

## The Continuing Storm: Andrés Duany and the New Urbanists Plan Post-Katrina Mississippi

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Six weeks had passed since Hurricane Katrina devastated the Mississippi Gulf Coast and flooded New Orleans. The day was bright and clear, as October days often are in Mississippi, but little else about the day suggested the normalcy of the pre-Katrina world.

Leaving home early in the morning, I drove from northeast Mississippi to Biloxi to participate in the Mississippi Renewal Forum. This was my third trip to the Coast since the hurricane struck. In the prior two trips, two of my friends and I helped my father remove furniture, appliances, carpet, gypsum board, and insulation from his water-logged home in Ocean Springs. That work was physical, and the mission clear. This trip promised a different experience.

Responding to an email from the Mississippi Chapter of the American Institute of Architects, I had duly registered for the Forum, which was being held in the Isle of Capri Casino, located on casino row in the Point Cadet area of Biloxi. To get there, I drove down Interstate 59 and Highway 49, each of which was lined with blue-tarp roofs and snapped pine trees.

Nearing the Coast, I encountered the trash line, a high-water mark of plastic shopping bags and other debris that represented the apogee of the storm surge. Among the shredded remains of the Coast, a lone man picked up garbage on the side of Interstate 110. Using a standard sharpened stake, he placed each napkin-sized shred into his 30 gallon trash bag.

Stab, drop. Stab, drop.

Both sides of I-110 were covered with garbage, tons of it. More trash blew out of the dump trucks hauling the detritus of what was Biloxi to northern Harrison County. Against this avalanche of trash, this one man worked away.

Stab, drop. Stab, drop. Quixotic, if not absurd. But necessary, I suppose.

Although one and half months had passed since Katrina struck, the National Guard still patrolled the Coast, sealing off Biloxi south of the railroad tracks. Showing my Forum paperwork, I passed the checkpoint and headed toward the hotel.

Like all of the surviving buildings on the beach, the Isle of Capri Casino lost its lowest floors, which were washed out by the storm surge and violent waves. Access to the Forum was provided by a ruined, inoperable escalator. Although the day was sunny and bright and the pleasant scent of saltwater hung in the air, Point Cadet was eerily quiet, suggesting some science fiction movie in which the remnants of humanity are living among the ruins of a past civilization.

Having walked up the escalator, I encountered a crude plywood door at the top, which proved to be the entrance to the Isle of Capri ballroom and the Forum. Inside was a series of portable tables arranged with the precision of a Roman army camp and all the other accoutrements of a modern design studio— computer workstations, pin-up boards, and (miraculously) air conditioning. Entering the Forum ballroom was—in the words of Ocean Springs mayor Connie Moran—like “the scene where Dorothy opens the door in the Wizard of Oz.”

Amid the hubbub, in the physical center of the room, was the wizard himself, alone, working methodically to straighten the tables, which were off, apparently, by some fraction of an inch. I

recognized Andrés Duany instantly, thanks to the Congress for the New Urbanism (CNU) press machine.

Despite the pre-Forum publicity, I had questions. Who were these New Urbanists, why were they interested in post-Katrina Mississippi, and why were they entrusted with the future of the entire Mississippi Gulf Coast?

### Hurricane Katrina

August 2015 will mark the 10th anniversary of Hurricane Katrina. Much has happened since August 29, 2005, including the Haiti earthquake, the Christchurch earthquake, the tsunami and subsequent nuclear catastrophe in Japan, Superstorm Sandy, and Typhoon Haiyan. Although the citizens of coastal Mississippi are still living with the consequences of Hurricane Katrina, the world's and the nation's attention has largely moved elsewhere, as suggested by the title of the recently published *Hurricane Katrina and the Forgotten Coast of Mississippi*.

Although disaster statistics can become numbing, some of the statistics relating to Hurricane Katrina bear repeating. Katrina is the third deadliest hurricane in recorded U.S. history, with approximately 1,200 deaths attributed to the storm. Katrina caused \$114 billion of total damage, including approximately \$70 billion of insured losses, making it the most expensive disaster in U.S. history.

### Crisis as opportunity

Why were Andrés Duany and the Congress for the New Urbanism invited to lead Mississippi's re-planning efforts?

