

The Last Thing We Need Around Here is Another University Professor! Reflections on Transformational Community/University Partnerships

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Abstract

This article explores the transformative potential of long-term, resident-driven community/university partnerships in addressing systemic urban challenges. Drawing on two detailed case studies – East St. Louis, Illinois, and post-Katrina New Orleans – the author examines how participatory action research (PAR) and empowerment planning can counteract the historic legacy of extractive, deficit-based academic research. The paper situates these efforts within the broader tradition of engaged scholarship in the United States, tracing its evolution from early democratic education ideals to contemporary service-learning and civic engagement movements. In East St. Louis, a collaborative framework known as *Ceola's Accords* redefined partnership principles, emphasizing co-equal participation, shared decision-making, and capacity building through initiatives such as the People's Planning School. This approach integrated PAR with direct-action organizing to overcome structural barriers to implementation, fostering grassroots leadership and institutional accountability. Similarly, in New Orleans, the ACORN/University Partnership mobilized interdisciplinary teams to produce an empirically grounded recovery plan for the Lower 9th Ward, challenging exclusionary redevelopment proposals and securing \$145 million in recovery funds. These cases underscore the importance of reciprocity, sustained commitment, and popular education in advancing equitable urban revitalization. They also emphasize the need for adaptive strategies that integrate technical expertise with community organizing to foster political power and resilience. The article concludes by calling for a contingency theory of community/university partnerships informed by neighborhood typologies and evidence-based planning approaches. By documenting both successes and limitations, this work offers critical insights for scholars and practitioners seeking to democratize planning processes and promote social justice through collaborative research and design.

Questo articolo analizza il potenziale trasformativo delle partnership di lungo periodo tra comunità e università, guidate dai residenti, per affrontare sfide urbane sistemiche. Attraverso due casi di studio – East St. Louis (Illinois) e la New Orleans post-Katrina – l'autore esamina come la ricerca-azione partecipativa (PAR) e la pianificazione orientata all'empowerment possano contrastare l'eredità storica della ricerca accademica estrattiva e basata sul deficit. Il contributo colloca queste esperienze nella tradizione statunitense dell'*engaged scholarship*, ripercorrendone l'evoluzione dagli ideali democratici dell'educazione alle attuali pratiche di service-learning e impegno civico. A East St. Louis, il quadro collaborativo noto come *Ceola's Accords* ha ridefinito i principi di partnership, enfatizzando partecipazione paritaria, decisioni condivise e rafforzamento delle capacità locali attraverso iniziative come la

Peoples' Planning School. Questo approccio ha integrato PAR e organizzazione diretta per superare ostacoli strutturali all'implementazione, promuovendo leadership di base e responsabilità istituzionale. Analogamente, a New Orleans, la partnership ACORN/Università ha mobilitato team interdisciplinari per produrre un piano di ricostruzione basato su dati empirici per il Lower 9th Ward, sfidando proposte escludenti e ottenendo 145 milioni di dollari in fondi di recupero. I casi evidenziano l'importanza di reciprocità, impegno duraturo e educazione popolare per una rigenerazione urbana equa, nonché la necessità di strategie adattive che uniscano competenze tecniche e organizzazione comunitaria per costruire potere politico e resilienza. L'articolo conclude proponendo lo sviluppo di una teoria contingente delle partnership tra comunità e università, fondata su tipologie di quartiere e approcci pianificatori *evidence-based*. Documentando successi e limiti, il lavoro offre spunti critici per studiosi e professionisti impegnati a democratizzare i processi di pianificazione e a promuovere la giustizia sociale attraverso la ricerca e la progettazione collaborativa.

Keywords: engaged scholarship; empowerment planning; community-university partnership.

Parole Chiave: engaged scholarship; empowerment planning; partnership comunità-università.

America's Long History of Public Scholarship

American universities have a long history of public scholarship that originated during the earliest days of its national independence in the late 1770s (Harkavy and Hartley, 2010). America's founding fathers, especially John Adams, Benjamin Franklin and Thomas Jefferson, believed that America's success in overcoming the crippling effects of its colonial origins would require the establishment of a radically different kind of higher education system: not one dedicated to preparing members of the privileged class for the learned professions but one committed to educating individuals from all walks of life to solve the 'wicked problems' that would inevitably confront an emerging democracy (Rittel and Webber, 1973).

