

HOPE VI, New Urbanism, and the Utility of Frames: A Reply to Melendez and Coats

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Based on our analysis of New Urbanist frames, we suggest that HOPE VI provides both structural and interpretive political opportunities to actors competing to frame the transformation of public housing. As a structural opportunity, HOPE VI alters public-housing debates by enhancing the possibilities for political action by economic elites in competition with other actors. As an interpretive opportunity, HOPE VI's explicit embrace of New Urbanism supplies a novel and strategic vocabulary that actors can attempt to use to influence policy, alter political alignments, and raise the public profile and salience of particular issues. Although each of the participants we discuss wielded the linguistic tools of New Urbanism, the developer (HRI) was able to selectively deploy such themes most effectively to create and magnify critical local issues. Principals in the Urban Conservancy suggest that these claims and subsequent related analyses require more nuanced consideration along a number of important lines. Here, we take the opportunity to detail and respond to four questions we see as raised by Melendez and Coats.

First, was the developer's success in attaining approval for inclusion of a Wal-Mart superstore (under construction and projected to open in the fall of 2004) in the redevelopment of the St. Thomas site due to use of a New Urbanist frame or due to possession of superior resources/power? Principals in the Urban Conservancy contend that HRI's deployment of selected, and arguably unorthodox, New Urbanist themes is far less relevant than the unrivaled political, financial, and organizational resources at its disposal. In other words, it doesn't really matter what Goliath says, so much as what he can do relative to weaker opponents. Although we agree with this basic assessment, we also contend that how Goliath uses his superior resources matters for understanding contemporary urban renewal and how it differs in process, if not outcome, from earlier eras of urban renewal. From this perspective, the validity and consistency of the developer's New Urbanist claims is less important than HRI's capacity to anticipate, co-opt, and obfuscate related claims by opposition groups. In this sense, the developer didn't really need to mobilize support with

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its New Urbanist strategy; instead, it merely had to anticipate and cloud opponents' use of this strategy.

Framing contests reflect larger struggles over access to and control over political and economic resources. In fact, Melendez and Coats support the materiality (i.e., the material basis) of successful framing when they note that what really mattered in the contest was that the developer "possessed the resources to hire a professional public relations firm to wage a campaign of disinformation that confused many in the public." Although they suggest that the developer's success represents less the malleability of New Urbanism and more the ability to reach more civic leaders and mainstream media, we would argue that it is precisely because HRI embraced and utilized New Urbanist vocabulary that it was able to maintain credibility with leaders and the media, as well as effectively muddy the issue and "fan the flames of racism." The New Urbanist frame embraced by HRI provided a central tool in allowing it to effectively stake its claim and to win the dispute via obscuring the issues that other interest groups wished to use to make their points (what the Urban Conservancy principals call the "core issues" in their understanding of the St. Thomas Wal-Mart situation). Although those in power in the city did indeed find the developer's arguments more compelling, the New Urbanist frame adopted by HRI's representatives enabled them to convey their points in a manner perceived as legitimate and to muddy their distinction from the values and claims held by the other groups contesting the issue.

Second, is the New Urbanist frame really the central issue to emphasize in analysis of the St. Thomas Wal-Mart case or were there other frames and issues with equal, if not greater, weight? Melendez and Coats argue that the frames deployed in the struggle went beyond those of New Urbanism and included aesthetic concerns, environmental impact, corporate citizenship, the local economy, cultural preservation, and social justice. Although we agree that many other frames and issues were brought into play in the debate, we argue that the New Urbanist frame had a greater utility for the groups we discuss due to its malleability and its ability to encompass and subsume other issues and frames within its claims. Its use allowed these groups to invoke a new vocabulary to attempt to accomplish relatively predictable and unchanged goals. New Urbanism includes key elements of each of these other frames within its philosophy, which is why it was such a successful, useful, and malleable frame for participants to use. Along these same lines, the Urban Conservancy principals suggest that race is perhaps the most salient issue to consider in analysis of the St. Thomas Wal-Mart case. We agree that race/class tensions and conflicts pervaded all aspects of the debate, as they do all elements of public/political life in New Orleans. These racial politics were clearly present and actively used in the framing activities enacted by each of the actors we discuss (the developer, former residents, and civic opposition groups). Again, the malleability of New Urbanism allowed each of these groups to attempt to frame their claims by using the tool of New Urbanist vocabulary as a means to approach the delicate issue of race to their advantage. New Urbanism provided a new means to approach an old debate.

Third, what is the history of New Urbanist frames in New Orleans land-use politics and, in particular, how have these frames been used by local civic actors? Does the use of New Urbanist frames predate the St. Thomas Wal-Mart struggle? Melendez and Coats note that New Urbanist opposition to big-box development in the inner city was evident three years earlier on a site not associated with HUD or its HOPE VI program, specifically, the debate over the construction of an Albertsons supermarket. Therefore, they suggest, it is perhaps problematic to argue that New Urbanist opposition sprung from the political opportunity

