Insurgent Architecture in the Seventh Ward

Rob Corser and Nils Gore
University of Kansas

Tactics are the practical means used to achieve strategic objectives. Compared to end objectives, tactics generally are much more flexible. While some tactical objectives do not change, others will vary considerably, adjusting themselves to fit each moment...

— Che Guevara

In January 2006, four months after the ravages of hurricane Katrina, we visited New Orleans to initiate a series of design-build collaborations between the KU School of Architecture and a newly forming neighborhood organization that came to be called the Porch Cultural Organization in the Seventh Ward. The unique character and challenges faced by the Seventh Ward residents, the depth of need after the hurricane, the vacuum of government resources and leadership, and a distance of more than 1000 miles between Kansas and New Orleans, have all contributed to the unique character of this ongoing project, now in its fifth semester. During that time, our expectations for the project have changed, our intentions for what we wanted to do have evolved, and our ways of interacting with our client group have matured in ways that we would not have predicted at the outset. The project objectives have transformed along with the rapid growth and changing needs of the Porch organization. The unprecedented conditions of post-Katrina New Orleans necessitated an inherently flexible approach to the work. In the DOMUS article "Reinventing New Orleans," published in 2007, author Anthony Fontenot described the project saying: "These small-scale interventions in the social and urban landscape, what Robert Corser describes as a form of 'guerilla architecture,' are intended as an immediate and inexpensive way of satisfying the needs of a specific group." [1]

Looking back on the past two years of work in New Orleans, we are interested in using this article to explore this idea of 'guerrilla architecture': to understand what that term might mean and how it might relate to our work. Although we began with an ethos of working quickly and flexibly, outside normal structures of design review or code approval, by focusing on light, mobile or highly targeted interventions, we did not intentionally model our work on any clear idea of guerilla architecture. In fact, it is only in retrospect that we are compelled to ask ourselves if this can truly be called a manifestation of guerilla architecture at all. In order to address this question, first we will try to frame a clearer understanding of exactly what defines or characterizes such an approach. Finally, we feel an obligation to evaluate critically how our emerging approach to design-build contributes new dimensions to this growing area of design pedagogy. Following a brief project overview, we will address some of these issues arising from our work.

Project Overview

In late 2005, the design team made its first contact with a newly-forming neighborhood association — the Porch Cultural Organization — in an economically challenged portion of the Seventh Ward, a majority African American district (94% in 2000) rich in history and tradition but suffering from under education, unemployment, disinvestment and numerous blighted properties even before hurricane Katrina. According to the 2000 census, 77% of households were renters with a median income of $12,459. Among adults over 25 years of age, 52% did not have a high school diploma.[2]

The initial design goals established by the community focused on the desire to reknit the neighborhood's social fabric and to raise its level of self-sufficiency and neighborhood pride. Between January and May of 2006, the design team made four separate trips to the neighborhood, and completed the installation of a series of public notice boards and a new community garden featuring a covered gathering space and a storage facility to host a tool lending library program.

One of the first needs faced by the community was for communication tools to get the word out about new resources, activities, and events. In response, the design team fabricated a series of distinctive notice boards that were intended to be placed at strategic places in the neighborhood to facilitate communication at a time when many residents still did not have utilities or phone service. With the help of neighborhood residents, these were installed early in February of 2006. Among the programs subsequently hosted by the notice boards was a poster series highlighting neighborhood leaders.[3] During that February visit, additional meetings were held leading to the development of the community garden project.

Located in an abandoned lot, the community garden features the first new permanent structures built in the neighborhood post-Katrina. The goal for this intervention was to give the neighborhood association a presence and some useful structures while they worked on acquiring a building to host their expanding operations. The shade structure was based on studies of Afro-Caribbean and Gulf Coast timber framing, and eventually took the form of a prefabricated system capable of being expanded or replicated on other

sites as needs arise. The tool shed is a robust steel and plywood panelized system featuring incised patterns derived from African textiles. Flexibility was immediately called for as the potential site for the community garden changed numerous times during the design and construction process and was only decided several weeks before the installation of our already fabricated structures.

Since its completion in May 2006, residents have embraced the garden, planting numerous beds with sunflowers, vegetables, and herbs, and they have laid plans to start an urban herb-farm program, employing local youth in a small, non-profit business venture. Numerous social gatherings have also been held in the garden, and the tool shed is hosting a growing collection of donated tools that are the start of their tool-lending program.

Subsequent projects have included a second shade pavilion for another location in the neighborhood, the creation of a mobile stage to host community events, an outdoor classroom to allow for educational and arts programs to be held adjacent to a newly acquired community center building, and flexible furniture systems for use in that community center.

