

## Rebuilding the Cultural Vitality of New Orleans

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*New Orleans has been called the soul of America. It is a cultural Mecca famed for fusion, the soil from which many uniquely American art forms have grown. Its neighborhoods are where cultural seeds are sown, where traditions have been invented and preserved—including music, cuisine, oral tradition, performance art, visual art, and architecture. These cultural expressions, and the people who gave birth to them, are what give the city its flavor—its international, national, and local identity and its cultural stature. They are, at the core, what make the city a tourist destination and an American icon. Yet, many cultural bastions are the poor of New Orleans—mostly African American residents from low-income communities that were flooded, torn apart, and in some cases, destroyed by Hurricane Katrina and the neglect in its wake.*

New Orleans' art and culture, formal and informal, are intrinsically valuable as expressions of a people. But they are also part of everyday living and essential elements of the city's social capital, civic engagement, and economic development. Many of the cultural practices and traditions based in African American communities, such as brass bands, second-line parades, St. Joseph's Day celebrations, and certain aspects of Carnival and the Mardi Gras itself, in its first and true

form as a community-based festival, have been supported by systems that even before Katrina were fragile and vulnerable in some respects, yet resilient and invincible in others.<sup>1</sup>

These systems of support are composed primarily of people's personal resources and networks, and anchor community organizations such as churches, social and pleasure clubs, and benevolent societies.<sup>2</sup> At the neighborhood level, such activities foster community identity and the social interactions

Long before the onslaught of Hurricane Katrina or the chaos of evacuation, New Orleans' social infrastructure was failing. News coverage of the overcrowded Superdome and the city's flooded streets exposed the poverty and vulnerability of many residents, especially African Americans. As New Orleans begins to rebuild, can the city avoid the mistakes of the past, instead creating more effective social support for low-income and minority residents? Innovation and experience from other U.S. cities offer promising strategies for reducing the risks of poverty and opening up opportunities for economic security and success. This essay is from an Urban Institute collection that addresses employment, affordable housing, public schools, young children's needs, health care, arts and culture, and vulnerable populations. All these essays assess the challenges facing New Orleans today and for years to come and recommend tested models for making the city's social infrastructure stronger and more equitable than it was before Katrina.

and connections that make collective action possible. These activities also spur tourism, the region's second-largest industry.

In embracing arts and culture as an important dimension of a city's life, New Orleans has had a great deal going for it, and compared to other U.S. cities, was ahead of the game. People in New Orleans appear to have had a much more inclusive concept of arts and culture than in other places. New Orleanians recognize the importance of artistic and creative activity taking place at both amateur and professional levels, whether in concert halls and art galleries or in churches and the streets, and in all sectors—nonprofit, public, and commercial.<sup>3</sup>

Additionally, unlike in many other places, recognition that root culture matters is widespread. This conviction is evident among the practitioners of artistic and cultural traditions as well as among New Orleanians who are not themselves practitioners, but who are aware that these cultural practices help shape the city's aesthetics. Art and culture were understood as an economic driver and an important asset of the city long before scholars and planners around the country expressed any interest in cultivating a creative economy or building a creative city.<sup>4</sup>

As rebuilding begins in Hurricane Katrina's wake, the losses are still registering. What can be rebuilt and recaptured is still uncertain. New Orleans has lost many of its residents in death and possibly in the dispersion of hurricane victims to other cities. It has lost money, businesses, and buildings. But has it lost its soul? Can the essence of the city be recaptured? Will a new New Orleans possess the spirit of creativity? Will it have the heart, the grit, and the people that made the city so interesting?

This essay discusses prospects for rebuilding New Orleans' culture, specifically with an eye toward including root cultural practices—formal and informal creative

cultural expressions carried out in communities, often in moderate- and low-income districts or neighborhoods. It presents findings from an initial scan (through 2005) of rebuilding, recovery, and relief efforts and offers a critique of rebuilding initiatives, particularly vis-à-vis the inclusion of root culture. The essay concludes with thoughts on how to resurrect and strengthen the continuum of opportunities for cultural expression—formal and informal, amateur and professional—that made New Orleans what it was.

