SUCCESSFUL PLACE MAKING IN A POST-KATRINA ENVIRONMENT: A REDEVELOPMENT STRATEGY TO RECLAIM SOCIAL EQUITY AND AUTHENTIC CHARACTER FOR A SMALL TOWN CENTER

by

MARK L. DEJARNETTE

(Under the Direction of John C. Waters)

ABSTRACT

New Orleans communities are being rebuilt in response to a variety of post-Katrina redevelopment needs. Construction ranges from restoring/renovating individual homes to rebuilding entire neighborhoods. Concerns for retaining authentic character in one of America's most historic cities initiated an investigation into whether the small town center, called Rivertown, now a part of the New Orleans suburban City of Kenner Louisiana can regain authenticity, social equity, and economic vitality using Smart Growth.

The theoretical framework of Smart Growth is prescribed for the study as it is inclusive of a variety of redevelopment scenarios that include recycled assets with infill development, Traditional Neighborhood Design (TND) development, and Enclave redevelopment. Three case studies from south Louisiana are evaluated for their value in creating whole communities. These are used to develop a redevelopment plan for Rivertown. The importance of social equity in redevelopment and value of the built environment in marginalized neighborhoods is recognized as an essential part of successful redevelopment with authenticity.

INDEX WORDS: New Orleans, Hurricane Katrina, Smart Growth, social equity, authenticity, place making, recycled assets, infill, Traditional Neighborhood Design (TND), enclave development

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of the Requirements for the Degree

MASTER OF LANDSCAPE ARCHITECTURE

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DEDICATION

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To everyone who helped me through a most difficult time in Post-Katrina New Orleans. You know who you are.

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

Purpose of Study

The study will examine various Place Making techniques being used to help revive New Orleans neighborhoods affected by Hurricane Katrina. A failing historic town center called Rivertown, situated on the edge of the suburban New Orleans city of Kenner, Louisiana, will be used for a study area (Figure 1.1). The basis of the study will be the guiding principles of Smart Growth theory placed in the context of three different redevelopment techniques; these include infill development, Traditional Neighborhood Design (TND), and enclave development. The use of existing older buildings to help guide redevelopment in terms of preservation, re-establishing a town fabric, architectural style, and materials will be described.

Three different case studies in the New Orleans area will be presented as redevelopment examples influenced by the effects of Hurricane Katrina. The benefits and deficiencies of these case studies will be compared. In turn, they will be used to help guide a redevelopment approach at Rivertown.

Attention to the social, economic, and environmental equity at Rivertown will be examined within its existing town fabric, its historic past, and how it fits contextually within the New Orleans region. Maintaining design integrity, authenticity, and honesty will be dealt with in the study.



Figure 1.1: Study area location map

Statistics of Loss and Recovery for the New Orleans Region

It has been nearly four years since Hurricane Katrina made landfall on the Louisiana coast. Since then, the consequences from the damage have been far reaching. The statistics presented here are intended to demonstrate the amount of redevelopment New Orleans is enduring.

A total of 1,800 deaths and estimated costs of \$81 billion in total damage to property were reported one year after hurricane Katrina.¹ The social and emotional implications on the lives of individuals, families, and communities attempting to return and rebuild from the damage caused is immeasurable. The physical and emotional burdens of the victims have been compounded by the slow response of the federal government to give assistance.

Based on costs and the number of people affected, the New Orleans metropolitan area sustained the greatest amount of damage initiated by hurricane Katrina. It damaged a total of 72 percent of New Orleans housing stock with 56 percent of that considered severely damaged. Jefferson Parish, the suburban portion of New Orleans, had 53 percent of its housing stock damaged with 20 percent of that severely damaged.² Out of 712,000 people affected by Hurricane Katrina, over 50 percent of them were living in Orleans Parish and more than 25 percent of them resided in Jefferson Parish.³

According to a December 2008 news release, 73.7 percent of the pre-Katrina homes in Orleans Parish are once again receiving mail. That growth slowed significantly in the first half

¹ Amy Liu, The Brookings Institution, "Building a Better New Orleans: A Review of and Plan for Progress One Year after Hurricane Katrina," The Brookings Institution, Special Analysis in Metropolitan Policy, (August 2006). <u>http://www.brookings.edu/reports/2006/08metropolitanpolicy_liu02.aspx</u> (accessed May 15, 2008).

² Greater New Orleans Community Data Center, "Current Housing Unit Damage Estimates, Hurricanes Katrina, Rita, and Wilma," (February 12, 2006, Revised April 7, 2006).

http://www.gnocdc.org/reports/Katrina_Rita_Wilma_Damage_2_12_06___revised.pdf (accessed May 15, 2008). ³ Thomas Gabe, Gene Falk, Maggie McCarty, and Virginia Mason, CRS Report for Congress "Hurricane Katrina: Social-Demographic Characteristics of Impacted Areas," (November 4, 2005), Congressional Research Service, The Library of Congress Order of Code RL33141. Table 1, CRS-9. <u>http://www.gnocdc.org/reports/crsrept.pdf</u> (accessed May 15, 2008).

of the year; however, New Orleans gained 3,873 households in the last five months of 2008. This increase is attributed to a strong local economy attracting workers to the city. New Orleans has not been greatly affected by job losses and mortgage foreclosures.⁴

Housing sales have also slowed, but New Orleans region is still experiencing a healthier market than the national average. Public school enrollment for Orleans Parish continues to grow while populations in other adjacent parishes have similarly declined. Economic indicators show that some tax revenues have nearly recovered to pre-Katrina levels and unemployment is at a low 3.1 percent. Employers are having difficulty filling job vacancies despite the fact that the number of employers across a five-parish has decreased.⁵

Infrastructure repairs are going slowly throughout the metropolitan region. Nearly two and a half years after the flood, the New Orleans Police Department headquarters has reopened. Other stations that were damaged are still housed in trailers or in temporary donated space. While historic streetcars are also fully functional, other public transportation in New Orleans is severely limited. As of February 2008 only 48 percent of the public transit routes are open and 19 percent of the number of pre-Katrina busses are running. By March 2008, FEMA had paid \$6.6 billion for infrastructure repairs; however about \$3 billion is still being held by the state of Louisiana.⁶

Research Methods

Research interest on Smart Growth in the greater New Orleans area topic began at the beginning of 2006 with the second edition of the iconic geographic-based novel by Peirce Lewis,

⁴ Allison Plyer, "New Orleans population growth picks up steam in the second half of 2008 – reaching nearly 74 percent of pre-Katrina levels by December 2008.", The Greater New Orleans Community Data Center, December, 2008, <u>http://www.gnocdc.org/media/GNOCDCDec31-08.pdf</u> (accessed May 15, 2009).

⁵ Amy Liu and Allison Plyer, "State of Policy and Progress: April 2008: Two Years, Eight Months Since Katrina made Landfall", the Executive Summary in the New Orleans Index, The Greater New Orleans Community Data Center, April 2008. <u>http://www.gnocdc.org/NOLAIndex/ESNOLAIndex.pdf</u> (accessed June15, 2009). ⁶ *ibid.*

"New Orleans: The Making of an Urban Landscape".⁷ Published two years prior to Katrina, it accurately paints a picture of why one of America's most exotic and enigmatic cities is what it is today; it also portrays, with near-prophetic insight, what the impact of a storm such as Hurricane Katrina would have on the region. During that time the author read other articles concerning New Orleans recovery and Katrina as well as periodicals such as Metropolis, Architectural Record, and Landscape Architecture Magazine. These initiated an extensive literature review by the author on the subjects of Smart Growth Principles and various Place Making techniques for redevelopment projects.

The author conducted a literature search at the College of Environment and Design Owens Library and the main library at the University of Georgia (and its on-line database resources), the library at the School of Architecture at Tulane University, and Loyola University's Monroe Library. Online Smart Growth publications and Katrina recovery statistics from websites were collected and studied. On a few occasions, pre-published documents were acquired from various individuals.

Fieldwork for this study includes an extensive inventory and analysis undertaken to understand and document the physiography, potential resources, historic character, building architecture, infrastructure, and land-use of Rivertown. Inventory data includes same scale map overlays, detailed building descriptions, and photo documentation. Informal interviews conducted with residents, former residents, business owners, workers at the entertainment venues, and government officials give an accurate portrayal of the place, as it is now and how it was before. Local festivals and other community affairs were attended to further develop an understanding of Rivertown.

⁷ Peirce F. Lewis, *New Orleans: The Making of an Urban Landscape* (Santa Fe New Mexico and Staunton, Virginia, Center for American Places, Second Edition, 2003), 200.

Fieldwork includes trips to several redevelopment projects all around the New Orleans region, including parts of the Louisiana, Mississippi, and Florida Gulf South. From these trips, three case studies for comparative analysis were developed for use in this study. Other examples outside the Gulf South were researched via internet and library resources. Information on the Dudley Street Neighborhood Initiative was initially acquired at a New Orleans Neighborhood Leadership Forum.⁸

Additional research about Smart Growth, Place Making, and design techniques continued throughout the project. Retelling the history of the area has not been an objective for this study. Nevertheless, understanding the history of the place from the last century onward has been important in considering certain aspects of social equity and appropriate Place Making in an historic context.

Personal interviews conducted clearly point to an overwhelming desire, on all levels, for Rivertown to regain its small town values and character. Concerns regarding a past history of racial divisiveness, community inequity, and a feeling of powerlessness in planning the future were common themes in the interviews. The information gathered from this analysis has weighed heavily in the recommendations for the project.

⁸ The Dudley Street Initiative, Neighborhood Leadership Forum, Best Practices in Neighborhood Revitalization: Increasing and Sustaining Participation and Control, (John F. Kennedy School of Government, Harvard University, Presented in New Orleans, LA, Dec. 1, 2007).

CHAPTER 2

DEVELOPING A PROCESS FOR AUTHENTIC PLACE MAKING USING SMART GROWTH PRINCIPLES

Smart Growth Makes Healthy Communities

Smart Growth is a broad based urban planning and transportation theory that deals with understanding and implementing ways to reduce various forms and causes of sprawl. Sprawl, also known as urban sprawl or suburban sprawl, is a term used to describe low-density population growth into rural or urban fringe areas. Sprawl has a negative connotation within the Smart Growth theory. Because sprawl is caused by a multitude of interrelated factors, approaches to combat sprawl through Smart Growth are also interrelated and equally broad in scope. The negative impact of sprawl includes loss of open rural and natural space, the decline of urban centers, and the decline of rural towns. Sprawl can also be characterized in increased cost of infrastructure, transportation, and pollution.

The formative ideas of Smart Growth began in the United States with the writings of urban sociologists and planners who recognized certain changes in the behavior and lifestyles of Americans across the country. Shifts in populations from urban centers to newly built suburban counterparts began to occur after World War II. This resulted in rural and natural areas being overtaken by wasteful development. In just a few short decades, urban populations across the country spread out into widespread areas that had previously been sparsely populated.

Jane Jacobs is arguably the most influential writer on this subject. Her book, "*The Death and Life of Great American Cities*", criticized the popular planning concepts of Urban Renewal.

Jacobs showed that Urban Renewal favored a separation of land uses over a more integrated scheme. She argued that separation led to, and created, a decline in the multi-layered aspect of human behavior, and hence the human urban fabric. Eventually this led to the destruction of the social aspect of communities on a whole. Jacobs postulates that the effects of Urban Renewal further stimulated decline into the rural landscape, small towns, and natural environments.⁹

Since its theoretical beginnings, Smart Growth has become formalized in its organization and application through the efforts of various and extensive collectives and coalitions of governmental, non-profit and private agencies. The three most prominent organizations in the United States to establish principles and practices of Smart Growth include the Smart Growth Network, Smart Growth America, and the Urban Land Institute. They have extensive websites for dissemination of information on current policy, education, and publications and are the main resources used here.

The Smart Growth Network was formed in 1996 as a collaborative of the Environmental Protection Agency and other governmental and non-profit agencies.¹⁰ It was formed in response to concerns about economic growth of a community, environmental protection, and enhanced community vitality.

Smart Growth America focuses on coalition building, communications, policy development, and research.¹¹ Nested within this organization is the Smart Growth Leadership Institute (SGLI). Through funding from the Environmental Protection Agency, the SGLI has created what they refer to as a Smart Growth Tool Kit that helps communities understand and

 ⁹ Jane Jacobs, *The Death and Life of Great American Cities*, (New York: Vintage Books, 1961).
¹⁰ Smart Growth Online, Smart Growth Network, <u>http://www.smartgrowth.org/sgn/default.asp</u> (accessed May 15, 2008).

¹¹ Smart Growth America, <u>http://www.smartgrowthamerica.org/</u> (accessed May 15, 2008).

implement smart growth initiatives. In addition, the institute can track and score the progress of those communities.

Finally, another organization devoted to leadership and outreach dealing with Smart Growth land use and policy issues is the Urban Land Institute (ULI).¹² The Urban Land Institute is a large non-profit research and education organization boasting over 40,000 members. It is also affiliated with a large number of industries that have business concerns related to land use and real estate development. The ULI's stated mission is '*to provide leadership in the responsible use of land and in creating and sustaining thriving communities worldwide*'.¹³ The ULI has been a significant player in the post-Katrina recovery process of the New Orleans area as part of the City of New Orleans' Bring New Orleans Back collaborative.

All of these organizations are focused on combating sprawl by developing or renewing communities using the 'Ten Smart Growth Principles'. ¹⁴ These guiding principles provide the foundation for the methodology that guides the revitalization plan for the Rivertown study area.

