

DISASTER RESPONSE AND PRESERVATION
2014 Coastal Resilience Conference, Galveston, Texas
October 8, 2014
Walter W. Gallas, AICP
Executive Director, Louisiana Landmarks Society, New Orleans

Thank you to the Galveston Historical Foundation for your leadership in this important subject. Your partnership with UTMB inspires me to look at creative partnerships in the work that I do in historic preservation in the New Orleans region.

This morning I did a run through beautiful residential parts of the island and eventually made my way to Seawall Blvd. The seaside reminded me in some ways of places I had seen during my work with the National Trust when I was based in Philadelphia: places like Rehoboth Beach in Delaware and Seaside Heights on the Jersey Shore. I had a three-state region rich in historic resources: Pennsylvania, Delaware, and New Jersey.

Since 2013 I have been the executive director of Louisiana Landmarks Society, a New Orleans non-profit historic preservation organization founded in 1950. The organization owns and operates a historic house museum, the 1799 Pitot House along Bayou St. John, which is also our headquarters.

I worked for eight and a half years with the National Trust for Historic Preservation, including three and a half years as field office director in New Orleans after Katrina and three and a half years as field office director in Philadelphia. Hurricane Sandy struck in October 2012 as the National Preservation Conference was about to get underway in Spokane, Washington.

I also have four years experience with the City of New Orleans as deputy director of their historic preservation commission. I hold a planning degree from the University of New Orleans, which in turn led me to get involved in preservation politics and advocacy in the city.

Today I am going to frame my talk around three questions related to disaster response and historic preservation and offer my observations:

- What happens immediately after a disaster?
- What was going on before the disaster that affected what we would deal with after the disaster?
- Are we learning anything?

What happens immediately after a disaster?

For me, Katrina was a dive into doing disaster response. My initial mission was to do reconnaissance—followed quickly by the need (from the National Trust’s standpoint) to

figure out what policies or attitudes were at work on the ground regarding historic resources.

Political leaders are always under pressure to perform and show results. After a disaster, they are under even *more* pressure to show results to a shaken public. Clearing debris is measurable and visual. It shows that something is being done. In the face of this, it's a big challenge to convince some that certain places are worth sparing. So there is this tension created by the desire to move forward and do something versus the call not to destroy what is valued and to think about the future impacts of post-disaster actions.

And remember: If the prevailing attitude in the municipal leadership toward historic resources was shaky or reluctant before, what's going to make it any different now?

The fear at the National Trust after Katrina was that in the rush to clean up the damage, properties which could be saved would be swept up as debris with all the rest of the debris. And then also the question of how to distinguish the "worthy" from the "unworthy" among the damaged historic properties, so that you know what to fight to save.

Let's get back to the need for surveillance—the need to know what the status of things are, so you at least can try to have the conversation with decision-makers about what's possible and important to save. In New Orleans after Katrina, the State Historic Preservation Office (SHPO) worked with FEMA's historic preservation staff to survey the city's damaged neighborhoods. This work resulted in determinations to expand the boundaries of some of the city's existing National Register Districts, adding more properties to scrutinize and discuss.

In New Jersey after Sandy, the SHPO scrambled to survey the damaged areas and added some of them as eligible for the National Register. Mantoloking, on a barrier island in New Jersey, by the way, comes to mind as one of the heavily damaged places where a 20th century neighborhood was identified as significant.

All of this surveying had to do with the fact that FEMA money was going to be used for the possible demolition of historic properties. What this triggers is a review and consultation process called for under Section 106 of the National Historic Preservation Act. Section 106—which many of you know—slows down the train and forces conversations about the future of historic properties when federal funds, like FEMA, are involved that could affect National Register-eligible properties.

Note that I say it slows down the train, and doesn't necessarily guarantee outright protections. Nevertheless, in New Orleans, that framework enabled us, the non-profit sector, to check on the work of the governmental sector. Our involvement succeeded in identifying hundreds of mistakenly targeted structures, and preventing their demolition. We also got a bit of a consolation prize in that selective salvage was done for houses

that were demolished, enabling items like windows and doors along with their frames, and other architectural elements to be resold and returned to use in other houses being restored.

