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Suburban swamp: the rise and fall of planned new-town communities in New Orleans East

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This paper examines the emergence, development and abandonment of 'new town' communities in eastern New Orleans in the half century after 1957. Containing about two-thirds of the land area in the New Orleans city limits, much of it wrested from swamps using emerging drainage technologies, eastern New Orleans promised municipal leaders, planners and citizens an alternative to crowded city and sprawling suburb. This paper also considers how planners and many local citizens viewed planned communities in the eastern stretches of the city as an antidote to population exodus from New Orleans. It explores the influences, design characteristics, social planning aspirations and environmental challenges that informed new-town planning in the 1960s and 1970s. Despite the collapse of the federal Title VII programme in the mid-1970s, New Orleans leaders and developers continued to seek ways to develop this land, ultimately fashioning a suburban landscape that attracted a socially diverse population seeking upward mobility. With the end of the city's oil boom in the mid-1980s, New Orleans East began to suffer public perceptions that it was becoming blighted. Following Hurricane Katrina twenty years later, the tattered suburban landscape prompted not just despair but determination to rekindle the spirit of a planned, idealistic community.

Introduction

Following Hurricane Katrina, the eastern stretches of New Orleans lay submerged under as much as ten feet of floodwater. Bounded by Lake Pontchartrain and Lake Borgne to the north and east and by the Gulf Intracoastal Waterway and Industrial Canal to the south and west, eastern New Orleans had almost 100 000 residents prior to the storm. Katrina's muddy waters inundated one of the last sections of New Orleans reclaimed from swamp for development in the twentieth century. The storm virtually destroyed one of the only growing areas in a slowly declining city, an area whose development once aimed to offset the loss of population to the suburbs. Indeed, the rise of eastern New Orleans reflected hopes that modern drainage projects could open up a new frontier within the city limits that would enable the Crescent City to avoid the fate of many other American cities in the face of suburbanization. For a time, planners dreamed of a socially diverse population living in a well-planned, attractive community of carefully situated houses, businesses, industries and institutions. Eastern New Orleans

emerged in the second half of the twentieth century and promised to create a ‘new town’ that might establish a new, more livable city.

As a result of flagging federal commitment, market pressures, economic decline and environmental challenges, however, much of the envisioned alternative to the pell-mell sprawl of suburban Jefferson Parish to the west never materialized. Indeed, even before the devastation of 2005, eastern New Orleans consisted of a decaying suburban landscape and a large swamp. A swath of dense, verdant tangles – interrupted only by vegetation-choked drainage canals and interstate highway interchanges to roads that were never built – revealed a failure to realize big plans. In the wake of Katrina, considerable attention has focused on the lower Ninth Ward, with its large displaced population of black homeowners, but eastern New Orleans (which comprises much of the rest of the Ninth Ward) has received far less attention, perhaps because it cut against the grain in a city steeped in history. Eastern New Orleans, despite its unfulfilled promise as a model for the future, provided a path to a better life for many of the city’s residents, especially African Americans, and a bedroom community for the ‘workshops’ of the New Orleans hospitality industry. This article examines the rise and fall of planned communities in eastern New Orleans in the last half century. It argues that ‘New Orleans East’, as New Orleanians have come to refer to the entire eastern two-thirds of their city, grew out of a marriage of developers holding vast stretches of land and planners hoping to realize a well-designed, suburb-like community that mirrored the social diversity of the city in a carefully sculpted natural setting. While economic and environmental challenges ultimately clouded this vision, New Orleans East served as a symbol of the city’s future, just as the French Quarter symbolized its past [1].

The idea of a planned community in New Orleans sprang from a variety of concerns, some peculiar to the Crescent City and others connected to national patterns of urban change. Although one observer claimed that ‘Orleanians will not be skyscrapered, monorailed or rocketed into the twenty-first century while there’s still some good living left in the twentieth’, at mid-century New Orleans often looked with as much envy as revulsion toward Houston, its sprawling rival to the west [2]. For years New Orleanians had struggled to balance nostalgia for their old city with their belief that skyscrapers and leafy suburbs connoted progress. Like many older American cities in the years after World War II, New Orleans suffered an exodus of its middle-class white population to surrounding suburbs, which in turn hastened the decay of large sections of the city. In the twentieth century, thanks to improvements in drainage technology, New Orleans’s white middle class population shifted northward and westward onto newly developed land reclaimed from swamps [3]. Although many of the newer neighbourhoods – including Lakeview, Lake Terrace, Lake Oaks and Lake Vista – lay inside the corporate limits of New Orleans, they filled with homes by the 1950s, forcing most metropolitan growth into neighbouring Jefferson Parish, where land remained cheap and plentiful through the 1960s. Meanwhile, in eastern New Orleans, Chef Menteur Highway (US Highway 90) languished with ‘weeds, a few tourist courts, several ungodly junk yards, and some used car lots’, according to one New Orleanian who believed the city should expand eastward into its own frontier rather than into that of another parish [4].

In contrast with many other cities ringed by suburbs they could not hope to annex, New Orleans stood island-like amid bayous, swamps, marshes, lakes and tidal bays. As the city and its suburbs consumed virtually all dry land, some leaders pointed to the vast, boggy expanse that unfolded to the east of the Industrial Canal, a shipping channel dug in the

1920s to connect the Mississippi River with Lake Pontchartrain. As late as the 1960s only two antiquated drawbridges connected this area to the rest of the city. Much like the more famous lower Ninth Ward to its south, whose residents had complained for years about the paucity of municipal services on their side of the canal, development in eastern New Orleans remained stunted in the post-war years as a result of its isolation [5]. Most of the area's population clustered in older houses near the two bridges or in fishing camps along the shores of Lake Pontchartrain. Tellingly, the city's one black public beach, Lincoln Beach, was located in this remote area, spatially segregated from white lakefront resorts to the west. If only the eastern portion of the city could be drained and developed, perhaps New Orleans might avert the stagnation faced by many cities whose incorporated suburbs blocked their ability to capture growth.

