

## **New Orleans is like Albania, in the best of ways**

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I am writing to you as one of over 20 graduate students in City Planning that the University of Pennsylvania sent down to New Orleans to help various development organizations with their reconstruction efforts. Having spent two years writing to you all from Albania, it came quite naturally for me to write a diary in part because it is now habit, but also because I love this city in many ways the way I love Albania, and for many of the same reasons.

As an urban planning dork, I drool not only over the architecture but over the trolley system which snakes through grassy medians (or “neutral ground” as they call it here) in the middle of the streets which are also home to joggers and other pedestrians. The park systems which abut this working (truly working, industrial and mighty) Mississippi, are impressive and the neighborhoods ringing the city make up for the commercial drunkenness of Bourbon Street.

However it is the food and pathos that make me love this city. A different flavor from Philadelphia it has the same age ripened personality, more friendly to be sure, but with weird politicians and intense local flavor. Oh and the flavor of the food... I really cant write enough about it, but there has been far too much soft succulent ribs, dripping po’boys, and red beans and rice then is good for me.

Above it all, there is an intense familiarity with the place, derived from all things, my time in Albania. It isn’t just the corner shacks on residential property in the poorest of neighborhoods which remind me of “dyqan te fshat” or the ability to drink in public. It’s the slightly slower pace of things, and the friendliness and garrulousness which I fit so well in to. I have spent my days walking through what at night are termed the worst of ghettos, smiling and talking to people, taking pictures of crumbling old “double shotgun” and “Cajun cottages,” low density Victorian housing, amid a cool breeze and falling in love with this city.

## **Tourons and WASHes**

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New Orleans does its best to ensure that the incoming tourists know that they are here in “Nawlins!” The lamps stretching down the highway medians are all detailed with wrought iron to evoke the French Quarter, and the concrete sound walls lining the self same road are stamped with magnolia icons. Even the city’s quirkiness is broadcast loudly; the billboards down the road advertise strip clubs, boasting “Thousands of pretty girls, 3 Ugly ones.”

Late one night a friend of mine noted much or most of the city’s most prized traditions were forged out of desperate poverty. In many ways the exaggerated and commercialized licentiousness, this quirky and boozy idea of New Orleans and Bourbon Street in particular, are outcrops of this tendency. New Orleans now makes its money off of people coming to drink and forget themselves amid the dense European blocks and highly architecturally articulated French Quarter.

However the magic of New Orleans does not lie in its amnesty from normal life. Locals insist that New Orleans is the northern most point of the Caribbean; it is that creole of various cultures which manifests itself both in law and society that makes the city what it is. It is a place where a friend noted, upon hearing of the possibility to purchase (or possibly steal) an Easter Bunny costume, that he could think of at least ten events

and locations where he could wear such a costume and it would not be in appropriate. It isn't just that ancient law requires any parade to have a police escort, such that wedding parties departing from churches are announced by the blazing sirens of motorcycled cops. Rather it's the insistence, purportedly grounded in the Napoleonic Code that the law is not here to protect people from their own stupidity that enables some of the more outlandish behavior in New Orleans. Sometimes this ends in disastrous results: several Penn students witnessed one wedding caravan tearing down the street hit the last cop trailing another procession, knocking him off and crumbling his bike.

The Tourons, as the worst tourists are not so affectionately known by local Waiter And Service Hipsters (WASHes) only see the ability to walk around with open containers, they don't see the historic European tradition of promenades and socialization which preceded and gave birth to it.

It is also hard for tourists today to see the damage of Katrina. It isn't just that the French Quarter was largely spared, and that most of the damage was out in the neighborhoods. But the city today relies solely upon tourist revenue and so they are catered and pampered in ways unbelievable to a Philadelphian. However, long time residents and street artists complain that today the city is "a city of special events... it used to be *the* special event."

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The colonizers as they call themselves returned to the city within a month after Katrina. Most of them are young and often single. There has been a huge demographic shift in the city, and its not just the rise of latino's coming in through the construction and service industry; it's the abandonment of the city by the old families and the elderly. Part of it is simply that it is much harder to start and raise a family here now. Insurance rates have sky rocketed and it is reflected in rents and prices. It can take six hours for the cops to arrive at the sight of a reported burglary. Moreover, ever since the Hurrucation as locals call the forced vacation of the hurricane, the old neighborhoods are empty of their long time residents. Now blocks which were home to generations of families intermarrying and growing up together are gone. Often these oldest neighborhoods are too toxic to come back to, torn to bits not just by the hurricane, but poisoned by the chemicals that the hurricane picked up from the refineries it hit first.

New to New Orleans are the "Crusties" or "Gutter Punks" familiar to some West Philadelphia residents. They invaded soon after Katrina, attracted by the numerous squatting opportunities and have stayed, smoking pot out of plastic bags along the water front and juggling in front of Jackson Square. However some things have stayed the same, the bar culture, especially among the service industry staff, remains as strong as ever. A small town, with an even smaller sub culture of hard core wait staff, they live in a small circuit of bars and dive's in the French Quarter, hanging out with friends and their adopted family of fellow service workers, preferring to stand around in bars on Christmas Day after having opened all their presents, then staying home and playing cards. The entire French Quarter, is in many ways, their own extended living room, at least between the hours of midnight and five in the morning when the tourists leave, and they have the town once again to themselves. It is wandering in the early hours of the morning, past Brad and Angelina's (Pitt and Jolie) house, through the maze of low "shotgun" houses (these small houses are one room wide, with a single doorway from which you can shoot a shotgun and not hit a wall as it travels to the back door, and which have great ventilation) and architectural marvels hopping from one dark bar to another, that you see the real city.

## After the Storm

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Post Katrina New Orleans faces a few unique challenges that are maybe both inherently local as well as consistent with other post disaster reconstruction efforts. This is a result both of rampant speculation and opportunism, and the gradual emergence of problems that may have once gone long unaddressed were it not for a ramped up reconstruction effort addressing these long structural issues.

The fires which dot the landscape, as old houses and properties go up in flames at the hands of land owners trying to take advantage of insurance coverage has set "New Orleans on fire." Land speculation is of course rampant, and in many ways one gets the impression that despite, or because of, the numerous agencies at work and a mayor largely ignored and or hated, that there is a vacuum of power and coordination which allows this opportunism to flourish. However other problems, such as the incredible proliferation of churches owning large and often scattered amounts of land through out the most impoverished areas which they are unwilling or unable to develop, would have gone long unnoticed without the attention the city's poorest neighborhoods are now receiving. All of these problems run into an even larger issue of land tenure. New Orleans has historically had a markedly low rate of home ownership, most of its land owned by large landlords, and enabling equity in low income areas is markedly difficult here.

