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Caring for Places: In Complexity

New Orleans set before us, front and center, all the elements of place: the forces of nature and topography within which places exist; varying patterns of buildings and streets that structure the settlement of places; building types that adapt (or not) to the conditions at hand, and disparities in the resources available to their builders. The physical and cultural landscape that grows up within these patterns requires nourishment and care—care that must extend to the fundamental structures on which all else depends. In New Orleans, a disturbed coastal ecology, the channels of the river, and levees and pumps that kept surrounding waters at bay formed the nexus of a structure that was imperiled.

We've been confronted, now, with the unforeseen or unattended-to consequences of the technological transformation of ground and resources. We've also seen that cultures, in all their complexity, are entwined within the fabric of a place in a way that develops fierce attachments and loyalties and draws people to it. Histories of all sorts, from the idiosyncratic and personal to the epic, become embedded in the structures themselves and archives they shelter.

We see, most essentially, that we must care for the justice of how resources are distributed within our environments and ensure that alert and equitable hands guide the continuing improvement and adjustment of places. This will be hard; there is always great opportunity for exploitation within the arrangements needed to stabilize a place—especially when responsibility is allocated to corporate owners who may be remote and care little for cherished nuance.

The impossibility of reconstructing exactly what was lost is obvious, and no doubt some of it does not bear repeating. Yet, without careful attention—even given the urgencies of the moment—there is great likelihood that patterns of construction will soon loom into place, in the name of expediency and profit, that will carry with them processes that disallow exactly the interim, ad hoc, marginal adjustments which have given so much spirit and charm to the places of New Orleans, forming the character that vibrates in our memories.

Even if there were a remote chance that large corporations would be interested in such fine-grain accommodations, there is no way they could reproduce what developed over time. But what could be devised are processes that engage community interest... that allow things to continue to transform and accrete, with new additions and modifications that bear marks of individual attention. What could now be built are places that accept the complexities of life, with patterns and groupings that enfold both existing structures that can be saved and new configurations that better suit the conditions of place and its evolving social structure. Such attention might offer hope as well as reminiscence, opportunities for complex initiative and expression as well as simple health and security.

New Orleans faces a challenge that has seldom been met well, especially through massive efforts at reconstruction conducted under duress. But it is a challenge worthy of a city that has won wide fame as a place of uncommon creativity... now masked by a face of disorder and plight.

Struck down by forces beyond control, set into harm's way by development hubris and social injustice, left unguarded through official neglect, the city yet seems ready to rise. With care, it will deck itself again in a bounty of initiatives.

—*Donlyn Lyndon*, Editor