

Framing the Urban: Struggles Over HOPE VI and New Urbanism in a Historic City

James R. Elliott*
Tulane University

Kevin Fox Gotham
Tulane University

Melinda J. Milligan
Sonoma State University

Recent debate over the federal HOPE VI program has focused primarily on whether local applications have met administrative pledges to provide adequate affordable housing to displaced residents of newly demolished public-housing developments. In this research we take a different direction, examining local processes of political mobilization and strategic framing around a specific type of HOPE VI redevelopment—one that includes construction of a big-box superstore as part of proposed urban renewal. We argue that the HOPE VI program's formal alignment with New Urbanism created a political opportunity for competing actors to adopt and espouse selective new urbanist themes and imagery to construct and advance divergent visions of what urban space ought to be. Through these framing strategies and struggles, the developer, displaced residents, and opposition groups produced "the City" as a rhetorical object that each then used to advocate specific redevelopment proposals while de-legitimizing competing claims. In this way, the HOPE VI program constitutes more than a new federal housing policy; it offers a new vocabulary for framing and mobilizing collective action in contemporary urban centers.

Sociologists have long recognized the significance of urban space as a basis for collective action (for an overview see Gieryn, 2000). Decades ago, scholars in the "community studies" tradition illuminated how urban space can operate as a source of neighborhood identification, social cohesion, and political mobilization (Gans, 1962; Suttles, 1968; Wellman, 1979). Later, sociologists documented how people come to identify with particular places in response to concrete, local threats such as urban-renewal displacement (Gans, 1962), expressway building (Gotham, 1999), hazardous-waste contamination (Levine, 1982), and punitive-policing practices (Bennett, 1997). More recently, a "spatial turn" in social theory has pushed scholars to consider how groups, in addition to mobilizing material resources, use "framing" strategies and symbolic devices to invest meaning in places and forge

*Correspondence should be addressed to James Elliott, Department of Sociology, 220 Newcomb Hall, Tulane University, New Orleans, LA 70118; jre@tulane.edu.

collective action in response to locally perceived challenges (Fisher and Kling, 1989; Kasnitz and Hillyard, 1995; Milligan, 1998, 2003; Soja, 2000; Wright, 1997).

In the present study we contribute to this latest line of research by examining framing processes associated with a recent application of the U.S. federal government's HOPE VI program in New Orleans, Louisiana. The HOPE VI Program (a.k.a., Housing Opportunities for People Everywhere) is a national program that seeks to replace distressed public-housing complexes in U.S. inner cities with economically viable communities that integrate subsidized and market-rate housing on site. We focus specifically on the program's formal alignment with the emergent design philosophy of New Urbanism and how this alignment provided competing interests with a strategic vocabulary for mobilizing rhetorical support for otherwise divergent visions of "the urban." We pay particular attention to how these interests challenged alternative frames, or definitions of the situation, as part of broader political strategies to reshape inner-city space and its meaning for constituent populations. Below we discuss the theoretical foundations of our study, followed by the HOPE VI program's links to New Urbanism.

FRAMING PROCESSES AND POLITICAL OPPORTUNITIES

Recent research on collective action emphasizes the importance of rhetorical "frames" and "framing processes" for understanding the character and course of social mobilization. In his classic book, *Frame Analysis*, Erving Goffman (1974, p. 21) defined a "frame" as a "schemata of interpretation" that enables individuals "to locate, perceive, identify, and label" events in the world at large. Subsequent research on collective action has extended Goffman's ideas to draw attention to the construction and mobilization of "collective-action frames," which refer to the dynamic and contentious generation of meaning by competing social groups. This body of research, while diverse, commonly defines framing as "[an] outcome of negotiating shared meaning" (Gamson, 1992, p. 111). This negotiation typically involves "[simplifying] the 'world out there' by selectively punctuating and encoding objects, situations, events, experiences, and sequences of actions within one's present or past environment" (Snow and Benford, 1992, p. 137). In a recent review of the literature, Benford and Snow (2000, pp. 615–618) discuss how these framing strategies can become crucial for social mobilization. For starters, actors can use "diagnostic framing" to define a situation in need of change. For example, actors can use an "injustice frame" to call attention to particular victims, to generate shared understanding of the causes of the perceived injustice, and to label responsible agents (Gamson, 1992, p. 68). Actors can also use "prognostic framing" to specify a remedy to the identified problem and the best strategies for achieving this remedy (Haines, 1996). Finally, actors can use "motivating framing" to articulate reasons for engaging and maintaining collective action in the face of competing definitions of the situation. Common "vocabularies of motive" include severity, efficacy, and propriety, which provide potential constituents with specific rationales for public action (Gamson, 1995).

These different tasks of collective-action framing can be distinguished conceptually, but actual deployment tends to be much more circular and ongoing, with competing groups often shifting and blending different types of framing strategies to mobilize support, respond to alternative frames, and advance their own particular vision of what should occur. This shifting and blending does not imply that the character and range of

collective-action frames are free floating. Rather, it recognizes that forces external to the situation at hand can influence how and when actors frame particular events in particular ways. As Meyer and Staggenborg explain generally, “movement development, tactics, and impact are profoundly affected by the shifting constellation of factors exogenous to the movement itself” (1996, p. 1633).

Central to this “shifting constellation of factors” is the political opportunity through which collective action emerges. According to Tarrow, there are four common types of political opportunities that encourage and shape collective action: “(1) opening up of access to power; (2) shifting alignments; (3) availability of influential allies; and (4) cleavages with and among elites” (1996, p. 54). In all four instances, political opportunities for change operate as “structuring cues,” or signals, that not only encourage but also shape collective-action and tactical-framing strategies. For example, Castells (1983) showed how civil rights legislation of the 1960s opened political opportunities for place-based movements that challenged pro-growth initiatives in major U.S. cities. Subsequent research has shown how local grassroots coalitions used this political opportunity to challenge elite framing of urban renewal as “growth and progress” and to advance an alternative framing of urban renewal as “displacement and exclusion” in need of more democratic and just deliberation (Logan and Molotch, 1987; Wagner, 1993; Wright, 1997; Zukin, 1991, 1995).

In these examples, political opportunities for collective action helped to shape the framing tactics that actors used to construct and mobilize their own views of what was fair and right. In turn, the construction and mobilization of these collective-action frames enabled actors to interpret certain events, allies, and activities as political opportunities. In this way, political opportunity and collective-action framing became actively and reflexively linked: political opportunity invited collective action, and collective action, through framing tactics, invited alternative definitions and expectations of the situation. Below, we discuss how political opportunity for change and associated framing strategies became entwined in recent shifts in federal public-housing policy.