An examination of the charters, mission statements and mottos of America's oldest universities, including Harvard University, the University of Pennsylvania, and the University of Virginia, reveals a common commitment to what Ernest Boyer called 'engaged scholarship' focused on enhancing citizens' capacity to work together cooperatively to build a robust economy and a vibrant democracy (Boyer, 1994). What John Dewey called the 'education for democracy' tradition within the American

academy was significantly enhanced in the 1860s and 1910s by Federal legislation that funded new public universities committed to advancing economic and community development within lagging communities and regions and the establishment of a national network of Cooperative Extension Offices charged with mobilizing public university students and faculty to work with community leaders to address critical environmental, economic, and social problems (Dewey, 1916; Peters, 2010).

By the mid-1970s, the combined effects of deindustrialization, disinvestment, and suburbanization, intensified by globalization, put new pressure on American universities to increase their focus on research, teaching and outreach devoted to addressing the local impacts of these trends that had caused many communities, especially those in the Midwest, Mid-Atlantic, and New England regions of the United States, to experience growing unemployment, homelessness, food insecurity, substance abuse, and urban violence (Bluestone and Harrison, 1982).

The initial movement towards greater campus support for resident-led urban revitalization efforts was undertaken by students sparked, in large part, by a single Harvard athlete, Wayne Meisel, who began working in a homeless shelter in Cambridge, Massachusetts following a crippling sports injury. This experience prompted him to undertake a 1500 mile 'walk of action' from Boston to Washington DC during which he challenged university students, faculty and administrators from campuses located along his route to undertake more ambitious community regeneration initiatives while also pressing state legislators and Congressional leaders to promote redistributive social policies at all levels of government. Out of this effort came the Community Outreach Opportunity League (COOL) – a national student organization committed to encouraging volunteerism and service-learning in support of bottom-up anti-poverty efforts (Meisel, 1988).

As students sought their assistance in enhancing the effectiveness of their community development efforts faculty soon joined the movement by designing pre-field preparation courses, offering credited internships, sponsoring project-based fieldwork classes, and creating post-placement seminars aimed at generating research into the structural causes of America's increasingly uneven pattern of metropolitan development. Many

of the experiential education principles for transformational service-learning and fundamentals of critical reflective theories that undergird our current engaged scholarship work was pioneered by a national organization of progressive educators established at that time called the National Society for Internships and Experiential Education (Stanton, Giles, and Cruz, 1999).

The final element of the academic community to join the engaged scholarship movement in the U.S. was college and university provosts and presidents. These higher educational leaders were challenged to provide institutional support for the nation's growing service-learning movement by the presidents of UPENN, Brown, and Stanford who established Campus Compact, a new national organization of college and university presidents dedicated to making engaged scholarship the centerpiece of American higher education. Within ten years, the membership of Campus Compact increased from the original three founders to eleven hundred university presidents (Hollander and Saltmarsh, 1999).

Supporting these efforts was a new federal program established by the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development to encourage colleges to expand existing or establish new community/university partnership programs called the Community Outreach Partnership Centers Program; several new high-quality journals, including the Michigan Journal of Community Service Learning and the University of Virginia's Journal of Community Practice to share new engaged scholarship research and practice; a national research network dedicated to advancing engaged scholarship by measuring student learning and community development outcomes called the International Service Learning Research Network; and a highly prestigious and coveted national designation program for civically engaged campuses created by the Carnegie Foundation for Excellence in Education (Carnegie, 2025).

Two Cases of Engaged Scholarship from America's Heartland

The primary objective of this article is to highlight the transformational role university faculty can play in supporting resident-led organizing, planning, design, and development in economically distressed communities. This article does this

by presenting two case studies of engaged scholarship from older industrial cities along the Mississippi River-East St. Louis, Illinois and New Orleans, Louisiana. Both of these communities were highly successful manufacturing and trading centers that experienced significant plant closings, bank disinvestment, fiscal crisis, and population decline during the last quarter of the 20th century. Facing increasingly serious economic and fiscal problems, local residents and municipal officials sought planning and design assistance from university-based researchers. These faculty responded by organizing interdisciplinary research teams to address resident-identified issues using highly participatory methods. Aware of the historic nature of the problems being confronted by local stakeholders, participating faculty established long-term partnerships to address these issues while engaging in ongoing critical reflection to enhance their effectiveness (Schon 1984; Forester, 1999).