From the outset, we have attempted to work closely with the Porch organization as it has evolved from a vague idea into a working reality, and to be culturally aware so that our projects would have a relevance to the users and neighborhood context. In our first community meeting, Seventh Ward artist Willie Birch challenged us to respond to the "African roots of Creole culture," and we have tried to work with that challenge constantly in mind.

Design-Build in New Orleans, Post-Katrina

Although there are examples of design-build programs that bring together groups of students to collaborate consistently with inner-city partners (Detroit Collaborative Design Center for example) or who travel to work intensively with local residents for shorter periods of weeks or months in areas of need internationally (like Basic Initiative), before hurricane Katrina, there were few programs that sought to collaborate consistently over a long distance, in an ongoing design/build process wherein face-to-face interaction is limited to only a handful of days each semester. In the aftermath of the storm, numerous schools of architecture have launched a wide array of programs that range from traditional approaches to urban design or collaborative design assistance, [4] to intensive on-site building efforts like Tulane's Urban Build program, and Project Locus's 'House of Dance and Feathers.' Most, however, are employing proven models of design or design-build project delivery.

Rather than focusing on generating an over arching vision in response to local needs, or proposing intensive, on-site building projects, our distance from New Orleans has encouraged us to focus more on approaches that favor lightness, flexibility, and the ability to quickly change course in response to changing neighborhood dynamics and desires, fluctuating

funding sources, academic calendars, and other unforeseeable circumstances. This tactical approach, aimed at meshing more productively with the everyday life of neighborhood residents but without the benefit of physical proximity, makes our process a relatively unique model for design assistance and design-build pedagogy.

What is 'Guerilla Architecture' ?

Reviewing recent design literature one can find numerous references to 'guerrilla architecture,' but no outright definitions of the term. Some of the earliest references are found in Robert Goodman's 1971 book *After the Planners*, which is largely a critique of post-war planning that resulted in socially destructive urban renewal and highway construction, often through disadvantaged urban neighborhoods like the Seventh Ward.[5] Goodman argues that top-down planning is potentially problematic because there is too much opportunity for external vested interests (like for-profit corporations) to coopt project goals in order to maximize their own financial gains from massive programs like the development of subsidized public housing, roads and infrastructure. To paraphrase: he decries the lack of transparency and likelihood of corruption in large, 'top-down' approaches and posits smaller, more nuanced, locally generated and directed 'bottom-up' initiatives instead. In his discussion of architecture and politics, George Baird describes Goodman's conclusions:

> *…for Goodman the entire formal apparatus of architecture had become at best irrelevant, and at worst oppressive. He concluded by calling for architects to reject what he saw as their traditional roles: "Instead of remaining the 'outside expert' trying to resolve the conflicting needs of the low-middle-high income metropolis, or simply 'helping the poor,' we can become participants in our own community's search for new family structures or other changing patterns of association, and participants in the process of creating physical settings which would foster these ways of life — in effect, we become a part of rather than an expert for, cultural change… (And) in what might be called guerilla architecture, I've found that the style of action, in fact, plays a crucial role in determining the effectiveness of a demand.*[6]

Goodman's reference to guerilla architecture as a particular 'style of action' evokes aspects of 'direct action' as an important model for our recent work in New Orleans that might shed further light on how 'guerilla architecture' might be understood.

Modern manifestations of direct action have their roots in the free-speech movement, anarchism, and punk music DIY (Do It Yourself) culture. In *Tearing Down the Streets: Adventures in Urban Anarchy*, author Jeff Ferrell describes the politics and tactics of direct action by showing examples of how graffiti artists, radical environmentalists, and others "clash with police…in an attempt take back urban spaces from the developers and 'Disneyfiers.'"[7] Although one of the major missions of our collaboration with the Porch is to discourage gentrification and the commodification of New Orleans's authentic cultural practices — and, thus, has an overt political dimension — it is clear that our socially productive intentions are only distantly related to the anarchist's 'clashes with the police.' In our case, there is little (if any) opposition to the work we are doing in the neighborhood; our 'direct action' has a different relationship to politics.