Ten Smart Growth Principles

- 1. Incorporate mixed land uses.
- 2. Take advantage of compact neighborhood design.
- 3. Create housing opportunities and choices.
- 4. Create walkable communities.
- 5. Foster distinctive, attractive communities with a strong sense of place.
- 6. Preserve open space, farmland, natural beauty, and critical environmental areas.
- 7. Strengthen and direct development toward existing communities.
- 8. Provide a variety of transportation choices.
- 9. Make development decisions predicable, fair, and costeffective.
- 10. Encourage community and stakeholder collaboration in development decisions.

¹² The Urban Land Institute, <u>http://www.uli.org</u> (accessed May 15, 2008).

¹³ *ibid*.

¹⁴ Smart Growth America, <u>http://www.smartgrowthamerica.org/</u> (accessed May 15, 2008).

This set of principles is a desirable redevelopment tool for a community like Rivertown because it targets broad and fundamental ways to improve the community character and its infrastructure. Each principle addresses certain aspects of the physical, economic, and social needs of communities and stresses the importance of doing so in a fair and equitable manner. The principles also focus on a positive impact on the environment and natural ecological systems. Together, the ten principles strive to create a genuine 'sense of place' that is reflective of that community.

Smart Growth principles are interrelated. Collectively they work together so that when one principle causes improvement, others are positively impacted and the overall benefit is greater than the sum of each improvement. Conversely, when certain principles are applied to a Smart Growth project while others are not, the overall benefit decreases and the project suffers. This layered dynamic in the principles of Smart Growth can be demonstrated in the following descriptions given below.

Mixed Land Uses

Mixed land use is a critical component in building a livable community for a number of reasons. Mixing land uses provides a variety of retail and commercial amenities and employment opportunities for a community. When placed in close proximity to each other, it offers more choices and shorter distances for transportation options. Mixed land use also goes hand in hand with other principles, including compact neighborhood design, walkable communities, and fostering communities with a strong sense of place.

The social implications of mixed land use include a revitalization of community life and social interaction. Having sufficient mixed-use space puts people on the streets, in public spaces,

and in retail areas at different times of the day. The perception of security is enhanced with 'eyes on the street' to look out after others.

Other economic benefits of having more mixed-use space in a compact area include improved property values as a result of the built-in conveniences of having amenities close at hand. This, in turn, improves retail profits and the local tax base because money is spent and made in the local community.

Compact Neighborhood Design

Compact neighborhood design focuses on reducing land consumption and the effects of sprawl. This complements the principles of mixed land use and walkable communities. One important aspect of compact building design is that it preserves open space. When there is more available space, particularly green space, certain environmental concerns can be reduced. For example, non-point source related pollution, street flooding, and increased sewerage and water facilities are mitigated with compact design.

Compact building design allows for shorter commutes and transit times. As a consequence it lowers costs and reduces pollution related to transportation. Compact neighborhood design decreases the need for sprawling infrastructure and reduces costs for building and maintaining public utilities.

Create Housing Opportunities and Choices

When housing opportunities and quality choices for housing are offered for people of all income levels and professions, the local workforce can come from within the community. A whole community needs to be supported by a wide range of occupations and skills. Without a range of housing, these needs cannot come from within the same community. When community needs are met from within, other smart growth objectives such as mixed land use and

transportation needs are also strengthened. Creating a range of housing opportunities for people with a range of professions creates more socio-cultural diversity in the community.

One way to assure that housing needs are met is to integrate sufficient single- and multifamily housing in a new development. In areas that are losing certain socio-economic groups to high housing costs, innovative measures may be necessary to deal with this type of problem. When the high cost of housing in the historic resort town of Breckenridge, Colorado, threatened to push out the resident work force that supported the town's livelihood, developers and municipal leaders worked together to construct Wellington, a one-hundred home neighborhood development specifically reserved for the full time residents that work there. The homes are offered to the residents at a third of the cost for the median home price elsewhere in Breckenridge.¹⁵

Create Walkable Communities.

Walkable communities are fundamental to Smart Growth and are also associated with mixed land use and compact neighborhood design. Walking is the most basic method of transportation within a community. Walkable communities require services, schools, and green space to be within a comfortable distance from one node of activity to the other and for the route to be safe to navigate. Whether those nodes are from home, to the library, the grocer, or a transit stop, the streetscape must serve all users in an equal manner. The users include the pedestrian, the bicyclist, the transit rider, or the automobile user.

Until post World War II when suburban sprawl increased our dependence on automotive transport, towns and cities were, by necessity, walkable communities. As land use became more compartmentalized and sprawled, modes of transportation shifted. Eventually streetscape design

¹⁵ Smart Growth Online, "This is Smart Growth", Smart Growth Online, September 6, 2006, <u>http://www.smartgrowth.org/library/articles.asp?art=2367</u> (accessed May 15, 2008).

in newer areas excluded sidewalks and made walking more difficult. With this shift, people's perceptions of walking also changed and sidewalks were replaced with parking lots. In successful Smart Growth communities, pedestrian transport is essential.

An added benefit of walkable communities is the opportunity of leisure through social intercourse and meeting people on the street. In places where walking is a major mode of transportation for daily activities, it is considered a means to facilitate meeting and greeting people. In parts of Spain it is such an important aspect of performance and ritual in daily life, the phrase, *hablando en la calle*, or 'talking in the street' is formally used to describe it. If only our American cities had such a ritual.

Other added benefits of walkable communities include the health benefits of reducing daily stress, improving cardiovascular health, and combating obesity. Relative to the principle of mixed use, pedestrian activity also creates the perception of security with 'eyes on the street'. Foster Distinctive, Attractive Communities with a Strong Sense of Place

Smart Growth strives to create interesting, attractive, and authentic communities through the development of design standards and construction that reflect the genuine character of the place and the culture. Design is directed toward all aspects of creating a town fabric with compatible building architecture, streetscape design, and green space. The physical relationship and orientation of existing assets such as the relation of green space and existing buildings are considered and valued in developing a design scheme. Infill helps to define the genuine sense of the place.

Preserve Open Space, Farmland, Natural Beauty, and Critical Environmental Areas

Open space is the natural and man-made land that imparts beauty and significance to the community at hand. It includes wetlands, farmland, natural areas and environmentally sensitive

areas. Besides creating beauty and a strong 'sense of place', these areas are essential habitats for wildlife and plant communities. Smart Growth considers open space to be an irreplaceable genuine asset of a community and preserving it to be an essential part of development. Preservation of open space bolsters local economies, preserves critical environmental areas and improves the quality of life for the community at hand and the community of the future. Preserving open space combats air pollution, attenuates noise, control erosion and reduces the heat island effect of populated areas. Open space also protects surface and ground water resources by filtering non-point source related pollution before it enters the water system. <u>Strengthen and Direct Development toward Existing Communities</u>

Smart Growth is applied to areas where communities already exist in a way that strengthens communities and utilizes the existing resources that exist within neighborhoods. In doing this, town fabric, infrastructure, open space, and natural resources are conserved and preserved. The economic benefits of this type of development can be cost savings in construction and reuse of existing resources.. It can also benefit the community by building a stronger tax base through a stimulated and convenient job market and available local goods and services.

Provide a Variety of Transportation Choices

Transportation is a fundamental tenant of early Smart Growth philosophy and is still a key principle today. Smart Growth developments create a range of transportation options to alleviate problems associated with traffic and automotive travel. Options within a Smart Growth community include pedestrian, bike, transit, and automotive activity that is connected to more regional forms of transit. Transportation options for Smart Growth communities assist in fulfilling other principles of Smart Growth such as creation of compact neighborhood design and walkable neighborhoods.

Make Development Decisions Predictable, Fair, and Cost Effective

Predictable, fair, and cost-effective development that is directed to the private sector and the community at hand is an essential principle of building a Smart Growth community. Municipal governments can encourage Smart Growth to happen through the private sector in a number of ways. It can offer various tax incentives for investors and developers. It can streamline the development review and approval process to make development go smoother and more cooperative. Local government can also assist in the development process by creating or amending municipal codes and variances that will benefit the process. Whatever the incentives for encouraging Smart Growth, the decisions and methods must be made with the interest of the community and the private sector in mind. It should be done so in a fair and transparent way. Encourage Community and Stakeholder Collaboration in Development Decisions

Showing a genuine concern for the civic well being of members of a community is a key factor in the social aspect of Smart Growth. By assuring the people of a community that their opinions count in the decision making process and that the goal for development is to make their community better, a genuine spirit of the community and a 'sense of place' is achieved. When the people affected by a Smart Growth development are excluded from the decision process, they feel divested in the community, resulting in suspicion and distrust. By incorporating collaboration between the community, local government, developers, and investors a greater sense of trust can be achieved. Involving the community in the planning process strengthens the community and often leads to innovative strategies that fit the unique needs of each community.

In situations where communities have been routinely excluded from these types of decisions, or there is a history of chronic or long-term inequity, the process of engaging the community, building trust, and enlisting the help of that community is the only way change can

happen. One of the most notable and dramatic examples of successful community-based revitalization is the Dudley Street Neighborhood Initiative in the Roxbury neighborhood of Boston, MA. By the1980's, the area was considered one of the most dismal and dangerous neighborhoods in any American urban setting. Beginning in 1984, a neighborhood grass roots initiative called the Dudley Street Neighborhood Initiative was formed in an attempt to salvage the neighborhood that had literally been dumped on and burned out by residents trying to get out of the area.¹⁶

Based on a philosophy of total transparency and the use of a community land control policy, the neighborhood began redeveloping community lands through the Community Land Trust called the Dudley Street Neighbors Incorporated. Adhering to long term visioning and planning, the Dudley Street Neighborhood Initiative (DSNI) jumpstarted redevelopment at all levels. As the neighborhood began to regroup as a unified community body, desirable low cost housing was provided. Crime in the community stabilized at unprecedented low levels. The entire effort was driven by the redevelopment efforts of the existing community that had control of the land through imminent domain. Once the neighborhood was stabilized by the efforts of DSNI, its proximity to downtown Boston attracted outside investors and those prices became driven by normal market forces. The Dudley Street neighborhood was further integrated with other socio-economic levels. Higher income projects began to infill the otherwise low-income neighborhood without causing displacement of its existing residents. Twenty years later, the Dudley Street Neighborhood continues its progress through its resident-led revitalization.^{17 18}

¹⁶ The Dudley Street Initiative, Neighborhood Leadership Forum, Best Practices in Neighborhood Revitalization: Increasing and Sustaining Participation and Control, (John F. Kennedy School of Government, Harvard University, Presented in New Orleans, LA, Dec. 1, 2007).

¹⁷ *ibid*.

¹⁸ Peter Medoff, and Holly Sklar, *Streets of Hope*, (Boston: South End Press, 1994), 1-6.

The Muddled Waters of Place Making

In theory, the ten guiding principles of Smart Growth have substance because they objectively address a wide range of concerns that deal with the built environment, the natural environment, and social aspects of communities. How these principles translate into the practice of 'place making' is more subjective. The questions of what a place should look like, how it fulfills Smart Growth principles, and how should it be measured against these principles is subject to the situation and condition of a project and how it will impact the community and the environment.

Ideas of authenticity are central issues to place making. For this study, 'authenticity' has several meanings that involve other important concepts as 'sense of place' and 'character'. With regard to historic architecture, 'authenticity' can refer to the artifact of a structure, its building materials, and building techniques; it can also relate to a certain period or style of architecture that is true to its age. The modern replication of structures using the same design and structural integrity as its historic counterparts may also be described as being 'authentic' in character. When used to describe a townscape, or feature in the townscape, 'authenticity' can refer to how it looks, or functions in an authentic manner. The latter is most relevant when addressing authenticity in the study area, where a number of historic buildings have been modified to replicate a period or style false to them or when the service or amenities have been portrayed in a false manner.

Three approaches for developing new communities are discussed later in this chapter. Issues of concern include the economics and how well the development supports various aspects of Smart Growth. The design approaches of three case studies taken from in and around New Orleans are evaluated in terms of Smart Growth values. From this point, the best practices and

shortcomings observed in those projects are used to describe critical Smart Growth needs in Rivertown and to support a redevelopment scenario based on those findings.

A recent study compared three similar-scale housing types in Chicago with regard to personal preference and dollar value. The study was then used as a basis to recommend suitable and common development types in the New Orleans area. The three comparable development types include infill, traditional neighborhood design (TND), and enclave.¹⁹ The Chicago study found that TND development was more desirable than enclave development in terms of design and for resale value even though upfront costs for the latter was comparably lower than a TND. The study compared a comparable infill development to both TND and enclave developments and found that when infill is well integrated into its surroundings, it is the most desirable type of the three based on both design and long-range monetary value.²⁰

Infill Development

Infill development occurs within an existing community rather than building on undeveloped land. New structures are built between existing ones and as a result, the existing infrastructure and town fabric are included in the plan. Infill is particularly effective when combined with recycling and reusing existing buildings. The conservative approach of infill development compliments Smart Growth approaches.

Infill development can be the most appropriate Smart Growth approach for redeveloping an area for a number of reasons. In terms of cost, conservation, and reuse of existing content, infill takes advantage of existing municipal infrastructure; in terms of authenticity and honesty,

¹⁹ Brent D. Ryan and Rachel Weber, Rachel, "Valuing New Development in Distressed Urban Neighborhoods "*Journal of the American Planning Association*, v. 73, no. 1, Winter. (2007), 100.

²⁰ Brent D. Ryan and Rachel Weber, Rachel, "Valuing New Development in Distressed Urban Neighborhoods" *Journal of the American Planning Association*, v. 73, no. 1, Winter, (2007), 107.

infill can use the existing architecture and the town fabric as a contextual reference and guide for future design and redevelopment.

