The Alliance for a Just Rebuilding held a rally on the steps of New York City Hall to culminate their “Turning the Tide” march, July 31, 2013.
“We have all experienced the devastating effects of natural and unnatural disasters in America.” So began a speaker at a post-Hurricane Sandy rally at Zuccotti Park on July 31, 2013, recalling two previous disasters that the audience knew well: the World Trade Center attack of September 11, 2001, and Hurricane Katrina’s flooding of New Orleans on August 29, 2005. Yet by “devastating effects,” he was not just referring to the terrorist attack or breached levees. As he went on to say: “the recovery efforts were the disaster inside the disaster.” His first example was close at hand: the Lower Manhattan Development Corporation (LMDC), the public–private conduit through which $20 billion in post-9/11 recovery funds flowed, housed in the reconstructed Deutsche Bank building now rising on Zuccotti’s northern edge. Shaking a fist at the tower, the speaker listed the major corporations and Wall Street firms that were primary recipients of New York’s aid. He drew a parallel to the “recovery,” where $32 billion in aid, the city, state, and federal governments were unable to rebuild the neighborhoods or fund the return of New Orleans’ poorest and most vulnerable communities. After Katrina, he said, “We vowed never to have that same situation arise on our soil.”

The speech was one of many, along the route of a “Turning the Tide” march led by a new labor-community coalition, Alliance for a Just Rebuilding (AJR). Beginning at the Staten Island Ferry terminal and culminating at City Hall, speakers represented the diversity of Sandy-impacted individuals and organizations from across the five boroughs, including public housing residents and renters still displaced or living with mold, day laborers who worked as first responders under abysmal conditions for little pay, and trade unions and community organizations whose members continue to face economic, health, and emotional hardship. Their immediate goal, as AJR director Nathalie Alegre put it, was to remind the many New Yorkers—including the then-New York City mayoral candidates—for whom Sandy was already a “distant memory” that thousands were still affected and in need of aid. Yet AJR had a longer term goal: to “turn the tide” on the top-down approaches to recovery and redevelopment that were established in the wake of 9/11 and Katrina. They unveiled a “people’s agenda” for post-Sandy rebuilding with four demands: good jobs, affordable housing, sustainable energy, and community involvement. What is striking is how radical this basic platform appeared up against the “new normal” of twenty-first century post-disaster redevelopment.

Witnessing these and other grassroots efforts in the months following Sandy has been extremely moving for me. Together with my co-author Kevin Fox Gotham, I have spent the past six years writing a book on post-crisis redevelopment in New York and New Orleans following 9/11 and Katrina. We were motivated to undertake this project after witnessing, in two very different cities facing two very different disasters, the same inequitable rebuilding
process that marchers now sought to prevent. We found this inequity in the short-term recovery phase (funded by FEMA) and the long-term redevelopment phase—funded by the Department of Housing and Urban Development through community development block grants (CDBGs) and the Liberty Zone and Gulf Opportunity Zone private activity bond (PAB) programs. Similar public–private agencies were established to govern the process: the LMDC for New York and the Louisiana Recovery Agency (LRA) for New Orleans. In both cases, the federal programs governed by the agencies were deregulated to eliminate “public benefit,” “low-income,” and “accountability” requirements. At each stage, low-income, disproportionately non-white communities, workers, and small businesses, the primary victims of disaster, were further disadvantaged in receiving aid, while wealthy, disproportionately white neighborhoods and high-end industries were privileged. In a process we termed “crisis-driven urbanization,” we traced how this uneven redevelopment transformed the post-disaster city: fortifying affluent neighborhoods, catalyzing gentrification and displacement in low-income areas, and realizing the long-held development dreams of powerful growth coalitions.

The fate of the $51 billion in post-Sandy recovery aid is undecided.

At the same time, we saw how these dynamics inspired new scales of solidarity and strategies of organizing, as long-standing groups and newly formed coalitions strove to challenge and change the course of this redevelopment. As of this writing, the fate of the $51 billion in post-Sandy recovery aid is undecided. If we really are to turn the tide, and ensure 9/11 and Katrina do not become the model for how to disburse this aid, the involvement of energized citizens and movements could not be more vital. Following are a few historic lessons that I hope might inform and aid their efforts.

