Review Roundtable: Is New Orleans a Resilient City?

The Resilient City: How Modern Cities Recover from Disaster

Roundtable Overview
Robert E. Lang and Karen A. Danielsen

We convened this JAPA roundtable at the American Collegiate Schools of Planning annual conference in October, 2005, less than two months after hurricane Katrina. It addressed the challenges of rebuilding New Orleans in the wake of that storm, and used the book *The Resilient City: How Modern Cities Recover from Disaster*, an edited reader that contains a dozen examples of how other cities recovered from disaster, as the basis for the discussion. We assembled a distinguished panel of academics, all of whom have either backgrounds in disaster planning or have spent time in New Orleans, to consider whether New Orleans is a resilient city. The roundtable was recorded. The edited transcript appears below, following this short description of the context and a synopsis of the main points raised in the discussion.

The New Orleans metropolitan area, which had 1.36 million residents in 2004, lies in a larger Gulf Coast region that stretches from Pensacola, Florida, in the east to Houston, Texas, in the west and is linked by Interstate 10 (see Figure 1). This region includes an unbroken string of nine census-defined metropolitan areas (and six surrounding rural counties) that together contain just over 10 million people (see Table 1) and share many environmental and economic attributes. The entire region is vulnerable to hurricanes, as most urban development in the area lies near the Gulf of Mexico, wetlands, and estuaries. New Orleans is famous for being mostly below sea level, but Houston is also quite low, having been built over and around a series of bayous.

The Gulf Coast economy depends on tourism, energy, fishing, and port-related activity. Its energy sector is quite diverse, and includes oil and natural gas extraction, refining, and financing. Though New Orleans has fallen behind Houston as an energy center and major port, producer services firms in both metropolitan areas specialize in energy, from finding new energy sources to extinguishing oil well fires. Houston is also home to energy futures markets, which until recently included Enron.

In a forum titled “New Orleans Rebuilds,” held on October 26, 2005 at the Century Club in New York, historian Kenneth Jackson noted that New Orleans was the most important city in the South as recently 100 years ago, but had fallen behind Houston and Atlanta by the middle of the 20th century. According to Jackson, the city’s entrenched elite afford entrepreneurial outsiders little upward mobility. This helps explain why the city attracts so few domestic migrants and has such a tiny foreign-born population despite its location near Latin America. New Orleans is among the slowest growing coastal metropolitan areas in the U.S. This is in contrast with most other places along the Gulf Coast, especially Houston. The roundtable discussion below shows that the relative decline of New Orleans may have made it less resilient.

Hurricane Katrina’s full impact on New Orleans is still not completely understood, but the preliminary data show that it may have been more devastated than any American city since the destruction of Atlanta during the Civil War. The best data available on the human dimensions of Katrina at the time of the roundtable came from the news media, especially USA Today. In an article by El Nasser and Overberg on October 30, 2005 (“Katrina victims settle in elsewhere,” p. A1), USA Today mapped and reported data from the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) and the United States Postal Service (USPS). The FEMA data show where 1.3 million requests for aid originated in the immediate wake of the storm. The USPS tracked change of address forms for displaced households. Though both sources showed where evacuees relocated after Katrina,
what impact did the hurricane have on the built and natural environments?
• Given the damage done by hurricane Katrina, how resilient is New Orleans?
• What role should government at all levels play in addressing this disaster?
• What role can planners and other development experts play?
What mix of local and national expert input is needed for rebuilding the city?
• What conditions existed in the city before Katrina that would predict its resiliency?
• What other outside factors will determine the degree to which New Orleans is a resilient city?
• Which populations and neighborhoods suffered the worst impact?
• Are other parts of the Gulf Coast impacted by hurricanes Katrina and Rita resilient?
• Should New Orleans be rebuilt and, if so, in what manner should the rebuilding occur?
• Speculate on the size, demographic composition, and economy of New Orleans in the future.
• What are the key lessons to be learned from Katrina?

Vale and Campanella sought to examine disasters and find common threads in the recovery process, to ascertain both why and how cities recover. They found each disaster offered a window into how the city functioned socially and culturally prior to the disaster. They also found that who participates in the recovery has much to do with its success, as it is partly a political battle. The role of outsiders is important because, though they can be agents of positive and transformative change, they can also be opportunistic, dooming the city to continued dysfunction. Campanella notes that the human and social fabric is as integral to recovery as the physical structure, and repairing it poses the biggest challenge currently facing New Orleans.

The panel did not agree on whether New Orleans is a resilient city. They predicted the new city would resemble more than differ from the old New Orleans, and would probably have more Latino residents than formerly. Their conclusions were based on many of the unique characteristics of New Orleans including:

Table 1. The Gulf Coast metropolitan population, 2004.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Metropolitan area</th>
<th>2004 Population estimate</th>
<th>Counties/parishes</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Baton Rouge–Pierre Part, LA CSA</td>
<td>751,965</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Beaumont–Port Arthur, TX MSA</td>
<td>383,443</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gulfport-Biloxi-Pascagoula, MS CSA</td>
<td>409,045</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Houston-Baytown-Huntsville, TX CSA</td>
<td>5,280,752</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lafayette-Acadia, LA CSA</td>
<td>524,163</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lake Charles–Jennings, LA CSA</td>
<td>225,877</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mobile-Daphne-Fairhope, AL CSA</td>
<td>557,227</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>New Orleans–Metairie–Bogalusa, LA CSA</td>
<td>1,363,750</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pensacola–Ferry Pass–Brent, FL MSA</td>
<td>437,135</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Surrounding rural counties in LA and MS</td>
<td>429,008</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gulf Coast total</td>
<td>10,362,365</td>
<td>57</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: CSA = Combined Statistical Area; MSA = Metropolitan Statistical Area

the USPS service information is especially important, because those who changed their mailing addresses were presumably intending to stay longer at their new locations.

The USA Today analysis found that most people affected by Katrina chose to stay in the Gulf Coast region. While significant numbers of evacuees located as far away as Seattle and Boston, more relocated in Houston and Baton Rouge. As of late October, 2005, the USPS found that 1,570,368 households were impacted by Katrina. Up to that time, just fewer than 300,000 change of address forms were filed. A USA Today zip-code analysis showed that about 70% of the people filing change of address forms stayed in the Gulf region. Change of address data show that more than half of New Orleans evacuees relocated to less affected portions of metropolitan New Orleans, Baton Rouge, and Houston. The next biggest share went to other parts of the Gulf Coast region, followed by the Dallas and Atlanta metropolitan areas. Nine out of 10 New Orleans evacuees who had filed change of address forms were still in the South in late October, 2005. This represents both a challenge and an opportunity. They may potentially help rebuild and repopulate New Orleans and other damaged areas. Yet the larger Gulf Coast region has been overburdened by accommodating so many of Katrina’s victims.