Even before his participation in the Mississippi Renewal Forum, Duany was one of America's best known and most vocal urban planners, the leader of what Harvard professor and urbanist Alex Krieger calls the East Coast New Urbanists. According to Krieger, the New Urbanists had become a force in American planning by the early 21st century—certainly in the planning of greenfield neighborhoods.

Writing in 2005, urban design professor Emily Talen defined New Urbanism as “an urban reform movement that gained prominence in the 1990s, [which] seeks to promote qualities that urban reformers have always sought: vital, beautiful, just, environmentally benign human settlements.” Talen goes further, arguing that New Urbanism represents a fusion of the four most prominent American urbanist schools or “cultures.” In a 2014 email to me, Talen confirmed that she believed her taxonomy of U.S. planning cultures still held true.

The success of the East Coast New Urbanists with planned communities such as Seaside, Florida, was both a blessing and a curse. On one hand, the success of Seaside made the New Urbanists very visible, but, on the other hand, it opened them to the criticism that they were too developer-friendly and only worked for upper-middle class or upper class clients. Perhaps, then, the New Urbanists saw an opportunity on the Mississippi Gulf Coast to address this criticism, because, as Professor Talen observed, the 11 Coast cities provided a variety of mixed-income clients and communities to serve.

In the months before Katrina, Duany's firm, the Miami-based Duany Plater-Zyberk & Company (DPZ), was working with Mississippi architect Michael Barranco on the Town of Lost Rabbit in Madison, Miss. After Katrina struck, Barranco recommended to Leland Speed, the executive director of the Mississippi Development Authority and a well-respected real estate and securities

investor, that the state talk to Duany about planning the recovery of the Mississippi Gulf Coast. Speed then convinced Mississippi Governor Haley Barbour to invite Duany and the CNU to participate in the Mississippi Renewal Forum. Duany traveled to Mississippi on September 12 and met Leland Speed and Jim Barksdale, a Mississippi native and former CEO of Netscape who was asked by Barbour to serve as the Chairman of the Governor's Commission on Recovery, Rebuilding and Renewal. The meeting went well, according to Duany, who later said, "I am an old enough guy to know that Barksdale and Leland Speed don't want to know what I know.... What Southern grownups do is just want to know that you get along."

The Mississippi Renewal Forum was part of the larger Governor's Commission, which was funded by a \$1 million gift from Barksdale and a matching grant from the Knight Foundation. Headquartered in Miami, Florida, the Knight Foundation, had a connection to the Mississippi Gulf Coast, as Knight Ridder at the time owned the Coast's largest newspaper, Biloxi's *Sun Herald*.

A confluence of events, which Duany discussed in almost religious terms, allowed Duany—and thus the New Urbanists—to lead the Mississippi planning process. First, Duany and DPZ had experience with post-disaster planning thanks to their work in Florida City, Florida, following 1992's Hurricane Andrew. Second, Duany had contacts in Mississippi, and, thus, credibility there. Third, the Knight Foundation, which was located in Miami and presumably aware of Duany's work, provided half of the funding for the Governor's Commission and thus the Forum charrettes. Finally, Duany was available and not overseas, which was usual for him at that time.

If providence brought Duany and the New Urbanists to Mississippi, it also brought risks. Duany said, “I actually thought at the time that if we fail, it will be the end of the New Urbanists, but so what? It’s not like we had a choice.”

Arriving ahead of the other CNU members, Duany and his wife and professional partner, Elizabeth Plater-Zyberk, arranged the Isle of Capri ballroom, which was divided into workstations for each of the 11 coastal cities, a double row of tables in the middle of the room for architectural design and rendering, spaces for regional planners, and a space for public relations. New Urbanist planners were assigned to lead the planning efforts for each community; local architects and others volunteered for certain communities or were assigned a community. Duany confirmed that the CNU firms were selected for their compatibility, and they clearly bought into Duany’s brand of New Urbanism—a decision that led architectural critic Michael Sorkin to observe sarcastically in a February 2006 *Architectural Record* article that the teams each worked “under the supervision of a trusted apparatchik.” Duany was an omnipresent force during the Renewal Forum, visiting the various CNU teams while coordinating the overall effort. It is not an exaggeration to say that the Renewal Forum was run with both military precision and nearly religious fervor.

The Mississippi Renewal Forum was an impressive operation. Even Biloxi officials, who among Coast leaders were the most skeptical of the Forum planning process, were impressed by the Forum itself. Biloxi Mayor A. J. Holloway noted that he had some differences of opinion with Duany, but Holloway described Duany as “active and vocal” and someone who was “working hard for the community.” Biloxi City Planner Jerry Creel thought the Forum was well-organized, particularly given the limited time to plan it.

