

# Equity Planning in Post-Hurricane Katrina New Orleans: Lessons From the Ninth Ward

**Kenneth M. Reardon**

The University of Memphis

**Marcel Ionescu-Heroiu**

The World Bank

**Andrew J. Rumbach**

Cornell University

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## Abstract

*This article describes how grassroots activists and community leaders representing poor and working class residents of New Orleans, together with planning students and faculty from three research universities, overcame racial, class, and cultural barriers to collaboration to create and promote a comprehensive Hurricane Katrina recovery plan for the neighborhoods that make up the city's Ninth Ward.*

## Introduction

During the past 25 years, there has been a growing acceptance of Ernest Boyer's notion of the scholarship of engagement within American higher education (Boyer, 1994). Today, more than 1,100 college and university presidents are members of Campus Compact, a national organization committed to mobilizing the assets of campuses to assist local residents, officials, and institutions struggling to improve conditions in economically challenged rural and urban communities.<sup>1</sup> Each year, millions of university students enroll in service-learning courses encountering what Jack Mezirow referred to as transformational learning experiences, while working with long-term community activists and leaders pursuing social justice through various organizing, advocacy, and service initiatives (see Mezirow, 1991).

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<sup>1</sup> For more information regarding the goals, programs, memberships, and accomplishments of the Campus Compact, visit the organization's website at <http://www.compact.org>.

In October 2005, in response to the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina, leaders from the Association of Community Organizations for Reform Now (ACORN) contacted planners and designers from Pratt Institute and Cornell University for technical assistance. These grassroots leaders representing the eastside neighborhoods of New Orleans challenged these academic planners to help them establish partnerships between social justice-oriented faculty from planning and design schools and ACORN chapters representing several New Orleans neighborhoods. At the time, these neighborhoods were being described as too damaged and “at risk” for future storm damage to merit public and private reinvestment. These leaders advocated the “right to return” for residents of all neighborhoods where reasonable stormwater management practices and building code enforcement could ensure residents’ safety.<sup>2</sup> ACORN activists questioned the accuracy of many of the initial damage and risk assessment reports that had prompted policy analysts to propose various forms of planned shrinkage.<sup>3</sup> Under these proposals, areas perceived to have experienced the greatest damage and to be at maximum risk for future flooding would be abandoned and transformed into permanent urban wetlands and wilderness areas in light of what the Brookings Institution estimated to be a likely 50-percent loss in population.

ACORN leaders viewed many of the early damage assessments and projections, which were being used to support policies that would concentrate recovery spending within the city’s Central Business District and in areas that had suffered the least amount of storm damage, with great skepticism. Desperate to ensure a careful assessment of post-Hurricane Katrina physical conditions, detailed estimates of building and infrastructure rehabilitation costs, and a systematic survey of displaced families’ redevelopment preferences for their eastside neighborhoods, these leaders sought to establish partnerships with willing members of the planning and design academy. Although committed to establishing such partnerships, neither these community leaders nor their university collaborators fully appreciated the challenges they would have to overcome to create a trusting and productive collaboration.<sup>4</sup> This context is described more fully in the section titled Contextual Challenges to Planning.

The case study presented in this article describes the experiences of one set of academic planners and designers who participated in this process as recorded by two graduate planning students and one faculty member who helped organize a collaborative team. This unique planning partnership was established in July 2006 to help Ninth Ward residents prepare a comprehensive recovery plan for the 10 historic neighborhoods that make up this area, and the partnership continues to provide technical assistance to residents committed to implementing *The People’s Plan for Overcoming the Hurricane Katrina Blues: A Comprehensive Strategy for Promoting a More Vibrant, Sustainable, and Equitable 9th Ward*.

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<sup>2</sup> The “right to return” was the first element in the ACORN Katrina Survivors Association recovery platform. For more information, visit the ACORN website at [www.acorn.org/index.php?id=10284](http://www.acorn.org/index.php?id=10284).

<sup>3</sup> *Planned shrinkage* or *urban triage* are terms made popular by the late Roger Starr, a former New York City housing commissioner and *New York Times* Editorial Board member, which recommended the systematic removal of services from severely distressed neighborhoods in cities confronting serious economic losses and out-migration (Starr, 1976).

<sup>4</sup> See Ferguson and Stoutland (1999) for a discussion of the challenges of establishing trust within ongoing community development initiatives.

## An Overview of the Literature and the Theoretical Framework

The team's New Orleans work was informed by previous scholarship in five distinct areas of inquiry. Among these were the ecological and social history of New Orleans, disaster planning, community development, advocacy and equity planning, and the community-university partnership literature. Team members prepared themselves for work in New Orleans by reviewing texts exploring the previously mentioned topics during a hastily organized 2-credit reading course, which Cornell students and faculty worked together to create during the 2006 fall semester.