It remains unclear how many people will return to their former homes in New Orleans. Obtaining a random sample posed tremendous challenges, but working with the Gallup Organization, and using information provided by the Red Cross and FEMA, USA Today polled evacuees on their likelihood of going home (S. Page, “Evacuees shun going home,” October 13, 2005, p. A1). The results showed that 39% of people did not anticipate returning to their homes, though they might come back to the city of New Orleans or the region. New Orleans may be a smaller place after Katrina, and as the roundtable discussion notes, will certainly be a very changed place.

The Brookings Institution analyzed temporary housing conditions of people displaced by Katrina (Katz, Liu, Fellowes, & Mabanta, 2005, Housing families displaced by Katrina: A review of the federal response to date), finding that at least half a million families were in some form of federally provided transition or quasi-permanent housing including cruise ships hotels, shelters, trailers, mobile homes, and rental housing. FEMA has provided trailers after past storms, including Andrew in 1992, which did extensive damage to housing in south Florida. Such housing is not necessarily temporary; some people are still living in the FEMA trailers that they received in the wake of Andrew. If FEMA provides too much of such housing in suburbs and exurbs, and these poor “Katrinavilles” become permanent, these undesirable locations may have long-lasting effects, as their residents remain cut off from jobs and community.

In the roundtable we sought to apply the book’s concepts rather than directly reviewing it, and invited the editors to participate. We asked the panelists to consider the following questions:

- How would Katrina compare to the other disasters profiled in the book?
- What impact did the hurricane have on the built and natural environments?
- Given the damage done by hurricane Katrina, how resilient is New Orleans?
- What role should government at all levels play in addressing this disaster?
- What role can planners and other development experts play?
- What mix of local and national expert input is needed for rebuilding the city?
- What conditions existed in the city before Katrina that would predict its resiliency?
- What other outside factors will determine the degree to which New Orleans is a resilient city?
- Which populations and neighborhoods suffered the worst impact?
- Are other parts of the Gulf Coast impacted by hurricanes Katrina and Rita resilient?
- Should New Orleans be rebuilt and, if so, in what manner should the rebuilding occur?
- Speculate on the size, demographic composition, and economy of New Orleans in the future.
- What are the key lessons to be learned from Katrina?
LANG: Welcome to the second JAPA book review roundtable. We're happy to have editors Tom Campanella and Larry Vale present. They will start out by making brief comments on New Orleans' resiliency.

VALE: The idea of our book was to look at examples of sudden traumatic change occasioned by disasters of all kinds and to see what one could say about the recovery of places. Assuming that there would be disasters to come, the challenge would be to ask better questions the next time around. One could look at the range of historical parallels and come up with a prediction about New Orleans. I felt fairly definitively, even in the waning days of August, that New Orleans would be rebuilt more or less where it was with some modest improvement based on the fact that almost no large city in the last 200 years failed to rebuild no matter how dramatic the destruction.

What we think is shared by the disaster types is that they are a window onto the society that existed just before the disaster struck. Thinking about recovery from such disasters raises a whole host of questions: What do you mean by recovery? Whose recovery? What does it mean socially and culturally? We were interested at least as much in finding out why cities recover as we were in the more common question of how cities recover.

The common thing that I observed is that each city stricken with a sudden disaster faces a politically necessary battle to turn that disaster into opportunity to do something better in the future. Government has failed when disaster strikes, whether it is a so-called natural disaster or a terrorist strike. There are tremendous pressures to figure out ways of controlling the narrative about what will happen. It can't be a narrative of despair, but must be a dominant message of hope, progress, and opportunity. What that means is that you have to figure out ways of controlling the narrative about what will happen.

Finally, there is this tension between the role of outsiders, those who are coming to turn opportunity into opportunism, and the more conservative role of the inertia of investment in particular places. That has come through again and again in past disaster scenarios. At some level, the sheer power of the past and the precedent of what has come before is a constraint on innovation or radical rethinking of places and yields a much less transformative result than might be desirable.

CAMPANELLA: One of the key observations that came out of our study was that reconstruction and rebuilding are not equivalent to recovery, or as framed in the 12th of our 12 axioms: "The process of rebuilding is a necessary, but by itself insufficient, condition for enabling recovery or resilience" (p. 351). One of the central challenges facing New Orleans now is to salvage and restore the city’s social fabric and the human infrastructure as much as possible. It’s clear that if New Orleans is to be rebuilt physically without a concomitant commitment to recovering the social fabric and the human infrastructure, then the city is going to be only a shadow of its former self. In the wake of Katrina, that is really emerging as one of the central challenges.

LANG: Does anyone want to address those comments immediately?

BLAKELY: I do. It’s not the physical rebuilding at all. It doesn’t matter whether it’s New Orleans, Oakland, or Los Angeles. There’s...
a tendency to feel you have to put the capital city back together rather than the human city back together. In Los Angeles and in Oakland, the wounds [after a 1989 earthquake and a 1991 fire] were in a sense deeper because there was a chance to solve the problem and it was missed. The people who suffered through the earthquake in Oakland continued to live with a freeway and other damage that fell down on them. What they got out of it was a new freeway built to serve them. You can’t build your way out of these tragedies. You really have to address that human issue in a very meaningful way. New Orleans has that particular problem and the humans aren’t there.

LAURIA: It’s hard to separate those two because you can’t deal with the human problem if the schools aren’t there. You can’t deal with the labor problem without housing. The idea of dealing with the built environment in relation to the human one is crucial. I don’t think we can separate them. If we tried to we would be slowing things down too much.

BLAKELY: You have to pay attention to the jobs and the human issues up front even while you’re doing recovery for the long term. Unfortunately the new commissions and decision bodies are only paying attention to capital and building and not people.

BURBY: There’s the assumption that the social capital was something that should be restored. This is questionable in a lot of respects, because the city had a very corrupt political culture and a caste system of the African Americans. The Creole Blacks basically dominated the political system to the disadvantage of the non-Creole Black population. It had what Banfield and Wilson (1963, *City Politics*, Harvard University Press) have called a very *private* regarding political culture, where few people seemed to care for the future or the public interest in the community. Almost everything was first, “What’s in it for me?” Second, “What’s in it for my family?” Third, “What’s in it for my friends?” There was extraordinary poverty and the city was not doing much to deal with its social problems. As Tom [Campanella] pointed out, there’s an opportunity, but it’s very hard to see how that opportunity will be taken—will it bubble up from below or come from the existing leadership at either the city or state level? It strikes me that somehow it has to come from the outside, some institution from the outside, either the government or private institutions.

LAURIA: In concert with local guidance and leadership.

BURBY: Yes, I’m not saying that something should be imposed on locals because obviously that would never work.

LAURIA: It’s very fragmented social capital because the African American city politics have been very Creole dominated. But the rise of religious sector politics among the Americanized African American population there, that’s where their power base would lie. We saw that a lot in the conflict with state representatives because they [non-Creole African Americans] were never able to directly access city politics itself, but they were able to leverage representatives at the state level through these religious organizations and their power.

