A New New Urbanism for a New New Orleans

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Debates surrounding New Urbanist leadership in the project of rebuilding New Orleans make it clear that the process of good urban redesign must prioritize an attention to local voices and local stories. New Urbanist thinkers have been involved in the rebuilding process in New Orleans since the first months after Hurricane Katrina. The New Urbanist role in the city’s planning process seemed to be dwindling last spring. However, recently, under the city’s new unified neighborhood rebuilding plan, four of the city’s most historic neighborhoods—the French Quarter, the Central Business District, Gentilly, and the trendy Warehouse district—chose the firm of Duany Plater-Zyberk, a firm whose reputation is almost synonymous with the New Urbanist movement, as their neighborhood planning team. Notably, however, three out of these four neighborhoods are business districts that suffered only minor damage from Hurricane Katrina. The residents of Gentilly, the only residential neighborhood to choose Duany Plater-Zyberk as their planning team, made their decision despite notable local concerns about the feasibility of the New Urbanist vision in New Orleans.

Ever since the New Urbanists entered the debate over the best way to rebuild New Orleans, local residents have expressed fears about the New Urbanist vision. These fears stem from a more widespread national criticism of the relationship between what New Urbanists claim to want to build and what they actually build. New Urbanist communities claim to prioritize mixed-income housing, mixed-use open spaces, and mixed-style architectural landscapes,
but often produce nostalgic simulacrums of traditional urban villages with housing units that sell for prices far higher than the market average. In the vulnerable environment of post-Katrina New Orleans, local residents have particular reasons to be skeptical about New Urbanist planners’ records for promising a kind of urban utopia that they cannot deliver. As New Orleans architect Errol Barron explains, “It’s not the (New Urbanist) aesthetic that’s wrong . . . it’s the artificiality of something planned all at once. What we have in this city is something that developed over a very long period of time, with lots of incremental adjustments along the way. Sweeping utopian plans . . . I don’t think would fit here.”

Despite New Orleans residents’ reservations about the New Urban vision, the city’s business leaders have now placed the renovation of the city’s historic and economic core in the hands of New Urbanist planners. Andres Duany and his team now have the opportunity to prove skeptics wrong. If they can do so, they will not only renovate the city’s historic core, they will also lift its soul. For, even though most New Orleans residents live outside of the city’s downtown areas, the city’s cultural and spiritual identity is inherently wrapped up in the unique and eclectic cultural and architectural traditions that constitute its oldest, most central neighborhoods.

A successful renovation of historic New Orleans requires planners that understand the city as a chronotope, a place that is situated in time and in histories as well as in space. Post-Katrina New Orleans requires its planners to embrace a “New” New Urbanism, a philosophy that would continue to seek the New Urbanist goal of building economically and environmentally sustainable communities but that would also attune itself to New Orleans as a “city of feeling,” to use Carlo Rotella’s term. Two recent interdisciplinary works on the role of local history and local narrative outline the possibilities inherent in this “New” New Urbanism. Read together, Story and Sustainability: Planning, Practice, and Possibility for American Cities, edited by Barbara Eckstein and James A. Throgmorton, and Sustaining New Orleans: Literature, Local Memory, and the Fate of a City, by Barbara Eckstein, call for a new kind of urban planning charrette (a multi-day series of meetings planners hold with city officials and residents that promotes joint ownership over planning issues) that would allow local voices and local stories to determine the shape of the city’s redesign. Both books position local stories and local sustainability as “mutually constitutive,” arguing that foregrounding local stories during planning efforts can work to enforce urban designs that prioritize economic justice, environmental health, and managed growth. Sustaining New Orleans
goes a step further, revealing, almost in spite of itself, the dangers inherent in storytelling itself, and the problem of finding truth in fiction.

*Story and Sustainability* is the result of a June 2000 symposium at the University of Iowa, “Planning as Storytelling: Sustaining America’s Cities.” At this symposium, interdisciplinary urban studies scholars gathered to discuss the importance of storytelling and what Robert Beauregard calls “discursive democracy” to the planning of sustainable urban communities. The resulting essays that Eckstein and Throgmorton gather in *Story and Sustainability* work in dialogue with one another to illuminate the power of storytellers to engage democracy, to encourage readers or listeners to imagine themselves as members of a range of interpretive communities, and to teach people to listen to the heteroglossias of the city.