Design charrettes are typically high energy events, and the Mississippi Renewal Forum was no exception. Called the “the mother of all charrettes” by Bill Lennertz, the executive director of the National Charrette Institute, the Forum captured the imagination of participants, Coast residents, and critics alike. Writing a few months after the event, *New York Times* contributor Jim Lewis said, “It took six days for the Congress for the New Urbanism to come up with a rough set of recommendations for the entire Mississippi Gulf Coast—six exhausting and exhilarating days spent hashing out everything from highway relocations to affordable housing.”

CNU teams gathered on the Mississippi Gulf Coast on Tuesday, October 11, 2005. The Mississippi Renewal Forum officially started on Wednesday, October 12, with a series of motivational speeches, including comments from Governor Barbour, Chairman Barksdale, and charrette leader Duany. On Thursday, the CNU teams toured the Coast, some by helicopter but most by car. The teams used Friday to draw and otherwise formulate ideas, which were presented to elected officials in the Isle of Capri ballroom on Saturday. Based on the feedback from those officials, the CNU teams revised their documents on Sunday.

On Monday, October 17, the 11 city teams plus teams representing infrastructure, transportation, the environment, and zoning codes publicly presented their plans, concluding the initial work of the Mississippi Renewal Forum.

### The Forum documents

Examining the Renewal Forum documents, one is struck by their remarkable uniformity.

All 11 city documents contain a map covered with circles representing the one-quarter mile “New Urbanist radius”—the distance most people consider walkable.

All 11 city documents reference form-based codes, with eight of the 11 specifically endorsing DPZ's SmartCode.

Ten of the documents explain the New Urbanist transect, which is a way of looking at urban density borrowed from ecology.

Five documents recommend major changes to Highway 90, a major east-west corridor that runs through nine of the 11 Coast communities.

Six documents specifically reference Duany and his leadership.

In addition to being similar from a content standpoint, the Forum documents are also similar stylistically. Disdaining glossy computer renderings, the Forum documents are filled with colored pencil and watercolor images, giving them a handcrafted and unmistakably retro feel.

Although their similarities helped to make the Forum documents a cohesive package, they also provided ammunition for critics who found the New Urbanist approach too uniform and too proscriptive, particularly given the diversity of the Coast's 11 major communities.

Despite some superficial similarities, the 11 cities along the Mississippi Gulf Coast are distinct communities. Waveland, Bay St. Louis, and Pass Christian are residential communities with numerous second homes and retirement homes; Long Beach is a bedroom community and home to the University of Southern Mississippi's Gulf Coast campus; Gulfport is a transportation hub and commercial center; Biloxi is a cultural center, home of Keesler Air Force Base, and the center of Coast tourism, with its eight casinos; D'Iberville is a bedroom community with a growing commercial focus; Ocean Springs is a bedroom community and growing entertainment destination; Gautier is a bedroom community and home to a community college; Pascagoula,



home of Ingalls Shipbuilding, is an industrial center; and Moss Point is home to the Coast's only majority African-American community.

Each of the 11 Coast communities received nearly the same treatment. For example, Waveland, the westernmost (and most heavily damaged) town, is shown a plan in the style of an aerial chamber of commerce map. Centered on Coleman Avenue, the plan includes the existing library and civic center, a new police station, a rebuilt city hall, an artist/small business incubator, and a trolley stop.

In a similar graphic style, the citizens of Ocean Springs are shown "West End Landing," which includes a rebuilt yacht club, a ferry and/or water taxi dock, and a rebuilt Ocean Springs-Biloxi bridge, located north in the place of the CSX rail line.

Moss Point, the predominantly African-American community located on the Escatawpa River, is shown a similar landscape, which includes a new marina, an environmental/cultural education facility, a new city hall, and a new police/fire station.

To deliver the above-referenced documents on the Forum's six-day schedule, CNU team members had to work almost superhuman hours. Duany later wrote, "We were spurred to undertake work for 12, 14, and for some, 20 hours a day. Barksdale called us 'over-caffeinated architects.'" Fortunately, the CNU teams had reserved the seventh day for rest.

