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# Planning for Diaspora: New Orleans Before and After the Hurricanes

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Planning for Diaspora

Barbara Eckstein

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# Planning for Diaspora

New Orleans Before and After the Hurricanes

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*Abstract: Given the recent devastation in New Orleans due to hurricanes and broken levees, US planners are realizing that they must think about New Orleans (place and people) as existing in different locations and not together in one location, as is the common planning presumption. Although Nick Spitzer--folklorist, cultural conservationist, Gulf Coast music expert, and radio host of American Routes--claims, persuasively, that to save a New Orleans that "we recognize" is to save its people and its cultures, this paper argues that those people and those cultures are inextricably tied to other issues of material, environmental, economic, and social sustainability. It further argues that to understand the role of cultures in the production of the city now that much of its population has been set flowin', we must look to other relevant diasporas. The case in point for this argument is the role of so-called HOPE-VI or New Urbanist public housing renewal in dislocating the residents of the St. Thomas Public Housing Development. They became an intra-city diaspora despite their formation of a savvy residents' council and their participation in the renovation plans. This paper concludes that to save a New Orleans that "we recognize" --and one more sustainable than the one that drowned--requires understanding the interaction of cultural production with other social forces and fighting for the role of local knowledge, skills, and lore in the rebuilding process.*

Keywords: Diaspora, New Orleans, HOPE-VI, St. Thomas Public Housing Development, American Routes

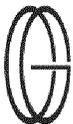
**T**HE UNIVERSITY OF New Orleans's College of Urban and Public Affairs employs a folklorist and cultural conservationist named Nick Spitzer. Because, in part, I want to argue that all academic planning programs and governmental planning agencies should employ such a folklorist, I begin by introducing Spitzer. In addition to teaching duties, he hosts and produces a weekly radio program called *American Routes*. Through that medium he can share his special expertise in Gulf Coast music. After the breaks in the city's levees following landfall of Hurricane Katrina on August 31, 2005, Spitzer, like all New Orleanians, had to evacuate the city, leaving behind his studio in the French Quarter. But the following Friday, September 7, 2005, he broadcast an "After the Storm" *American Routes* from Lafayette, Louisiana, southwest of New Orleans.<sup>1</sup> In the "After the Storm" program, Spitzer asserts that the task at hand is to preserve "a New Orleans that we recognize." To do this, he assumes, we must save the people and the cultures.

Spitzer's role is crucial to the rebuilding of a New Orleans that "we"—i.e., local people--recognize. But his assertions about cultural sustainability must be tied to social, environmental, and economic sustainability if local cultures are again going to thrive in

place, in neighborhoods, and if those neighborhoods are going to be more sustainable places than the ones that were submerged in ten—twenty and more!—feet of water. Sustaining New Orleans involves, by necessity, both an investigation of what lore is sustained in public memory—local and not—about the city and also an investigation of the best possible balance of claims for social justice, environmental health, and economic viability. For good and ill, the stories about and reputation of New Orleans derived from folklore, literature, music and a host of other cultural productions are inextricable from sustainability as it is understood by environmental scientists, urban designers, and planners. For good and ill. This caveat is significant. Cultural conservationists like Spitzer are engaged in saving the cultures of some of the region's least affluent and influential residents, and yet like historic preservationists whose architectural interests often serve the most affluent and influential residents, folklorists have to consider the disabling as well as the enabling features of what they fight to protect. What gets said or sung about New Orleans and how the city's problems get framed and addressed, literally what gets built and what does not are in an infinite cycle of producing one another.

The first song that Spitzer played on September 7, 2005, was Randy Newman's "Louisiana, 1927,"

<sup>1</sup> When Hurricane Rita then hit southwest Louisiana and rebroke a levee in New Orleans, Spitzer broadcast "After the Storm II: Allons a Lafayette." Those programs are accessible through the *American Routes* archive at <http://www.americanroutes.org/archive.html>.