### **Ecological History**

The team began investigating the region's ecological history by reading Ari Kelman's *A River and Its City: The Nature of Landscape in New Orleans* and Peirce F. Lewis's *New Orleans: The Making of an Urban Landscape*, which chronicle the historical origins of New Orleans and efforts to control its seasonal flooding (Kelman, 2003; Lewis, 2003). Team members also read John Barry's extraordinary volume, *Rising Tide: The Great Mississippi Flood of 1927 and How It Changed America*, which describes the conflict between military- and civilian-trained engineers regarding the adequacy of a levees-only approach to stormwater management in the days preceded by the flood of 1927 (Barry, 1998). In addition, they read John McPhee's wonderfully crafted essay on the Atchafalaya in his volume, *The Control of Nature*, which records the failure of recent stormwater control strategies undertaken by the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers (McPhee, 1989). In addition to reading these classic texts, the team read a series of more recent works that described the factors that contributed to the catastrophic levee system failure and breakdown of local, state, regional, and national rescue, relief, and recovery efforts following Hurricanes Katrina and Rita. These works included Jed Horne's *Breach of Faith: Hurricane Katrina and the Near Death of a Great American City* and John McQuade and Mark Schleifstein's *Path of Destruction: The Destruction of New Orleans and the Coming Age of Superstorms* (Horne, 2006; McQuade and Schleifstein, 2006).

### **Social History**

Seeking to gain insights into the city's rich social, cultural, and political history, the team studied Richard Campanella's *Geographies of New Orleans: Urban Fabric Before the Storm*, Harry Williams' *Huey Long*, and Abbott Joseph Liebling's *The Earl of Louisiana*, among other volumes (Campanella, 2006; Liebling, 1970; Williams, 1969).

### **Disaster Planning**

Reading Lawrence Vale and Thomas Campanella's *The Resilient City: How Modern Cities Recover from Disaster*; Jon William Toigo's *Disaster Recovery Planning: Preparing for the Unthinkable*; and the article by Raymond Burby, et al., "Creating Hazard Resilient Communities Through Land-Use Planning," team members gained a deeper understanding of the staying power of most urban settlements and what can be done to make cities more disaster resistant (Burby, et al., 2000; Toigo, 2002; Vale and Campanella, 2005).

## Community Development

Team members were introduced to the fundamentals of community-based planning by reading William Peterman's *Neighborhood Planning and Community-Based Planning: The Potential and Limits of Grassroots Action* and Herbert Rubin's *Renewing Hope within Communities of Despair: The Community-Based Development Model* (Peterman, 2000; Rubin, 2000).

## Advocacy and Equity Planning

Realizing the need to help residents gain voice within the city's often contentious recovery planning process, team members reviewed Paul Davidoff's classic article, "Planning and American Pluralism"; Norman Krumholz's *Making Equity Planning Work: Leadership in the Public Sector*; and Marie Kennedy, Chris Tilly, and Mauricio Gaston's "Transformative Populism and the Development of a Community of Color" (Davidoff, 1965; Kennedy, Tilly, and Gaston, 1991; Krumholz, 1990).

## Community-University Development Partnerships

Finally, team members also studied Henry Cisneros's booklet, *The University and the Urban Challenge*, which invites university faculty to involve their students in critical problem-solving and development efforts in economically challenged communities (Cisneros, 1996). The team also studied Richard Schramm and Nancy Nye's *Building Higher Education-Community Development Corporation Partnerships*, which is one of the first systematic evaluations of the community-university partnership movement that raises critical questions regarding the potential limits of town-gown development collaboratives (Schramm and Nye, 1999).

## The Project's Theoretical Framework

A careful review of these scholarly works gave light to some of the challenges the team might confront in assisting resident-led planning efforts. The model of grassroots planning and development that emerged sought to integrate the core theories, methods, and practices of participatory action research, direct-action organizing, and popular education into a holistic approach to community change. The ultimate goal of the approach was to enhance the capacity of poor peoples' organizations to influence the public and private investment decisions that determine quality of life.

## Contextual Challenges to Planning

In general, faculty on the team found scarce economic resources, concentrated political power, and considerable social distance between residents seeking change and their outside supporters. Many planning experts viewed environmental conditions in post-Hurricane Katrina New Orleans as being hazardous to human health. The travel and lodging costs made engagement in Gulf Coast recovery efforts expensive. The evacuation of residents challenged those committed to participatory approaches to planning and design. Finally, the contentious nature of local government politics and the often poorly organized federal relief effort raised questions regarding the usefulness of community-university recovery planning partnerships. Notwithstanding these and other challenges, a small number of academic planning and design departments stepped forward to work with ACORN to produce comprehensive recovery plans for several of the city's most severely damaged

neighborhoods. Most of those universities that involved their students in these collaborative efforts were influenced by the advocacy planning ideas of Paul Davidoff, who believed that planning outcomes for the poor could be improved when planners helped poor people's organizations create their own independent plans (see Davidoff, 1965).

## Organizing for Action

Several weeks after Hurricanes Katrina and Rita, Steven Kest, ACORN's national staff director, called the Cornell University Department of City and Regional Planning (CRP) to request CRP's help in mobilizing planning and design students and faculty to assist resident-led recovery efforts in New Orleans. ACORN's main local concerns were concentrated in the city's eastside neighborhoods, where more than 9,000 ACORN members lived. In response, CRP's chair, Kenneth Reardon, met with Kest to learn more about the immediate research, planning, and development needs of those neighborhoods. Reardon then communicated the needs to CRP's students and faculty, which resulted in significant student-led efforts to obtain departmental funds to launch the New Orleans Planning Initiative. With \$100,000, 36 students and 4 faculty members worked together to design a 2-credit course that provided potential New Orleans volunteers with a basic orientation to the city (Gustafson, 2005).