## Impacts of the Storm

The French Quarter was largely spared Hurricane Katrina's wrath. Bars and restaurants on Bourbon Street are open and the party is starting up. Many of the city's main museums and the gallery district in the French Quarter also made it through the disaster relatively unscathed, and many have resumed business (Robinson 2005). But other facets of the New Orleans cultural community did not escape unharmed. In other parts of the city, in the Lower Ninth Ward and nearby neighborhoods, life is not nearly back to normal. Many of the residents of those communities—some artists and artisans as well as professional and amateur musicians and tradition bearers—have lost possessions, family members, and friends. They have had to abandon their homes and have relocated temporarily or permanently to other parts of the state and the country.

Many Mardi Gras Indian tribes are scattered, as are members of brass bands, independent musicians, and cooks from many of New Orleans famed restaurants.<sup>5</sup> Longstanding social aid and pleasure clubs, organized to support leisure and community needs, have dispersed, as have church congregations and parishes. Service workers in large hotels and other tourist businesses

(some of whom are also artisans, tradition bearers, and amateur practitioners of native cultural art forms) are also scattered. Whether or not most displaced New Orleanians will return home is still unknown, as is the future of the social systems supporting traditional cultural practices.

That said, at least six of the Mardi Gras Indian tribes are planning to return to New Orleans to march at Mardi Gras in 2006. And in Austin, for example, Mardi Gras Indians are gearing up to practice their traditions there and have even enlisted some Texans to participate (Eggler 2005). The president of the Zulu Social Aid and Pleasure Club, an historic African American club with about 500 members that organizes the popular Zulu parade on Mardi Gras morning, reported that the organization's headquarters were flooded and that many of the members have fled New Orleans, but that most plan to return (Texeira 2005).

Members of popular brass bands have ended up in Atlanta and Houston (Yolles 2005), while some musicians have come back to New Orleans for occasional gigs, though it is uncertain if they are staying. People have kept connected by cell phones and through the web, and some evacuees express firm resolve to maintain ties.

In the Treme neighborhood, known for its contributions to New Orleans' music and culture, many residents have left; there is concern that community institutions integral to how the community organizes socially and culturally will perish. For example, even though the Treme neighborhood was not as hard hit by Hurricane Katrina as some areas, St. Augustine Church, a pillar of that community, sustained \$400,000 in damages to an already-weakened structure. St. Augustine's pastor worries that the archdiocese, already strapped for resources before the storm (and further stretched after it), will shut the church down. He is seeking

donations and wants to prove that the church can stand on its own (Webster 2005). But the community the church serves is mostly poor.

In the Bywater Marigny area, home to many artists, arts organizations, and small clubs and music venues, there is evidence that musicians are performing and other artists are returning to this moderate-income community. However, there are also reports that artists are struggling financially to retain living and working spaces; the cost of real estate in that community is escalating, even as income for many of residents appears to be decreasing and becoming even less stable.<sup>6</sup> The many traditional Creole cottages in Bywater Marigny have historic and architectural value, a huge selling point now that so many of the city's other architecturally important structures have been lost.

As 2005 ended, cultural losses had not been fully inventoried, but there was a sense that the artistic community had suffered greatly and that its losses would hurt tourism. The fact that the lights are on in the French Quarter and hotels are beginning to resume business holds out some promise that New Orleans can recover, but is no indication that all is well. The culture of New Orleans is very much at risk when the people who make and preserve it are scattered and living in a sea of uncertainty and when the places where artists and tradition bearers live, where they make and practice their art forms, are largely destroyed.