Tracing the Roots of Disaster

It is by now well known that disasters and their outcomes are never “natural.” Regardless of the immediate trigger, catastrophic events need not lead to large-scale, long-term crises for cities and their populations. In places where risk and inequality are minimal, disasters can be contained; where they are great, crises ensue—and at an extreme become endemic. The broader socio-spatial, political-economic, and historic context is key to understanding their origin and impact—as well as to devising strategies for recovering from them.

In the case of New York and New Orleans, and a great many crisis cities like them today, this broader context can be traced to the market-oriented approach to urbanization that began in the late 1970s as elites responded to urban unrest and fiscal crisis by creating new public–private partnerships to push through more market-friendly reforms and growth strategies, from political and economic restructuring to urban rebranding. While always a site of capital accumulation, cities since this time have increasingly operated as “for-profit” enterprises. Typical urban policy platforms have rested on some combination of privatization, deregulation, fiscal austerity, business incentives, and attacks on organized labor, all in an attempt to attract new levels of investment, consumption, and private development. Investment in urban development, meanwhile, became a “spatial fix” to fiscal and accumulation crises. In New York City, this entailed the “financialization” of Lower Manhattan, despite local efforts to maintain a more mixed economic base; in New Orleans, it entailed the urbanization of the wetlands, despite efforts to preserve this essential storm buffer and eco-system. Both were highly contradictory interventions: exacerbating uneven development and spawning new forms of economic, environmental, and social risk.

Thus, by the time of the 2001 and 2005 disasters, New York and New Orleans had been suffering from decades of inequitable and unsustainable policy and planning, driven by the interest of local growth coalitions. In New York, the city’s dependence on the volatile finance, insurance, and real estate sector for tax revenue increased its vulnerability to economic downturns. In New Orleans, flood risks were intensified by wetland destruction driven by oil and shipping interests, and uneven levee
building by the Army Corps of Engineers to accommodate the development schemes of local parishes. In both cities, the bulk of risk devolved to low-income people, who typically lacked adequate insurance, an imbalance that was exacerbated by post-crisis policies of fiscal austerity and uneven redevelopment. All of this created the uneven landscape of risk and resilience upon which 9/11 and Katrina fell, and produced the conditions for transforming a sudden disaster into a long-term crisis.

**Radical Rupture and the Politics of the Crisis Moment**

In her book *The Shock Doctrine*, Naomi Klein cites Milton Friedman’s famous saying that “only a crisis—actual or perceived—produces real change. When that crisis occurs, the actions that are taken depend on the ideas that are lying around.” The role of political leaders, then, is to “develop alternatives to existing policies, to keep them alive and available until the politically impossible becomes the politically inevitable.” Yet what might these alternatives be? While Klein emphasizes the tendency for increasingly conservative ideas to gain sway, it should be remembered that, by creating a profound break in “business as usual,” crises also present a potentially radical rupture, that is, historic opportunities for new forms of political intervention. By laying bare pre-existing social and environmental injustices—as those who are most vulnerable suffer most—disasters can create historical opportunities for galvanizing progressive forces around redressing long-standing injustices, changing the dominant course of urban development, and pursuing “high-road” rebuilding that emphasizes good jobs, affordable housing, and environmental sustainability. This can be spurred on by imaginative, inclusive planning, and the radical energies of what Rachel Luft has called “crisis organizing.”

In both cities, crisis organizers formed broad-based coalitions, and forged new local and national networks—not least the U.S. Right to the City Alliance formed following Katrina. Also novel were redevelopment watchdog groups: Reconstruction Watch in New York City post-9/11 and Gulf Coast Reconstruction Watch in New Orleans. These groups struggled for years for a more inclusive, equitable, and transparent post-disaster planning process.

Yet the challenges they faced were real. The post-crisis period is one of mourning and mutual aid, when engaging in politics as a grassroots group can feel unseemly. This concern, however, is not shared by powerful public/private coalitions making early decisions, often behind the scenes, on how to appeal for and target aid. This dilemma is captured in an urgent letter written two weeks following Katrina from leading New York civic groups that had been active following 9/11:

> The early design of relief and recovery programs will have a lasting impact on the fairness of the rebuilding effort. Structures and systems will get “cast in stone” very soon that can either promote broad civic participation in the rebuilding process or make the process very undemocratic. To the extent local groups are able, it is critical to be cohesive, to be vocal, and to get involved now, in the early stages of program design, so that groups representing local communities, people of color, low- and middle-income people, and small businesses can be an active part of the process . . . In New York, many of us hesitated to criticize program design because we didn’t want to seem ungrateful or (in the post-9/11 world) divisive. As it turned out, however, when we got into debates later on, the early design of the programs limited our ability to influence the decision-making process.

