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2016

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UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA,
IRVINE

Becoming Blight: Property and Belonging in Post-Katrina New Orleans

DISSERTATION

submitted in partial satisfaction of the requirements
for the degree of

DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

in Anthropology

by

Sean Mallin

Dissertation Committee:
Associate Professor Julia Elyachar, Co-chair
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2016

DEDICATION

To

David F. Ruccio

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ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I would like to thank my advisors, Julia Elyachar and Bill Maurer, for their unwavering support for this project from the start, and for being such amazing scholarly role models. Keith Murphy also deserves thanks for pushing me to think about my project in new ways, and making me buy a camera, which I still regret not using more. I owe an enormous debt to my undergraduate advisors—Carolyn Nordstrom, Rahul Oka, and David Ruccio—for guiding me through the earliest stages of this project.

I would like to thank my colleagues and friends who have contributed in one way or another to this project, especially Kalin Agrawal, Chima Anyadike-Danes, Andrea Ballesterio, Victoria Bernal, Joella Bitter, Alyse Bertenthal, Tom Boellstorff, Emily Brooks, Nick Caverly, Leo Chavez, Joshua Clark, Nate Coben, Ben Cox, Jenny Fan, Catherine Fisk, Véronique Fortin, Caitlin Fouratt, Angela Garcia, Georgia Hartman, Kate Henne, Robbie Kett, Leksa Lee, Janny Li, Mona Lynch, George Marcus, Norma Miranda, Smoki Musaraj, Sylvia Nam, Valerie Olson, Kris Peterson, Simone Popperl, Stevie Rea, Beth Reddy, Nick Seaver, Ivan Small, Christopher Tomlins, Allison Truitt, Mariana Valverde, and Melissa Wrapp. Taylor Nelms, in particular, provided endless encouragement, read a million half-baked drafts, and helped me put topic sentences in the right place. I would also like to thank everyone who read versions of this work in a Dissertation Writing Seminar and a [Working Title] Workshop. And many organizations deserve thanks for their monetary support, including UC Irvine's Center in Law, Society & Culture; the National Science Foundation; and the Mellon/ACLS. I have also received support from the Department of Anthropology and School of Social Sciences at UC Irvine.

New Orleans has been my home away from southern California for close to a decade. I would like to thank my friends who enriched my time there, especially Nick Albares, Chris Calitri, Jason Chao, Aaron Cook, Dave Darragh, Alli DeJong, Sammy Geisler, Marta Jewson, Jen Laffin, Dave Lanser, Adrian Manriquez, Allison Meraldo, Geoff Moen, Emily Steiber, Danny Treat, and Misty Wetzel. I met so many generous New Orleanians who were willing to talk with me about difficult topics. I can never thank them enough, so I'll just continue to thank them as much as I can. Two informants, in particular, were integral to my research: Ms. Kathy and Ms. Rita. Thank you. I would also like to thank everyone at the numerous organizations that allowed me to conduct research on or among them, including the Code Enforcement and Hearings Bureau, New Orleans City Council, the New Orleans Redevelopment Authority, and the former Office of Recovery and Development Administration; Beacon of Hope, Capstone, the Crescent City Community Land Trust, Habitat for Humanity, NOLA East Clean Sweep, Operation Helping Hands, Project Homecoming, and Project Home Again; and neighborhood associations in Broadmoor, Gentilly, Hollygrove, Lakeview, Mid-City, New Orleans East, and Zion City.

I would like to thank my family for their support. And finally, I would like to thank Jennifer Henry, who shared this dissertation—and so many good times in New Orleans and elsewhere—with me over the past five years. She has contributed to this work in countless ways, not least of which by reading numerous drafts, and correcting many of my spelling and grammar mistakes. Any remaining errors, of course, are my own.

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ABSTRACT OF THE DISSERTATION

Becoming Blight: Property and Belonging in Post-Katrina New Orleans

by

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Doctor of Philosophy in Anthropology

University of California, Irvine, 2016

Associate Professor Julia Elyachar, Co-chair

Professor Bill Maurer, Co-chair

This ethnography examines the politics of property in relation to emergent forms of urban citizenship and belonging in post-Katrina New Orleans. It focuses on controversial plans to redevelop thousands of vacant properties in New Orleans abandoned after Hurricane Katrina. These properties, which initially stood as symbols of the storm's destruction, have recently become targets of municipal blight eradication efforts as the city transitions from post-disaster recovery to more contentious forms of urban renewal. City officials use code enforcement and auctions to transfer properties to new owners and demolish thousands more, reshaping property relations across an already fractured landscape. By redefining who will be included in the "new" New Orleans through a property's material condition and effects, blight-fighting programs elide the race and class disparities that have shaped the city's uneven recovery. While these programs have been contested by activists and community organizations, they are on the whole widely embraced by returned residents. Code enforcement and other blight-eradication efforts provoke reflection on property rights and responsibilities, and on private property in general, as socially and materially embedded projects of reconstituting the post-storm community. Based on twenty-

seven months of fieldwork with residents, neighborhood associations, municipal bureaucrats, and urban planners, this dissertation examines the role of vacant properties in debates about urban sustainability, gentrification, historic preservation, and racial justice, ten years after the disaster supposedly ended. It expands on previous scholarly work to highlight changes in the meaning of recovery and community as the city moves beyond the “post-Katrina” moment. In so doing, it contributes to empirical and theoretical research on property and value, inequality, citizenship, and race in post-disaster and post-industrial cities around the country.

INTRODUCTION

It was a warm evening in July 2010. I was on my way to a town hall meeting in Mid-City, a working-class neighborhood in New Orleans. It had been almost five years since Hurricane Katrina, and the storm's residues were slowly giving way to signs of recovery. Many people had returned and rebuilt their homes, new stores and restaurants had opened, and the city had just elected an optimistic new mayor who, in his inauguration speech, encouraged residents to "stop thinking about rebuilding the city we were and start dreaming about the city we want to become." But on my way to the meeting, winding through an up-and-coming section of the neighborhood, I passed dozens of run-down homes and overgrown lots, reminders of storm victims who never returned. There were still more than 60,000 vacant properties in New Orleans—more than a quarter of the city's housing stock.

The town hall meeting was held in a large church. More than two hundred residents filled the pews to hear Mitch Landrieu, the newly elected mayor, discuss the city's budget priorities for the following year. Attendees asked him about potholes and streetlights, but the conversation quickly turned to the topic of blight. One by one, residents stood up and shared stories about neighboring properties that had been empty since Katrina. An elderly black woman said she was scared to leave her house at night. Another woman worried that the vacant house next door would collapse. Finally, a middle-aged man stood up and asked the mayor, "When are you going to make owners take responsibility for these properties?" The room broke out in applause. Mayor Landrieu admitted that blighted properties were a problem, but explained that addressing them would be a "tough issue." Most of these properties were empty as a result of the storm, and their owners might still be trying to come back. On top of that, most vacant properties were privately

owned, so it would be difficult for the city to intervene. His administration was working on a strategy to combat blight, Landrieu said, but he wasn't sure if people were ready to say "we aren't going to wait any more for people who aren't coming back." The mayor asked the audience to raise their hands if they wanted him to get serious about blight "sooner rather than later." A sea of hands went up, almost everyone in the room.

I didn't know what to make of the scene. For years after the storm, vacant properties were a common sight, one not out of place in a city that had just suffered a major disaster. These properties bore marks of the storm—water lines, mold, and spray painted rescue signs. Their emptiness reminded people of the massive displacement induced by Katrina. Yet most people assumed that these properties would eventually be rebuilt. Indeed, many fought bitterly for their right to return so this prospect could become a reality. As time went on, however, many properties remained empty, and some even began to decay. With each passing year, these vacant properties were increasingly seen as a nuisance. The hopes of returned residents faded as properties around them began to crumble. Many residents began to refer to them as "blight."¹ I watched Mayor Landrieu address vacant properties in several town hall meetings that summer in 2010, and in every meeting he got the same response: it was time to move on. A few months later, he unveiled a new blight-eradication strategy. The city would use code enforcement, demolitions, and auctions to wipe out 10,000 blighted properties within three years. The editorial board of the *Times-Picayune*, the local daily newspaper, welcomed this new, aggressive approach to blight: "Thousands of New Orleanians have put a lot of money and muscle into rebuilding their homes and neighborhoods. Their hard work has been undermined by owners who haven't acted responsibly" (Times-Picayune 2010).

¹ Since this project queries the legal and technical constitution of blighted properties, the term should always be read in scare-quotes; however, for the sake of readability, I omit them hereafter.

In my dissertation, I examine this new orientation to the storm's ruins, one that saw vacant properties not as the eventual foundation of a rebuilt city, but as *blight*. I became interested in this issue as residents began to articulate their desire to move on, even when many of their former neighbors remained displaced. I wanted to understand how their views about vacant properties connected to wider struggles to reckon with the promises and failures of post-storm recovery. Blight-fighting rhetoric seemed to depart from earlier post-Katrina conflicts over the right to return and rebuild storm-damaged homes and neighborhoods. As vacant properties remained, and grew into a source of negative value, however, post-storm recovery was reimagined as a process of replacing neighbors who didn't come back, a process that would involve an increased role for the city in redeveloping vacant properties. I explore the relationship between blight-fighting strategies and these new visions of property and personhood, and recovery and community, as storm-damaged properties are regulated, repurposed, and redeveloped in the name of the public good at the same time as the content of the post-storm public is being redefined.



Figure 1. A vacant property next to a rebuilt house. Photo by author. 2013.

New Orleans is undergoing one of the most aggressive blight-fighting programs in the country. In 2012 alone, city officials inspected about 11,000 properties, conducted 5,000 hearings, demolished 3,700 buildings, and auctioned more than 400 properties. In 2013, the city auctioned more than 1,500 properties. The general strategy is widely supported by residents and neighborhood associations across race and class lines, even as some people criticize aspects of the process. Property relations have been constituted as a particular type of problem in the post-storm landscape. Remaking property relations, the purported goal of code enforcement, raises other problems, particularly around re-embedding social and materially relations, and reconstituting the post-storm community. These processes are tied together around the concept of blight—a concept with a long history in urban policy and planning, but which takes on added significance by relating property abandonment to the promises and failures of post-Katrina recovery. Storm-damaged properties weren't always considered blighted. This dissertation explores the sociolegal conditions and consequences of vacant properties becoming blight.

Defining blight

Blight is an ambiguous term. Over the past century of its use in urban contexts, it has been subject to numerous and often conflicting definitions. Robert Fairbanks (2001, 2003), in his survey of the concept, outlines several approaches to “the notion, the phenomenon, the concept, process, object, trope, buzzword or political baby known in common discourse as blight” (1).²

Blight can be a spatial term, applied to streets, blocks, or entire neighborhoods, yet it can also be a temporal term, denoting ruination or decline (Fogelson 2003; Gordon 2004). Blight is

² Applying the concept of blight to urban areas is a distinctly U.S.-phenomena, at least historically, though this might change as vacant properties become a growing popular and policy concern in cities around the world. Thank you to Mariana Valverde for making this point to me.

sometimes measured through shrinking property values, though it nearly always involves social, moral, or aesthetic judgments, as well (Valverde 2011). While many scholars associate the term with redlining and other segregationist policies, the politics of blight have never been clearly defined. The concept's definitional openness has enabled it to be taken up by diverse and sometimes awkward coalitions, and across conventional political divides (Gregory 1999; Pritchett 2003).

The concept of blight grew out of the plant sciences in the nineteenth century, where it referred—and still refers—to a contagion or disease.³ Around the turn of the twentieth century, progressive reformers began to refer to “blighted areas” in cities, where industrialization and European immigration prompted the growth of so-called slums.⁴ Reformers targeted run-down tenement buildings as “unfit for habitation by civilized people” (Fogelson 2001:322; see also Katz 2013). “As they now exist,” wrote one journalist in 1899, “the tenements are standing menaces to the family, to morality, to the public health, and to civic integrity” (Fogelson 2001:323).⁵ While most reformers saw urban blight as having a corrosive effect on moral citizenship, experts sometimes adopted the opposite approach, viewing certain “undesirable” people as having a “blighting influence” on the urban environment (see Fogelson 2003:322). University of Chicago sociologist Ernest Burgess blamed “disturbances of metabolism” in the urban environment on population increases “such as those which followed the great influx of southern Negroes” to northern cities in the early twentieth century and that, according to him,

³ For example, *Phytophthora infestans*, or potato blight, is what caused the Great Irish Famine.

⁴ While the language of slums is much older, according to Robert Fogelson (2001), “it was not until the early 1910s, that [reformers] began to speak of ‘blighted areas’ or ‘blighted districts’ as a distinct part of the urban environment” (347).

⁵ Slum clearance measures soon passed in many jurisdictions. New York, for example, passed the Tenement House Act of 1895, which allowed the city to demolish run-down buildings deemed uninhabitable (Pritchett 2003:7-8). These measures promoted safe, affordable housing as a “civilizing” project, reflecting environmental determinist theories in vogue, but also the Progressive era’s paternalistic project of “integrating” recent immigrants and inner-city residents into mainstream American ways of life.

sped up the “junking process in the area of deterioration” (Pritchett 2003:17). Foreign-born property owners were also considered a threat.⁶

With the professionalization of urban planning in the early twentieth century, many experts attempted to quantify blight, usually through changes in real estate values (Light 2009).⁷ In her influential study, *Urban Blight and Slums*, Mabel Walker (1938) defined a “blighted area” as “one which has deteriorated from an economic standpoint and therefore become less profitable to the city, the general public and the owners of real estate. Depreciation has set in and the area is rapidly becoming a liability rather than an asset” (6-7). A slum, by contrast, was “an area in which the housing is so unfit as to constitute a menace to the health and morals of the community, and [. . .] a residential area with an extreme condition of blight” (3). Blighted areas, in other words, were precursors to slums, though their trajectory could be reversed through social or political intervention (Gordon 2004; Light 2009). While many early reformers were wary of government interference in private markets, the growing embrace of planning and zoning in the early twentieth century opened space for experiments in public housing and urban redevelopment (Pritchett 2003).

Despite many attempts, urban experts “never developed a systematic process by which to determine when an area was blighted,” and often resigned to “define the phenomena with vague generalities” (Pritchett 2003:18).⁸ Such open-ended definitions made blight a “useful rhetorical device” for promoting racial segregation (18).⁹ Red-lining and urban renewal—commonly known as “Negro removal” (see Massey and Denton 1993)—provided a “race- and power-

⁶ Their alien status rendering them, in the eyes of many, “not interested in the broader good of the city” (Pritchett 2003:20).

⁷ Experts also understood blight through ecological models of urban development. Some urban scholars even viewed blighted areas as part of the natural “life cycle” of cities (Fairbanks 2001:10; see also Light 2009).

⁸ Most governments, in fact, “stopped short of defining blight and instead offered a descriptive catalogue of blighted conditions—often pasted *verbatim* from Progressive-era health or safety statutes” (Gordon 2003:312).

⁹ Class conflicts were also evident in renewal projects, especially as people reimagined inner cities as “urban frontiers” ripe for gentrification (Smith 1996).

evasive narrative” of neighborhood decline that “served to obscure its origins in the deliberate policies and practices of the public sector and private capital, thereby reconfirming popular and professionalized discourses about poverty that located its roots in the race-specific behaviors and cultural dispositions of the poor” (Gregory 1999:90-91; see also Sugrue 2014).¹⁰ Urban renewal projects were undertaken in many cities, and usually targeted majority-black neighborhoods (Hirsch 1998). For example, in the 1960s an elevated expressway was built in New Orleans right in the middle of a thriving black commercial district, displacing many residents and businesses in the process (see Crutcher 2010). As with earlier slum clearance measures, urban renewal discourse related a property and its owner in intimate—through often antagonistic—ways, as deserving or underserving of the normal bundle of rights associated with property ownership.

At the turn of the twentieth century, urban blight was understood as a problem of inner-city slums. Since the turn of the twenty-first century, urban blight is more commonly understood as a problem of post-industrial decline. It is no longer the *presence* of certain people, but rather the *absence* of sufficient people that is seen as causing blight. These transformations—themselves a product of white flight and suburbanization, manufacturing decline, and other social and economic shifts—have become the focus of scholarly discussions around shrinking cities (Dewar and Thomas 2012; Mallach 2006; Ryan 2014), in which blight is a key concept. Blight has also become the object of popular fascination through ruin photography (critically called “ruin pornography”), with entire websites and coffee table books packed with pictures of decrepit homes, abandoned factories, and weed-filled lots. Critics argue that such images obscure the

¹⁰ Critics of urban renewal often turned the language of blight around. Jane Jacobs (1992), for example, mourned the “The Great Blight of Dullness” that often resulted from renewal projects (121). Many geographers have used the concept in similar ways to describe conditions of suburban—rather than urban—life, characterized by redundant strip malls and cookie-cutter homes. Like earlier scholars, they underscored the built environment’s effects on inhabitants: “to live in a blighted environment is dispiriting, demeaning, and profoundly dehumanizing” (Lewis 1973:4). These geographers embraced the concept’s qualitative nature. “Blight, like any aesthetic matter, lies in the eye and mind of the beholder. It is inherently subjective” (Lewis 1973:i).

historical roots of urban decline, isolating individual properties from their social and economic contexts, and erasing people that currently “live with” these ruins (Stoler 2008). This is true in academic studies of blight, as well. Robert Fairbanks (2001) argues that most scholars overlook “how [blighted] spaces are consumed, negotiated, manipulated and shaped by the residents who live there” (34).

The concept of blight has a messy history. However, it isn’t always—or only—used to promote dispossession. Such singular interpretations betray the concept’s wily past: its progressive and conservative deployments, its embrace by affordable housing advocates and high-end developers. Though it is important to understand contemporary references to blight in relation to its troubled past, the term doesn’t come with a built-in politics (Valverde 2005). This is clear in New Orleans, where blight-eradication projects have not only been imposed by city bureaucrats and planners, but have also been embraced by residents and neighborhood associations as a way to promote civic engagement and, in some cases, social critique. People connect blighted properties to wider questions about urban citizenship and belonging, reflecting on property, not as a natural or inevitable thing, but as a social and material problem.

Problems with property

Hurricane Katrina unsettled property relations across the city, both materially and symbolically. Conflicts about post-storm recovery were not only *about* property, but were in many cases enacted *through* property. I started my research when many residents viewed storm-damaged properties as embodying the potential to be restored. They envisioned recovery not only as a material process, but also one of remaking social relations and a sense of place.

As time passed, however, vacant properties were increasingly seen as a nuisance. Their decay undermined any sense of progress made by those who had returned, and seemed to threaten recovery writ large. One report three years after the storm argued that blighted properties “destabilize neighborhoods, depress property values and subject neighbors to health and safety hazards. Blight deters investment and increases the likelihood that neighboring properties will also decline and become blighted. In post-Katrina New Orleans, it discourages residents from restoring flood-damaged homes. Blight also represents lost tax revenue potential in a city with troubled finances” (BGR 2008:1). Vacant properties became a source of negative value, and were viewed as a threat to public health, safety, and welfare—one that led many of my interlocutors to reflect on vacant properties, not through the promises of recovery, but as a problem.

Property offers a unique lens onto transformations in the meaning of recovery and community after the storm. But my focus on property raised certain ethnographic dilemmas, since property was both an empirical object and an analytical tool (see Maurer 2003). My interlocutors talked about property in ways that anticipated many critical moves employed by scholars, such as pointing out that property is social, or that rights should be balanced by duties and obligations. My concerns about materiality, personhood, and regulation intersected with the concerns of my interlocutors. I try to address this recursive aspect of my research questions by moving back and forth between property as an object and analytic, a practice my interlocutors employed in their own engagements with blight. I examine how the concept of property works: “who uses it, for what purposes, and with what effects” (Verdery and Humphrey 2004:2), with particular attention to its “diversity and loose ends” (Blomley 2004:637; see also Gibson-Graham

1996, 2006).¹¹ But I also mix in sociolegal work on property that outlines alternative notions of private property that emphasize its social embeddedness and material effects (Alexander 1999; Novak 1996; Singer 2000; Valverde 2011). Finally, I bring together a wide range of ethnographic work on property (Coombe 1998; Hann 1998; Li 2014; Mitchell 2002; Strathern 1988, 2005; Riles 2011; Verdery 2003), money and finance (Callon 1998; Maurer 2005; Miyazaki 2013; Riles 2011), and value (Elyachar 2005, 2010, 2011; Graeber 2001; Kockelman 2006, 2010; Munn 1992), to show how materiality and meaning are involved in the co-constitution (and redistribution) of persons and things in the post-storm city.

I am not the first person to study post-Katrina recovery through property disputes. Scholars have recounted conflicts over urban planning (Barrios 2011; Breunlin and Regis 2006), public housing (Arena 2012), racialized dispossession (Lipsitz 2006; Woods 2009), and the notorious Road Home program (Finger 2008). In most of these cases, analysis of property is subsumed to the concept of disaster capitalism, with property as merely an adjunct to an inevitable process of marketization (Adams 2013; Klein 2007; Johnson 2011). From the beginning, however, property played an ambivalent role in the city's recovery. Property disputes involved conflicts between federal, state, and local jurisdictions, questions about value and social justice, and concerns about environmental sustainability. Moreover, many scholars have not traced changes in redevelopment priorities since the first few years after the storm, when recovery administration shifted from federal and state to municipal entities.¹²

I grew interested in questions surrounding vacant or abandoned properties—questions that are widely overlooked in sociolegal scholarship on property—because they seemed to sit in

¹¹ Chris Hann (1999) writes that “the word ‘property’ is best seen as directing attention to a vast field of cultural as well as social relations, to the symbolic as well as the material contents within which things are recognized and personal as well as collective identities made” (5).

¹² It is telling that even the books that came out marking the tenth anniversary of Katrina, in 2015, mostly covered the storm and immediate aftermath, with only a few late chapters or an epilogue dealing with recovery's later years (Gratz 2015; Kroll-Smith, Baxter, and Jenkins 2015; Rivlin 2015).

awkward relation to earlier work on property, markets, and redevelopment on post-Katrina New Orleans.¹³ Vacant properties bring attention to property's material condition and effects, the relationship between a property and its owner, the city's role in regulating nuisances, and strategies for redistributing properties to new owners. Vacant properties have prompted a discourse about the responsibilities of owners, displacing an earlier discourse based entirely around property rights. Through vacant properties, people reflect on the norms and forms of property, in some cases even discussing alternatives *to* private property, or alternatives forms *of* private property. They not only see private property as social, but also are actively reconstituting the social through property—though questions remain about what kind of social will be created, and who will be included in it.

The qualities of property

Legal scholars usually describe property as a bundle of rights—a relationship between persons, and not a relationship between persons and things (Macpherson 1978; Penner 1996).¹⁴ This model of property dates to the end of the nineteenth century when, according to Morton Horowitz (1992), “the definition of property rights became divorced from concrete physical objects [. . .] and came to turn more and more on abstract ideas of individual expectations of market values” (370; see also Maurer 1999). Since then, many scholars suggest that property's “disintegration” has only continued through new intellectual and financial property forms in

¹³ In fact, one of the few law review articles I found on abandoned property was a seemingly tongue-in-cheek piece on the property status of home run baseballs (Finkelman 2002). There is more work in policy and planning world on vacant properties (see Dewar and Thomas 2012).

¹⁴ J.E. Penner (1996) sees this as the “currently prevailing understanding of property in what might be called mainstream Anglo-American legal philosophy” (712). Alternatives views of property, however, still exist (see Alexander 1999; Purdy 2011; Singer 2000).

which property rights are increasingly fragmented or separated from concrete objects (Grey 1980; see also Brown 2004; Coombe 1998; Hirsch 2010).¹⁵

But property, at least for my interlocutors, was often stubbornly material—not a bundle of rights, but rather a bundle of qualities with effects that spread beyond walls, fences, and property lines. Neighbors complained about unkempt yards, broken windows, rats and raccoons, and other signs of disorder, as the condition of vacant properties became a matter of concern (Latour 2004). Yet it wasn't only residents who viewed property as socially and materially embedded. New Orleans officials also construed vacant properties through their qualities and effects. Indeed, the municipal code defined blight with a varied list of conditions and threats. Though many scholars contrast expert and everyday views of property (Hann 1998; Scott 1998), I was struck by their *similarities*, especially in discussions of blight, which both drew on “embodied, experiential, and relational categories” that emphasized specific qualities of properties (Valverde 2011:281).¹⁶

To understand this property discourse, I look to scholars who “examine the thing-ness around which property relations coalesce” (Sawyer 2004:105; see also Hayden 2003; Hetherington 2009; Maurer 2000; Peterson 2014; Strathern 1999; Verdery 2003). These scholars show that ostensibly abstract property forms are materially instantiated, either through the qualities of property objects themselves, or through documents, titles, maps and plans, or everyday practices of maintenance and care (Blomley 2013; Rose 1994). In doing so, this work provides an alternative to “a conception of [property] rights as abstract relations between people”

¹⁵ Though recent work in the social studies of finance pushes back against arguments about the “abstract” or “immaterial” nature of contemporary economies (see Callon 1998; Joseph 2014; MacKenzie 2009; Zaloom 2006).

¹⁶ In many cases, however, scholars seek alternative perspectives only among marginalized groups, whose views of property are seen as concrete, dynamic, and socially embedded. Scholars contrast these views to expert discourse on property, which they see as abstract, individualistic, or anti-social. Yet many policymakers in New Orleans were concerned about vacant properties in much the same way as residents.

with “one in which rights are relations between people that are mediated, and troubled, by the frailty of material things” (Hetherington 2009:225).

The qualities of property are not self-evident, but only come to matter only in specific contexts (Keane 2003). Moreover, vacant properties are qualified through diverse social, material, and semiotic arrangements—through everything from popular media to public policy (Chumley and Harkness 2013; Kockelman 2016).¹⁷ Images of run-down homes circulate on nighttime news and in official reports. Blighted properties are constituted as such through personal experiences and redevelopment projects, enacted through everything from community maps to code enforcement. Certain qualities come to matter more than others, especially those associated with visual appearance or physical threats. Throughout this dissertation, I trace the “different modes of objectification” of vacant or blighted properties (Keane 2003:411), since “the particular way the ‘thing’ is constructed has effects” (Sawyer 2004:87). In doing so, I contribute to a broader literature on qualities and qualification to show how particular characteristics become “bundled” with property objects, and shape their meaning and use (Callon, Méadel, and Rabharisoa 2002; Keane 2003; Strathern 1992; see also Besky 2013; Fehérvári 2013; Mitchell 2011; Murphy 2014).

Property and personhood

Vacant properties are not only a material problem in post-Katrina New Orleans. They are entangled in a moral discourse that redefines what it means to be a responsible owner—and ultimately, a good neighbor—in the aftermath of the storm. Blight-fighting discourse connects a

¹⁷ Michel Callon, Cécile Méadel, and Vololona Rabeharisoa (2002) define “qualification” as a process that establishes “a constellation of characteristics, stabilized at least for a while, which are attached to [a] product and transform it temporarily into a tradable good in the market” (199).

property's condition to its owner's actions and intentions, not only relating persons and things, but also constituting particular *types* of persons as responsible or irresponsible, and as more or less deserving of inclusion in the city's future (Pottage and Mundy 2004).

Marilyn Strathern (1999) argues "ownership gathers things momentarily to a point by locating them in the owner, halting endless dissemination, effecting an identity" (177). This identity can take different forms. An object may become intertwined with one's sense of self, eliciting deep emotional attachments (Maurer and Schwab 2006; Miller 2005; Myers 1989; Radin 1982). An object may also connect its owner to others, affecting a collective identity. Homeownership, for example, can be a source of material wealth, yet can also be wrapped up in notions of citizenship and class. Homes can be passed down through generations of kin, solidifying social or political ties, even becoming an "inalienable possession" (Shipton 2009; Weiner 1992).¹⁸ But ownership can also become a burden through debt. Some scholars show how such property debates cause social relationships to unravel (Dudley 2002), while others point out that debt can create new ties across individuals with similar ties to debt (Elyachar 2005; Stout 2016).

Not every connection between property and personhood is achieved. Certain statuses are ascribed by others, imposed by external structures, or shaped through preexisting standards and classifications (Bowker and Starr 1999; Poon 2009). Often these statuses, when entangled with property, produce or reproduce social inequalities. Cheryl Harris (1993), for example, argues that notions of property are commonly "contingent on, intertwined with, and conflated with race" (1714; see also Massey and Denton 2003). The same is true with gender and class, among other identities (Cattelino 2008; Povinelli 2002; Walley 2013). Links between property and personhood have been used to deny property rights to different groups, from indigenous peoples

¹⁸ Inheritance can also be a source of inter-generational inequality (see Bear, Ho, Tsing, and Yanagisako 2015).

(Cronon 1983) to slum dwellers (Ghertner 2012). Historical and cross-cultural examples show a range of ways in which property relationships are shaped by ideologies of race and class, evolution and development, use and improvement, even cultural beliefs about authorship (Coombe 1998; Strathern 1988, 2005; Verdery and Humphrey 2004). Connections between property and personhood are not only singular and affective, but are also shaped by wider socioeconomic and political processes that influence both the experience of ownership, as well as the very criteria for acquiring property.

I examine how New Orleanians evaluate property and personhood through notions of labor—a notion that has long been tied to property and property rights, most famously in the political philosophy of John Locke. The politics of property, so often framed through struggles against privatization, or in defense of public goods, in this case centers on a property's condition as an index of its owner's actions and intentions. Discourse about responsible ownership since the storm highlights practices of maintenance and care. Property is understood as something that needs to constantly enacted—even if only through mundane actions such as mowing lawns or fixing broken windows (Blomley 2004).¹⁹ Labor communicates an owner's claim, while its absence is taken as a sign of abandonment. By *not* maintaining a property, or taking responsibility for its condition, owners are understood as forfeiting their property rights, as well as any claim to belonging in the post-storm community. Private property takes on a public face through these communicative actions. Responsibility, often tied to individual morality and self-governance, is also invoked to regulate private property in the name of the public good.²⁰ New

¹⁹ Similar discourses concerning visual appearance and social order are quite common, and usually reflect middle-class values or world-class aesthetics, though they vary from place to place (Harms 2012; Fehérváry 2013; Ghertner 2015; Gregory 1999; Murphy 2013; Safransky 2014).

²⁰ The concept of responsibility is often associated with neoliberalism (Muehlebach 2012; Shamir 2008), though it has a much longer genealogy (Guyer 2012; Trnka and Trundle 2014), one that includes alternative forms of responsibility that are not wed to atomized visions of social life.

Orleans officials draw on this socially and materially embedded vision of property to justify their blight-fighting interventions.

Governing property

After the storm, the city enacted a number of laws regulating the appearance and condition of vacant properties, primarily through municipal health, safety, and building codes. Since then, municipal regulations have only become more pervasive. Most accounts of private property—even those written by its critics—adopt the assumption that private property and government regulation are naturally and necessarily opposed. This didn't seem to be the case with code enforcement and other municipal blight-eradication efforts.

Over the past several decades, scholars have argued that a particularly model of private property has achieved near-universal embrace (Hann 1998; Harvey 2012).²¹ This model, emphasizing individual, exclusive ownership, is often tied to the rise of neoliberalism, though it has a much longer genealogy in Euro-American thinking. While this model is widely embraced, other scholars point out that private property is rarely as “sacrosanct” as it appears (Valverde 2011:293). Cities regularly govern private property through a range of municipal codes, such as noise ordinances and zoning bylaws, though these often remain invisible or relatively unremarked upon (Ben-Joseph 2005; Dubber 2005; Novak 1996).²² These regulations are not opposed to private property as such, but represent a “countertradition” in American law and

²¹ The idea of unbridled rights held by a single owner—what the 18th century jurist William Blackstone referred to as one's “sole and despotic dominion”—is the quintessential image of private property in both academic and everyday accounts. Even critical scholars hold fast to this image of private property. Chris Hann (1998) argues “the rigorous specification of private property rights is nowadays almost everywhere thought to be a necessary condition not only for improved economic performance but also for healthy societies founded on civil and political liberties (1).

²² “A large part of what cities do by way of legal regulation—and so a large part of how citizens interact with city hall—operates through property” (Valverde 2012:31).

policy “in which individual rights were inseparable from social duties, liberty was regulated, and the private and public were inextricably intertwined in a vision of a well-regulated society” (Novak 1996:x). This tradition, drawing heavily on the police powers, which Ernst Freund (1904) famously defined as “the power of promoting the public welfare by restraining and regulating the use of liberty and property” (iii; see also Dubber 2005; Neocleous 2000), undergirds almost every municipal regulation of property.²³

Urban governance does not involve a single logic or approach. Rather, it involves “both old and new gazes, premodern and modern knowledge formats, in a nonzero-sum manner and in unpredictable and shifting combinations” (Valverde 2011:281). Though many scholars have shed light on techniques of “seeing like a state,” the norms and forms of “seeing like a city” remain vastly understudied (Scott 1998; Valverde 2011). Mariana Valverde (2003:3) highlights the “pragmatic and plural objectives and rationalities of city governance,” especially when it comes to regulations of urban disorder, where regulations usually “have nothing to do with a general, rational plan, but are rather reactive and site-specific responses to complaints” (2011:282; see also Gandolfo 2013). I show how post-Katrina redevelopment projects converge “on different kinds of property owners and different kinds of properties” (Valverde 2011:292), governing urban disorders through inherently subjective categories such as blight (280). Code enforcement involves an “aesthetic governmentally” that polices through appearance rather than numbers and grids (Ghertner 2010, 2015; see also Harms 2012; Rabinow 1989). Seeing code enforcement merely as a form of social control, however, assumes that property in its natural state is unrestrained (Strathern 1985). I highlight the productive aspects of property regulations, since

²³ Indeed, “few legal scholars have reflected on the fact that only municipalities can force homeowner to fix up their yards, even if the risks to neighbors are purely aesthetic, and to repair the abutting public sidewalk out of their own pocket (Valverde 2012:25-26). It offers an alternative way of thinking about private property—though one that isn’t without controversy, as it has been also used to promote slum clearance, and today in various regulations of homelessness.

regulations not only constrain existing property ties, but also create new ones. Marilyn Strathern writes, “we should be thinking not of individual rights as against collective rights, but of different kinds of collective” (Strathern 1996:24). Code enforcement reoriented property rights and responsibilities, redefining post-storm recovery, as well as the content of the post-storm public.

Reprivatization

Blight-fighting efforts since Hurricane Katrina were created to untangle vacant properties from existing sociolegal relations so that they could be reprivatized under new owners. Private property would be unsettled only to be remade. Post-Katrina reprivatization, however, differs from cases of privatization studied by critical scholars, in which experts try to introduce private property through mapping, title registries, or other means of formalization (Hetherington 2009; Mitchell 2007). Most vacant properties in New Orleans were already privately owned. They were just not being used in “productive” ways, and in fact were constituted as a threat. Blight-fighting projects focused on reprivatizing properties under responsible owners, redistributing property, and thereby remaking property relations. It wasn’t property’s *form* that was changing (from collective or public property to private property), but rather its *substance* (from one particular owner to another).

I engage with work on property restitution as well as more general privatization schemes to understand how private property is made and remade (Fay and James 2008; Stark 1996; Verdery 2003). This work shows that questions about restitution and redistribution “forces the moral principles of restoration and justice to confront the difficult practices of determining ownership,

defining legitimate claimants and establishing evidence for claims” (Fay and James 2008:1). Code enforcement is both a technical endeavor, dealing with questions about public policy, and also a moral project, dealing with questions about fairness and inclusion. As with restitution, it also involved temporal questions, including how long to wait before enforcing building codes against property owners who might still be trying to rebuild. Code enforcement and other blight-fighting measures share characteristics with restitution processes more broadly, which “draw both on modernity’s romantic aspect, a nostalgia for the lost rootedness of landed identity and *gemeinschaft*, and on its technicist aspect, as restitution is implemented through state bureaucracies and often tied to plans for ‘development’” (1).

Recent work shows that privatization is neither a smooth nor inevitable process, but is shot through with conflicting goals and values, and inevitable misfires (Butler 2010; Mitchell 2007). In many cases, property restitution or redistribution involves explicit reflection on the moral aspects of ownership—whether these are questions about kinship and inheritance, or about rectifying past injustices (Fay and James 2008). But it also places property within a broader political economic context. As with markets, privatization relies on a range of social, material, and technical infrastructures in order to work (Callon 1998; Elyachar 2010; MacKenzie, Muniesa, and Siu 2008; Mitchell 1998). While policymakers in New Orleans often talk about code enforcement as a way to return properties to “the market,” the process actually constitutes markets—themselves regulated and constrained in particular ways. Katherine Verdery’s (2003) study of decollectivization in post-socialist Romania, for example, reveals how farmers given title to land often weren’t able to secure capital for seeds, fertilizer, or tools. They were owners, she argues, yet “obtaining rights often failed to generate ownership that was effective” (4).

Reprivatization efforts in post-Katrina New Orleans face similar challenges. While the city relies on auctions to redistribute properties in certain neighborhoods, they use other strategies in neighborhoods without active real estate markets, experimenting with alternatives to private property, creating urban gardens or pocket parks, often owned and maintained by community groups or neighborhood associations.²⁴ The city also acts as a “steward” of thousands of properties that they maintain (though don’t necessarily own) while they wait for real estate markets to rebound. Blight-eradication projects not only redistribute private property, but also redistribute the very potential for privatization, helping some neighborhoods recover, while seemingly abandoning other neighborhoods to reckon with the storm’s ruins on their own.

It takes a lot of work to create private property, to keep it functioning, and to undo it when circumstances change. Residents, bureaucrats, and planners in post-Katrina New Orleans advocate not only renewed versions of private ownership, but also argue for alternatives, experimenting with property’s forms and functions. The possible outcome of this experiment is still unclear. What is certain, however, is that as the city reimagines its futures in the face of increasing economic and environmental challenges, private property is not only offered as a solution, but remains, in many ways, a problem.

Fieldwork in unstable places

I was one of the millions of volunteers who came down to New Orleans to help rebuild after Hurricane Katrina. And like many of these volunteers, I became attached to the city in ways that

²⁴ Shannon Dawdy (2010) argue- “the grip of private property relations is loosened” in contexts of abandonment, allowing new claims to arise on newly formed “commons” (17).

I never anticipated.²⁵ I came through a service-learning program sponsored by my university in summer 2007. I worked for Operation Helping Hands, a non-profit rebuilding organization run by Catholic Charities, and based out of St. Raymond's Church in the Gentilly neighborhood.²⁶ After the storm, the church and adjacent school were closed by the archdiocese; the cafeteria was converted into a tool shed, the rectory into volunteer housing, and the church, its pews and alter torn out, was used for storage.

