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9/11: Will The Lessons Learned Help New Orleans?

by Tom Angotti

12 Sep 2005

Four years after 9/11, the nation is facing another disaster, not on 16 acres but over an entire city. What have we learned about land use planning in the aftermath of 9/11 and will any of it apply to the rebuilding of flood-floored New Orleans? I think there are five major lessons.

1. Leadership Matters

Leadership matters in the immediate response to such tragic events. Local, state and national leaders set the standard for the rescue efforts when they show they care about the victims, and demonstrate their commitment by personally engaging in the response. Even long-time enemies of Rudolph Giuliani admired his courage and caring, qualities that also were found in the widespread relief efforts by individuals and civic groups from around the world. In New Orleans we are watching arrogant officials point fingers at each other while they blame the victims and shift the burden to poorly equipped civic groups.

2. Public Discussion Helps

Major disasters elicit solidarity and sympathy with victims that in turn can stimulate healthy public discussion and debate about plans to rebuild. In the first year after 9/11, the press was filled with ideas from all over the world about how to rebuild lower Manhattan and Ground Zero. Coalitions like the Civic Alliance to Rebuild Downtown New York, Rebuild Downtown Our Town (R.dot), NY New Visions, and the Labor Community Advocacy Network organized extensive discussions and contributed many innovative ideas. So strong was this outpouring that when the Lower Manhattan Development Corporation (LMDC) commissioned its first plan for the World Trade Center site in 2002, it received an overwhelming thumbs down from the public because it was too much about office space and not enough about people. The LMDC changed its plan somewhat and held an international competition to choose a new design. Architect Daniel Libeskind's conception was chosen and it incorporated some key ideas from the civic discussion.

In New Orleans, the public mood is hardly ripe for constructive engagement like this, though it is sorely needed. Major questions such as whether to rebuild or relocate the city, and what the new city should look like, require serious study and deliberation. Many people are rightfully outraged at the government response to Katrina and are even less likely to lend legitimacy to a top-down plan advanced by those who neglected the victims. This may well encourage the White House, state and local governments to forge ahead on their own and continue to ignore a public they know mistrusts them.

3. Property Matters

Within a week of 9/11, developer Larry Silverstein, who owns the largest lease on the World Trade Center site, declared his intention to rebuild the Twin Towers as an act of defiance against terrorism (and no doubt good for his property). This idea was shunted aside by even Silverstein's strongest supporters, including Governor George Pataki, who understood the public mood of mourning and outpouring of sympathy with the victims. Michael Bloomberg, soon to be the mayor-elect, expressed reservations about dumping 11 million square feet of office space back on the trade center site. Bloomberg reminded us that when it was built, the trade center depressed real estate values in lower Manhattan, and midtown is the largest business district (and would become even larger with his rezoning of the West Side).

But talk about buying out Silverstein, or swapping the Port Authority's land at Ground Zero with city land at the airports, went nowhere. Silverstein persisted, moved ahead with his building program, and got \$7 billion in insurance money. 7 World Trade Center is almost completed. He and his architect David Childs untwisted Libeskind's Freedom Tower into a look-alike of one of the original towers. And it's not clear that any of the cultural facilities or the memorial will be significant enough to make it the mixed-use development that the public overwhelmingly favored. The new World Trade Center is shaping up to look like yet another office park.

In New Orleans, the biggest property owners may well call the tune as well. Press reports say that many of the refugees don't want to go back. Those who have no property have nothing to go back to. Those that owned homes will probably have no place to go for many months, if not years. But there were valuable commercial properties and homes in the city's historic district, and these owners, who are more likely to have had flood insurance, will want to rebuild and probably have the most political influence. The oil and petrochemical industries will no doubt want to rebuild. The problem we face is that for them to fulfill their wishes, we will have to fork over many billions of dollars in subsidies to de-contaminate and flood-proof the city. A government that gave massive tax cuts to the rich should have no problem with this as long as it helps their core constituency, the "deserving rich." (This was the same government that cut public infrastructure spending in the region, which increased the city's vulnerability to flooding.) In the end, the oil and petrochemical industries might go on welfare permanently and a rebuilt New Orleans might be little more than a reproduction of its former self for tourists, heavy on theme parks and shopping malls.

4. The Impact On The Environment Must Be Dealt With

In New York we learned that refusing to recognize the environmental impacts of disasters can cause serious illness and death. After 9/11 federal EPA head Christie Todd Whitman declared that the air in lower Manhattan was safe to breathe, a statement consistent with Mayor Giuliani's call for people to go about business as usual. It turns out that the White House had more to do with that declaration than the EPA experts. As a result, residents and workers who were exposed to toxic particulates face long-term risks of cancer and respiratory disease.

New Orleans was an environmental disaster in the first place, the center of a region of petrochemical industries known as Cancer Alley, built in a vulnerable flood plain without adequate protection. We now know the flood waters had extremely high levels of coliform bacteria, but more than a week after the flooding, officials could not say what chemicals were in this toxic brew.

Since global warming may increase the likelihood of storms like Katrina, perhaps the most important element of post-disaster planning should be to address this phenomenon. But as long as the Bush administration continues to deny that global warming is a reality, it will become more difficult to plan for future disasters.

5. Immigrants Suffer

In the post-9/11 atmosphere of anti-immigrant prejudice, immigrants are the least able to take advantage of relief and rebuilding funds. We will never know how many immigrant workers and business owners were too afraid to approach authorities after 9/11 to seek help. And the enormous outpouring of international solidarity after 9/11 did not translate into a planning process that seriously incorporated ideas and energy from across the globe. In New Orleans, the Mexican, Vietnamese and other immigrant communities may be the most silent victims, especially given the role of many of the federal, state and local law enforcement officers who were given orders to shoot-to-kill.

6. Race Matters

Finally, the most difficult issue in New Orleans was but a minor matter in New York City: racism. There was a disproportionate absence of New York City's multi-racial majority in the public and private forums that led to the plans for rebuilding lower Manhattan. Prominent black architect J. Max Bond, Jr. told The New York Times in October of 2003, "If there had been a greater variety of people, someone would have questioned the program."

But in New Orleans race and poverty are center stage. Even normally conservative TV news channels had no trouble seeing that those left behind were black and poor. They were not included in the disaster planning and didn't have the means to get out in time. They were the victims of chaos and military-like search-and-destroy missions, and are branded "looters" so they can serve as scapegoats for government incompetence at every level. Will they be invited to the table when plans are made for the future of New Orleans?

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