I was not one of those over-caffeinated architects; I attended the opening session but left soon afterward. A Coast native, I had not lived in my hometown for 15 years, so I was not really a local. Moreover, I was not a member of the CNU nor part of one of their teams, so I had no role there, either. My attempts to join one of the touring teams were rebuffed ("not enough room"), so

I figured I would do something else for the remainder of the week. After all, my parents were still working on their house, and the yard was a mess.

The end of the Forum did not mean the end of the CNU's work on the Coast. Reports were finalized and published on November 17, 2005, and several CNU teams returned to Mississippi in December for town-hall style meetings with local citizens. Although CNU team members donated many hours to the Forum, the event provided an excellent marketing opportunity for those firms, and many of them later secured continuing—and paying—work on the Mississippi Gulf Coast, a point made by Mississippi architect and director of the Gulf Coast Community Design Studio, David Perkes.

#### Blank slates and other challenges

The high level of destruction on the Coast led some observers to describe the region as a “blank slate,” but that casually tossed around phrase was misleading.

Former Ocean Springs City Planner Eric Meyer noted that the land market on the Mississippi Gulf Coast differs from other U.S. land markets. In other regions, land is typically considered a commodity. In Mississippi, land is often associated with a family's heritage. According to Meyer, assembling land for large projects, such as those shown in the Renewal Forum plans, can be problematic. Although large sections of the Coast were scoured clean by Katrina, and many lots contained nothing more than oak trees and slabs, a legal palimpsest of property lines and a strong sense of family heritage remained, making big plans such as those developed in the Forum difficult to execute.

In addition to the Coast's concept of heritage, the individual and collective memories of Coast residents played an important role in the recovery process.

In the classic 1977 study of disaster recovery, *Reconstruction Following Disaster*, Robert Kates acknowledged the power of memory, writing that "There is already a plan for reconstruction, indelibly stamped in the perception of each resident—the plan of the pre-disaster city."

Often, this plan is more of an impediment than an asset. Kates wrote, "In general, the reconstructed city will be more familiar and less changed than inferred from the initial destruction and more safe and less vulnerable to recurrent hazard. But the achievement is inevitably less than the potential opportunity for change offered by the disaster."

Eric Meyer noted that not many places—even a fast-growing city like Atlanta—are ready for the kind of change that a disaster brings. Discussing the post-disaster environment, Meyer said, "In an existing town, folks just psychologically [are not ready for big planning projects]. To heal themselves and so forth, they want everything to look the same—they want things to go back the way they were. And I get that. Everyone is fighting trauma.... So how do you get the impetus to go back differently?"

If memories inhibited Mississippi residents from seeing what the Coast could be, the *lack* of memories on the part of the CNU teams inhibited their ability to understand what the Coast had been. For example, the CNU designers did not fully understand the power and motivations of "entrenched development interests," such as the Mississippi Department of Transportation or the CSX railroad, an observation made by disaster recovery expert Gavin Smith in his treatise on pre-planning for disaster recover. These organizations and others made decisions that quickly

rendered many of the Forum's grandest ideas moot, including the conversion of Highway 90 to a low-speed beach boulevard and the relocation of the CSX rail line north of I-10.

### Design in the aftermath of catastrophe

Occurring just six weeks after Katrina, the Mississippi Renewal Forum took place very early in the recovery process. Large portions of the Coast were buried under rubble, and some areas would not be cleared until September 2006, more than a year after Katrina's landfall.

Despite the difficult timeframe, CNU leaders projected almost absolute confidence before, during, and immediately after the Forum. Writing in the weeks following the Forum, John Norquist, the CEO and president of the CNU during the Forum, stated, "A planning venture of this size easily could have run into obstacles, but this one didn't."

That the charrettes happened at all was remarkable, but Norquist's statement failed to differentiate the Forum as an event and the Forum as an urban planning exercise. Urban planning is not just the production of pretty pictures or model zoning codes, but rather it is part of a complex social, political, and economic process that leads to the construction of actual towns and cities. Because of overlapping jurisdictions, dispersed power, and a general skepticism of government, urban planning in the United States is rarely easy, even under ideal conditions. Under more difficult conditions, such as the continuing crisis of disaster recovery, the task becomes nearly impossible. Referring to the post-Katrina planning process in New Orleans, Olshansky and Johnson wrote, "There is no easy way to rebuild after such devastation. Everything has to be done before everything else. Everyone is under stress, and preexisting conflicts intensify. It is complicated, confusing, and frustrating."

