Those Brad Pitt Houses

Stephen Svenson

As we cross over the Claiborne Avenue bridge from the Upper Ninth Ward on Gray Line International’s “Hurricane Katrina—America’s Greatest Catastrophe” tour, local artist Brad Dupuy informs us in his rich voice that we “are about to enter what is known famously as the Lower Ninth Ward.” What makes the Lower Ninth Ward notable, at least for Gray Line and the rest of the world, is that this is where Hurricane Katrina hit the hardest. According to Dupuy, the Lower Ninth “saw a tremendous amount of media attention largely because this is where you would have seen our highest numbers of fatalities, where you would have seen the highest numbers of people in need of being rescued from their properties.” It is also the place where the most people lost their homes when the levees broke in August 2005.

Looking north from the Claiborne Avenue bridge, we can see the spot where the Industrial Canal levee breached, flooding the Lower Ninth Ward. In all, 4000 homes were lost in the Lower Ninth. As we tour the area in 2008, most of the debris has been cleared and all that remains are a few brick houses scattered amongst the skeletal foundations of countless others. Katrina virtually wiped this neighbourhood away, literally knocking houses off their foundations.

The bus turns in to what was once a neighbourhood near the levee, and we are greeted by the remains of brilliant pink canvas structures. They were part of an art installation called The Pink Project. Dozens of tent-like buildings had dotted the landscape, denoting the spots where houses once stood and, presumably, would stand again. Our guide informs us that superstar Brad Pitt and the Make It Right Foundation had launched The Pink Project a few months earlier. As we drive by Common Ground Relief, a non-profit foundation that initiated the gutting of houses in the Lower Ninth and assisted residents after the flood, a sign greets us: “TOURIST Shame On YOU. Driving BY Without Stopping. Paying TO See MY PAIN. 1600+ DIED HERE.” My companions and I take some solace in the fact that, despite taking part in America’s Greatest Catastrophe tour, we aren’t really tourists. It’s reading week in Canada and our group of university students has come down to help out by giving...
media support to Common Ground Relief. We’re volunteers and we are staying in the thick of things where Make It Right homes are going to be constructed.

Thom Pepper, the operations director for Common Ground Relief, tells us excitedly about how Pitt’s Make It Right, in collaboration with community stakeholders, is planning to build 150 new, LEED-certified homes in the seven-block area next to the levee. Make It Right has tracked down 90 of 150 property owners, and 75 are interested in having new homes. Even from our bus, we can feel the hopeful enthusiasm that pervades the air. It will take more than the biblical three days, but this part of the Lower Ninth Ward, it appears, will rise again.

Before Katrina, there were two views of the Lower Ninth Ward: that of the general public and that of residents. Relying on local and national news reports, the public believed the Lower Ninth to be a dangerous and isolated place, racked by high rates of crime and homicides. Residents, who for years chafed at this portrayal, saw themselves as a community of activists, rich in family networks, embedded in stable neighbourhoods, anchored by affordable homes and a deep Christian faith. As we learned, there are a lot of churches in the Lower Ninth, a lot of homicides and, at 60 per cent, the highest rate of home ownership in all of New Orleans.

In her 2007 article, “The Forgotten People of New Orleans: Community, Vulnerability, and the Lower Ninth Ward,” published in the Journal of American History, Juliette Landphair noted a “fierce loyalty among residents to their neighbourhoods” that encouraged “civic activism focused on strengthening municipal services.” While it had its economic and social troubles, the Lower Ninth’s strong identity attracted non-profits such as Common Ground Relief and Make It Right.

The lower ninth ward today is an eerie expanse of mostly forgotten houses that have been left to rot in Katrina’s aftermath. The area along the levee wall east of the Claiborne Avenue bridge, where Make It Right and others have been busy building houses, is the exception. A bright new sign now welcomes visitors to the “Historic Lower Ninth Ward” as they arrive at Brad Pitt’s legacy: a carnival of colourful, uniquely shaped houses.

Next to Common Ground Relief’s base of operations, Make It Right’s interpretive display has replaced the “TOURIST Shame On YOU” sign. Tourists flock to see the Make It Right houses, which have been featured in Architectural Digest and the Cultured Traveler section of the New York Times. The latter characterized the homes as “New Orleans’s newest tourist attraction.” After telling the story of Katrina, the display presents Make It Right’s mission statement: “To be a catalyst for redevelopment of the
Lower Ninth Ward, by building a neighborhood comprised of safe and healthy homes that are inspired by Cradle to Cradle thinking, with an emphasis on a high quality of design, while preserving the spirit of the community’s culture.”

The “Brad Pitt Houses,” as they are customarily called, are a hit, and Pitt, it seems, is a hero. Make It Right landscape architect Tim Duggan describes the project as a testing lab for sustainable redevelopment. Kelly Schulz, spokesperson for the New Orleans Convention and Visitors Bureau, says Pitt, “has done so much for the city, I can’t even express it. He’s built homes in the most devastated part of the city. And not only is he building homes, but they’re environmentally friendly. He really wants to make the neighbourhood bigger and stronger than it was before.”