Building Harland Bartholomew's New Orleans East

New Orleans East was born, on paper at least, in 1957. Remarkably, the 32 000-acre tract had remained largely intact since the King of France had granted it to Sieur de St Maxent in 1763. Over the course of two centuries the land had produced timber, cypress logs, sugar and furs, though oil prospecting had yielded only frustration. As late as the 1950s no one had attempted to drain the vast majority of the estate. Envisioning the development of his property, Col. R. E. E. de Montluzin, who had owned the tract since 1923, attempted to market it himself in the 1950s, encouraging 'the man with vision' to consider purchasing twenty-five-acre parcels as an investment. In language reminiscent of railroad companies' ads for arid western land a century earlier, Montluzin proclaimed of the swampy waste, 'Very little beyond some pruning and thinning is needed to transform this virgin land into park[s] more genuinely beautiful and picturesque than any in all New Orleans'. He averred that such tracts would also prove ideal 'for the growth of oranges, tomatoes, celery, cucumbers and other truck crops; for chicken farms and dairies. Picture to yourself a 25-acre orange grove showering its golden wealth upon a happy owner. A dream? Far from it!'. What's more, he pointed out, 'Faubourg de Montluzin' lay only twenty minutes from Canal Street, the city's leading business thoroughfare. Of course, without the resources to drain and protect the land from flooding, Faubourg de Montluzin hardly seemed a bargain [6].

Unable to interest individual investors, in 1957 the entrepreneur retained the services of renowned St Louis urban planning firm Harland Bartholomew and Associates, which prepared a master plan for a new town. Two years later, Montluzin sold his land to Dallas oil tycoons Clint W. Murchison and Toddie Lee Wynne Sr, who possessed the immense capital necessary to undertake development. The oilmen, who also owned the Six Flags Over Texas amusement park, promptly formed New Orleans East, Inc., and asked Harland Bartholomew to update his plan. Buoyed by the prospect of Texas oil interests taming the wilderness to the east of town, New Orleans Chamber of Commerce officials projected that by 1990 New Orleans would have 985 000 residents within its corporate limits, a massive increase from the 1950 census figure of 570 000. A brief New Orleans East-commissioned history of the parcel recounted how in the previous six decades, thanks to modern swamp-draining technology, 'New Orleans literally rose like Venus from the sea'. The book then trumpeted the syndicate's ambitions:

Now it is the turn of New Orleans EAST to assume its role in the area's march of progress. If ever the future can be studied from the past, New Orleans, augmented by its last remaining section, is surely destined for a tomorrow that neither the facile pen of the journalist nor the measured phrases of a lawyer can express. Posterity will certainly look upon it one day and say, 'What hath God wrought'.

The book's purple prose conveniently obscured a more troubling history – the fact that the Crescent City, as geographer Craig Colten has demonstrated, was an 'unnatural metropolis' that never fully overcame problems inherent in its soggy site [7].

The original plan for New Orleans East made generous use of the entire 32 000 acres (the largest single-owned parcel inside the city limits of a major US city), leaving little land in a natural state (Fig. 1). The majority of the land between Lake Pontchartrain and the Intracoastal Waterway comprised a planned city criss-crossed by curvilinear streets and broad boulevards that ran perpendicular to the proposed route of Interstate Highway 10 as it sliced through the swamp on its way to Pointe-aux-Herbes, the eastern tip of Orleans Parish. High-density commercial and multifamily apartment buildings clustered along the interstate in a new town centre. Most of the remainder of the plan called for moderate- to low-density housing interspersed with community gathering places, such as schools, parks, churches and shopping centres. Planners attempted to avoid typical suburban sprawl by keeping commercial zones small and scattered, except along I-10. To the east of the protective levee the plan provided for the conversion of marshlands into a 'Florida type development' with all houses facing waterways navigable by pleasure craft and reached by hundreds of fingerlike culs-de-sac. Finally, at Pointe-aux-Herbes the plan envisioned a lakeside resort astride the interstate highway. New Orleans East, Inc., also hired Sasaki, Walker and Associates of Watertown, Massachusetts, to study ways of transforming the plan's extensive network of drainage canals and lagoons into aesthetically pleasing waterways in the tradition of Frederic Law Olmsted's park designs. Chef Menteur Highway divided residential, recreational and commercial uses to the north from industrial ones to the south. The plan included a strip of light industrial plants between the highway and the Louisville and Nashville Railroad tracks, reserving a larger heavy industrial sector between the railroad and the Intracoastal Waterway, adjacent to the one thousand-acre site that once housed the Higgins and Chrysler defense plants [8].

New Orleans East promoters attempted to attract a variety of income groups by offering not only detached houses but also multifamily dwellings, such as garden apartments. However, like conventional suburbs, New Orleans East was to be primarily a preserve of the single-family house surrounded by a lawn and served by a private driveway. Further, it made no provision for racial balance. In 1959 most white New Orleanians probably had little desire to extend the city's checkerboard racial housing pattern into the suburbs. Indeed, by that time a large Federal Housing Administration-supported New Orleans subdivision called Pontchartrain Park had been set aside for middle-class African Americans in a segregationist attempt to contain black migration to the city's periphery. As historian Arnold Hirsch has argued, Pontchartrain Park represented the 'apotheosis' of Jim Crow in New Orleans, accomplishing for residential racial segregation what no development apart from public housing projects had done. With Pontchartrain Park to its west, New Orleans East could well have become an unapologetically lily-white community had it been realized in the reactionary 1950s instead of the more activist 1960s and 1970s. New Orleans East, for all

Figure 1. Harland Bartholomew and Associates prepared a plan for New Orleans East in 1959 that made full use of the entire site, much of which remained underwater. Multifamily housing and retail functions clustered along I-10, surrounded by interspersed single-family homes and parklands. An industrial zone paralleled the Intracoastal Waterway to the south, while 'Florida-type' homes faced interconnected waterways along Lake Borgne to the east. (Courtesy *Harland Bartholomew and Associates Collection*, University Archives, Department of Special Collections, Washington University Libraries.)

its promise of thoughtful planning, simply provided a means of capturing white flight from the older sections of the city that had for the previous fifteen years proceeded almost entirely to the west into neighbouring Jefferson Parish [9].