a moving ballad partially in the voice of a “cracker” or poor white farmer. As a resident of south Louisiana, this cracker has a conspiracy theory about the extraordinary 1927 Mississippi River flood. He chants repeatedly, “They’re trying to wash us away.” “They” are the federal government of Calvin Coolidge and other elites imagined but not known by the poor farmer. As it happened, this conspiracy theory had considerable basis in fact. Historian John Barry tells the story well in *Rising Tide: The Mississippi Flood of 1927 and How It Changed America*. Barry makes it clear that the business elite of New Orleans in 1927 convinced the mayor and governor and the representatives of the U.S. federal government that a crevasse, or break, should be dynamited in the levee below New Orleans in order to release the flood water in that parish, or district, and save the city. Their plan was carried out thus destroying the trapping industry of the neighboring parish which was never reimbursed by New Orleans as city leaders had promised. Upriver at the Yazoo Mississippi Delta black workers were prohibited from evacuating so that they would not permanently relocate to Chicago and away from the plantations they worked in the South.

Hearing the song in 2005 only days after the federal government failed so miserably to come swiftly to the aid of New Orleanians trapped by the quickly rising water, one can easily entertain suspicion of the current federal administration. Indeed, conspiracy theories linked to a history of oppression play a significant role in the current crisis. David Remnick writes in the *New Yorker* of October 3, 2005, of the theories of New Orleans refugees in Houston’s Astrodome and in a shelter at New Iberia. For example, one woman told Remnick, “I couldn’t leave. I was terrified. I didn’t have any money, no car, nothing. Where was I supposed to go? They shoulda had some buses. It’s me and my five kids. I live in Desire, the Ninth Ward. I think it was a setup to get black folks out of New Orleans forever. Look around. Who’s here? Nobody but the black and the poor. They ain’t got but ten white families in the whole Astrodome.”<sup>2</sup> A history of oppression, a history of, in fact, having been conspired against, can override the evidence that this time the federal government and others in power were incompetent rather than conniving.

Conspiracy theories and rumors sustained in public memory as well as diasporas resulting from misguided engineering decisions, environmental unconsciousness, and economic greed—all exacerbated by climatic conditions—precede the current disaster and have been sustained by it. If New Orleans is again going to be what Nick Spitzer calls “a city we recognize,” how can planners, and policy makers, politi-

cians and citizens address the needs and the rumors of the dispossessed, those folk of New Orleans diaspora, bring them home, and help to produce a sustainable city that will not drive these same people away next year?

A week after the flooding in New Orleans, Dowell Myers, a planning professor at the University of Southern California, sent his colleagues throughout the United States a message about planning for the New Orleans diaspora. Through the Planning Educators Electronic Mail Network at PLANET@LIST-SERV.BUFFALO.EDU, Myers wrote under the subject heading “Planning the New Orleans Diaspora to Save the Community.” In his message, he observes that [U.S.] planners are accustomed to dealing with a place and its people as one entity, and he argues that they must rethink their work when the human community is separated from the place. They must think about this word “diaspora.” He asks how the community and not just the individuals can be sustained in virtual space in dispersed locations until, gradually, finally, former residents will return to real space in New Orleans with jobs and housing in place. He concludes, “We need to figure it out.”<sup>3</sup>

Now months after Myers’s initial analysis of diaspora, we know how hard it will be to sustain that dispersed community and to return it to meaningful life in a New Orleans that ‘we recognize.’ This is especially true, given that many of the people Remnick talked to said that there was nothing left for them in New Orleans. This is all the more reason for giving Myers’s crucial questions thoughtful consideration.

But we do not need to “figure it out” from scratch. Just as conspiracy theories are not new to this disaster, diaspora is a human condition as old as Moses. Older. Examples from the Partition of India to the war in the Sudan could be instructive. But since New Orleans has been the port of Africanist culture into the United States, we might best consider the centrality of diaspora to that history, even if the current generations of New Orleanians have stayed put for well over a hundred years. It would be instructive to rehearse the effects of the diaspora created by the west African slave trade or the so-called Great Migration of U.S. African Americans out of the South and into northern, Midwestern and western U.S. cities, and to rehearse the effects on displaced cultures and peoples. But I would like to draw attention to a more recent diaspora *within* New Orleans, one mirrored in most every U.S. city. In this example is the kind of folk culture Spitzer would like to conserve and the kind of community that Myers wants to protect as well as fodder for the kinds of rumors Remnick heard at the shelters in Texas and southwest

<sup>2</sup> Remnick, “High Water,” 55.

