The Viet Village Urban Farm and the Politics of Neighborhood Viability in Post-Katrina New Orleans

ALLISON TRUITT
Tulane University

Abstract

Viability emerged as a contentious political term in post-Katrina New Orleans. While initial expert-led proposals defined neighborhood viability in terms of topography, community-based groups emphasized the cultural and historical aspects that defined neighborhoods as viable. This analysis focuses on the politics of neighborhood viability with regarding to a specific neighborhood, Village de l’Est, well known for its sizeable Vietnamese population. Community leaders effectively employed cultural discourses to increase the visibility of the neighborhood and make claims on recovery dollars. One of these proposals was for an urban farm. The case-study presented here focuses on how the proposal made evident how claims of viability often generated conflicting visions of neighborhoods in pre- and post-Katrina New Orleans. [Sustainability, Urban farm, Vietnamese Americans, New Orleans]

Introduction

In late 2010 the Tulane City Center in downtown New Orleans featured a window display of a Vietnamese neighborhood in New Orleans. On the right-hand side were photographs of lush gardens and an early Saturday morning market that defined the Vietnamese presence in New Orleans, while on the left were digitized images of a proposed Viet Village Urban Farm (see Figures 1 and 2). The showcase exhibited more than a culturally distinct neighborhood in New Orleans. It proposed a vision of neighborhood recovery in the post-disaster city in which the signifiers of cultural difference would be the basis of sustainable development.

Processes of planning, mapping, and proposing projects have been critical strategies for neighborhood groups to produce their presence or their right to place in New Orleans (Sassen 2003). Neighborhood and community-based groups challenged the initial expert-led proposals that emphasized topographical vulnerability and economic feasibility as rationales for rebuilding a smaller and more efficient post-Katrina New Orleans. For Village de l’Est, a neighborhood identified with the Vietnamese community, the planning process offered an opportunity to assert its right to place on the basis of multiculturalism. One initiative, the Viet Village Urban Farm, proposed to convert long-standing gardening practices and an early Saturday morning market into a new platform for recognition by linking cultural heritage to environmental...
sustainability and green technologies. Ultimately, even though the Viet Village Urban Farm garnered support from numerous sources, it did not alter the actual landscape.

My interest in the Urban Farm began in 2007 when I designed a course for Tulane students to learn about Vietnamese place-making initiatives in partnership with the Mary Queen of Vietnam Community Development Corporation (CDC). The pastor of Mary Queen of Vietnam Church, Father Nguyen The Vien, suggested that the Urban Farm project would be an ideal for students, although he warned it would be “back-breaking work.” At that time, the CDC had not yet taken title of the land. By spring 2011, the CDC determined the project was too costly after the Corps of Engineers classified the land as low-grade wetlands. Still, the planned Urban Farm was a tantalizing initiative for the CDC, its staff, and the students. A staff member at the CDC suggested that Tulane students organize focus groups with celebrity chefs to gauge their interest in the Urban Farm, locating feasibility in the attention of local chefs rather than the needs of residents of the neighborhood of Village de l’Est.

The Viet Village Urban Farm serves as a case-study to understand the politics of neighborhood viability in post-disaster New Orleans. While this case raises important questions regarding how and when Asian Americans “make an appearance in the American imaginary” (So 2007:8), it also brings to the fore more general questions regarding how specific groups draw on values of cultural difference to assert their “viability” as a basis for planning initiatives and the distribution of power in the planning process, particularly “who has the resources to leave their imprint on the city’s landscape, its significations, its cultural institutions, and its social structures” (Steinberg and Shields 2008:8). As will become evident, neighborhood participation alone did not alleviate the problem of a just distribution of recovery dollars, especially in New Orleans East. How then the Vietnamese community became an icon of the city’s recovery in an underfunded and low-lying area sheds light on the politics of rebuilding and recovery. Still

Figure 1. Display case, Tulane City Center, New Orleans. Photo by Caitlin Beaudoin.

Figure 2. Close-up of planned urban garden, Tulane City Center, New Orleans. Photo by Caitlin Beaudoin.
success, as I demonstrate in this article, required that the community continually reassert its presence as Vietnamese by structuring development initiatives around those features defined as culturally authentic even as the projects themselves sought to transform those features. The Urban Farm is one example of how signifiers of cultural heritage could be converted into claims of sustainability, thus recreating the very hierarchy of values that the community-based planning process was intended to circumvent.

