

CITYbuild Consortium of Schools: From Disaster Response to a Collaborative Model for Community Design and Planning

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* The CITYbuild Consortium of Schools is a consortium of design
* and planning schools based at the Tulane City Center in New
* Orleans, Louisiana. This group came together after Katrina
* through common interests in grass roots neighborhood
* recovery support. The article looks at the context in which
* such a consortium came to be, some of the results of the first
* two years of collaborative practice and some critical reflection
* on the goals and realities of this model of collaborative
* community design in a post disaster context.

Introduction

The following collage of words, images, journal excerpts, sketches and other textures is assembled with two goals in mind. The first is to communicate to the reader a little about the history and personality of the CITYbuild Consortium of Schools, founded in New Orleans at the Tulane City Center at the beginning of 2006. The second is to give some context to the reflections – on the modes and practice of our work over these first two years and the uncertainty of our future – which the writing contains. It is a complex story that we have compressed for this format and we have often made an assumption that people interested in our narrative have some experience with the complexities of university/community partnerships and therefore understand the dynamics of the working environments explored here.

The last two years that this body of work represents have been so busy, and the post-Katrina working environment so difficult, that we have had few opportunities to engage our peers in this format for critical reflection and it is an opportunity and process we are grateful for.

The CITYbuild Consortium of Schools' Members

University of Arkansas
School of Architecture

Boston Architectural College
School of Landscape Architecture

Design Corps

Georgia Institute of Technology
College of Architecture

University of Kansas
School of Architecture and Urban Design

University of Kentucky
School of Architecture

Massachusetts Institute of Technology
Department of Urban Studies and Planning

University of Minnesota
School of Architecture

University of Montana
Environmental Studies Program

Project Locus

University of Southern California
School of Policy, Planning, and Development

University of Texas at Arlington
School of Architecture

University of Texas at Austin
School of Architecture

Tulane University
School of Architecture

Washington University
College of Architecture and Urban Planning

Wentworth Institute of Technology
Department of Architecture

Excerpt from *Groundwork – 2006 Review*
CITYbuild Consortium of Schools' First Annual Report

The idea for the CITYbuild Consortium of Schools developed in the Fall of 2005 out of two post-Katrina conferences – *Reinhabiting NOLA* at Tulane University, and the *Arkansas Summit* at the University of Arkansas – held among national design-related university programs seeking a plan of action to address the unprecedented crisis in New Orleans. Recognizing that many were expressing the same desire to get involved, the seed was planted for the creation of a multi-disciplinary collective of schools working together to meet the complex recovery and rebuilding needs. The CITYbuild Consortium was initiated in January 2006 starting with 10 schools representing the fields of Architecture, Landscape Architecture, Urban Design, Planning and Policy, Real Estate Development, Historic Preservation and Environmental Studies. The role of host (and, in large part, generous first-year supporter) was taken up by the Tulane City Center at Tulane School of Architecture – a school grappling with its own difficult recovery issues.

After an evacuation semester teaching Tulane students at Arizona State University, I returned to New Orleans and Tulane in January 2006 and began working with Dan Etheridge and Alan Lewis of the Tulane City Center and Dean Reed Kroloff to define the mission, organizational structure and outline for procedures for CITYbuild. During the first 10 weeks of Tulane's re-opening we were overwhelmed (in the both the positive and negative sense of the word) by all of the expressions of interest and concern from people across the nation – faculty and students, researchers and documentarians – requesting tours, information and insight into the city, its history, and its condition. Everyone was essentially asking the same questions – “How did this come to happen?” and “What, if anything, can be done?” Answers were hard to come by.

We began to identify the needs of our communities and determine the skills and interests of remote design-related programs. Some schools made their own local contacts and developed projects, but looked to us for maps, collected data, guidance and logistical assistance. Other schools came to us without a determined project, community or need to focus on and we helped to develop connections for viable partnerships. (This required, and continues to require, a great creativity and capacity for quick but accurate assessment of skill sets and needs, for which Dan Etheridge has a truly remarkable gift.) Because there was no existing model for this type of inter-university cooperative entity, we were required to develop the terms of membership, procedures, and ethical standards for participating schools while initiating the documents and processes to become a non-profit organization. In March, thanks to Bryan Bell, we were joined by Design Corps Fellow Sarah Gamble, who offered invaluable leadership, dedication and creative vision in the critical role of CITYbuild Coordinator. By the end of Spring 2006 several schools had completed projects that would serve as exemplary models of partnership, process and execution for the projects to come.

