Inventing the Crescent:
A Review and Critique of New Orleans’ “Reinventing the Crescent” Plan

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Inventing the Crescent

Introduction

In August 2005, Hurricane Katrina, one of the deadliest storms in U.S. history, hit the Gulf Coast, causing significant damage in the southern Gulf states. New Orleans, a city built partially below sea level and protected by levees, was hardest hit by the hurricane and its effects. Eighty percent of the city was flooded, primarily in the lower income areas that were mostly residential (Figure 1).\(^1\) Hurricane Katrina completely destroyed or made uninhabitable over 300,000 homes, and caused an estimated $96 billion in damage.\(^2\) Nearly five years later, recovery efforts have been uncoordinated, ineffective, and slow in bringing change and people back to the city. The majority of the low-lying neighborhoods still have only recovered about 55% of their pre-Katrina populations (Figure 2). Given the widespread damage from Katrina, planners, developers, and designers have proposed a variety of plans to redevelop the devastated areas of the city.\(^3,4,5\) Unfortunately, the majority of these big plans do little to address the wider landscape issues of the region.

New Orleans in the wake of Katrina is a unique city to plan and redevelop in, due to the city’s historical and cultural context. Neighborhoods have unique cultural identities in New Orleans; from the French Quarter to the Lower Ninth Ward to the Central Business District, people identify strongly with their neighborhoods, and neighborhoods have long been a part of the political process. The City Planning Commission divided New Orleans into 13 different planning districts (Figure 3). After initial plans for the redevelopment of New Orleans came out in early 2006, “many neighborhoods began to meet and develop their own independent neighborhood plans, enlisting the help of local residents, planners, architects, national universities and professional firms.”\(^6\) The strength of neighborhoods in people’s

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**Figure 1.** This map shows flood depth in New Orleans after Hurricane Katrina. Most of the flooding came from Lake Pontchartrain, and devastated much of the poorer parts of the city.

**Figure 2.** Divided by planning district, this map shows the percent of June 2005 residences that were back in use in September 2008.
identities and interests in New Orleans creates a different context to work in than most designers and planners are used to, and presents a unique challenge to those who choose to work in New Orleans.

The primary landscape issue that plagues New Orleans is water infrastructure. With much of the city below sea level, and the end of the Mississippi River and Lake Pontchartrain forming major boundaries of the city, the larger issue of water is one the city must always have in mind. The first section of this paper will explore the water issues and large-scale proposals to prevent future flooding and create a sustainable water management plan for the future. The remainder of the paper will focus on a master plan called Reinventing the Crescent, prepared in part by Hargreaves Associates. While there are many ideas and plans in the works for New Orleans, the Crescent plan was selected because it is one of the most concrete plans in New Orleans and currently has the most momentum and capital. The project, located on the banks of the Mississippi River, focuses on the development of park and public space to reconnect the people of New Orleans to the waterfront (Figure 4).
The second section of the paper will introduce this plan in detail, and the third section will present critique and analysis of the plan.

**Water and Flood Control Management in New Orleans After Hurricane Katrina**

The city of New Orleans has a long and troubled relationship with the water bodies that flank the city on three sides. As a well-established port for the southern United States, New Orleans depends on access to major waterways such as the Mississippi River and the Gulf of Mexico, and established itself commercially and economically largely based on its location. However, New Orleans is also situated directly in a flood prone river delta that is subject to violent tropical hurricanes and storm surges. Over the past 200 years, 27 major floods have struck New Orleans, an average rate of nearly one major flood every ten years. The primary water hazard is from high levels in the Mississippi River and Lake Pontchartrain. This is caused by natural rainfall and storm-related surges from the Mississippi River Gulf Outlet Canal. The construction of the Gulf Outlet Canal, completed in 1965, was largely responsible for the significant erosion of coastal swamp and wetlands. By 1989, the canal was over three times wider than originally constructed in some areas due to the swift erosion of neighboring wetlands. Furthermore, the canal provides a direct path for storm surges to push towards the city without impediment from the previously existing natural buffers in the Mississippi River delta region (Figure 5).

Recognizing the continually devastating effects of the channel, the city of New Orleans closed it in early 2009 and is working to create a barrier of 430,000 tons of rock to block future storm surges from Lake Pontchartrain and alleviate some of the saltwater intrusion. The risk of flooding is further exacerbated by the fact that much of the city is below sea level so much of the water that makes it past the flood barriers must be pumped out (Figure 6).