HOPE VI AND NEW URBANISM

One of the most important political opportunities to arise in U.S. cities over recent years involves the federal government’s HOPE VI program, which aims “to end public housing as we know it.” In response to growing concerns over concentrated inner-city poverty, this program encourages local authorities to identify and demolish distressed public-housing complexes in their jurisdictions and to work with private developers to construct mixed-use, mixed-income communities on the newly cleared sites (U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development, 1999, 2000). Since the U.S. government first began awarding HOPE VI grants in 1993, it has distributed over \$5 billion to over 100 local housing authorities across the country, resulting in the demolition of approximately 140,000 public-housing units nationally. A unique feature of this program is how it has linked material resources allocated for this change with a new strategic vocabulary for defining how it should unfold at the local level. In considering the implications of this linkage for collective action, we begin with shifts in material resources associated with the program.

Unlike past federal housing programs, which allocated nearly all federal monies to physical redevelopment, HOPE VI urges local housing authorities to devote a certain percentage of their funds (usually 20 percent) to economic development initiatives that

are to begin once the targeted housing complex has been demolished. These initiatives include establishing “public-private partnerships” with local developers to leverage capital to finance inner-city revitalization, including the provision of subsidized public housing on the redeveloped site. This shift in federal housing policy has opened access to power to private developers, rendering them influential players in the design and redevelopment of low-income urban housing. The second feature of the HOPE VI program that makes it unique in terms of political opportunity and framing is its official alignment with the emergent design philosophy of New Urbanism.

In short, New Urbanism is a professional movement of over 2,000 members who advocate design strategies based on “traditional” urban forms that are intended to check unplanned, low-density, suburban “sprawl” that has dominated metropolitan development since the 1950s (Bohl, 2000). Formalized in 1993 with the foundation of the Congress for the New Urbanism (CNU), this professional movement calls for design and development of neighborhoods that are compact, small scaled, mixed use, and pedestrian friendly (i.e., characteristic of urban development prior to World War II). Not only are such neighborhoods believed to be more “livable,” they are also believed to improve the sense of community and degree of sociability experienced by constituent residents.

Since its founding in 1993, CNU has actively sought to align itself with significant projects and sponsors as a means of making its mark on the planning profession (Pyatok, 2000; see also Katz, 1994; Steuterville, 2000). As part of this strategy, leaders identified and courted the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) and its new HOPE VI program. In 1996, CNU succeeded in convincing HUD Secretary Henry Cisneros to sign the CNU charter in Charleston, South Carolina. Shortly thereafter HUD released a report explaining that: “The New Urbanism principles that will be promoted by HUD and its partners . . . include: defined neighborhoods of limited size; flexible zoning standards to allow a mix of compatible uses, along with a mix of housing styles and levels of income; public parks and gathering space; historic preservation; mass transit connections; and pedestrian-friendly streets and walkways connecting the neighborhood to the surrounding area” (U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development, 1997b, p. 3).

HUD’s official alignment with the new design philosophy of New Urbanism continued under Cisneros’s successor, Secretary Andrew Cuomo, who issued a press release stating: “All of us at [HUD] are committed . . . to the goal of livable, mixed-use neighborhoods built to a human scale. This is consistent with the principles of the New Urbanism—and yes, we strongly support this approach because we’ve seen that it works” (U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development, 1997a). Building on this commitment, CNU appointed an Inner-City Task Force that joined with HUD officials to develop a formal set of New Urbanist guidelines aimed specifically at regulating HOPE VI revitalization projects across the country. According to official pronouncements, these *Principles for Inner City Neighborhood Design* “are designed to serve as a framework for both the design and the process of designing HOPE VI and other urban infill developments” (Congress for the New Urbanism and U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development, 2000). In the present study, we contend that these shifts in federal housing policy provided not only a new political opportunity for social mobilization but also a new strategic vocabulary that diverse groups could selectively appropriate to frame this opportunity and mobilize support for otherwise competing visions of contemporary urban renewal. This contention builds on the idea that political opportunities involve changes in political culture that expand the reservoir of strategic frames available for use and enhance the potency of

particular applications (Gotham, 1999). In advancing this argument, we examine how a private developer, displaced residents, and civic organizations each adopted New Urbanist language and symbols to articulate their own unique visions of what HOPE VI redevelopment should entail. In the process, “the City” became not just a geographical container for collective action but also an *object* of collective action that competing interests “produced” through competing applications of New Urbanist framing strategies. Below, we describe the setting and data through which we examined these events.

SETTING AND DATA

Our case study of HOPE VI redevelopment focuses on the St. Thomas public-housing complex located in the Lower Garden District of New Orleans, Louisiana. Several factors make this case unique with respect to distressed public housing and urban renewal. First, New Orleans is an old city with an extremely high percentage of structures and neighborhoods built prior to World War II. According to the 2000 Census, over three-quarters of the housing stock in the surrounding Lower Garden District was constructed prior to 1950—over three times the national average—with similar percentages in nearby neighborhoods. Consequently, “New” Urbanist themes that invoke prewar design principles are not so much an abstraction as a material reality that defines much of the local milieu. Second, as a result of the city’s unique history and peculiar topography, spatial, but not social, segregation of African Americans and whites has remained relatively low in most neighborhoods, including the area surrounding the St. Thomas site. This legacy means that the HOPE VI redevelopment of the St. Thomas site is not occurring in or on the fringe of an urban “super ghetto,” as in many other cities. Rather, it is occurring in a racially mixed area of town with competing visions of “who belongs.” Third and finally, New Orleans is among the poorest cities in the nation with roughly 10 percent of residents living in public housing—among the highest rates in the nation. Thus, how redevelopment of the St. Thomas site transpires will set an important precedent for how events are likely to unfold on similar sites throughout the city.¹

The St. Thomas public-housing complex itself was completed in 1941 on a 50-acre “super block” that abuts the Mississippi River between the city’s Warehouse District downriver and the affluent Garden District upriver. Originally constructed as “white” public housing in the wake of the Great Depression, by the 1990s St. Thomas had become more than 95 percent African American with an average annual household income under \$5,000 (less than 15 percent of the median household income for the city). Because of its prime geographic location, the St. Thomas site had long been coveted by local elites looking for profitable redevelopment opportunities. So when HUD announced its HOPE VI program, few were surprised that the Housing Authority of New Orleans targeted St. Thomas for demolition and redevelopment. To examine the discursive struggle that ensued, we proceeded as follows.

First, to learn about the objectives and guidelines of the HOPE VI program, we consulted government documents published by the Government Accounting Office, the Department of Housing and Urban Development, and the Housing Authority of New Orleans. Next, we examined numerous public documents and reports issued by the New Orleans City Planning Commission, the Historic Districts and Landmarks Commission, the Preservation Resource Center, and other civic groups in New Orleans to familiarize

ourselves with competing views on the St. Thomas redevelopment initiative. We then reviewed hundreds of pages of interview transcripts and notes from focus-group meetings with public-housing residents in several sites across the city to familiarize ourselves with how residents perceived the impending demolition of existing sites, relocation to off-site housing, and disruption of social networks. These transcripts and notes were available from a multi-year team ethnography conducted by graduate students and faculty working in two local universities during the late 1990s (see Devine and Sams-Abiodun, 2001; Gotham and Brumley, 2002).