Learning from Experience – The Emergence of Principles of Good Practice in East St. Louis, IL

I began my academic career in 1990 as an Assistant Professor of Urban and Regional Planning position at the University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign – the State of Illinois' land grant university. Shortly after my arrival on campus, I was informed by the Head of the Department of Urban and Regional Planning that I would be coordinating a struggling community development assistance project in East St. Louis, IL - the nation's poorest African American city located 122 miles from our main campus (Reardon, 1998).

This once thriving riverfront community, historically referred to as the 'Pittsburgh of the West', had been devastated during the 1970s and 1980s by the combined effects of deindustrialization, bank disinvestment, suburbanization, and severe cuts in domestic spending programs. By 1990, its population, which once approached 100,000, had fallen by 60%, 2/3 of its local businesses had closed resulting in the loss of 12,000 jobs, its unemployment rate had risen to 35% and its poverty rate had jumped to more than 50% - prompting some observers to refer to the city as 'America's Soweto,' 'Beirut by the River,' and 'The South Bronx of the Midwest.' (Kozol, 1992).

When I first met with a group of East St. Louis leaders in the

summer of 1990, one of the older church women gently grabbed my hand and squeezed it until it turned bright red while saying, «Honey, last thing East St. Louis needs is another college professor who looks just like you (i.e., white), telling us what any sixth grader in town already knows.» Sensing my confusion, Ms. Ceola Davis, a long-time outreach worker from a local settlement house who was chairing the meeting, directed my attention to three large boxes resting on the conference table around which we were meeting that were labelled:

1960 to 1970 – 7 university reports, cost = \$525,000

1970 to 1980 – 12 university reports, cost = \$1.5 million

1980 to 1990 – 18 university reports, cost = \$ 2.2 million

After I examined the contents of these boxes, Ms. Ceola Davis explained how generations of faculty from my university had undertaken 'extractive' research in East St. Louis using their findings regarding the city's tragic economic collapse to secure external grants which they used to support their research (Reardon, 2003). While this research approach enabled them to produce long lists of peer reviewed articles that advanced their academic careers, these publications had the unintended consequence of significantly reinforcing the negative image outsiders, especially policymakers and funders, had of the city, making it increasingly difficult for local community development professionals to secure the resources needed to carry out the revitalization strategies recommended by these studies.

While my university colleagues pursued their needs/deficit-based urban research, a small group of local churches leaders, supported by the Lessie Bates Davis Neighborhood House, the Katherine Dunham Centers for the Arts and Humanities and State Representative Wyvetter H. Younge, was working together using an assets-based/appreciative inquiry research methodology to plan and implement a series of small-scale improvement projects. Beginning with resident-led trash clean-ups and the construction of a children's playground that attracted considerable volunteer labor, local institutional support and regional press attention, these organizations began to imagine the pursuit of larger and more impactful economic and community development projects to revitalize their

neighborhood and city. As they discussed their vision of a more vibrant, sustainable, and democratic community, they identified the need for considerable planning and design assistance (Kretzman and McKnight, 1993; Cooperrider and Whitney, 2005). While these grassroots leaders knew the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign had the capacity to provide such support, they were unwilling to partner with university researchers under what they described as the 'old rules of the game' which they viewed as colonial. They refused to cooperate with UIUC faculty coming into their neighborhoods uninvited and unannounced to study issues they had identified based upon their own intellectual interests and/or the suggestions of external funders with little or no consultation with community stakeholders. Local leaders shared their anger about being repeatedly interviewed by such researchers regarding existing conditions and future development opportunities who rarely, if ever, shared their East St. Louis data, findings, and recommendations with them.

Angered by what they described as a colonial approach to community research that had done little to advance local economic and community development, the leaders I met with in the Summer of 1990 invited my colleagues and me to enter a more reciprocal and mutually beneficial form of partnership based upon the following five principles.

First, we the long-time residents and community stakeholders and not you, nor your institution or your funders will determine the issues the partnership will work on.

