

Lessons Learned: Urban Planning in New Orleans

Contributed by the AIA Knowledge Resources staff

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SUMMARY

The inadequacy of planning efforts in place in New Orleans before Hurricane Katrina has made the recovery planning process that much more difficult. An extensive planning process that began in mid-2006 has helped unite citizens and set direction for the recovery effort. This Best Practice was developed in response to two presentations given at a symposium hosted by the AIA Center for Building Science and Performance Knowledge Community on March 1, 2008.

THE PROBLEM

Prior to Hurricane Katrina, New Orleans did not have a comprehensive city plan in place nor did the city show significant signs of investment in its future. The city's planning dialogue focused on individual neighborhoods rather than on the city as a whole.

Immediately following the hurricane, many planning, design, and architecture organizations, including Duany Plater-Zyberk & Company, the Urban Land Institute, the AIA Regional and Urban Design Committee, WRT (Wallace, Roberts & Todd), and the American Planning Association, spent time in New Orleans to help the recovery planning effort, with little luck. Reactive planning efforts failed to bring about the change and direction the city needed. The planning that was done by outside organizations had a few flaws: Many plans lacked substantive grassroots input. As well, the planners often relied on the leadership of a strong mayor and city officials to take their plan and make it happen. Another flaw in early planning efforts was the designation of specific neighborhoods as unsafe, based on topography. Determining that a neighborhood or street was uninhabitable pushed aside the generations of residents who had grown up there, dealt with recurring floods, and still wanted to come back. In more ways than one, these plans did not have adequate buy-in at the local level.

A DEFINITIVE PLAN: UNOP

In late 2006, progress became more tangible with the creation of the Citywide Strategic Recovery and

Rebuilding Plan, or Unified New Orleans Plan (UNOP), which was dubbed the "People's Plan." It was developed by an extensive team led by the New Orleans Community Support Foundation and the Community Support Organization. (The UNOP is the source for all quotations in this Best Practice.)

Unlike former plans, the UNOP was based on a broad-based citizen planning process: "This cumulative and culminating plan would integrate the 50 previous plans into a comprehensive, citywide recovery plan that would serve as the 'official' recovery plan for the City of New Orleans." The "50 plans" refers to a City Council initiative to develop 49 individual neighborhood plans that stemmed from the first reactive voluntary planning effort by the Urban Land Institute.

The first step in the UNOP process, and perhaps one of the most influential for fueling the recovery effort, was defining an approach for the recovery effort, as outlined in the beginning of the final plan: "The Citywide Plan states that the recovery and rebuilding of the City is contingent on two related factors: (1) the rate at which residents are returning to their homes in neighborhoods throughout the City; and (2) the continuing risk of future flooding from another hurricane."

The formation of the UNOP included four rounds of district meetings, three community congresses with live video feed to/from displaced residents, two student congresses, input from district and neighborhood leadership and stakeholder groups, the administration of call centers and surveys, and the participation of grassroots organizers and diaspora outreach partners. The complexity of this effort is perhaps one of the most remarkable aspects of the plan. Contemporary urban planning practices often rely on charrettes or town hall meetings, but the UNOP effort was on a much larger scale. It is hoped this expansive participation will provide the enthusiasm needed for implementation of the plan.

IDENTIFY RECOVERY PRIORITIES

The participation of the public in the development of the plan was critical to its success. This was

particularly brought home during the community congresses, where the following priorities were expressed:

- “Reduce Flood Risk: New Orleans must do everything possible to advocate for Category 5 flood protection and wetland restoration in order to protect the city from future storms. At the same time, New Orleans should set voluntary standards for individuals to reduce their flood risk by making decisions to rebuild stronger or relocate safer. Financial incentives and support must be available to help residents reach those standards.”
- “Empower Neighborhoods to Rebuild Safer and Stronger: Empower residents to rebuild stable and safe neighborhoods by providing financial incentives and the best possible information, rather than through government mandates and enforced standards.”
- “Build Affordable, Rental and Low-Income Housing: Build housing for renters, low income families and public housing residents, so that everyone can come home to New Orleans who wants to do so. Funding is needed to build low- and moderate-income public housing.”
- “Reopen and Rebuild Public Facilities: Public facilities, like schools and healthcare centers, should be reopened and rebuilt based on repopulation and recovery rates. Temporary, satellite or mobile facilities should be used in less populated areas. The city should develop a plan to expand services as neighborhood populations grow. Where possible, public facilities should be combined under one roof to increase efficiency and lower costs.”
- “Rebuild Communities around High Quality Schools: Neighborhoods should be rebuilt around schools as 24/7 community centers. Improving school quality is essential to New Orleans’ recovery.”

IMPLEMENTATION

The recovery effort needs to be a collaborative one across different levels of government with continual feedback from citizens. To lead the effort the mayor created the office of Recovery Management in December 2006. “The Office of Recovery Management, working with and through City Departments and semi-autonomous agencies (such as the Sewerage and Water Board [S&WB], the Regional Transit Authority [RTA] and the new East and West Bank Levee Districts) will implement elements of the Recovery Plan in concert.”

For more information, the UNOP document can be found at www.unifiedneworleansplan.com.

RESOURCES

More Best Practices

The following AIA Best Practices provide additional information related to this topic:

- 11.09.06 Disaster Resilience in Design
- 11.09.03 Ten Principles of Community Partnering
- 11.09.01 The Urban Design Process: Creating and Achieving a Vision

Feedback

The AIA welcomes member feedback on Best Practice articles. To provide feedback on this article, please contact bestpractices@aia.org.

Key Terms

- Leadership
- Events
- Disasters and planning failures
- Urban design
- Master planning

This Best Practice was produced in collaboration with the AIA’s Knowledge Communities; for more information please go to http://www.aia.org/nav_kc.