Rendering the Invisible Visible: *Cultural Architecture and Predatory Planning in Atlanta's Sweet Auburn*

by **KIARA NAGEL WITH KENNEY BAILEY**

In the process of rebuilding New Orleans, new challenges have arisen for both planners and organizers. Planners from across the country have been openly accused by indigenous New Orleans residents and organizers of overlooking sophisticated cultural infrastructure unique to the city. Whether builders with intergenerational knowledge of building materials or social and pleasure clubs with extensive networks for locating residents across the post-Katrina diaspora, local voices have been overlooked and underappreciated as outside "experts" have rolled in (see article by Neville and Irazabal in the Summer 2007 issue of this magazine).

When planning, we often pay attention to incorporating quality design, improving infrastructure and generating growth, but when we are in particular communities, we are intervening in the cultural infrastructure of that community. The Design Studio for Social Intervention (DS4SI) launched the Cultural Commons Project to connect cultural and community development practitioners and to generate new ideas for how to work within the cultural infrastructure. During the 2007 U.S. Social Forum in Atlanta, the Cultural Commons Project brought together practitioners from New Orleans to Albuquerque to Honolulu to share stories of their struggles as cultural practitioners contending with development. The process demonstrated that strengthening the cultural commons is vital to true community development.

Why Sweet Auburn?

The workshop centered on Auburn Avenue, a place and a neighborhood that once served as a backbone for the civil rights movement-building work. It was once considered the richest black street in the world, the epicenter of Atlanta's early black economy, a mecca for political organizing of all kinds and a thriving cultural commons.

Today, however, it takes a leap of faith to imagine what Sweet Auburn used to be like. On the one hand, it's now an international tourist destination. It's not uncommon to see Japanese tourists taking pictures or a sizeable group of American tourists checking out the many civil rights sites on Segways. On the other hand, it's a hyper-local site of Atlanta's excluded. Amidst the tourists it's not uncommon to see boarded up storefronts, run-down buildings and addicts smoking crack in broad daylight.

Further complicating this picture is all the new development. The neighborhood is far from immune to the gentrification and condo-mania sweeping Atlanta. When cultural infrastructure is affected by development, the artifacts may remain—often co-opted to make the neighborhood feel more authentic—but the culture itself can be threatened with extinction and displacement. As Mari Cowser of the Historic District Development Corporation (HDDC) wonders, "How do we make sure we still have fried green tomatoes and sweet peach tea down the street when all is said and done?" If history and culture is marketable, what happens when the capacity to produce that culture is removed to make room for redevelopment?

How Do We Define Predatory Planning?

One of the goals of visiting Sweet Auburn was to see if our practitioners could identify what we call predatory planning. Predatory planning is the intentional process of dispossession enacted through the simultaneous use of multiple, often globally powered, redevelopment tactics in the wake of trauma. I use the term to describe the new phenomenon emerging in the Gulf, especially New Orleans, in the wake of Hurricane Katrina. The fact that Shaw and Halliburton, companies contracted to handle rebuilding in Iraq, were also awarded mega-contracts to handle Gulf redevelopment is an indication that a new term is ⇨

needed to understand what places are experiencing. Put a more colloquial way, this is not your backyard gentrification anymore. In the case of predatory planning, the speed, complexity and intentionality of development are heightened at the same time that a trauma or shock has diminished the capacity of residents to participate or resist.

Predatory planning's impact encompasses a traumatic stress reaction involving root shock and destruction of the cultural commons. Root shock, the collective trauma left behind when communities are uprooted, is described in Mindy Fullilove's book *Root Shock* (2004). It can result in decimated communities with rising rates of HIV, drug addiction, depression and stress. It can also impact the cultural commons in the form of social networks and cultural traditions, as seen, for instance, in the second line tradition of New Orleans jazz funeral processions or in Hawaii's master hula dances. These are cultural practices tied to a locale, connected to a specific intersection of place and culture, and can often buffer the brute impact of root shock for a community. Even outside of catastrophic events, the cultural commons often rely on—and point to the significance of—people who may not have much monetary value to the market, whether it be a prodigious young spiritual healer or an elderly man who teaches local surfers the roots of their craft. Their presence of such leaders makes their communities richer and healthier; their absence makes communities even more vulnerable to predatory planning.

Walking Sweet Auburn

There really is no better way to understand place-based struggles than to get out and walk in the community with the people who know it best. At the U.S. Social Forum workshop, we asked four local organizers and residents, Mari Cowser, Charles Johnson, Saudia Mawwakkil and Gerry Hudson, to lead us on a tour of Auburn Street as a way to orient cultural practitioners from specific place-based struggles around the U.S. to the larger forces affecting all communities. We wanted participants to engage in the experience and build solidarity across locales. The familiar cycle of abandonment and reinvestment is highly evident in Sweet Auburn, with the neighborhood experiencing many of the building blocks of predatory planning: redlining, Jim Crow, urban renewal, slum clearance, federal highway programs, planned shrinkage and eventual gentrification and redevelopment. Today the community's struggles are both residual and new.