Establishing viability in the post-disaster city

This essay examines the Viet Village Urban Farm as a case-study for understanding the politics of viability in the post-disaster city. Viability emerged as a keyword in initial plans for recovery after Hurricane Katrina in 2005. A more urgent version of “sustainability” that has dominated recent discourses of urban-planning and modes of governing global cities (McDonogh, Isenhour, and Checker 2012), viability underscored what was at stake in New Orleans: the very survival of the city. In the initial weeks and months of recovery vital questions were raised: Where could citizens safely rebuild? Would residents and jobs returned to the city? Could the city be protected from a future disaster? Viability, as the recovery process would eventually demonstrate, was not just a matter of geographic elevation or economic feasibility. It was also a matter of historical patterns, social networks, and cultural commitments.

Initial recovery proposals emphasized two metrics of viability: the number of residents who had returned or pledged to return to particular neighborhoods and geographic elevation. In October 2005, Mayor Nagin launched the Bring New Orleans Back Commission and named the Washington-based Urban Land Institute (ULI) as the commission’s source for urban-planning expertise. After a month of study-trips and interviews, the ULI sponsored a public forum in November during which panelists recommended by transforming low-lying neighborhoods into green space for storm retention purposes. The experts attributed the city’s tragedy in terms of a citywide failure to respect the waters that surrounded the city and proposed instead to return the badly flooded and largely emptied neighborhoods to wetlands, a move that would express “harmony between the urban/engineered and natural environments” (Urban Land Institute 2005:45, 71). By turning badly flooded areas into green space, the city in its historic contours would be preserved.

The proposal was couched in the rhetorical frame of sustainability, an almost mythic version in which nature precedes human settlement (McDonogh et al. 2012:114). Yet this vision of ULI panelists conspired with popular representations of New Orleans as an antebellum city built along the high ground of the banks of the Mississippi River. Massive drainage projects that made marshes and swamps habitable
rendered the city more vulnerable to the water that surrounded it (Colten 2002; Lewis 2003) while the network of oil pipelines and engineered waterways threatened the city’s fragile line of defense of wetlands and barrier islands. The task of rebuilding New Orleans, the experts warned, would require returning those neighborhoods built on reclaimed swampland to nature to save the antebellum and colonial New Orleans.1 The Commission’s recommendations were announced on the front page of the Times-Picayune. The paper’s headline cried, “4 Months to decide,” a succinct reference to the four-month moratorium on rebuilding permits in neighborhoods that experienced at least two feet of flooding, or approximately 80 percent of the city (Donze and Russell 2006). A map accompanying the article depicted large green dots over those areas at higher risk to flooding, conveying the idea of which neighborhoods would be converted into park space (Nelson et al. 2007:29). Areas targeted for forced buy-outs included most of New Orleans East, Gentilly, the northern part of Lakeview, and much of the Lower Ninth Ward. Residents who lived in areas marked by green spaces were symbolically cast outside the “New Orleans” worth saving.

The ULI panel was not unaware of the politics of rebuilding. Its report cautioned: “All citizens must be treated fairly; no group should be treated as second-class citizens because of its race, class, or the degree of Katrina’s impact on it” (Urban Land Institute 2005:47). The commission recommended that an expert-led committee create a redevelopment plan for each of the city’s thirteen districts to determine the future viability of their neighborhoods, which would be demonstrated by 50 percent or more of the residents returning or committing to returning. Ultimately, both the BNOBC and the ULI failed to address the historical and economic contours of the city’s expansion, thus eliding profound questions about expressions of citizenship, spatial justice, and urban politics (MacLeod and Ward 2002:154). This expert-led vision of rebuilding and reconstruction set in motion a struggle between two versions of the city, the first as a space to be governed, managed, and policed, and the second as a space of community composed of families and social institutions (Flaherty 2008:30).

In response to the proposed moratorium, ordinary citizens, community activists, fair housing advocates, and journalists galvanized around the “right to return.” They claimed that green-spacing neighborhoods was a politically-motivated and racially-structured vision of the city and that the return of former residents needed to be facilitated without regard to race or property ownership. Viability was exposed as a political device that would prohibit the rebuilding of some neighborhoods to preserve the survival of others. The City Council of New Orleans eventually overturned the four-month moratorium and recommended that community-based, neighborhood-by-neighborhood planning groups be central to any decision regarding the recovery of the most devastated areas of New Orleans. Claims of viability, now reopened for definition, were thus central to the politics of recovery.
New Orleans East and the problem of social inclusion

