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The New Normal

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With thousands of foreclosures or families living in negative equity it can be difficult to narrow down the impact of foreclosure on a single subgroup. However, different income groups were impacted in drastically different ways. Research on the impacts of foreclosure to middle-income homeowners is still quite thin. In order to get a better understanding of how the foreclosure crisis has impacted middle-income communities in New York City, we take a closer look at one middle class community in Queens that was ground zero for foreclosures: St. Albans.

St. Albans has been a stable, predominately African American neighborhood since the middle of the 20th century. Today it remains a solidly African-American suburb, with 91 percent of the area’s 48,000 residents, with 91% identifying as Black or African-American.

Overall, the socioeconomic demographics of St. Albans are similar to borough-wide averages, but a few notable exceptions set St. Albans apart. The area’s housing stock and suburban character are unique for New York City: it has an extremely high percentage of detached single-family homes, widespread car ownership, and low population density. While the average homeownership rate in New York City is 32 percent, 77 percent of St. Albans residents own their homes. Of these, 26 percent own their homes outright, and of the 74 percent with a mortgage, 29 percent have homeownership costs of less than $2000 per month. The high rate of homeownership and concentration of long-term homeowners brings greater stability to St. Albans than other neighborhoods in Queens. Although the length of time residents have owned their homes in St. Albans is similar to the Queens-wide average (42% of homeowners in St. Albans moved in before 1990, versus 38% in Queens), the extraordinarily high homeownership in St. Albans means that there is a very high rate of long-term homeowners per capita.

**GROUND ZERO FOR HOME FORECLOSURES**

Like in other neighborhoods in New York City, property values in St. Albans fell as a result of the housing crisis. For a glimpse at this decline, this study recorded the home values of 114 individual lots on four St. Albans blocks from January 2005 to August 2012. The market value for homes is currently an average of 20 percent below the market value in January 2008, with some properties as much as 40 percent below peak value. Out of 114 parcels, 112 parcels experienced a decline in value between 2008 and 2010.

The number of homeowners at risk of foreclosure in St. Albans is particularly striking. In 2011, the Neighborhood Economic Development Advocacy Project monitored the 90-day pre-foreclosure notices that servicers must send to homeowners with defaulting or delinquent mortgages. Of the 345,435 notices servicers distributed across the state, 94,890 were concentrated in the New York City area. St. Albans’ proportional share of 153 notices per 1,000 units was the worst in the city.

Using data provided by the Furman Center, this report analyzed 268 St. Albans homes...
Access to public transportation should be a universal right. Throughout the world, people continue to face barriers accessing employment opportunities, healthcare services, and daily activities due to a lack of mobility options. This issue is exacerbated for certain groups in developing countries, ranging from the visually impaired and the elderly, to an expecting mother and a veteran confined to a wheelchair. Some cities are recognizing the importance of accessible transit, such as Medellin, Colombia and Ahmedabad, India, while others are struggling to adapt.

I had the opportunity to live in one of those struggling cities – Hyderabad, India – for five months. I spent my time working with a transportation consulting firm on equitable transport options for vulnerable population groups. Hyderabad, like many cities in Southeast Asia, has significant traffic challenges.

A lack of education on the roadways and little enforcement perpetuates a perilous situation for any traveler on the roadways. Whether it is a motorized or non-motorized transport mode in the city, anguish and despair are ever-present. Providing proper footpaths is an essential component of an accessible trip journey since nearly every journey begins and ends on foot. Unfortunately, footpaths in Andhra Pradesh are rare. While legislation in India requires the implementation of accessible footpaths, the few footpaths that are built are almost always poorly maintained and riddled with obstructions. Widths are also reduced in order to compensate for future roadway widening or informal parking spots. This reality presents footpaths as highly unreliable since there is no universal standard that is accessible for people with disabilities and the elderly.

Community groups are striving to change this scenario. In 2005, Kanthi Kannan started the Right2Walk Foundation to advocate, lobby, and promote awareness for footpath infrastructure in Hyderabad. Kanthi is a very passionate and concerned citizen – one who always makes her presence known in community meetings – and realizes that “every day we lose a life” because footpaths are not of proper quality in the city. She believes walking allows the poorest of the poor to access the city as their given right. This sentiment can be echoed by Enrique Penalosa, the former Mayor of Bogota, Columbia, who recently gave a lecture at NYU on the future of cities, stating, “quality sidewalks are the most important part of a democratic society.” And yet, cities continue to fail at recognizing the necessity of sidewalks for the greater good of society.

People with disabilities have the most to lose when it comes to accessible transport options. When exclusion persists and people with disabilities are denied essential transport services, their costs significantly increase and the challenges worsen. This vicious cycle intertwines disability with a lack of opportunities, which leads to poverty. Transportation, however, can be a tool for poverty alleviation if focused appropriately on those who need it. People with disabilities have the chance to rise out of poverty if given the opportunity to access activities and services like employment and healthcare independently and safely. By providing for the most vulnerable, policy makers and planners can improve the livelihood of those who need it most.

It only takes one day in India to realize that their transportation leaves a lot to be desired. Yet, one can also see just how many hard-working, socially aware individuals are working to change the archaic norms. If anything, my experiences in India lifted my spirits – if people in their situation can be working so hard for a bright, sustainable future, then it must surely be within reach.