Managing the complex water-related hazards associated with the Mississippi delta is arguably the most daunting challenge of the redevelopment of New Orleans. The New Orleans

![Diagram](image.png)

**Figure 5.** The manmade Mississippi River Gulf Outlet Canal contributed significantly to the surge of stormwater into Lake Pontchartrain during the hurricane. The canal was cut through the natural formation of the silt deposits in the delta region and provides an unfiltered path for saltwater infiltration.
2030 plan for water management focuses on examining each community or neighborhood for its resilience from water-related hazards. Each community’s capacity to anticipate risk and respond to hazards when they occur is the central focus of this plan, which is still poorly developed, for the city’s redevelopment. On a larger scale, the plan touts a tiered system of natural and manmade barriers and the Lake Pontchartrain Basin Foundation as the most effective strategy for flood control (Figure 7).

The most critical feature of the Foundation’s system is the restoration of coastal wetlands and natural barrier elements such as silt deposits in the river delta, which have been eroding at alarming rates over the past century. The Foundation estimates that over 2 million acres of coastal land has been lost on Louisiana’s coastline over the past 70 to 80 years. Furthermore, the construction of dams and levees along the Mississippi River both in the gulf region and farther inland have blocked the natural passage of silt and sediment that contribute to the consistent regeneration of coastal land.\textsuperscript{11} Despite efforts to promote the regeneration of coastal wetlands and natural barriers through actions such as the closure of the Gulf Outlet Canal, the sheer magnitude of coastal land that has eroded over the past century is so great that these regions may be impossible to realistically restore.
Project in Focus: Reinventing the Crescent

The Reinventing the Crescent project benefits from its prime location on some of the highest ground in New Orleans. However, it is not the most immediately obvious site for expansive park and recreational space, as the public of New Orleans has been traditionally detached from the Mississippi River. Since the river provides the valuable inland transportation and shipping linkages that have resulted in much of the city’s economic prosperity since the 18th century, the riverfront has held a largely industrial role and was rarely harnessed for public use (Figure 8). Kirt Rieder, a principal at Hargreaves Associates, the design firm responsible for the Crescent’s landscape architecture remarks that most residents of New Orleans, including those from the neighborhoods abutting the 40-acre Crescent site, have never even visited the riverfront and do not consider it a welcoming public space.\(^\text{12}\) Indeed, much of the land adjacent to the river has been historically occupied by ports, wharves, railroad lines, and shipping-related industrial facilities. The Crescent project primarily seeks to remove the physical barriers to public access along the Mississippi River and develop a continuous network of green spaces along the waterfront while creating gathering places of distinct character to encourage civic activity and foster community energy.\(^\text{13}\)

On November 15, 2006, the City of New Orleans, the New Orleans City Council and the Port of New Orleans reached an agreement that defined the purpose and location of the Crescent project. This agreement was called the Cooperative Endeavor Agreement (CEA). The CEA mandated that the riverfront should be redeveloped and used for public open space, commercial, and non-maritime uses. The New Orleans Building Corporation (NOBC) took the lead on the project of developing the riverfront. Through the guidance of the NOBC, the Reinventing the Crescent Steering Committee was created in 2006. This committee consists of leaders from all related public organizations and representatives of all surrounding neighborhood associations. The design process was spearheaded by a combined team of planners, urban designers and landscape architects from many design firms, including Chan Krieger Sieniewicz, Hargreaves Associates, and TEN Arquitectos.

Figure 8. The current riverfront is a post-industrial landscape that still has some active industry but is largely abandoned.
Location
The site for development is a six-mile crescent-shaped strip of land that runs along the Mississippi River’s edge in southeastern New Orleans. The development site was established by the CEA and is 174 acres in area along six miles of riverfront property (Figure 9). Its width extends from the riverbank to the floodwalls leaving a long yet narrow area for development. Of the 174 acres encompassed within the CEA, only 22%, or approximately 39 acres, were appropriate sites for buildings. This is due mainly to construction restrictions provided by the US Army Corps of Engineers. In order to maximize land usage, the area was designated for green public park space.