The spatial fate of neighborhoods is entwined with attributions of their social value within the larger context of the city. In her analysis of imageability and the just city, Delia Duong Ba Wendel (2009:356) argued that marginal spaces such as the Lower Ninth Ward and New Orleans East were burdened with demonstrating their viability to more powerful actors, thus impairing their ability to make claims on resources for rebuilding. In the Lower Ninth Ward, activists successfully linked the neighborhood both to the history of jazz and the Mardi Gras Indians (Regis et al. 2011) and attracted celebrity-driven rebuilding efforts such as the Make it Right Foundation. By contrast, the eastern section of the city, while comprising almost two-thirds of the landmass of Orleans parish, was largely forgotten by the local and national media. Without a claim on the city's historicized past, New Orleans East hardly registered as a site worthy of investment. New Orleans East continues to be marginal to the wider portrayals of the city's recovery. It has not received large state-led redevelopment projects such as Mid-City where land has been broken to build the University Medical Center. The celebration of events such as the opening of Winn-Dixie, a large grocery store, in September 2007 underscored the lack of resources for the area. Residents cheered the event like a “local jazz festival” (Bullard and Wright 2009:36) as officials of the company ceremonially opened trading on the NASDAQ-exchange on Wall Street, but three years later the area was still defined as a commercial and food desert (Nolan 2010).

The low imageability of New Orleans East can be traced to its post-World War II development. Until the mid-twentieth century, the eastern section of the city was a terrain of bayous, swamps, and marshes. Planners envisioned this swath of land as an “edge city” (Garreau 1991), a more livable city than the urban core that would avoid the traps of suburbanization by creating houses, businesses, and industries. By the 1970s the city’s “new frontier” (Souther 2008) was the fastest growing area of city, but its growth slowed as the oil boom that fueled earlier growth turned to bust. In the 1980s, the race and class composition changed as white residents moved to St. Tammany Parish and middle-class black residents bought homes, turning New Orleans East into an extension of the inner city, “increasingly black and with pockets of poverty” (Bullard and Wright 2009:23).

New Orleans East’s portrayal as a decaying suburban landscape in the local media since the 1990s should be read critically in terms of its shift to a majority black population. The area’s devaluation was reinforced by ULI’s reference to its outer edge in positive terms, Bayou Sauvage National Wildlife Refuge. The largest urban wildlife refuge in the United States, Bayou Sauvage had attracted 400,000 visitors per year before 2005. The ULI proposal highlighted the refuge offered a new vision for the eastern frontier of the metropolitan region, one that demonstrated
“respect” for water that residents in New Orleans East were said to lack. Ironically, the origins of the wildlife refuge lay in the failed development of eastern New Orleans when a major land development company successfully sold more than 20,000 acres to the federal government as an urban wildlife refuge (Colten 2002:238). The conversion of that land once slated for urban expansion into wetlands was a result of both federal legislation like the 1972 Clean Water Act and the problem of subsidence that made further development too costly.

As urban development slowed in the 1970s, the vacancies in the apartment complexes on the easternmost edge of the city were filled by refugees from Vietnam (New Orleans Indo-chinese Resettlement in the Metropolitan New Orleans Area Task Force 1980). With funding from Section 8 housing, the Associated Catholic Charities resettled refugees in two garden apartments in Village de l'Est. One of the apartments, Versailles Armes, would later become an unofficial moniker for the city’s Vietnamese neighborhood. The Village de l'Est subdivision, initially designed as a 600-acre trace of single and double-residential houses for workers at NASA Michoud Assembly Facility, became associated with a new population whose sense of solidarity was, like the NASA workers who preceded them, based on their status as newcomers and physical isolation (Souther 2008:202).

Village de L'Est is now synonymous with the Vietnamese presence in New Orleans. While the neighborhood’s population is racially mixed, it has one of the highest concentrations of Vietnamese residents outside Vietnam (Airriess et al. 2002). More than 6,000 native and first- and second-generation Vietnamese live within a one mile radius of the church (Peck 2008). The neighborhood’s relative isolation and the close ties of residents provided cohesion that made the neighborhood appear “authentically” Vietnamese. Like other neighborhoods in New Orleans East, Village de l'Est was part of the broad swath of eastern New Orleans slated to be “green-spaced.” Initial assessments deemed half of the residential properties as substantially damaged. The rapid return of this Vietnamese American residents and their successful activism around key issues, including the restoration of utilities and protests over a landfill, received widespread coverage in the national media, replacing images of abandonment with stories of successful neighborhood recovery (Lee 2010; Nguyen 2012). The once “isolated enclave” turned into an icon of neighborhood viability in the post-disaster city.