Local observers in the 1960s viewed eastern New Orleans not just as a chance to offer a new residential lifestyle but also as the city's best hope of enticing industrial investment. The project came at a time when New Orleans was losing manufacturing firms. Between 1958 and 1961, the New Orleans metropolitan area lost about 8600 manufacturing jobs, accelerating a downward trend that began in the early 1950s [10]. During the first half of the 1960s it appeared that another infusion of federal money like that of the World War II years might drive industrialization in New Orleans. In 1961, with the space race accelerating and the Cold War heating up, the National Aeronautics and Space Administration (NASA) opened a mammoth facility in eastern New Orleans to produce Saturn V rocket boosters for the Apollo moon project. Located in the same plant that had housed Higgins and Chrysler, the NASA Michoud Assembly Facility mushroomed to more than 11 000 workers between 1962 and 1964. Boeing, which won the NASA contract to build the rockets, transferred more than five thousand employees from Seattle to New Orleans. The spectacular growth in employment surrounding the lunar project inspired ebullient city boosters to dub New Orleans 'The Heart of the Space Crescent' and catalysed a building boom in eastern New Orleans and across Lake Pontchartrain in Slidell, Louisiana [11].

New Orleans East took advantage of the NASA influx as it completed its first two neighbourhoods, Village de l'Est and Venetian Isles. Serving as a prototype for the larger New Orleans East development, Village de l'Est featured a mixture of single- and double-family houses [12]. It became an instant community with strong civic involvement. United by their stake in the lunar landing programme, their newcomer status and their physical isolation from the rest of the city, the families of Village de l'Est resembled their counterparts in earlier wartime housing developments that had sprouted on the fringes of war manufacturers. They congregated in the community centre and formed a garden club and neighbourhood improvement association.

The first of the new town's extensive plans for 'Florida-type' waterfront developments, Venetian Isles, did not foster the same sense of community. Lacking the interlocking grid of curvilinear streets and sidewalks that encouraged pedestrian activity and sociability in Village de l'Est, Venetian Isles consisted of seven hundred purely single-family estate homes that turned their back on culs-de-sac devoid of sidewalks to face waterways, encouraging the individual or family pursuit of boating rather than visiting and interacting with neighbours (Fig. 2). One New Orleans East executive, attempting to justify his request that the city council waive its requirement for sidewalks, argued that for the first time New Orleans had an opportunity to adopt successful waterfront development principles utilized in places like Miami and Fort Lauderdale, Florida. He believed such development was ideally suited to the 'sea-going craft' that space-industry 'people' might bring to New Orleans. 'What the plan achieves', he added, 'is the merger of the historic ... charm of Venice, with one aspect of the South – the old tidewater plantations'. He suggested that, with winding drives dead-ending at plantations that faced rivers and 'no "traffic flow" past the property', sidewalks served no function. His allusion to southern plantations reveals the limited sense in which New Orleans East could truly function as a new town [13].

Figure 2. Pictured in this 1960s company brochure, Venetian Isles was the only section of New Orleans East's planned 'Florida-type' waterfront development to be completed. Suggestive of the limits of its developers' commitment to creating a fully inclusive new town, Venetian Isles promised to give New Orleans a section of exclusive waterfront residential properties similar to those found in suburban south Florida. (Courtesy Louisiana Division/City Archives, New Orleans Public Library.)

Title VII in New Orleans: Ponchartrain New Town in Town

In 1969 New Orleans East suffered a major setback when Murchison died and Wynne shelved additional development after city officials blocked his effort to build a downtown hotel. Unable to get their larger planned city off the drawing board, three years later the officers of New Orleans East, Inc., saw a golden opportunity when the city of New Orleans came forward with plans for a federally backed new-town project called Pontchartrain. New-town projects had a long history even in the Great Society years. The American foray into new-town developments in suburbia had proceeded in fits and starts for four decades. It drew upon British urban planner Ebenezer Howard's idea in the late nineteenth century for 'garden cities', planned communities of mixed housing, commercial and industrial land uses laced with greens ringed by pastoral open spaces. Howard's model inspired the development of Letchworth and Welwyn in England and numerous other developments in Europe but remarkably few in the USA. The first federal involvement in the use of new towns to achieve social ends appeared under Franklin D. Roosevelt's New Deal. Resettlement Administration head Rexford Tugwell's fascination with new towns led President Roosevelt to approve what became known as greenbelt towns to avoid the taint of socialism in the eyes of more conservative congressional leaders. Although the government oversaw the building of three such towns outside Washington, D.C., Cincinnati and Milwaukee, by the early post-war years attention turned to encouraging highway construction and affordable mortgages for single-family homes, both of which encouraged explosive, usually uncontrolled suburban expansion on the outskirts of the nation's cities [14].

Although the preponderance of public and private monies found their way into conventional suburban development after World War II, the new-town impulse resurfaced in the 1960s as a result of critiques of the ubiquitous suburban landscape of culs-de-sac and tract houses. Influenced by the successes associated with planned communities in Great Britain, Scandinavia, eastern Europe and even the Soviet Union, some real estate developers, corporations and federal officials hoped that a public-private partnership would help create, within the bounds of a free-enterprise ethos, an alternative to the rampant suburban sprawl and central city decay that plagued so many American metropolitan areas. Planner, developer and urban visionary James Rouse built the highly influential planned cities of Columbia, Maryland and Reston, Virginia, once more calling federal attention to the possibility that careful planning could deliver social diversity, community services and a sense of place in suburbia. If the notion of master planning drove some new-town projects in the USA, the presence of large, undeveloped tracts of surplus land owned by corporations was probably more important to most. In contrast to Columbia and Reston, many new towns sprang from corporate investment by Goodyear, Westinghouse, Aetna Life, Gulf Oil and even Stanley Marcus of Dallas-based Neiman-Marcus department stores. The new towns of eastern New Orleans were no exception [15].

