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## OA ARCHIVE: THE ARCHIVE OF GOOD WRITING

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### THE TERRIBLE OPPORTUNITY

*How a crisis for the Gulf Coast became a defining moment for New Urbanism.*

by **MATT DELLINGER**

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Driving the Mississippi Coast in February, I found a way to map the destruction from Hurricane Katrina: look for Waffle Houses. The buildings, at one time identical, now spoke objectively of their zip codes. Off Exit 16 on Interstate 10, in Diamondhead, the Waffle House was open and doing a brisk business. They were out of Philly cheese steak, and the staff was a little behind in their cleaning, but the food was hot and the ladies behind the counter had the wherewithal to sing along with a Lucinda Williams song on the radio. In D'Iberville, the place was trashed; the damaged facade said WAF. On Beach Boulevard in Biloxi, the Waffle House had no facade or any walls at all. The tall roadside sign, with its yellow squares and black letters, stood alone next to an empty brick bunker of a foundation. Live-oak trees and billboards were about all that survived along Beach Boulevard, where the slow lane was for gawkers who couldn't believe their eyes and the fast lane was for locals who couldn't bear to look anymore.

The road ended at the tip of Point Cadet, where the bridge to Ocean Springs lay in rubble in the water. Not far away, on the small, unsteady table in her FEMA trailer, next to her cigarettes and a stack of brochures for modular-

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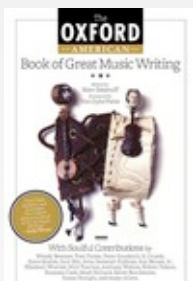


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housing designs, Judy Filipich kept a St. Anthony novena candle that a friend in Virginia had sent to her. "I thought St. Anthony was just for when you lose things," Filipich told me, "but I found out he's a little more universal." Anthony of Padua, in addition to being the patron saint of lost objects, fishermen, the mail, and missing persons, is supposed to alleviate shipwrecks and barrenness. He could be the patron saint of South Mississippi.

From the doorway of her trailer, Filipich could see in a glance all that remained of the home where she grew up: a broken, bare pecan tree that she wasn't sure was still alive, a small pile of recovered bricks, and an assortment of pipe fittings, power cords, and other scraps not easy to identify. Her busted shrimping boat, the *Maggie Too*, sat on blocks in the yard. Hurricane Katrina's thirty-foot surge demolished the house but left her driveway and her pink concrete porch, which would have been a nice place, under happier circumstances, to sit and admire the ugly magnificence of the Casino Magic barge across the street. Of course, under those happier circumstances, the barge would still have been docked in the Gulf of Mexico two blocks away, not looming above her from where a parking lot and a pawn shop used to be.

Filipich, a fifty-eight-year-old freelance city planner, weathered the storm at a friend's place on the Back Bay of Biloxi, a mile inland. Her house had survived Hurricane Camille, in 1969, and because she couldn't fathom anything worse, Filipich left everything behind. She didn't bother to pack a bag. At her friend's house the next morning, the water came up through the floorboards. Furniture floated. The two women fled to the attic with the friend's dog, and stayed until the water subsided at noon. Filipich knew that her house must have flooded too. But she hadn't imagined it would be gone. The next day—a bright, sunny one—Filipich went home to find her entire neighborhood wiped out.

That's where things get fuzzy. Filipich doesn't remember days, she said, just a weird blur of time. She slept at her sister-in-law's in Ocean Springs, and came over to Biloxi whenever she could to sift through rubble and "piddle." Because nobody had electricity for weeks, she had missed the newscasts, the drama in New Orleans, the speeches and telethons. She was shocked one afternoon when a television crew from Finland approached her. "Why would anyone in Finland care about a storm that hit Mississippi?" she asked. "They said, 'It's an international event. Foreign countries are contributing money.' I just couldn't believe what they were telling me." President Bush was in Biloxi that day, the Finns told her, greeting survivors a few blocks away. But Filipich didn't go. "I was in shock," she said. "I had no outside concerns."