The solutions to these problems are not always handled with the greatest of care either. Habitat for Humanity, lauded for its efforts, is criticized by local development officials for building shelter not homes, criticizing 3 bed room houses with only one bathroom and shoddy materials. Nor does giving tents and mattresses to homeless protestors relocated from their original site in front of city hall to the I-10 underpass quite solve the problems.

This is not meant as a blanket criticism against the reconstruction efforts. The flood of support that has come largely independently of government encouragement, as massive amounts of funds are still tied up in a legislative and political morass, is heartening. However it's a messy process, and in it remains to be seen what sort of clean up will have to be done for the reconstruction process itself.

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Some things will never be cleaned up. I can only imagine that my friends can still taste the gasoline in their mouths as they siphoned it out of parked cars to fill their own truck on their way out of the city during the storm. These are the stories you hear here, between natives late at night over beer the stories that never made it to the national news. Or if they did, they washed away with our traditional short attention span. Sitting on the roof of my friends building at three in the morning it was conceivable to imagine the entire sky line dark and dead, but try as I may I could not conceive of sitting in a darkened superdome stuffed into the upper sections because the ground floor was flooded living in a concrete and dangerous air bubble with out drinking water and afraid of roving gangs. I can't imagine what it was like to be on the bridge out of town, which technically is in your own Parish, and have Jefferson County police cross the bridge to make sure no one actually walked across the bridge into their county, trapping you in hell. Tales of how the police and national guard acted, forcing people at gun point to go to the convention center, tearing off the doors of hotel liquor cabinets because they were too lazy to find the key on the key chain that the manager had given them, are just as horrifying as the dead bodies rotting in the city for three days outside people's houses I cried when I heard of the woman who months after the hurricane returned to her local grocery and asked to pay for the goods she looted during the flood and then stood there crying with the cashier who refused her money. But I rage not only at a President who turned away the help of foreign countries, and at the rest of this country where it

would seem New Orleanians can never be comfortable because we can't understand what they went through nor do we want to. I don't know how Albanians do it, stuffing the turmoil of the 1997 chaos, the road side gangs and random kidnappings and the like, into the back of their collective psyche, I can only hope we never do the same.

Genevieve Cadwalader

New Orleans Journal Entry

Friday: our last day of working for Neighborhood Housing Services.

Today before work I got up early, slipped on my running shoes and went for a jog along the streets of the French Quarter, just north of our hotel. Since part of the experience of this trip was to explore areas of New Orleans that are beyond the path of a typical tourist's visit, I wanted to make sure I saw the French Quarter in its off hours. The streets were calm, just beginning to show signs of life. As I ran along, I took in the brightly painted houses, wrought iron balconies, and peered through grates to the courtyards beyond, imagining what it would be like to live in one of these buildings. This run made me realize however that beyond the architecture, what gives the French Quarter its unique character are the people crowding its streets and spilling out onto its sidewalks every evening. As a planner, I can't help but fall in love with this place because of its vibrant street life.

Since we completed all of the surveying yesterday for NHS, today is a day of final data entry and general wrap up of the projects we have been working on. It was a beautiful day so we brought our laptops outside and set ourselves up in the outdoor classroom at the Community Center. Over the course of the day, several of the resident volunteers who surveyed with us during the week stopped by to thank us and encourage us to return to New Orleans sometime. In the 5 days we've worked out of the 7<sup>th</sup> ward community center I've been amazed at the warmth and gratitude people in the neighborhood have shown towards us.

The highlight of the day was the presentation we gave to the representatives, including Rev. Cheryl Cramer from Beecher Church, whose immediate neighborhood we had surveyed on Monday. They were interested in starting some small-scale development projects in blocks surrounding their Church. Our goal was to provide them with some initial information on the existing conditions of each parcel so that

they could go forward with their plans. Cheryl expressed to us that she believed that working on rehabilitating the neighborhood was a logical extension of their Church's mission and would be a concrete way to build community with their neighbors. In preparation for the meeting, we had to pull together all the data we collected and make it meaningful to the Church in a very short period of time. I thought this was a particularly valuable process for us as students to go through because we will undoubtedly be synthesizing information on short notice again and again during our careers. The presentation to Beecher went well and I think we left them better informed about what the development process involves as well as armed with good data about their neighborhood.

One of the most obvious roadblocks to redevelopment in New Orleans is that lack of accurate data available and the amount of data that is shared between organizations. So many of the efforts to rebuild that I saw in New Orleans are disconnected. I can't help but wonder what the consequences may be to rebuilding in such piecemeal and relatively unregulated manor. It was an incredible experience to meet so many people who lived in the 7<sup>th</sup> Ward, many of whom had owned houses there for generations. Through them, I gained a better appreciation of how ingrained the New Orleanian lifestyle and culture is in its residents. They all had an incredible amount of hope and optimism for the future of their city. Katrina has given us the opportunity to take planning and rebuilding efforts to a new level, to approach these complex problems in creative ways and I sincerely hope that this ambition is realized.

“We don’t call this a hurricane. We call this ‘When the levees broke.’”

The people of New Orleans look at the continued devastation around them and don’t usually curse god or Katrina. To them, the disaster was not a natural one; it was the failure of government to serve its citizens, from the local government to the state to the federal government and emergency management agencies.

So what were these failures? They are many, but the ones that struck me most are:

- Hurricane Katrina did not hit New Orleans – its worst bulk missed the city and made landfall to the east. When the levees broke, the storm was a Category 2. The Army Corps of Engineers said the levees were supposed to withstand a Category 4 storm and did not acknowledge until well after the storm that the levees had not been properly maintained.
- The federal government, especially the President, was sluggish to act on the disaster. New Orleanians can’t understand how Bush reacts to international natural disasters sooner than he addressed New Orleans. They don’t understand how the victims of 9/11 were all cut checks for damages stemming from the government’s failure while they are fighting tooth and nail to get insurance and Road Home money.
- A political dispute between Gov. Kathleen Blanco and Mayor Ray Nagin hampered recovery efforts. While they quibbled over power and authority, bodies floated in the street and floodwaters stood stagnant. It is criminal and unthinkable that a political feud could get in the way of restoring the city
- In the aftermath of the storm, many people nationwide asked why homeowners did not have flood insurance. The answer is that the National Flood Insurance Program didn’t require them too. These people were not actually in high flood risk areas, and now they’re being penalized for not having enough insurance. Would you buy insurance you never thought you’d need?

Yet, in the midst of all this, hope endures. It is everywhere. The people of the 7<sup>th</sup> Ward had no reason to trust a bunch of white people with clipboards looking at their houses. The neighbors we met were generally incredibly thankful for the help we brought. Walking around the city, there are few signs that the government is rebuilding. Instead, that challenge is being taken up by non-profits and churches. Volunteers are restoring New Orleans, not government agencies.