At the end of Summer 2006, our partnering schools had built some of the first new construction projects in the entire city. We had also created a website to act as a centralizing repository for information and documentation, and we had our Member Council in place, which consisted of one representative from each CITYbuild member school. This formation was instrumental in harnessing a collective momentum at the beginning of Fall 2006 in which we saw new schools get involved, new partnerships formed and new projects developed with a greater sense of purpose and collaborative influence. We made great strides in moving from a reactive position of tactical response to a proactive position of strategic development. By creating a Community Partner Project Register to determine the specific community needs, we streamlined the process of identifying potential partnerships for schools. Additionally, during this time, we developed the organizational by-laws, the three-year budget, and we became incorporated in the state of Louisiana.

In November 2006, the first CITYbuild Member Council meeting took place in New Orleans. We saw for the first time the realization of what we had only conceived a year earlier and had been elusively working with in virtual and incremental form – a room full of people from across the nation at one table discussing what CITYbuild is and what it can and should be. We finished the year with an amazing body of work owing to the inexhaustible effort and talent of the CITYbuild-affiliated faculty and students and the inexhaustible spirit and determination of our community partners.

What started as an ad-hoc operation struggling to field requests for tours and information from a crippled city developed in one year into an organization comprised of 17 national schools providing design solutions and built responses for community recovery and redevelopment.

There is much to celebrate, as evidenced by the following pages, but there is still much to reckon with. In meeting with people and presenting CITYbuild and the affiliated projects at conferences and other events, I try to impress upon listeners that *now* is the time for the great work to be done. While it is impossible to express all of the gratitude for the “first responders” and to fully see how they provided life support for a city in critical condition, it is only now that the ground is ready for the substantial rebuilding to happen. Insurance and federal recovery assistance monies are just now starting to make their way into the hands of affected businesses, families and individuals; the lines of material supplies are getting back to capacity; city planning recommendations are being formalized; and emotional stability is returning along with hope. People and businesses are finding the means and the resolve to come home and get their lives going again. It has been slow to get here, but now is the time to have a significant impact on the redevelopment of a culturally rich, uniquely significant national treasure. We cannot afford to miss this opportunity. The substantial recovery of New Orleans is still a long way off and many of the lessons to be learned from this unprecedented situation are yet to come. I ask you to get involved.

Doug Harmon, CITYbuild Director, April 2007

Understanding Our Role and Responsibilities

The preceding excerpt of Doug Harmon’s introduction to *Groundwork: 2006 Review*—the first annual report for the CITYbuild Consortium—provides a good sketch of the beginnings and accomplishments of this new organization. As a member of the founding team, I read through this account and remember every step we took to get to where we are today. As good a job as Doug has done in summarizing this history, it is impossible to incorporate the sense of chaos on the ground in New Orleans that was prevalent every step of the way. There was no leadership from government entities, there were no blueprints for the type of collaborative work we were proposing, and people’s lives were devastated.

Add to this chaos the fact that we were proposing to assist people and organizations that had lost most if not all that they owned and were severely traumatized by the memories of the disaster. In short, it would be difficult to invent a situation with higher stakes when it comes to university/community partnerships. To add to the complexity of the situation we did not only have one or two schools to think about working together in this context, we had an initial group of 10 that had expanded to 17 schools by the end of the first year. It was clear we needed some guiding principles to effectively manage our collective efforts and uphold a standard of responsibility and stewardship we could all be proud of.

Amidst this chaos we all agreed that our most effective strategy would be to develop as simple a framework as possible. Given the limited time and resources available to begin the work, as well as the complexities inherent in the geographically dispersed partnership models we were proposing, this was also the only realistic possibility. The general two-step process outlined below is something I would like to claim was our intention from before we started working, and while this is basically what we were doing, it is only through some critical reflection at this stage of our organization that we are able to so clearly understand how we have been working.

