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Connecting the “Big Easy”: Lessons from the people surrounding the Lafitte Greenway in New Orleans, Louisiana

Philip Koske

Introduction

The 3.1-mile (4.99-kilometer) linear Lafitte Greenway, one of the first revitalization projects since Hurricane Katrina (2005), is designed to become a vibrant bicycle and pedestrian transportation corridor linking users to the world-famous French Quarter and central business district. As an emerging city, New Orleans generally developed sections of swamp land starting near the French Quarter and growing outward in most directions. The resulting transect of neighborhoods with access to the Lafitte Greenway begins with areas associated with early development, such as Fauborg Tremé and Bayou St. John, to 20th Century development found within the Navarre and Mid City Neighborhoods. In all, the Greenway directly impacts nine distinct neighborhoods with several documented sub-districts, including the Tremé neighborhood which has the distinction of being the first freed black neighborhood in America, a hot spot in the southern civil rights movement, and the starting point of a great jazz tradition.

A multi-disciplinary team of landscape architects, civil engineers, ecologists, economists, crime prevention experts, park management consultants, and public engagement specialists incorporated public input, synthesized measurable objectives, and worked across a range of scales to plan and design one of the most important planned public spaces since the hurricane. The project began in spring 2009 and is scheduled to begin the first phase of construction in the fall of 2013.

Background

The 54-acre (21.9-hectare) *Lafitte Greenway* (hereafter Greenway) includes what was once the Carondelet Canal (in existence between the 1790s and the 1930s) and a major railroad right-of-way, which was highly active in the 1850s and 1950s but with only limited portions active today. The Carondelet Canal, connecting colonial New Orleans to Bayou St. John and then to Lake Pontchartrain, was one route through which commercial goods from the northern states entered the city, first on shallow-draft boats until the 1840s when rail service was introduced.

The *Lafitte Corridor* (hereafter Corridor) is a 1,375-acre (556-hectare) district that includes the Lafitte Greenway and a rich mix of residential, retail and industrial uses. The Corridor contains 13,583 residents and includes the canal site and rail rights-of-way as well as adjacent neighborhoods within 0.25 miles (0.4 kilometers) of the Greenway (Figure 1).



This diagram shows the ten neighborhoods that cross or are adjacent to the Corridor. Eight of these neighborhoods cross the Greenway.

This district contains a distinct split of education levels, socio-economic conditions and racial compositions, creating a challenging context for community engagement. Census data indicates that Broad Street forms a dividing line in general characteristics. The income east of the Broad Street (Tremé, Lafitte, etc.) generally top at \$30,000 (\$186,354 RMB) in earnings per household with a home ownership rate of 25 percent, while areas west of the bayou (Mid City, Bayou St John) register an average income starting at \$30,000 (\$186,354 RMB) and home ownership approaching 50 percent in most areas. Community members from the respective neighborhoods had differing ideas about the future role of the Greenway despite close proximity and the post-Katrina surge in civic cohesion. In addition, there existed a palpable sense of mistrust between different portions of the community.

This paper describes how the design process and proposed design interventions as developed by Design Workshop (DW) for the Lafitte Project (Project) were shaped by the public process and community engagement, which includes design strategies for the Greenway and an economic revitalization plan for the Corridor. The design approach deploys research methods that seek to accomplish three objectives:

- 1) To measure the baseline site and community conditions,
- 2) To establish benchmarks with which the proposed design can be measured against comparable projects and established standards, and
- 3) To broadly and deeply engage the public in shaping the program for the greenway and the design of the open space.