New Orleanians live DESPITE a legacy of corruption; DESPITE being almost entirely below sea level; DESPITE the failures of Hurricane Katrina; DESPITE a vacuum of dynamic leadership; DESPITE feeling like they’ve been left behind.

The spirit of New Orleans lives on.

Carolyn Johnson

*On an early morning jog through the French Quarter, I saw workers hosing down the streets. The morning air smelled like stale beer and fried food.*

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*At noon, we met up with the Fellows working in New Orleans for a barbeque at a park on the banks of the Mississippi. The drive to and from was beautiful. We traveled through a part of Uptown that that is home to old mansions painted pinks, yellows and blues. The day was windy and cool but the sun was shining.*

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*The Fellows seem to be content with their work and happy with life in New Orleans. I heard at least two non-locals say that the adjusting to southern culture has been a challenge.*

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*Our surveying site is not the most heavily impacted by the storm – flooding was on a lesser scale. However, it is an area of historic disinvestment and considered one of the most dangerous in the city.*

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*While surveying, the owner of a barber hop warned us about how unsafe the neighborhood is. Up until this point, I felt secure.*

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*Houses, some abandoned some occupied, stand in fields of grass in the lower ninth ward. The scene looks almost rural. Chris tells us that the environment surprises him too. Most of the flooded homes and rubble have been cleared away. We see signs of homes now gone; a cement slab or a cinderblock foundation. As a group, we have talked about the *New Orleans spectacle*; the tourist-like way of outsiders who come to the city for a glimpse of Katrina's carnage. It feels uncomfortable and sad to be part of the frenzy.*

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*The second line jazz music playing at the bar was loud and wonderfully dance provoking. Young people kept spilling through the entrance and it seemed impossible that one more animal could fit inside the red mitten. Shoulder to shoulder, sweaty back on sticky arm, we moved along to the horns.*

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*New Orleans is a segregated city like Philadelphia. Sean tells us that racial relations are much different in the south. I wish I could stay longer to better understand the culture of this place.*

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*People are curious about why we are walking around with cameras and scribbling notes. Everyone seems to be comfortable after we explain our task. Today, I told an older man that Sally and I were from Philly and a sense of camaraderie entered the conversation; it was as if the fact that we all lived in hard knock cities united us in a way that made smiles and jokes acceptable.*

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*Chris is a log-time resident of the city and I was interested in hearing his thought on the "outsiders" who have moved to the city to help with the redevelopment. Our lunch came before he answered the question and the subject fell by the wayside. People say that New Orleans is a city that does not like change. It must be hard to have an influx of new blood with new ideas.*

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*Are there any vegetarians in NO?*





Faith Cole  
PennIUR – New Orleans, LA Spring Break Journal  
March 25, 2008

New Orleans seems like a complicated place. My first impression: Why does the bathroom at the airport's baggage claim have a biohazard container for used syringes? Drugs? Insulin injections? Rampant diabetes due to beignet over-consumption?

Nothing in New Orleans really looks new – except for the risers they're building along I-10 to accommodate another layer of highway – although Linda optimistically thinks they could also work for light rail. On the ride into town, the billboard advertisements are predominately about strip clubs in town – probably in the French Quarter, including Larry Flynt's Barely Legal. Remember him from the days of the highly controversial Hustler store on 6<sup>th</sup> street in downtown Cincinnati (Cincinnati) – where the new contemporary arts center building stands. I haven't been typing for three days and my fingers feel rusty. As we get closer to the CBD, we see the spread out towers of downtown New Orleans. Nothing looks new. Evidently, skyscraper technology evolved in the '80s to the point where they could finally build towers on soil – and it looks like nothing new has been built here since. Imagine that in the hot, humid New Orleans climate it's difficult to keep things clean, the way that grandma complains about living in a small town on the Florida panhandle. Nature is constantly striving to reclaim the land here – either through the vegetation that grows all year, the rains and moisture that aid the deterioration process, or because of storms like Katrina – the reason why we're here.

But, you come to NOLA for its history, charm and culture, not for the modern architecture. Still want to check out the Piazza D'Italia – Sally's a great fan and we saw slides of it during one of our many PoMo lectures in 550. Larice would be proud.

As we rounded the Superdome, I cringed, thinking about all of the people who spent days in there after the storms hit, and all of the horrendous things that did or didn't happen there – all so convoluted in the news – such a hazy time for everyone. There is rust coming out what look like ventilation grates on the side, like it's gone leaky, or is crying, or oozing some kind of rot. In a way, the towers of downtown bathed in bright daylight looks like a printed advertisement that's been in a store window so long it's been bleached by the sun. There is a lot of grey and beige. Near the Superdome some we see a different kind of billboard – four young, black, male faces lined up – with their first and last names under their pictures, “Wanted for Murder” stretching across the top. You wouldn't guess that Philly is the city w/ the Murder Capital title.

The hotel is huge, right on Canal Street, on the edge of the French Quarter. It's very nice, but also worn around the edges, like most things here seem to be. Our room is on the 22<sup>nd</sup> floor, our window faces riverside. The Mississippi is huge, wide, and busy. Barges drift down like industrial icebergs, moving steadily hauling glacial mountains of rock, or dirt, or some other kind of rough material. I think about the fact that there is Ohio River water in there, that came all of the way from Cincinnati (my hometown) – and before that from Pittsburgh (where I lived for five years). I love river cities and have fantasized about a Huck Finn adventure. Can't imagine what the River must have been like 150 years ago. Or even 40 years ago for that matter. I talked to my grandma during our regular Sunday call and she told me all about how she and grandpa spent 14 weeks here in 1971? 72? When he was doing consulting work . . . in Metairie? She would walk through the Quarter, have her coffee and beignets at Café du Monde, then circle Jackson Square. She had a portrait done in Pirate's Alley. It's hanging in her house – I know exactly the one she means – and it really is her spitting image.

We napped after we arrived. I'd not slept well the night before and was still exhausted from having a cold + midterms the week prior. Once we were up, I wandered around with Anna and Genevieve through the Quarter. There was an Italian parade going on. The girls kissed the Italian men, got beads and even a garter. A man walked past with two puppies, I asked if I could pet them. He said yes, then he asked me for money. I didn't give him any and felt awkward for having initiated the conversation.

We finally landed at a restaurant called Petunia's. It didn't take long to get a table. We had gumbo all around, nice and slimy with the okra and oh so tasty. It reminded me of how many items on Mullane's menu (my mother's restaurant) were Cajun inspired.