She was likewise distracted in October when an army of planners, architects, and experts commandeered the still-standing Isle of Capri casino hotel a quarter mile away. One hundred and ten professionals under the banner of the [Congress for New Urbanism](#) (CNU), an organization that promotes walkable, mixed-use communities and opposes the suburban building habits commonly known as sprawl, gathered in Biloxi at the invitation of the newly minted [Governor's Commission](#) on Recovery, Rebuilding, and Renewal. Their task, like the precipitating disaster, was of historic proportions. Led by their charismatic front man, Andrés Duany, the New Urbanists, in one week of underpaid, emotionally charged, caffeinated zeal, produced detailed proposals for each of the eleven devastated communities along the Mississippi coast. In keeping with their principles, they designed the region as a series of walkable, mixed-use neighborhoods connected by a new rail line and a beautified U.S. 90 Beach Boulevard. At some point during the week, Filipich wandered over to the Mississippi Renewal Forum charrette, as it was called, but she found the colorful renderings of leafy avenues, main street shops, and trolley stations difficult to digest. "I wasn't in the mood," she said. "I was still cleaning debris out of my yard. I couldn't go and concentrate on some pretty little drawings."

The fact that planners arrived while locals like Filipich were still waiting for

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FEMA trailers is a point of great pride for the state officials and local leaders who made it happen. The decisive quickness with which Mississippi gathered its wits was in marked contrast to the confusion in New Orleans. Their disasters were different—Mississippi was wiped clean by an act of nature, while New Orleans sat poisoned by the failure of man-made levees—and the contrast affected the postures of politicians. While New Orleans shuffled its feet in the national spotlight, Mississippi quietly constructed a vision for itself that was real enough to [print on paper](#), real enough to adore or despise.

“The gift the New Urbanists brought was catalyst projects,” Ricky Mathews, the forty-eight-year-old publisher of the *Sun Herald*, told me, sitting in his office with a sketch of the reimagined Biloxi on the wall behind him. “They gave people a chance to think about something they didn’t realize they could think about at that stage of the game.”

Mathews had survived his own ordeal during the storm—his family watched as churning waters swept away the neighboring house; a corpse was draped in a nearby tree—but just a week later he found himself talking Big Picture with Governor Haley Barbour, Mississippi Development Authority Director Leland Speed, and Governor’s Commission Chairman Jim Barksdale. Michael Barranco, a New Urbanist architect in Jackson, had phoned Speed to suggest a charrette led by DPZ, the firm that Duany runs with his wife, Elizabeth Plater-Zyberk. Speed, a long-time real-estate developer, was already a convert. He had read *Suburban Nation*, a New Urbanist Bible of sorts co-authored by Duany and Plater-Zyberk, and had been so taken with the ideas within that he had given some twenty copies to various mayors around the state. Speed and Barranco called Duany, and a few days later the three gathered in Jackson to meet with Barksdale and the Governor.

Barbour was delayed by several hours, and so Duany, not one to sit still, asked Barksdale for a tour of a nearby Nissan plant. The two hit it off. “Jim and Andrés walked out the door,” Speed said. “And when they came back, I guess I’d say they had bonded.” When the Governor arrived, worn-out and in no mood for long lectures on land-use patterns, “he looked at me and Barksdale,” Speed recalled. “He said ‘Are you two guys for this?’ We said, ‘Very definitely.’ He said, ‘Let’s go.’ And we were off and running.”

The idea had been for DPZ to plan three of the affected towns as a template, but the Governor insisted that the entire coast be addressed, a proposition too massive for any one firm. But Duany had a cavalry to call: the highly organized, philosophically united CNU. He posted urgent bulletins on an exclusive internet listserv, and was able to handpick an elite roster of participants.

Those who attended the charrette struggle for superlatives to describe it. At the end of the week, when Barksdale threw a closing party with a loud local band and an open bar, nobody wanted to go home. “It was a happening,” said Speed, who, like many, walked away believing that something monumental had transpired. He also felt a stronger allegiance to New Urbanism, and to Duany: “I have sipped the Kool-Aid,” he told me. “I’m a member of the cult now.”

Over the last twenty-five years, New Urbanism has inspired many passionate followers, and many passionate critics. But it has never occupied a stage this large. A design of this scale has never been attempted in modern planning. The hazard-mitigation obstacles are formidable, the sociological sensitivity is high, and the world is watching. It is not lost on Duany or his colleagues that the post-Katrina rebuilding efforts present them with an enormous opportunity, a singular chance to prove that their methods and philosophies can work. For a quarter century, Duany and the New Urbanists have preached the gospel of traditional neighborhood development. Remaking the Gulf Coast, they believe,

could be their miracle.



The cult of New Urbanism is in large part the cult of Andrés Duany. He is expert at his profession, but, more importantly, he is a master communicator. "These people follow him with a determination and loyalty that's almost unnatural," Ricky Mathews observed. (He, too, is now a fervent believer.) "His ability to see things so clearly and lead people with that passion—as a result, he's not beholden to anybody."