As students and residents of New York City, we each have become personally aware of the increasing vulnerability of urban regions to natural disasters. In the wake of 2012’s Superstorm Sandy, the costs of an unpredictable climate and inadequate urban infrastructure are impossible for urban planners to ignore.

The Spring 2013 issue of the Wagner Planner, “The New Normal”, is an exploration of where innovation has taken place and the places where it is needed the most: cities. The authors present a thoughtful retrospective on two of the most destructive disasters in recent U.S. history, highlighting both the failures and the successes in cities’ preparation and response. We review original research by Wagner students on the vulnerability of New York City’s waterfront housing, take a careful look at the effects of the foreclosure crisis on middle-income families in Queens, and sit down with Richard Florida to discuss the potential of urban planning to build more resilient communities in an exclusive interview.

New urban planners enter the field at a critical junction. This issue is a call to students and current practitioners to study the disasters of the past in order to inform our response to those of tomorrow. As the world’s population continues its rapid and widespread urbanization, the importance of safeguarding our cities against disaster will only grow.
Planning for the New Normal

BY RAE ZIMMERMAN

BLACKOUT
An explosion at one of Manhattan’s central power stations plunges parts of the city into an eerie darkness as Superstorm Sandy passes, underscoring humanity’s tenuous dominance over the force of nature.

DISASTER BY THE NUMBERS
Just how destructive were Hurricane Katrina and Superstorm Sandy? Our info-graphic spread, Disaster by the Number, compares the data behind two of the biggest disasters in recent U.S. history. Page 8
Disasters are destructive conditions or events that arise suddenly or unexpectedly. The target of disruption varies enormously and cities known for their robustness have become targets of many of the events. Each community shapes the way it reduces the consequences. Yet there are many shared lessons that unite communities throughout the world. Disasters both destroy and create communities.

As is now well-known, a growing number of extreme events or the magnitude of their consequences is occurring worldwide in terms of the degree of destruction and cost. These encompass extreme weather events such as record high temperatures, persistent heat waves, increased or decreased precipitation, storms and flooding.

In addition, there are extreme consequences of geophysical events, accidents and acts of terrorism. Weather extremes have occurred against a backdrop of climate change that in addition to the weather extremes noted, is also bringing rising sea levels and rapid melting of ice.

Policy makers, managers and planners face several aspects of disasters and their consequences. One is how their complexity creates interdependencies that magnify the impacts of a given attack. Second is that knowledge of preconditions or precursors underscores the need for detection, prediction and forecasting. Third, preconditions may differ from what we know and expect in terms of average conditions. For example, age of structures may be a strong factor in the overall deterioration of the built environment, but is often not the cause of a disastrous collapse. Finally, human behavior is a fundamental part of how extreme consequences become. For example, people are increasingly concentrated in areas vulnerable to weather, climate and geophysical phenomena. While population density is critical for efficient use of resources, in vulnerable areas it can increase the number of casualties.

Efforts will be needed at all levels beginning with the translation of individual and public perception into community action and public will, which in turn will drive legislative and financial institutions. Resources are usually more concentrated on the edges of a disaster during preparedness and response and the later stages of recovery and ultimately prevention and resilience will need greater attention.

Our metaphors have moved over the past few decades from environmental carrying capacity to sustainability to resilience, but many of the concepts have remained the same. So - know your region, its people and its economy, and the articles that this issue contains from policy, planning and management are a step forward in this effort.
When Hurricane Katrina made landfall in southeast Louisiana in August 2005, it quickly became the deadliest - and by some counts - the most destructive hurricane in U.S. history. The intensity and size of the storm, coupled by the failure of the city’s levee system, devastated New Orleans and its surrounding areas. Nearly eighty percent of the city was submerged in water, with the most destruction centered in the poorest neighborhoods. The scale of the damage and human cost of Hurricane Katrina is matched only by Superstorm Sandy, which tore through the country’s most densely populated region in October 2012. Below is a comparison of the toll on critical infrastructure and lives between Hurricane Katrina and Superstorm Sandy.
Millions of buildings damaged by flood or wind

1.2 million

0.4 million

Gallons of water pumped from New York City’s subway system

300 million

Total estimated cost of recovery

$148 billion

$71 billion

Number of deaths tied to storm

1,836

285
WHAT IS THE ROLE OF URBAN PLANNING IN
REBUILDING NEW ORLEANS?

BY JACKIE BURTON, MUP '14

When Hurricane Katrina made landfall in late August 2005, the resulting destruction made New Orleans’ Lower Ninth Ward a household name. As the nation watched the devastating floods displace an entire urban population, many wondered how or if the city would recover. While we still don’t have a definitive answer to this question, there is much to learn from what has transpired in the Lower Ninth Ward since Katrina. Two key themes are that urban planning and infrastructure have become estranged, and that while landscape urbanism has played a vital role in rebuilding the neighborhood, the absence of urban planning in this process has rendered its results incomplete.