What was going on before the disaster that affected what we would deal with after the disaster?

In my business, even when there hasn't been a major disaster, we are presented with historic properties in sorry condition. Pre-Katrina New Orleans was a leader in the nation in the number of blighted properties. This was brought on by a number of factors: poverty, population decline, lack of a city housing development plan, disinvestment, and a one-industry (tourism) economy based on low-wage jobs. Now add to this a disastrous failure of public infrastructure after a hurricane—and stir.

New Orleans also had the highest proportion of renters in the population of anywhere in the country. When renters suffer damage to their homes, they aren't the ones who are going to make the repairs. They vote with their feet--and leave. New Orleans suffered extremely heavy damage in parts of the city most densely populated with renters.

The parts of the city least affected by flooding after the floodwall and levee failures were those on the high ground nearest the Mississippi—the so-called “sliver by the river.” In the 18th and 19th century, New Orleans development clung to the naturally occurring high ground built up near the river. It wasn't until the invention of an efficient screw pump, which could drain water from the city, that the footprint of New Orleans expanded into former wetlands and swamps. Faith in engineering enabled this development. After Katrina, 19th century maps of New Orleans remarkably mirrored the non-flooded parts of the city in the 21st century.

In other parts of the country, housing development occurred in places (in hindsight) that it shouldn't have—barrier islands, along coastal beaches, and in drained wetlands, setting the stage for increased property losses after storms.

Back in New Orleans, there were other things that had been going on before Katrina that affected what would happen after Katrina. Disasters can be an opportunity to move long-desired capital projects forward. A case in point: a new state university hospital. Planning had been going on for years for an expanded medical district in the Central Business District. The storm provided the perfect opportunity to build something shiny and new. When the plan grew to include the construction of new home for the VA hospital as well, the project was a juggernaut. Over 150 homes in a National Register district were in the way, though. The battle to spare the Mid-City neighborhood consumed major portions of my time in New Orleans from 2006 to 2009.

Preservation battles often lack hard data and are more about ideas and values. In the case of the Charity Hospital battle, a statewide preservation non-profit, the Foundation for Historical Louisiana, raised money to conduct a \$600,000 study which determined that the million-square-foot building could be returned to 21st century hospital use.

But the decision to move forward with the ambitious and costly new hospital plans had been made high up in the state and university administration as well as in Veterans Affairs. The state's art deco Charity Hospital was declared unusable, and FEMA funds were sought to build a replacement. Congress also appropriated funds to build a new VA hospital.

Are we learning anything?

In New Orleans, planners immediately after Katrina tried to designate portions of the city's vast footprint out-of-bounds for rebuilding, due to the extreme levels of flooding and the low elevations. These areas were designated with green dots on maps to indicate they would be reserved for green space. Neighborhoods like Broadmoor, the Lower Ninth Ward, and New Orleans East rebelled, and the city backed off. Today there is no place in New Orleans where you can't build--that's any different than from before the storm.

In New Jersey, I recall the "battle of the sand dunes" after the storm with some Jersey Shore property owners fighting dune building to protect the coast, because the dunes would obstruct their views.

In New Orleans, we went "back to the future," elevating houses again (as we had for centuries), sometimes with ridiculous or disastrous results.

Today in New Orleans, the city has been allowed to apply one last time to use FEMA funds to demolish residential properties. While it could have proposed as many as 1,500, it identified about 600. Only properties on previous post-Katrina lists could be put forward. So, city officials haven't learned much. The system favors funding demolition over sale and rehab.

Today in places like Woodbridge, New Jersey and Fox Beach, Staten Island, houses built close to water or in wetlands are being bought out and demolished—and owners relocating farther inland. Nature has quickly returned.

And what about those renters I was talking about earlier who left after their homes were damaged? Many of them aren't back, because now they can't afford the high rents. We really need to have a conversation about this, since this is happening across the country. The cause of the high rents is the lack of supply.