NELSON: Before we get there, what should be redeveloped from a planner’s perspective? As context, consider the Vanport flood of 1948. Vanport was Oregon’s second largest city then, but was nearly wiped out when the Columbia River broke through levees. In all, 18,000 people lost their homes and 50,000 were displaced. That area is now largely vacant. The decision was made by the state and the nearby city, Portland, to not rebuild that area because of the danger of flooding in the future. That is a decision that needs to be considered for perhaps large sections of New Orleans. As the book points out, parts of cities are memorialized as a consequence of disasters or intentional conflicts and so forth. What may have been lacking in the book were two other kinds of decisions about not rebuilding: *decommissioning* and *restoration*.

It’s one thing to memorialize a piece of the city and that becomes the reflection or memory of the catastrophe, but it’s something else to decide that this particular area should not be rebuilt, given that the larger areas can absorb the displaced population. Vanport was decommissioned as a city, the buildings torn down, the land turned into open space, by and large, and the people redistributed back to the much larger city of Portland, which was then 300,000 people. Also, the Vienna fairgrounds in Austria are built on a flood plain that has a long history of large-scale flooding. These examples of decommissioning parts of cities should be part of the discussion of whether to rebuild large areas of New Orleans.

The second part is what I would call *restoration*. For example, in some California and North Carolina coastal areas, if buildings in foredune or other sensitive areas are destroyed by storms, they’re not allowed to be rebuilt. Taking those two examples in mind for New Orleans, about 40% of the city essentially has to be either removed or rebuilt. I wonder how you’d do that when the levees themselves are insufficient to protect against the next hurricane. I understand the levees are designed for Category 5. How long would it take to rebuild the levee system in New Orleans to withstand a Category 4, and for how much money? What about rebuilding levees to withstand a category 5? What do you do with the parts of the city that are then vulnerable to the Category 4 or 5? Do you rebuild with imposing risk of a Category 4 or 5 coming in or do you wait until the levees are in shape and then rebuild? That raises the question, if you don’t rebuild (and I don’t think you should rebuild) where do the people go?

Should part of New Orleans be decommissioned? If that is the case, how do you make that happen? My greatest fear is that we’ll rebuild much of the 40% that should not be rebuilt, and then we have a Category 4 hurricane. It’s not a matter of if, but when.

LANG: Chris, in the case of Vanport, weren’t primarily low-income Blacks displaced? Because the history was that the flooding occurred and people were all displaced in north Portland, which is the most segregated in an already high level of racial segregation in the city. There was no rebuilding that occurred, but a certain segment of the population somewhat parallels the New Orleans case, something important to factor in.

NELSON: That’s a good point. It turns out most of the people were not Blacks, but they were mostly low income. Of the 18,000 people displaced, 5,000 were Black. While Blacks were not the dominant group, it is probably also fair to say that most Blacks then living in the Portland area lived in Vanport.
LANG: My understanding is there was a racial dimension to that issue about rebuilding, like the Lower Ninth Ward.

LAURIA: Yes. Whether or not there is a racial dimension, there is going to be racial politics to any decommissioning because all but one of the areas that received the worst flooding are low income and primarily African American. In the New Orleans case, it’s presaged already in the politics that’s now going on. The representative for the Lower Ninth Ward section is already having meetings in Baton Rouge about how to maintain homes for the Lower Ninth community. It’s going to be very treacherous politics to decommission this area. I understand why one might want to decommission from an abstract perspective, but it’s very, very difficult when we start talking about social structure and family relationships.

In New Orleans, you’re talking multiple generations of social ties at a minimum. While in many U.S. cities social ties go one, two generations deep nowadays, in New Orleans, social ties go five, six, seven, eight, nine, ten generations deep. The emotional component, the political component, and in particular the history of the Lower Ninth Ward in terms of flooding, and hurricane Betsy, the whole view of this creates incredibly treacherous politics, especially when, most of us—all of us, I’ll say—believe in a very grassroots kind of determination of what happens in a community. It’s going to be very, very difficult for planners to propose a decommissioning of certain areas.

BURBY: I want to make another related point, which applies to the book. Katrina was clearly a catastrophe. In the disaster literature, there’s a difference between disasters and catastrophes, which makes it very difficult to learn from previous disasters because with a catastrophe, institutions are wiped out and the city ceases to function. In disaster, they aren’t. For example, the Northridge [California] earthquake created $40 billion in losses, but the City of Los Angeles was functioning. They didn’t lay off half of their workforce. The city government was in place. In New Orleans, the city government is demoralized, bewildered.

The other thing is in New Orleans, only a small part of the city is actually safe. So if you’re talking about decommissioning, taking it to the ultimate extreme in most of the city you’d go right back to the areas of original settlement.

BLAKELY: But Berlin, which was mentioned in the book, could have been decommissioned and never rebuilt.

BURBY: The World War II cities and Guernica were obliterated, literally, by allied bombing raids or the decision to use the atomic bomb. I think those cities are equivalent to New Orleans in terms of the degree of loss. But the rest of the book deals with disasters that are much smaller events in terms of the extent of damage or proportion of the building stock that was damaged.

LANG: How about the 1906 San Francisco earthquake?

BLAKELY: That city was evacuated.

LAURIA: But that’s different. While it’s the same scale, the size of the population, the complexity of the economy was very different.

LANG: That was also a city on the upward tick, whereas New Orleans is one of the slowest growing large metropolitan areas in the United States, especially for a coastal, sunbelt, metropolitan area.

BURBY: But the other thing with San Francisco is that what destroyed the city was not the earthquake, but the fire, which was a very fortunate thing because all the buildings were insured.

San Francisco revived almost instantly because of a huge in-pouring of insurance money that allowed everybody to redo it. In New Orleans, everything is not insured, so it’s not known where the money is going to come from.

MARET: Well, in this case, the disastrous effects of hurricane Katrina are the result of many problems: too little spending on levee construction and maintenance, and not enough funding for FEMA disaster preparedness, among others. These services could only have been provided by the federal government. You have a complex situation today in New Orleans; parts of the city have been wiped out by the wind, parts swallowed by water, and parts damaged by both wind and water. The result is a long and complicated process even for people with insurance; long because of the scale and nature of the disaster. It takes a long time to get insurance company adjustors (both homeowner and flood) or FEMA to come onsite. After the adjustors visit the fight begins over who is responsible for the damages and who should pay. This issue is also critical for people who were not insured.

CAMPANELLA: It’s important to make note of what Mickey [Lauria] was saying about the deep-rootedness of the people here in New Orleans. This is a hopeful thing because even though these folks are scattered across the country right now, the cohesion that they have may eventually bring these folks back together. These people may well come back in far greater numbers than the polls are showing.

I brought up the point at another conference that we might look at the urban renewal disasters (which is one theme that we originally wanted to get in this book, but didn’t get in); these are very useful for understanding what’s happened in New Orleans. In Boston’s West End, for example, even though the built environment was obliterated, people maintained their ties in exile, even to this day. Even the folks that lived in the Pruitt-Igoe housing complex, in spite of the building being demolished, still get together. For 28 years now they have had an annual reunion. If bonds were formed there, in what planning schools commonly refer to as one of the great disasters of modern planning, just imagine how strong the Katrina bonds are. I think the bonds will prevail.

