T he word “will” comes up constantly in the Lower Ninth Ward now; *We Will Rebuild* is spray-painted onto empty houses; “it will happen,” one organizer told me. Will itself may achieve the ambitious objective of bringing this destroyed neighborhood back to life, and for many New Orleanians a ferocious determination seems the only alternative to being overwhelmed and becalmed. But the fate of the neighborhood is still up in the air, from the question of whether enough people can and will make it back to the nagging questions of how viable a city and an ecology they will be part of. The majority of houses in this isolated neighborhood are still empty, though about a tenth of the residents are back, some already living in rehabilitated houses, some camped in stark white FEMA trailers outside, some living elsewhere while getting their houses ready. If you measured the Lower Ninth Ward by will, solidarity and dedication, from both residents and far-flung volunteers and nonprofits, it would be among the best neighborhoods in the United States. If you measured it by infrastructure and probabilities, it looks pretty grim. There are more devastated neighborhoods in New Orleans and neighboring St. Bernard Parish, let alone Mississippi and the Delta, but the Lower Ninth got hit hard by Katrina. Its uncertain fate has come to be an indicator for the future of New Orleans and the fate of its African-American majority.

The place has come a long way already. Even seven months after the storm, when I first visited the Lower Ninth, it was spookily unpopulated and almost untouched since the storm. Cars that had been flipped and tossed by the waters still stood up against buildings, atop each other, hung over fences and laid on their backs. Houses that had been shoved by the force of the water into the middle of the street or that had been smashed into splinters looked untouched, except by sardonic graffiti: Thanks for Nothing FEMA on one dislodged building; a simple Baghdad on another house later rehabilitated by Common Ground Collective, the radical relief group co-founded by ex-Black Panther Malik Rahim. Debris was everywhere. Down near the levee break, Common Ground had opened up a little tool-lending and supply center where returnees could get volunteer help, and its logo flew defiantly over the blue house: Solidarity Not Charity with a black fist holding a wrench.

The ruinous terrain of the Lower Ninth contrasts with the vibrancy of the culture there. New Orleans remains troubled by deep race and class divides and high levels of crime, but the city, by all accounts, also had a lot more civic life than most of the United States—not just cavorting in the streets during Mardi Gras season but a long tradition of gregariousness and neighborliness; people knew their neighbors, talked to strangers, called everyone by endearments, invited everyone on the block to the crawfish boil, had strong networks in carnival krewes, second-lines, music groups, social clubs, churches, to say nothing of the extended families so many people have. (The Lower Ninth had a high percentage of homeowners, but even the renters often rented from relatives or lived near homeowning family members.) It’s why a lot of people come back, or want to, and it’s a major resource for reclaiming the city—though it can’t replace money and institutional willpower. Though various forms of government support exist, most people regard the capricious red-tape bureaucracies with frustration at best. Many homeowners have found that they are not eligible for Road Home (the state rebuilding program) or other funding, for one reason or another, and even the eligible have found the rules strangling and the flow of money excruciatingly slow and unpredictable.

In the Lower Ninth, the wrecked cars, smashed houses and debris are gone, for the most part, and a lot of the remaining...
houses look pretty good, though mold and other damage can be hard to see. People have even made their own street signs, further evidence of social strength and institutional weakness. NENA, the Lower Ninth Ward Neighborhood Empowerment Network Association, keeps a big map in its cement-block office—lent by St. David’s Catholic Church next door—with a green pushpin for every returnee, and the green dots are scattered everywhere, though they represent only a small percentage of homes and residents. NENA was founded by resident Patricia Jones, a former small business owner, with many other Lower Ninth Ward residents, in April 2006, and the organization helps people cut through the extraordinary red tape that surrounds the new building codes, the Road Home fund, the insurance regulations and other bureaucracies returnees face, but it also fosters connections and community.

Though a lot of outside organizations are here, locals lead most of the efforts. I asked Linda Jackson, a member of NENA, how the community felt about the assistance pouring in from around the world, and she replied in her whispery voice, “They’re stunned. They never thought the world would reach out the way they did. I’m not going to say that it makes up for [the initial, official Katrina response], but the help that we’ve been given from throughout the US and the world, it makes us work that much harder. We say: You know what, if that’s something worth fighting for. And that’s what we’re doing at this point.”

Not long after the storm, in October 2005, the Sierra Club—which has long been involved in environmental justice politics in the Lower Ninth—convened a press conference. The club’s young president, Lisa Renstrom, spoke of the need to “rebuild smarter and better” and “repair the inequities of the past.” Pam Dashiell, a longtime neighborhood activist and organizer for the environmental group the Louisiana Bucket Brigade, recalls, “A bunch of us were able to come on that day, and what a great day that was too. And we sat down together and talked about creating a plan for the community and ourselves.” Dashiell, a warm, easygoing political powerhouse, had been president of the Holy Cross Neighborhood Association (Holy Cross is the southern stretch of the Lower Ninth and its highest ground). As members of the HCNA began to return, they held meetings several times a week. They still meet weekly rather than monthly, as they did before Katrina. Though there are many forces at work in restoring the neighborhood, not all of which intersect, the HCNA has been potent for both its ambition and its coordination of many outside groups and funders, including the Sierra Club. And while a lot of individuals and groups aspired to restore only what had been, the HCNA looked at how to make the Lower Ninth better.