Scheduling the Forum shortly after the storm was advantageous to those advocating change.

According to CNN reporter and Bay St. Louis native Kathleen Koch's book *Rising from Katrina*, this was the position of Bay St. Louis Mayor Eddie Favre, who wanted to use the design process to ensure that key, long-standing infrastructure issues were addressed. Another advocate of change, Ocean Springs Mayor Connie Moran, was pleased with the timing of the forum. Moran said, "Some may say that it was too early, but for me it was perfect because it gave me the inspiration to push for the amenities we wanted on the bridge.... and also for planning for downtown."

Conversely, Biloxi officials were critical of the timing of the Forum. Mayor Holloway said, "I think it was too soon. We were still reeling.... [The Renewal Forum] came along and took a lot of time from what I thought I needed to be doing." Likewise, Jerry Creel believed that the Forum was too early, as people were still recovering from the shock of the storm. Creel also noted some specific issues with the Forum, specifically the availability (or lack thereof) of final FEMA flood maps and the fact that displaced people were not able to participate in the charrettes.

Eric Meyer had concerns about the timing of the Forum as well, stating, "If folks aren't ready to participate, then you are only going to have a few [people] there." Meyer said when he was hired after Katrina to serve as Ocean Springs' new city planner, he was told numerous times that few people had the opportunity to participate in the Renewal Forum. In Meyer's opinion, the lack of citizen participation undercut the authority of the Forum documents.

In *Planning for Post-Disaster Recovery*, Gavin Smith noted the pros and cons of scheduling a charrette early in the recovery process. On the positive side, major projects have not started yet, so the charrette can potentially influence the direction of those projects. On the negative side,

many citizens are still working to address basic needs like food, clothing, and shelter and do not have the capacity to participate in seemingly extraneous activities, such as community planning sessions.

Indeed, as Professor Talen wrote in 2008, the Forum did not include the usual public participation sessions associated with charrettes for numerous reasons, including the continued evacuation of citizens from their homes, the need for citizens to address basic needs such as shelter and clothing, the focus of local religious and other civic organizations (who are often key participants in charrettes) on immediate disaster recovery, and the difficulty of adequately advertising the Forum. However, Duany was not concerned about the apparent lack of citizen participation in the Forum for two reasons.

First, he argued that few storm victims are in a position to contribute to a charrette so soon after the storm. Duany said, “I knew, having been hit by hurricanes, that you just feel like shit for four weeks. And even if your house does not go down, it’s just this weird trauma. And nobody is going to come in and discuss anything intelligently.”

Second, Duany argued that in a republic, government officials are elected to represent the public and, thus, the public’s interest was adequately represented at the Forum by the elected officials who attended. Partially, he based this argument on DPZ’s experience in Florida City, Florida, after Hurricane Andrew and the positive results he saw working with that community’s strong mayor.

Some Coast residents who nominally participated in the charrettes may have been there more in body than in spirit. Duany, who argued that the participation of elected officials was important to

the Forum, also said, “I should have known that the mayors and councilmen coming in were zombies. Just because they can put on a tie and stand up and talk doesn’t mean they were there.”

Duany’s reliance on input from public officials may undercut his argument that the real value of the Mississippi Renewal Forum was its therapeutic quality. According to Professor Talen, much of the good of community planning comes from the process itself. This good is lessened and perhaps lost if citizens are not able to participate fully in the planning sessions.

### Critical Reception

During the Forum and for about six months afterwards, much was written about the CNU’s efforts in Mississippi. Much of the criticism represented a new front in an ongoing war of ideas between the New Urbanists and their critics.

Writing in February 2006, Michael Sorkin said, “I happened to be in Biloxi during the CNU charrette that helped guide the development of the group’s plans for the Gulf, and I found it both impressive and horrifying.” While impressed with the organization skills of the CNU, particularly given the lack of infrastructure on the post-Katrina Coast, Sorkin had two main criticisms of the Mississippi Renewal Forum.

First, he found the CNU’s proposed plans too formulaic and prescriptive. According to Sorkin, charrettes usually provide an excellent opportunity to get ideas from many people and vet them in a public forum. However, said Sorkin, “CNU charrettes.... seem to be media for the recirculation and validation of ideas that are already decided, for telling people what’s best for them.”

