

Losing Our Commons—Predatory Planning in New Orleans:

The Importance of History and Culture in Understanding Place

by Kiara L. Nagel, with J. Eva Nagel

I walked beyond the French Quarter. Past the clean, brightly lit streets and postcard views. I crossed through Treme, where debris still lay in the streets. Back into the Seventh Ward, into a war zone. I was looking for Mama D's place. Almost every house was abandoned; whole blocks had been flooded out. The only vehicle I saw was a military ATV, which rolled by us as we tried to cross the street, jumping over the foul-smelling mud. The water had drained away, but not much else had changed in the five months since the storm. The devastation was staggering and the stillness rang with a post-apocalyptic resonance. It wasn't until we turned onto North Dorgenois Street that we saw the first sign of life: a bonfire surrounded by people cooking food, cars bringing news and supplies, volunteers working, camping out, and all of it circling around Mama D, the woman in charge.



Post Hurricane

The Associated Press recently warned, "Hurricane Katrina may prove to be the biggest, most brutal urban-renewal project Black America has ever seen" (Davis, 2005).

It has been more than 18 months since the largest disaster in the history of the United States. Last fall the news was filled with reports of people rebuilding, but

Definitions:

The commons: that which is public be it space, ideas, or culture.

Predatory planning: an aggressive and deliberate practice of using land use zoning, public policy, law, and city planning to knowingly remove assets from the public or the poor to benefit a few or the very wealthy.

an eerie silence has reigned since the spring municipal election. Huge segments of the population remain displaced. The efforts to reach them and meet their needs have been shrouded with confusion and secrecy. Katrina survivors are still reeling from trauma and untreated post-traumatic stress disorder. The planning and rebuilding process is largely fueled by investors, architects, and developers. Deals are being made, land is being bought and sold, and predatory planning reigns. In the neighborhoods one hears the heartbreaking stories of homes destroyed and families sundered, and of a more universal loss—the loss of community, of roots, of soul. It is the loss of the commons.

Predatory planning and the loss of the commons are inescapably linked. When planning decisions are made that result in dispossession of the poor and privatization of land and public resources, the commons are sacrificed. Yet a vibrant commons offers the most effective way to resist predatory planning. By examining the effects of urban renewal on Treme, a distinctive neighborhood in New Orleans, we will understand what it means to destroy the commons as well as the importance the commons hold for strengthening community assets and rebuilding the Gulf Coast region. The lessons from earlier destruction and rebuilding processes can provide tangible insight into the current rebuilding process and what tactics may be used to keep predatory planning at bay.

I first met Rick Mathieu when a friend was driving me home and said, "You have to meet Rick." So we stopped the car on Treme Street, and Rick jumped in. After brief introductions, Rick began, "You all don't know what went on down here." He told us stories of rescue. He and other members of the Soul Patrol personally rescued over 2,000 neighbors in the Sixth and Seventh wards. They used their own boats and did what they had to do for their communities during the flood. "Nobody came," he said again and again. "Imagine that, nobody. People had no water, no ice. The old people were dying. I seen things no man should ever seen, dead bodies, desperation, all of that. But we just kept working, through the night, whatever we had to do."

I spent many days with Rick during my time in New Orleans in January and March of 2006. These stories were still fresh for him. He spoke of pain and a deep history of oppression that stretched far beyond Katrina and New Orleans. He also made sure to take me to his favorite picnic spots with a bucket of shrimp and instill in me the un-

derstanding that people here know how to live well. His teachings and those of many others in New Orleans have served as the foundation for my graduate research on the cultural commons and continue to affect me to this day.

Treme: The Roots Go Deep

The Treme neighborhood in New Orleans's Sixth Ward, adjacent to the French Quarter, is truly unique. Founded by free people of color, the neighborhood is dotted with charming homes owned for centuries by Creole families. Echoing with jazz and brass band traditions, populated by the Mardi Gras Indians and the proud legacy of civil rights activists, these few small blocks cast a magical spell. Before the Civil War, Blacks in New Orleans owned over \$2.2 million in real estate (\$100 million in today's dollars). This created a strong economic base of free people of color that influenced politics, culture, economics, and business. The early residents of Treme were some of the city's finest craftsmen, artisans, and musicians in the country, as evident in the neighborhood's historic architecture and musical legacy. Yet in the mid-twentieth century, Treme became the site for civic and transportation projects that sliced and diced the neighborhood.