Faith Cole  
PennIUR – New Orleans, LA Spring Break Journal  
March 25, 2008

On Sunday morning I was on the street by 9:30am. The Concierge directed me to Café du Monde for coffee and a beignet, so I headed up Decatur Street. The sun is so bright here, I needed to pick up some sunglasses. I stopped into one of the many nearly identical gift shops – selling beads, hot sauce and bikini tee shirts – that run along the road to look around. I ended up chatting with a woman (originally from Vietnam) behind the counter, and she told me about how her ex-husband stayed in NOLA during the hurricane. The entire first floor of his house flooded. He and the dog were on the second floor for three days. He finally swam out, found a boat, and headed back to get the dog. A police officer intercepted him and forbid him to return to his house, finally pointing a gun at him and threatening violence if he persisted. The ex-husband left. As he turned away, the ex-wife gestured as if she were him, wiping away a tear, that formed as he realized that the dog would never survive. When he finally did return to the house, the dog had died. She said that he has a new dog now, and that he will never stay in the city again when there's an evacuation for a storm.

Café du Monde was packed. I couldn't get a table at another café, they'd only seat me if I ordered a full meal. The next place didn't have pastries. I finally cut into the quarter from Decatur, was admiring all of the architectural detail and be-ferned balconies that I missed on the previous night when it was too dark, and the crowds were too distracting to notice much of anything else. I accosted a man walking by with a to-go cup of coffee to ask where he'd gotten it. In a deep NOLA drawl, he directed me to Croissant D'or – lovely – got a café au lait and a chocolate croissant for \$3.60! And got to pet a basset hound to boot. Was lovely, and seems like the kind of place where people who know the area like to go. I hope to go back. Definitely worth waiting for.

Managed to get back to the hotel in time to meet the group to head out to Audubon Park for the CUREX Fellows picnic. St. Charles Avenue is amazing, Magazine Street, there's so much to say about it. The buildings are lovely, charming. The streetcar, slow as molasses runs in the center – so slow that people walk, jog, and ride bikes along the tracks – they call it “neutral space.” The trees and electrical wires lining the roadway are strung with beads – tossed into the air and left to hang during Mardi Gras perhaps – not too long ago . . . The plants are gorgeous, now things are looking really green and alive. Live Oaks draped with Spanish Moss remind me of trips to Tallahassee. Azaleas are blooming in the Garden District.

Looking out the hotel window isn't where I really got close to the Mississippi. It was at the park, located right on the water's edge, near to the zoo. The ships float by, so silently, and quickly, the current moves fast. The ships tower above you and are so close it's difficult at all to read a name like – Lochness – on the prow.

The picnic was fun, sunny, windy, cold in the shade. The BBQ was slow in the making. Had good conversations with fellows. Amber lived in Cincinnati for two years while starting some business. She lived up the street from Kaldi's and said that Cincinnati was the first time that she saw / experienced such a degree of poverty and segregation. Funny, to hear her describe the part of town where I spent so much time - went to school downtown until 10<sup>th</sup> grade. Gerri, my babysitter, who helped my mom raise me, lived right down on Main Street. Abby wants to save the homeless squatters from burning buildings, Ian wonders if it could have been an insurance fire. Monica worked for Enron and had to pack her bags when things went bust, but she said it was a great time while it lasted. She thinks I'm 22? – too bad I'm probably older than she is. She advises me professionally to pick something and focus on it, get really good at it. Amber recommends finance classes. With these guys, the focus is totally policy, not design – finally a place where designers aren't king – so this does exist! They see themselves as implementers, not planners.

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Other thoughts on NOLA:

- Property ownership seems high for a place that is so poor. Perhaps further evidence that people really don't move away and that NOLA is and has always been their home. On one hand, it's charming and increasingly rare with people being so mobile - but it's also challenging from the standpoint that it never makes sense to build in a flood plain and expect that structure to last.

Faith Cole

PennIUR – New Orleans, LA Spring Break Journal

March 25, 2008

- The press seems to say that nothing is happening, but in fact, a ton is happening - NOLA has, I think, four plans that have been drafted for it, lots of money has been set aside, thousands of volunteers have traveled there to work, donation money has been collected, etc. - it seems like there just isn't a well functioning, efficient administrative system to coordinate, implement, and monitor recovery programs, such that it's falling on the shoulders of nonprofits (bought by private foundations - namely Rockefeller)
- Coordination and interaction between numerous federal, state, local, and grassroots is a challenging issue. Interns spent one week volunteering across three nonprofits and one public agency. Many of our impressions about the structure of organizational relationships draw on interactions with our CUREX Fellow supervisors. It seems that communication, transparency, and information sharing do not occur frequently or without some resistance. The fact that we were all involved in property surveys - using different forms, answering different questions, and using different databases to capture our data further illustrates the lack of coordination on a broader scale. On one hand, the level of grassroots activity in place of strong public leadership and guidance is inspiring - at the same time - it does not offer the same kind of opportunity for coherence and standardization that the administration of New Orleans has lacked - that a more macro approach could present.
- CUREX Fellows are in a unique position where their sense of professional identity in New Orleans is more strongly associated with their status as fellows - rather than employees for one nonprofit or another, or a public agency. The level to which Fellows interact with one another socially and their common bond of the program, creates trust and affability that strikes one as general absent in relations between employees of various agencies and other bodies. For these reasons, Fellows find that their track 2 / off the record dialog enables them to ask for - and share - information much more easily than would be the case if their relationships were defined by the overarching bureaucratic culture of New Orleans (or many other organizations for that matter).
- A large element of the city's laissez-faire charm and "let the good times roll" atmosphere flourishes because of the city's lax administrative and regulatory enforcement. After generations of a relaxed (and at times corrupt) way of doing business, the new governor is cracking down and forcing people to obey strict(er) standards and processes. If NOLA had generations to fix things, it the city might have been successful phasing in various requirements, and following up with compliance monitoring and enforcement. Instead, NOLA is being forced to jump to attention quickly - and on a broken leg at that.
- Now, when NOLA finds itself reeling to recover - and there are plenty of funds and programs available for that to happen - the legal requirements and restrictions on the money make it challenging for people to actually gain access to the aid that the federal government has granted to them and which the state currently holds. One of the most illustrative examples of this conundrum deals with the requirement of accurate property titles in order for home owners to qualify for and receive federal rebuilding funds currently held by the state. One important piece of background information is that New Orleans is unique for having a high proportion of low income homeowners. In many cases, as it has been explained to us, prior generations have paid off the property - and it has passed on to family members over the generations. Due in part to a lax regulatory environment and in part to homeowners' lack of knowledge, resources, or willingness to do so, updated property entitlements have not been filed to reflect changes in ownership. Now people who have spent their entire lives in one house find that the state is not legally able to recognize their claims. The difficulties of post-Katrina are compounded by reinvigorated state-level scrutiny on how funds are divvied up. Louisiana and New Orleans are known for corruption and the new governor has decided to crack down on bad accounting and at a time when people are still reeling from the collective trauma of the storms and their aftermath.