The Lower Ninth Ward has always been one of the poorest neighborhoods of New Orleans. As the city expanded in the late 1800s, wealthier residents staked out the scarce lands at higher elevations, and “the swampy expanse downriver that ultimately became the Ninth Ward” became home to free blacks and immigrant whites who couldn’t afford to live elsewhere. The carving of an Industrial Canal in 1918 divided the Ninth Ward into the Upper and Lower halves, the latter portion resting South of the canal and at the lowest elevation. Increasing suburban development and highway construction in the 1950s and 60s, and the devastation caused by Hurricane Betsy in 1965, fueled white flight out of the area and solidified the neighborhood’s status as an almost exclusively black, poor neighborhood.

Collectively, these factors resulted in the neighborhood becoming a paradoxical area of concentrated poverty and crime, yet strong, tightknit community, which was figuratively and literally isolated from the rest of the city.

Despite the Lower Ninth Ward’s history of neglect, the inadequacy of the federal government’s response to Hurricane Katrina was surprising. In the wake of the storm, and in the absence of adequate relief aid funding, it was debatable if the Lower Ninth Ward had a future at all. An advisory board, commissioned by then-mayor Ray Nagin, proposed razing the “blight” of destroyed homes and essentially allowing the land to revert back to its natural swamp-like state. Civic activism, combined with ample press coverage that raised awareness about the social justice issues facing the Lower Ninth Ward, defeated this planned shrinkage. Many cried fowl, seeing that option as a kind of de facto urban renewal project, one that would pin nature as the scapegoat in wiping out the historically undesirable neighborhood.

As a result, a renewed stream of federal funding and private and nonprofit initiatives began to re-homestead the Lower Ninth Ward. This paper will examine two projects- the new levee system surrounding New Orleans, and the Make it Right homes in the Holy Cross section of the Lower Ninth Ward, considered together as “Lower Ninth Ward rebuilding infrastructure”- as examples of the current disconnect between urban planning and infrastructure, and as projects that highlight the enfeebling reality that landscape urbanism requires infrastructure, but can exist without urban planning.

Under the direction of the Orleans Levee Board, the Army Corps of Engineers constructed the original levees that failed during Hurricane Katrina; their failure is widely believed to have been the entirely preventable cause of most of the hurricane’s destruction. The Orleans Levee Board was disbanded after Katrina, and the Southeast Louisiana Flood Protection Authority (SLFPA) was formed in its stead to oversee construction of the monumental new levee system, which was also constructed by the
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Although the new levee system successfully thwarted Hurricane Isaac earlier in 2012, it has been dubbed “woefully inadequate” by SLFPA president Tim Doody, and he may be right. According to the New York Times, “The new system was designed and constructed to provide what is informally known as 100-year protection, which means it was built to prevent the kind of flooding that has a 1 percent chance of occurring in any given year. But New Orleans has seen storms far

“...there’s also an elephant in the room: until another disaster strikes, nobody really knows for sure if the houses can actually withstand catastrophic flooding.”

Concerns, Make it Right is not on track to meet their goal of constructing 150 new homes by 2013, yet they’ve expanded their efforts to several other cities.

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Manhattan’s far west side, Greenpoint-Williamsburg, Hunter’s Point and Coney Island; all of these neighborhoods were inundated by Superstorm Sandy’s storm surge. They are all also part of major rezoning efforts that are set to make them prime locations for massive residential development. Over the past decade, a significant proportion of the city’s recent growth has occurred closer and closer to the water’s edge. At a time when New Yorkers have finally begun to grasp what climate change and sea level rise looks like, the city is also set on a path to encourage much of its future growth along the glaringly vulnerable waterfront.

After years of decline in the city’s waterfront communities, Mayor Bloomberg and his administration have made a concerted effort to invest in areas adjacent to the water. Stretching over 520 miles, the reintegration of the waterfront into the city fabric can increase ecological vitality, provide additional recreational space, and promote economic development. The ironic reality remains that the city’s effort to revitalize its historic waterfront has also left many of the new businesses and residents directly in harms way. When the city rezoned the Greenpoint–Williamsburg waterfront in 2005, much of the attention was focused on the heights of proposed buildings, or how mass transit would cope with the increased ridership. Sea level rise was very rarely part of the discussion.

When Sandy made landfall in late October 2012, much of New York’s recent developments were in the direct path of the storm surge. Citywide, 126 census tracts grew by more than 25 percent in population since 2000. Of those tracts, 48 were impacted by Sandy storm surge. Since 2002, over 27,000 residential units have been added on Manhattan’s West Side and another 37,000 in the Financial District. New York has done a great job in attracting new residents to the city, but much of this growth has been oriented towards waterfront development without much heed to sea level rise implications.

Instead of keeping the water out, people have begun proposing soft development strategies. These designs replace hard infrastructure that tries to keep water out with a constellation of interventions that mimic and work with natural systems. One such example involves porous pavement designs that retain and filter water rather than quickly channel it away. Another soft design example would utilize waste glass to create jacks that can be dumped into New York Harbor. This would potentially catalyze a formation of natural reefs and shoals, creating a complex underwater topology that can mitigate the power of future storm surges. New York City is an urban expanse the stretches across three islands and a peninsula; this is not an engineering problem, it is a geographic reality. Using natural design processes to manage a natural process may be the only option New York has to properly grow and sustain its waterfront development.
The share of NYCHA public housing units located within Sandy’s surge, despite making up only 5 percent of New York City’s total housing stock.
Hurricane Sandy hit the New York Metropolitan Area on October 29, 2012, causing devastating impacts to transportation infrastructure. The destruction demonstrated the vital and central role that the Metropolitan Transportation Authority (MTA) plays in the region. Every day, nearly 10 million people rely on the MTA’s regional network of subways, buses, commuter rail, and bridges and tunnels to travel to work and leisure activities. When these services were unavailable after the storm, the region’s economic activity suffered, forcing people to find alternative and more time-consuming ways to travel. The MTA, however, was proactive and adaptive in finding solutions to transportation challenges created by the storm.