I spent two summers (2007 and 2008) working for the organization as a site leader in charge of volunteer crews.²⁷ I spent most of that first summer gutting homes and preparing them to be rebuilt. As the organization transitioned from gutting to rehabilitation work, it soon became clear that my talents were not in construction. I was inept with a circular saw, but could effectively wield a paintbrush, so supervisors put me in charge of painting crews. I spent my second summer overseeing volunteer groups as they scraped, caulked, and painted houses. Working on homes allowed me to meet many residents, since neighbors would come by and offer snacks and drinks, and ask where people were from. They also shared stories about the storm and its aftermath as well as ongoing struggles with recovery. I kept in touch with many residents that I met during this time, and some even became my earliest informants.

²⁵ I often tell people that my decision to go to graduate school was really just a way for me to have a reason to keep coming back to New Orleans. That's not too far from the truth.

²⁶ Not everyone who worked at OHH was Catholic, or even religious. Like most post-storm rebuilding organizations, OHH was run by a mix of young leftists, committed locals, and dozens of Americorps volunteers.

²⁷ I continued volunteering with the organization during fieldwork trips between 2010 and 2012.



Figure 2. The author painting a house. Photo by Marisa Gaither. 2008.

I made two more summer trips as a graduate student in 2010 and 2011 before conducting fifteen months of fieldwork between June 2012 and September 2013. I spent most of this time living in two neighborhoods: the Lower Garden District (which didn't flood during Hurricane Katrina) and Mid-City (which did).²⁸ The Lower Garden District sat between the more affluent Garden District and the up-and-coming Warehouse District. My block in the Lower Garden District was undergoing rapid gentrification after decades of decline, as people recognized the value of living above sea level. Mid-City, where I stayed for the majority of my fieldwork, was a predominantly working and middle-class neighborhood. Most of its residents were black, though

²⁸ During the summers of 2007 and 2008, I lived for a short period of time across the river, in a town called Marrero, and then in Gentilly.

the neighborhood also had sizable white and Latino populations.²⁹ Mid-City was also gentrifying, and during the three-year span I stayed there, many new shops, bars, and restaurants opened up, and rental prices were skyrocketing.³⁰ But many parts of the neighborhood still struggled to regain their pre-storm populations, and run-down properties could be found on almost every block.³¹ The storm was present in ways that it wasn't in unflooded neighborhoods. One of my favorite coffee shops even had a blue line painted along one wall marking the height of Katrina's waters. I was reminded of the storm every time I stirred half-and-half into my coffee before sitting down to write field notes.

When I started conducting dissertation interviews in 2010, I was interested in people's experience of recovery, and their struggles to rebuild. After talking to several residents, however, I noticed that the way they talked about recovery was through its shortcomings—embodied, in many cases, in the vacant properties still lining city streets. They complained about blight, a term I didn't recall hearing very often during my previous summers in the city. So I began asking residents about it, and soon found that it wasn't hard finding people who wanted to talk about blight. It was an issue that seemed to concern people across race and class lines. I interviewed people from neighborhoods across the city: Broadmoor, Central City, Hollygrove, Lakeview, New Orleans East, the Seventh Ward, the Lower and Upper Ninth Wards, and Mid-City. I would often receive an email or phone call from someone who had heard that I was “interested in blight” and wondered if I had insights on how the code enforcement process worked (I did), or if

²⁹ According to the 2010 census, Mid-City's population at the time was 55 percent black, 27 percent white, and 15 percent Hispanic.

³⁰ My roommates during fieldwork had to move out shortly after I left, in June 2013, because their rent was being raised by 40 percent.

³¹ The entire neighborhood lost about a quarter of its population between 2000 and 2010.

I wanted to buy the blighted property next door to them (I didn't).³² I conducted most of my interviews in homes, though also conducted some in coffee shops, parks, or community centers.



Figure 3. Map of primary neighborhood fieldsites with Hurricane Katrina flooding overlaid. Map by author.

If one neighborhood provided a focal point for my research, it was Gentilly.³³ A number of my co-workers at St. Raymond's were from the area, and they put me in touch with siblings, cousins, neighbors, and friends. I also felt that the neighborhood had been overlooked by academics covering the aftermath of Katrina.³⁴ Gentilly was a relatively new neighborhood, as far as New Orleans neighborhoods go; it was developed in the mid-twentieth century on newly drained swamp. Its residents were mostly black and middle-class. Its homes were built on

³² Their disappointment at the latter response, to me, only indicated how dire their situation had become: the prospect of a young, twenty-something year old stranger moving in was something appealing—at least, more appealing than what was currently next door.

³³ Gentilly actually refers to a number of smaller neighborhoods, though many residents, both inside and outside the area, also refer to it as Gentilly. I refer to them as Gentilly for brevity's sake, and because they were connected through a larger "Gentilly Civic Improvement Association."

³⁴ Though there are exceptions (see Kroll-Smith, Baxter, and Jenkins 2015).

concrete slabs, with brick facades and large grassy yards, and chain restaurants dotted the neighborhood's main thoroughfares. Gentilly didn't have the "classic" New Orleans aesthetic found in older neighborhoods, though it was one of the most heavily Katrina-damaged areas of the city. Its population dropped by roughly one-third between 2000 and 2010.³⁵

I started attending neighborhood meetings in Gentilly and Mid-City early in my fieldwork, and expanded to several other neighborhoods as my research progressed. Blight was a recurrent issue at these meetings, though it wasn't the only one; crime, schools, potholes, and noise also frequented their agendas. Neighborhood associations are never perfectly representative of their constituents. At many meetings, homeowners usually outnumber renters, and their leadership tends to be older, more educated, and more socially or politically connected than the average resident. I would go to some meetings with single-digit turnouts, while others would draw several hundred attendees, especially if a controversial issue was on the agenda. But these meetings provided important data on how certain residents constructed the neighborhood, both discursively and administratively, through organizing activities, remaking their communities in often mundane ways. This was especially true as neighborhood associations became active in the city's fight against blight.

Most neighborhood associations didn't work in isolation. Rather, they collaborated with non-profit organizations, philanthropic foundations, or community development corporations, many of which emerged after Katrina and were revising their missions to address changes in the post-storm landscape. These partners often served as mediators between neighborhood associations and city government, making any "non-governmental" designation rather meaningless. Many also provided technical support, contributing in particular to blight-fighting

³⁵ It dropped around 41,000 to 28,000 residents. This number excludes the Lakeshore neighborhoods, which were largely unaffected by flooding.

projects through community mapping or acquiring properties for urban gardens, or helped neighborhood associations share strategies by organizing grassroots development workshops. I participated in many of these activities in order to understand these emergent collaborations.

I was also interested in municipal policies themselves, and how they were shaping post-storm recovery efforts. During my first summer working for Operation Helping Hands, one of my supervisors asked volunteers to spend a week mowing overgrown lots. The city was citing properties with high grass, he explained; we were mowing them so their owners wouldn't be fined. This was my introduction to the strange world of municipal code enforcement. I remained interested in municipal law and policy over the coming years, especially conflicts around public housing, but only delved into code enforcement in earnest after Mayor Landrieu unveiled his blight-eradication strategy in September 2010, as I was finishing up my first summer of fieldwork. By the time I returned the following summer, the newly formed Code Enforcement and Hearings Bureau was conducting inspections, hearings, and auctions. I began attending code enforcement hearings because they gave me a convenient place to observe the day-to-day work of municipal governance. I sat through more than three hundred hearings over the next several years. Hearing officials were accustomed to neighbors coming to sit in on hearings for properties on their street, but they at first didn't understand why someone would want to observe hearings for many properties, as I did, much less observe for hours on end. After a while, however, we became familiar, with ample time to chat during the transitions between cases.³⁶

I also traced the pre- and post-hearing activities, interviewing code enforcement staff and shadowing building inspectors, studying the entire "pipeline," as officials called it. I also examined the public-facing aspects of the code enforcement process, including monthly

³⁶ Instead of writing a dissertation (or "paper," as they called it) on code enforcement, they suggested I write a movie, and even selected actors and actresses to portray them in the cinematic version of their work lives.

“BlightStat” meetings, where department heads met to review performance measures and discuss new strategies.³⁷ I traced changes in code enforcement policy and practice, and spent many hours in city archives watching fuzzy video recordings of old City Council meetings. I also witnessed changes in real time, as policymakers revised the municipal code in response to new regulatory and redevelopment priorities in 2013, just before I completed my long-term fieldwork. Process was not only an analytic, but was also an empirical reality that I had to grapple with (Moore 1978; Riles 2004). I studied a city under construction—or reconstruction—as well as an emergent set of policies and practices responding to these changes.

It was a challenge to undertake research in such an unstable place (Mertz, Warren, and Greenhouse 2002). Signs of recovery and ruination were everywhere. I started taking pictures of nearly everything I saw, usually on bike rides around the city. My commute downtown for hearings, in particular, gave me a view of the continuities and changes in one stretch of the city.

I usually left my apartment around 8:30 a.m. to get to the hearings, which started at 9. The first thing I encountered was the vacant house across the street. One side had been painted after the storm, but the rest was in disrepair. Vines covered the roof and the windows were boarded. My neighbors never mentioned the owner’s name when I tried to ask them about the house. They merely said that “he stopped working on it” or “he really needs to clean up the place.” Whatever personal connections they had seemed to be forgotten. “He” was just another absent owner.

I turned down Orleans Avenue and moved past brightly colored shotgun-style homes interspersed with run-down buildings and overgrown lots. I passed the remains of an abandoned church with a worn sign facing the street that read “We Are Coming Back,” though it never did. Further down was the former Lafitte Housing Projects. Most of its units were demolished after

³⁷ This was modeled on “Crimestat” and other audit-based approaches to governmental transparency embraced by the Landrieu administration, and by many other cities across the country.

the storm and replaced with mixed-income apartments and town homes.³⁸ More than five years since redevelopment began, however, large swaths of the grounds remained empty. Across the street from the Lafitte Projects was a restaurant as well as a string of crumbling homes, one of which collapsed during an overnight storm. I stopped to take pictures as a city inspector pulled up. He walked over to the pile, hands on hips, and shooed away some neighborhood kids running along the sidewalk.



Figure 4. Collapsed house. Photo by author. 2012.

There was a two-story vacant house on the same street that had been painted bright yellow after the storm, but now vines crawled up the sides and covered the roof. People would sit on the front porch and take refuge from the sun. Empty beer cans littered the yard. One day there was a bulldozer parked in the empty lot next door. By the next day the yellow house was gone.

I would sometimes cut through an area of Mid-City razed in 2010 to make way for a new hospital complex. The city's decisions to demolish twenty-five square blocks—which included

³⁸ Many residents protested their destruction, while others supported redevelopment as a way to lessen the “concentrated poverty” of modern public housing (see Arena 2012).

many homes rebuilt after the storm—was widely contested by residents and preservationists, though the city eventually moved forward.³⁹ For months the site remained empty, but once construction began it moved at a frenetic pace. Each morning, workers in neon vests guided trucks in and out of the construction area. Pile drivers drowned out any traffic noise and raised huge clouds of dust. I would hold my breath as I pedaled by. Near the end of my fieldwork, a steel skeleton had begun to rise, though it would be several more years before the hospital would open.



Figure 5. Hospital about a year away from completion. Photo by author. 2014.

On my way home I circled through the residential streets along Tulane Avenue. The area had been in rough shape even before Katrina, though people envisioned that it would change in the coming years with the new hospital. In fact, a defunct brewery had already been converted into lofts, though its imposing gates and ubiquitous security cameras made it look more like a

³⁹ Preservationists scored a small victory when they convinced the city to move about eighty historic buildings to new sites. It was not uncommon to see a home with its roof shorn off being driven down the street on the back of a truck. These homes were supposed to provide “infill” development in other neighborhoods, but after a few years, most of them still sat empty and without roofs, their insides destroyed by the elements.

prison than a residential space. A friend of mine lived in the neighborhood. On one side of her house was an empty lot where we would occasionally throw a frisbee. On the other side was a large, dilapidated house, and an upturned mattress hung out a second-story window. Neighbors told her that the property hadn't been touched since the storm.

Chapter outline

This dissertation provides a snapshot of some of the changes—and lack of changes—seen in certain New Orleans neighborhoods over a ten-year period, from 2005 to 2015. I trace the movement—uneven and not always unidirectional—from disaster recovery to a more general form of urban renewal, which involves a set of policies and practices now deployed in many cities to combat blight. Over the course of six chapters and a conclusion, I highlight the numerous aspects of property that have animated debates about post-storm recovery and community. While each chapter covers a distinct topic, Chapters 1 and 2, Chapters 3 and 4, and Chapters 5 and 6 are also paired through particular forms of engagement with property. Throughout, I use property to move across empirical and conceptual scales. Property discourse can “make the abstract concrete” (Musaraj 2011:90), but it can also make the concrete abstract. The following chapters trace processes of concretization and abstraction *through* property, as both a concept and object, and across various sites (Joseph 2014).

The first two chapters are paired through the notion of investment, and cover the period from 2005-2007. They explore how residents, bureaucrats, and planners imbued storm-damaged properties with potential through contested visions and promises of recovery. In Chapter 1, I recount the disaster and its effects at an everyday level, as people lost a sense of normal, and

imagined recovery as a project to rebuild normal. Many ended up investing storm-damaged properties—both their own and their neighbors’—with the expectation that these properties would be restored. In Chapter 2, I recount post-storm planning debates about the city’s footprint, which involved competing concerns about viability, on one hand, and the right to return, on the other. These debates invested storm-damaged properties with political significance, tying them to wider battles over racialized belonging after Katrina.

The next two chapters are paired through the notion of transition, and cover the period from 2007-2010. By the second anniversary of the storm, recovery efforts had begun to slow, evident in the tens of thousands of vacant properties remaining in the city. In Chapter 3, I show how residents who had initially imagined that their neighbors would return grappled with these properties, especially as many began to decay, undermining their previous visions of recovery. In Chapter 4, I retrace the development of post-storm blight-eradication policies, which tried to establish increasing material standards for rebuilding storm-damaged properties. I show how these policies grappled with questions about private rights and the public goods—questions raised against the backdrop of federal and state laws that shaped the city’s eventual redevelopment strategy.

The final two chapters are paired through the notion of sorting, and cover the period from 2010-2013. Both chapters explore how residents and bureaucrats distinguished properties that were being worked on from those that had been abandoned, and in doing so, engaged in reflexive projects of remaking the post-storm community, albeit at different scales. In Chapter 5, I describe code enforcement hearings, and their logic for designating properties as blighted or not. In Chapter 6, I recount one neighborhood association’s efforts to remap their community through property condition surveys, and to plan ways to repurpose still-vacant properties.

In the conclusion, which begins with a retrospective from the ten year anniversary of Hurricane Katrina in 2015, I explore the role of market-based redevelopment strategies in New Orleans and other so-called shrinking cities. New Orleans has historically been seen as an exceptional city—its food, music, and culture marking it as the antithesis of modern, American life (Hirsch and Logsdon 1992). Today, however, it is more commonly seen as a prime example of the economic and environmental challenges many cities now face. New Orleans is lumped together with Baltimore, Philadelphia, Detroit, and other post-industrial cities as experts come up with strategies responding to reverse decades worth of population loss and economic decline. New Orleans is also lumped together with places like Miami, New York, and other coastal cities at risk from rising sea levels, as experts try to build more sustainable cities. What does it mean that America's urban future is being imagined through post-Katrina New Orleans?

CHAPTER 1: REBUILDING NORMAL

Calvin returned a month after the storm. He wound his way through the Seventh Ward streets on his way to his home, just as he had done a million times before. But this time he struggled to keep his eyes on the road. They were pulled away by the mud-caked cars, bleached-brown grass, and water lines ringing every house. Like most people, Calvin was not prepared for the uncanny sights and overwhelming sense of disorder. Nothing was familiar. He accidentally passed by his own house, not recognizing it from the street. When he stepped out of the car, there were no sounds, no movement, no signs of life.

Calvin told me this story two years later as we sat on his front porch. I was painting his neighbor's house with a group of volunteers, and Calvin had bought us water to show his appreciation. Over the next week we would chat several times a day. Each time, he would share bits of his "Katrina story," which involved evacuating to a friend's house in Baton Rouge, then moving to a cousin's house in Dallas, where he stayed with his wife until he came back to New Orleans. However, our conversations quickly turned to the recovery process. His neighborhood was struggling, he told me. Many of his neighbors couldn't afford to rebuild, and relied on volunteers for help. So far, only a few of them had returned. "She's coming back," he said, nodding towards the house we were painting, "but work has been slow. Everything around here's been slow."

On one of my last days working on his neighbor's house, we sat on his porch talking. Heavy beads of sweat dripped down my face, drawn out by the summer heat. Calvin was eager to move back into his house and start reestablishing some of the routines unsettled by the storm. But as he looked across the street at the empty houses that covered the block, he wondered aloud

what kind of life he would have. As soon as the sun went down, a heavy silence would cover the neighborhood, and Calvin would be reminded that he was alone. After a while, Calvin sighed and said to me, “You know, for us, the first casualty of Hurricane Katrina was *normal*.”

These words seemed to capture many residents’ experience of the storm and its aftermath. Such sentiments were expressed through stories about being displaced, coming home and sorting through waterlogged furniture, searching for a place to buy groceries, waiting to move out of temporary trailers, or yearning for neighbors to return. Normal was ubiquitous in its absence, in everything that *wasn’t* normal after Katrina. But normal was also present in attempts to salvage it from the storm’s ruins—through memories as well as material practices of rebuilding. What did it mean that so many residents conceptualized post-storm recovery as about recapturing, reclaiming, and ultimately rebuilding normal?

For a while I thought these ideas about normal were simply nostalgic, predicated on sentimental visions of pre-storm life. But treating people’s invocations of normal this way seemed to miss how they came into being *after* the storm, and continued to be shaped by encounters with the storm’s traces, and through the slow recovery process. Rebuilding normal, for most people, wasn’t just about reproducing the social and material worlds ruined by the storm; it was about reconstituting a sense of time and place. From the beginning, however, residents would need to make compromises and reckon with spaces that had been altered, perhaps indefinitely, by the disaster. Rebuilding normal involved actively making—and not only re-making—social life in ways that unsettle any clear distinction between the pre- and post-storm city.

In this chapter, I trace how normal was remembered, reanimated, and reconciled through confrontations with storm-damaged spaces.⁴⁰ I draw on work on materiality and material culture to show how certain things came to shape post-storm life (Bennet 2010; Brown 2004; Ingold 2007; Keane 2003; Miller 2005).⁴¹ While much of this work underscores the co-constitution of persons and things in and through time, I highlight the “disjunctures and fractures [. . .] and the likelihood of noncontemporaneous practices in which [. . .] there are cataracts of objects never fully assimilable to any ‘context’” (Pinney 2005:257-269). To underscore these intermingling temporalities—evoked through the storm’s residues—I also draw on work on ruins and ruination, which grapple with the material legacies of violence, and how they shape contemporary spaces and subjectivities (Dawdy 2010; DeSilvey and Edensor 2013; Gordillo 2014; Stoler 2008), as well as work on haunting, which shows how material things can embody past traumas, and can have uncanny effects in the present (Garcia 2010; Gordon 2008; Navaro-Yashin 2012).

Shannon Dawdy (2006) writes that anthropological studies of disaster tend to focus “on the major event of the disaster itself (hurricane, earthquake, drought, etc.) and policy reaction, rather than on the day-to-day micro processes through which individuals, households, and neighborhoods define *recovery* by moving around debris, burying past living surfaces, and rearranging the landscape” (720). She notes how the first month after Katrina was “a special period during which people [we]re highly attuned to the sorting and deposition of artifacts, the demolition of structures, the redesign of cities, and the movement of dirt itself. Perhaps under no other conditions are the relations between people and their landscape quite so self-conscious or quite so active” (720). These “relations between people and their landscape,” I argue, were

⁴⁰ Most of these stories were gathered from people who came back and wanted to rebuild normal. There aren’t many from people who couldn’t return and whose lives were never able to return to normal. Nor are there many stories from people who found a new normal in some other city.

⁴¹ This work builds on many different empirical and philosophical traditions, from speculative realism and object-oriented ontologies, actor-network theory, Hegelian work on objectification, Peircian work on semiotics, and approaches in political ecology and post-humanism, as well as archaeology.

largely framed through the concept of normal, and of rebuilding as oriented towards a future in which normal, normalcy, or normality would be restored. Memories and material legacies of the storm would “mediate future possibilities” (Keane 2003:418), a form of haunting that, as Avery Gordon (2008) argues, produces a “something-to-be-done” (xvi). The residues of the storm—both the things that survived as well as the memories of things that didn’t—shaped subsequent rebuilding practices.

The storm and subsequent recovery efforts involved subjective and intersubjective experiences (Csordas 2008; Dejarlais 1997; Kockelman 2016; Stewart 2007). Normal was a concept people used to make sense of the storm and share their experiences with others. Many of my interlocutors could talk about their personal losses in one breath, and in the next describe helping a neighbor gut their house, relating their experiences as part of the same process. It was these shared causes and consequences of the disaster, forged largely through shared elements of the recovery, which shaped notions of rebuilding normal. Everyone had a “Katrina story,” and more importantly, people began to recognize their story as one among other “Katrina stories,” even if there were differences across race and class, or across neighborhoods. This wider discourse about rebuilding normal cast recovery as a certain form of anticipation. Normal was not a neutral term, but came to embody an imperative to rebuild. It produced “a collectively held sense of promise or at the very least probability, rather than a mere sense of possibility; a futurity structured around the feeling of expectation and entitlement rather than mere hope.”

(Muehlebach and Shoshan 2012). It framed rebuilding as a norm—one with particular social and moral force.⁴²

⁴² I therefore attend to “the variety of ways in which norms are lived and inhabited, aspired to, reached for and consummated” (Mahmood 2005:23). Like middle class consumers in post-socialist Hungary, residents picking up the pieces of their lives after the storm focused on “creating spheres of normalcy in spaces within their control” (Fehérváry 2013:234).

Casualties

Katrina began as a tropical depression over the Atlantic Ocean in mid-August 2005. It developed into a tropical storm as it moved across the Caribbean, and into a roaring hurricane before crossing over southeast Florida. The hurricane grew from a category one to a category three storm before taking a sharp turn north as it transformed into a category five monster.⁴³ It was the storm that many meteorologists had warned about—the one whose surge might topple levees and flood entire cities in coastal Louisiana, and it was heading straight for New Orleans. On Sunday, August 28, 2005, the day before it was scheduled to make landfall, the front page of the *Times-Picayune* announced: “Katrina Takes Aim.”

All around the city, residents prepared for the coming storm. They boarded up windows, cleaned out refrigerators, and packed for the days-long exodus beyond the storm’s path. They spent hours on the road in bumper-to-bumper traffic. Trips that normally took a few hours lasted a full day. Lines at gas stations stretched the length of football fields. Lawmakers prohibited price gouging, but it still happened. Evacuees were exhausted by the time they were able to settle into motels, shelters, or a sibling’s spare room. Some stayed up to watch the news. Most eventually fell asleep.

Many residents chose to stay. Some had weathered past hurricanes: Betsy in 1965, Camille in 1969, and a dozen smaller ones since then. The previous year, Hurricane Ivan had prompted a mandatory evacuation of the city. At the last second, the storm turned east, as they always seemed to do. People were tired of spending so much time and money on evacuating. They

⁴³ Category five is a measure of the Saffir-Simpson scale, which measures a hurricane’s strength based on wind speed. Hurricane Katrina was a category five—the scale’s highest rating—until making landfall. By the time it reached New Orleans, it had been downgraded to a category three storm.

would ride out the storm with residents who never evacuated as a matter of principle.⁴⁴ But many people had no choice. They couldn't afford to evacuate, even if they wanted to, or didn't have access to transportation. Those remaining in the city stocked up on chips and crackers and beer; unpacked generators, flashlights, and batteries; filled their bathtubs with water; and moved their cars to high ground. As night came they heard the wind roar and felt the walls tremble and shake. Some stayed up placing buckets under leaky roofs. Most eventually fell asleep.

It wasn't a direct hit. Katrina grazed the city, dumping several inches of rain, and sending screaming winds that sent roof shingles flying. There were reports of minor damage as well as flooding in some neighborhoods, but nothing compared to the more dire predications made over the previous days. New Orleans dodged another bullet, reporters claimed. Evacuees were relieved at the news and expected they would be able to return to the city in a few days, once they were sure the power was restored and roads were reopened. As the day went on, however, reports came of breached levees in Lakeview, Gentilly, and the Lower Ninth Ward. People in the city noticed that even though the storm was over, the water kept rising.⁴⁵ It crawled up front steps, seeped under front doors, and continued to rise as people rushed into their attics. Many people didn't have a chance to grab anything. "In less than three hours I watched everything that I had worked for for forty years go away," one woman told me. "That's mind-boggling. I mean, that's *mind-boggling*."

For the next few days evacuees remained glued to their television sets. Each minute seemed to bring worsening news. There were reports of roving bands of vigilantes, bodies floating in the water, police officers shooting at people trying to escape into neighboring

⁴⁴ The storm also came at end of the month, when many residents were waiting for welfare, social security, or employment checks (Quigley 2007).

⁴⁵ Those living near levee breaches experienced more rapid destruction—a wall of water that knocked over houses, flipped cars, and consumed into neighborhoods, sometimes within seconds.

parishes. Newspaper articles described “an unimaginable scene of water, fear, and suffering” (Shea 2005), and printed images of people sleeping on the convention center floor, grieving over an elderly relative slumped in a wheelchair, or rowing boats down streets with their heads just inches below the power lines. Most evacuees knew someone who had stayed and scoured lists from the Red Cross, posted messages on Craigslist, even exchanged information in the comments sections of online news articles trying to track down loved ones (Wilson 2005). People zoomed in and out of satellite photos seeking information about their homes, but even those with the best mental maps of the city had a hard time deciphering the images of rooftops peeking above the water, landmarks and street signs submerged. “It was painful and horrible to be watching it from wherever you evacuated to,” one woman later told me. “I had to stop [watching] after a while. I couldn’t take it, not knowing what was going on with your property, with all your things, your neighbors.”

Most people who were stuck in the city didn’t know the extent of the chaos. Compared to the cacophony of information available to those watching on television, many people in the city faced complete radio silence. Many people were trapped in attics or on rooftops and were trying to figure out a way to escape. Some commandeered boats and made their way to higher ground, while others waded through the water, carrying children on their backs, clutching plastic bags filled with clothes, food, and whatever else they could salvage. Thousands gathered on highways or outside the Superdome and waited for buses to pick them up.⁴⁶ But hours, then days went by. Temperatures hovered in the nineties and there was little shade from the sun. People began to suffer from dehydration and heat stroke. Several died from exposure. When the buses finally

⁴⁶ Though media coverage depicted a near-Hobbesian state of anarchy, scholars have pointed to the overwhelming evidence of compassion and selflessness among the storm’s victims (see Solnit 2010).

arrived and people remaining in the city were finally evacuated, they joined the tens thousands who had evacuated before them. But for many, this was only the beginning of the disaster.

Over the next few weeks, storm victims were resettled in cities around the country. Some stayed with family, but many others made temporary homes of motels, trailers, shelters, stadiums, cars, even tents. Most people had only planned to be gone a few days, but were now being told that it might be months before they could return home. They didn't have jobs or cell phones or access to their bank accounts.⁴⁷ Many were still trying to get in touch with family members separated during the storm. They needed to find clothes and a place to stay, a school to for their children, medicine for chronic health issues. Meanwhile, they heard pundits and politicians question whether their city should rebuilt at all. Residents found themselves missing little things they left behind. "Here I was, just evacuated, still in my clothes and all smelly, and then the only thing I wanted was to be back," one woman told me. "I was in a strange city, and then I missed my city. I missed my home."

Numbers began to filter in. Almost two thousand dead, with many more still missing. More than four hundred thousand people displaced. Billions of dollars in damages. Years—maybe decades—of rebuilding ahead. But the disaster had further casualties. Commentators predicted the country would talk about pre- and post-Katrina like they talked about pre- and post-9/11. The storm shook the country's faith in its elected leaders. It sparked conversations about race and class, poverty and inequality, and the decades-long erosion of the welfare state. The subtitle for the award-winning documentary, *Trouble the Water*, was: "It's not about a hurricane. It's about America." In one memorable scene, Ninth Ward resident Kimberly Roberts sits with her cousin in the back of a moving van after being evacuated. Her cousin said she "can't believe all of what

⁴⁷ Many communities welcomed displaced residents and donated money, food, clothes, even cars for them to use. Schools opened their classrooms, and stores and restaurants hired workers. But some communities also worried about crime—a fear stoked by media reports that gave displaced residents a bad image.

we're seeing on TV. That's the type of stuff you see, you know, in third world countries. This is America. It shouldn't be happening here." Kimberly responded: "They treated us like we was [sic] un-American. Like we lost our citizenship." Her cousin continued: "They cannot say that they did not have the means. Our government is supposed to be one of the greatest, but it's proven to me that, hey, if you don't have money and you don't have status, you don't have a government."

Normal was the most profound casualty of the storm. It was washed away as water consumed the city. It withered as people waited on rooftops and sidewalks for help. It steeped in toxic waters while people waited to come home. One expert predicted that it would take "five years before the region attains a semblance of normalcy" (Walsh, Lewis, and McQuaid 2005). But residents held onto the promise that normal would return. It was the only thing keeping some of them going.

President George W. Bush gave a speech in Jackson Square two weeks after the storm. French Quarter bars and strip clubs were already up and running; like other areas along the river, it had escaped serious flooding. Yet water still remained in many neighborhoods, and most residents were still displaced. President Bush promised to reunite families separated during the storm, to deliver medical supplies, social security checks, and unemployment benefits, to get people out of shelters and into rental units, to return basic services and repair vital infrastructure. He promised to return things to normal. "We will do what it takes. We will stay as long as it takes to help citizens rebuild their communities and their lives. And all who question the future of the Crescent City need to know: There is no way to imagine America without New Orleans, and this great city will rise again."

Returning home

Sharon turned her key but the lock was rusted through. She ran her shoulder into the door but it still wouldn't budge. Her husband, James, came up the steps behind her, toolbox in hand. When she told him the door was jammed they both laughed. After spending two months in her brother's spare room, and several hours on the road, they had finally come home, only to be stuck on their front porch.

James eventually used a crowbar to pry open the door. A thin stream of light revealed scattered debris, upturned furniture, and mold crawling up the walls. Sharon took a deep breath, pulled a bandana over her mouth, and stepped inside. The floor was still muddy and wet. She maneuvered around the things strewn across the ground. Sharon didn't think anything could be salvaged. An entire life's worth of stuff was withered, discolored, warped beyond recognition. The floorboards were cracked and uneven. Even the walls bowed. She caught a glimpse of a photograph on the wall, but couldn't make out any of the faces. It took her a few seconds to remember that it had been sitting in water and that the colors had been washed out. But then she found her coffee table in the kitchen with a glass statue—an angel—on top. “The statue was just sitting there, in the same spot when we left, like the flood never happened,” she told me. To her, it was a sign that she was meant to rebuild.

Almost every resident had similar stories about returning to their flood-ravaged homes for the first time. It was an experience that was both intimate and uncanny, mediated by a profound sense of disorder. One woman recalled stepping into an “alternate universe” where everything was “out of place.” Her things had “swirled around,” floated to different rooms, and were covered in mud or muck. Another man told me that some of his things were swept into his front

yard. He found underwear hanging from tree branches. “It just didn’t make any sense,” he told me. “Everything was out of whack. Everything, you know, was just everywhere. You forgot where you were. You couldn’t believe this was your home. It was just this big nightmare, but then you didn’t wake up.”



Figure 6. An ungutted house. Photo by author. 2007.

Many people experienced their first trip home as another moment in the drawn-out disaster that stretched for months, even years, after the storm. For some it was even more traumatic than the storm itself. They had to face the brute reality of the disaster, which until then many had only experienced from a distance through media coverage. Lucky people returned to find their homes intact, but would have to decide whether they could rebuild or if it would be easier to raze it and start over. They would also have to sort through their items and figure out what they could salvage and what they would toss to the curb. But many people returned only to find concrete steps. Their homes and belongings had been swept away. Some decided then and there to wash

their hands of the city. They simply couldn't handle the loss. One woman told me that her neighbor took one look at his house and never came back. He had a heart attack soon after.⁴⁸

The storm left marks on the very bodies of its victims. People had to smell the rot, see the water lines, and feel the carpet squish under their feet. Returning home was a thoroughly embodied experience. People developed strange rashes from the toxic dust that covered nearly every inch of the city. Many reported suffering from "Katrina cough" for months after returning. Others developed asthma, infections, or heart troubles. One resident saw a direct connection between the storm's ruins and their storm-shattered selves. "Half of us have swollen like soaked rafters. Half of us have withered like tide-poisoned boxwood. Moldy walls are stained teeth, wind-frayed curtains our shaggy hair. Some of us have aged a hundred years, like our Van Winkle houses. Some of us have spooked-stallion eyes. We are a mess" (Lackey 2010:27).

Residents commonly narrated their return through the things they lost: furniture, clothes, dishes, trophies, photo albums, records, instruments, toys, books, televisions, and cars; mortgage records, birth certificates, drivers licenses, social security cards, and bank statements. All of these things constituted layers of meaningful order, simultaneously semiotic and material, through which people mapped their life's movements and journeys (Miller 2009). Most items were destroyed outright; pictures were washed of their images, books and records turned into mush, furniture disintegrated. Renee Martin told an interviewer: "The stuff, I guess by being wet, had mildew everywhere. And I had some personal things. Some stuff that you can't get back. Like all my grandbabies' pictures, and long friends' phone numbers. That stuff you can't find. That stuff you can't get again if you don't know where they're at. Everything I was working for, look at it,

⁴⁸ New Orleans had a relatively high rate of home ownership before the storm, exceeding the national average in many neighborhoods. Homes served as a form of equity and intergenerational wealth, especially for the the city's black working and middle classes. They also reflected settlement patterns in a city where many born-and-raised residents tend to stay, and it was common to find generations of kin living on the same block. Yet even those who rented often developed strong connections to their neighborhoods.

it's gone down the drain. And when I went in there, I didn't even much try to save nothin'. I was more afraid to touch somethin' because I was afraid that I was gonna get somethin'. That's why I didn't touch none of the stuff, and I just left it there and come on out" (Vollen and Ying 2008:221).



*Figure 7.*Steps to nowhere. Photo by author. 2013.

Storm waters ravaged the mundane and mass-produced alongside the cherished, the one-of-a-kind, and the irreplaceable. Many people were struck by the totality of destruction, the heaps of items at once familiar and strange (DeSilvey 2006). They were most distraught at losing photo albums, mementos, and childhood trophies—things connected to individual and collective identities. Anthony Letcher describes the salvage mentality that overtook many residents. “Everybody talkin’ ’bout ‘back home.’ Even us poor people who’ve been renting, I wanna come home to what I know. [...] I just talked to my Aunt Joanie today in Abbeyville and she was tellin’ me go in her house, go look by her house and see if she can get the family graduation pictures. That’s all she’s thinkin’ about, them pictures. I guess that’s probably all she could think about.

She ain't got no more house. [...] So all that's gone. All that's tore up" (Vollen and Ying 2006:255). The storm not only destroyed people's possessions, but also undermined their very sense of self.

People mourned the items they lost, the memories and social ties bound up in seemingly mundane things, whose significance was only clear once they were gone. But the storm also gave new meaning to items that survived. In many interviews, people mentioned particular items they had salvaged, such as Sharon's glass angel. These items reassured them that, despite the damage, not everything was lost. Some people believed that these items had been saved by divine providence. Their unlikely survival gave them an otherworldly aura.



Figure 8. Damaged photograph salvaged by its owner. Photo by author. 2011.

These items became signs that their owners could—and should—rebuild. Retrieved items symbolized the persistence that many people hoped to find in themselves as they began to rebuild. People would display them prominently in their homes, on walls or bookshelves. People even saved washed out images, entire photo albums of them, in their attempt to provide some continuity between past and present. Saving these items provided a way to salvage a little bit of their lives—and a little hope for the future.

A few years after the storm, I sat with my friend, Jeremy, on his porch. He had just brought down several boxes from his attic that he had packed after returning to his home, in October 2005, but hadn't opened since. "I don't even remember what I put in all of these," he said, ripping off the tape. He pulled out items one by one and laid them out on the ground: a box of crayons, several videotapes, a plastic lunchbox and a thermos. "I don't know why I saved this stuff. I really don't. It all seems silly now," he laughed. After the storm he left behind several instruments even though they could have been restored. "I didn't want to deal with them," he said. "I just wanted to move on." But among the things he saved was his childhood teddy bear. He remembered finding it buried under some debris, still wet. He put it through a washing machine a dozen times to make sure the mold was gone. We continued to unpack the boxes, sorting through what he would keep and what he would throw away. Most things would end up in the trash, but not the bear. Jeremy bounced it on his knee like a newborn child. "I'm glad I saved this."

Picking up the pieces

Sharon got to work right away. Calvin, too. They joined residents across the city who engaged in the “everyday work of repair” to restore the look and feel of their neighborhoods (Das 2006).

They purchased gloves and boots and respirators and started gutting their homes, deconstruction being the first step of reconstruction. They pulled up carpets and floorboards and ripped down drywall. When only the studs remained, they sprayed everything with chemicals. Plaster, insulation, and wood slats mixed with plastic water bottles and dust masks piled along curbs.⁴⁹

Lower Ninth Ward resident Cassandra Andrews told a reporter: “When I rebuild the city I feel like I’m rebuilding myself” (Powers 2006).

Glenn Roberts was the first person to return to his street in Gentilly. He told me about the emptiness that pervaded the neighborhood. “When I first came back after the storm, one of the most eerie feelings was you didn’t see any animals, you didn’t see or hear any children, you barely saw any people,” he told me. “Everything was gray—it was just like a bomb fell down. Everything was gray: cars and boats, things was in the middle of the street. It was just horrible.” People often commented on how quiet it was, especially at night, with no passing cars, barking dogs—really, anything—to cut through the silence.⁵⁰ “A lot of people can’t fathom nothing,” one woman told me. “It’s hard to understand absolutely nothing, which was here when I came in October [2005]. Virtually nothing.” I asked her if she meant people. “Just nothing” she laughed. “It’s hard to fathom. There were some people, but just a handful of people compared to hundreds of thousands. That’s almost nothing! But nothing in terms of television, radio, telephone, cable, wireless. It was nothing. Garbage pickup, mail delivery, FedEx, you know. There was one gas

⁴⁹ Hardware stores were some of the first businesses to reopen. Their shelves were picked clean as soon as they were stocked. Prices for everything from plywood to wheelbarrows jumped wildly—much like rents in the tight post-storm housing market—frustrating residents trying to rebuild. Residents weren’t the only ones working. Immigrant workers, often untrained and ill-equipped, carried out much of the rebuilding work, to the chagrin of local contractors. They picked up garbage and hauled it to dumps in the city, arousing protests from adjacent neighborhoods. They came from Brazil, Honduras, Guatemala, Mexico, among others, some following historic paths of immigration to the city, especially from Central America, beginning in the 1950s and 1960s.