Sally Foster  
1<sup>st</sup> year Master of City and Regional Planning Candidate  
Urban Design Concentration

*The city of New Orleans charmed each one of my friends on the trip, and I was no exception. From the balconies of the French Quarter to the trolleys and neutral grounds of the Garden District, the beignets to the shrimp creole, and the sunshine to the warm greetings from everyone we met, we encountered a city with a character and soul unlike any other.*

*Central City, the area that the New Orleans Neighborhood Development (NONDC) works in, is an inner suburb located in the midst of all of New Orleans' charm. Yet, like many of these suburbs across the country, the area has experienced considerable disinvestment and wrestles with crime and poverty. This was true before Hurricanes Katrina and Rita and continues today in their aftermath.*

*The hurricanes had an immense impact on the city. Even two and a half years later, the physical ramifications remain apparent, though different neighborhoods manifest it differently. In areas of the most severe flooding, buildings have been reduced to mere foundations now that debris removal has been finished. Areas that fared better have abandoned and deteriorated buildings, some of which have been victims of arson, as well as water lines and spray paint markings left by rescue workers during the first few days after the storms.*

*While these physical conditions make it difficult to escape the realities of Katrina in these residential neighborhoods, the NONDC team learned that it can also be difficult to determine what resulted from the storms and flooding and what had deteriorated long before. In some sense, the difference is immaterial at this point. Katrina had non-physical impacts as well, not the least of which was bringing to light many of the inequities and struggles facing the city. In response, there has been renewed interest and increased funding opportunities directed at restoring the city's health. In response, many small, non-profit redevelopment initiatives have sprung up. Many others have changed their focus in response to the changed environment. These were, by and large, the organizations that we as interns were exposed to first hand over spring break. It became clear to me that opportunities for true improvement can come out of even the most horrible of situations.*

*Yet, to take advantage of this opportunity requires immense amounts of work. Individual homeowners and business owners that I encountered talked about the incredible amount of effort they put in to restoring their property. Now, they worry about the properties around them that have not been brought back. They hope something will be done with them. This is where other organizations step in. There are huge amounts of work to be done in these situations as well to help property owners restore and rebuild or to find someone who will. Despite the outpouring of support and the uprising of communities, there is more to be done.*

*Just a few weeks before I got on a plane for New Orleans, the city was not a part of my thoughts at all. The whirlwind of planning for and going on the trip itself have left me with an experience that will stick with me for years to come.*

Mary Itz

New Orleans Journal

Tuesday, March 11, 2008

Today we took a car ride with Ben, one of the two NORA inspectors. We went to lunch at a very small but very crowded neighborhood restaurant on the other side of I-10 called Two Sisters. The kitchen was cramped and could fit only a few people, but the fried chicken and greens were quite delicious. During lunch Ben told us his history and gave life lessons. He grew up in New Orleans. He drove to Baton Rouge a few days before the Katrina hit. He came back six weeks after the storm to start rebuilding. By learning his father's and grandfather's trade he became an experienced carpenter. He fixed three houses before he started to rebuild his own. He said that the entire tragedy of the aftermath of Katrina did not hit him until after he completed his house months after the flooding. After NORA reopened months after the storm, he went on inspections and began to see the destruction. He would walk into houses and there was nothing left inside and he would walk into others and everything was almost in place, just as the owners had left in months before.

Ben is a very proud Creole from New Orleans. He gave us a quick synopsis of the Creole culture. For him to be Creole is to be proud of one's heritage, French, Spanish, Native American, and African American. It is also about craftsmanship and what is learned and passed down from previous generations. It is a duty to God, family, and community. And it is all about the cooking! His son plays in a brass band and plays what he calls, "upbeat jazz" music, and we had the fortune of listening to parts of a CD.

After lunch we drove in the periphery of where the LSU Hospital may be built. An area bounded by Orleans Avenue and Canal Street to the north and south and North Broad and I-10 to the east and west. In a windshield we were to identify abandoned structures that could be public hazards and take a photo of the property. These properties would then be identified as possible parcels that NORA would file suit against for a taking after further inspections by the inspectors. Ben then took us by parcels he had already inspected and were currently identified as parcels ready for NORA to file suit. Next, we drove through the Seventh Ward and saw the raised shotgun house that Ben grew up in and the house that his uncle still lived in. His uncle's house was a large duplex with several steps to the front door. One side a trailer sat. This was the first visible water line that I saw on a house.

Our tour ended with a quick drive through of the Lower Ninth Ward. Ben pointed out as we drove across the industrial bridge how the water sat above the low land on either side. When we crossed the bridge there was an empty field. I soon realized that this had formally been a neighborhood with houses. We turned down a street where front stoops going nowhere served as reminders of what had been. As we drove further from the levee there were some houses, every few blocks a house would be currently occupied. I saw one FEMA trailer located with nothing around it for blocks. There was one block with huge beautiful old trees, but nothing remained standing the few blocks surrounding it. One house had a refrigerator on the roof, and another house had floated to a spot a few blocks from where it had previously belonged, and one was left that had entirely collapsed on itself. I asked why some

houses that were clearly now located on someone else's property and clearly unlivable were left standing. Ben replied that the served as a reminder of what had happened which I thought was an amazing truth. The cleanup should have removed all of the wreckage and razed all unstable buildings, but instead some reminders had been left.

There were some but very few efforts of rebuilding here. Every few square blocks there would be a house that was currently occupied. As we drove back to the office across another bridge, there were no stores open along the commercial arterial road. For current residents to purchase even convenience items, they would have to drive at least ten or fifteen minutes in a car. To me, those rebuilding seemed so isolated.

We ended the day with some time talking to Omeed. He moved to New Orleans in June 2007 and is a graduate from law school and planning school. He identified himself as part of the second wave of rebuilders. The past two years he identified as the first wave of people which were emergency organizations that came to New Orleans to clean up and to begin the process of identifying what would happen next. He identified the second wave of people as himself and the CUREX Fellows as those who are coming to New Orleans and staying for the long haul. These are changing and strengthening the current institutions to redevelop the city.

Thursday, March 14, 2008

Today we were tasked to do a windshield survey of two hundred properties in Lakeview. Most properties are LLT currently owned by the Louisiana Land Trust and soon will be given to NORA. From our survey and back up research, this will give NORA the information needed to identify properties that should be offered to neighbors as part of the Lot Next Door Program, those that could have Katrina houses built on them, and those parcels that should be sold to developers.

Lakeview was an interesting contrast compared to the Lower Ninth Ward. The Lower Ninth Ward was described to us as housing that was inexpensive enough to be bought by low income people who moved to New Orleans from other places in Louisiana and Mississippi. These houses here were not always built up to code. Lakeview was also a hard hit area in New Orleans but it has predominantly middle to upper income residents. Some houses had been abandoned and there were many vacant lots, but there was a lot more rebuilding evident here than in other parts of the city. The streets in this area were particularly in poor condition. There was an esplanade on one street and it was evident how the ground had sunk around an underground pipe. There were huge sinkholes in other areas that were big enough to swallow a car.