Learning from recent previous experience with storms and extreme flooding, the MTA developed strategies and used new technologies and infrastructure in preparation for hurricanes. Realizing imminent threats to the city and its infrastructure, Governor Andrew Cuomo announced that subways would be shut down on Sunday, October 28 at 7:00 p.m. and buses would suspend service at 9:00 p.m. to allow the MTA enough time to make preparations for the storm. In addition, the agency moved rolling stock to higher ground, closed ventilation grates, removed electrical infrastructure, and placed sandbags in vulnerable areas. This allowed the MTA to be ready to restore service as quickly as possible.

As a result of the MTA’s preparations, the storm caused no damage to the rolling stock; buses were back in service on Tuesday, October 30 at 5:00 p.m., and some subway service returned on the morning of Thursday, November 1. Both transit modes ran free of charge for riders through Friday, November 2. Despite these successes, there were unexpected challenges, including the flooding of the Hugh L. Carey Brooklyn-Battery Tunnel and Queens-Midtown Tunnel. Trees and other debris lay along Metro-North (MNR) and Long Island Railroad (LIRR) tracks. Impressively, almost all repair work was done with internal resources, employees, and equipment.

The MTA was effective in assessing the damage to infrastructure and instituting a cleanup plan. Inspectors examined every stretch of impacted rail and electrical infrastructure to ensure their functionality. One of the most challenging aspects of the storm repair is the 108-year old subway system, which has unique and outdated parts that require extensive time and costs to replace.

The subway system was severely affected by the flooding of its tunnels between Manhattan and Brooklyn. MTA employees used their three pump trains to remove water from the tunnels as soon as possible. Workers put in double shifts on consecutive days to get the pumping done.

On Wednesday, October 31, the MTA announced that subway service would resume the following day, primarily north of 42nd Street in Manhattan and into the Bronx, east of downtown Brooklyn and Williamsburg, and in parts of Queens. The F and N trains (between Manhattan and Queens) were the only trains crossing the East River, which created massive crowding issues at stations and on trains. Limited Metro-North service between Grand Central and White Plains began, and limited Long Island Railroad service between Jamaica Station and Penn Station and Atlantic Terminal resumed as well. The MTA worked tirelessly to get the system back in order, opening lines as they became ready and power was restored.

(continued on page 20)
Nearly half of American households are one emergency away from a financial disaster. This is the finding by the Corporation for Enterprise Development (CFED). According to a report issued by CFED, approximately 44 percent of households do not have enough money saved up to cover basic living expenses for 3 months without steady income. Without a cushion of savings to fall back on, one emergency, such as a job loss or an unexpected medical event, could push these families over the brink and into financial disaster.

While the majority of these “liquid asset poor” households live below the official poverty line, many of them also lead middle class lifestyles. The CFED report, which synthesizes information culled from the 2013 Assets and Opportunity Scorecard, found that three-quarters of these households are employed full-time and over 15 percent of them earn more than $55,000 per year. “It’s really a mainstream issue,” Andrea Levere, President of CFED told the Huffington Post: “…this issue isn’t just about ‘those poor people,’ it’s about half of us.”

When an emergency does strike, households that lack a cushion of savings are forced to seek out expensive forms of credit to make ends meet. The report found that the average American borrower carries $10,736 in credit card debt. Those monthly fees can eat away at a household’s already meager financial resources. The Scorecard also found that more than half (56.4%) of consumers do not qualify for short term credit at “prime rates” and are forced to turn to high-cost alternative types of credit such as payday, auto-title, or installment loans which can carry triple-digit interest rates.

Hurricane Sandy tragically showed us just how financially unprepared for an emergency many households are. When the storm hit New Jersey, New York, and the surrounding area, it destroyed people’s homes, businesses, and livelihoods. The financial damage that Sandy wrought upon the region is estimated to be between $60 billion and $80 billion, much of which has been borne by households and small businesses. While a reserve of emergency savings would not have saved homes or businesses from Sandy’s wrath, it could have provided a financial cushion to those families whose lives were upended by the storm. A reserve of emergency savings might have helped households see themselves through the roughest patch immediately after the storm until help could arrive in the form of low-interest government loans.

Saving is difficult, particularly for low-income families who are living paycheck-to-paycheck. But a reserve of emergency savings can be instrumental in preventing an unexpected event from turning into a financial disaster. One of the best ways that cities can prepare their residents for the next disaster is by designing policies that promote household savings, especially emergency savings. These policies can take the form of tax-time savings initiatives, citywide savings campaigns, or matched savings programs. Although New York City is already at the forefront of these efforts in many respects, the city should redouble its commitment to increasing financial stability amongst its residents by promoting household savings. If it manages to do this, then when the next disaster strikes – and this now seems to be a question of when, not if – households may have adequate savings to prevent an unexpected emergency from turning into a financial calamity.
THE GREATEST AGE OF URBANIZATION

IS THE URBAN PLANNING PROFESSION POISED TO LEAD A GLOBAL RENAISSANCE?

