

Proposal for a paper for PAA, 2008

New Orleans after Katrina:
Alternate Visions of Justice

John R. Logan
Brown University

This is a proposal for a paper about the future redevelopment of New Orleans that draws primarily on the views of people who have returned – or who have plans to return – to destroyed neighborhoods. It does not intend to give priority to their views, but rather to use their perceptions as one prism through which to understand what is at stake in the planning process.

The interviews have been conducted in four neighborhoods of the city, identified in Figure 1. In each neighborhood I have selected a single block whose population composition (by race, housing tenure, income) is similar to that of the larger area, and I have made an effort to reach every resident or former resident of that block. The total potential sample is about 100 households, and interviews have been completed up to now with 35.

(Figure 1 here)

I intend to organize the material around various aspects of justice, by which I mean simply what residents consider to be their rightful expectations about the society's treatment of them and their neighborhoods. I am just beginning to analyze the interviews, and I am struck by the diversity of opinions. However the overall framework may fit into a framework of self-interest and community interest. **Self-interest:** The dominant view is that that "I" have a right to return, based on my longstanding ties and commitments to the neighborhood, regardless of the environmental hazards, and that I should be made whole for the failures of government that were exposed by Katrina. **Community interest:** The dominant view is that not every neighborhood should be rebuilt (although mine should), that the city will be better off if it sheds the less desirable sector of the previous population, and that my neighborhood should protect itself against downgrading.

I place these views in the context of a city whose black neighborhoods were disproportionately impacted by Katrina (as illustrated in Figure 2), and where socially "neutral" policies – such as concentrating public investments and infrastructure in less damaged zones and restricting development in low-lying areas – have evident racial and class implications.

(Figure 2 here)

Following is a sample of excerpts from interviews that begin to express these ideas. I emphasize that this is a work in progress, and the final draft of the paper may pick up on some very different themes.

Justice 1: The right of return?

It's like the death of a family member really. And when this first happened and we talked about, you know...what was the source of our grief? What were we really struggling with? And we realized that you know it wasn't really the loss of the stuff, even though that was part of it. Stuff has sentimental value and stuff carries memories. You lose your couch and it's no big deal. You lose your pictures and that's a different thing. But you still realize that those memories are all stored in here. And so you start to analyze that it wasn't really the loss of the stuff so much as it was the loss of your lifestyle. I mean we had.... It was very common for us on the weekends like Friday afternoon, Saturday afternoon....we love being outside and we would barbecue and our neighbors would come over and just kind of hang out and have a drink. And then all of a sudden, where are your neighbors? (Lakeview resident)

And that's why people have looked at New Orleans and said, "How can you guys fight so hard to live there? You are in a bowl. The climate's horrible. Da da da da da." They don't understand. This is the largest small town you will find in the country. The people here really are...as much crime as there is...as much racial tension as there might be...when you get down to individual neighborhoods and communities, it's about the relationship. And it's about the family. It's about the person. It's your neighbors. That really is what is so unique and special. We are confined by water. We can't spread out. If we grow, we grow here. You know what I mean? And so there is closeness here that.... You can go anywhere in the city and if you start talking about where you went to high school. Or, what did your dad do? What did your mom do? There is going to be a connection somewhere. (Lakeview resident)

Or not to return ...

No, I'm movin', and I'm sellin' it and I'm moving to Gillsburg, Mississippi. And I'm outta here. Whatever happens, I'm gonna be homeless up there for a minute. There's nothing else, I'm going from one bad state to another bad state. 'Cause Mississippi ain't too much better. But I'm gonna be a hell of a lot safer; I won't get drowned. You know? (Gentilly resident)

Justice 2: Expectations of just treatment

So I had to have another adjuster come out. He came out in March. I hadn't heard from him until two weeks ago. And they . . . he only called me because I filed a complaint with the insurance commissioner's office. And when I filed a complaint, everybody started calling me. The guy called me and said, 'Your check is in the mail.' This what I gotta do to get money from y'all? When I've been paying every year? (New Orleans East resident)