In terms of preservation, infill development creates continuity in the fabric of a town simply by filling vacant space between existing buildings. Infill assists to preserve, rehabilitate, and recycle existing structures and spaces, particularly historic structures, by reconnecting them back into the townscape. Blending infill with its historic surroundings, particularly with regard to scale, street orientation, and building materials can create coherency for what would otherwise be fragmented and vacant space. In helping to preserve the historic built environment, history itself is preserved.²¹

Traditional Neighborhood Design (TND) Development

Traditional neighborhood design (TND) is where complete neighborhoods, or village-like towns, are created using principles of traditional town planning. Smart Growth Principles are fundamentally rooted in the formative development of TND. Thus, TND are typically Smart Growth based.

Because a TND project is built from the ground up, all aspects of Smart Growth can be incorporated into the design from initial planning to project completion. A TND controls the desired density for a project and the amount of mixed land use. Community design is fully integrated from initial development and master planning to the written code that describes how the community will function. Equal detail is paid to the town plan, neighborhood socioeconomics, the streetscape, the building architecture, and the appearance of residential landscapes.

²¹ Melinda J. Milligan, "Buildings as History: The Place of Collective Memory in the Study of Historic Preservation" *Symbolic Interaction*, v. 30, issue 1 (2007): 105.

TND developments that are designed to be pedestrian friendly facilitate certain social aspects of Smart Growth. Design of public, semi-public, and private space within a Smart Growth community is consciously done to improve the safety and welfare of the community. Focusing on the physical form of a newly designed community facilitates a whole host of Smart Growth objectives that strives to create a more cohesive social fabric for` the community.

TND communities are designed with a predictable and intended outcome for order and attractiveness. The planned hierarchies of streets maximize efficiency, scale is appropriately managed along the streetscapes, and green space creates continuity within the neighborhood.

TND developments are sometimes criticized for portraying historic character that results in an unauthentic and contrived look. Some architects regard this to be ethically irresponsible while others specialize in the practice. Preservationists view imitation to be conflicting and threatening to the appreciation of authentic historic architecture. Ironically though, when modern architecture is placed alongside that which is historic, opinions of architects and preservationists are split. Some feel the practice defines the old from the new and the others criticize it for the lack of architectural continuity. In an interview just after Katrina, a notable New Orleans architect, Lee Ledbetter, conceded that a few historic looking TND developments built in various New Orleans neighborhoods are not enough to compete with the miles and miles of authentic historic architecture in the city. Still he cautions that imitation of old architecture is not a desirable direction for a city that has the real thing;

"It has a certain false historicism... You can't replicate something that was built when those materials [old growth timber, etc] could be bought off the shelf. The thought of the city turning into that frightens me."²²

²² Doug MacCash, "New Orleans: New Urbanism?" Seattle Times, November 16, 2005, <u>http://seattletimes.nwsource.com/html/nationworld/2002626329_neworleans16.html</u> (accessed May 15, 2008).

The New Urbanist movement is rooted in Traditional Neighborhood Design and some consider the two synonymous.²³ The New Urbanists are arguably the most criticized for heavily borrowing from past architectural styles. This approach was lampooned in the 1998 film, *"The Truman Show"*, where the ideal and idyllic lives of an entire community in a picture perfect small town was actually a stage set and being secretly filmed for the entertainment of others.²⁴ The movie was filmed at Seaside, Florida, one of the best-known New Urbanism communities designed by architects Duaney-Plater-Zyberk (DPZ).

Another pitfall of TND projects is that housing opportunities are usually divided into similar socio-economic classes; these range from predominately low-income subsidized housing to exclusive high-cost resort communities. Because of their predictable look, TND developments can be readily identified from their surroundings. As a result they tend to be associated with one type of socio-economic status. This can be problematic when low-income TND projects are stigmatized for being dressed up housing projects.

Enclave Conversion Development

Enclave development is criticized by Smart Growth advocates because it inwardly focuses its building scheme away from the surrounding communities and excludes them by literally putting up barriers. Examples of enclave developments are gated communities and housing projects. Because enclaves oppose Smart Growth ideology, they are not a preferred candidates for Smart Growth based development. Enclaves do share certain similarities and benefits with TND projects, so they can be effectively converted into communities that embrace Smart Growth values.

²³ Stephanie E. Bothwell, Raymond Gindroz, and Robert E. Lang, "Restoring Community through Traditional Neighborhood Design: A Case Study of the Diggs Town Public housing" *Housing Policy Debate*, v. 9, Issue 1 (1998): 92-93.

²⁴ Peter Weir, Director, *The Truman Show*, 1998.

Both types of projects are similar in scale and spatiality. They are also similar in their ease of development with regard to the placement of buildings, streetscape development, and green space. Both offer upfront cost savings in terms of time and legal fees when problems of multiple-ownership are eliminated. In considering these advantages, an existing enclave development can be converted into better Smart Growth-based projects by becoming more integrated in its surroundings.

When considering whether to redevelop enclave housing, particularly when it is a housing project, it is important to consider the history of the building. Structures are viewed as symbols of history and as memory so their presence can be a reminder of the past. When the past is a difficult or painful memory, it can lead to negative feelings for those involved. Some of these negative memories can be ameliorated over time.

Linda Milligan convincingly argues that the historic built environment has an inherent right to exist in its authentic state despite its 'difficult histories'.²⁵ Milligan disputes the anti-preservationist view to remove such buildings stating that such action would make it impossible for a city such as New Orleans to maintain much of its historical fabric. She argues that most historic buildings in New Orleans exclude the middle-class and therefore have a memory of either being lived in by white and wealthy or the non-white and poor, the latter of which most likely built both.²⁶

The relevance of this discussion centers on a recent controversy in New Orleans to save a collection of enclave style housing projects from the 1940's. These enclaves were originally built to house returning post WWII veterans, in contrast to later urban renewal housing designed specifically for low-income residents such as the failed Pruitt-Igoe development. Despite

²⁵ Milligan. 105-106.

²⁶ *ibid*. 111.

protests from preservationists and former residents alike, the three housing projects were approved for demolition both by the Housing Authority of New Orleans (HANO) and the Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD). HANO cited high costs for refurbishment, but also acknowledge that they are physical reminders of failed social and housing policies of the past.²⁷ Preservationists disputed cost as a valid concern. Five similar housing units of the St. Thomas public housing project were cost effectively rehabilitated after Katrina and integrated into the River Garden project with better street design and access.

Evidence that enclave housing can be effectively rehabilitated and integrated into its surroundings as a conversion using TND is shown with the redevelopment of the Diggs Town housing development in Norfolk Virginia. Design measures were taken to recycle the buildings and reintegrate them into the surrounding community.²⁸ The two-story barracks-like structures were renovated and redesigned with semi-public, and private outdoor space using landscaping, fenced lot lines along front yards, backyards and porches. The existing superblocks were reconfigured into city-sized blocks with coherent streetscapes with sidewalks and planted street curbs.²⁹ The Diggs Town community was integrated into the redevelopment plans by being allowed to give their input at the onset of the project. The overall success of the Diggs Town redevelopment showed that the physical design, even when buildings of a particular history are involved, can supplant past problems of history.³⁰

²⁷ Margaret Foster, "In New Orleans, Demolition Begins on Public Housing" *National Trust for Historic Preservation Magazine*, March 13, 2008. <u>http://www.preservationnation.org/magazine/2008/todays-news/in-new-orleans-demolition.html</u> (accessed May 15, 2008).

²⁸ Bothwell *et al.*, 111.

²⁹ *ibid*. 98-103.

³⁰ *ibid*. 111-112.

Development using Sustainable and Modern Design

Another building approach to consider for community redevelopment options, whether as infill or new neighborhood development, is one that focuses on modern and sustainable design. This approach presents as many benefits as problems, especially when used in a place with such historic proportions as New Orleans.

Recognizing the many environmental concerns of today and the unique opportunity presented by the widespread damage caused by Hurricane Katrina, the option to rebuild New Orleans neighborhoods with sustainable and green design is a necessary Smart Growth choice. Since Katrina, the New Orleans area has shown a greater awareness of green practices. Unfortunately, the majority of repairs and rebuilding of the housing stock has not been overly sensitive to green building, especially with regard to recycling materials and other practically green building practices. Some of the latter is attributed to time constraints imposed on the community needing to get back into their homes and the amount of displacement caused by the hurricane.

When green building practices take on a modern look, a number of issues arise regarding how the design integrates into its surroundings. Whether building new neighborhoods or infilling historic neighborhoods, using modern forms is a clear way to distinguish what is historic or rebuilt. While this would seem to please preservationists and architects alike, factions of both oppose the mix of modern with historic for reasons discussed earlier in this chapter. As an example, consider the modern house design shown in Figure 2.1. It strongly references the older adjacent houses with regard to building setbacks, use of materials, form, and scale, yet it is clearly distinguished from others.



Figure 2.1: A modern house design that references architectural form and scale of adjacent houses

Whether people find modern design an appealing lifestyle choice is another issue to consider. Pierce Lewis contends that American popular taste is simply not fond of modern architecture. He reasons that Americans have an uncritical fondness of the past. And with the exception of an elite and high-brow few, Americans prefer historic looking architecture over modern. He contends that this preference is founded in the illusions people have about the romantic and bucolic past and also in architecture that look back to foreign countries— particularly those in England and Europe. Lewis supports this by pointing out America's obsession with revivals in architectural fashion such as the Greek revival, neo-Romanesque, Tudor revival, to name a few. He also notes that the International Style was loved and embraced by the architectural *literati* for fifty years but it affronted the tastes of popular America and therefore never became popular for everyday homes.³¹

Modernism currently embraced in popular culture of today is seen in recent trends of popularity for mid-century modernism. Based on Lewis' critique of taste in the American Landscape, one could conclude that its popularity is also a romantic 'look back' in time for generations who missed the fifties and sixties.³²

If Lewis is correct, it would suggest that modern architecture might be too unfamiliar for a collective community, such as New Orleans, that has primarily lived in and around older styles. Given this possibility it would be wise to integrate modernist architecture into redevelopment efforts in ways that aren't too visually confounding and strange (Figure 2.2).

³¹ Pierce Lewis, "American Landscape Tastes" in *Modern Landscape Architecture: A Critical Review*, ed. Marc Treib, (Cambridge, MIT Press, 1992), 10.

³² *ibid*.


Figure 2.2: A modern house design that does not reference the architectural form and scale of adjacent houses

CHAPTER 3

CASE STUDIES

Overview

Three examples of redevelopments involving building infill, traditional neighborhood design, and enclave design have been selected for comparison and for redevelopment discussions for Rivertown, Kenner, Louisiana. They are the Village of River Ranch in Lafayette, Louisiana, River Garden in the Lower Garden District of New Orleans, Louisiana, and the Make It Right 9 (MIR 9) project in the Lower Ninth Ward of New Orleans. River Garden and River Ranch developments were well underway prior to Katrina; the Lower Ninth Ward neighborhood is being redeveloped because it was devastated during the floods of Hurricane Katrina.

Each case study follows a consistent format for comparison. These include an overview of the community make-up, Smart Growth successes and failures, and the design intent of the project.

In addition, a retrospective analysis, one year after completing each case study, was done to track any progress or changes in them. At that time, residents were informally interviewed for their insight about the respective areas. Any significant changes were then noted.

Case Study I: The Village at River Ranch, Lafayette, Louisiana

About the Community

The Village at River Ranch is a newly-built high-end neighborhood situated on approximately 200 acres of land along the south bank of the Vermillion River.³³ This region is

³³The Village of River Ranch. <u>http://riverranchdevelopment.com/</u> (accessed May 15, 2008).

located on the outer and southern edge of Lafayette, Louisiana. Prior to development, the land was farmed for sugar cane. River Ranch is adjacent to older, less fashionable but attractive, suburban neighborhoods and strip developments along several major city arteries.

About the Design

River Ranch is a meticulously designed and planned neo-traditional neighborhood that fully embraces the New Urbanist philosophy of town planning. It consists of a centrally located hub of mixed-use commercial and retail facilities with adjacent walkable residential neighborhoods. Elements in the project include streetscape design detail and partitioning of urban green space. The architectural and cultural typologies used in the building designs include Caribbean, French, American Colonial, Creole, Acadian, Spanish and Neoclassical revival influences.

The project began in 1996 and is still in construction. Urbanist architect Steve Oubre, cofounder of Architects Southwest, is credited with the master plan design. The entire community is controlled by strict adherence to a set of design codes and requirements that apply to the architecture, building setbacks, and construction materials. Construction is pre-approved by an architectural review board and must be done by a builder/contractor that is approved by the design review board. Community regulations and 'rules of conduct' have been developed by the project management team with input from community members.

Smart Growth Implementation

The entire project takes advantage of mixed-use compact design. The commercial district is comprised of fashionable restaurants, shops, and other retail services for the residential community (Figure 3.1) on the ground level with commercial suites and multi-family residential



Figure 3.1: Compact mixed-use design at River Ranch

units above. There is ample parking throughout the commercial district with, parallel and perpendicular, street parking around the square (Figure 3.2). A convenient multi-story parking garage and a surface parking lot are on the outer perimeter of the district for additional health club parking.

