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Urban Resilience and the Recovery of New Orleans

Thomas J. Campanella

This article considers the recent catastrophe in New Orleans in terms of "urban resilience," the capacity of a city to rebound from destruction. Based on a variety of historical examples, I argue that urban resilience is largely a function of resilient and resourceful citizens. Hurricane Katrina not only devastated the built environment of New Orleans but, by forcing a massive evacuation of residents, tore apart its social fabric as well. I maintain that plans to rebuild the physical infrastructure of the city must be accompanied by a commitment to rehabilitate its social fabric and communal networks. Only with strong citizen involvement at the grassroots level will the rebuilding of New Orleans yield a robust and inclusive metropolis, rather than a theme-park shadow of its former self.

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What makes a city resilient? What enables a devastated metropolis to rebuild its physical fabric and recover its social fabric and cultural identity? What factors will determine whether New Orleans can rebound from Hurricane Katrina as a richly diverse and inclusive metropolis? Cities are extraordinarily durable. Yet the media and popular press were loaded with dire prognostications about the death of New Orleans in the weeks following Hurricane Katrina. The city, "left to the dead," as the *Atlanta Constitution* headline said (Dart, 2005, p. 1), was completely destroyed according to New Orleans Deputy Police Chief Warren Riley. Perhaps it would not be wise to rebuild, U.S. House Speaker Dennis Hastert counseled, given the Crescent City's perilous locale. A *Washington Post* essay by Joel Garreau (2005) on the future of New Orleans was titled "A Sad Truth: Cities Aren't Forever."

The Persistence of Place

History tells us otherwise, that the modern city has an almost magical capacity to rebound even from catastrophic destruction. True, we have lost cities in the past: Vesuvius buried Pompeii; Monte Albán, near Oaxaca in modern Mexico, was permanently crushed by the Spanish conquistadores. But these are history's exceptions. Even the storied destruction of Carthage by the Romans after the Third Punic War did not last forever. True, they leveled the place and reportedly spread salt to assure its infertility. But it was the Romans themselves who later resurrected the city, during the reign of Augustus, making the port the administrative hub of their African colonies. In modern times cities have become even more durable, in spite of humankind's increasing ability to wreak havoc and the growing size of cities in known natural hazard areas. Since about 1800, virtually no major city has been permanently lost or abandoned (St. Pierre, Martinique, whose 30,000 inhabitants were annihilated by a volcanic eruption in 1901, is among the few exceptions). Although the 20th century was a period of destructiveness "unmatched in human history" (Tung, 2001, p. 15), the devastated cities of Hiroshima, Tokyo, Warsaw, Dresden, Berlin, and Beirut, are all still with us. The same goes for cities pummeled by the forces of nature. Galveston, Texas, was wiped out by a hurricane in 1906; San Francisco endured earthquake and fire

in 1906; the 1976 earthquake in Tangshan, China, killed at least 250,000 people in that city; Mexico City endured an even more powerful quake in 1985. Each of these cities suffered appalling losses and were profoundly altered by catastrophe, yet each survived and even flourished.

Why is the modern city so quick to rebound? In part it has to do with the rise of the nation state, which has a vested interest in the well-being of its cities, especially its national capital. A country that can do little for one of its own cities telegraphs weakness to a global audience. The advent of fee-simple ownership of private property created a virtually indestructible means of organizing space; even if a city is turned into nuclear ash, property lines can be recreated if the legal documents still exist. The concomitant rise of the modern insurance industry, a fundamentally conservative institution, itself encourages speedy reconstruction; insurance awards are generally based on what was lost and where, and urge property owners to rebuild *in situ* and as before. Layered networks of urban infrastructure also make the modern urban site "sticky." Concrete foundations and deeply buried utilities often survive a major catastrophe, and virtually guarantee that a place will not be abandoned. Moreover, the geographic and economic advantages that led to a city's initial development (Carthage's deep-water port, for example, or Chicago's central location in the Midwest) often survive disaster.

