

# Rebuilding Community

BY HAROLD DERIENZO

Given my experience of living and working in the South Bronx during its devastation and revitalization, I have often been asked if I see lessons that can be applied to today's devastation in New Orleans.

Comparisons are tempting. In New Orleans, more than two hundred thousand people have been violently displaced by Hurricane Katrina. In the South Bronx in the mid- and late seventies, hundreds of thousands of people were also violently displaced. In New Orleans, some segments of the business community and political leadership are resolved to see a much smaller (shrunken) New Orleans. This resembles the calls of then-Housing Administrator Roger Starr for "planned shrinkage" of the Bronx. The *Wall Street Journal* has called for making the devastated areas of New Orleans enterprise zones to stimulate outside investment. This seems eerily similar to financier Felix Rohatyn's 1976 plan to demolish the remaining South Bronx tenements, pave over the resulting acreage, and put up signs: "Industrial Sites for Sale." Finally, there are the remarks of U.S. Representative Richard Baker (R.-La.), as cited in the *Wall Street Journal* and reported by Charles Babington of the *Washington Post*: "We finally cleaned up public housing in New Orleans. We couldn't do it, but God did." (Rep. Baker later denied making such a remark.) In the 1970s, many found similar consolation in the widespread devastation caused by fires in the South Bronx.

Although these comparisons are tempting, the devastation of the South Bronx—and its resurgence—is a singular story, as is the one being written for New Orleans today.

When Roger Starr spoke of planned shrinkage, he was responding to a belief that urban areas were

suffering and would continue to suffer from the middle-class preference for suburban living arrangements. His position was that the city had to plan and actively accommodate shrinkage, while at the same time relocating its dependent populations to less devastated areas, such as the Lower East Side and Clinton (formerly known as Hell's Kitchen), where services could be more efficiently provided.

But when political and business leaders today talk about the shrinkage of New Orleans, they are generally doing it under the guise of what is mostly referred to as "New Urbanism" (NU). Where planned shrinkage is based on consumer preference for suburban living, NU is premised on upper-middle-class preference for the benefits of urban living, such as a short commute, good stores nearby, "latte on demand," and the like.

Another premise that is at variance regards the poor. As opposed to seeking efficient delivery of services to the poor through relocation and concentration, NU in New Orleans seeks dispersion of the poor and development of residential clusters for the privileged. In fact, many such developments also exclude or discourage children as well. In essence, NU clusters are neosuburbs, containing atomized residents who are able to pay for necessary and desired services and whose ability to retain residency is based on income generated from outside the residential clusters. These are characteristics of suburbia transformed into a metrofaux residential setting.

Having said this, and knowing full well that no amount of remote technical advice will be of much use to the hard-working people who are rebuilding New Orleans, what I can offer are some general

words to those seeking to encourage community while restoring the infrastructure and residential and commercial fabric of the city itself.

But what does it mean to rebuild community? It is much easier said than done.

Although comparisons are tempting, the devastation of the South Bronx in the 1970s—and its resurgence—is a singular story, as is the one being written for New Orleans today.

Any discussion of community development must start with a workable definition of *community*. Many of us take the word for granted, assuming that just because people live in a given location they form a community. But certain additional conditions must exist, the absence of which will cause any sort of community-based initiative, and especially a community-building initiative, to fail.

A community is a group of people with something in common. Beyond that, for community to exist, there must also be interdependence and a collective capacity to accomplish agreed-on goals. These three components of community are inextricably linked (and are discussed at greater length at the end of this essay). Most so-called community-building initiatives assume community with just the first of these conditions in place: commonality. Community builders often see a group of people with a common need or problem and attempt to fix the circumstances through outside intervention and assistance. Most of those engaged in such initiatives ignore the second and third necessary components of a community.

It is certainly easy to label a group of impoverished people a community of those sharing the concerns of everyday life under the weight of economic and political circumstances and personal woes. But these people are not a community at all; they are simply

an agglomeration of people in similarly depressing circumstances. As Winifred Gallagher notes, “community rests on shared values . . . and the ability to influence events” (p. 193).