So when we got the awards letter though it was kind of like, you know, it was nice. This was money we never counted on. But we looked at it and were like; this is so wrong you kind of have to fight. You have to fight it. You know? It was just the principle. It was just wrong... So you look at it and you look at are government and you go, "What are you doing? Are you really trying to help people? No. Obviously, you're not." And coming from the state who was supposed to be using federal funds to help their people. That's what was so wrong about it. (Lakeview resident)

Justice 3: Expectations of restitution

Those people that were struggling in areas before the storm are still struggling. So I think the economy is kinda oppressed. I think more federal funding, or quicker federal funding... I mean they say that they're sending aid, but you don't, you're not seeing it. Most of the money that they said they're giving out, that they're dishing out, you're just not seeing it throughout the city. And it's been, it's going on two years. You should see some results, you know. (Gentilly resident)

I don't understand why the funding is not there. It seems like we're getting a lot of money and that they are diverting money to other projects. I don't know if that's because they can't figure out how to... they are just being pulled by different political entities or they can't figure out which area to start in, or to start from the bottom up, or... the priorities that I read don't make any sense to me at all. I mean again it has nothing to do with infrastructure and basic needs first. (Lakeview resident)

Justice 4: Effectiveness of government action

it sounds like they are having a bunch of great meetings, but it doesn't sound like there will ever be a plan that will ever actually be implemented because the more they talk about it the less money they have to actually do anything because they keep saying... at the beginning they were talking about parks and bike paths and all kinds of stuff. And then it's like, "if we have money left over." And then you read it again and it's like, "Well, we're not going to have the money, but that would be a great idea for the future, if we could." (Lakeview resident)

Everybody's still doing studies. Studies, studies, studies. It's depressing. It's not organized. There's no hope. There's so much infrastructure that needs to be rebuilt. How long it's gonna take? They said 10 years, they said 20 years; I believe it's gonna be 60 years, in order to get this place the way it's supposed to be. You know? The state is just sucking up the money and using us as an example. Poverty has been here since the early 1800s. And here it is in 2007. Still talking about poverty in New Orleans. So, when's it changing? (Gentilly resident)

Justice 5: Engineering solutions

Well, my main thing is just . . . hope they fix the levees. Because if the levees wouldn't have broke, it wouldn't have been this kind of damage. I mean, we would have had wind damage, or whatever, but . . . the hurricane itself didn't do what the flooding did. I think we flooded because the levees wasn't really properly maintained . . . and they really wasn't up to specs. If they would have been maintained right, and up to specs, they would . . . they should have held. You know? (New Orleans East resident)

What happened was definitely I think a man-made issue. I think it can be fixed. I think that they can do something about those levees. I think that they absolutely have to do coastal preservation. Otherwise, they can have thirty foot levees, but if you don't have a coastline to break that surge, you're going to have a problem. There's a lot of things that have to happen, but we are like any other coastal town. . . We are all vulnerable to hurricanes and storms and storm surges. So, yes, I think it can happen again. It is something. . . you live with the threat of hurricanes. That's what you live with on a coast. (Lakeview resident)

The case for limiting redevelopment

I think everybody is trying to please everybody and not making tough choices and decisions. So, I mean, I think there are parts of New Orleans that cannot be protected properly, or will not be protected properly, and to allow those people to rebuild is not the thing to do. I think they should have paid heed to the proposals to shrink the city. (Lakeview resident)

So, as a whole there's areas in the city that probably shouldn't be reinhabited. You know, I hate to say it, I got a lot of friends in the St. Bernard Parish area that, you know, you're always going to get it. That's just the way it is. The Lower 9th Ward, they call it lower, because it's low and it's low on the river and it's close to, you know. . . there's just not enough buffer to avert any kind of a storm surge anymore. And we get into the coastal erosion situation. That's where a lot of the money would be better spent. (Gentilly resident)

Justice 6: Whose city?

