Civic Engagement in the Wake of Katrina
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HOME, New Orleans

UNIVERSITY/NEIGHBORHOOD
ARTS COLLABORATIONS

Jan Cohen-Cruz

HOME, New Orleans (HNO) is a neighborhood-based, arts-focused project that incorporates local organizations and residents; local artists, including HNO coinitiator Jan Gilbert of the VESTIGES Project; and students and faculty members from two historically black universities in New Orleans, Xavier and Dillard, and two predominantly white ones, Tulane in New Orleans and New York University (NYU), the latter through a visiting professor and two students. Our focus is “home” in its many manifestations: individual dwellings, neighborhoods, and the city itself. Our grounding is a university course that combines practice and reflection. Our process emphasizes sustainable ways to use art to contribute to ongoing neighborhood life. That is, HOME, New Orleans responds to local priorities through arts workshops, memorials, youth theater, performance, and installation art, contributing to revitalizing efforts. Through the arts’ capacity to bring people together, we hope to facilitate local bonding and cross-race, intraneighborhood, and class bridging. Our work is twofold: to train university students in civic engagement and to engage neighborhood residents in arts-based projects that modestly contribute to rebuilding community in New Orleans.

In what follows, Jan Cohen-Cruz, who coinitiated HNO’s university component with Ron Bechet, stitches together reflections with excerpts from conversations with Bechet, a professor of art at Xavier. Tulane En-
glish professor Amy Koritz and Dillard Art Department chair John Barnes, the other HNO faculty, joined them in one conversation. Cohen-Cruz was a professor at NYU’s Tisch School of the Arts; she recently became the new director of Imagining America, based at Syracuse University.

In June 2006, ten months after Katrina, I attended a small gathering in New Orleans of university faculty members who regularly do community arts work with their students. Our host, Ron Bechet, engaged us in conversations about arts departments responding to local crises, brought us to a meeting with about one hundred local artists and a few interested parties from other fields to discuss a role for art in rebuilding community, and showed us around the devastated city. The view on the ground was heartrending. Neighborhoods emptied of inhabitants and basic services with crumbling homes and craterlike potholes bespoke how utterly at the mercy of the storm and levee breaks they were and how little government aid had been forthcoming. Trailers parked alongside a smattering of homes on dark streets indicated that as few as one per every thirty households had returned to some areas. A dearth of reopened hospitals, public transportation vehicles, grocery stores, and businesses made returning wildly challenging even for those with intact dwellings. Seemingly sturdy housing projects remained closed, their low-income, black renters kept out of the city, possibly forever. Was New Orleans going to rebuild itself as a different city without the 70 percent African American population that included victims of the most entrenched poverty but also many of the carriers of the city’s celebrated culture?

Coincidently, a few days after I got home I heard from Richard Schechner, a former professor of mine who forty years previously had gone to graduate school and then taught in New Orleans and been part of the Free Southern Theater. He had also recently been in New Orleans, at the invitation of local artist Jan Gilbert, and now imagined a project he called HOME: New Orleans, which would consist of installations and theater snippets in front of and inside ruined houses, briefly bringing back to life a range of memories before the houses were bulldozed or repaired, turned into condos, or otherwise irrevocably changed. He wanted Gilbert to coordinate an artist component and me to head up a university component. He saw the project on a very large scale, necessitating many artists and students, moving from neighborhood to neighborhood, and culminating in a giant parade to the Superdome to exorcize the bad spirits that remained after the ordeal many people had suffered before being evacuated in the immediate aftermath of the storm.

I wanted to do something in New Orleans. I had never witnessed my government less responsive to a domestic disaster, and it simply was not okay. I also wondered if the level of need in New Orleans would cause people to take art interested
in social engagement as well as aesthetics more seriously. Art with content and in venues at a distance from everyday life is the conventional norm against which community-based art frequently needs to justify itself. Would Katrina challenge those limits? Would it catalyze a crisis of meaning among artists like the one I had witnessed in the immediate aftermath of 9/11? In the conservatory-type atmosphere of my own workplace, NYU’s Tisch School of the Arts, my political theater classes overflowed. My office and those of my colleagues were sites of continuous, heartfelt conversations with each other and students alike about what kind of art mattered, if any, in a world seemingly bent on fratricide if not self-extinction. Under such circumstances, how could one not question one’s priorities?

