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## CRITIC'S NOTEBOOK

### In the rush to rebuild, a house divided

**While the Gulf Coast lies in ruins, two camps of architects are dueling over the direction of post-Katrina reconstruction.**

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HALEY BARBOUR, governor of Mississippi, former chairman of the Republican National Committee and longtime friend of W., has been joking to colleagues that until very recently he knew only two French words: bonbon and bourbon. Now, he tells them, he's learned a third: *charrette*, a term architects and planners use to describe a brainstorming session in the early stages of a project.

If that seems a rather obscure word for a governor with little professed interest in architecture to be using, it's also a telling indication of how the post-Katrina reconstruction process is shaping up.

*Charrette* is a favored bit of jargon among architects connected to the Congress for the New Urbanism. And the Congress for the New Urbanism, or CNU, has become, with surprising speed, the go-to planning group for politicians along the Gulf Coast.

In Barbour's state, New Urbanists dominated a weeklong *charrette* held in October at the Isle of Capri casino in Biloxi. Led by Miami architect and CNU mainstay Andrés Duany, the so-called Mississippi Renewal Forum architects and planners from around the country who are loyal to the group's cause.

Louisiana Gov. Kathleen Babineaux Blanco has also begun relying on New Urbanists for rebuilding advice. This week the newly formed Louisiana Recovery Authority tapped Duany to lead a statewide *charrette* and chose Berkeley-based architect and planner Peter Calthorpe, a CNU founder, to develop a long-term regional plan for areas devastated by hurricane flooding.

You might think that many American architects and planners would be encouraged by the news that these governors were turning to design professionals for counsel so early in the reconstruction effort. But you'd be wrong.

Oh, would you be wrong.

The idea that New Urbanists such as Duany and Calthorpe may be helping to write plans for the new Gulf Coast has horrified many architects and left-leaning cultural critics — revealing, in the process, quite a bit about the ambitions and anxieties that

mark contemporary architectural practice in this country.

"Among the New Urbanists, Calthorpe is on the progressive and thoughtful side," says Reed Kroloff, the dean of the architecture school at Tulane University and former editor of *Architecture* magazine. But he termed Calthorpe's Louisiana appointment "very, very disappointing" and "a sign that the whole region has been handed over to the CNU."

The response from other architects and critics was, to put it mildly, less measured. Eric Owen Moss, director of the Southern California Institute of Architecture, told the *Washington Post* in October that New Urbanists were finding a foothold in the Gulf Coast because their agenda appeals "to a kind of anachronistic Mississippi that yearns for the good old days of the Old South as slow and balanced and breezy, and each person knew his or her own role."

Next came comments from Mike Davis, a writer who can throw gasoline on a fire with the best of them. Calling the New Urbanists an "architectural cult," he reported to readers of *Mother Jones* that during the Mississippi Renewal Forum, "Duany whipped up a revivalistic fervor that must have been pleasing to Barbour and other descendants of the slave masters."

The New Urbanists weren't shy about firing back. In a letter to Moss, Stefanos Polyzoides, a Pasadena architect and another CNU founder (there seem to be dozens of them), called Moss' statements "outrageous in their prejudice.... Your understanding of the CNU is superficial at best. And your comments sound remarkably hollow for a director of a school of architecture."

He added: "If you are tempted to engage in a broader debate on this, I would be delighted to do so personally and/or by fielding a team to engage you whenever and wherever you choose."

While the uproar has been highly entertaining for fans of architectural gossip, it raises two important questions: What is it about New Urbanism that makes so many architects so nervous, if not apoplectic? And how did the CNU manage to establish a beachhead along the Gulf Coast so quickly? The answer to the second question, as it turns out, helps provide clues about the first.

### **Concepts widely embraced**

THE Congress for the New Urbanism, founded in 1993, promotes goals that nearly every architect can endorse, at least in theory: taming suburban sprawl, connecting new construction to mass transit planning and making neighborhoods friendlier to pedestrians than to cars. Long based in San Francisco, it recently moved its headquarters to Chicago; its president and chief executive is John Norquist, who

served as mayor of Milwaukee from 1988 to 2003.