Literature Review

The design team drew upon a broad range of writings, research, and previous experience to inform the design process and research methodologies. These resources can generally be categorized into groups including design related, recreation related, public engagement related, previous study review, and culture related. Examples related to physical design include authors such as Patrick Geddes (Geddes, 'Cities in Evolution'), Ian McHarg (McHarg, 'Design with Nature'), Ann Spirn (Spirn, 'The Granite Garden'), Michael Hough (Hough, 'Cities and Nature Process'), Danilo Palazzo and Frederick Steiner (Palazzo and Steiner, 'Urban Ecological Design'), and others who have sought to define an ecological approach to urban design and planning. Resources related to public engagement included Randy Hester's Ecological Democracy, Daniel Kemmis Community and the Politics of Place, Daniel Yankelovich's Coming to Public Judgment as well as writings by Clare Cooper Marcus and Walter Hood. The team carefully considered research published by the National Recreation and Park Association (NRPA) and *Time Saver Standards for Landscape Architects* as guides for recreation and program-related topics. Culture-related examples included *An Unnatural Metropolis: Wrestling New Orleans from Nature* by Craig E. Colten and the PBS documentary *Faubourg Tremé The Untold Story of Black New Orleans*, 2009. Both the Greenway and Corridor have been the focus of many previous research and planning efforts. These include "The Lafitte Greenway: A Master Plan for the Lafitte Corridor," Brown+Danos Land Design (2007), "Lafitte Greenway: Sustainable Water Design," Waggonner+Ball Architects (2010), and "Plan for the 21st Century: New Orleans 2030," City of New Orleans (2010).

Over 100 metrics-based rating and certification systems have been created world-wide for design projects, including LEED, SITES, and the Greenroads[®] program. Only a few require participation by stakeholders. Though the effectiveness of these engagement efforts is not currently analyzed, their requirement is a step in the right direction for both public and private-led teams working toward sustainable solutions. The documentation of landscape architecture research and evidence-based design is accelerating in the United States, in large measure due to the Case Studies Initiative of the Landscape Architecture Foundation (LAF). The organization’s landscape performance series matches private firms with university programs in landscape architecture to critically evaluate the performance of built landscapes against measurable objectives. This experience in assessing the performance of new community and streetscape projects informed the methodologies for the Greenway and Corridor. It is anticipated that the project (including specific strategies for both the Greenway and the Corridor) will be a future subject of the LAF Case Study Initiative.

Goals and Objectives

The overall goal for public outreach related to the Lafitte Greenway was to attract a broad cross section of involvement within a largely fragmented series of neighborhoods. Given the range of social, cultural, financial, and educational conditions found within the study area, it was a multi-layered challenge. The complexities of the task required tremendous preparation, respect for those participating, and trust-building transparency. Objectives of the public participation plan included:

- Allowing the public to shape the design,
- Utilizing the creative nature of New Orleans,
- Connecting communities,
- Allowing the public to prioritize proposed improvements,
- Utilizing the public’s knowledge of the area to verify existing conditions,
- Engaging the public in interesting and creative ways,
- Making the public feel comfortable about participation, and
- Confirming conclusions generated by the team.

Methods

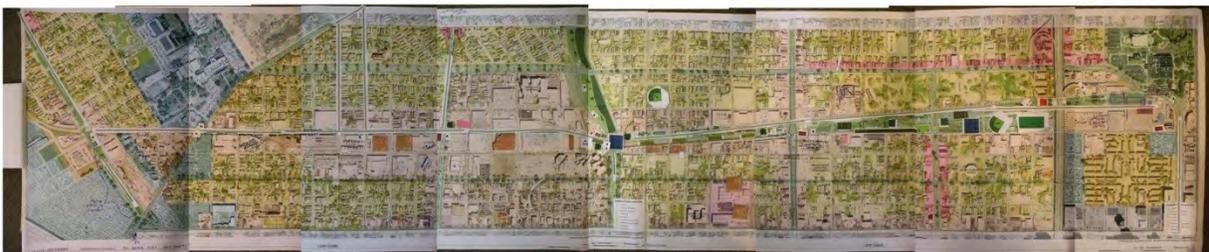
The community engagement approach was comprehensive and inclusive of all segments of the New Orleans community, with specific focus on those neighborhoods and organizations within the Corridor. The consultant team organized and led eight public presentations, held over 75 stakeholder meetings, posted on-line surveys and directly engaged approximately 1,000 people in the process. In a community continually plagued by unrealized planning projects and unproductive public processes, the approach needed to be a balance of comprehensive data-collection and efficiency.

