had their best interests in mind, a distrust steeped in the tortured history of the 1996 HOPE VI redevelopment of St. Thomas public housing into River Garden, a mixed-income site. “Using federal HOPE VI funds and private money, the St. Thomas project [had] been redeveloped as River Garden, a physically attractive New Urbanist, mixed-income neighborhood in which, controversially, fewer than one in five former public housing households [were able] to return” (Graham, 2009). An African American social justice activist in New Orleans explained that St. Thomas:

…was a very historic neighborhood and one of the hearts of the Black Indian and Second Line Traditions. It was a very traumatic experience when it was torn down and the people forced out. The area was also the site of many community protest [sic] for rights, against the police and the city government. When they moved people into the St. Bernard housing project, it started a wave of violence in that neighborhood, because the St. Thomas was an uptown project now being placed in the St. Bernard, a downtown project also part of the 7th ward which doesn't mix with the St. Thomas or the 10th ward in which it was located. (personal communication, November 7, 2005)

Critically, the community development sector was implicated in the St. Thomas redevelopment; a local CDC leader explained that a powerful private-sector developer in the city, Joseph Canizaro

owned all the land around the St. Thomas Housing project (large Hope VI) and he started a CDC that could bring all the important community interests to the table. He used this convening as a vehicle to buy off important community figures. Then he pushed through the development and dropped funding from the nonprofit. (personal communication, November 3, 2005)

Canizaro now co-chaired Nagin’s BNOB Commission, the recovery committee responsible for the Urban Land Institute’s infamous green dot plan interpreted by New Orleans as returning certain neighborhoods to nature (Olshansky & Johnson, 2010). Canizaro was a major developer in the city and a friend of and major donor to President Bush and described by a local, African American community development leader as “the most dangerous person in the city” (personal communication, November 3, 2005).

In New Orleans, because of the trauma and injustice associated with the St. Thomas redevelopment, federal policies of income mixing and poverty deconcentration were viewed with outright hostility by many local activists and residents. This “traditional urban planning idea,” one local social justice activist explained, disrespected the “cultural identity of [New Orleanians] as attached to neighborhoods and land base” (personal communication, September 15, 2005). He warned against the growing enthusiasm of the state, academics, and policymakers for reinvigorating the deconcentration paradigm in New Orleans:

…it goes without saying that [in New Orleans] you will live forever, in the neighborhood you grew up in and your parents grew up in. 7th ward for life. There is no consideration of leaving the neighborhood to live in another part of town. That in itself is traumatic when it does happen as we recently saw [with] the ST. [sic] Thomas…Violence escalated, as the communal identities clashed, and people never really integrated into the downtown community…so the mixed income idea is awash if people can’t return to their communal space. (personal communication, September 15, 2005)

This Nagin-Canizaro-Bush connection and its relationship to past and future public housing outcomes in New Orleans epitomized the political and institutional networks that residents and community groups had long distrusted. New Orleans community organizations struggled to overcome histories of racial, cultural, and neighborhood-based conflicts with one another in competition for scarce resources. They struggled to work in good faith with outsiders and were particularly suspicious of institutional power. Systemic poverty and inequality in New Orleans over hundreds of years—from slavery, from Jim Crow, from public housing and urban renewal and HOPE VI, from patterns of development that shunted African Americans disproportionately to low-lying, vulnerable neighborhoods, from prior government malfeasance against African Americans in the face of floods (e.g., Barry, 1998) —led to a deeply ingrained, widely held suspicion in New Orleans of government, “experts,” and their resources.
Both the City of New Orleans and the State of Louisiana had long been riddled with government corruption, adding to the degree of distrust. As Lowe (2006) writes, civil society organizations had to flourish “in spite of the political situation” in New Orleans (p. 73). In the aftermath of one of the worst natural disasters in the United States, where accusations of shocking, degrading, and mortal ineptitude by the Bush Administration were widespread (Alter, 2005; Kurtz, 2005; Polman, 2005; Sullivan, 2005; Thomas, 2005), HUD and HANO’s move to undertake the “largest demolition in the city’s history” (Browne-Dianis & Sinha, 2008) in the face of ongoing displacement, affordable housing scarcity, and labor shortages was both unbelievable and of a piece of the state’s response to Katrina. For vulnerable, displaced public housing tenants, legal action seemed the only and the most just recourse to get home to New Orleans.