If the movement has a bible, it is "Suburban Nation," a 5-year-old book Duany wrote with his wife and design partner, Elizabeth Plater-Zyberk, and Jeff Speck. It proposes tempering sprawl's ill effects with development that puts homes and apartments closer to offices and transit lines.

It also calls for architecture that respects and even directly revives historical precedent. And this is where the CNU and its critics part ways.

The book's chief villains are Modernist architects — notably Le Corbusier, who rejected the close quarters and the squalor, not to mention the ornamental architecture, of 19th century cities. (Indeed, the CNU's name is a tongue-in-cheek homage to a Modernist city planning vehicle, the *Congres Internationaux D'architecture Moderne*, founded by Le Corbusier and others in 1928.) In a series of manifestoes published in the 1920s and 1930s, he celebrated the arrival of the private automobile as a force that would liberate city planning.

He also called for the construction of high-rise residential towers that CNU leaders say led to the disastrous Modernist housing projects built in the U.S. and Europe in the 1950s and '60s. That charge has been revived this fall as pundits look for explanations for the violence that has roiled French cities.

At the start of "Suburban Nation," setting up Le Corbusier for the kind of critique that had been executed far more persuasively and elegantly by Jane Jacobs 40 years earlier, Duany and his co-authors use a particularly inflammatory quote from the architect's 1935 manifesto "Ville Radieuse":

"The cities will be part of the country; I shall live 30 miles from my office in one direction, under a pine tree; my secretary will live 30 miles away from it too, in the other direction, under another pine tree. We shall both have our own car. We shall use up tires, wear out road surfaces and gears, consume oil and gasoline."

Architects in academic and avant-garde circles, most of whom remain loyal to Modernist principles, have charged for years that beneath the New Urbanists' love of picket fences, porch swings and gabled roofs lies an approach to new construction that perverts the Modernist legacy and is too friendly to developers.

Indeed, Moss says he was a bit surprised by the uproar his comments about the Mississippi *charrette* provoked simply because this critique of New Urbanism has become so familiar.

As Kroloff told NPR in September, the New Urbanists "believe that within the traditions of 19th century city planning in the United States are most if not all of the answers to 21st century planning." In New Orleans, he added, the result could be an effort "to re-create your grandmother's hometown, for no other reason than that

Americans are just besotted by historicism. They love historicism. If we let New Orleans do that, we're going to have a silly, Disney-fied, cartoon version" of the city.

All you have to do to understand the level of their concern is to look at the results in the handful of residential developments that have been produced in accordance with the New Urbanist philosophy. If you ask Leland Speed, a real estate developer who heads the Mississippi Development Authority and invited CNU leaders to the Biloxi forum, what New Urbanist developments he sees as models for reconstruction in Mississippi and New Orleans, he will give you two names: New Town at St. Charles, a suburban development outside St. Louis, and Baldwin Park, Fla.

Both suffer from an overly precious, faux-historical design. (The first image you see on the New Town at St. Charles website is a picture of three cherubic white kids fishing together on the end of a dock.) The overall effect is Eisenhower-era America as glossily reimagined by Ralph Lauren.

Nostalgic architectural forms aside, it is unclear how either development is helping limit sprawl or end the American love affair with the private car. The construction of pedestrian- and transit-friendly development will require a significant and somewhat painful shift in our cultural priorities. But the New Urbanist developments are hardly peddling sacrifice to potential home buyers.

What both promote, instead, is the notion — one that American consumers find irresistible — that we can turn back the clock to a more connected and neighborly culture without giving up three-car garages and the other less-than-environmentally-friendly luxuries we've grown accustomed to.

Barbour too can reasonably be accused of using New Urbanist ideas to send a profoundly mixed message of how Mississippi will rebuild.