With the successes of Columbia and Reston fresh in their minds, new-town proponents in the federal government created their own new-town initiative in the hope of reversing the prevailing suburban patterns of racial, social and cultural separation that had hastened the decay of inner cities. In 1970 the US Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) enacted the Urban Growth and New Community Development Act, better known as Title VII, which subsidized the development of 'new town-in-town' projects conceived by

private developers and sponsored by local governments [16]. Some of these new-town projects, notably Cedar-Riverside in Minneapolis, Coldspring New Town in Baltimore, and Roosevelt Island in New York, aimed to reshape urban neighbourhoods with high-density, high-concept Modernist architecture that would appeal to a broad range of people. In contrast, other new-town plans focused on Garden City alternatives to conventional suburban development.

Despite its embrace of tradition, the Crescent City was hardly immune to the rosy enthusiasm that infused new-town plans across the USA. With the recent completion of I-10, which opened outlying areas to accelerated suburban development, municipal leaders understood the imperative of capturing growth. The need to beat the suburbs at their own game, along with the presence of a large property held by an influential developer, steered new community planning in New Orleans away from in-town, architecture-driven design concepts and toward the Garden City-influenced satellite town model. In 1972 the city proposed Pontchartrain New Town in Town, choosing an 8400-acre portion of the syndicate's tract. The new town, which was to house 86 885 people within thirty years, would be centred almost twenty miles east of downtown New Orleans. The federal government agreed to guarantee a \$US50 million loan for the project. Unlike many projects under the federal new-town programme, then, Pontchartrain was to an extent a vehicle for realizing a much older private-sector goal. In accordance with 1972 federal legislation, the city of New Orleans created a New Community Development Corporation (NCDC) in February 1973, composed of five *ex-officio* members and seven civilian representatives to serve as a liaison between HUD and New Orleans East, Inc. The latter formed a separate entity, Pontchartrain Land Company, to administer the HUD programme locally. Shortly thereafter, the NCDC reached an agreement to purchase the syndicate's land for \$US15.6 million and bring the project fully under municipal control [17].

Pontchartrain, like other 'new town-in-town' projects, had lofty goals. According to one of its principals, it would serve as an 'urban laboratory' that would 'provide solutions to problems not just for New Orleans residents but for city dwellers everywhere'. Pontchartrain would 'be designed to capture all of the charm, love and culture of the people and city' while offering new opportunities for better housing, jobs and services. More to the point, it would combine the social diversity of the city with 'the suburban idea of better living conditions and openness for everyone'. In so doing, Pontchartrain would generate new hope in the future of American cities [18].

Pontchartrain and other new towns faced considerable social challenges that reflected prevailing attitudes toward housing. Historian Nicholas Dagen Bloom has argued that Title VII planners and developers, mistaking elite desires for popular ones, generally failed to understand that white middle-class Americans preferred conventional suburbs. The lukewarm public response to Title VII, which Bloom has called the 'Icarus of government programs', prompted a re-evaluation of the proper development strategy for Pontchartrain by 1974. With no construction yet underway, a major San Francisco planning firm prepared a supplemental report on the new town's social plan. It highlighted the pitfalls of marketing a new town, noting that if Pontchartrain were promoted as such, 'residential dissatisfaction will be sharp ...'. Lamenting that the objectives of new-town development – diversity of housing, mixed-income groups and a pre-planned community – would be sacrificed if the company marketed Pontchartrain as simply a large-scale subdivision, the firm suggested a

way to resolve the dilemma. It observed that it was critical to attract middle- to upper-income residents and argued that ‘the presence of a large percentage of low and moderate income housing is a significant impediment to the capture of this market – especially during the early, image creating phase of a project’s development’. It recommended building less low-end housing in the early phases and making such dwellings ‘as “socially acceptable as possible” (i.e., housing for the elderly, moderate as opposed to low income, scattered site housing as opposed to “projects”)’. The report made no mention of race, yet clearly it understood that the introduction of large numbers of poor African Americans could ruin the new town’s ability to attract affluent whites [19].

Environmental considerations also shaped new towns. Following the tradition of planned communities, the ‘new town-in-town’ programme committed itself from the start to finding ways of integrating development as seamlessly as possible into the natural environment. In practice, this commitment varied widely from project to project. The Woodlands, a Title VII development in the Piney Woods section north of Houston, was designed by Scottish-born landscape architect Ian McHarg of the noted design firm Wallace McHarg Roberts and Todd. It became a model of environmentally friendly design, tucking its houses and apartments into the forests and removing as few trees as possible. Building many structures of unfinished wood, the town’s developers used mirrored glass on others to reflect the verdant forests [20]. If The Woodlands’ developers made innovative use of their natural environment, nature proved as much an obstacle as an attraction for Ponchartrain’s planners. To be sure, Pontchartrain summoned the same firm as the successful Houston new town to the west. The plan for Pontchartrain envisioned a marriage of city and country – while artists’ renderings depicted sculptural Modernist buildings in the central village, a system of canals and lagoons and a naturalistic borderland would comprise 55% of the entire site (Fig. 3). Soon after planning commenced, however, the tract’s paucity of hurricane protection measures placed the application for HUD funding in jeopardy [21]. Although the local NCDC promised to erect a levee along I-10, in September 1974 HUD insisted that the local agency purchase only 4500 acres at first, leaving the remainder until the initial land was sufficiently protected from floods [22].

