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## If New Orleans Is a Blank Canvas, Many Are Poised to Repaint

By Manuel Roig-Franzia  
Washington Post Staff Writer  
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NEW ORLEANS -- New Orleans has gone retro -- way retro. It is, in a fundamental sense, as it was long ago, 287 years ago, when a French aristocrat named Jean Baptiste le Moyne, Sieur de Bienville, decided it would be a nice spot to have a city.

Two weeks after Hurricane Katrina brutalized the city, much of the inviting high ground tucked into the big Mississippi River crescent that so entranced Bienville is dry and inviting, confirming that he was one smart Frenchman. Most of the rest of the city is abominably uninviting -- underwater or soggy or mud-crusted and foreboding; its future is uncertain, much as it was when Bienville showed up.

New Orleans is bankrupt. Its population of nearly half a million is scattered around the country, banned -- for no one knows how long -- from returning. Its dry streets are spookily empty, and its wet streets may take a month to pump out. Yet all anyone in Louisiana seems to talk about is putting it back together again. The question -- the one with no answer yet -- is, how?

"We're on a journey here, and we don't have a road map," said Ralph Brennan, scion of a New Orleans restaurant empire built on the elegance and charm of the venerable Commander's Palace in the city's Garden District.

Rebuilding and resurrecting Bienville's town -- the town he left for Louis Armstrong and Winton Marsalis, for Tennessee Williams and the French Quarter stripper Belle Starr -- is turning into an obsession here. The powerful business interests who talk of speedily reopening the French Quarter are trying hard to show confidence, saying that what they consider the best of the city, its graceful mansions and its French Quarter, is intact. Others think of the best of the city in different terms, and they fret that its sultry, elemental vibe may be lost forever if the poor now stashed about the nation in evacuation centers don't return to make music and stitch Mardi Gras Indian costumes and send off their dead with jazz funerals.

"The soul of New Orleans is gone -- they're dispersed in Texas and all over, and a lot of these people might not come back," said Deacon John, the New Orleans guitar legend whose distinctive, bluesy riffs play like a soundtrack for his home town. "We don't want New Orleans to turn into another Disneyland."

The breadth of the devastation makes New Orleans an irresistible palate for urban planners, who see a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity to reinvent a major city, something akin to arriving in Chicago after its Great Fire or San Francisco after its Great Earthquake.

The plans being tossed about range from the modest and safe -- nascent discussions among city officials about offering citywide wireless Internet service -- to the seismic and controversial: bulldozing the flood-prone lower Ninth Ward, a bastion of New Orleans African American culture, and turning it into a

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park that could absorb floodwaters.

"There's no sense rebuilding in the areas that are lowest," said Pres Kabacoff, a prominent New Orleans developer known for converting old warehouses and factories into hipster condominiums. "You have an opportunity, sort of like a Venice, to protect the center and build out."

But Kabacoff and others who favor converting the city's most perpetually soggy neighborhoods -- most of which are predominantly African American -- into green space will surely encounter massive opposition, both from preservationist groups and from black leaders in a city that is 67 percent African American.

"It may be necessary to bulldoze homes, but then we've got to build them back -- I'm adamant about that," said Danatus King, president of the New Orleans NAACP. "It's the right thing to do."

With no clear direction from the beleaguered city government, the wealthy of this town have begun to rev up New Orleans on their own. Brennan plans to reopen his French Quarter bistro, Bacco, as soon as next week, even though he hasn't been able to reach anyone with the city to find out if that is okay. "I will probably cry," Brennan said, envisioning the first meal he will serve there.

Each day, as the sight of lighted high-rises has returned to the city's Central Business District, business leaders have grown bolder in their projections. Now, power players such as Bill Hines, managing partner of the mega-law firm Jones Walker, say the French Quarter and a large portion of the rest of the city, with the exception of the most flooded neighborhoods in the east, could open in a month or less. Just a few days ago, business leaders were predicting 90 days.

"You want to get the area from the French Quarter all through Uptown open as soon as possible," Hines said. "If that's done, it sends a great message."

But the task that lies beyond the relatively unscathed center of New Orleans is daunting: draining a city still nearly half underwater, restoring power, assessing whether to bulldoze entire neighborhoods, figuring out what to do with a quarter-million students whose schools are unusable in the metropolitan area, and dealing with hundreds of thousands of evacuees growing more anxious by the day to return to their city.

Even thornier is the huge issue of the city's levees. Some want to see them raised; others argue that such an approach would not be sufficient unless billions more are also spent on restoring the state's sinking coastal marshes, which can act as storm-surge buffers.

Spotty cell phone service -- a man with a friendly drawl comes on to say "all systems are busy" with maddening regularity -- complicates everything, as does the geography of a wrecked metropolitan region that meanders through marsh towns in neighboring parishes, such as Plaquemines, where whole blocks were scraped free of houses when the Mississippi River came surging over the levees.

Preservationists are urging New Orleans leaders not to rush to judgment about damaged homes. Richard Moe, president of the National Trust for Historic Preservation, said the tendency after natural disasters has been to tear down buildings before properly assessing whether they can be saved. In New Orleans, that could mean the loss of abundant charm -- the shotgun houses, Creole cottages and camelbacks that gave the city, even its poorest neighborhoods, an irresistible, porch-sitting charm.

"We're very worried that decisions are about to be made that are not informed," said Moe, who will soon

be sending inspection teams to New Orleans. "Before New Orleans figures out what it is going to become, it needs to save as much of its past as possible."

There is talk here of creating vast trailer cities, reopening closed school dormitories and cramming military bases with thousands of construction workers. It will take years. Although the Bush administration has pledged to let local leaders drive the process, there is a good deal of skepticism that the federal government will cede complete control of billions of dollars to a city and state where graft and corruption are practically art forms.

"When Texas was getting all its oil and gas money in the '60s and '70s, it invested in infrastructure; Louisiana squandered it," Hines said. "This may be our last shot to get a second chance."

Hines, former director of a regional planning organization called Metrovision, wants a committee made up of political and business leaders to be formed to oversee the rebuilding. And, perhaps more so, he wants the federal, state and city officials who have savaged each other over the past two weeks to knock it off.

"If we keep firing these bullets at each other, the winner is going to be the other states that want to take away our business," Hines said. "Shut up on the blame thing."

Hines, for all his business booster's optimism, isn't sure how long it will be until New Orleans is a whole city again. But the city's DNA bodes well for him. New Orleans has a habit of making something beautiful out of a mess. After all, the fires that nearly destroyed New Orleans in the late 1700s gave the Spanish a chance to rebuild the city and lace it with exquisite wrought-iron balconies before giving the French Quarter, and the rest of the place, back to the French.

"The Orleanians pursued their good times, eating, drinking and being merry," the prolific Louisiana writer Hartnett Kane once said. "For mightn't they die or lose everything tomorrow or the next day if yellow fever arrived, or a flood."

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