Gallagher did not mention interdependence, yet this is an important feature of community as well. There can be no interdependence between and among people unless there is a need, a capacity, and a recognized self-interest in sharing that capacity. If you need me to fix your roof, I will most likely not do it unless I perceive that some interest of mine is being served. Outside the context of community, my interest would be in receiving payment or some other form of direct reciprocity for my service. But in the context of community, there is an implicit recognition that the community as a whole benefits from the well-being of each of its members. As such, considerations of immediate payment and direct reciprocity are not as relevant. All the members of a community perceive themselves as forming one social web—interconnected, interdependent, and affected by the individual loss or gain of its members.

So I may help you to fix your roof, but now it is the community as a whole that implicitly owes me something in return for my service. I may never receive anything directly from you in return for having done work for you, but if I never receive anything at all then I am not really a member of that community. Conversely, you do not owe me anything, but you owe the community as a whole something of value in return. If you never repay the service, then you are undermining the community and eventually will find yourself marginalized, or even ostracized.

I maintain that today community as a social, political, and economic construct is deeply threatened. In its place, we have people isolated into individual household units and grouped into geographic clusters. The inhabitants are linked only through infrastructure and delivery of local services. Furthermore,

these groupings—we generally call them neighborhoods—are totally dependent on outside economic operations beyond the individual or collective control of those in the neighborhoods.

In the political realm, this transformation of communities into simple neighborhoods operating as externally dependent, locally serviced, residential clusters has mirrored the transformation of citizens from active participants in the political life of society into mere taxpayers and consumers of public services. This dismal devolution is a direct function of our economic system, which thrives on individual consumption patterns, workers who are detached from resources needed for production, and citizens who are politically neutered and amenable to manipulation.

In the absence of a local economy, there can be no local community, no interdependence, and no collective capacity. Without collective capacity, there is no real political capacity.

### **Community Building**

*Community building* became a widely used term in the field of community development in the 1990s. In 1996, the Chapin Hall Center for Children at the University of Chicago published a compendium of articles on community building. The collection of eight essays and thirty-five responses was intended to provide the best current thinking on the topic. The compendium contained some important insights, such as recognition that economics was central to community building (even if in an undefined manner). Ultimately, however, the book failed for much the same reason that many community-building efforts themselves have failed: the concept of community was not sufficiently examined. Community and neighborhood were used as interchangeable terms. The existence of community was presumed while community-building efforts were being undertaken. But it's impossible to build on something that does not exist.

During the nineties, I became involved in a number of community-building programs. One such effort, funded by the New York Community Trust, was called the Neighborhood Strategies Project. It became clear to me early on that the foundation's vision of community building was to furnish the people of four inner-city neighborhoods of New York City with access to jobs and services. The important breakthrough of this project was its recognition that there is an inextricable link between community and the economy. Its basic flaw was that it sought to superimpose a prescribed construct of community similar to the concept of "neighborhood," instead of putting in the necessary work (and risking the possible frustration) of really attempting to build community.

The lead program officer wrote a paper on some early efforts at community building and was enthusiastic about an emerging economic and job development model that focused on a "sectoral" analysis of the local economy. This analysis identified specific economic sectors, such as health care, in which job growth was anticipated. The purpose of the analysis was to determine and project growth areas in the regional economy that local residents might be helped to access. Job training had already been replaced with "workforce development" by the time this initiative started, and a "work first" approach was encouraged. In the end, this community-building effort became little more than a job placement program and had very little to do with community building. It yielded some tangible benefit to individuals who took advantage of the opportunities, but only limited success overall.

It became clear that the program officer from the New York Community Trust, as well as most of the leadership from local community organizations, believed that a productively functioning community was little more than a geographic area where people have access to living-wage jobs and are supplied with life's necessary services. In impoverished areas, the inhabitants should simply be offered more support services. So the sponsors of this effort were

hampered by an ill-defined sense of community, confusing it with a well-functioning neighborhood—probably much like the neighborhoods in which the sponsors lived.

The New York Community Trust sponsored several retreats for its leaders. At these retreats, I attempted to challenge the group to better define our goals, both tangible and intangible, and discuss the concept of community. My efforts clearly exasperated the others.