Cities Are More than Buildings

It is clear that the modern city is virtually indestructible. At the same time, there is no question that a catastrophe will profoundly alter a city's fortunes and fate; and therein lays the more compelling matter of resilience and recovery. Indeed, it is possible for a city to be reconstructed, even heroically, without fully *recovering*. Put another way, resilience involves much more than rebuilding. This is a point that Lawrence Vale and I attempted to make in *The Resilient City: How Modern Cities Recover from Disaster* (2005). The anthology, which began as a colloquium and graduate seminar shortly after the September 11, 2001 terrorist attacks, examines diverse historical examples of post-disaster reconstruction and recovery. Out of these studies we developed a framework for analyzing the commonalities and key differences in post-disaster urbanism. In our concluding chapter, "Axioms of Resilience," we asked whether it is possible "for a city to be rebuilt without being resilient." Our answer, in part, is the last of our 12 axioms: "The process of building is a necessary but, by itself, insufficient condition for enabling recovery and resilience" (Vale & Campanella, 2005, p. 351). Broken highways can be mended, buildings repaired and made taller than before, communications systems patched back together. But cities are more than the sum of their buildings. They are also thick concatenations of social and cultural matter, and it is often this that endows a place with its defining essence and identity. It is one thing for a city's buildings to be reduced to rubble; it is much worse for a city's communal institutions and social fabric to be torn apart as well. To enable total recovery, familial, social, and religious networks of survivors and evacuees must be reconnected. "Urban recovery occurs network by network, district by district, not just building by building; it is about reconstructing the myriad social relations embedded in schools, workplaces, childcare arrangements, shops, places of worship, and places of play and recreation" (Vale & Campanella, 2005, p. 347).

Sometimes disaster destroys the social infrastructure of a city but leaves the built environment intact. Cities have endured contagions, such as the Black Death, that decimated local populations while leaving hardly any trace on the physical city. A traumatic event like the race riot that engulfed Wilmington, North Carolina, in 1898 is another example. Wilmington was North Carolina's largest and most important city in the 19th century. It was also home to a large population of African Americans, some of whom occupied key positions in the local business community. Then, on November 10, 1898 a band of White supremacists burned the offices of Wilmington's Black newspaper, the *Daily Record*, and began a killing spree that left scores, possibly hundreds, dead. With the exception of a few structures, the subsequent riot hardly affected Wilmington's built environment, though it completely destroyed the ability of Blacks and Whites to live in harmony. The forced departure of the Black entrepreneurs and skilled craftsmen also ruined the city's economy. Wilmington never fully recovered from the race riot, devolving into a second-rate city (Cecelski & Tyson, 1998).

Recovery is also difficult when post-disaster reconstruction is imposed from outside without the sanction of the local population. The Basque city of Guernica in northern Spain failed to recover for an entire generation because rebuilding was supported by a hated regime. Guernica, a symbolic center of Basque autonomy and independence, was destroyed in 1937 when Franco requested that Hitler's Condor Legion bomb the city. Hitler obliged, testing saturation bombing techniques he would later unleash on Great Britain, Poland, and elsewhere, pulverizing the town on a busy market day in late April. The bombing became known to the world largely as the subject of a monumental painting by Picasso, *Guernica*, which became an icon of the horrors of war. It is less well known that by 1946 Franco had rebuilt the entire city center. However, the city's

emotional and psychological healing was delayed until after Franco's death in 1975 (Kirschbaum & Sideroff, 2005).

Sources of Resilience

There are many factors that affect a city's resilience, and no two cities are alike in their inherent capacity to rebound. Some of these are functions of larger political and economic realities and not easily changed. A city with a robust, diversified economy, for example, will rebound much more quickly than a city with a narrowly specialized or weak economy.