LANG: Tom, if I could make a related point, I was on a panel with Kenneth Jackson and he raised the point about the intergenerational or multigenerational nature of the hierarchy of the most senior people, the richest people, the most plugged-in people in New Orleans and argued that it was impenetrable. It was, perhaps, the most impenetrable elite in the United States.

LAURIA: That’s very, very true. And the Coca-Cola Company and Freeport MacMoRan moved their headquarters out of New Orleans because of that.
LANG: Especially contrasted with Atlanta, Houston, and places that are world cities now. His argument was that this impenetrability was something that was two nested. It produced resiliency and connectivity, but not resiliency in that the city was on a downward trajectory, due in part to the fact that nobody who was entrepreneurial and ambitious could crack it. Jackson’s point was that no matter what, you could not get in or fall out of it.

BLAKELY: But this is an interesting issue because I think the first people to resettle New Orleans will be Hispanics.

LAURIA: Because of the construction industry.

BLAKELY: I would have brought the local people back and housed them to rebuild New Orleans to have a common experience in the rebuilding effort that would be cross-racial. This is something we did quite by accident in Oakland in the fire recovery, because you needed people and you got people who were rich and poor, Black people and White people working side-by-side to recover White people’s homes primarily. But this was giving Blacks skills that they could later use, so it was future-proofing the city, as I saw it. I had a role in the rebuilding and we accomplished a lot. New Orleans has no one clearly in charge. That’s one of the things we have to consider is how the rebuilding is done and who’s engaged in it. Because here’s an opportunity to give people skills, to alter their life chances, to improve and maybe even deal with some of the other social issues. When I was there working with the people in Shreveport, that wasn’t even in the discussion. It was hard to get New Orleans into the discussion.

LAURIA: I think it’s going to be a little slower. One of the things I liked about the book that relates to this is the discussion about politics, the threat to the current governance coalition that exists because of the hurricane.

BLAKELY: Like Mexico City. [The Mexico City disaster was the great 1985 earthquake, which exposed evidence of corruption and torture, thereby contributing to political reform. (See Campanella, this issue.)]

LAURIA: Right. What you’re seeing on the negative side is the mayor acting in a very reactionary way to the Hispanic population coming in, for example, or with the governor in terms of what’s being done. The entire governing coalition of New Orleans is under threat and potentially we can look at this as positive, precisely for some of the reasons that you mentioned. Prior coalition members are now forced to deal with their homes. Many of the people that were not of the political sector, but involved in the coalition, have the first priority of dealing with their industry, dealing with whatever their business was.

Second, you have increased the openness and access to the governing coalition, and that’s going to be contested in terms of increasing influence from traditional external actors. We’ve already seen that. There’s going to be new external influence, both legitimate and illegitimate external influences. Finally, the local constituency is losing face. The major concern of Mayor Nagin was the loss of face of the political sector. This is all mentioned in some way or another in the book. Because of that loss of face, there’s an opportunity for political change and the development of grassroots purchase in the new governing coalition.

MARET: Local grassroots voices in New Orleans have to be allowed to participate in the rebuilding of their city, communities. Citizens of New Orleans deserve a voice, but they need leadership and organization, especially as they are dispersed all over the country.

LAURIA: Well, they’re struggling. Right now, there are members of a lot of the nonprofit (some religious and some nonreligious) organizations trying to organize a grassroots influence on this process. They’re operating primarily out of Baton Rouge right now. They’re trying to crack the coalition and to get involved. They’re very wary of carpetbaggers. That’s a real issue there. External influences, even good-intentioned influences, are suspect and find it difficult to engender local cooperation. There’s a real hesitancy right now. I received a call about this and was asked to get involved, but when they talked about the politics of it, I said, “Well, wait. Call me when you know what you’re going to do,” because I don’t want to be viewed as a carpetbagger coming in and taking advantage of this particular situation.

BURBY: One of the threats in New Orleans is that local elected officials will try to get their political constituencies back into the city to keep them in power. That could result in hit-and-miss rebuilding on blocks. Bill Rohe [of the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill] pointed out that we really want to have cohesive neighborhoods rebuilt that are compact and that do not have a lot of empty space. For that to occur, there will have to be planning by the city and money from outside. If we just let the private sector do it, people will come back to a block and one house will get rebuilt, five houses will get torn down and stay torn down forever. We’ll end up with neighborhoods that are fragmented physically and socially. The social cohesion that was there before will be hard to bring about with such a pattern of rebuilding. The real threat that we’re seeing in New Orleans right now is that everything seems to be totally ad hoc. I don’t know if anybody else feels that way.

MARET: More significantly, whose vision is being pursued and by whom? There is no coherent plan. Development seems to be led by the first corporate interests on the scene. New Orleans needs a strong unifying vision. Local officials, community leaders need to work on a master plan. Elected officials need to exercise leadership on this very important civic and planning issue and include neighborhood and community leaders, but there doesn’t seem to be any guidance.

BURBY: A total lack of guidance from the city or anywhere else.

BLAKELY: See, that’s the problem. In the book’s case studies, there were a few instances like that but there was someone who had some degree of legitimacy in most of these examples. New Orleans seems almost bizarre to me, like, Haiti or something.

CAMPANELLA: Or the social fabric was intact like in the Mexico City case; the people were able to very quickly come together and organize.
BURBY: Yes. In New Orleans, because of the venal city government dating back to the 19th century, the business community persuaded the state legislature to separate the functions that really mattered to the city away from the city government. These functions include the sewerage and water board (which is responsible for drainage as well) and also construction and maintenance of levees, operation of the port, schools, and even the parks. Each is overseen by a board that is to varying degrees independent of the city government. This is critical in New Orleans since the city cannot bring about reform and improved systems acting on its own. For example, drainage is a serious problem in New Orleans and people don’t realize that the pumps that remove rainwater from the city are designed to handle a storm with a 1-in-10-year recurrence interval. Anything stronger than that, such as a 25-year storm, floods the city. The city floods, large portions of it, regularly in heavy rains, not just from hurricanes. Fixing that problem requires action by the sewerage and water board, and not the city per se. But recovery for them is extremely difficult. You have to have the water and sewer workers at the same time that the street is repaired.

LAURIA: Well, here’s a classic example in even nonrecovery periods. If you recall the Carrollton Street redevelopment, the city totally redid this major boulevard that runs from the river almost all the way to the lake. They repaved it and then had to redo it for drainage repairs, tore it all up, redid it again. Then they put in a trolley line, tore it all up, and redid it. This happened over a decade. That area and those businesses (between Canal Street and City Park Boulevard) had to deal with a torn-up area three times. They probably had a clean street for 1 or 2 years out of that decade. That’s the kind of lack of coordination that occurs there even during normal times, let alone during disaster times.