The Planning Process
The project leaders behind the planning process are the New Orleans Building Corporation (NOBC) and the Reinventing the Crescent Steering Committee. The development of the plan was shaped by the input of various representatives of surrounding communities and influential organizations. The community input process lasted for a year and included a number of town halls and community meetings, many of which were well attended. After the selection of the design team, the first two months were used for research and conceptualization of the physical design. Over the next three months, the plan was publicly reviewed. During this public review stage, the plan was improved and implemented accordingly. After the final review, the final concept design was completed after assuring that all other design concerns had been addressed. For the remaining four months of the planning stage, economic studies assessing the feasibility of the plan were completed. During the final stages of the planning process, the NOBC and the Steering committee formulated strategies on how to achieve each of the stated goals throughout the project.

Cost of Development
The estimated cost of the Reinventing the Crescent project is $294 million. The sources of funding for the project are a combination of state, federal, local and private sources. The majority of funding will come from the state of Louisiana, which will provide over 50% of the total estimated cost of development. The federal government will then provide 23% of the total cost, leaving the local government, private, and non-profits funders to provide a combined 22%. The current amount of money received for initial development is $30 million, provided by the federal government’s Community Development Block Grant funding.

Development Goals
The Reinventing the Crescent plan was developed to address multiple goals. Each goal was formulated by the needs and concerns of the citizens, and also the physical and structural needs of the city that would provide comfort and safety for every citizen. The first
Reinventing the Crescent

Locations of interest

01  Celeste Park
02  Market Street Promenade
03a  Riversphere
03b  Nine Muses Square
04a  Julia Street River Terrace
04b  Convention Center Blvd.
05  Spanish Plaza
06  Woldenberg Park
07  Moonwalk
08a  French Market Connection
08b  Place Portage
09a  Mandeville Wharf
09b  Mandeville Rear Apron Connection
10  Press Street Landing
11  Piety Park
12  Poland Fields
13  Bywater Point
14  Port of Embarkation
15  Holy Cross Levee Promenade

Figure 9. The Reinventing the Crescent development project is located on a six-mile strip of land on the banks of the Mississippi River.
major design goal was the removal of the physical barriers to provide public access at the Mississippi River. For much of the past century, flood walls and rail lines connecting to the ports have been in use along the waterfront, forming barriers to public access to the river (Figure 10). Despite their abandonment, the remaining train tracks and current flood walls still act as barriers to the waterfront. The *Reinventing the Crescent* plan aims to remove these barriers, both physically and psychologically, by providing access to the river for the first time, retrofitting old industrial spaces into gardens and public centers, and building entry points to the park along the riverfront (Figure 11). After removing these barriers, the designers intend to create a continuous linear network of green spaces along the water’s edge.

The second major goal of development is to create places of distinct character that encourage civic activity and foster community energy. Some of the important ways in which the designers will achieve this goal is through the creation of public parkways and the renovation and creation of new infrastructure. Throughout the riverfront, there are numerous abandoned buildings and infrastructure that are unsafe for human occupancy. Additionally, due to the region’s past history, which was centered on trade and transport, the remaining infrastructure conveys an image of the abandoned industry (Figure 12). In order to bring life back to the riverfront, the designers aimed to turn these abandoned spaces into attractions for citizens of all backgrounds and ages (Figure 13). Through programmed spaces such as outdoor cinemas, amphitheatres, playgrounds, and nature preserves, the design team tries to create new uses for old infrastructure that better serve the needs of the community and attract people to the waterfront.

The third major goal of development is to breathe life into the economy of the region. The design team hopes to make an impact on the region through increasing the municipal and state revenue by expanding the tax base. The plan also seeks to contribute to the New Orleans economy by creating 24,000 new permanent jobs and thousands of temporary jobs throughout the construction and development phase of the project. Since the site for the

![Figure 10](image1.jpg), The current railway infrastructure is a barrier to the riverfront and physically and psychologically limits public access.

![Figure 11](image2.jpg), This rendering by the designers depicts their vision for the railroad tracks that incorporates them into a larger park and garden.
Crescent project is directly adjacent to the Central Business District and other prominent neighborhoods, the designers hope it will act not only to create jobs during its development, but also to revitalize this area of the city as a whole and act as an economic stimulus for all of New Orleans. Through the development of the region, the developers hope that new businesses and industries will emerge. This stimulation of economic growth is projected by the plan to trigger $3.6 billion in new private investments near the riverfront.

**Design Plan**

Using the above goals, the rich history of the riverfront, and the unique constraints of the site, the design team developed a master plan for the area. The major elements of the master plan can be seen in Figure 9.