Early examples of predatory planning can be traced back to the 1920s, when prime land created by construction of the levees became exclusively white neighborhoods. The African-American population was pushed to the edges of the already crowded backswamp—areas that were the first to flood and last to be pumped dry (Logson and Hirsch, 1992). In the 1930s and '40s, these neighborhoods were bulldozed in order to build segregated public housing developments. Then, in the 1960s and '70s, came the construction of Interstate 10 through the heart of Treme. This urban renewal fiasco created Louis Armstrong Park but resulted in the displacement of over 400 families, which further decimated the already crumbling commons. As if this were not enough, in recent years the neighborhood has had to contend with encroachment from privatization, gentrification, casinos, and now the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina.

The Commons of Treme

The vibrant life force of Treme gave rise to many cultural and religious institutions. A closer look at the evolution of three of these—Congo Square, St. Augustine's Church, and the social aid and pleasure clubs—illustrate the rise and potential fall of Treme's cultural commons.

Congo Square stands in the center of Louis Armstrong Park. There amid the swirling brick patterns, slaves were able to gather on Sundays for worship, funerals, and dances. In Congo Square, African traditions mixed with other influences to create a distinct musical sound and cultural traditions that are still evident today. It became a place where traditions and cultural practices could be carried on and political resistance could develop.

St. Augustine's, a Catholic church built in 1841, served as one of the most important cultural institutions for Creoles during its first century of existence. The diversity of its founding residents is often cited as evidence of the neighborhood's unique mixed heritage. Because the church was integrated from the time of its beginning, slaves were able to worship there and Blacks and Whites both purchased family pews. Famous parishioners included Homer Plessy, jazz great Sydney Bechet, civil rights activist A. P. Tureaud, and Alison "Tootie" Montoya, a notable Mardi Gras Indian chief. St. Augustine's provided strength to its constituents throughout the conflicts and changes of Reconstruction, the civil rights movement, and the aftermath of Katrina.



St. Augustine's Church



Congo Square

"They would sit here and sing. Pray in his name. After church they'd walk over to Congo Square, and they'd do their thing," said the Rev. Jerome LeDoux. Doing their thing, he explained, meant drumming, bartering, making music, exchanging memories and recipes—fashioning a culture, a cuisine and a sound that would uniquely characterize New Orleans (Nolan, 2006).

While I was in New Orleans, the archdiocese presented a plan to close St. Augustine's. My connections to neighborhood elders and organizers often led back to this important landmark. I made it a regular habit to stop by St. Augustine's and attend Sunday services. Many people, even non-churchgoers, respected Father Ledoux and recognized the importance of the church as a longtime support of social networks. Father Ledoux's last mass, a jazz mass, was packed shoulder to shoulder. Folks were weeping over his final words. Immediately afterward, resistance began mounting to the church closing. I watched a group of students, acting in solidarity with the church's congregation, as they occupied the church rectory and refused to leave. Church elders held a 24-hour vigil out front, and people stopped by to bring food or get the latest news. The struggle resulted in national media attention and eventually was successful in reinstating the church. But the idea that such an important cultural institution could be removed was a frightening prospect to many residents.

Social aid and pleasure clubs emerged after the Civil War, when African-American neighborhood organizations began to spring up in the city as mutual aid

foundations. These clubs assisted newly freed slaves with burial costs and other social support. They evolved into social aid and pleasure clubs, where members pay monthly dues and can borrow against them. These societies created their own expressive approach to funeral processions and parades (www.nps.gov). Community participation in parades became known as “the second line,” a true triumph of the commons. One can still encounter a second line on the back streets of Treme on any given Sunday. It is an expression of community pride that provides dependable work for musicians and serves as a training ground for young musical talent.