<sup>3</sup> Myers, “Planning the New Orleans Diaspora to Save the Community,” email.

Louisiana. While some actors in this story fight to sustain the culture and the community in place, others disperse the people of the neighborhood, creating an intra-metro diaspora years before the hurricanes of 2005.

It is a familiar story connected, in the United States, to the federal government's HOPE-VI initiative. HOPE VI is a plan to undo the disastrous urban renewal program of the sixties that concentrated the poorest and usually the darkest citizens in isolated sites within the inner cities, often in high rise buildings. HOPE VI has called for replacing those now dilapidated structures with low rise buildings constructed for mixed income residents and located within neighborhoods of mixed use—commercial as well as residential. But just as the New Orleans Super Dome displaced the African American residents of the neighborhood it razed—the one where jazz legends Louis Armstrong and Buddy Bolden grew up—and the inner city Interstate-10 highway overpass that shadows Claiborne Avenue has disrupted and diminished the central Mardi Gras parade and celebration route of many African American New Orleanians, HOPE VI renovation, in the hands of the Housing Authority of New Orleans partnered with private developers, has displaced many poor and black New Orleanians—many of them children. It has displaced many more than it situated in new or renovated structures. Those left over from the HOPE VI renovation projects were set flowin' by development before the flood water chased them to higher ground.

One location subject to HOPE VI razing and renovation was the St. Thomas Housing Development, the one shown in the feature film *Dead Man Walking*. Next to St. Thomas is a Catholic Social Service Agency called Hope House where Sister Helen Prejean, the subject of *Dead Man Walking*, went to work. The story of St. Thomas in the final decades of the twentieth century is instructive for folklorists and planners worrying about sustaining New Orleans.

The St. Thomas Residents Council (STRC) formed in the oldest of the New Orleans public housing developments, contiguous to the historic Garden District, near the port moving up-river away from the tourist sites, and in the corridor of riverside warehouse district renovation. In 1982, "STRC organized a takeover of [the Housing Authority of New Orleans] --HANO's-- main office to protest poor living conditions" and then organized a rent strike which ultimately resulted in a \$21-million rehabilitation

grant from the federal department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD).<sup>4</sup> From 1979 through 1996 when they reached an agreement, HANO and HUD battled to determine who would control the publicly owned homes, occupied by a tenth of the city's residents. Amidst this struggle between the city and the nation, the St Thomas Residents Council, originally, by necessity, a group comprised exclusively of low-income *women* of color, organized on a different geographic scale: their neighborhood.<sup>5</sup> With the assistance of Barbara Major and the People's Institute for Survival and Beyond, the Residents Council reached outside their island of public housing to form the St. Thomas/Irish Channel Consortium (STICC), "an organization made up of the Residents Council and about a dozen social service and community organizations [like Hope House] that serves as a mechanism for resident participation in decision making affecting the community."<sup>6</sup> From this political and geographic base, residents of St. Thomas worked to avoid the fate of Iberville public housing residents mostly excluded, in the 1980s, from top-down land development decisions about their desirable location proximate to the French Quarter and the Central Business District.<sup>7</sup> St Thomas Residents Council could instead participate—with savvy—in the map-making of developer Joseph Canizaro, who planned to extend the transforming and lucrative downtown warehouse sector upriver to the Garden District and the neighborhood of St. Thomas. The Residents Council and St Thomas /Irish Channel Consortium became participant-cartographers in this now familiar central city exercise in urban economic growth and redevelopment. On their emergent map, the Residents Council sought to erase the vectors linking them to Angola Penitentiary and to the sorrow of a group like Survive, which brings together the families of murder victims, by working to undo their isolation from their immediate wealthier Garden District neighbors and from the scale of local and national funding necessary to change their residences and their lives. That is to say that the St Thomas Residents Council remapped their neighborhood by striving to redraw the socioeconomic conditions in one urban neighborhood of the region. Their organizational efforts can stand as an inspiration to the city's current rebuilders.