The residential neighborhoods are comprised of single-family homes located within a short walking distance of the commercial district. Streetscapes are connective and furnished with trees, good sidewalks, and well-marked roads. The neighborhoods have several small parks with walking/jogging paths around ponds. Parallel street parking is available for visitors and residents have alleyways with rear garage parking. Houses are evenly set back and close to the street with landscaped front yards. Neighborhoods are clustered into groupings of similarly priced and scaled homes fashioned along a similar theme. (Figure 3.3)

Smart Growth Shortcomings

River Ranch is a popular development because of its attractive design and walkable mixed-use community, but it falls short on a number of Smart Growth expectations that relate to community exclusivity and design integrity.

Exclusivity is due to the high cost of living at River Ranch. There is a significant lack of housing opportunities and amenities for lower socio-economic community members. As a result, the service work force for River Ranch comes from outside the community. Additionally, River Ranch does not have desirable amenities such as churches, public schools, and libraries.

River Ranch is a new community and its design and residential behavior is controlled by the covenants of the developer. Stakeholder collaboration and fair and predictable development decisions are limited. Although this is contrary to Smart Growth values, the people who live there do so, in part, because they value these aspects.



Figure 3.2: The River Ranch Town Square with surrounding mixed-use



Figure 3.3: Clustered neighborhoods are comprised of similar scale homes with a variety of floor plans and the same architectural schemes

An ongoing argument in the design world is relevant to River Ranch. Do TND projects truly foster distinctive, attractive communities with a strong sense of place when town planning and architectural styling is applied in a heavy-handed and contrived manner? The town plan and building architecture at River Ranch creates an architectural pastiche that goes beyond the history and culture of the Lafayette area. This has resulted in a 'Disneyesque' quality to the place. It is ironic that the River Ranch website promotes its design for being unique rather than a cookie cutter community.³⁴ Despite the heavy-hand in design, other superior factors such as building quality, use of materials, and attention to landscape detail gives River Ranch a sense of realness and permanence and people like it.

As a final note, no aspects of sustainable design related to building construction and land conservation have been considered for this project. There is ample green space within River Ranch in the form of parks, plazas, and streetscapes. The development however was built over former sugar cane fields and expanded the outer edge of Lafayette which defies Smart Growth. Retrospective Analysis

River Ranch is a successful high-end community development that serves the needs of its intended residential community. It is exclusive and relatively expensive so it affronts the principles of Smart Growth that suggest communities need varied levels of economies in order to be balanced and fully functional. As a result of this exclusivity, River Ranch feels like an enclave development without the gates. The architecture and town planning as a TND is too heavy-handed and contrived giving it an authentic quality to it. Nevertheless, the design and many amenities are the reason why community members like it.

³⁴The Village of River Ranch. <u>http://riverranchdevelopment.com/</u> (accessed May 15, 2008).

One year after this study was conducted, the River Ranch community is relatively unchanged. Development has slowed, presumably in response to the recent economic downturn in the housing market. A large high-end grocery store, the Fresh Market, has opened at River Ranch and a number of commercial and retail businesses have changed ownership. However, vacancies do not seem to be a problem. Small changes have occurred that benefit the community. Mail is now delivered to individual homes because residents do not want to go to the central postal area to collect mail. Centralized mail is a strategy to create opportunities for social interaction such as meeting the neighbors. The illegal use of off-road vehicles such ,as golf carts, is prevalent and even a sanctioned form of transportation on the River Ranch Website. The desire for residents to want these things, reinforces the feeling that the community is enclave oriented.

Case Study II: River Garden, New Orleans, Louisiana

About the Community

River Garden is a newly built mixed-income neighborhood situated on about sixty acres of land in the historic Lower Garden District of New Orleans, Louisiana.³⁵ Prior to redevelopment, the area was the St. Thomas public housing project. The area is bounded by the Mississippi River, historic warehouses, and older residential areas. St. Thomas was built in 1941 to replace a declining nineteenth-century neighborhood and to temporarily house lower mixedincome residents after WWII. It fell steadily into decline, and by the 1980's had become one of the most dangerous housing projects in the city. Today, River Garden is a compact neighborhood that consists of mostly single- and double-family middle-income housing. Approximately one-third of the homes are subsidized for lower income residents.

³⁵River Garden. <u>http://rivergardenneworleans.com</u> (accessed May 15, 2008).

Design Intent

The design intent of River Garden is two-fold. It is a restoration of the original neighborhood using neo-traditional neighborhood design and its design embraces defensible space strategies in an attempt to curb crime.

The neighborhood restoration commenced with replacing the housing project superblocks with most of the original nineteenth-century street plan. The historic neighborhood design was replicated using local architectural styles of Creole cottages, Victorian doubles, and Greek revival houses similar to the original homes of the area (Figure 3.4).³⁶

A number of defensible space design features have been incorporated within this new neighborhood configuration. Defensible space theory was developed by the architect and city planner, Oscar Newman. It promotes a belief that care for one's space can help curb crime and other negative behavior in housing projects simply by allowing residents to be responsible for their space. The resident as caretaker takes ownership of the space from the intruder; in return, the intruder feels less secure in his surroundings.³⁷ Defensible space theory cites four factors that contribute to the amelioration of these conditions.³⁸

The four factors of defensible space include:

- 1. Territoriality. A person's home is sacred. Having personal property to to care for creates a sense of ownership and pride. Semi-private and private outdoor space such as yard, patio, or front porch is defensible space.
- 2. Natural surveillance. This is the link between an area's physical characteristics and the residents' ability to see what is happening. People sitting on their front porches or stoops are in a strategic position to observe the neighborhood and streets.

³⁶ Cathy Booth Thomas, "New Orleans: A future by the River?" *TIME*, Thursday, March 02, 2006, <u>http://www.time.com/time/printout/0,8816,1169205,00.html</u> (accessed May 15, 2008).

³⁷ Oscar Newman, "Creating Defensible Space", Institute for Community Design Analysis, U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development Office of Policy Development and Research, April 1996, <u>http://www.huduser.org/publications/pdf/def.pdf</u> (accessed on June 1, 2009) 15-24.

³⁸ *ibid*.



Figure 3.4: Replicated Creole cottages, Victorian doubles, and Greek revival houses in the River Garden development

- 3. Image. Image is the capacity of the physical design to impart a sense of security. Privacy fences enclosing patios and front yards with picket fences are simple devices that send a clear message that space that is off limits to intruders.
- 4. Milieu. This includes additional features that can affect security, such as proximity to a police substation or busy commercial area.

Since 1996, the Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) has embraced the concepts of defensible space in their public housing design principles. Beginning with the River Garden project, the Housing Authority of New Orleans has committed to incorporating these principles and to build more mixed-income housing to replace the three other housing projects that have been demolished.³⁹

Design details at River Garden that employ defensible space theory include the removal of the superblock street configuration and reestablishment of the original street grid. Most of the multi-family barrack-style housing units of St. Thomas have been replaced by single- and double-family homes. The housing units that were not replaced were converted to mixed-use. A limited number of town-homes and multi-family rental units have been created for the elderly. Transitional space and boundaries that establish territory include the use of porches with small front yards, stoops on sidewalks, and private backyard spaces with small patios. Streetscapes are highly visible and offer a continuous network of sidewalks and planted curb zones. The homes have private off-street rear parking with parallel street parking for guests. Green space consists of several highly visible small plazas with trees and nearby playgrounds. Front yards are professionally landscaped and maintained by River Garden management (Figure 3.5).

River Garden was funded by the House and Urban Development HOPE VI program and developed by Historic Restoration Incorporated, or HRI Properties, under the leadership of New

³⁹ Katy Reckdahl, "Extreme Makeover", The Times-Picayune, Tuesday May 12, 2009, A-6.



Figure 3.5: River Garden green space includes small plazas, mature Live Oak trees and landscaped front yards

Orleans native Pres Kabacoff.⁴⁰ Kabacoff is credited, in part, for creating the highly successful renovation and restoration of the fashionable Warehouse District of New Orleans.

Smart Growth Implementation

River Garden combines adaptive re-use of five original structures from the St. Thomas Housing Project that were saved from demolition; in addition, the newly built TND project replaces the other block housing that was demolished. The project takes advantage of compact neighborhood design with a variety of single-houses, double-houses and limited multi-family housing units, the latter reserved mostly for the elderly. The homes are available for both renters and homeowners. Public, semi-public, and private spaces are carefully delineated in a coherent manner using landscaping and decorative fencing, encouraging a feeling of ownership for the residents.

River Garden is an attractive and distinctive neighborhood. Its success in building a strong 'sense of place' centers on its plan and architectural style that take advantage of the surrounding historic fabric and how it reconnects with adjacent neighborhoods. Though the houses are replicas, they blend well into their surroundings. If a distinction can be made about the difference in the character of the neighborhoods, the older houses show more expected wear for their age, whereas ones in River Garden are clearly new.

This perception that the neighborhood blends with its surroundings is assisted by the presence of the mature Live Oaks and other trees that were saved for open green space. The trees give River Garden the appearance that it has been around as long as the adjacent neighborhoods. Another advantage of River Garden is its ability to borrow from the scenery

⁴⁰Garry Boulard, "Final Phase of New Orleans' River Garden begins this fall", New Orleans City Business, February 26, 2007, <u>http://findarticles.com/p/articles/mi_qn4200/is_20070226/ai_n18636378</u> (Accessed May 15, 2008).

around it. Bell towers of historic churches, tall trees in a distance, and rooflines of neighboring communities create a visual connection with those areas (Figure 3.6).

Smart Growth Shortcomings

A significant and controversial shortcoming of the River Garden development includes the lack of true mixed-use for the project. To its benefit, River Garden is within easy walking distance to Magazine Street, one of the largest commercial and retail areas in New Orleans, but Magazine Street is not an integral part of the neighborhood. As a solution, a Wal-Mart was built in conjunction with, and adjacent to River Garden. Despite vigorous opposition of citizens in nearby neighborhood, merchant associations, local preservation organizations, and Smart Growth for Louisiana, the 200,000 square foot Wal-Mart Superstore opened in 2004.

In its favor, the store was built with design empathy toward the surrounding commercial vernacular architecture that consists of nineteenth- and early twentieth-century brick and metal warehouses along the river. The structure is clad in patterned red brick and terracotta blocks with large

segmental arch windows similar to other buildings in the area. Some see the context sensitive design as an acceptable alternative to inevitable sprawl and the imposing typical Wal-Mart design standards on the community, but because big box retailing is a primary cause for urban and small town decline, the notion that it can replace local retail and commerce opposes Smart Growth values.

Patricia Gay, the executive director of the Preservation Resource Center in New Orleans, vocally opposed building the Wal-Mart but she did not oppose the housing project redevelopment. Gay applauded the re-opening of the city streets around River Garden and even



Figure 3.6: Bell towers of historic churches and other borrowed scenery from other neighborhoods create visual connectivity

cautiously complimented the outcome of the project. She still did, however, criticize the effects the Wal-Mart might have on local retail businesses and felt that retailing options could have been done so much better.⁴¹ Provisions for approximately 26,000 square feet of additional neighborhood retail space were slated for the final development phase of River Garden but that phase, which began in 2008, has stalled and its current status is uncertain.

Finally, similar to River Ranch, River Garden falls short of other Smart Growth principles that relate to community-based concerns including stakeholder collaboration, fairness and predictability in development decisions, and bolstering existing community. River Garden is fully managed by HRI, which makes and enforces the project regulations. Residents have no responsibility for building or lawn upkeep and residents are regulated with limits to express themselves in their surroundings by allowing them to add personal touches to the exteriors of their units. This has resulted in complaints by residents. By banning activities such as putting inflatable pools on their patios and Christmas tree lights out on their porches, some residents feel stuck in a housing situation where they are not welcome.⁴² Without an ownership stake or the freedom to express their own tastes, the potential of disinvestments for the residents is a problem.

Retrospective Analysis

The design of River Garden successfully fulfills the goals and objectives of a reclamation project for an urban space that, prior to the time of development, was a complete urban renewal failure. Because of the building architecture, its orientation to the street, and its visual familiarity, River Garden is hardly recognizable as a government subsidized development. As a

⁴¹ Greg Thomas, "Home Grown", *The Times-Picayune*, Sunday July 25, 2004,

http://www.ghw-nola.com/times-picayune_article/index.ssf.html

⁴² Eve Troeh, "Katrina & Recovery, New Orleans' Controversial Public Housing Model", *National Public Radio*, May 30, 2008, http://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId.5571289 (Accessed May 30, 2008).

result, the stigma of it previously being a housing project is diminished to the point that people unfamiliar with its history often mistake it for a trendy and upscale development.

One year after first studying River Garden, the neighborhood remains well kept and friendly. Conversations with residents sitting on their porches suggest that River Garden is becoming a diverse mixed income community. One resident pointed out with pride where the former New Orleans Mayor, Sidney Bartholomew, had been living after Katrina and where police officers and other professionals were living on his block. When questioned about limitations imposed about personal effects in public areas, he indicated that people could garden in their back yards and decorate house exteriors during holidays but inflatable pools were not allowed.⁴³ A number of home porches have houseplants, outdoor furniture, and seasonal wreathes on their doors. The second phase of development is well underway with many different housing options. Included in Phase II is a large centrally located multi-purpose playground.

An observation made during a recent visit to the area is that River Garden neighborhood feels very safe and secure to walk around. Residents spend time on their porches and stoops in a very traditional New Orleans manner and children play and ride their bikes on the sidewalks and in the green spaces. Congregations of people seem to form on the edges of River Garden in the older surrounding neighborhoods often times spilling out onto the streets that are also blocked by double parked cars cruising the neighborhood. In contrast, the behavior in these adjacent neighborhoods makes them feel less safe to be in than River Garden.

