

Table of Contents

Gentrifying Disaster: In New Orleans Ethnic Cleansing G.O.P. Style 1

Gentrifying Disaster: In New Orleans Ethnic Cleansing G.O.P. Style

ByMike Davis

In a recent email to Louisiana officials, FEMA curtly turned down the state's request for funding to notify displaced residents that they could cast absentee ballots in the city's crucial February mayoral election. FEMA also declined to share data with local authorities about the current addresses of evacuees.

In the eyes of many local activists, FEMA's refusal to support the voting rights of evacuees is consistent with a larger pattern of federal inaction and delay that seems transparently designed to discourage the return of Black residents to the city. As one Associated Press dispatch presciently warned, "Hurricane Katrina [may] prove to be the biggest, most brutal urban-renewal project Black America has ever seen."

Ethnic Cleansing, GOP-style

In the weeks since Bush's Jackson Square speech, FEMA has alarmingly failed to advance any plan for the return of evacuees to temporary housing within the city or to connect displaced locals with reconstruction jobs. Moreover for lack of a tax base or emergency federal funding, local governments in afflicted areas have been forced to lay off thousands of employees and are unable to restore many essential public services.

Bush's promise to promptly help the region's unemployed—282,000 in Louisiana alone—has turned into slow-moving House legislation that would benefit less than one-quarter of those made jobless by Katrina. The powerful House Republican Study Group has vowed to support only relief measures that buttress the private sector and are offset by reductions in national social programs such as food stamps, student loans, and Medicaid.

The Republican leadership accordingly has blocked bipartisan legislation to extend Medicaid coverage to all low-income hurricane victims and has imposed unprecedented demands for loan repayment upon local governments. Katrina's victims, as Paul Krugman has pointed out, have been "nickel and dim[ed]" to an extent that casts grave doubt over whether large-scale reconstruction "will really materialize."

In the meantime more than two-thirds of FEMA contracts (according to Louisiana Governor Kathleen Blanco) has gone to out-of-state firms, with a blatant bias toward Halliburton and other Texas-based investors in Bush Inc. Simultaneously, unscrupulous employers have saturated Latino neighborhoods in Houston and other southwestern cities with fliers advertising a cornucopia of jobs in New Orleans and Gulfport.

With Davis-Bacon and affirmative-action requirements suspended by executive order, immigrant workers—housed in tents and working under appalling conditions—have flocked to jobs sites in the city, largely unaware that tens of thousands of blue-collar evacuees who would relish these jobs are unable to return for lack of family housing and federal support. Ethnic tensions are artificially inflamed by speculations about a "population swap" and impending 'Latinization' of the workforce.

New barriers, meanwhile, are being erected against the return of evacuees. In Mississippi's ruined coastal cities, as well as in metro New Orleans, Landlords—galvanized by rumors of gentrification and soaring land values—are beginning to institute mass evictions. (Although the oft-cited Lower Ninth Ward is actually a bastion of blue-collar homeownership, most poor New Orleanians are renters.)

Civil-rights lawyer Bill Quigley has described how renters have returned “to find furniture on the street and strangers living in their apartments at higher rents, despite an order by the Governor that no one can be evicted before October 25. Rents in the dry areas have doubled and tripled.”

Secretary of Housing Alfonso Jackson, meanwhile, seems to be working to fulfill his notorious prediction that New Orleans is “not going to be as black as it was for a long time, if ever again.” Public-housing and Section 8 residents recently protested that “the agencies in charge of these housing complexes [including HUD] are using allegations of storm damage to these complexes as a pretext for expelling working-class African-Americans, in a very blatant attempt to co-opt our homes and sell them to developers to build high-priced housing.”

Minority homeowners also face relentless pressures not to return. Insurance compensation, for example, is typically too small to allow homeowners in the eastern wards of New Orleans to rebuild if and when authorities re-open their neighborhoods.

Similarly, the Small Business Administration—so efficient in recapitalizing the San Fernando Valley in the aftermath of the 1994 Los Angeles earthquake—has so far dispensed only a few million dollars despite increasingly desperate pleas from tens of thousands of homeowners and small business people facing imminent foreclosure or bankruptcy.

As a result, not just the Black working class, but also the Black professional and business middle classes are now facing economic extinction while Washington dawdles. Tens of thousands of blue-collar white, Asian and Latino residents of afflicted Gulf communities also face de facto expulsion from the region, but only the removal of African-Americans is actually being advocated as policy.

Since Katrina made landfall, conservatives—beginning with Rep. Richard Baker's infamous comments about God having “finally cleaned up public housing in New Orleans”—have openly gloated over the possibilities for remaking New Orleans in a GOP image. (Medically, this might be considered akin to a mass outbreak of Tourette Syndrome, whose official symptoms include “the overwhelming urge to use a racial epithet.”)

Republican interest in reducing the Black Democratic vote in New Orleans—the balance of power in state elections—resonates with the oft-expressed desire of local elites to purge the city of “problem people.” As one major French Quarter landowner told *Der Spiegel*, “The hurricane drove poor people and criminals out of the city and we hope they don't come back. The party's finally over for these people and now they're going to have to find someplace else to live in the United States.”

