

Community and Urban Resilience in New Orleans

UCLA Student Travel

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Introduction

In March 2015, UCLA graduate students in urban planning, public policy, social welfare, and public health travelled to New Orleans to study efforts around resilience in social justice, public health, economic development, and environmental sustainability. New Orleans offers a rich and diverse cultural heritage, yet its citizens are severely divided by socioeconomic disparities. The city's unique topography and deeply rooted multiethnic population pose both significant challenges and opportunities to the region's ability to recover and thrive in the wake of devastation from Hurricane Katrina, the BP oil spill, and potential future disasters. Our group's multidisciplinary experience allowed students from the Luskin and Fielding Schools to examine these features of the city and its historic resilience efforts through a critical lens focused on both government and community organizations.

For the New Orleanians we spoke with, the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina was a man-made disaster, not solely a natural disaster. The majority of damage was caused by breaches in the improperly engineered and inadequately maintained levee systems. The social and political histories leading to these events are riddled with socioeconomic injustice and segregation. However, opinions varied on the treatment of and response to the events. One camp, composed of city promoters such as the economic development agency, redevelopment agency, and local government, believes that the city is ready to move forward; this group is vigorously promoting a new path for the city as a place for outside economic investment and growth opportunities for businesses. A second camp, composed of place-based community groups and newly founded nonprofits, is struggling to return home and rebuild communities while fighting disinvestment and exclusion in an attempt to chart a new path towards a future without continued systemic injustice. While these differences in perspective may seem to present an insurmountable roadblock, they may help to hold all groups accountable in their actions going forward and positively contribute to the future of the Crescent City.

Charting a New Path: Development-Focused Groups and Government

We visited many groups involved in promoting New Orleans as a place for economic investments that would unabashedly plow forward on new projects, plans, and policies for the city. This perspective became apparent during multiple roundtables at City Hall, a tour of Crescent Park (a new waterfront park), a meeting with the New Orleans Redevelopment Authority—home of the Chief Resilience Officer for the City—and at our discussion of regional economic development strategies with Greater New Orleans Inc., a regional economic development alliance. In the first years after Katrina, new projects focused on increased safety and the opportunity for an equitable city with updated levee technology, stormwater treatment systems, citizen returns, vacant lot activations, targeted community crime prevention, and redesigning public spaces, creating new parks, and reorganizing city management systems. By creating a safer city with more services and a more cohesive populous, New Orleans may be better able to cope with issues of poverty and injustice.

But ten years later, many government-sponsored projects are increasingly geared towards bolstering economic investment, updating oil drilling technology and collaboration, clean technology, and blight control. For example, Greater New Orleans Inc. is pursuing an aggressive agenda of business development by traveling around the world to talk with international businesses to assure them that

the new and improved sixteen-billion-dollar floodwalls are in place and that New Orleans is a prime place for business expansion. These and other similar efforts we encountered are not focusing on the needs of pre-Katrina citizens. Instead, focus has shifted to attracting younger populations interested in starting nonprofits and other ventures in innovation and sustainability. As we toured the city we came across countless post-Katrina nonprofits and new ventures; this painted a picture of a city making strides towards a future of better planning and response to disasters, but not always grounded in the community context.

Grounded in History: Community-Based Groups and Nonprofits

Community groups are approaching New Orleans's history with a different perspective. From our conversations with staff at groups such as the Village de l'Est Green Growers Initiative (VEGGI) Farmer's Cooperative, and the Kingsley Settlement House, these organizations maintain vivid memories of man-made disasters and historic segregation. These memories inform their current work in improving the built environment and halting historic socioeconomic disparities.

VEGGI's project consists of clearing land in New Orleans East as part of a place-based strategy to increase local healthy food access and take back land that had remained vacant in a community that has faced exclusion and lack of services in the Katrina recovery efforts. East New Orleans is predominantly made up of African American and Vietnamese populations. This community was the last to be granted official re-entry after Katrina, yet it was one of the first to return and begin rebuilding. Its members returned out of necessity because they had nowhere else to go and did not want to lose their homes. VEGGI's work to build a local food system and secure jobs for community members helps to recirculate investments in the community and fight unjust and unhealthy food systems.

The Kingsley Settlement House, a nonprofit organization focused on strengthening families and communities in thirteen Southeast Louisiana parishes, has served New Orleans's changing communities for 120 years. Historically, settlement houses formed the origins of modern social work as well as place-based policies and services. Kingsley's broad services, including education, nutrition, elder care, and physical activity, are successful due to its clearly defined community service area and quick adaptation to changing demographics, needs, and environmental disasters. The Kingsley House is directly responding to disinvestment from its community by providing services and deeply engaging itself in the fight for justice in the Crescent City.

Conclusion

Our trip to New Orleans provided the group with powerful and much needed on-the-ground context for learning from the perspectives and actions of government agencies and community organizations. We saw some groups looking to chart new, ungrounded paths forward after a cursory rebuild of existing infrastructure and systems, while others focus on rebuilding paths grounded in history, potentially ignoring entirely new opportunities. Learning from the past is just as important as not being inhibited by it. The mix of perspectives and strengths of the community groups and governmental organizations in New Orleans will guide the city on the best path forward if the groups learn to listen to one another and work together.

The group wishes to thank all of the people and organizations that met with us and we hope that, in some form, UCLA graduate students will normalize the practice of multidisciplinary, student-initiated study trips and that our respective schools will see the worth in providing formal paths for supportive funding.

Lead Photograph

New Orleans, Louisiana. In the Lower Ninth Ward, cement foundations of homes that washed away or were torn down due to mold infestation hold back lush wild grasses, indicative of a community simultaneously trying to move forward while retaining its history. Photograph by Diana Liduvina Benitez