Another such program with which I became personally involved was called Bronx Center. This effort was initiated by Fernando Ferrer, who was then the Bronx borough president. For decades, the Bronx had been so devastated that it became an international symbol of urban decay. (In Italy, there was an area of Milan known as the “Bronx of Milan,” because of its physical condition. In France, there was an expression, “C’est quoi se Bronx?” referring to any situation that was out of control and beyond any rational explanation or resolution.)

Ultimately, the Bronx was revived as a result of substantial public subsidies, an extensive infrastructure of community development corporations, and local leadership that focused on results and not patronage. Ferrer was a key player in this revival; he set the tone for the borough from the top. Having overseen the revival, he sought to create the equivalent of a Bronx downtown. Unlike Brooklyn or Manhattan, the Bronx had never been its own city, so it did not have a downtown area. Ferrer’s vision was to exploit and further develop a number of “development nodes” of closely grouped health, recreational, educational, and commercial facilities and connect these nodes to constitute the equivalent of a dynamic downtown.

He also sought to capitalize on the public investment that was scheduled, over the next ten years through the city’s capital budget, to maximize the benefit to the borough. First, his office worked with the Regional Plan Association (RPA) to write a

report that amounted to much of the platform for the Bronx Center planning effort. Following publication of that report, Ferrer convened a group of leaders under the direction of Richard Kahan, a former power broker who headed the Battery Park City Authority and New York State’s Urban Development Corporation (later renamed the Empire State Development Corporation). Kahan was and is well connected, and he demands that public servants spend taxpayer money to advance the general welfare—and do it in a way that is measurable and accountable.

The Bronx Center initiative began with a flurry. Public announcements were made. Local forums were held. U.S. Housing and Urban Development Secretary Jack Kemp attended one forum. Development opportunities were targeted on areas of opportunity and planned public investment. The environs around Yankee Stadium and the Bronx Terminal Market was seen as potentially being a Bronx version of Camden Yards. The waterfront, mostly inaccessible owing to industrial use and the existence of a commuter rail line, was analyzed and designed for eventual passive and active recreational use. The area around Hostos College and Lincoln Hospital was viewed as having potential for biotechnology companies.

The area east of Yankee Stadium, where a new and huge criminal court was being planned, was analyzed for uses that would be neighborhood-friendly. Commercial space would be directly accessed from sidewalks as opposed to behind fortress-type walls. Various projects would benefit the neighborhood. Plans were in place for a local charter school for law and justice to encourage area youth to pursue careers in criminal justice. This offered hope for the young people in the community, in direct contrast to some of the negative, even if inadvertent, signals being sent to our youth, as demonstrated later.

At this time, I was teaching a class at the Graduate School of Planning and Architecture at Columbia

University. My students were working on a planning project for Bronx Center and happened upon a sign that was replete with irony. As was the city's practice, all capital projects were announced through site signs that read something like "Rebuilding the future of the Bronx" and then listed the mayor and other elected officials. The particular location in question was the site of a new juvenile detention facility to be built on 149th Street, just east of the 149th Street Hub commercial district and right across the street from a public school. So at this site, the future home of a juvenile prison, was a sign lauding the use of public funds in "rebuilding" the Bronx—in full view of the junior high school students who may have been looking out of their class windows and pondering their futures. Surely, establishing a charter school offering a more positive entry into the criminal justice system was a more hopeful idea.

Another major component of the planning effort came out of the RPA planning exercise, which focused on redevelopment of the Melrose Commons Urban Renewal Area. Under the RPA plan, the Melrose Urban renewal area was to be razed and replaced with midrise multiple dwellings for moderate and middle-income residents. When I asked then-Deputy Borough President Genevieve Brooks about the current residents of the area and how they felt about the plan, her response was something like, "Nobody lives there, and those that do want to move." This seemed to me highly improbable, but I held my tongue.

Ferrer and Kahan both initially endorsed the Melrose Commons urban renewal plan, as well as endorsing a planning process that was open, inclusive, and subject to review by residents. Out of this endorsed approach came creation of the Bronx Community Forum, which I chaired. The forum became the outreach and resident participation component in the planning effort.