Second, interested community residents and leaders must be actively involved, on a co-equal basis, with university scholars at each phase of the research, planning, design, and development process, including the following steps:

- Inventorying potential issues;
- Selecting and defining actionable issues;
- Formulating planning goals;
- Creating workable research designs;
- Devising instruments;
- Collecting data;
- Analyzing research findings;

- Structuring action plans;
- Establishing evaluative criteria to measure project effectiveness and efficiency;
- Collaborating with local leaders in completing a rigorous (ongoing) program evaluation of the partnership's ongoing activities;

Three, the University must make a minimum five-year commitment, beyond a probationary year, to permit the partnership to progress from conceptualization to implementation of projects.

Fourth, the University must ensure parity regarding all external fundraising efforts by sharing resources on a 50/50 basis with community partners to enable them to enhance their organizational capacity.

The University must assist local leaders in establishing a community-controlled development corporation to enable the city to sustain these neighborhood planning and developing effort after "the shine goes off the community/university partnership apple" on your campus and administrators move on to new issues and geographic priorities.

After local leaders shared their principles for non-exploitive/non-colonial community-university partnerships with my colleagues and me, Ms. Davis invited us to return to our campus to discuss their proposed partnership framework with our colleagues, my Department Head and the Dean of the College of Fine and Applied Arts. Several days later I met with my dean to discuss the results of my first East St. Louis meeting. I informed her that there was good and bad news. The good news was that there was an inspired group of East St. Louis church women who were passionate about rebuilding their city and were already doing extraordinary work, with little outside support, to achieve this goal. I then proceeded to describe their volunteer clean-up campaign and recent success in transforming three abandoned building lots into a very attractive and highly functional toddlers' playground without any material assistance from the City of East St. Louis.

She then asked me what the bad news was; I then told her that they were much more serious about collaborative research than we were, at which point I shared a typed copy of the residents'

proposed partnership framework. As she studied the document, she smiled saying that they clearly had considerable experience working with higher educational institutions. After reviewing the document, which we had come to refer to as the Ceola's Accords, she telephoned Ms. Davis to inform her that UIUC's College of Fine and Applied Arts' architecture, landscape architecture, and urban and regional planning program would do everything possible to honor both the letter and spirit of their proposed partnership proposal. With the Dean's signature on the East St. Louis residents' partnership agreement, UIUC's Urban Extension and Minority Assistance Project (UEMAP) was launched.

I responded to the Dean's commitment to develop a mutually respectful and beneficial community development assistance program in East St. Louis by promising to pursue our work using participatory action research methods, as articulated by William F. Whyte (Whyte, 1991) and Davydd Greenwood and Morten Levin (Greenwood and Levin, 1998). This increasingly popular approach to social science seeks to integrate local knowledge and university expertise to gain a deeper understanding of the structural causes of social problems, generate a wider range of historically and culturally informed solutions acceptable to local residents, aggressively test path-breaking remedies by seeking to implement them in the field while always expanding the participation and leadership of local actors in order to enhance the organizational capacity of local community development institutions (Geertz, 1983; Saija and Pappalardo, 2018).

Over the course of several years, what began as a single planning studio organized to assist the Emerson Park Development Corporation in completing a comprehensive neighborhood improvement plan evolved into a college-wide effort. This initiative expanded quickly to involve six architecture, landscape architecture, and urban planning studios with more than 150 students each year in resident-led planning and design/build projects that earned excellence awards from the American Planning Association, American Institute of Certified Planners, American Institute of Architects, American Society of Landscape Architects, US Department of Agriculture, and the United Nations Preparatory Committee for the Habitat II Conference. Sadly, few of these award-winning projects received funding

from local and county officials who depended upon a notoriously corrupt political party to maintain their power.

While our participatory action research succeeded in producing award-winning plans and designs establishing UIUC's College of Fine and Applied Arts as a valued ally in the eyes of residents, it failed to generate a broad base of non-partisan, political support needed to ensure the implementation of resident-conceived plans. In the absence of such 'people power' our cooperatively produced plans and designs remained unrealized proposals on the shelves of local planners and in the centerfolds of urban planning and design magazines and journals (Bobo, Kendall, and Max, 2001). Frustrated by the partnership's inability to implement even its most modest proposals, the community leaders and university faculty participating in the project decided to re-imagine our approach by integrating the key principles and techniques of direct action organizing, as articulated by Saul Alinsky, Mike Gecan, and Wade Rathke into our PAR-based research and planning process to overcome the key barrier to transformational change – the lack of organized citizen power that made it difficult, if not impossible, for non-elite communities, such as East St. Louis, to effectively advance redistributive economic and community development policies aimed at improving the overall quality of life in their communities (Alinsky, 1971; Gecan 2004; Rathke, 2009).