With this background, we began to examine how competing groups framed their claims, mobilized supporters, and discredited others in political struggles over the fate of the newly cleared St. Thomas site. Toward this objective, we focused specifically on the discursive battles that took place in two broad public fora. The first consisted of public meetings held explicitly to address the St. Thomas redevelopment project. At least one of the authors attended 12 such meetings held by local government agencies and civic organizations between 1999 and 2002, taking notes and tape recordings. The second forum was the local print media, within which we examined five sources: *The Times-Picayune*, the city's largest newspaper; *The New Orleans Tribune*, the city's largest African-American news magazine; *New Orleans City Business*, the city's primary business weekly; the *Gambit Weekly*, Louisiana's largest weekly newspaper, based in New Orleans; and *Preservation in Print*, the city's leading preservationist magazine, published nine times a year by the Preservation Resource Center of New Orleans and the Louisiana State Historic Preservation Office. We focused specifically on the period from the summer of 1999 to the fall of 2002, examining each issue of each printed source for material explicitly referencing Wal-Mart, HOPE VI, public housing, historic or neighborhood preservation, and/or urban redevelopment in New Orleans.

After collecting these materials, each author examined them independently for "framing" strategies, particularly those employing New Urbanist themes and vocabulary. After completing this task, the authors reconvened to compare notes and identify common framing strategies uncovered by independent investigation. Rather than computing intercoder reliability scores for these procedures, we used a general rule of agreement in which we selected framing strategies and illustrative statements identified by all three investigators as most salient and indicative of the sustained framing contest surrounding St. Thomas redevelopment. In relaying the details of this investigation, we lean toward an analytical, rather than a narrative, approach in order to highlight key points of contention among lead actors and their consequences for collective action. We begin with a brief historical prelude leading up to the political struggle over the St. Thomas site and then proceed to examine the actions and rhetoric of the three key actors involved in this struggle: (1) the developer, (2) displaced residents, and (3) civic opposition groups. For a summary of framing strategies employed by each actor, see Table 1.

FRAMING (NEW) URBAN DEVELOPMENT

In 1996, around the time HUD Secretary Cisneros signed the CNU charter, the Housing Authority of New Orleans (HANO) received two HOPE VI grants for the St. Thomas housing complex: one for \$3.5 million to demolish the 160-odd structures on site; and another for \$25 million to relocate residents and leverage an estimated \$320 million needed to

TABLE 1. Urban Visions and Framing Strategies of Key Actors

	Developer	Residents	Urban Conservationists
Primary goal	To use a Wal-Mart superstore to help finance its for-profit HOPE VI renewal project.	To ensure that HOPE VI renewal results in sufficient housing for former residents who wish to return.	To conserve the local “urban fabric” and the viability of local merchants through small-scale, mixed-use development.
Primary New Urbanist theme	New Urbanism is about bringing profitable low-cost shopping and job opportunities to underserved inner-city residents.	New Urbanism is about rebuilding sustainable communities that improve the life chances of poor residents <i>in situ</i> .	New Urbanism is about conserving small-scale, pedestrian-oriented neighborhoods with a sustainable mix of housing, job, retail, and recreational opportunities.
Chief political contention	For HOPE VI renewal to proceed it must be profitable, and big-box retail is profitable as well as useful to low-income city residents.	Housing and service needs of displaced community residents come first, design criteria and local merchants come second.	The proposed superstore is antithetical to New Urbanist design principles and threatens the viability of local merchants and the overall quality of “urban life.”
Political vulnerability	HOPE VI design guidelines are antithetical to big-box retail.	Residents possess few human, political, and social resources.	Opposition groups are vulnerable to charges of racism and elitism.
Framing strategies	Frame big-box retail as contributing to “mixed use” development that serves neglected job and retail needs of inner-city residents. Invoke Porter’s “competitive advantage” thesis to legitimate the development of low-cost retail in the inner city, regardless of design.	Frame HOPE VI renewal as a legally binding promise to community residents. Frame nonresidents (including neighborhood merchants) as “outsiders” with little legitimate stake in the renewal process.	Frame the proposed superstore as a suburban form that threatens the “urban fabric.” Frame the redevelopment process as undemocratic because it neglects the “common good” of all city residents and ignores true grassroots activism.

complete the redevelopment project. The project, when finished, was to consist of over 500 units of new subsidized housing along with 200, or so, market-rate condominiums in conjunction with new commercial enterprises (Bagert, 2002). Soon after these grants were awarded, St. Thomas residents were relocated and nearly all of the complex was demolished—all prior to finalization of exact details of how redevelopment was to unfold.

The first developer selected by HUD and HANO officials to redevelop the St. Thomas site, with residents' support, was the Florida-based Creative Choice Homes. After two years of little progress and alleged malfeasance, however, HUD removed Creative Choice Homes from the project. Soon thereafter, a committee consisting of a mayoral appointee and four HANO officials recommended that the redevelopment contract go to Historic Restoration Incorporated (HRI). HRI accepted the contract and became the lead player in the St. Thomas redevelopment project in the fall of 1999.

During the ensuing two years, local officials, neighborhood associations, and civic organizations paid relatively little attention to the project and HRI's involvement in it. However, in July 2001, HRI announced that it was replacing its original design plans, which consisted of small-scale residential and commercial units, with new design plans, which consisted of a Wal-Mart superstore with an adjoining 900-space parking lot. Following this announcement, an intense political struggle erupted over issues of affordable housing, race, economic development, historic preservation, and urban morphology. Below we report how key actors framed their positions in this struggle, focusing on each group's use of New Urbanist vocabulary to legitimate claims, mobilize support, and discredit competing frames, or definitions, of the situation. We begin with the private developer, HRI.

THE DEVELOPER—BRINGING SHOPPING AND JOBS TO NEEDY CITIZENS

HRI is a locally owned, multi-million-dollar firm. Following the 1984 World's Fair in New Orleans, HRI played an instrumental role in renovating distressed structures in the city's aging Warehouse District into new, middle-class condominiums. More recently, HRI completed a similar renovation of the historic American Can Company in New Orleans' Mid-City neighborhood. Both projects won praise from local politicians, preservationists, and community residents as "positive redevelopment" that respected and promoted the unique culture, heritage, and historic built environment of New Orleans. In addition to garnering good press, the scale of these projects also helped HRI nurture working relationships with the mayor's office and members of the New Orleans City Council. These political connections, in conjunction with the employment of ex-mayor Sidney Barthelemy, facilitated HRI's eventual selection as the lead developer in the St. Thomas project in 1999, following removal of Creative Choice Homes by HUD officials.