At 2:00 P.M., the group emerges from Historic Ebenezer Baptist Church and is welcomed by Saudia of the Martin Luther King, Jr., National Historic Site. Moving down the block, we gather around the statue of John Wesley Dobbs, grandfather of the first black mayor of Atlanta who coined the phrase Sweet Auburn to describe how African-American money "ran like honey." Charles Johnson, president of the Sweet Auburn Fest, which draws over 100,000 guests to the neighborhood each year, explains how the street was lined with restaurants and businesses during its heyday: black-owned insurance companies, a grand hotel, a tailor shop, and

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around the corner the Butler Street YMCA. The Royal Peacock Club was just one of several nightclubs in the neighborhood. "You really need to ask some questions here," Johnson says. "This used to be one of the richest black streets in the country and why does it look like this now when we been under thirty years of black administrations? We need to have some honest conversations about what's really going on."

While Johnson points out the intricate stonework detail decorating the Prince Hall Masonic Lodge, cultural practitioners from Honolulu duck into the Sweet Auburn Bread Bakery. Vicki Takamine emerges with sweet potato pie to share with everyone. You have to use all your senses to understand and appreciate the cultural commons! When we visited Hawaii, Vicki took us to sacred sites and explained the rootedness of native cultural practice in the land, a lesson given on the way to a legendary shrimp truck that served us plates of buttery shrimp and rice. How can you be allowed to plan a whole community without visiting the local rib shack?

Across the street is a boarded up house, with several men hanging around out front. A woman approaches us, crack stem in hand, requesting financial assistance. "Let's move along," one of the tour guides urges. "That's enough of that." "We have a lot of pain in our communities," Hina from Hawaii offers. Rick from New Orleans responds, "They going to clean that up so fast. Once that development goes in, all them people are gone."

The experience of root shock caused by dislodging people from social and cultural networks is well known by marginalized communities around the country. Tour guide Mari Cowser agrees: "We've all suffered from Model Cities, urban renewal, empowerment zones. I call them the delayed triplets. There is usually a pattern and what you have to do is better familiarize yourself with the past to understand what is happening. We are experiencing the same thing all over the country. There's already been a plan. We've just not been part of it."

We approach a monstrous cement structure, the I-85 overpass. "This is what divided this community," Johnson shouts over the traffic. Rick Mathieu knows this story well. His New Orleans neighborhood of Treme, another site for civil rights organizing with a strong black economy and vibrant culture, is still reeling from the I-10 expressway that dissected the neighborhood's core decades ago. As the group lingers in the dead space under the highway, the dank smell of urine and trash is as hard to ignore as the roaring sound of eight lanes of traffic overhead. ⇨

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LEFT: *Welcomed by local hosts outside Ebeneezer Baptist Church, practitioners fom Atlanta, New Orleans, Hawaii, Atlanta, and beyond prepare for a walking tour of Sweet Auburn.*

RIGHT: *The I-85 overpass that bisects and divides the Sweet Auburn neighborhood.*

Sweet Auburn's Lessons

The cultural infrastructure that existed alongside the black civic infrastructure is now difficult to trace. It's fairly easy to say that the area was, and still is, staggering from the effects of root shock, a shock that happened years ago from the building of the highway, urban renewal and economic fallout. We also assert that the people showing the effects of that shock the most, who are reeling from hereditary trauma, are also currently being used to justify the neighborhood's upcoming "clean up." We would classify this strategy—the turning of the results of prior trauma into a development tactic—as part of the new predatory planning. Sweet Auburn had the potential to become a vibrant site-specific cultural infrastructure, but it was stopped before it had a chance to fully grow.

We have opportunities to prevent this in places still fighting for their cultural lives. We also have plenty to learn from such places about what it takes to construct viable civil societies. So how do we stop what seems to have happened to Atlanta from happening in New Orleans and other places?

Trans-Local Dialogue

During our time in Sweet Auburn we shared stories with one another. Rick Mathieu traveled from New Orleans with his two sons. He shared his family's experience of surviving the flood by drawing from its cultural commons. Now he is seeing complete abandonment of certain areas of the city coupled with massive investment in others.

Vicki Takamine from Honolulu spoke about her community's struggles with the enclosure of sacred sites and the impact that tourism and development are having on cultural practices.