Before it was able to surmount environmental impediments, however, the NCDC learned in January 1975 that HUD was issuing a six-month moratorium on approving new Title VII projects, one that ultimately led to a withdrawal of all government support. The combined effects of the 1974 recession, federal cutbacks to Title VII under the Gerald Ford administration, and a growing belief that the programme was ineffective and mismanaged pointed to the dissolution of HUD’s new-town programme, which came later that year [23]. While The Woodlands developed a strong sense of community that enabled it to survive and even flourish after the federal axe fell, most government-funded new towns were left unfinished. In contrast, New Orleans East, Inc., flush with Texas oil money, remained committed to creating a new town even without federal support.

Scarcely missing a beat, in June 1975 New Orleans East, Inc., announced revamped plans for Orlandia. This new town of 155 000 residents promised many of the features of Pontchartrain but turned over individual subdivisions to ‘subdevelopers’. Dubbed ‘The Newest New Orleans’, Orlandia reportedly had a population of 11 000 by 1977, a figure that reflected the development of Village de l’Est and Venetian Isles. Orlandia’s promoters, less bullish following the demise of Title VII, began selling at public auction parcels for

Figure 3. Pontchartrain New Town in Town renderings such as this one depicted Modernist buildings, open-air plazas, and public art installations in a park-like setting. One of dozens of planned Title VII new towns in the early 1970s, Pontchartrain mimicked the design concepts associated with Reston, Virginia, Columbia, Maryland and other leading new towns. (Courtesy Louisiana Division/ City Archives, New Orleans Public Library.)

industrial use adjacent to the Michoud plant and undeveloped residential land in Village de l'Est and Venetian Isles, but it undertook no infrastructure improvements across the vast, swampy expanse between Chef Menteur Highway and I-10 [24].

Lake Forest: model community or conventional suburb?

Meanwhile, another planned community began to emerge in eastern New Orleans in the 1960s and 1970s. In 1964 the LaKratt Corporation of New York purchased about five thousand acres of land from Mrs Joseph W. Brown, the widow of a wealthy oil magnate and Las Vegas casino operator. Long seen as a possible focus for future urban growth, the so-called Brown Tract remained a truck farming area that supplied fresh produce to some of New Orleans's leading restaurants, including Kolb's. As early as 1913, local businessmen Frank Hayne, Robert H. Downman, Paul Jahncke and M. L. Morrison had envisioned selling ten-acre plots to gentleman farmers for orange groves. Forming the New Orleans Lake Shore Land Company, these men advertised 'New Orleans, once a city without suburbs, has

at last a location for the man who loves country life'. Unfortunately, a 1915 hurricane and subsequent freezes in the following two winters killed both the citrus trees and the company's ambitions. Following World War I, Samuel Zemurray, president of Cuyamel Fruit Company and then United Fruit Company, bought the tract. When real estate developer Harry Latter learned in 1942 that Higgins Industries was constructing a shipbuilding yard for the war effort, he asked Zemurray to sell him two thousand acres to build a shipyard workers' town to be financed by the federal Defense Housing Administration. Latter hoped to build five thousand homes on 100- by 125-foot lots in a picturesque, planned community near the yard, allowing room for 'householders to have a vegetable garden and chickens, and giving them ... the desire to continue living in New Orleans after the war'. Zemurray, however, held onto his land until 1954, when he sold it to Joe Brown [25].

When the New York firm acquired the property, it set out to create a planned community called Lake Forest. According to an advertisement by New Orleans Public Service Inc., which urged New Orleanians to 'Join the PARADE to BETTER LIVING in a new *Planned* city', Lake Forest would be a 'city within a city' and offer public transit service and new schools, hospital, library and parks (Fig. 4). While New Orleans East would face tremendous obstacles to development, Lake Forest grew rapidly in the last third of the twentieth century, accounting for most of the eastern New Orleans population. Unlike New Orleans East, which for a time included social planning as one of its goals, developers moved toward characterizing Lake Forest as an idyllic suburban landscape of spacious homesites, golf courses, tennis courts, marinas and picturesque lakes (Fig. 5). Much like in conventional suburbs, the planned development centered on the Plaza in Lake Forest, a one million square-foot regional mall with an ice skating rink built in 1974. Apparently Lake Forest's allure was a compelling alternative to suburban flight, although it had the same damaging effect of increasing vacancies in the inner city [26].

By the 1970s, Lake Forest enjoyed a reputation as a place that offered 'the American Dream' in a city that had long struggled to reconcile its singular cultural identity with the illusive image of the Sunbelt South. Both blacks and whites felt welcome there. One resident, comparing old New Orleans to various sections of Lake Forest, believed that while 'people on Magazine [Street] do not ... imagine moving to State Street', residents of 'Norwood can easily imagine moving to Barrington or even, someday, to Lake Forest Estates'. Lake Forest, then, promised an egalitarian community of fellow seekers of the suburban ideal. Nevertheless, both whites and blacks who moved to Lake Forest sometimes displayed fears shaped by race and class. One black resident who had moved from a poorer Seventh Ward neighbourhood to the Barrington subdivision pointed out that his choice of a suburban lifestyle in Lake Forest did not make him 'part of the so-called exodus from the city' while conceding that 'where we lived before the neighborhood's getting worse and worse'. Another white resident in the Norwood subdivision lamented the presence of older neighbourhoods with sno-ball stands and Virgin Mary statues in front yards, concluding that it was 'a shame' that developers had not 'taken the entire area and just leveled it'. A third Lake Forest homeowner recalled how his friends in the Kenilworth North subdivision

went in and built, and then they started to have just one or two [African Americans] here and there come in, and then all of a sudden they had them on both sides and all across the street, and they ended up selling and they ended up selling black, too.

Join the PARADE to BETTER LIVING
in a new *Planned* city... *Modern Eastern New Orleans*

COMBINING Suburban LIVING
with *City* CONVENIENCE

Smart homeowners are discovering the many attractions and conveniences of living in New Orleans. For example, the population of the developing eastern section of our City has more than doubled between 1960-1968. Why?