⁵⁰ One scholar recalls a “frontier atmosphere” (Campanella 2008).

station, there were no drug stores, no hospital, no fire department. Nothing. It's hard to imagine dealing with nothing. Those were the challenges of everyday living."⁵¹

The normal things that people took for granted were gone. At the same time, the city was overrun by new sights and sounds, most tied to the storm. Helicopters buzzed overhead, while military trucks rumbled down streets. Soldiers stood on busy corners holding large rifles. Resident met reminders of the storm around every corner. Everything seemed out of place: buildings pushed off their foundations, cars piled under the interstate, debris hanging from trees. "Everything was strange then," Sharon remembered. "I mean, you looked around and you saw your neighborhood. But everything was different, like every house had spilled their guts on the street." Personal belongings were made public. "It was eerie seeing all that stuff," she continued, "because that was stuff I had seen in my neighbor's house. I knew where that stuff came from." Navigating around the city provoked unwanted memories. It was hard to see an empty house without also seeing the water or thinking about the neighbor who died trying to get out. One journalist wrote: "Everywhere you go now, there's some memory staring you in the face. What it used to look like" (Rose 2007:230).

Almost immediately, memorials popped up around the city. People held vigils outside their favorite bars or restaurants. At Camellia Grill, a popular Uptown eatery, residents posted sticky notes on the windows with pleas to reopen. A newspaper article describes the "shared longing in the hand-scrawled words ('miss' by far the most recurring)" on these notes (Anderson 2006). Many others penned articles or blog posts or made YouTube videos mourning the drowned city. New Orleans-themed songs were re-recorded in tribute to the city. "Do You Know What it Means

⁵¹ But it wasn't only the absence of people that lent the city its uncanny character. Little routines were unsettled. "I would get cravings for a sandwich or a soda and then realize I couldn't get any of those!" one man told me. "Yeah, I wanted my neighbor back, but I couldn't even find stuff to eat!"

to Miss New Orleans,” a tune made famous by Louis Armstrong in the 1940s, was a common post-Katrina dirge, given new meaning for displaced residents yearning to come home.

Everyone experienced the disaster in their own way. But there were points of resonance or repetition, places or things through which people came to understand their experience as something shared with others. Homes, in particular, were sites of mutual awareness and interaction. Neighbors helped each other gut homes, celebrated every time someone returned to the street, swapped information about contractors, and shared stories about people who were still displaced. “How’s your house?” was a near-ubiquitous greeting, acknowledging the shared struggles for residents who had returned. Through this question, “people asked and spoke about themselves, their relationship to these changed surroundings, and their efforts to reclaim and maintain some degree of social and physical grounding. More deeply, they spoke of their ability, or inability, to live fully in their environments. They spoke of the nature and experience of human dwelling in this particular time and place” (Carter 2008:1). The question also acknowledges how individual rebuilding practices were wrapped up—and often social and emotionally invested—in the same practices of those around them.

The local newspaper also played a role in constituting a collective orientation to recovery. It circulated stories and images about the storm and its aftermath, creating a shared mode of interpretation—a post-storm public (Anderson 1983; Kockelman 2006; Warner 2005). Almost everyone turned to it for updates on the recovery, and for months its pages contained nothing but Katrina-related news. Its opinion page became a space for critiques of disaster response and discussions of post-disaster planning. There was even a small box on the front page counting the days since the storm as well as a rising casualty ticker. Later, the paper included accounts of people coming home and cleaning up their blocks. Pictures showed residents in hard hats and

masks, with close-ups of mundane items such as shoes, books, and clothes covered in mud, surrounded by rubble. These items had no context; they could have been from anyone's home, from any one of the dozens of flooded neighborhoods. Readers saw experiences that mirrored their own.

The newspaper also informed the post-storm public about practical aspects of recovery. It explained the brightly colored spray paint on their homes and produced a guide for gutting and remediating properties (Gist, Peck, and Walker 2005). The guide, while providing step-by-step instructions, also spoke to readers intimately: "Have Kleenex ready, and a shoulder to cry on [. . .] Set a realistic and manageable schedule. Don't try to rehabilitate your house in one day." It then explained how to assess damage, sanitize items, and remediate mold. The guide even included a list of items to pack: camera, heavy rubber gloves, goggles, a first-aid kit, garbage bags, flashlights, a stick to turn things over and scare away snakes, drinking water, and a change of clothes. It even suggested bringing "Vicks Vap-o-rub (apply under your nose for smell)." Subsequent articles dealt with insurance, rebuilding grants, soil contamination, and other concerns that victims shared, mixed with updates about restaurants, bars, and even local sports teams, reminding readers of the normal things that were slowly returning.

As more people began to return, they shared in the experience of hauling waterlogged items to the curb, gutting their homes, and struggling to survive in a city without services. They encountered reminders of the storm across the city and in the daily newspaper. People shared evacuation stories, first return stories, and as they started rebuilding, they shared information about volunteer services and neighborhood meetings. They invested new value in everyday life. But they also constructed recovery as a common project. Recovery would be about rebuilding normal. It became a form of anticipation, expectation, and investment—made in and through the

ruined landscape—that aimed at a particular image of the post-storm city. Normal emerged through confrontations with the uncanny residues and haunting traces of things “there but not there” (Buchli and Lucas 2001:12). Anthony Letcher describes this revaluation of the city. “Just before this flood came up, I wanted to leave this motherfucker. I was so disgusted with New Orleans. That’s how I felt ’bout here before the flood came...But how they say? You never miss a good thing till it’s gone. You never miss a good thing, baby. Check this here out. A motherfucker missing his home. Man, he missin’ his home. And all my family missin’ home, bro. That’s all everybody talk about in my whole family. ‘Lord have mercy. I wanna go home. When they gonna get this built? When they gonna get this built?’” (Vollen and Ying 2006:214).

Signs of normal

Bleached grass turned green. Broken windows were replaced with new, gleaming panes. Plastic signs popped up announcing reopened stores, restaurants, and nail salons. Sharon watched neighbors repaint their homes in bright purples and golds as a “big middle finger to Katrina.” And then there were the refrigerators. They appeared on curbs just weeks after the storm. People spray-painted messages on their sides condemning police brutality or government incompetence, or making jokes about their spoiled contents.⁵² People also turned them into street signs, painting arrows to point people to health clinics and food distribution centers. But whatever the message scrawled on their sides, these refrigerators were also ubiquitous signs that people were coming back.

⁵² Messages included: “Funky. Not In A Good Way!” or “Free Beer and Maggots!” or “Sir Stinks A Lot.” In fact, a whole book dedicated to “the discarded refrigerators of post-Katrina New Orleans” (see Laborde 2010).

Journalist Chris Rose chronicled the slow return of normal in his articles for the *Times-Picayune*. Just days after the storm he wrote, “amid the devastation, you have to look for hope. Forward progress of any kind. Even the smallest incidents of routine and normalcy become reassuring” (Rose 2007:19). Over the next few months, his accounts were sprinkled with moments that captured these signs of progress. One day he was driving down the street when “out of nowhere, in total desolation, there was a working stoplight. I would have been less surprised to find a Blockbuster Video on Mars. And the funny thing is, I stopped. I waited for it to turn green, and then I drove slowly on my way, even though there were no other cars anywhere and the likelihood of getting a ticket for running the only traffic signal in town seems very unlikely right now” (ibid.). Later that day he saw a man watering his lawn. “The toilets flush now” he added, “and I never thought that would be a sound of reassurance” (ibid.). Within a month things were returning at a faster clip. “I was sitting on my front stoop and an RTA bus marked *Magazine* zoomed by. I thought: ‘Well, how about that! That’s a good sign.’ Never mind that the bus was empty; at least it was running, and that’s a sign of normalcy. And it was going way too fast, and therein was another harbinger of the same-ol’, same-ol’” (31).

A working traffic light, a flushing toilet, and a running (though empty) bus were “signs of normalcy” in an otherwise abnormal city. Daniel Finnegan, an artist from the Ninth Ward, was one of the first people to return on his street. After a while, he started to get used to the emptiness, though admitted “you could almost go crazy if you were to live in that kind of environment for a long time. It would almost be like, you would never be ready for society again.” It was a “strange thing” to see people come back over the following weeks. “I had to use the brakes on my bicycle yesterday for the first time,” he told a reporter (Vollen and Ying 2008:202). Most people, however, celebrated the return of these “little things,” as one of my

informants put it. “This is going to sound really silly,” she told me in 2008, “but one of my happiest moments in the last three years was when Domino’s [Pizza] reopened.” She used to go there with her friends every week. But even though most of her friends were still scattered across the country, Domino’s Pizza was back. That, to her, was progress.

No sign of normal was more reassuring than seeing a neighbor come back. Many residents took pride in being one of the first people to return on their street, seeing it as evidence of their commitment to the city’s recovery. Residents were also encouraged when other people returned, seeing it as an affirmation of their own decision, and a sign of continued progress. It also created a bond between them—cementing their mutual commitment to the common goal of recovery. Robin, an elderly black woman from Broadmoor, told me the first few years after the storm involved a mix of emotions. “It was devastation, it was heartbreak,” she said, “but it was also ‘at least we’re back here.’ That was the most strange feeling. We were in a war zone when we came back, I mean, no lights, the National Guard going around in tanks. It was kind of eerie and weird, you know. Not everybody was back at the same time. But there was a relief that your house was still standing and your neighborhood was still there, and New Orleans was still here.” I asked her when things started to feel normal again. “When you started seeing your neighbors coming back” she replied. “Our across-the-street neighbor was one, I think he was back before we were, and we were just so excited to see each other, and to know that he was coming back and we were coming back and we had that commitment. It was wonderful.”

This commitment was reinforced through an explosion in civic boosterism. Ali Arnold (2010) describes the bumper stickers and t-shirts that appeared across town. “Almost immediately, everyone had a sticker, expressing their love for our crescent city. ‘Be a New Orleanian where you are’ was one of the first I saw (and proudly donned, I might add). Later,

‘New Orleans: Proud to Swim Home,’ a clever redux on the pre-Katrina ‘New Orleans: Proud to Call it Home.’ The sticker mottos quickly moved onto t-shirts, and suddenly, the tourist trap shops in the Quarter were challenged by several burgeoning t-shirt storefronts selling local pride wear. My favorites were the ones that simply read ‘Bywater’ or ‘Uptown’ or ‘Mid-City,’ allowing us the opportunity to advertise that we were replanting ourselves in our communities, with even deeper roots than before” (255-256). Stickers and t-shirts were less common in some neighborhoods, though most people found ways to express their intentions. Many people put up signs in windows or front yards: “I am coming home.”

Yet normal was not always desirable. Some people, in fact, worried about the city sliding back into some of its more noxious patterns. Reflecting on the empty bus zooming down the street, Chris Rose (2007) asked: “What could be a better indication of a return to the old ways than the colossal inefficiency of our public transportation system?” (31). Similar jokes were spray-painted on walls, boarded-up windows, and the ubiquitous refrigerators. They betrayed a sense of unease about the pre-storm city, with its many flaws, and the potential that these features might simply be reproduced. A fair amount of these concerns were underwritten by racial prejudice; pleas to move beyond “old ways” were too often euphemisms for keeping poor, black residents from returning. But many residents also admitted that problems with crime, schools, and unequal opportunities were not part of the New Orleans they wanted to retain. Rebuilding normal, in other words, was not about rebuilding *every* aspect of the pre-storm city. But who would get to decide which normals would return?

Residents also had to grapple with the idea that some normals might never be restored. Rebuilding would involve negotiations. Sharon knew several people who wanted to wait and see how their neighborhood fared before committing to return. She couldn’t blame them, either,

especially if they had small children, health problems, or didn't want to rough it in a city lacking basic services. And already there were people who decided they weren't coming back. But even those who were committed to returning embraced changes. Most were relatively minor. People rebuilt their homes with new energy efficient appliances or storm-resistant materials, or raised their homes on piers. I met one woman who was working on her parent's house, which she had recently inherited after her parents died during the storm. She walked me through each room and explained the changes she planned to make. Too many unwanted memories lingered in each space to rebuild it exactly as it had been prior to the storm, she told me. Instead, she would knock down some walls and rearrange the placement of each room. But she wanted the outside to be painted in the same terra cotta shade from her childhood.

While some people read signs of normal as betraying retrograde movements, most embraced them as indicators of progress. Signs of normal imbued the post-storm landscape with a clear trajectory. They inspired people to believe that the city could return to normal, or at least some semblance of it. People started rebuilding because they thought others would do the same. They read potential through every action: every wheelbarrow of stuff taken to the curb, every piece of siding replaced, every fresh coat of paint. These actions were not only signs of individual investment but a pledge to the city's revitalization—a collective investment in rebuilding normal. As one woman told me, “when you rebuild your house, you're making a commitment to this city as home.” Rebuilding was given a normative dimension. There was often a gray line between the notion that people would rebuild and the notion that people *should* rebuild.

Signs of normal worked through association, becoming embedded in particular objects, inhering in the post-storm landscape. Webb Keane (2003) describes how certain “qualities of

objects” come to “have a privileged role within a larger system of value” (414). Signs, for him, do not float freely, but are always embodied in concrete things. A particular quality “cannot be manifest without some embodiment that inescapably binds it to some other qualities as well, which can become contingent but real factors in social life” (ibid.). “Normal” is not a concrete, sensuous quality, but it became associated with certain objects, places, or changes in the post-storm landscape, signifying a connection either to life before the storm or to a particular kind of life that residents want to rebuild. Signs of normal assumed many objects into their sphere. If nothing else, the instability of the concept “normal” emphasizes the fact that any sign is subject to “sociability, struggle, materiality, and contingency,” for what comes to signify “normal” for residents was not pre-determined but rather emerged through their encounters with the changing post-storm landscape (413).

Conclusion

Thomas Campanella (2005) argues that after any disaster there is usually a period of “regressive resilience”: people want to rebuild everything the way it was. While this is certainly understandable, this phenomenon has its drawbacks. “Just as the built environment is commonly reconstituted as before, the power structure and social hierarchy of a city can quickly replicate itself in the wake of a catastrophe,” he argues. “Divisive pre-disaster inequalities and injustices are resilient, too.” This view contrasts with more positive portrayals of resilience and continuity across a catastrophic break. It also cautions those who privilege “memory” and “place” as unproblematic concepts for understanding or supporting certain visions of recovery.

Normal was never neutral; the concept was contested from the moment the levees broke. Victims of Hurricane Katrina lost their own normals, situated and subjective, but also cultivated a collective normal that grew out of the recovery process, engagements with the storm's remainders, and the circulation of stories, "Katrina stories," that achieved their shared quality as residents began to recognize their own experience as having something in common with others. Elements of the post-storm landscape were given new meaning, especially those associated with life before the storm, but also those associated with persistence and continuity after the storm—particularly the home.

In making recovery a shared project, one enacted socially and materially, the concept of normal made residents feel like they were part of something bigger, and imparted significance on their individual decisions to rebuild. Refrigerators lined along streets, trash piled on curbs, trailers parked in front yards, new doors, roofs and windows—these signified the slow return of normal, and oriented recovery towards the future. These signs instilled a sense of progress, even if this temporality folded into itself through myriad attachments to the past. But this potential was threatened when post-storm planning began, and certain neighborhoods were written off of recovery maps. Planning imparted new significance to property and place, and politicized the home, not only against this promise of rebuilding normal, but through property claims, and individual and collective protests around the right to return.

CHAPTER 2: THE GREAT FOOTPRINT DEBATE

“4 Months to Decide: Nagin Panel Says Hardest-Hit Areas Must Prove Viability.”

So read the headline of the *Times-Picayune* on January 11, 2006. These words were followed by the subheading: “City’s Footprint May Shrink; Full Buyouts for Those Forced to Move.” The article summarized a report by the Bring New Orleans Back Commission (BNOB), which had been created by Mayor Ray Nagin after the storm to advise his administration on redevelopment strategies. The report suggested that flooded areas be given “four months to prove they can bring their neighborhoods back to life or face the prospect of having to sell out to a new and powerful redevelopment authority” (Donze and Russell 2006). The details, however, were overshadowed by a map of the city, just below the headline, with large green circles placed over “approximate areas expected to become parks and green space.” It became known as the “green dot map.”

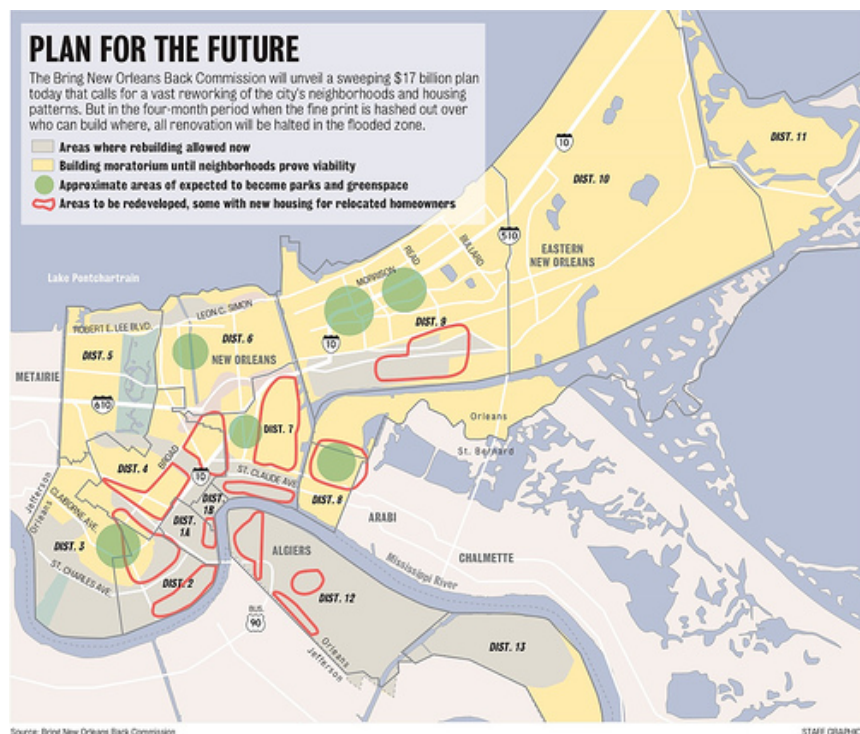


Figure 9. The green dot map. Map by the New Orleans *Times-Picayune*. 2006.

The map's appearance marked the high point of what one geographer has called "the great footprint debate"—a debate about when and where the city should rebuild (Campanella 2008). Since the storm, "the question of whether all of the city's neighborhoods can or should be resettled has been the most contentious issue in play" (Donze and Russell 2006). At stake was not only whether certain neighborhoods would be allowed to rebuild, but also whether certain residents would be allowed to return to the city. Planning jargon seemed to mask attempts to reshape the city's demographics. The green dot map seemed to be just another attempt to bar poor, black residents from coming back. Allison Truitt (2012) describes how "residents who lived in areas marked by green spaces were symbolically cast outside the 'New Orleans' worth saving" (324). While this "plan for the future" was later abandoned, it shaped recovery in many ways, not least of which by placing property at the center of planning debates.

In this chapter, I analyze post-storm planning and the concepts through which it was imagined, contested, and enacted. I focus, in particular, on disputes over the city's footprint, evident in the green dot map and other plans to shrink the city. Through recovery plans, the post-storm landscape evaluated through the concept of viability, which combined economic and environmental measures to prioritize rebuilding in certain areas.⁵³ This approach spawned alternative claims by residents about their right to return, as well as alternative notions of viability. In the previous chapter, I explored the emotional investments in post-storm recovery through notions of rebuilding normal. In what follows, I show how political struggles over the post-storm landscape played out through population and property.

Scholars recounting post-storm planning debates often oppose the views of top-down experts and everyday residents who talked past each other, worked at cross purposes, and

⁵³ This concept "underscored what was at stake in New Orleans: the very survival of the city. In the initial weeks and months of recovery vital questions were raised: Where could citizens safely rebuild? Would residents and jobs returned to the city?" (Truitt 2011:323; see also Reese, Sorkin, and Fontenot 2014).

envisioned recovery through contrasting discourses and practices (Barrios 2011; Breunlin and Regis 2006).⁵⁴ This analytical opposition results in a rather flat treatment of recovery plans, which are reduced to expressions of market ideology. Critics tend to smooth over the numerous internal debates among planners, conflicts between city council and the mayor, and the many compromises made over the years (Olshansky and Johnson 2010). Scholars also overlook the encounters and exchanges that muddle the boundary between experts and non-experts, as well as between different forms of expertise (see Riles 2011). My account diverges from previous studies of post-storm planning that see it as driven solely by racial prejudice or profit motives. It also diverges from more general treatments of urban planning as merely a form of social control (Holston 1989). Planning does not involve a singular politics—or even a singular perspective. Drawing on recent work in anthropology and sociolegal studies (Hetherington 2011; Hull 2012; Valverde 2009), I show how residents, neighborhood associations, and urban planners struggled over recovery through—and against—particular visions of the post-storm footprint, tying together property and population through contested notions of urban viability. Rather than try to uncover the intentions behind post-storm plans, I focus on their effects (Latour 2005; Valverde 2003), which were to politicize property in space and time.

In the first section, I outline early attempts to come up with a post-storm rebuilding approach that would address questions about neighborhood viability. These attempts set the terms for later disputes about property and planning.⁵⁵ In the second and third sections, I trace resident and neighborhood responses to the green dot plan. I move beyond a critical analysis of the plan itself to understand the forms of protest it provoked, as property and population were

⁵⁴ This opposition maps onto more widely known distinction between space- and place-based knowledge forms (Lefebvre 1999; Scott 1998).

⁵⁵ Indeed, one could argue that planners adopted a relatively post-humanists standpoint, though perhaps with a different politics usually adopted by such scholars (Kohn 2013).

entangled through conflicts over the right to return. I show how these protests quickly transformed from a movement oriented around racial solidarity to one oriented around property rights. Public protest against the green dot plan resulted in the city embracing a so-called *laissez-faire* approach to recovery. Scholars have interpreted this approach as a continuation of the “market-based recovery” initiated after the storm (Adams 2013). However, the approach emerged as an alternative to top-down plans that eschewed markets as the most efficient driver of redevelopment. *Laissez-faire*, in this case, was *not* planned—at least not in advance (Polanyi 2001). In the fourth section, I reflect on how this approach shaped post-storm recovery. While it seemed to be a victory for right to return advocates, it was a bittersweet victory. Property rights were protected, but the capacity to exercise those rights—and wider forms of urban citizenship—were ultimately curtailed.

Race and repopulation

In an article published just days after the storm, journalist Christopher Cooper (2005) chronicled how “the city’s monied, mostly white elite is [. . .] maneuvering to play a role in the recovery.” James Reiss, a successful businessman, informed Cooper about a meeting scheduled for the next day where he and other power brokers would begin planning the city’s revival. Reiss claimed that “those who want to see this city rebuilt want to see it done in a completely different way: demographically, geographically and politically.”

Such sentiments were common after the storm, with quotes from experts and politicians appearing in a number of news outlets, excited about the opportunity to rebuild New Orleans with “better services and fewer poor people,” as Cooper put it (see also Flaherty 2010). These

weren't empty statements. Soon after the storm, state lawmakers took control of the city's public schools, eventually transforming most of them into charter schools, and disbanded the teachers union.⁵⁶ Federal agencies, meanwhile, accelerated the transformation of public housing into mixed-use units.⁵⁷ Pundits argued that these changes were about building a brighter future for the city. Many residents, however, were wary of seemingly benign calls for reform, seeing them as thinly veiled attempts to keep poor, black residents from returning. These fears were stoked by comments from policymakers who seemed untroubled by the city's changing demographics. HUD Secretary Alphonso Jackson told one reporter: "Whether we like it or not...New Orleans is not going to be as black as it was for a long time, if ever again" (Associated Press 2005).

Racial tensions only increased as recovery planning got underway. On September 30, 2005, Mayor Nagin created the Bring New Orleans Back Commission (BNOB) to manage redevelopment.⁵⁸ Joseph Canizaro, a prominent developer and longtime Republican fundraiser, was named chairman, and the commission's nineteen members, though split evenly along racial lines, was comprised of the city's economic and political elite.⁵⁹ The commission partnered with the Urban Land Institute (ULI), a Washington D.C.-based think tank, and began holding public meetings across the city.⁶⁰ At the same time, urban planners streamed in from around the country offering their services, often pro bono.⁶¹ Though some planners indulged in the image of post-

⁵⁶ A process that had actually begun before the storm, but increased in scope and speed after the storm.

⁵⁷ Representative Richard Baker was notorious quoted as saying: "We finally cleaned up public housing in New Orleans. We couldn't do it, but God did" (Babington 2005).

⁵⁸ While their task was to come up with rebuilding recommendations, their ideas were often taken as the city's official position on rebuilding issues.

⁵⁹ Most were lawyers, bankers, and developers, though Wynton Marsalis and Irvine Mayfield—two of the city's most esteemed jazz products—were also included, as was the city's Catholic Archbishop. Only two women sat on the commission: a lawyer and a director of a neighborhood health clinic. They broke down into subcommittees on land use, culture, education, health and social services, and economic development, among others. While commission leadership was made up of elites, subcommittees were peopled by community activists, non-profit leaders, and everyday citizens (Campanella 2009; Rivlin 2015).

⁶⁰ These meetings were usually poorly attended since many residents were living in other cities.

⁶¹ These planners had diverse affiliations with non-profit organizations, think tanks, universities, or philanthropic foundations.

Katrina New Orleans as a “blank slate” on which to impose their plans, most engaged with the concrete challenges the city faced. It would need to repair roads and sidewalks, reopen medical centers, restore police and fire services, and rebuild its water management infrastructure. It would also have to figure out to do with the 130,000 homes that were damaged or destroyed by Katrina’s waters.

New Orleans would have to accomplish this without any real information about how many people would eventually return to its hardest-hit neighborhoods. Indeed, population was perhaps the most central issue confronting planners. New Orleans was home to about 455,000 people in 2000, down from more than 600,000 people in 1960. Few planners expected the city to regain its pre-Katrina population (Campanella 2008). Rebuilding over the city’s existing footprint would place an incredible burden on public resources and infrastructure. Experts warned that unplanned resettlement might produce a gap-toothed recovery—widely known as the jack-o’-lantern effect. Without proper oversight, the city risked turning into “Detroit South” (Russell and Donze 2006). Planners were also concerned about people rebuilding in areas that might be vulnerable to future storms, though they felt that they could minimize this risk by concentrating repopulation in neighborhoods above sea level. “Out of nostalgia, do you want to put a shotgun shack back there where it floods all the time or say, ‘Is there a better way?’” asked one engineer (Walsh and Barnett 2005).

Shrinking the city, planners argued, would address the combined economic and environmental issues New Orleans faced, which only became more urgent after the storm. Yet even though most agreed in principle that the city should shrink, it wasn’t always clear what shrinking would actually mean in practice. The city could raze entire neighborhoods or merely increase density on high ground. Moreover, many planners sympathized with residents who

wanted to move back, regardless of the risks. “It was a hard time for me,” one city planner remembered. “On the one hand, you have all these people who wanted to come back home, and they wanted everything to be the same. I understand that, you know, because I was there, too. I felt the same way dealing with my own house,” he told me. “But on the other hand I had the planner side of me that needed to step back and think, what kind of city are we going to have? Or what kind of neighborhood are these people going to have? Maybe we shouldn’t rebuild everywhere. But it was a hard conversation to have.”

In November 2005, the Urban Land Institute presented their recommendations to the public, suggesting a staged approach to recovery. “Rebuilding should happen in a strategic manner, encouraging those areas that sustained minimal damage to begin rebuilding immediately,” explained the report (*A Strategy for Rebuilding New Orleans 2005:7*). Areas with more extensive damage should “evaluate the feasibility for reinvestment” and “proceed expeditiously” (7). Experts emphasized that viability was their primary concern when deciding which neighborhoods should rebuild first—a term that, for them, included population projections as well as topographic and soil analyses, combining a number of human and non-human factors. While sympathetic to those who lost their homes, one expert told city officials: “Your housing is now a public resource. You can’t think of it as private property anymore” (Carr 2005).

ULI’s recommendations didn’t mention anything about shrinking, but merely outlined a particular *timeline* for rebuilding, though one that “essentially discourage[d] development [. . .] in various hard-hit neighborhoods” (Russell and Donze 2005). Neighborhood leaders roundly criticized the proposal. They pointed out that population numbers, ostensibly neutral, didn’t account for the storm’s disproportionate effect on poor, black neighborhoods. Some questioned why the priorities weren’t reversed; maybe the city should rebuild the *most* damaged

neighborhoods first. Others worried the recommendations would become a self-fulfilling prophecy, deterring public and private investment in areas that needed it most. City Council rebuked the ULI recommendations, and passed a resolution stating that “all neighborhoods [should] be included in the timely and simultaneous rebuilding” of New Orleans (Russell and Donze 2006).⁶²

Many people took the ULI’s recommendations as the city’s official position on rebuilding. However, the BNOB still had to incorporate these recommendations into their own plan. In an attempt to make the ULI strategy “more palatable to homeowners,” the Bring New Orleans Back commission began discussing alternative approaches (Meitrodt and Donze 2005). For example, rather than postponing rebuilding in hard-hit neighborhoods, they might give residents a certain time period to prove their viability (Russell and Donze 2005). But if the city was going to allow people to return, BNOB commission members also wanted to temper expectations about the kind of city they would be returning to. “We need to tell people, ‘You can come back, but there are no guarantees,’” said one commission member during a meeting in December 2005. “There may not be a grocery store. There may not be police. If we don’t tell people that, they’re going to be up in arms because we weren’t honest with them” (Russell and Donze 2005). Another member said they should warn residents to expect a “rural level of services” in many neighborhoods. Chairman Canizaro agreed: “That puts people on notice, but allows them to come back.” Yet many residents felt the city was sending mixed messages. “They kept saying that they were rebuilding for everybody, that the city was going to be whole,” one man told me, “but every time

⁶² Some defended the ULI’s recommendations. Alden McDonald, a BNOB member from New Orleans East, asked: “Does the city have the resources to deal with services for the entire pre-Katrina population? No. [...] I think we have to deal with [rebuilding], not from an emotional point of view, but from a very realistic point of view as to what will work best for everyone. I am emotionally attached to my home, but when I think about it, will I be able to get flood insurance? Will I have any other neighbors?” (Meitrodt and Donze 2005).

they talked details, it was about this or that neighborhood that probably won't come back. They weren't being straight with us.”

In mid-January 2006, the commission released its report recommending a moratorium on building permits until “neighborhood planning areas”—a term applied to every storm-damaged neighborhood—could prove their viability. People could begin rebuilding, the report said, but their neighborhoods would have to show that they could attract “sufficient population to support the equitable and efficient delivery of public facilities and services” (Action Plan For New Orleans 2006:11).⁶³ If, after four months, a neighborhood hadn't met certain population benchmarks, residents might become eligible for buyouts through a public redevelopment agency. BNOB members saw this as a compromise between plans to “declare areas off limits,” on the one hand, or “allow market forces to determine the city's future,” on the other (Donze and Russell 2006).⁶⁴ But it also shifted the meaning of viability, making it almost synonymous with repopulation, and shedding earlier environmental concerns raised by planners.

The four-month timetable applied to every flooded neighborhood, but the report highlighted six that might eventually include green space, outlining these areas with green dashed lines. The map that appeared in the newspaper the next day covered these same areas with large, green dots. It seemed to confirm widespread fears that it was just another plan to shrink the city. BNOB members, however, claimed that the newspaper misrepresented their message. “We didn't have the data or the legal authority to draw out with any specificity on a map where we would put these protective green spaces,” one member later told me. “We just

⁶³ Put more bluntly: “there have to be enough people living close to each other to justify the expenditure of public funds to serve them” (Action Plan for New Orleans 2006:11).

⁶⁴ In the section outlining the “City-wide Framework for Reconstruction,” the authors described that the report “was done with the understanding that, in the short term, there will be a considerably smaller population and reduced public revenues. Therefore, the plan must be responsible in two ways. First, it must use scarce public resources efficiently and equitably to benefit the most citizens. Second, it must not mislead citizens by making or implying promises regarding provision of public facilities and services that cannot be fulfilled.”

thought we'd approximate with green dots the areas where we think one should look into the idea of putting protective green spaces." But this point was lost on people who connected the green dots to earlier recommendations to shrink the city. The commission member realized this the moment they released the report. "When that green dot map was first presented and the first comment back from someone in the audience went, 'That green dot is over my house. Who's coming to get my property? Because over my dead body will they get it.' We realized then where we were in time, and the power of messaging and timing. Literally, facts were quickly irrelevant. You couldn't sate that gentleman by saying, 'Look, we'd have to eminent domain your property and we're not even the government so don't worry!' But it doesn't matter because you're trying to convey confidence."

Right to return

Residents began calling for their right to return almost immediately after the storm. The phrase circulated on internet forums and message boards, was emblazoned on banners, signs, and t-shirts, and even served as the title for a post-storm documentary (Smiley 2007). "The right to return was the right for us to come home," a resident later told me. "It means we are human beings and the government can't tell us where we can't rebuild." In offering a competing vision of the post-storm footprint, right to return movements generated new coalitions, articulations of race and class, and perspectives on property rights. They shaped how the city would—and wouldn't—rebuild.

Like many contemporary diasporic communities, displaced New Orleanians tapped into global activists networks and discourses when mobilizing for their right to return (Bernal 2014).

Jordan Flaherty (2010) recalls how one group “designed their first logo with a key to represent the right of return for New Orleanians, intentionally using the same key design Palestinians have historically used (based on the keys many Palestinians still hold, belonging to homes they were forced to leave in the mass displacement of 1948)” (92). Palestine was a common reference point for storm victims, but it wasn’t the only one. Activists invoked several transnational struggles to justify their right to return. The head of one non-profit organization, for example, argued that the right to return was a “humanitarian principle [as] good for our NOLA folks as well as for Rwanda refugees. After the war, and the air clears, people have the right to return to their home” (Flaherty 2010:67).⁶⁵

While many people connected the right to return to anti-displacement activism, others read it through histories of civil rights struggle. “The five days of video-taped Black debasement in New Orleans will weigh as heavily on the African American psyche as the dogs and water hoses of Birmingham,” wrote journalists Glen Ford and Peter Gamble (2005). References to other pivotal moments in civil rights history abounded and served as a call to arms: “New Orleans represents a challenge to African Americans, unprecedented since the epic struggles of the Fifties and Sixties” (Ford and Gamble 2005; see also Dyson 2006; Luft 2010; Woods 2010). A group of black ministers and community leaders penned a “New Orleans Citizens’ Bill of Rights.” First on the list was the “right of return” for all displaced persons: **“THE CITY SHOULD NOT BE DEPOPULATED OF ITS MAJORITY AFRICAN-AMERICAN AND LOWER INCOME**

⁶⁵ Some legal scholars even argued for a “domestic right of return” drawing on existing international law (Inniss 2007).

CITIZENS, and must be rebuilt to economically include all those who were displaced” (bold and capitalization in original; see also Quigley 2007).⁶⁶

Despite these diverse genealogies, right to return activists embraced a common theme: racial solidarity.⁶⁷ They promoted the right for black residents to participate in the city’s recovery, and protested against racialized dispossession. They stressed the unique obstacles black residents faced when trying to come home. A “Right to Return, Vote and Rebuild” march was organized just months after the storm, sponsored by the Rainbow/Push Coalition, the NAACP, and the National Urban League, with such prominent figures as Jesse Jackson, Al Sharpton, Michael Eric Dyson, and former mayor Marc Morial as speakers. The event connected the right to return to broader struggles for racial justice. New Orleans, many argued, was an important site of black history and cultural production, and should remain a majority-black city.

Debates about the city’s post-storm footprint transformed right to return struggles. While never losing its racial overtones, the right to return quickly became about when and where people could rebuild. Plans to shrink the city, in particular, were seen as a threat, not only to people’s right to return, but also to their right to rebuild their individual homes and neighborhoods. The threat represented by these plans redefined the right to return in spatial terms, particularly through notions of property rights. This shift aligned with wider concerns tied to property in the post-storm city. Residents had already seen their property rights threatened when thousands of buildings were demolished without notice in the months after the storm. Images of people standing amidst the rubble of their former homes circulated on nighttime news, as did stories about contractors razing homes that were undamaged or under construction. ACORN challenged

⁶⁶ Bill Quigley, a law professor at Loyola University, wrote about the right to return in academic journals as well as progressive magazines and websites, becoming one of its more prominent advocates (see Quigley 2006 and 2007). He brought together civil rights issues with broader questions about displacement in international law.

⁶⁷ In many cases, activists also mentioned class, though this was often seen as implicitly tied to race. More widely overlooked were gender disparities in the disaster’s impact (see Quigley 2007).

purported land grabs, in some cases standing in front of bulldozers or filing legal stays against demolition. Residents were also concerned about speculators buying up storm-damaged properties. Community activist Malcolm Suber raised the specter of dispossession at a City Council meeting. “The question that we have for ourselves is: Are we going to allow some developers, some hustlers, some land thieves to grab our land, grab our homes, to make this a Disney World version of our homes, our lives?” (Donze 2006). Fears about developers, hustlers, and land thieves converged with long-running worries about gentrification that only intensified after the storm, as property values in historically black neighborhoods on high ground skyrocketed (Barrios 2011; Crutcher 2010).

It was the green dot map, however, that ultimately placed property—and property rights—at the center of post-storm planning debates. Less than a week after the map was made public, more than five hundred residents attended a city council meeting to protest the recommendations. One man threatened to “sit in [his] front door with [a] shotgun,” and received a round of applause (Donze 2006). He wasn’t the only person to vow to defend their property by force. At another meeting, a New Orleans East resident told city officials: “I’m ready to rebuild and I’m not letting you take mine. I’m going to fight, whatever it takes, to rebuild my property [. . .] I’m going to suit up like I’m going to Iraq and fight this” Another resident agreed: “I don’t think it’s right that you take our properties. Over my dead body” (Randall 2006).

Most of the areas highlighted by the map as potential green space were majority black neighborhoods. These residents were especially distraught at the prospect of losing their homes, and compared the green dot plan to redlining and other segregationist policies. But the property-based reaction to the green dot plan also enrolled residents from across the city—and across race and class lines—into the right to return struggle. White and middle-class property owners,

largely absent from earlier right to return protests, began to embrace the slogan, mostly because the city required every flooded neighborhood to prove its viability, and thus threatened their futures, as well.⁶⁸ Marc Morial (2006), son of the city's first black mayor and an early advocate for the right to return, argued that the movement transcended the color line. "Katrina was an equal opportunity destroyer. It devastated the lives and homes of the rich and poor, black and white, the 'haves' and the 'have nots.' Our nation's core values demand that Katrina's victims have the right to return, rebuild and recover."