The Bronx Community Forum held its first meeting at Lincoln Hospital one Saturday morning to

describe the Melrose Commons plan and get some local feedback. We expected an orderly meeting, but it was soon disrupted by residents of Melrose who lambasted the plan and accused the borough president and others of conspiring with the police to harass them from their homes.

I often cite this meeting when speaking about community organizing and the importance of understanding perspective. After this meeting, many of the Bronx Center sponsors and leaders felt that since the charge that there was an organized conspiracy between Ferrer and the police department was demonstrably false, the people making it were beyond help or just fools. From the perspective of those living and working in the Melrose area, their conclusions (even though wrong) were a reasonable derivative of the circumstances they confronted daily, such as open and aggressive drug dealing while official enforcement agencies focused mainly on less-dramatic quality-of-life infractions such as traffic violations and unclean sidewalks, which targeted otherwise law-abiding citizens and businesses. Once we "knew where they were coming from," it was possible to understand the residents' complaints and address them respectfully.

Following that tumultuous meeting, I toured the area with a volunteer planner for Bronx Center, Petr Stand, to meet local homeowners. We began to hold regular Tuesday forums at a local church, and he started a planning studio where the initial urban renewal plan was changed block by block. In the end, the leadership of Bronx Center, including Ferrer, approved our new, minimally disruptive, contextual urban renewal plan. As a result, the original displacement urban renewal plan was scrapped. This new plan went on to be approved and is still being implemented as of this writing.

In terms of community building, the Bronx Center initiative gets an A for effort. The project was a major planning effort that sought to make the billions of dollars of planned public investment benefit

the residents. It was a great idea, promoted by well-meaning, well-connected, hard-working, and highly intelligent people. However, in the end the effort was built on public resources and was doomed to fail once those resources dried up, as they did with a change in city administration. In 1989, David Dinkins lost the mayoralty to Rudolph Giuliani, who ultimately defunded most of the Bronx Center program initiatives.

Bronx Center did result in a few concrete results: a revised Melrose Commons urban renewal plan, a new school, and some solid planning for future work. But as a community-building effort it failed first and foremost because it was an attempt to infuse community into a top-down planning initiative.

Even before the money was gone, sponsors and leaders of the project engaged in bitter feuds arising from the lack of planning and consensus building and what we meant by certain basic terms.

### Community Building Today

I would maintain that two prevailing forms of community building are currently practiced. The first I define as a “static enhancement model.” This form of community building reinforces current power relationships, seeking only to enhance the capacity of individuals to deal more effectively with prevailing circumstances. In this model, the current circumstances are assumed to be immutable and the product of natural forces (the “invisible hand,” if you will).

Most community-building initiatives subscribe to the static enhancement model, just as their funders do. This model prescribes aid to the needy in a manner that does not threaten the worldview and comfortable existence of funders and sponsors alike. There is an honestly held conviction that the “less fortunate” simply lack information, access, training, values, and positive role models needed if they are to succeed. Failure is due to these individual deficiencies. These sponsors believe that for the poor to get ahead they

must overcome personal and local barriers to gain entry into the mainstream. Programs and funding streams are organized around these assumptions.

But conditions are not immutable. Change is constant. Change occurs without pause, and the only questions really are (1) will we adapt to change? (2) will we be buried by it? and (3) will we ourselves become agents of change?

As for the “natural order” of things applying to human affairs, I believe that Isaiah Berlin is instructive: “Ends are not, as had been thought for more than two millennia, objective values, discoverable within man or in a transcendent realm by some special faculty. Ends are not discovered at all, but made, not found but created. . . . There are no objective rules, only what we make” (pp. 227–228).

In the static enhancement model of community building, there is an assumption that people’s problems stem from wrong attitudes and lack of information, education, training, and access. It is assumed that with proper adjustments in these areas individuals will become productive members of society.

The static enhancement model of community building has nothing to do with community at all. It has everything to do with the question that has plagued those in power since the French Revolution: What to do about the poor?