Well, living conditions in Eastern New Orleans make it such a nice place to call home. Specifically planned with the homeowner in mind, this "city within a city" features complete zoning protection of property values. The overall attractiveness of Eastern New Orleans is further increased by wide streets, sub-surface drainage, and underground electric distribution lines. Rapid access to the heart of the City is another advantage... Interstate Highway (5-10) puts the edge of the central business district mere minutes from most any subdivision in Eastern New Orleans. Transit also links Eastern New Orleans with all other parts of the City. And then there are convenient service facilities... new schools, a new 160-bed hospital, and large modern shopping centers. Also recently completed are branches of the Public Library, police and fire departments as well as modern recreational facilities and parks.

Yes, New Orleans has much to offer. You'll want to see some of the distinctively-styled homes in the rapidly-developing subdivisions that add the final touches of beauty and modernity to these practical convenience features. Come see for yourself and you'll see why it's not hard to tell why Eastern New Orleans is the "in" place to live.

A Tax-Paying, Investor-Owned Utility Company Serving
New Orleans with Low-Cost Electricity, Gas and Transit

FORWARD: NEW ORLEANS 15

Figure 4. Referencing a local penchant for parading, this 1970 advertisement by New Orleans Public Service Inc. (NOPSI), the city's electric, gas and transit utility, urged New Orleanians to consider relocating to 'Modern Eastern New Orleans'. NOPSI naturally viewed eastern New Orleans as a new frontier for expanding its services. (Courtesy *New Orleans Magazine*.)

Figure 5. Arrayed around a forty-acre lake, Lake Forest Estates was the most exclusive of the neighbourhoods in the Lake Forest development. In this 1973 advertisement, Lake Forest promised suburb-like community where leisure and recreation were close at hand – a decided departure from the social planning focus envisioned for the federal new town in New Orleans East. (Courtesy *New Orleans Magazine*.)

Interviewed residents also observed that the construction of new, high-density apartment complexes along I-10 might one day become the seeds of future slums, suggesting the degree to which an anti-urban mentality was not confined to suburbs beyond the city limits. Clearly eastern New Orleans, for all its promise of being a place where people mingled freely, harboured some of the same prejudice found in the older city itself [27].

The immigrant transformation of Village de l'Est

Just as Lake Forest became a racially mixed area, the small completed south-western corner of New Orleans East attracted diversity by the 1970s. As NASA employment at Michoud dried up in the aftermath of the lunar landing programme in the early 1970s, Village de l'Est emptied out, leaving many vacant houses with unkempt yards. Soil subsidence resulting from hasty construction on newly drained swamplands buckled sidewalks, cracked streets and severed foundations in the neighbourhood, depreciating property values. Ironically, where earlier planners had debated whether to encourage Roman Catholic institutions and social services to assist in the new-town project, Associated Catholic Charities (ACC) came to the rescue of the decaying subdivision by relocating about one thousand Vietnamese refugees to its Versailles Arms garden apartments and, ultimately, in detached houses as well. In just a few years after 1975, Village de l'Est became known for its Vietnamese enclave. Originally intended as park-lined lagoons, the neighbourhood's unimproved drainage canals became improvised irrigation ditches for traditional Vietnamese gardens in which mostly older women in sampan hats tended 'neat rows and tidy columns of ... turnips, Vietnamese coriander, taro, ginger, Chinese celery, scallions, watercress, mushrooms, lemon grass and dill', much of it offered in a weekly open-air market held in the Versailles Arms' central courtyard. Numerous Vietnamese businesses and services transformed the stretch of Chef Menteur Highway that frames one end of the neighbourhood, while Mary Queen of Vietnam Church offered a sense of community, albeit to a different demographic than planners of 'The Newest New Orleans' could have imagined [28].

Nearby Lake Forest residents in the 1970s, who sometimes expressed ambivalence about the future of their neighbourhood, demonstrated persisting racial problems that could not be left behind in the embrace of 'new towns'. Citing a long and continuing history of white oppression of African Americans, the mostly black Urban League of Greater New Orleans deplored the actions of the mostly white ACC, which it claimed was attempting to help Vietnamese immigrants get ahead of blacks. In a city in which close to 55% of African Americans lived in poverty, and in which World War II-era industries had bussed in thousands of rural whites to avoid hiring blacks, such a reaction to the massive wave of newcomers was hardly surprising [29].

As tensions eased, Village de l'Est, the transformed prototype for thirty-two other New Orleans East neighbourhoods that never left the drawing board, developed – with no central planning – the very sense of place that new-town planners had envisioned for Pontchartrain. In addition to their farmers' market, the eastern New Orleans Vietnamese community, which counted 5978 people by 2000, preserved and adapted traditional customs that provided a basis for civic involvement that many planned towns never delivered. Like the space industry workers who preceded them, the Vietnamese residents created a community

from shared traits, in this case language, culture and the memory of war and emigration. Mary Queen of Vietnam sponsored annual Tet celebrations each January, and the Village de l'Est Elementary School, with its nearly even mix of blacks and Vietnamese, observed the Vietnamese New Year with songs, dances and skits that provided a truly multicultural experience [30].