Between this time and announcement of the new Wal-Mart plans in July 2001, public concern over HRI's involvement in the St. Thomas redevelopment project was minimal. After the Wal-Mart announcement, however, an intense "framing contest" emerged among the developer, displaced St. Thomas residents, and local civic organizations. The latter, initially led by the Preservation Resource Center, questioned the legality, as well as the desirability, of using a Wal-Mart superstore to leverage community redevelopment funds for the St. Thomas site. These challenges occurred largely through coordinated public protests, articles and letters in the local print media, and public hearings over zoning exemptions, property acquisition, and other legal clearances. Much of this struggle against

HRI reflected efforts to stigmatize Wal-Mart and HRI as “threats” to the historic and neighborhood-focused character of New Orleans’ built environment and to gain support from community groups, merchants associations, and political officials for redevelopment plans that were more in line with those originally specified in the 1996 grant award. These plans called for small-scale, mixed-use development without an anchor store whose size required an exemption from the city’s existing anti-“big-box” ordinance.

To counter this public opposition and to mobilize support for its new redevelopment plans, HRI implemented two “prognostic” framing strategies. The first strategy emphasized the low-cost shopping and job opportunities that Wal-Mart would bring to the city’s poor population, including displaced residents who were to return to the site upon completion of the project. Additionally, HRI argued that Wal-Mart was the only large retailer interested in anchoring the redevelopment project—others had been approached and had declined to participate—and that without Wal-Mart redevelopment would likely grind to a halt due to the financial constraints of the redevelopment project. Without Wal-Mart, HRI claimed, the community of St. Thomas could not be rebuilt or, specifically, would not include much, if any, affordable housing. As part of this framing strategy, HRI argued that a lack of retail competition in inner-city New Orleans meant that (African-American) urban shoppers were paying more than (white) suburban shoppers for the same retail goods. Thus, a big-box retailer like Wal-Mart would provide not only jobs to former St. Thomas residents but also low-cost shopping currently unavailable to New Orleans’ predominantly African-American urban population. This framing strategy is evident in an editorial written by Sheila Danzey, one of HRI’s project directors, in the *New Orleans City Business*, where the target audience consists largely of local business leaders who might be wary of a colossal competitor like Wal-Mart entering city boundaries.

The city of New Orleans is fortunate that Wal-Mart is the retailer that has taken the risk in committing to this formerly troubled, high crime-devalued neighborhood. . . . HRI believes that the St. Thomas Redevelopment is a win for the entire community. It maximizes use of federal, state and private investment while bringing middle-class families back to New Orleans. This program also brings back affordable discount shopping and it provides safe, sustainable housing for the former St. Thomas residents. (Danzey, 2002)

This framing strategy deliberately ignored design recommendations published in HUD’s *Principles for Inner City Neighborhood Design* and, instead, highlighted the development of a new “mixed use” environment that would benefit New Orleans’ African-American and low-income residents, as well as others. In other words, rather than adhering to the physical components of New Urbanism, the developer proposed an auto-centered, large-scale development and emphasized New Urbanist language about “mixed-use” access to goods, employment, and housing, implying that anything else was racist and classist. To support this frame, HRI and other proponents of the Wal-Mart plan began defining displaced residents as victims of “elitist” historic preservationists, bent on reclaiming the St. Thomas site for their own particular white, upper-class needs and values. In one of his many statements to *The Times-Picayune*, HRI executive Pres Kabacoff explained the situation thus:

It is no wonder that many New Orleans’ poor, in desperate need of discount shopping, affordable housing and jobs with benefits believe our opponents to be racially

motivated. Blanket generalizations are always unfair. However, on this one, I believe some of the opposition is motivated by reasons of race or class status and thereby is tragically distorting the noble cause of historic preservation. Our vision is different. HRI is standing up for the multi-ethnic, diverse future of New Orleans and battling for our commitment to bring new affordable housing, convenient discount shopping and jobs with a future to the former residents of St. Thomas. (Kabacoff, 2001)

By promoting this particular vision of “mixed-use” space, HRI reinterpreted New Urbanist lexicon to stigmatize opposition to the Wal-Mart plan as unsympathetic to the needs of the city’s large low-income and largely African-American population. In the process, HRI was able to draw on existing stereotypes of the preservationist movement as one concerned about “buildings, not people” and comprised of old-guard, white elites—stigmas that plague the preservation movement as a whole in the United States (Barthel, 1996). Sheila Danzey, HRI project director, echoed this framing strategy, claiming that opposition groups, especially the local Preservation Resource Center, had a “hidden agenda.”

We’ve got to stop letting 10 percent of the people make decisions for 70 percent of the people [referring to the city’s majority African-American population] . . . Before HUD awarded the contract and funds for this HOPE VI project, no one considered this prime property. Now all of the sudden they do . . . A lot of people with the Preservation Resource Council [sic] don’t even live in the city. The president of the PRC . . . actually lives in [the suburb of] Metairie so what right do they have to tell New Orleans residents what to do. (Allman, 2001)

The ways HRI “got their message out” and framed conditions was very different from competing groups. As these quotations suggest, they had ample access to the city’s leading newspapers and used them strategically and repeatedly to frame the proposed Wal-Mart as beneficial to New Orleans’ “true” urban majority. Evidence later revealed that HRI also paid African-American leaders to arrange pro-Wal-Mart rallies, paid consultants to apply the “racist” label to opposition groups in public statements, hired pollsters to document urban demand for Wal-Mart, and produced “advertorials” in *The New Orleans Tribune*, the city’s major “black” news magazine (see Egger, 2001). Below is an excerpt from one such advertorial that sought to document inner-city support for Wal-Mart.

Dr. Silas Lee, a preeminent pollster and market researcher, conducted an extensive poll and focus groups on the St. Thomas Revitalization and the desirability of a Wal-Mart in the New St. Thomas. “The citizens of New Orleans overwhelmingly want this Wal-Mart,” said Dr. Lee. His research reveals that 69% of respondents feel that revitalizing St. Thomas should be the “top priority” for city planners and that 71% of the respondents would definitely or probably shop at the Wal-Mart if it were built. (*New Orleans Tribune*, 2001)

This statement illustrates not only HRI’s resource base—it could afford to hire market researchers—but also how the firm used this base to undercut opposition to Wal-Mart. It did so by using “catastrophizing” claims to emphasize the severity of poverty in the city and by using “victimizing” claims to highlight the plight of poor African Americans in the face of “racist” historic preservationists. Several scholars, including Gamson (1992, 1995) and Kubal (1998), have drawn attention to how activists and claimsmakers construct a “problem” using calamitous imagery and motifs such as “disastrous” and “alarming,”

among others, to emphasize the breadth and depth of the problem. This “motivational framing,” according to Benford and Snow (2000, p. 617), provides a rationale for engaging in collective action, including the construction of appropriate vocabularies of motive. In the case of St. Thomas, proponents of the Wal-Mart plan frequently framed issues in racial and class terms, claiming that opposition groups were guided by an arrogant mentality that presumed that only they knew how redevelopment should proceed. In this way, HRI argued that civic opponents were “enemies of progress” who sought to “preserve blighted neighborhoods and their residents in their present squalor.” The “main risk to New Orleans,” according to one HRI spokesperson, was not disappearing historic buildings but “disappearing job opportunities” as a result of a “preservationist mentality” (Gilberga, 2001). Indeed, one opposition leader, asking not to be identified, admitted that preservationists “are kind of the last symbol of the white oligarchy trying to tell the black man what to do” (Warner, 2001).

