

Planners, Preservationists Address Prospects of Gulf Coast Recovery

If Hurricane Katrina can rightly be considered one of the worst calamities to befall the United States, the disaster also presents an unprecedented opportunity to rebuild and restore the devastated Gulf Coast region. Yet major questions remain, including what gets rebuilt, how that rebuilding process will occur, and who makes those decisions. "I see it both as tragedy and opportunity," said Sara Galvan, managing editor of *The Next American City* magazine. "I'm confident the Gulf Coast will be rebuilt."

In November, Galvan joined a panel of planners and preservationists who met at the National Press Club in Washington, D.C., to examine the financial, logistical, and political challenges of the post-Katrina era. The event also featured presentations by Paris Rutherford, director of urban design for RTKL Associates; Peter Brink, vice president for programs at the National Trust for Historic Preservation; and Saroj Jha, senior infrastructure specialist at the World Bank.

Even as they acknowledged the need for architects, preservationists, and others to be engaged in Gulf Coast recovery, the panel repeatedly stressed the importance of local involvement and decision-making authority. "Even the most well-intentioned planners," Galvan said, "must be checked by a diverse group of individuals with local knowledge."

Too often, noted Jha, local communities are relied upon in the immediate wake of a disaster, only to be shunted aside in sub-



Mark Wolfe/Courtesy FEMA

The force of Hurricane Katrina completely destroyed many buildings, such as this landmark church in Biloxi, Mississippi.

sequent months and years. "Once the professionals take over and communities take a step back," Jha said, "[solutions] are brought to the community and they are merely asked whether they like them or not." It is necessary, Jha continued, for local, state, and federal governments to develop an institutional framework for mitigation and recovery at every stage. Specifically, Rutherford outlined four steps that comprise a roadmap for change in the Gulf Coast: readying the infrastructure, recalibrating the regulations, creating catalyst projects, and strategizing for the future. In addition to damaged infrastructure, Rutherford noted

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that the region's reputation – and especially New Orleans's – had suffered from unflattering images of looting and poverty. "We need to examine land-use and marketing policies and think more carefully about how local character creates a sense of place," he said.

For one, panelists agreed that the region must align its redevelopment goals with market-based strategies to boost local economies. Galvan suggested this might include rewriting building codes, better design in affordable housing, and the creative use of concepts such as "usufruct," where the city is allowed to assume temporary ownership of a residence to fix it up and lease it out. In addition, Rutherford advanced the idea that key catalyst projects across the region would encourage the formation of public-private partnerships. "In this emerging age of city-states," Rutherford said, "the Gulf Coast needs to be an identifiable player in the new global marketplace."

Redevelopment should also include rehabilitation, said the National Trust's Peter Brink. "Oftentimes when surveying damaged areas, the first impulse is to plow facilities to the ground and start over," he said. "We've also learned that this impulse is almost always wrong." He cited that \$1 million spent rehabilitating buildings holds more local value than the same \$1 million dedicated to new construction, because most of the money spent on rehabilitation goes toward local labor, rather than materials.

The National Trust is advocating for new legislation that would encourage property owners to choose rehabilitation over demolition, Brink said. These incentives include a federal Disaster Relief Historic Homeowner Assistance Tax Credit, which would authorize credits of 30 percent of qualified rehab costs for historic houses damaged by Katrina, and a two-year, \$60 million grant program under the federal Historic Preservation Fund, to be used for repair of historic structures in the region. The Trust also has established a Hurricane Recovery Fund, so far raising more than \$1 million.

Over the long term, local communities can be sustained and empowered by preservation projects, Brink concluded. "They feel a connection to something real and lasting that wind and water cannot destroy." — Kim A. O'Connell

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