A part of the vision for the Residents Council has been the creation of a community as family, a family base with the power to heal and protect its members and to hold them accountable. Speaking of struggles within the Consortium, Barbara Major explained in

<sup>4</sup> Reichl, "Learning from St. Thomas," 176.

<sup>5</sup> Young and Christos-Rogers, "Resisting Racially Gendered Space," 103.

<sup>6</sup> Reichl, "Learning From St. Thomas," 177.

<sup>7</sup> Cook, and Lauria, "Urban Regeneration and Public Housing in New Orleans," 538-52.

1993, “The consortium is a family and no one is prepared to leave. We will struggle through. That’s what families do.”<sup>8</sup> Note: “No one is prepared to leave.” This phrase stands in stark contrast to the despair of many current refugees interviewed by Remnick. Remember too, that Dowell Myer has suggested that in dealing with the current diaspora, we need to think in terms of saving communities rather than simply individuals. The Residents Council stipulated one useful definition of “community.”

Within the neighborhood of St. Thomas, family was not to be just a metaphor for political organization; it was to be constitutive. The Residents Council expressed a commitment to dealing with the children and elders of residents and a commitment to including black *men* heretofore “deemed invisible” by federal housing policy, welfare policy, school policy, health policies, and police practices.<sup>9</sup> Seeing men as part of the neighborhood rather than as victims of crime or Angola-bound reconfigured their role in the neighborhood. Men in the neighborhood formed Black Men United for Change in 1992.<sup>10</sup> And in 1994, one of the worst crime years in New Orleans history, Fannie McKnight of the Residents Council asserted,

“Our young men are talking about wanting to stop the violence in our community. They say they’re tired of it.... We’re taking a spiritual approach to dealing with all this violence. We’re not crying and complaining, we’re pulling ourselves up to fight. There’s a spiritual grieving process going on. This city was dead but the people in this community is not. Shame can’t be used against them anymore.”<sup>11</sup>

“This city was dead but people in this community is not.” These too are words that could inspire the current exiles and their advocates. This approach and all Residents Council strategies were articulated as long-term relationship-building: a future long enough for atonement and proximate enough for accountability. It was a holistic strategy.

The insistence on seeing urban challenges in terms of whole systems, urban renewal in a regional context, and the processes for change from the ground up became the key strategies of HUD in the later 1990s.<sup>12</sup> The St. Thomas Residents Council’s participation in neighborhood map-making which arose amidst some of the worst years for public housing residents in New Orleans subsequently became more fashionable. Since the HUD/HANO Cooperative Endeavor Agreement of 1996 has been in place, HANO claimed—at least before the 2005 flood—that HUD’s HOPE VI programs (Housing Opportunities for People Everywhere) had been rebuilding the structures and the decision-making practices in New Orleans neighborhoods.<sup>13</sup> St. Thomas has been one such program. The Residents Council, HANO, and the private developer Historic Restorations, Inc. (HRI)—chosen by HUD—have engaged in a HOPE VI-induced, mixed use, \$320-million, public-private transformation plan for St. Thomas. (The site is on the river ridge and remained above water throughout the recent catastrophes.)

This pricey revitalization process promised ultimately to improve conditions for some residents, but not all.<sup>14</sup> Whether these mixed results signaled the Resident Council’s successful partnership in the map-making process which controls land use in the city became difficult to say once most of St Thomas had been demolished, and 775 families, all of the former residents, had been removed to other public housing developments or non-HANO housing where they could use section 8 vouchers, that is, public housing subsidies. In 2001 they were awaiting the new construction.

At least as early as January of 1996 St. Thomas residents were invited by HANO executive director Michael Kelly and HANO administrator Peggy Landry to envision with potential developers the transformation of their neighborhood. At that time, I imagine, many drew in their mind’s eye and on newsprint the physical maps that would change their lives and enlarge their futures. But by October of 2001 Residents Council president Barbara Jackson lamented, “This definitely didn’t work out the way

<sup>8</sup> Interview with Barbara Major, May 1993, quoted in Young and Christos-Rodgers, “Resisting Racially Gendered Space,” 106.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, 106 and 103.

<sup>10</sup> Williams, “St. Thomas ‘Guide’ to Oversee Facelift,” Metro B1.