I saw high water lines on a few of the abandoned houses. It was then realized that this water line was not left by the rising water. It was not even left by the water when it was at its peak. This line showed where the water level stood for weeks after the storm.

As I looked back through my emails the other night and thought back to the lead-up to this trip, I realized that from the student's standpoint, this trip went from idea stage to having booked tickets in a little over two weeks. The fact that there were over twenty people ready and willing to commit to the trip is impressive; the fact that the people working behind the scenes made it happen is even more impressive.

We were in New Orleans for a week, and I think it's important to put our story within that context. A week is not a lot of time, *especially* in a city that's been fighting an uphill battle of redevelopment since it flooded over 2 ½ years ago. During our week in New Orleans, we got a lot of work done. The projects we finished were relevant, practical, and in a lot of cases will serve as building blocks for future redevelopment. But what made the most substantial impression on a lot of us were the stories we heard and the conversations we had with people in the neighborhoods where we worked every day.

A week is not a lot of time. We know that. But it's plenty of time to listen to stories from people whose family and neighborhood ties go back for generations. It was enough time to speak with a woman whose great-grandparents bought the same house she's lived in for decades and now shares with her own grandchildren. It was enough time to hear from a man who swam through the floods of Hurricane Bessie in 1965 and who had to do it again forty years later. It was enough time to listen to a grandmother tell a story of displacement and frustration, but ended with joy at returning home and hope at what the future could bring.

A week is more than enough time to begin gathering the information that really matters.

It's easy to get so focused on trying to accomplish a goal or a project that we often forget the importance of listening to what other people have to say. We forget the role that listening can play in helping to accomplish that goal. In the specific context of New Orleans, it's important to remember that all these things we're doing—the CUREx fellowships, the redevelopment efforts, the funding of spring break internships—are all happening because of these stories.

New Orleans has a story it needs and wants to tell. But like many powerful stories, it's one that's not openly shared with anyone. You have to show a respect and a genuine interest that as a general rule should surround all conversations. . As an outsider, you have to be willing to listen when the time is right and the stories surface.

Before Feb. 7<sup>th</sup> (first email), no one in our class was talking about New Orleans. A month and a half later, 21 of us are eagerly figuring out how we can get back.



### **Remembering why I wanted to become a planner in the first place.**

While writing a segment of our New Orleans report, I realized that the work my classmates and I did in that one week in New Orleans was exactly why I wanted to become a planner. That's why I had spent all that time putting together those grad school applications, searching out a summer internship and attending lectures. Doing work that directly impacts the lives of people in positive ways is what I hoped becoming a planner would mean. From the smiles on their faces and the energy they displayed, I knew my classmates felt the same way, and for that I was so proud of our group. It was our first stab at putting our Penn educations to real, practical, good use, and we certainly enjoyed it. Even upon our return to chilly, rainy Philadelphia and reintroduction to those laptops that missed us so over break, the feeling of joy extending from our trip to New Orleans persisted. We seemed to smile at each other more and collaborate even better. This I credit not only to the fulfilling nature of the work we did there, but also from the lessons we learned from the people of New Orleans and the Rockefeller Fellows we worked with.

The residents I encountered all over New Orleans taught me to be hopeful, grateful and kind at every chance I got. We northerners always hear about southern hospitality and find it alien and possibly even unnatural. What I never could have imagined is how powerful this character trait can be. Homes, life-long communities, schools, family members washed away with Katrina. Residents of New Orleans lost everything and have not been fairly compensated. They have been displaced and cast off to Houston or Atlanta. They have been told their communities are not going to be rebuilt. And yet they are not bitter. They are not hostile. They are determined. They are hopeful. They are going to rebuild, even if it means living in a cramped trailer for years while they piece the house back together in the evenings and on weekends. Upon the sight of volunteers, they welcome them to the community, tell them that they are grateful for their presence, and ask them never to forget. I imagine that a less resilient people could have been knocked out of commission by Katrina. Anger at the government's weak response may have paralyzed others. A lack of resources could have proved too discouraging. But not the people of New Orleans. Using whatever scarce resources they can scrounge together, they will rebuild.

Why, one might ask. Well, I believe now that you must spend some time in New Orleans in order to understand. Before I went, I didn't necessarily think that the rebuilding of New Orleans proper was most important, as long as those affected received new homes and compensation for their losses. The revelation a trip to New Orleans produces is that place matters, New Orleans matters. New Orleans is a beautiful, wonderful place. A celebration of life, pure and simple. A city with a soul. So unique. The only place in America where parades regularly trump traffic and no one honks, except when joining in the festivities. A place that can leave a smile on your face, months after you return to Philadelphia. We must protect, nurture, and cultivate New Orleans. If place does matter, and I hope most believe that it does, New Orleans matters the most.

That New Orleans has a soul unlike any other city is nothing new to its displaced residents. It is a part of them just as they are a part of it. The city will never be fully healed without them. It will never be whole. And neither will they. As 7<sup>th</sup> Ward resident and Beecher Church Reverend Cheryl explained to me, the displaced people of New Orleans have spent their lives there. Their families have spent generations there. The city's canals flow through their veins. To live elsewhere, against their will, is to ask them to leave an integral part of their identity behind. I don't want to have to do that. Clearly the swarms of workers and volunteers in New Orleans can't reconcile themselves to that so-called solution either. I hope my classmates and I can do right by our planning education by doing better.

# NOLA Spring Break Journal

By Linda Meckel

## *Initial Reactions of NOLA*

Wow. I must say New Orleans is fantastic. Setting a bunch of city planners loose on the dense, walkable, vibrant area like the French quarter on a Saturday afternoon with cameras produced lots and lots of photos and impressions of “sense of place.” While it seemed like there were mainly tourists hitting all the hot spots we were, Café du Monde, Jackson Square and the French markets. More of the locals, or at least young people who were in New Orleans longer than a week were utilizing the riverfront area as well.

The nightlife is impressive. All sorts of music are accessible, and even more impressive were the mix of ages out and about. New Orleans truly is a city for all ages, or at least those older than 21. The sounds of jazz we enjoyed epitomized the notion one has of the south, and the rich, full bodied culture that spills out on to Frenchman Street. Bourbon Street was a whole other experience, with almost too much sensory overload, was broken up finally by the discovery of inner courtyards hiding behind all the neon signs. However, these were still bursting with all sorts of people, but mainly a much younger crowd than that on Frenchman Street.