The Second Line

In their own way, each of these “neighborhood places” where people gather and practice cultural traditions plays a role in strengthening social networks. The cultural practices they engage in are laced with tools for a healthy and vital community: empowerment, connections, engagement, and resistance. These traditions are rooted in Treme’s neighborhood places and passed down through the generations.

Cultural Resistance from the Commons

Treme gave birth to the *New Orleans Tribune*, the nation’s first African-American daily newspaper (www.tremedoc.org). Creoles of Treme and the neighboring Seventh Ward founded Comité des Citoyens in 1891 to resist Jim Crow legislation. They selected Homer Plessy, from Treme, to test the segregation laws. Fifty years before Rosa Parks, Plessy challenged segregation on public transit. His case went all the way to the Supreme Court, and *Plessy v. Ferguson* resulted in “separate but equal” legislation that prevailed for half a century. Martin Luther King visited New Orleans in the 1950s and recognized the city as a center for the civil rights movement, a role model for other Deep South communities. Treme

soon became a hotbed of political activity and gave rise to nationally prominent civil rights workers, members of Congress of Racial Equity (CORE), musicians, and politicians. This culture of community building became the staging ground for mobilizing leadership and developing a national resistance to political oppression.

Jerome Smith, a lifelong Treme resident and civil rights leader, explains the linkages between culture and organizing a movement for racial justice:

I was fortunate to be born in the area of town where the dominant cultural expression of creativity was on the block where I lived. Alison “Tootie” Montana, who was the chief of the Yellow Pocahontas Indian tribe, afforded me great opportunity when I was a youngster, to understand the sense of bringing about expressions that would bring magic to our streets. Anything we made was an expression of the self. And if it was applauded, we were gracious. And if not, we were cramped in the kind of misery from the rejection. So that prepared me to deal with the journey in relation to the struggle, in relation to the whole civil rights campaign, the whole universal struggle for betterment. (Jerome Smith, personal interview)

Urban Renewal Comes to Treme

Urban renewal targeted 1,600 African-American neighborhoods across the country in the middle of the twentieth century, leaving destruction and wounded social networks in its place. In New Orleans, the Treme neighborhood was the hardest hit. Many historians trace the epidemics of drug addiction, the collapse of the black family, and the rise in incarceration of black men to the losses that followed the bulldozing of these neighborhoods. Treme serves as a dramatic example.

From Storyville to Iberville

Storyville, a neighborhood on the edge of Treme, was established in 1917 when Alderman Sydney Story, concerned about vice in the city, passed legislation creating a red light district that limited prostitution to this area. A vibrant neighborhood brimming with an active commons, Storyville boasted prominent benevolent halls, music venues, and social clubs where many musicians honed their craft and emerged on the national music scene. Convinced of its decadence, city politicians later shut down Storyville. The Housing Authority of New Orleans purchased and demolished the neighborhood in 1940. Some of the finest mansions of the time were leveled to make way for a new public housing project. The housing authority evicted over 800 African-American families from the Storyville neighborhood to build the then all-white complex of Iberville. Lafitte, a public

housing project only a few blocks away, was built for blacks.

From Sacred Neighborhood Place to Highway

Before the 1960s, Black Mardi Gras was held each year along the neutral ground on North Claiborne Avenue in Treme. This large median, covered in towering oak trees and lush meadows with a paved strip down the middle for promenading, stretched over 13.5 acres. It was the center of the neighborhood and the center of Black New Orleans's economic, social, political, and cultural life. North Claiborne's Black business district ran along both sides of the public commons. Over 200 businesses were thriving at its peak, including the first Black pharmacy, as well as restaurants, social clubs, and groceries. North Claiborne was a lively place for commerce, recreation, social interaction, and cultural celebration. Jerome Smith describes children playing, men working on cars, people listening to radios, and elderly women cutting grasses to make tea. It was the central gathering place for neighborhood activity where people would "sit and witness so much of their soul." This is a great definition of the commons.