I asked people over the coming years why the reaction focused so much on property. They claimed that Louisiana was a "property rights state," and that its citizens had a high regard for private property. Many also referenced the city's high homeownership rate as promoting strong attachments to property rights—and hostility towards anyone who would threaten those rights. Indeed, plans to shrink the city seemed to contradict popular notions of private property embraced across the political spectrum (Blomley 2004; Singer 2000). Though early right to return activists came primarily from anarchist or civil rights group, they increasingly found support among conservatives and libertarians, as well as a nationwide campaign against eminent domain abuse. Marc Morial (2006) argued that the green dot plan "could shake the foundation of the basic rights to property and freedom of choice we Americans hold dear." Father Vien The Nguyen, a well-known priest in New Orleans East's Vietnamese community, made a similar point, yet with a more pointed contrast: "We have the right to live in our homes where we choose. That's the beauty of it, isn't it? Other countries—dictatorial, Communist—they tell people where to live and not to live. We are different from that" (Vollen and Ying 2006:211). The

⁶⁸ Indeed, when I started my fieldwork, in 2007, I was just as likely to hear upper-middle class white homeowners talk about their right to return as I was to hear it from a public housing resident or someone from the Lower Ninth Ward.

right to return became a staunch defense of property rights—against planning, against buyouts, and against shrinking.

At the same time that the property-based version of the right to return seemed to rally people around a common interest, their actual property discourse remained eclectic. While some people embraced a strict vision of property rights based on title alone, others referenced their intentions or actual investments in rebuilding to justify their right to return. Sean Gerowin (2006), for example, wrote an editorial about coming back to the city after the storm “filled with purpose,” his family wanting to rebuild their home as well as “some consistency in our lives.” He faced long battles with insurance companies and federal bureaucrats. “Now,” however, in the wake of green dot plan, “the antagonist is our own city government.” Gerowin argues “we are not looking for any help from the city. All we ask is that it not infringe on our property rights by denying city services or permits.” In his editorial, Gerowin argued for his right to return based on the fact that he had already invested so much in rebuilding, echoing Lockean notions of property rights, while also drawing on so-called “personhood” arguments (Radin 1982).⁶⁹ In shifting towards property-based arguments for their right to return, residents alternated between individual property rights and a more communal sense of entitlement. As Gerowin writes “New Orleanians like our family have already invested time, money and love in rebuilding our city. Allow citizens to make personal decisions and sacrifices to rebuild their properties.” Many people who argued for their right to return also believed that their neighborhoods could be made whole, if only planners moved out of the way, producing a sense of neighborhood solidarity through the defense of property, or their collective right to return. Right to return struggles brought attention to property and place—or property *in* place—as part of the politics of post-

⁶⁹ Margaret Radin (1982) observes that “most people possess certain objects they feel are almost part of themselves. These objects are closely bound up with personhood because they are part of the way we constitute ourselves as continuing personal entities in the world” (959). These objects, she argues, merit greater legal protection.

storm recovery, and would be taken up by neighborhoods as they argued for their own right to return.

Neighborhood planning

Within weeks after the disaster, residents began meeting in churches, bars, community centers, and still-moldy living rooms. They crowded around foldout tables, sat on milk crates or paint buckets, and got to work; they revitalized existing neighborhood associations or started brand new ones. Richard Campanella (2009) writes “despite their tenuous life circumstances and other responsibilities, New Orleanians by the thousands joined forces with their neighbors and volunteered to take stock of their communities; document local history, assets, resources, and problems; and plan solutions for the future” (32).⁷⁰

Many neighborhood associations began with the modest goal of providing space for residents to meet and share information on rebuilding questions. Over time, however, they started providing quasi-public services normally associated with city government.

Neighborhoods established community development corporations, opened schools and health clinics, and organized cleanup events (Seidman 2013; Wooten 2012). Lakeview’s neighborhood association surveyed every street and cataloged “junked cars, clogged drains, fallen trees, severed telephone wires, inoperable gas lines, broken power transformers, missing street signs, potholes, and any other physical problem close to their homes” (Wooten 2012:79). Broadmoor

⁷⁰ Several organizations started online through message boards or email lists. David Winkler-Schmit (2006) describes the case in Gentilly: “The Gentilly Civic Improvement Association (GCIA) spearheaded Gentilly’s redevelopment simply by coming into existence. In October [2005], several members of a ‘Gentilly After Katrina’ Internet group decided to form an umbrella organization to represent all of Gentilly’s neighborhoods; there are more than 20 that make up Planning District 6. Scott Darrah, president of GCIA, filed the necessary paperwork and the group began to reach out to smaller groups in order, as Darrah puts it, ‘to unify and come together on common issues like neighborhood plans.’”

residents created lists of empty properties and the whereabouts of their owners. They went door-to-door, placed signs in front yards, and spent hours on the phone trying to reach people who were still displaced. One resident from Gentilly, reflecting on her post-storm activism, told me: “It was born out of necessity. We needed to come back and we needed to rebuild. If we didn’t know our neighbors before the storm then we know them now.”

After the green dot plan was announced, neighborhood associations found new purpose. Groups around the city recall standing-room-only meetings, with displaced residents even driving in from out of state after hearing news of their neighborhood’s planned conversion into green space. People wondered whether it was worth rebuilding if the city was just going to take their property. But most were just angry. When city officials questioned whether some neighborhoods should be rebuilt, “people responded by saying, ‘Well, I’m going to make damn sure that *my* neighborhood will come back,’” recalls Jeanne Nathan (2014:191). She compared it to “an enemy [that] helps rally the troops. In this case the enemy was anyone who questioned the viability of a neighborhood” (191). A few days after the green dot map appeared in the newspaper, several hundred Broadmoor residents attended a rally to argue for their *neighborhood’s* right to return. One resident jumped on a car and addressed her neighbors. “How dare the city question whether our neighborhood is alive,” she screamed. “We’re not going to let the city tell us what we’re going to do with our property” (Wooten 2012:93). She pointed to her house, already partially rebuilt, and promised to defend it against the city. “We want the mayor to know that we’re here,” another participant told a reporter. “We’ve been challenged to show that our neighborhood is alive” (Donze 2006). Following the rally, one woman recalled, “everyone just got together and banded together...[We] were really pushing to keep this neighborhood and bring it back” (Wooten 2012:92).

Protests weren't the only strategy that neighborhoods used to promote their right to return. New Orleans East's Vietnamese community asserted its "right to place on the basis of multiculturalism" through an urban farming project, in which "signifiers of cultural heritage" were "converted into claims of sustainability" (Truitt 2011:321-323). Cultural authenticity was mobilized in other neighborhoods to emphasize local contributions to the city's architectural, culinary, or musical heritage. Residents and neighborhood groups drew on culture and history to bolster claims to a neighborhood's place in the post-storm landscape (Crutcher 2010; Eckstein 2005; Gotham 2007). Their attempts to brand—or rebrand—cultural practices, however, resulted in some tensions. Allison Truitt (2011) argues that the Vietnamese community's gardening project "recreat[ed] the very hierarchy of values that the community-based planning process was intended to circumvent" (323). Relying on cultural claims also produced a double bind for neighborhoods forced to enact authenticity in ways legible to others (Cattellino 2010; Povinelli 2012). Such claims undermined recovery efforts in neighborhoods without the cultural capital—the historic homes or famous restaurants—associated with "authentic" New Orleans, rendering them less deserving of being rebuilt.

In addition to protests and place-based rebranding, many neighborhood associations constructed their own plans in response to the green dot map.⁷¹ Broadmoor was one of these neighborhoods, and soon after the storm organized repopulation and revitalization committees to survey properties on every block.⁷² In neighborhoods across the city, residents studied building codes and zoning procedures. Often, when I would meet with residents, they would bring printouts of maps or minutes from the latest city council meeting. "We all earned degrees in

⁷¹ This surge in neighborhood planning didn't emerge out of nowhere. It built on traditions of community activism and neighborhood planning, some of which grew out of the previous decades, retreat of many federal programs, funneled instead through community development corporations (Fairbanks 2009; Germany 2007; Gregory 1999).

⁷² At one meeting, a residents told his neighbors, "There is no guarantee of success, but our best shot at survival will be for us to come together and produce our own plan" (Wooten 2012:97).

planning after Katrina,” one woman joked as we discussed her post-storm activism. Another resident wrote in a blog post: “We catalog and coordinate. We write and administer grants. We gut houses. We sit in attendance and listen carefully. We go to planning meetings because we are investing in a house whose value depends on the recovery of the neighborhood [. . .] We attend Housing Conservation District Review Committee meetings because the city has made clear its intention to demolish our homes without notifying us, compensating us, or giving us a process for appeal” (Neville and Coats 2009:315-16). Many neighborhood associations didn’t reject expert practices, but merely repurposed them through their own claims about neighborhood viability (see Peluso 1995).

Neighborhood plans began with the premise that most, if not all, residents would eventually return. A woman from Gentilly involved in her neighborhood association told me: “The main focus of the neighborhood was obviously getting all of us back because none of us were living in houses. We were all living in rentals or trailers or whatever. So that was the first goal, to get us back. Because, you know, we needed to prove to the city that the whole neighborhood was viable.” This wasn’t only a lofty ideal, but was also a practical challenge, given the deadline proposed by the city for demonstrating a neighborhood’s viability. Yet many neighborhoods were also split, not only along race and class lines, but through distinctions between young and old, single residents and those with families, and other distinctions. Moreover, attendance at neighborhood meetings usually only included residents who had returned; displaced neighbors were often unable to make their voices heard. Local attorney Davida Finger notes “an emphasis on property owners all around, treating renters as second-class

citizens” (Nguyen 2009).⁷³ Still, many residents were committed to the vision—if not the reality—that recovery meant the return of every displaced person.⁷⁴

This image of the post-storm community was enacted in a number of ways. Many neighborhood plans began with a survey to find out the status of neighbors, with some groups even carrying out their own censuses to have the most up-to-date population figures. Through neighborhood maps and plans, residents cultivated interest in their own properties as well as in the fate of those around them—as the blogger noted above, “we are investing in a house whose value depends on the recovery of the neighborhood” (Neville and Coats 2009:315). Nobody wanted to rebuild their home only to find themselves, years later, living on a half-empty street. A neighborhood’s viability was not only the premise of grassroots plans, but also one that returned residents tried to produce by encouraging others to rebuild. Not only were new forms of neighborhood identity cultivated through post-storm organizing and protests against the green dot map, but also a collective interest in the condition of individual properties, since one property’s fate was wrapped up in the fate of an entire neighborhood. This interest produced new forms of solidarity, which is highlighted in most accounts of post-storm neighborhood organizing, but it also created forms of interdependence—and in many cases, obligation.

Laissez-faire

⁷³ Adolph Reed, a political scientist who was born and raised in New Orleans, saw a similar division between owners and non-owners: “With each passing day, a crucially significant political distinction in New Orleans gets clearer and clearer: Property owners are able to assert their interests in the polity, while non-owners are nearly as invisible in civic life now as in the early eighteenth century” (Quigley 2007).

⁷⁴ Though post-storm planning (and opposition to post-storm planning) tended to value property owners over renters and public housing residents, the language of property was also used by others to justify their right to return. Renters and public housing residents claimed their right to return through ties to place or identity.

Mayor Nagin distanced himself from the green dot map (or at least the popular interpretation of it) almost immediately after the storm. He distanced himself, too, from any plan to shrink the city. Instead of delaying recovery in heavily damaged neighborhoods, or reducing the city's footprint, he proposed that "market forces" should determine recovery patterns. "I want you all to come back, and we can work this out," he told evacuees in December 2005 (Levy 2005). His position, according to one reporter, was that "individual decisions and the free market, not central planning, will dictate which areas will be viable as the city recovers" (Warner 2006). People began to refer to this as Nagin's "laissez-faire" approach to recovery.⁷⁵

Though this approach seemed to go against the recommendations of Nagin's handpicked for BNOB commission, it wasn't a radical position for the business-friendly Democrat, who had spent much of his career as a telecommunications executive, and was elected in 2002 with most of his support coming from white voters (Grace 2002).⁷⁶ Yet the market rhetoric involved an about-face, as Nagin turned against his former base, criticizing the white "Uptown" elite, who he claimed were trying to wrest control of the recovery. The mayor's "paeans to free-market initiative [were] interspersed with attempts to portray himself as the guardian of low-income New Orleanians against all those nasty developers angling to swoop in and force them from their neighborhoods," wrote one journalist (Grace 2006). He argued that a market-based approach would produce the most equitable outcome by allowing everyone to come back.

Markets, in this case, weren't promoted for their efficiency, but for their apparently unbiased design for sorting who would and wouldn't rebuild. By not ruling out entire neighborhoods, and drawing on the language of self-determination, Nagin's approach seemed neutral, at least on its face. Laissez-faire was a political strategy as much as an economic

⁷⁵ However, it is unclear whether Mayor Nagin ever used this phrasing.

⁷⁶ In the run-off Nagin won every majority-white precinct in the city (Grace 2002). He later endorsed Republican Bobby Jindal in his campaign for governor in 2004.

strategy, tied up in a strange calculus that placed market forces alongside civil rights, and against urban planners. Many critics saw this as pandering, as the mayor was in the midst of a bitter re-election campaign, and was trying desperately to revitalize his image after widespread criticism of his handling of the storm. The green dot plan was an easy target for the embattled mayor, since it was almost universally reviled by residents. Over the previous months it “ha[d] become almost taboo to discuss any proposal more modest than an immediate and total rebuilding” (Levy 2005). Another journalist put it even more strongly: any plan to shrink the city was “political kryptonite” (Warner 2006).⁷⁷ Nagin cultivated a campaign and self-image against the green dot map. He did so by embracing the market.

The mayor’s *laissez-faire* approach was criticized by many of the same experts that he had initially turned to for rebuilding advice. Urban Land Institute planners were the most unrelenting in their attacks. They painted a dystopian future that would result without a more substantive plan. “I can take you through parts of North Philadelphia or Detroit or Baltimore and show you what it will look like,” one said (Filosa 2006). Bill Odell, an expert at a prestigious architecture and design firm, criticized the mayor’s free market approach as “political cowardice” (Ward 2006). “What will happen is that more affluent neighborhoods will rebuild and low and middle-income areas will be left in limbo,” Odell predicated. A report by a government watchdog group claimed the “*laissez-faire* approach is no plan at all. While purporting to empower residents to rebuild, the approach denies them the fundamental assurances needed for rational investment,” and turns homeowners into “unwitting speculators,” leaving the city’s redevelopment “to chance” (BGR 2005).⁷⁸ “At the city level, Nagin’s approach to rebuilding shows a...reluctance

⁷⁷ Nagin was applauded by city council members, including Jackie Clarkson, who argued: “There’s nothing better than free enterprise and the free market to decide how this city is rebuilt” (Ward 2006).

⁷⁸ These critics echoed utilitarian models of property that emphasized the role of property rights in planning and rational decision-making. Jeremy Bentham argued that “security” was one of the most important elements of law

to exert a heavy hand,” wrote one journalist. “The results so far, while not deadly, are frustrating to many looking for signs of progress and guidance on how they can come home” (Grace 2006).

Nagin’s repositioning was savvy, and many residents embraced it. He was re-elected with overwhelming support from black voters, a reversal from four years earlier. Yet his approach wasn’t actually a major departure from the BNOB’s recommendation that every neighborhood be given a chance to prove its viability, even if some areas would later be turned into parks or green space.⁷⁹ Nagin merely did away with the moratorium on building permits, and the requirement that residents prove their neighborhood’s viability, allowing people to rebuild wherever they wanted. But this left unanswered the question about what might be done in neighborhoods that never fully recovered their pre-storm populations.

Many neighborhoods soon encountered shortcomings to the laissez-faire approach. Nagin promised equal right to return, no matter which neighborhood residents lived in or how much damage their homes sustained. But without the means to exercise that right, many residents were unable—or unwilling—to do so. It would be months before the state’s Road Home Program would begin accepting applications and even longer before they would begin distributing rebuilding grants. Meanwhile, people were mired in disputes with insurance companies, banks, mortgage lenders, and contractors. Many chose to wait until their neighborhoods were in better shape before returning, especially since certain areas still lacked vital services, including water and electricity. Reverend Jesse Jackson, standing in front of the site of the levee breach in the Lower Ninth Ward, argued “The right to return is hollow without a plan for transportation and a place to stay” (Nolan 2006).

and property. The “free and durable possession which merits the name of property” was central to cultivating expectation, or “the power of forming a general plan of conduct” (Macpherson 1978:50-51).

⁷⁹ In fact, BNOB recommendations, while seen by many activists as a prime example of top-down planning, were criticized in the same manner as Nagin’s later market-based approach. Planners worried that giving people a four month grace period didn’t provide adequate information for people to make rebuilding decisions.

The laissez-faire approach pit neighborhoods against each other as they competed for scarce public and private resources—widening existing inequalities as well as engendering new ones (Barrios 2011; Wendel 2009). While many accounts celebrate the grassroots nature of neighborhood planning, many of the more successful groups were bolstered by connections to non-profit organizations and elite institutions.⁸⁰ Broadmoor, for example, had strong ties to Harvard University, which provided funding and technical support as well as summer interns for their community development corporation. Areas with homegrown expertise—that is, lawyers and other professionals who knew how to navigate city and state bureaucracies—also fared better. Lakeview, a majority-white and upper-middle class suburb, was wrecked by flooding, but rebounded much more quickly than similarly damaged neighborhoods because of this.

A year after the storm, Jed Horne, editor of the *Times-Picayune*, argued that the “market forces” approach left the post-storm city “directionless” (Goodman and Horne 2006). Rebuilding “atomized into a series of independent neighborhood projects” and the city became “a petri dish for ideas about housing and urban life. An assortment of foundations, church groups, academics, corporate titans, Hollywood celebrities, young people with big ideas, and architects on a mission have been working independently to rebuild the city’s neighborhoods, all wholly unconcerned about the missing master plan.” This could be “at once exhilarating and frightening to behold” (Curtis 2009). But at the same time the city and state made certain decisions that would have a noticeable effect on recovery patterns. They encouraged commercial investment and infrastructure improvement in downtown areas and around a new biomedical district (Campanella 2008:349).

⁸⁰ Universities that contributed planning or technical support included Berkeley, Columbia, Harvard, MIT, Rutgers, and Tulane, among others.

Laissez-faire had a narrow purview, characterizing the relationship between property owners and the government, ignoring how rebuilding decisions were shaped by much broader factors involving the availability of schools, hospitals, grocery stores, utilities, and public services.⁸¹ Just as some experts had predicted, many residents faced uncertainty about the future of their neighborhoods. Even those who could return were reluctant to take the first step without guarantees that their neighborhoods would be secure. This was especially true with flood protection. Maps released by the Army Corp of Engineers in 2007 showed “work [that] has been completed so far benefits some of the city’s wealthier and predominantly white neighborhoods more than its poorer and mostly black areas” (Witt 2007). “There is a real question of equity and justice in terms of what neighborhoods are being assisted,” said law professor William Quigley, responding to the maps. “There is a sense that by their actions, our public officials are indicating that some people are more welcome back to New Orleans than others” (ibid.). This resulted in a prolonged sense of displacement, even among those who were able to return. Civil rights attorney Tracie Washington said, “I’m still displaced until the conditions that caused my displacement have been alleviated. I’m still displaced as long as Charity Hospital remains closed. I’m still displaced as long as rents remain unaffordable. I’m still displaced as long as schools are in such bad shape” (Flaherty 2010:67).

This contradiction between abstract equality and actual inequality has dogged liberalism since its founding, but takes particular form when property is involved (Marx 1844; see also Hetherington 2012).⁸² Katherine Verdery’s (2003) study of decollectivization in post-socialist

⁸¹ Some people questioned the seemingly uneven distribution of public and private services, especially when the state announced that it would pour \$185 million into repairing the Superdome. Others criticized the unending stream of expensive plans. “They’re spending far too much money on planning,” one Gert Town resident said. “What we need is not rocket science. We need housing. We have philanthropic dollars at waste, we have federal dollars at waste, we have people who are wasting” (Warner 2006).

⁸² Many scholars have also tried to unravel the distinctions between liberalism and neoliberalism, and the latter’s departure from what Milton Friedman once called the “naive ideology” of laissez-faire (Peck 2008:7; see also

Romania documents how farmers given title to land often weren't able to secure capital for seeds, fertilizer, or tools. They were owners, she argues, yet "obtaining rights often failed to generate ownership that was effective" (4). The same happened with many New Orleanians who, after achieving their right to return, found themselves without the means to exercise that right.⁸³ City government stepped back and acquiesced to "market forces," but federal and state programs wouldn't step in for another year or more. Thousands of people were left owning properties that they couldn't afford to rebuild.

Conclusion

Laissez-faire was a short-lived victory for many residents who, after securing their right to return, found themselves without the means to exercise that right, or returned home only to find a neighborhood they weren't sure they wanted to return to. People had invested in their homes and neighborhoods, and in a particular vision of recovery that would include everyone who was displaced. They came back because they thought others were coming back, too. Their activism built on a certain vision of recovery in which everyone would return, not only because they wanted to rebuild, but in order to prove their neighborhoods were worth rebuilding. This vision of recovery was the product of planning debates that gave new meaning to home and neighborhood, largely through idioms of property. But post-storm planning produced divisions

Collier 2011; Foucault 2010; Mirowski and Piehwe 2015). Liberalism posits a strict separation between the state and a self-regulating market. Neoliberalism, at least as it was imagined by its central theorists, envisions a more active role for the state in facilitating market competition. Jamie Peck (2008) argues that early neoliberal theorists distinguished between planning against markets, which they saw exemplified in the reigning Keynesian doctrines, and planning for markets, which they saw as the only legitimate form of state intervention and planning. Nagin's approach had more in common with nineteenth century liberalism than with twentieth or twenty-first century neoliberalism, though there are clear resonances with the latter as recovery planning was transferred to neighborhoods associations and other non-governmental organizations (Brash 2011).

⁸³ Planners who advocated shrinking the city had predicted this problem might arise, though their solution—a staged approach to recovery—would have resulted in inequalities, too.

between neighborhoods, as well as divisions within neighborhoods, between people who rebuilt and those who didn't.

Neighborhood planning was a political project—and promise—enacted by its residents, which mirrored beliefs about the city's to rebuild normal. But post-storm planning debates, which swung between top-down and laissez-faire approaches, missed the crucial question about how people would be able to rebuild. Conflicts about where and when to prioritize redevelopment missed the broader social and material infrastructures that make a city worth living in. By deferring to the market, the city abandoned any real concerted plan for its recovery. An article written after the three year anniversary of the storm argued that “Mayor Ray Nagin’s declaration that a laissez-faire ‘market forces’ approach would drive New Orleans’ population higher than before the flood seems well off the mark. Although some neighborhoods have recovered strongly, in many the population remains down by 50 percent or more. Across the flood zone, ghost homes sit empty by the hundreds on blighted, overgrown blocks” (Russell 2008).

CHAPTER 3: RUINED DREAMS

Sharon was sitting on her porch when I pulled up to her house, in July 2010. She had offered to show me around her neighborhood. Though almost five years had passed since the storm, her street remained empty; there were only four occupied homes on her block. I wanted to learn why. We walked slowly, dodging the large cracks in the sidewalk. The afternoon clouds brought little relief from the stifling summer heat. Finally, we paused in front of a string of vacant properties.⁸⁴ “They moved to New York a few months after [Katrina]. Don’t think they’re coming back,” she said, pointing to a dilapidated house. “They got taken by some contractor. He ran away with their FEMA money,” she said, pointing to the boarded-up house next door. Sharon wove together stories of long-lost people and places, memories engaged through material remains. “Look at my area,” she said. “Look at it. My best friend, she used to live right there,” pointing to a set of concrete steps peeking out from knee-high brush. “We’ve been friends for years. Now all I see are steps. She’s in Baton Rouge, said she’s never coming back.”

We arrived back at her front porch and I joked about the Christmas lights still hanging from her eaves. “Yeah, my neighbors must think I’m crazy!” she said. We both laughed, since Sharon didn’t have any neighbors. I asked what she thinks when she sees her neighborhood in such condition. Sharon gazed at the unkempt field across the street. “This doesn’t look like a neighborhood,” she replied. “I don’t know what it looks like. I can’t even put it in words. It looks like it wants to be a neighborhood. It has the potential.” Of course, when I looked across the street I just saw another vacant space, another casualty of Katrina. Sharon, however, remembered when this neighborhood was alive—and these memories gave her hope. “This is why I came

⁸⁴ I use the phrase “empty lot” because that is how they are described by most of the city residents I’ve spoken with. Of course, what “empty” means depends on the context, as such lots are often “full” of memories or material remains.

back,” she said, turning away from the field. “This is why I’m still here. Because soon, God willing, this will be a neighborhood again.”

Sharon was one of thousands of residents living in limbo in the years after Katrina. These residents invested in the promise that their neighborhoods would return to normal, but after a years staying on half-empty streets, many were growing impatient, especially as properties began to decay, undermining any sense of progress, and putting the possibility of recovery in question. Sharon was more optimistic than most, though she wouldn’t remain so for very long.

In this chapter, I show how residents altered their expectations of post-storm recovery as vacant properties began to decay. These properties, which for years were symbols of the storm’s destruction, increasingly became a nuisance. As signs of ruination began to outweigh signs of rebuilding progress, residents began to redefine recovery, not through their neighbors’ return, but through desires to move on. Building on the work of Nancy Munn (1986), I examine the positive and negative potentials, which were read through a property’s material condition, and were connected to “certain types of transformative action through which a community seeks to create the value it regards as essential to its communal viability” (3; see also Elyachar 2005). Negative potentials, interpreted through ongoing decay, threatened “the capacity to produce the desired value and the ideal construction of self and social relation this value entails” (Munn 1986:3).

I also build on recent work on ruins to highlight the intertwined aspects of meaning and materiality—and their complex temporalities—in the post-storm landscape.⁸⁵ I explore, in particular, the “spatial quality of temporality” exhibited through rhythms of recovery and

⁸⁵ “Ruins” wasn’t a term I encountered very often in the field. People usually referred to a property or house with qualifiers such as empty, vacant, or abandoned. People also used concept of blight—either as an adjective (“that property is blighted”) or as a noun (“look at all this blight!”). I invoke ruins less for their conceptual power than for the kinds of concerns that I share with ruin scholars.

ruination (Navaro-Yashin 2012:7; see also Lefebvre 2004). A ruin “seems to have lost its function or meaning in the present, while retaining a suggestive, unstable semantic potential,” write Julia Hell and Andreas Schönle (2010:6). A ruin also “indexes both the hope and hubris of the futures that never came to pass” (DeSilvey and Edensor 2012:468). Vacant properties exhibit “disparate temporalities, whose mutual relationship is neither linear nor cyclical but rather transversal, multi-temporal, or [. . .] trans-temporal” (Pedersen and Nielsen 2013:124). These varied temporalities were enacted through contrasting rates of material decay, and through the encounters that people had with ruined spaces, the memories these encounters provoked, the past, presents, and futures they revealed and concealed.

For many returnees, vacant properties produced a “sense of arrested rather than possible futures” (Stoler 2008:202)—what Yael Navaro-Yashin (2012) has called a “stunted temporality” (7). Ruins made people feel stuck in time and space. Yet ruination was an evolving process. Focusing on ruination “is to broach the protracted quality of decimation in people’s lives, to track the production of new exposures and enduring damage” (Stoler 2008:196). The ongoing ruination of vacant properties reshaped how residents experienced the promises and failures of post-storm recovery, mediated through the crumbling homes around them (Gordillo 2014).

Nancy Munn (2013) argues that spatial transformations “do not, of course, merely operate in time; they also give time a specific form—in general, making absences and new pasts, as they make new forms of the present and, consequently, alter future potentials” (142). I trace the emergence of these temporal forms as recovery efforts waned and residents began to grapple with thousands of vacant properties that remained—how they “cope with and also take advantage of unfamiliar and largely alienating temporal relations marked by uncertainty, ambiguity, and contradiction” (Harms 2013:346). Through their encounters with storm-damaged

properties and their subsequent ruination, residents had to revise their expectations of post-storm recovery, and reckon with a potential future in which many of their neighbors may never return.

In the first section, I examine recovery's stutters and stops shaped by broader social and economic processes. In the second and third sections, I explore how residents grappled with vacant properties as matter out of place and time. In the fourth section, I explain how many residents began to articulate desires to move on through—and against—the persistent presence of vacant properties. In the fifth section, I conclude by returning to Sharon's street a year after the neighborhood tour in the opening paragraphs of this chapter, to recapitulate the arc that is the topic of this chapter, and understand how storm-damaged properties became blight.

Bumps on the road home

In January 2007, the Brookings Institution released a report on the recovery, citing much evidence of a city on the mend. Hotels were back in business, airport traffic was on the rise, many schools were back in session, and sixty-six percent of residential addresses were receiving mail, a rough proxy for repopulation. New housing permits even surpassed pre-Katrina levels for the first time since the storm. These statistics painted a rosy picture of recovery—one that was progressing at a rapid pace. Yet the recovery, for many residents, had not even begun.

One year after the storm, Louisiana Governor Kathleen Blanco launched the Road Home program, which would provide rebuilding grants to owners of storm-damaged properties.⁸⁶ Until then, residents who wanted to start rebuilding had to rely on insurance money or personal savings. Though it eventually dispersed more than \$9 billion dollars to individual homeowners across the state, the Road Home program was slow to get off the ground, and many residents

⁸⁶ These grants would be funded by federal rebuilding dollars.

struggled to navigate the convoluted application process (Finger 2008). People sat in crowded waiting rooms before seeing a case manager, went through several rounds of review, and were often denied on some technicality. State legislators, supposedly concerned about fraud, required residents to provide unreasonable amounts of paperwork, ignoring the fact that many people lost these documents (titles, mortgage records, electricity bills) when their homes flooded. David Sawyer from Pontchartrain Park, summarized the Kafka-esque application process: “File some papers, go back, wait, get something from them asking for more papers or different papers, and then file some more papers. And while all this happens you’re trying to keep your mind focused on getting your house back. You know, trying to get back to a stable life” (Kroll-Smith, Baxter, and Jenkins 2015:89). Davida Finger (2008), an attorney who helped residents navigate the process, argues that many residents were “stranded and squandered” by the Road Home program.

ICF International, the company contracted by the state to administer the program, was widely criticized for its abysmal performance (Adams 2013).⁸⁷ By March 2007, seven months after the program started, only 2.5 percent of applicants (2,780 out of 111,887) had received grants (PBS 2009).⁸⁸ Those who were approved for grants were routinely disappointed, since the average homeowner received \$54,586 less than they needed to rebuild (Finger 2008:59). This shortfall was even more acute in low-income neighborhoods since grants were primarily based on a property’s pre-storm market value, rather than reconstruction costs—a clearly discriminatory formula that was the basis of a later lawsuit (see Carr 2011). ACORN activist Tanya Harris argued that because of these disparities, “a lot people will be discouraged from

⁸⁷ Though it profited handily from the job (see Adams 2013).

⁸⁸ More than 45,000 New Orleans homeowners eventually received Road Home grants. This was more than many experts predicated, and was taken as an indication of the strong desire on the part of many residents to rebuild. About five thousand homeowners, however, took the buyout option, and sold their properties to the state. These properties sat in limbo in a state-run land trust before being transferred to the New Orleans Redevelopment Authority, which redistributed some of them through auctions or alternative use programs.

coming back to New Orleans. A lot of people not only will be discouraged; a lot won't financially be able to do that" (PBS 2009). I met one woman, Gloria, who dipped into her savings and borrowed money from her brother to complete repairs on her Gentilly home. Many of her neighbors, however, lived paycheck to paycheck; those without family or friends to lean on or without access to credit usually couldn't afford to rebuild.⁸⁹

Rebuilding started and stopped according to circumstances outside any one person's control. Gloria remembered struggling to find a contractor "because everyone was booked," she told me. "You could make three or four appointments and none of them would show up. It took us a year just to find a crooked contractor!" Though volunteers could rip out drywall and mow grass, they were not usually not able to complete more intricate work.⁹⁰ Many suffered discouraging setbacks. One man told me about thieves who stole the newly installed copper wiring from his house. "It's like one step forward, two steps back," he told me. "Three steps back! They stole some tools, too." But in most cases, delays had more to do with unpredictable cash flows. Someone might hang new drywall one week and then spend months scrounging up money for the next task, rhythms that were mirrored in the ebb and flow of people back into the city. Mack, a middle-aged black man, was the first person to move back to his street in New Orleans East about five months after the storm. He put a large fence around his yard because he didn't want his children to have to see what surrounded them. "Visually speaking, I must have been insane to invest money in that. The whole place was a mess," he told me. But once his neighbors saw that he had come back, some of them decided to take the plunge. "It only takes

⁸⁹ Some people used the rebuilding grants to payoff outstanding mortgages, and ended up with next to nothing to put towards repairs.

⁹⁰ The city also required work to be inspected, and with many of its employees still displaced, it was only a short time before a backlog formed.

one to get things started. I think I gave the others some hope. Now seventeen or nineteen on my street have come back. That's really good! Now I don't need my fence anymore."

While some people took pride in being the first to return on their block, others waited. Without a support network of neighbors and kin, many didn't want to come back to a city still lacking basic services. The green dot plan also contributed to indecisiveness. People didn't want to pour money into rebuilding only to be forced to move if their neighborhood couldn't reach a certain population benchmark in the future. Finally, many people were simply too traumatized to come back. Gloria told me that a lot of her friends "just walked away from their houses or sold them at a loss. They said 'There's no way I'm going through that again.' And these are people that would have had a chance, you know, because, well, they weren't rich but they probably had insurance and they probably had some funds available. But the whole psychological thing was too much for them." Many were simply deterred by the uncertainty. Kalamu Ya Salaam explains why his brother, a cardiologist, chose to not return to the city: "He's made a practical decision, and that practical decision is that he's not going to reopen his practice right now. He can't. That whole *Field of Dreams* bullshit just doesn't work in New Orleans, which is if you open it, they will come. Ain't no buses, ain't no place to live" (Vollen and Ying 2006:247).

Many residents ended up settling down in new cities. Gloria told me that every block in her neighborhood in Gentilly "has at least two or three empty houses because you have a lot of people who didn't come back. They went to Texas because they had better jobs and the schools were better. And it just took too long. If I'm somewhere else for three years and still fighting FEMA, and I like where I'm at and I have a job, and some stability where I'm at, why should I come back? So when you run around you see a whole lot of houses just sitting with people who have no intention of coming back, they've made their homes elsewhere." Thousands of people

set down new roots in Atlanta, Dallas, Houston, Memphis—Sunbelt cities that provided a more robust quality of life. These cities also provided children with a change of scenery. “Remember, there were people before Katrina who had never left New Orleans in their lives,” Gloria continued. “So some are pretty excited to be somewhere different and try somewhere new. I mean, if you look at it, we’re kind of behind the times a little bit. I mean, I love my city, it’s an exciting city, but as far as education and industry, we’re behind. And you take a lot of young people and you take them elsewhere and they see it’s better libraries, better schools, stuff for kids to do—they have nothing here. People start to see different possibilities. And so many people never came back.”

Non-profit organizations had a profound effect on recovery patterns. Kevin Brown, the executive director of a rebuilding organization in the Hollygrove neighborhood, claims: “Wherever we did a house...if we do one or two houses on the block, that block would come back... And you can tell. Right now, I mean, if you were to drive with me through Hollygrove, you could tell where we did a house because the neighbors are all back. And you can tell where we didn’t do a house because those blocks have maybe one, two people on them” (Wooten 2012:167). I saw similar patterns in Gentilly, where a non-profit organization built a string of houses along one street, bringing that area back. Their impact was clear, especially when compared to the state of the rest of the neighborhood, which according to one neighbor was “a totally different world. It still looked like the storm just hit.”

In many neighborhoods, construction was often met by destruction. Thousands of homes were demolished after the storm. You could drive by a building in the morning and it might be gone by that afternoon. Anne Gisleson (2010) writes: “What we have noted, driving around these past few years, after the dreamy shock of the disaster began to wear off, is how stuff keeps

disappearing. Buildings, whole blocks, shopping centers. A neat, complete sort of removal, leaving a raked-over plot of dirt or square of weeds and a questioning sensation—was that drugstore/bank/shotgun/Victorian mansion really ever there?” (2). The patchwork of new and old could be unsettling. One woman told me about a recent visit to her friend’s house in the Upper Ninth Ward: “When I went to see her and her new house, I saw it and it was nice, and very pretty. But it had no character. Everything is new. Where are the memories? These are things that make a home. So now at almost 65 years old she is trying to make a house a home. That is out of the normal context! And no matter how new and pretty the stainless steel is, it just serves to show you that everything else is gone. You can’t recapture what was. It’s furniture and houses that have no memory. Pretty, but no memory.” Many who returned encountered this sense of dissonance in their most intimate spaces. Pamela Harold was adamant: “I didn’t joyfully move out, get my house fixed up, and move back here. What I did, we all did, was painful; it was laborious; it was hard. I look at a corner and think I see a piece of furniture that I used to love. But it’s not there. A picture used to hang here and over there. Why aren’t they there now? There’s so many different fibers in a home. It’s not just a house, it is layers of things and memories” (Kroll-Smith, Baxter, and Jenkins 2015:128).

Matter out of place

By the third year anniversary of the storm, half-finished homes were scattered around the city. Neighbors began to complain about their appearance and effects. Many griped about high grass and weeds that sometimes grew higher than a single-story building. Vines consumed structures, blooming bright yellow flowers in the spring, and wrapped around joists, slowly ripping a

building apart from the inside.⁹¹ Ornithologists were excited about the new bird species they found in overgrown lots, but many residents were concerned about more troublesome pests—rats, snakes, raccoons, and possums—drawn to these spaces (Rich 2012). Some of my friends ordered mousetraps in bulk to combat the rodents in the vacant lot next door to them, though there was little people could do about the feral cats and dogs roamed in and out of abandoned homes. Mosquitoes bred in stagnant pools of water. “I ain’t never seen bugs like I did in that place,” one woman said, referring to the lot next door to her. “I couldn’t even give you the name of them! I went by one day and there was a strange looking lizard there, and I ran,” she said, pumping her arms up and down in mock sprint.⁹²

I interviewed a Mid-City man whose eyes would start burning every time he opened his bedroom window. His allergies only began after the storm when several vacant properties on his street grew wild. One couple blamed their child’s asthma on mold in the ungutted homes on their street. Another woman worried that the boarded-up house next door might just blow up one day “with all of the gases from the mold.” The uncertainty was what disturbed neighbors most. “God knows what we’ve been inhaling coming out of that house,” a Gentilly man said about the run-down building across the street. “It’s the mold that really worries me. You don’t know what’s going on in there. But it has to be a health hazard.” Neighbors also worried about empty lots becoming informal dumping grounds, piled with tires, mattresses, broken television sets, even burned-out cars. One woman in the Upper Ninth Ward would clean up the garbage in the lot next to her house, only to see it return within a few days. People would stroll by and throw bottles or cans into the grass while she watched from her porch. “I try to yell at them,” she told me. “It’s

⁹¹ Chinese tallow, an invasive tree species, also sprouted quickly, maturing in only a few months, growing dense and nearly impenetrable.

