

The Man With the Plan



Andres Duany

**New Urbanist Leader Duany Forges Ahead
With His Ideas For Rebuilding New Orleans**
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NEW ORLEANS -- Standing in the buff-colored sanctuary of St. Leo the Great Catholic Church here, Andres Duany, the high priest of the New Urbanist city-planning movement, laid down a challenge to the 375 people who jammed the pews to hear his vision for the city's sprawling Gentilly section.

"The question is whether you want to go back to Aug. 28," he told the group, "or into the 21st century."

More than eight months after Katrina's Aug. 29 arrival flooded 80% of New Orleans, a process for answering that question is finally emerging for tens of thousands of residents who still must decide whether to rebuild their homes and what they want their neighborhoods to look like if they do.

Several large New Orleans neighborhoods, frustrated with the paralysis that set in among city officials after Katrina, are pushing ahead with developing their own reconstruction plans for their sections of the city. At the same time, city and state leaders this week are furiously working to cobble together a framework that will blend all of the plans -- including ones developed by teams of architects and planners working with the Louisiana Recovery Authority and the New Orleans City Council -- to create a master rebuilding plan by the end of the year.

Mr. Duany's Miami-based architecture and planning firm, Duany Plater-Zyberk & Co., has played a major role in planning the reconstruction of the hurricane-devastated areas of Mississippi and some areas of Louisiana outside New Orleans. He was invited in April by the Gentilly Civic Improvement Association, a neighborhood group, to help draw up a plan for the area that stretches north and east from near the middle of the city. The group had no money to pay for the work. But in hopes of showcasing New Urbanism in a city whose history, scale and layout have tremendous appeal to the movement's followers, Mr. Duany has covered more than \$150,000 in costs for himself and about a dozen members of his firm, as well as some of the expenses of some 40 volunteer planners, engineers and architects. He will be reimbursed for some of that, however, through grants from private foundations.

Even though the city's most historic neighborhoods, such as the French Quarter and the Garden District remained dry after the storm, Mr. Duany says New Orleans represents "the planning Super Bowl," and a player in the game has to be New Urbanism, which has worked over the last quarter century to popularize traditional, walkable development as an alternative to suburban sprawl. "We don't want to be left out," Mr. Duany told the group's April 20 meeting.

Heavily hit by the flooding that followed Katrina, Gentilly offers what Mr. Duany sees as a microcosm of New Orleans, a mix of race, architectural styles and terrain. But its overall suburban feel also makes it a prime candidate for a makeover. DPZ, as Mr. Duany's firm is called, is known for its so-called retrofits, in which it seeks to transform suburban settings into more traditional town centers. But Mr. Duany may be best known for Seaside, a resort community in the Florida Panhandle. While that project offers a counterpoint to subdivisions, malls and office parks, it is also attacked by critics as a phony playground for the rich. The movement is also criticized as nostalgic and unimaginative for its heavy reliance on 19th-century architecture.



A levee break floods the neighborhood after Katrina.

"Architecture in which the answers to the future only live in the past represents a limited world view," says Reed Kroloff, dean of the school of architecture at Tulane University. As part of Mayor Ray Nagin's Bring New Orleans Back Commission, Mr. Kroloff objected to Mr. Duany's participation in New Orleans. "We've got great planners here," says Mr. Kroloff, who is no longer associated with the city's rebuilding efforts. "We don't need an out-of-town firm."

While agreeing with the New Urbanists on several planning concepts -- mixed-use development, higher density and walkability among them -- Mr. Kroloff argues that the redevelopment of New Orleans must be guided by more contemporary planning. For instance, he objects to the New Urbanists' fondness for town squares, arguing that public green space should follow the natural pattern of the landscape.

Despite that resistance, Mr. Duany led property owners in Gentilly over the course of an eight-day series of community meetings late last month between teams of residents and architects, toward a vision that could remake the working- and middle-class community. Though most of the roughly 21,000 housing units are intact, Gentilly has been largely a ghost town since the storm, home to only about 6,000 people, or 13% of its pre-Katrina population of 45,000, according to planners and local organizers.



Plan to turn a Gentilly strip mall into a town center.

The plan for a new Gentilly calls for thousands of nondescript ranch-style houses and bungalows built in the 1950s and 1960s to be be "elevated" above flood level by removing their roofs and constructing

new second floors with porches. It would also include redeveloping languishing strip shopping malls into a town center, transforming open space left from the demolition of houses into plazas and remaking a business park into a higher-density workplace. He acknowledged the changes would likely make the area more affluent but says the plan would allow the neighborhood to adopt the best of current planning concepts and to compete with new suburbs outside New Orleans. "Here's a chance to accelerate the clock," he told the civic association.

A number of neighborhood and community planning efforts are under way in New Orleans, though few have gotten as far as Mr. Duany's, according to local architects and planning officials. A team of graduate students from Harvard's Kennedy School of Government is working in the Broadmoor area, and Tulane University is creating housing prototypes in the Treme neighborhood.

Whether any of that work eventually leads to anything concrete will depend on a series of complicated political and financial questions. New Orleans's recovery was largely frozen after Katrina by a morass of often seemingly intractable rebuilding and financing questions, and political fights. Draconian layoffs a little more than a month after the storm eviscerated the city's planning staff. Proposals developed by Mayor Nagin's blue-ribbon Bring New Orleans Back Commission left unclear whether some hard-hit neighborhoods would be permitted to rebuild and were widely denounced. Then, the commission was unable to get federal or state funds to finish its planning process. Looming over all discussions of rebuilding were the questions of whether the levees could be rebuilt strongly enough and whether federal officials would order that every building within the flood zones be rebuilt at higher elevations.

Things began to change last month. The Federal Emergency Management Agency issued advisories indicating that thousands of New Orleans homes currently below a certain elevation could be rebuilt -- and would qualify for critical federal reconstruction funds and flood insurance -- if they are lifted by at least three feet. Work on restoring levees to the pre-Katrina strength has reached nearly 80%, according to city officials.

Months of political wrangling over how federal funds approved by Congress late last year would be disbursed are also finally being settled. More than \$6 billion -- and potentially another \$4.2 billion pending in Congress -- in federal block grants will flow to property owners through the Louisiana Recovery Authority, the state agency coordinating the rebuilding of South Louisiana.

In April, the City Council trumped the mayor's rebuilding commission by appropriating \$2.9 million to pay its own team of planners, led by Lambert Advisory LLC, in Miami, and SHEDO LLC, in New Orleans to come up with redevelopment plans for 49 flooded neighborhoods. The firms have pledged to honor the work already completed in areas such as Gentilly. Ten days later, the Rockefeller Foundation announced a \$3.5 million grant to the Greater New Orleans Foundation that will fund the work of another New Orleans architect, Steven B. Bingler of Concordia LLC, to find a way to knit together all of the efforts so that they can produce a rebuilding plan acceptable to state and city officials.

City Council President Oliver Thomas says a memorandum outlining how all the groups will work together will come together soon. The residents of Gentilly and other devastated neighborhoods say at this point they just want action -- regardless of whether it is New Urbanism or who draws up the plans.

"I don't give a flip what you call it," says Nikki Najiola, a member of the civic-improvement group who applauded Mr. Duany's concepts for Gentilly. "Just get me back into my house."



Duany Plater-Zyberk & Company

A home in New Orleans' Gentilly neighborhood, right, and what the New Urbanist plan suggests could be done to raise the living space higher.