During this academic course, graduate students organized a campaign that generated \$22,000 to send 19 students and faculty to New Orleans to help eastside residents gut their homes in preparation for rehabilitating these structures. Working alongside local residents, Cornell students and faculty built relationships with those residents leading the recovery efforts, enabling them to acquire a clearer understanding of the community's highest priority planning and design needs. Simultaneously, CRP faculty organized a special roundtable session to examine the recovery planning needs of New Orleans for the 2005 Annual Meeting of the Association of Collegiate Schools of Planning (ACSP) scheduled to take place in Kansas City, Kansas, in late October. At this meeting, Richard Hayes, ACORN Housing Corporation's director of special projects, suggested that those faculty members who met with him at the ACSP annual meeting convene with ACORN the following month to cosponsor a Rebuild New Orleans Policy Conference in Baton Rouge. At this policy conference, the 52 planning and design scholars in attendance presented a list of 36 research, planning, and design projects they were prepared to undertake.

Within weeks, Pratt Institute and the New Jersey Institute of Technology (NJIT) faculty were working with ACORN's New Orleans East Chapter, the University of New Orleans and Tulane University were supporting recovery efforts in the Gentilly neighborhood, Harvard's Graduate School of Design was assisting the Broadmoor community, and Louisiana State University's (LSU's) School of Architecture and Cornell University's Department of City and Regional Planning (CRP) were working on projects identified by Ninth Ward leaders.

## Earning a License To Operate as "Good Partners"

From their work with Ninth Ward leaders during the winter of 2005–06, Cornell University students and faculty developed a list of short-term research and technical assistance needs. CRP subsequently attempted to address these needs by creating five specially designed studio courses

focused on the preservation of a public market, investigation of alternative stormwater management systems, reintegration of the Ninth Ward's street system, efficient organization of the area's relief and recovery workforce, and expansion of affordable housing within the community.

More than 80 students from these classes worked together during the spring of 2006 to prepare preliminary project displays, which they brought to New Orleans March 25–26, 2006, to share with interested residents and elected officials from the Ninth Ward. Anticipating 40 to 60 participants to attend a half-day charrette (collaborative design session), the students, faculty, and community partners were delighted when more than 150 individuals showed up to review the students' work. The residents' enthusiastic response to the students' display boards and their spirited critiques encouraged the students to produce a series of inspired final projects. The Ninth Ward residents and leaders' positive response to the projects prompted ACORN to propose a jointly funded summer internship program that enabled 10 of the most talented students to continue working on their Ninth Ward projects.

## Recovery Summer

Among the projects the summer interns completed was an analysis of 3,000 tax-adjudicated (delinquent) properties that Orleans Parish wished to give to area developers and nonprofit organizations. The interns also completed a survey of alternative tax assessment techniques appropriate for use in weak markets. Finally, the students produced a booklet titled, *A Guide to Participatory Neighborhood Planning in New Orleans*, in anticipation of the city's plan to produce a comprehensive citywide recovery strategy.<sup>5</sup> As the students' internships were drawing to a close, ACORN asked them to prepare a formal proposal for comprehensive planning services in response to a city-issued Request for Qualifications (RFQ).

Realizing the breadth of the planning activities required by the RFQ, the students decided to invite faculty and students from several schools with complementary expertise to form a new community-university partnership, which they named the ACORN Housing/University Collaborative (the Collaborative).<sup>6</sup> They succeeded in recruiting Cornell, Columbia, Pratt, NJIT, and LSU faculty to participate in the Collaborative. Later, the Collaborative was chosen as 1 of 23 finalists from a pool of 69 private firms. As finalists, Collaborative representatives were invited to make a brief presentation before an expert panel assembled by the Rockefeller Foundation, the Greater New Orleans Support Foundation, and the Clinton/Bush Katrina Fund, which was charged with selecting the final list of 15 consultants to prepare the Unified New Orleans Plan (UNOP) (UNOP, 2006). The Collaborative's presentation stressed the unique combination of community organizing, neighborhood planning, civil engineering, affordable housing credentials, and the track record of the newly established network.

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<sup>5</sup> See ACORN Housing Corporation, 2006. Students from Cornell University, Louisiana State University School of Architecture, New Jersey Institute of Technology, and Pratt Institute, in a combined effort, contributed to this booklet.

<sup>6</sup> The original name of the consortium was the ACORN Housing/University Partnership. When the Counsel's Office at Cornell University raised concerns regarding liability issues, the name was changed in May 2007 to ACORN Housing/University Collaborative.

## Selection as UNOP Senior Consultants

Ten days after the presentation, the Collaborative was informed that it had also been designated as one of five organizations to serve as senior consultants within the UNOP comprehensive planning process. Shortly after being notified of the selection, the Collaborative team attended an all-day meeting to review UNOP's overall goals and objectives and the draft scope of services. Although the team members were very pleased to be selected to participate in what they believed to be one of this generation's most important planning projects, they had two serious concerns moving forward. First, UNOP required participating consultants, within 3 months, to collect and analyze a wide range of data for yet-to-be-assigned neighborhoods to prepare comprehensive infrastructure plans for these neighborhoods. This schedule was extraordinarily aggressive, given the data availability, research methodology, and citizen participation challenges the team expected to confront. Second, the UNOP scope of services, despite acknowledging the critical educational, employment, healthcare, municipal service, and public safety problems confronting the city's neighborhoods before Hurricanes Katrina and Rita occurred, did not require consultants to address these issues. Although painfully aware of the challenges related to producing a technically defensible infrastructure plan, the Collaborative team members were convinced that any plan that did not address the economic development and human capital challenges confronting the city's neighborhoods would be doomed to fail.