⁹² Gloria told me “sometimes when I come home I just want to scream. The grass in the house next door is taller than me! And who knows if there’s snakes or who knows what in there.”

like, ‘I live here! This is my house!’ But the stuff just piles up. It’s really depressing. I come in here and have this house spotless. When I walk outside it’s like I’m in a different world. I sit on my porch and think: I can control what’s inside but I can’t control what’s outside.”



Figure 10. Trash dumped in front of a vacant lot. Photo by author. 2013.

The vast majority of complaints, however, were about crime. People rehearsed popular versions of broken windows theory—the idea that minor signs of disorder (trash, graffiti, or broken windows) precipitate more serious infractions—when talking about vacant properties (Wilson and Kelling 1982). These spaces not only seemed to attract crime, but also stood in the way of efforts to prevent it, offering criminals places to hide, and represented fewer sets of eyes on the street.⁹³ In one infamous case, a teenage girl was raped in an abandoned house in the Lower Ninth Ward. According to police, “the suspect emerged from within an area of tall grass in front of an abandoned house” (Williams 2010). Coverage of another case involving the murder of a teenage boy pointed to the neighborhood’s deteriorated condition as an accessory to

⁹³ Jane Jacobs (1992) argued that eyes on the street were an vital mechanism for preventing neighborhood crime and disorder.

the crime. Though scholars have criticized such environmental determinist approaches (see Katz 2013), residents embraced the logic, and responded to the murder by organizing a neighborhood clean up. “With high grass on one side of the street, and abandoned homes on the other,” wrote one journalist, “neighbors said it’s not a matter of if another crime will happen, but when” (WDSU 2012).



Figure 11. Neighbors show the author an abandoned house on their street. Photo by author. 2012.

The threat of crime, whether real or imagined, often invaded the intimate lives of residents. It wasn't only something that existed outside, but rather made them feel uncomfortable in their own homes. I interviewed an elderly Gentilly woman who lived next to a squat brick house abandoned after the storm, and when I arrived for our scheduled interview, she peeked through her window before undoing several locks on her front door. She began telling me about the

property next door, emphasizing the crime she had witnessed: kids breaking in, using drugs, even meeting for drug deals near the alley. “I have a lot of uneasiness, especially at night time, when I go to bed I hear all kinds of noise. I hear everything. I think I can hear a mosquito walk across the floor.” Before she turns in, she makes sure her door is locked, then slides her sofa in front of the door, just to make sure nobody can get in. “That’s how I’m living right now,” she said, shaking her head. I asked her whether that was safe—what if there was a fire inside her house and she couldn’t get out? “I’m more worried about the people out there than any fire in here,” she responded. “I’ll be honest with you, I hate to see nighttime come.”

Many scholars have criticized the broken windows theory on an empirical basis, though it remains a potent social fact for residents in neighborhoods overrun by vacant properties (Roberts 1999). Most of these “crimes” only existed as potential embodied in vacant properties. But this made crime concerns ubiquitous, shaping people’s everyday rituals, even making some reconsider their very residence in the city. I interviewed one man in Hollygrove who told me that the vacant properties on his street were so “depressing” that he and his wife were planning to move. The couple was going to Baton Rouge that afternoon to look at houses. “We thought about looking around New Orleans but this stuff is everywhere. There’s not a street we could find without blight.” They just recently had a child, which provided a “different filter, a different lens on the neighborhood. It’s not the environment we want to raise her in.” He wasn’t the only one worried about the social and psychological consequences of vacant properties on future generations. Sharon hated seeing children walk past rows of empty buildings, spaces that were not only physical threats (“someone could come out and grab them”), but also, she believed, spaces that affected them in a deep-seated, emotional way. “If you want children to feel good about themselves, you need to give them some kind of organization, but this is just

dysfunctional. How can you tell your children you live in a functional society, where people really care about them, when they have to walk through all of this to get to the bus stop? How are you going to let them know there's a better world outside when they look outside their door and they can't see a block that can be cleaned up?"

All around the city, vacant properties were increasingly seen as a threat, and not only in the present, but to a desired future. Their ongoing deterioration rendered them as ongoing and ever-increasing dangers. This notion was most explicit in fears about vacant properties collapsing on neighbors. "Down the street one house eventually gave up the ghost and collapsed in," one Broadmoor man told me. "It did a ton of damage to the house next to it that wasn't blighted. It literally fell in on them and the whole side of their house had big chunks taken out of it. It's not fair to the people that live around it because if something happens to your house because of it, good luck finding the people who own it."



Figure 12. The remains of a collapsed house. Photo by author. 2012.

Stories appeared on nighttime news that sensationalized these occurrences. Here's an excerpt from one (Capo 2013):

NEW ORLEANS -- Patricia Nelson restored to her Central City neighborhood after Katrina. But now she's afraid, because the side wall of the long empty house next door is leaning dangerously towards her home. "I am very frightened," said Nelson. "I am very frightened because I can't even walk through my alley or anything because I'm so afraid this house is going to come down." The view from her windows is of the decaying structure. When the side wall separated two months ago, her brother nailed two small boards in place. That's what is keeping the collapsing wall from hitting her home. "The house is so weak, it's like if a hard wind comes, it's gonna be on my house."

As residents grappled with run-down homes and overgrown lots, it became more difficult to hold onto a view of property as spatially contained (Blomley 2016). Normal property boundaries were transgressed by mold, rats, high grass, and crime. The line between private rights and public responsibilities became blurred. Vacant properties seemed to violate the norms of property ownership that see it as embedded in social and community relations. "Your home should be your little haven, the place where you have your memories as a family and your gatherings," one Broadmoor woman told me. "To feel intruded upon, whether you want it or not, it's just a burden. And it's something you deal with every day when you're living next to a blighted house." Vacant properties became a matter of concern, mostly as matter out of place. The concept of blight seemed to capture this spillover, this sense of transgression, by constituting vacant properties as a nuisance.

Matter out of time

As more properties were rebuilt and reoccupied, those that remained empty appeared increasingly out of sync with the rest of the city's recovery. They unsettled a sense of time and

progress, reminding residents of the storm, and ultimately leaving many feeling stuck, unable to move on. People worried that their neighborhoods would never be like they were before the storm—or worse, that they would remain like they had been *since* the storm.

Macarena Gomez-Barris (2008) writes about the “afterlife” of political violence as the “continuing and persistent symbolic and material effects of the original event of violence on people’s daily lives, their social and psychic identities, and their ongoing wrestling with the past in the present” (6; see also Das 2006; Garcia 2010; Navaro-Yashin 2012). For many residents, the storm didn’t end when water was pumped out of their neighborhoods. It didn’t end when they finished sorting through their waterlogged stuff. The storm didn’t even end when they moved back into their homes. It survived in myriad, often mundane ways. Residents encountered sights or situations that brought them back to the storm—including empty homes on nearly every street. One woman in Gentilly told me that seeing these properties “just brings back the days when the streets were white and chalky and mounds of, oh my gosh, it was crazy.” Another woman told me that whenever she saw blue tarpaulins that were used to cover damaged roofs, she would start crying. Many residents zeroed in on particular things, such as water lines remaining on homes. “For the longest time you could see the water line on [the house next door]” a woman in Broadmoor told me. “I was like ‘Could somebody please just clean the water line off of this house?’ I didn’t want that constant reminder of how deep the water was that day.”

Vacant properties reminded people of their former neighbors—of “all the people that aren’t coming back,” as Gloria once put it. An elderly woman in Broadmoor told me about the previous inhabitant of the run-down house next door to her. “I have memories of the person who lived there before, and us being a neighborhood, and having fond memories of hanging out in her house.” She was frustrated with its current condition, “but for me it’s a little more personal

because I knew what it was like pre-Katrina, so I knew it was a fun little house. It's sad to me.” These memories were especially upsetting because she knew that her neighbor probably wasn't coming back. “Now there's this constant reminder that she had to move all the way to North Carolina and be separated from all these people she felt a kinship with and felt comfortable with. And we just don't know what's going to happen with the property.” Confronting the things former neighbors left behind could also be unsettling. “I went into the house across the street and they just left it all. There are still clothes hanging in the hallway, in the closets. There's still canned food in the kitchen. The water lines are clear. Somebody came in and threw away all the furniture and pulled up the carpets and that's where it's ended, nothing else has been done. It's like a time capsule. You walk in and it's eerie because their little kids' clothing is hanging in there and I'm thinking ‘My God, those kids are in junior high by now. Or they're going to high school.’ And it's just a weird little snapshot in time.”



Figure 13. Water lines still visible on a house in Mid-City. Photo by author. 2012.

Some people were strangely fascinated by these ruins, to the point that a few even told me that they had almost gotten used to seeing them around. But for most, these ruins continued to traumatize them. “It’s not over,” one woman told me almost three years after the storm. “You still have to traverse this city and see all this destruction. And that has an unconscious affect on you, I don’t care what you say.” There was a chronicity to these reminders—embodied, as they were, in almost every aspect of the built environment. They kept the storm in people’s lives, on repeat. “Every morning I get up and I walk outside and that’s what I see, a big old rotting boarded-up house,” one woman told me. “It’s a reminder of all the bad stuff that happened. And it’s like you almost can’t move forward if you have this one little eyesore that you keep having to deal with every day.” Another explained how “there are things that come up every day or once a week or month that bring you back to the situation here. And I’m an adult and I think I’m in pretty good emotional and mental health, but it is traumatic.”

Many residents talked about vacant properties as “slowing down” or even “holding back” rebuilding efforts. Many people felt stuck. One man in Central City spent his weekends mowing the empty lot next to his house. “That shouldn’t be my burden,” he told me. He came back after the storm to restore his community. “Now it’s hell,” he said. “Nothing is moving.” Scholars have documented similar situations of uneven transformation. Yael Navaro-Yashin (2012) describes a sense of “stunted temporality” experienced by Turkish-Cypriots after the island’s partition, who felt “spatially enclosed and temporally in a limbo status” (7). Residents in redeveloping neighborhoods in Ho Chi Min City experienced a “liminal state of ruptured time” due to pending evictions (Harms 2013:345). In post-Katrina New Orleans, a sense of stasis was produced through the city’s uneven recovery, in which many people felt trapped in neighborhoods that, as Gloria once put it, “still look like they did after Katrina hit.”

There was a spatial quality to this temporality. People could feel “recovered” in one space but not in another. “I feel recovered when I’m in my home, or I’m standing in my yard,” one Broadmoor woman told me. “But in terms of my neighborhood, no. Because here’s one, two, three neighbors that I’ve known over the years that aren’t there, that would prefer to be there. And then there’s the house across the street that’s turned over a few times, a lot of rehab work done, but now it’s in foreclosure and its back on the market, and it sat there for quite a while. It’s going to because people look next door to me is a house that’s empty, and it doesn’t look bad but it doesn’t look great either. And across the street is one that’s really depleting. It’s a pigeon hotel. When you buy a home, you don’t want to say ‘Well, that’s been there since the storm. Am I going to have to face that every day in my new home?’” These discrepancies could transform someone’s home, otherwise rebuilt, into an unhomely space. The close proximity, being able to view a blighted property from one’s door or window, made it feel like an intrusion. The repetition of sights across the city—water lines, overgrown yards, empty homes—brought people back to the storm, no matter what progress they were able to make on their own homes.

While many residents moved back hoping that storm-damaged properties would be rebuilt, they now had to confront a far less desirable future. It wasn’t only that their neighborhoods might not return to their pre-storm state, but that they may actually become worse. The collapse of one future—of a rebuilt normal—forced residents to confront another based on the threat of ongoing ruination (Nielsen 2014; Stoler 2008). Vacant properties had lost their potential to be rebuilt. Their condition not only reflected damage from the storm, but also indexed ongoing neglect. Blight seemed to capture this negative potential—one that indicated a past loss, but also a future threat—that residents experienced through the shortcomings of post-storm recovery.



Figure 14. A vacant property next to a house that had been rebuilt. Photo by author. 2012.

Residents began to reevaluate the place of vacant properties in the post-storm landscape. There was a point in time after which many regarded these properties as blighted. Not everyone agreed on the cutoff, though people usually settled on the four or five year anniversary of the storm. That should have been enough time for people to decide whether they were going to rebuild or not, residents told me.⁹⁴ A woman said that in her area of Broadmoor, “it was like four years because a lot of people had already come back and the houses they were living in, whatever condition they were, everybody was hard at work. You could see trucks all the time, up and down streets. So I think five years, yeah, after five years. By that time you’d gotten all your FEMA money, you’d gotten the other government funds, you should have been at least at some stage that was agreeable for everybody. I’m not saying you’re supposed to have your house done, or beautiful, but to see movement, or some kind of good faith effort. Five years is way more than enough, I think. I mean, four years, almost everyone on my block was back, living permanent.”

⁹⁴ There was certainly some selection bias in the responses I received. But even strangers I spoke with didn’t know anything about my research seemed to agree that the time for waiting was over.

After so much time spent living with residues of the storm, many New Orleanians simply wanted to move on. “Everyone else in this area has repaired their home,” one woman told me, “there’s no reason we should still have to live next to a blighted house. There is no more Katrina excuse.”

Moving on

An article in the Times-Picayune published in August 2007 featured three-dozen comments from residents “speak[ing] out about blight” (Times-Picayune 2007). Jaimie Bergeron in Lakeview said living near abandoned properties was “demoralizing.” Greg Heimsoth in the Upper Ninth Ward said he “can’t see putting any more money into my property when the unstable building next door has the potential to fall onto mine.” But there was still a sense that vacant properties had a chance to be rebuilt. Sarah Taylor, from the Upper Ninth Ward, even had some “good news”: “the owner of the property recently decided to renovate the property, which will drastically improve the safety and appearance of the block.”

I have described how some residents grew frustrated with the lack of “movement” in their neighborhoods, or with the continuing deterioration of vacant properties. But the status of many properties was still unclear; it wasn’t always clear which way they were moving, either towards recovery or further ruination. Residents were more patient when properties showed progress. Gloria told me: “the [properties] where there’s nothing at all happening are much more frustrating. If you at least see something happening every once in a while it’s like “OK, they’ve trying.’ We all know. It takes everybody a long time. It took us a long time.”⁹⁵

⁹⁵ Another resident told me: “If he had shown any good faith whatsoever—gut it and cut the grass—I would be far more sympathetic than I am now. I’m a high school teacher. I deal with kids and second chances, and where I teach we’re so big on learning from mistakes and learning from behavior instead of punishing. I wish he just showed a little bit. If he showed up with a hammer I’d help him gut it!”

A man named John walked me around his street in Mid-City in 2011. He pointed to the house across the street. Its owner had installed new doors a few weeks earlier; a month before that, she mowed the lawn. “That lady seems to be working hard,” he said. “Is it blight? Yeah, probably. But I wouldn’t put her on the city’s blight list, because she’s trying and making decent progress.” Though “anything actively taking damage is blight because it’s actively destroying the house,” he told me. “At this point? Yeah, that’s blight.” Another man put it to me this way: if the vacant properties on his street were “boarded up and maintained,” he wouldn’t worry about them too much. “But these are not secured properties,” he complained, “and every year they get a little worse, a little worse, a little worse.” This ongoing deterioration impacted their ability to be rebuilt. “I mean, maybe before 2007 before all the rot and stuff set in. But the windows are all knocked out. You can see daylight through the ceilings. It’s never going to be something that can be rebuilt.”



Figure 15. The house with new doors. Photo by author. 2011.

Movement became the way that residents evaluated a property's potential, especially as it was tied to its owner's actions. These evaluations connected a property's material qualities to practices of maintenance and care. I asked one Gentilly man what makes a property blighted. "Just the overgrown weeds and vines, all the signs of neglect, the structural failings, squatters, thieves, raccoons, stray cats, trash," he replied. "And if [the owner] doesn't show up. That's the very definition of neglect. If you're definition of care and attention and maintenance, if your frequency is like once in eighteen months, then that's a problem." A blighted property was not only run-down or deteriorating, but was also a property whose owner "doesn't show up," a product of neglect. Another resident was explicit about this point. When asked what makes a property blighted, she responded: "First and foremost, just vacancy. Any kind of lack of occupancy. Both of the properties next to me, I haven't seen anyone there for years." Gloria, too, saw blight as a result of long-term vacancy: "When a house just sits it just continues to die. It's amazing how you can take a house that's not in the best of shape and put people in it and it'll perk up and kind of look like 'OK, I'm going to hang on for a while.' But you take that same property and take people out of it and it just sort of dwindles and droops, and just dies, bit by bit. It's amazing." Property, according to Gloria, was animated by its connections to its owner—literally, it was what kept a property alive. I talked to many residents who made similar comments, seeing an empty house as one that had lost its spirit or soul, causing it to decay. When a dilapidated house on Sharon's block toppled one day, she told me: "It just gave up. I think it got tired of waiting to be a home again."

For years, many residents believed in the potential that their neighbors would come back. The longer properties stood empty, the more that potential began to fade. Many people who returned were upset about how they felt they were being treated by their former neighbors. I

interviewed a man named Gordon in 2010 who had neighbors on either side of his Gentilly house, but right across the street was a vacant house. It was gutted after the storm but hadn't been touched for two or three years, since its owner ran out of money and moved to Baton Rouge. He was frustrated because he knew the owner well—they had grown up together and gone to the same schools. Gordon still saw her brother from time to time. “Nobody wants to come back and say ‘I can't do this.’ I can't imagine people like having their neighbors mad at them. There's a sense of obligation there. It can't be comfortable for them, you know, so they get awkward about it,” he told me. The woman never came by, never responded to his inquiries about what she intended to do with the house. “I call every now and then and say ‘Hey, what's your plan with this property?’ But it's out of sight and out of mind for her. But for me, it's the only thing I see when I look out my window. You can't escape it when it's right in your face every day.” He didn't understand why she couldn't sympathize with *his* situation. “I kind of wish we could be more like neighbors.”

Many residents made this connection between a property's condition and expectations about normative social (and specially, neighborly) relations. “My vision of being a good neighbor does not mean letting your house rot,” one woman from Mid-City told me. “I understand if you're struggling but these [houses] got to get moving somehow. You better start working, or something” In some cases, an owner was present but wasn't moving quickly enough to satisfy neighbors. “I'm just angry,” a woman in Broadmoor said, pointing to the boarded up house next door. It had been raised on cinderblocks, with a dumpster parked in the yard. The owner would have someone working on it a few days a month, the neighbor told me, but it was still a long way from being habitable. She was frustrated with its condition, but was even more upset about the way her former neighbor has acted towards her. “He never once came and said,

‘You know, you guys have been really awesome. I’m so sorry. Let me tell you about what’s going on and where we are. I know this impacts you.’ And that amazes me. If I had a property like this then I would go and thank [my neighbors] and touch base and, something, because it impacts us so directly. But he never has.”



Figure 16. Graffiti on a boarded house. Photo by author. 2013.

Leaving a property empty and in disrepair was seen by many residents as a disavowal of social ties—of neighborliness, on the one hand, but also of the commitment to being part of the post-storm community. “They’ve moved on, they’re somewhere else,” Gloria told me. “But we’re back here dealing with their blight.” Many residents believed that their former neighbors had “moved on,” or at least moved elsewhere. It wasn’t that they didn’t sympathize with former neighbors’ situations. Rather, residents felt that this fact gave them license to move on

themselves. Gordon walked me up and down his street, pointing out several other vacant properties that were quickly deteriorating. We arrived back at his porch and he peered over at the house across the street. “It’s really aggravating for some people to behave like that when the rest of us are trying to get the city back to where it was and celebrating every time a house would get redone. And to have these other kind of people who totally disregarded their own properties—they didn’t care, they just didn’t care at all. If you’re not about to renovate your house at this point, seven years out, there’s not some fantasy program that’s just going to come through for everybody and start throwing money from the skies. It’s kind of time for people to—I hate to say it—shit or get off the pot. Go ahead and sell your property instead of dragging us all down.”

Conclusion: “Katrina furniture”

To conclude, I return to Sharon’s neighborhood in July 2011, a year after our walk recounted in the chapter’s introduction. By then, her optimism had given way to a deep-seated ambivalence about her future. She began to acknowledge that recovery, at least in her neighborhood, might be over.

“There’s a house by mine that still has Katrina furniture in it,” Sharon told me one day over lunch. “Six years later—can you believe it?” I had never heard anyone use that phrase—“Katrina furniture”—but I immediately knew what she meant. The house hadn’t been gutted, and remained sitting with its Katrina-ravaged contents.

I walked over after work and it was just as she had said. The house was small with a tan brick exterior, an overgrown yard, and a roof missing most of its tiles. Tattered curtains waved in and out of the broken front window. Sharon later told me that her daughter had nightmares about

those curtains. I walked up and peered inside, and saw things strewn across the floor: upturned chairs, rags and clothes, things covered in pieces of drywall that had fallen from the ceiling. Every inch of the floor was covered in debris. I went around the side of the house and saw the back door was wide open. I noticed a stack of plates in the kitchen sink. Had they really been sitting there for six years? My mind raced through the possible dangers: mold, chemicals, spiders, nails—who knows? I didn't go in.



Figure 17. The house with “Katrina furniture.” Photo by author. 2011.

I went around the corner to Sharon's house and found her sitting on her front porch. She asked if I had seen the house. I nodded. “It's just a bad memory of what happened to us,” Sharon said, shaking her head. “You know, when you pass a house and see the stinking furniture in there and all the old stuff, all the mold on the wall. Who wants to live next to something like that?” Sharon tried to remain upbeat about her neighborhood's outlook, but it was becoming difficult for her to keep up appearances. Over the past year she'd made comments about the challenges of being one of the only people on her block. We talked about this as we sat on her front porch,

looking out onto the vacant properties on her street. “Look at it, all these empty fields, it’s depressing. My grand baby keeps asking me, ‘When are we going to take a ride into the city,’ and I keep telling him ‘Baby, we are in the city.’ He keeps saying ‘No we’re not,’ and I’m almost starting to believe him!”



Figure 18. View from the back door. Photo by author. 2011.

I asked if she ever considered moving after the storm. Sharon shook her head. She and her husband wanted to come back because they were “pretty sure our neighbors would come back. And we also thought that the nursing home [across the street] was coming back.” But things never got moving. While other areas of the city were recovering, it seemed that her neighborhood was only getting worse. “It’s depressing. [The city] knocked down some houses, people don’t cut their grass, you have grass growing as tall as buildings. That’s depressing.” The worst part, though, was being alone. “I sit down and think about Roy, I think about Linda, I think about my nieces and nephews. They all went and bought houses in Tennessee. They aren’t coming back.” Her daughter had just returned from Memphis but stayed on the other side of town. Sharon and

her husband were the only people on her street. “We’re here and that’s it. We’re stuck in this situation and we can’t go anywhere else. It might not have been the most beautiful neighborhood [before the storm]. It wasn’t a neighborhood with picket white fences. But at least we had our families here. We had people we could talk to.” Her only neighbors now, she tells me, are the snakes, possums, and raccoons that inhabit the empty lots next door.

Sharon spends most nights sitting on her porch and imagining a different recovery. “I always daydream about having neighbors, about how if the storm hadn’t come how different our lives would have been. And that’s why I know now that material things aren’t worth anything. Because if I had to live in that same raggedy house we had and have neighbors, I’d be really happy. If I could snap my fingers and have my city back like it was before the storm, I would love it.” I asked her if she thinks the neighborhood will ever rebound. Sharon sighed. “I don’t see it getting better at all.” And it wasn’t just her neighborhood. “There are going to be a lot of neighborhoods like this. A lot of people, their neighborhoods are going to be looking like mine, I guess. No people, empty houses. I think this city, this is the farthest it’s going to get. I think I may wind up back here for years by myself.” City officials were partly to blame. “I don’t understand how people in office can ride around neighborhoods like this and not make it a priority,” she said. Being overlooked, for her, was “a reminder of the haves and have nots. Because we don’t have, this is how we have to live. It’s like nobody cares about us.”

We sat on the porch as the sun went down. The neighborhood turns pitch black at night; most of the streetlights didn’t work. Sharon went inside to grab some beers and turn on the porch lights. I asked her what she would like to see done with the vacant properties. “I want them to be gone. If it was me, I’d try to knock them down myself. Most of them are already falling down as it is. It wouldn’t take much. Just a few chains and pull with my car, that’s it. It’s just sad all of

these properties just sitting there. It's horrible. The dirt, it just makes you feel unclean. We need to get rid of all of this. Mentally, it's not good for your mental health. It's depressing. If I knew it was going to look like this, six years later, I wouldn't have come back."

CHAPTER 4: PROPERTY'S PUBLICS

On January 18, 2008, Loyola University New Orleans College of Law held a symposium titled, “Revitalizing Community Assets: Blighted, Abandoned and Tax Adjudicated Property and Land Use in Post-Katrina Orleans.” Law professor John Lovett, in his introduction to the symposium, argued that the topic “was not a theoretical or abstract problem,” but rather “one of the most fundamental physical realities that confronts” every New Orleans resident: “the vast number of abandoned, blighted and vacant buildings that now cover our urban landscape” (2007:719). Though the city had thousands of vacant properties due to decades of population decline, since the storm “the incidence of abandoned, vacant, blighted and tax adjudicated properties has soared,” with some experts estimating the city “now contains as many as 100,000 abandoned or blighted structures (720).⁹⁶ More than two hundred people attended the symposium and saw presentations from a panel of experts on the city’s options for combating blight, which ranged from expropriations to code enforcement and property auctions.⁹⁷ The symposium wasn’t the first time that storm-damaged properties were identified as blight, but it tapped into a growing anxiety about their negative effects on post-storm recovery.

In this chapter, I show how experts constituted vacant properties as a regulatory and redevelopment problem after Hurricane Katrina. I trace two major shifts in policy approaches to this problem. The first is the transformation of private property into a public threat through municipal blight-fighting ordinances. These ordinances undermined absolute notions of private

⁹⁶ The problem, he argued, was also “not going away given the substantial and probably permanent population loss” the city had suffered since Katrina (Lovett 2007:720)

⁹⁷ Presenters included Emory University law professor Frank Alexander, Tulane University law professor David Marcello, Loyola University law professor Davida Finger, NORA’s Ommeed Sathe, the Office of Recovery and Development Administration’s Jeffrey Thomas, and City Council member Stacy Head. Tom Darden, executive director of the Make it Right Foundation, and Bradford Powers, executive director of Jericho Road Episcopal Housing Initiative, also presented.

property rights, justifying government interventions to protect public health, safety, and welfare. At the same time, blight-fighting ordinances actively reconstrue the public worth defending; this is the second major shift in policy approaches to vacant properties. The post-storm public was redefined as including only those people who had come back and rebuilt. Code enforcement and other blight-fighting strategies reshaped notions of private rights and public goods, as well as the content and meaning of the post-storm public.

By showing how private properties became a public problem, I contribute to scholarship on the public-private distinction, as well as more recent work that tries to complicate it (Blomely 2011; Elyachar 2012a, 2012b; Gal 2002; Muehlebach 2012; Valverde 2012). Scholars have traced the multiple genealogies of public goods, interests, and spaces, each aligned with discrete visions of the private sphere (Hirschman 1997; Low and Smith 2013; Novak 1996; Warner 2005). While some see a clear separation between the two, private and public can also become entangled, as was the case with post-Katrina property regulations, which constituted vacant properties as a public nuisance. In such cases, public-ness didn't refer to a "space of non-commodified purity" (Hayden 2004:120; see also Calhoun 1993), but rather to a set of qualifications on property rights, revealing a public-ness at the heart of modern notions of private property (see Gal 2002; Hirschman 1997; Rose 1994).

I also build on work in the anthropology of policy to understand how municipal laws actively create persons and things to be governed (Wedel, Shore, Feldman, and Lathrop 2005).⁹⁸ Much of this work addresses state-level policy, assuming that other scales of governance work in similar ways (Das and Poole 2004; Ferguson and Gupta 2002; Scott 1998). Mariana Valverde (2011), however, questions this analogy between city and state governance, and argues that there

⁹⁸ Moreover, concepts such as "land use" seem to muddy the distinction between persons and things (Valverde 2005).

are distinct ways of “seeing like a city” that “have nothing to do with a general, rational plan, but are rather reactive and site-specific responses to complaints” (Valverde 2011:282 fn3). This is especially true with urban disorder, as shown by D. Asher Ghertner (2015) in his study of Delhi slums, which he argues are governed through an “aesthetic normativity” that works through “codes of appearance rather than through the calculative instruments of map, census, and survey” (1-4; see also Cooper 1998; Fehérváry 2009; Harms 2012).

Blight-fighting regulations do not necessarily oppose public and private rights, but seek to produce a particular kind of public, peopled by responsible owners. Policymakers drew on normative ideas about a property’s appearance and condition to justify municipal interventions. These interventions also tied to particular normative timelines of recovery. Here, “social order is inscribed in public modes of viewership” that produce a “shared mode of aesthetic engagement with mutually recognizable visual markers of order and disorder” (Ghertner 2015:6-7). This “public mode of viewership” not only reflected existing values, but was also used to impose new ones, altering social and material relations, governing vacant properties according to notions of propriety that placed them squarely within expert attempts to remake the post-storm community (Alexander 1999; Li 1996; Strathern 1996). Vacant properties were rendered a threat to public health, safety, and welfare, through the concept of blight, privileging those who had returned over the continued right to return for those still displaced.

Since the storm, policymakers have employed several strategies to regulate the use and appearance of unoccupied properties. These regulations outlined progressive benchmarks for recovery—in many ways, dictating its scope and scale. By promoting ever-increasing property standards, these policies also attempted to standardize recovery’s pace. The city eventually committed to using code enforcement, demolitions, and auctions to combat blight, embracing an

especially aggressive form of this strategy after Mayor Landrieu was elected in 2010. This commitment to code enforcement might be seen as part of a market-based recovery (see Adams 2013). However, city officials were not always committed to code enforcement—or any single blight-fighting strategy, for that matter. They adopted code enforcement, in part, as a response to changes in the state constitution just months after Katrina that restricted eminent domain powers. Blight-fighting strategies involved conflicts over jurisdiction and scale that highlight contingency and uncertainty as critical aspects of policymaking (Cormack 2008; Richland 2013; Valverde 2009).⁹⁹

In the first section, I describe legal transformations at the federal and state levels that shaped the city’s redevelopment options, putting expropriation and public ownership off the table. While this was going on, the city was already pursuing a strategy to encourage people to redevelop their storm-damaged properties, which I describe in the second section. In the third section, I detail the emergence of code enforcement approaches to regulating vacant properties, while in the fourth section I explore their use of lien foreclosures, which employed debt as a mechanism to transfer vacant properties to new owners. Throughout, I show how public and private were intertwined, not just as property forms, but through their actual substance; experts interrogated private property relations as well as who made up the public.

Two storms

On June 23, 2005—two months before Hurricane Katrina—the United States Supreme Court decided *Kelo v. City of New London*, a controversial eminent domain case. The case examined an

⁹⁹ As Matthew Hull (2012) argues, “portrayals of bureaucracy often exaggerate stability, overlooking how bureaucrats and bureaucracies respond dynamically to events” (xiii; see also Riles 2004).

urban redevelopment strategy that had become increasingly common in struggling cities: using eminent domain to consolidate private properties for large-scale revitalization projects. In many cases, expropriated properties were transferred to new, private owners—including major corporations—seemingly contradicting the Fifth Amendment of the U.S. Constitution, which stated that private property could only be taken for a “public use” (Pritchett 2003). Advocates of this approach argued that increased jobs or tax revenue that resulted from projects contributed to the public good—they *were* a public use, at least in a very broad sense. For decades, this use of eminent domain went relatively uncontested. In rare cases when courts heard complaints, judges nearly always adopted the wide interpretation of the “public use” clause. When Susette Kelo challenged New London’s use of eminent domain to acquire property for a Pfizer research campus, she was only the latest to highlight what critics had come to call “eminent domain abuse” (see Becher 2014). Her case was heard by the Connecticut Supreme Court, which sided with New London, and then the U.S. Supreme Court, which upheld the lower court’s ruling.¹⁰⁰

Susette Kelo may have lost the case, but she won in the court of public opinion. *The New York Times* reported: “the decision provoked outrage from Democrats and Republicans, liberals and libertarians, and everyone betwixt and between. Dozens of state legislatures considered bills to protect private property from government seizure, and many passed new legislation; Justice John Paul Stevens, the author of the decision, issued something like an apology; a campaign was started to use eminent domain to seize the home of another justice, David H. Souter; and, on

¹⁰⁰ Justice Stevens wrote the majority opinion, and was joined by Justices Breyer, Ginsburg, Kennedy, and Souter. Justices O’Conner, Roberts, Scalia, and Thomas dissented. In his opinion, Justice Stevens, argued that over the past several decades “the court has defined [the public use] broadly, reflecting its longstanding policy of deference to legislative judgments as to what public needs justify the use of the takings power.” Its decision was in line with earlier case law, particular *Berman v. Parker* (1954) and *Hawaii Housing Authority v. Midkiff* (1984), both of which embraced a wide interpretation of the “public use” clause, and largely deferring to states and municipalities to use their discretion in specific cases.

Wednesday, a ruling from the Ohio Supreme Court adopted the analysis of the dissenters in last year's decision to reject an effort to oust the residents of a Cincinnati suburb" (Liptak 2006).¹⁰¹

Lawyers from the libertarian Institute for Justice, which had represented Susette Kelo and her neighbors, had run an aggressive media campaign against eminent domain abuse for years before the ruling, and opposition began to build. They ramped up their rhetoric when they saw public sentiment turn in their favor. Many people were troubled by the idea that government could take property and give it to a major corporation, especially since Kelo's neighborhood and many other areas targeted for expropriation weren't visibly blighted, and united people across conventional political divides. Mobilizing a grassroots advocacy organization—the Castle Coalition—that the Institute for Justice had created in 2002, activists began pressuring state legislatures to restrict the eminent domain powers upheld by the *Kelo* decision. They also engaged in public outreach, printing an *Eminent Domain Abuse Survival Guide* and a state-by-state "report card" on eminent domain laws. They were incredibly successful; forty-four states eventually passed eminent domain restrictions, barring transfers of expropriated properties for private gain, and enforcing a narrower definition of public use.

Louisiana was one of those states. In September 2006, voters approved two state constitutional amendments in response to the *Kelo* ruling (Alexander 2007; Marcello 2007).¹⁰² The first amendment placed restrictions on the *acquisition* of property through eminent domain, prohibiting any taking for "predominant use by any private person or entity" or "for transfer of ownership to any private person or entity." The second amendment placed restrictions on the *disposition* of expropriated properties, prohibiting any city from selling or transferring

¹⁰¹ As with many issues involving property, eminent domain cases inspire alliances across conventional political divides. Susette Kelo was represented by the libertarian Institute for Justice, but was also supported by Jane Jacobs, the NAACP, and the Southern Christian Leadership Conference.

¹⁰² Amendment 5 of the 2006 Louisiana Acts amended the Louisiana Constitution article VI, section 42(B) and article VI, sections 21(A) and (D). Amendment 6 of the 2006 Louisiana Acts amended the Louisiana Constitution article I, section 4 by adding section 4(H). See Marcello (2007, 766).

expropriated property that had been held for less than thirty years without first offering it to the original owner or rightful heir.¹⁰³ The post-*Kelo* amendments also narrowed the definition of “public purpose,” which would no longer include economic development or increased tax revenue, even if these activities provided incidental benefits to the public. Public use became synonymous with public ownership.

A report by the Castle Coalition praised Louisiana’s amendments, arguing that they would protect victims of Hurricane Katrina from the “greedy ambitions” of developers “whose vision of New Orleans doesn’t include its long-time residents” (2007:22). Worried that the city would take their storm-damaged properties (perhaps as part of attempts to shrink the city), many residents joined in celebrating the amendments. But many experts were disappointed by their passage. Tulane University law professor David Marcello wrote that Louisiana voters “could not have chosen a worse time” to enact such “restrictions on the power of expropriation,” which could have been a useful tool for acquiring and redeveloping storm-damaged properties (2007:766). Emory University law professor Frank Alexander, a nationally renowned expert on housing and real estate, argued that the “constitutional storm” represented by the post-*Kelo* amendments “suddenly—though perhaps inadvertently—cast doubt upon the ability of local and state governments to expropriate properties that are threats to public health or safety and return them to productive use” (2007:743), and worsened the effects of the prior storm, Katrina.

These two storms—Katrina and *Kelo*—were the main topic of the Loyola University symposium in 2008.¹⁰⁴ Experts debated the effects of the amendments, and whether the city might find any ways around the restrictions, or perhaps an exception for blight eradication. Some city officials wanted to move forward with expropriations while they challenged the amendments

¹⁰³ If the owner declined to purchase the property, it could only be sold through a public auction.

¹⁰⁴ I have to credit Frank Alexander’s article for the “Two Storms” formulation.

in court. Many panelists, however, cautioned against this approach, urging policymakers to explore alternative redevelopment strategies. There was no guarantee that the amendments would be overturned, they argued. Unless officials were content with eventually having thousands of storm-damaged properties on their hands, they would have to come up with another redevelopment approach, though it wasn't clear what that approach should be. The only thing experts agreed on was that the amendments produced a conundrum that would have wide-ranging—if unintended—consequences on post-storm recovery.

Good neighbors

On April 20, 2006, five months before Louisiana voters approved the state's anti-*Kelo* amendments, New Orleans City Council approved the Good Neighbor ordinance.¹⁰⁵ The ordinance, according to an official press release, “was adopted to establish a deadline for the remediation or demolition of properties damaged by Hurricane Katrina and/or Rita and to establish penalties for failure to properly remediate such properties.” Homeowners would be required to gut and sanitize their storm-damaged properties. If owners were unable to begin repairs right away, they would have to board (or “secure”) their property and maintain their yards. City Council members chose August 29, 2006, the one-year anniversary of the storm, as the deadline for compliance. Any homeowner who failed to bring their property in line with the Good Neighbor requirements would be fined and could have their properties expropriated (a penalty devised before officials knew of the impending *Kelo*-related restrictions). City Council

¹⁰⁵ City Ordinance No. 22203 M.S.C. It was also variously referred to as the “Good Neighbor program,” “Good Neighbor plan,” or “Good Neighbor initiative.”

members hoped the ordinance would “cajole neglectful homeowners into meeting a minimum post-Katrina standard” (Pope 2007).