RICHARD FLORIDA SAYS YES.

AN EXCLUSIVE INTERVIEW
BY ALEJANDRA RANGEL SMITH, MUP ‘13
ABU DHABI - During January 2013, Richard Florida taught a class entitled The Global City, which focused on the strengths and weaknesses of cities, in particular Abu Dhabi in the global economy. We were able to sit down with Professor Florida to talk about the future of the urban planning profession. Our discussion touched on three central themes: gentrification, planners’ reticence to growth, and the growing ‘backwardness’ of the urban planning. “Growth and development are important” Florida makes clear. “What I fear in urban planning is that it is becoming a very backward looking profession...maybe we need to call it placemaking and city building. I think we may need a new vocabulary, a common language.”

Alejandra Rangel Smith (ARS): In this era of rapid urbanization, cities are expanding and intensifying rapidly, what advice would you give young urban planners on how to incentivize global cities that are creative and innovative?

Richard Florida (Florida): What a great time to be planner. Cities are where the action is. They are the social and economic organizing units of our time – the sources of innovation, wealth and growth. And of course the most rapidly growing cities are in the emerging and developing world. We are going to put more people in cities and spend more on city-building over the next few decades, than ever before. My advice: travel the world. Go see the great process of urbanization as it unfolds. Be part of the greatest age of urbanization ever.

ARS: If you had limited resources, would you invest in improving and expanding the infrastructure correctly or would you invest in programming the existing city intensely?

Florida: It’s time to stop building outward and intensifying the space and infrastructure we already have. All good things – innovation, new startups, jobs, economic growth, social capital, and so much more stem from density. And denser places are more interactive, safer, more energy-efficient and more environmentally friendly.

ARS: From what platform do you think urban planners will have the most impact on cities, planning territory for growth and intensification, providing incentives for the economy or creating the right regulation?

Florida: Both matter. But the fact of the matter is that planners need a better platform. Look at how economists make their case and shape the public conversation. Not just economists, CEOs, political officials, foreign policy makers – they are all engaged. But planners not so much. Worse yet, I like to say our field suffers from the narcissism of small difference: we debate and fight with each other endlessly. But really, we know what it takes to build great cities. We know what works and what does not. It’s our obligation to get there and build a bigger platform and engage the public. I’ve said many times cities are our most important form of economic and social organization. And the place we choose to live has the biggest effect on our lives – as much or more than our choice of college, our job, even our life partner – because all of those other choices turn on where we live. My view is that as planners we have an obligation to help people understand the places they live in, and help them make the best and most informed choices possible.

ARS: Considering the great amount of bureaucracy in developing countries, in what sector do you think urban planners will have the most power and impact? Public, private or non-profit sector? How about in the developed cities?

Florida: The big shift I see is away from the public sector and into the not-for-profit and private sectors. Young planners I speak with are less enthused with the slowness and bureaucracy of government. They like the feel of smaller, startup organizations. That seems like a good thing to me.

ARS: Thinking globally, what cities do you think will present greater opportunities and challenges for urban planners to have an impact? Developing cities, mid-sized or vice versa?

Florida: Global cities in the emerging and developing economies. This is the greatest era of city-building in world history. There’s so much to be done. So much these cities have to do and learn. So much planners have to offer

ARS: In terms of participatory planning, how do you think planners can involve community members in an efficient way? Does technology enhance or alienate in this process?

Florida: Jane Jacobs became a friend and mentor late in her life. I asked her after the terrorist attacks on the World Trade Center, as a New Yorker, what would she like to see happen there, how would she like to see the site rebuilt. She said basically I was asking the wrong question and starting from the wrong premise. It’s not what she would like to see happen, or any so-called expert for that matter. She said planners should go visit the site, absorb the site, talk closely with the people who work there, live there, commute through there. They’re the ones who know what needs to be done. Involving the community – the people who live and work in places – is key. And yes technology makes this even easier.

ARS: Finally, in light of recent events such as Superstorm Sandy, apart from strengthening their infrastructure how do you think cities and planners should plan and manage for climate change and disasters?

Florida: We need resilience not just sustainability. Resilience comes from people and neighborhoods that are flexible and adaptable. Density helps too. Denser, more mixed used neighborhoods seem more resilient and better able to respond. We need to empower communities and neighborhoods to be able to respond quickly and flexibly. Top down planning simply does not work. When it comes to climate change, national leaders have been slow to respond on climate change, but city leaders and mayors have stepped out in front. Benjamin Barber has a new book out titled: “If Mayors Ruled the World.” We’d all be a lot better off if we followed the lead of mayors and city builders on climate change.
New York City has a booming tech scene. Since 2007 over 500 tech start-ups have popped up right in the city. Many of these start-ups focus not on hardware but software development. They serve markets such as fashion, media, advertising and finance that are already prominent in our local economy. The City’s strong service economy has drawn these start-ups to New York.