BLAKELY: I want to ask a question of you New Orleans people. It’s about future-proofing. Most of the cities in this book, unless destroyed by bombing, improved the physical situation so a future disaster would be less likely in the natural disaster cases. Now, unless New Orleans does something spectacular, why would anybody move back to New Orleans, with climate change and the likelihood of flooding?

BURBY: And why would you invest in it?

MARET: Well, as everybody knows, New Orleans is one of the most beautiful cities in the U.S., nurtured by a great mix of culture, music, savoir vivre, and deep family roots. So most people who can make the choice to live there don’t just look at the investment, they look at the quality of life and the sense of community, family. Having said that, it’s obvious that families need to be safe, and building a safe city will take time. It’s going to require a new levee system, a massive reconstruction of the wetlands around New Orleans, and planning high-density and mixed-income neighborhoods on the higher ground. But citizens are already coming back; they are not waiting for the levee board to come up with a new plan.

BLAKELY: Why would you trust this levee board? Why would you trust anything that anybody said about future-proofing in New Orleans? Now, the guy who was supposed to be in charge of emergency services stole $26 million. You’d have to have a federal overseer or someone who would rebuild the levees that had legitimacy. In Oakland we could say, “Here’s a new fire district,” or “tear down freeways in San Francisco” and the same thing in Los Angeles. There were new things done that would secure your investment and make you feel better for future earthquakes. California laws have been massively changed in response to earthquakes.

LANG: So what roles should governments take?

NELSON: Maybe that leads into what I was going to ask. What are the especially pertinent lessons that we would apply to New Orleans as far as we know the situation now, of the 12 axioms?

BURBY: The book pointed out a lot of negatives such as everyone looking out for themselves. We don’t have to learn that from anybody else. But to my mind, the lesson is that somehow there has to be an external institution or force by implication.

BLAKELY: But that’s not in the book.

LAURIA: But that’s particularly problematic if you expect oversight to come from the federal government. If we look at the early response by the federal government (not just FEMA) the same concerns I have for the local government I have of the federal government oversight. The only thing I can come up with is to construct some form of nongovernmental organization that then does this oversight and monitoring.

BLAKELY: Like the RPA [New York Regional Plan Association].

BURBY: So we need a TVA [Tennessee Valley Authority] or something like that.

VALE: There actually is a proposal in Congress co-sponsored by Senators Kennedy [D-Massachusetts] and Gregg [R-New Hampshire] that we hope could provide some input into a Gulf Coast Regional Recovery Authority that was meant to kind of coordinate local responses, and deal with all the kinds of planning issues and housing issues and ecological issues.

BURBY: On a regional scale.

VALE: It was proposed before Rita struck, but fortunately it had “Gulf Coast” in the title and was prepared to expand all the way to Florida. The legislation was filed in mid October.

LANG: The best estimates from the displacement due to the two storms, Rita and Katrina, is that 70% of people remain in the space of the Gulf Coast, would remain in the space that would be affected by that legislation, which means that the absorption of it happened locally. Houston needs New Orleans and New Orleans needs Houston along that very fragile coast, due to storms.

VALE: Even though this agency has a 3-year sunset proposed to it, it’s the sort of thing that is, in a way, future-proofing, because it is saying, “Look, the Gulf Coast is going to be vulnerable indefinitely and we need to have a better coordinated governance structure.”
LANG: Is resiliency, then, at the larger-than-metro level, at the multimetro scale?

LAURIA: The question about damage done and how resilient New Orleans is is a little misplaced. This comes out of the book, too. It’s really, how resilient is the U.S.? One of the things that really stuck out, like six degrees of separation, is the number of people not directly attached to the Gulf Coast that have been affected by this disaster. This case is a national problem and it’s really going to be a comment on how resilient we are as a nation.

BURBY: Yes. In that respect, 9/11 was interesting. If you look at where the insurance payments went for 9/11, they’re spread all over the country. It was not all concentrated where the event occurred, and I think this will be very similar.

LANG: Going back to 9/11, somebody who managed the relationship of FEMA from 9/11 told me that most of the legal work to get FEMA to pay up came from shadow governments; it came from the authority that runs Battery Park City. Instead of hiring national lawyers, the lawyers were local. I raised this question with New Orleans. Is there an institutional frame in New Orleans that can negotiate successfully with the federal government? This person said that New York successfully dealt with the federal government because they were sophisticated from New York City. She worried that that capacity did not exist in New Orleans.

BURBY: That’s exactly correct.

LAURIA: Well, even if it did exist, it’s not trusted. There’s a difference in the level of ability to leverage at this point.

BLAKELY: My experience with FEMA, of course, is very different because it was a different situation. FEMA in Oakland and San Francisco were so helpful in getting federal money from all different sources and working with us with foundations to match the money.

BURBY: FEMA is the wrong agency because FEMA doesn’t have urban planners. You can count the number of city planners that are on FEMA’s staff. There is no urban development knowledge. They’re suddenly given this role of creating temporary housing, creating mini-cities. They know nothing about how to do it, which is why they create these FEMAvilles that are socially desolate places. There’s a disconnect in our federal response and recovery programs.

BLAKELY: I’ve seen FEMA in three different situations including New York City and had great respect for them. Now having seen what goes on in New Orleans, I can’t believe it’s the same organization.

BURBY: Well it’s not.

BLAKELY: But that is a rapid change. 9/11 wasn’t that long ago, but the FEMA headquarters were in New York City. That may have made a difference. They were also in San Francisco and Los Angeles so close to the disaster that they could respond.

NELSON: They were also their own independent agency.

BLAKELY: Yes, they were also their own independent agency up until that time. But that is a remarkable transformation in an agency.

BURBY: The federal agency that needs to be in New Orleans in a big way is HUD [Housing and Urban Development], because if you look at the disaster relief authorities and programs, they’re primarily oriented to making homeowners whole. In New Orleans, the homeowners occupy a minority [47%] of the housing stock.

VALE: Although the majority of the Lower Ninth Ward were homeowners according to the 2000 Census.

BURBY: But the Lower Ninth Ward is a very small part of New Orleans and a very small part of what actually was flooded. The disaster relief legislation does almost nothing for renters. You get up to $10,000 or $12,000 in your pocket, but they do nothing to replace the rental unit that you used to occupy. That is covered by the Small Business Administration, which will give the owners of that rental unit a loan if they want to reinvest, and they may not. It seems to me that HUD’s low-income housing programs have to be rolled out if we’re going to do something.

NELSON: Tom and Larry, based on your work behind the book and the lessons you’ve learned, what are applicable to the New Orleans/Katrina situation? You’re already advising Congress. What are the lessons that you think we should have learned from this?

VALE: The lesson is the need for some kind of strong organizational authority—and the extreme difficulty of accomplishing that in a democracy. That may be a cop-out, but it seems to me we have this very contradictory challenge of getting to a point where someone is clearly put in charge who can lead in a way that doesn’t alienate the local population that needs to feel so central to the rebuilding process. In places that we discuss, like Tangshan in China, where a quarter million or half million may have died in a 1976 earthquake, the city of a million was back up to that population within 10 years and re-housed. But you had a very different kind of political system that could make that happen, and this has almost no applicability to the realities of the United States, let alone the intricacies of the politics of New Orleans. We cannot extract from the book a simple how-to message other than to suggest that this combination of authority and grassroots buy-in that is true of any good planning process needs to apply in this case.