The book’s form resembles the planning charrette that it seeks to bring about. Part one of the collection forms the book’s ideological center. In three essays, it expands upon the symposium’s central “ideas about how sustainability, story, and democracy mutually construct one another” (4). The second part consists of eight complementary and contradictory essays and seeks to “exemplify, amplify, and modify” the central arguments of part one by “presenting a deliberate heteroglossia of theoretical and experiential, academic and nonacademic, expository and narrative, familiar and unfamiliar texts” (5). The collection’s design is ambitious. Collectively, the essays within it complicate, comment on, and sometimes oppose the truth claims of other essays in the collection. Consequently, the collection is useful as much for its arguments about the importance of local storytelling to urban planning as for the way in which it models an ideal “New” New Urban planning charrette in which divergent voices come together to discuss how local imagined versions of a city’s past can interrogate and inform ideological designs for the city’s future.

Though the collection was first published in 2003, the recent events in New Orleans and on the Gulf Coast inadvertently cast Eckstein and Throgmorton’s work as a model toward which planners in sustainability-seeking communities around the world might turn their attention.

Part one consists of one essay by each of the editors, as well as the book’s key piece, “Democracy, Storytelling, and the Sustainable City,” by Robert A. Beauregard. Of all the essays in the collection, Beauregard’s does the most work to explain the dangers inherent in planning cities without engaging community participation. In this short piece, Beauregard pulls together much previous work on the role of public storytelling in democratic public planning. From William Chafe to Thomas Bender, he cites an array of scholars from outside
of Eckstein and Throgmorton’s collection, a move that adds perspective to
the collection’s conversational and often self-referential mode of thinking.
Beauregard’s essay seeks to gather the storytelling elements in urban planning
around the idea of a discursive democracy (as opposed to representative or
participatory democracies) in order to emphasize that for a city to become
sustainable it must be “attentive to the shared concerns of its people and to
the future implications of its future actions” (73). In a discursive democracy,
the truth of individual stories is alternately mirrored, interrupted, or inverted
by the truths of other stories. When the public sphere consists of “citizens in a
wide variety of settings and from the full array of social positions” (77), stories
gain legitimacy only if they prove able to connect with other stories. There
is no single “expert” version of the city; no story gets at the facts of the city
exactly. By contrast, when panels of experts attempt to plan cities in private
meetings, the stories of the experts begin to seem impervious to modification.
Beauregard’s essay gets to the heart of the problem in New Orleans today—the
impossibility of convening a discursive democracy in an evacuated community.
The city’s planning process heretofore has been largely a charrette in which the
voices of experts are allowed to speak without interruption or contradiction
by local stories and voices.

Both Throgmorton’s and Eckstein’s essays complement Beauregard’s revela-
tion of storytelling’s power to establish a common ground between planners
and residents. For Throgmorton, discursive storytelling is most useful for the
way it enables locals and planners to imagine what Lawrence Buell has called
the “tenticular radiations” of a place—the often forgotten technological sys-
tems that surround each locality and make that locality’s existence possible.
Throgmorton emphasizes that the urban public does not merely consist of
those who live in a city and might participate in the city’s discursive democracy.
He positions New Urbanism as a planning philosophy that pays attention
to how cities shape regions. New Urbanists seek to be attuned to the stories
related to a city’s effect on surrounding regions and ultimately the world. The
New Urbanist regionalist vision is a relatively radical type of conception of
the city. It sees the city as the hub at the center of a larger environmental and
economic technosystem. A sustainable city, according to Throgmorton, is first
and foremost an environmentally conscious one. The problem, as pointed out
by Eckstein in her essay “Making Space: Stories in the Practice of Planning,”
is that when local stories go unheard, the boundaries of place tighten, differ-
ent interpretive communities go on the defensive, and habits of living remain
unquestioned.
Eckstein explains what is at stake in Beauregard’s claim that stories in a discursive democracy work toward truth by making one another transparent. With the perspective of a literary scholar, she repeatedly links the planner’s task to that of the literary theorist or critic, claiming that her contribution to urban planning is the ability to ask, “What can the careful interpretation of stories contribute to the discipline of planning and the future of cities?” (15). She wisely notes that just as literary theorists ask questions about the power dynamic that exists between authors, their texts, and their readers, planning theorists should ask questions about the relationship between planners/authors, the way they compose their plans/texts, and the way in which their texts speak to or speak for their constituents/readers. Eckstein describes how planners will often transmute or misinterpret local stories in order to further their own planning goals. When planners manipulate local stories to suit their own goals, the planners themselves disappear as authors. Planners can claim that their design is the product of consultations with the public, without actually having to faithfully represent the text of these public consultations. As a result, the plan begins to lose touch with its reality as a story—an imagined version of the city’s possibilities—and instead begins to seem like an authorless, untroubled, objective text that eclipses local voices at the same time that it can veil individual or corporate motivations.