Several weeks after UNOP announced the initial list of neighborhood and senior planning consultants, each planning team presented its unique planning philosophies and community planning methods to representatives of the city's neighborhoods during a public meeting. Following this meeting, residents and elected officials from the city's seventh and eighth planning districts—an area of 10 neighborhoods known as the Ninth Ward (see exhibit 1)—overwhelmingly selected the Collaborative to be their consultants. Planners from Eckbo, Dean, Austin & Williams (EDAW) Atlanta Office and architects from John C. Williams Associates were selected to help the Collaborative prepare the comprehensive recovery plan for the nine unique neighborhoods comprising the Ninth Ward.<sup>7</sup> Upon receiving a confirmation of their appointment as the Ninth Ward's planning consultants from the Concordia Consulting Group, the private firm managing the UNOP process, Collaborative team members confirmed the participation of the various institutions that had earlier agreed to participate in the project. As the end of the summer approached, faculty from Pratt, NJIT, and LSU informed the Collaborative that they would be unavailable to participate in the Ninth Ward project because of their involvement in other New Orleans projects.

In August, faculty from Cornell, Columbia, and the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign met with representatives of ACORN in New Orleans to craft a detailed work plan designed to enable the team to (1) collect and analyze the historic and current physical conditions data needed to prepare the infrastructure plan required by UNOP's Draft Scope of Services and (2) assemble and analyze additional survey, interview, and focus group data from returning residents, institutional

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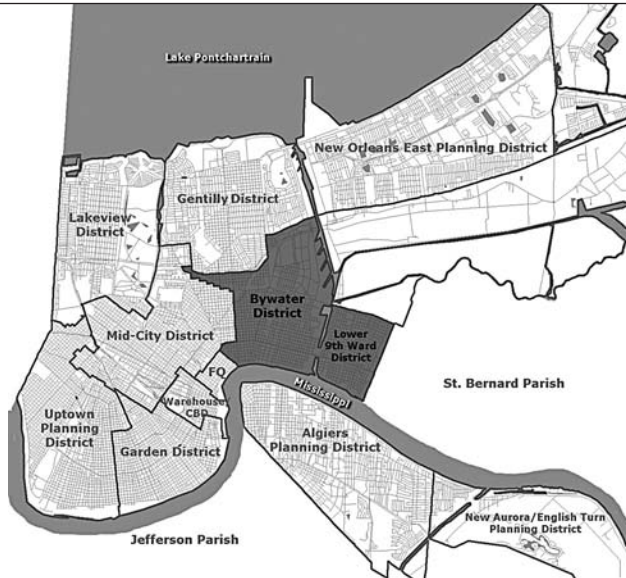
<sup>7</sup> Members of the Collaborative were aware of the large number of highly skilled planners and designers with previous neighborhood planning experience who were attached to EDAA's Atlanta Office. They also knew about the Williams Group's prior experience overseeing the development of New Orleans' successful Riverwalk. The team believed the experience and expertise of these two outstanding firms would greatly contribute to its Ninth Ward recovery planning efforts.



## Exhibit 1

### UNOP-Designated Planning Districts

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Source: Greater New Orleans Community Data Center (<http://www.gnocdc.org/mapping/docs/Neighborhood.pdf>)

leaders, and elected officials to address the Ninth Ward’s broader economic and community development needs. By going beyond UNOP’s Draft Scope of Services, the team sought to prepare a holistic recovery plan that would give balanced attention to the significant physical and social development needs of the Ninth Ward’s individual neighborhoods, several of which were in serious trouble well before Hurricanes Katrina and Rita came ashore. The team’s overall staffing plan assumed an experienced project planner would be hired to supervise the technical work of three recent graduates from the participating planning schools who would be stationed in New Orleans. The efforts of these individuals would be extended by the work of 45 to 60 students, who would undertake most of the field-based data collection, data entry, data scrubbing, preliminary data analysis, Geographic Information System (GIS) mapping, and report drafting activities under the supervision of participating faculty.

## Gathering the Facts

Within days, this staffing plan had to be abandoned when more than a dozen experienced project planners contacted by the Collaborative indicated that they were already working on Gulf Coast-related planning and design projects. Confronting a shortage of seasoned practitioners with prior disaster planning experience, Richard Hayes of ACORN Housing Corporation and Ken Reardon of Cornell University agreed to co-manage the planning process with the assistance of two Cornell planning students who volunteered to set aside their studies to serve as full-time project staff. Six graduate research assistants from Cornell and Illinois universities assisted this small and dedicated staff. Returning to their respective campuses following this planning meeting, participating faculty recruited seven additional faculty willing to organize five workshops with students who would



form the backbone of the project team. By Labor Day, the faculty had enrolled more than 80 students in the following Collaborative courses scheduled for the fall of 2006:

- **Graduate Housing Studio**, *Department of Urban and Regional Planning, University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, Lisa K. Bates, Assistant Professor*. Twelve professional and doctoral students were recruited to complete detailed surveys of the Ninth Ward's housing market and business sector.
- **Post-Doctoral Research Seminar**, *Earth Institute, Columbia University, Rebekah Green, Post-Doctoral Research Fellow*. Four post-doctoral students in civil engineering and environmental science were assembled to develop sampling protocols and survey methods to determine the storm damage, structural integrity, and rehabilitation costs for the Ninth Ward's building stock.
- **Introduction to City Planning**, *Department of City and Regional Planning, Cornell University, Kenneth M. Reardon, Associate Professor*. Forty sophomores were enlisted to review historic plans for the Ninth Ward, survey buildings, interview residents, and research model revitalization programs.
- **Neighborhood Planning Workshop**, *Department of City and Regional Planning, Cornell University, Kenneth M. Reardon, Associate Professor; Richard C. Kiely, Visiting Lecturer; and Michelle M. Thompson, Visiting Lecturer*. Twenty-two students were mobilized to create survey instruments, interview schedules, and focus group protocols needed to prepare a comprehensive recovery plan.
- **Urban Design Studio**, *Department of City and Regional Planning, Cornell University, Jeremy Foster, Associate Professor*. Twelve students were recruited to prepare urban design policies to reconnect the isolated neighborhoods of the Ninth Ward.

Students enrolled in these courses successfully completed the following research activities required by the Collaborative's UNOP contract:

- Reviewing 29 historic plans describing physical, economic, and social conditions within the Ninth Ward.
- Analyzing Ninth Ward population and housing trends using U.S. Census data.
- Summarizing Ninth Ward physical conditions as described by city-managed GIS data.
- Distilling principles of good practice for postdisaster recovery planning available within the literature.
- Conducting an inventory of successful postdisaster recovery projects in the areas of infrastructure, education, health, safety, housing, and the arts.

As students completed their analyses of these data, participating faculty assembled the project team at the Levin School of Urban Affairs at Cleveland State University in mid-September 2006 to share their preliminary research results, review a revised work plan, and prepare for a major field-based data collection effort in New Orleans scheduled for late October. A week after this meeting, project team members traveled to New Orleans to share the highlights of their archival, physical conditions, and best practice research with 75 residents of the Ninth Ward.

Following the Collaborative's completion of the first UNOP deliverable, team members created survey instruments and sampling protocols to determine the structural integrity of the Ninth Ward's building stock, the percentage of families that had returned to restore their homes, and

residents' preferred redevelopment strategies. As plans were being finalized to bring 80 students to New Orleans for 5 days, the Collaborative received a fax from the Concordia Group, informing the team that it had been "realigned." According to this fax, an alleged conflict of interest involving the team's community partner had come to their attention related to the partner's supposed control of former tax-adjudicated properties in the Ninth Ward. According to the Concordia Group, the community partner's ownership of these properties placed them in the position of functioning as both planners and developers, in clear violation of the American Institute of Certified Planners' Code of Ethics. In light of this situation, the Concordia Group believed they had no choice but to realign the Collaborative.

Although shocked to receive this news just days before undertaking a major survey of existing physical conditions, business activities, and residents' preferences, the participating faculty were confident that this problem would be successfully resolved to enable the team to continue its work as part of the UNOP process. The faculty based their assessment on the following facts: (1) the community partner had not yet received title to any tax-adjudicated properties within the study area; (2) several high-profile UNOP consultants were actively engaged in development projects within the city, yet were not being charged with conflicts of interest; (3) the Collaborative had disclosed its affordable housing activities in its RFQ submission and presentation; (4) the team's initial outreach, data collection, data analysis, and report-writing efforts had received positive feedback from local residents and officials; and (5) the UNOP contract, if necessary, could be easily transferred to one or more of the universities responsible for the overwhelming bulk of the UNOP activities, thereby eliminating any perceived conflict of interest with the community partner. When efforts to resolve the alleged "conflict of interest" charge failed, members of the Collaborative faced a serious dilemma.

Members of the team questioned whether they as planners had an ethical responsibility to continue working if the quasi-public agency responsible for funding this effort on behalf of the city's long-suffering poor, working class, and middle-income residents refused to cover our expenses. The students responded with a resounding "YES," offering to help raise the estimated \$50,000 needed to complete the plan. Over the course of the previous year, many of these students had spent a considerable amount of time getting to know the residents of the Ninth Ward and were unwilling to abandon those individuals, whose needs they believed local officials had long ignored.

Many students viewed the question of the nation's willingness to rebuild New Orleans and its poorest neighborhoods as a litmus test of society's commitment to racial justice and equality. They considered the decision to continue the project following the Collaborative's dismissal as a modest act of solidarity in light of what an earlier generation of university students had done during Freedom Summer in 1964. Both student and faculty participants in the project believed that the team was in a unique position to collect data that would challenge several long-held assumptions regarding the Ninth Ward. A number of public and private-sector leaders had publicly questioned the advisability of reinvesting in the Ninth Ward, given the degree to which the local housing stock had been compromised by the storm, the slow rate of return of residents to the area, and the lack of commitment on the part of former residents to rebuild. Those involved in the Collaborative were concerned that the Ninth Ward would not be treated fairly given these unsubstantiated but widely held beliefs.

With a member of the Collaborative's faculty team placing \$34,000 on his family's American Express Card with assurances from the community partner that they would find a way to cover the team's future expenses, the Collaborative brought approximately 80 students and faculty to New Orleans between October 25th and 29th to carry out the following field-based research activities:

- Inspecting 3,500 residential properties to determine their structural integrity.
- Surveying Ninth Ward sidewalks, streets, and curbs to evaluate their current condition.
- Evaluating the maintenance levels of 29 local playgrounds, parks, parkways, and residual open spaces.
- Documenting business sites along the Ninth Ward's four busiest commercial corridors.
- Interviewing 230 individuals from households in which members had returned to the Ninth Ward.
- Facilitating focus groups involving members of a dozen civic groups active within the Ninth Ward.<sup>8</sup>

The students expressed shock at the physical devastation they saw and seemed overwhelmed by the warm reception they received from the vast majority of Ninth Ward residents. Members of most returnee households took time out of their rehabilitation activities to share their deeply moving storm stories and equally passionate hopes for their community's future. Angered by what they perceived to be a poorly conceived and often uninspired recovery effort in the Ninth Ward, the students returned to campus committed to entering and analyzing the physical and social data they had collected to produce a comprehensive recovery plan that would clearly articulate the hopes and aspirations of local residents.