CAMPANELLA: I would just underscore the second point, that cities are only as resilient as their citizens. Until we are able to bring these people together who were affected by Katrina in New Orleans, the city is not going to really rebound to anything like it was before. I see that as one of the central lessons—a resilient city needs resilient citizens. Right now we need to get these people back so that they can participate in the political process and make sure their neighborhoods get the money and attention necessary.

VALE: Who is the “we” that is bringing these people together?

CAMPANELLA: That’s the big question. I don’t know. There have been different attempts on the parts of different organizations to try to facilitate this. From what I gather, it’s not gone very well, frankly.
BURBY: A lot of people question, Tom, whether the highly dependent population is going to be better off being brought back to New Orleans where there are very few job opportunities for the long run anyway; to a school system that was totally bankrupt and doomed their children in perpetuity to a lack of opportunity. A lot of people feel those displaced people are much better off staying where they’ve been dispersed, finding jobs, making new lives for themselves and their children.

CAMPANELLA: Yes. Well, maybe I’m romanticizing this a bit, but these displaced people from the city coming back could organize in a way that the Mexico City folks did and demand changes to these huge infrastructure and social problems that plagued them beforehand.

BURBY: But where’s the economy going that is going to provide the jobs?

LAURIA: Right. The individuals, the dependent population, the underemployed population that you’re talking about, where are they going to be in other cities and what are the schools like in the areas where they’re going to be in other cities?

BURBY: They have to be better.

LAURIA: I’m not sure of that. My experience is they’re not necessarily better, at least not better enough to make a difference in life chances of the individuals involved. One of the opportunities (and I’m a bit of an optimist) that this poses is that there were never going to be resources put into the physical plant of the New Orleans public schools before Katrina. This is a real opportunity for those resources to flow here. Obviously, you know the New Orleans schools like I do. It’s more than just physical plants that need to be rebuilt.

But, if we look at the positive side, the housing stock that we’re talking about that was destroyed, particularly for the low-income population, was not in good shape. There were 37,000 abandoned housing units throughout that housing stock; that stock was really bad already. This is an opportunity to get resources for affordable housing and physical plant and, hopefully, a restructuring of the public school systems. If I have any ability to do anything in this situation, it’s going to be pushing for those kinds of things to bring back the population that makes New Orleans what it is, which is not the social elite by any definition. That’s probably true in most places, but it’s especially true in New Orleans. If we don’t bring back much of that population, it implies that we need to—

BURBY: Create opportunity for it.

LAURIA: Right, create opportunity for it or we’re missing what we could be doing.

BLAKELY: That’s a crisis.

NELSON: Want to ask another kind of question. Most of the examples in the book dealt with locations that were economic dynamos for the city or region, and the displacement was temporary because realistically people had very few alternatives to returning. Not in all cases, but my observation is that there was a lot of place-boundness and what I would call primacy in location going on that led to resilient outcomes. But here, we have, let’s say, 200,000 to 300,000 people who are no longer living right now in New Orleans. A high percentage may never return. They’re dispersed across the southeast, from Houston to Atlanta and even into parts of the midwest and northeast. When you disperse 200,000 people to this region of 20 or 40 million, you’re talking about a literal drop in the bucket in terms of absorbing these people in a variety of ways, through jobs and social institutions.

LANG: I could add precise numbers to that right here because they’re more dramatic than that. It’s actually 70% go into a region of about 10 million, and the number, according to the post office, is 1.57 million units that they cannot deliver mail to in a population of over 3 million displaced. So it is not a drop in the bucket. The share that went to Houston, Baton Rouge, and to New Orleans itself, its suburbs unaffected, are enormous and the majority of the absorption, over 50%.

BLAKELY: That’s a crisis.

NELSON: Well, would a stop in Baton Rouge result in a return to New Orleans or a second stop in Houston or Atlanta? The displaced population is probably a small share of the total region that is likely to absorb them. For example, metropolitan Atlanta alone adds 50,000 to 100,000 each year anyway. Houston likewise and Dallas–Fort Worth. What percent of those who are now displaced will come back to New Orleans or what percent will stay where they are or relocate in the same region and be absorbed with jobs and new social contacts? My guess is that a very high percentage of displaced people will find it easier to establish new roots than return. Of course we don’t know how long it will take to make large parts of the city habitable again.

LANG: The first opinion poll, done by Gallup, found 39% unwilling to return.

BURBY: Somebody was saying it depends on whether people have extended families or social supports. Those who don’t are less likely to come back.
LAURIA: My guess is it’s entirely contrary to that. I don’t disagree with the poll, but I disagree with the interpretation of the poll because this is a poll taken immediately after Katrina.

CAMPANELLA: It’s just a snapshot and it could change even more.

LANG: More importantly, these people mostly are within the metropolitan area. When they say “not going back,” they mean not to their block, not that they’re leaving New Orleans.

CAMPANELLA: To go back to the earlier question you asked about the “place,” I think this is one of the most place-intensive cities we have. I read somewhere that the residents of Louisiana and in New Orleans have the deepest roots in terms of family connections to place of any state and any city.

LANG: And are the least likely to move away.

CAMPANELLA: Yes. Whether we then equate that with resilience, that’s a leap I’d rather not make. But it does at least create a real attraction.

LANG: And makes it a city less likely to attract new residents. The city has 3% foreign born, despite being on the Gulf of Mexico.

BURBY: But there’s a surplus labor supply. People wouldn’t move away, therefore there are too many workers for available jobs, and people would take lesser jobs.

LANG: Let me ask you this, a hard question here. Could you think of a worse place for this to have happened to in the United States?

VALE: The worst place would be one that had the ecological vulnerability without the kind of cultural impact that New Orleans has. This is the most imageable and well beloved city in the region, and that is a huge advantage, because it means that this is a city that exists in the mind’s eye of a global population, not simply of a local Gulf Coast one. It means that there is a tremendous hunger, especially in a tourism-driven economy, to bring something back. The worst case scenario would be a city with the vulnerabilities and future risk profile of New Orleans that didn’t have the tourist base unscathed.

BLAKELY: Like Galveston.

VALE: Yes, Galveston would be an example. Galveston is now twice the population it was in 1900 before the flood; but it probably was never going to be a very large place.

LANG: But Southeast Texas was going to get a big city.

VALE: Southeast Texas needed a port city just like the Mississippi Delta needs New Orleans. For lots of complicated reasons, New Orleans is in its best possible location even though it is a terrible place to have to build a city.

BURBY: But its locational advantage is no longer there. The port employs 5,000 people I read, which would not support a large city.

It was in the right place in the 19th century, but in the 21st century, its location is irrelevant.