That Providence/Enterprise had the support of the “City of New Orleans Office of Recovery Management and Office of the Mayor, Louisiana Housing Finance Agency, State of Louisiana Office of Community Development, Louisiana Recovery Authority, and many neighborhood groups and collaborators” could only serve to alienate the residents and their organizational allies who believed that these state entities acted in mainly discriminatory and violent ways toward low-income Black New Orleanians (“Providence/Enterprise Plan,” 2008). Yet, Providence/Enterprise, in a rigorously documented public effort, had made contact with 650 former Lafitte households by 2008, working with them on site planning, providing social services, and hearing residents’ intent to return or move on with their lives elsewhere (“Providence/Enterprise Plan,” 2008).

Project documents asserted the partnership’s “unsurpassed local credibility,” given Catholic Charities’ presence in New Orleans since 1727, and the “technical expertise and access to financial resources necessary to carry out planning and redevelopment of this magnitude in a timely, efficient and equitable manner” (“Providence/Enterprise Partnership,” n.d.). This position did not dispute local characterizations of HUD and HANO as willfully harmful toward former tenants, especially evident in the nonprofits’ care to distance themselves from the “decision to demolish Lafitte” (“Providence/Enterprise Plan,” 2008) but it, nonetheless, positioned the development partnership as best equipped to honor residents’ right to return through its centuries-long roots in New Orleans providing affordable housing and social services and unparalleled housing and finance expertise, including in similar HOPE VI projects around the United States.9

**Lafitte as Referendum on HOPE VI**

The conflicting strategies of The Advancement Project legal team and the Providence/Enterprise redevelopment partnership are nested in larger debates over public housing policy in the United States, particularly the transformation of public housing via the federal HOPE VI program of the last two decades. Graham (2012) details the conflict among housing and community development practitioners over public housing demolition and the construction of mixed-income projects, and the broader debates within the field over the deconcentration thesis. One of the primary concerns with HOPE VI public housing revitalization, as it is known, is the net loss of original tenants from the rebuilt sites. Popkin, Levy, and Buron (2009) find that 60–70% of tenants never return to former sites, and a portion of residents disappear from housing authorities’ rolls entirely. HOPE VI has also spurred an unfortunate following by municipalities around the country, who are pursuing public housing demolition with minimal consideration for the services and counseling encouraged in the HOPE VI model.

Yet, support from policymakers, academics, and housing developers for mixed-income communities persists, due to enduring beliefs that it is a mutual strategy of poverty alleviation and urban development (Joseph, Chaskin, & Webber, 2007), despite HOPE VI’s qualified success. In their review of the oft-cited theoretical bases for mixed-income housing, Joseph et al. (2007) conclude:

...there is a compelling rationale for mixed-income development that has nothing to do with lifting families out of poverty and is simply based on enabling the private development of valuable inner city real estate. Assuming for the moment that there are a significant number of mixed-income developers for whom poverty alleviation is a goal, more clarity is needed about which pathways of change those developers and their partners intend to promote...given the multiplicity of partners involved in any single, mixed-income development effort—private and nonprofit developers, public agencies, social service providers, community partners, lenders—there are likely to be a multiplicity of expectations, in some cases contradictory. (2007, p. 397)

This “multiplicity of expectations” was evident in post-Katrina New Orleans, as some housing and civil rights activists came to view their former nonprofit and planning allies as “at best, disingenuous” (Sinha, 2009) in their...
advocacy and at worst, actively working against Lafitte residents to “take away their homes and prolong their exile” (Graham, 2006b). The often contradictory outcomes of public housing revitalization, that is, the disturbing rates of displacement and permanent loss of deeply affordable units versus upgraded housing stock and the potential stimulation of economic development, meant that in an already contentious and vulnerable environment like New Orleans, with legitimate distrust of state-sponsored programs and the experts and nonprofits who deliver them, the ability to reach agreement on how best to preserve community assets and fulfill the right to return was ill fated.