The greatest concern for the long-term success of the project relates to whether defensible space theory can stand the test of time, particularly when aspects of ownership is sometimes a perception and not a reality.

⁴³ This information was gathered from a personal and informal conversation with River Garden resident, Ronald McCoy on June 14, 2009.

Case Study III: Make It Right 9 Project, New Orleans, Louisiana

About the Community

Make It Right 9 (MIR 9) is a neighborhood infill project situated in the northern half of the lower ninth ward above North Claiborne Avenue in New Orleans.⁴⁴ The lower ninth ward is the last downriver ward in Orleans Parish and bounded by waterways on three sides—the Industrial Canal on the west, the Florida Avenue Canal to the north, the Mississippi River to the south. St. Bernard Parish lies to the east. Until 2005 this portion of the lower ninth ward was comprised of a stable community of primarily African-American homeowners who had lived in the neighborhood for generations. The neighborhood and housing stock was devastated by flooding caused when the Industrial Canal was breached twice during and directly after Hurricane Katrina (Figure 3.7).

Design Intent

The MIR 9 project was founded by actor Brad Pitt and assisted by a team of design experts to help rebuild the portion of the Lower Ninth Ward that was devastated. The project began in 2006 as a design competition sponsored by Global Green with a focus on innovative green building design. The competition used four guiding principles for the building designs. These include safety, affordability, sustainability, and high quality design. The mission statement of the Make It Right 9 Project incorporates these:

The Mission of Make It Right 9 is clear: it is to be a catalyst for redevelopment of the Lower 9th Ward, by building a ne ighborhood comprised of safe and healthy homes that are inspired by Cradle to Cradle thinking, with an emphasis on a high quality of design, while preserving the spirit of the community's culture. The goal

⁴⁴ Make It Right 9, <u>http://www.makeitrightnola.org/</u> (accessed May 15, 2008)



Figure 3.7: Figure ground map of the MIR9 project area, Holy Cross neighborhood, Lower Ninth Ward

*is to accomplish this quickly, so that th e first residents can begin returning to their homes as soon as possible.*⁴⁵

The competition, coordinated by William McDonough + Partners and the Los Angeles architecture firm Graft, focused on the high sustainability philosophy of 'Cradle to Cradle' design. The architects for the competition worked for free and signed off on the rights to their designs. Constraints of the competition focused on cost and design directed toward health and safety for the residents, sustainability through the use of materials, energy efficiency, durability, and environmentally friendly low impact design.

The selected designs have a modern appearance and take advantage of the regional vernacular architecture typical of homes in New Orleans and appropriate for harsh conditions of the coastal south. Features include elevated foundations, extended rooflines, wide shaded porches, outdoor side hall galleries; interior features include tall ceilings and cross-ventilation for improved air circulation. The design forms reference shotgun homes, side hall cottages, camel backs, and even fishing camps common in the area. Some of the MIR 9 house designs include elements less familiar to their New Orleans counterparts; these include skewed orientations of rooflines in relation to the rest of the house structure for optimal orientation of solar panels and non-traditional elevated building configurations. The resulting designs have a subtle familiarity of typical New Orleans style homes merged with sleek, somewhat eccentric, new green architecture (Figure 3.8).

Smart Growth Implementation

MIR 9 is an infill project with a goal to reconstruct 150 houses in what had been a medium density neighborhood. Because nearly every house in the neighborhood was badly damaged and then demolished, the project should be considered a newly constructed sustainable

⁴⁵ *ibid*.



Figure 3.8: Modern house design that merges familar regional style with sustainable green architecture (Concordia team design)

and modern design acting as a catalyst for continued redevelopment in the area. Community collaboration commenced from the project's initiation with town-hall meetings and other gatherings directed toward local residents wishing to return to the neighborhood. These meetings have continued through local community groups to assure that the community is engaged in social and design aspects of the project. Homes are sold to community participants to assure they have a financial stake hold in neighborhood.

Smart Growth Shortcomings

The project has not focused on aspects of mixed-use within the neighborhood and it does not make provisions in its design for critical needs and infrastructure for the area. These are being addressed outside the controls of the MIR 9 project as part of government recovery projects or through community organizations, faith-based groups, and other recovery agencies.

One organization, ACORN, had been involved in much of the early recovery planning for the lower ninth ward. The organization is largely an advocacy group concerned with building better communities by improving social justice, particularly in lower-income areas. Their work in equity planning demonstrated the effectiveness of including residents of an effective area in order to understand their needs for recovery and achieving social equity.⁴⁶

Retrospective Analysis

The MIR 9 project is a success with regard to using fame and celebrity to heighten awareness and forward the recovery efforts in a highly marginalized neighborhood.

The project also uses the precarious situation of the neighborhood to forward the goodness of green practices for rebuilding New Orleans and elsewhere. Though a symbolic gesture for

⁴⁶ Kenneth M. Reardon, Marcel Ionescu-Heroiu, Andrew J. Rumbach, "Equity Planning in Post-Hurricane Katrina New Orleans: Lessons From the Ninth Ward" *Cityscape: A Journal of Policy Development and Research*, v. 10, no. 3 (2008) U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development • Office of Policy Development and Research.

equitable recovery, the practicality of rebuilding a lower income neighborhood from the ground up using green technology has not been fully demonstrated. One year after the area was studied, about a dozen houses have been completed. Conversations with residents in the area indicate that they are very happy to have such energy efficient houses.

Gertrude LeBlanc, a resident living in one of the few homes that was not rebuilt by the MIR9 project commented that she had a 'traditional' New Orleans home, but seemed very happy with the quality of the MIR9 homes and the speed of recovery (Figure 3.9). She recognized that in addition to energy efficiency, the MIR9 houses also had familiar architectural appointments of 'traditional' New Orleans homes such as the large covered porches and side hall floor plans.⁴⁷

The northern Holy Cross neighborhood endured a considerable amount of damage during and after Katrina, and because the neighborhood already lacked significant community amenities and services, it is reasonable that the MIR 9 project could have been more effective if it would have considered redeveloping a new and more compact town plan that provides the community with more critical needs. By addressing re-design in a more compact fashion, some areas, such as those adjacent to the Industrial and Florida Canals could have been enhanced and buffered with more open green space.

⁴⁷ Informal conversation with Gertrude LeBlanc on June 21, 2009. Ms. LeBlanc was a resident of the Lower Ninth Ward prior to Katrina and one of the first residents to return. The steps of her original home remain in her front yard, as a memorial of sorts of the event. Today it is covered with pots of flowering plants.



Figure 3.9: Traditional (Creole) style house (left) adjacent to a MIR 9 house (right, Pugh + Scarpa team design)

CHAPTER 4

THE STUDY AREA: RIVERTOWN, KENNER, LOUISIANA

About the Community

Rivertown is the original town center of the New Orleans suburban city of Kenner, Louisiana. It is comprised of approximately 320 acres of land situated alongside the Mississippi River. In some ways, it evokes the essence of a traditional small town in America because it developed as one.

Rivertown has a well-defined compact street grid that is transected by one of America's historic mainline railroads.⁴⁸ It has a main street-like central business corridor, Williams Boulevard, with two other commercial and light industrial corridors (Figure 4.1). These supported an agriculture-based industry related to growing, packaging, and distributing fruits, vegetables, and flowers to nearby city markets including New Orleans. Its neighborhoods are quiet and well kept for the most part. They consist of modest, mostly free-standing craftsman style homes from the 1920's and later ranch style homes.

Over the past fifty years Rivertown has suffered from the effects of suburban sprawl and other problems that caused its local economy and population to dwindle considerably. During this time, its community demographics shifted from a largely Sicilian and German immigrant population to a predominantly African American population. A bitter and protracted lawsuit over noise between the community and the nearby New Orleans airport in the 1980's resulted in considerable physical fragmentation and social trauma to an entire neighborhood. This area,

⁴⁸Lewis, 2003 Fig. 9.



Figure 4.1: Williams Boulevard in Rivertown

referred to as the Airport Buyout Zone, was bought out, houses demolished, and remains vacant to this day.⁴⁹

A revitalization effort to improve the area occurred in the early 1980's, resulting in its current name, Rivertown. During this time, a number of buildings around Williams Boulevard were refurbished and converted to a series of entertainment venues, restaurants, and museums mostly directed toward a youth audience. The revitalization resulted in an unfortunate creation of an unauthentic townscape featuring a collection of hokey façades on buildings along Williams Boulevard that portray things such as the Old Time Barbershop, the Old Post Office, and the Heritage Park that replicated parts of local history from pre-settlement time up to the turn of the century. Tree lined streetscapes and pedestrian malls were also included in the redevelopment. Motivation for the revitalization effort was to capture tourism on the coat tails of the 1984 Louisiana World Exposition held in New Orleans. Despite unfortunate events that included a slumping local economy tied to the oil and gas business and the financial failure of the 1984 exposition, Rivertown continued to function. By 2005 and the onslaught of Hurricane Katrina, it had become rundown and was an economic burden to the city of Kenner.

Rivertown Inventory

An inventory of Rivertown reveals that despite the fact that portions of its commercial corridors have been badly altered and there has been considerable loss to the original building stock, enough of its town fabric still exists and can be useful in guiding a redevelopment plan for the area. Residential areas not affected by the Airport Buyout are still well intact.

Rivertown possesses a number of significant historic and potentially historic structures ranging from the late nineteenth century to the middle of the twentieth century. The architectural

⁴⁹ The effects of the Airport Buyout Zone will be discussed in the following chapter.

styles of structures include Victorian cottages, and Italianate commercial buildings, Craftsman, and modern structures. This mix of styles is situated throughout parts of the commercial corridors and their presence contributes to a significant portion of the town fabric.

Early twentieth-century Italianate structures include the Felix Block Building and the original Kenner Town Hall, both listed on the National Register of Historic Places for their architectural significance and importance with regard to the town's developmental history (Figures 4.2 and 4.3). Other significant commercial buildings along Williams Boulevard include more Italianate buildings and several Victorian cottages, now functioning as restaurants and gift shops.

Along Third Street there is a collection of large dilapidated vacant structures poised for redevelopment and recognized as an important connective node to other commercial areas. The buildings include the old Kenner High School, the A. Wattigny & Son Building, and the Stephen J. Barbre Middle School.

The old Kenner High School, built in 1924, is a monumental two-story neoclassical style structure with strong Palladian and Beaux Arts influences (Figure 4.4). The building is situated on Third Street with its façade facing the river. It is listed with the Historic American Building Survey (HABS). In 2008 it was nominated and accepted on the National Historic Register in hope of redeveloping it as a mixed-use commercial space.

The A. Wattigny & Son Building is adjacent to the school complex within this prospective commercial node (Figure 4.5). The structure was built in the early twentieth century as the home and grocery business for Kenner's first mayor. In addition to its connection with the early history of Kenner, its architectural character combines neoclassical Italianate and Arts and Crafts styles and should be considered for preservation and reuse.



Figure 4.2: Historic Felix-Block building at Williams Boulevard and Third Street



Figure 4.3: Historic Kenner Town Hall in Rivertown



Figure 4.4: The old Kenner High School



Figure 4.5: The Wattigny and Son Building

The Stephen J. Barbre Middle School is adjacent to the old Kenner High School and also faces the river. Built in 1962 and designed by the New Orleans architect A.George Decorbier (Figure 4.6), it is the only example of significant mid-century modern architecture in the area.

A third commercial node in Rivertown consists of a cluster of commercial and industrial buildings situated along the rail line at Kenner Avenue and on the east side of Williams Boulevard. They include a neo-classical two-story structure, an icehouse and a vegetable packing shed from the late nineteenth and early twentieth century. The 20,000 square foot icehouse is a vernacular brick structure built in 1892 and the oldest known commercial building in Rivertown (Figure 4.7). It is currently fully functional as an icehouse and otherwise filled with antique industrial artifacts related to the ice industry. The Cristina family built and continuously operated the icehouse until Katrina in 2005 stopped ice production; the building is currently for sale.

Directly across the tracks from the icehouse is the site of what was known as the 'old packing shed'. This 1924 wooden structure was also built and operated by the Cristina family. The historic importance of the packing shed was recognized in the 1984 Rivertown plan but it was unsuccessfully nominated to the National Register of Historic Places.⁵⁰ In 2005 the shed was knocked down by wind from Hurricane Katrina. The Cristina family have plans to reconstruct the building for use as office space for family business concerns.

Existing residential neighborhoods are clustered in the eastern half of Rivertown around the Williams Boulevard commercial area. They are attractive and well-defined medium density neighborhoods of freestanding homes with continuous sidewalks and on-street parallel parking

⁵⁰Jane Brooks, ed., *Rivertown: A Plan for Kenner, Louisiana's Historic District*, Prepared by Graduate Students in the School of Urban and Regional Studies, University of New Orleans, Urban Planning Studio, May 1984, 5-6.



Figure 4.6: Elevation drawings of the Stephen J. Barbre Middle School



Figure 4.7: Cristina family icehouse

throughout. The homes are mostly 1920's Craftsman homes with a few nineteenth-century Victorian cottages and modern ranch style homes interspersed among them. There are a few small, but significant, groupings of earlier sharecropper shotgun homes and Creole style cottages throughout Rivertown. There are some elderly and other low-income assisted barracks style apartment housing projects interspersed within the residential neighborhoods. Several churches and schools are located throughout the entire Rivertown area.