## The Team's Research Findings

Among the major findings that emerged from the students' research were several observations that challenged local officials' assumptions regarding the Ninth Ward. (For a map of the survey area, see exhibit 2.) The following observations were among the students' findings:

- Eight of ten of the Ninth Ward's standing residential structures were structurally sound.<sup>9</sup>
- The vast majority of those structurally sound structures were excellent candidates for cost-effective rehabilitation.
- The area where building demolition appeared justified was limited to a relatively small portion of the northwestern quadrant of the Lower Ninth Ward.
- A higher percentage of residents than had previously been reported appeared to have returned to the area to stay.
- Almost all of those who were restoring their homes were doing so to return as residents to the neighborhoods.

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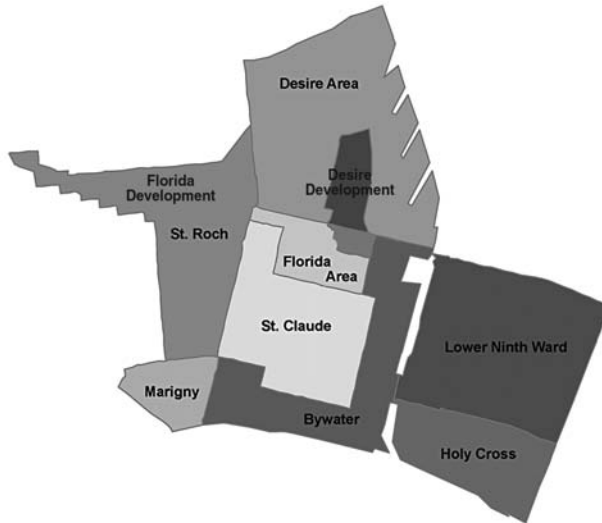
<sup>8</sup> A complete discussion of the Collaborative's research methodology is presented in *The People's Plan*, found at [www.rebuildingtheninth.org](http://www.rebuildingtheninth.org). The team's basic research design was a mixed-methods approach that used a variety of quantitative and qualitative techniques, in a triangulated manner, to ensure a high level of reliability and validity.

<sup>9</sup> For a summary of the technical findings of the housing conditions survey, see Green, Bates, and Smyth (2007).

## Exhibit 2

### Ninth Ward Neighborhoods

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Source: Greater New Orleans Community Data Center (<http://www.gnocdc.org/mapping/docs/Neighborhood.pdf>)

- The majority of those who were restoring their homes had not yet received either insurance or “Road Home” payments<sup>10</sup> and were funding their rebuilding activities with personal savings, liquidation of their 401(k) retirement accounts, gifts and loans from family members and friends, and cash and in-kind contributions from local, regional, and national religious organizations.
- Many of those interviewed feared they were making costly building design and construction errors that might jeopardize their ability to keep their properties.
- Those interviewed voiced the need for technical assistance in the areas of building design, construction management, and environmental science.
- Most returnees were in regular contact with family members and friends who had been evacuated from the Ninth Ward and wished to return but would not do so until some progress had been made in certain fundamental services, such as public schools, health care, and police protection.

Eager to share these results with the Collaborative’s community partner, Ken Reardon presented a summary of the team’s major findings and planning recommendations in New Orleans to representatives of the community partner. Wade Rathke, the community partner’s chief organizer, said, “This is powerful stuff! These data contradict many of the key assertions of the Urban Land Institute and Bring New Orleans Back Commission reports that suggested the Ninth Ward’s housing stock was damaged beyond repair and that few residents wished to return.” Rathke asked if the team could transform its preliminary results into a compelling, high-quality, professional plan

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<sup>10</sup> The Road Home Program was an initiative of the State of Louisiana in which homeowners received a grant in addition to their insurance payment to help cover the cost of either repairing or replacing their flood-damaged properties. This program was funded with federal passthrough funds from the Community Development Block Grant program.

that could withstand serious criticism from local planners, developers, and downtown advocates. He argued that the Collaborative members, as outsiders to the UNOP planning process, stood the best chance of influencing the city's approach to the Ninth Ward if the team could release its final document by January 6, 2007—10 days before the city's planning consultants would be issuing their plans. Having assured local leaders that, despite the rapidly approaching end of the semester and holiday season, the team could produce a high-quality, professional report, Reardon sent an e-mail to members of the Collaborative, informing them of the enthusiastic response their preliminary report had received. He then asked those who could to curtail their holiday celebrations by returning to Ithaca, New York, on December 28th to help transform the preliminary draft, which lacked essential statistical charts, GIS maps, and urban design sketches, into a well-organized, tightly written, and lavishly illustrated professional report.