Residents criticized the ordinance for its apparent indifference to their struggles to rebuild. They pointed out that many people still hadn’t been able to inspect their properties; even fewer had received insurance payouts or construction grants. The deadline for compliance was also “a slap in the face,” one resident later told me. Activists argued that the one year anniversary, “should be a day for remembering our loved ones lost to the disasters following Hurricane Katrina, not a date for worrying about whether or not you have a house to return to” (Atlas 2010:293). An online petition calling for the ordinance’s repeal stated that it “takes advantage of the vulnerable residents who do not have sufficient funds and/or equipment to gut, de-mold, board their windows, and maintain their yards in order not to be fined.” Many didn’t appreciate how the ordinance seemed to blame individual homeowners for their property’s condition. One blogger commented “the city’s been talking about homeowners who don’t gut their houses as though they’re criminals, not victims” (Schroeder 2006). Stephen Bradberry, from ACORN New Orleans, and Jeffrey Buchanan, from the Center for Human Rights, criticized the ordinance’s disproportionate impact on black residents, claiming it would “further ‘cleanse’ New Orleans of its African American low and middle income families, continuing the exclusion and discrimination that have become hallmarks of the reconstruction” (Bradberry and Buchanan 2006).

Proponents of the ordinance, however, argued that it was necessary to move recovery forward. One city official told me that during this time ungutted properties were “very powerful symbols of the lack of recovery” and that the ordinance was needed to “instigate

redevelopment.”¹⁰⁶ Though it had only been a few months since the storm, some people worried that without clear signs of progress, residents and businesses might decide against returning. The ordinance highlighted this growing divide between homes—and homeowners—who had returned, and those who hadn’t, seeing the potential for vacant properties to actually become an obstacle to the rebuilding of others. One resident, for example, speaking in support of the ordinance, complained that the “property rights of people who are doing everything possible to get back are not being respected” by people who hadn’t gutted their homes (Eggler 2007). Even the official press release argued that the Good Neighbor ordinance provided “safeguards to protect citizens’ properties and to implement safeguards to ensure that the financial investments of returning citizens are not depreciated by the intentional or unintentional failure of their neighbors to comply with the City ordinances.”¹⁰⁷

When the one-year deadline for compliance passed, inspectors began conducting enforcement sweeps in neighborhoods across the city. They converged around parks, schools, and other visible, public spaces, and were aided by residents and neighborhood associations who reported properties through the city’s 3-1-1 hotline or through their city council representatives. In a *Times-Picayune* opinion piece, Nagin thanked “all the neighborhood groups and residents who walked the streets with us and communicated with us to help identify damaged properties and those who have provided information for the benefit of the Good Neighbor Plan,” and encouraged residents to “stay committed and involved” (Krupa 2008). Over the coming months, officials identified more than 12,000 properties with Good Neighbor violations, and sent notices

¹⁰⁶ The city stopped enforcing other building standards, focusing only on these post-Katrina standards, and only in flooded neighborhoods.

¹⁰⁷ The city later softened its rhetoric, even changing some of the language in the ordinance, and promised that their main goal was merely to encourage people to rebuild. Mayor Nagin even suggested that the ordinance was merely “educational.” It would be easy to dismiss this as rhetoric, but the resident backlash seems to align with this view that most people believed these properties could eventually be rebuilt, even if they disagreed on the timeline for doing so.

to owners ordering them to fix their properties or face expropriation. Yet they struggled to follow up on these threats. The city was overwhelmed by the number of properties under its charge, and suffered critical staff shortages and technical problems. By April 2007, fewer than 200 of the cited properties had gone through an administrative hearing. Above all, officials were paralyzed by questions raised by the anti-*Kelo* amendments, which passed one month after the ordinance went into effect, and seemed to render the ordinance toothless. Without the threat of expropriation, city officials had no way to encourage property owners to comply with their mandates.

The Good Neighbor ordinance ultimately met a “quiet death” in September 2007 (Krupa 2008). City officials suspended enforcement while they began work on a new chapter of the municipal code. Yet the ordinance, though widely regarded as a failure, had many unanticipated effects. While the city was unable to process the vast majority of cited properties, officials estimated that more than 7,000 properties were “voluntarily” abated during its brief life.¹⁰⁸ It also set a precedent for the city’s extensive role in governing storm-damaged properties in the years that followed. The Good Neighbor ordinance was the first attempt to anchor citywide recovery to a single, legally defined timeline. August 29, 2006, marked a turning point after which certain standards—gutting, remediation, and boarding—were to be enforced across every neighborhood. In doing so, it related an individual property’s condition to a *public* standard, one that would continue to change as recovery progressed. The ordinance also moralized a property’s condition by connecting it to the actions of “good neighbors,” underscoring property ownership as something that must be enacted publicly. But it also rested on a particular image of the post-

¹⁰⁸ This number may be deceiving, as the plan coincided with the period during which many people began receiving Road Home grants. It is difficult to say whether the voluntary abatements were a result of the ordinance, of people finally receiving the means to rebuild, or, of course, some combination of many factors. Still, city officials touted the number as one of the few successes of the Good Neighbor ordinance.

storm public, which was premised on the potential for every homeowner to return. This would change, however, with subsequent policies, which constituted storm-damaged properties as a threat to those who had already returned.

The public welfare

After months of drafting and deliberation, the City of New Orleans added a new chapter to its municipal code in March 2008. Chapter 28, entitled “Postdisaster Recovery and Neighborhood Stabilization,” was the most comprehensive attempt to date to encourage residents to rebuild. It outlined new standards for unoccupied properties as well as new enforcement options for addressing delinquent properties. Its most important contribution, however, was in identifying storm-damaged properties as a potential “threat to public health, safety, and welfare” through the concept of blight, an important change, especially as the city began to pursue code enforcement as its primary blight-fighting strategy.

As its title suggested, the new chapter was meant to address post-disaster recovery as well as “neighborhood stabilization,” the latter a phrase that came into use during the mortgage and foreclosure crisis.¹⁰⁹ While the chapter built on similar code enforcement processes around the country, particularly in Los Angeles and Philadelphia, New Orleans officials wanted to mold their approach to address certain post-storm priorities. Rather than attempt to regulate every property in the city, they suspended enforcement on occupied properties, and focused only on unoccupied properties. They also focused their attention to a property’s exterior condition. Yet at the same time as it specified a new object of municipal governance, the chapter also expanded

¹⁰⁹ Indeed, much of the funding for code enforcement was tied to the federal Neighborhood Stabilization Program (NSP) which was designed to aid communities with real estate markets impacted by the foreclosure crisis.

code enforcement into unflooded neighborhoods for the first time since the storm, and covered a broader set of property standards than the Good Neighbor ordinance, including walls and foundations, roofs and drainage, sidewalks and driveways, chimneys, and doors.¹¹⁰

Chapter 28 was part of a wider attempt by officials to revitalize a code enforcement program that many experts believed had been “historically ineffective” (Bureau of Governmental Research 2008b:1; see also Marcello 2007).¹¹¹ Over the previous decades, various departments had been charged with enforcing municipal health, safety, and building codes, though most had been plagued by funding and staff shortages, as well as rigid property protections in the state constitution. After the storm, federal disaster-relief funds poured in, and the city devoted a significant portion to code enforcement. Several departments were consolidated under the new Office of Recovery and Development Administration, with increased staff and a new computerized system for tracking properties through the enforcement pipeline. The chapter, in other words, reflected a policy shift away from expropriation and towards code enforcement as the primary tool for addressing vacant properties. Legal scholars had recommended this shift even before the anti-*Kelo* amendments restricted the city’s eminent domain powers. David Marcello, in fact, had been pushing for the city to adopt more aggressive code enforcement policies for decades. The new constitutional amendments only made code enforcement an even more attractive option. In an article based on his Loyola University presentation, Marcello (2007) argued that: “the city’s most promising redevelopment strategy is one of the most mundane options available. Code enforcement has been an established weapon in the municipal

¹¹⁰ These minimum standards defined only a baseline that properties would have to meet, and worked according to a different logic than standardization as such (Ben-Joseph 2005; Bowker and Star 1999). Not every house had to have the same number or style of windows; windows only had to “be kept in good condition and weather tight.” Not every house had to have a chimney, but if it did the chimney had to “be maintained structurally safe and in good repair.”

¹¹¹ Municipal code enforcement had existed in New Orleans in one form or another since the Spanish colonial era, though the contemporary version grew out of the Progressive movement at the turn of the twentieth century (see Campanella 2008; Colten 2006).

enforcement arsenal since cities first enacted housing and building codes. Code enforcement has never been fully deployed in New Orleans' war on deteriorated housing; it's long past time to implement an aggressive and effective code enforcement strategy" (769).¹¹²

Before code enforcement could be "fully deployed," however, city officials would need to come up with a new definition of blight. This was one of the goals of the new chapter. Frank Alexander, writing prior to Chapter 28's release, commented "the law of 'blighted' property in Louisiana is the epitome of disjointed and disconnected statutes, with . . . multiple differing statutory definitions of the term 'blight'" (Alexander 2007:744).¹¹³ Policymakers wanted a new definition of blight that would be applicable to the entire city, but would also be sensitive to post-storm realities. They couldn't use an overly strict definition, since, as one report noted, almost every resident has "been suddenly and unwittingly cast in the role of blighted property owners" (Bureau of Governmental Research 2008a:7). A city official involved in writing the chapter told me how difficult this was. He struggled with "how far to stretch a blight definition." Should it encompass properties that were gutted but had not been rebuilt? Should it include occupied as well as unoccupied properties? "It's impossible to come up with a definition for a word like blight and on the front end capture every instance of what might be blight," he told me. "There's no way. There's no amount of words that can be orchestrated to do so. It's folly to try to do so." To get around this problem the city opted for a number of "rebuttable presumptions of blight." He explained that these presumptions would place the "onus on the property owner to come to the hearing with evidence of why [their property] is not a blight," given its condition.

¹¹² Several policymakers I interviewed told me that Marcello's argument had a strong influence on the city's eventual approach. But the shift to code enforcement also came through advice from outside experts, as well as visiting officials from Los Angeles and Philadelphia, who explained their widely hailed code enforcement strategies.

¹¹³ Jeffrey Thomas (2007), who worked for the Office of Recovery and Development Administration, argued that "central to the legal framework for remediating storm-damaged properties are the definitions for 'public nuisance' and 'blight,' which serve as threshold determinants for all enforcement actions" (862).

City officials eventually agreed on a mishmash of disembodied qualities and threats, any of which might be present in an actual property (see below). Many of the “rebuttable presumptions of blight” involved conditional conditions—that is, they required administrative declarations for them to be considered official. For example, a property may be blighted if it has been “declared to be a fire hazard” or “declared to be vermin infused” by a city inspector. Many of the other rebuttable presumptions were equally vague; a blighted property might have a “substantial adverse impact on neighboring properties” or be “unsafe, unsanitary or conducive to ill health.” Colin Gordon (2004) writes that such “descriptive catalogue[s] of blighted conditions” are present in nearly every municipal definition of blight (312). Indeed, such “unsystematic lists of potentially risky spaces and activities” are common tools of urban regulation (Valverde 2003:161). One official involved in writing the chapter admitted as much. He told me that he started by “Googling municipal codes from other cities.” I thought he was joking. “Seriously!” he laughed. “I spent a few days on my couch, in my pajamas, just Googling blight definitions. That’s how we wrote the first draft [of Chapter 28].”

In determining whether an unoccupied property is blighted, pursuant to section 8 of Act No. 170 of the 1968 Regular Session of the Louisiana Legislature, as amended by Act No. 135 of the 1994 Third Extraordinary Session, Act No. 375 of the 1995 Regular Session, and Act No. 101 of the 1997 Regular Session, the following factors establish a rebuttable presumption:

- (1) Any dwelling, structure or premise that is declared a public nuisance as defined in the Code of Ordinances for the City of New Orleans or any dwelling, structure, or premise that demonstrates chronic vacancy or unresolved code violations for unsafe, unsanitary, or unhealthy conditions; or
- (2) Any premises declared to be a fire hazard; or
- (3) Any premises declared to be vermin infested or lacking in facilities or equipment required by the housing code of the city.
- (4) Any dwelling, structure, premise, or vacant lot in such a state of deterioration that it creates a substantial adverse impact on neighboring properties, including but not limited to depreciating property values; substantial and unreasonable interference with the lawful use and enjoyment of other space within the neighborhood; or an increase in criminal activity stemming from illegal

activities taking place on the Unoccupied Property; or

(5) Any structure or dwelling damaged, rendered uninhabitable, or otherwise has become an unoccupied property as a result of an act of God or other natural or unnatural disaster that, upon inspection is deemed to pose a serious, imminent and continuing threat to the public health, safety and welfare by reason of being unremediated, uncutted, open to the public, unsafe, unsanitary or conducive to ill health.

(6) Any structure or dwelling that is determined to be a “demolition by neglect” pursuant to section 84-108, 84-218, or 166-121 of the Code.

(7) It is a vacant lot and: (a) the lot is abandoned property; or (b) the lot is owned by a person who has been found guilty of failing to maintain the lot in accordance with provisions of this Code, pursuant to an administrative enforcement hearing by an the municipal court of the city and/or by an administrative hearing officer; and the lot has either been adjudicated to the city for unpaid taxes, or has outstanding liens, privileges, or an assessment has been placed on the unoccupied property pursuant to this Code, or has other charges imposed pursuant to R.S. 33:1236.

Chapter 28 envisioned blight as a multifaceted threat to the public—and in particular, the post-storm public. Indeed, the ordinance approving the chapter stated that “substandard, vacant, unremediated, dilapidated, decayed, unsafe or unsanitary unoccupied properties *threaten the physical, social and economic stability of the surrounding neighborhood*, thereby undermining post-disaster recovery throughout the City of New Orleans and *requiring the City to expend a disproportionate amount of public funds for remedial action, dissuading community reinvestment, and jeopardizing the effectiveness of city government and citizen-led recovery and rebuilding activities*” (italics mine). Vacant properties not only deterred individuals from returning to the city, but also had the potential to “stall community-level recovery” (Thomas 2007:842). They required the city to use public resources in the form of increasing police and fire services to keep vacant properties from harming others. Finally, vacant properties represented lost tax revenue—a drain on public coffers. Blighted properties were not only slowing recovery, but in some cases were actually reversing its trend. They also threatened the health, safety, and welfare of people who had *already* come back. The post-storm public was now centered on those who had returned. It was this public, in particular, that needed protecting from the deleterious

effects of vacant properties. While earlier property regulations still held out an at least implicit hope that people would come back, Chapter 28 seemed to be about moving on. It “enact[ed] a redefinition of public-ness, which also restructure[d] the relationship between rights and property” (Ghertner 2012:1178). This was most clear in its use of auctions, which relied on a new technique that carved out a specific role for the city in regulating and redeveloping properties—not through ownership, but through debt.

Transfers, not takings

“City Uses New Auction Technique to Fight Blight” (Hammer 2008). So read the headline of an article describing a new state law allowing cities to seize and sell blighted properties through a technique called a lien foreclosure.¹¹⁴ The technique had just been approved by City Council and was being tested in several neighborhoods across the city. It would offer a welcome alternative to expropriations, a “process [that] has come under court challenges,” the article notes, and to tax sales, which were “risky for the buyers” since they did not provide clear title. As one lawyer explained to me, the new law allowed the city to “act like a bank” and foreclose on debts owed to it for code violations. I didn’t know how to respond. At the height of the national mortgage and foreclosure crisis, New Orleans officials were actually trying to produce *more* foreclosures.

The lien foreclosure technique was created in response to the anti-*Kelo* restrictions on eminent domain. Soon after the state constitutional amendments were approved, in September 2006, a group of experts and policymakers, most from New Orleans, began working with state legislators on a mechanism that would allow the city to transfer blighted properties to new

¹¹⁴ The procedures are outlined in RS 13:2575 and RS 13:2576.

owners without having to take them first.¹¹⁵ State Senator Cheryl Gray Evans (New Orleans) authored the bill, which was approved in June 2007. Within a year city officials were using code lien foreclosures as part of their broader campaign against blight, promising to send thousands of properties to auction.¹¹⁶ Many residents supported the city's efforts, as did historic preservationists, who saw foreclosures as a welcome alternative to demolition (Hammer 2008).

The legislation touched on many aspects of the code enforcement process, but its major contribution was adding an *in rem* (or “against the thing”) enforcement option, allowing the city to fine a property, rather than its owner, for code violations. The city could convert that fine into a “judicial mortgage” and then foreclose on that mortgage, selling the property at a sheriff’s auction. This was a practical alternative to personal judgments, which go through a different—and much more extensive—judicial process. Code liens against a property could be processed by an administrative hearing, rather than through a personal lawsuit. Moreover, officials knew that many homeowners wouldn’t be able to pay their fines. David Marcello argued “for some post-Katrina property owners, this *in rem* option will be an appealing alternative, because it allows them to walk away from their devastated properties without *in personam* liability” (2007:824).¹¹⁷

Code lien foreclosure got around another issue that was raised by the anti-*Kelo* amendments: public ownership. Through the lien foreclosure, the city could forcibly sell blighted properties through a sheriff’s auctions, getting them “out of the hands of irresponsible owners” and into the hands of those who would rebuild them, according to one report (Lee and Marcello

¹¹⁵ The group included David Marcello, Stacy Head, and experts from the National Vacant Properties Campaign, which had been working in the city for years before the storm.

¹¹⁶ Technically, the city could already collect fines based on code violations. However, the new legislation provided the *in rem* foreclosure option. As Marcello (2007) writes, “under the new enforcement option, the City may apply directly to the clerk for a writ, eliminating the need to file an ordinary proceeding and avoiding the entry of a personal judgment against the property owner. For some post-Katrina property owners, this *in rem* option will be an appealing alternative, because it allows them to walk away from their devastated properties without *in personam* liability” (823-824).

¹¹⁷ It seems unlikely that this was very “appealing,” however, since owners would still lose their properties as a result of the process.

2011:9). Unlike expropriation, which would require the city to take ownership of a property, lien foreclosures don't involve the city taking possession of a property before transferring it to a new owner. The technique had the same *effect* as using eminent domain in the way outlawed by the recent constitutional amendments, but involved a different process that drew on a completely different legal—and specifically, state constitutional—source, allowing officials to sidestep these regulations. The city wasn't a “taking” property; it was merely a “transferring” property. This was a very important distinction. Indeed, at a public meeting one official described the city's code enforcement strategy as “the most aggressive blight taking program in America,” but a city attorney quickly corrected him: “We're not taking!” “Oh,” the official replied, “I mean the most aggressive property *transfer* program in America.”

2012-6900	BANK OF AMERICA, N.A vs [REDACTED]	[REDACTED] FOURTH STREET	\$138,391.69	No
2011-7972	CITY OF NEW ORLEANS vs [REDACTED]	[REDACTED] ROGER WILLIAMS STREET	\$575.00	Yes
2013-11110	CITY OF NEW ORLEANS vs [REDACTED]	[REDACTED] DANTE STREET	\$625.00	Yes
2013-10942	CITY OF NEW ORLEANS vs [REDACTED]	[REDACTED] SARATOGA STREET	\$575.00	Yes
2013-11100	CITY OF NEW ORLEANS vs [REDACTED]	[REDACTED] IBERVILLE STREET	\$655.00	Yes
2013-11020	WELLS FARGO BANK, NA vs [REDACTED]	[REDACTED] EASTOVER DRIVE	\$361,152.92	Yes
2013-8736	FV-I, INC. IN TRUST FOR MORGAN STANLEY vs [REDACTED]	[REDACTED] BILL STREET	\$111,296.29	Yes

Figure 19. Screenshot from sheriff's sale website. www.civilsheriff.com. 2013.

Many people criticized the new technique. Ommeed Sathe, the Director of Real Estate for the New Orleans Redevelopment Authority, compared property auctions to “moving the chairs around on the decks on the Titanic” (Lovett 2007:724). He worried that they would simply transfer properties to others similarly unprepared to restore them. Some experts argued that code enforcement wouldn't allow the city to consolidate properties for large-scale redevelopment. Others worried that auctions would promote speculation, though city officials vowed that

purchasers would be held to the same standards as other property owners. The most pointed criticisms, however, were over the issue of compensation. Louisiana's constitution requires that cities provide "just compensation" to owners of expropriated property. Code lien foreclosures have no such requirement. This seemed to penalize owners twice-over: they would lose their homes and wouldn't paid anything for them. "We may not like blight," one lawyer wrote in a letter to City Council, "but there has to be a better way than taking properties from people whose only real 'crime' may be not having enough money to make repairs." He called the lien foreclosure process "unconstitutional" and "a taking without just compensation." Members of the Occupy NOLA movement critiqued lien foreclosures along similar lines. They disrupted a sheriff's sale in December 2011, chanting: "This auction is illegal and immoral. It is a way to steal homes, redistribute wealth, and prevent the right to return," and compared them to the bank foreclosures occurring at the same time around the country.

This connection between mortgage and code lien foreclosures was not merely rhetorical. The two shared many features. Foreclosed properties were even sold alongside each other at sheriff's sales. Potential buyers were sometimes confused about how to distinguish between them; the only way to do so was to check if the city or a bank was listed as the plaintiff. The two foreclosure processes also similarly hinged on debt. With mortgage foreclosures, the debt was between an individual and a bank or broker, or in some cases one of the entities that purchased mortgage-backed securities. With lien foreclosures, the debt was actually the product of a conversion, as fines for code violations were transformed into a lien, and were between a property owner and the city. Bill Maurer (2012) writes that debt raises questions about obligations, and recent work has highlighted the role of debt in the formation of social relations at the interface of private and public life (Elyachar 2005; Joseph 2014; Roitman 2005; Stout

2016). The obligation in this case involved maintaining one's property according to the municipal code. But many residents also felt that property owners had a broader obligation to rebuild after Hurricane Katrina. Many returnees felt abandoned by their former neighbors who never came back. Like all debt relations, this one was based on the promise of a return (Peebles 2010)—though in this case, it was the return of people to their homes, and the return of pre-storm ways of life. This debt, figured as an obligation to rebuild, was transformed into a tangible debt to the city.

David Graeber (2012), in his widely read account of the history of debt, highlights how modern debt is used to translate qualities into quantities, social relations into mathematical relations. What struck me most about the debts imposed to produce lien foreclosures, however, was that its exact dollar value didn't seem to matter. The city could foreclose on a lien for one dollar or one million dollars. What mattered was the debt itself, not its precise amount, because the debt didn't measure a quantitative harm—a certain amount of money borrowed but never repaid—but a perceived failure to rebuild, a lapsed obligation that, while rendered in monetary terms, was not measured in them. Instead of “reduc[ing] moral obligations to debts” (13), lien foreclosures becomes a way to formalize moral obligations that many felt had gone unfulfilled. Debt, in other words, didn't quantify property relations, but rather *qualified* them. Lien foreclosures unsettled previous property relations, promising to transfer blighted properties to new owners. Through these transfers, the city would reconstitute the post-storm public around the figure of the “responsible owner” who would live up to their obligation to maintain their property.

Conclusion

In his 2010 inauguration speech, newly elected Mayor Mitch Landrieu urged residents to “stop thinking about rebuilding the city we were and start dreaming about the city we want to become.” His forward-looking rhetoric stood in stark contrast to earlier visions of post-storm recovery, which had largely been about the past, and about restoring neighborhoods to their pre-storm condition. However, faced with chronic abandonment, many people had begun to embrace this new vision of recovery, built around a new relationship to storm-damaged properties.

During his mayoral campaign, Landrieu promised to get tough on blight, and following his victory he formed a “Blight Task Force” to evaluate and improve the city’s code enforcement policies (Lee and Marcello 2010), while also naming a “Blight Czar” to oversee administrative changes. Landrieu argued that the previous mayoral administration never really committed to code enforcement, and had been too slow in moving properties through sheriff’s sales. He promised to be more aggressive, and in September 2010, when announcing his new strategy, vowed to get rid the city of 10,000 blighted properties within three years. The strategy was applauded by residents and neighborhood groups, as well as city council members and other city officials who had grown weary of constituent complaints about next-door blight. Though it was certainly more aggressive than regulations imposed during the previous administration it was not much of a departure from earlier municipal policies. From the Good Neighbor ordinance to Chapter 28, Landrieu’s strategy built on a legal and policy infrastructure that was put in place over years of legislative work, long before he entered office. Indeed, one article covering the mayor’s strategy quotes City Council member Stacy Head, who had been integral in creating the lien foreclosure technique: “For four years, I have spent the bulk of my time on the council trying to make sure that the laws were right both locally and in the state so that we could have a

comprehensive blight-reduction strategy. And now that we have a partner in the [Landrieu] administration to move it forward, it is happening” (Donze 2010).

Landrieu’s approach, however, confronted the fact that the fight against blight would involve a renewed vision of recovery, reshaping property and belonging. In his town hall meetings during that first summer, he addressed questions about inclusion head-on, admitting to an audience in the Lower Ninth Ward that combating blight “deals with our brothers and sisters and our aunts that aren’t coming back” (Grace 2010). But he felt that it was time to “switch from worrying about the people that are not here to the folks that are here struggling with a blighted house next door to them” (Tilove 2010). His vision, articulated in his inauguration speech, and put into practice through code enforcement, involved returning vacant properties to the market, redistributing them to new owners. This came at the price of severing ties to former neighbors, but it seemed to be one that most people were willing to pay—at least for the prospect of having new neighbors.

Before they could transfer any properties, however, the city would have to sort through them to figure out whether they were blighted or not. Lien foreclosures were the last step in a meticulous code enforcement process, which not only scrutinized a property’s condition, but also its potential to be rebuilt. Each property that Landrieu promised to erase from city streets would have to go through this process, and each would have to be inspected, researched, and brought through a hearing before it could be declared blighted, and the city could intervene.

CHAPTER 5: THE HEARING

Jim shifted uncomfortably in his chair. His neck craned to see the image projected onto the wall showing a squat brick building covered in vines. A city official read the address and, nodding towards the image, asked Jim to confirm that this was his property. “Yeah, it was my momma’s house, but she passed after Katrina and now it’s mine,” he explained. Jim was living in Houston now, though he had plans to eventually move back to his New Orleans East neighborhood. “To be honest with you guys, I just assumed the city took it” he said, shrugging his shoulders. “I mean, it’s been this long. I didn’t think our names were still on it.” But the property was still his, at least on paper, and he had received a certified letter from the city alerting him to the hearing when the property was cited for code violations. Jim appeared at the hearing to make sure that he wouldn’t get fined, though the city official assured him that any fines wouldn’t be “on him,” but would rather “stick to the property,” since “only the property is on trial here.” Jim smiled, as if that made perfect sense. “What if I wanted to try to fix it up?” Jim asked. “Well,” the city official said, “we could give you a few months to get some work done. But you’ll have to come back and show us that everything is moving in the right direction. You need to address some of these issues with the condition.” She rattled off several violations that needed attention. Jim took notes on a scrap piece of paper. “I want some time,” he said. “It was a nice house back in the day. It makes me sad to see it like this. It makes me a little embarrassed seeing it like this, to be honest. My mom, it would break her heart to see it like this.”

I saw hundreds of residents sit in Jim’s chair while being asked intimate details about their relationship to their property. Many were still trying to rebuild, and recounted struggles with contractors, insurance companies, and stubborn siblings. Very few owners who appeared

challenged the accusation that their property was in bad shape. Most, in fact, seemed embarrassed, and cringed when city officials read their code violations and scrolled through pictures. They admitted that they hadn't worked on the property for a while, or had just plain forgotten about it. City officials reminded them that these properties had become a nuisance to neighbors, and asked them to imagine what they would feel like if they had to live next door to a blighted house. Some owners, after finding out that fines were only levied against the properties, were willing to walk away from the property and let the city move forward with a demolition or auction. Others promised to work harder, if only they could have more time. The hearing's results were not always predictable from a property's condition alone, or from snap judgments about its owner. But the hearing played an important role in the code enforcement process by providing city officials with a method to sort properties that were being worked on from those that were truly blighted, opening the latter up to further intervention. Everything hinged on what happened during the hearing.

In this chapter I explore the bureaucratic management of property relations through the code enforcement process, and in particular through hearings. Code enforcement hearings involve face-to-face interactions between residents and city officials, mediated by a range of documents and images, and oriented towards gauging a property's status. I focus on the distinct logics and strategies that bureaucrats mobilize to make their judgments since, in contrast to many studies of expert knowledge, their decisions were inherently subjective and discretionary—and were valued as such. Figuring out whether a property is blighted is not a straightforward process. This is due, in part, to blight's ambiguous definition, but also because a property's current condition is not what made it blighted. Code enforcement officials were more interested in whether a property had potential to be rebuilt by its current owner. They connected a property's

condition to its owner's actions—deploying a particular labor theory of property, using the hearing process as a sieve to separate active and inactive property relations (Kockelman 2013; Maurer 2013; see also Bowker and Star 1999). Hearing officials were interested in a property's condition, which is what brought it to a hearing in the first place, but once it was at a hearing, officials were interested in the property relation, and its future potential. Properties weren't the only thing being rehabilitated through the code enforcement process; hearing interactions worked as much on owners as on their properties.

Many scholars have examined how “legal techniques fabricate persons and things” (Pottage 2004:1; see also Hirsch 2010; Maurer and Schwab 2006; Strathern 1999; Verdery and Humphrey 2004). New Orleans officials draw on various bureaucratic tools to relate specific qualities of persons and things as one's status as a “responsible owner” is communicated through their property's condition. I build on this work, as well as work on the anthropology of bureaucracy (Bernstein and Mertz 2011; Feldman 2008; Gupta 1995; Herzfeld 1992; Latour 2009; Riles 2006), to show how governance does not only involve rote actions that create the appearance of indifference or objectivity, but also involve in-depth interrogations of concrete property relations. These interrogations, which constitute property relations as an object of governance and rehabilitation, unfold in a setting akin to the small claims courts, asylum hearings, and mediation sessions studied by legal anthropologists (Coutin 2003; Nader 2005; Merry 1990; Greenhouse, Yngvesson, and Engel 1994). Anthropologists working in these settings have show how micro-interactions are important sites in which broader power relations and inequalities are revealed through close attention to legal language and performance (Cabot 2013; Conley and O'Barr 1990; Goodwin 1994; Mertz 1994; Richland 2008).

Code enforcement hearings are a dialogic process structured according to bureaucratic rules and procedures, yet are also oriented around a range of documents, such as inspector's reports, photographs, title information, work contracts, and more. While documents and other forms of evidence are overlooked in many studies of legal discourse and practice, recent scholars have focused on how official processes are mediated by paperwork, which, among other things, formats the kinds of information seen as authentic or legitimate (Brenneis 1994; Hull 2008, 2012; Vismann 2008). In the hearing, documents not only represent a property's condition at the time of inspection, but are also interrogated and constantly re-interpreted by city officials. Their meaning is "not merely representational, but aesthetic, indexical, and material as well. Documents are always encountered by particular people in particular contexts, and their interpretation is never separable from the contingencies of the encounter" (Hetherington 2011:8). Hearings provided a space for code enforcement officials to evaluate the property relationship, and to incentivize particular forms of ownership.

In the following sections, I recount the path of properties and their owners through the code enforcement process, which unfolds in a fairly standardized way. A property is inspected, and if it has any violations it is sent to a hearing. If it is found guilty, a city attorney decides whether to send the property into one of several city programs, or send it to auction. In the dissertation's conclusion I'll address some of the broader patterns of unequal enforcement that resulted from the code enforcement process. Here, I focus on the interactions involved during the hearing, the different forms of bureaucratic knowledge mobilized to make decisions. In the first section, I provide a narrative of the inspection process to show how bureaucratic knowledge is originally formatted. I move on to a description of the hearing process in the second section, before examining its forms of evidence and decision-making logic in the third, fourth, and fifth sections.

The code enforcement process provides a unique way to study law in action, since thousands of properties have been funneled through over the past few years. While each case is different, I found patterns in how bureaucrats used the fairly subjective standards contained in municipal law to judge the status of vacant properties and their owners.

Inspections

It is a cold winter morning in January 2013. Wesley picks me up in a truck with the city seal emblazoned on its side. He is a building inspector with the Code Enforcement and Hearings Bureau and is allowing me to ride along with him to see the inspection process up close. A former college football player, Wesley is an imposing figure, with a booming voice, but also a quick wit. I expected a short ride around one or two neighborhoods, but ended up on a five-hour-long trip around the city, with Wesley providing his view of the city's "war" against blight. His stories wound through public policy and economics, poverty and family dynamics, even the materiality of vacant homes—a complex social analysis of blight.

As we begin our drive, Wesley tells me that we are going to a neighborhood called Central City. "I won't use the word infested with blight," he says, describing the neighborhood, "but it's had a lot of challenges, not only since Katrina but before Katrina." The area has a "very deteriorated housing stock, and you have elderly populations that don't have the financial wherewithal to continue maintenance that their property needs." Many of these elderly people "left and didn't return" after Katrina, while others came back "but unfortunately died off. All that age, if it didn't catch up with them, the stress of Katrina did."

After a few minutes of driving, we arrive in Central City. Wesley parks the car, steps out, and walks towards a vacant corner lot while I follow him with my notepad and pen. The city's blight-fighting strategy is a "balancing act" between demolition and preservation, he explains. "This was a building we tore down two years ago for the mayor's fight the blight day," pointing to the lot. "It was a big complex, but look, it's right across the street from the school, and the kids were coming in doing all kinds of illicit acts. So we got rid of it. Again, you don't go tear down a building if you can help it, but this one, it was bad." He points to the house next door with vines hanging from the roof and siding ripped off. "And this one here, it's open. This is our biggest challenge. If you have enough money you could save any building. But in your eyes, what would you do?" I wasn't sure what to say. "Tear it down?" I ask. "Be careful when you say that, now!" Wesley says, shaking his finger in mock disapproval. "Some of the council members, preservationists, they would say: 'Oh yeah, save that.' And don't get me wrong, you probably could. But here's what happens: they run through, I call them the neighborhood salvagers. I think you know where I'm going with this. They'll walk through and they'll go through the building and they'll start with the chimney. Now, with a structure, if you take out the chimney, you've taken out the anchor of the building. People will say, 'I looked at the building the other day, how did it just fall? Somebody had to do something.' Yeah, somebody did!"

I ask why "neighborhood salvagers" go after the chimney. Wesley walks through the front door. "Stay right there. I don't want you to have to step on anything," he says, disappearing into the house. He rummages around and then walks out with a brick in his hand, then drops it in front of me. "That, my friend, is called a St. Joe's brick. Each of these bricks, if it's in good condition, sells for a buck fifty or two bucks a brick. So if I have a problem, if I have an addiction, the doors, bricks, they're gone." He turns towards the building. "Could you save it? Of

course—if you’ve got enough money. But you’re going to need new roof, new siding. It’s termite infested, the floors eaten up, you’ll need new windows. Man, start over, start over.”

We walk down the street past another empty house covered in vines. “See that vine? That’s a rope, not a vine,” he says, walking excitedly up to the house. “They’ll run like snakes through the house.” He rips off a piece of siding and tosses it to the ground, revealing half-inch thick vines curling through the frame. “Once it gets through the building, it’s over. It’ll bring the building down.” He tells me about what he calls the “tremor effect” caused by buses and cars passing by and sending vibrations through a structure. “Every building is built to rock” he says, “but this building here, every day, it’s rocking. And see these vines, its tugging. So this building is in a fight for its life right now. It’s called tug-of-war. And every day the structural integrity of these buildings is diminishing.” Wesley says that a property collapses in the city almost every day—though usually more in the summer due to the rain and humidity. During the winter, more houses catch fire, “because they become shelter or refuge for vagrants, transients.”



Figure 20. Vines growing through a house. Photo by author. 2013.

I ask if he has seen many changes in code enforcement over the years. “Like anything, some good, some bad” he replies. “One thing I’ll say, since the storm, we now have more public buy-in. We have public participation.” He recognizes that not everyone appreciates what the city is doing. “New Orleans is caught between the haves and have nots. It’s a very poor city. Poor in terms of job type, income level, educational level. All of these is a challenge, because we don’t have a very strong tax base. And over the past years, especially in [Mayor Landrieu’s] administration, we’ve gotten to be more aggressive with enforcement.” But he’s proud of the impact they’ve made. “I ride through the city, it’s noticeable, it’s visible. There’s a lot of work—a *lot* of work. But we’ve done a lot.”

We eventually get to the street that Wesley is supposed to inspect. He explains the process. “Basically, when we do an inspection, what we’re looking at is the exterior of the property.” He points to the house in front of us. Its windows and doors are boarded, and most of the siding has come off, revealing tarpaper and insulation. The rear appears to have caught fire at some point, leaving only charred remains. “So we’re looking at, obviously, needs paint. There’s missing weatherboards on the sides. The sills—you familiar with construction?” I nod my head. “The sills have deteriorated, so we’re looking at that. We’re looking at the studs, the studs are deteriorated and missing. This property is open, it’s open in the rear. Gutters are bad, the roof’s bad. You can see through it.” The whole time Wesley is scribbling on a small notepad. Then he takes out a camera. “We’ll take pictures, in general of the condition of the house and if there are some serious, specific defects I take pictures of those,” he explains, casually snapping away without looking through the viewfinder. “For instance, this house has a really bad deteriorated sill. I’ll shoot a close up picture of the sill, just to add flavor.” Wesley smiles.



Figure 21. The fire-damaged rear of the house. Photo by author. 2013.

We go around the house and complete the inspection. Wesley walks in front of me, kicking glass and pieces of siding away, pointing out where the termites have eaten at the structure. When we get to the back yard, we survey the fire damage. He read me his notes: “exterior paint, weatherboards are deteriorated loose and missing, exposed studs, sills are deteriorated and missing, high grass is in the rear, the roof is deteriorated and leaking, and the piers are substandard—and that’s enough. I’ll probably throw in that the structure is deteriorated and I’ll also put down that there is fire damage. That’s just a note that we make, and guess—this I’m putting at 25%. I think all of them I just put 25%.” I ask him why he isn’t more precise with the amount of fire damage. “Look, this property is obviously in bad shape. I’ll type these up,” he says, waving his notebook, “then they’ll bring the owner in, if they can find him, you know, if he’s even still alive. Then he’ll have to answer for it. Do I think it’s blight? Yes indeed! But it’s only my job to get this property to a hearing.”

Wesley has been an inspector for more than a decade. He has a rich perspective on the city and its problems. His ruminations about blight are sociological, at times, weaving macro-economic issues—jobs, education, class—with interpersonal issues, such as sibling disputes. He also has an intimate knowledge of properties themselves, their materials and design, as well as the informal economy of bricks and floorboards that inadvertently causes many to collapse. Wesley put these aside, however, when he carries out inspections, materializing vacant properties in a particular way, and for a particular purpose. After he’s done with his day’s inspections, he usually goes to his office or a coffee shop and types his notes into a standardized form. He translates these notes into boxes and checkmarks, uploads his pictures, and submits the package through the city’s case management software. From there, a file is started for the property, research is begun, and the owner is notified that their property has been cited for code violations, and that they must appear for a hearing.