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of HOPE VI. We agree that civic actors used New Urbanist themes prior to the St. Thomas Wal-Mart struggle as a means of framing opposition to large-scale retail development in the city and that this framing strategy emerged partly from frustration with political concessions made by the city's leading preservation organization, the Preservation Resource Center, which focused its efforts on attempts to save several historic houses slated for demolition as a part of the Albertsons project. However, the framing strategy was much less visible and effective in this earlier case than in the subsequent struggle, in the nearby St. Thomas neighborhood, over the inclusion of big-box retail within a HOPE VI project. We contend that the increased visibility and effectiveness of this strategy as a frame in the later case of the St. Thomas Wal-Mart stems largely from the political opportunity of HOPE VI and the sheer scale of its redevelopment projects. In other words, without denying the importance of local history, we contend that to demolish an entire residential neighborhood and replace it with a mix of housing and commercial development anchored by a superstore is qualitatively different from building a supermarket on a partially vacant lot. In brief, the St. Thomas Wal-Mart case involved much higher stakes and was far more complex than the Albertsons situation. It is this difference, more so than the organizational maturation of local New Urbanists, that explains how and why New Urbanism emerged as a strategic vocabulary that *all* actors, to varying degrees, adopted and espoused in pursuit of their own particular visions of the urban.

Melendez and Coats draw attention to the history of land-use and preservation politics in New Orleans, including the Albertsons debate, which they suggest are central for understanding the divisions between civic actors in the St. Thomas Wal-Mart case. Although the Albertsons situation is certainly part of this larger history, the differences between these two disputes point precisely to the specific negotiations of the framing process in play, including why the New Urbanist frame began to be invoked by all of the key participants in the St. Thomas Wal-Mart case. In the Albertsons case, preservationists felt on firm ground entering that conflict in order to attempt to preserve the residential fabric of an historic neighborhood, that is, it was a clear issue of "historic preservation" for them, so there was no need to shift to an alternate frame. In the St. Thomas Wal-Mart case, each of the civic opposition groups found it useful to invoke New Urbanism to defend their positions. As the preservationists found when they initially tried to enter the debate through opposing destruction of historic warehouses, a "preservation" issue, a larger frame was needed in order to allow them to argue effectively and publicly against Wal-Mart itself. In both these cases, there was a divide between urban "quality-of-life" advocates and preservationists, but the differences between the two groups serve to illustrate the utility of the New Urbanist frame to encompass the beliefs and agendas of each in the St. Thomas Wal-Mart case.

Fourth, how has the use of the New Urbanist frame altered local politics in New Orleans and will the frame continue to have ongoing utility in local land-use battles? We suggest New Urbanism will continue to be invoked by developers and other economic and political elites as a means to reinforce existing power relations. At the same time, local activists will seek to deploy New Urbanist themes to challenge public policy and contest existing divisions of power. Additionally, the continued presence of HUD monies in New Orleans, a minimum of \$1.58 billion between 2000–2008 (Roberts, 2004), will encourage New Urbanism's use by actors influenced by HUD's ability to set the vocabulary of the housing conversation.

The utility of the New Urbanist frame will likely continue to expand in its appeal. For example, preservationists have become increasingly explicit in their claiming of the frame

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and appear eager to embrace its use. At present, the historic preservation movement is defining opposition to big-box retail (and to Wal-Mart, in particular) as a preservation issue, a claim it articulates through New Urbanist language. (See Barthel, 1997 on the preservation movement's ongoing search to expand its mission, as is clearly occurring here.) In May 2004, the National Trust included the entire State of Vermont on its list of "America's 11 Most Endangered Historic Places," arguing that its historic form and character are threatened by the pressures of big-box retail development generally and by Wal-Mart specifically (Belluck, 2004). The preservation movement's official claiming of Wal-Mart opposition as a reasonable issue may now encourage local preservation organizations to become actively involved in their own big-box battles much earlier on, as likely would have been the case in New Orleans had big-box opposition initially been more firmly perceived as part of the legitimate domain of preservationism.

New Urbanism possesses a Janus-faced quality, for example, its principles and themes have the potential to be used to strategically reinforce power relations by some groups and to combat the status quo by others. New Urbanism will continue to be invoked widely, but likely most successfully as a means to reinforce existing divisions of power. For example, the use of race as a wedge issue is clearly not a new strategy in itself, but one whose use is facilitated by New Urbanism's provision of novel means through which to deploy it. The Urban Conservancy principals suggest that the formation of new civic groups, including urban "quality-of-life" proponents, was fostered by the perception of the PRC as linked to traditional ways of "doing business" in New Orleans, and that the existence of these new groups evidences a shifting in such debates and power structures. Although some of those who distanced themselves from the PRC did so to publicly escape the "white, elite" reputation that clings to the group, we expect that the goals of preservationists and other urban quality-of-life groups will continue to be viewed as relatively similar by outsiders. This view is unlikely to change, especially given the isomorphic expansion of the preservation movement's mission to encompass neighborhood preservation, retail revitalization, and cultural preservation, for example, issues amenable to the same New Urbanist frames used by quality-of-life groups. It is debatable whether the struggle over Wal-Mart and New Urbanism suggests that "meaningful change has occurred in the nature of public discourse," as noted by Melendez and Coats, who go on to say they "hope the naked power of traditional elites in the city is slowing eroding." Instead, we read the St. Thomas Wal-Mart struggle and the deployment of New Urbanist ideology within it to suggest that there are new bases or mechanisms by which developers and other traditionally powerful actors can (and will attempt to) influence and control public debate.

References

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