Interstate 10 was constructed through North Claiborne Avenue's neutral ground in the 1960s. It sliced through the Claiborne neighborhood, dividing the Sixth Ward from the rest of Treme and destroying the public commons. The avenue had been considered one of the most prosperous African-American business districts in the country. The number of businesses along North Claiborne Avenue dropped from 115 in 1965 to 35 by 2000. Real estate values plummeted and business



Murals painted on two supporting pillars under I-10

owners struggled to remain viable after the highway went in. Today the massive concrete structure of I-10 supports six lanes of traffic that race overhead while the abandoned area beneath the highway has become polluted, unsafe, and unused.

On my first day in New Orleans since the hurricane, I walk through the streets of Treme. Some neighbors are working on their houses or cleaning up the front of their homes. A man rides by on a bike and greets me. In the distance, I see the cut of the overpass, looming over the small, bright wooden hous-

es and neatly patterned streets. When I get to North Claiborne, I can't hear anything over the roar of the cars. I stand in silence under the highway, imagining what once was. The area between the pillars, once the famous neutral ground, is littered with abandoned cars, broken glass, and now hurricane debris. Remnants of the life that once existed are visible in the old cars, as if they were just left behind in a hurry. The first thing I notice is the mural that masterfully covers the I-10 support pillars—a portrait of what once existed here.



Underneath I-10

In an interview, Jerome Smith said, "There's really been no renewal. There's been consistent loss. This has been accelerated by the onslaught of Katrina."

Treme Today

During my time in Treme, I was overwhelmed by the love and generosity that people showed me—watching out for me, feeding me, taking time to tell their stories, answer questions, give me a personal tours, or take me along on daily activities. Time spent on the stoop, sipping a beer and chatting, watching contractors come and go on the otherwise abandoned block, talking to the elders outside of church, gave me a chance to try to grasp the history and the current struggles of the neighborhood. You have to hear the music, walk in the second line, sit and eat with people to really understand what is happening in this place, what it means historically, and how people are experiencing it in their daily lives. Unless you are part of the commons, it is difficult to understand the breadth of its impact.

Looking back, we can see decades of damage accumulating in the Treme neighborhood. From the legacies of slavery and Jim Crow through urban renewal and institutional racism, up to the current predatory planning in the wake of Katrina, the loss continues. The erosion of the commons contributes to Treme's vulnerability and weakens its capacity for future neighborhood organizing and participation. The hurricane damage allows for massive buyouts and bulldozing, and rapid gentrification and redevelopment, eerily echoing previous urban renewal projects. Many of the plans being proposed and carried out prevent the city's poorest residents from involvement in shaping their communities or from even returning at all.

Treme resident: "This is the opportunity of a lifetime for developers. It's a land grab. Rich markets here, houses, it's a gold mine. They're worth gold. Someone is selling the house behind mine for \$495,000."

Ron Chisom, a resident for more than 63 years, said he is not surprised that the government is not doing what they are supposed to. "We've been having Katrina for years."



Since Katrina, many of Treme's residents remain scattered around the country. Residents do not know where their neighbors are or how to get in touch with them. After 12 days of wading through chest-deep polluted waters and crawling into unlit, damaged homes to rescue hundreds of residents in the Sixth and Seventh wards, Rick Mathieu was forced, like a criminal, onto a plane by National Guards. Instead of being honored as a national hero, he was not even told where they were taking him until they announced, "You are now landing in Omaha, Nebraska."

Researcher and psychiatrist Mindy Fullilove describes the phenomenon of root shock following urban renewal as "the traumatic stress reaction to the destruction of all or part of one's emotional ecosystem. Root shock at the level of the individual is a profound emotional upheaval. . . . Root shock at the level of the local community ruptures bonds, dispersing people to all the directions of the compass" (Fullilove, 2004). Fifty years after urban renewal, Treme residents are still feeling the shock. In conversation, they are quick to bring up the highway



Treme resident Rick Mathieu (seated) and his son, Stevie



Rick Mathieu rebuilds his New Orleans home

and the effect it had on their families and their neighborhood. Hurricane Katrina, the lack of response from local and national officials, and the predatory planning in its wake is yet another seismic root shock for residents of Treme.