Eckstein advocates that planners be deliberate about reading all stories, or plans, as constructed narratives. She notes that “hope for sustainability, whether it means preservation or change, may reside in a planner’s ability to distinguish story truth from data truth . . . in the stories they hear and tell” (30). This is a useful argument, for it reveals the constructed, liminal nature of even the most comprehensive urban plan. However, Eckstein’s focus on the responsibility of planners as storytellers elides their responsibility as builders of storytelling venues. The problem in New Orleans, for instance, has been the relative absence of the local public from the planning charrette. New Orleans is an extreme case, in that a large percentage of locals are scattered in different locations across the nation. But, the situation nevertheless exemplifies the problem inherent in asking planners to take on the more passive role of listening to and interpreting available stories instead of asking them to build storytelling venues and to actively work to locate local storytellers. Part two of *Story and Sustainability* complicates Eckstein’s advice to planners with its various perspectives on how fruitful yet difficult it can be for planners to infuse both their planning processes and their final, built projects with designs that promote discursive democracies.
Framing the beginning and end of part two are three firsthand narratives that relay instances in which resident voices proved to be crucial to shaping revitalization projects into long-term plans for a healthy community. These stories, by Carlo Rotella, Kenneth Reardon, and Joe Barthel, serve to root the ideas of the collection in actual cities with functioning, albeit flawed, discursive democracies. The center of part two juxtaposes essays by practicing planners with meditations by planners working in academic contexts. First, the editors situate Michael Berkshire’s narrative about an instance in which unmediated public storytelling produced planning chaos between essays by Seymour Mandelbaum and Leonie Sandercock that offer complementary models for using storytelling within the planning process in dynamic ways. Then, the editors pair an essay by planning theorist Edward Soja with an account by New Urbanist practitioner Karin Franklin of her work to build a New Urbanist community in Iowa City. In his piece, “Tales of a Geographer-Planner,” Soja uses a personal narrative to underscore the spatial nature of storytelling. Inversely, Franklin’s piece emphasizes the importance of time to the way in which people experience built spaces. Her narrative of the planning and building process draws attention to how the look and the feel of New Urban spaces today are defined by their newness. The stories that the spaces of New Urban villages tell remain as of yet undecided. Read together, Soja and Franklin’s essays encourage designers to see the spaces they build as places that link the past with the future. Like postmodern novels, good urban design today must do away with linear constructions of neighborhood identities and seek, instead, to “tell multiple stories, [to] leave sufficient space for the stories of others to be heard, [and to] cultivate a veritable ‘garden of forking paths.’”

