# The New Orleans Watershed

Just as the aftermath of the tragedy of 9/11 brought new and widespread public attention to architecture, so has the aftermath of Katrina brought unprecedented public attention to planning. Suddenly everyone knows how to read the map of New Orleans. And with that new literacy comes a heightened understanding of the many intricate ways in which topography, history, economics, class, and politics affect the way a city looks. The physical essence of a city frequently has little to do with the details that command the attention of design review boards.

For the people of New Orleans and the Gulf Coast, there is no comfort in knowing that the world has seen other disasters. Natural disasters, such as the 1730 tsunami that struck Hokkaido, Japan, with a loss of 140,000 people and even the 1970 cyclone that hit Bangladesh, with an estimated loss of 300,000 to 500,000 lives, seem long ago and far away, those numbers of no consequence when one family member is missing now. The world has also seen other disasters caused by failures of civil engineering — such as the collapse of the Zuider Zee seawall in 1287 (50,000 lives lost) and the Johnstown Flood of 1889 (2,000 lives lost) — but the greater tragedy of New Orleans is not the failure of the levees but the human failure to maintain and replace them. Fires have devastated great cities, including London (1666), Chicago (1871), and Boston (1872); water-soaked structures that survived Katrina but require demolition only add to the cruelty of New Orleans' loss. The world has also seen horrific destruction that cannot be blamed on acts of God and nature. War has leveled communities both large and small, from Hiroshima to myriad settlements in Sudan that remain nameless in Western media. Less dramatic but more insidious is the destruction of cities by policy: devastating urban clearances in the name of renewal. This is the second tragedy that still threatens New Orleans.

An examination of disasters through history yields two comforting lessons: clusters of disasters are not signs of apocalypse; and devastation can hold the seeds of rebirth.

Urbanists are fond of biological metaphors to describe cities. "A city must grow or it will die" is one common but flawed aphorism. Although they may lose influence, cities seldom actually die. Understanding the lifecycle of the city and accepting that cities may assume different forms and functions over their history are still largely elusive concepts. The architectural and planning world has yet to produce its own Gail Sheehy — no one has written *Passages* for the city.

Perhaps because their own history is so short, Americans do not think of their cities in terms of historical strata. John Berendt's *The City of Falling Angels* describes Venice, a maritime trading center and the seat of the Venetian Empire in the 13th and 14th centuries, now a tourist center of only 70,000 people. There, excavations for a recent restoration project revealed not only the floor of Marco Polo's 13th-century house, 2 meters below grade, but also floor structures even lower, dating from the 11th, 8th, and 6th centuries.

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The devastation of New Orleans presents immediate challenges, but it also offers the opportunity for planners to rethink their role. The last few decades have recast planners as economic development engineers working at the behest of politicians. The failed environmental policy and destruction of wetlands that contributed to losses along the Gulf Coast suggest a different model: planners as urban wellness professionals, holistically managing the health of the city over its lifetime. ■

Elizabeth S. Padjen FAIA
Editor