



## The Build/No-Build Line

### Mapping out the philosophies on the future land use of New Orleans<sup>1</sup>

Richard Campanella

*The Katrina flooding of 2005 ignited a debate between abandonists and maintainers. Should the city move to higher grounds or should it be rebuilt as before? Should concessions be made? If so, where should we draw the line? Richard Campanella explains the arguments behind these positions and why *laissez-faire* was the ultimate policy, until the next catastrophe.*

Various philosophies have emerged on the rebuilding of New Orleans after the Hurricane Katrina-induced deluge of August-September 2005, each with its own logic, passion, experts, and dogma.<sup>2</sup> 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 entitled "Time to Move to Higher Ground," which later earned him a national audience on CBS *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.<sup>3</sup>

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 arguments as "emotional" or "nostalgic." Abandonists almost always have nothing to lose personally if the city does disappear, and feel no obligation to propose financial compensation plans for those who do. 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

---

<sup>1</sup> Excerpt from the book *Bienville's Dilemma*, Center for Louisiana Studies, 2008.

<sup>2</sup> Variations of this essay appeared as an editorial by Richard Campanella in the *New Orleans Times-Picayune*, and in an article in the journal *Technology in Society*.

<sup>3</sup> Timothy M. Kusky, "Time to Move to Higher Ground," *Boston Globe*, September 25, 2005, p. D12 (emphasis added).

scientific or engineering one. To be against maintaining all neighborhoods is to be against people and against culture – worse yet, against *certain* peoples 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 postdiluvian 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.”<sup>4</sup> 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 fall 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. Concessionists argue that, in the long run, this would reduce costs, minimize grief, protect the environment, and save lives. Concessionists sometimes failed to recognize, however, that footprint shrinkage itself costs money, in the form of fair and immediate compensation to homeowners.

Sensitive to accusations of elitism, concessionists soften their message with careful wordsmithing and confusing maps (see *The Great Footprint Debate*). They 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 subdivisions of New Orleans East. Concessionists enjoy widespread support among many educated professionals who live on high ground, but encounter fierce resistance among maintainers, who often accuse them being, at best, unrealistic utopian dreamers, and at worst, elitist, classist, racist land-grabbers.

Reports that rural, isolated lower Plaquemines Parish – home to only 14,000 people, or 2 percent of the region’s population – may not receive full funding for levee maintenance seems to have spawned 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 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.”<sup>5</sup>

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 abandonist arguments that earned Kusky the enduring hatred of many New Orleanians. They’re just applying them below different lines on the map.

---

<sup>4</sup> Jay Arena, as quoted by Gustavo Capdevila in “World Economic Forum: Davos and New Orleans, Neoliberal Twins.” Inter Press Service News Agency, January 30, 2006, <http://ipsnews.net/news.asp?idnews=31964>, accessed May 26, 2006.

<sup>5</sup> Timothy M. Kusky, “Time to Move to Higher Ground,” *Boston Globe*, September 25, 2005, p. D12.

Second, we should probably only pencil-in whatever build/no-build lines we draw, because we may well wish to change them if the going gets rough. Others have. Illinois Republican Rep. J. Dennis Hastert was among the first to hint at abandonment when he said rebuilding New Orleans “doesn’t make sense to me. And it’s a question that certainly we should ask.” Shaken by angry responses, he later clarified his statement: “I am not advocating that the city be abandoned or relocated...”<sup>6</sup> Wallace, Roberts & Todd, a design firm hired to advise the BNOB Commission, at first professed a bold maintainer philosophy (“If you plan on shrinkage, shrinkage is what you’ll get”) but ended up recommending concessions in their final report to the Commission. Even Kusky softened his abandonist advice and suggested the possibility of “newer, higher, stronger seawalls” for “the business and historic parts of the city.”<sup>8</sup>

I, too, as a geographer with both physical and cultural interests, have grappled with my concessionist recommendations when confronted by the tragic personal stories of individuals who desperately want to maintain the world they once knew and loved. Should another hurricane of the magnitude of Katrina strike New Orleans, we may see build/no-build lines erased and redrawn *en masse*: maintainers may become concessionists, concessionists may be willing to concede more, and abandonists will increase their ranks.

Finally, beware those who claim to speak solely “for science,” or “for the people.” This is a complicated, interdisciplinary dilemma. The social scientist needs to be at the table as much as the physical scientist; the humanist deserves a voice as much as the economist; the poor renter of a shotgun house should be heard as much as the rich owner of a mansion. We should acknowledge that a tangle of personal, cultural, financial, nostalgic, emotional, practical, and scientific factors underlie which philosophy – abandon, maintain, or concede – we uphold for the future of New Orleans, and that *this is OK; this is acceptable*.

### **Postscript: Who prevailed?**

Mayor Nagin, supported by most flooded homeowners and a vociferous cadre of local officials, opted for a politically safe *laissez-faire* repopulation and rebuilding policy. Abetting their victory, more through passivity than active support, was the federal government: FEMA’s revised Advisory Base Flood Elevation maps, released in 2006, continued to make flood insurance available to heavily flooded areas, thus encouraging their rebuilding. And no federal buy-out plan promised compensation to homeowners and business owners who would be forced off their land in a concessionist (eminent domain) mandate coming from city, state, or federal levels. No sane person “concedes” his or her major life investment without fair compensation.

The apparent outcome: *Let people return and rebuild as they can and as they wish, and we’ll act on the patterns as they fall in place*. The maintainers prevailed in drawing the build/no-build line along the existing, pre-Katrina urban edge (though the possibility of a lower-Plaquemines concession remains). Whether that line gets erased and redrawn again – by concessionists or by abandonists – will be determined by the insurance industry, by mortgage companies, by property values, by federal intervention, by disappointed residents forced to re-address their initial post-Katrina rebuilding stance, and ultimately, by nature.

Professor at Tulane University, geographer **Richard Campanella** is the author of six critically acclaimed books on the physical and human geography of New Orleans, including *Bienville’s*

<sup>6</sup> Joseph B. Treaster and Deborah Sontag, “Despair and Lawlessness Grip New Orleans as Thousands Remain Stranded in Squalor,” *New York Times*, September 2, 2005, p. 1.

<sup>7</sup> John Beckman, oral presentation on progress of WRT Design’s investigation, New Orleans, Louisiana, December 2, 2005 (attended and recorded by Richard Campanella).

<sup>8</sup> Timothy M. Kusky, “Time to Move to Higher Ground,” *Boston Globe*, September 25, 2005, p. D12.

*Dilemma, Geographies of New Orleans* and *Lincoln in New Orleans*. The only two-time winner of the Louisiana Endowment for the Humanities Book of the Year award, Campanella has also received the Williams Prize for Louisiana History and the Mortar Board Award for Excellence in Teaching from Tulane University.

His work on New Orleans may be perused at <http://richcampanella.com/>.

**To quote this article:**

Richard Campanella, « The Build/No-Build Line. Mapping out the philosophies on the future land use of New Orleans », *Metropolitiques*, 1 June 2011. URL : <http://www.metropolitiques.eu/The-Build-No-Build-Line.html>