**Crescent Development, Phase One: Crescent Park**

The first phase of the plan is Crescent Park, an area just east of the bend in the river (Figure 14). The sub-projects of phase one are the redevelopment of Mandeville Shed and Piety Wharf, linked together by Linear Park and Piety Gardens. These projects were selected for initial development because of their low cost and the designers’ belief that they can provide meaningful progress toward bringing people to the riverfront. The project so far has only received $30 million in funding, and as such the planning and design team had to select subprojects that were less costly and showed promise as the foundation for other projects. Both the Mandeville Shed and Piety Wharf projects are redevelopment and retrofitting projects of the old current structures.

The Mandeville Shed project retrofits an old wharf that was partially destroyed by Katrina into a large-scale event and gathering space. The master plan describes it as an open-air venue, an 80,000 square foot amphitheatre, with space for recreational use along the water. Mandeville Crossing provides a winding entryway into the park connected to 77 parking spaces, landing in the Mandeville Shed (Figure 15). Mandeville Wharf is connected...
Piety Wharf by the Linear Park, and farther east is Piety Gardens. Much of Piety Wharf burnt down recently, but the remaining structure will be used as a pavilion with seating, and for a viewing area of the river. Piety Gardens is a large garden with walkways tracing old railroad paths, views of the river and Piety Wharf (Figure 16). The area is primarily designated as a place in the park to see the river, experience the water view and batture landscape, as well as act as an entry-point for locals. One of the largest playgrounds in the park is also located in the Piety Gardens area. At the end of the Garden will be a picnic area, running paths, and places for active recreation such as athletic fields.

The Crescent and Water

The Reinventing the Crescent project benefits from its prime location on some of the highest ground in New Orleans. It is clear that the designers have addressed this site as a post-industrial landscape, with many of the pedestrian paths and promenades following the old patterns of railroad lines and wharf-loading access routes. However, critically absent from the expressed goals of the project is flood protection and mitigation of water hazards.
Though the site of the Crescent project is by no means the most flood-prone or vulnerable land in the city, the plan largely ignores the major water-related issues that are critical to the successful redevelopment of the city. The fact that this project currently has the most momentum of any major development project in New Orleans today, complete with federal, state, and local public funding, is a troubling indicator of the redevelopment priorities of the city. With a total budget of nearly $300 million for construction over the next eight years, the Crescent offers architecturally flashy public spaces in lieu of lasting infrastructural and landscape developments that would contribute to the city’s flood control management system in the long term. The 40-acre site contains already contains long stretches of existing flood walls that pose a significant challenge for the designers of the Crescent’s waterfront. In addition to mandates that the flood gates must be closed indefinitely and that no structure can touch the flood walls in any way, clearance areas of up to 20 feet on each side of the walls must be left vacant for emergency reinforcement by large vehicles.

These policies regarding flood control barriers allude to the larger problem with the water management strategy that extends far beyond the scope of the Crescent project. Nearly five years have passed since Hurricane Katrina but there is still no single body or organization that is responsible for water management and coastal restoration on a citywide or regional scale. While some advocacy groups and organizations have generated the beginnings of plans and recommendations—such as the Lake Pontchartrain Basin Foundation and its tiered defense system—none has been granted the authority, the political capital, or the funding to further develop these ideas and drive them into action. Derek Hoeferlin, a faculty member at Washington University in St. Louis’ Graduate School of Architecture and a project manager of the Unified New Orleans Plan, describes water management as “the elephant in New Orleans’ room,” further noting that the issue of water hazards in any city-backed plan has been “conspicuously ignored.”

Hoeferlin and other architects and planners involved with local redevelopment projects have largely attributed this shortcoming to a lack of clear leadership and the intense battles in New Orleans’ political arena.