To buttress its claims that big-box retail was consistent with “mixed-use” themes espoused by New Urbanist mandates and to convince local political officials of the viability of its new Wal-Mart proposal, HRI abandoned the preservationist rhetoric it had used to frame prior large-scale projects in New Orleans and, instead, blended New Urbanist themes with Michael Porter’s (1997) influential treatise on *The Competitive Advantage of Inner Cities*. Pres Kabacoff of HRI explained his firm’s position succinctly in a public forum on the redevelopment of the St. Thomas site following the Wal-Mart announcement.

Michael Porter at Harvard developed a competitive center on inner city initiatives [sic]. I met him several years ago, and he said, “Pres, cities are underserved by retail, bring them in.” And, so we did—Wal-Mart. (Public Forum, 2001)²

In framing its Wal-Mart plan in this way, HRI spokespersons emphasized two key themes from Porter’s “competitive advantage” thesis. The first theme stressed that, to be successful, inner-city redevelopment must depend on private, profit-driven initiatives based on economic self-interest and genuine competitive advantage; it should not rely on endless government subsidies. The second theme was that the “competitive advantage” of the St. Thomas site lay in its combination of population density and unmet local demand, which were both ripe for big-box retail. As Porter explains in his writings: “The consumer market of inner-city residents represents the most immediate opportunity for inner-city-based entrepreneurs and business. Despite low average incomes, high population density translates into an immense labor market with substantial purchasing power” (1997, p. 306).

HRI deployed this framing strategy in two ways. First, it used the strategy to legitimate its Wal-Mart proposal as not only fiscally realistic but also consistent with leading business theory. Second, it used these claims of legitimacy to solidify political support from the local chamber of commerce, the mayor, and city council members (Elie, 2001; Stuart, 2001a). Along the way, HRI continued to align itself with New Urbanist principles of mixed-used space and to depict opposition groups as insensitive to the needs of New Orleans’ “true” urban population: low-income African Americans.

DISPLACED RESIDENTS—REBUILDING COMMUNITY, NOT JUST BUILDINGS

Framing is a political strategy that can profoundly affect the nature of collective action and implications for future activism (Meyer and Staggenborg, 1996). Yet prevailing social

conditions typically mean that political and economic elites have more influence, gain more media attention, and have more persuasive power and clout than their challengers. In fact, according to Ryan, dominant actors, or frame holders, often “do not even have to prove the facts they assert” (1991, p. 13). By contrast, Stanbridge explains that less dominant actors typically “operate within a framework of unequal power relations that are subject to the constraints and opportunities arising from changing, as well as more enduring, political structures” (2002, p. 530). In the St. Thomas case, displaced residents clearly enjoyed the weakest position in these unequal power relations and wielded the fewest strategic resources in the framing contest that emerged around HRI’s Wal-Mart proposal.

Initially, when public struggle over the Wal-Mart proposal began, the central objective of displaced St. Thomas residents was merely to hold HRI accountable to the terms of the original 1996 grant award, specifically, to rebuild the number of subsidized units promised to displaced residents. (As alluded to earlier, former residents feared that, without Wal-Mart, little to no affordable housing would be rebuilt on the site at all.) To promote this objective, residents and their legal representatives began framing redevelopment plans in terms of the moral imperative of “community,” stressing contractual obligations to bring back all displaced residents who wished to return to the St. Thomas site upon project completion. Unable to get their message out consistently in the mainstream press, residents and their spokespersons often relied on public fora and emphasized HUD’s New Urbanist mandate to “(re)build communities, rather than just buildings.” This framing strategy is evident in a statement made by a legal representative of the St. Thomas Residents Council (STRC), Harold McClough, at a public forum on the Wal-Mart proposal.

What [the residents] care about is that they moved from their homes so that they could build a site, and they want to make sure that it’s built so that they can come back. And if, for some reason, the streets or the Wal-Mart or anything else keeps the site from being built, that land is still owned by [the Housing Authority of New Orleans], and HANO has an obligation to put the same number of residents that want to return right back on that land . . . I want Wal-Mart to come to this community. What I don’t want to happen is for [the site] to become a golf course or for [the site] to become affluent housing. I need my residents to return because that was what was promised to them. And without Wal-Mart happening, that’s not going to happen. There is no other plan on the table. (Public Forum, 2001)

Displaced residents reinforced this viewpoint with numerous letters to the editor published in *The Times-Picayune* and *New Orleans Tribune*. Such letters were one of the few public outlets in which residents could speak directly for themselves, but they were also an outlet in which the identities and words of self-proclaimed residents could not be verified, prompting suspicion by some opposition groups.

Pardon my introduction, but I am sick and tired of being sick and tired of this endless controversial opposition to the Wal-Mart/St. Thomas Housing development issue. As a former tenant of 25 years of the St. Thomas development, I have every right to feel the way I do as I wait through the delay to rebuild my home. (West, 2001)

I’ve lived in St. Thomas all my life, and I want to move back as soon as the new units are ready. I also need a career—not just a job—so I can give my children a better

life. I hope that Wal-Mart will provide me steady employment and a bright future for my family. (*New Orleans Tribune*, 2001)

“The redevelopment of St. Thomas is the best thing that has happened to our neighborhood in the last 50 years,” said Rev. Torin Sanders, pastor of the Sixth Baptist Church. “We are creating a new, safe community where our families can thrive and prosper.” (*New Orleans Tribune*, 2001)

This framing strategy tended to cast HRI and its Wal-Mart proposal in a positive light and to portray opposition groups as thoughtless interlopers into the local community. Yet relations between residents and HRI were far from amicable. According to Phyllis Cassidy, who lent her accounting and business expertise to the St. Thomas Resident Council, “HRI’s heavy-handed and condescending treatment of the STRC . . . has allowed me to experience firsthand the insults of marginalization, powerlessness and oppression.” Cassidy went on to state that “HRI’s actions make it abundantly clear that their goal is not to assist low-income former residents of St. Thomas to achieve self-sufficiency but rather to assure that they and their representatives are excluded from the entire St. Thomas Redevelopment process” (Cassidy, 2001). Sheila Danzey, HRI project director, admitted that: “It was always an acrimonious situation,” and Benjamin Bell, HANO executive director, reported that: “The biggest challenge that we have is maintaining trust [among former residents and HRI]” (Stuart, 2001b). This mistrust rendered a true public-private partnership between residents and HRI precarious from the start, as McClough explains:

It was supposed to be a partnership between HRI, HANO, and the St. Thomas Residents Council. It was a little mismatched partnership because here we have a multi-million-dollar developer, we have a bureaucrat, and 750 families of poor black folk. And what you think would happen is exactly what did happen. We became the “silent partner.” And when I say “silent,” I don’t mean in the respect that people didn’t know we were a partner; they did. But we also weren’t invited to meetings and when we did come to meetings, we were asked to be quiet. They didn’t want to hear our opinions. We were not part of the decision-making process on a lot of things. (Public Forum, 2001)

With the emergence of civic opposition in the late summer and fall of 2001, political conditions shifted and displaced residents faced another challenge. In addition to holding their own against HRI, they now had to compete with local groups who sought to redefine how the renewal project should proceed. In response to these shifting political conditions, displaced residents explicitly extended their “community frame” to emphasize the identifier of race. This framing strategy often occurred with the financial and political encouragement of HRI officials and was intended to stretch the framing symbolism of “community” to include all members of New Orleans’ low-income, African-American population, not just displaced St. Thomas residents. This strategy pitted not simply “St. Thomas residents” against “outsiders” but, more broadly, the city’s African-American majority against its white elite, as illustrated in the following letter to the editor by a displaced resident.