Unfortunately, the same process unfolded following Katrina—indeed, as I explore below, post-9/11 redevelopment was rapidly embraced as a model for the Gulf. Nonetheless, the message still resonates. In fact, in the weeks and months after Sandy, those involved in post-9/11 organizing saw even greater challenges. Just weeks after the storm, there were suddenly a plethora of agencies with different mandates, many even more inaccessible than the LMDC. As a Reconstruction Watch researcher told me six months after Sandy, there was, ironically,
some “nostalgia” for the LMDC: “at least they had one address, and held public hearings, even if our voices weren’t heard.”

In addition to the problem of early engagement, there is the problem of sustaining the struggle over the long term. This was articulated by an administrator at University Settlement, a Lower East Side aid agency that did groundbreaking post-9/11 crisis organizing: “We had zero resources for all this advocacy work, and frankly, [after two years] we had to turn our organizing energies to more immediate issues, such as welfare and minimum wage rate increases, and local housing fights.” Thus, a lesson for organizers would be to “get political” from the start, be ready for strategic engagement with often nebulous rebuilding agencies—or in spite of them, and build the resources necessary to support political work well beyond the crisis moment.

Uneven Redevelopment

It was precisely in the “beyond the crisis moment” period, that of long-term redevelopment, that we saw the most strikingly similar dynamics unfold in New York and New Orleans. In addition to the political exclusion of grassroots groups, this similarity emerged from the fact that 9/11 was used as a legal precedent in shaping federal, state, and local responses to Hurricane Katrina.

First, New York City’s powerful Wall Street–backed lobbying groups secured sweeping changes at the federal level in how recovery funds could be distributed and for what purpose. These changes transformed historic mechanisms for disbursing disaster aid: FEMA grants, CDBGs, and PABs. Following 9/11, provisions regarding “public benefits” and “means-testing,” as well as “public oversight,” which once governed these mechanisms, were stripped from the legislation through a series of waivers. This was justified by the claim that funds had to flow freely and flexibly to financial sector victims, and be used to incentivize development in a restricted, wealthy area of Lower Manhattan. This ignored the equally harmful health impacts and arguably more devastating economic impacts of the disaster on low-income, largely uninsured residents, workers, and small businesses in Chinatown and the Lower East Side. Yet these waivers were used as a precedent in the deregulation of aid for the entire Gulf Coast region following Katrina, with the “Gulf Opportunity Zone” modeled on the “Liberty Zone,” and the LRA channeling CDBGs just as the LMDC did before it. Few questioned whether a business-friendly tax, bond, and grant package designed for Lower Manhattan’s elites could be retrofitted for this vast, low-income region.

As a result, in New York and New Orleans, “recovery” and “redevelopment” were used to steer billions of public dollars to powerful industries, real estate developers, corporations, and already wealthy neighborhoods. Organizers did win some important concessions, with a small proportion of funds going to public goods like parks, infrastructure, and affordable housing, thanks to their advocacy. Yet on the whole, the “New Lower Manhattan” and “New Orleans Miracle” were characterized by uneven redevelopment: increasing wealth, population, and infrastructure for affluent neighborhoods like New York’s Financial District and New Orleans’ Lakeview, alongside decline, gentrification, and/or displacement in low-income neighborhoods like the Lower East Side, Chinatown, and the Lower 9th Ward. Thus seemingly temporary, localized emergency responses can powerfully alter future urban trajectories.

Crisis-Driven Urbanization and Hurricane Sandy

With “Superstorm Sandy” in 2012, a massive catastrophe once again exposed uneven landscapes of risk and resilience. It did so everywhere it touched down, from Atlantic City to Port-au-Prince, where inequalities were the most extreme and health impacts by far the most severe. Yet it was in its impact on the New York City area that Sandy brought the two cases I studied together in the most unsettling way. Following on the heels of Hurricane Irene in 2011, Sandy blew away any doubt that New York is now as vulnerable to extreme weather as New Orleans has long been. This is due, in large part, to the effects of global warming and sea level rise for the coastal cities in which the bulk
of the world’s population now lives. Yet the lessons of Sandy extend beyond this; in its ongoing effects on vulnerable communities and ecosystems, Sandy is also a reminder of the legacies of crisis-driven urbanization.