While a growing number of these “new economy” companies have crossed the bridge to DUMBO and Downtown Brooklyn - a vast majority of these start-ups are located in Downtown Manhattan. The Flatiron District, Union Square, Soho and TriBeCa house a majority of these start-ups. However there is concern that growth could be stifled in the Tech field due to low vacancy rates and rising rents in these neighborhoods.

The Downtown Brooklyn Partnership (DBP) believes they can solve this problem by creating a “Tech Triangle” district in Brooklyn. This Tech Triangle would consist of Downtown Brooklyn, DUMBO and the Brooklyn Navy Yard and would aim to create services and incentives in these areas, which would encourage start-ups to move to Brooklyn and further grow the local Economy. The goal for DBP is to find the right mix of financial incentives and provision of services that would make Tech Start-ups locate to these areas in Brooklyn which have more vacancies and lower rents. This will ensure continued growth in the Tech field and provide an economic boon to Brooklyn. To planners and politicians it seems like a win-win.

A recent survey of Manhattan-based tech firms, conducted by the Center for an Urban Future, asked a variety of questions in order to find out what factors contributed to these firms locational decisions. Transit connectivity is a major concern to 91 percent of Manhattan based tech firms. A desire to be located in “tech neighborhood” was the second greatest concern, with 57 percent of respondents listing. According to this survey, Transit and being in a “Tech neighborhood” were vastly more important to tech firms then the costs of rent.

The survey reinforced many conventional norms concerning “new economy” firms. Tech start-ups tend to like converted industrial spaces over others; they have strong preferences towards buildings with good natural light, open ceilings, large kitchens and buildings that allow bicycles. Additionally most start-ups prefer month-to-month leases as most of them are planning to expand rapidly and unexpectedly. Probably the most unsurprising result from this survey (and the hardest to overcome) is the lack of knowledge within this business community about neighborhoods outside of Manhattan – and specifically what amenities they have to offer.

Many of these issues can be addressed. A targeted media and public outreach campaign would help market these neighborhoods to the Tech Community. Local zoning regulations can be changed to encourage more buildings and retro-fittings to create more spaces that the new economy firms like. Lastly the city can work with land owners to encourage month-to-month leases to make their properties more appealing to the tech sector.

However poor or perceived poor connectivity is probably one of the largest barriers that the Tech Triangle will have to face. Although Downtown Brooklyn is well served by a variety of subway lines – DUMBO and the Brooklyn Navy Yard are not. One of the proposed recommendations for DBP is to create a special “circulator” bus. This proposed bus would work much like the Washington DC Circulator. The buses go along designated areas.
that underwent the foreclosure process from 2005 to 2012. The average difference between the original purchase price of the home and the price sold at auction or after REO classification was $113,002. Using the dataset of 268 St. Albans homes that entered foreclosure between 2005 and 2012, this paper determined that 9 percent of all blocks within St. Albans blocks were host to three or more foreclosures.

Because of the high rate of homeownership and the analysis of foreclosures in St. Albans, one can deduce that homeowners in St. Albans invested greatly in their homes. Historically, homes in the community were more expensive than other communities in Queens and although incomes in St. Albans are higher than average, a substantial investment would be needed to purchase a home. Many community leaders stated that foreclosures often cause families in St. Albans to lose everything. They confirmed that residents’ displayed a propensity to invest the majority of their wealth in their homes as opposed to savings. Research confirms that among middle-income families, the value of a home represents a substantial share of a family’s wealth. Middle-income families rely on the appreciation of their homes in order to finance children’s education and retirement. Lacking the equity of a home to borrow against will have an impact on middle-income families who have faced foreclosure in St. Albans and around the country.

In addition to the loss of equity, foreclosures also blemish individuals’ credit scores for seven years. Deyanira Del Rio, the Associate Director of NEDAP, said that “landlords and employers are increasingly using credit scores as a means of evaluation, and the negative effects of refinancing scams could paint borrowers in an inaccurate light.”

Income demographics point to an additional reason why the loss of credit is particularly devastating for St. Albans’ families. St. Albans is a middle-income community with a median income of $77,213. While the credit scores of St. Albans residents are not known, families with higher incomes are more likely to have more responsible credit payment behavior. According to House Logic, a for-profit entity providing homeownership education, individuals with higher credit scores are often hit harder by foreclosures. The road to recovery for individuals who previously had higher credit scores is also considerably more difficult.

Understanding the role that foreclosure plays in the lives in middle-income families will be crucial to policy-based interventions. A tremendous amount of wealth was lost over the past five years. A family’s future ability to borrow and access the housing market will have a large impact on the nation as a whole and the housing market recovery.

Ride Out of Poverty

I am convinced that universal access is possible, where every city has reliable transportation infrastructure for all, regardless of gender, age, and income. Transportation planning and engineering is not just about providing a high level of service, it is about using universal infrastructure in every society to further implement just and equal treatment of all its members. Once we shift to this mindset, we can create a socially responsible transportation system throughout the world.

(Re)Making it Right

more damaging than the 100-year standard. Katrina is generally considered to have been a 400-year storm.” Other debates spurred by the new levees range from pleas from nearby towns for their own protective infrastructure, to accusations that the massive system has callously redirected flooding to other parts of the region as far away as Mississippi.