## Cultural Rebuilding Efforts

In federal rebuilding efforts so far, arts and culture are not part of the disaster relief package. The National Endowment for the Arts (NEA) has not yet announced any specific plans to address needs in the Gulf Coast in Katrina's aftermath (although the agency has publicly stated that it will extend support to the region once more is known

about damages and losses). At the national level, the National Endowment for the Humanities has provided emergency grants to libraries, museums, colleges, universities, and other cultural and historical institutions in the affected areas.<sup>7</sup> Also, Dana Gioia, the NEA's chairperson, has indicated that including arts and culture in the disaster recovery package for New Orleans will set an important precedent, since they have never been a part of federal recovery packages before.

Among national foundations, the Ford Foundation was, at the time of our inquiry, the most visible in committing resources for hurricane relief and rebuilding. It has invested in organizations working directly with low-income communities particularly hit by the hurricane and aftermath. The Ashe Cultural Center, a key promoter of community-based arts and culture in New Orleans, is one of the initial recipients (Ford Foundation 2005).

At the state level, Lieutenant Governor Mitch Landrieu has proclaimed that Louisiana "lives through the creativity and culture of its people. Louisiana is set apart by its deeply rooted, authentic, and unique culture. We are the soul of the nation."<sup>8</sup> His rebuilding plan would resurrect Louisiana as a preeminent tourist destination and make Louisiana's cultural economy the engine of economic and social rebirth. The lieutenant governor's "Louisiana Rebirth" initiative has a national advisory board that includes tourism, business, and cultural leaders, and prominent African American New Orleanian artists—Wynton Marsalis, Aaron Neville, and Lawrence Fishburne. Meanwhile, state arts agencies in the Gulf Coast have also banded together to devise a plan to help rebuild the region's culture.

Locally, Mayor Ray Nagin's Bring New Orleans Back Commission has assembled a cultural steering committee of business, community, religious, and cultural leaders, and academic and public officials. The

committee's composition is promising, and several members are likely to champion low-income communities and root culture. However, at the time of our review of initiatives, the committee's goals and objectives had not been fully articulated. The Arts Council of New Orleans has worked with the Louisiana Division of the Arts to establish a relief fund to meet the immediate and long-term needs of the region's artists and arts organizations for basic subsistence. Whether musicians and tradition bearers involved in root cultural practices will benefit is unclear. Some Mardi Gras Indians, brass musicians, and similar culture bearers have ties to the Arts Council, but many do not.<sup>9</sup>

Scores of rebuilding initiatives from diverse groups focus on New Orleans arts organizations and artists, particularly musicians. For example, the Jazz Foundation of America has made emergency funds available to help musicians pay their rent, provided donated instruments to musicians, and sponsored counseling and pro bono legal services. The foundation has also created gigs for musicians at schools and shelters and connected musicians with possible employers around the country.<sup>10</sup> MusiCares and the Recording Academy have established the MusiCares Hurricane Relief Fund and committed \$1 million to be distributed to musicians and other music industry employees affected by the hurricanes. The organization also distributes musical instruments to musicians harmed by the hurricane.<sup>11</sup> On <http://www.NOLAGigs.org>, prospective employers can offer work to displaced musicians from New Orleans and musicians can search for work.

Tipitina's and the Lake Eden Arts Festival have teamed up with such national media as National Public Radio and the *Wall Street Journal* to collect instruments for musicians and gather other support. Tipitina's projects include soliciting donations of tambourines for

the city's Mardi Gras Indians and coordinating sponsorship of Mardi Gras Indian tribes. Tipitina's is also reported to have connections with musicians in local brass bands. Higher-profile relief efforts include a five-hour event at Lincoln Center in New York hosted by Wynton Marsalis, with jazz historian Ken Burns. Harry Connick, Jr., the Neville Brothers, and other internationally known musicians with personal ties to New Orleans have also helped to organize benefits and participated in relief efforts.

There are many well-intentioned efforts to rebuild and address the needs of the cultural community, but at the time of our investigation, there was no evidence of coordination and no entity with a clear birds-eye view of all the activity.