The battle against Wal-Mart is being led by elitist groups and individuals who think only they know right from wrong in regards to urban development. This snobbish attitude, however, is one that the disadvantaged and less privileged members of our

community can ill afford It is time for the enemies of progress to devote their talents to something productive and let entrepreneurs like HRI do what they do best—that is, responsible urban development and job creation. (Gilberga, 2001)

In response to these framing tactics, opposition groups began to emphasize the harm that a big-box superstore would have on local merchants on nearby Magazine Street—a retail corridor of small, locally-owned businesses, many specializing in expensive clothing, antiques, and home furnishings. (Additionally, they reiterated the usual arguments made by anti-Wal-Mart groups—that the corporation fails to provide decent wages and benefits to workers and that it returns profits to its Arkansas headquarters rather than investing them locally—but these efforts had little impact, as is typically the case in communities debating whether to allow Wal-Mart to build.) This counterframing strategy, however, carried little credibility with the everyday experiences of St. Thomas residents and African-American residents of New Orleans more generally. Harold McClough, legal representative for the St. Thomas Residents Council, offered the following response to critics' charges that Wal-Mart would undercut neighborhood merchants.

Now, just one block from the former St. Thomas community, you have all these small shops on Magazine Street. Everyone says, "Well, [Wal-Mart] is going to kill the shops on Magazine Street." Well, what have the shops on Magazine Street done for poor black folks. Go, drive down Magazine Street during the middle of the day and see how many black folks help you buy your antiques. You're not going to see that many. You're not going to see any at all, I bet'cha. (Public Forum, 2001)

In this and related statements, displaced residents used what few discursive resources they possessed to build both functional and symbolic designations that linked race with New Urbanist themes of community (re)development. The result was a dual deployment of the "community" frame to actualize group interests. On the one hand, residents used "community" to refer to an objective reality embodied in the physical, if fuzzy, boundaries of the St. Thomas residential area in need of revitalization. On the other hand, residents used "community" to denote a common subjectivity based on shared experiences with racial prejudice and discrimination. Each of these bases of affiliation afforded legitimacy to St. Thomas residents and representatives seeking to define HOPE VI redevelopment from the perspective of displaced public-housing residents. This framing strategy not only resonated with the life experiences and observations of local African Americans and neighborhood leaders outside the St. Thomas area, it also served to undermine the claims of competing groups who also sought to speak for "the community."

CIVIC OPPOSITION GROUPS—FROM HISTORIC PRESERVATION TO CONSERVING THE URBAN FABRIC

Until HRI's Wal-Mart announcement in 2001, there was no sustained, public debate over the demolition and redevelopment of the St. Thomas housing complex, despite the site's location within a National Register Historic District. Civic organizations and residents tacitly agreed that the area was distressed and in need of radical change, but discussion about the exact nature of this change remained confined largely to closed-door negotiations among the developer, the local housing authority, and displaced residents. However, once HRI announced redevelopment plans that would require a range of approvals and exemptions from city departments and officials, the conversation became very public and

quite heated. It was the planned inclusion of a Wal-Mart superstore in the new redevelopment plans that drew the greatest attention from opponents. As details of these plans surfaced, a “framing contest” emerged in public outlets.

The first and best-organized group to enter this “contest” was the Preservation Resource Center (PRC), a private nonprofit organization committed to traditional promotion of “historic preservation.” The PRC’s leadership objected to many aspects of HRI’s newly proposed redevelopment plans: its violation of existing zoning and big-box ordinances; its likely effect on historic neighborhoods surrounding the St. Thomas complex; its failure to adhere to the typical scale of local urban neighborhoods; and its potential impact on local businesses. However, the organization was unsure how best to challenge HRI’s new plans publicly. Leadership’s main concern was developing a framing strategy that offered the highest probability of success without overstepping the organization’s official mission of historic preservation.

One option was to frame opposition to the redevelopment plans in terms of neighborhood, rather than building, preservation—a position taken by the U.S. preservation movement for some time as a means of countering accusations of elitism. Another option was to protest a specific aspect of the plans that seemed to fall more squarely within the organization’s official purview of historic preservation: the planned demolition of historically significant, 19th-century cotton press warehouses on the redevelopment site to make room for a 900-space parking lot to adjoin the new Wal-Mart superstore. The PRC eventually opted for the latter strategy, using public meetings and statements to the local media to stress the historic and cultural value of the cotton press warehouses, specifically, and the tourist dollars that such value generated, generally, by keeping the historic fabric of the city intact. The strengths of this framing strategy seemed to be that it provided solid legal standing, since the warehouse complex could not be demolished without approval from the city’s Historic District Landmarks Commission, and that it was consistent with the PRC’s common public invocation of: “When have we ever regretted saving an old building?”

During early stages of this framing effort, however, several factors thwarted the PRC’s development of a broad-based civic coalition across local fault lines of class and race. For starters, the PRC entered the public debate by arguing that saving the historic warehouses on the St. Thomas site was in the best interest of all New Orleanians because it would help to preserve local heritage and the tourist dollars it generates. Yet for many African Americans, the cotton warehouses slated for demolition held no architectural significance or historical value beyond a perceived connection with slavery. Preservationists, most of whom were indeed white and relatively affluent, countered by claiming that the warehouses, built after the Civil War, had, in fact, been an important site of interracial labor mobilization by waterfront workers. However, the nearly all-white composition of the PRC leadership and its emphasis on saving what appeared to many to be architecturally unremarkable warehouses rather than allowing redevelopment to move forward, weakened the credibility of the organization’s traditional preservationist framing strategy and, in the process, its effectiveness in mobilizing opposition beyond its core base of supporters.

Ultimately, this framing strategy helped to win a battle but not the war: the PRC and its allies succeeded in saving the historic warehouses and reducing the proposed parking lot by 150 spaces, but these concessions on the part of the developer did little to halt the project as a whole or the inclusion of the Wal-Mart superstore as its anchor. As the amended plans made their way through local commissions and boards for approval, the political

liabilities of the PRC's traditional "preservationist" frame became increasingly evident. Some leaders even began to wonder publicly if the warehouse "battle" and subsequent compromise had not been a red herring, intended to distract and weaken "preservationist" opposition to the Wal-Mart superstore. Kabacoff, chief executive of HRI, even announced publicly after the compromise that "I can lose the [cotton warehouses] but I can't lose the Wal-Mart" (Thomas, 2001). As PRC members debated their next step internally, a new coalition of actors officially entered the framing contest with a press conference on October 22, proclaiming themselves Citizens for Urban Vision.