Planning, too, can dramatically bolster a city's resilience. Well rehearsed evacuation and emergency management plans can enable a city to endure a crisis with minimal loss of life. Cities that invest in hazard mitigation planning and action can also reduce their vulnerability. The federal government institutionalized hazard planning by creating the Federal Emergency Management Agency Mitigation Directorate in 1993; passage of the Disaster Mitigation Act 7 years later offered state and local governments incentives and technical assistance to plan to mitigate the effects of disasters. Many of these initiatives were put on the back burner after the terrorist attacks of 2001, but this may change yet again. As David Godschalk has written recently, Hurricane Katrina "hammered home a simple but irrefutable lesson: Acting beforehand to mitigate natural hazard impacts is much more effective than picking up the pieces afterwards" (Godschalk, 2005, p. 58). Much the same is true for business enterprises. As Yossi Sheffi argues in *The Resilient Enterprise*, identifying potential "high-impact/low-probability disruptions" is key to building a resilient organization. So is boosting the "redundant capacity" of critical infrastructure (Sheffi, 2005, p. 176). Applied to cities, this could involve identifying multiple evacuation routes, providing a backup electrical grid or communications system for emergency management personnel, or providing neighborhood-level shelters and caches of food and water.

But in the end, the resilience of both cities and enterprises comes down to people. A business is only as resourceful as its employees and management. A city is only as resilient as its citizens. Resilient citizens have enabled urban resilience throughout history. At the outset of World War II, a "Blitz spirit" enabled Londoners to carry on in spite of daily and nightly bombardment by the German Luftwaffe. Even the class divide seemed breached; Buckingham Palace was bombed along with the industrial East End. Government ministers, convinced that the bombs would cause widespread chaos and a collapse of morale, were happily proven wrong. In New York after the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, impromptu candlelight vigils and informal memorials created a palpable sense of cohesion and warmth that surfaced again in the blackout of August, 2003, in stark contrast to the "Night of Terror" during a similar power outage in 1977.

A very different form of resilience emerged in the aftermath of the Mexico City earthquake of 1985. A disaster puts the legitimacy and authority of a government on trial, exposing the shortcomings of political leadership and in some cases even revealing startling abuses of authority. Such revelations can become the catalysts for political change. The Mexican government's initial response to the earthquake was to rebuild major infrastructure systems, often at the expense of meeting basic food and shelter needs of city residents. The earthquake also exposed evidence of corruption, stoking further discontent: shoddily built new municipal buildings were flattened by the earthquake, and exposed police station cellars contained evidence of torture. The effect of all this was to galvanize the capital's citizens to demand political accountability and a reordering of reconstruction priorities. As Diane Davis (2005) has written in *The Resilient City*, "Within days of the earthquake people began to organize on their own and reclaim the city for themselves by taking over the business of recovery and reconstruction without assistance from government authorities. Their efforts ensured that certain activities were recovered or restored, ranging from housing to medical services" (p. 270). Grassroots mobilization led to lasting political reforms, new political leadership, and a commitment to building affordable housing.

There have been inspiring stories of citizen resilience in New Orleans. Residents of the devastated Lower Ninth Ward, where home ownership among the mostly African American population is close to 60%, have been fighting for a chance to rebuild. The working-class Vietnamese American community of east New Orleans known as Versailles was also hard hit by Katrina and thoroughly flooded; homes and businesses were destroyed, as were the extensive market gardens surrounding the community. But the social fabric held, secured by a common heritage. This enabled an extraordinary degree of communal resilience. As the *New York Times* reported, the Vietnamese

> formed neighborhood groups to rebuild, using the [local] church as headquarters. One team repairs and decontaminates the houses. Others arrange tetanus shots to prevent illness, and acupuncture sessions to ease stress. Another team buys food to make spicy stews and rice for the families who visit for the day to check on property. Friends and family members drive

> one another to work, church or even back and forth to cities in Texas where they have temporarily settled. (Hauser, 2005, p. 22)

Surviving the catastrophe reinforced rather than weakened the Vietnamese community's bonds to New Orleans. As a priest in the community told the *Times-Picayune*, "Before Katrina, when we said homeland, we meant Vietnam. . . . When my people say homeland now, they mean New Orleans" (Hamilton, 2005, p. 1).