As an outsider I would not presume to head up HNO, but I e-mailed the proposal to Bechet and asked if he would take that role. He asked if I would come down and work with him, and I said yes. Ron and I committed ourselves to the project with the understanding that it might change significantly in response to what people wanted in the various neighborhoods. And so we embarked upon “Home.”

How was Katrina a catalyst for HOME, New Orleans and your participation in it?

RON: Katrina was definitely a catalyst for me doing HNO. I was chomping at the bit in Houston, where we had evacuated, wondering what we could do. The Xavier Art Department was already heavily involved in community arts. We always talk about the arts rejuvenating community and giving back; this was a fantastic time to actually put it into action. I thought we should use the arts to heal, to bring people together, and to figure out what was valuable and who we were now as New Orleanians.

I also wanted to teach students how to bring people together, especially through the arts. A lot of Xavier students want to be doctors, and you ask them why and they say, “To help people.” But then they’re forever talking about grades. How to get students to look at a bigger picture, get beyond themselves? We’re bombarded by the media and the American dream to strive more for what you gain individually through material wealth than what you gain for the community through knowledge. I’m trying to figure out what I can do to teach students not just about craft but also about substance. I want college students to understand they come from someplace and they need to go back to someplace and think about where they fit in and why they are learning. Training alone is too closed.

AMY: When I first got back to Tulane after evacuating from Katrina there were memos that we were all going to help rebuild New Orleans. I
figured that the details of how would follow. But they didn’t. I saw no effort to learn what people were doing and how Tulane might have an impact. At that point I thought I’d either just sit in my office and cry or find a way to do something as an individual. It was imperative that I stop being a traditional English teacher to the extent I even was and that I become more engaged in the community. So when Ron called me during the summer and invited me to that late August HNO meeting, I was already thinking about centralizing civic engagement in my work as a teacher and scholar. HNO made perfect sense. My major motivation was teaching a course with people who shared my agenda.

JOHN: Katrina was definitely my catalyst. Before the storm I didn’t have a serious interest in community-based work. I thought there were compromises I’d have to make. I tend to be pure in my methodology in making artwork. So I had an insular attitude. I saw myself as someone who lives in New Orleans but is more of a global than local citizen. I didn’t have a problem with that perspective until after the storm.

In fall 2006, we laid the groundwork for four neighborhood projects. I remember a Central City meeting on a street corner because no nearby cafés or restaurants had reopened and our local partner, Ashé, was hosting a drumming circle making sustained conversation there impossible. Here are brief descriptions of the projects and the neighborhoods in which they are situated.

Central City

Visual artist and Dillard professor John Barnes is working with students, the Ashé Cultural Arts Center, and the Central City Economic Opportunity Center (EOC) to create a mixed media quilt/installation-cum-legacy of the community pre-Katrina. Visual artist Jeffery Cook is offering insight into the found-object collection process and art making in community settings through workshops at the EOC. The content of the quilt is being developed through story circles and conversations with the senior citizens who use the center. Ashé is a well-established African American cultural organization. Its beautiful gift shop features traditional African as well as contemporary African American handicrafts, art, and clothing. Some people criticize Ashé for not reflecting the neighborhood; nobody goes around in African robes. I’m told that its audience was initially mostly people of color who are into art and African culture but is now quite diverse racially. Even before Katrina, Central City was the site of one of five Main Street projects in New Orleans that intended to revitalize formerly bustling neighborhoods that had for some time
been economically depressed. Hopeful signs of rebuilding include Café Reconcile, a place for a tasty, low cost lunch, which was set up to train low-income people in cooking, serving, and other restaurant jobs. It features such dishes as catfish, fried chicken, red beans and rice, barbecue, cornbread, and collards.

Lakeview

Former Lakeview residents—visual artist Jan Gilbert, theater artists Kathy Randels and Andrew Larimer, and writer Jan Villarrubia—are creating a bus tour through this white, formerly well-to-do neighborhood, one of the worst hit by the levee breaks near Lake Pontchartrain. It will commemorate Lakeview life: citizens, stories, and sites. The first stop is the Lakeview Baptist Church. Kathy Randels’s father came out of retirement to lead the twenty-five or so congregants remaining when the former minister left, believing the neighborhood would never come back after the storm. Based on story circles she conducted with church members, Kathy, who is a well-known local performance artist, is using theater to connect the congregants’ religious faith to the process of neighborhood reconstruction and revival. Teachers and students from the Metairie Park Country Day School are conducting oral histories with and making portraits of neighborhood residents, which will be displayed at the church. Site-specific installations and performances are taking place at some of the artists’ former homes (as imagined in the original proposal). To conclude, audiences will partake of an intergenerational meal and musical performance at the lakefront site of the much beloved Bruning’s Restaurant, of which all that remains is the concrete foundation. Beacons of Hope, a network of post-Katrina rebuilding centers located in people’s garages, is incorporating the project in its efforts to encourage people to return.