Currently, the Army Corps of Engineers is tasked with redeveloping and maintaining flood control management systems for the city but the bureaucratic and brute-force approach employed by the Army Corps is crippling to designers, ecologists, and landscape architects who better understand the regional ecological and hydrological systems. The current strategy of building larger and larger levees along the Mississippi River and Lake Pontchartrain does not provide a realistically sustainable model for flood protection and has actually contributed to land subsidence and erosion of sub-surface drainage infrastructure. A range of non-governmental voices from landscape architects to journalists have stressed the reality that the city and its public still refuse to acknowledge directly: that the constant attempt to keep water completely out of the city is futile. A method of integrating water into the city core is needed to provide space for water to flow and drain through natural
systems. For example, a collaborative water infrastructure project called “Gutter to Gulf” has documented the poor design of most New Orleans streets, which worsen the drainage problems by simply “send[ing] stormwater at high speed across impermeable surfaces and into storm drains.” The slick street surfaces contribute to speeds and volumes of oil and chemically contaminated water that cannot be managed by the city’s pumping systems. The Gutter to Gulf project stresses the importance of the creation of neutral ground, composed of planted street medians and swales that allow for the percolation of water into the street’s underground canal through a sand and gravel filter (Figure 17). By introducing trees and native greenery to roadways and medians, the travel time of the water is increased and the resulting system has greater absorptive capacity (Figure 18). On a regional scale, innovative ecological restoration of coastal wetlands and swamp habitats of the greater delta could offer a much more sustainable long-term solution than the continual erection of levees and barriers around the city core.

The Crescent project underscores this disjoint between designers and the Army Corps, as there has been little, if any, collaboration between the two groups to integrate the existing flood control barriers into the site’s design. To its credit, the Crescent project does offer the promise of effectively reclaiming post-industrial land for public use. But despite the site’s relatively low risk of flooding due to its positioning on high ground, it could serve as a much more compelling model for other parts of the riverfront that are more flood-prone (such as the Lower 9th Ward to the east) by employing a localized version of the multiple lines of defense system proposed by the Lake Pontchartrain Basin foundation. Even the creative addition of natural barrier structures within the landscaped areas or small parcels of vegetative swampland would allow the Crescent to act as a proving ground for waterfront redevelopment. Given its momentum and the availability of funding, the Crescent project could be harnessed by the local and state governments as a venue for innovative design in flood protection, instead of leaving the unsightly flood walls standing as towering, impermeable barriers between the urban core and the river.

Figure 17. A proposal from the Gutter to Gulf project for using planted street medians and swales to slow the speed and volume of stormwater entering the city’s drainage and pump systems.
Politics, Economics, and Neighborhood

The Reinventing the Crescent project exists within the larger context of the New Orleans politics and redevelopment. While the plan has emerged in the five years since Katrina, it does not address issues of physical post-Katrina reconstruction. As mentioned previously, none of the public funding for project comes from state or federal disaster recovery sources. As stated before, the Crescent lies on some of the highest ground in the city and within the commercial and industrial centers for the city that were not flooded during Hurricane Katrina (Figure 19). To categorize the plan as only a quick response to

Figure 18. A visualization of a potential planted median and its linkage to the existing drainage canals below the street level.

Figure 19. None of the riverfront property that the Crescent project will occupy was flooded during Hurricane Katrina. This project is not a recovery effort but is instead a larger redevelopment effort.

"Reinventing the Crescent" and Hurricane Katrina Flooding
Hurricane Katrina would ignore the other, more important issues that are involved. Instead, this project rides the national wave of interest in New Orleans to address more long-term issues of economic development. New Orleans is part of the shrinking cities phenomenon that has affected other American cities such as Detroit or Buffalo. The city reached its peak population of 627,525 in the 1960 census and now has less than 300,000 residents.\(^{16}\) In a *Times-Picayune* article, local architect Steven Bingler stated that “before the storm, we were not realistic about the fact that the city was already shrinking, and had been for a long time.”\(^{17}\) Katrina only exposed issues of blight, vacancy and decline in the city that were largely ignored previously, providing a renewed interest in redevelopment.

The language used to sell the project is consistently focused on the economic incentive that it will deliver and operates on an IF/THEN investment model: IF public sources invest a certain amount to stimulate development, THEN private development will result in increased community spirit, tax revenue, more jobs, and further commercial development. “New Orleans Riverfront: Reinventing the Crescent, An Economic Perspective,” a document produced for the NOBC, details the logic for investing and estimates total profits over a thirty year period. A timeline in this document estimated that the majority of the public funding for all three phases would have been acquired by 2011.\(^{18}\) This document was produced in January 2008, before the economic crisis that began in late 2008. As there is no new material available on funding estimates from the NOBC, it is unclear how development will proceed. The project is already about 18 months behind its original schedule and the first phase of construction is dramatically smaller than the first phase described in the *Reinventing the Crescent* plan.\(^{19}\)