The Code Enforcement and Hearings Bureau

Hearings are held four days a week, from around 9:00 a.m. to 4:00 p.m., in a building across the street from City Hall. They aren’t easy to get to. People have to battle downtown traffic, and the only available parking is in private lots or metered spots along the street. A security guard in the building lobby directs people to the thirteenth floor, then down a hallway until reaching a glass door with “Code Enforcement and Hearings Bureau” etched on the front.¹¹⁸

Everyone who shows up for a hearing is told to sit in the waiting room until their address is called. The waiting room contains about thirty chairs set up in neat rows. A magazine rack stands in the corner and soft music plays over the speakers. It has the same anxious and ascetic feel of

¹¹⁸ After a few incidents with angry homeowners, a uniformed police officer was stationed at a small desk nearby.

the waiting room at a dentist's office—probably because, as with a dentist's office, most people did not want to be there. Usually there are no more than a dozen people inside, though every now and then the room brims with people waiting their hearing. They play with their phones or sort through documents, read books, or stare out the window. Occasionally, someone tries to make small talk with others around them, usually to glean information about the hearing process. Most, however, just sit quietly until they are called into the hearing room.



Figure 22. The waiting room. Photo by author. 2012.

Most people, when called into the hearing room, expect it to look like a traditional courtroom, with separate areas for plaintiffs and defendants, a raised podium for the judge, and ample seats for observers. They are surprised when they enter a room the size a small office (about eight feet by ten feet), furnished with two desks set up in a “T” shape and a half-dozen chairs. Pink folders sits on the table alongside some pens, a clunky tape recorder, and a projector aimed at the bare, peach-colored wall.



Figure 23. The hearing room. Photo by author. 2012.

There are three main participants in each hearing: a facilitator, a hearing officer, and a defendant. Facilitators are case workers employed by the city. When I started attending hearings in 2011, there were about eight facilitators, each one in charge of their own individual cases. Facilitators were civil servants with no formal legal training, similar to social workers, and interacted quite frequently with property owners, even calling to remind them of an upcoming hearing. Over the next year, however, the city moved all but two facilitators into other administrative or research positions. The facilitator position morphed into something more like a prosecutor. They would present evidence and make recommendations about fines and judgments. The two remaining facilitators, both of whom are black, middle-class women in their forties or fifties, are no longer attached to individual cases. Hearings move more quickly, as different facilitators don't have to shuffle in and out, but they also have less personal knowledge about each case.

Hearing officers are lawyers who act as judges and decide whether a property is guilty. About two-dozen are contracted by the city and paid by the hour, though no more than two or three are used on any given day. Before starting the position, hearing officers are given basic training in the code enforcement process, though none I met had any particular expertise in property or land use law. One, for example, was a specialist in maritime law, another in personal injuries, while another told me his “day job” consisted of writing wills. Hearing officers are the only ones empowered to make official judgments about a property, and though they are supposed to be impartial and independent from the city, they often base their judgments on recommendations made by facilitators. Still, every hearing officer has their own style, some relatively restrained, others more active and engaged, with a few even relishing displays of sympathy for residents, reducing recommended fines and penalties, or giving them extra time to bring their property into compliance. Many saw their work as a way of “contributing to the city’s recovery,” as one put it. “I usually charge \$300 an hour,” another told me. “I make a fraction of that here. But I wanted to help the city along with rebuilding, and I think this blight fight is part of that.”

Defendants are usually a property’s owner or owners, though in some cases a relative may appear in the owner’s stead; very few defendants have legal representation.¹¹⁹ Most defendants are in their forties or older, and most are black, from neighborhoods that flooded during Hurricane Katrina. About a quarter of the cases I witnessed involved defendants who were no longer living in New Orleans, and had driven or even flown in for their hearing. Quite a few properties were co-owned by several heirs; I even saw cases in which a dozen family members would file in, each owning a small fraction of the property. Facilitators estimate that a quarter to

¹¹⁹ When they did, it was usually a case in which the property was owned by a developer, corporation, or non-profit organization.

a half of the defendants scheduled to appear on any given day don't show up, and are automatically judged guilty. I usually sat in a chair in the corner reserved for neighbors or other members of the public who sometimes come in to provide testimony, usually against the defendant. In most cases, however, I was the only other person in the room.

Every hearing follows the same general format. Hearing officers swear in defendants and then facilitators present the city's case. After going through an inspector's report and pictures, and listening to a defendant's testimony, the hearing officer makes a decision and signs a judgment. The interactions throughout are relatively formal, with facilitators and most defendants referring to the hearing officer as "your honor," and each waiting their turns to speak. Many defendants show up to hearings dressed in their Sunday best, though there were exceptions, which I will discuss in another section. Hearing officers wore business attire. Facilitators, however, usually color-coordinated their outfits for each day of the week: yellow on Mondays, purple on Thursdays, and so on.

There were other aspects of the hearing that relaxed the strict formalities of conventional legal settings. Before the hearing started, hearing officers sometimes engaged in small talk with defendants, asking about their house, its location, even whether they knew people in common.¹²⁰ New Orleans is not a very large city, after all. Moreover, during the hearing, the facilitator or hearing officer sometimes asked to go "off the record" and have the tape recorder stopped so they could engage in a more informal discussion with the defendant—often to tell them in rather blunt terms about their options for achieving a certain result. Moreover, since the hearing isn't bound by the normal rules of evidence imposed on civil and criminal trials, facilitators and hearing officers frequently let defendants "vent"—that is, share their stories, even if these stories

¹²⁰ It wasn't unusual to find out that one of the defendant had common friends with the facilitator or hearing officer, though I only saw a facilitator recuse herself in two or three cases.

have no direct relevance to the hearing at hand. But when they do try to bring residents back on track (and they often do), they focus on evidence about the property and its condition contained in the city's file. While properties arrived at hearing because they had code violations, the presence of violations alone didn't mean they were blighted. Blight was something that had to be proven.

Documenting blight

Kathy is a facilitator for the Code Enforcement and Hearings Bureau. Before each hearing, she thumbs through a salmon pink file containing an inspector's report, photographs, mortgage records, and other documents for the upcoming case.¹²¹ Inside the file is every piece of evidence she will present during the hearing. Its contents reflect a property's current condition and connect the property to its owner or owners, as well as its bureaucratic history in the code enforcement process. The file is "a product of a dense network of connections with, rather than separation from, what is represented" (Hull 2012:213; see also Cabot 2012; Hull 2003). But each piece of evidence within the file has a different connection to the property in question, constituting it socially and materially as an object of municipal governance.

¹²¹ The front of the file includes the property's address, the names of any owners, and a case history for properties that had been through previous hearings. Like the government files Matthew Hull (2012) studied, these are unusual because "signs of its history are continuously and deliberately inscribed upon the artifact itself...A file is a chronicle of its own production, a sedimentation of its own history" (116-117; see also Messick 1996).

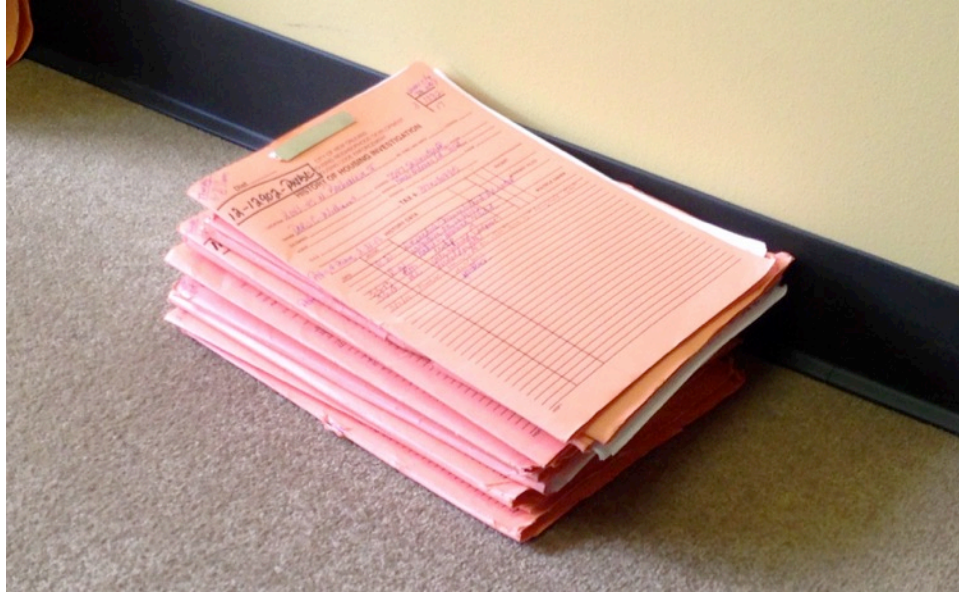


Figure 24. A stack of files. Photo by author. 2013.

A tremendous amount of work goes into producing the file. An inspector's initial report is included, as is a follow-up report completed the week of a property's hearing. After an initial inspection, a property undergoes title research so that city officials can identify possible owners and notify them about the hearing. This is a time consuming process. The title researcher has to check mortgage and conveyance records, crosscheck these against notary records, and sometimes even walk across the street to search through other property records at City Hall. Many of the records are stored in large, musty books on the third and fourth floor of the building. There is also a computer database, though digital records are notoriously unreliable, with mismatched addresses and misspelled names.¹²² City officials use this information to notify every possible owner about the hearing. Without doing so, the whole process would be open to legal challenge.

Back in the hearing room, Kathy studies the inspector's report and title information, and circles the names of owners with her purple pen. As soon as she's done going over the file, a secretary calls in the defendant from the waiting room—usually not by name, but by their street address. The defendant takes a seat and Kathy explains the process before clicking on the tape

¹²² The title researcher told me that he usually completes three or four properties a day.

recorder. She then reads a list of violations from the inspector's report, which usually goes something like this:

“Your honor, the inspector visited this site on the third of April, 2013, and found the property to have several violations at that time. He found that the structure was in a deteriorated condition. The weatherboards were deteriorated, loose, and missing. The studs were exposed. The exterior needed to be painted. The roof was deteriorated and substandard. The grass and weeds at the rear of the property and the right side of the building afforded a potential rat harborage.”

Kathy pieces together an image of a property's current condition through the boxes and check marks in the inspector's report.

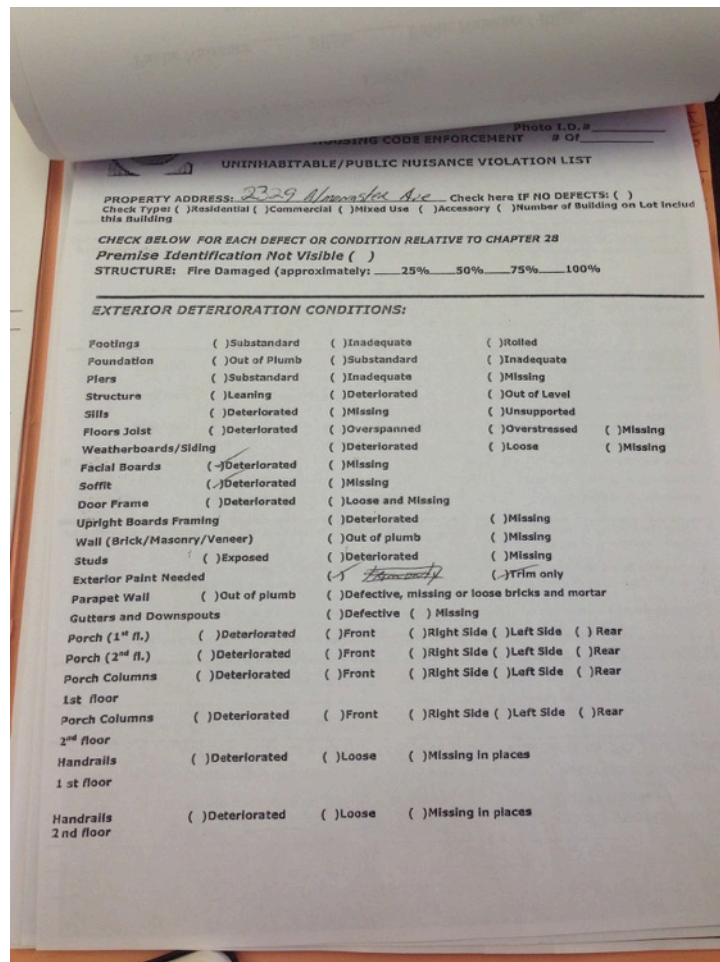


Figure 25. Inspector's report. Photo by author. 2013.

Distinct code violations are transformed into a composite image, reinforced through pictures projected onto the wall that show properties from their front and sides (see Goodwin 1994;

Lynch 1985). Usually, a property is shown in isolation from those around it, though in some cases, pictures show grass or debris that cross over property lines, or structures leaning precariously towards a neighboring property. Kathy clicks through these images, giving the hearing officer a chance to see specific violations, while also getting a more general impression of the property's condition.

Facilitators and hearing officers treat these pictures with particular reverence. I asked one hearing officer about his decision-making process. "I just look at the pictures," he told me, leaning back in his chair. "The pictures say a thousand words." But pictures could be deceiving. In several cases defendants pointed out that an inspector had taken pictures of the wrong property, that pictures were older than inspectors claimed, or did not adequately capture work that the defendants had completed. Facilitators also found discrepancies between the violations listed in reports and those visible in pictures. In one case, Kathy flipped through an inspector's pictures and turned to the hearing officer, "he says 'paint needed,' but I don't see where." In another case, she noted that the inspector had said there was no work in progress even though a ladder was visible in the foreground. While pictures could serve to solidify the reports and other documents in the file, creating a seemingly objective image of the property, they could also undermine such an image, raising questions about a property's status.

The point of these pictures, however, was not to prove that a property was blighted or not. Rather, pictures are meant to provide a baseline against which subsequent investigation will take place. As I'll discuss later, the information in the file captures the condition of a property so that subsequent changes—or lack of changes—can be measured. In other words, a property's condition as represented in the inspector's report and pictures had little bearing on whether it would eventually be given a blight judgment. I've observed several hearings in which properties

that were considered “obviously” blighted, at least from the evidence in inspector’s reports and pictures, were reevaluated in light of evidence and testimony provided by its owner.

Before one such hearing the facilitator informed the hearing officer about the upcoming case. “Look at this!” the facilitator said, passing the hearing officer some of the pictures. The hearing officer flipped through them, shaking her head. “That’s got to be one of the worst I’ve seen!” They showed me the pictures—a house covered in vines, with broken windows and the front door hanging ajar. The defendant, a young black man dressed in a polo shirt, came in carrying a digital camera and a stack of papers. He nodded as the facilitator read through the code violations. When it was his turn to speak, he explained that several family members had been fighting over the property. The title issues had just been cleared up, and he had already begun work on the house. He shuffled through his papers and brought out building permits. The facilitator glanced over them and then passed them to the hearing officer. “Well, it looks like that’s in order,” the hearing officer said. “So how long do you think it’ll take to get it all done?” “As soon as I can! I already fixed the siding,” the defendant said, grabbing his camera. The hearing officer and facilitator crowded around him as he scrolled through pictures he had taken that morning. “Looks nice!” the facilitator told him. “And make sure the windows are boarded from the outside,” she said, pointing to the screen. The facilitator gave him a few more recommendations, and urged the defendant to continue working, since he still had several code violations that he needs to bring into compliance. The hearing officer reset the case for 60 days, and told the defendant to “keep up the good work.”

Matthew Hull (2012) writes that scholars need to see “graphic artifacts not as neutral purveyors of discourse, but as mediators that shape the significance of the linguistic signs inscribed on them” (13). In the hearing, the file provides only a starting point for deliberations. It

represented a property at a single point in time. Facilitators and hearing officers, however, wanted to see improvement. While a property was brought into a hearing based on its current condition, the hearing process was about determining a property's future.

Property potentials

“What is your plan for this property?” Hearing officers always ask defendants some version of this question. They want to know whether the defendant intends to rebuild, and if so, how long they expect to take. The information contained in the file, on its own, gives little information about whether its owner is interested in rebuilding. Though the property is ostensibly on trial, hearing officers often focus on the status of its owner when making their decisions. They try to gauge an owner's commitment to rebuild, and if this commitment matches their capabilities. Blight is not so much a judgment about a property's current condition, but rather about its potential.

Heath Cabot (2013) describes the “social aesthetics” of eligibility she witnessed in asylum hearings in contemporary Greece (see also Brenneis 1987; Coutin 2007). There, administrative decisions were “supremely composite and dialogical, grounded not so much in formal articulations of law as in the sociabilities and sensibilities” of bureaucratic encounters (452). She argues that participants were “deeply engaged in seeking to respond to and make sense of each other, through highly personal, contextualized, and unpredictable sets of encounters. These intersubjective dynamics and the social aesthetics through which they unfold reflect, invoke, but also sometimes undermine normative frameworks of assessment” (453).¹²³

¹²³ Her account goes against conventional Weberian or Kafka-esque representations of bureaucracy and bureaucratic knowledge.

Code enforcement hearings involve a similar social aesthetics. Though the process begins by scrutinizing files, documents, and photographs, it is the ensuing discussion and debate that brings these graphic artifacts to life. Hearing officers try to “make sense” of the defendant, as one admitted when describing his approach to me in between cases: “I try to figure out what the owner is doing, what their mindset is.” He turned to face the spot where defendants usually sit and began a mock interrogation. “What are your plans? Are you going to live in it or just try to flip it? Do you have the money to fix all these violations?” He also tries to “figure out what’s going on in their lives. You know, what is their story?” He tries to be fair. “My job is not to be evil.” I saw many hearing officers use this approach. They would ask probing questions about a property owner’s intentions, about rebuilding plans or their timeline for addressing particular violations, or if they had paid property taxes—anything, that is, to gauge whether they still had an active interest or connection to the property. But they would also ask questions about a defendant’s personal finances and family situation to understand if their interest could be acted upon.

The way that facilitators and hearing officers treated people in hearings was often shaped by the specifics of the encounter. They were usually more patient with elderly residents who wanted to rebuild, and during a hearing would walk these defendants through the process, explaining each step, repeatedly asking if defendants understood what was happening. This could take a rather paternalistic turn, as some hearing officers tried to caution elderly residents against rebuilding. “Have you been back to the neighborhood?” one hearing officer asked an octogenarian man, who nodded. “Your house isn’t the only one that looks like this,” he said, pointing to the picture on the wall. “Are you sure you want to put money into this? You can see the house next door, it’s empty, too. Is that how you want to spend your last years?” Women who

showed up alone were also treated with condescension, particularly by male hearing officers. One woman was even asked whether she had any brothers who could help her through the process, even though she had already hired a contractor to begin work, and showed no signs of being unable to handle the situation on her own. Moreover, questions about personal finances were usually prompted by signals of racial or class identity. Facilitators and hearing officers also distinguished between different types of property owners, and were most aggressive with “developers”—that is, defendants who weren’t planning to live in the property, but were only going to sell it or rent it out. As one hearing officer told me: “Developers come in and buy up properties for a fraction of what their worth, and tell me they’re not going to fix up this one until their done and renting this other one. No, you can’t do that! You’re holding everyone else up! There are rats going into your neighbor’s yard!” Another hearing officer told me that she didn’t think it was fair that developers could have the same maximum fines as an elderly couple who couldn’t afford to rebuild. “We should be able to fine [developers] ten times as much. These fines are like a mosquito bite for them. But not for an elderly couple, it’s like a shark bite. It’s like we’re biting off their arm!”

All of these questions were meant to probe a property’s potential—to understand whether the owner was serious about wanting to rebuild. Bureaucrats are often charged with ignoring context, but in many cases they merely create their own context for judgment, in this case by relating the current condition of a property to its future potential through questions about its owner’s character and capabilities. The hearing involved a particular way of reading a property’s condition and, through its condition, the intentions of its owner. Defendants had to prove that they were responsible by presenting a plan. But they also had to address the code violations, though not necessarily all at once. If it was a defendant’s first hearing they were usually given a

“reset,” assigned another hearing date several months later, and told to begin repairs. Defendants would have to put their plan into action. And they would have to reappear at the hearing and show that they had made some progress in bringing their property into compliance.

Work in progress

“This is 343 North Miro,” Kathy tells the hearing officer, handing him the case file. The defendant, a black man in his early forties, enters the room and sits down. Kathy reads the violations: “missing siding, deteriorated soffits, window frames missing, grass more than eighteen inches high, trash and debris that affords a rat harborage.” The hearing officer turns to the defendant and asks about his plans for the property. “I want to fix up the property, but I have financial problems. If you can recommend where I can get a grant from the state, that would help,” the defendant says. “I don’t know about grants,” the hearing officer replies. “Most of this will only take some labor,” the hearing officer replies. “It won’t cost you too much money. It’s mostly aesthetic. You just need to make it presentable.” The defendant explains that he works full time and has two daughters. He barely gets by on the money he makes. “If I give you time, will you be able to fix this up?” asks the hearing officer. She turns to the facilitator. “It’s his first time [at a hearing], right?” “Yeah,” the facilitator responds, and the defendant perks up, “Yes ma’am!” “You don’t want to have fines, because fines stay with the property, and you don’t want that,” the hearing officer continues. “How much time can you give me?” the defendant asks. “Usually we give 30 days. Can you fix it in 30 days?” she says. “I think so. I can get some friends to help,” the defendant responds. “Alright, 30 days” she says. “Just show some progress. That’s what we need to see. If we give you time you have to put in the effort.” After the hearing is over and the

defendant leaves, the hearing officer tells me, “I have to believe him the first time. But if he comes back and it’s not fixed, I’ll throw the book at him!”

I saw this happen time and again: a defendant would appear and state their intention to rebuild, and the hearing officer would give them more time, as long as the defendant promised to show “work in progress” by the next hearing. A first hearing, such as the one above, was used to gauge a property owner’s intentions, and the defendant was usually given a reset for thirty, sixty, or in some cases ninety days, after which they would reappear and have to show that they had made improvements since the last hearing. The presence of “work in progress” was how most hearing officers distinguished blighted and non-blighted properties. While a property might be in bad shape when it is inspected, what matters in determining its blight status was how a defendant acts *after* they have been cited. Responsibility was enacted through repairs—fixing broken doors, adding a fresh coat of paint, and keeping grass below eighteen inches. These repairs affirmed a property’s potential and its owner’s capacity to bring the property into compliance. But this also put the onus on property owners to appear at the next hearing with concrete proof that they had made progress.

When a follow-up hearing occurs, usually a month or two after an initial hearing, it usually isn’t very difficult for hearing officers to see if the property owner had completed work. Between the two hearings, properties are re-inspected, and then compared to see if any repairs had been made. Moreover, there was a box on their report for “work in progress” that they could check if there is visible construction going on. In follow-up hearings, facilitators would state whether the inspector found “work in progress” or “no work in progress” after they read through the code violations. Defendants are also asked to bring in their own pictures of work they had been completed. Many carry digital cameras and scroll through pictures on the small, built-in screen.

In one case, a defendant tried to show the hearing officer pictures on their phone. The hearing officer squinted as she swiped through the pictures, then handed the phone over to the facilitator. The facilitator asked the defendant to “indicate what progress has been made,” since it was hard to see any details in the pictures. The defendant replied that the windows have been boarded, the gutter taken down, and that everything except the roof and the paint was done. The facilitator suggested they reset the case for sixty days. Then the defendant asked whether he really had to repaint the house. “The paint isn’t deplorable. I know at some point you have to repaint, but that’s one [violation] I didn’t understand,” he said. The facilitator asked if the paint was peeling, flaking, or fading. The defendant shook his head. “Well you need to show us,” the facilitator replied, and told the defendant to bring in hard copies of the photographs to the next hearing.

Facilitators and hearing officers usually had little patience for people who claimed to have completed work but didn’t bring proof. In another case, the facilitator asked the defendant if they had done any work since the previous hearing, because the only change she could see in the inspector’s pictures was that the grass had been cut. “Yeah,” the defendant answered. “Do you have pictures?” the facilitator asked. The defendant shook his head, “I forgot.” The facilitator clicked her tongue. “You need to do the things the city is asking you to do, because there can be some hefty fines. Because your grass is cut, I’m not going to find you guilty. Just conditional guilty.” She then lists a number of things he would have to fix before the next hearing, including the roof and siding. “I don’t have no money to get the roof or siding fixed,” the defendant said, throwing his hands up. The hearing officer stepped in: “Well you have to get someone to go up there and cover it. You can have fines of \$100 a day. After thirty days, that’s \$3000. You can buy a whole new roof for that. You have to fix the hole in your roof. We’re not telling you how to fix it, but it can’t look like this.”

Those without pictures or other documentation of ongoing construction, such as building permits or work contracts, sometimes found other ways to perform their responsibility. Several people came to their hearing in paint-splattered clothes, to show that they had just been working on the property. One man claimed that he worked for a construction company, holding his hands out in front of the hearing officer so that she could see his callouses. “If I can do it for my company, I can do it for myself,” he said. The facilitator gave him a thirty-day reset. One hearing officer told me: “I’d never judge anybody who picks up a paint brush. Even if you’re 90 years old, you show me a picture of you with a paintbrush, and I’ll continue it. Even if it’s a hopeless case. At least you’re trying.”

Facilitators and hearing officers not only sorted those who were working on their properties from those who weren’t, but also tried to encourage particular enactments of ownership. During an initial hearing, facilitators usually made a copy of violations for defendants to take with them, often telling them which to address first. Facilitators reiterated that they were only interested in a property’s exterior. After one defendant told a hearing officer that they had spent several thousand dollars on drywall and cabinets, the hearing officer replied, “this hearing is concerned with the outside of your property. We want the grass cut, the windows boarded, so focus on that first. You can do the inside later. Focus on the outside first.” In another case, the facilitator told a defendant: “We just want to make sure it doesn’t look like a blighted property. What you do on the inside is your business.” If defendants were worried about construction costs, facilitators and hearing officers would encourage them to start with less expensive repairs, or to see if they could enroll family members to help paint or cut the grass. Through these recommendations, they outlined the actions that a “responsible” owner should make in regards to their property.

Facilitators and hearing officers also used fines—or the threat of fines—to incentivize action, or “put a fire under [the defendant’s] ass,” as one facilitator put it. If a property wasn’t moving as quickly as they wanted, they sometimes gave it a “conditional guilty” judgment, which meant that if the property wasn’t brought into compliance by the next hearing, then it would receive an automatic guilty judgment. This provided an ultimatum—a final chance—for owners to complete their work. I saw them use this quite often. When explaining to one defendant why they were receiving a condition guilty, a hearing officer said: “You’re not without resources, but you seem to be without zeal.” Occasionally, defendants fought back against such claims that they weren’t trying. Facilitators usually responded by exhorting them to think about those who lived next door to their run-down property. When one defendant complained about being cited, Kathy asked the defendant, “How would you like to live next to this? You wouldn’t, right? But all those people on that street have to live with it everyday. You need to take care of it!” In another case, she told a defendant: “You’re focusing on rights. But you need to focus on obligations, as well. You have an obligation to your community.” In yet another case, a hearing officer told a defendant: “We have to balance your needs against the needs of the city as a whole. We have to protect the citizens from public nuisances.”

Conclusion

I saw many properties come back two or three times before finally being ruled in compliance. For the most part, hearing officers were generous in giving people more time, as long as they continued to show work in progress. If work stopped, however, the property would usually be judged guilty, which happened quite often, as well, with many owners realizing that they would

be unable to make all of the repairs. The hearing sorted properties, not according to their static condition, but according to their trajectory, a measure that connected a property's condition to its owner actions. Properties moving towards compliance were not guilty of being blighted, since they were tied to responsible owners. Those considered to be irresponsible owners were those who didn't show up to hearings, didn't provide a plan, or didn't complete repairs in a timely manner. This understanding overlooks how so-called irresponsible owners were usually those who couldn't afford to make repairs on their own, such as the poor, elderly, and disabled.¹²⁴ The people least able to enact property according to the dictates of the municipal code were those who were most likely to be dispossessed.

The hearing, and the city's blight-fighting strategy as a whole, individualized responsibility for a property's condition, placing the onus on property owners to bring it them compliance. There were no city programs available to help homeowners. If defendants asked, they were usually referred to a list of non-profits and charities on the city's website. Facilitators and hearing officers were aware of some of these problems. One hearing officer told me that he tries to be sympathetic to those who come in. He likes to think of them as neighbors. Many "don't know what's going on" and, of course, "they didn't ask for the hurricane," he said. Kathy told me: "It's sad, people want to hold on to these properties, but they just don't have the means."¹²⁵ "Sometimes I think we do more harm than good," one hearing officer said to me after a particularly emotional case. "We're just making it harder for some people to come back."

¹²⁴ When residents would ask for programs to provide assistance, most case workers referred them to the city website, which listed charities and non-profits, though many had stopped doing construction work.

¹²⁵ A former facilitator who had been moved to a research position told me that she was much happier not having to sit through the hearings. "I just couldn't bear seeing those people realize that they were going to lose their property. It was the worst part of the job. I just couldn't keep doing it after a while."

CHAPTER 6: REMAPPING COMMUNITY

Nick unrolled a map on the table. Residents gathered around and saw their neighborhood, Claiborne, from a bird's-eye-view.¹²⁶ The map was colored in with the results of a property condition survey they had completed a few weeks earlier. Each color represented a different condition: blue for properties in good condition, yellow for properties in fair condition, orange for properties in poor condition, and red for properties in extremely poor condition. "That's the one with all the vines, and the walls falling down," one man said, tapping his finger on a red corner parcel. Everyone nodded. "That's the worst one!"

It had been eight years since Hurricane Katrina. Claiborne, located in central New Orleans, had seen some of the worst flooding in the city. Since then, many people had returned and rebuilt, yet the neighborhood was still plagued by run-down homes and overgrown lots, which outnumbered occupied properties on many blocks. Those standing around the map hoped that the property condition survey. Sylvia, the neighborhood association's president, had been a strong advocate of the survey. She hoped it would help the neighborhood sort through these properties, providing a picture of their present condition so that residents could begin planning the neighborhood's future.

The survey was fairly straightforward. Residents walked around with clipboards and cameras to document the condition of every property in their neighborhood. Many neighborhoods had begun to use these surveys as they embraced some of the city's blight-eradication goals, most aided by Nick's non-profit organization.¹²⁷ But these surveys and similar

¹²⁶ Claiborne is a pseudonym.

¹²⁷ A native New Orleanian, Nick attended one of the city's elite private high schools, then moved away for college, only to return a few years later to earn a master's degree in urban planning. After the storm, he began working for a

mapping practices were also caught up in the process of redefining recovery and community at the neighborhood level. As residents peered over the map, they remapped the neighborhood, drawing new connections between property and belonging, and constructing new forms of civic engagement—as well as urban citizenship—that were increasingly common in other post-industrial cities.

Scholars often treat maps (and related technologies such as surveys and grids) as exemplary forms of state knowledge that obscure more complex and often fleeting realities on the ground (Blomley 2003; De Certeau 1984; Holston 1989; Lefebvre 1992; Scott 1998). J.B. Harley (2002) argues that modern maps work by “reifying power, reinforcing the status quo, and freezing social interaction within chartered lines” (79). Scholars contrast state maps to other ways of seeing, often drawing on cartographic metaphors, in order to highlight those things that maps supposedly miss—context, emotion, rootedness, place (Bruno 2002; Buck-Morss 1991; Massey 1994).¹²⁸ Others describe how maps can be used to undermine—or at least unsettle—expert visions. Nancy Peluso (1995) shows how communities mimic state practices to produce counter maps: representations that draw on local knowledge or experience to contest expert analyses.

Claiborne’s survey shared many features with counter maps, and with related notions of community, participatory, or indigenous mapping (see Chapin, Lamb, and Threlkeld 2005; Corbett 2009). But the survey also differed in important ways. Community mapping advocates often take local knowledge as given—as something merely captured and represented in maps.

This knowledge might offer a particular vision of space by relaying nuances or vernacular

non-profit organization helping neighborhood groups collect data and produce maps, just like the one he had made for Claiborne.

¹²⁸ Ironically, these critics draw on a particular stance towards truth: that it consists in the correspondence of representations with reality (Maurer 2005). This critical stance has spawned alternative forms of mapping that supposedly capture more “real” spaces and places, such as Michel de Certeau’s (1984) description of walking in the city as a form of unruly spatial practice.

toponyms eschewed in conventional maps. And by arguing that community members should have a prominent role in mapping, advocates highlight important political questions about *who* creates spatial knowledge. Yet few scholars have explored *how* local knowledge is created through community mapping. Claiborne's property condition survey valorized movement through the neighborhood as the primary form of knowledge production. Local knowledge wasn't static, located within particular bodies or spaces, but was produced through interaction—through residents meandering through streets to document changes in the post-storm landscape. Residents recognized that the landscape was changing—rapidly, in many cases—as some areas recovered, and others didn't.

I use the term walking cartographies to capture these embodied and embedded spatial knowledge enacted through the survey and related mapping and planning practices. These practices were present in early-post storm neighborhood plans, which I discussed in Chapter 2, but became more prominent later, as they were enrolled in property condition surveys and neighborhood planning oriented towards redeveloping blighted property. Surveys blended subjective, relational, and experiential knowledge with the norms and forms of modern maps. Movement was key, not only movement in space and time, on foot through the neighborhood, but also through circulating the maps through city bureaucracies in order to bring their plans to fruition.

These walking cartographies differed from community maps in another way. In many neighborhoods, including Claiborne, the contents of the post-storm community was an open question. Mapping and planning process were attempts to define (or redefine) the community: figuring out who had come back, which properties could be rebuilt, and what residents wanted to do in the future. As residents came up with plans for these properties, they remapped the

neighborhood a second time, projecting new futures onto its ruined spaces. Mapping was a way for them to intervene: a means to plan, strategize, and act to salvage a past, and increasingly, to maintain a future, keeping the neighborhood intact in the face of ongoing ruination (Harms 2012; Ringel 2014; Stoler 2010). Mapping provided a set of openings to rethink the neighborhood and alter its present course. It allowed residents to reorient their spatial and temporal expectations of post-storm recovery. While it is celebrated as an extension of post-storm community organizing, it is also a response to new challenges—in particular, the uneven recovery that has not only left residents feeling abandoned by their former neighbors, but also entire neighborhoods feeling abandoned by the city.

Mapping and planning, in other words, is a form of “vernacular statecraft” (Colleredo-Mansfeld 2009) that has taken hold in the cracks of new inequalities opened up since the storm. They are attempts at political engagement and economic redevelopment. But they are also modes of community making. Kregg Hetherington (2011) writes “maps—even inaccurate, contestable, illegible, distractingly ornate, or dated maps—invite and enable people to do things that they couldn’t otherwise do” (7). One of the many things Claiborne residents were able to do with maps was reflect on what it might mean to move on from old visions of recovery. They surveyed and planned as part of their ongoing struggle to redefine their community through (and oftentimes against) the lingering presence of vacant properties. Community mapping didn’t capture or represent local knowledge; it helped produce this knowledge, and in turn, helped produce the very community that was mapping—and being mapped. Through the concept of walking cartographies, I highlight the political stakes of these mapping projects, as well as the social and economic imaginaries they afford.

Standards and surveys

Sylvia arranged tables and chairs as people trickled into the community center. Neighbors chatted about the afternoon storm that had dumped several inches of rain on the area. I fumbled with my recorder and dug through my bag for a pen, having only attended a few neighborhood meetings, and still feeling awkward about my presence. Sylvia cleared her throat and began the meeting. The survey was the first item on the agenda. Nick explained the process and passed around a sign-up sheet for volunteers. Sylvia reminded everyone that the survey would help the association “target some of the problem properties in the neighborhood” and “plan what we want to do, moving forward.” After the meeting, she encouraged me to volunteer so that I could get a better view of the “blight problems” they were facing. “It doesn’t mean a lot until you walk around the neighborhood,” Sylvia said. “Then you really see it.”

Nick hosted a training session a week before the survey. The volunteers squeezed into his downtown office for a short slideshow presentation explaining the survey process, and how we would to classify each property. “A ‘good’ structure, it appears habitable with few repairs needed,” Nick said. His screen showed a picture of a house with curtained windows and a fresh coat of paint. Everyone nodded. “‘Fair,’” he said, clicking to the next slide, “is a property that can be lived in—it’s habitable—but it may need repairs. It may be missing a weatherboard or two, there may be vines growing on it, some of the wood may be damaged.” His screen showed a picture of a house with a new door but some missing weatherboards. Everyone nodded. “So ‘poor,’ the structure isn’t habitable,” he continued. “There’s no utilities, it’s boarded or unsecured. There’s no [water and electricity] meters, maybe.” “The roof’s about to fall down?” Sylvia asked. “Well that would be ‘extremely poor,’” Nick replied, “like this one.” He clicked to

the next slide: a picture of a house with a collapsed roof. Everyone laughed. “The structure’s unsound,” he said. “Water can enter. Major mold, vines, and walls missing... That’s an ‘extremely poor.’”

Good, fair, poor, or extremely poor: these were the categories we would use to sort the neighborhood’s properties. Most of what we would look for—high grass, broken windows, missing siding—was invisible from a bird’s-eye-view. The survey required that we move through the neighborhood on foot and capture the view from the street. The final map would translate this perspective into a top-down image of the neighborhood, erasing much of the footwork that went into it, but the map also relied on this situated view to capture the information it would ultimately represent (Haraway 1988).

Nick asked if anyone had questions. One man described an abandoned property on his street with a building permit in the window. What category would it fall under? “It’s very difficult to tell,” Nick admitted, “but that’s why we always work with residents and neighborhood associations, because you probably know if the house down the street is being worked on or not. The whole idea is that residents know better than university students because you know the neighborhood, you live there.” A property’s condition—visible to passersby—had to be related to what residents knew about a property’s context and history. Nick described other clues about a property’s status. Residents could see if the permit was expired, or look for trashcans, electric meters, even holiday decorations. These were signs that a property might be inhabited—or at least would be in the near future.

The survey categories were not as hard-and-fast as they appeared. Rather, they provided a taxonomy of contextual cues to be corroborated by residents as they carried out the survey.

David Turnbull argues that modern maps rely on the “elimination, or erasure, of the practices and

itineraries that contributed to [their] production” (1996:62). The survey, by contrast, drew on the movements of the mapper through space and time—a pragmatic unfolding in which the act of mapping and the map were inextricably bound. This doesn’t mean that walking cartographies provide an unmediated perspective on neighborhood space—as if such a view exists. Instead, our perspectives were shaped by the survey categories, while the categories themselves relied on people to apply them as they moved through the neighborhood (Grasseni 2004; see also Goodwin 1994).

A week after our training sessions the volunteers gathered to carry out the survey. I was paired with a resident named Gary, who was born and raised in the neighborhood, and had just retired after several decades as a high school teacher. After quick introductions we walked to our designated corner and began our route around the block. We moved from one house to the next, taking no more than a few seconds at each one. Gary would usually point to some feature, I would remark on another, and one of us would guess at a category. It was a diagnostic—and dialogic—process. One house, for example, was missing its front door and had a hole in its roof. “Very poor?” I asked Gary. “Yeah, I’d say very poor,” Gary replied. In other cases we had conflicting assessments. One house had broken windows and missing weatherboards. “Poor?” I asked. Gary scratched his head. “Well, I think this one’s maybe fair.” I pointed out the high grass in the front yard. “Yeah,” he said, still scratching his head, “but compared to some of the others...I think we just call this one fair.”

