This article offers a look at the disaster-recovery and redevelopment plan for New Orleans, Louisiana. The Unified New Orleans Plan (UNOP) is the road map and blueprint for rebuilding. UNOP was given further credibility in March 2007 when the city's new Disaster-Recovery Chief Edward Blakely unveiled a $1.1 billion phase-one investment scheme, the first step in what is projected to be a 10-to-15-year effort.

Planners, politicians, and citizens have been fighting over the Crescent City's future for two years. Will a new plan and disaster-recovery chief hone a workable vision that builds what's needed while it preserves what's beloved?

Even before Katrina's deathly waters receded, New Orleanians knew their cherished city would never be the same. If there was a silver lining amid the misery of lost lives and ruined communities, it was the chance to remake the Crescent City into a better version of its soulful and sultry self.

But what should the new New Orleans look like? Should submerged neighborhoods be abandoned? Should all homes in flood zones wear stilts? Should the city draw itself up to high ground and get on with life as a much smaller place?

There was no lack of advisers, from planners to architects to developers to politicians and their redevelopment gurus. Finally, after more than 20 months of well-publicized stumbles and false starts, including competing sets of recovery schemes, New Orleans seems to be moving forward, albeit in the face of huge challenges.

The Unified New Orleans Plan (UNOP) is the road map and blueprint for rebuilding. The long-term plan carries a $14 billion price tag and was created by ordinary citizens working with planning...
professionals after-hours and on weekends in churches, schools, and community centers. It replaces previous uncompleted schemes that fell by the wayside for lack of funding or political support. UNOP includes big ideas to rebuild the entire city-infrastructure improvements, public schools, housing, and flood protection-as well as custom projects like biking paths and gardens that benefit particular neighborhoods. One ambitious proposal, for example, would tear down a stretch of elevated highway that 50 years ago sliced through an African-American enclave, mowing down a boulevard of glorious oaks.

When it was released in February, UNOP took more hits than a piñata. The heaviest stick was held by the Bureau for Better Government, a local watchdog group that pronounced UNOP little more than a wish list that ducked hard questions of how and where to rebuild.

Steven Villavaso, the urban planner whose firm, Villavaso & Partners, led the team of professionals that wove together more than a dozen community designs into UNOP, defends the plan, saying, "UNOP is not the end, it's the beginning. It's flexible. It was designed to accept the changes and improvements that will inevitably come. What validates UNOP is that it carries the weight of broad-based, grass-roots citizen participation."

UNOP still needs to pass muster with the city planning commission, the city council, and the mayor, but adoption appears likely by early summer. Most public officials support the plan, and the Louisiana Recovery Authority is waiting on the adoption of UNOP to start the flow of $300 million in federal recovery funds.

UNOP was given further credibility in March when the city's new disaster-recovery chief, Edward Blakely, unveiled a $1.1 billion phase-one investment scheme, the first step in what is projected to be a 10-to-15-year effort. This scheme, which took a lot from the UNOP plan, proposes using 40 percent of the public dollars as leverage to draw investors, developers, and residents to 17 targeted clusters throughout the city, and about 60 percent for citywide projects. While all of the money is not in hand, the plan includes potential sources and strategies for raising it.

Blakely, a Californian who was brought to the city with great fanfare by Mayor Ray Nagin, has emerged as the go-to guy for disaster recovery. He devised response plans for Oakland, California, after the city was hit first by the Loma Prieta earthquake in 1989 and then a devastating fire in 1991. Blakely's urban-planning expertise has been sought by foreign local and regional governments in countries ranging from New Zealand to Vietnam.

Steven Bingler, an architect and planner, whose firm, Concordia, coordinated the neighborhood planning process that resulted in the UNOP document, believes this pedestrian-oriented cluster concept is the best strategy for success. "It's a sustainable model where people can walk to most of the places they need to go," says Bingler. "It's the way communities used to be before we started driving everywhere. Think of it as using the French Quarter--a self-sustained community--as the DNA for rebuilding other neighborhoods."

Most of these target clusters are in areas that escaped the worst flooding. But two communities, the 9th Ward and East New Orleans, both nearly wiped away by the surge, made the cut. Their inclusion suggests that the city's new map will not have a smaller footprint--at least not by design.