In my view, such an assumption is ridiculous. An approach that views economic marginalization, political disenfranchisement, and individual disempowerment as totally dependent on individual dysfunction is either naïve or simply asserted for institutional or political expediency. Such a view sees poverty as pathology—a condition that must be analyzed, treated, and—whenever incapable of remediation—managed, institutionally isolated,

or punished. In short, the static enhancement model of community building has nothing to do with community at all. It has everything to do with the question that has plagued those in power since the French Revolution: What to do about the poor?

In contrast to the static enhancement model of community building, there is the transformative model. This approach views external circumstances as playing a central role in creating areawide social, economic, and political dependencies. Within this view, community-building efforts seek to organize residents in ways that rebuild meaningful relationships between them. These meaningful connections then redefine a sense of collective identity, place, and capacity. Within this paradigm, the institutional sponsor is not viewed as caretaker or manager, but as facilitator in a process that leads to a proper relationship between itself and the residents or community members served (as opposed to the sponsor servicing clients). Further, the institution then serves as a vehicle to implement locally generated action plans. In other words, at the successful end of the process the relationship among residents changes, as does the relationship between residents and their local institutions. If a local institution refuses to accommodate this transformation, the institution must be replaced or displaced by another, accountable community institution.

As an example of a transformative model, assume that a group of residents decide there are talents, capacities, and needs within the group that can be addressed through mutual aid and cooperation. All the members of the group have some free time. The members of the group also have access to a vehicle and the ability to drive, along with the abilities to cook, babysit, house-watch, supervise latch-key kids, knit, research, do word processing, perform home repairs, and so on. They decide to set up some form of cooperative arrangement. Using a system for documenting the contributions and receipts of each member of the cooperative (that is, establishing

their own currency or method of bookkeeping), the members begin to offer and receive goods and services from within this closed economic system.

By creating this form of cooperative arrangement, the members form a community. This community, like any other, is not totally self-contained and self-sufficient, but it does serve important economic needs of its members. This community is based on commonality. Thanks to the diverse array of talents employed to meet the diverse needs of members, interdependence develops. Because each member has a contribution to make, collectively the cooperative group has the capacity to achieve desired outcomes, even if each family is thereby a bit more economically sufficient and less economically marginalized. Over time, economic capacity and interdependence translate into political arrangements and enhanced political capacity.

Through this effort, a transformation occurs. Relations among the members of the community are transformed. In some small way, this internal transformation can create a new power dynamic that affects the broader scheme of existing power-sharing processes and institutional arrangements. If this community decides to address some broader concern such as neighborhood security or educational enhancement for their children, they will be in a better position to create an institutional response as well as the ability to hold the institution accountable.

### **Neighborhood**

It is important not to confuse the concepts of neighborhood and community. Almost a century ago, Robert Park defined neighborhood as “a collection of people and institutions occupying a spatially defined area” (quoted in Sampson, 2005, p. 90). Physical proximity to each other creates neighbors and neighborhoods. People will reside in a neighborhood so long as each person, most often dependent on employment and other income sources from outside the area, can afford to live there, or until the

person chooses to “buy up” into a better neighborhood or is forced to leave because of a change in natural or political circumstances such as urban renewal or eminent domain.

The more affluent the neighborhood is, the more diverse and numerous the services are, at least through the upper middle class, beyond which amenities are most often self-contained through private employment of drivers and caretakers; enjoyment of country clubs for open space and recreational activities; and use of private education, private facilities, and the like. The poorer the neighborhood, the less diverse the services, as with inner-city neighborhoods that have a *bodega* (a Spanish deli) on every corner.

When I first moved to the South Bronx in 1976, I wondered why there were so many bodegas. Over time I realized that ten acres in Scarsdale and ten acres in the South Bronx may have the same aggregate purchasing power, but the difference is that in the South Bronx there are more people per acre with less money per household, so that all they can buy are the basics. It seems a simple enough concept, but it took me a while to figure it out.