To emphasize the importance of this decision to modify our engagement approach, we changed the name of our partnership from the East St. Louis Urban Extension and Minority Assistance Project (UEMAP) to the East St. Louis Action Research Project (ESLARP) and shifted our approach from participatory action research to empowerment planning. This new methodology transformed each data collection activity that we undertook in the community. No longer were researchers satisfied to collect residents' assessments of existing conditions and aspirations for the future. Now, they were equally committed to challenging local stakeholders who appeared committed to moving the community forward in a better direction to become actively involved in resident-led development organizations that were in the vanguard of local neighborhood revitalization efforts.

This new approach, which combined the core principles and practices of participatory action research and direct action

organizing, soon produced plans that elicited broad-based support from growing numbers of residents and institutions, especially religious organizations, parent/teachers' associations, trade unions, and senior citizen groups. These organizations soon began to exert non-partisan political pressure through letters to the editor, citizen petitions, and 'large turnouts' at public hearings on officials responsible for allocating local economic and community development funding.

This pressure soon resulted in a series of increasingly large grants from area funders for resident conceived projects that began to produce visible improvements in East St. Louis' most distressed neighborhoods. Therefore, you can imagine our surprise when a group of fifty neighborhood leaders that we had been working with for several years invited us to a meeting at which they questioned our commitment to empowerment planning. Long-time Emerson Park Development Corporation President, Richard Settle, began this session by thanking us for our support for resident-led improvement efforts. He then proceeded to say, «While you have found it necessary to provide your graduate students with fifteen hours of the best research, planning, and design classes each week to enable them to be effective contributors to the community development projects we are working on, your university, which is our state university, has never provided local leaders working on these joint efforts with a single hour of such training. With all the best intentions, you have replicated a racist, classist, and sexist form of community/university partnership. Within your partnership model, we are not even the tail on the dog. We are the fleas hoping to land on the tail of the dog».

Having identified this problem, he went on to propose a solution – the creation of a Peoples' Planning School to provide our community partners with the architectural, planning, landscape architecture, development finance, and non-profit management training needed to amplify their voice within future collaborative planning processes. Richard described this proposal as a straightforward effort designed to level the playing field between residents and university-trained researchers participating in our partnership (Reardon, 2019). Accepting this community-generated proposal for enhancing the effectiveness of our work, we organized a ten-course curriculum in participatory

community planning, design, and development which 300 East St. Louis residents subsequently completed. This popular education strategy, inspired by Ivan Illich (Illich, 1972), Paulo Freire (Freire, 1973) and Myles Horton (Horton, 1990), became the third leg of our empowerment planning model dramatically enhancing the effectiveness of our East St. Louis work leading to the adoption of our engaged scholarship model by faculty working in several other economically distressed urban and rural communities in the United States.

An Unexpected Opportunity to Pursue an Empowerment Planning Approach to Post-Disaster Recovery Planning

As the end of the summer approached in 2005, I began my first year as the newly elected Chair of Cornell University's Department of City and Regional Planning. As the Labor Day holiday began, weather reports were dominated by news of a possible Category Five Hurricane forming in the Gulf of Mexico heading toward the City of New Orleans. Several days later, reports documenting multiple levee failures within the city and the surrounding parishes resulting in devastating flooding and unprecedented property damage and loss of life began to emerge. Post-hurricane news reports indicated that more than 1,300 men, women, and children lost their lives during the storm – with 90 of these individuals living in the city's Historic African American community known as the Lower 9th Ward.

Shortly after the storm subsided, the Federal Emergency Management Agency contracted with planning, engineering, and design professionals from the Urban Land Institute and the American Planning Association to prepare a post-disaster assessment study that concluded that less than half of New Orleans' pre-hurricane population of 675,000 residents would return to live and work in the Crescent City (Olshansky and Johnson, 2017). Based upon this finding the ULI/APA planning team prepared a future land use map that identified 'high risk' neighborhoods where they recommended future development be prohibited, transforming these areas into forever 'green' open space districts. An examination of their map, referred to as the Green Dots Map, revealed that most of the African American neighborhoods located on the City's eastside had been designated as future 'urban wilderness areas'. This included the

Historic Lower 9th, Ward, one of the first places in the American South where former slaves had been able to acquire land to build homes and establish businesses.

