



Rethinking Urbanism in the Shrinking City of New Orleans

New Orleans is a ragged city. In the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina, this metropolis has rebounded in fits and starts, with the gap-toothed development of new housing flanking broken buildings, and swaths of activity ringing large vacant sections of the city. While Frederick Jackson Turner asserted in the 1890's that the "frontier has gone," and Joel Garreau declared Edge Cities "the final frontier," the shrinking city of New Orleans offers up a fresh model of untested territory. In New Orleans, the last frontier may actually be found in the resurrection of urban wilderness.

It is expected that the recovery of New Orleans will engage the same narrative that served to legitimize the settlement of the New World, incorporating capitalism, technology and the heavy footprint of human development. The spirit of the city, however, is much better suited to a radical grassroots approach. Beyond the unconventional urban forms traced by New Orleans' canals and neutral ground, lie equally unique place-based issues, such as high soil toxicity, extreme wealth disparity and the threat of flooding from a sunken topography. New Orleans shoulders such a magnitude, multitude and curious assortment of problems that the city defies conventional solutions.

The recovery process doesn't have to involve restraint, discipline, or the neat frames of civilization. Because New Orleanians are comfortable with the chaos that has historically amplified this city, there is room for radical innovation in the rebuilding effort. New Orleans is an ideal place for creative and messy solutions, progressive and strange methodologies; it isn't too precious, and it isn't in control.

This untamed environment promotes rugged individualism, ripens the ground for innovation, and cultivates the creative renewal of a people's relationship to place. However, the City of New Orleans, FEMA and even local non-profit aid organizations have been slow to respond to this region's rebuilding needs. Worse, these institutionalized planning efforts lack imagination and a progressive sustainability agenda. In contrast, the following design interventions provide simple and speedy improvements for greening the urban frontier of New Orleans.

Forty Acres and a Mule

One hundred thousand buildings stand vacant in New Orleans today, under threat of demolition due to associated arson, blight, and maintenance. The City of New Orleans could immediately restore its shrinking population and also bring life to these buildings by implementing squatter's rights, immigration reform and an open call for homesteaders. Like the many prior waves of U.S. immigration, these new groups would boost multiculturalism in New Orleans, while reducing the rampant homelessness and exorbitant rental rates in the city, both of which have more than doubled since 2005.

Relax Density

Vacant parcels of land, some thirty thousand already seized by the New Orleans Recovery Authority, are logical opportunities for the extension of greenspace in the city, rather than new built development. In practice, this might manifest itself in the expansion of single residential lots that seize neighboring plots, or a new urban fabric of pocket parks and community gardens. Either way, this growing patchwork of natural spaces affirms an intention to invite wilderness in the city, while embracing a reduction in density.

Detoxify Land

In the weeks following Hurricane Katrina, New Orleans held a body of contaminated sludge that democratically seeped over lot lines and across neighborhood boundaries. Bioremediation offers an opportunity to cure soil toxicity by trapping heavy metals in natural plant growth over time. This process could begin with guerrilla-style phytoremediative seed bombs launched from the street, and grow into a more thorough and widespread planting effort. Because bioremediation takes several years to cleanse contaminated soil, and doesn't have many negative development effects, every lot could immediately begin this process, without regard for future development plans. In the interim, these sites would benefit from the creation of new natural habitat, and an overall reduction in maintenance, urban heat sink issues, and stormwater runoff.

Link Scattered Sites

Beyond greenspace, vacant lots in New Orleans offer cheap and useful space for the generation of local fuel sources, food production and other grown products. While this land exists in separate parcels scattered throughout the city, they can be coordinated by a single entity and managed for synchronized biofuel production, tree nurseries for free tree programs, urban gardens. If New Orleans's population ever rebounds, this reduction in density proves temporary, as these uses readily support future development.