Industrialization efforts, the oil bust and white flight

Eastern New Orleans also continued to inspire visions of new industrialization in a city that had never fully realized the promise of the New South. A 1970 plan called Centroport USA, sponsored by the New Orleans Port Authority, had sought to shift New Orleans's port facilities from antiquated wharves along the famed crescent of the Mississippi River to the undeveloped land along the Intracoastal Waterway and the Mississippi River–Gulf Outlet, another channel completed in the 1950s to provide a shorter shipping route to the Gulf of Mexico. The port, however, never found the necessary funding for such a grand vision and thus only constructed a small portion of the new facilities. Nevertheless, the failure to build a new port did not diminish officials' hopes of capitalizing on the presence of so much developable land along navigable waterways. In 1978 Mayor Ernest N. 'Dutch' Morial took office, inheriting a fiscally distressed municipal administration in a declining city despite the superficial luster of a rapidly expanding oil and gas industry and predecessor Moon Landrieu's urban revitalization efforts in downtown and the adjacent French Quarter. Citing tourism as 'an industry by which the defects in our economy are papered over', Morial argued that 'we can ill-afford to remain the hotelkeepers and waiters for the well-heeled tourists, the porters and truck drivers for the exporter-importer' [31]. The new mayor understood that the Crescent City suffered a lack of both well-paid manufacturing jobs and of an adequately educated, skilled workforce to fill them. Morial's primary response entailed obtaining federal grants to develop to 12 000-acre industrial corridor along the Intracoastal Waterway in eastern New Orleans. The so-called Almonaster-Michoud Industrial District (AMID) was intended to provide 50 000 industrial jobs by 2000. Unfortunately, federal funding to cities dried up in the 1980s, followed by a disastrous oil-industry bust that hit the Gulf coast particularly hard, which limited the scope of improvements and investment in the corridor [32].

The oil bust, which hit in the winter of 1985, erased many of the economic gains New Orleans had enjoyed in the fifteen-year oil boom. Within two years of the collapse of oil to \$US9 a barrel in 1985, unemployment in Louisiana soared to nearly 15%, more than double the national average. Metropolitan New Orleans fared little better, with its jobless rate topping 13%. Between 1981 and 1988 the Orleans Parish labour force shrank by more than 31 000 jobs [33]. Joblessness would have been much more severe had the Crescent City not experienced a massive population exodus of 60 989 of its 557 482 residents in the decade after the 1980 census. While New Orleans lost much of its middle class to suburban Jefferson Parish in the four decades after World War II, the oil bust produced the first net losses for the entire metropolitan area, with an estimated 90 000 people leaving during the seven years after 1983. To be sure, by the 1980s eastern New Orleans proved a powerful magnet for middle-class and affluent blacks who felt unwelcome in suburban Jefferson at St Tammany parishes,

but the abrupt collapse of the oil boom created a housing glut that HUD and the Housing Authority of New Orleans attempted to ease by encouraging low-income blacks to move there [34].

Blacks figured prominently in the meteoric population ascent of the area from less than 45 000 in 1970 to more than 90 000 twenty years later. While eastern New Orleans gained population amid regional losses, it was simply draining the older portions of the city as an increasing number of African Americans fled housing projects and substandard houses for newer houses and apartments in the newer area. As Mickey Lauria has demonstrated, upper-middle-income whites who lost energy- and oil-related jobs in the second half of the 1980s – including many who were relative newcomers with little equity in their homes – faced the grim prospect of foreclosure or selling at a loss, which in turn opened a trove of affordable housing to aspiring middle-class blacks. When viewed alongside the white gentrification of racially integrated neighbourhoods in New Orleans's older sections near the river, the recession-linked white exodus exacerbated racial residential segregation in the city. Further, the soaring number of federally subsidized Section 8 housing units in a number of complexes along I-10 in the Lake Forest area began to replicate demographics once confined to the inner city [35]. The commercial areas of eastern New Orleans, likewise, suffered in the oil-bust economy and appeared uncommitted to serving a changing clientele. The Plaza in Lake Forest lost three of its four anchor stores and many of its smaller tenants, which had a chilling effect on New Orleanians' image of New Orleans East.

Coupled with insurmountable environmental concerns, the oil bust also brought the final demise of New Orleans East, Inc., and set the area on a different path, but not before a final attempt in the early 1980s to capitalize on the property. On the heels of a faltering Orlandia plan, Clint W. Murchison Jr, owner of the Dallas Cowboys, gained a majority stake in the property in May 1980 and proposed yet another new-town development, naming Barton Higgs, an Australian politician-turned-urban planner, president of the corporation. Like its predecessors – New Orleans East, Pontchartrain and Orlandia – the new development comprised a residential and commercial component called the Villages of Oak Island and an industrial park, Michoud Industrial Center. The first phases of the Villages plan provided for the construction of housing for 50 000 people, with the entire parcel accommodating 200 000 when completed in twenty-five years. More than previous plans, the Villages emphasized the creation of interlocking transit corridors that favoured buses, bicycles and pedestrians. The Villages utilized the concept of several contiguous 'urban villages' that clustered residences near village centres, schools, parks and other community focal points but, in contrast with the concept of New Urbanism, they would be decidedly suburban in character. Like earlier new-town schemes, the Villages' stated goal was to create a place where 'families of varied economic stations' could live. Before the property could be developed, Murchison developed a debilitating illness and his oil and real estate empire began to crumble as the oil economy declined and lawsuits for unpaid loans mounted into the tens of millions of dollars [36].

Environmental challenges and new directions

The New Orleans East concept, after floundering for nearly three decades, ultimately yielded to the natural environment. As Craig Colten has shown, the demise of the development

syndicate, coupled with growing public sentiment favouring environmental protection that emerged by the 1970s, produced an effort to reclaim swamplands from the threat of development. As late as 1981, prior to the oil bust, New Orleans East officials were negotiating with the US Army Corps of Engineers to gain permission to drain nearly ten thousand acres of wetlands, setting aside the 200-acre Blind Lagoon as a token wildlife sanctuary to appease environmentalists. Apart from the syndicate's difficulty in draining the wetlands, New Orleans East's property fell into receivership in 1985, and its creditors entered talks with city, federal and environmental officials about converting the land into Bayou Sauvage National Wildlife Refuge, which legislation made possible the following year. Bayou Sauvage, as Colten argued, represented a new realization that wetlands could be viewed not just as obstacles to urban expansion but rather as valuable natural resources that could enlighten and educate the public as well as provide a buffer against hurricanes [37].

