

How Local Rebuilding Efforts are Working in New Orleans

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By Anisa Baldwin Metzger

Four years after Hurricane Katrina ravaged the Gulf Coast, the struggle to rebuild continues. In the days after the 2005 storm, when the levees were breached in several locations, about [80 percent of the city was flooded](#). While the area is going through a painful recovery, it is giving everyone lesson after lesson on how to undertake such a massive effort.



It's no surprise that the volume of rebuilding activity is high: federal funds are pouring in for just this purpose. The surprise is how that volume is playing out, through small organizations who are daring enough to allow for experimentation and who know the value of strong partnerships. This network of non-profits and start-ups is taking on the daunting challenge of rebuilding while respecting the identity and character of a place so rich with history.

You might think, as I did, that what New Orleans really needs is a couple of large contractors dedicated to building back large swaths of the city, repairing what can be repaired and rebuilding what needs to be rebuilt. We want to get people back in safe, solid homes, and there is ample frustration at how long everything takes to get done in the city. On top of the issue of slowness, the reality is that large companies are usually better able to invest time in research and development and therefore to foster innovation. But it seems that the community of small players that has risen out of the recovery process is not only making residents and local business-owners feel more like a part of the rebuilding process but is also allowing support and room for growth within the

building industry in a way that would not be possible in a larger-scale operation.



Image source: [Make It Right Foundation New Orleans](#) One benefit of community-based rebuilding operations has been their willingness to provide local workers with on-the-job training in the new skills needed for green building. When Construction Director John Sader and the team at [Make It Right](#) put out an RFQ for solar PV installation on their first batch of homes in the Lower Ninth Ward of New Orleans, they were pretty disappointed with the results. The bids included ten companies from out of state and only two local companies. It was a clear indication of the lack of capacity that was, and is, a common complaint with builders after Hurricane Katrina. Although it admittedly has a bit of an advantage over some of the other organizations here (Brad Pitt), Make It Right is still a group that, like many others here, is trying to push the envelope in a place that often forcefully resists change. Organizations like Make It Right have sought out ways to push innovation in New Orleans' building industry by using the manageable scale of their projects to enable new ideas to take hold. They allow subcontractors to learn on the job, and they set up competition between builders to be cooperative, hard-working, and open to new ways of building. They partner with other groups, such as [Good Work Network](#), to provide general contractor development and technical workshops. "The way the contractor guarantees his next job with us, and we tell them this, is to accept the learning curve and be helpful to everyone else," John says. The healthy competition between the large numbers of contractors not only allows for new practices to take hold in the local industry, it also drives affordability and performance.

Local groups have also been willing to engage with the community, generating results that preserve city character and serve needs specific to New Orleans. Across town from the Make It Right project, a growing group of individuals has been assembled by The Salvation Army to work on building 125 green, affordable homes and renovating 125 existing homes in a program called [EnviRenew](#). They're working closely with two neighborhood development corporations; and they're convening architects, real estate agents, sustainability consultants, financing authorities and other local professionals to come up with a way to rebuild homes for targeted populations like the elderly, teachers and first responders with small families. Like other small rebuilding projects, the collaboration of players is key. By bringing neighborhood representatives together with building professionals, the group is demonstrating that lengthy engagement with a community can bring about results that are best for all involved. Through the neighborhood development corporations, they've gained community support for the acquisition of lots and the plans for the new homes. When the group wants to make a decision about how the program will proceed, they often draw together a quick focus group of residents to guide progress. The manageable scale of the project allows both the immediate community and local building professionals to participate, so — in the larger picture — the city can be fully participatory in its own rebuilding.

Hundreds of organizations are trying to come up with effective solutions that will not only work for New Orleans but will also provide templates for whatever may be the next international disaster. The best result, as EnviRenew development consultant [Will Bradshaw](#) says, "would be if we do figure out, out of all this messiness, and in many different ways, how to package all of this for use elsewhere, in other places that may need

it.” The biggest relief organizations in the world are still learning from the successes and failures of their response to Hurricane Katrina. The City’s preparation and evacuation for Hurricane Gustav in 2008 was, by all accounts, miles ahead of what was done to prepare for Hurricane Katrina. But many of the most successful and creative solutions are being carried out by smaller-scale operations that allow room for experimentation, pull in neighborhood groups and local businesses, and partner with a wide variety of the city’s many non-profits and start-ups. It may not be the fastest, or even the cheapest, way to get stuff built, but New Orleanians don’t want just ‘stuff.’ They want a built environment that reflects and serves well the city’s funky, lilting, jumbled identity. And that takes some creativity.

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