Duany is quick with a pejorative ("tawdry" and "dismal" are among his favorites) and blunt in his reproach of what he sees as bad development and bad design. He is not a tall man, but he stands with great poise. He dresses smart but casual (almost never a tie) and is fluent and interesting on topics such as building techniques, traffic patterns, shopping habits, military history, tourism, and tax law. He speaks with a vague accent (he is Cuban), almost always extemporaneously, and often with a detached syntax that could be taken as snobbery. But the more he talks about what "humans" do and like and deserve, the more he sounds not like a snob but like an alien who has been studying human civilization from a distance for some time and only just decided to visit and lend a hand. His message, normally: Your city has been victimized by bad planning, and it needs to do better—it can do better—and if it doesn't do better, it will suffer. What he offers, essentially, is tough love.

"Andrés is intellectually honest," Mathews said. "And he can come across really direct." The casinos are mistreating your city, Duany told Biloxi. You beg them to come, they gobble up the beachfront, push their dumpsters and parking lots at you, and hold their customers prisoner. "He told us, 'You've lost focus. This place is a gem, a diamond. But you've run it with low expectations. You should learn to expect more. If you learn anything from Katrina and the rebuilding process, it's *expect more.*'"

At the request of the Governor, no casino developers or condo builders were allowed to participate in the charrette (he believed their presence would have been overwhelming). Instead, they were brought to the Isle of Capri the day after the final plans were presented. Duany addressed them, his language tailored to his audience. "We make a great deal of money for developers," he said of his firm. "Ninety percent of our work, we're retained not by people who want to do good, but want to do *well*. And if they happen to do good in the process of doing well, and it's marketable, excellent." He struck the same optimistic tone as the day before, but what he had sold as populism then he now pitched as profitable: If the developers cooperated and invested in a true urban fabric, they could create something more attractive and valuable than any one of them could devise alone.

If modular homebuilders manufactured their houses locally, he told them, they could save transportation costs and provide the wages that would allow local people to buy their product. If Wal-Mart built smaller stores in town centers, they could become neighborhood five-and-dimes and defuse the criticism that they were destroying Main Streets. If casinos built inland urban structures, as a new Mississippi law allowed, they could anchor local merchants and encourage an integrated tourism economy that would allow longer stays, thereby increasing their consumer base. "You can add vitality and cosmopolitan excitement to these towns," he instructed them. "See how this symbiotic relationship works? That's what planning is."

Some of Duany's more idealistic followers, who find casinos and Wal-Marts

distasteful for reasons other than their design, grow uncomfortable when such unsavory forces are welcomed as allies. But Duany's pragmatism is unabashed. Maybe DPZ has never drawn plans for a strip club or an opium den, but one gets the sense that they would, if asked, because Duany's concern is not who or what occupies a building or town so much as the physical building or town itself. What happens if Wal-Mart goes out of business? "To a planner, the present is almost irrelevant," Duany told me. "It's a discipline of the future. What you create will be working on all cylinders not tomorrow, but fifty years from now."



The oldest DPZ creation, then, is only half-ripe. Twenty-five years ago, a Miami developer named Robert Davis hired Duany and Plater-Zyberk to create a master plan for [Seaside](#), a new town he was building on the Florida panhandle. Davis imagined a quaint, neighborly place where residents could walk barefoot and children could sleep on the porch—a village that somehow captured all the pleasures of life by the ocean. Duany and Plater-Zyberk carefully designed the eighty-acre site with retail, residential, and public spaces in close proximity. The pedestrian was made king. Cars were accommodated, but tamed. And the architecture was aligned to a strict set of design rules. It was the first specimen of what would come to be called New Urbanism.

Duany and Plater-Zyberk studied architecture at Yale in the early '70s. They were students of Vincent Scully, a beloved and respected art historian who, though marinated in modernism, loved vernacular New England architecture and detailed its virtues in several influential books. It had never occurred to Scully that these traditional houses could be built again. His students would teach him that. "I remember Andrés and Lizz taking our seminar around," Scully told me, "showing us how well these things worked; how great was the basic typical American vernacular lot, with the lot, the trees, the sidewalk, the planting strip, the curve of the street, how it all worked, how the porches worked, how the houses had certain proportions. All of a sudden it was like a veil fell from my eyes. This all could be done!"