However, there are problems with this theory. Why did older ghettos have more retail diversity, with the same density and perhaps even less aggregate household income (or, in economic terms, aggregate demand)? Formerly, poor neighborhoods of New York City had considerable retail diversity: the butcher, the baker, and others. This diversity was made possible by and was also due to the economic multiplier effect that was more prevalent in the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries than it is today. If a low-income person spends a dollar on bread and the shopkeeper takes the money home to Scarsdale, then the dollar is spent just one time in the low-income neighborhood and is gone. If a low-income person buys bread and the shopkeeper takes the dollar and repairs his shoes, and if the cobbler takes the dol-

lar and gets a haircut, and if it all happens in the same neighborhood, the neighborhood benefits from the multiplier effect. So it is possible to have retail diversity within a low-income neighborhood. But if there is no substantial multiplier effect because there is no integrated local economy, then you get a bodega on every block.

Some would disagree with this analysis. Paul Grogan and Tony Proscio, for example, make the case that the inner city has more density of purchasing power and therefore can accommodate more retail business. Their evidence for this comes from neighborhoods where purchasing power has been increased by working-class families living in newly constructed and heavily subsidized homes, thus allowing them more disposable income.

Of course, some neighborhoods function better than others. Jane Jacobs lists a number of variables that make for a functional urban neighborhood. She takes the position that a functional urban neighborhood must have diversity and that this is a function of a number of factors, namely, mixed primary uses, small blocks, “aged buildings” (along with more modern ones), and concentration.

Mixed primary uses mean that there are varied activities at different times of the day. For example, residents may use the sidewalks and retail businesses mostly in the early morning, evening, and weekends. During the day, workers at manufacturing facilities or offices put money into the community during breaks and lunch hour. On holidays and weekends, when plants and offices are closed, the neighborhood may attract tourists. This mixture of activities makes a neighborhood thrive.

Jacobs emphasizes the importance of short city blocks. She maintains that long blocks force pedestrians along cavernous routes, while shorter blocks encourage a variety of paths to reach an intended destination. These various paths aid exposure to more people and more businesses.

Aged buildings are needed beside modern ones to support housing choices among a mix of residents of differing economic classes and walks of life. When these people walk the streets and use the neighborhood stores, they do so as equals. This kind of equality, Jacobs maintains, is essential to a neighborhood. A stockbroker and a shoe shiner going to the store and spending their loose change for a newspaper are both “equal” to that task. This equality paves the way for other neighborly activities and manifestations, such as collective security.

Jacobs also makes a good case for concentration as a necessary component of a healthy neighborhood. She states that though concentration is generally viewed as essential for downtown areas, the “relationship between concentration and diversity is very little considered when it comes to city districts where residence is the chief use” (p. 201). Jacobs makes the distinction between concentration as a necessary component of a healthy neighborhood and overcrowding, which is not: “Densities are too low or too high when they frustrate city diversity instead of abetting it” (p. 209).

Note that some professionals in the field of environmental psychology have a contrasting understanding of neighborhood. Robert Gifford writes, “Neighborhoods are cognitive creations, not geographical entities” (p. 20). I agree that a neighborhood is not a fixed geographical entity and that it can shift over time and in regard to human interactions and interrelationships. However, a neighborhood originally has a geographic basis because people are geographically based. Over time, a location such as Little Italy in lower Manhattan may shift from a functioning neighborhood to a block or two of restaurants and eventually to nothing other than a state of mind. But that is not to say that Little Italy was never anything more than a “cognitive creation.”

A neighborhood can function, and function well, without community. But economically thriving, diverse, socially agreeable neighborhoods do not a

community make. Neighborhoods cannot be communities where there is no interdependence, no collective control over the resources necessary to achieve common goals, and no sense of shared commonality beyond proximity, class, and a shared right to demand services that are purchased through private dollars or local taxes.

### Three Necessary Components of Community

*Commonality* is something that a group of people hold in common, and a necessary basis for community. This element might be geographical circumstances, shared concerns and values, children, beliefs, needs, issues, and so on. Although commonality is a necessary component of community, it is only one such element and not the only basis for community organizing efforts. Without a more expansive perspective, most such efforts fail once the external supports are removed.

*Interdependence* is a difficult concept to appreciate, especially for those who fund comprehensive community initiatives, community building, and community organizing efforts. What interdependence presumes is that a necessary component of community is economic. In my experience, because funders and policymakers (many of whom believe they have all the answers) start with the premise that the world is as it is because of the natural order of things, the goal is then to teach people how to survive and thrive within this world that, after all, works so well for them. But let any one of them lose household income and go without the benefit of family or inherited wealth, and the person will learn soon enough that the community in which the person believes he or she is living is not a community at all, just a local residential service cluster that sustains people only to the extent that it is supported by them through their outside economic endeavors. Community, without some economic capacity that defines the relations between and among its members and advances the quality of life of those within that community, is not a community at all, just an aggregation of people within some set of shared circumstances.