VALE: Because so much of the older New Orleans is there, the relevance has shifted to tourism. The challenge is to make sure that a city has more than its very low-end jobs and its very high-end jobs. That’s going to be a really tough one. My hope would be that it would begin with the sort of assumption that Ed mentioned about Oakland, which is how can we turn the rebuilding of the place into an opportunity to hire the people and train the people and offer new skills to the people who need them most? Either that happens or equivalently other new groups come to the city in search of those jobs and the trend on immigration starts to change.

Resilience in part depends on the time frame that you want to give it. To me, it is better to have a 20-year window on it rather than 1- or 2-year window on it. Will we look back on this in the way that one can look upon Mexico City 20 years ago and see a catalytic moment for what turned out to be, on balance, very positive change out of disaster? Or will we look back and see another nail in the coffin of a declining city?

NELSON: Do you see a positive outcome to this?

VALE: I see a very mixed picture. I don’t know New Orleans well enough, and I want to be very careful about what I say.

NELSON: Then I’ll ask the question of the two here who have lived there the longest: Ray and Mickey.

BURBY: It very easily could be positive because of the huge investment, at least in public money, that’s going to occur in New Orleans. The challenge is to bring about private investment in the city outside of the tourist industry, which is a very low-wage industry.

LANG: Do you have confidence in that public investment? New York almost had to sue the federal government to get even a modest share of what was promised to them. I’m not confident the federal government will come through in a significant way.

BURBY: I’m confident that the money will flow in, but for it to have a transformative effect the state really has to step in and restructure the governmental system there. For example, fiscally the city is a basket case. The city has a $75,000 property tax exemption (homestead exemption). The median home price in New Orleans was $87,000. There was never enough money to have adequate school physical plants or to pay teachers adequate salaries. There was never enough money even to drain the water out to keep sections of the city from flooding every three or four years. There was never enough money to fix the potholes. Taxicab drivers said they completely redid the suspension on their cabs every six months in New Orleans. Unless those basic structural government problems can be fixed in New Orleans, the money will flow in, but nothing will change. There’s opportunity, but whether it will be realized depends, as somebody pointed out, on whether there’s leadership to bring about needed changes.

LANG: Why would the federal government give money to that city, given those terms, given its priorities?
LAURIA: We have to be concerned with giving and taking away more than with not giving. I'm optimistic, although it's a cautious optimism. The thing that makes New Orleans somewhat resilient is the insular strength of its culture. In my experience there, most of the trends that flew across the U.S. had dimple effects on New Orleans, though they would take over in other cities. That's because the indigenous culture was so strong and so insular that it didn't bother too much with what was going on nationally for the longest period of time. That's a real positive.

The potential of changing the governance of the region is strong, too. Not government, but governance, in terms of the actors that are going to be involved in the replanning. We need somebody that is not part of the cronynism of the federal government, but is also outside of the pure patronage system and the past patronage system of that regional body. That's where one of the difficulties lies. My biggest fear is that the insular culture will be gone. The hardest hit population, besides the low-income population, is going to be the small businesses that were based on that insular culture because they can't function elsewhere and they have no base to work with now. There also needs to be an influx of money to small business associations.

BURBY: Another important ingredient in all this will be for the idea of regionalism to take hold somehow, because as somebody pointed out earlier in our discussion, this is really not a New Orleans problem. It's a New Orleans regional problem. In the past, New Orleans and its suburbs didn't talk to each other. They ignored each other. They viewed themselves as competitive. Somehow they need to start thinking about how to work together for the well-being of the region. Regional transportation, for example, is a critical issue.

MARET: We witness the same fragmentation in the disaster management process. The different parishes of the New Orleans metropolitan area are not helping each other in the rebuilding process. They don't seem to understand that cooperation could help the entire region be up and running in less time. St. Bernard Parish, Plaquemines are dealing with major destruction. Orleans Parish contains a mix of destroyed neighborhoods like the Lower Ninth Ward and working neighborhoods like the French Quarter and the Garden District. Parishes like Jefferson Parish are actually being privileged by the situation as people come to live and shop there; they're receiving most of the tax base money, so critical for the survival of the central city. And St. Tammany Parish, north of the lake, is hosting many evacuees. Housing prices have been rapidly rising, especially across the bridges. To go back to the transportation issue, it's clear that a regional transportation network is essential but currently dysfunctional; most attempts to create regional transit systems have failed in the past.

BURBY: The roadblock to any kind of regional cooperation is race, plain and simple.

LAURIA: On both sides.

BURBY: On both sides, yes.

LAURIA: On both sides in the sense that the political base in New Orleans is also dependent upon that racial issue, as is that of the suburbs of Metairie, et cetera.

NELSON: I'm going to propose another question again based on your axioms in the back of the book, which I think are terrific summaries. You talk about how “disasters reveal the resilience of governments.” I sense that the federal government, as clunky as it is, is going to be fairly resilient. If anything, it has a wealth of resources. Specific units of local government will also be resilient, such as the drainage district. But what about the city government itself? Is this a test of its resilience or is it simply not resilient?

VALE: One of the things that we make very clear by the end of the book when we challenge our own title is that bouncing back may not always be a good thing. The intent to return to a dysfunctional past practice is there as a strong possibility in almost all of these cases that we document. But there are also these exceptional ones, like the Mexico City case, where the disaster reveals the problems of the local government in a way that pushes social movements forward to the point where significant transformative governance can occur. It's back to what Mick [Lauria] was saying before, is this actually the moment of national and international attention that forces a reconsideration of some of the institutional deficiencies of the place? Can that be leveraged into rebuilding a city that has some institutional reform, as well as architectural form?

BLAKELY: We are actually close enough to a national election for New Orleans to be an issue in both the mid-term elections, 2006, and the presidential election. People are already posturing so that New Orleans's rebuilding will become an issue.

BURBY: It’s a sore that's not going to go away.

BLAKELY: New Orleans is a slightly different case. If you were talking about Galveston, for example, it would disappear fast. But New Orleans has two cultural features, and one of them happens to be Black. The Republicans have put themselves in a very difficult position with this intent to do outreach to Black people and younger people by ignoring this.

The Democrats, on the other hand, particularly Hillary [Clinton], can ride very high on an issue like this. So it can't be ignored. The mid-term elections are important in this, too. I agree with you, federal money will go there. Where it sticks is another issue.

At some level you could convince people that New Orleans is not in a position to help itself; that perhaps something like this would be politically a very good thing for both sides of the aisle in order to show the U.S.'s resilience. This is a win-win. Republicans can say, “We put this structure in place to assist them in this hour of need.” We are trying to bring back a native institution such as jazz. This resonates with the entire American public. Jazz is the music of American people. It's not the music of Mexico or Canada or someplace else.

If we played this right, those of us who are professionals could get the government to act at the national level, even though it’s crippled at the state and local level. Once that happens, then the neighborhood groups could galvanize. They would have a point to go to. You notice that in the places like Serbia, it’s only when the internationals came together that the local people could galvanize to save themselves. The few good roles the U.S. has played are in those places where we’ve gone in and helped people galvanize to help them-
selves rather than conquer them. Here’s a place where you could use almost the same strategy. The national government is almost acting like an international referee in a sense.