Following the adoption of this future land use map and related re-zoning plan, the city issued a Request for Proposal inviting experienced engineering, planning, and design firms to submit proposals to prepare comprehensive recovery plans for the city's sixteen planning districts, including the Lower 9th, Ward. A few days later, I received a call from Wade Rathke, Chief Organizer of the nation's largest grassroots organizing project headquartered in New Orleans, the Association of Community Organizations for Reform Now, better known as ACORN, which had 9,000 dues paying members living in the city's majority African American communities that had recently been designated 'urban wilderness areas' (Reardon and Forester, 2016).

Rathke indicated that he and his New Orleans' members were highly skeptical of the city's recently adopted Future Land Use Map and Zoning Text which they felt were not based on a careful study of future climate change-related disaster risks but rather on racial and class bias and bigotry. He had called me to ask for our department's assistance in preparing an empirically based risk assessment and, if warranted by the data, a rezoning proposal and recovery plan for the Lower 9th Ward.

Following my conversation with Rathke, whom I did not know except by reputation, I called a department-wide meeting to discuss ACORN's request for planning assistance. Having watched the shocking news coverage of 9th Ward residents waiting on their roofs for several days to be rescued, thirty graduate students and five of our faculty agreed to contribute to an Interdisciplinary studio organized to prepare a post-disaster risk assessment for the Lower 9th Ward and, if supported by the data, a post-disaster recovery plan that would support ACORN's key demand to city officials – The Right to Return!

In the days following this departmental meeting, our students and faculty began working with Lower 9th Ward residents who had managed to return to the city and ACORN staff, to formulate a highly participatory methodology to systematically assess the likelihood of future climate change-related risks confronting this historical African American community. We also devised an equally participatory methodology that could be used to

formulate a ten-year post-Katrina recovery plan in the event, these risks were determined to be acceptable.

The extensive data on historical, demographic, economic, social, municipal services capacity, and physical conditions, in combination with local stakeholders' perceptions of existing conditions and future development preferences data collection and analysis, needed to complete a scientifically rigorous risk assessment and recovery plan exceeded our human resources. This necessitated recruitment of additional graduate planning and engineering students and faculty from Columbia University, the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, and the University of Catania (Sicily/Italy) to help us. These university partners ultimately increased the number of our 'studio' participants to more than 100 individuals (Reardon, Green, Bates, and Kiley, 2008).

Needing to cover the significant costs of repeated New Orleans field trips we applied, with the encouragement of the Mayor's Office, to become one of the sixteen consulting groups hired to work on the city's post-disaster recovery planning initiative. We were both delighted and surprised when our ACORN/University Partnership Team was subsequently selected from a pool of more than sixty international planning/design/engineering firms to prepare the risk assessment and post-disaster recovery plan for the Lower 9th Ward. In the days following our selection, we began to seriously question how a team primarily comprised of grassroots activists and first-year graduate planning students could be the best qualified team to undertake the risk assessment and recovery planning for one of the most seriously impacted communities in the city and region?

Putting this troubling question aside, we began our research by using our campus' development office to call more than 1000 former Lower 9th Ward residents who were members of ACORN to learn about: a) their lived experiences during the storm; b) their understanding of the current physical condition of their properties; and c) their 'desire' to return home. Based upon our conversations with more than 500 displaced Lower 9th Ward residents, we were able to determine that many of their properties were, despite experiencing significant wind and water damage, still standing. With few exceptions, the residents we spoke with were deeply committed, as were their

other family members and Lower 9th Ward neighbors they were in touch with, to returning to the neighborhood to rebuild their homes, businesses, and community. These families identified the following services as critical to their families' return: safe temporary housing, meaningful employment opportunities, functioning public schools, improved access to emergency health care, and dependable public safety.

These preliminary results, some of which needed to be verified through field surveys, stood in stark contrast to the Urban Land Institute's preliminary research findings which had suggested that few of the buildings in the Lower 9th Ward were structurally sound and that only a very small minority of displaced residents were interested in returning to the city. After sharing the results of our telephone survey of displaced Lower 9th Ward residents with municipal planning officials, we mobilized our students to carry out physical condition surveys using a Rapid Appraisal Protocol developed by the UN to determine over a two-week period the structural integrity of a sample of more than 3,500 residential, commercial, industrial and community facilities properties in the Lower 9th Ward over a two-week.