HUD’s aggressive and myopic insistence on public housing demolition is central to this coalition’s collapse and to the unusual degree of attention paid and resistance to the future of the Big Four. For organizations within this recovery network, the fate of New Orleans public housing was an equity and racial justice issue. HUD and HANO had housed about 5,100 families in public housing prior to Katrina (Filosa, 2006). These displaced tenants, along with other renters, were significantly underrepresented in the city’s and state’s recovery plans despite disproportionate damage to the city’s rental housing stock (Clark & Rose, 2007) and the pre-Katrina reality that 57% of residents were renters.11

Furthermore, former public housing tenants in New Orleans epitomized the undesirable residents elites wanted to see permanently cast out of the new New Orleans that would rise from Katrina’s waste. As Baton Rouge area GOP Congressman Richard Baker exulted to the New Orleans Times-Picayune, “We finally cleaned up public housing in New Orleans…We couldn’t do it, but God did” (Hirsch & Levert, 2009, p. 212). HUD Secretary Alphonso Jackson declared New Orleans unlikely “to be as Black as it was for a long time, if ever again” and that “[o]nly the best [public housing] residents should return,” i.e., those with jobs who paid their rent on time (Anderson v. Jackson, 2006). Powell (2007) recounts

One of Nagin's closest advisers and richest contributors, James Reiss, said as much in an unguarded comment to the Wall Street Journal a few weeks following Katrina: “Those who want to see this city rebuilt want to see it done in a completely different way: demographically, geographically and politically…I’m not just speaking for myself here. The way we’ve been living is not going to happen again or we’re out.” (p. 865)

Public housing in New Orleans is architecturally, culturally, and historically significant (MacCash, 2011; Ouroussoff, 2007). The city was home to some of the earliest projects in the nation, and amid the city’s intense resident and economic segregation, public housing projects were highly visible and symbolic tight-knit physical and social communities within a city organized entirely around dense, close kin and neighborhood networks. The physical structures took on outsized meaning in the recovery process and in HUD’s demolition plans, imbued by the people and networks that lived in them over generations. Kingsley (2007) writes, “Buildings and their neighborhoods were the settings where New Orleanians defined their identity, developed their customs and rituals, and understood their sense of place. After Katrina disrupted those histories and memories, people looked to their buildings and neighborhoods even more desperately” (p. 719). I witnessed this attachment at a planning meeting in Tremé, where people spoke about the Lafitte buildings as if the structures themselves were their neighbors.

As organizations attempted to cohere around a shared recovery strategy, the lack of a supportive state apparatus to smooth their efforts not only complicated implementing this vision, but also centered on HUD as the primary challenger to empowering residents and their expert organizational allies to rebuild their communities. Given HUD and HANO’s “history of mismanagement, neglect, gentrification and displacement in New Orleans” (Graham, 2012, p. 6),12 the comparative lack of rights and voice for the poorest, displaced New Orleanians and the relative lack of storm damage to the brick projects compared to the private rental housing market, the struggle over public housing grew into an outsized, symbolic battleground over the rights of the poor in the new New Orleans, their rights to the city, to housing, to participation in the recovery process, and to their bodily and community autonomy. Indeed, the conflict over public housing in New Orleans coincided with the growing critique and resistance to policies of deregulation and privatization that result in gentrification and displacement in low-income communities nationwide, and with the call for alternative policies and solutions (see, e.g., Bratt, Stone, & Hartman, 2006; Brenner & Theodore, 2002; Gotham & Greenberg, 2008; “Harrisburg Housing Authority,” 2007; Mays, 2007; Peck, 2006; Right to the City Alliance, 2010; Shortt, 2007; Slater, 2006). Activists mobilized around preserving public housing, arguing that it is a barometer for society’s commitment to safe and affordable housing for everyone, and an indispensable safety net tool for the poor, as one of the few housing policy arenas still relatively insulated from the vagaries of the market (Right to the City Alliance, 2010). The struggle over public housing in New Orleans became linked up in...
the years following Katrina with national and international movements for the right to cities as diverse, accessible, integrated, public spaces, and affordable, safe, vibrant places for all strata of society.