After Yale, Duany and Plater-Zyberk were hired as junior faculty in the Architecture Department at the University of Miami. Robert Orr, a fellow alumnus, soon joined them, and the three continued to analyze why certain old neighborhoods worked so well and felt so right, and how such places might be built from scratch. They measured the widths of streets, the radii of curbs, the distances between porch and sidewalk, trying to crack the code. Seaside was the first attempt to apply what they had learned, and so far it has been a success, judging from the price of real estate there, the number of imitation communities that have cropped up around it, and the hurricanes it has withstood. The University of Miami, meanwhile, has become the hotbed of New Urbanism: The architecture department where Orr and Duany once taught is now the School of Architecture, Plater-Zyberk is its dean, and Scully teaches one semester a year.

For the Mississippi charrette, Duany put Orr in charge of Waveland, a low-key beach community that bore the full brunt of Hurricane Katrina. Waveland was an unassuming, idyllic place. Unlike Seaside, it had a high percentage of year-round residents, many of whom had lived there since birth. Everyone seemed to know everyone. There was an active arts community, and a well-liked row of locally owned businesses on Coleman Avenue. A quarter century ago, it could have served as a model for Seaside, but now that Waveland is the blank slate, it might end up the other way around.

In mid-February, Orr flew down from his home in New Haven, Connecticut, to offer guidance on building a traditional home—he came armed with two yellowing books, *The Coast of Mississippi: Its Past and Progress* and *Historic Buildings of the French Quarter*—and to give Waveland residents who had missed the charrette a primer in New Urbanism. On a Friday night, in a classroom at Waveland Elementary (the largest room still standing, someone remarked), Ted Longo, the mayor's brother, introduced Orr by saying, "We can do whatever we want with our properties. But let's face it: It would be a shame not to do at least some of these things in these plans. Waveland could never afford to bring in the type of talent brought in by this charrette process." Thirty locals sat in pint-sized plastic chairs wearing exhausted expressions and work clothes. Orr stood before them in a red shirt buttoned to the top, khakis, and a brown blazer.

"You all were unfortunately the recipient of nature's worst nightmare," Orr said to them, "and I and a whole bunch of other people came down uninvited—at least not by you—and plopped down these plans here." No one had explained where the New Urbanists were coming from, Orr said, or how their work might be useful moving forward. "So far, you may have seen a lot of pretty pictures." Onto a screen in the front of the room that only partially covered an explosion of construction paper hearts on the wall (it was just before Valentine's Day), Orr projected some of those pretty pictures. And some ugly ones, too.

*Aerial view of typical American suburb:* "This is what Americans have come to love, open-space suburbs. Everyone has their house, a pool in the backyard. This is a well-known and well-loved image. And this is where we shop, where you really get the cheap prices. We love this. Wal-Mart. Strip centers."

*A diagram of small black dots and large black rectangles:* "Those things I showed you took up a lot of space. In this sketch, you can see twenty people take up a hundred and twenty square feet; twenty cars, six thousand square feet. This is how we've grown exponentially. Taking care of the car."

*Aerial view of small village:* "This is a little town in Vermont. This is how towns were developed for many, many generations. A street like this, you can imagine things happening, kids in the street."

*Aerial view of typical suburban development:* "All these people come out and have to get on this arterial road here. That creates huge traffic. If this person wants to visit that person, he can't go directly. A three-minute walk ends up being a five-minute drive."

*Street-level view of typical suburban cul-de-sac:* "This is the kind of environment we Americans are living in. When you look at it, it looks like a zoo. People pull their snouts into their garage, and close down so it's all safe. You open your garage with your opener and go inside and don't come out. There's no sense of community, knowing your neighbors."

*Photo of King Street in Charleston:* "So basically, there was a group of us in the late '70s who said there must be an alternative to this. Where is our country heading? We went to look at these kinds of neighborhoods. We discovered they weren't bad. People in these neighborhoods kill for these neighborhoods. Property values go up and up. Look at all the people walking. There's coffee shops. People get together, talk about stuff, movies, shopping. Action, communicating. Doing what humans do that makes us different from all other animals. And this street is what allows that to happen."

That the American human is subjected to the poor conditions of suburbia, Orr explained, is not his fault. Zoning ordinances that became popular after World War II separated the residential from the commercial from the industrial, essentially illegalizing the mixed-use neighborhood. Under such zoning laws, Orr told them, if Charleston were destroyed it couldn't be built back the way it

is now.