Architecture

For more than 200 years, locals built houses that have natural heating and cooling features and could withstand hurricanes. Across the street from Rick Mathieu's house on Treme Street, he points out a house that was built for \$350,000 before the storm. It was completely leveled by Katrina, while his 150-year-old cottage again survived the storm. In Treme, people passed down skills in the building trades. "Sheetrock, carpentry, air conditioner, electric, plumbing, bricklaying, jacking up houses. You name it, there's a niche for it all. You can take your skill and do anything at anytime in life" (Mathieu, personal interview). Support for this intergenerational process came from elders within from the commons. The craftsmanship of Treme is something that will not be replaced by new developers and stick-built or modular housing. Local workers skilled in the building trades have found themselves largely shut out of viable employment in rebuilding efforts led by large development firms and contractors who employ outside labor.

Music

Several people explained how children used to learn marching band in the public schools. Budget cuts in recent years have eliminated these programs. Katrina scattered musicians and broke up bands. Where will the famous brass bands be in 20 or 50 years? Lolis Eric Elie's May 1, 2006 column in the *Times Picayune* pointed to the lack of jazz acts at this year's New Orleans Jazz Festival and Louisiana Heritage Fair. Hip-hop and national acts were taking center stage over New Orleans's own.

Disputes over live music venues in Treme highlight the tensions around the cultural commons. Some newer residents protest loud late-night music and crowds that gather in the streets, while older Treme residents recognize that small clubs and Second Line parades are part of the neighborhood fabric that makes Treme what it is.

Food

Food is a link to the traditions and culture of the people, and New Orleans food is world-renowned. People were always happy to feed me during my time there. "That's New Orleans," they would say, offering another helping of red beans and rice. However, the keepers of the culinary secrets are disappearing. The fate of Dookie Chase's Keith's Place and other Treme favorites are uncertain. These places were not just local restaurants, but intrinsically linked to the culture of resistance. Dookie Chase served civil rights workers, literally feeding the revolution. Where will authentic New Orleans cuisine be found in the future?

Treme's Future

The people and their culture create the magic that is the cultural commons and the lifeblood of New Orleans. Former University of New Orleans planning professor David Gladstone said, "Culture is sold in the French Quarter, but it is produced elsewhere in many of the neighborhoods that have been devastated by the storm" (*Democracy Now*, September 7, 2005). Architecture, cuisine, and music are three aspects of culture that Treme and other New Orleans neighborhoods have shared with the world. Looking at these we can see evidence of the process of devaluing a community and disassembling a culture, even as it is marketed to tourists. Ron Chisom of the People's Institute for Survival and Beyond says, "When you do a deal you have to protect the culture. Treme is more than just a dollar. It has given life to the city" (Kamerick, 2002).

Conclusion

For the Treme neighborhood of New Orleans, cultural resistance is rooted in the commons. Destruction of the commons means destruction of cultural infrastructure. Without the commons there is little defense from the forces of predatory planning. One aspect is the massive disjuncture evident in the rebuilding of New Orleans. The scale of the damage and need is staggering. Community groups, already stressed beyond capacity, are being asked to take on tasks of gigantic proportions with little institutional or governmental support. There is political disconnect when displaced persons are prevented from voting and cut off from political representation, and appointed commissions are making planning decisions that impact the entire city. There is economic disconnect when large-scale developers are making millions while lifelong homeowners can't afford to rebuild and many are denied resources that would allow them to return to the city. There is emotional disconnect when locals face widespread trauma, while developers and architects are moving forward at lightning speed. These are the symptoms of predatory planning, a new level of complexity, disjuncture, and damage accumulation particularly evident over the last year and a half.

In the Treme neighborhood, people are experiencing new levels of predatory planning. They have the sense that they are at war, but can't quite find the enemy. Predatory planning is on the rise: today Treme and other neighborhoods in New Orleans, eventually communities throughout the United States and around the world. Strategies for strengthening the cultural commons require an understanding of the historical and cultural importance of this infrastructure. Alternatives to predatory planning require strong coalitions and partnerships across diverse stakeholders and recognition of the impact of predation. We must stand together and fight for our neighborhoods, for our commons. The well-being of our children and the vitality of our planet depend on it.

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