This new opposition coalition officially included members of the newly formed Urban Conservancy, several neighborhood associations near the St. Thomas site, and a local merchants association. Although the coalition's leadership included several prominent preservation advocates, the organization itself was careful not to appear preservationist oriented or to link itself officially to the PRC. As one of the leaders of the new opposition coalition explained, the group's chief concern was not with historic preservation, specifically, but with conservation of the "urban fabric," more generally. In pursuing this framing strategy, Citizens for Urban Vision touted their racial diversity and proclaimed themselves a "true grassroots movement of citizens concerned about OUR city" (Coats, 2001), emphasizing the developer's failure to adhere to New Urbanist design principles that were codified in government documents to help guide local applications of HOPE VI grants.³

This particular strategy on the part of Citizens for Urban Vision can be understood as primarily one of frame amplification and frame extension. In scholarly terms, actors often deploy such framing tactics in order to idealize, embellish, clarify, or invigorate existing values or beliefs with the intent of recruiting new members and mobilizing people to action (Benford and Snow, 2000). Frame-extension and frame-amplification processes are particularly relevant to movements that depend on "conscience constituents," who differ from movement beneficiaries, and to movements that have been stigmatized because their beliefs or agenda conflict with those of more dominant groups in society (Berbrier, 1998). Conceptually, frame extension involves elaborating and broadening the meaning of a movement's frame to include other issues, concerns, or problems. Relatedly, frame amplification involves accenting and highlighting some issues or beliefs as more important than others. These punctuated, or accented, elements may function, according to Benford and Snow, "in the service of the articulation process by providing a conceptual handle or peg for linking together various events and issues" (2000, p. 623). In operating in this way, these punctuated issues, beliefs, and events become like synecdoches, symbolizing the larger frame, or movement, of which they become a part.

In advancing their frame-amplification strategy, leaders of Citizens for Urban Vision attempted to mobilize opposition around explicitly New Urbanist design principles, advocating the view that small-scale, pedestrian-friendly, urban spaces constitute renewable public resources that demand wise stewardship. As part of this (re)framing strategy, movement leaders focused less on the virtues of specific historic properties and more on differences between urban and suburban worldviews. This strategy is reflected, for example, in the shift of oppositional slogans from "When have we ever regretted saving an historic building?" to "No Sprawl-Mart," "Is the worst of the suburbs the best we can do?," and "Got Neighborhoods?" Relatedly, the coalition's frame-extension strategy involved depicting opposition to Wal-Mart as something more than simply standing up for old buildings; it now extended to include issues and concerns presumed to be important to all New

Orleanians, namely, protecting the city's unique quality of life from suburban-oriented development embodied in Wal-Mart. This frame-extension process was widely deployed in public hearings and statements to the press, including the following editorial in *The Times-Picayune*

Everything that makes our city distinctive—that makes it special—is a product of a specific mindset, a particular set of values, a worldview. In New Orleans, the worldview or philosophy which guided our development was urbanism . . . The suburban worldview created gated communities from which we drive to shopping malls, strip centers, fast-food restaurants, and yes, big box discount superstores . . . We must embrace one of two worldviews—urban or suburban. If we fail to make a decision, New Orleans will become suburban by default. The proposed 200,000-square-foot Wal-Mart on Tchoupitoulas Street is an example of the encroachment of the suburban worldview into the city. (Vogt, 2001)

Another member of Citizens for Urban Vision expressed similar views.

One can argue that HUD's HOPE VI program is based upon the New Orleans neighborhood tradition—a tradition that has encouraged cultural diversity, magnificent architecture and a general quality of life that is unique in America. Wal-Mart, most certainly, is not in the New Orleans tradition. It is a low-density suburban-style development whose scale and automobile orientation is everything that this city is not. (Borah, 2002)

This shift in political frames from historic preservation to urban conservation was important strategically in two respects. First, it gave diverse opponents of the Wal-Mart proposal a common vocabulary to help forge coherent collective action following the warehouse compromise. As a leader of the Urban Conservancy, a constituent organization, put it, "lumping together of concerned parties as 'preservationists' oversimplifies the issue and creates an elitist image. Small business owners, residents and shoppers—have genuine concerns that are not primarily motivated by 'preservation'" (Melendez, 2001). Second, the shift in frames toward themes of urban conservation and design principles linked oppositional mobilization directly to themes espoused and publicly encouraged by HUD as part of its broad HOPE VI initiative. Thus, without denying contractual obligations to displaced residents, the newly formed Citizens for Urban Vision emphasized the developer's contractual obligations to pursue a particular *type* of redevelopment—"urban" redevelopment. One local architect and proponent of New Urbanism put it as follows.

[The claim] that Kabacoff's plan embraces the ideas of "New Urbanism" is an affront to every architect and urban planner in America. The "New Urbanism" seeks to strengthen a city's neighborhoods by making them pedestrian-friendly, carefully blending residential with commercial use on a village-like, accessible scale. But this big box Wal-Mart will be driven by the automobile, with an estimated 10,000 cars a day clogging our fragile neighborhoods . . . The project's enormous scale also flies directly in the New Urbanism's face. The retail store alone will be the size of 5 football fields . . . Add a wasteland of asphalt to accommodate over 800 cars, and you have a project the size of the Superdome on the edge of the historic Lower Garden District. (Dansereau, 2001)

Despite this coherent and sustained New Urbanist framing strategy, on November 22, 2002, after 16 months of often bitter political struggle, the New Orleans City Council unanimously approved the final plans to develop the proposed Wal-Mart superstore as part of the HOPE VI revitalization of the St. Thomas site. With this approval, the public “framing contest” dropped precipitously from public view. As it did, opposition groups shifted tactics, with several filing lawsuits to halt land acquisition, development, and building. These suits allege that the planned development violates federal historic-preservation and environmental laws, and that public entities failed to follow proper procedures in approving bond issues, tax-increment financing, and zoning changes. Several of these lawsuits are still pending.

Later, in July 2003, the Louisiana State Department of Environmental Quality found that HRI had not complied with certain requirements of the Clean Water Act. In addition, the state found that preliminary site clearance had provided inadequate drainage and was exacerbating the Lower Garden District’s sewerage problems, causing property damage to adjacent residential neighborhoods. In response, three groups—the Historic Magazine Row, the Coliseum Square Association, and Smart Growth for Louisiana, all earlier members of Citizens for Urban Vision—filed notice of an intent to sue HRI, thereby bringing to six the number of lawsuits seeking to block the Wal-Mart redevelopment plan. These developments suggest a future of protracted conflict and the emergence of potentially new bases, and frames, of opposition. As a result, the future of St. Thomas currently remains uncertain and open ended, although pointing strongly toward a new residential development organized around a Wal-Mart superstore.

