

Dilemmas of Race and Class in Post-Katrina New Orleans:
Michael Kane

Do we just jettison our poor, about 37-40% of the pre-Katrina New Orleans?

We had all hoped that the Urban Land Institute would be our deliverance. We thought of it as a chance to offer a comprehensive plan to those who would deny us help. It would show that we had finally got our act together. We had such high hopes that it would kick-start our recovery. Their final report has been delivered and it seems to have missed the mark.

ULI interviewed three hundred people after the hurricane. They tapped the resources of hundreds of specialists in land use and urban planning. They did it at no charge. They did it fast. They did it with enormous professionalism. It was a great gift to this city.

And yet I believe that their key recommendations—that whole sections of the city which had been flooded be the last to be rebuilt (what many people heard, not what they said) – actually created more division than unity of purpose in New Orleans. This unity is important because we are being accused by the national government and others of not having our act together down here—another excuse to not give us the help that they do not want to give us.

Here is a minor case study on how outsiders don't get what are major dilemmas for this beloved land: The three hundred people interviewed by ULI as a reality check on their planning process, were all part of a New Orleans that had returned to the city. Right now the city has about 60,000-70,000 permanent residents. Before Katrina, New Orleans had a population of 450,000. Who is it that has returned? Who is it that is left behind? An awful lot of people were left out of that conversation.

Who were the people left out? If 80% of the housing that flooded was owned or lived in by African-Americans and 20% by whites, one can begin to understand the reactions to the ULI report by many in the African American community. It might be perceived by those affected that the people whose housing might have escaped with minimal damage are making the decisions for people whose housing was devastated. I have the same objection to planning for a renovated school system. Simply put, most of the people direly affected by this storm and flood, are not here. They are largely silent. They are largely dis-invited to the dialogue.

Who are the dis-invited? I wish I could show you a slide of the areas where there are simply no people living right now. When I was younger I used to visit schools in all of those neighborhoods. I know these areas because of my experience as a trainer of parents in the local school system. I wish that the Urban Land Institute had done so when the residents were still there. If one could overlay a grid map of the extent, and the geography of poverty in this city, the issue of social class comes to the forefront. Those areas are not in the dialogue. The people represented in those areas had little or no contribution to the plan for rebuilding offered by ULI.

It is not just race; it is economics and race in a lethal combination that divide this city into haves and have-nots. That same grid would show the census tracts of the highest infant mortality, the highest death rates from cancer, highest crime areas, highest underemployment, worst schools, highest dropout rates, highest blood pressure, and any of the other indices that reflect Third World poverty conditions. The combination, unless we take positive steps to combat it, will be deadly for our recovery. And because of our blindness to issues of race and class in the recovery

Sure there were pockets of wealth in the destroyed areas. Unlike most American cities, here you can find great wealth and great poverty juxtaposed minutes from each other. Yes, a great number of the flood victims in the Lower Ninth Ward were black homeowners, not renters or transients. Yes there is a gated community of some of the most wealthy African Americans in the city located in the flooded New Orleans East. And yes, the Lakeview area, is largely white middle class and upper class homeowners. All suffered. But if the pre-Katrina statistics are correct, the flooded areas were largely poor and black. They have become an endless repetition of the scenes we all saw at the Superdome and at the Convention Center. The poor, the old, and the non-white are still, largely, the victims of this catastrophe.

It is precisely that analysis of race and class that is the chief failing of the Urban Land Institute report. Admittedly they are urban planners; they are not sociologists. But one cannot blather on about the charms of this city or the fabled return of the streetcars on Canal Street without ---for the sake of integrity and healing---- facing the underbelly of racism and classism which is the shadow side of our raffish charm. Integral planning must address long festering dilemmas while at the same time dealing with levees and bricks and mortar, and financing.

If the city is to rebuild I believe it needs to have an affirmative response to the issues of race and class that have plagued this city for at least a century. Katrina merely surfaced them for the world to see. And we are way behind in offering that response. That affirmative response should be a Marshall Plan for the recovery. We can't even get a decent percentage of the federal contracts awarded to disadvantaged businesses in this city. The mayor testified to this before Congress.

But how can we have an affirmative response to the issues, when anyone who raises the issues of race and class is immediately condemned (ironically) as a racist, an obstructionist, a negativist, or as a person who is playing the race card? Such shibboleths impede a healing discussion that could surface some innovative and creative ideas for an integral recovery. It is worth the risk. But we do not have the words to say it.

Dr. Peter Dangerfield, my old boss and long- time director of Total Community Action, the local antipoverty agency, has some telling research. He has shown that when the rest of New Orleans was doing great in the boom years, that rising tide did not lift all boats. His maps and charts and statistics seem to prove that whole sections of New Orleans were left out of the boom times in this city. And now, that pre-Katrina poverty has been

exacerbated. Structural poverty, he argued, hardly budged when the rest of New Orleans was doing great. I wonder if his analysis has any relevance for our current dilemmas.

We talk about general programs that will help the recovery: levees, buyouts, new rebuilding corporations, special help for small businesses, etc. But how can a poor person raise a house to new FEMA flood standards? How can they eat and pay a mortgage on low wages? How can they work in the tourist industry while not having even a FEMA trailer to house their families? Those are certainly great ideas, but they do not wrestle with some of the fundamental dilemmas of New Orleans. Intractable poverty is a distinguishing feature of New Orleans whether the privileged want to admit it or not. What are the various commissions doing to give special help to people whose incomes, before Katrina, made New Orleans one of the poorest cities in the United States? Is it simply that we need to jettison our poor? Maybe we just ought to admit it and get on with creating Disneyland of the River.

The chief obstacle to rebuilding New Orleans is our lack of the will to honestly confront the long term dilemmas of race and class manifested in the poverty endemic in this region. Until we do, there can be no comprehensive planning for an integral recovery. And that would be another major catastrophe. We have only six months before the next hurricane season.