The Airport Buyout Zone is a 60-acre swath of land situated centrally in the western half of Rivertown. The area was an older residential until the late 1980's when the New Orleans airport purchased it from the residents because of noise issues. The event fragmented the entire Rivertown community and has had a pronounced negative effect on the area since. The land of the Airport Buyout Zone is currently rezoned for special industrial use and about 30 acres includes an area that is designated a no-build zone due to noise. The City of Kenner and the Airport Authority have made it clear that the Airport Buyout Zone will not be redeveloped for residential use in the future.

Despite the unfortunate circumstances of the Airport Buyout, after twenty years the area has become a large expanse of green space that contributes to a small town, even rural, appeal to Rivertown (Figure 4.8). Public green space is limited to a riverfront plaza called La Salle's Landing, and the Buddy Lawson recreational facility.

La Salle's Landing is the most visible public green space in Rivertown and centrally located at the base of Williams Boulevard on the river levee. (Figure 4.9) It is accessible to all with a plaza flanked with flags, seat benches, and informative signage. On top of the levee, an important regional bike path, the William Keller Memorial Bike Path, passes through Rivertown. A significant function of the landing is to physically connect Rivertown to the Mississippi River.



Figure 4.8: The rural character of the land in the Airport Buyout Zone



Figure 4.9: La Salle's landing at the foot of Williams Boulevard

Three community cemeteries called Belle Grove, Love and Charity, and St. Rosalie on the western edge of Rivertown contribute to more semi-public green space in the area. The cemeteries were all established in the nineteenth century and are still in use. St. Rosalie is the community cemetery of residents of Italian descent and the others are predominantly African American. In 1996 all three cemeteries were officially recognized by the city of Kenner as historic landmarks. They are preserved and maintained with a community development block grant and cared for by family members who keep them painted and decorated.

Smart Growth Implementation and Case Study Assimilation

Rivertown benefits from having an existing town fabric that is an original and real traditional neighborhood design. That town fabric is sufficient to allow for a redevelopment plan using infill between the existing historic building stock. The benefits of the existing building stock are two-fold; it can guide redevelopment in an authentic and context sensitive manner and it can be recycled and preserved to benefit infill. The redevelopment plan should build on the existing street plan, the densities of built areas, open space, and current land use. In doing so, the distinctive true character of Rivertown will be preserved and replenished rather than erased. The approach of conserving existing assets is also a positive move toward an improved environmental responsibility.

The best practices of Smart Growth used in the three case studies will be evaluated in terms of redevelopment recommendations for Rivertown. Conversely, the shortcomings of those projects will also be considered for what to avoid in the Rivertown project.

Rivertown is similar to River Garden and the MIR 9 projects. Each has a history of being a functioning community. In contrast, River Ranch was previously unpopulated and undeveloped farmland. River Garden and MIR 9 have rebuilt on parts of their existing town

plans and used certain parts of the existing fabric. Rivertown also can take advantage of its town plan and fabric to rebuild using a combination of infill and recycling of existing assets.

River Garden and River Ranch successfully employed similar Traditional Neighborhood Design strategies that reference familiar local architecture. Rivertown should also exploit TND, when infill is not possible, and take design cues from the significant building styles and how they are placed in the town plan. Rivertown has seen its share of inappropriate and unauthentic replication of architecture with its 'Disneyfied' museum district. The heavy-handed place making method of themed neighborhoods used at River Ranch should be avoided.

When at all possible, the Rivertown plan should focus on recycling its existing building stock and infilling new buildings using form-based methods that strive to compliment the existing buildings' orientation, setbacks, mass, scale, and materials. Infill should blend and be complimentary in style to the architecture in the area; this architecture included the prevalent Italianate forms in the commercial areas, the vernacular forms along the industrial corridors, and the modest wood frame and brick bungalows in the neighborhoods.

The use of contemporary, affordable, and sustainable infill design used in the MIR 9 project is a practical redevelopment strategy for Rivertown. This approach supports Smart Growth principles that strive to create lower impact, environmentally friendly, and affordable housing. The use of contemporary design would also assist to establish authenticity without imitation. Design focused on environmental and social equity for the community would also be a desirable Smart Growth achievement.

Embracing a contemporary design approach could meet with opposition from the community, particularly from community members that prefer a more familiar and traditional townscape. In this case, sustainable infrastructure design that relies on traditional architectural
styles is an acceptable approach. The use of conservation minded and innovative design using recycled building materials, like structures built by Rural Studio, is also a viable approach for its aesthetics, sustainability, and function.⁵¹ Because Rural Studio style design attempts to create a balance between high architecture and philosophy within a more low-brow and colorful vernacular, 'making do' architecture, it can satisfy design conscious fans as well as those who feel comfortable with more straight forward architecture. If a Rural Studio and MIR 9 approach is used in a place like Rivertown, it is critical that client/community feedback about taste and style are incorporated in the design process.

River Ranch does not address the needs of repairing an existing community, but it does demonstrate that good comprehensive design and planning can ensure the best possible outcome of a project. It is critical that the design process includes an understanding of and provision for the needs of the target community. This should be a vital part of any Rivertown redevelopment plan.

River Ranch succeeded in providing a whole range of mixed use amenities directed towards the community and located within a walkable distance from the residential neighborhoods. This model approach should be used for creating mixed use in the Rivertown project. The big box retail option, as a solution to mixed use design that has been utilized in River Garden, defies Smart Growth Principles. It should be avoided at Rivertown. Mixed use in Rivertown should satisfy the needs of the community, should be re-established in the traditional commercial zones, and should incorporate prospective new commercial nodes, such as the old Kenner School complex. Establishing these nodes will assist in pedestrian connectivity to other

⁵¹ Andrea Oppenheimer Dean and Timothy Hursley, *Rural Studio, Samuel Mockbee and an Architecture of Decency* (New York, Princeton Architectural Press 2002).

areas. Nodes can also act as transitional points and buffers to other parts of the community such and different industrial types in the area.

Each of the case studies incorporated small amounts of green space into their plans. These include small playgrounds, recreational areas, and small parks. However none of the case studies attempted to conserve open land. River Ranch actually opposes the notion of conserving open space because it used open farmland to create the development. River Garden and the MIR 9 projects use infill strategies for previously occupied urban space and therefore did not have much open space to conserve. River Garden is currently building a large multi-use playground on a large city block where a housing project once sat.

The MIR 9 project focused much of its attention on rebuilding one new home for each destroyed as a way to amend certain wrongs directed toward the community. Because of massive devastation to the Lower 9th Ward and MIR 9 project area and deficiencies in the existing neighborhood plan regarding access to mixed use amenities, medical services, etc. other options could have been pursued. It would have been reasonable to keep the community intact but redesign it with more compact design and mixed use. The entire community would have beenfited and more open green space could have been returned to the area.

Rivertown has had a good deal of its land cleared and abandoned for a significant time period, and in some ways it looks like the MIR 9 project area. Rivertown has a rare opportunity to reclaim its open space in the Airport Buyout Zone for uses that would support the community. Because the land use has been rezoned from residential to special industrial, or a 'no build' zone, it would be reasonable to reclaim the space for a productive and traditional land use related to agricultural concerns.

CHAPTER 5

SOCIAL INFLUENCE AND PATTERNS OF CHANGE ON RIVERTOWN

General Overview

Even though Rivertown is part of Kenner, Louisiana, a suburb of New Orleans, it is more like a small town. The social dynamics associated with the history of urban development in both of those cities have had considerable influence on the present state of Rivertown. That history has played a considerable role in the decline of the urban and social fabric of Rivertown. These issues need to be recognized and addressed for real and positive change.

The recent history of Rivertown shares some similarities with the urban core of New Orleans. Both places experienced economic decline directly related to expansion of the suburban parts of Kenner. In addition to suburban growth, three other factors have played a pivotal role in the economic downturn of Rivertown. They include dismantling of an existing neighborhood and the resulting displacement of residents to accommodate the interests of the airport industry, deadending streets at railway crossings and other junctures to benefit railroad and to curb circulation, and the implementation of an unsuccessful tourist-oriented renewal plan to act as an economic stimulus for the area.

A Historic and Municipal Reference

Rivertown is situated alongside the Mississippi River approximately 20 miles upstream from the *Vieux Carré*, or the French Quarter, of New Orleans. Both communities were settled by the French in the early eighteenth century. The French Quarter was the first neighborhood and

commercial hub in New Orleans whereas Rivertown history has always revolved around agriculture.

French plantations were first built along the Mississippi River around 1720. By 1845 two plantations, Belle Grove and Pasteur, occupied the land now known as Rivertown. Following a series of events including the yellow fever epidemic in the 1850's, the Civil War, and Reconstruction, the land exchanged hands a number of times. By the late nineteenth century and into the first half of the twentieth century the area, by then called Kenner, was farmed by European immigrants of German, Irish, and Sicilian decent. The industry became known as 'the Green Gold', as its robust agricultural market specialized in growing, packaging, and distributing fresh produce, fruits, and flowers to local markets in New Orleans and other nearby cities via train.⁵²

In addition to agriculture, other commerce grew to support the prosperous community along two main corridors—Williams Boulevard and Third Street. By the 1950's, similar to other small towns on the edge of large cities, the area began to feel the effects of urban sprawl from its large metropolitan neighbor, New Orleans.

Typical patterns of urban change in New Orleans and Rivertown occurred later than other American cities because, until that time, growth was geographically confined to the relatively high natural levee and ridge systems of the river and other nearby bayous or tributaries. As levee and pumping systems were built around the city, swamplands were drained. By 1950 rapid expansion began in regions located further from the river in what Pierce Lewis refers to as, 'The

⁵² Mel Leavitt, *Kenner, An Historical Sketch*. (Kenner Louisiana: Commissioned by Merchants Bank, 1980), no numbered pages.

Suburban Explosion'. By 1970, New Orleans had doubled in size and a suburban culture completely separate from the old prewar city of New Orleans had developed.⁵³

In addition to the newly created inexpensive land made available through draining the swamps, racial integration of public schools brought on by *Brown vs. the Board of Education* contributed to the rapid expansion and the onset of 'white flight' and subsequent sprawl. As New Orleans began to integrate, affluent families removed their children from the public to the private school and middle-class white families moved to outlying, primarily white parishes.⁵⁴

The Suburban Explosion of Kenner

By 1960 New Orleans metropolitan area had begun to spread out into nearby smaller

communities. Once this occurred, growth was quick and with little regard for planning.⁵⁵

Sprawled suburban growth in New Orleans progressed similar to other comparably sized cities in

America. Pierce Lewis aptly describes the landscape and culture of the suburban New Orleans,

which the City of Kenner typifies:

"The results have not been fortunate. As in dozens of other North American cities, New Orleans's suburban landscape is compounded of new cars, new roads, an insatiable appetite for inexpensive houses with open space, deficient of landuse controls, unrestrained greed by land sellers and house builders, a studied reluctance of municipalities to cooperate with one another, and an almost pathological desire of local governments to see their particular bailiwicks grow."⁵⁶

From 1960 to 1980 the City of Kenner grew from 17,000 to 66,000 people. In contrast,

south Kenner, or Rivertown, declined in population.⁵⁷ As new development continued,

⁵³ Lewis, "New Orleans", 76-77.

⁵⁴ *ibid*, 99.

⁵⁵ *ibid*, 77.

⁵⁶ *ibid*, 77.

⁵⁷ Wendell Prosper Dufour Jr., "Pattern for Progress Land Use Plan", document prepared at the University of New Orleans Department of Urban Planning for the City of Kenner Louisiana, 2007, 5.

population shifted immediately northward to the suburbs of Kenner. As these suburbs quickly fell out of fashion, sprawl spread further north to Lake Pontchartrain.

Today Kenner is divided into three disparate parts. These are the suburban north Kenner, the suburban south Kenner, and the historic region called Rivertown. All exhibit various symptoms and conditions of sprawl. The suburban parts were created by the sprawl while Rivertown was a victim of it. The negative impacts on Rivertown include loss of its white immigrant population to the northern suburbs and neighboring parishes and an economic decline at the expense of suburban growth.

North Kenner is completely suburban in character with most of its development occuring from 1970 until present day. South Kenner, north of Airline Highway, is a first generation suburban neighborhood of inexpensive tract houses built after WW II. Technically part of south Kenner, Rivertown is separated from the suburbs by Airline Highway. It has a small town and rural character unlike suburban south Kenner. Differences in these areas can be observed in the 2007 General Land Use map of Kenner (Figure 5.1). North Kenner is zoned predominantly for low-density residential use with a good deal of parks, recreation, and commercial use interspersed throughout the area.

South Kenner is dominated by the presence of the Louis Armstrong International Airport and large parcels of airport-related industrial and commercial areas. Runways, parking garages, car rental agencies, airport hotels, and the airport dominate the landscape.

Two major commercial roadways, Williams Boulevard and Airline Highway, pass through south Kenner. Airline Highway separates south Kenner from Rivertown to the south. Built in the 1930's under the administration of Huey P. Long, this roadway has become a second hand commercial strip so uninviting that Pierce Lewis describes it as, *"the longest and ugliest*



Figure 5.1: Proposed 2007 Land Use Map of Kenner Louisiana

scar of strip commercial development in Louisiana".⁵⁸ Williams Boulevard is also a commercial strip except for the Rivertown area where it has more of a 'main street' appearance.

Other Contributors of Decline in Rivertown

In addition to the negative effects that suburban expansion has had on the area, three factors have had a direct negative impact on the social fabric and the visible landscape of Rivertown. These are the 'airport buyout', the dead-ending of streets, and the creation of the Rivertown entertainment district.