**Coda: Faubourg Lafitte**

Lafitte site redevelopment was delayed for several years after the bottom fell out of the tax credit market during the recent housing crisis. Today, the new Faubourg Lafitte is rising on Lafitte’s former footprint, supplemented by a mix of scattered site housing around Tremé to integrate the site into the community (see Figures 2 and 3).

Providence/Enterprise brought virtually everything to the redevelopment that housing advocates call for in public housing revitalization: one-for-one replacement with a physical unit; resident participation in site planning and tenant leadership for the new site; wrap-around supportive services for returning and neighboring residents; reliance on local organizations for organizing and social service provision; integration of the site plan into the overall built environment of the neighborhood; and deep expertise in housing finance, public housing revitalization, and delivery of social services in a culturally sensitive manner.

Yet, this model redevelopment was extremely contentious and hard won in the aftermath of Katrina. It unfolded within historically, institutionally, and contextually rooted resistance to public housing transformation, radiating outward from New Orleans via nationwide advocacy networks and embodied in protest, litigation, and even sustained legislative advocacy aimed at stopping or at least

Figure 2. Lafitte demolition, in the spring of 2008, Tremé, New Orleans. Source: Karen Apricot, by permission.

(Color figure available online.)
slowing down HUD and HANO. The rhetoric of the recovery network profiled here, that of stepping in as a quasi-government, of confronting the exposed inequities of global capitalism and the South’s apartheid economy, of building a movement for the most important period of urban restoration since Reconstruction, all suggested grander recovery ambitions than site revitalization plans and litigation. Of course, in the moments and months after disasters, rhetoric is fiery, aspirations are bold, and solidarity is in rich supply. Furthermore, GOP control of the White House and both houses of Congress when Katrina struck suggested strenuous obstacles to any liberal or progressive redevelopment plans.

But implicit in the deeper critiques of Katrina’s exposure of decades of anti-urban bias, institutional inequality and racial and economic injustice was an admission that past urban revitalization strategies had been insufficient. Sure, New Orleans would benefit from even basic investments in housing, jobs, and education, but what it really demanded was new models of human, physical, and community development. Beginning with mobilization across the Katrina diaspora, combined with strong local representation and underwritten by substantial resources from national supporters and advisers, this diverse coalition of organizations believed they had the knowledge, connections, and resources to finally bring such an integrated vision of organized community control and redevelopment leadership to bear in this historic moment.

Unfortunately, the coalition operated within a hostile and chaotic post-flood political environment in which local and national social justice activists believed that Katrina had given cover to policymakers and their private-sector
allies to remove a significant portion of the city's undesirable, seemingly intractable, pre-storm features utilized mainly by the working and very poor, that is, its failing public school system, its hulking public hospital, and its public housing projects (see, e.g., Arena, 2007; Graham, 2006b). Furthermore, available for recovery were an abundance of tax credits and large tracts of publicly owned land formerly sheltering the poorest New Orleanians. Organizational actors with housing and real estate expertise were uniquely advantaged in this landscape, and they struggled to put their financial and political resources to equitable use for displaced New Orleanians. As one advocate suggested,

...Low-income, marginalized, dispersed populations need organized, active, persistent representation so they don’t get left out of this…those of us who can accumulate large parcels of land in certain neighborhoods, for large-scale redevelopment efforts, need to incorporate community organizing into planning and redevelopment to drive reconstruction…” (Graham, 2006a; italics in original)