Media darling Make It Right has shortcomings as well. The organization’s difficulties in obtaining funding makes its longevity as a force for reconstruction seem questionable. The homes, although subsidized, are still quite costly to design and build, making them an impossible purchase for the average Lower Ninth Ward resident. Many local residents see them as more of a tourist destination than a rebirth of their neighborhood. There’s also an elephant in the room: until another disaster strikes, nobody really knows for sure if the houses can actually withstand catastrophic flooding.

The challenges of rebuilding infrastructure in the Lower Ninth Ward may seem disjointed, but that is precisely why urban planners can and should play a role here. Infrastructure that is deeply connected by the natural landscape from the micro-level of 80 homes in Holy Cross, to the levees surrounding the Ninth Ward, out to all of New Orleans, should be developed with a regional intention that is heavily influenced by the landscape of the region, and planners should be at the helm of this development. Planners have the ability (and arguably, the duty) to fill the role of developing urban areas with a sustainable, regional perspective. In New Orleans, allowing space for the regional-minded urban planner to enter this development offers the greatest potential to solve conflicts such as regional Gulf Coast flooding.

Further, according to a recent study by the United Nations Office for Disaster Risk Reduction, infrastructure itself accounts for only about one-sixth of what urban residents believe is necessary for disaster preparedness. Higher up on the list were more organizational, information, and policy-centered concerns. Numbers one and two were “taking disaster risk reduction into account in new urban planning regulations, plans, and development activities,” and “establishing councils, committees, and disaster management structures dedicated to disaster risk reduction.”

Urban planners are trained to think on a regional scale and to create multi-faceted projects. Their presence would ensure that the Lower Ninth Ward is redeveloped in a cohesive way that is tied to the environmental realities of the region beyond the neighborhood. They would likely be more concerned with, and able to plan for, desperately needed elements like multi-modal transportation infrastructure, economic growth initiatives, and long-term development and community resilience than flashy Make It Right.

Indeed, urban planning and infrastructure have become estranged, and landscape urbanism has the potential to re-unify them. A silver lining of the tragedy that the Lower Ninth Ward has experienced is that it has the ability to become a hub for this re-unification, should city officials, nonprofit organizations, and private entities choose to recognize
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and support it. In the meantime, we can be sure that the hearty residents of the Lower Ninth Ward will continue piecing together their beloved neighborhood as all of these elements swirl around them like leaves on a gulf breeze.

In the Wake of Sandy
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On Saturday, November 3, 80 percent of the subway system was back in operation, including one of the East River subway tunnels, the Joralemon Tunnel of the 4/5 trains. This tunnel experienced significantly less flooding than the others because its entrances on both the Brooklyn and Manhattan side are at relatively high elevations. This was an important repair because the 4/5/6 line is the highest capacity transit corridor in the country (on its own it would be larger than any other rapid transit system in the country).

The MTA was committed to getting the entire system running again, and not just focused on Manhattan. This is highlighted by a valiant effort to restore subway service to the Rockaways. Hundreds of feet of track and the signal system along the Broad Channel Bridge were permanently damaged. On Sunday, November 11, the A train was extended to Howard Beach, and a free shuttle bus was set up between the Howard Beach and Far Rockaway/Mott Avenue stations. The MTA, however, says that it will be months before subway service is restored between the Rockaway Peninsula and Howard Beach. To restore transit service within the Rockaways peninsula, the MTA brought subway cars on flatbed trucks and placed them on unused tracks to run a shuttle, the ‘H’ train, between the Far Rockaway-Mott Ave. and Beach 90th Street stations. This line opened on Tuesday, November 20. From Far Rockaway, riders can take a bus shuttle to Howard Beach to regular A train service.

On Tuesday, December 4, J/Z service was extended to Broad Street, and on December 21, after cleaning severe damage from flooding in the Montague Street tunnel between Manhattan and Brooklyn, full R train service was restored. With the exception of the A train between Howard Beach and the Rockaways, and the South Ferry 1 train station, the entire subway system is fully operational at the time of writing.

By Monday, November 5, commuter rail service had been mostly restored. On the MNR lines east of the Hudson River, almost all of the lines were operating. Those that travel through New Jersey west of the river from Rockland and Orange counties were still without service. Shuttle buses filled in service gaps where possible in MNR service areas until November 19 to allow commuters to get to work while repairs were done. By Thursday, November 8, almost all LIRR service was restored, with the exception of the Long Beach Branch, which had to operate with diesel trains because of damage to power substations. This branch was almost completely restored on November 25, however it still runs with some limitations.

BRIDGES AND TUNNELS

All bridges and tunnels were closed before the storm in preparation for the high winds and flooding. Although most bridges were able to re-open in a short amount of time, the two MTA tunnels—Hugh L. Carey Brooklyn-Battery and Queens Midtown Tunnels experienced significant flooding.

Even with preparations, the MTA did not expect the tunnels to experience such a large quantity of flooding. This forced the MTA to be flexible in their recovery plan and address unexpected issues.