A 2007 press release about the project describes it as “a vibrant riverfront that thrives as a compelling focal point for the city, reconnecting neighborhoods to the waterfront and sparking over $1 billion in new construction.”\(^{20}\) Sean Cummings, the CEO of NOBC, speaks about the project as part of an initiative to attract more business, residents, and tourists to New Orleans by both preserving its cultural heritage and inserting new development, essentially an act of gentrification. Cummings describes, “the idea is that we want to make a break with the past. The city has rested on its laurels for too long. We want to say that this is indeed a new New Orleans. It’s not losing its signature sense of place or culture but it is expressing it in a new time.”\(^{21}\) Cummings is also a boutique hotel developer in the city and owns many properties adjacent to areas that the *Reinventing the Crescent* plan seeks to revitalize. A recent ruling from the Louisiana Board of Ethics stated that Cummings can continue to lead the NOBC effort because he does not have a “substantial” financial interest in the projects (the board initially decided there was a conflict of interest until Cummings appealed and presented them with the complete riverfront plan).\(^{22}\)

According to one online source, Cummings and his father own about 20 properties adjacent to areas that stand to be redeveloped by the Crescent Plan (Figure 20).\(^{23}\) Almost half of these properties were bought since Sean Cummings began working at the NOBC in
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2000, leading this resident to question the hidden motives for this development as another example of a developer manipulating civic policy for private economic gain. It also raises the question of who will really benefit from the Reinventing the Crescent project—the current residents of nearby neighborhoods, new residents attracted by the gentrified downtown, new businesses who see cheap office space, the flocks of tourists that prowl the French Quarter, or Sean Cummings? From the most pessimistic viewpoint, the project could be read as an invention of Mr. Cummings to benefit his private business interests. Whether or not there is actual criminal activity involved in Cummings’s personal business, this example illustrates how tangled the rhetoric surrounding the project is and how different groups frame the proposal in a variety of manners.

For example, numerous community groups, meanwhile, see only their lack input in the process. The Riverfront Alliance, a group of concerned citizens who live in the adjacent neighborhoods, voice concern, stating that they “are afraid Reinventing the Crescent will foist a design on [them] that does not actually benefit [their] neighborhoods, but instead serves as an economic benefit plan for a small group of developers.”24 The plan actually contains little documentation from the group’s interaction with the neighborhood organizations. There is a wide gap between the concerns of the NOBC and those voiced by neighborhood residents.

Figure 20. Over the course of the last ten years, both Sean Cummings and his father John Cummings III have acquired numerous properties adjacent to future development. This has been a cause for suspicion about the interests of Sean Cummings in redeveloping the area. It is also speculated that some of the properties bought by the father-and-son team were specifically bought by the father to avoid conflict-of-interest suspicion for Sean Cummings.
This is evident in the rhetoric and language used by the groups. For example, where the NOBC sees Mandeville Wharf as an attractive open-air performance venue for 10,000 viewers, the Riverfront Alliance sees an open-air rock nightclub that would pose huge parking issues and sound concerns.\textsuperscript{25} In the Faubourg-Marigny neighborhood, residents are clearly in favor of the park plan but have practical concerns about parking and sufficient space for sports.\textsuperscript{26}

At least during Phase 1, the project avoids intervention directly into neighborhoods, choosing to only develop the isolated riverbank. The entire project would change if there were greater concern with tying park conversion further into the neighborhood instead of it remaining an edge condition (\textbf{Figure 21}). There are certainly enough vacant or abandoned parcels to encourage this type of development. Corridors such as Elysian Fields Avenue or Piety Street are prime for park extension but this was not an important goal for the project (\textbf{Figure 22}). The initial \textit{Reinventing the Crescent} proposal shows some effort to plant trees into neighborhoods but it is unlikely that these initiatives will survive in the final built plan due to budget constraints. A scheme that both addressed waterfront and stretched into adjacent neighborhoods would have been effective at both attracting new residents and improving existing residential areas.

\section*{Physical Plan}

The renderings presented by Hargreaves Associates depict a riverfront park that looks tastefully post-industrial and benignly enjoyable. There are, however, serious issues with the physical design and the landscape treatment.