Local groups are struggling to ‘rebuild smarter and better,’ but the obstacles are huge, and many residents are still not back.

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The list of who came to help sounds like the setup for a joke: A Black Panther, an accountant, a bunch of Methodists and the mayor of Portland walk into a bar. Or if you prefer, Brad Pitt, some graduate students, lots of young anarchists and the Sierra Club walk in. No one yet has assessed the scale of the volunteer influx to New Orleans, which has been compared to Freedom Summer during the civil rights era but has far outstripped it in sheer numbers. It’s a safe understatement to say that more than 100,000 volunteers have come from out of town, and they have done and are doing everything from medical care, food preparation, demolition and construction to aid with red tape and planning.

There is great dynamism here in the Lower Ninth, and determination, but the obstacles are huge, and many residents are still missing, far more than are back. Most of the returnees have lost family members to the Katrina diaspora, and the fabric of the neighborhood is still mostly holes. Dashiell evacuated to St. Louis with her daughter, her daughter’s partner and grandchild. Only she returned, and she returned even though she was a renter who had lost everything in her home. That she loves the Lower Ninth is as clear as that she is a major force for its revival. Little more than a month after Katrina, she told the press, “We’re not going down,” and “We want to rebuild in the best, healthiest and most sustainable way.” She told me this summer, “Our reputation was worse than the reality. Lower Nine was a synonym for poor, dark-skinned and crime-ridden.”

To understand the strength of the Holy Cross Neighborhood Association, you need to understand that the environmental and social issues here did not begin on August 29, 2005. Founded in 1981, the HCNA had fought the attempt to build another lock on the Industrial Canal more than ten years earlier. Darryl Malek-Wiley, a big, cheerful white-haired white guy who lives at the opposite end of town, became an environmental justice organizer for the Sierra Club, and his focus has long been on this neighborhood. So the Sierra Club and the HCNA were already in place when Katrina hit; Common Ground, Emergency Communities, NENA, the People’s Hurricane Relief Fund and other organizations emerged in the wake of the storm.

A lot of people elsewhere bought the story that these places did not make environmental sense to reclaim and re-inhabit. Dashiell recalls that the developers who were part of the city’s Bring New Orleans Back Commission “were in reality looking at ways to not bring the Lower Nine back. To hear what they were really saying at that level and what they were doing was just unbelievable, and for me that was a catalyst. We had to do something. We organized. We developed a plan. We were everywhere we could be.” Environmentalists were the ones “who provided the support.”

The HCNA pursued a rebuilding effort that would address the ways New Orleans had chosen to violate the natural landscape. Unlike mostly middle-class, white Lakeview or New Orleans East, home to many Vietnamese-Americans, the Lower Ninth is not a new neighborhood or one on extremely low ground, and its ecological precariousness is relatively recent.
There were inhabitants here in the early nineteenth century, long before the Industrial Canal cut off the Lower Ninth along its western edge from the rest of the city. This canal, dug in the 1920s to provide a direct waterway between Lake Pontchartrain and the Mississippi River, which forms the neighborhood’s southern border, is penned in by levees that had failed catastrophically before, in Hurricane Betsy in 1965.

Another watery border, this time in the bayou to the north, was gouged out in the 1960s and named the Mississippi River Gulf Outlet Canal, or MR-GO. It created a shorter route for shipping traffic—and for storm surges, salinization and the loss of some 27,000 acres of wetlands, making yet another unnatural edge of vulnerability for the place. Thanks to erosion, it is far wider than the US Army Corps of Engineers originally made it. Breaches of the MR-GO canal’s levees were responsible for much of the flooding of St. Bernard Parish and the Lower Ninth in 2005, and water that surged up this “hurricane highway” may have been responsible for the even more devastating breaches of the Industrial Canal. It is quite literally a murderous piece of engineering, and in July even the Army Corps of Engineers finally agreed that it should be closed.

Restoring the wetlands at the Lower Ninth’s northern edge is a challenge that has been taken up by the HCNA, with the University of Wisconsin’s Water Resources Management doing the research. One of the first facts that emerged is that a forest had died there, in Bayou Bienvenue (which is also the southern periphery of New Orleans East, though the two places are many miles apart by road). The cypress forest that could still be seen in photographs from the 1950s died of the salinity from the MR-GO canal, and with it went one layer of protection against storm surges. A forest would buffer any future storm surge, and the trees would help hold the wetlands as land rather than open water. One idea under consideration is to develop the wetlands to serve as the final filtration system for New Orleans’s sewage-system discharge, which, unsurprisingly, comes out near there. Such filtration systems have been developed in progressive/alternative areas like Arcata, California; putting one in a poor community of color that is as much the inner city as the ecological edge is a radical shift in who gets to go green. Other proposals involve building nature trails and recreational facilities. The landscape architecture department at the University of Colorado, Denver, has also shown up to aid the Lower Ninth, and its students are participating in landscape design for the wetlands.