Sunday morning brunch we indulged and went to Commander’s Palace for their Jazz Brunch. The inside of the building was fantastic down to every last detail, and the experience made me feel like I stepped into the south of yesterday, and the luxurious plantation house style of life. Amidst the bread pudding soufflé, serenade by the jazz trio, perfectly timed and extravagant service, and savannah treetop inspired décor the romanticism of New Orleans came through. Then as we rode the St. Charles Street car up into Uptown and the Garden District, the subtle change from the vibrancy of the Quarter to the peaceful and historic Garden District was apparent. Moving towards Audubon Park and the river park, where the endless sea of parked cars and people having barbeques along the levees broke the romanticism and truly demonstrated the everyday life of the New Orleans resident, well as least how they spend a leisurely afternoon – of course lots of food is involved, this city is all about the culinary adventures!



The interesting thing about moving between all of these places is that there was a noticeable amount of vacant buildings. At this time I am uncertain why. Is this the result of the storm or a city that was already in decline?



## *Reactions to the Central City Neighborhood and Scope of Work*

The Central City neighborhood of New Orleans is completely different from the other areas of the city experienced thus far, except for the prevalence of the double shotgun style of housing. While it is apparent that there is a greater degree of vacancy here, it does not seem that it was created by flood damage or the hurricane. This was supported by our host leaders at NONDC, who explained that this area has been in decline for awhile, and that the storm has in fact hastened the turnover and susceptibility (and maybe funds available) for the redevelopment of property.



It wasn't until the second or third day that we realized we were in one of the worst neighborhoods of the city. The poverty here is much different than what one would experience in Philadelphia, PA or Richmond, CA. It occurs at a much lower density, and in a much friendlier context. Everyone wanted to know who we were and what we were doing, where in other cities where I have done similar activities people aren't as forthcoming with their inquiries to your presence in their neighborhood unless they approach it in a negative manner. Only one group of younger adolescents made me and my fellow surveyor uneasy, but it was only because they didn't smile when talking to us. At the same time, to say our presence was completely welcome is a misrepresentation as well. It seems as if we are not the first to come through the neighborhood with clipboards. NONDC is well established in the neighborhood and the residents are receptive to their involvement in the neighborhood. Mainly residents were concerned with getting help to redevelop and fix their houses. The sense of need is still there two years after the storm, which possibly was the most powerful impression I took away from this experience. The question of why hasn't redevelopment or at least a direction or plan in which to head needs to be addressed in a more substantial manner.



## *Final Impressions*

Much more work needs to be done to repair the blight and vacancy that is ever present in New Orleans. There is definitely a need for organizations in New Orleans to have professional experience to help build databases and quantify the existing conditions for the area because so much has changed in the last few years. As the city redevelops it will undoubtedly retain certain aspects of the city and change others. It is a tremendous opportunity to help in this process and witness the changes and decisions that are occurring.



NOLA journal, Chris Dimotsis, 03.25.08

Pralines, Hurricanes, Big Ass beers – Beignets! Vacant, overgrown, unsecured, debris-filled, lots. Little Freddy, Rebirth, Soulja Slim – Walter Wolfman Washington? Slit throats, burned Land Rovers, drinking on the street at 10 am – barely coherent. These are only a few of the jarring juxtapositions I began to understand in New Orleans. It is a place where a hurricane only pushed the inequality and social problems to the light. And even before Katrina, it was like many other cities, desperate and in need of massive repair. But NOLA is special for its unique charm, its Mardi Gras, its vitality and culture and hope. Though one question continues to nag me – can we return to the neighborhoods of the past?

Talking to any resident of the lower 7<sup>th</sup> ward would certainly give you the impression that this is not a choice. This is their home and their lives. Things must return to normal. Houses must be rebuilt, money should be provided, and the strength of the New Orleanian spirit must be resuscitated. But who is leading this charge, and why is this inevitable?

After five days of exhausting work mixed with just as much play, I still can't answer this question. In fact, New Orleans left me with many more questions than answers. One day I got fed up with hearing about which restaurant we'd go to that night, (which would be a restaurant that many in our neighborhood could never visit), and I thought I would go into the streets and ask a few of the semi-drunk residents the question. Their reply was: "HUD's got the money now, and we need it." Does HUD have the money? Are they in charge? If they do have the money and are in charge, why would they give it to some semi-drunks standing on the street at 10 am? And what is it my place to know or even care?

I can't say that I came back from the trip feeling good (the only exception is the work we accomplished). NOLA got under my skin, and I internalized many of the disturbing occasions. Like the first time I saw the X marking that denotes when a house had been inspected by FEMA, and if anyone had died. Someone died in the house across the street from our organization. This is a reality behind the news reels.

I know that I'm supposed to feel both confused and uncertain, because that is what the rebuilding effort seems like. I can't understand the planning efforts in any coherent way, despite being a planner. And if I were a displaced resident moving back, I would have no idea who to contact about fixing my drowned house. Maybe I'd try to call my pastor who might know something, or talk to other friends and relatives who know. It wasn't clear to me in any way how an individual looking to resettle would go about starting that process. But I guess that something is working, because some 60% of people have returned to the problem city they had before.

But that's what we do, return to our problem cities, internalize the experience, process it, and then retell the story so that we don't forget. Keep the money flowing.

But I'm not convinced that something like this won't happen again, and that the money should continue to flow. The corruption stories and shady politics run well before Mr. Long's time. And what about these

levees anyway? Are they superior to the old? Will another 100 year flood/storm/disaster wipe out this work? How does Mississippi feel about all this attention? They don't have a Mardi Gras.

To really understand these questions I'd have to take a few engineering courses here, and maybe a disaster management course there, and maybe even a few on environmental science. Who has time for that when there is a disaster to reckon with?

So where does this leave me? I think of something that Tom Daniels said in my sustainable development class: "I won't work in places that are too far gone." I'm not sure I completely endorse this view for New Orleans, but I believe it's close. And that's probably not a popular position to take, but that's what this experience tells me. How can you have a city that condones drinking in the streets of the French Quarter, and drinking in the streets of the 7<sup>th</sup> ward? The tourists love it, and the 10 am locals are raging alcoholics. Now imagine a redevelopment authority that is getting GIS in 2008, and a city that had every plan imaginable created, all molding into one god knows what it means plan. But they are a people who always smile and ask how you are doing. It's a radiant disaster, and it's exhausting. But they need smart, young, energetic people to help rebuild, to share information and gather data. Push the process. If all goes well maybe they'll have something of a city in 20-30 years.

So I'll stay the course, study economic development, and try to figure out ways to turn our urban poor into a stable, tax-generating middle class. Another day, another inexorable urban challenge, save the river and a bad hurricane.

As we flew over New Orleans, I looked closely to see if there was water or destroyed buildings on the ground. I had no idea what to expect and when we finally arrive in downtown, it looked like any other city. Only when we went into the neighborhoods and saw the water lines remaining from the flood, did we understand that this city is still struggling to get back on its feet after the devastation of Katrina. What many people don't understand is that development here has always been a difficult and many homes were in disrepair before the flood. For a region like this, with already limited resources, to be hit by a disaster of such magnitude, was overwhelming for both state and local governments, not to mention the ill-prepared Federal Emergency Management Agency. It was amazing to see how much was actually going on with limited help from these organizations. Community organizations, however, have stepped up into a major role in the rebuilding process.