The recovery of Village de l'Est offered an inspiring model for many residents about the city’s future. Unlike in other post-industrial cities where the economic success of Asian Americans led to racialized tensions with African American residents, Vietnamese and African American leaders forged alliances to secure resources that crossed lines of difference, including the successful protest against dumping debris and restoring utilities (Tang 2011:123). How Vietnamese leaders in particular skillfully converted previous experiences with displacement as refugees into a narrative of model citizenship is part of the politics of viability in post-disaster New Orleans.
Revaluing the figure of the refugee

Asian American scholars have emphasized the paradoxical role of refugee identity in the United States. Stripped of their connections to their “homeland,” refugees were cast in the role of newcomers who consented to the American version of capitalism and democracy, a role that elided how such refugees bore the legacies of U.S. militarism and violence. Their success was instead attributed to “cultural traditions,” claims that implicitly critiqued “poor black and brown communities for perceived persistent problems of poverty, unemployment, and crime” (Espiritu 2006:416). In the immediate days following Hurricane Katrina, journalists invoked the word “refugee” to describe the unfathomable images of people stranded on rooftops, abandoned in shelters of last resort, and deprived of food and water. While the term was subsequently critiqued for stripping U.S. citizens of their place within the national order (Masquelier 2006), the term transformed the figure of displaced Vietnamese residents into uncanny models of resilience and rebuilding. Vietnamese experiences with flight and exile offered a compelling narrative for the local and national media who turned their previous displacement into an explanation for why they were able to successfully rebuild using only community resources rather than state aid (Williams 2005). To be sure, many of the residents in Village de l’Est had experienced displacement first-hand. Some had fled the installation of a communist regime in northern Vietnam in 1954. Many fled a second time in 1975 after the collapse of the Republic of (South) Vietnam. Stories in the popular press of the recovery efforts in Village de l’Est focused on parallels between their arrival in the United States with their efforts of recover from the hurricane, but neglected a more critical discussion of the legacies of U.S. militarism, race, and violence, ironically a focus that has galvanized scholarship on African-American responses to the storm (Bullard and Wright 2009; Luft 2008; Lipsitz 2006; Somers 2008).

Displacement provided a powerful rhetorical frame for Vietnamese community leaders as well. Reverend Nguyen The Vien, the influential pastor of the Mary Queen of Vietnam Church, declared in October 2005, “Before Katrina, when we said homeland, we meant Vietnam. When my people say homeland now, they mean New Orleans” (Hamilton 2005). In this widely cited quote, he effectively drew on his own pastoral power in his collective use of “my people” while also emphasizing the rights to place through a narrative of return (Airriess et al. 2008).

“Homeland” no longer signified Vietnam; it now meant New Orleans. In subsequent public presentations and private conversations, Father Vien effectively highlighted the Vietnamese community’s previous marginalization to stake their claim to participate in the rebuilding process. He described how municipal maps ended at I-510, thus cutting the subdivision of Village de l’Est off the map. He pointed out that beautification schemes to plant palm trees along Chef Menteur Highway, one of the main arteries connecting New Orleans East to the rest of the...
city, also ended at I-510. He reminded local and national audiences how grateful his congregation had been with the installation of a stoplight at the corner of Alcee Fortier and Chef Menteur Highway, which prevented needless accidents. Through these examples of social marginalization, the leader of the church crafted a message that Vietnamese residents were the ideal citizens for the recovery process because they had already overcome government neglect to build their lives and livelihoods in New Orleans. And they were capable of doing so again.

By August 2006, the neighborhood was deemed by urban planners as a success: over 3,000 residential units or 80 percent in the Village de l’Est neighborhood had been gutted, signifying to urban planners a “definite” commitment to repopulate the neighborhood (Village de L’Est Neighborhood Planning District 10 Rebuilding Plan, 20). In 2008, the Times-Picayune declared Reverend Vien one of the “city fixers” linking the success of the Vietnamese community’s rebuilding efforts to that of the city. While the Vietnamese community in Village de l’Est became an icon of recovery, its successful return was very much organized by and through the Catholic Church. Rebuilding churches in the post-disaster city was one of the most visible strategies by which residents demonstrated their neighborhood’s viability (Wendel 2009). The Mary Queen of Vietnam Church provided the infrastructure and networks to sustain rebuilding efforts by connecting members of the congregation with other Vietnamese institutional networks including the ethnic media and national-level organizations (Airriess et al. 2008:1339, Vu et al. 2009). At the same time, the church also connected the congregation to support available through the Catholic Church. Mary Queen of Vietnam Church functioned as a staging ground for public forums, a site for distributing Red Cross rations, and even temporary housing for a tuition-free charter school, all with the blessing of the Archdiocese of New Orleans. It is therefore with caution that the successful rebuilding efforts of the neighborhood be cast exclusively in the national frame as “Vietnamese.”