In Waveland and the rest of the Gulf Coast, the impediment to reconstruction will not be zoning so much as federal guidelines. In order to get flood insurance, homeowners must comply with [FEMA's elevation standards](#), which, post-Katrina, could become prohibitively high in many areas. The New Urbanists at the charrette did not shy away from this predicament, but rather forced the issue, demanding best-guess advisory maps and arguing that elevation was not the only way to survive a hurricane (with modern materials, couldn't houses be built to *withstand* periodic flooding rather than avoid it?). Meanwhile, they hedged their bets by drawing up fanciful solutions involving stilted beachfront bungalows thirty feet in the air and commercial streets with raised promenades and open-air markets on the ground floor.

If you want to talk to the people of Waveland about New Urbanism, it's best not to have a FEMA flood-elevation map in the room. At a meeting earlier in the day in one of the double-wide trailers that make up Waveland's downtown, Orr was more or less pushed aside by residents trying to locate their homes on the maps. Confusion reigned. Glen Currie, a local architect who had taken part in the charrette, expressed doubts about the watercolor renderings Orr had hung around the room. "What everyone truly needs to understand is, you're talking about a walkable city and you're talking about putting everyone up in the sky. Just functionally, stop and think about what that means. Understand that that drawing is a lie," he said. "The planning is intelligent. It's lovely. But it's extremely expensive." It would be nine months before people would know whether they could build back or not, and then a long appeal process would follow. Eventually, Currie fears, people would start to pull out. "And once they leave, there's no money to rebuild." Waveland would most likely become a weeded-out shadow of its former self, he said, with fewer, more expensive properties built to the new standards. "The only people who can do it are condo owners, rich New Orleanians, and people like me who have assets," he said. "That's nice for us. But the character of the city? Ask yourself how much that drawing costs. The reality is millions and millions and millions of dollars for one street."

The most eligible bachelor at the evening meeting at Waveland Elementary was a twenty-two-year-old named Brett Weyman, who graduated from an exclusive prep school in Virginia and went on to study architecture at the University of Tennessee, where he was a backup quarterback for the football team. Weyman wore a jacket and the only tie in the room. His employer, InterSouth Properties of Charleston, South Carolina, controls real estate all over the Southeast, he told me, and has become very interested in New Urbanism. InterSouth had seen the plans from the charrette, and sent Weyman down to Mississippi to acquire property. He had just bought the lot at 220 Coleman Avenue in Waveland. An awesome place, he thought, for a luxury inn, with suites on the upper floors and maybe a rooftop restaurant where you could look out over the trees to the ocean.

After Orr's presentation, Weyman introduced himself to Kathy Pinn, the gregarious president of the Coleman Avenue Coalition. Pinn and her husband, Ron, had lived at 237 Coleman, above their store, That Cute Little Shoppe, which sold antiques, furniture, jewelry, kites, chocolate rum balls, and whatnot. She was delighted to meet her new neighbor, and tickled by the thought that her little community was already attracting the confidence of real-estate investors.

"You hold onto a quarter-acre lot," Weyman said, "and before too long, you'll have a million-and-a-half-dollar property."



"I should actually write down what's going to happen. There's not going to be any affordable housing, and we're going to get blamed for it," Duany told me the next day, "but it's FEMA's fault. Everything they've done makes housing expensive. It's the largest unfunded mandate you could imagine."

New Urbanists are often accused of building their communities exclusively for the rich, and indeed, many traditional neighborhood developments are populated by, and marketed to, the affluent. But New Urbanists argue that traditional neighborhoods are expensive because relatively few exist, and that, ironically, they are being attacked because the market has confirmed their assertion that these are desirable places to live.

Nothing about New Urbanism inherently prohibits inclusion. In an ideal case, as the [Charter for the New Urbanism](#) reads, "cities and towns should bring into proximity a broad spectrum of public and private uses to support a regional economy that benefits people of all incomes." A waiter or housekeeper, in other words, should be able to get to work, buy lunch, and pick up the kids from school without starting a car. Some New Urbanist firms have made a killing selling master planned communities to the upper class. But putting New Urbanism to work for the poor is something that the Department of Housing and Urban Development has been trying since the 1990s with its [Hope VI program](#), which replaces depressed high-rise housing projects with neighborhood street grids, and assigns units to residents with a variety of needs. In Biloxi, just blocks from where Judy Filipich spent the morning of Katrina in her friend's attic, the Bayou Auguste public-housing apartments had recently been replaced with a mix of Hope VI rental units, lease-to-purchase units, and elderly public-housing units. The neighborhood today stands, literally, as a testament to the quality of the construction: Flooding ruined other homes in the vicinity, but the Hope VI structures survived.