### ***The People's Plan***

Four graduate students, three faculty members, two faculty spouses, and one undergraduate student returned to Ithaca on December 28, 2006, to produce *The People's Plan for Overcoming the Hurricane Katrina Blues: A Comprehensive Strategy for Promoting a More Vibrant, Sustainable, and Equitable 9<sup>th</sup> Ward* (ACORN Housing/University Consortium, 2007a). Another 12 students and faculty supported this core production team by contributing to the effort as “on-call/online” researchers, mapmakers, illustrators, and wordsmiths. Working 16-hour days during a 10-day period, this network succeeded in preparing a 170-page recovery plan aimed not at restoring but at transforming conditions in the nine neighborhoods comprising the Ninth Ward. *The People's Plan* featured 56 immediate, short-term, and long-term revitalization initiatives to address the environmental, healthcare, educational quality, employment opportunity, business service, affordable housing, public safety, and arts and cultural challenges that Ninth Ward residents had confronted well before experiencing the devastating effects of Hurricanes Katrina and Rita.

On January 6, 2007, a small group of students and faculty from the Collaborative flew to New Orleans to present the plan to 50 professional planners, civic leaders, elected officials, trade union allies, and members of the press who attended a breakfast briefing on *The People's Plan*. The official response to the plan was extremely positive. State Senator Ann Duplessis said, “This is awesome; you got it just right! These proposals, if enacted, would address the vast majority of the citizen complaints I am receiving in my district office.” The president of the New Orleans City Council also voiced strong support for the plan, urging members of the Collaborative to formally petition the City Council and City Planning Commission to incorporate *The People's Plan* into the soon-to-be adopted comprehensive plan being prepared by the UNOP consultants. Immediately following this breakfast briefing, members of the team presented *The People's Plan* to an enthusiastic assembly of more than 100 Ninth Ward residents, who encouraged the team to seek immediate city endorsement of the plan (Burdeau, 2007).

The following day, two long articles appeared in *The Times-Picayune* newspaper, comparing the warm reception that the Collaborative's plan received from Ninth Ward residents to the ambivalent and sometimes hostile reception most of the plans produced by the UNOP consultants received (see Egger, 2007, and Filosa, 2007). The writers attributed the broad-based support that *The People's Plan* appeared to enjoy to the participatory process that the team had used in prepar-

ing the document. The following week, an Associated Press wire story titled “9<sup>th</sup> Ward Can be Rebuilt, Planners Say,” lauding the content of *The People’s Plan*, began to appear in metropolitan newspapers across the country and overseas. Encouraged by the positive response that the plan was receiving and aware of the additional work needed to further refine the plan’s immediate-term proposals, Cornell’s CRP organized a followup workshop to prepare an executive summary of the plan and to formulate detailed implementation strategies for the plan’s most important near-term projects (ACORN Housing/University Consortium, 2007b).

### **Pursuing Successful Implementation of *The People’s Plan***

In February 2007, representatives of the Collaborative presented *The People’s Plan* to the New Orleans City Council, which subsequently passed a unanimous resolution directing the city’s staff to incorporate the main elements of the document into their comprehensive plan. In March, Collaborative representatives presented *The People’s Plan* to members of the New Orleans City Planning Commission, which passed a similar resolution recommending the incorporation of the main elements of *The People’s Plan* into UNOP’s comprehensive plan. On March 30, 2007, Edward Blakeley, director of the Office of Recovery of the City of New Orleans, held a press conference to announce the outline of the city’s \$1.1 billion investment strategy. Of the 17 rebuild zones, where \$145 million in public investment would be concentrated, 2 were located in the Ninth Ward in areas recommended by *The People’s Plan* (Nossiter, 2007).

Although city officials were engaged in the final review of the UNOP plan, which received City Planning Commission and City Council approval in June 2007, students in Cornell’s Community Development Workshop pursued three different strategies to advance the implementation of *The People’s Plan*. First, they prepared a 31-page summary of *The People’s Plan* that was widely distributed.<sup>11</sup> Second, they assisted the Collaborative’s community partner in organizing policy briefings on the plan for representatives of major lending institutions in New Orleans, New York City, and Washington, D.C. Finally, they completed feasibility reports that described how a proposed community planning, design, development, and legal assistance center, together with a model mixed-use/mixed-income development contained in *The People’s Plan*, could be implemented.

Meanwhile, the Collaborative’s community partner concentrated on efforts to help Ninth Ward homeowners secure their insurance payments and Road Home grants. The partner also worked with LSU’s Department of Architecture to build two single-family homes for long-term residents of the Ninth Ward that met all local building codes and Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) elevation standards. Finally, the community partners worked with interested local, regional, and national lenders, as well as government agencies and philanthropic foundations, to assemble the capital needed to effectively assist homeowners wishing to rebuild their own structures and interested in moving into a model mixed-use development proposed for both the Ninth Ward and the New Orleans East neighborhoods. Although the community partner initially found considerable private-sector interest in its New Orleans homeowner rehabilitation and new construction initiatives, the disruption caused within the nation’s mortgage markets by the growing subprime lending

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<sup>11</sup> Copies of the “Executive Summary” of *The People’s Plan* can be downloaded at [www.rebuildingtheninth.org](http://www.rebuildingtheninth.org).

crisis appears to have caused many private investors to withhold their support for these initiatives pending some resolution of this problem. The number of subprime loans originated in the eastside neighborhoods of the city has unfortunately further complicated an already difficult development situation.

## Lessons Learned

Through involvement in the organization and management of the Collaborative, the team has drawn the following tentative lessons from its ongoing involvement in relief and recovery efforts in New Orleans' Ninth Ward.