The airport buyout was the bulk removal and demolition of an entire residential neighborhood that had been in place prior to the encroaching New Orleans Airport. This event left a dramatic visible scar on the local landscape that is still visible nearly twenty years later (Figure 5.2). It also left a psychological scar on the affected residents. The buyout was initiated in 1980 with a class action lawsuit relating to airport noise. The bitter and protracted suit was settled in 1989 resulting in a buyout of over 500 homes and some businesses that were subsequently razed.⁵⁹

The massive demolition and clearing left roughly ninety acres of land, roads, and infrastructure abandoned. The community felt disenfranchised and abandoned for the benefit of the airport. Most residents took what was considered a fair market value for their property while a few holdouts continue to live in the fragmented neighborhood. Neighborhoods around the buyout zone, and excluded in the lawsuit, were also left stranded in the remaining fragmented

⁵⁸ Lewis, "New Orleans", 77-78.

⁵⁹ Matt Scallan, "Airport plan expands buyout area. More homes may get insulation for noise.", *Times-Picayune*,. Thursday, January 30, 2003.



Figure 5.2: Map of Rivertown showing the Airport Buyout Zone (light pink) and the No Build Zone (in dark pink)

parts of town. Kenner City Councilman John Lavarine III, whose district at that time included the area said, *"They felt like the buyout tore their neighborhood apart and left them behind."*⁶⁰

The demolition and clearing of the Airport Buyout Zone was comparable in scale to the destruction that Hurricane Katrina caused when the levees failed. While the levee failures have been attributed to human negligence, the repercussions for the overt and intentional actions in Rivertown due to political favoritism towards big business have been dramatic and long-standing.

After nearly twenty years, the area resembles open green space. The only reminders of the events are the remnants of sidewalks and dilapidated streets. Regardless of the fact that noise levels within the buyout zone may have decreased to tolerable levels, city and airport officials have no intention revamping the noise maps and allowing any of the land to be used for future residential purposes. This attitude shows a continued disinterest in the community despite recent studies indicating that noise levels have decreased to tolerable levels around airports, making them much more desirable places to live than they were in the past.⁶¹

Another failure of the city government to support community over the concerns of big business is demonstrated by permitting the railway companies to close off more than half of the railroad crossings in the area. In addition, the city itself has also closed off some streets to curb local circulation. The closings have further exacerbated the isolation caused by the airport buyout.

Although traffic studies have not been conducted in the area, city officials cite safety issues to be the reason for the closings. Studies show an array of determinants to be much better

⁶⁰ *ibid*.

⁶¹ Daniel P. McMillen, "Airport Expansions and Property Values: The Case of Chicago O'Hare Airport, *Journal of Urban Economics*, vol. 55, 2004, 627-628.

collision predictors than simply numbers of crossings.⁶² These include the type and size of crossings, types of warning devices installed, and whether adjacent use is commercial or residential. A local resident of Rivertown observed that regardless of the number of crossings, the same number of vehicles cross over the tracks but with fewer opportunities to do so. Ironically, the worst crossing accidents have occurred at the main crossing on Williams Boulevard that remains open. The Williams Boulevard crossing now bears the burden of most of the traffic through Rivertown. In reality, the railroads closed the crossings to save on maintenance costs rather than for safety concerns. This has been to the detriment of community convenience and the public right-of-way.

A third element contributing to the decline of Rivertown appears to be somewhat less deliberate than the previous two. A redevelopment plan to create a tourist destination of Historic Rivertown was devised to capitalize on the expected and much hyped economic success of the 1984 World Exposition in New Orleans. Due to unrealistic optimism over projected financial gains, local economic downturn, poor attendance, and negative publicity, the exposition not only lost money; it was the first in history to go bankrupt and closed early. The unfortunate economic woes caused by the exposition in New Orleans also trickled down to Rivertown.

In 1983, the Kenner City Council made its first step toward reinventing the area by passing a resolution to recognize the Kenner Historic District and officially calling it Rivertown. Rivertown is not on the National Register of Historic Places; its designation is strictly local and was done out of civic pride and recognition that the potentially historic buildings in Kenner are located in Rivertown. During that time however, a number of structures were nominated to the

⁶² Oh Jutaek, Simon P. Washington, and Doohee Nam, Accident prediction model for railway-highway interfaces, *Accident Analysis and Prevention 38*, (2006) 346–356 (p. 355-56 for citing).

National Register. The Old City Hall and the Felix Block Building were accepted (Figures 4.2 and 4.3).

In 1984, a redevelopment plan for Rivertown was conceived by a team of graduate students from the School of Urban and Regional Studies at the University of New Orleans (UNO).⁶³ The plan studied the feasibility of creating a new image for the area and an entertainment district to improve the economic base for the area. The program involved creating a series of museum attractions and entertainment venues at the southern end of Williams Boulevard to showcase the historic past of Rivertown.

The report was comprehensive and focused on funding, profitability, attendance projections, parking, and traffic circulation. Unfortunately, unrealistic projections tied to those of the 1984 World Exposition were used to create various business scenarios for Rivertown. This error was followed with an uncertain plan for managing the facilities. The result has caused the entertainment district to falter over time.

An obsessive concern for convenient parking and traffic circulation resulted in large parking lots to be built between some older buildings in the heart of Rivertown that was historically commercial and retail space. Additional parking surrounded the churches in the front of newly created strip malls. Like suburban shopping malls across America, the parking lots in Rivertown are filled a few times a year during special occasions. For the rest of the time they are vacant paved space.

Another bad design decision, popular at the time in urban renewal, was the creation of a pedestrian mall. This was developed at the expense of closing yet another neighborhood street that passed through the entertainment district. The design promoted the popular myth of the time

⁶³ Brooks, 1.

that the traditional gridiron street pattern was the most dangerous street design and that cul-de sac design offered more safety for pedestrian activity.⁶⁴ The UNO report supported the city's desire to close Fourth Street and create a walled cul-de-sac plaza in front of its two repertory theater buildings (Figure 5.3). The report stated that closing the street to vehicular traffic would improve pedestrian activity.⁶⁵

From informal interviews with residents and visitors of Rivertown, there is a perception that the creation of the plaza was racially motivated, merely a decorative barricade to prevent people in the neighborhood easy access to the tourist part of Rivertown. Statistics show that Rivertown has far less crime than other parts of Kenner, but it is perceived to be a 'bad' part of town. This is evident in a recent dialogue of blog responses from a Times-Picayune article about recent economic interest in Rivertown.⁶⁶

Posted on 04/23/08 at 1:19PM

Nolaola says...

*We like Rivertown but how about cleaning up the surrounding hood so that families can feel safe?*⁶⁷

Posted on 04/23/08 at 1:32PM **Taddattitude says...**

...nolaola

The neighborhood surrounding Rivertown is not that bad, It has a lot of elderly people and others that actually care. Don't get me wrong, every neighborhood has some trash. I'm sure you can find some here and there but overall, it is pretty safe.⁶⁸

 ⁶⁴ Lucy, William H. and David L. Phillips, "Chapter 10, The Cul-de-Sac Myth: Housing Markets and Settlement Patterns", *Tomorrow's Cities, Tomorrow's Suburbs*, (Copyright by the American Planning Association), 250.
⁶⁵ Brooks, 23.

⁶⁶ Online blog responses from the Times-Picayune Article by Mary Sparacello' *Shops Small Farms Seen in Kenner Study*, NOLA.com, (April 23, 2008)

http://www.nola.com/news/index.ssf/2008/04/shops_gardens_seen_in_south_ke.html (accessed May 15, 2008)

⁶⁷ *ibid*.

⁶⁸ *ibid*.



Figure 5.3: The Repertory Theater Plaza at Lloyd Price Avenue and Minor Street

Closing off Fourth Street has contributed further to circulation problems already compounded by the dead-end streets at the closed railroad crossings and the blocks removed from the buyout zone (Figure 5.4).

The vision of the mayor for a time of 'rediscovery' of historic Rivertown was, "...an effort to reclaim the city's long and historic past through a revitalization effort of south Kenner."⁶⁹ It is not clear if the intention of that statement was to use historic preservation as a stimulus for revitalization or whether it was being used to engineer consent to allow the tourist attractions be built in Rivertown.

A townscape depicting nineteenth-century 'rivertown' life consisted of a grouping of façades in a post-modernist style with a 'western Victorian' influence to showcase the historic character of Rivertown (Figure 5.5). The buildings housed museums showcasing wildlife and fisheries, science and space technology, Mardi Gras, model trains, and even the New Orleans Saints Hall of Fame. Entertainment venues included a repertory theater, a children's theater, and a planetarium. A designed outdoor space of woodland park, known as Heritage Park, depicted various activities of daily life from pre-settlement time to the turn of the twentieth century.

The children's theater is an example of the Disneyesque direction the Historic Rivertown District would take under the guise of preservation (Figure 5.6). The building, originally eclectic Italianate in style, was transformed into the Children's Castle adorned with Medieval Gothic style doors, red bannered turrets on all four corners of its castleated parapet and a *tromp l'oeil* side entry with a mote, drawbridge, and knight in shining armor.

The zoned ordinance called The Neighborhood Commercial PUD Option District, or RTC1-PO, covers all of Rivertown except the Airport Buyout Zone. It was intended to guide the

⁶⁹ Brooks, 4.



Figure 5.4: Map showing dead-end and discontinuous streets (red dots) in Rivertown



Figure 5.5: Elevation drawings of the 'western Victorian' building fa±ades along Williams Boulevard in the Historic Rivertown District



Figure 5.6: The Children's Castle in the Historic Rivertown District

preservation for the residential and commercial historic character of the Historic Rivertown District and given a charter to appoint a historic review board to interpret and enforce the guidelines. The mayor appointed the review board with no standards for the appointment defined.

The Rivertown District Ordinance stated intent is as follows:

"The purpose of the District is to maintain, restore, reconstruct, and redevelop neighborhood commercial developments that incorporate a distinct colonial, Victorian architectural motif that will be consistent with the "Rivertown Historical District"⁷⁰

The vague, broad-based language of the ordinance typifies a common misconception that 'colonial character' in America is identified by motifs such as gold-gilded eagles clenching arrows as found in Colonial Williamsburg Virginia. The reference to the Victorian era was a step in the right direction but it still fell short of describing the historic essence of Rivertown. Real colonial character is seen in Rivertown, but only in some very modest nineteenth-century French Creole cottages and sharecropper homes. The historic character of the commercial buildings in Rivertown are, for the most part, eclectic Italianate and the most prominent potentially historic residential structures are the 1920's eraftsman bungalows and a few modest Victorian side hall shotgun homes (Figures 5.7 and 5.8).

Despite the economic hardships Rivertown faced early on, the city has subsidized the venues at about \$500,000 per year to keep them open. They continued to operate until 2005 when a number of the venues closed, due in part to damages they sustained from Hurricane Katrina. In 2006, a newly elected mayor determined that Rivertown needed to become more fiscally responsible and has instigated a new redevelopment plan based on Smart Growth.

⁷⁰ *ibid*.



Figure 5.7: Typical craftsman bungalow in Rivertown



Figure 5.8: Typical Victorian shotgun in Rivertown

Obstacles for Change

Rivertown has experienced a series of events that left visible scars on the landscape. Some of these appear to be less intentional, or at least less insidious, than others. Nevertheless, the result is negative for both the place and the people. Suburban sprawl has caused Rivertown to struggle to maintain community members and a local economy. The destruction and removal of a neighborhood is unsettling, but to think it was the deliberate consequence of a legal judgment and the best solution to solve a conflict is horrific. When confronted with posted 'Dead End', 'Do Not Enter' and 'Keep Out' signs on half the streets in a quiet neighborhood, it is hard to rationalize that it is for community safety. It is possible to imagine that someone could re-muddle a building until its historic integrity is lost and while doing so, thinking they were actually improving its character.

Physical obstacles can easily enough be corrected, but when they are put up to oppose a group of people, intangible obstacles are created that are much more difficult to reverse. Whether this is a consequence of people acting out on some aspect of the human condition is irrelevant if the goal is to create real change within the physical and social fabric of a community.

The Dudley Street Neighborhood Initiative demonstrated that physical repairs to a marginalized neighborhood can initiate change and be a source of creating community pride, involvement, and a renewed interest in a place. It also showed that effective change comes when there is some level of communication and mutual trust between the municipal leadership and the community. All stakeholders need to have confidence that all participants are acting with common interests. Design that seeks to rebuild communities must be done with transparency and consistency on all levels.

Peirce Lewis contends that perception does not rely on objectivity and fact, but rather on systems of values and beliefs that defy rational discourse; he further contends that perception is slow to change.⁷¹ The dialogue between the two bloggers suggests perception is an obstacle regardless if it is founded in fact. It is ironic that their comments are ambiguous. Are they describing the people in the neighborhood or the neighborhood itself? When nolaola expresses a desire that the 'hood' needs to be cleaned up so that families can feel safe and Taddattitude speaks of trash in the neighborhood, one wonders if they are speaking of litter or people, or both. When nolaola makes a connection with safety and cleaning up the hood, one can assume he is talking about crime. The trash that Taddattidude speaks of likely refers to some of the neighbors. The fact that Rivertown is really safer than suburban Kenner supports Lewis' observations that reality is irrelevant in terms of rational discourse and perception.

It is clear that obstacles for change involve both those that are physical and those in the collective minds of individuals involved. Repairing what is physical requires more than merely repairing and rebuilding the environment. It requires repairs to be done with authenticity and respect for the place and genuine fairness and compassion for community members.

⁷¹ Lewis, American Landscape Tastes, 4.

