

NEW ORLEANS

Of the Louisiana parishes (counties) impacted by Hurricanes Rita and Katrina in 2005, Orleans was the last to draft a plan guiding its recovery — a document necessary to qualify New Orleans for its fair share of federal and state resources available for recovery.

Over nearly a two-year period, New Orleanians, both returnees as well as those who have yet to come home, participated in three distinct, but not necessarily sequential, planning efforts, of which the most decisive and important was known as the Unified New Orleans Plan (UNOP).

While most of projects described in UNOP will never be fully implemented, the plan's release in January, 2007 marked a new chapter in the city's recovery. The plan will likely not be physically determinative of the shape of New Orleans reborn, but its psychological impact — a realization that the city must take a hard look at its priorities given a limited set of resources — has allowed policy makers to begin to make the tough choices that will guide the pace and directionality of reconstruction. Based largely on the UNOP document, the city's Recovery Czar Ed Blakely

— formerly the chair of the Department of City and Regional Planning at Berkeley — released in March a priority list of areas to be targeted by the city for redevelopment using local funds. In addition to directly utilizing the preliminary design documents from UNOP, the list also reflects the idea of “clustering” the returning population in nodes and steering it towards places adjacent to already recovered neighborhoods. This approach is designed to both efficiently restore utilities and to target funds in areas where they will be most likely to support economic recovery.

In addition, the energy and interest that coalesced during the UNOP process put a spotlight on the city that has continued to inspire the design community. Frederic Schwartz (B. Arch '73), who led the UNOP effort in two of the city's fourteen districts, is currently sponsoring a design competition for

neighborhood parks in devastated portions of the city. His colleague Allen Eskew, who studied at Berkeley under professor Alan Jacobs and worked closely with Schwartz during UNOP, recently was honored when his locally-based firm was chosen as part of a team led by Chan Krieger Sieniewicz to redevelop the city's long-neglected riverfront (an effort unrelated to UNOP).

It would be dishonest, however, to describe the recovery planning process in New Orleans as smooth. After FEMA's early attempts at prioritizing reconstruction projects fell flat, the first local planning effort was Mayor Ray Nagin's Bring New Orleans Back (BNOB) Commission, which began immediately after the storm. Much maligned for its top-down approach — the most controversial of its recommendations was a moratorium on rebuilding in certain portions of the city — BNOB fell out of favor

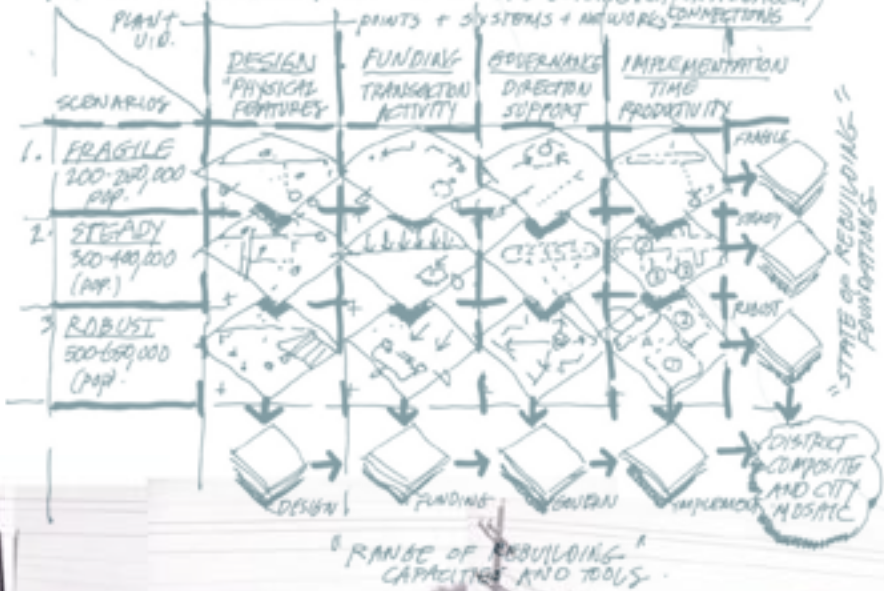
BY JED HORNE

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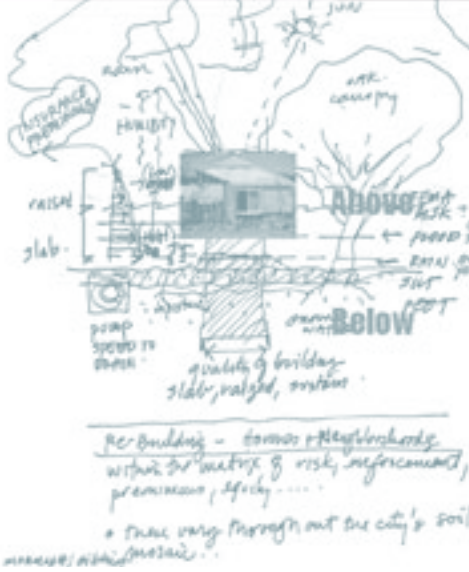


Abandoned home in the Tulane-Gravier neighborhood

SCENARIO WORKSHEET
FOR EACH NEIGHBORHOOD - INSIDE AND OUTSIDE (CITY OR ADJACENT)



Below: Existing urban fabric in UNOP District 4
Drawings right and below: Schwartz' vision of different recovery scenarios for the city



with both policy makers and the public at large by the end of 2005.

In the vacuum that ensued, the City Council proposed a process of its own in the spring of 2006. The Council's plan, overseen by Miami-based Lambert Advisory, involved the participation of thousands of local residents in the drafting of forty-nine separate documents for each of the flooded neighborhoods in the city (approximately 80% of its land mass). Ultimately, however, it was necessary to produce a single document covering all of New Orleans (including the un-flooded central business district and historic French Quarter), and to think at a city-wide level about policies that would prioritize recovery in a sustainable manner. At the behest of state decision makers, the Unified New Orleans Plan began its work in the summer of 2006,

almost one year after Hurricane Katrina made landfall.

The UNOP process, which divided the city into fourteen districts, each planned by separate teams of nationally recognized planners and architects, proved ultimately successful in bringing together the city's fractious political establishment and polarized communities in support of a single vision of recovery. The entire document, released in January, 2007, is available online at www.unifiedneworleansplan.com.

During UNOP, community participation at the city-level relied heavily on three "Community Congresses" run by the consulting firm American Speaks. David Campt, a recent graduate of Berkeley's PhD program in City and Regional Planning, was heavily involved the America Speaks' local effort. The



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Congresses were large meetings of over 1,000 participants that included video-uplinks to members of the Diaspora (not adequately represented in other efforts). For most people, these events were the first time they were given the opportunity to discuss citywide recovery issues in a public forum, and the broad-based agreement reached during the interactive polling sessions suggested that the city was more amenable to a guided (and slower) recovery than was previously thought. While UNOP avoided the determinism of the earlier Bring New Orleans Back process, the ultimate vision — a rationalized process of rebuilding beginning with those areas that have been best able to recover on their own — is largely similar.

With the culmination of UNOP

— and the hiring of Recovery Czar Ed Blakely — New Orleans is beginning its third-year after Katrina still devastated but cautiously optimistic about its future. Schwartz and Eskew both believe that, properly implemented, New Orleans' recovery can be a model for how our cities in general think about rebuilding their respective infrastructures, many as damaged by years of abandonment and neglect as New Orleans was during a single day. This hope continues to inspire the as-yet-unwritten story of the rebirth of a great American city. ^{Fw}

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Right: Schwartz' vision for community parks throughout New Orleans