The success of Mary Queen of Vietnamese Church contrasted with another Vietnamese religious institution, the Van Hanh Buddhist Temple located about a mile way. It likewise sustained significant damage from the storm but did not become a gatekeeper for rebuilding efforts for several reasons. The figurehead of the center, a Buddhist nun, decided against returning to New Orleans, the congregation was more geographically dispersed, and many members chose not to return to New Orleans. The smaller post-storm congregation was evident in the public pledge board where the names of people who made monthly donations after August 2005 shrunk considerably. Since then the Buddhist center has been rebuilt and even expanded, testifying to the willingness of Vietnamese residents to support the institutions as a means of cultural preservation, social mobility, and ethnic identification (Bankston and Zhou 2000). Like the Church, the Buddhist center drew on broader networks, including the spiritual support of a leading monk from Dallas, Texas and the financial support of his temple, but it did not become a model of neighborhood recovery.
Despite these differences, the rebuilding strategies employed by the church were often deployed in the name of a singular and cohesive Vietnamese community, staking claims on scarce resource dollars by highlighting its distinctive cultural heritage. While this strategy was effective in a time in which difference was a strategy of recognition, it also restricted how Village de l’Est could be inserted into broader federal, state, and municipal initiatives around rebuilding. Proposals to rebuild the neighborhood invoked features that would represent the community as Vietnamese (Aguilar-San Juan 2009) and nothing conveyed the image of the community more to wider audiences than the gardens and Saturday morning market.

Markets and gardening

Place-making strategies of Vietnamese communities in the United States must negotiate terrain already imbued with meaning and value (Aguilar-San Juan 2009). In Boston, the community is dispersed in areas saturated with historical sites that privilege the early formation of the United States, while in Orange County, the Vietnamese presence is defined by a large shopping mall providing consumers an easy to digest taste of Vietnamese culture. By contrast in New Orleans, it is the semi-tropical climate and its surrounding marshes that have been characterized as a familiar landscape for displaced Vietnamese refugees, naturalizing their presence through references to the lush surroundings. Featured stories of the Vietnamese community in the local and national media highlighted the market gardens and the early morning Saturday market (Peck 2008; Maxim 2009). These two icons of the Vietnamese presence in New Orleans were featured in the rebuilding and recovery plans.

Prior to Hurricane Katrina, gardening was associated primarily with elderly Vietnamese residents. Geographers Airriess and David Clawson described the gardens as “an opportunity to create order in a new socio-economic environment over which they [the gardeners] otherwise have little control” (1994:19), a form of self-making that enhanced their experiences of autonomy in a new land. By growing vegetables unavailable in grocery stores catering to a non-Vietnamese clientele and herbs attributed with medicinal qualities or used in dipping sauces that imparted a familiar taste, gardening expressed attempts to “stay Vietnamese” (Aguilar-San Juan 2009). Gardening and more specifically the fruits of those efforts were crucial vehicles for conveying a tangible, sensual experience to members of the community that bridged the experiences of displacement.

The gardeners and their makeshift community gardens called attention to the diverse and sometimes contradictory meanings ascribed to New Orleans’ easternmost edge. While the wetlands are popularly understood as a pristine natural environment, we have seen earlier that their designation in the case of Bayou Sauvage was a strategy to recoup value
It was along the unimproved drainage canals, once a symbol of the city’s planned frontier, that elderly Vietnamese improvised gardens. Most gardeners used their own backyards or extended their gardens from their property on the bayou levee land. Some gardeners, however, tilled otherwise unused land. Until the mid-1990s, the gardeners worked the land under an agreement between the Archdiocese of New Orleans and the New Orleans East Corporation (Treadway 1994a). When the land was auctioned by federal entity to dispose of the assets of failed savings institutions, rumors circulated that the new landlord would no longer allow the elderly Vietnamese residents to garden on the property. The new owner reportedly described the gardeners as “trespassers.” Eventually, an agreement between the residents and owner was brokered for the gardeners to lease the land for a symbolic rent of $1 (Treadway 1994). The dispute made apparent the different values encoding the land. While the new owner was concerned with establishing his ownership rights, the Vietnamese gardeners were concerned with maintaining culinary traditions that endowed the new land with familiar meaning.