But not everyone is so enamoured. Someone has scribbled “PSYCHOBABBLE” under Make It Right’s mission statement on the display sign. Some argue that Pitt’s development does not preserve “the spirit of the community’s culture.” Rebecca Firestone wrote on The Architects’ Take blog, “the fancy LEED homes ignored the social fabric of the old neighbourhood in subtle functional ways, thus providing a fragmented, expensive, and incomplete solution.”

One of the controversies is the failure of the Brad Pitt houses to embrace the porch culture that defined the Lower Ninth Ward. Duggan says that including regional designs “was an explicit request by the founder Brad Pitt.” He concedes, however, that the houses are “modern abstractions.” Visitors to the ward have been known to mistake Make It Right houses for art installations. And indeed in some ways they are. A sign in front of each house gives the name and city of the architect who created it. Architects from around the world have donated their designs for single-family homes and duplexes. A 2009 article in the New York Times describes some of their creations: “An angular house by GRAFT, a multinational architecture firm, features a porch enclosure that looks as though it had been cracked open by a storm, an unfortunate visual resonance. A house by the Japanese architect Shigeru Ban has a private courtyard space between the living room and bedrooms, but none of the detailing that would make it feel like a part of New Orleans.”

Pepper, who lives in the area, says “everybody who comes in from out of town goes ‘Oh wow, this is really great,’ but they [the houses] have not been well received here in the community.” In addition to complaints about the porches, the houses are criticized for being small and not suitable for multigenerational family living.
Pitt may be chagrined to hear that his Make It Right houses have disappointed some locals, but he can take heart from Craig Colten, a geography professor at Louisiana State University and author of *An Unnatural Metropolis: Wrestling New Orleans from Nature*. In an interview, Colten said that he believes that the houses have struck a kind of balance. “I might quibble with the design,” he added, “but if it’s shelter over people’s heads, it’s a contribution to the overall viability of the city.”

The Lower Ninth Ward has not been rebuilt despite the six years that have passed since Katrina hit. Also commenting on *The Architects’ Take blog*, architect Mark English is critical of the failure of the city to do more for the Lower Ninth Ward, but that doesn’t mean he’s keen on Pitt’s efforts. He writes, “A vacuum of leadership at every level has left the task of ‘salvation’ to celebrities and their private celebrity architects—with projects that are an exercise of vanity over practicality. Are we seriously expected to believe that a handful of LEED houses will somehow create a template for the future, even while the architecture itself destroys the porch culture that formerly characterized the close-knit social life of the neighbourhood?”

Ironically, however, these celebrity efforts have “sort of forced the city’s hand” in many cases, Pepper recognizes. Utilities are coming back, and citizens, with the backing of Make It Right and others, are fighting for a new civic centre and getting parks rebuilt. “[It’s] been a struggle,” Pepper says, “[but] it’s been made a lot easier because of Brad Pitt’s interest in pioneering and helping to rebuild down here.”

Whichever position one takes, the Make It Right intervention may best serve as a cautionary tale demonstrating that green buildings need to attend to local culture in their design and execution if they are to make a strong contribution to sustainability.

Perhaps in the wake of Katrina, Pitt and his collection of local, national and international architects were tantalized by the imaginary “blank canvas” before them, and in their enthusiasm they unwittingly created a place to be toured rather than lived in. From the window of a bus, the future looks bright and exciting for the people of the Lower Ninth Ward. We wondered what the perspective was for residents watching the tourists roll by, but there was no one out on a porch to ask.

**NOTES AND DEFINITIONS**

LEED: Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design; frequently used for standards in earth-friendly building. (para. 4)

catalyst: determining factor to encourage movement, inspiration. (para. 8)
STRUCTURE AND TECHNIQUE

Canadian university student Stephen Svenson joined others during a Canadian reading week to help the Common Ground Relief project in New Orleans. Svenson volunteers with Brad Pitt’s Make It Right project in the building of 150 new homes to restore the Lower Ninth Ward area of New Orleans, the neighbourhood hardest hit by Hurricane Katrina and one that also struggled with economic hardship even before the disaster.

Svenson’s article contrasts the “do good” desires of celebrities and volunteers with the needs of the community by exploring the positive and negative sides of the philanthropic endeavours’ rationale and goals.

TOPICS FOR DISCUSSION AND WRITING

1. Using examples from the article, what are some of the issues faced by the community in the rebuilding of the Lower Ninth Ward? How do these needs compare to the goals of the organizers?
2. What is Svenson’s purpose in writing the article? Is his conclusion in line with the rest of the article’s tone? Provide examples to support your opinion.
3. What challenges do the organizations face in rebuilding the community? How do the associations and the respective members demonstrate their commitment?
4. What could be some of the reasons for the slow work in New Orleans?
5. Svenson uses external sources to support some of his statements. Do these sources provide relevant information? What, if any, other individuals or groups would you speak with and include?
6. What questions, if any, do you think are unanswered by the article?
7. As a volunteer to help with “media support,” does Svenson’s article support the Common Ground Relief project or criticize it? Use examples from the piece to explain your conclusion.