Nor are downsizing and gentrification necessarily offensive to Democratic neo-liberals who have long advocated breaking up concentrated poverty and dispersing the black poor into older suburbs. The HOPE VI program, the showpiece of Clinton-era urban policy, demolished traditional public housing and ‘vouchered out’ residents in order to make way for mixed-use, market-rate developments like the St. Thomas redevelopment in New Orleans in the late 1990s that has become the prototype for elite visions of the city's future.

There exists, in other words, a sinister consensus of powerful interests about the benefits of an urban ‘triage’ that abandons historical centers of Black political power like the Ninth Ward while rebuilding million-dollar homes along the disaster-prone shores of Lake Ponchartrain and the Mississippi Sound.

The New Urbanism Meets the Old South

Into this fraught and sinister situation now blunders the circus-like spectacle of the Congress of New Urbanism (CNU): the architectural cult founded by Miami designers Andres Duany and Elizabeth Plater-Zyberk.

Twenty years ago, when Duany was first barnstorming the nation’s architectural schools and preservation societies, the New Urbanism seemed to offer an attractive model for building socially diverse and environmentally sustainable communities based on a systematization of older ‘city beautiful’ principles such as pedestrian scale, traditional street grids, an abundance of open space, and a mixture of land uses, income groups and building forms.

In practice, however, this diversity has never been achieved. Duany and Plater-Zyberk’s Seaside—the Florida suburb so brilliantly caricatured in the 1998 film “The Truman Show”—was an early warning that kitsch would usually triumph over democracy in New Urbanist designs.

Despite the populist language of the CNU manifesto, moreover, Duany has always courted corporate imaginers, mega-developers and politicians. In the mid-1990s, HUD under Secretary Henry Cisneros incorporated New Urbanist ideas into many of its HOPE VI projects.

Originally conceived as replacement housing for the poor, HOPE VI quickly morphed into a new strategy for replacing the poor themselves. Strategically-sited public-housing projects like New Orleans St. Thomas homes were demolished to make way for neo-traditionalist townhouses and stores (in the St. Thomas case, a giant Wal-Mart) in the New Urbanist spirit.

These “mixed-use, mixed-income” developments were typically advertised as little utopias of diversity, but—as in the St. Thomas case—the real dynamic was exclusionary rather than inclusionary, with only a few project residents being rehoused on site. Nationally, HOPE VI led to a net loss of more than 50,000 units of desperately needed low-income housing.

Smart developers accordingly have been quick to put New Urbanist halos over their otherwise rampant landgrabs and neighborhood demolitions. Likewise, shrewd conservatives like Paul Weyrich have come to recognize the obvious congruence between political traditionalism and architectural nostalgia.

Weyrich, the founding president of the Heritage Foundation, recently wrote that the “new urbanism needs to be part of the next conservatism,” a conservatism that remakes cities by purging their criminal underclasses. (After Katrina, Weyrich castigated New Orleans for “its welfare state and entitlement mentality... a prototype for Liberals” and questioned whether it should be rebuilt at all.)

Weyrich was the spiritual bridesmaid during the recent nuptials between the CNU’s Andreas Duany and Harley Barbour, the sleazy former tobacco lobbyist and Republican chair, who became governor of Mississippi by wrapping himself in the Confederate battle flag.

Barbour, long King of K Street, is nobody’s fool, and he is trying to extract as much long-term political and economic advantage from Katrina as possible. One of his declared priorities, for example, is bringing the casinos ashore into larger, more Las Vegas-like settings; another is to rapidly restore shoreline property values and squelch any debate about resettling the population on defensible higher ground (north of I-10, for example).

It was thus a rather brilliant stroke for Barbour to invite the CNU to help Mississippi rebuild its Gulf Coast “the right way.” The first phase was the so-called “mega-charrette”, 11-18 October, that brought 120 New Urbanists together with local officials and business groups to brainstorm strategies for the physical reconstruction of their communities.

Duany, as usual, whipped up a revivalistic fervor that must have been pleasing to Barbour and other descendants of the slave masters: “The architectural heritage of Mississippi is fabulous .. really, really marvelous.”

With *Gone with the Wind* as their apparent script, the CNU teams spent a frenzied week trying to show the locals how they could replace their dismal strip malls with glorious Greek Revival casinos and townhouses that would rival any of those that once existed on MGM’s backlot. The entire exercise stayed firmly within the parameters of a gambling-driven ‘heritage’ economy with casinos “woven into the community fabric” and McMansions rebuilt on the beach.

In the end, however, what was important was not the actual content of the charrette, nor the genuine idealism of many participants, but simply the legitimacy and publicity that CNU gave to Barbour’s agenda. Duany, who never misses an opportunity to push his panaceas to those in power, has foolishly made himself an accomplice to the Republicans’ evil social experiment on the Gulf Coast.

Mike Davis is the author of, among other books, *Monster at the Door: the Global Threat of Avian Influenza*.