Step 1: Matchmaking

The vast majority of architecture, planning and other associated schools that reached out to us at Tulane School of Architecture immediately after the hurricane were after two things. The first was information. Professors and students were looking for up to date information and had difficulty finding it. They were looking for data on a recently transformed place and wanted to compare the past and the present. We collected all the information we could find and established a data repository of maps, articles, etc., related to the city and recent developments and made it available to all CITYbuild schools. For those groups that traveled to New Orleans we organized guided tours

through the city for first hand exposure to the flooded neighborhoods and slowly recovering communities. The second service people were looking for was assistance in locating a community partner with whom they could engage in a curriculum based recovery assistance semester. These were the schools that felt a responsibility to do something to help the people of New Orleans, and also saw an opportunity to engage their students in a very real and very critical situation.

As Doug Harmon explained, we initially did all this on an ad-hoc basis. But as the calls continued to come we began to recognize the potential for these resources to have a significant collective impact for grass roots recovery efforts city-wide. At this stage we formalized our efforts and negotiated a collective ethical platform on which to base all of the work. This is the point where we applied the name CITYbuild to our collective efforts and where we reached out to our collaborators to pool resources and work together.

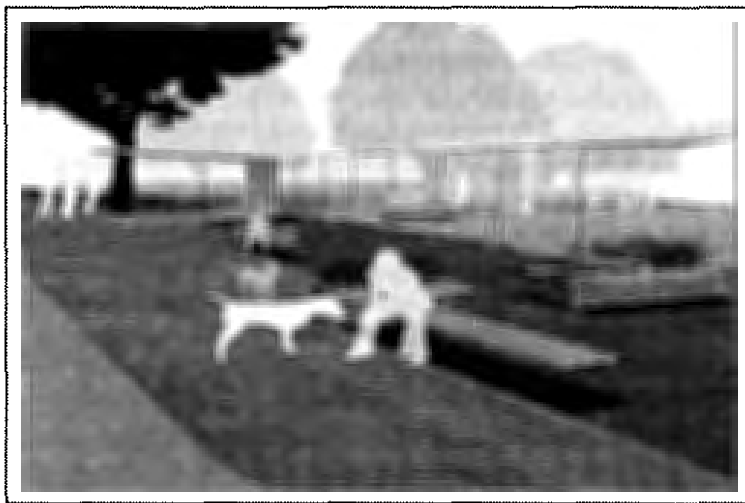
This is also the point where we looked more comprehensively at our role as "matchmaker" and what our responsibilities are to all involved. For this part of our work we adopted the principles of mutual benefit—i.e., if it does not work for both partners' goals, then it does not work. From the perspective of the CITYbuild schools, our responsibility was to find a project that would facilitate opportunities for the professor to meet their curricular requirements. These requirements differed greatly from urban design scale issues, to technical building issues, to regional landscape issues. With these identified we were able to locate a community partner with an appropriate project for the group. Once we had set up this partnership, our responsibility for mutual benefit was primarily with the community partner, and in most cases it was as simple as clearly understanding the scope and scale of the proposed work and making sure that this was realistically achievable by the partner school (it was at this point that we joked about experimenting with online dating service software).

It is also important to articulate our efforts to promote the idea of long-term partnerships as part of the initial matchmaking process. We had multiple reasons for this strategy but the most important was our understanding of the learning curve (and associated productivity) for non-local schools working remotely with community partners. Essentially, we feared that schools might take an entire semester adjusting to working under these intense circumstances and be just at a point where they could engage in a meaningful partnership with a local organization before it was time for them to return home. If individual faculty members would make a longer-term commitment to a local organization, we could work towards a partnership that effectively advocated for the principles a given community organization was working towards. Two years into CITYbuild, I am very pleased with our results on this issue. We have multiple schools about to enter the fourth or fifth semester working with the same organization and the efficiency and effectiveness of these partnerships improves with every new group of students.