### Challenges in Rebuilding

Without doubt, the cultural sector is looking to the tourism industry as a revenue source for rebuilding. However, reliance on tourism poses both opportunities and challenges for addressing the full continuum of cultural assets—including the contributions of poor people—that make New Orleans culturally significant. For example, the Louisiana Rebirth plan refers explicitly to building on the deeply rooted authentic culture of Louisiana and mentions artists and artisans. However, in plan-related documentation on affordable housing, the population served is characterized only as hospitality workers; conspicuously absent is its key role in creating the deeply rooted authentic culture touted in the plan's guiding principles.

As the plan plays out, how will the contributions of low-income communities to the tourism sector be interpreted and compensated? Will these communities continue to be viewed as only service-sector workers, or will their cultural contributions to the economy be recognized? At the local level,

advocates for artists, artisans, and tradition bearers must make the argument that many ordinary (and often) low-income people are central to producing New Orleans' culture and potentially deserve special consideration. However, to those working on a tourism-based development agenda, this nuanced argument can be dwarfed by concerns for more commercial and market-driven activities tied to big business.

Some scholars and people in the local music scene fear that emphasizing cultural tourism in rebuilding will result in a Disneyland version of New Orleans without the Lower Ninth Ward, the Treme neighborhood, and other lower-income places that give the city its character (Roig-Franzia 2005).<sup>12</sup> Such scholars as Ferrell Guillory, director of the Program in Southern Politics, Media, and Public Life, University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill, have also warned that much of New Orleans' culture was built around poverty and that preserving the culture while mitigating class divides will be challenging.

Historical preservation also threatens to overshadow the importance of people and "living" culture as New Orleans is rebuilt. The debate about whether to rebuild the Lower Ninth Ward is indicative of this conflict. Many of the most vocal proponents of rebuilding argue mainly from the desire to preserve historically significant buildings and physical structures. Preservation is important, but so are the people living in those communities, who are creating the culture and who descend from its creators and guardians—two points often overshadowed in the debate.

So, who are the advocates for the full spectrum of the New Orleans cultural community, and the low-income segment in particular? Who can step up and interact with the tourism industry and others involved in economic development anchored in tourism? The answer to this question is not completely



clear. Organizing this politically disenfranchised and now-scattered population could be very difficult. For example, the Bring New Orleans Back Commission is open to the public and is said to welcome input. However, at the time of our inquiry, the poor and those from the communities most affected by the hurricane appeared to have had little direct say about how the city will be rebuilt. Also noted, the social networks that made grassroots community organizing an option have been disrupted, if not destroyed.

That said, we heard that representatives of the Mardi Gras Indian tradition had participated in commission meetings, as had a few artists connected to the Marigny Bywater area, a representative of a social aid and pleasure club, and someone from Refugees of Katrina. Input appears to have been limited to pleas for recognition, respect, and a voice at the decisionmaking table. There is some promise of potential community input vis-à-vis the Urban Land Institute's planning initiative (the Institute's effort to conduct research and sound out residents from the affected communities) though at the time of our inquiry, it was too early to judge results.

Despite the unlikelihood of organizing the artists and tradition bearers hardest hit by the hurricane, there is some hope that the interests of this population can be addressed. Shirley Trusty Corey, president of the Arts Council of New Orleans and a member of the cultural steering committee for Mayor Nagin's Bring New Orleans Back Commission, values the full continuum of culture in New Orleans and the root cultural practices and practitioners within that spectrum. Corey was pushing for the adoption of a formal cultural policy for the city—a statement that officially gives New Orleans arts and culture stature and credibility within the city's policy framework. Also, world-renowned jazz musician Wynton Marsalis, active in state and local rebuilding efforts, is using his influence to promote

respect for root culture in a way that is completely consistent with providing for the disenfranchised.