LANG: I want to ask a question here concerning historic preservation because the city’s culture is not just jazz and Creole cooking. It’s important architecturally. Now, I realize because the historic core of the city is built on the highest ground, that the city retained the French Quarter and the Garden District. But there is a wider vernacular architecture to the area that’s important. How much effort should be put into preserving the density and the mix of neighborhoods or how much should they be put on the block?

LAURIA: Well, if you do it intelligently, it works, because of the raised Creole cottages and the old shotguns. If you do a little of the FEMA work where you raise the plot of land a little bit, those are going to be much better structures than current building elsewhere in the U.S.

LANG: How about a shotgun McMansion?

LAURIA: Some of those Creole cottages are like mansions; you could use that style for the people who could afford that. But in general, the density of the double shotguns and the Creole cottages would work in some places and that they’re not that expensive to build either. That’s one of the nice things. You can produce a double shotgun probably for $80,000. The cost of land is not going to be an issue. There’s an ability to produce affordable housing if you can get the capital in there. The low-income housing tax credit would work as a mechanism to encourage private capital to build affordable rental housing, because that’s what you’re going to have to do for that population.

NELSON: I’m going to chime in on the historic preservation part because I think it is Jane Brooks’s classes at the University of New Orleans over the past 20 years that have documented, in a variety of ways, all the historically significant neighborhoods and structures.

BURBY: There are 13 historic districts too.

NELSON: What occurs to me is that one of your axioms of resilience is reliance by remembrance. Brooks’ classes have essentially created that memory. This may actually facilitate the reconstruction and design of neighborhoods that might otherwise have been obliterated.

LANG: Could you do a pattern book?

BURBY: They exist.

LANG: Yes go back in and restore with sensitivity, not exact reproduction, but that kind of flavor.

BURBY: A very important tool in the rebuilding of New Orleans is going to be the New Century New Orleans Land Use Plan [New Orleans City Planning Commission, 1999]. Because this document basically was not what we had planned, it was a description of each of New Orleans’s neighborhoods and recounts its history. It provides detailed land use maps. It identifies the problems these neighborhoods had and offers proposals for solving those problems. It’s almost a road map if one wants to recreate what was there before, and that’s what the people want.

NELSON: If these plans can be used to solve the problems that might not have been solved otherwise, that ties into another axiom Vale and Campanella came up with in terms of the opportunity that disasters or catastrophes create to reshape government itself.

BLAKELY: You said having plans before is better than planning after. So you could bring out an existing plan to try. I want to just bring up one caution about historic preservation. In Oakland, historic preservation has nearly crippled Oakland’s recovery from the earthquake because building owners refused to deal with those historic buildings, and they have created eyesores.

LAURIA: We’re more thinking about historic reconstruction than historic preservation.

BLAKELY: Yes, reconstruction, not preservation.

VALE: We had two groups from the region come to MIT. The first was a group of displaced architects and preservationists from Tulane and elsewhere. The second was the former planning director, Kristina Ford, who had done the ’99 plan and won three APA awards for it as she exited in 2000 with a mayor who didn’t want her anymore. The statement that we kept hearing was 80% of the building stock is salvageable, and that the older stock that was built out of cypress wood was about as rot-resistant as you could get. So it isn’t even starting over from zero in a lot of places, at least those places where the structural frames could be retained. There was some hope; this was from an architect who was the advisor to the preservation council there. I came away surprisingly buoyed about the possibilities of salvaging much of the architectural fabric in many of the historic districts.

LAURIA: In the historic districts that will be true, but I think a lot of the areas were more recently built.

LANG: We’re down to the final points here. Does anyone want to speculate on whether now that Baton Rouge is larger than New Orleans you think that Baton Rouge will remain the largest city in the state?

BURBY: That’s really difficult, because Baton Rouge and New Orleans have historically been in competition with each other for resources and prominence in the state. One of the big difficulties is Baton Rouge’s willingness, i.e., the state government’s willingness, to invest in the rebuilding and resurrection of New Orleans. Undoubtedly, some would like to see Baton Rouge become the dominant city in the state.

LAURIA: I think politically you’re correct. But I also think that Baton Rouge does not have the loyalty. Baton Rouge is twice its normal size right now. It doubled in size in two weeks. But that was
precisely because people were pre-positioning themselves to go back. Baton Rouge doesn’t have the infrastructure to deal with that.

NELSON: Doesn’t have the “resilience”?

LAURIA: It doesn’t; it really doesn’t. People in Baton Rouge come to New Orleans, and a lot of what they like about where they live is the proximity to New Orleans. My guess is that Baton Rouge is not going to hold onto that model.

LANG: And, finally, as Ed [Blakely] noted earlier, will the construction attract a large Hispanic population? This is not traditionally a Hispanic city despite a small Honduran population in the city, if I’m not mistaken.

LAURIA: Guatemalan and Honduran.

LANG: A tiny share relative to other cities. Would you think in the 2020 census that you would have a non–African American majority city in New Orleans, because you would have a culturally diverse city that contained a large Hispanic population and whatever White population returns?

BURBY: I personally don’t think so. I think it’s going to go back to being just about what it was in 20 years.

LAURIA: My guess is that you won’t. You won’t lose the African American majority, but you will have a lesser percentage of African Americans. You will have a much higher percentage of Latinos.

CAMPANELLA: That’s what happened in the wake of Andrew in Florida.

LAURIA: It’s going to go from 70% African American to probably 55 to 60% percent African American with that Latino population pulling in that last 10 or 15%.

NELSON: That suggests to me that the Latino population attracted to all the opportunities this might present will have to settle somewhere else. Would that be Jefferson Parish?

BURBY: Sure. Jefferson Parish is an aging suburb with all the problems of aging suburbs. It has a fairly large, low-priced housing stock that would provide a logical place where moderate-income Hispanics will settle.

LANG: Final prediction. If you had to pick a number out for the 2020 census, how big would the city be?

BURBY: 400,000.

LAURIA: I was going to say 400,000.

BURBY: That would be 80% of what it was.

NELSON: I was going to say around 350,000.

BLAKELY: 350,000 to 400,000.

BURBY: Without another hurricane occurrence, though.

NELSON: That’s a question I didn’t ask earlier. What if we have one or two more of these in the next 10 years?

LAURIA: We’ll have them, but they’re not necessarily going to hit New Orleans. But if you do get one or two more hits like this, all bets are off.

BURBY: Well, remember the levees after [hurricane] Betsy 40 years ago. It took 40 years to raise them to the Category 3 level. They’re not going to be raised to Category 5 in anything less than 20 years. This is an enormous engineering problem.

NELSON: From what I read, we’re in a period now of 10, maybe 20 years of accelerated and intensive hurricane activity.

BURBY: Along with rising sea levels and other hazards

NELSON: And loss of wetlands and areas becoming increasingly vulnerable.

LANG: Well, may we all be here to see if we were right, and we’ll end it with that. Thanks.

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