Step 2: Advocacy

After the initial negotiations (meetings with community groups, conference calls etc.) of the matchmaking process, our role at the CITYbuild coordinating office shifted into one I would describe simply as advocacy. At the beginning of the CITYbuild work, we felt this advocacy would be done almost entirely on behalf of the community partner. We understood the potential for faculty members to promise too much and walk away from unfinished projects at the end of a semester and we wanted to ensure this did not happen. We also understood that these community organizations were working in an environment where the demands on their resources exceeded anything they had ever accomplished by many orders of magnitude and they needed direct support to provide their school partners with the information needed. The latter of these issues was straightforward and simply required our attention when it was called for; the former, however, was more difficult to manage as we had little leveraging

power to enforce spoken commitments in a disaster zone. This was when the CITYbuild website was established. From our collective imaginations, this tool seemed the best way to enforce standards should the need arise and was a way of publicizing the initial commitments. The website developed as a place to report on the positive progress and also an appropriate place to call out those lacking follow-through. This strategy was not an invention of the CITYbuild office in New Orleans, but was considered important by all the founding schools.



We need to go on the record here as stating that time has shown that this issue never needed enforcement. The faculty group that came together to found CITYbuild was a self-selected group of people that were responding to their own principles in the first place. However, we all felt it important to not only protect the limited time and energy of New Orleans-based community organizations, but to maintain the quality of the work of an often marginalized field of research and outreach in design and planning schools around the country. Further, we learned that much of our attention to advocacy ultimately needed to be directed at our own peers in the wider design and planning

education community to ensure the work being done by these faculty members was duly recognized and that they were not penalized for an unconventional approach.

Towards these goals it became a priority for CITYbuild's first Director, Doug Harmon, to travel to conferences and symposia to promote this work. Many of the faculty that helped found CITYbuild are young and working towards tenure and some found themselves accused of things ranging from lacking academic rigor to the extreme case of being called ambulance chasers. This issue is one that we as a new and small organization do not, unfortunately, have a significant impact on and it is important to note that we are part of a growing movement in design and planning schools to engage communities and provide service to communities that lack the resources to engage professionals. We do, however, consider it important to speak with a single voice as a growing national consortium whenever an appropriate forum is available.

Conclusion

CITYbuild is a very simple idea, and while it has often been referred to as innovative, in the context of the time and place in which it was conceived it seemed like an obvious thing to pursue. The organization arose from an enormously complex situation full of chaos, promise, and uncertainty, yet the bare-bones intention of the Consortium was easy to convey to New Orleanians and professors from around the country, who then embraced the opportunity for collaboration. Thus far the results from these collaborations constitute a body of work of which the member schools and community partners are collectively proud. The impact statement from our first annual report –reprinted here – is a good quantitative summary of these results. We feel it is also an endorsement of our collective vision for this broad reaching collaborative agenda. However, while the impact of the built, physical work is easily celebrated, it is the intangible products that have perhaps had a more substantial impact on our participants (faculty, students,

and community partners) and the city on a larger scale. From the perspective of faculty and students it was the opportunity to engage in a cross-cultural exchange and be given some real opportunity and associated responsibility to participate in the life of a New Orleans community. For the community partners, the primary benefit beyond the delivered work was the knowledge that people were committed to helping them recover their lives and were willing to work for it. Those who are aware of the widespread feelings amongst New Orleanians of abandonment at the hands of government entities will understand the deep and lasting importance of this point.

At this point in our history, we match feelings of celebration with those of uncertainty about the future. CITYbuild has fostered collaboration, provided encouragement, and helped to maintain ethical standards for partnership. We have reinforced the responsibility of higher education to engage and assist devastated communities through intentional and responsible relationships across cultural and geographical landscapes. The Consortium has tackled uncertainties and produced positive outcomes demonstrating that academic rigor and design excellence lead to successful community-based work. CITYbuild has also openly shared participants' experiences and allowed others to learn from both the successes and mistakes. Yet as our nation's focus slowly shifts away from New Orleans and the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina, so does the focus of the academic institutions who facilitated the participation of their own faculty and students. If CITYbuild is to be maintained as a framework for design and planning schools to engage community based projects, the next couple of years are critical. If we cannot demonstrate the meaning and utility of what we do outside of the parameters of a nation shocked by Hurricane Katrina then our work will be celebrated as a successful disaster response mechanism. The nationwide faculty and students that initiated this experiment feel we have much more to offer and much more to learn than that.