Others did not have the benefit of such a tight-knit social network. Many of the hardest-hit communities in New Orleans were also among the poorest, and subject to social problems including a broken public school system, drugs, and gang violence. Those already struggling to survive will find it difficult to bounce back from such a devastating blow. The resiliency of many such New Orleanians was already critically low.

Many residents of the inundated neighborhoods who fled to the Superdome and Convention Center were subsequently evacuated to places far from New Orleans, though it is still not clear how many people left, nor how many will return. One of the first comprehensive surveys of the New Orleans evacuee population, conducted in early October, 2005 using data from the American Red Cross, determined that 39% of evacuees (some 50,000 households), mostly poor and Black, did not intend to return (Page, 2005). If accurate, this will be the largest internal migration of Americans in a generation. The impacts of this dispersal will be felt in communities all across the United States, but nowhere more so than New Orleans.

If a city's capacity to rebound rests largely upon its citizenry, then it is a bad day indeed if the citizens go missing. Ironically, the recovery of New Orleans as a real and robust city and not a theme-park version of its former self rests heavily on the shoulders of those most burdened by the catastrophe. Tourists and conventioneers may bring needed dollars, but it is the residents of the Lower Ninth Ward, Gentilly, New Orleans East, and other stricken neighborhoods who constitute the lifeblood of the Big Easy, carrying in their traditions, cuisine, musical heritage, mannerisms, and habits of speech what made New Orleans unique. Their geographic dispersal makes coordinated grassroots activism exceedingly difficult. It will be hard to mount a campaign of the sort that helped reform Mexico City when the potential coalition is scattered across the United States with little means of communicating with one another. Some critics claim federal authorities have resisted sharing basic information about evacuee whereabouts (e.g., M. Davis, 2005). Even those families intending to return have been held off by a lack of temporary housing within the city limits and other impediments that some have interpreted as "transparently designed to discourage the return of Black residents to the city" (M. Davis, 2005). Or, as the Associated Press put it recently, "Hurricane Katrina may prove to be the most brutal urban-renewal project black America has ever seen" (Associated Press, 2005).

Lessons Planners Know Well

Like others, I attempted to ascertain what might lie ahead for New Orleans from past natural disasters. But America's post-war experience with urban renewal may provide closer historical analogies. As it evolved in the 1950s, urban renewal was aimed at eliminating "urban blight" in the vicinity of downtowns, primarily enabling subsidized commercial redevelopment close to city centers, though vague promises were also made about public housing for those displaced. In nearly every major American city, whole swaths of urban fabric were removed. Of course, as Jane Jacobs, Herbert Gans, and others argued, many of the districts targeted as slums were in fact vibrant neighborhoods, typically inhabited by Blacks, White ethnics, Hispanics, and other minority groups. Blacks bore the brunt of urban renewal, often called "negro removal."

As Peter Hall (1988) wrote in *Cities of Tomorrow*, "In city after city—Philadelphia, Pittsburgh, Hartford, Boston, San Francisco—the areas that were cleared were the low-income black sections next to the central business district" (p. 229). The demolition of the Golden Triangle district of Pittsburgh displaced some 5,400 families, most of whom were African American (Hall, 1988). In Kansas City, the local press hailed urban renewal's promise of "A Dream City Without Slums," as the Land Clearance for Redevelopment Authority began bulldozing "predominantly black neighborhoods adjacent to the downtown" (Gotham, 2001, p. 302). Urban renewal in St. Louis leveled Mill Creek Valley, a vibrant center of African American culture in the Midwest and a birthplace of ragtime and jazz. (Scott Joplin made it home; Josephine Baker was born there, as were Miles Davis and Tina Turner.) St. Louis planning chief Harland Bartholomew declared congested Mill Creek Valley a slum in the mid 1950s, targeting the area for urban renewal. By the 1960s clearance had reduced Mill Creek Valley to a 465-acre wasteland known locally as "Hiroshima Flats." Some 6,400 homes and 40 churches were destroyed, and more than 20,000 people displaced, 95% of whom were African American. The Mill Creek Valley story was repeated coast to coast, and by the mid 1960s had displaced one million Americans (Anderson, 1964). Hurricane Katrina inflicted its greatest harm on this same demographic group.