Second, Sorkin believed the proposed plans failed to adequately address future storm hazards and other environmental issues. This concern was echoed by Gavin Smith, who suggested in *Planning for Post-Disaster Recovery* that the New Urbanist's transect-based codes should be modified to include an "H" or hazard transect to address land that is exposed to storm surge or other natural hazards.

Many critics, particularly those in academe, focused on the CNU's penchant for—or perhaps acceptance of—traditional design. Speaking in a November 2005 *New York Times* article, architect and University of Arkansas professor Marlon Blackwell said that the New Urbanists use "historicism as a way to validate a kind of moralistic take on architecture." In the same article, Mississippi State University architecture professor David Buege expressed his desire for designs that were "more deeply satisfying than New Urbanism." In a December 2005 *New York Times* article, University of Virginia professor of architecture William Morris criticized the New Urbanists for promoting what he called "neotraditional" styles.

On one level, the above-listed complaints are about style. Many New Urbanists favor traditional architecture, which, according to the Modernists, may not be appropriate for a particular time or the climate. New Urbanists counter that many "styles" developed as a response to climate and, as such, are appropriate and timeless.

On a deeper level, the argument is one of avant-gardism versus traditionalism, or even more fundamentally, idealism versus empiricism. The most strident critics of New Urbanism find its forms retrograde and uninspired. For example, California architect and educator Eric Owen Moss said in a 2006 *Financial Times* article, "[New Urbanism] is the most pessimistic and unimaginative form of architecture because it does not allow for the possibility that something



new could be better than what went before.” Furthermore, Moss argued that the New Urbanists do not respect the natural, incremental growth of cities, saying, “These people do not believe in the natural evolution of cities.”

Some forum participants found the uniformity and scale of the CNU proposals problematic. Jerry Creel argued that each coast city has its niche, and imagining similar plans working equally well across the Coast is hard. Likewise, David Perkes believed that the Renewal Forum failed to address adequately the differing conditions in the eleven coastal communities. Perkes said, “Every single town—including towns like Moss Point, which is a small town of 10,000 people that struggles to keep even a few stores and restaurants—[was] shown this downtown plan that you would think came from Cambridge, Massachusetts.” Such density was unrealistic given the relatively low population on the Coast, a condition aggravated when many evacuees did not return to the region.

Working on such a tight timeframe—a one week charrette held just six weeks after the storm—virtually ensured that some key issues were missed. One the New Urbanist’s misunderstandings of Ocean Springs was the importance of the tree ordinance. Although they “penciled in” many new trees, they did not understand the development limitations imposed by the ordinance, which is designed to protect live oaks and other significant existing trees. Looking at one large-scale proposal, Meyer called it “utter fantasy,” given the number and location of live oak trees on the site.

Others found the Forum proposals impractical. In a 2006 *New York Times Magazine* article, General Clark Griffith, charged with Biloxi’s second attempt to plan post-Katrina, said, “There are some good ideas in [the Forum documents].... It kind of got off into la-la land, but that’s

what thinkers and people like that do.” The Forum documents contain numerous examples of out-of-scale or otherwise inappropriate projects: vast expanses of six-story downtowns, water taxis and ferries, and light rail systems serving a region not nearly dense enough to support them.

Duany identified two reasons why some of the New Urbanist’s work on the Mississippi Gulf Coast visited General Griffith’s la-la land: a failure to understand post-storm conditions, and what Duany called the “hovering billions of dollars.”

During the Forum, New Urbanist designers worked from photographs of pre-storm conditions. The mistake they made, said Duany, was misunderstanding the level of damage wrought by Katrina—damage that returned the Coast to late 19<sup>th</sup> century urban conditions. CNU designers “coded” their work as if the pre-August 2005 urban fabric were still in place, but in many locations, that fabric was completely gone. Thus, many of the plans called for six-story buildings for the urban centers when the reality of post-Katrina conditions could only support a density equal to one-story buildings.

Meanwhile, many otherwise outlandish proposals seemed reasonable given some of the money being discussed for recovery. Duany said, “The billions of dollars is what actually made us crazy.” For example, most communities along the Coast wanted the damaged CSX rail line moved out of their towns and north of I-10. The price tag for that project was \$795 million, which is a huge amount in terms of local revenues but not in terms of the federal recovery dollars.

If some of the Forum proposals proved impractical, the Forum itself had a real, practical effect on the recovery of the region—helping to restore a sense of hope for South Mississippians.