From these complementary, cross-disciplinary attempts to struggle with the subjectivity and possessiveness of individual urban stories emerges the idea that for people to plan and maintain sustainable communities, the process of telling and listening to stories must be continual. Public spaces, maps of neighborhood territories, and maps of urban and regional boundaries are continuously changing and evolving. Individual and collective storytelling efforts reflect communities as changing, future-oriented places as much as they reflect communities as places rooted in divergent histories. As far as its national vision goes, Story and Sustainability is “hopeful that by placing story and storytelling in the foreground, [it] can make the many social, environmental, and economic consequences of contemporary life in the United States more visible to more kinds of urban users, planners, and scholars” (7). But Eckstein’s editorial idealism translates into eerie skepticism in her own work,
Sustaining New Orleans. This book can be read as an extended example that proves the extent to which communities cannot become sustainable unless they also become discursive democracies. Eckstein’s analysis of the relationship between widely read literature, local voices, and urban planners shows what happens when a city positions local stories not as the foundation of the city’s design but merely as the city’s key commodities.

Sustaining New Orleans uses some of the best known works about the city—Tennessee Williams’s A Streetcar Named Desire, Nelson Algren’s A Walk on the Wild Side, Walker Percy’s The Moviegoer, Ishmael Reed’s Mumbo Jumbo, Anne Rice’s Interview with the Vampire, and Sister Helen Prejean’s Dead Man Walking—to contextualize the major urban planning decisions and dilemmas that have shaped the city over the past half-century. The fact that Eckstein’s book precedes Katrina, eerily anticipating what is now the apparent unsustainability of New Orleans’s infrastructure, is reason enough for scholars to pay attention. For scholars interested in the relationship between literature and cities, as well as for those interested in making New Orleans into the place it has always held the potential to be, Sustaining New Orleans is exciting. Eckstein has a keen ability to historicize the ways in which commodified images of the city’s various neighborhoods have served to distract the nation from the reality of those neighborhoods and of the city itself. From page one, she attempts to mesh the disparate disciplines of archival history, literary analysis, sociology, and critical urban theory in order to unveil the sources and possible solutions to the city’s current unsustainability.

New Orleans has historically struggled to align concerns about preserving the city’s history with concerns about enabling economic growth. Eckstein argues that images and stories about the city participate in “the framing of the city’s problems, the proposed solutions to those problems, and the perceived effectiveness of those solutions” (xi). Eckstein presents New Orleans as a kind of case study, but in light of Hurricane Katrina, her explication of how literature can turn public attention away from or toward local problems makes her detailed outline of pivotal moments in recent New Orleans history particularly resonant. Eckstein’s method incorporates and expands upon current interdisciplinary approaches to interpreting the role of literature in cities. She credits Rotella’s October Cities for helping to frame her investigation into the relationship between New Orleans as a city of feeling and as a city of fact. Her work also resembles recent work by scholars such as Betsy Klimasmith and Timothy Spears, whose approaches to urban literature benefit from a detailed analysis of divergent urban histories.7 In a manner similar to Spears’s Chicago
Dreaming, the pages of Sustaining New Orleans contain a kind of concentrated archive for scholars who wish to investigate the relationship between New Orleans cultural productions and the evolution of the spaces of New Orleans neighborhoods, public housing developments, and business sectors.

Eckstein’s chapters tend to hinge on turning points in New Orleans’s past in which the city took large steps toward its current tourist-based economy. Her goal is to explain how and why the city has continued to be seen as exceptional in the nation’s imagination, even at the same time as the city has grown up during the twentieth century to look and feel much like other sprawling urban regions. Her research and her literary interpretations seek what she calls the “place tone” of the city—the “pulse” that consists of the “ongoing dialectic of materiality and representation” (3). In the profitably romanticized New Orleans region, where the “place tone” is one of the city’s most precious commodities, the stories and representations that city dwellers tell and remember often make their way into romanticized versions of the city that shape how national and international communities view it. Thus, although Eckstein does not start out arguing that mass-market literature has often served to reinforce poor planning decisions and uneven development in the city, in many of her chapters, she accedes that when they capitalize on myths about the city, the literary works in question can become critical tools that city officials use to strengthen the city’s unhealthy dependence on tourism. For instance, Eckstein analyzes Williams’s A Streetcar Named Desire and Algren’s A Walk on the Wild Side within the context of the urban renewal efforts that were going on when these works first became widely popular. Eckstein can thus show how Williams’s portrayal of New Orleans as always already obsolete and Algren’s definition of the city “out of its relationship to sexual vices” (67) became images that stuck to the city like glue, drawing in tourists while simultaneously diverting attention from the city’s rapidly increasing areas of uneven development. Similarly, Eckstein criticizes Percy’s The Moviegoer for simply blaming the depression of its urban flaneur, Binx Bolling, on internal, existential despair instead of exploring the effects of the city’s toxic environment and unjust social systems on New Orleans residents. Finally, Eckstein criticizes Rice’s Interview with a Vampire for failing to make good on its initial invitation to readers to “understand New Orleans’s colonial past and the African American roots of its Gothicism in its trans-American context” (173), arguing that it instead reconfigures the city’s colonial and African past as “Inside the World of Anne Rice and not the other way around” (174).