According to April Carter in *Direct Action and Democracy Today*, "Direct action is...generally understood as a means for people to exert pressure on governments or other powerful institutions such as business corporations." Given the long-held skepticism about the potential effectiveness of ANY government among many New Orleans residents, this political sense of direct action is not a particularly apt description of our work in the Seventh Ward. We, and our neighborhood partners, are not seeking to exert influence on institutions of power like the government, but instead, are working within a vacuum of institutional power — where government has failed to respond and lack of social cohesion threatens the community from within. In terms of power relationships, our goal is to help local residents re-empower themselves both individually and collectively. It could be said that rather than 'direct action' we are encouraging a sort of 'active redirection' of neighborhood energy to focus back on itself — to reinvest and recommit to the rebuilding of the community's tattered social fabric. In his 2004 book, *Urban Avant-Gardes: Art, Architecture and Change*, Malcolm Miles asks: "Can art or architecture change the world? Is it possible, despite successive failures, to think of a new cultural avant-garde today?" His more nuanced description of direct action is a particularly useful way

to imagine a productive, rather than oppositional focus for direct action:

> *At first, direct action seems aligned with interruption of the dominant society's routines, often in symbolic gestures that appeal to the humor and imagination of diverse groups of people and might be expected to widen a base of popular support for alternative policies or anti-capitalist practices of consumption. But it may equally, or more, be a means through which the values of participants evolve into a new social consciousness…it may be that direct action is not primarily aimed at changing policy (though it may open public debate, particularly when there is an overreaction by the authorities to its playful tactics); it may be that the ephemeral site of direct action is instead a social formation co-present with (while rejecting the values of) the dominant society; and that the key aim is to build an alternative value structure among participants, so that the means is the end and what is seeded is likely to be long-lasting.* [8]

By focusing on the creation of new social consciousness and the seeding of long-lasting changes in participant's value structures, Miles' characterization of direct action accords well with our subconscious desires as teachers to help shape the attitudes of young professionals and our commitment as citizens to participate in neighborhood re-building.

So, what can we conclude about the definition of 'guerilla architecture' and its relationship with political strategies of 'direct action'? Looking at our work, from our point of view, we would like to think that it is progressive, edgy, and maybe even transgressive. We like the idea of slinking in, in the dead of night, quickly erecting provocative pieces of architecture, and disappearing, just as rapidly without a trace. Exciting and fresh, is it not? Maybe...

Or maybe not. Consider this:

> *You take a long time ago, this seventh ward here was full of trade people. You can build a house, really didn't have to spend no money at all. You knew plasterers. You knew lathers. You knew carpenters. You knew plumbers, you know, black guys that was plumbers. It was hard for them to get a license, but they still knew the work, you see.*
>
> *You didn't have to go like to Home Depot and all them different places. You'd go to most of them second-hand places and get that good old cypress and pine material that you can't find today. Everybody helped each other and people wasn't jealous in those days like that. I'd work on somebody's for free on Saturday.* [9]

These are the words of Allison "Tootie" Montana, a Mardi Gras Indian chief and resident of the Seventh Ward, describing what it was like to be a tradesman (in his case, a lather) in the city of New Orleans. The Seventh Ward is recognized as a "quintessential Creole neighborhood," and the home of many of the skilled tradesmen who built some of the notable mansions and buildings in the uptown district of New Orleans, featuring exquisite examples of craft and design in the building arts. Skilled Creole artisans like Tootie Montana created the ironwork, plaster, moldings, and carpentry that contribute to New Orleans' rich building heritage, in part. The typical apprenticeship for many of these workers consisted of on-the-job training from family members: fathers and grandfathers in family-owned businesses. In that sense, many of the skills and techniques are "home-grown;" authentic products of local culture. [10] A parallel, subaltern building culture developed in New Orleans in reaction to the exclusion of blacks from mainstream (white) building companies, labor unions, training programs and other cultural structures and systems.

In other spheres of life subalterns arose as well: Social and pleasure clubs were developed as alternatives to mainstream business, philanthropic and country clubs; mutual aid and benevolent societies were formed as alternatives to commercial insurance companies.[11] Black-owned businesses flourished along North Claiborne Avenue, and in the realm of the musical arts, jazz and blues developed as authentic, parallel forms outside of the white mainstream.[12] Generally, these subaltern cultures developed without the sanction of the mainstream culture (they were, in some cases, vigorously opposed by the mainstream culture), and accordingly, evolved their own norms, traditions, rules, and patterns of behavior. It is easy not to know about these subaltern cultures: "The conspicuous neglect of this rich cultural idiom in the social science literature reflects the persistent invisibility of the respectable working class in New Orleans itself."[13]