CHAPTER 6

A PATH FORWARD

The Engineering of Consent

Rebuilding a community requires more than designing a town plan and filling the space with streets, buildings, and green space. If we believe that places are for people, then the built environment is only successful if it responds to the needs, pleasures, and liberties of those who use it. When the 'engineering of consent' for design is motivated so people are harmed, ignored, or in some way marginalized, the social fabric of the community is damaged and the goodness of the place decreases. When members of a community are devalued, the environment is also at risk to be devalued. Inequities such as these must be corrected before progress can happen.

Rivertown has had a history of prosperity and decline. During more prosperous years, its burgeoning local industry of agricultural concerns supported the community and the community thrived. Decline commenced with a loss of that industry in connection with a demographic shift from a predominantly white working class to a less affluent African American community. Following white flight, three events occurred that began to erode its physical landscape causing further isolation of the community. Those events include the 'airport buyout', the dead-ended streets, and then the redevelopment of Rivertown that did not benefit the local community.

The 'engineering of consent' for a new redevelopment plan in Rivertown is one that follows Smart Growth ideology to create equity for the place and its people (Figure

6.1). The plan focuses on reclaiming a damaged landscape and town fabric to serve the local community with authenticity and honesty. The plan considers the economic and social recovery for the community to be equally important.

A Seven Point Plan to Create Equity in Rivertown

The town inventory confirms that enough of the historic fabric of Rivertown remains intact to facilitate a redevelopment plan that focuses on preserving and reestablishing the authentic character of the community. Infill with recycling of existing structures is the most desirable and compatible redevelopment approach for Rivertown. Infill should be done with compatibility and empathy toward the form, scale, and materials of the existing structures. Existing structures should be stabilized and conserved for mixed use and maintaining the authentic character of the place. Existing residential neighborhoods are the most intact parts of the town. They have an authentic character unto themselves that should be left to improve under the influence of normal market forces as other parts of town are improved. A seven point plan for achieving equity, and therefore Smart Growth, in Rivertown have been developed (Figure 6.2). These are only achievable with total transparency and understanding directed toward the community at hand. They are:

1. Create socio-economic development within the three commercial Rivertown nodes

The three historic commercial nodes of Rivertown, Williams Boulevard, Kenner Avenue, and Third Street offer the greatest potential for areas to re-establish economic vitality in the area. Each are strategic areas for different economic redevelopment schemes that would fulfill many needs of the community. The nodes are also spatially ideal to serve as centers where people can walk to and from (Figure 6.3). Because many



Figure 6.1: Proposed mixed-use plan for Rivertown

A Seven Point Plan to Create Equity in Rivertown*

1. Create socio-economic development within the three commercial Rivertown nodes

2. Rebuild and repair the "Complete Street" for better safety, circulation and connectivity

3. Create a base of amenities directed toward the well-being of the local community.

4. Have a redevelopment preference for infill combined with adaptive reuse, then TND, or Enclave Conversion respectively

5. Allow for design freedom but be compatible with surrounding buildings.

6. Make regional transportation a local matter with a variety of options.

7. Embrace mistakes of the past and make the most of newly created open space

* These are only achievable with total transparency and understanding directed toward the community at hand.

Figure 6.2: A Seven Point Plan to Create Equity in Rivertown



Figure 6.3: Map of Rivertown showing the three commercial mixed-use nodes

of the buildings in these three areas are owned by the City of Kenner, they are poised to jump-start economic redevelopment and attract private investment.

The three nodes were selected because they contain a number of important commercial structures with a high degree of integrity; they can be recycled through structural restoration and adaptive reuse to re-emphasize the authentic character of Rivertown. The 're-muddled' buildings along the Williams Boulevard corridor need to have their unauthentic façades removed and become reoccupied with necessary commercial amenities such as banks, post offices, and ground floor retail.⁷² Recognizing that the museums and other entertainment venues are important symbols of Rivertown; having them is practically thought of as an entitlement to the rest of Kenner. They should be reconfigured to be more concise, with new entrances on side streets rather than on the retail portion of Williams Boulevard, and they should be self-supportive. It is suggested that the mixed-use nodes should act as a taxing district that directly supports the museum and entertainment venues, thus encouraging economic development and cooperation between the two.

Buildings along Kenner Avenue offer generous amounts of space for grocers and other consumer markets that Rivertown desperately lacks. The Cristina Icehouse, built in 1892, is the oldest building in Rivertown and represents an important supporting industry of the past related to fresh produce distribution. It consists of 25,000 square feet of ground floor vacant space, and is poised for renovation. The complex of school buildings on Third Street offers a vast amount of space for a number of adaptive re-use opportunities and for new commerce in Rivertown. The proximity of the Third Street

⁷² John C. Waters, "re-muddled", a common term often used in historic preservation lectures at the University of Georgia in 2002. Re-muddling refers to the inappropriate remodeling of structures so that historic integrity is lost.

node to the Airport Buyout Zone property makes it a candidate for future commerce related land use.

2. Rebuild and repair the 'complete Street' for better safety, circulation and connectivity

Improving vehicular and pedestrian circulation and connectivity to Rivertown is an essential part of a redevelopment plan. Streets with ample parking and streetscapes with usable sidewalks should be designed according to AASHTO Green Book standards.⁷³ Reclaiming as many dead-end streets as possible is critical to re-establishing a physical and emotional connectivity to residential neighborhoods and the commercial areas.

Circulation needs to be improved by re-opening more of the closed railroad crossings and redeveloping some smaller streets in Rivertown into primary and secondary streets. Hollandey Street should become a primary access road to service future light industrial and agricultural uses in the western part of the study area in a manner similar to how Williams Boulevard functions (Figure 6.4). A minimum of three, but preferably four, secondary roads should be fully reopened to re-establish connection between the Williams Boulevard commercial corridor. These include Fourth, Fifth, Duncan and Daniel Streets. Because of the past history of closing off the street, Lloyd Price Avenue (Fourth Street) must be reopened to create a physical connection with the residential neighborhoods and Williams Boulevard.

⁷³ AASHTO. *A Policy on Geometric Design of Highways and Streets, American Association of State and Highway Transportation Officials. Washington, DC, 2001.*



Figure 6.4: Recommended street plan to improve circulation

3. Create a base of amenities directed toward the well-being of the local community

All basic conveniences of public facilities, such as general commerce and retail are severely lacking in Rivertown. There are some retail stores, beauty shops, and restaurants, but there are no banks, grocers, pharmacies, and general merchandise stores in the area. Rivertown desperately needs an economic base of amenities that the community can rely on for at least some of their needs.

Rivertown has two elementary schools, one of which is private and there are no secondary schools in the area. Considering this factor for a successful redevelopment plan that seeks to be Smart Growth based, an educational component to the plan should be considered a fundamental need to support the families in the area. Given the remarkable success of the charter schools that have opened since Katrina in several Louisiana parishes, they could significantly help redevelopment efforts in Rivertown.

Rivertown has two fire stations, but no post office, police station, or any public works offices in the area. The Community Services Office of Kenner is housed in Rivertown. This office manages the museum and entertainment venues and provides important public services to mostly low-income and elderly residents. These include the Committee on Aging, Handicap Services, and the Food Bank.

<u>4. Have a redevelopment preference for infill combined with adaptive reuse, then TND,</u> or enclave conversion respectively

Infill redevelopment in and around the three commercial nodes will create continuity and restore the historic streetscape around existing buildings. TND development should be considered where infill is not practical. Enclave development of

any kind is not a viable option unless it relates to conversion of existing enclave housing, particularly public housing.

5. Allow for design freedom but be compatible with surrounding buildings

The application of architectural design styles for either infill or TND development scenarios should be left for the designer/developer and client. Form-based code should be considered since it focuses on design components such as compatibility of building types, dimensions, façade features over uses. Contemporary sustainable design practices directed toward the environment and community safety should be mandatory for all new construction.

6. Make regional transportation a local matter with a variety of options

Transportation options for Rivertown are limited because the study is limited in regional scope. The proximity of the commercial nodes to the mixed-use and residential of Rivertown areas is a near ideal model of Smart Growth design for pedestrian and nonmotorist physical activity (Figure 6.5). A regional bike path along the river connects New Orleans to Rivertown and to other upriver parishes. Other regional transit issues are out of the scope of influence for a redevelopment project on a local scale of Rivertown, but none-the-less are intimately connected.

Light rail service from the New Orleans Airport into New Orleans via Rivertown has been discussed since the 1980's and continues to be a viable option for future regional transport. Bus service is the only regional transportation option available currently; it is severely limited due to fierce suburban resistance to an expanded network.⁷⁴

⁷⁴Coleman Warner, "The Nontourist's Guide to New Orleans: What's Behind the Mask.", *Planning*, v. 67, no. 2, (February 2001), 8.



Figure 6.5: Street plan showing an ideal quarter mile walking radius of a circle

Transportation needs to be a mandate for more comprehensive regional planning when considering more local and small-scale development.⁷⁵

7. Embrace mistakes of the past and make the most of newly created open space

One of the most important aspects of a new redevelopment plan for Rivertown is the rare opportunity to reclaim previously developed land in the Airport Buyout Zone and return it to profitable open green space. The fact that this green space could have a positive economic impact to the area and return a lost, but traditional use of land is remarkable. Historically the Rivertown community has always been supported by landuse that has centered on agriculture and its related industry. It should continue this tradition. The loss of the agriculture related industry marked the onset of decline for the area, therefore it would be especially poignant for its to initiate improvement. Returning the land to agricultural concerns could also be viewed as a catalyst to erase the unfortunate memories of the events that took place in the Airport Buyout Zone. The demand for new markets of locally grown produce has soared throughout the New Orleans region since Katrina; its return is feasible for providing support for a new, but traditional, agricultural industry (Figure 6.1).

Again, these points are only achievable with total transparency and understanding toward the community of Rivertown.

Considering Socially Directed Programs that Support Smart Growth Values and Design

In a time when mortgage defaults and home foreclosures are at an all-time high across the nation, even the most growth obsessed cities and parishes in the New Orleans area are reconsidering their options for controlling unbridled growth. The benefits of

⁷⁵ *ibid*. 6.

'smart decline' and 'managed growth' are being measured against an inability for municipalities to afford the costs of building and maintaining new infrastructure, transportation costs, and blight management.

Ironically, the catastrophe caused by Hurricane Katrina has been a vanguard of change for local communities and governments. Some have become aware that the blighted housing stock, vacant land, and suffering commercial centers can only be replenished through investments of home-ownership made possible through education and understanding. To facilitate this, social recovery networks and community support groups have coalesced under a single online resource called LouisianaRebuilds.info.⁷⁶ These agencies offer comprehensive services and assistance to people for every conceivable situation of recovery. The programs include home-buyer training programs and home loan and grant programs focused on rebuilding adjudicated and blighted properties.⁷⁷ Services to assist in aspects of design, restoration, and reconstruction are rolled into the programs rather than being the focus of redevelopment. The idea that communities can be physically rebuilt by addressing social concern of those communities is powerful and aligned with Smart Growth values.

One agency active in rebuilding some badly damaged neighborhoods of New Orleans is Neighborhood Housing Services (NHS), a local chapter of NeighborhoodWorksAmerica.⁷⁸ The socio-economic benefits of home-ownership are couched within social values supported by Smart Growth and they include:

- Homeowners improves neighborhoods
- Owners are more involved in civic affairs

 ⁷⁶The LouisianaRebuilds.info website, <u>http://www.louisianarebuilds.info/</u> (accessed June 15, 2009).
⁷⁷ *ibid*.

⁷⁸The Neighborhood Housing Services of New Orleans website, <u>http://www.nhsnola.org/</u> (accessed June 15, 2009)

- Home ownership builds wealth
- Homes are a good investment
- Homebuyers benefit the economy

NHS provides services they call Full Cycle Lending to prospective homebuyers. The program focuses on education and home-buying assistance for qualified individuals and families. They target first-time homebuyers in low- to middle-income brackets and potential homeowners in higher income brackets. In doing so, neighborhoods are being repopulated with diverse socio-economic groups of people. Because the program focuses on infilling and renovating the blighted housing stock in New Orleans, participants can choose the neighborhoods where they want to live. This flexible arrangement offers considerable choices that include such factors as proximity to work, living within a certain school district, affordability, and even adventure.

The programs offer assistance for acquiring conventional mortgages, construction loans, and generous soft-second mortgages, the latter being forgivable for those who stay in the neighborhoods. Some programs also include generous matched savings programs and assistance in getting first-time homebuyer tax credits. In addition to these programs, the NHS offers assistance in connecting participants with qualified and vetted architects and builders with an understanding of the local architecture. This critical aspect of development helps assure that rebuilding is done with some degree of integrity and compatibility with the neighborhoods.

Conclusion

It is clear that the principles of Smart Growth can be effectively applied to a number of different redevelopment scenarios to make communities better places to live. When social aspects of Smart Growth are not included in the design process, community

development can suffer. The impact of those deficiencies can manifest themselves in a number of ways. The absence, or exclusion, of one or more socio-economic groups necessary for a community to function properly might be a relatively benign shortcoming. However, as more socially oriented Smart Growth ideals are disregarded in new design, or rebuilding, older communities can become, or remain, dysfunctional.

When a community such as Rivertown experiences loss to its physical and economic fabric in a way that causes its members to feel harmed or marginalized in some way, community goodness falters. At least some of the damage that the Rivertown landscape has experienced seems to have been done out of some degree of disregard for the community. When this occurs, it is unlikely that repairs to the physical landscape can be sufficient to erase that memory so that the community heals. Addressing the social ills of a community in tandem with creating the built environment is an effective way to achieve Smart Growth and create healthy communities.
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