In addition to the logistical aspects of public engagement, the team emphasized utilizing tools that accommodated a range of educational levels (literacy), access to technology and work schedule or child care responsibilities. For example, the national average for adults reading at the lowest functional level is around 25 percent of a given population. In New Orleans, that number exceeds 40 percent. This fact presented a serious challenge in making participants feel

comfortable and in being able to obtain useful information from them. Another issue related to palpable disconnects linked social justice and race in differing parts of the Greenway. Early meetings with community leaders pointed to the need to host the same meeting in two different locations, due to the cultural and social disparity between the neighborhoods in the Corridor and many citizens resistance to attending a meeting in a nearby neighborhood. Given the scale and scope of the Greenway and Corridor, this approach made sense geographically as well. In both locations the team employed several methods to achieve a productive result.

“Chip Game.” The design team engaged both groups of stakeholders at community meetings and more specific focus groups with a “Chip Game” exercise. In this format, users were given a scaled map of the study area and asked to place and glue scaled pieces representing program elements such as a soccer field or water feature along the Greenway. Once participants completed the activity, the team scanned the map and studied it for patterns. The foundation of the game was developed through recommendations for area space standards for outdoor recreation facilities by Time Saver Standards for Landscape Architecture and NRPA based on a general population of 13,583 (the pre-Katrina population to which we were planning in the Corridor). This Chip Game was played at initial public meetings, within smaller community or social group meetings, and with both high school and elementary school groups. Lessons learned from this exercise included:

- The physical size of the maps necessary to include a 3.1-mile (4.99-kilometer) linear Greenway was difficult to manage in small rooms;
- The maps and necessary supplies were expensive to produce, costing upwards of \$500 (\$3,106 RMB) per set;
- Due to length, users tended to only work in particular parts of the map, leaving other parts empty or working to fill gaps without critical thinking;
- Users working in the same area sometimes had conflicting opinions, with no mechanism to resolve issues before gluing pieces to the map;
- In an “open house” format, stakeholders arriving at times when a fresh map was not available caused some confusion and visitors questioned why they were not able to add to or change maps that were completed;
- The chips are somewhat difficult to work with for long/linear program elements such as trails, pathways, roads or rain gardens;
- This project included two scales of assignment: Corridor and Greenway. Participants tried to fit all chips on the Greenway, despite the fact that chips provided were intended to fill needs throughout the Corridor;



The “chip game” involved users gluing program pieces to a large base plan as part of either a focus group meeting or public open house.

The chip game did reveal a dramatic difference of opinion between neighborhoods about the Greenway’s possible role within their community. On the heels of Hurricane Katrina, much publicity existed and a lot of study was conducted on how under-utilized open spaces could be used to defer or reduce future flooding in low portions of the city. The other perspective related to the lack of community and recreational facilities available within the Corridor. With the space given, it became clear that supporting both goals successfully would not be possible. However, the main difficulty in accommodating both community programming and storm water management was not due to park area, with even the most aggressive storm water concepts proposed for the Greenway dominated only 25 percent for water storage/surface area. Instead, the issue was in the cross section. Providing a contiguous water conveyance system splits an already narrow space into two or three narrow spaces, mostly eliminating the possibility of medium- or large-scale programmed recreation. This was also an issue with the trail location, but the footprint of that feature requires around 15 feet (4.6 meters) compared to a canal needing at least 60 feet (18.3 meters).

“Open House” hours. The team had two points of focus related to the “open house” outreach method. The first was to provide stakeholders who had irregular work schedules or child care obligations the chance to engage the design team and take a look at progress. In many cases, visitors brought children with them or were on their way to or from work obligations. Focus discussions related to a range of topics were scheduled during the open house so stakeholders with specific areas of interest (storm water, crime prevention, etc.) were able to have a detailed dialogue with design team members. For visitors who casually stopped by, docents were at the entry ready to show visitors around and answer basic questions or make introductions to specific team members.

“Dot” exercises. During general public meetings, the team employed simple “dot” exercises which allowed users to prioritize improvements in both map format and chart format. This was done as a supplemental exercise to keypad polling. Due to the high-profile nature and complexities of the project, many of the general meetings were fairly long. For this reason, the design team felt it would be helpful to include at least some physical activity as part of the meeting. These exercises also gave stakeholders who were unable to follow the polling questions an opportunity to interact with the site map and document their priorities.