In the introduction to the report produced by the leaders of the Mississippi Renewal Forum, Barbour says he and other state officials "are compelled to rebuild in a time-honored way." But he has also helped secure passage of a new state law allowing the casinos that now occupy barges lining the Mississippi coast to move to bigger, more permanent and presumably more lucrative locations on solid ground. There is nothing time-honored about that effort — indeed, there has been significant opposition to the law among religious leaders and political conservatives.

It is this very attempt — to lay traditionalism like a veneer over directly pro-business policymaking — that opens up the New Urbanists to an oft-heard charge: namely, that they are willing co-conspirators in a kind of nature-gobbling development that is significantly less enlightened than it claims to be.

## A rapidly rising profile

THE debate about the New Urbanists' influence in Katrina reconstruction efforts and the way it has begun to ricochet from the Gulf Coast to Washington, D.C., to Southern California in the end has broad ramifications for contemporary architecture.

It comes at a time when cutting-edge designers such as Rem Koolhaas and Zaha Hadid enjoy an unprecedented level of celebrity and public recognition yet have failed to find influence in government — particularly American government or suburban America or with big developers.

The New Urbanists, meanwhile, have been more skilled at making themselves welcome on Main Street and in the corridors of power — even as their stock among fellow architects, particularly young and urban ones, has plummeted.

No architectural interest group attracts as much criticism as the CNU. But the group's leaders are increasingly able to brush off those gripes, because they have made the calculated decision that the people whose minds are worth changing include everyone *but* architectural elites.

"New Urbanism is a multidisciplinary effort that has to do with planning, with resource management, with land-use issues," Calthorpe says. "So whether we wind up with architecture critics on our side, I really couldn't care less."

It remains to be seen, of course, how much real as opposed to rhetorical influence the new urbanists will have along the Gulf Coast. One very real possibility, which the CNU has failed to confront with anything close to forthrightness, is that developers and politicians will simply use soothing new urbanist language to justify soulless new construction.

Still, the speed and discipline with which the Mississippi *charrette* was organized offers a case study in how architects and planners can make their ideas heard by those in power — and ought to serve as a lesson to those architects who have been such consistent critics of the organization's priorities.

Local CNU leaders in the South, particularly Mississippi architect Michael Barranco, knew that Speed had read and admired "Suburban Nation." Barranco called Speed less than two weeks after the hurricane hit and offered to arrange a *charrette* staffed by CNU architects and planners. Speed agreed immediately, and in turn recommended the *charrette* to Jim Barksdale, the Mississippi native and former Netscape CEO whom Barbour tapped to oversee the state's reconstruction effort.

"I had never even heard of New Urbanism," Barksdale says. "But I trust Leland. I told him, 'You guys know this stuff better than I do. You make the arrangements.' You have to remember, this was just one of a dozen issue committees we were

trying to set up."

On Sept. 20, Barbour and Barksdale announced the Mississippi Renewal Forum would take place from Oct. 11 to 18.

The next day, Duany sent out a detailed e-mail to *charrette* participants, marked by an almost martial tone, with the subject line "Katrina Notice 8G: General Explanation." "The *charrette* will require an enormous amount of skill, patience, and resiliency," he wrote. "You will be receiving individual instructions shortly. Please monitor your e-mail over the next week and respond efficiently.... We will provide generalized work material, paper, tables, lights, extension cords, and printers. However, you must bring your own pencils, rulers, scales, cameras and computers."

He went on to say: "It will be a difficult task but we have been inadvertently preparing for this eventuality for many years. John Norquist and I and many others are tremendously excited by the prospect of serving in this manner. It is heartening to know that no other organization nor single firm is even remotely capable of doing so."

Whatever you make of the CNU agenda or of the developments that have been produced under its banner, you can't help but be impressed by the organizational strength it has displayed in rushing into the planning breach along the Gulf Coast. More than anything, the effort brings to mind the way Republican operatives bested Democratic ones in certain crucial swing states during the 2004 presidential election.

The Biloxi *charrette*, in other words, may go down as the architectural elite's Ohio: the place it watched rather helplessly as its ideological opponents outclassed it not through nimble thinking or grand theory or inspiring plans but simply by being more disciplined and better organized. And there is no need, in this version, for a recount.

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