Yet there is also hope in the urban renewal experience. New Orleans' future as a robust and inclusive metropolis rests in large part upon the decision of thousands of evacuee families to come home and participate in the recovery process. We still know very little about the factors influencing such decisions, or what incentives might encourage more people to return to New Orleans. But we do know from studies of neighborhoods destroyed by urban renewal that communal institutions and social networks often survive even the destruction of the physical environment itself. Bonds forged in the "old neighborhood" endure, even in exile. Residents of Boston's old West End met informally for years after their neighborhood was bulldozed, and eventually inspired a quarterly newspaper, the *West Ender*. Even former residents of the infamous Pruitt-Igoe Houses in St. Louis have maintained bonds forged in their now-vanished community. For 28 years they have been holding annual reunions. "Few offer bleak tales of the crime and vandalism, the crumbling despair, the months of insufferable heat," reported a local newspaper of the 2005 reunion; "Rather, they speak of the sense of community they felt . . ." (Roberts, 2005, p. 16).

If the former residents of a notoriously beleaguered public housing project can look back with such fondness on their past, then surely there is hope for the storm-torn neighborhoods of New Orleans. After all, Pruitt-Igoe was a short-lived place with only a fraction of the rich legacy and dense social fabric of New Orleans. The Crescent City is an extraordinarily "sticky" place, with one of the highest rates of resident nativity of any major city in the United States. According to the 2000 Census, 84% of New Orleanians were born in Louisiana (U.S. Census Bureau, 2000). Thousands of these residents were forced to flee in the wake of Katrina, and many have already found new and better lives away from the Gulf Coast. For many evacuees, such gains will outweigh the loss of their old friends and family in New Orleans. On the other hand, the "pull of place" is likely to become stronger in coming months as the city is cleaned up, housing becomes more readily available, and people long for a life left behind.

Will a New City Have New People?

That New Orleans had a high share of native residents is not completely positive. It was also a result of the city's inability to attract newcomers. New Orleans, as is now well known, has been struggling with serious economic and social problems for years. The city's population peaked around 1960, when it was more than 600,000; on the eve of Katrina there were 462,000 residents in the city. But this may change yet again. Reconstruction and cleanup operations will require a huge labor supply, one that cannot be met locally. Thousands of Hispanic workers have stepped into the vacuum and may remain. As Gregory Rodriguez (2005) put it in the *Los Angeles Times* recently,

> No matter what all the politicians and activists want, African Americans and impoverished white Cajuns will not be first in line to rebuild the Katrina-ravaged Gulf Coast and New Orleans. Latino immigrants, many of them undocumented, will. And when they're done, they're going to stay, making New Orleans look like Los Angeles. (Rodriguez, 2005)

A similar demographic shift occurred in Florida during the construction boom following Hurricane Andrew.

South Central Los Angeles, devastated by the Rodney King uprisings in 1992, was also transformed by an influx of Hispanic immigrants. Supermarkets destroyed by the rioters were replaced not by the ubiquitous Ralph's, Vonn's, or Albertson's, but by Gigante, one of Mexico's largest food retailers. As William Fulton (2005) wrote in *The Resilient City*, the newcomers infused South Central with "confidence, energy, and sheer *chutzpah*" (p. 306). If large numbers of the city's African American evacuees choose not to return home, Mayor Ray Nagin's prediction of a city "overrun by Mexican workers" may come true (Campo-Flores, 2005, p. 46). Of course, if the local economy fails in the long run to ignite, these newcomers are not likely to stay.

In the end, an influx of Hispanics would be only the latest in a long series of immigrant waves to reach the Crescent City. New Orleans is among the most diverse cities in America; it has always been a place of flux and transformation, settled and shaped by an astonishing diversity of cultures, including the Creole blend of French and Spanish, African and Afro-Caribbean, German, Irish, Italian, Anglo-American. Now, evacuees returning home in the wake of Hurricane Katrina will be joined by yet another wave of incomers seeking to make New Orleans home, and giving it new life in the process.

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