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“Pick a block and just do it,” advised Dennis Livingston, a Baltimore carpenter who works with communities to rebuild their neighborhoods and to remove lead paint, mold, and other pollutants from houses. “If you fix one block and make it beautiful, neighbors will see what can be done and start following the pattern. If you don’t create the model of how to do it, you will be sunk.”

Livingston delivered this advice last November at a New Orleans rebuilding conference held at Louisiana State University in Baton Rouge. The conference was organized by the Association of Community Organizers for Reform Now (ACORN) to gather ideas for rebuilding the crippled city.

Livingston, among others, emphasized the importance of getting people back into their neighborhoods and reconnected to their communities, and reviving the networks that sustain lives, especially for people of low and moderate income. Livingston suggested that more trailers could be parked in driveways and on empty lots around a neighborhood to house displaced residents working on their homes, and that the upper floors of empty schools where flooding only occurred on the ground level could be used as temporary housing.

“You won’t learn what you need to do by simply describing the problem,” Livingston added.

And yet, in the months since Livingston made his suggestions, official strategy proposals and onerous restrictions have made this grassroots rebuilding approach as difficult as possible. Governmental policies have emerged that would displace thousands of property owners from redeemable homes, accelerate deterioration of mildly damaged structures, and displace thousands of residents anxious to return.

The debate over what to do with New Orleans is leaving the most affected citizens out of the decision-making process. Distant planners, designers, and developers have declared that they know what is best for residents without consulting them. Inspectors of questionable competence have deemed houses beyond repair while all manner of experts are arguing over whether neighborhoods should be rebuilt at all, without understanding the strength of authentic, long-evolving communities. The family enclaves, the social networks, the historic attachments to property—not visible in the physical structures—are being ignored.

But New Orleanians are resisting official discouragement, slowly but surely, one house, one family, one block, one neighborhood at a time. And they are doing it with the extraordinary help of dedicated not-for-profit organizations that are rallying teams of volunteers from schools, churches, and communities around the country. National organizations like ACORN and Common Ground are joining forces with college

students and scores of church groups to assist residents in different ways.

As of early March, ACORN alone has cleaned out close to 750 houses in the critical neighborhoods of the Ninth Ward, Gentilly, Lakeview, and elsewhere. ACORN staff have guided beleaguered evacuees through the bureaucratic morass that is FEMA, helped them fight the insurance companies trying to pay less than policies provided, connected them with legitimate contractors who won't overcharge them to rebuild, and organized major demonstrations to open up unwarrantedly closed neighborhoods. ACORN has also gone to court to prevent demolition without homeowner consent. Locally, the Preservation Resource Center of New Orleans has provided generators for homeowners in historic neighborhoods where the City has not yet brought back electricity. They have held rebuilding workshops for interested residents, distributed work supplies, and assisted in rebuilding individual structures.

Skeptics might ask why residents would do this without assurances that the levees will be rebuilt properly. Why, when more hurricanes will come? Why, if insurance and government funds are not covering the full cost? Why, when the government will not yet guarantee that the house or, even worse, the neighborhood, won't be razed altogether?

There are thousands of "whys," but if you haven't lived in New Orleans where hurricanes and flooding are a fact of life and if you haven't been displaced from your lifetime home by an overwhelming disaster, you need to rethink the question. The overall answer is: It is a matter of individual decision. Fairness dictates giving people choices in face of the reality that they know better than anyone else what is right for them. Fairness dictates honoring their energy and commitment, and respecting their decision.

In New Orleans, thousands are either following or trying to follow a modified version of Livingston's prescription. In so doing, they are repeating a tried-and-true pattern illustrated in regenerated neighborhoods all over the country from Baltimore to Portland, from Savannah to Pittsburgh, from the South Bronx to Cincinnati, from Boston to Detroit.

Successful urban neighborhoods grow organically and are self-generated—not developer-built. In city after city, examples abound of citizens taking back the streets, occupying and renovating deteriorated and abandoned housing, turning rubble-strewn lots into parks and playgrounds, and repopulating once vibrant neighborhoods and regenerating that vibrancy in the process. This bottom-up, step-by-organic-step approach is the only regeneration process that works in an enduring way. It works differently in each and every community, depending on the social, physical, and economic character of that community and the circumstances of destruction.

This process is vibrantly visible in New Orleans today.

This winter, on one Gentilly block, five FEMA trailers were parked in homeowner driveways, a sign of real progress. But of the five—all delivered on December 5—one was operative. The remaining four were installed on cinder-block footings, but electrical and

plumbing was not connected, and the keys were still held by FEMA. "By the time they give me access," one musician homeowner said as he was fixing up his mildly flooded, raised shotgun home, "I'll be back in my own house." He was doing it himself, undeterred.

In the historic Holy Cross section of the Lower Ninth Ward where three feet of water flooded for only twenty hours, residents were only recently able to start moving back in as this area was one of the last to regain some utility services, like electricity and water. This delay in residents' return probably did as much damage as the brief intrusion of water. Now, house after house is approaching livability. This is one of the storied neighborhoods, rich in colorful shotgun houses, camelbacks, Creole cottages, many built by the fathers and grandfathers of today's occupants who own them mortgage-free.

At the modest New Israel Baptist Church in the Ninth Ward, the sense of hope was profound. Built in 2002 of cedar and decorated in purple, gold, and white, this modest Saint Claude Avenue church was cleaned by ACORN volunteers. The organ and every last pew had been destroyed. But now, with donated chairs, the church has reopened and is beckoning the flock home. Pastor Douglas Haywood and his wife, Althea, were in telephone contact with all four hundred of their scattered parishioners. "Knowing the church is reopened gives them hope," Pastor Haywood says. Some who thought they would not return are now doing so.

"Lively, diverse, intense cities contain the seeds of their own regeneration," Jane Jacobs wrote forty-five years ago in *The Death and Life of Great American Cities*. This is true of New Orleans today, if leaders would just allow those seeds to be sown.

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