Working hard to pump the tunnels, the MTA was able to accommodate rush hour traffic in one direction as quickly as they could for the tunnels, opening one tube at a time—Manhattan-bound in the morning, Brooklyn-bound in the evening. The Queens-Midtown Tunnel was able to open partial service starting Friday, November 8, and returned to full operation on Friday, November 16. On Monday, November 12, limited rush-hour service for buses reopened in the Hugh L. Carey Tunnel in the Manhattan-bound tube. On Tuesday, November 13, the tube was opened to car traffic as well, with one lane for buses and one for cars and normal traffic was completely restored on Monday, December 10.

COMMUNICATION AND CLARITY

Once it was announced after the storm that the subways would reopen in some parts of the city, the MTA was quick to adjust its service map as routes became functional. The map featured a stripped down version of the normal subway map, featuring operational routes in full color, and non-operational routes in gray. Typical map features, such as parks and neighborhood names, were removed for clarity, so users could easily interpret which routes were open.

To communicate this information, all updates to bus, subway, commuter rail, THE BUS BRIDGES

The commuting challenges forced officials from the MTA, in coordination with the New York City Department of Transportation (NYCDOT) to create a bold and innovative transportation solution: impromptu Bus Rapid Transit. Between Brooklyn and Manhattan, 330 buses ran to replace missing subway service. The agencies instituted New York’s first truly exclusive busways over the Manhattan Bridge between Jay Street and Atlantic Avenue/Barclays Center and Midtown Manhattan. Buses also traveled across the Williamsburg Bridge (although not in exclusive lanes) from the Hewes Street station to Midtown Manhattan. In Manhattan, the buses traveled on bus priority lanes on Lexington Avenue, East 23rd Street, Third Avenue and Bowery.

On the first day of this operation, Thursday, November 1, people swarmed to these stations, causing overcrowding and confusion. NYCT President Prendergast acknowledged the challenges of running the buses. “If the bus bridge did anything,” Prendergast said, “it helped underscore for people how our rail system has a lot more utility than our bus system.” By Friday morning, 3,700 people boarded the buses per hour, with three buses loading simultaneously, and rode into Manhattan on dedicated lanes. Lines to board buses were still packed on Friday, but the system was functioning much more efficiently. The MTA was once again able to coordinate and solve some of the issues by being adaptable and proactive.
In the Wake of Sandy
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and bridge and tunnel service were posted on the MTA's website, Twitter, and Facebook. The map was posted and updated numerous times per day as routes opened, again highlighting the responsiveness of the agency. This information outreach was essential at a time when many were without television, internet, or cell phone service; by posting information in many places, the MTA was sure to reach a large proportion of the population. The MTA also conveyed images of the storm damage by posting photos and videos online, which helped the public comprehend the extent of the flooding in the system.

THE RESILIENCE OF THE MTA

The recovery efforts of the Metropolitan Transportation Authority in the wake of Hurricane Sandy were remarkable, demonstrating the MTA's importance to the region. First, it was well prepared, protecting critical equipment and infrastructure. Then, during and immediately after the storm, it was quick to adapt to the needs of the system, filling the service gaps left without the East River subway tunnels with buses. Finally, it systematically and effectively repaired and restored service primarily using its own internal resources, re-mobilizing the region within just a few days after the storm. Within weeks almost the entire MTA transportation network was back in full service after dealing with the most devastating storm in the New York Metropolitan region's history. The MTA should be commended for its impressive recovery, and the vitality of their services to the region and its economy must be recognized.

The Brooklyn Tech Triangle
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“circular routes”, with cheaper fares and have a limited amount of express stops. They would be branded and marketed differently then normal busses – becoming a cheap, fast “Tech Bus” that the community would be excited to ride on.

In order to encourage more firms to move to Brooklyn, the city currently gives a whopping $3000 per person yearly tax credit to any business that moves from Manhattan to Brooklyn. As we learn from Urban Economics - this is a gross waste of funds. Tax incentives are marginal in locational choice, and the services, amenities and transit connectivity that firms want in Union Square, will not be replicated in the Brooklyn Navy Yard. When asked in the survey - only 4% of tech firms said that tax incentives were a top factor in their locational decisions. These funds could easily be redirected into more public services that would make these neighborhoods more attractive.

The Brooklyn Tech Triangle does have a lot of potential. Along with the recommendations mentioned above, a number of ideas have been recommended to DBP such as the creation of an Art Walk between theses neighborhoods or a local bike share to encourage greater connectivity. But the idea with the most profound potential is to market each neighborhood specifically to different sub-sectors of the Tech economy. DUMBO already has a large number of creative firms and could be marketed to further art and design based start-ups. The location of DoITT, NYU Poly and the future CUSP building could be marketed to open data tech start-ups. And lastly the Brooklyn Navy Yard would be a great location for any tech firm interested in small manufacturing - such as HEVO Power Inc., a small start-up located in Soho that will eventually produce wireless electric charging stations.

During our interviews I had the pleasure to speak to the head of a local tech incubator, Micah Kotch. Micah founded the NYU Poly 137 Varick tech incubator in 2009 and is one of the foremost experts in New York on Start-ups. When asked about the Brooklyn Tech Triangle he stated, “The six things start-ups need in no particular order are; talent, services, expertise, a tech community, an introduction to customers and an introduction to capital.” The Brooklyn Tech Triangle will need to focus on its weak points in regards and work to create comparative advantages to these criteria. However once and if the right combination of services and amenities is found – the Tech Triangle economy will flourish.
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