These different vantage points on gardening have not entirely disappeared. Even some Vietnamese-American activists have characterized the gardening activities of Vietnamese elders as an encroachment of property rights. In an interview with the Southern Foodways Alliance, Peter Nguyen, a staff member of Mary Queen of Vietnam Community Development Corporation, described the gardening activities as “squatting,” which he elaborated as

\begin{quote}
Instead of having grass, they use the front yard, backyard, and some of them—if they don’t have a yard, they’ll move onto other people’s land and they will be squatting like. Over the levee, even some of the vacant lots that haven’t been developed, they’ll come in there and—build a little garden” (Nguyen 2007).
\end{quote}

This perspective overlooked the manifold ways in which Vietnamese residents in Village de l’Est did in fact maintain American norms such as maintaining the perceived ideal of a grassy front yard, while confining gardening activities to backyards or communal gardens (Airriess and Clawson 1994).

Gardening activities were integral to the Saturday morning market held in the parking lot of a small commercial strip center in front of a block of apartments. As in other places where people keep small gardens, some women would sell their surplus to supplement their household income while others sold special Vietnamese dishes. The Saturday morning market with the women lined up in front of their tarps on the ground resembled the “crouching” markets of Vietnam where the huge spiked jackfruit and cakes wrapped up in steamed banana leaves provided a sense of the exotic-next-door for New Orleans residents. Parked cars linked the right-hand side of the street, transforming a lane of traffic into a parking lot for an hour or two as people rushed to buy a handful of
greens and some fish for the Saturday meals. Several grocery stores opened their doors for the market as well, ensuring the residents and visitors could purchase more than the live fish and fresh greens available in the parking lot.

The market started up slowly after 2005 with the blessing of the owner of a grocery store located in the same commercial strip. By 2012, the marketplace had changed in its composition. While older Vietnamese women sold clusters of vegetables, middle-aged white men also brought cages of rabbits and chickens to sell from the back of their pick-ups trucks, and still other sellers traveled from far away as Florida to sell their produce. The Saturday morning market, while still a popular venue, was not a static feature but rather a dynamic event that responded to shifts in the surrounding neighborhood, mirroring the broader demographic shifts as Vietnamese businesses were replaced by food trucks and remittance services catering to migrants from Central America.

Despite such changes, both Vietnamese and non-Vietnamese residents in New Orleans saw the gardens and the market as icons that defined the neighborhood in distinctly cultural terms. As such they were incorporated into the plans for rebuilding and renewing the neighborhood as a community garden, which later expanded into the Viet Village Urban Farm, a far more ambitious project that connected the gardens and market to broader constituencies in the city.

The planned urban farm

The Viet Village Urban Farm was proposed by the Mary Queen of Vietnam Community Development Corporation (CDC), a non-profit organization established in May 2006 to coordinate urban development in the surrounding area. The CDC’s projects were designed to highlight the neighborhood’s commercial zone as distinctly Vietnamese, a cultural center, a neighborhood health clinic, and a charter school. While these projects hinged on the values of cultural heritage or “ethnic authenticity” (Rudrappa 2004:187), they also inserted the neighborhood into broader rebuilding initiatives, like the Urban Farm.

Community-development corporations have been associated with urban development since the 1970s. Their expansion in the 1980s was a direct response to the withdrawal of municipal and state governments from the problems of urban poverty (Stoecker 1997). Since then, these organizations have been instrumental in a broader restructuring of urban governance. And as their sources of funding tend to be outside the specific neighborhood or community they represent, they are subject to different forms of oversight and control. In post-disaster New Orleans, these organizations have staked claims on scarce city resources (Nelson et al. 2007:42), but in so doing, they have also contributed to outsourcing government activities, a process associated with neoliberalism (Lipsitz 2006; Somers 2008).

The Mary Queen of Vietnam CDC has thus had to negotiate issues of both empowerment and marginalization that arise when claims for
recognition are based on multicultural mandates. On the one hand, the CDC has been instrumental in advocating on behalf of Vietnamese residents of Village de l’Est and the wider New Orleans area. The CDC organized community rallies to protest turning a waste staging area into a landfill for household debris immediately after the storm (Nguyen 2012, Tang 2011). The CDC also channeled assistance to shrimpers and other people employed in the seafood industry after the BP oil spill in April 2010. Not all of the activities have been so explicitly aligned with the needs of residents. Several initiatives depended on wider participation of residents in New Orleans such as the decision to establish a charter school that was temporarily housed in a church building. And as schools were subject to oversight and guidelines that churches were not, the church buildings had to conform to different building codes and safety permits. Other projects such as the community-based health clinics have been supported by federally funded grants, rendering the CDC accountable to multiple, and often competing, interests in order to pursue its goals.