**The devastation Sandy caused in Lower Manhattan was partly a result of shortsighted, market-oriented, post-9/11 redevelopment.**

Most immediately, the devastation Sandy caused in Lower Manhattan was partly a result of shortsighted, market-oriented, post-9/11 redevelopment. Billions in federal rebuilding dollars fueled the meteoric construction of luxury residential and commercial towers on the southern tip of Lower Manhattan—with proximity to low-lying waterfronts actually boosting real estate values. In addition to ignoring the economic and environmental needs of neighboring low-income populations, this construction placed new, wealthy residents and their tax-financed buildings at enormous risk. Advance warning was provided by Hurricane Irene’s “wake-up call” in 2011. The Bloomberg administration was commended for creating emergency evacuation zones for low-lying areas—including Lower Manhattan—and actually evacuating more than three hundred thousand people in those areas. Yet this known risk in no way inspired a change in course for downtown real estate development. Indeed, just one week after Irene, at the official unveiling of the “new Lower Manhattan” for the ten-year anniversary of 9/11, the only official allusion to the storm was Mayor Bloomberg’s assurance that it would have “no impact” on rebuilding. Speaking at a Wall Street breakfast sponsored by the real estate–backed Association for a Better New York, the mayor proudly promised the continued construction of waterfront towers “come hell or high water.”

Additional relationships between the events were revealed in the coming days, weeks, and months, as the pre-existing uneven landscape of risk versus resiliency—worsened by redevelopment following 9/11, as well as by the 2008 financial meltdown—enabled the storm to have such devastating and starkly uneven economic, human, and environmental impacts. The “new” Lower Manhattan—wealthier, more heavily insured, with superior infrastructure, and more politically connected than ever—was able to withstand the storm’s initial impact better than most, and then repair and rebuild in what seemed like lightning speed. Some fared better than others, illustrated famously when the only building on the Lower Manhattan skyline to stay lit on the night of the storm was the new Goldman Sachs tower (a leading recipient of Liberty Bonds and CDBGs). Nonetheless, with some notable exceptions, the downtown area was to get essential services like electricity, heat and hot water back within days, and 99 percent of its commercial, residential, hotel, and retail inventory “back to business” within weeks.

This stood in stark contrast with equally inundated parts of the Lower East Side and Chinatown, as well as Red Hook, Coney Island, Far Rockaway, parts of the South Bronx and Queens, and the north shore of Staten Island. For these low- and middle-income, racially diverse neighborhoods, with high concentrations of industry and public housing and far less by way of private resources or political clout, the response by FEMA and city agencies was woefully inadequate. Thus, neighborhoods remained flooded; schools and clinics stayed closed; apartments and businesses were without light, heat, or working plumbing; and people remained in buildings with serious structural damage and mold contamination, for weeks and often months. The overwhelming race, class, and geographic disparities created profound shock that defied local comparison, even to 9/11. As Red Hook public housing resident Toni Khadijah James put it, “This is our Katrina.”

**For neighborhoods with high concentrations of industry and public housing, the response by FEMA and city agencies was woefully inadequate.**

This comparison begs the question of whether longer term uneven redevelopment will, here, too, follow on the heels of unequal recovery. Troubling evidence was provided on June 11,
when Mayor Bloomberg announced, “A Stronger, More Resilient New York,” his administration’s $20 billion plan to increase the resilience of infrastructure and buildings citywide in the face of climate change and sea level rise. The plan is fundamentally a technology- and real estate-driven intervention. One concern it raises, echoed by sustainable planning experts, is that New York City could now end up looking like New Orleans due to the heavy involvement of the Army Corps of Engineers in the plan’s design. As we have seen with decades of uneven levee construction and wetland urbanization in New Orleans and the Gulf, development interests largely dictated their terms to the Corps, to disastrous effect. If this occurs in New York, whatever flood control systems created may make areas like the “New Lower Manhattan” appear safe for investment and habitation, yet simultaneously mask the considerable risks produced by waterfront development and market-oriented urbanization themselves. This leads to a deeper concern with the plan: however state of the art, a technological fix will not build real resilience, as it will not address the broader social and environmental inequalities that increase vulnerability and lay the ground for future crisis.

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New Solidarity

Yet there is another history repeating itself after Sandy: that of new solidarity among first responders, residents, community-based organizations, aid organizations, local governments, and, notably, labor unions (ranging from nurses to transit workers, firefighters to construction unions). A week following the tenth anniversary of 9/11, Occupy Wall Street formed in reaction to the fallout from the 2008 economic crises set off by many of the Wall Street firms that benefited so disproportionately from 9/11 redevelopment aid. These movements, in turn, created fertile ground for the formation of Occupy Sandy, the efforts of which proved more effective than FEMA in bringing aid to the most distressed communities in the outer reaches of the boroughs.