CONCLUSION

The St. Thomas case may not generalize to other HOPE VI projects, but it does illustrate how struggles over urban space associated with this new federal program can develop into “framing contests” in which competing actors vie for “the ability to tell others what the key issues are, what these issues mean, and who the good guys and bad guys are” (Ryan, 1991, p. 10). The St. Thomas case also shows how framing tactics deployed by competing groups are not free floating but, instead, reflect elements of the political opportunity from which they emerge and become entwined. In this case, the political opportunity sprang largely from a new federal program designed to end public housing as we know it. Out of this opportunity came new power relations that favored private developers and a new strategic vocabulary that groups could selectively appropriate to mobilize public support for otherwise competing claims about how urban renewal should proceed. Both dimensions—the new power relations and the new strategic vocabulary—provided each actor with a grievance and an opportunity to act. These grievances and actions became particularly evident in the St. Thomas case once the new developer, HRI, announced renewal plans inconsistent with the HOPE VI program’s formal alignment with New Urbanism, in general, and *Principles for Inner City Neighborhood Design*, in particular.

In the political struggle that ensued, each competing group punctuated and defended its own definition of the situation through the interjection of various New Urbanist themes and language. The developer stressed its proposal’s “mixed-use” qualities, using this theme to drive a wedge between the interests and allies of residents and those of opposition groups. Displaced residents, by contrast, stressed the program’s commitment “to [re]build

communities, not just buildings” in order to emphasize residents’ contractual, but weak, position at the negotiating table and to exclude perceived interlopers, including nearby shopkeepers, who seemed to threaten this position. Finally, opposition groups came to stress the program’s formal alignment with (neo)traditional urban, as opposed to suburban, morphology. These framing strategies do not imply that all actors in the struggle were equal but, instead, show how the political opportunity presented by HOPE VI can trigger collective action and debate over who has the right to live on the redeveloped site, at what cost, and how answers to these questions fit into larger, more subjective understandings of what “the City” is and ought to be.

In the process, the developer, with its superior organizational and financial resources, was able to advance its particular “mixed-use” frame in press conferences, paid advertorials, lobbying, and the local media. These multiple and consistent inputs into the “framing contest” allowed the developer continually to adjust to oppositional framing strategies and to provide displaced residents with an amplified voice when it suited their interests, such as when residents challenged the “racism” and “elitism” of traditional preservationist framing strategies. The grievances of displaced residents also provided a rationale for vilifying groups who wished to slow the renewal process in order to consider alternative plans. As part of this strategy, residents extended the “community” frame to unify a diffuse low-income, African-American population into a loosely knit, but symbolically powerful, pro-Wal-Mart contingent. By comparison, civic opposition groups came to rely heavily on frame-amplification and extension strategies that stressed particular design principles of New Urbanism, often through public meetings and guest editorials in major daily newspapers. Overall, these events show how competing interests pursued different framing strategies that reflected the unequal power relations and shifting political opportunities in which they were embedded. In the St. Thomas case, these conditions led to a very different sort of public debate than that typically witnessed in struggles for and against the construction of Wal-Mart superstores in rural and suburban space.

Beyond the specifics of the St. Thomas case, we believe that these details speak to a couple of issues of broader interest to city and community scholars. First, alongside recent calls to place urban events analytically within a “global-local” framework, urban sociologists have begun to talk increasingly about how “the City” operates as a meaningful social unit in its own right (see recent exchange between Gans, 2002, Gieryn, 2002, and Zukin, 2002). In this vein, a key question becomes how “the City,” or “the Urban,” acts as something more than a mere spatial container for individual and market activity—a core sociological question, dating back to Weber’s (1958) treatise on *The City* that sought, among other things, to explain how the burghers unintentionally created foundations for citizenship in medieval cities. In the present study, we have sought to show how the federal government’s new HOPE VI program has, among other things, unintentionally contributed to a situation in which developers, low-income residents, and civic organizations collectively construct and mobilize around particular ideas of what “the City” is and should be in the future. Although these efforts are ongoing, they suggest the possibility that “the City,” far from becoming irrelevant in the current age of economic globalization, remains a meaningful political construct in its own right—one that resonates with a diverse set of actors and shapes how they negotiate shared meaning in today’s inner-city environments.

Second and finally, the St. Thomas case suggests that the relationship between HUD and the Congress for the New Urbanism is largely one of convenience. At no time during the struggle over the developer’s Wal-Mart plans did HUD officials publicly enforce, or

even endorse, New Urbanist design principles as a matter of serious contractual concern. In fact, during the spring of 2003, HUD Secretary Mel Martinez traveled to New Orleans to approve the Wal-Mart plans and to accelerate the superstore's construction. This lack of formal commitment to its own published guidelines undermined New Urbanist framing strategies and suggests, more generally, that as a planning and design movement, New Urbanism is much too malleable to provide meaningful regulation of inner-city renewal efforts. If developers can use "mixed-use" themes to defend the construction of a big-box superstore in inner-city space, and if displaced residents can use "community" themes to challenge input from longstanding neighborhood shopkeepers, it suggests that an extremely broad and conflicting set of agendas can be accommodated under principles of New Urbanism, rendering its design guidelines so elastic as to be ineffective. Even proponents of New Urbanism acknowledge that it "provides for extraordinary flexibility" and that "absolute rejection of formula define the movement" (Bohl, 2000, p. 781). As a result, New Urbanist guidelines appear to do little to tip the balance of power in political struggles over urban renewal on formerly distressed public-housing sites and currently leave developers not only with a heightened degree of power but also a strategic vocabulary with which to justify and legitimate this power. The generalizability of these conclusions remains to be seen as the HOPE VI program moves forward on other sites throughout New Orleans and the nation.

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Notes

¹ For those wishing more demographic context, from 1960 to 2000, the population of the City of New Orleans declined from 627,525 to an all-time low of 484,674—a loss of almost 143,000 residents, or 22 percent. Moreover, since 1960 the racial composition of the city has changed from majority white to majority African American. In 1960, whites comprised 63 percent of the city's population, and African Americans comprised 37 percent. By the 2000 Census, these percentages had reversed themselves. In 1969, the poverty rate for the metro area was 20–26 percent in the city and 13 percent in the suburbs. These rates have changed little since this time, with the poverty rate in the City of New Orleans currently about double that in surrounding suburbs.

² Michael Porter had delivered a public speech one year earlier at Tulane University advancing his "competitive advantage" thesis and its applicability to New Orleans. Local political and business elite attended.

³ The PRC also used New Urbanist themes to oppose the Wal-Mart plans in its online newsletter and *Preservation in Print*, suggesting that, rather than building new "old" neighborhoods espoused by New Urbanism, the city should preserve the traditional neighborhoods it already has. Still, the PRC was unable to utilize this frame successfully due to lingering stigmas of preservationism's elitist past (Barthel, 1996) and its supposed lack of concern for "people."

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