Excerpts from Student Writing

On the way back to Kansas, I talked with my professor about how a few students in Kansas can help rebuild New Orleans. How could we begin to make an impact? The shade structure is something of a symbolic gesture. We didn't have the resources to build a house. Even if we did, how would that help? One family would have a place to stay while all the neighbors did not. We were trying to help a whole neighborhood—to give them something to be proud about. It would be a place to meet and plan and help each other, like neighborhoods in New Orleans have always done.

I doubt that New Orleans will ever be the same as it was before Hurricane Katrina. I know I will never see it the same way. But now I have spent time in one neighborhood, getting to know it. And I have seen the resiliency of its people, rooted to their land and ready to fight to grow back against all odds. It is because of those people and their love for their city that I have hope for New Orleans. —*Emily Moisan, Seventh Ward Shade Structure, University of Kansas School of Architecture and Urban Design*

When we arrived at the site, we immediately started our project with two design charrettes focusing on the interior layout of the PEC [People's Environmental Center] and the demonstration gardens located along the front and side of the building. Not only will our project become an important educational center for the community, but it is also inspiring change as it progresses. This is the most rewarding aspect for me because once change has started, others will soon follow. Just by building, I can have an effect on the whole context of a neighborhood. This gives a very new meaning to the word "site" for me, one that I would never have learned without leaving the studio and academic research behind – coming to a real site within a community that has real need. —*Kennan Rankin, People's Environmental Center Wentworth Institute of Technology Department of Architecture*

Ronald Lewis was my only substantial connection in New Orleans to a resident whose home had been destroyed by Katrina. He is unequivocal in his distrust and disillusionment with the city planning process. "No more dots," he kept saying, referring to the little stickers that he has put on endless maps at endless meetings to indicate where a school or fire station might go. At a UNOP meeting, he caused a stir by telling the facilitator that he could do her job. "I can get up there and ask you what you want and write it down on a list." Ronald is understandably suffering "charette fatigue." He refused to vote for a planner at the Tuesday meeting because he refused to make an uninformed vote. And he doesn't believe it would have made a blind bit of difference anyway. In this broader context it's interesting to consider the politics of the House of Dance and Feathers, whose opening was on Saturday. Ronald should be moving back into his home of 29 years as I write this, just before the one year anniversary of Katrina. The goal of renovating his house and building his museum anew was to generate grassroots energy and action in the neighborhood, and in doing so to attract the attention of the media and the city at large. —*Lucy Begg, House of Dance and Feathers, University of California, Berkeley; Branner Traveling Fellowship*

Working with actual materials gave me a confidence in architecture like I had never experienced. I began to understand the process of building. I began to pay attention to detail because each decision was a design choice, down to the welds and details for the lettering. Piece by piece the stage was coming together and the group knew it. We could feel a sense joy and pride. Taking part in the design/build studio left me looking for more opportunities in my community, whether it was Habitat for Humanity or Design Corps. I was eager to begin another hands-on project. —*Simon Mance, Seventh Ward Mobile Stage University of Kansas School of Architecture and Urban Design*

Impact – 2006 Measures of Effectiveness

The CITYbuild Consortium has included and assisted:

More than **30** national and international design-related programs (19 states, 3 countries; see list below) involving over **60** university faculty and more than **600** visiting students: conducting research, participating in community design workshops, generating design proposals, and participating in local service projects

Over **40** related national university courses that have been dedicated to New Orleans recovery in: Architecture; Landscape Architecture; Urban Design, Planning and Policy; Real Estate Development; Historic Preservation; Environmental Studies; and Service Learning.

Over **75** (avg. 1/week) CITYbuild tours, lectures and presentations have been given locally and nationally to promote the work of CITYbuild-affiliated work and raise awareness for the effective and intelligent recovery of New Orleans.

In 2006, approximately **16** structures (from urban furniture to multi-family housing) were built or rehabilitated, comprising over **7,400 sq. ft.** of new construction. Additionally, there were more than **200** designs and project proposals generated and delivered to various local agencies. There are currently **20** design proposals to be constructed in 2007.

CITYbuild has worked with over **20** local organizations, community leaders and agencies.

CITYbuild Consortium built work and service projects have contributed over **\$250,000** in dedicated resources to the communities of New Orleans (not including associated costs of school travel, design service hours, presentation materials, and labor) resulting in an estimated **\$1.5 million** in total economic impact.