Gary told stories as we walked. “This one right here is one of the worst blights we have,” he said as we passed by a house that was barely visible under a blanket of vines. “The two people who owned this, they’re deceased. They had two kids but they’ve been gone a while.” He peered down the street at a row of run-down properties. “This was a nice block before the storm. Ms.

Emmit lived on the corner, and Ms. Holton who taught at the high school. The LeBlancs were across the street. It was a nice block.” With some properties he waxed nostalgic, but with others he became visibly angry. “How can they just leave their property like this?” Gary asked in front of one house we both agreed was extremely poor. “The people who left their properties like this, they don’t realize what it’s doing to us here,” he continued. “They’re somewhere else. Meanwhile, we’re back here just trying to get back on our feet!” While it would be hard to translate the full force of Gary’s comments onto the survey, they revealed his impetus for mapping in the first place. Gary turned his disillusionment into a desire to map. This was true of many of the volunteers I spoke with. Most were dissatisfied with Claiborne’s current state and wanted to move on.



Figure 26. A property in “very poor” condition. Photo by author. 2013.

Martha Lampland and Susan Leigh Star (2009) write “standards, and the actions surrounding them, do not occur acontextually” (7). When residents judged a property’s condition, they combined the disembodied qualities bundled in each category with an actual structure. The

survey employed relatively standardized categories, but it also relied on residents to apply and in many cases refine those categories. Standardization did not exempt residents from exercising judgment—in fact, the survey relied on it. Context mattered. But it mattered in a particular way. And the context we were interested in was produced, in part, by walking through the neighborhood, combining what residents knew about particular properties with the flexible standards embodied by the survey. But there was another context that played a role in their judgments. Neighbors complained about homes that still looked like they did right after the storm. “Everyone else in this area has repaired their home,” one woman told me, “there’s no reason we should still have to live next to a blighted house.” While the survey would result in a representation of neighborhood space, it was also allowed residents to reflect on time—on how far the neighborhood had come since the storm, and what it hoped to become in the future.

Conditions of belonging

Many scholars have related mapping to the politics of belonging (see Blomley, Sommers, and Smandych 1999; Elyachar 2003; Maurer 2000; Peluso 1995). Eve Darian-Smith (2002), for example, describes the ritual “beating the bounds” in which English villagers walked their community’s borders in a public procession. “It was a highly symbolic event that marked the territorial limits of the village,” she writes, “defining ‘insider’ and ‘outsider’ and the complex bundle of social relations that informed a feudal community” (251).

Claiborne’s survey shared a similar ethos. However, as residents walked through the neighborhood, they marked insiders and outsiders through a property’s condition, rather than its location. Residents focused on material signs of abandonment or decay. Broken windows,

chipped paint, missing siding, and overgrown grass referenced past, present, and future neglect. The survey process allowed residents to connect these qualities to new modes of inclusion, oriented around notions of moving on. As I spoke to residents about the survey, many individualized responsibility for a blighted property's condition. They blamed others for being "irresponsible" or for "not caring." I was surprised how quickly some condemned their former neighbors in expressing their desire to move on. Indeed, many felt that displaced neighbors had themselves moved on. "These are people who used to keep up their property when they used to live back here," one woman told me. "Some have been abandoned, they move on and they just don't care."

While earlier debates about the right to return involved a relatively narrow discourse of property rights, later debates about recovery involved a different model of property, one focused on an owner's responsibility to rebuild. This was not a seamless shift, and it didn't happen overnight. One resident told me that for years she "had qualms about aggressively going after [neighbors] for not fixing up their property because we understood what the circumstances were...you know, these are people we've lived with." But now residents were "mostly frustrated that [blighted properties] have been here this long." She was angry that "there's people who are gaming the system to not take care of their property." These feelings were not universal, but they were certainly ubiquitous. How properties came to be abandoned—and the race and class disparities that generated the uneven recovery—were secondary to the fact that properties had become a nuisance. If people sometimes obscured the causes of abandonment, it was because they had to live with its consequences.

Early grassroots recovery efforts imagined community to involve everyone who was displaced. With the survey, community refined as those who came back, *by* those who came

back. Neighborhood activism grew out of the realization that run-down homes and overgrown lots had effects that stretched beyond walls, fences, and property lines. Residents drew on an alternative genealogy of private property in American life—one that emphasizes responsibilities, rather than rights, and justifies strict property regulations in the name of the public good (Novak 1996; see also Dubber and Valverde 2008). This changed how people understood belonging, which became less about identity (who someone is or where they live) and more about action (what they do with their property). Post-storm inclusion was about contributing to the city’s revival, largely by rebuilding one’s home.

Claiborne’s survey allowed residents to forge shared criteria for interpreting neighborhood space. Most residents embraced its forms, standards, and goals. But the process was about more than producing a map; it cultivated a set of commitments, desires, and relations that didn’t exist with the same coherence before. Their walking cartography allowed residents to produce their own abstraction, partially undoing ties to the neighborhood’s pre-storm past, but also re-embedding properties within a new set of concerns tied to a post-storm future. The times and place of these properties were no longer situated within their histories and personal attachments but in the exigencies of neighborhood development, and the personal struggles of neighbors dealing with vacant properties next door. It also allowed residents to see past individual properties and scale the issue to the neighborhood as a whole. Gary, for example, told me that seeing all of the vacant properties helped him understand the true scope of the problem. “I get so worked up over the [blighted] property next door to me, I forget about the rest of them. We all have to deal with this problem!”

The survey made blighted properties into a shared problem. And in throwing light on the people who shared this experience, it redefined who the neighborhood was made of, and who the

neighborhood was for: people who came back. Community mapping wasn't only oriented around involving the community in the mapping process. The survey remapped the community itself—a community that no longer included people who were still displaced. It was part of a much longer process of severing ties with those who had abandoned their property, and was one of the first steps in moving on. This process had already been happening for years. But the survey coordinated—in part, by constituting—experiences that had until then remained latent and largely dispersed. Living next door to a vacant property was one thing. To map all of the vacant properties in your neighborhood, and to meet other people who lived next door to a vacant property, reoriented how people defined the neighborhood as such.

During the survey, Gary and I talked to a woman sitting on her porch. She had called the city about the dilapidated house next door several times but nothing had been done. What else could she do? Gary shrugged his shoulders and told her to continue calling. As we walked away, Gary sighed, “It’s been eight years now. So many of us are tired of living like this. You don’t see as many people coming back as you did right after the storm. Now we have to figure out what to do next. Most of these properties now, I don’t think any of them are coming back.” The survey, originally a tool used by neighborhood associations to measure progress in post-storm recovery, was now used to map new forms of belonging. Mapping the neighborhood was about remapping the very idea of the neighborhood and reorienting expectations of post-storm recovery. Claiborne residents would use these maps to figure out what to do next.

Planning stories

“About seventy-three percent of the houses are occupied now,” Nick said, pulling up a map of the neighborhood on his computer. Sylvia and I were in his office going over the preliminary survey results. “But that doesn’t include all of the empty lots,” he added, of which there were around one hundred scattered throughout the neighborhood. Sylvia gazed at the map. Nick paused and waited for her response. She leaned back and smiled. “I think this is really going to get us going,” she said. “It’s something we can come around together as a group, get to know people in the neighborhood, and really think about what we can do together to make it better. I think this encourages more people to start to take ownership of the community.” Even the empty lots provided an opportunity, she added. Some residents had recently asked her about starting a community garden. Now that residents had mapped the neighborhood, they could use the information to plan its future.

About a dozen residents attended the neighborhood association’s next meeting. Nick unrolled the map and residents gathered around as he explained the results. The room was quiet as people absorbed the image. The map, spread out over an entire table, was a little intimidating. But people quickly found their bearings. “I remember that one,” a woman said, pointing to a red parcel. “It’s bad.” Others discussed what had occupied parcels before the storm: former churches, corner stores, or pharmacies. It took some people a while to find their bearings in the checkerboard of colors. “Is that the Donaldson house?” Gary asked, tapping his finger on a yellow parcel. “No, there’s is the one next door,” Sylvia answered. “That’s right,” he laughed, moving his finger over an inch. His smile faded. “I don’t think they’re coming back.”

But they weren’t there to reminisce. Nick wanted residents to produce a neighborhood plan. He distributed colored pens and residents began marking up the map. Sylvia wrote “community park” over a string of empty lots. Gary circled an orange parcel he thought would

make a good a sandwich shop. One woman drew a house. “That’s going to be my new neighbor!” she said. Several people circled homes they wanted demolished. As residents drew over the map, they imagined the kind of neighborhood they wanted to live in: what it would look like, the kinds of businesses it would have, the amenities it would offer. The map catalyzed this “collaborative imagining,” which was rooted in the present, but was also oriented towards the future (Murphy 2005). In contrast to many professional planners who envisioned the post-storm city as a blank slate, Claiborne residents used the map to plan through the storm’s residues, filling the gaps of an uneven recovery, enacting their own versions of development. Planning was not only a mental exercise, but was a thoroughly embodied form of remapping the neighborhood.¹²⁹ Walking cartographies were at once a method of surveying and a particular orientation to planning through the imagination of future experience at the level of everyday life. Paul Kockelman (2010) describes how maps highlight “preferred and dispreferred places, or worthy and unworthy positions,” as well as commitments, entitlements, and identities (150). Claiborne’s map “project[ed] a set of values” and allowed for “evaluation” (151).

¹²⁹ See Keith Murphy’s (2011) discussion of how architects use similar embodied practices, or “embedded skits,” when designing buildings.



Figure 27. Reviewing the survey results. Photo by author. 2013.

Their work of reimagining the neighborhood was also motivated by what some residents saw as threats from competing plans for the area. They were concerned about encroachment from a nearby university and hospital complex. Sylvia also heard rumors that a developer wanted to build a factory on the neighborhood's edge. There was a long history in New Orleans and elsewhere of nuisance industries being placed in poor or minority neighborhoods (see Checker 2005). Claiborne residents worried about the traffic, noise, and pollution that would follow. "If we don't plan, someone else will," Gary warned. "If we don't work to develop the community, we'll get developed out of it."¹³⁰ Fears about speculation and gentrification lent a certain anxiety to the planning process. But most were cautiously optimistic about the neighborhood's future. As the meeting came to a close, residents created a wish list, which included a community center,

¹³⁰ Before the meeting, I asked Nick what he imagined the neighborhood's plan would look like. He told me it should reflect what the residents wanted. He did not want to impose his own views; if they did not want a community garden, he wouldn't suggest it. Nick framed his relatively laissez-faire approach as a reaction to the more heavy-handed planning that occurred throughout the city after the storm. He was well aware of the critiques levied against planners and wanted to counter their negative reputation. But this did not stop him from making suggestions.

library, urban garden, and new houses. Residents also listed sidewalk and street repairs, as well as a host of social services, such as childcare, mental health counseling, work training, and exercise classes. Hannah Appel (2014) describes list making as “an intentional act of conservation, of keeping alive, and even salvage of a kind, not of a past, but of a potential future” (615; see also Nelms 2015). Many of the items on the neighborhood’s wish list didn’t exist before the storm. By naming them, and then committing them to paper, residents opened the possibility for their realization. They embodied the space of the map for “prospective and prescriptive exercises” to anticipate “what would and should be” (Tomlins 2001:327).

Still, these plans weren’t totally divorced from the present. The knowledge provided by the survey and map would allow residents to imagine ways to care for neighbors in the here and now. “[The survey] will be good for getting to know our neighborhood, get the demographics of our community,” one woman told me. “We have a lot of elderly people in our neighborhood. And some of them cannot get their houses done because they don’t have the money. So how do we bring in groups or organizations to help them? Well, we have to know about them, to start, to help them get back and their lives in order. Because I feel that we as a neighborhood are responsible for the elderly, as well.” Though some residents drew a sharp line between those who had come back and those who hadn’t, others held more flexible timelines for return, and still desired to bring stragglers (at least elderly stragglers) into the fold. These articulations of care extended to properties, as well. Many people already maintained empty lots next door to them by mowing the grass and keeping them clean. One man suggested the neighborhood association formalize these practices by creating an “adopt a lot” program. He offered to go door to door and solicit volunteers. Claiborne residents used the survey to promote new solidarities between people and property alike. Their knowledge intersected with forms of power and exclusion as

well as forms of care. In doing so, it played an important role in actually redefining the community, and the kinds of rights and responsibilities that community members would hold (Fennell 2015; Warner 2005).

The survey allowed residents to remap the community through property conditions. But the process of conducting the survey, coupled with the planning meetings that followed, also allowed residents to interact, affording not only a conceptual, but also an interpersonal remapping of the community. Community was remade, sometimes explicitly, through the planning meeting, as residents shared stories and ideas, met new neighbors, and became friends. The vacant properties that weighed so heavily on residents in their daily lives proved fodder for a lively reimagining of their neighborhood. The chance to remake these ruined spaces offered hope—if only for a while—that together they might build something new. Residents looked at the survey map and acknowledged that many of the red parcels were people that would never come back. Though many individuals had talked about moving on, the planning session had resulted in a broader consensus on this point, and a tentative vision of what that might look like. This realization prompted its own performances of locality. But the plan was only the first step. The list offered a glimpse of a potential future. Now they had to figure out what to do next.

Building alternatives

Sylvia looked over the wish list. “This is a great start,” she said, beaming. Nick looked over the list, too, and as the planning session died down, he brought up the neighborhood’s next steps. He told residents that they would need the city’s help if they wanted to see their plan come to fruition. The map would help inform city officials about the neighborhood’s needs, but they had

to be strategic and deliver the information in manageable chunks. If they sent city council members a list of every overgrown lot in the neighborhood, nobody would pay attention, because that was too much to tackle all at once. Instead, he told them to focus on the worst properties. Sylvia and the others conferred for a few minutes and came up with a list of ten properties they wanted demolished. They emailed their list to city council, the mayor's office, and officials in the city's code enforcement department.

About a month later, their city council member attended a neighborhood meeting. Sylvia showed her their survey results and explained that the association was planning a cleanup day. The council member studied the map and pointed to a number of green parcels—vacant lots—concentrated around a major intersection. “All of these are overgrown, right?” she asked. Residents nodded. “Let's see if we can't help out with that,” she replied. The next week, when the neighborhood held their cleanup event, the council member brought volunteers, provided water and snacks, and donated tools, gloves, and trash bags. She also coordinated with the city's sanitation department to pick up the trash.



Figure 28. The neighborhood cleanup event. Photo by author. 2013.

In the following months, the council member connected the neighborhood association with a church group that agreed to maintain the lots, and also helped the association acquire three city-owned lots to use as a community park. Claiborne residents saw vast improvements in a relatively short time. Sylvia gave most credit to the survey and map. After all, that's what drew the council member's attention. The map allowed them to articulate their own vision of development, against outside developers, but also to reverse the neglect they had experienced from city government. To produce this effect, residents recognized that their knowledge had to walk—that is, it had to move in and out of bureaucratic circuits (Hull 2012). In order for it to do so, their knowledge had to be legible to others. The survey and map did just that.

Their success was partial. While they were able to mow some overgrown lots, build a park, and demolish a few run-down structures, they still didn't have a sandwich shop, library, or community center. And they didn't have any new neighbors. As the excitement brought out by the planning session began to subside, residents began to acknowledge the obstacles standing in

the way of the neighborhood's development. This point came up again and again: the city had limited resources and the neighborhood didn't have much money. It would be hard to attract developers. While they wanted neighbors to come back, they began to acknowledge that they may need to start thinking about alternatives they could build, but also alternatives to buildings, such as parks and green space. But this didn't stop them from pushing. Sylvia frequently commented about producing a sense of ownership of the neighborhood. These comments were not simply rhetorical. Several members of the neighborhood association were actively researching how to acquire vacant lots through community land trusts or other forms of common ownership. By planning an alternative future, residents tried to control the scope and timeline of changes in the neighborhood. As Gary put it, the neighborhood would develop whether they liked it or not. The question for them was *how* the neighborhood would develop, and what role they would have in developing it.¹³¹

Claiborne's approach didn't oppose grassroots and expert practices. Analyses that do presume already settled knowledge hierarchies, one abstract, the other closer to the ground. Walking cartographies were more about meandering, drawing on tools of planning, but also on personal experiences and embodied memories, oscillating between different practices. This made mapping a more dynamic process, allowing them not only to represent the neighborhood, but also to intervene in it. For residents, development was a kind of maintenance, an attempt to carry on certain elements of pre-storm neighborhood, in ways that resonated with civil rights-era calls for self-determination. But they also produced new connections with city hall, which sometimes placed them in competition with other neighborhoods, but also allowed them to achieve certain

¹³¹ A few conflicts arose during the planning session. Some residents worried about an influx of renters without roots in the neighborhood. Others worried about prioritizing overgrown lots over street repairs. Still others thought it would be useful to partner with a nearby university despite losing some autonomy. Finally, residents worried about gentrification in the neighborhood. But even those concerned about gentrification did not reject the need for development in the neighborhood.

goals. Still, progress was slow, and even two years after the planning session, many of the neighborhood's vacant properties remained in the same state they had been when residents conducted the survey. But they were still planning another survey for 2014. They would walk the neighborhood again, and this time they would collect more information. They would count the neighborhood's children so they could argue for a library, and they would do a better job of trying to track down family members of absentee owners. With federal recovery money slowing down, residents knew that they would have to be even more vigilant in their claims on city resources. They had already been abandoned by post-storm recovery. They didn't want to be abandoned a second time.

Conclusion

For several years after the storm, the future that many residents longed for was about the past, about rebuilding the city washed away by the flood. While some politicians are optimistic about the city's course, the future has a much more ambivalent place in the everyday lives of residents. Their hopes are tempered by the ruins that stand as reminders of the storm and of neighbors who never returned. The unrealized promises of post-storm recovery have forced many people to imagine a different future than they did a decade ago.

As some neighborhoods move on from the storm, the city's fate becomes further entwined with other post-industrial cities, many of which deal with thousands of vacant properties in their midst. New Orleans, like Baltimore, Philadelphia, and Detroit, has suffered from decades of population loss and deindustrialization. In New Orleans—as in post-Hurricane Sandy New York—disaster recovery has become a pretext for urban renewal (Gotham and Greenberg 2014).

But many cities also face budget and revenue shortfalls, mounting pension obligations, and crumbling infrastructure. Claiborne's is just one example of the kind of "vernacular statecraft" emerging on the frontiers of urban life (Colloredo-Mansfeld 2009). Surveys and maps have played a vital role in redefining belonging in neighborhoods overlooked by post-storm recovery. Claiborne residents produced surveys and maps to document the current state of the neighborhood in order to change it. They mapped the neighborhood in order to remap the neighborhood. But the process is not over. While many of these activities are oppositional, contesting ongoing forms of development, or highlighting abandonment or neglect, they also seek to forge new links between municipal governments and their citizens. New civic forms, building on long histories of community organizing and civil rights struggle, draw on maps to express their local needs, and carve out spaces self-determination. New Orleans neighborhoods use surveys, maps, and plans to promote post-storm recovery and to move renewal efforts beyond the post-Katrina moment. Mapping, while always about space, also involves the politics of time, whether in terms of post-storm recovery, in the face of decades of economic and population decline, or to outline post-industrial futures.

CONCLUSION: MARKETS AND THE MEANTIME

As the tenth anniversary of Hurricane Katrina approached, reporters from major news organizations flocked to New Orleans. Hundreds of articles and stories appraised the city's progress. Much of it shared the same message: parts of the city had rebounded—"the French Quarter is choked with tourists, construction cranes tower over the skyline, and hipsters bike to cafes in gentrifying neighborhoods"—yet overall "recovery has been uneven" (Stein 2015). Articles frequently began with stark contrasts between neighborhoods reflected through disparate vacancy rates. "Drive through the Marigny and Bywater neighborhoods and you'll be hard-pressed to find an unoccupied home, save for a few straggling properties being fixed up for sale in a super-hot real estate market," one reporter wrote. "But just across the Industrial Canal [in the Lower Ninth Ward], it's a different story in many places. There, you'll find a scattering of houses looking like the teeth of a jack-o'-lantern on broken streets lined with weed-choked lots" (Adelson 2015a).¹³² This pattern was repeated across the city: "Core neighborhoods are booming, having lured both returning New Orleanians and newcomers alike, while some parts of the city still seem barely unchanged since late 2005."

Many scholars have connected the uneven recovery to the market-based strategies employed after the storm, in which "the for-profit market serve[d] as the engine" for redevelopment projects (Adams 2013:5). Code enforcement and other blight-eradication strategies seem to be just another instance of this "market-driven governance," with its emphasis

¹³² These patterns were clearly racialized, as some reporters noted: "Perhaps the most enduring legacy of the storm is the severe contraction of New Orleans' black community, now nearly 97,000 residents smaller than it was before Katrina" (Adelson 2015b).

on property auctions and on personal responsibility.¹³³ Indeed, during my main period of fieldwork in 2012-2013, almost every conversation about blight eradication involved discussion of markets.¹³⁴ Yet policymakers rarely talked about *the* market. Instead, they talked about different *kinds* of markets. They described market spaces (neighborhoods, main streets, and entertainment corridors), catalogued market types (residential, commercial, and mixed-use), and discussed market potentials (slow and fast, strong and weak). They also talked about the need to regulate markets, guard against speculators, and tailor development projects to local conditions. Markets were plural. And they were almost always tied to the visible hand of municipal government.

I end this dissertation by reflecting on the role of markets in ongoing recovery projects, because they seem to differ from the accounts of “disaster capitalism” published after the storm (Adams 2013; Klein 2007). While critics of disaster capitalism saw a particularly narrow vision of free markets imposed as the guiding logic for redevelopment, current approaches less coherent, and more experimental. Markets, for many urban experts, are not abstract logics, but rather empirical objects to be governed. Timothy Mitchell (2002) argues that too many scholars view the concept of economy as a social and historical constant rather than a product of discursive and practical struggle. The same could be said for the concept of markets. Julia Elyachar (2005) notes that markets do not always involve the “abstract meeting point between supply and demand” (124). Market exchanges may rely on embodied actions or ad hoc decisions (Elyachar 2011; Guyer 2004; Zaloom 2003), and are enacted or represented through models,

¹³³ Though it was adopted in response to legal questions surrounding other possible redevelopment strategies (see Chapter 4).

¹³⁴ This wasn't a surprise. For years scholars have described the influx of market models into municipal, state, and federal government through audit and austerity measures as well as through public-private partnerships (Brash 2011; Hackworth 2006; Kipnis 2008; Somers 2008).

graphs, equations, or charts (Callon 1998; Mackenzie 2008; Pryke 2010; Ruccio 2008).¹³⁵ Not all market practices are the same. The differences matter.

This is especially true in New Orleans and other so-called shrinking cities. While market-oriented projects are often used to promote economic growth, today's shrinking cities frequently have different goals, namely managing decline (Ringel 2014). What circulates or travels isn't so much an abstract market logic, but rather a set of techniques for understanding and governing existing real estate markets, many of which are "distressed," and need significant public support or reinvestment. Markets are documented, categorized, and qualified through a shared set of concerns that are then used to justify municipal interventions. While this approach has inspired residents to make new claims on public goods, it also reproduces certain inequalities through differential and unequal forms of urban citizenship.

Market values

Over the past few years, policymakers in New Orleans have turned to a tool called a market value analysis to streamline its code enforcement and redevelopment activities. The tool combines a wide set of social and economic indicators into a spatial representation of the city's real estate markets. It was produced by a Philadelphia-based consulting firm in 2012-2013.¹³⁶

¹³⁵ While it is important to study the circulation of market techniques that lead to the appearance—and at times, the effect—of a global economic system, it is also important to study their loose ends (Appel 2012; Gibson-Graham 1996; Maurer 2013). Various scholars critique the tendency to see capitalism in everything. They show how these representations reinforce capitalism's aura and self-image, overshadowing existing and potential alternatives. And they also point to the materiality and performativity of the economy, the emergence of markets through particular social arrangements and techniques. Markets are not natural, but rather are made. I try to sidestep the "tendency to identify any program with neo-liberal elements as essentially neo-liberal, and to proceed as if this subsumption of the particular under a more general category provides a sufficient account of its nature or explanation of its existence" (Rose, O'Malley, & Valverde 2006:21).

¹³⁶ The firm had already completed similar analyses in more than a dozen cities. Sara Safransky (2014) describes the market value analysis in Detroit.

The firm sent a team down to work with city officials to compile information on property values and transfers, foreclosures, vacancy rates, owner-occupancy rates, population densities, commercial land uses, among other indicators.¹³⁷ The team checked the data through a process called field validation. They drove around the city to see if their data corresponded to what they saw through the car window, usually accompanied by local experts. The team performed a kind of para-ethnography to impart “social mediation to economic analysis” (Holmes 2009:399).

As soon as the team had a workable data set, adjusted through field validation, they ran a statistical technique called a cluster analysis to group each census block into one of eight market clusters, each assigned a different color.¹³⁸ Purples and blues represented strong markets, while oranges and reds represented weak or distressed markets. After completing the cluster analysis, the team conducted another round of field validation, though this time they focused on areas between clusters. Did they notice any difference as they moved from a yellow cluster to a red cluster? Did a purple cluster in one part of the city really look like a purple cluster in another part of the city?

The firm unveiled the market value analysis at a public meeting in early 2013. The map showed the city broken up into dozens of small squares colored according to the analysis. Market clusters didn’t align with traditional neighborhood boundaries, and many people later told me this made it difficult to understand the map. The market value analysis represented city space in a completely alien way.¹³⁹ This was intentional. “We want people to think about markets, not neighborhoods,” the presenter said, “because market strength is really what you can capture and

¹³⁷ The backbone of the analysis was data. But the city’s records were unreliable, and even when the team was able to track down a desired data set, the information was often dated or incomplete.

¹³⁸ A census block is the smallest spatial unit used for collecting U.S. census information. It is smaller than a census tract—in some cases, no larger than a city block. There are 497 census blocks and 72 official neighborhoods in New Orleans.

¹³⁹ New Orleans neighborhoods are a particularly important sites of local history, identity, and political activity. Though their boundaries are fuzzy and contested, neighborhoods are one of the primary units of both expert and everyday knowledge in New Orleans (Campanella, 2008).

transform.” He gave an example: most people assume “the whole Lower Ninth Ward is just in rough shape,” but it actually had four different markets, some of which were “areas of opportunity.” Thinking about markets provided a certain level of “granularity” to their analysis because they start with census blocks, rather than whole neighborhoods, which tend to be much larger.

Thinking about market characteristics rather than neighborhood histories was problematic, given how race and class shaped market indicators. Property values, for instance, reflected longstanding prejudices. In fact, the map bore a striking resemblance to maps of racial segregation in the city: poor, black neighborhoods often overlapped with “distressed” markets in orange and red.¹⁴⁰ Jessica Cattelino (2015), however, argues that valuation techniques not only reflect existing values, but are also “mechanism[s] by which interests and value are *produced*” (np; see also Çalışkan and Callon 2010). While the analysis failed to reckon with race and class, it allowed residents and planners to see neighborhoods in new ways, connected to others not through shared demographics, but through particular market conditions. While it is important to underscore what these techniques overlook, it’s also important to trace their real-world effects, and not only treat them only as failed representations (Hetherington 2011; MacKenzie, Muniesa, and Siu 2008; Maurer 2005). Cluster analysis forged new relationships organized around market data and municipal interventions. City officials would use the map when making decisions about how to distribute public resources and services. They would govern through a particular measure of market values.

¹⁴⁰ The map also resembled mid-twentieth century redlining maps, which were used to discriminate against minority home buyers. In fact, one of the consultants that produced the analysis told me that he was uncomfortable using red because of these associations, but the city decided to use the color anyway.

Market priorities

“Those documents and maps will be at every table when making decisions,” remarked one city official as the presentation came to a close. A resident asked for more details about the kinds of decisions that would be made with the analysis. “Not every neighborhood needs the same type of services, or has the same priority for services,” another official responded. “[The market value analysis] will help us look at what areas are strong and what areas are particularly weak and target activities where they’ll have the greatest impact, to capitalize as best we can on what is already going on in the area.”

These choices were represented in an empty table with market clusters along the top row and sample interventions in the left-hand column.¹⁴¹ The city, the presenter explained, should “set governmental priorities by market cluster”—that is, they should pair particular interventions with market conditions. The market value analysis was meant to be flexible, and not project the kind of one-dimensional approach central to earlier market reforms, such as structural adjustment (Escobar 1995). But even though interventions would differ according to each cluster’s needs and strengths, the basic approach of using market values was meant to travel. The circulation of this technique was not based around a single policy prescription (or set of prescriptions), but on a particular mode of decision-making, which could theoretically be applied anywhere. The market value analysis would allow cities to economize the distribution of public services and infrastructure according to this projection of market potential (Çalışkan and Callon 2009; Mitchell 2014).

¹⁴¹ Not all of these interventions were confined to real estate development. While they were not included in the slideshow, during the presentation the firm’s representative mentioned things like job training and enhanced public safety measures as strategies the city could use to enhance market strength, reflecting a broad vision of what constitutes—or contributes to—strong markets.

City officials were most excited about using this approach when making code enforcement decisions. In strong markets, the city could use auctions, infill, and rehabilitation, while in weak or distressed markets, they could use demolitions and lot maintenance. Properties in strong markets, in other words, would be returned to private hands. Properties in weak markets, however, might be funneled into public maintenance programs, or converted to non-residential use. While some “market clusters” would achieve relative autonomy from blight-fighting interventions, the point was not to cease all municipal interventions, but to target them to a particular area’s needs and strengths, mediated—and in many ways, produced—by the market value analysis.

This approach did not appear out of nowhere. It was developed in response to austerity measures that were increasingly shaping cities—and city governance—around the world (Blythe 2015; Hackworth 2006; Safransky 2014). The working assumption of the market value analysis is “public subsidies are scarce and must be leveraged where they will have the most impact.” For years, the city’s post-storm redevelopment activities were bolstered by federal grants and were shielded from some of the fiscal issues other cities confronted due to the foreclosure crisis. But cutbacks were looming. New Orleans officials readied themselves for future cuts by seeking the most cost-efficient ways to promote development in the present.

Many residents were concerned about the implications of this triage approach. What did it mean that certain areas of the city were valued—and would be governed—differently than others? Different neighborhoods—and the people who lived in them—would have different claims on municipal resources, determined by market strength. It was not only about which areas received attention, but also about the kind of attention they received. It was not only about the absence of government, but also about the strategic deployment of different kinds of governance.

And it was not about government staying out of real estate market, but also how governing decisions were made according to market conditions. The market value analysis produced a distinct model of urban citizenship (Somers 2008). Residents would have differential access to public goods according to their presence in a particular market cluster.

Waiting for the market

It had been a relatively calm—even boring—City Council meeting in November 2013. Jeffrey Hebert, executive director of the New Orleans Redevelopment Authority (NORA), had just finished a presentation on the agency’s activities over the previous year. Councilman James Gray,¹⁴² whose district includes the Lower Ninth Ward, asked Hebert about the agency’s plans for the hundreds of city-owned properties in the neighborhood, as well as those under the agency’s care after having gone through the code enforcement process. “Cut the grass,” Hebert replied. Gray paused, seemingly taken aback by the admission. “We don’t expect that we will ever get rid of all those properties [in the Lower Ninth Ward],” Hebert told him. NORA had spent several years disposing of its more marketable properties. The rest, he explained, would be difficult to sell. “We’re going to start seeing, basically, a slower market for the properties we still have in our inventory,” Hebert warned council members. “That’s the reality that we face. If you look at Baltimore, if you look at Philadelphia, if you look at Pittsburgh, Cleveland, you name it, we’ve been there, we’ve looked at it. They will tell you that at a certain point there are properties that the city will maintain or own in some fashion” (see Vanacore 2013).

¹⁴² Gray, a lawyer, had long been an advocate of development in the Lower Ninth Ward, even coming out in favor of a controversial plan for condominiums. Referring to the condominium project, Gray said, ‘The [Lower Ninth Ward] desperately needs activity and development. For this particular site, we’ve waited for close to 10 years, and this is only person that has stepped up and said they’d develop at that site. The details you can argue over, but for me it’s a bigger picture: if the city of New Orleans is going to recover, if the Lower Ninth is going to recover – we need development. We cannot turn it away’ (Moskowitz, 2015).

Gray pointed out that many of the neighborhood's properties weren't being offered at auction. He contrasted the "quick sales" in other neighborhoods to the agency's "lackadaisical approach" in the Lower Ninth Ward. Hebert explained to council members that auctions worked in strong markets, where desirable properties were quickly bought up and redeveloped, but vacant properties in weak or distressed markets often went unsold. Gray asked what harm it would do to offer more at auction. It's not that properties in his district were inherently unmarketable, he argued; they just weren't given a chance to prove their market potential. "We routinely test our auctions—we test different areas—and we've actually had properties sell in [low-income] areas," Hebert responded, trying to regain his footing. But they were worried about "flooding the market," releasing more properties than there was demand for, and thereby lowering property values nearby. The city also had "limited resources," he said, and "we want to make sure we're tailoring [auctions] to where we see the most interest and the greatest impact" The city didn't have enough people to fill its existing housing stock, and needed to think about ways to shrink.

This exchange underscored the temporality of real estate markets and their effects on urban renewal strategies since Katrina. In addition to "strong markets" and weak markets," spatialized through the market value analysis, experts were also beginning to discuss "fast markets" and "slow markets" each with different redevelopment potentials. Governing markets in time entailed different tools and policies than governing markets in space. Fast markets were those that could function on their own, without much intervention, while slow markets would require public stewardship or even ownership for the foreseeable future, since if they weren't kept at a basic standard of maintenance, they could drag surrounding properties and property values down even further. The city, according to Hebert, was experimenting with strategies for "properties that are

in those slower-to-market communities that we have to be good stewards of,” which would probably involve finding alternative uses (pocket parks, green spaces, urban farms) until the market “returned.” Hebert said, “we can maintain [vacant properties], and if the market comes back, we can build on [them].” This temporality was reflected in many of the city’s lot maintenance strategies. For example, the city had a pilot program to plant trees on vacant lots in order to beautify these spaces and discourage trash dumping. These trees were usually placed along the lot’s boundaries leaving an opening—or “buildable area”—in the center. If the market rebounded, someone could place a house on the lot without having to rip out the trees. Such measures kept the property ready for residential development while still occupying the space in the meantime.



Figure 29. A vacant lot transformed into a rain garden by NORA. Photo by author. 2014.

But there was a fine line between “when” and “if” a market would return, between a future to come and a future still in question. This is what set off the debate at the city council meeting. NORA experts realized that they might never redevelop certain properties as housing, and that

repurposing them might be the first step in permanently reducing the city's residential footprint. This would entail that some properties might remain in public hands indefinitely. Stephen Collier (2011) argues that during the heyday of structural adjustment, neoliberal models "presumed that after an initial period of intervention, the state would withdraw and market forces would predominate" (142). Hebert implied that this might not be the case in certain storm-damaged neighborhoods. His admission that some properties might never be reinhabited confirmed fears about the city's triage approach, and growing concerns that some areas might be willfully abandoned. Property alternatives, in this case, wouldn't be temporary, but would involve alternatives to housing in general, taking private properties out of the market by merging them with existing properties or transforming them into green space. Having a slow market was akin to having no market at all—now and potentially in the future.

Jeffrey Hebert's comparisons to post-industrial cities didn't fit with Councilman Gray's understanding of New Orleans' post-storm renaissance. "We brag about the fact that we're growing faster than any other city in America," said Gray. "All the projections I see say we're going to go past where we were before the hurricane. And that's very different from all those shrinking Northern cities that are never going to be what they once were." Gray may have been misled about the city's population, which was still far below its pre-storm heights, but his comments pointed to the widespread unease about the recovery's uneven results. Many neighborhoods in his district had only a tenth of their pre-storm populations. Gray still seemed wed to the promises of post-storm recovery—fed by boosters who claimed that New Orleans was on an upward trajectory.¹⁴³ But his comments also pointed to the fact that for many neighborhoods, recovery had seemingly stalled.

¹⁴³ This measure is true, but only if you take the post-storm population as the baseline for later changes. New Orleans still has far fewer residents than it did before the storm.

Gray and Hebert sparred for almost half an hour. Another council member eventually stepped in and moved to other business. Before Gray ceded the floor, however, he wanted the last word: “When you talk about flooding the market and lowering the values, who are we protecting with that? There’s a real issue about whose purpose we should be serving with these properties.”

In the meantime

In 2012, the City of New Orleans hosted an event called “Lots of Progress,” in which people could pitch ideas for repurposing vacant lots. The top three ideas would receive an actual property as well as some startup money to get their plans off the ground. The winners were a fruit orchard, an aquaponics farm, and a couple who proposed using goats to maintain overgrown yards.

After seeing that code enforcement was having almost no impact in low-income neighborhoods, city officials began looking for alternatives for properties that wouldn’t sell at auction. They donated some properties to community groups to use as gardens, parks, or farms. They also unloaded some properties through events like “Lots of Progress.” But many of their more ambitious ideas—for example, to sell vacant lots in the Lower Ninth Ward for \$100—ran into legal issues. Some policymakers have recently floated a “mow to own” program in which neighbors might gain title to an empty lot after a few years of taking care of it, but so far little progress has been made in finding large-scale alternative uses for the city’s tens of thousands of vacant properties. The only place the city has found some success is with its lot maintenance program. After a property is deemed blighted, it can be placed on a list to be mowed about once a

month. The city attaches the bill to the property, though many officials acknowledge that they have a slim chance of ever collecting the money from property owners.



Figure 30. A vacant house painted to look like it is occupied. Photo by author. 2013.

All over the city, one can now find a mix of private and public endeavors to address blight. While many see alternative use projects as part of the permanent shrinking of the city's residential footprint, other see them only as a temporary measure, undertaken in the meantime, until the city fully rebounds, and its half-empty streets can be made whole. This is especially true for the many residents who make use of—or at the very least take care of—vacant properties next door. These properties, which were privately owned but effectively abandoned, have become de facto commons, reclaimed from time to time by neighbors who put them to use. But these commons are also a reminder of the unrealized future that many hoped for—a future that now seems far off, deferred. Residents are waiting for the city to invest in their neighborhoods, waiting for someone to build a grocery store, waiting for market conditions to improve, waiting for run-down homes to be rebuilt and reoccupied. In the meantime, they try to stem further

decline. They mow empty lots, build gardens and parks, report nuisance properties to code enforcement, and keep planning, hoping that something might come of their efforts. Their hopes are mixed with anxieties, set off by the ongoing ruination around them. Nothing better captures this shaky optimism than this boarded-up house I came across one day in Central City, painted to look like a home. It was an art project completed by local children who aren't sure what the future holds, but have still found a way to make a home in the present.

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