And then there’s the new development down by the Mississippi, organized by Global Green—a US branch of Mikhail Gorbachev’s Green Cross International—but orchestrated by the movie star Brad Pitt. Pitt, who with his partner, Angelina Jolie, and kids temporarily relocated to New Orleans after Katrina to film a movie, has reportedly been interested in architecture for a while. He helped organize and underwrote a competition to design sustainable housing for New Orleans. Originally, the project was to have generated houses across New Orleans, but after Pitt met Pam Dashiell and the HCNA, he decided all the resources should go into the Lower Ninth. Members of the neighborhood group got involved in the competition to design an eighteen-unit apartment building, several single-family homes and a community center that will include daycare facilities. The Home Depot Foundation put up major money for construction,
and ground was broken this summer on the former industrial land Global Green purchased.

The Lower Ninth also drew in the Sharp Solar Energy Systems Group, which initially decided to put minimal solar systems on five New Orleans roofs, and finally ended up putting far more extensive systems on ten rooftops in the Holy Cross area, including a system on the roof of NENA. Again the HCNA was a partner in developing the program. One argument for solar and related hyperlocal programs is that after the next disaster, those who aren’t on the grid won’t be hamstrung by its failure. Another is that if New Orleans is a major victim of climate change, it should be a major player in carbon-neutral energy sources and green building. Malek-Wiley also emphasizes less glamorous environmental steps being taken in the neighborhood, including installing heat-reflective insulation in attics and getting the city to recycle some of the cleared-away debris and not just dump it all in leaking landfills on the Vietnamese community’s side of Bayou Bienvenue.

Restored local wetlands, green housing, solar roofs—these are only small pieces of the large puzzle of restoring one tiny area of the Gulf Coast. The Army Corps of Engineers is rebuilding New Orleans’s levees to withstand a Katrina-level event, not a Category 5 hurricane. The ocean is rising. The wetlands farther out to sea are eroding. The city as a whole is in trouble. Like depopulated cities such as Detroit, it faces real problems about a shrunken tax base for the same-size footprint. New Orleans had been in steady economic decline since the 1960s, and nothing much suggests that’s about to turn around now. Regeneration of this one neighborhood, like so many others, could be undermined or sabotaged by these larger forces. But the Gulf Coast will also be rebuilt one piece at a time, and this piece doesn’t lack the powerful tools of will, vision or love.

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**AS EDUCATIONAL REFORM THRIVES IN NEW ORLEANS, PUBLIC SCHOOLS ARE LEFT BEHIND.**

### The Charter School Flood

Rob Wyman says he couldn’t field any more questions about error-filled report cards, so he made this sign and tacked it onto his office bulletin board: “We are sorry. We did not do the report cards. We don’t know how the problems happened. We do not know how to fix the problems.”

He knew it was not the best way to explain to angry high school students why they hadn’t received accurate credit for their work. But incorrect report cards weren’t the worst problem at Joseph T. Clark High School, one of approximately twenty-five schools that were operated during the past school year by the State of Louisiana in the so-called Recovery School District (RSD) in New Orleans.

Wyman, the school’s guidance counselor, pulled open his top desk drawer and took out a sheet of paper that was covered with hand-drawn squares and arrows. In his spare time, he said, he has been devising escape routes from the school in case of a fire. The school hasn’t had a drill all year, he said. “The students have no idea where to go. The teachers have no idea where to go. Here’s the kicker: We have kids in wheelchairs on the second floor, and I’m afraid for their safety.”

As he spoke, groups of students milled about in the hallway outside his office, near the school’s metal detectors. Some of the students in the building were taking the LEAP test—the state’s high-stakes exam that monitors schools’ progress and decides if a student will be promoted to the next grade. For those who had already taken the test during a previous session, holding rooms had been assigned. The rooms weren’t monitored by the students’ regular teachers, and students were periodically popping into Wyman’s office, saying they didn’t have any work and pleading to use the phone to call their parents or guardians to come pick them up. He declined each request in apologetic tones. “My job isn’t to help you leave school,” he said to one student.

Wyman spent his lunch break leading me on a tour through the school. When we reached an upstairs classroom, William Perkinson waved us in. Perkinson readily acknowledged he had never taught before he came to Clark; he had a college degree but no teaching training or credentials. He just answered an ad in the paper. When he arrived at the school, he walked into a room filled

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*Micahel Tisserand's latest book is Sugarcane Academy: How a New Orleans Teacher and His Storm-Struck Students Created a School to Remember (Harcourt). He can be contacted through www.michael-tisserand.com. Research support for this article was provided by the Investigative Fund of The Nation Institute.*

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John McDonogh Sr. High School’s 2007 commencement—its first since Hurricane Katrina
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