Justice Re-Investment
New Orleans

9/29/2005
New Orleans, LIDAR elevation image with cross-section from Lake Pontchartrain through Ninth Ward to Mississippi River identified.
Elevation above sea-level through a cross-section (Ninth Ward, New Orleans) versus Prison Admissions (top) and versus Prison Expenditures (bottom).
Florida Homes are located, accounted for hoods to prison. Police District 5, where the cyclical imprisonment, re-entry, and re-imprison Phoenix, Louisville to Los Angeles, high rates of displacement and replacement.

The institutions of criminal justice -- police, courts, prison, parole -- dominate these neighborhoods. The least acknowledged, but surest, index of inner-city erosion and public neglect can be measured in the overwhelming presence of the criminal justice system in a few neighborhoods in a few cities in every state.

The traditional response has been: more and more criminal justice. In the poorest New Orleans communities, the criminal justice system is both a result of civil neglect, and a cause, further destabilizing these neighborhoods. But the agencies of criminal justice are no substitute for strong civil institutions. The money spent to remove and return residents year in and year out results in no appreciable improvement in the circumstances of those places.

Here’s a project: if you had a half million dollars a year, this neighborhood, and the people who live there, what would you do? Would you continue to spend it all renting prison cells for a few years at a time? Or would you invest some of that money differently, in the civil infrastructure of the block?

**DURING**

At least, it was accurate to call them residents of the Florida Homes. In the late 1990s, the city’s Housing Authority started a massive “redevelopment” project there. The aim was to destroy, overhaul, and rebuild it, almost entirely. Once it included more than 700 housing units. Today, very little of the original Florida is left.

In April 2005, only 215 people lived there—nearly half of them under the age of 17, twice as many women as men, and 100% African-American.

The story of New Orleans is a story of population transfers and displacements. Year after year, parts of the population are moved around, dispersed from “problematic” public housing projects between prisons, jails, Section 8 housing, and shelters—moving from one low-lying part of the city to another.

Then the hurricane came and brought a huge wall of water over the levee, and the Florida disappeared beneath it. Hurricane Katrina arrived on August 29, 2005. The second overhead image, taken on August 31, 2005 by a NOAA satellite, shows the census block submerged under eight feet of water. What’s left of the housing project is practically invisible.

Everyone in the Florida who wasn’t already thus became a refugee.

What to do now? In the lively post-Katrina discussion boards at nola.com, more than one contributor had the same idea, summed up in the title of a posting on September 24: “BULL-DOZE IT!”

“Miss Cee,” who had identified herself as a former schoolteacher from the area and had already incurred twice about conditions in the Florida (“haven’t heard anything about the area other than the water was up to the second story there”) answered directly: “public housing ... is not the problem...”

as usual people are looking at the immedi ate solution. tear down the Florida. [ ... ] unfortunately thats just a band-aid on a gaping wound ... and it wont last.

While I’ll concede that yes, the majority of serious crimes happen in concentrated areas, or by residents of concentrated areas around the projects ... that problem will not be fixed by just leveling them.

Instead of debating whether or not to destroy the projects, discussions should be focused on WHY the conditions are the way they are. why is the crime rate what it is? why does it seem to be getting worse? what are the underlying factors BEYOND the bricks. the projects are just a physical manifestation of issues that extend much farther beyond the immediate structure.

While Katrina exposed neglected physical infrastructure, it also exposed a deeper problem—the fragility of civil institutions in New Orleans’ poorest neighborhoods, an infrastructure made even more unstable by the constant displacement and resettlement of people in the criminal justice system.

The New Orleans rebuilding effort will pit more competing development approaches against one another. Rebuilding must involve more than the physical infrastructure of the city. Rethinking local and institutional investments requires paying attention to the neighborhood’s cyclical refugee phenomenon. Not only the one caused by the storm, but the everyday fact of displacement which defines daily life in so many high-resettlement neighborhoods around the country—a phenomenon we have not been willing to see, but which Katrina has made sorely evident.

The rebuilding effort that New Orleans is facing is one that many city neighborhoods should take note of. Taken together, housing and criminal justice policies amount to a de facto population resettlement policy; but one without an explicit direction. What would it be like to rethink development from the perspective of resettlement?

Justice reinvestment? Miss Cee pointed to education, jobs, and good government, and “redeveloping” “without addresses anything . . . i dont care if you tear down every the florida, the new desire, the st. bernard, the nolia, AND the iberville. aint nothin gone change.”

Before

In New Orleans, in 2003, upwards of 28,000 city residents (about 4 out every thousand) left the city—because they were sent to prison.

The first satellite photograph, taken on January 11, 2004, shows a public housing project called the Florida Housing Development, a WWII-era complex of buildings in the city’s Ninth Ward, occupying about 20 acres. The State of Louisiana spent nearly half a million dollars the previous year incarcerating some of the people who otherwise lived in this census block.

And over the course of just a couple years, the State spent millions of dollars to remove and return residents of “the Florida” back and forth between prison and home. Criminal justice experts call this a “million dollar block.”

In 2003, Louisiana taxpayers spent $12.6 million sending residents of a few neighborhoods to prison. Police District 5, where the Florida Homes are located, accounted for 16% percent of the City’s roughly half million people, but 26% percent of those incarcerated.

But it’s not like they’re staying in prison. It is entirely accurate to call them “residents” of the Florida. Most of them will come out again, headed back to prison, most of them for many years. of those incarcerated.

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After

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For more information, contact the Project Directors: Laura Kurgan, Eric Cadora, Research Associates: David Reinfurt, Seth Spielberg, and Sarah Williams. Special thanks to Lionel McIntyre for help with New Orleans, to Charles Swartz at the Justice Mapping Center, and to Thomas Keenan for help with the text.

*Million Dollar Blocks* is a project of the Spatial Information Design Lab at the GSAPP. Project team: Project Directors: Laura Kurgan, Eric Cadora, Research Associates: David Reinfurt, Seth Spielberg, and Sarah Williams. Special thanks to Lionel McIntyre for help with New Orleans, to Charles Swartz at the Justice Mapping Center, and to Thomas Keenan for help with the text.