Our work with Neighborhood Housing Services was important for the redevelopment of the 7<sup>th</sup> Ward, but the process of meeting neighbors and hearing their stories was important for the development of our impressions of New Orleans. There is an incredible energy and hope in many of the residents we met, as well as people all over the city. Despite the lack of funding from many governmental sources, all the help rushing in from schools and religious organizations keeps optimism in place for the future. Residents were thankful for our work, but I was just thankful for this experience and their acceptance of a whole population of outsiders trying repair their neighborhoods.

Walking through the streets of New Orleans was like nothing I had ever seen before. Balconies strewn with ferns and flowers hung overhead, while young and old alike strolled the streets with a drink in hand. No one was in a hurry. No one wanted to be anywhere else. The music, however, was the most amazing...so much energy flowed from old blues legends, young brass band musicians, and jazz street performers. Tourists mingled with locals and everyone was friendly, because that's the nature of this remarkable city

The residents of new Orleans are welcoming and grateful, but they are also wary of all the outside help. Planning and development, especially by outside firms and organizations, has often threatened the deep roots of many neighborhoods in low level areas. It is important to understand that the people of New Orleans are fundamentally tied to the city itself and want it back the way it was, despite future danger. The main goal for the future is how to reconcile these deep seated roots with the safety of the city, especially in a world of global climate change and predicted rising seas levels.

**Reflections on the trip to New Orleans, Spring of 2008**

Monday: After getting turned around a few times, we found the New Orleans Neighborhood Development Collaborative office. It happened to be situated in a mid-rise office building with an Andy Warhol and Jackson Pollock, along with slew of other incredible pieces of artwork.

We met with the three main staff members at NONDC – Chris, Charles and Shawn – to learn about the cluster projects and mixed income developments they are working toward. Their big one is “CJ Peete” – an old housing project that is now going to be a mixed-income development, with the help of McCormack Baron Salazar and CSS. Property management with social services, units at affordable and market rates. A school will anchor the new village. We drove out to take a look at CJ Peete as well as some of the modular homes they had just built (\$140,000 for 1500 sq ft) in Central City (“the ghetto” as we’d later be told). We learned that because Central City is closer to the river than the lake, it experienced only a few feet of flooding, indicated by the pink ribbons on the telephone poles.

After having lunch at “Reconcile Café” – run by high school age youth – we paired off, mapped out our survey area and spent our first couple of hours walking the neighborhood streets of Central City. Batteries ran out in the digital camera they gave us after 45 minutes. We had to call the office manager, Willie, to bring us more. Plenty of neighbors were out on their stoops or working in their yards, on their houses. Mostly people were real friendly. One man asked us if we were selling “noners,” and as I was trying to understand what he asked us, Ariel was resonding “No, no, we aren’t selling any.”

Tuesday: We worked the kinks out on Monday. Ariel is my partner for the week, and this is how we’re doing it: I match up the parcels on the map to the houses in front of us (a more challenging task than you might think), snap a photo, and read off the parcel numbers and the photo numbers to Ariel. In the beginning we spent more time discussing the status of the houses: “Would you say this is occupied or vacant? The window is boarded up, but there is a trash can out front that looks like it is in use...” or “Would you call this blighted? Someone is definitely living here, but the window’s busted on the second floor and there’s a tire in the front.” Every house was a “double or converted shotgun” “cajun cottage” or “camelback” – long and narrow single story homes with slight variation. Most residents were okay with us snapping a photo of their houses, but some asked us not to when we explained what we were doing. “I don’t own this house, my sister’s not home.” Chris was on the ball with us today, drove by in the afternoon to see how we were doing, called to check in. We had lunch at a vegetarian place today, so Carolyn could finally have a real meal. It was pretty good. What else. Today we went up to the fourth floor to see the Andy Warhol. Blue shoes, like Dorothy’s, filled a canvas taller than most of us. I also got a sun burn on my neck today. Nice.

Wednesday: Pretty much the same deal as Tuesday, except today we had re-chargeable batteries. We also had a new section of Central City to work out. We are starting to get a little anxious about how long it will take to input all the data into the PlanReady application they have. A long time, we suspect, and we wouldn’t dare leave them with a pile of chicken scratch to decode. A couple of us started, and found that we could input the data at a rate of 40 or so an hour, uploading photos and double checking our



parcel numbers etc. Only two computers had the application. We are never going to get our 1000+ entries in at this rate. Have to figure something else out, use our laptops, something.

Today it seems like more neighbors are wondering what we are doing, walking around their neighborhood snapping photos and taking notes. One man said "oh I'm trying to qualify for that Road Home money, maybe this will help me get it!" Another man approached us later in the afternoon and gave us his name and his address, stating that two people like us had come by earlier, and he wanted to make sure that we knew his house was occupied so that it would not get demolished. He repeated himself a few times and we told him we would let our colleagues know. This made me sad, made me wonder about the impact of our notes "blighted, not blighted, vacant, occupied." We weren't just evaluating buildings, we were evaluating people's homes.

Today we ate at "Lil Dizzy's Café" with Chris and Willie, where they served fried chicken with lost bread (French toast). Sorta like how syrup spills over and gets on your breakfast sausage, I imagined. I had fried chicken and potatoes, and a few of us had this incredible bread pudding for dessert. Oh and sweet iced tea. About 20 ACORN volunteers were eating in the café too. Over lunch I kept thinking about one of my previous Americorps volunteers whose last name is Gillespie, and who has epilepsy. He said when he was younger people used to tease him by calling him "Dizzy Gillespie." He laughed when he told the story so I felt okay laughing, too. You should too, I suppose.

Thursday: This morning we finally figured out how to get the PlanReady application on all of our laptops, so we can each do our own! We spent the day doing this, mostly. NONDC had a board meeting, we spoke with one of their board members for a brief minute – a banking executive who was real excited about being able to fund work like that done by NONDC.

Today we had lunch at this hole in the wall place that had TONS of barbeque. I got cranky about it because I'm really not that into eating meat, chicken's good but not on the bone really. Willie is our lunchtime chaperone.

Friday: Last day, we are feeling a little sad. I really love these guys, all of them. NONDC is golden, in my book. We finished our data entry, had a bunch of seafood, and drove out to the 9<sup>th</sup> ward to see where the levees broke. Heartbreaking. Fields of grass where homes used to be. Fats Domino's house is still shining in neon. To be honest, I thought he'd passed awhile ago. Some jazz fan I am. Used to be so up on the jazz pianists.