

## **Making sustainability public: The bayou observation deck in the Lower 9<sup>th</sup> Ward of New Orleans**

**Stéphane Tonnelat, translated by Eric Rosencrantz**

*How can the residents of a flooded neighborhood in New Orleans, torn between reconstruction imperatives and environmental exigencies, prove its viability? Stéphane Tonnelat looks at a solution people from the Lower 9<sup>th</sup> Ward in New Orleans came up with: a platform providing access to the bayou as well as a forum for debate about the future of the neighborhood. This public space seems to have bolstered the sustainability of a neighborhood in a risky location.*



**Figure 1: Bayou Bienvenue observation deck in the Lower 9<sup>th</sup> Ward, New Orleans, where John Taylor greets visitors. ©S. Tonnelat 2010**

John Taylor, a 60-something African American sporting a baseball cap and pepper-and-salt beard, spends his days on the wooden bridge overlooking the Bayou Bienvenue on one side and the Lower

9<sup>th</sup> Ward of New Orleans on the other, where he introduces visitors to the bayou. Taylor recalls his childhood, before Hurricane Betsy hit in 1965, when the bayou was still freshwater and he'd go out fishing among the baldcypresses – in fact the stumps of the old trees can still be seen sticking up out of the water. “Back then you couldn't even see across to the other side of the bayou because the woods were so dense. And the water was covered with lily pads.” John goes on to point out that the marshland cypresses served a vital ecological purpose:

Every mile of planted bayou can reduce the flood in case of a hurricane by two feet. The bayou used to stretch all the way to the sea, 75 miles from here. So you do the math. If the bayou had still been alive in 2005, the Lower 9<sup>th</sup> wouldn't have got flooded when Katrina hit. That's all on account of the Mr. Go [Mississippi River – Gulf Outlet] Industrial Canal, which, starting in the '60s, connected the gulf directly to the bayou, bringing plenty of brackish water – which the cypresses couldn't take. But it's also on account of the canal that the waters surged into the bayou, first with Betsy in 1965 and then with Katrina in 2005, their speed and their force compounded by its funnel effect. It's because of Betsy, by the way, that they built this seawall, which has separated us from the bayou, cut us off from its riches, but above all which has kept us from seeing its gradual demise. Before this deck, most of the neighborhood folks, the ones younger than me, didn't even know the bayou existed.



**Figure 2: View of Bayou Bienvenue from the observation deck in 2010: note the protruding stumps of the baldcypresses. © S. Tonnelat**

This interview, in April 2010, was my very first lesson in delta ecology. It enlightened me not only on technical aspects of hurricane-related phenomena, but also on the history of the essential ties between this neighborhood, which was devastated by the floods, and its natural surroundings. John Taylor is a public figure by Jane Jacobs' definition (1991). He is one of the factors that is turning the future of the neighborhood and its sustainability into a public problem. What is



remarkable about this particular story is the preeminent role of the little observation deck, which has helped make the plight of the Lower 9<sup>th</sup> in the city and in the delta a visible and debatable issue.

### **An order to prove neighborhood viability**

Since Katrina struck in late August 2005, the Lower 9<sup>th</sup> Ward has become the symbol of both the disaster that hit New Orleans and the deep-seated racial inequalities that leave some more exposed to the elements than others. The neighborhood was submerged under considerable floodwaters, to be sure, though the flooding was actually comparable to that in other areas of the city, such as Lakeview, a wealthy and mostly-white neighborhood. Nonetheless, it rapidly became the textbook case of a place that perhaps should never have been developed in the first place, seeing as it is built on land located outside of the city and wedged in between various waterways. However, the Lower 9<sup>th</sup> also came to be viewed in the media and by the rest of the city as one of the crucibles of culture so peculiar to New Orleans – which, in and of itself, is deemed reason enough for its reconstruction (Regis, Breunlin and Lewis 2011). In these regards, the Lower 9<sup>th</sup> might be said to embody the breadth of the [build/no-build line](#) between land to be abandoned and land to be maintained that is so well described by Richard Campanella (2008) in his book *Bienville's Dilemma*.