At the aforementioned planning meeting in Tremé, an elderly African American resident and public housing activist accused the planners of leading a process that would end up “just like St. Thomas,” where “those people are totally gone” (personal communication, n.d.). Visions of demonstration blocks hosting new models of equitable development gave way to a public housing revitalization contract and class-action lawsuit, as the coalition’s bold plans for a transformed Tremé and New Orleans narrowed and clouded in the face of HUD’s determination to unbuilt its own pioneering housing legacy in New Orleans.

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Notes
1. Davis (1999) argues that organizational differences in distance to the state results in certain organizations versus others being more institutionally aligned and enjoying more cooperative or accessible relationships with the state or being institutionally more powerful to challenge the state.
2. Two were headquartered in the Bay Area of California, and the remaining 11 were headquartered along the Boston–Washington corridor.
3. The mean asset base was $1.36 billion for the Northeast organizations, due in part to the enormous endowments of two national foundations. It was $27 million for New Orleans-based organizations. The range across the entire 28 organizations is from a negative net worth of $2 million to over $11 billion in assets.
4. For instance, activists from Community Labor United (CLU) in New Orleans reached out to faculty allies in the Department of Urban Studies and Planning at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT) for recovery resources and support. CLU would go on to become the People’s Hurricane Relief Fund and Oversight Committee (PHRF), and sought technical and strategic assistance in the first weeks after the flood around building a political response to what was quickly being framed as a manmade disaster resulting from government failure and neglect (e.g., Thomas, 2005).
5. Please see Wellman (1983), Rivera, Soderstrom, and Uzzi (2010), Diani (2003), and Klandermans and Oegema (1987) for network definitions. Please see Ferguson and Stoutland (1999) for a similar analysis of the community development system.
6. Personal communications are gleaned from my field notes as a practitioner and scholar in post-Katrina New Orleans, including communications such as meeting notes, e-mails, records of conversations, etc. Occasionally, and regrettably, these materials were not dated.
8. At the time of this exchange, a scholar’s petition titled “Moving to Opportunity in the Wake of Hurricane Katrina” (Briggs et al., 2005) was circulating online. It best embodies the appetite for deconcentration strategies, though it did not call explicitly for public housing demolition. Also see The Brookings Institution (2005).
9. The Enterprise Social Investment Fund has been a frequent private development partner in HOPE VI nationwide.
10. In total, HUD housed about 14,000 families prior to Katrina, with 5,100 in public housing and 9,000 using vouchers, a population of 49,000 people that was more than 10% of the city’s population (Filosa, 2006).
11. The state devoted the vast majority of its Community Development Block Grant redevelopment funds ($10.4 billion) to making homeowners whole to rebuild their properties, allocating only about $1 billion to rental properties, especially $852 million to small rental property owners, reflecting the relative lack of large, multifamily properties in the city. An additional $1.7 billion in low-income housing tax credits was set aside for large, mixed-income developments (Public meeting at the Louisiana Supreme Court in New Orleans, LA, July 11, 2006).
12. Activists working with displaced public housing residents post-Katrina estimate that “half of the working poor, elderly and disabled who lived in New Orleans before Hurricane Katrina have not returned. Because of critical shortages in low-cost housing, few now expect tens of thousands of poor and working people to ever be able to return home” (Evans, 2008).

References


Right to the City Alliance. (2010). We call these projects home: Solving the housing crisis from the ground up. Retrieved August 29, 2010, from http://www.urbanjustice.org/pdf/publications/We_Call_These_Projects_Home.pdf


Appendix

Figure A-1. Neighborhoods in Orleans Parish. On the map, Tremé/Lafitte is upriver from the French Quarter and downriver from City Park and Bayou St. John.

Source: Reproduced by permission of Greater New Orleans Community Data Center.

(Color figure available online.)