Working in two-person teams, the students were first trained in the use of the UN Rapid Appraisal Protocol to evaluate the structural integrity of buildings in two Ithaca neighborhoods featuring building types like those found in the Lower 9th Ward. Travelling to New Orleans for the first of two four-day field surveys, our students and faculty managed to complete exterior inspections of more than 1,000 structures. While there were many seriously damaged buildings, most of the structures surveyed appeared to be in good to excellent shape making them strong candidates for 'cost-effective' rehabilitation.

Residents' responses to our presence in the community were deeply moving. People were delighted to see us; they engaged us in extended conversations; and were eager to share their struggle to return their family homes and businesses to 'good order'. As we explained our approach to evaluating the structural integrity of their properties, they described how local real estate agents representing powerful downtown developers were offering to purchase their homes for mere pennies on the dollar. After telling us about these experiences, the residents would ask us if we thought they should accept these offers which

the real estate agents insisted would only grow smaller over time as their properties, exposed to the elements, deteriorated, and lost value.

We encouraged the residents to resist these pressures for two weeks until we completed our structural integrity surveys. As a result of our advice, the number of home sales in the Lower 9th Ward plummeted as residents waited for the results of our property assessments. This seriously angered the developers seeking to assemble properties, at deeply discounted prices, within this historic African American neighborhood. When their complaints to Cornell University's President regarding students with limited engineering knowledge conducting building assessments in the Lower 9th Ward failed to curtail our activities, the city's chief planner responded to pressure from developers by 'realigning' our team – i.e., firing us based upon an alleged violation of the AICP Code of Professional Conduct that he and his real estate allies assumed would remove our team from the Lower 9th Ward and allow them to resume their 'fearmongering' and 'block busting' activities. They were mistaken.

As we planned our final data collection effort, we faced a dilemma. Having been fired by the city, we now lacked the funds to cover the costs of our New Orleans field trip during which we planned to complete the final 1,000 inspections needed to determine, beyond a reasonable doubt, the state of the Lower 9th Ward's building stock and infrastructure systems. After a long discussion of the disturbing history of 'white allies' abandoning communities of color when they came into conflict with powerful local elites, one of our faculty and his wife offered to cover the costs of our remaining New Orleans fieldwork enabling us to board the plane for New Orleans.

Upon our return from New Orleans, we had two weeks to organize and analyze our data. The analysis revealed two stunning facts:

FACT #1: 8 of 10 Lower 9th Ward structures were, despite the storm, structurally sound;

FACT #2: The overwhelming majority of these structures could be 'costeffectively' rehabilitated – an assessment that was verified by the leadership of the New Orleans' Building Trades Council of the AFL-CIO;

As the semester was wrapping up, I returned to New Orleans

to share our research findings with ACORN's Executive Board whose members were thrilled, indicating that "This is exactly what the residents have been telling us since the very first days of the storm!". Wade Rathke then asked me how quickly we could convert our thirty pages of research findings I had shared with his national board into a fully developed, professional quality recovery plan. I indicated that we could do this by the end of the spring semester. He explained that this would be too late – we would need to complete the plan by the first week of January because the sixteen private planning consultants whose findings were anxiously awaited by the city, state, nation, and the world would be reporting their results on January 15th. Rathke was convinced that if we could present our data to local, state, and federal officials by January 6th, we could positively impact the future of the Lower 9th Ward in a dramatic fashion.

Returning to campus ten days before Christmas, I invited the 100+ Cornell, Illinois, Columbia, and Catania students who had contributed to our New Orleans Planning Initiative (NOPI) to forgo their winter holidays to assist in the preparation of *The People's Plan for Overcoming the Hurricane Katrina Blues: A Blueprint for Building a More Vibrant, Equitable, and Sustainable Lower 9th Ward* (Hayes, Reardon *et al*, 2007). Exhausted from the demands of a travel and fieldwork intensive semester, fifteen students and five faculty joined the effort to transform 500 pages of raw data into a concisely written and well-illustrated 240-page recovery plan.