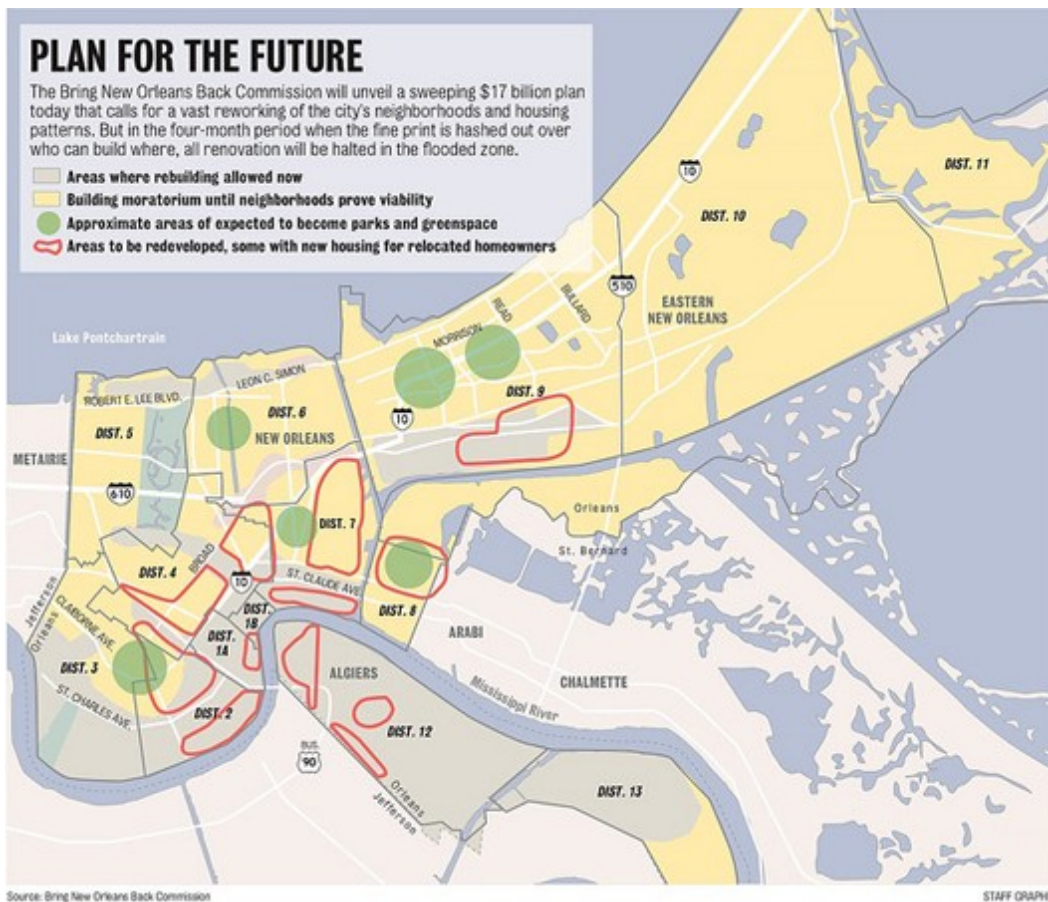


**Figure 3: Explanatory map of the delta location posted in front of the deck in 2009**

In fact several post-Katrina courses of action helped raise serious questions about the validity of the very existence of this neighborhood. First of all, the residents were not permitted to return to their neighborhood for three months after the floods. Under the "Look and Leave Program" run by the city and the Red Cross, they were bussed back in, but only allowed to visit their former homes

in order to salvage whatever they could. The *New York Times* quotes Colonel Terry Ebert, Homeland Security director for New Orleans, as having claimed: “There’s nothing out there that can be saved at all” (Landphair 2007).

Then this district, along with several others in the city, found itself “green-dotted” in the 2006 BNOB (Bring New Orleans Back) plan: the residents were quite alarmed when environmentalist planners proposed replacing some low-lying neighborhoods, including the Lower 9<sup>th</sup>, with “greenspace” to serve as a retaining basin. The plan was soon scrapped in the face of city-wide protests, but it did serve as justification for Mayor Ray Nagin to require that every neighborhood prove its viability by coming up with a rebuilding plan as well as figures to show that sufficient numbers of former residents had returned. Several neighborhoods, such as Broadmoor, rose to the challenge and did a remarkable job of planning their own reconstruction and assisting returnees, which, as Samuel Bordreuil points out (2010), has had a powerful knock-on effect on other parts of the city. However, the return to the Lower 9<sup>th</sup> still appears to be held up by the sheer extent of the damage and the limited means of would-be returnees. The northern stretch of the Lower 9<sup>th</sup>, the part closest to the bayou and the most devastated, still looks a lot like a gigantic empty lot. According to the 2010 census, only 4,500 people have come back to the neighborhood out of a pre-Katrina population of 18,000.