The major issue in the physical design is site access. Phase One only has two main points of access, at opposite ends of the 1.5 mile stretch, not including David Adjaye’s Piety Crossing. Other at-grade crossings were eliminated by the Army Corps of Engineers, citing concerns for preserving the structural integrity of the flood wall. While the flood wall is critical, it creates a barrier to public access, resulting in an ugly, twisting pedestrian access

\begin{figure}[h]
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\includegraphics[width=\textwidth]{image21.jpg}
\caption{The park area and actual neighborhood are separated by commercial and industrial properties, some of which appear to be abandoned. Opportunities to extend the park into the neighborhood weren’t thoroughly considered in Phase 1 of the plan.}
\end{figure}
ramp to deliver users up and over the flood all and railroad tracks (Figure 23). These restrictions protect the flood wall and allow emergency access along it, though ironically in an area that has rarely flooded, if ever. The land along this stretch of the Mississippi, built up by the deposit of silt as the river slowed in this tight bend, is the highest in the city (Figure 24). Responding to the projects lack of concern regarding flood control measures, Hargreaves principal Kirt Rieder remarked that if the water ever breached the flood wall, the rest of the city would already be submerged, highlighting the area’s superb elevation.xxvii This condition of relative safety represented an opportunity to deal with the flood wall in a different way. Perhaps walkways could have been attached to the wall and would move park users parallel to the wall in the journey up and over it. This would treat the wall as an object to be engaged and experienced instead of an impermeable urban boundary that remains saturated with negative memories of past flood. The project could have been an opportunity
for the Army Corps of Engineers to demonstrate their techniques for flood safety, altering their image in the minds of New Orleans residents as inefficient and incompetent. Also, if built correctly, new structures could increase the strength of the wall itself. No such designs were even imagined as the narrow mentality of the Army Corps dominated the discussion and the designers failed to push for solutions that provided a more active engagement of the site.

With appreciated effort, the designers consciously preserved connections to the site’s cultural history as an intermodal location of exchange between ships and rail cars. This preservation highlights both the historical importance and fragility of the wooden wharves: they were once sites of important commerce, delivering all of America’s supply of bananas, but are now in disrepair and rotting. Some have been removed by the city despite the objection of the design team; others have burned accidentally, even recently. While numerous built elements evoke the history of the area, the ecological landscape itself goes untreated. The site brings park users to the water’s edge but it does not address any of the hydrological processes that created the land or that are ongoing within the river’s ecology. Further, the site has a large amount of tension—between water/land, natural/artificial, dry/flooded, safe/dangerous—that is masked by the light, distinctly European post-industrial character. When pressed about engaging the local landscape, the response was that the plan called for mostly native species.

The local landscape exists in the project as the batture, a large section of “volunteer species” that occupy low-lying riverbanks at the east end of the first phase of the plan (Figure 25). Batture is a semi-submerged shelf on the edge of a river formed by the deposit of sediment on the riverbed. This boundary area has significant ecological impact, allowing
waterfowl and fish to flourish, in addition to providing flood control regulation by slowing storm or flood surges. Further upstream, miles of batture line the edge of the river but in New Orleans it has been improved and built on. Like Boston, much of the riverfront property in New Orleans was built on reclaimed land, including major downtown sites such as the convention center.

Curiously, batture also has a critical legal and social history. Because of its liminal status of existing between dry land and river, ownership of batture land has long been a

Figure 25. A rendering shows the isolated batture next to the Piety Gardens. This type of landscape goes unacknowledged in the Crescent plan. Batture is currently a waste area, filled with old pilings, rusty machines, trash, and during the summer even serves as a destination for the city’s homeless population.

Figure 26. Documentation from a Supreme Court case in 1807 about legal ownership of batture land. This shows the different profiles of the submerged area. These drawings were made in front of the Faubourg Ste. Marie, exactly where the Crescent park is to be built.
contentious issue (Figure 26). In *The Unnatural Metropolis*, author Craig Colten describes the area as a common dumping ground for trash and human waste in the 19th century, reeking horribly in the summer with no waters to wash away the garbage. This landscape, equally as historic as the site’s wharves or abandoned railroads, is allowed but entirely ignored, treated as waste land littered with old piers, rusty structures, and homeless people. The *batture* is not allowed to flourish or even be acknowledged but merely contained, only broken by a single deck that extends over the river. As further criticism, the plan uses paths that follow the arcs of railways. This move is only evident in plan views of the project and is lost when moving spatially through the park, a common shortcoming of some landscape projects. Addressing the *batture* could have been a source for a more specific and experiential treatment of the riverfront, whose design that is frequently criticized as bland or general. In addition, exposing the site’s industrial history while minimizing its connection to batture and thus the river as a system, the design favors one historical precedent over another in deriving inspiration for the plan.