In some cases, subaltern cultural practices become visible to the world at large, as when, say, second-liners appropriate the public street — after having secured the necessary permits and approvals from the city — for a Sunday afternoon parade, and "through the transformative experience of the parade, they become owners of the streets."[14] In other cases, the subaltern practice remains underground: "the underclass black [Mardi Gras] Indians remain tribal and anonymous, perform their own music, and march through the city on the back streets, where they come and go as they please. As in colonial times, they still deny outside authority and refuse to subject themselves to the financial burden and humiliation of being monitored and controlled by the city. To do so, in fact, would betray the function and historical meaning of their tradition."[15]

Generally not intended as overtly political, transgressive practices, these subaltern cultural movements were invented to facilitate the daily business of life as a matter of practical concern. It would be potentially detrimental — by inviting mainstream intervention — to call too much attention to subaltern practices. As a result, many of these subaltern cultural practices have qualities similar to that of our work in the Seventh Ward. Both are flexible, improvisatory, low-cost, episodic, collaborative, self-initiated, and self-contained (in the sense of not seeking approval of the mainstream culture).

It is a question of means and ends: given a goal, there are numerous ways of achieving it; but depending upon circumstances, not all avenues are open. Extreme circumstances may call for atypical means or tactics. The relationship of tactics and circumstances is a vital one; according to Michel de Certeau, "The place of a tactic belongs to the other. A tactic insinuates itself into the other's place, fragmentarily, without taking it over in its entirety, without being able to keep it at a distance. It has at its disposal no base where it can capitalize on its advantages, prepare its expansions, and secure independence with respect to circumstances."[16] Tactics are intimately tied to circumstances and each continually re-informs and redefines the other. When disenfranchised people develop subaltern cultures, they advance a new set of tactics to make their lives livable within the circumstances that define their world. Similarly, when we bring students to New Orleans to

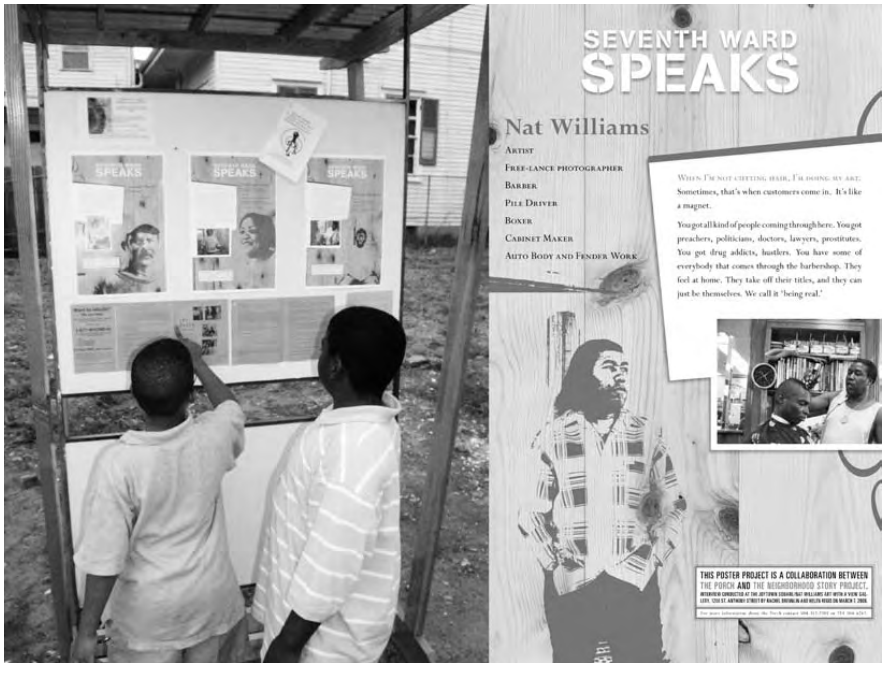
assist in rebuilding we behave tactically, based on our circumstances and the post-Katrina context.

In *Spaces of Hope*, geographer and social theorist David Harvey describes at length, a theoretical political actor he calls "the insurgent architect." He describes their particular skills: "…in addition to the speculative imagination which he or she necessarily employs, she or he has available some special resources for critique, resources from which to generate alternative visions as to what might be possible." [17] He goes on to describe the importance of creating both practical tools for, and utopian visions of, new social realities; and he focuses on the related processes of rule-making and rule-breaking.

