Natural is Not in It: Hurricane Katrina, Race, and the Built Environment

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Abstract:
Hurricane Katrina was not a natural disaster; rather it illustrates the role that human choices play in many arenas we tend to think of as governed by chance natural occurrence. This essay explores this theme on three different levels.

First, insights from the legal analysis of the built environment illuminate the disaster as an example of the influence of human choices on the shape of the environment, including urban planning and flood control policy.

Second, Katrina underscores the role of race-based choices in the fate of Americans. Like environmental decisions, deliberate racial segregation and neglect were as critical as chance occurrence in contributing to the disaster. While the impact on African Americans is obviously a central aspect of the disaster, a racial analysis of Katrina must go beyond a mere black-white dichotomy. Katrina raises additional issues such as the intersection of race and class and the strained relationships between African Americans and Latino immigrant laborers in the reconstruction of New Orleans.

Third and finally, the essay critiques the current trend to conflate social justice with economic efficiency. That view attempts to avoid moral responsibility for policy choices by allowing purportedly natural market forces to determine outcomes. In the wake of Katrina, some argue that New Orleans would do better without assisting the return of its poor residents displaced by Katrina. But not all social choices can be made by balancing material considerations against moral ones: sometimes we must make outright material sacrifices in the name of moral duty. Market-driven decisionmaking is not morally neutral, but constitutes a conscious choice of self-interest over compassion.

Keywords: Hurricane Katrina, race, geography, built environment, environment

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