The targeted areas, each about a half-mile in diameter, are historic centers of commerce for their neighborhoods. They were selected, in part, because they already have anchors like commercial and retail strips or shopping centers that planners hope will appeal to entrepreneurs, developers, and investors.
In one target area, in New Orleans East around New Orleans East Plaza, the assistance will focus on rebuilding the heavily damaged commercial corridor there. In another, along Harrison Avenue in the Lakeview neighborhood, not as damaged as New Orleans East, the assistance will support rebuilding that has already started. St. Roch, a historic neighborhood near the Mississippi River where flooding was minimal, represents a third category of target zones. St. Roch's commercial strip, where many mom-and-pop businesses have reopened, will get help to refresh and broaden the commercial and retail base there.

Robert Tannen, a New Orleans urban planner, sees the risk and the rationale in such a strategy. "The private market is going to deal with the low-risk neighborhoods, so I think they chose to put emphasis on the neighborhoods where private investment isn't so certain. But until the Corps [Army Corps of Engineers] and the state can demonstrate that there is protection to all neighborhoods with gates, levees, and coastal restoration, those areas are still at risk." While the Army Corps of Engineers had repaired and strengthened the levees to pre-Katrina condition by last June, the task of providing additional security is ongoing, with the ultimate goal of providing 100-year protection for the system by 2010. "The Corps is preparing for the 2007 hurricane season by focusing on improvements that will significantly reduce risks for critical areas," says John Meadon, deputy director of Task Force Hope. "This includes increasing levels of protection at the three outfall canals. The temporary floodgates will prevent storm surge from entering the canals, providing more effective storm and flood managements. The Corps is continually increasing pumping capacity at the outfall canals."

These target clusters have brought a flicker of hope to a city hungry for leadership, direction, and momentum. Still, many fear that in the rush to rebuild, much of the city's authentic flavor--in fact, its very soul--could be lost.

There is a lot at stake. New Orleans is ancient when compared to other American cities. A remarkable amount of its historic fabric has survived since the city's birth in the early 1700s, though much of it is in a state of decrepitude. More than a collection of homes and institutions built by the high and mighty, the city's architectural heritage includes entire neighborhoods where generations of middle- and working-class families-black, white, and mixed-race-lived and worked. It seems that nearly every block in the central city, no matter how highly decorated or humble, has a story to tell.

But even before Katrina, the city was adrift. According to the Census Bureau, nearly 30 percent of residents lived in poverty, and the city had a higher unemployment rate and lower rate of home-ownership than the national average. Starting in the 1960s with the desegregation of public schools and ending with the bust of the gas and oil industries in the early 1990s, New Orleans witnessed a population retreat from which it never recovered. Between 1960 and 2000, the city lost nearly a third of its residents. Historic neighborhoods in the central city were hurt the most by this exodus.

But for the preservation movement, the city's economic decline would have taken a greater toll. Starting in the 1970s, nonprofit organizations like the Preservation Resource Center successfully campaigned to have the city's humbler streetscapes recognized as architectural and historic treasures worthy of protection. Today there are 16 protected historic districts, covering more than half of the city.

Walter Gallas, director of the field office for the National Trust for Historic Preservation, says a huge challenge in keeping the city from losing more of its history to post-Katrina neglect is the desire of many residents and public officials to see storm-damaged buildings bulldozed or transferred to those who would repair them. "The laws are in place," says Gallas, "it's a matter of
enforcement on the local and federal level. Properties tagged for demolition are supposed to be reviewed, and that doesn't always happen."

The city's landmark protection laws say structures or edifices within historic districts can't be demolished, altered, moved, or restored without a certificate of appropriateness. Moreover, a federal statute says that if a federal agency is involved in the undertaking—as is often the case in post-Katrina New Orleans—a public review is required before structures listed on the National Register of Historic Places or in historic districts can be demolished. The law applies even in cases where the city believes the buildings may be in imminent threat of collapse or are potential hazards to the community.

If salvation for the city's historic streetscapes hinges on the success of the rebuilding plan, no single entity is more pivotal to the rebirth than the New Orleans Redevelopment Authority (NORA). Long in charge of recycling abandoned or tax-delinquent buildings throughout the city before the storm, NORA lacked the teeth—legal and financial—to make much of a difference on the blighted landscape. But last spring the state passed legislation to expand NORA's powers that increased its board from seven to 11 members, gave the agency bonding authority, and allowed it to use new market tax credits.