I think we've got this whole class of people in this city who walk around with blinders on who think all the social problems are not their problems. We have to do something about our poor and disenfranchised or this city will never move ahead. I get so tired of hearing post-Katrina. . . I don't know. . . everybody making blanket statements. . . "I hope the blacks don't come back." You know, that's not our problem. I can see if you'd say, "I hope the drug dealers don't come back and the people who want to sit around and do nothing don't come back." But the racial divides in this city just kill us. (Lakeview resident)

Realistically, some of them places should have been torn down a long time ago [laughs]. You know? Because it's raggedy, and, you know, crime and drugs . . . some of that stuff needs to be torn down anyway.

I wish it doesn't ever get to be back what it was. Because, to me, it wasn't really that good. Well, I mean, you had crime, drugs, murder, vacant houses, abandoned houses . . . I mean, this city was a mess. (New Orleans East resident)

Justice 6: New beginning for whom?

Believe it or not, the thieves and the criminals, they were one of the first ones that came back. Because they see opportunity now. You see what I'm saying? You know, so, my main thing is protection for the people, fix the levees, you know, do something with the school system . . . you know, because there's . . . so many things in New Orleans was bad, before the storm, and the infrastructure that has been destroyed . . . so now, we have the opportunity to put things back . . . way better than they was. So this is an opportunity, you know. (New Orleans East resident)

An unboarded, open house, that's an attractive nuisance. So people start living in a house, burn it up, becomes a crack house, whatever. Tear it down. I have no problem with fewer neighbors. . . . That'd be fine. I prefer homeowners to renters. Simply because statistically speaking, poor people commit more crime. (Gentilly resident)

Downgrading the neighborhood?

And there are certain sections of the city where because of the type of housing that was put in property values went down. And I don't want to see that. We are investing too much. . . . And so it concerns me when a developer come in and puts in the cheapest thing they can. You know . . . that is a concern to me. It is a concern to me when I have neighbors that are going to sell their property to the state through the LRA. (Lakeview resident)

I want to be committed and that's why I'm glad that my neighbors on my block are committed. But, you know, I'm afraid of a lot of it being rebuilt and rented and it becoming more of a rental neighborhood as opposed to a family-oriented neighborhood. (Lakeview resident)

I also hear . . . I mean this is all hearsay . . . but I hear a lot about people who buying two lots so that they can buy a bigger house. And, you know, Lakeview was a charming little neighborhood of charming little cottages. That was part of it's charm. You know, I hope that not all these McMansions come on board. (Lakeview resident)

And so you're able to either do like we did and split the cost with your neighbor or buy a whole other lot and have a big piece of property that you can build a house that you want to build on it. I'm hoping that that is what is going to happen. You know people were talking and saying you know, "Do you want to live in a neighborhood where all these

McMansions are just going up?” I said, “I don’t care.” I know what I want my house to look like.... But I don’t have a problem if everyone around me is rich. I mean it sounds good. It sounds like a good place for me to live. (Lakeview resident)

Losing the elderly. A loss ...

The sad thing is that Lakeview was a a marvelous neighborhood in that it really spanned the entire lifespan. The spectrum of life. We had very elderly couples that had lived there for years that were wonderful. They were like neighborhood grandparents. And I’m a grandparent, but I don’t consider myself as old as they were. And uh, they’re the people that are not gonna be able to move back. You know, they just don’t have the...I mean, this has been a very draining experience. (Lakeview resident)

Or another opportunity ...

They had a lot of elderly people living there but they also had a lot of up and coming people that were in their late twenties and early thirties who were just able to afford these smaller houses when the elderly people died. The younger people were able to come in and take the older houses and renovate them. And that was going on before Katrina. So this will hopefully help this middle class/upper class population grow. (Lakeview resident)