Duany said, “You have to do therapeutic planning at first.... Forget anything realistic....What we

and the politicians did was the right thing—they needed therapy.” Duany’s position is not hyperbole—Gavin Smith also argued that the Forum was valuable as therapy, as did David Perkes.

If the immediate planning session is basically therapy—a “group hug” to use Duany’s term—when should the actual planning take place? At some later point, when basic services have been restored, when citizens have returned, and when citizens and elected officials alike can think with clarity. The key, said Duany, is not exhausting the entire design budget in the initial session.

These nuanced reflections came much later. The mood immediately following the Forum was optimistic, almost gleefully so. Writing soon after the Forum, urbanist and photographer Sandy Sorlien and Leland Speed observed, “As the national team headed home.... We walked through the Gulfport-Biloxi airport with one of the charrette organizers, John Norquist of the Congress for the New Urbanism. ‘OK,’ he said, ‘let’s hold the next charrette in Detroit.’”

Such was the “mission accomplished” spirit of the Mississippi Renewal Forum that the well-documented problems of Motor City seemed like just another adventure, a problem that could be licked with six days, a case of bumwad, and some sharp Prismacolors.

With the advantage of additional hindsight, however, the legacy of the Forum has proven to be more complex.

### Reflections

Although I did not attend much of the Forum, I did track its reception from afar, keeping a 3-ring binder of newspaper and magazine articles. This hobby proved valuable when I decided to go to graduate school in 2011, providing me with the kernel of a research project.

In November 2011, I tracked down Duany at an Institute of Classical Architecture and Art conference in New York City. I introduced myself and discussed my research agenda. Duany offered to answer my questions concerning the Forum, asking if I could travel to his office in Miami.

In December, I boarded an airplane at Logan International Airport, taking my talents and research agenda to South Beach (actually the Coral Way neighborhood).

More than six years had passed since Katrina when I spent a full day with Andrés Duany at his Miami office. We spent the morning session inside and the afternoon session outside, moving under cover as one of South Florida's ubiquitous rain showers passed overhead. Duany smoked and drank Cuban coffee (it's really, really strong). He was energetic, gracious, thought-provoking, often very funny and surprisingly self-critical.

Although Duany bluntly referred to aspects of the Mississippi Renewal Forum as "failures," he was probably correct when he asserted that the New Urbanists were the only planning organization that could have tackled the Mississippi Renewal Forum. Mississippi's design community was too small and too overwhelmed to be effective on a tight timeframe, and university programs often do not deliver the practical solutions the destruction of Katrina demanded. Only the CNU had the organization, the infrastructure, and the *esprit de corps* to tackle such a complex operation on the required timetable.

Today, as the ten-year anniversary of Katrina approaches, the influence of the New Urbanists can be seen along the entire Mississippi Gulf Coast. For example, downtown Ocean Springs is denser, more walkable, and more urban, with more restaurants and entertainment than before Katrina, and D'Iberville is receiving its first casino, located in conjunction with a new

transportation hub. In terms of policy, three Coast cities have adopted at least part of DPZ's SmartCode, and the majority of the remaining cities have otherwise updated their development codes.

Conversely, many of the New Urbanists' grandest plans failed to materialize. Much of D'Iberville's growth has been focused in a set of strip shopping centers at the intersection of I-10 and I-110. Highway 90 remains a thruway, not the scenic local boulevard the New Urbanists envisioned, and the CSX railway continues to physically divide many Coast towns. While some communities continued planning exercises with their Forum teams, other communities, such as Biloxi, opted to start over with different urban design professionals.

For many of the participating New Urbanists, the Mississippi Renewal Forum was a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity. Duany said, "[Participating in the Forum was] unbelievably exotic, unbelievably heroic—it was a dream, it was so cool to do it, and we all knew it." Other participants echoed Duany's enthusiasm.

Was the New Urbanist vision of the Mississippi Gulf Coast fulfilled? In the summary report from the charrettes, Duany wrote, "Are such visions fulfilled? Often not—or at least not to the extent that we would like them to [be]."

Trying to plan the recovery of such a large region, so soon after the disaster, amid the continuing crisis of recovery, could easily be seen as a Sisyphean labor.

As such, I cannot help but think of Duany and the New Urbanists in terms of that lone man, picking up trash on I-110, trying to restore the Coast one shred of paper at a time.

Quixotic, if not absurd.

And, at the same time, absolutely necessary.