> The state constitution guarantees the rights of native Hawaiians to exercise their traditional and customary practices on ancestral lands, whether they own that land or not and this includes gathering rights…. In order to preserve my rights to gather native plants and resources, I was told I had to prove every leaf and fish that my great great grandparents went to gather. This policy was clearly set up for us to fail. Our response: forty drummers, hundreds of dancers, and over 1000 people gathered at the demonstration and shut the capital down to protest around the gathering rights! Their action interrupted the passing of the bill and they became cultural policymakers.

Ayinde Summers is a cultural practitioner and youth worker

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LEFT: *Luxury condominium development underway along Auburn Avenue co-opting the Sweet Auburn name.*

RIGHT: Low-income housing slated to be cleared for redevelopment.

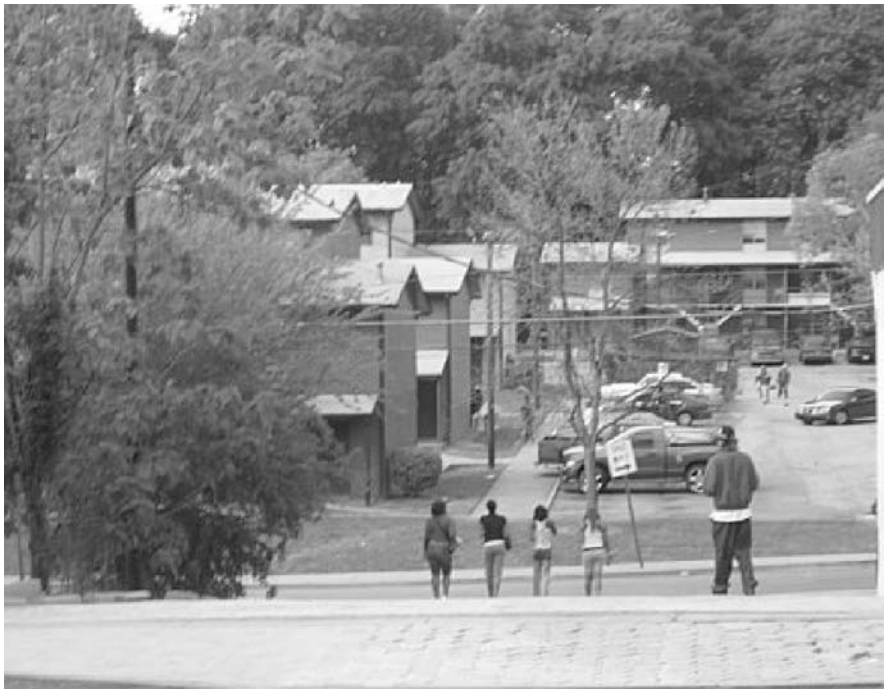
from Atlanta. After hearing Hawaiian practitioners speaking about cultural charter schools and the intentionality of intergenerational work, he drew connections to his work with youth on the Gulla Islands off the coast of Georgia and their struggles to maintain culture.

It's nearly 5:00 P.M. when we make it back up the hill to Ebenezer Church. The afternoon sun and the sites have drained our energy, but Ms. Cowser offers cold drinks up the block at the HDDC offices across from Dr. King's childhood home. We clearly have only begun to build together, and it's a long way to beginning to develop strategies for resistance to predatory planning.

Implications for Planning

Predatory planning provides a framework for understanding the new era we have entered—an era marked by globalized redevelopment forces, an increase in the number of severe natural disasters and the existence of widespread trauma and disaster capitalism. Today's realities render our old planning terms out of date. Gentrification used to take years to flip a neighborhood. Today we have seen how it can happen in a matter of months or, in the case of Katrina and other atrocities, almost immediately. As the tools of dispossession increase in power and complexity, organizers are left wondering if their old tactics will still be effective. As best said by Mindy Fullilove and the Root Shock Institute, asking grassroots efforts to stand up to global regimes is rude. As organizers stretch to respond, so must planners. Our strategies for intervention are, at best, missing a critical piece of inquiry. At worst, they are becoming obsolete.

As planners, we are not necessarily equipped with tools needed to both recognize and work with local cultural infrastructures. It's not enough to land in a new place and start to look for cultural infrastructure. We must begin by making sure that cultural architects are a part of our conversations about placemaking, arts-based redevelopment, culturally-based tourism and other strategies for progressive community development. We must also realize that these conversations are urgent. The cultural commons is endangered. Sweet Auburn was listed as one of America's most endangered places by the National Trust for Historic Preservation. Recent attempts to genetically patent traditional sacred Hawaiian poi plant are moving forward. New Orleans is circulating a new petition to make social and pleasure clubs submit permits for second line parades. Our cultural commons are under attack. Predatory planning is occurring, for the most part, unchallenged. As progressive planners we must join community organizers in creating processes and structures to support vitality of place and learn to see cultural architects as vital to community development—or else fail to see communities as vital.



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