Filipich, for her part, had no flood insurance, so she can't afford much. But she wants to stay in Biloxi. "My inclination is to get me a little house and hunker down," she said. "Just to get something. After you're in this trailer for a little while, it hits you just how temporary it is. It's a weird insecurity." She is contemplating a geodesic dome, she told me, because it would be relatively cheap and easy to construct.

One afternoon in February, Filipich rode with an old friend over to Ocean Springs to look into another option: the [Katrina Cottage](#), a three-hundred-square-foot home conceived during the charrette by a New York designer, Marianne Cusato. When Mississippi called in September, Duany decided that part of the New Urbanists' response should be to tackle the lack of decent emergency housing. The Katrina Cottage was an answer to the FEMA trailer, an attractive, permanent structure that sleeps four and costs about the same as an installed trailer.

In January, a delegation of architects and CNU officials flew down to Orlando to unveil the first prototype at the International Builders' Show, an enormous convention dedicated to everything the Katrina Cottage is not: French-door refrigerators, multi-nozzle walk-in showers, and thousand-square-foot decks. "That cottage is the most pleasant place in the entire exhibit," Duany told a press conference. "Two hundred acres of stuff in this exhibit, and that little porch is the nicest place to be." The cottage was a hit. People who weren't even in the market for disaster housing marveled at the smart use of space, the hidden storage under the lower bunk beds and porch seats, the darling little kitchen corner. Several visitors inquired as to whether they might be able to buy one as a hunting cabin or beach bungalow.

But as far as FEMA was concerned, it had one fatal flaw: It was permanent. And the Federal Government is not in the homebuilding business. "FEMA takes the trailers away after eighteen months," Duany said in a presentation at the cottage. "Why? Because they lower real-estate values and cause social problems." Why would the government pay to install something impermanent when the same money could be spent building starter homes, he asked. "You can actually live in them while you're gradually adding to your house, which is very much the American tradition. That's how the poor people used to do it in this country," Duany told the crowd. "Traditional architecture is about people of very low means and therefore high intelligence building over time without the long-term help of government and without the help of mortgages."

Filipich's home and the other houses on her block were built in the 1920s by Croatian immigrants, she told me, and passed down. The neighborhood had survived hurricanes and the arrival of the casinos. But it wouldn't survive this. "Mr. Tony, everyone knew. He's old and they didn't get him a trailer and so he went to some old-folks home," Filipich said. "The lady next door, she's not coming back. Down at the end it was two elderly ladies and they went with their kids and they're not coming back. I'm the only trailer here.

"The guy down the street, his daddy had a hardware store on the corner forever and it just had everything. They got wiped out. He was saying the other day, 'I wish I had a crystal ball and I could just see where we're going to be in two years.' It's an awful thing. In your normal life you sort of know what your future is going to be, at least a few years down the road. I just can't think of the future. I just don't have any concept. I mean, people say you should live in the now, but that's ridiculous. I'm in the now because I don't have a past. That's been wiped out."



Pining for bygones is exactly the kind of thing that the critics of New Urbanism do not condone. To many modernist and progressive architects, the idea of building new houses that look old is a sentimental waste of human creativity, if not a creepy, manipulative fantasy. Those in positions of academic or editorial power are often critical of New Urbanism, and several were quick to disparage the Mississippi Renewal Forum. Eric Owen Moss, the director of the Southern California Institute of Architecture, complained to the *Washington Post* that the New Urbanists' "ideological image-making would appeal to a kind of anachronistic Mississippi that yearns for the good old days of the Old South as slow and balanced and pleasing and breezy, and each person knew his or her role." Reed Kroloff, the dean of the School of Architecture at Tulane, speaking to NPR in September, just days after it was announced that Duany would lead the charrette, warned that New Urbanism is "wrapped far too often in this treacly, sugarcoated, neo-precious architecture that tries to recreate your grandmother's hometown."

Mention these critics to Duany, and you might see him flustered. When I visited DPZ's home office in Miami, Florida, in January, Duany and I had lunch at a Cuban restaurant in Coral Gables. On the way back, we started to talk about his detractors, and Duany's voice grew sharp as he absentmindedly drove his Porsche for several blocks in first gear. "I can't stand the level of criticism. It is so subprofessional. They just take a look at it and say, 'I hate it! I hate it!' Why should I even respond to that? It's brilliant, in lots of ways that *count!* And people love it, and the kids love it. It's this New York and L.A. intelligentsia. The architecture critics. Six critics in America. It's six fucking critics! And four magazines. Well, fuck them! Who cares? Nobody reads them!"