After Sandy [there is] new solidarity among first responders, residents, community-based organizations, aid organizations, local governments, and labor unions.

Over the longer term, through an ongoing series of conferences, community meetings, and mobilizations, coalitions like AJR and the Sandy Regional Assembly have kept up the fight. These community labor alliances have sought not only to redress the wrongs of Hurricane Sandy but also to transform existing models of post-disaster rebuilding. Their vision builds on and exceeds that of post-9/11 and post-Katrina coalitions. It reminds us that crises provide moments of radical rupture, and shows us that these moments can be cumulative. Crucial here has been the learning from and drawing connections between past processes of crisis-driven urbanization, with their unequal socio-economic and environmental impacts, and unfinished political legacies. What if these are the “ideas lying around” in the wake of Sandy, and when the next disaster hits? Perhaps, then, this moment can help to turn the tide, ushering in a new era of post-crisis redevelopment in which resources and organizing are directed toward rebuilding a city that is more just and sustainable—and so more truly resilient.

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Notes

1. The speaker was Bobby Tolbert of VOCAL-NY. The author recorded his speech at the rally.
2. For images and a description of the rally, as well as a list of the more than thirty groups involved,

3. Other important coalitions include the Sandy Regional Assembly, created by the New York City Environmental Justice Alliance, and Occupy Sandy. Also significant are new neighborhood-based groups, like Restore Red Hook and Staten Island Recovers.


6. Both were facilitated by larger scale forces; in New York by the state government in Albany, and in New Orleans by the Army Corps of Engineers.

7. For this history, see, for example, Greenberg, Branding New York and Craig Colten, An Unnatural Metropolis: Wrestling New Orleans from Nature (New Orleans: Louisiana State University Press, 2006).


11. In New York City, this included the Labor Community Advocacy Network (LCAN), Rebuild with a Spotlight on the Poor, and Beyond Ground Zero. In New Orleans, this included the Neighborhoods Partnership Network, the Greater New Orleans Disaster Recovery Partnership, the Citizens’ Road Home Action Team, the Lower 9th Ward Center for Sustainable Engagement and Development, and Levees.org.


14. Email correspondence with the author, August 9, 2013.


18. Downtown Alliance, Back to Business: The State of Lower Manhattan Four Months after Hurricane Sandy (New York: Downtown Alliance, 2013), available at www.downtownny.com/sandy/#/sthash.UXVsfN5T.dpuf. Some important exceptions go unmentioned in this report. South Street Seaport, particularly the shops on Pier 17, remained shuttered for months, with many tenants evicted. In addition to damage caused by seven-foot tidal surges, this may be attributed to the priorities of the landlord. The Howard Hughes Corporation had submitted plans to redevelop the pier for higher end retail and a hotel soon after purchasing the property in 2010, and, according to press accounts, appears to have used the post-Sandy moment as an opportunity to implement this plan. In addition, the recovery of a few high-rise office buildings on lower Broadway (including DC 37 offices) was delayed due to a lack of phone and Internet service. On the whole, however, the rebound of the financial district stood in dramatic contrast to other storm-affected neighborhoods.

19. The same was true across the Hudson River, in Jersey City and Hoboken, where poorer neighborhoods that were seriously impacted remained without electricity for weeks.

21. To view the report, go to www.nyc.gov/html/sirr/html/report/report.shtml. While dubbed a “plan,” there is nothing binding about this report, nor has it passed through City Planning. Rather, it is a “vision plan,” and, I would argue, a form of marketing and PR intended to build internal political consensus and attract investment. Of course, given its issuance in the final months of the administration, there is no assurance it will become policy. Nonetheless, it represents advocacy for a Bloomberg model of “resilience” that bolsters his administration’s real estate–focused redevelopment agenda. Important for this is the plan for a “Seaport City,” which would create new land for high-end development in Lower Manhattan via a new neighborhood jutting into the East River. Interestingly, even the real estate world was confused by this costly and dangerous plan, though appreciative of the effort to support their needs. See Josh Dawsey, “Storm Plan’s ‘Clunker,’” *Wall Street Journal*, June 17, 2013, available at http://online.wsj.com/news/articles/SB10001424127887323734304578546002468792318.


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