Ban Mowing

Post-Katrina New Orleans has adopted a special fondness for the lawn mower. In this verdant city, green shoots split through brick sidewalks, plants overtake whole houses, and thick jungles appear overnight in empty lots. Teams

of volunteers from well-meaning mission groups descend upon the city to neaten empty lots and trim voluminous yards. The city would become more sustainable simply by halting this activity; volunteers could be more effective change agents for meaningful work, and natural areas would thrive within the city, thereby boosting urban habitat, cleaning the air, and improving soil health. More importantly, there would be an overall reduction in the use of fossil fuels.

Collect Water

The sunken topography of New Orleans collects rainwater: this runoff feeds into geriatric pumping stations and is lifted out into Lake Ponchartrain, at the rate of 1.5 inches per hour. This system has two major flaws: toxic urban runoff moves directly out to the lake, and the pumps are woefully undersized for their task. Water pools in streets and yards, occasionally flooding cars, before it gets expunged from the city. Instead, vacant lots in New Orleans can act as temporary holding areas for this runoff. Old swimming pools and other depressions instinctively act like cisterns on these sites, providing immediate storage capacity and reducing the threat of flooding. Eventually, these pools could become living machines to filter that toxic water, and perhaps even provide the space for small-scale urban catfish and crawfish farms.

Hijack Canals

The canal network in New Orleans operates like a Southwestern American wash system. During periods of heavy rain, canals come to life with roiling waters and swept-up debris. Otherwise, these skeletal concrete corridors support tenuous emergent plant life and a constant, if lean, shelf of water. In an effort to promote this green growth, while pairing opportunities for urban hiking and biking, canals could feature an elevated bike path and fissures for volunteer plants. Like a reverse NYC highline, this trail system could involve minimal initial infrastructure, starting with a series of stiles that would act as entry and egress points into the canal system, and then phasing in grassroots-driven signage and mapping, graffiti murals, an opensource guidebook, aeries for birds, and finally, an elevated path.

Seize Potholes

20,000 potholes interrupt the streets of post-Katrina New Orleans. Caused by sinking soils and the high water content of this marshy land, potholes reach soil below the street, and can be both dangerous to pedestrians and hard on cars. A fast alternative to road resurfacing would be to empower locals to fill these depressions with a plant, tree or bush. A single vertical planting would serve to slow traffic, clearly identify potholes, and add greenery to the urban streetscape. These planted roads would help to absorb water runoff, while serving as a physical reminder that the city is at once verdant and invincible.

Share Livestock

Spaces that require mowing in New Orleans need a neighborhood goat. These friendly animals could be tethered at playgrounds, available for check-out to trim yards or to prune back growth on empty lots. Enterprising locals would have access to their milk for cheese production. Meanwhile, chicken tractors could occupy the space of the empty neutral ground in New Orleans, where the birds would be safe from predators, free to eat insects and fertilize the City's median grasses, and provide eggs for the entire neighborhood.

Pirate Public Space

In New Orleans, buildings typically fill an entire lot, often with minimal front, side and rear yard setbacks. As a result, many residents lack access to their own land for gardening. However, the city's consistent swath of greenspace between the street and the sidewalk in front of each house makes an ideal urban garden. This land typically benefits from good solar access, and accommodates both produce and fruit trees. Like Ulf Matthiesen's Space Pioneers, this pirating of public space also signifies a step towards the empowerment of urban subcultures.

Redefine Native

The greening of New Orleans' empty urban spaces involves an inclusive and unrestrained approach. Emergent ecologies often include non-native plants, and these volunteers occasionally introduce harmful environmental responses. On the other hand, volunteers are hardy, well-suited to the hot and humid climate and harsh urban environment, provide habitat and a density of foliage on each site, and fix both the soil and the air. More importantly, non-native volunteers are a relevant local phenomenon. Like the carpetbaggers that have descended upon post-Katrina New Orleans to aid in the redevelopment of this city, and the fresh ideas that these people initiate, volunteer plants thrust New Orleans forward.