In general, the most widely heard advocates for the poor have been prominent musicians and other artists, many with New Orleans roots or connections, who have expressed their feelings and frustrations on stage and in the media. Danny Glover, an actor and activist, said that when the hurricane struck, “it did not turn the region into a third-world country, as it has been disparagingly implied in the media; it revealed one...” Singer Harry Belafonte declared, “Katrina was not ‘unforeseeable’; the loss of life and suffering was not ‘unavoidable.’ It was the result of a political structure that subcontracts its responsibility to private contractors and abdicates its responsibility altogether when it comes to housing, health care, education and even evacuation” (Belafonte and Glover 2005).

Examples of advocacy on behalf of the poor and disenfranchised—pointing up longstanding inequities and demanding to be at the decisionmaking table—are important. However, such advocates do not necessarily know how to interact and negotiate effectively with the players who will likely control the purse strings for the lion's share of rebuilding—the federal government and the tourism industry. Developing the capacity to engage with these players seems critical.

## Cultural Considerations for the “New” New Orleans

The previous discussion points to some action steps that should be considered as cultural rebuilding continues and the low-income communities hurt by the storm find their voices and assess their options. Four interrelated recommendations emerge as crucial.

First, a **cultural policy** that gives arts and culture stature and funding clout in the public policy world, as proposed by Shirley Trusty Corey, should be adopted at both the state and local levels and should clearly state that the cultural vitality of New Orleans—the continuum of arts and culture that makes New Orleans exceptional—needs to be protected, advanced, and financially supported. Research demonstrates that *cultural vitality*, defined as “a community’s capacity to create, disseminate, and validate arts and culture on its own terms,” is an important dimension of a healthy place to live.<sup>13</sup>

Second, to buttress this policy, the arts and culture sector needs to *cultivate advocates working in other policy domains* and in the business community who can effectively integrate arts and culture into those agendas. For example, stronger arts education programs, with a particular focus on New Orleans root culture, should be added as the city rebuilds its public schools. Special provisions for affordable spaces for artists and organizations central to cultural work, including arts organizations, social aid and pleasure clubs, and places such as some community centers and churches, should be an essential part of community redevelopment. Also, employment development programs should include provisions for artists’ jobs—employment that compensates artists for making their art. To this end, advocates for the full spectrum of arts and culture, and for root culture in particular, must be cultivated and positioned to act in support of artists, artisans, and tradition bearers in a wide range of public policy circles (Urban Institute 2003). Additionally, negotiation with the business sector for resources is also essential.

Specifically, advocates for arts and culture must be in a position to effectively interact with the tourism industry and government to negotiate tax-based contributions to the cultural sector. Advocates from both inside

and outside the cultural sector who can articulate the value of artists and tradition bearers to New Orleans (and the city’s economic development in particular), and who can also make the case for considering and meeting this population’s needs, are urgently essential. Similarly, community organizing to promote root culture’s seminal role in New Orleans’ culture and economy must reflect the voices of the arts practitioners themselves.

Third, **consistent measurement** of the city’s cultural vitality is crucial. This includes measures of opportunities for cultural engagement, incidence of actual participation in its many forms, and support for cultural activity (including financial resources, as well as social networks and in-kind resources necessary for arts and cultural practices). Without baseline information and ways of periodically gauging if conditions are improving or not, effective planning and programming is unlikely.

Fourth, the New Orleans cultural community desperately needs a robust and proactive **funding intermediary** that (1) buys into the idea of cultural vitality and appreciates the cultural ecology of New Orleans in its fullness, (2) has a bird’s eye view of the New Orleans cultural scene, and (3) can garner resources from multiple funding sources and then strategically deploy them for the benefit of artists, artisans, and tradition bearers (Jackson, Herranz, and Kabwasa-Green forthcoming).