While *Times-Picayune* columnist Allan Katz had considered the development of eastern New Orleans 'the metropolitan area's last roll of the dice' for a troubled city, nothing demonstrated the wisdom of not creating a 'new town' for 200 000 people more convincingly than the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina in 2005. As floodwaters slowly receded, leaving brown watermarks throughout eastern New Orleans and many other parts of the city, the future of New Orleans East (or 'the East'), now commonly conflated with the entire stretch of Orleans Parish east of the so-called 'high-rise' that carried I-10 across the Industrial Canal, became uncertain. Long assigned a prominent role in hopeful visions for New Orleans's future, the East now lay in ruin. Its shopping mall was completely flooded, as was Six Flags New Orleans amusement park, originally opened in 1999 as Jazzland. Its neighbourhoods were in shambles as the several lakes of Lake Forest temporarily became inundated by the Gulf of Mexico. Nearly a year later, only an estimated 28 000 of eastern New Orleans' 98 000 residents had returned [38].

As Mayor Ray C. Nagin's 'Bring New Orleans Back' planners, Urban Land Institute consultants and New Orleanians contemplated the Crescent City's future, they argued over whether to reduce the size of the city's 'footprint' by abandoning large low-lying areas built away from the natural levee of the Mississippi River, which had long afforded a modicum of protection for older neighbourhoods once its levees were raised to their present height. Predictably, discussions of a reduced footprint raised the vexing question of how to grapple with the fact that the majority of such areas were home to much of the city's African American population. Even as some planners talked about the historic opportunity Katrina provided to abandon areas that arguably should never have been constructed on such hazardous terrain, determined citizens urged the restoration of the entire city [39].

By 2006 New Orleans East business leaders sounded hopeful notes. One state economic development official pointed to a bright future for the Michoud facility in supporting NASA's next-generation spacecraft initiative, noting, 'We like to think New Orleans east could mimic Huntsville', the city in northern Alabama that transformed cotton fields into a hub of the aerospace industry. Additionally, aviation officials reiterated support for a pre-Katrina plan for relocating Louis Armstrong New Orleans International Airport from suburban Kenner in Jefferson Parish to eastern New Orleans, where it would be better situated to serve the expected rebound of the tourism industry along the Gulf Coast between New Orleans and Biloxi, Mississippi. Others unveiled new plans that underscored the area's continuing unique position as a symbol of the city's future [40].

Echoing officials' and developers' ongoing tendency to look to big plans as panaceas, the first comprehensive development plan for the area evoked earlier visions of New Orleans East as a planned suburban community. In August the *Times-Picayune* reported New Orleans East 'would arise as a land of bicycle paths, lush landscaping and vibrant neighborhoods'. In contrast to earlier plans – and perhaps more akin to Lafayette, Louisiana's ersatz River Ranch – this newest blueprint called for 'French Quarter-style' nodes of commercial and residential development at each interchange along Interstate 10. Unlike the social idealism that marked the Pontchartrain new-town-in-town plan of the 1970s, planners three decades later expressed concern that 'misguided development' could detract from the plan and called for restrictions on rebuilding large apartment complexes, many of which once offered Section 8 units that allegedly lowered the quality of life in eastern New Orleans prior to Katrina. The plan's clear preference for single-family homes paralleled the effort in older sections of the city not to rebuild most of the public housing projects lost to the flood [41].

Alongside grand visions of a revitalized New Orleans East were the myriad efforts of citizens to reconstitute their communities. Several neighbourhood associations became clearinghouses of information for the eastern New Orleans diaspora, making sure they knew the state of talks about recovery, lobbying local officials and surveying residents about their plans to return. Residents who wanted to rebuild, like their better-known counterparts in the lower Ninth Ward, sometimes charged that racism underlay the city's alleged indifference toward their needs. Frustrated with municipal officials' aloofness and reports that concentrated on the French Quarter, Uptown and lower Ninth Ward, a group of eastern New Orleanians displaced to Baton Rouge formed East New Orleans United & Whole, which served a similar role to that of neighbourhood associations. Similarly, the area's Vietnamese community rallied under the guidance of Mary Queen of Vietnam Church in a determined effort to salvage the Village de l'Est neighbourhood. The church's priest, Rev. Nguyen The Vien, noted that Katrina changed his parishioners' notion of 'homeland' from Vietnam to New Orleans and only increased their desire to return. The church played a key role in protesting the reopening of a city dump nearby to accommodate refuse from post-Katrina demolitions [42].

Conclusion

In retrospect, it is easy to argue that building new towns in eastern New Orleans was precisely the wrong thing to do. Responding to a US Army Corps of Engineers that was, as historian Ted Steinberg has argued, 'far more interested in projects involving the economic development of wetlands than in saving human lives', developers sought to profit from the Corps' promise to contain the waters that threatened eastern New Orleans. Choosing a low-rise, expansive development scheme to replace a swamp demonstrated less sensitivity to the natural environment than the more enlightened efforts at Columbia, Irvine, and The Woodlands to situate development thoughtfully within nature. Like other new towns inside existing city limits, New Orleans East drained older neighbourhoods of population, while encouraging resettlement on a hazardous floodplain despite local faith in the hurricane protection levee system. Yet it is well to remember the larger scenario in which planners operated. In a city hemmed in by watery expanses, developers were well-accustomed to draining swamps,

pumping storm water, and raising levees in their bid to expand New Orleans. Further, in a densely settled city whose residents were clamouring for suburban lifestyles, the development of tens of thousands of acres inside the city limits presented the irresistible appeal of etching the city's future on a clean slate. It also represented an opportunity for black New Orleanians to escape the problems of living in the inner city and carve out the suburban lifestyle that so many African Americans were seeking nationally in the wake of the most active phase of the civil rights era. Although it achieved a racial balance only briefly in the 1980s and topped 80% black by 2000, New Orleans East demonstrated that suburbia did not have to mean lily-white satellites outside the city. Two years after the costliest disaster on American soil, many still hope that this onetime 'new town' offers a key to a better future for a struggling city [43].

Notes and references

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