*Collective capacity*, the third necessary component, follows from the first two (commonality and interdependence). For a community to be a community, there must be an internal capacity to accomplish goals that are necessary or desirable. Collective capacity results from each individual having something to offer to the collective “pot” from which common good can be achieved. In established communities, the vehicles for accomplishing the commonly held agenda of its members are institutions such as local civic clubs, associations, concerned citizen committees, and the like. I would maintain that it is possible to gauge the health of any community by determining the extent to which its institutions are controlled by residents or by outsiders. With regard to impoverished neighborhoods, ask yourself: With no access to the primary sources of wealth (natural resources, information, technology, means of production) and with most people possessing or trending toward negative wealth, what opportunity is there for residents to exercise power and form a true community? This brings us back to New Orleans.

With regard to impoverished neighborhoods, ask yourself: With no access to the primary sources of wealth (natural resources, information, technology, means of production) and with most people possessing or trending toward negative wealth, what opportunity is there for residents to exercise power and form a true community?

There is a singular opportunity in the redevelopment of New Orleans. It is framed by the likelihood that a massive rebuilding effort *will* take place in New Orleans. Who will benefit from the rebuilding? Will it be only the neo-NU yuppies, or will the indigenous poor benefit as well? With proper government incentives, there is an opportunity to rebuild community in a manner that is consistent with the principles outlined in this essay: respecting commonality

(the shared history, culture, and geography of its residents), encouraging long-term and sustained interdependence, and fostering collective economic and political capacity. These goals could be reached through a WPA-type program of employment, investment, and training that would channel the majority of rebuilding investment dollars to local unemployed and underemployed residents. There must be sustained emphasis on the local economy and on mutually supportive consumer-producer-service activities.

The economy of New Orleans has a lot going for it: its historical tourist trade, ports, oil production, and cultural and educational institutions. All of these economic activities and sectors require labor at every level of competency and remuneration. If the wealth created by these industries can be supplemented and complemented by indigenous economic activity that is based on mutual aid and support—forming a local economic system that is both formal and informal—then the rudiments of community are possible. A system of taxation whereby all locally generated trade and commerce is exempt from most taxes would be a great start.

In a way, such a tax incentive system would represent the inverse of an enterprise zone, where businesses are given tax relief to locate in a specific geographic area and hire its residents. My plan offers the incentives elsewhere. I propose that locally generated and supported economic activity be exempt from taxation. Outside owners will be taxed as they are now (call it a currency export tax, or a local multiplier deflating tax). So a dollar spent in McDonalds would be taxed on every level. But a dollar earned at McDonalds and subsequently spent on purchase of locally made bath products would be exempt from both sales tax (benefiting the purchaser) and income tax (benefiting the seller). In this way, there is a built-in advantage to local economic activity that over time encourages local economic and political arrangements, along with forming the basis for the building of true community.

Of course, such a program would require a dramatic change of attitude. Far too many people believe that undermining the free flow of capital and concentration of wealth is equivalent to undermining democracy itself. Such attitudes are not restricted to one political party. Throughout his tenure, President Bill Clinton invoked democratic ideals as an important part of the American legacy in all our international affairs. But I cannot remember one time when, in the context of international affairs, he invoked the word *democracy* without the follow-up qualifier “and free markets”—by which he was referring to the largely unfettered international flow of capital. Americans have been conditioned to equate democracy with concentrated, globalized, corporatist capitalism.

No set of specific prescriptions for the rebuilding of New Orleans can be imported from the outside. However, if rebuilding New Orleans is accompanied by the perspectives, attitudes, and commitments necessary for community rebuilding, then the outcome will prevent what some have described as the planned “Disneyfication” of New Orleans. Instead, the result will be a more participatory, more equitable, and more democratic society in the Big Easy.

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