"Duany likes to label anyone who disagrees with him either an elitist or a member of the intelligentsia," Reed Kroloff told me when I paraphrased Duany's sentiments. "Like many people who lead a movement, it's much easier to lead that movement and speak to your clients if you have an enemy."

There is a real philosophical divide in the architecture world, and the schism has been made geographic in the post-hurricane planning of the Gulf Coast. Kroloff, with New Orleans architect Ray Manning, was initially put in charge of the planning committee for Mayor Ray Nagin's Bring New Orleans Back Commission, while Louisiana Governor Kathleen Blanco, perhaps heeding the popular enthusiasm created by the Mississippi charrette, asked DPZ and Peter Calthorpe, a New Urbanist developer from California, to do local and regional plans for the rest of Southern Louisiana, from Lake Charles in the West to Arabi, next door to New Orleans, in the East. By February, the New Urbanists had some three hundred miles of coast under their influence, and Duany wanted desperately to get involved in New Orleans.

"I keep telling Reed, 'Just let me at it for a week and I could just save it.' I know exactly how it has to happen," Duany told Donna Fraiche, the chair of long-term community planning for the Louisiana Recovery Authority, at the Lake Charles charrette in February. "The reason New Orleans is not being solved is because we're not there. And he knows that."

But Kroloff was doing everything he could to distance himself—and New Orleans—from Duany's work. Even after he relinquished his spot on the Bring New Orleans Back Commission, he seemed to be taunting Duany from [the pages of Artforum](#): "The New Urbanist Svengalis have now seduced Louisiana's hapless governor and been given the keys to the state," he wrote. "But the real goal, the very city on which their movement is based, is New Orleans. And until now, no one has offered an alternative to their toothache of a future."

The pages that followed showed designs created by American and Dutch firms during a symposium Kroloff held in the Netherlands. As promised, the drawings had very little in common with the watercolor postcards produced during the Mississippi charrette. They included a stack of school and community spaces built into a hillside (based on a child's drawing), and a tall, gleaming "mediatheque" library with mid-rise gashes of exterior space covered in greenery. The accompanying text was, for the layman, slightly puzzling, with talk of "deep planning" ("gathering large amounts of data and then [molding] them, with the help of the computer, into iconic form"). These were meant only as inspiration, Kroloff said, not true plans. But perhaps one could forgive the "hapless" Governor Blanco for being seduced by talk of trees, sidewalks, and porches.

Though Kroloff and Duany differ completely on the relative merits of traditional and modern architecture, they agree on certain things. "I believe that generic suburbia, as presented to the public through the eyes of the developers and reinforced with zoning codes, have wrought upon America some of the most destructive city form that you could possibly imagine," Kroloff told me. "And on that, Andrés Duany and I see eye to eye."



You probably haven't heard much about the plight of Lake Charles after Hurricane Rita. The story was upstaged by the bigger hurricane that hit the bigger city, and it fell short of TV-tragic. The local public officials in Lake Charles did a good job of evacuating residents (including thousands of Katrina refugees who had taken shelter in the Lake Charles Civic Center); Federal, state, and local law enforcement kept people and property safe; aid came

quickly and was dispensed efficiently. Within a month, the floodwater was pumped out, utilities were restored, and most of the debris had been cleared away. What could easily have been a plane wreck for Lake Charles was reduced to a case of lost luggage—a troublesome ordeal that offered the chance to buy some new clothes.

DPZ held their Lake Charles charrette in February, and over the course of the week, the Mayor grew so enthusiastic that he planned a city council meeting to coincide with Duany's final presentation to the public. The council voted, on the spot, to endorse all of the firm's recommendations. It was the most forward embrace Duany had ever experienced. Lake Charles was hungry for change, and if moderate hurricane damage was all it took to raise the private money and public support to hire Duany, then so be it.

"There comes a time for a city, when it's time to get a proper suit," Duany told Lake Charles mayor Randy Roach and a few dozen local leaders on the opening day of the charrette in February. "It's not enough to own short pants. When a city's getting to be fifty, sixty years old, it's ridiculous to be winging it as if you're a piece of countryside."

To witness DPZ attack the troubles of an intact downtown, with the added emotional and financial fuel of a hurricane recovery, was perhaps to see them at their best. Critics often take the New Urbanists to task for working so much on greenfield sites creating brand-new towns on undeveloped land. ("His suburbs are better than most developers' suburbs," Kroloff said of Duany. "But that's like saying strep throat is better than pneumonia. You're still not well.") Duany insists that, in order to be effective, the New Urbanists must engage problems where they occur, and that every well-built place is a victory, regardless of where. But it's also far simpler to build a new development: A single client owns all of the land, and the land is a blank slate. There is no need for the political corralling required in a downtown redesign or regional plan. When DPZ is hired to revitalize part of an existing city, as they have done for a dozen towns, including Baton Rouge and Providence, they must cross their fingers and hope that the mayors and zoning boards and public works departments follow through. This can take years.