The effort to appeal to multiple audiences could be detected in the changing scope of the urban farm project. Initial groundwork for development plans was based on focus groups that included seniors, business owners, and youth convened by Mary Queen of Vietnam Church. These plans were then developed by a group of architects, design professionals, civil engineers, and housing developers to create concepts for community housing and the Versailles business district. The original plans for community gardens were displayed during the annual Tet or the Lunar New Year festival in 2006. Residents selected which plan appealed to them by affixing a gold star sticker next to the diagram.

As plans have expanded, both in terms of their scale and depictions of social life, the connection between the proposed Viet Village and the needs of the residents in the neighborhood has become increasingly tenuous. The plans for Urban Project were created in collaboration with landscape architects Spackman, Mossop & Michaels, civil engineers, the New Orleans Food and Farm network, and Tulane City Center. Designs for the farm included garden plots for individuals, commercial growers, a covered market area, and even a playground in order to promote intergenerational activities related to gardening and farming. Also included were sites for organic gardening, a retail outlet linked to local chefs and grocery stores, and animal husbandry. This design won the 2008 Analysis and Planning Award for Excellence from the American Society of Landscape Architects.

The national appeal of the design was in part its promotion of values associated with sustainable technology. While the community gardens signified self-making in a foreign land, the urban farm was depicted in modern aesthetics complemented by goals of recycling and energy efficiency (MNQVNCDC.org). The rationales for the project also shifted from support for the elderly members in the community to future generations and commercial opportunities through references to ecology and food citizenship. In the same interview quoted earlier, Peter Nguyen...
described how the planning had been done with an eye, not towards the current generation of gardeners, but the “future generation” (Nguyen 2007). With its focus on organic food production and clean water, the Urban Farm was a project designed to appeal to young people in the neighborhood. This shift required two contradictory moves: first, the Urban Farm was represented as continuous with the gardening practices of Vietnamese residents, but then it cast those same practices as unsustainable. Ultimately, the Urban Farm was depicted as a viable and healthy alternative to the long-standing gardens along the Maxent Canal, which were described as using contaminated water because of their proximity to the controversial landfill. Ironically, the digital rendering of the farm with its neatly tended rows and unpopulated marketplace figured as an eerie depiction of post-Katrina New Orleans. The absence of people in the proposed covered plaza area contrasted with the rows of vendors crouching on plastic tarps with fish and shrimp on display in Styrofoam boxes and vegetables laid out on plastic tarps, raising the question of how diagrams are not utopian possibilities but also modes of domination.

In January 2011 the project was at standstill, stymied by its designation as low-grade wetlands. Several years earlier, the CDC had purchased a 20-acre parcel of land for $1.65 million from a member of the Mary Queen of Vietnam Church (Bruno 2011). At the time, the owner of the land had assured the CDC that it would be feasible to develop the land into an urban farm. Later tests by the Corps of Engineers designated the land as “jurisdictional wetlands,” which required a land-swap or purchase of environmental credits before the designated land could be developed. Its designation as low-grade wetlands was in its murky uses during the period when the area was a dumping site after Hurricane Katrina.

The Urban Farm project gained substantial support, but as the staff explained, few donors were interested in funding the purchase of environmental credits. Although the Urban Farm may have been “the sexiest project in the universe,” as one of landscape architect who designed the project called it (Bruno 2011), it was relegated to the same fate that experts had envisioned for New Orleans East, returning the land back to “nature,” in the name of restoring wetlands to protect the city from future flood events.\(^9\) It is with great irony then the Viet Village Urban Farm project remains mired by the site’s classification as wetlands, a designation itself that emerged from the failed attempts of an urban development corporation to convert the land into profit and further muddied by the expedient attempts to use that site for dumping.

**Conclusion**

This essay located the proposed Viet Village Urban Farm within a larger story of the post-disaster recovery in New Orleans. It emphasized how Village de l’Est became an icon of recovery despite the lack of attention given to the wider area of New Orleans East. The Mary Queen of Vietnam Community-Development Corporation spearheaded
projects of neighborhood recovery, successfully employing claims of cultural difference. One such project was the Viet Village Urban Farm, which was initially a community garden that was later expanded to connect residents to the corporate foodworld of New Orleans and promote sustainability. In so doing, the Urban Farm ultimately proposed a very different vision of sociality in the neighborhood.