Dot exercises are a quick and inexpensive way to solicit basic feedback at meetings, but there are social limitations that should be considered before relying on this exercise as the only means of direct engagement. The results of these exercises are somewhat influenced by peer pressure. A participant may be excited about a particular program item but feel intimidated about placing his or her dot next to a topic to which no one else has responded favorably. In general, Dot exercises are an effective tool for getting participants active and for identifying trends but have limitations when applied to complex projects.

Keypad polling. Remote polling tools are endlessly flexible and accurate, and participants typically enjoy the interactivity within slideshow presentations. The design team utilized keypad polling in all open meeting formats to track the flow of information, to all for anonymity, and to document demographic data. Demographic data for any public process is critical for qualifying both a process and outcome, and can help alert a design team when particular segments of the

public are not being reached, as well as help to provide valuable political cover for decisions in instances where controversy is inevitable. An additional benefit is that all participants are given an equal voice during meetings, unlike more conversational meeting formats where often only the most vocal individuals dominate response time, which in turn yield unproductive results and tend to discourage many participants.

Public input generated by the keypad polling dramatically shaped both physical planning and general goals for the project. During the design charrette and open house, the team used feedback related to goals and priorities to form a preferred design from two concepts generated based on initial feedback from the public. An example of a question used includes “The location that I prefer for the volleyball courts complex is:” Choices related to locations shown on the alternatives were included as well as a “none of the above” option. This approach may seem simple, but the complexities of the stakeholder group made such transparency essential for both the community and City leadership. Such questions were asked for topics ranging from programming to operations and maintenance. The outcomes proved that despite community differences, expectations for the project were generally more aligned than initially expected. Two distinct concepts began to form; the first was characterized by a linear trail that connected a broad range of programmed activities, while the second concept included much more passive space and naturalistic landscape character.

Designers, experts and the general public often fall prey to preconceptions based on their own understanding of matters related to everything from ecology to finances to art to functionality, and creating an open dialogue around these ideas to can be difficult. An example from the Lafitte process related to proposed “native” or “naturalized” landscape character helps illustrate this challenge. Many people in urbanized portions of Louisiana view snakes, rats, ants and mosquitos as “nature” and have an accordingly adversarial relationship with the natural environment. This attitude has been well documented over the last 300 years of settlement in the area and remains pervasive to this today. Thomas Jefferson wrote about the “yeoman farmer” and the importance of an educated populous. Designers are in many ways the “educated elite” that Jefferson describes, and our ability to either educate or embrace “native intelligence” should be a consideration in any public process. The design team identified this issue and tested it with the public.

The design team approached the topic by educating the public on the full range of benefits of such landscapes and talked about examples of other landscapes in the New Orleans area that represented the intent. When asked about the proposed development program, around 30 percent thought that the proposed plans were too intense, suggesting a high desire for non-programmed or naturalized landscape. 84 percent responded favorably to a landscape transect that took users through distinct native landscape typologies based on topographic elevation. Finally, “passive recreation lands” consistently ranked as a top 3 priority in all study areas. The ability of the team to communicate the full range of benefits associated with such landscapes, successful examples within the community and their role in defining a “passive” experience within the Greenway was a significant part of the success of the design.



The team used a large illustrative cross section to describe key relationships and vegetation types within the New Orleans area landscape.

The design team also considered several additional tools that would have been helpful at the outset of the project and some that were applied to the process later. Online polling tools such as Survey Monkey or MetroQuest were not employed for the project due to a disparate lack of internet access across communities. For teams planning to use these tools they should plan for how responses will be weighed against in-person meeting data. Additionally, content being tested online is exactly the same as the content from meetings. It is important to generate an “apples to apples” comparison of data and to communicate to both the client and public how each data set is to be weighted to. In hindsight, it would have been helpful to have collected online survey data to track as an additional point of reference.

Results

The range of meetings and workshops during the Lafitte process resulted in the direct engagement of approximately 1,000 individuals and 73 organized community groups. While the interaction with community groups was successful, the engagement with the general public was limited to 0.5% of the population living in the study area. Data collected during the final public meetings helped to validate both the design process and its resulting products. The recorded data also sent a powerful political message to City leadership: “Build the Greenway now!”