> *Challenging the rules of community means challenging the very existence of such a collectivity by challenging its rules. It then follows that communities are rarely stable for long. Abundant opportunities exist here for the insurgent architect to promote new rules and/or to shape new spaces. Our capacities as rule makers and rule breakers here enters fully into play. Part of the attraction of the spatial form utopian tradition is precisely the way in which it creates an imaginary space in which completely different rules can be contemplated.* [18]

In this instance, one might ask whether appropriating public space for festivals in which a totally new power structure of Mardi Gras Indian tribes — with chiefs and warriors, territories and social hierarchies — might be considered a semi-utopian, rather than simply a culturally-resistant way, of imagining an alternative reality. It is a rule-making as much as it is a rule-breaking activity in its practice of substituting new, grass roots, bottom-up social and spatial structures for the top-down realities of City Hall and FEMA. In our design/build collaborations that focus on creating targeted tools of community infrastructure, the will *to get it done by any means possible* represents both the student's desire *to do* rather than simply *to imagine*. At the same time, it represents neighborhood residents' commitment 'to do for themselves,' rather than wait for some disembodied government agency to do things for them.

So maybe this is who we are: "insurgent architects," members of mainstream culture, with an understanding of the advantages (and disadvantages) of the norms congruent with membership in that culture, yet with an openness to imagine something other, the skills to propose alternatives, and the willingness to act on that imagination. By collaborating with a subaltern culture and investing in the rich possibilities inherent in that culture, we have been able to build a few small projects that we think will make a difference in the life of the Seventh Ward community.



It is important to avoid romanticizing the transgressive thrill or overestimating the political effectiveness of the modest projects we have undertaken. They remain small but useful tools, and we hope, evocative catalysts for community action. Larger battles remain to be fought, and as Harvey points out:

> *It is not always easy here to define the difference between insurgent politics of a progressive sort and the exclusionary and authoritarian practices of, say, homeowner associations who defend their property rights…For the privileged, community often means securing and enhancing privileges already gained. For the underprivileged it all too often means controlling their own slum.* [19]

It is our hope that by assisting in the creation of incremental improvements in neighborhood cohesiveness and involvement, that larger and more meaningful political, social and economic changes might be fostered.

notes

1 Anthony Fontenot, "Reinventing New Orleans," *DOMUS* 905 (2007): 95–99.

2 US Census Bureau, 2000 Census

3 Rachel Breunlin, of the Neighborhood Story Project, coordinated the poster project and has documented twenty-four community residents so far.

4 See CityBuild (http://citybuild.org/) for an accounting of university participation in post-Katrina design and planning. University of Kansas is a member school.

5 The Seventh Ward was the victim of destructive highway construction when I-10 was constructed along the path of Claiborne Avenue, the 'black' business street in this portion of New Orleans. Long-time neighborhood residents are still bitter about the resultant decimation of their indigenous business and social culture. Also, as of this writing, there is a city council-approved plan in the city of New Orleans to demolish much of the existing public housing stock (some 5000 housing units) and replace it with mixed-income, lower density housing. There is an abundance of skepticism among public housing residents that they will be included in the future schemes and many— understandably, given the track record of similar projects, in other cities — see these plans as a way to "get rid of" them.

6 George Baird, *The Space of Appearance* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2003), 264.

7 Jeff Ferrell, *Tearing Down the Streets: Adventures in Urban Anarchy* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 2001).

8 Malcolm Miles, *Urban Avant-Gardes: Art, Architecture and Change* (London: Routledge, 2004), 214.

9 John Ethan Hankins, et. al., *Raised to the Trade: Creole Building Arts of New Orleans* (Gretna, LA: Pelican Publishing, 2003), 115.

10 Ibid. "Among black plasterers — often excluded from jobs on the basis of race — learning the trade sometimes involved sneaking off during a lunch break to a work site just to observe. Plasterer Herbert Gettridge…was forced to 'steal' ideas because he was not allowed to apprentice with white workers." (p. 116) Traced back through generations of hand-me-down learning, one can detect the African roots of Creole architecture in the design and detailing of vernacular building in New Orleans.

11 Michael P. Smith, *Mardi Gras Indians* (Gretna, LA: Pelican Publishing Co., 1994), 25.

12 Helen Regis, "Second lines, Minstrelsy, and the Contested Landscapes of New Orleans Afro-Creole Festivals." *Cultural Anthropology* v.14, no.4 (1999): 472.

13 Ibid., 473.

14 Ibid., 478.

15 Smith, 25.

16 Michel deCerteau, *The Practice of Everyday Life*, (Minneapolis: Univ. of Minnesota Press, 1998), xxix.

17 David Harvey, *Spaces of Hope* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000), 237-238. When Harvey uses the term, "insurgent architect," he is speaking metaphorically. Obviously, there is no metaphor required in our case.

18 Ibid., 239.

19 Ibid., 240.