Similar stories have also been told of other lauded recovery projects such as the Make it Right Foundation in the Lower Ninth Ward (Wendel 2009). The houses built by the foundation have been featured on national magazines, yet residents have lamented to loss of wrap-around porches and the lack of space to accommodate multi-generation households (Svenson 2012). Both projects were designed to enhance the imageability of the neighborhoods, but in so doing, they each proposed new visions of sociality and forms of conduct in post-disaster New Orleans. Elderly refugees who toiled the soil and organized small informal markets, and members of multi-generational families whose lives took place as much on porches as inside the house equally struggled against social marginalization. These projects were intended then to garner recognition, but both proposed different visions of sociality. This analysis is not meant as a critique of either the Urban Farm or other like-minded initiatives like the Make it Right Foundation. Rather, it is intended to draw attention to the complex dynamics of viability by asking how the “organic” quality of the city, so highly praised by the Urban Land Institute in November 2005, can be preserved to enhance the capabilities and opportunities for all urban residents. Today visitors and residents still enjoy the early morning Saturday market where elderly Vietnamese lay out greens and herbs to sell to their neighbors. While this event conjures up the values of cultural heritage, it just as importantly testifies to the need for understanding the ongoing interplay between environmental justice and the politics of race on New Orleans easternmost edge.

Notes

Acknowledgments. I would like to acknowledge the staff of Mary Queen of Vietnam Community Development Corporation whose work has been instrumental in improving the neighborhood and facilitating residents’ access to city services since 2006. The staff opened the doors of their organization to my students and helped us better understand the politics at work in representing place and community. I am also grateful for the comments of three anonymous reviewers and Petra Kuppinger whose detailed comments, thoughtful critiques, and familiarity with New Orleans vastly improved this article. Finally, I would like to thank Edward Snajdr who organized the Circulating City: The Dynamics of Representing Urban Space, Place, and Community panel delivered at the American Anthropological Association meetings in New Orleans in 2010 where this paper was first presented.
Efforts to sacrifice outlying areas to save New Orleans are not new. In 1927, faced with the rising waters of the Mississippi River, the Corps of Engineers blasted the levees in Saint Bernard parish, which lay downstream, in an effort to prevent New Orleans from flooding (Barry 1998).

The concept of green space as a planning device to include some classes of residents, but exclude others was also advocated by some residents in New Orleans East who lobbied to convert multi-family apartment complexes into green space.

It is important to note that the notion of homeland emerges out of the condition of diaspora or being cast from one’s homeland.

Here a comparison can be drawn between analyses that focus on the important role of extended families as endogenous social networks with the more institutionalized presence of churches in New Orleans. Flaherty emphasizes the role of extended families as a cornerstone of community, yet many of these social networks were ruptured because of the hurricane (see Breunlin and Regis 2008; Lipsitz 2006). Analyses of the Vietnamese community both before and after the storm, by contrast, have focused on the important role of congregations both as promoting social mobility but also cultural heritage (Bankston and Zhou 2000; Airriess et al. 2008).

Institutions such as Boat People SOS also participated in recovery efforts. Organizations such as the National Alliance of Vietnamese American Service Agencies and Boat People SOS were crucial service-providers that helped bridge language differences by providing translators. While initially organized to assist with resettlement, the organization later took up policy advocacy and casework in light of welfare and immigration reforms. It also participated in the Katrina Aid Today (KAT) National Case management Consortium and assisted the American Red Cross’ efforts to reach Vietnamese Americans affected by Katrina (Nguyen and Nguyen 2007).

I would like to acknowledge one of the reviewers’ patient comments that have helped eliminate some of my earlier characterizations of the gardening practices.

In contrast to the volunteer relief efforts documented by Rachel Luft (2008), most of the staff, but not all, identify themselves as Vietnamese. Some are lifelong residents in the neighborhood, but other staff and volunteers have also been culled from around the United States. While this characterization may have mitigated reconstituting a field of racial difference, it also presumed that volunteers and staff were situated in the neighborhood on the same terms as long-term residents, a point that has been critiqued in the broader literature on Katrina (see Luft 2008; Flaherty 2008).

The CDC’s visibility has also meant that it has become highlighted in recent elections in which Anh “Joseph” Cao, the Congressman, who had requested federal funding for the Viet Urban Farm, came under scrutiny during his bid for re-election against Cedric Richmond. Richmond claimed that Cao’s funding request for MQVNCDC raised questions about funneling money to favored organizations, thus
demonstrating the tensions between visibility, on the one hand, and transparency, on the other.

The land available for environmental credits was held by oil companies, often their depleted oil fields.

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