

Expanding the Frames: A Response to “Framing the Urban”

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As actors in the struggle regarding the development of the St. Thomas Wal-Mart in New Orleans, we are intrigued by the analysis laid out in “Framing the Urban.” Not only do the authors provide a unique perspective, but also as an organization interested in public discourse and communication, we benefit from close scrutiny of the communication of the groups involved in this situation. Although we find the conclusions of the authors compelling, we sense that readers will benefit from a more complete view of the issues at play “in the trenches” of New Orleans’ unique landscape: the historic and political context, the subtexts of race and economics in this case as well as similar disputes (of which there are many), and a broadening of understanding of the frames deployed in this struggle beyond simply “New Urbanism.”

New Orleans is not unique in the problems that it faces as a modern American city. However, its unique physical and social climate complicates surgical academic analyses. As the authors note, New Orleans has a “peculiar topography.” The city core is landlocked because of boundaries created by the Mississippi River and Lake Ponchartrain, leaving little land available for new development. Additionally, since New Orleans has been spared from much of the urban-renewal programs that left their mark on many major American cities, the city has an above-average amount of historic building stock. These factors ensure that almost any development that does not involve adaptive reuse is likely to engender conflict. The density of the city is both its asset and its challenge.

Virtually all interested parties acknowledge problems in the planning process and the existing land-use plan; it is difficult to comprehend and subject to political pressures. It is also outdated; the last major changes to it having been made in 1970. The city’s planning commission lacks formal systems for informing residents of developments proposed for their neighborhoods and there are no meaningful procedures for incorporating public input into developers’ plans. This helps create a political environment of acrimony and vicious debate in public forums.

Public conflicts involving land use predate the St. Thomas Wal-Mart struggle. Efforts to locate an Albertsons grocery store into another economically depressed and predominantly African-American neighborhood known as Central City created its own contentious debate in 1998. Relevant to the current discussion is the fact that the Albertsons project

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involved many of the same actors: Pres Kabacoff (future developer of the St. Thomas Wal-Mart), Katz and Columbus (the public relations firm responsible for introducing the issue of race into both controversies), the Preservation Resource Center, and a handful of the opposition personalities such as Bill Borah, Lloyd Vogt, Val Dansereau, and others who would emerge in the Wal-Mart debate at the core of the ad hoc Citizens for Urban Vision. Since the development did not require direct governmental funding, HUD was absent in the Albertsons case.

It was during the Albertsons controversy that one of the first challenges to suburban style development in New Orleans was articulated publicly. New Urbanist architect Lloyd Vogt and attorney Bill Borah, both noted preservationists, published an op-ed in the local newspaper decrying the “Godzilla” of suburban style big-box development in the inner city. Although the article did not receive a great deal of public attention outside of the parties most directly involved, the ideas inspired many who were directly involved in the Albertsons negotiations. Many of the opponents were later disappointed by the PRC’s signing of an 11th-hour agreement supporting the Albertsons development. This created a gap between the PRC and those articulating a defense of urban space/urban quality of life that would be fully emergent in the Wal-Mart controversy.

In many ways, this gap helped give rise to new voices on these types of issues. Although the PRC is commonly accepted as a leader in New Orleans on preservationist issues and debates, its perception as being made up of a group of wealthy elites focused on individual structures has been an entrée for new organizations to come forward. Smart Growth Louisiana, led by Bill Borah and our organization, the Urban Conservancy, are two examples.

In the St. Thomas Wal-Mart debate, a number of different “frames” were used. Some examples include the noted New Urbanist themes, but also invoked were aesthetic concerns, environmental impact, Wal-Mart’s role as a corporate citizen, its effect on the local economy, cultural preservation, and social justice. These shifted heavily throughout the debate, in some ways due to the political needs of the actors, but also because the scope of the public debate was growing in both traditional media sources and the efforts of a wide variety of grassroots activists. At the time, some joked that there “was something to offend everyone” about Wal-Mart in the St. Thomas development, much more than just perceived clashes with New Urbanist principles.

We agree with the authors of “Framing the Urban” that New Urbanist guidelines are vague and provide only a limited framework for development. However, those supporters of big-box development in the inner city are at best a fringe element within the New Urbanist community. Much of New Urbanist thinking surrounds solving the problems related to development identical to the Wal-Mart proposed for St. Thomas: suburban-style building construction, automobile-centric design, loss of community and culture, and the environmental problems related to the runoff from impermeable cover. Although the debate on Wal-Mart was wide ranging, the fact that the developer could appropriate the language of New Urbanism to defend the Wal-Mart represents less the malleability of New Urbanist concepts than the ability to reach more civic leaders and mainstream media with a substantial public relations investment. The developers possessed the resources to hire a professional public relations firm to wage a campaign of disinformation that confused many in the public about what New Urbanism is and isn’t, and to subtly—and not so subtly—tie many of the issues to a campaign to fan the flames of racism in the city.

RESPONSE TO "FRAMING THE URBAN"

Racial struggle is very real in New Orleans. Although the city's physical environment minimizes spatial segregation, social segregation still prevails. By almost any measure, New Orleans is a struggling city with tremendous poverty and there are many actors competing for a share of the city's limited financial resources. It is through this lens of competition that many in New Orleans view land-use struggles as "who gets what at whose expense." The political nature of land-use deliberations, due to the ill-defined planning process, only furthers the seemingly unfair and arbitrary nature of these decisions. It was in this climate that the developer was able to control the subtext of discussions with media events like a gathering of African-American ministers on the steps of City Hall, or the testimony of "concerned citizens" who would later be shown to be on the developer's payroll. The subtext of discussions became a series of code words. All opponents of the Wal-Mart were labeled "preservationists," and the word *preservationist* became code for white and elitist or the one label that kept many in the public from getting more involved: racist. One of the strategic mistakes made by opponents of the Wal-Mart was failing to build coalitions within the African-American community on the issue, a fact that was painfully obvious when viewing the vast majority of opponents, most of whom were white and middle to upper class. The overwhelmingly African-American former residents of St. Thomas eventually shifted from support for to opposition to the redevelopment when it became clear that the vast majority would not be allowed back to "The New St. Thomas." But by then it was too late. Most of the battles had already been lost and opposition was at best a minor delay to the project.

In both the Albertsons and the Wal-Mart controversies, the real underlying currents were race and the limits on commercial development in the city, but in both cases, these were rarely acknowledged openly. In the Albertsons controversy, there was considerably less public attention, but no less bitter debate. In the latest battle, the developer ultimately prevailed in the controversy not because the public found his arguments more compelling, but because the core issues had been so effectively obscured that many citizens tired of a fight they felt unwinnable, that the developer had so thoroughly corrupted the process that the Wal-Mart was a "done deal." This could be considered proof that in inner-city politics, Goliath always beats David, a story so often repeated it becomes a cliché. Another facet to this story is one of irony. Albertsons' hard-fought efforts in Central City would eventually be trumped. When the Wal-Mart was finally approved by the city council, Albertsons, citing competitive pressures from the Wal-Mart being built blocks from its planned location, abandoned its project entirely, leaving an empty lot to the community.

However, instead of "David versus Goliath," we see another message in this story. We see success in the fact that the somewhat sophisticated tenets of New Urbanism became a part of public discourse and that issues like quality of life, sustainable economic development, and democratic control of communities became parts of the public's language. We contend that meaningful change has occurred in the nature of public discourse in the city as a result of this unfortunate project and we hope that the naked power of traditional elites in the city is slowly eroding.