With fresh leadership and more legal and administrative clout, NORA will serve as the city's land bank. Its portfolio has or will include tens of thousands of blighted and or tax-delinquent properties. In addition, as homeowners opt to sell storm-damaged homes to the state recovery authority—one form of reparation in the Road Home program (the $7.5 billion federally funded initiative that provides up to $150,000 in grants for Louisiana homeowners to rebuild or sell their homes to the state)—the agency will take those houses, too. "Our job is to return these buildings to commerce," says Joseph Williams, a former investment banker who took over NORA in January. "But we are well aware that the mandate comes with a respect for the historic value of many structures."

Right now, Williams has more on his mind than ornamental gingerbread and authentic replacement windows. A barrier to previous campaigns to put blighted buildings into the hands of new owners had been the tedious task of clearing titles. Finding owners was daunting before Katrina and is often impossible now. Another hurdle is the law that gives owners three years to pay off taxes and reclaim properties. Williams hopes to petition the state legislature for a liberalization of that constraint to shorten the time owners have to reclaim tax-delinquent properties. Some experts have put the tipping point for the city's return to viability at a population of at least 350,000 residents versus its pre-Katrina population of 480,000. Estimates say about 223,000 people currently live in the city.

Angela O'Byrne, an architect and advocate for multifamily housing, subscribes to the "higher density on higher ground" school of thought when it comes to the city's future. "People in our community still resist what I consider concepts of smart growth that forward-thinking cities all over the world have accepted. They link density with renters and renters with poverty," says O'Byrne, a former president of the New Orleans chapter of the AIA and president and owner of Perez Architects. "You can achieve the objective of mixed-income housing without sacrificing quality if it is done correctly." O'Byrne says the key is the right amount of investment going into the developments and quality management after that.

O'Byrne points to Oakland's award-winning Mandela Gateway as an example of the kind of development she would like to see in New Orleans. The mixed-income, mixed-use development that replaced a dilapidated public housing complex includes 168 units of affordable rental housing and owner-occupied town houses. Developed by the Oakland Housing Authority and nonprofit
BRIDGE Housing Corporation, the rental component—which opened in 2004--has spurred commercial and residential development nearby.

What others see as the greatest threat to the city's future is the temptation to get stuck in the past. "I do have some concerns that the city will be built back in an artificial way," says E. Eean McNaughton, Jr., an architect in private practice and a member of the Regional Planning Commission. "I believe that we should lie down and die to protect what is original to our city. But if we do it right, what is built now will reflect this place at this time."

McNaughton acknowledges that this concept is often a hard sell in New Orleans. And to that point Sean Cummings, a local developer who currently serves as the executive director of the New Orleans Building Corporation's ambitious riverfront development initiative, says those who shape the landscape--builders, designers and planners--have a duty to educate the public. "A city is like a human being, it is supposed to evolve," he says. "Where has it ever worked to do the same thing over and over again?" he asks, noting, "It's such a short-sighted approach to re-creating a city. You look to cities like Chicago or New York or cities even older than New Orleans like Barcelona; you'll find a mix of the old and the new. These places all have a strong sense of place. Our challenge is to create architectural beauty of this time and have it be obviously a part of New Orleans."

Regardless of which of these contrasting visions prevails, the challenge of the Katrina catastrophe has overwhelmed the nation's traditional methods of cleanup and recovery. The scale of this disaster was never contemplated by the existing federal law: 134,000 housing units damaged of 188,000 occupied before the storm, and 68,000 rental units damaged of 100,000 available pre-Katrina. Moreover, in a city where 113,000 units are over 50 years old, most of the city's historic housing is at risk. The question now is not whether to preserve or develop New Orleans, but how to do both.

Planners have identified 17 clusters for development

Developers and preservationists are fighting over the Iberville housing project (foreground in photo).

Modern buildings such as the old Texaco tower (right) are also being restored.

From the air, Lake Forest Plaza seemed to be fine after Katrina But water damage made it unusable, and it was torn down, leaving only part of its sign

In the Holy Cross neighborhood, the Preservation Resource Center restored a classic shotgun house

In the Lower Garden District, new market-rate housing is being built

In the Lower Ninth Ward, many houses have been torn down or left abandoned, while one new house is going up

One of the target clusters includes Freret Street (above), in part because a hospital is nearby.

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