Louisiana after Katrina focused almost all its efforts on steering HUD funding to owners of single-family homes. There was a state-managed program for the repair of rental housing, but it was an abysmal failure in planning and execution. As a result, New Orleans, not a wealthy city, has rents higher than it's ever seen before.

Nevertheless, nine years after the storm, there's some extraordinary work being done by Redmellon Redevelopment that takes the redevelopment of housing—rental housing—to scale using low income housing tax credits. This isn't new construction. This is using houses in modest old neighborhoods, usually double shotguns, and rehabbing them.

Who cares if the new tenant doesn't share the preservationist's excitement about historic detail, old growth timbers, and early craftsmanship! The place offers secure, safe, and sturdy housing that is in the city and that someone of modest means can afford.

Today, I am still surprised when some of my colleagues question why the historic preservation community should concern itself with sea level rise or coastal restoration. One of them said to me, "We aren't the Sierra Club." Wow.

Our own history of preservation in this country is so closely tied with the protections of the natural landscape—beginning in the latter 19th and into the early 20th century: The establishment of Yellowstone as the world's first national park in 1872, to protect the "curiosities" and "wonders" sighted by hunters and trappers in the area; the first National Monument designation in 1889 of Casa Grande, an ancient Native American ruin in Arizona, to protect it from looters.

Then, the first major national preservation legislation to protect sites on federal lands—and to establish penalties to prevent their destruction: the Antiquities Act of 1906. This led in turn to the establishment of the National Park Service—to manage the growing number of places—in 1916.

So, nature and historic preservation go way back.

If we don't get involved with this issue and work on things like resilience, and armoring vs. retreating and coastal rebuilding—there won't be any built resources for us to worry about. You have only to look at the current images of the Louisiana coast to see that the Gulf of Mexico is lapping ever closer to the door of New Orleans, and the coast looks like Swiss cheese.

Disasters can beat you down, but they can also spur more citizen engagement than ever before, and I saw this in New Orleans and in communities in New Jersey. In New Orleans, existing neighborhood groups were strengthened, and new one were created. They became more politically savvy, sophisticated and self-assured.

Have we learned anything more about flood protection? The system that was in place when Katrina struck was defective, and a new system of floodwalls and pumping stations and gates is nearly in place. But what does that flood protection get us? A false sense of security? The evidence is that the system that was built is already out-of-date, having been based on storm and surge data that has since grown more sophisticated. Add to that the lumbering pace of Army Corps of Engineers projects, and we seem to continue to miss the mark.

Are we still fighting the water, fighting nature with our engineering and technology—just as we tried to tame the Mississippi River after the 1927 floods, instead of trying to embrace it?

In conclusion:

As the number and intensity of natural disasters increase, we are all being forced to work harder and harder to make decision-makers face the facts. Can we armor our way out of storm surge and sea level rise? Places like Galveston and New Orleans and any other coastal community with systems of floodwalls and pumps and barriers can't be complacent. The changes are here and will continue to come.

Many of the buildings, neighborhoods, streets and landscapes that define the character of our communities are more resilient than we might imagine. Yet, there is clearly a point at which we all need to turn to one another and admit that our blind faith in engineering and technology got us into this predicament.

Of course we are not going to return to a pre-technology age, but where is nature in all of this? Nature treated not as something to be mastered and controlled, but something to be lived with and understood. I am reminded of the work by David Wagoner, a New Orleans architect, and his "Living with Water" project and the "Dutch Dialogues," which have brought the thinking of Dutch engineers to New Orleans. The conversation goes on, and we eagerly await implementation of any scope.

All kinds of crises and challenges are swirling around us, and seemingly growing in number at a faster rate. I say natural disasters and climate change are right up there with war and genocide and disease, because the loss of the physical places that shelter us and give us privacy, that express our cultures, that are the stages for our public displays and celebrations, that provide continuity and stability through generations--the loss of these can pull the rug out from under our humanity.

We must try to do all we can to protect and preserve the places that have defined us, but the task has never been more daunting.

Thank you!