**Data generated in the wake of major natural disasters such as Hurricanes Katrina and Rita may lack reliability and consistency.** The initial damage assessments completed by FEMA-hired contractors, which formed the foundations for the initial Urban Land Institute report (ULI, 2005) and subsequent Bring New Orleans Back Commission's strategy recommending early investment in the city's least damaged areas, were tragically flawed. Poorly executed damage assessments for the Ninth Ward encouraged many public and private institutions to abandon short-term relief and recovery efforts, which discouraged many would-be evacuees from returning to their homes. If the Collaborative had not undertaken, at its own expense, a systematic survey of the structural conditions of the Ninth Ward's building stock that challenged these early results, city recovery officials may have conducted a large-scale clearance of neighborhoods in the Lower Ninth Ward, at great expense to the nation and at irreparable psychological harm to the neighborhoods' homeowners.

**University-based engineering, architecture, landscape architecture, and urban planning programs can play a crucial role in enhancing the planning and design capacity of community-based organizations and municipal agencies following large-scale disasters.** As shown by the successful implementation of the Collaborative's research into public recovery efforts in the Ninth Ward, higher education institutions helped individual neighborhoods complete comprehensive recovery plans and undertake specific revitalization projects. This work helped local institutions design and implement major improvement projects that they may not have been able to undertake on their own.

**The ability of colleges and universities from outside the Gulf Coast region to make significant contributions to recovery efforts in New Orleans depended, in large degree, on schools establishing and maintaining mutually beneficial relationships with local community-based organizations.** In the days and weeks following Hurricanes Katrina and Rita, the city's loose-knit network of social service agencies, churches, and grassroots organizations often had the best information regarding local conditions and needs. More often these organizations, rather than the city's planning and development agencies, reached out to colleges and universities requesting assistance for storm-damaged neighborhoods. These organizations frequently introduced sympathetic faculty from outside the region to specific grassroots organizations leading local recovery efforts. In many cases, these organizations helped visiting students and faculty locate facilities to house their volunteers, organizations to feed their workers, and local businesses to provide needed supplies. It is unlikely that many of the higher education institutions that came to New Orleans seeking to support local recovery efforts would have been able to do so without the guidance and assistance



of such groups as New Orleans ACORN, Common Ground, Broadmoor Neighborhood Association, and Holy Angels Roman Catholic Church.

**Although the need to coordinate the efforts of the large number of colleges and universities involved in post-Hurricanes Katrina and Rita recovery activities has been clear throughout the past 3-plus years, little progress has been made in creating a clearinghouse to maximize higher education's contributions to the region's recovery efforts.** Hundreds of colleges and universities have sent students and faculty to New Orleans to participate in short-term relief and recovery efforts. Dozens of higher education institutions have accepted the challenge to contribute, on an ongoing basis, to the region's long-term recovery efforts. Despite the scale of these efforts, little has been done to create a coordination mechanism to ensure that every community in need receives a fair share of available campus-based support. In addition, no systematic effort has been undertaken to match specific campuses possessing specialized forms of knowledge and expertise with communities in need of particular competencies. The absence of an office to coordinate such efforts also means that little of the experience, knowledge, skills, networks, and data created by the many campuses working in New Orleans has been shared—requiring each campus to reinvent its own version of the “campus guide to recovery planning.”

**Local, regional, state, and federal officials readily acknowledge the critical contributions that campuses have made to the Gulf Coast's recovery efforts. Little discussion has taken place, however, regarding how national recovery officials might work with appropriate disciplinary associations and national higher education organizations to create a national office capable of mobilizing and coordinating student and faculty resources in response to future regional or national disasters, such as the recent Southern California wildfires.** It might make sense for the U.S. Department of Homeland Security (DHS) to convene a meeting of federal agencies and higher education institutions that participated in the post-Hurricanes Katrina and Rita relief and recovery efforts to discuss the establishment of a program and a process for mobilizing a cross-section of the nation's engineering, architecture, landscape architecture, urban planning, and social work programs in times of major regional and national disasters. With a modest amount of funding, the DHS could create a small grants program, similar in size and scope to the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development's former Community Outreach Partnership Program, to encourage campuses with relevant academic departments to establish or expand their disaster preparedness and recovery planning programs to introduce their students, faculty, and staff to principles of good practice in this rapidly expanding field; train an interdisciplinary core of campus faculty who, along with their students, could be mobilized in the event of major disasters; and fund the travel and field-based volunteer expenses of students, faculty, and staff who participate in this emerging form of national service. Success in establishing such an office might also lead to a discussion of how the Corporation for National Service might expand its AmeriCorps and VISTA programs to encourage high school and college graduates to devote a year to disaster-preparedness and recovery efforts in return for college loan forgiveness or tuition assistance. The overwhelming response that the Collaborative's requests for student volunteers received suggests that the current generation of U.S. college and university students is ready, willing, and able to make a serious contribution to the redevelopment of regions that have been devastated by natural disasters and official neglect.

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## Authors

Kenneth M. Reardon is a professor and director of The University of Memphis Graduate Program in City and Regional Planning.

Marcel Ionescu-Heroiu recently completed his Ph.D. in City and Regional Planning at Cornell University and is currently employed as a consultant by The World Bank in Washington, D.C.

Andrew J. Rumbach is a Ph.D. student in Cornell University's Department of City and Regional Planning.

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