Two weeks before the sixteen consulting teams working on the city's overall recovery plan presented their findings and recommendations, a small group of our students and faculty, armed with 100 copies of the ACORN/University Partnership's 'Peoples' Plan', travelled to New Orleans to present the highlights of our work to a standing room only crowd of Lower 9th Ward residents, institutional leaders, and business owners; local/state/federal elected officials; architects, engineers, and planners involved in local and regional recovery efforts; and members of the international press who had gathered at Holy Angels Church in the Lower 9th Ward's Bywater neighborhood. At the conclusion of our presentation the room erupted in applause, as New Orleans' former City Council President Oliver Thomas complimented our students on the quality of the work

and asked if we could formally present our preservation-based recovery plan to the City Planning Commission and the City Council during the coming week, which we of course agreed to do. Following our presentations before these two regulatory/legislative bodies, they voted to unanimously adopt our plan which generated the following banner headline in New Orleans' Times-Picayune Newspaper – «Planners Say the Lower 9th Can Be Rebuilt!», This Associate Press article was subsequently carried by more than 175 metropolitan newspapers throughout the U.S. and abroad.

Two months after the New Orleans Planning Commission and City Council adopted the ACORN/University Partnership's "Peoples Plan" for the Lower 9th Ward, New Orleans' Recovery Czar, Dr. Edward J. Blakely, former Dean of the UCLA School of Planning, held a press conference announcing the rezoning of the Lower 9th Ward from an 'urban wilderness' to a 'mixed-use' district as we had recommended. He also announced an immediate commitment of \$145 million in emergency recovery funds to enable residents to return home thereby marking a complete reversal of the Urban Land Institute's earlier recommendation (Raciti and Reardon, 2025).

Twenty years after Katrina, the Lower 9th Ward's population has returned to 66% of its pre-storm levels. While its racial composition has significantly changed, it has been preserved as one of New Orleans' largest and most vibrant African American neighborhoods. This unexpected outcome is due, in large part, to the hard work and courage of members of an unusual community/university partnership based on the empowerment model of community planning first developed in East St. Louis, IL. Thanks to Cornell University's John Forester, we are fortunate to have a book detailing the efforts of the ACORN/University Partnership to provide an empirically based risk assessment and 'best practices' recovery plan for this important African American community (Reardon and Forester, 2016). The success of this unique community/university planning partnership reaffirms the wisdom of Rene DuBos' observation that "Whenever human beings are involved, trend is not destiny", and Margaret Mead's advice to, "Never doubt that a small group of thoughtful, committed, citizens can change the world. Indeed, it is the only thing that ever has" (Crobe and Reardon, 2023).

Conclusions and Reflections

These cases suggest the potential for significant neighborhood revitalization even in the most economically distressed communities. They also highlight the value of long-term community/university development partnerships as a 'social invention' capable of engaging a wide range of local, regional, state, and federal institutions in support of resident-led community economic development (Whyte, 1983). The East St. Louis and New Orleans cases also remind us of the importance of shared work, over an extended period, by residents of economically marginalized communities and engaged scholars to overcome the lingering effects of historic 'extractive/colonial' research methods by past university faculty. Moreover, these cases reveal how the reflective practitioner skills and discipline of local residents and university scholars can enable them to successfully modify, in real time, their planning and design approaches when confronting unexpected planning challenges and opportunities. Finally, these well documented cases featuring both inspired and flawed examples of planning practice provide a useful preview for planning and design students to the always messy world of professional practice. As faculty involved in ongoing community/university development partnerships continue to document neighborhood revitalization efforts and their impact, more advanced theories are needed to guide this work. A typology for classifying neighborhoods based on meaningful sociological categories such as: economic health, political power, internal social cohesion, social distance (in terms of race, class, gender, religion, etc.) existing between residents and university-based engaged scholars, and regional context is needed. Once formulated, additional theory that offers guidance regarding the specific community planning approach (e.g., advocacy planning, equity planning, transformational planning, empowerment planning) that should optimally be applied in each type of neighborhood can be formulated. Founded in these frameworks, a large-scale sample survey of community-university partnerships could be undertaken to determine which of these recommended approaches is best suited for a particular neighborhood. By completing such research, an evidence based contingency theory of community/university partnership choice could be developed and refined to guide planners' and researchers' work.

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