The final plan balances hydrologic, recreational, cultural and historical considerations in the context of a design that incorporates sustainable storm water infrastructure, native plantings, adaptive re-use of existing buildings, much needed program elements like practice fields for local high school sports and rain gardens and pathways located in the historic alignments of the canal and railroad.

In addition to the Greenway design, the team developed an economic revitalization strategy for the Corridor including strategies for a dramatic expansion of the community gardening program, a projected score of 78 (“Gold” rating) using LEED® standards; and for the creation of mixed-use developments at major intersections. A set of form-based development standards will supplement the City’s new zoning ordinance to ensure orderly infill in response to this new civic asset. A Corridor-wide strategy for storm water management will also address the district’s historic flooding problems.



The proposed storm water strategy for the Greenway focuses less on conveyance and more on absorption. This strategy reduces flooding, allows for large recreational areas, and may help to reduce soil subsidence, which is a common issue in the Corridor and a major reason for parts of the city sitting below sea level.

As the Greenway will employ the most extensive use of green infrastructure and native plant material in New Orleans, the design team knew that it would be insufficient to merely build the Greenway. It will also be necessary to outline strategies and guidelines for operation and management. New Orleans may be unique among American cities in that responsibilities for its open spaces are divided between two City agencies: Parks and Parkways and the New Orleans Recreational Development Commission. The consulting team prepared maintenance budgets and protocols and facilitated management strategies of the Greenway between these two entities. Although it is estimated to cost \$35 million (\$217.4 million RMB) to construct the Greenway as fully realized, the City has only \$6.5 million (\$40.4 million RMB) dollars available for construction. In this climate of severe fiscal austerity, the consultant team was also asked to develop partnership programs in which various civic groups could develop and fund portions of the project.

Discussion

A key factor to consider when measuring the success of a public process is the diversity and level of attendance. Despite the range of efforts and accessibility the Lafitte Greenway process yielded less than 1/3 of the participants needed to constitute a statically valid sample. Given the low turn-outs in both local and national elections common in many parts of the country, it should not be surprising that such a local process falls short of statistical validity. The key question that needs to be addressed with the team responsible for judging the validity of workshop results is this: does statistical validity matter in a participatory democracy or are the decisions to be left to those who show up?

Getting members of the public to attend an in-person meeting, interact with an online resource or participate in a small focus group is a challenge with any process. A cross section of

participation that parallels the characteristics of a target population is very rare and difficult to achieve. Data may be collected related to active participants, but we can assume that many stakeholders monitor progress by checking in with published material or in casual conversation with trusted community leaders. In the case of the Lafitte process, the demographics for general attendance at meetings did not match the documented demographics of the study area, yet there was representation from nearly every stakeholder group.

The need to understand the impact of design interventions on social factors will be important to funding and prioritizing greenway projects in the years to come. For example, baseline data now exists to that can help explain changes over time in the economic, education, public health and safety conditions of corridor residents. It is plausible that the creation of a major park within a given area will provide opportunities for recreation,, improved public health, employment, poverty reduction and in general alternatives to crime . This requires multivariate analysis and some mechanism within the planning process to document adequate baselines, set measurable objectives and the creation of a protocol for ongoing monitoring. This could be a future role for Fábos-directed study and the Landscape Architecture Foundation.

Demonstrating that improvements in the study area are a direct result of the creation of the Lafitte Greenway will be difficult, but the process employed at least documents the baseline conditions at a critical time in post-Katrina New Orleans.



The final greenway design created a balance of recreation, trail space, and storm water management.

Conclusion

The Lafitte Greenway and Corridor plans seek to capitalize on under-utilized public open spaces, bringing residents of nine New Orleans neighborhoods together on a common ground. Taking a comprehensive approach to analysis and implementing a robust outreach process, the team’s plans for the Greenway and Corridor consider all represented voices and are a true reflection of the New Orleans public. The design team’s intent was to create a community supported and implementable solution for the Greenway and revitalization of the surrounding Corridor. The success of the project in achieving these objectives, however, can only be determined over time.

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