To garner and deploy resources to the cultural sector, this financial intermediary needs to stay abreast of potential funding sources within and outside of the cultural sector and in close contact with advocates (discussed previously) who can push for resources to be allocated to artists and tradition bearers. Key here will be finding ways to support and compensate root cultural practices, which often rely on both formal and informal community institutions and groups as

well as on individuals. Since current funding structures are set up to provide resources to nonprofit organizations and to commercial or public entities, supporting individuals and informal or unincorporated groups seminal to cultural practices will be a particular challenge.

Who is in a position to play this role? Does a new entity need to be created? A scan of the existing arts and culture infrastructure in New Orleans suggests that the Arts Council of New Orleans already, to some extent, plays an intermediary role, enjoys strong leadership, and might be suited to take on aspects of the intermediary roles described here. However, the organization would need substantially more financial resources and staff would have to be reconfigured and strategically augmented to work more intensively with people beyond the formal cultural sector. Even before Hurricane Katrina, the staff was stretched and resources were tight.

Without question, the situation in New Orleans presents great challenges and offers great opportunities. Rebuilding New Orleans has center stage. The rest of the country, and the world, is watching. Now is the time to take risks, change some of the old paradigms, and explore new ways of sustaining culture.

## NOTES

1. Mardi Gras (or Carnival) is an annual celebration including parades, masked balls, and other festivities over a period of several days preceding Ash Wednesday—the beginning of Lent, a period of abstinence and repentance in the Catholic faith. The principal day of the Mardi Gras celebration is the Tuesday prior to Ash Wednesday. Key entities involved in organizing Mardi Gras parades and festivities are known as “krewes.” These are based in social organizations that exist in both African American and white communities. Historically, these entities are segregated and reflect the class and racial stratification in New Orleans, with white krewes dominating the parade scene.

2. In African American communities, social and pleasure clubs are mutual aid societies created not only to support

leisure activities, but also to help members cope with significant life events such as funerals.

3. For a discussion of an expanded concept of arts and culture, see Jackson and Herranz 2002.

4. In recent years, scholars and policymakers have turned their attention to the idea of the “creative economy,” which emphasizes a shift in focus to an economy based on creativity and ideas as the principal commodity. The parameters of the creative economy are not fixed; different sectors, such as the arts sector, currently are assessing how they fit within this concept. The creative city ideology is concerned with drawing on the creativity of residents to address urban problems and prospects. See Landry 2000.

5. The Mardi Gras Indian tradition is a uniquely New Orleanian practice said to commemorate American Indians and their efforts to assist runaway slaves. Thirty to forty Mardi Gras Indian “tribes” create hand-sewn costumes with intricate patterns, beadwork, and feathers. The tribes wear the costumes (or “mask”) and compete with each other in impromptu dance performances on the streets of New Orleans in various neighborhoods during Mardi Gras, and also on St. Joseph’s Day. Brass bands are also an artistic tradition unique to New Orleans. These bands play throughout the year for jazz funerals and for events organized by the local social aid and pleasure clubs. Some brass bands also tour commercially.

6. Interview with M.K. Wegman, Faubourg Marigny resident and CEO for the National Performance Network, November 23, 2005.

7. See <http://www.neh.gov/grants/guidelines/hurricanekatrina.html>.

8. See <http://www.crt.state.la.us>. In the state of Louisiana, according to law, arts and culture is the sole formal responsibility of the lieutenant governor.

9. For example, see <http://www.mygroupweb.com/cgi-bin/groupweb-view.cgi> and <http://www.louisianahp.org/rescue>.

10. See <http://www.jazzfoundation.org>.

11. See <http://www.grammy.com/musicares/>.

12. Also, see the work of Ari Kelman, history professor at University of California, Davis.

13. Inherent in the definition of cultural vitality is a continuum of opportunities for cultural engagement. The continuum comprises formal and informal as well as amateur and professional participation in public, nonprofit, and commercial sectors. Participation includes not just audience and consumer participation but also making, teaching, learning, validating, and supporting arts and culture. See Jackson, Herranz, and Kabwasa-Green (forthcoming).



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