<sup>11</sup> Interview with Fannie McKnight, May 23, 1994, quoted in Young and Christos-Rodgers, “Resisting Racially Gendered Space,” 107.

<sup>12</sup> Calthorpe and Fulton, *The Regional City*, 244.

<sup>13</sup> Housing Authority of New Orleans (HANO), <<http://www.hano.org>>.

<sup>14</sup> The *New Orleans Times-Picayune* tells one hopeful story of relocation, that of Mrs. Evelyn Melancon, the first black resident in her building in the 1960s. Now, 35 years later, she, a model tenant, has been spared relocation to another public housing development by the intervention of a nun who works in a local social service agency. Mrs. Melancon will move to a shotgun house in the neighborhood. Her neighbor, Mrs. Lillie Petite, also a grandmother with dependents, will instead be moved first to the Florida housing development and then to the high-rise Guste public housing development. See Jensen, “Sweet Sorrow: New Homes Give New Lease on Life,” National 1.

we had planned. It wasn't what we pictured."<sup>15</sup> What became of culture and community, not to mention political organization? Why were they not sustained?

A clue resides in the descriptions of the project by HANO and HRI. In 2001, HANO still listed themselves, Historic Restorations Inc, and the Residents Council as *partners* in the St. Thomas project.<sup>16</sup> The private developer HRI, however, described the collaborative effort this way:

The St. Thomas Re-Development in New Orleans is a massive project currently underway that will transform land previously occupied by public housing developments into a vibrant community set in a historic area.<sup>17</sup>

HANO and HRI both clearly understood HUD's priorities and the stipulations for HOPE-VI funding, yet in embracing those new urbanist ideas, HRI also announced that it would build from bricks and mortar a community where there were once (only) public housing developments, that is, presumably, no community.<sup>18</sup> The presumption of the private developers that physical design, architectural historic preservation, and replacement of former residences with many upscale structures will produce a "vibrant community" is one key social, economic, and cultural explanation for the disappointment and diaspora of former St. Thomas residents. But other agents in the production of place—including the folk cultures that Spitzer conserves—have inevitably participated for good and ill in the rumors and reputation that shape how city makers of all sorts frame and address problems. This is not to underestimate the power of elite developers in New Orleans or in any city, but it is to understand their influence in the complicated context of the lived and represented place. In that complexity responsibility for the past and future physical, social, and cultural condition of New Orleans spreads like water over everyone.

Peter Calthorpe and William Fulton—themselves advocates for physical design as a core constituent of city-building—claim that we live at neighborhood and regional scales (more than at city, state, and national scales) but lack political structures to take ad-

vantage of their opportunities. Thus, instead of inhabiting "communities of place," we inhabit "communities of interest," "gated communities of the mind"<sup>19</sup>: I'll hang with my co-workers, class, age, and ethnic group; you hang with yours. In contrast, resident-organizers in the St. Thomas neighborhood attempted, over time, to build not only a political structure but also a spiritual community "inclusive of built structures, collaborative policies, and, most importantly, human relationships based on an acceptance of struggle and conflict, an appreciation of culture, and an ethic of accountability."<sup>20</sup> But those residents, and others like them, became part of an intra-metro diaspora separated from the evolving neighborhood place which gave rise to their active community. In such partial circumstances it is hard to be anything but a community of interest. Ironically, the Catholic social service agency Hope House remained on St. Andrew Street, in 2001, next door to the barbed wire inclosing the demolition site that was once the dilapidated housing for 700 families. In 2001, Hope House workers still stayed in touch with 600 of those families through "Keeping the Ties," a weekly newsletter devoted to dispelling misinformation about St. Thomas.<sup>21</sup> They tried to sustain community in virtual space, as Dowell Myer asks us to do now. If, in their dispersed state across the metropolitan region in 2001 or across the South in 2005, the former St. Thomas residents who worked to build their community could meet the substantial challenge of sustaining it, while also addressing the personal, social, and financial challenges of dislocation, then perhaps they could reconstitute a community of place whether in their re-developed, old neighborhood or in a different site or on a different scale.