**Connection to Larger Planning Efforts**

While the *Reinventing the Crescent* plan represents the most promising development in New Orleans since Hurricane Katrina, there are others, notably the city-wide NOLA 2030 Master Plan prepared by Goody Clancy. In sections detailing changes in parks, there is almost no mention of the *Reinventing the Crescent* initiative; it is reduced to a subpoint under a larger goal of improving access to waterfronts and one small rendering from the booklet is used.

One of the major goals of the NOLA 2030 plan is increasing park space so that every resident is within 1/3 of a mile from a park (Figure 27). There is no integration of the

![Figure 27](image-url)
Reinventing the Crescent project into the larger goals of the NOLA 2030 plan. Hargreaves designer Kirt Rieder mentioned this, noting that the only interaction they had with Goody Clancy was to include a new zoning type to benefit the Reinventing the Crescent initiative.\textsuperscript{31} It is disappointing that the largest current development project in the city has no integration with a larger plan for city-wide improvement. This issue further contextualizes the project in terms of private development and gentrification instead of delivering genuine solutions about the future of the city.

**Larger Issues of Sustainability**

Another large problematic issue is long-term sustainability, both in terms of economy and ecology. The project promises total rejuvenation of the city’s downtown convention spaces in order to draw people back to New Orleans. A later stage of the project maps out a 15-acre space that could be used for large exhibitions or concerts. In an earlier version of the plan, another area, at the confluence of the Mississippi and the Intercoastal Waterway, was to support condominiums and an outdoor theatre. High-rise apartments were quickly struck down by the community—labeled as elitist and upscale in a city known for its shotgun houses and high poverty levels—despite their ability to increase the tax base for the neighborhood. All of the economic language has been drastically altered by the current recession and the financial vision for the project, developed in January 2008, has not been updated yet. It is uncertain whether the public-private partnership utilized in realizing the Crescent will succeed. In a time where large-scale construction efforts are being put on hold globally (in Europe, Dubai, and elsewhere), the immediate future does not look bright for an on-time completion of the project in 2018.

Additionally, it is suspect that public sources will invest so much money in an area that is consistently faced with disaster and whose flood protection measures sometimes fail. In this case, the development is largely happening on the vulnerable side of the flood walls, although this particular area is rarely flooded given its elevation. Increased wetlands destruction, climate change, sea level rise, and the subsidence of New Orleans all threaten the very existence of the city, leading some to question if it should continue to be inhabited at all. This is a question unasked by the city’s government and citizens—reconstruction is the only option.

The Reinventing the Crescent project ignores these larger questions of urban sustainability. This is a missed opportunity for the designers of a project with so much momentum and promise to avoid engagement with these systems. A good example of this type of questioning and landscape engagement is given by the Morphosis proposal for rebuilding the city. Morphosis is a well-known contemporary architecture firm who has been involved with Brad Pitt’s Make It Right campaign to build houses in New Orleans (Figure 28). They also produced a study about rebuilding the city in a radical way, proposing to buy back low-
lying land from residents and re-concentrating development along more elevated spines that are safer. The purchased land would be returned to wetlands to increase flood security for the city. The proposal also states that this solution would be cheaper than the expensive flood infrastructure upgrades that the city is facing now. Perhaps the radical angle of this proposal is why it isn’t being seriously considered, but at this scale designers have a responsibility to intelligently engage with the natural systems that shape the form of cities.

Conclusion

Criticism of the *Reinventing the Crescent* project is difficult because it exists only in drawings, renderings, and rhetoric. According to Hargreaves Associates, bidding for the construction should be awarded May 2010 and construction of the first phase will take about 18 months, hopefully finishing by 2012. Given the political condition of New Orleans it is impressive that the project is progressing while reconstruction efforts remain unrealized. If built, Crescent Park will serve as an initial sign of revitalization in the city. It is disconcerting that this first sign comes as a development with questionable interests but at least this constitutes some interest.

We have evaluated the project on two levels: on how well it seems to achieve its stated goals and on how it addresses other critical issues for the city. Despite the difficult configuration, the park will probably be successful in its goals of allowing access to the river. Many residents spend their whole lives without ever experiencing the river up close outside of the French Quarter’s tourist promenade. This park offers residents the opportunity to reconnect with the river in a enjoyable, though benign, way.

But, when considering the larger and more urgent infrastructure issues facing New Orleans the *Reinventing the Crescent* project fails to deal with these issues and this represents a serious shortcoming in the design of the project, especially as these issues become increasingly important in the future.
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