**Figure 4: Bring New Orleans Back map published by the *Times Picayune* in 2006. The Lower 9<sup>th</sup> Ward (in District 8) is half covered by a red-lined green dot at the center of the map.**

## **A viability model in the delta**

But the Lower 9<sup>th</sup> actually did respond to the mayor's challenge. Not through mass repatriation, as in New Orleans East ("We're viable because we're here!"), but by transforming the neighborhood, through various actions, into an ecological and cultural model of a community embedded in a big-river delta floodplain – which in turn set an example for a great many other towns the world over. The action that grabbed the most media attention was probably "Make It Right", Brad Pitt's foundation for sustainable flood-proof housing using various technical innovations (floating houses, solar panels, novel building materials etc.). Another, less conspicuous, but no less important, undertaking is a center for the environment and sustainable development set up by residents and members of the [Holy Cross Neighborhood Association](#).

I'd like to describe one of the nodes of this ecologically-gearred movement by focusing on the seemingly minor, but, I believe, important, role of this roughly 15 m<sup>2</sup> wooden platform, built in 2008, straddling a floodwall that protects the Lower 9<sup>th</sup> from the risk of overflow from the Bayou Bienvenue. Rather than pitting the social and cultural arguments for reconstruction against the environmentalists' arguments for a return to nature, I maintain that this public space succeeds in reconciling the two perspectives by making public at once the natural history of a neighborhood made up of elder residents' memories of past experience, an elucidation of the recent disaster, a proposed remedy for the adverse development of the neighborhood since the 1960s and a scenario to ward off future disasters.

## **A public problem and a public space emerge**

The story of this observation deck begins in January 2006, when a group of professors and students of landscape architecture at the University of Colorado conducted a workshop in the Lower 9<sup>th</sup>, asking "How can one survive here?" They discovered the history of urbanization in New Orleans, a city that developed in sections perpendicular to the Mississippi. Traditionally, warehouses and single-family homes occupied the highest ground, along the banks of the river, which itself is above sea level. The farming developed behind the housing, on the tidelands. The freshwater marsh of the *bayou*, or backwater, covered the area behind the farmland, serving both as protection against flooding and as a fishing ground. So the planning grid was adapted to the river by fanning out the farmland around its twists and turns. But in 2006 the bayou was gone. It was invisible. By studying a section of the 9<sup>th</sup> ward, the students found out that it was hidden behind a triple barrier of undergrowth, rail lines and a wall of steel piling. It had also vanished from memory, save for the recollections of some elderly residents over the age of 60, who helped the students find a way in to the bayou. In parallel, a team of teachers and students from the Water Resources Management program at the University of Wisconsin-Madison, likewise drawing on the memories of the neighborhood elders, investigated the sanitary state of the bayou and ways of restoring it. But they needed a practical means of access to take measurements of the salinity of the water. The Holy Cross Neighborhood Association in the Lower 9<sup>th</sup> encouraged these initiatives, espousing the revitalization of the Bayou Bienvenue as a key neighborhood viability objective. The team of landscape architects came up with a plan for an observation deck and sent for the building materials from Colorado. In July 2007, the students and neighborhood organizers held a crab boil in front of the triple barrier. They then widened the path so residents could reach the floodwall and climb up the rungs of a ladder to catch a first glimpse of the bayou. However, the Levee Board, the administrative body in charge of the floodwall, got cold feet and threatened to take legal action against the university if the students went ahead with the construction of the platform. But the Holy Cross Association came to its defense. A well-known local architect provided assurances that the project posed no threat to the structural integrity of the wall. In fact the plan was simply to have the observation deck elegantly straddle the steel barrier, with its feet set on the crushed-stone ballast, without any foundations whatsoever. After six months of talks, the Levee Board finally agreed to



look the other way. The students came back specially from Colorado in late January 2008, during their vacation, to build the deck<sup>1</sup>.