But of course the odds are not good. The developers—Joseph Canizaro, Pres Kabacoff, and others—are prepared to continue their agenda on a larger scale now that whole neighborhoods of New Orleans have been devastated and deserted. And communities like the St Thomas Residents Council do not even have proximity and emplacement with which to resist.

But some local organizations do have their feet on the ground and are fighting for local ideas and local jobs in the rebuilding effort. One such organiz-

<sup>15</sup> Bell, "A Complex Undertaking," National 1. Other evidence of STRC's disappointment came in the form of a protest at the September 7, 2001, "Justice for All," annual ball where HRI CEO Pres Kabacoff was presiding as honorary chair. The call to protest participants charged that "his image of the great liberal-minded developer is unwarranted as long as he destroys housing opportunities for poor people" (email from the St. Thomas Community Law Center provided in Alexander Reichl's correspondence with the author).

<sup>16</sup> Housing Authority of New Orleans. <<http://www.hano.org>>

<sup>17</sup> Historic Restorations, Inc. <<http://www.hrihci.com>>

<sup>18</sup> HRI notes that when they signed on to the project, the average family in St. Thomas consisted of a single mother and three children with an average income of less than \$5000 per year. Between 1992-95 there were eighteen murders in the neighborhood. The site generated no property or sales tax, and the contiguous, "blighted" warehouse district paid less than \$25,000 in sales taxes per year. I infer their definition of community from this proffered data. <<http://www.hrihci.com>>

<sup>19</sup> Calthorpe and Fulton, *The Regional City*, 3-4.

<sup>20</sup> Young and Christos-Rogers, "Resisting Racially Gendered Space," 110.

<sup>21</sup> Jensen, "Hope House Not Giving Up on St. Thomas," Metro1.

ation is the Urban Conservancy. Weeks ago they went to Washington D.C. to meet with their Louisiana representatives, a concrete proposal in hand. The Urban Conservancy is especially noteworthy because they strive to know the pulse of the New Orleans place-tone—cultures in communities—and because they are working to reamass their greatest asset, people of modest income in place in neighborhoods organizing for local markets, local shops, local jobs, and environmental health of local sites all consistent with and in celebration of local cultures. The local leaders of the Urban Conservancy understand that sustaining local cultures that live in public memory is tied, in complex ways, to the balance of environmental, economic, and social justice needs that define a sustainable place. They conclude, “New Orleans cannot be rebuilt exactly as it was. By definition, this means that some difficult and potentially painful decisions will have to be made as we move forward.

New Orleanians need to make these decisions together. So that together we can mourn the losses and together we can celebrate the renewal and rebirth of the city we love.”<sup>22</sup> “The city we love” and a “New Orleans we recognize” cannot be and should not be precisely the same New Orleans that existed before the flood.

The Urban Conservancy, like the St. Thomas Residents Council before them, have what James Scott in *Seeing Like a State* calls metis, local knowledge, local skills, necessary understanding of local communities. Without this, no scheme for addressing the place of New Orleans and the diaspora of its people has a ghost of a chance of bringing those people home, sustaining them and their cultures, creating a more sustainable site than the one that flooded, and still recreating a New Orleans that “we—that is, those who love New Orleans—recognize.”

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<sup>22</sup> “Mr. Coats Goes to Washington,” email. [uc@urbanconservancy.org](mailto:uc@urbanconservancy.org).

## About the Author

*Barbara Eckstein*

For the last decade I have been studying the city of New Orleans, Louisiana. My specific interest is the connection between what is sustained in local and outsiders' memories about the city and the sustainability of the city as environmental scientists, economists, and workers for social justice would understand that term. The result has been a book called *Sustaining New Orleans: Literature, Local Memory, and the Fate of a City*. While it is tempting to think of culture--story, music, food...--as having a healing effect, I argue that story and other elements of culture participate for good and ill in the fate of a place. I show this to be the case in New Orleans considering the interaction of popular literature set in the city, folklore, and particular material problems and responses to them. Ironically, poignantly, this book was completed just six months before the hurricanes that devastated the city and was published (Routledge) two months after the hurricane. The book's argument for the importance of local metis--local knowledge, local memory, local skills--is all the more necessary, I believe.



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