Their ideas caught on well, and fast, in Lake Charles. The entire firm descended on the town, arriving a day early to set up operations in the ballroom of the Lakefront Hotel and to begin touring the city. By the time the first morning meeting took place, the team knew the city layout and had a good feel for what streets and areas needed intervention. Large aerial maps hung on the wall. More were taped down to tabletops, and planners were already drawing alternate realities on tracing paper over them. It was like a war room, but instead of picking targets to destroy, the team was conferring on how best to re-create. As Duany conferenced with small groups of decision makers at a table along one wall, his colleagues hurried busily in and out and around the room, typing on laptops or sketching. The whirr of a pencil sharpener and the low murmur of conversation were constant.

"Most of the team will be out observing very closely," Duany told the mayor. "They'll be observing your shops, maybe the lighting of your shops, when they open, when they close, the condition of your curbs." Every block would be rated according to the quality of the pedestrian experience, he told them, and he didn't think the diagnosis would be good. "You have a singularly empty core. America has a lot of empty downtowns. This is one of the most empty I've seen."

At evening meetings with the public, Duany worked them over with more therapeutic tough love. I know your young people are leaving, he told them, because you have nothing to offer them. A small plot in a subdivision is not enough. You have to rebuild your core, and with it your culture. Your civic

center building is a giant eyesore because it's surrounded by parking lots that are wasting valuable waterfront, he said. The building is so ugly that it's cool. Keep it. But turn the land around it into shops and hotels with parking lots concealed inside. You had plans for a canal, he told them mid-week. That plan was bad. We've done a better one. He showed them a rendering, finished minutes before, and people loved it. They seemed to love Lake Charles more because of the drawing of the canal. Faces lit up, then reappeared in later meetings. Duany, like a physician, was reassuring in his command of their malaise.

"You know where power is?" he said to me after one particularly effective presentation. "People who allow you to understand something. Anyone who actually gives you an insight. You'll follow that person anywhere. My job is not to have mumbo-jumbo. My job is to clarify how the world works."

At the final presentation and city council meeting, in the retro-cool Civic Center, there was a buoyant gravity in the room. With a PowerPoint presentation on screen and a green laser pen in hand, Duany spent an hour introducing them to their potential future, and after applause and comments, the resolutions to endorse the plan were read aloud. A councilman whispered something to a maintenance man, who then walked to the back of the room and pulled open the floor-to-ceiling curtains to reveal the dramatic sunset over the lake. The votes were all unanimous, all yea. Mayor Roach, before rewarding the team with keys to the city, spoke for the record. "God in His infinite wisdom has a way of positioning communities and people to be in the right place at the right time," he said. "Andrés, you are a friend to us because you have told us what we needed to hear." Four months before, he noted, the Civic Center was a shelter for more than three thousand Hurricane Katrina refugees. They all had to flee again when Rita came. "I don't think that anybody back then would have thought we'd be having this discussion today. You will go on to different places. But I guarantee you, you will not do more for any community than you have done for us."

The next two Louisiana charrettes, in Vermilion and St. Bernard Parishes, ended much the same way. DPZ's plans were adopted within days. The apparent rise of New Urbanism is suddenly such that Duany worries there may not be enough practitioners to satisfy the growing demand. If they become as popular with local governments as they have been with greenfield developers, that could mean a whole new chapter for New Urbanism. Perhaps even a better one. The new towns they create inevitably feel a bit contrived in their awkward infancy (Disneysque, the critics like to say), but a revived downtown feels fixed-up and alive. It's a much harder trick—the changes must be more surgical and collaborative—but by New Urbanism's own calculus, a renaissance is worth a dozen creations.

The Gulf Coast, if all goes well, could be a great success in this regard. The centuries-old communities, with their well-established character, won't easily submit to Disneyfication, whatever that means. The stakeholders who remain and can afford to rebuild will do so how they please; the planning will be superimposed, not imposed. A tourist in Biloxi ten years from now might walk from a marina restaurant to a Monte Carlo-style casino, but not, God willing, without passing near the pink porch of Judy Filipich's Katrina Cottage, or her geodesic dome on stilts, or whatever she comes up with. ■