**Figure 5: Volunteers widening the path to the floodwall that separated the neighborhood from the bayou in 2007 ©HCNA**

As soon as the observation deck was opened to the public, it became an important location in the Lower 9<sup>th</sup>. The organizers used it to get residents and visitors to come and see for themselves the neighborhood's nexus to the bayou and, with that, to the delta ecology. A great many photographs of and news reports on the deck were subsequently posted and circulated on the web. In December 2008, two community organizers, Pam Dashiell, director of the Lower 9<sup>th</sup> Ward Center for the Environment and Sustainable Development, and Darryl Malek-Wiley, a Sierra Club environmental organizer, were filmed on the deck by ABC26, a local branch of the nationwide network, explaining the stakes involved in restoring the bayou.

After the Mr. Go Canal was closed by the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, the Water and Sewerage Administration looked into a plan to desalinate the bayou waters by discharging therein effluents from a wastewater treatment plant that is visible from the deck. The Army Corps also proposed rerouting some of the waters of the Mississippi towards the bayou so as to supply it with freshwater and dredging the mud at the bottom of the neighboring Lake Borgne so as to raise the bed of the bayou in order to facilitate the growth of semi-aquatic vegetation. The Wisconsin water management students also planted small "floating islands" in June 2009 to test the viability of various species of brackish-water plants. Another group set up an information booth on the history of the bayou. When an egret made its home on the floating islands, the residents took that as an encouraging omen. That same month, the *Times Picayune* (Reid 2009), the leading local daily, came out with a list of sights worth discovering in New Orleans: the observation deck came in ninth on the list.

When the deck burnt down in an accidental fire in June 2009, it was promptly rebuilt by the Make It Right crew and enhanced by the addition of a pergola as well as steps leading down to the

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<sup>1</sup> I'd like to thank Joern Langhorst, assistant professor of landscape architecture at the University of Colorado, for background information about the history of the observation deck.

water of the bayou. It is now a local landmark. In the fall of 2009, it was visited by Bartholomew, the Greek Orthodox Patriarch in Istanbul, who came to see the progress on the project and to bless the waters, then by Nancy Sutley, head of the White House Council on Environmental Quality, who came to assure the residents of the U.S. president's support. Both visitors were greeted by John Taylor, who gave them the same lesson in delta ecology set forth at the beginning of this article.



**Figure 6: Bartholomew I, Eastern Orthodox Archbishop in Istanbul, greeted by John Taylor on the deck in 2009 ©Ecumenical Patriarchate**

## The power of public space

Ever since the deck was built, a great many meetings have been held there and a great many people have come to assess the problem first-hand, but also to be at the very spot where words and images mesh. During my last visit to New Orleans, a group of cyclists on a Lower 9<sup>th</sup> Rebirth Bike Tour made a stop on the deck to discover the bayou there. Their guide, well trained by John Taylor himself, took advantage of the opportunity to give them a lesson in delta ecology. So the deck has become a public space in both of the usual senses of the word: as a space accessible to everyone and as a forum in which to discuss the future of the neighborhood and of the city in general (Tonnelat 2010). Thus, contrary to the calls for virtuous behavior customarily conveyed by the media, the question of the neighborhood's viability has been gradually built up through a polyphonic narrative as a public problem in the sense advanced by Dewey (2003), in that it affects people who are indirectly concerned. John Taylor is one of the public figures recognized by the community for his role as a multiplier in providing public exposure, on the observation deck, to the complexities of the neighborhood's predicament in the delta. Now, at least until the next disaster strikes, no-one in the neighborhood, in the city, or in the United States will question the Lower 9<sup>th</sup> Ward's claim to be a fully-fledged part of the city. In fact, by making the bayou *visible*, the deck has also helped make the neighborhood *viable*.



**Figure 7: View of the Lower 9<sup>th</sup> Ward from the deck, 2010 © S. Tonnelat**

Kai Eriksson (Erikson & Yule 1994) talks about environmental disasters caused by the invisible hand of man as a “new species of trouble” that is particularly hard to bear for the communities affected. The experience of the bayou observation deck points a way of overcoming these new obstacles and creating a shared sense of disaster and, by the same token, of the lessons to be learned from it. It is a testimony to the shareable power that a fully-fledged public space, however small it may be, can give to a neighborhood that is striving to survive in a risky location.



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