

Geography, philosophy, and the build/no-build line

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Abstract

Deeply rooted values and perceptions regarding technology, society, place, and the environment inform the passionate debate about the future of New Orleans. This article describes three overriding rebuilding philosophies, and their geographical implications, that have emerged from that public discourse in the year following Hurricane Katrina. It concludes with a commentary on embracing social, cultural, and humanistic values even when the problem at hand appears to be one of science, engineering, and technology.

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1. Introduction

Various philosophies have emerged on the rebuilding of New Orleans, each with its own logic, passion, experts, and dogma. But all can be boiled down to a simple line on a map, separating areas recommended for rebuilding from those deemed best returned to nature. Where people locate their build/no-build line says as much about them—and how they view and weigh science, economics, social, and humanistic values—as it says about the geographical future of New Orleans.

One philosophy recommends the total abandonment of the metropolis. Its advocates essentially draw the build/no-build line at the metropolis' upper boundary, somewhere between rural St. Charles Parish and urbanized Jefferson Parish, or above Lake Pontchartrain's northern shore. St. Louis University geologist Timothy M. Kusky first voiced the "abandonist" philosophy in a *Boston Globe* editorial, which later earned him a national audience on the popular US television show 60 minutes. He readily acknowledged:

New Orleans is one of America's great historic cities, and our *emotional response* to the disaster is to rebuild it grander and greater than before. However, this may not be the *most rational or scientifically sound* response and could lead to *even greater human catastrophe* and *financial loss* in the future [1].

Abandonists like Kusky tend to be pragmatic and fiscally conservative; for them it is a rational question of hard science, hard dollars, and body counts. In making their case, they cite only the gloomiest scientific data on subsidence, coastal erosion, and sea-level rise, and dismiss humanist and cultural

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arguments as “emotional” or “nostalgic.” Abandonists almost always have nothing to lose personally if the city does disappear. They are loathed in New Orleans, but occupy a seat at the table in the national discourse.

At the opposite end are those who advocate maintaining the urban footprint at all costs. Unlike abandonists, “maintainers” see this as primarily a humanist and cultural question, rather than a scientific or engineering one. To be against maintaining all neighborhoods is to be against people and against culture—worse yet, against certain people and certain cultures. Maintainers tend to be passionate, oftentimes angry, and for good reason: many are flood victims and have everything to lose if the build/no-build line crosses their homes. If a levee can be built well enough to protect *them*, they reason, why not extend it around *us*? Among the most outspoken maintainers are social activists who interpret any post-diluvian adjustment to the urban perimeter as a conspiracy of “politically conservative, economically neoliberal power elites” who “are doing everything in their power to prevent [working-class African-Americans] from returning” [2]. Ignoring scientific data and fiscal constraints, maintainers push the build/no-build line beyond the rural fringes of St. Bernard Parish, even all the way to the Gulf of Mexico.

In between are the “concessionists,” usually aficionados of the city, particularly its historical heart, and often residents of its unflooded sections. Concessionists struggle to balance troubling scientific data with treasured social and cultural resources. Their answer: concede certain low-lying modern subdivisions to nature—areas which, incidentally, they never found structurally appealing in the first place—and increase population density and flood protection in the higher, historically significant areas.

Sensitive to accusations of insensitivity, concessionists soften their message with careful wordsmithing and confusing maps. The Urban Land Institute (ULI), which advised the city on rebuilding options in November 2005, delineated three innocuous-sounding “investment zones” and cartographically depicted them in barely distinguishable shades of lavender. One had to read the report very carefully to understand that, in fact, “investment zone A,” despite its optimistic name, was recommended for substantial conversion to green space and, at best, delayed rebuilding [3]. In January 2006, the Bring New Orleans Back (BNOB) Commission map echoed a similar concessionist sentiment, euphemistically labeling flooded areas with questionable futures as “neighborhood planning areas,” while unflooded zones with rosy outlooks were called “immediate opportunity areas” [4]. Maintainers angrily denounced both the ULI’s and BNOB Commission’s concessionist philosophies at every public hearing and in no uncertain terms.

Concessionists place their build/no-build line somewhere between those of the abandonists and the maintainers—sometimes near the Industrial Canal, sometimes between the Metairie/Gentilly Ridge and the lakefront, usually to the exclusion of the distant, charmless, low-lying suburbs known as New Orleans East. Concessionists enjoy widespread support among many educated professionals who live on high ground, but encounter fierce resistance among maintainers. One resident of a neighborhood slated for possible concession declared to the chair of the BNOB Commission (who happens to be a major real estate developer), “Mr. Joe Canizaro, I do not know you, but I hate you. You have been in the background trying to scheme to get our land!” [5].

Recent news that rural, isolated lower Plaquemines Parish—home to only 14,000 people, or 2% of the region’s population—may not receive the \$1.6 billion needed for levee repair [6] might spawn a fourth philosophy: push the build/no-build line down just past Belle Chasse, the only major community in upper Plaquemines Parish that adjoins the metropolitan area. Advocates might include city dwellers, both concessionists and maintainers, who stand to benefit from the abandonment of lower Plaquemines because it would clear the path for aggressive coastal restoration while reducing the price tag on their own protection. Let the sediment-laden waters of the Mississippi River replenish those eroding marshes, they might contend; we need to restore them to buffer the metropolis against storm surges. What about the rural peoples who have called those marshes home for over a century? Well, as geologist Kusky put it in his now-famous abandonist editorial, it’s “time to move to higher ground” [1]. (Fig. 1)

Thus, social, cultural, and humanistic values, plus a sense of personal investment, tend to push the build/no-build line in a downriver direction, while scientific and financial values nudge the line upriver. What to make of all this?

First, even the most ardent lovers of New Orleans should refrain from loathing the abandonists. After all, concessionists (and those maintainers willing to sacrifice lower Plaquemines) are essentially making the same

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