Sustaining New Orleans’s most hopeful thoughts about how New Orleans literature can work to make the city more sustainable unexpectedly lie in the
two chapters that concern the city’s least sustainable, impoverished neighborhoods. The last chapter of the book traces how Prejean’s *Dead Man Walking* remaps Louisiana based on a “spirit region” (Eckstein’s term). Eckstein argues that Prejean’s activism leads her to redraw the spiritual “map” that separates Louisiana citizens from the site of executions. In an ambitious and ultimately successful interpretive move, Eckstein outlines how Prejean’s remapping of Louisiana resembles the remapping project of the St. Thomas Residents’ Council in New Orleans. Both seek to undo the physical and interpersonal “remoteness” (204) so common to sprawling, twentieth-century cities by pulling citizens together based on political goals, socioeconomic conditions, and moral beliefs.

Through the figure of the spirit region, Eckstein predicts modes of community activism that have become crucial to New Orleanians today, who certainly understand how political or moral maps can change when communities become forced to redefine their physical centers. She also offers literary critics a useful trope for remembering how literature can work to expand imagined communities by linking readers together based on their moral, spiritual, or political commonalities. Finally, although Eckstein does not note this, the figure of the spirit region works retrospectively to explain why the other literary works she discusses fail to convey the city’s real interests and problems to the rest of the nation. The spirit map that most mass-market literature imagines for New Orleans is one that extends beyond the city’s current map and backward into an indefinite, romanticized past. Eckstein’s analysis of Prejean allows her to suggest at the end of her book what she should perhaps argue from the outset—that mass-market literature about the city often serves to reinforce national and international notions that the only parts of the city worth preserving are those whose chief purpose is to enable tourists a safe escape into a controlled timeless zone.

*Sustaining New Orleans* shows why it is that the worst kind of New Urbanism—the kind that claims to value traditional urban village communities, but in reality invokes nostalgia only to increase the sales prices of picture-perfect, single-family homes and loft apartments—might mesh seamlessly with the long-standing goals of city officials and preservationist elites. *Story and Sustainability and Sustaining New Orleans* advocate, instead, a new New Urbanism that insists upon creating and maintaining a discursive democracy in the space of the city. Both works show that doing so must be the first, and is the most crucial, step toward rebuilding the New Orleans region into the vibrant, sustainable place it has the potential to be. If *Sustaining New Orleans* is frightening, perhaps that is as it should be. If *Stories and Sustainability* is
too idealistic, that is because most of the nation already knows that the New Urbanists in New Orleans today will probably never realize that the stories that matter in New Orleans are the ones that will emerge only if the city repopulates its school yards, grocery stores, sidewalks, and stadiums, and tosses aside current arguments for rebuilding the city for a smaller population in favor of finding ways to reopen the city to all of its evacuated residents and their evacuated stories.

Notes
1. New Urbanism became particularly controversial during the critical months just after Hurricane Katrina, when Mayor Ray Nagin’s now defunct Bring New Orleans Commission hired the New Urbanist organization the Urban Land Institute to design a large scale plan that would adjust the city’s footprint in the name of environmental and economic sustainability. When the ULI’s plan called for razing several low lying neighborhoods and replacing them with green space, Nagin’s team rejected their recommendations.
5. Eckstein and Throgmorton, Story and Sustainability, 4.