Lower Ninth Ward

Xavier University visual artist and professor Ron Bechet, neighborhood sculptor Rashida Ferdinand, and a group of students are collaborating with the Neighborhood Empowerment Network Association (NENA) Center and the Martin Luther King Elementary School. They plan to establish a healing center as part of NENA that will include the use of clay to provide an opportunity for people to think, evaluate, and participate in something pleasurable, building cups rather than houses. The first step was supporting the NENA Center through university technological proficiency. Next the group organized a clay workshop at the King School in its temporary uptown home. In fall 2007, King moved back to the Ninth Ward after the school was repaired and the kids’ houses re-
built. Then people of different ages who use the NENA Center came together with the kids in workshops, using the skills that they’re learning and developing together to create a memorial or monument commemorating and reflecting their community.

Seventh Ward

Dancer Stephanie McKee, Ed Buckner of the Porch Cultural Organization (the neighborhood sponsoring organization), and I have started a theater program for neighborhood youth. When I arrived in January 2007, the Porch leadership wanted a workshop for local teens using the problem-solving techniques of theater innovator Augusto Boal. What they got was a theater and education project for fifteen children age five to fourteen. The reason for the shift is instructive. On the one hand, very few teenagers wanted to join. Moreover, Boal’s techniques work best when there are likely to be participants with experience in solving the problems at hand, and no one here has dealt with a catastrophe on the scale of Katrina. Given that community art is finally about working with whoever is in the room, we took an asset-based approach, creating pieces based on positive initiatives that already exist in the neighborhood in order to offer the kids something of meaning with potential continuity. We address problems that existed pre-Katrina such as the low level of reading among youth and the paucity of positive activities for them. We began by recruiting students and securing a space in which to hold the workshop until the Porch’s own building was renovated. With the help of Troi Bechet of Neighborhood Housing Services, we got use of nearby Saint Anna’s Church.

There is also a fifth HNO component, the Bridging Group, led by Amy Koritz, associate director for community and culture at the Tulane/Xavier Center for Bioenvironmental Research, with Xavier’s community arts coordinator Shawn Vantree and e/Prime executive producer Kevin McCaffrey. They look for cross-project connections and help with overall documentation and publicity, although each team documents and publicizes itself as well.

As we were getting the neighborhood projects going, faculty and students from the four schools met once a week at alternating universities for two-and-a-half hours through the course Rebuilding Community through the Arts. We laid out the theoretical groundwork for the practice, shared ongoing challenges and successes, and planned, in teams, for the neighborhood work. There is enormous energy around rebuilding in New Orleans, and the scale is such that people hear about even our very modest efforts. This is quite unlike New York City, where nothing I do gets this much traction.
How were university students organized into neighborhood teams and what did they contribute?

RON: We placed the students according to their availability with a maximum intracollege mix in each neighborhood team. We probably should also have prioritized a skill mix so students could have taken on different roles at the sites. Everybody doesn’t have to do everything.

JAN: At NYU my community work is mostly with drama and other arts majors who all have art skills to apply to the community. Going cross-school like we’re doing and incorporating different student skills may be even better because the real world needs are multidisciplinary themselves.

RON: Yes. For example, Donisha, a Xavier medical student, could easily talk about nutrition or provide information about health to use in artwork. Conversely students from the health field would see that more people might understand their data if they were communicated through the arts rather than through a technical document. The students who are not artists—I have one art minor but no art majors in the Ninth Ward—are more excited about the actual doing of the clay than the ceramicist, Rashida Ferdinand, who’s cofacilitating. The development of the craft is built in through doing it with the people that they’re working with. Is it the craft or is it the communication that’s more significant in the outcome of this particular project?

JAN: I think it’s a balance. If I didn’t have Jack, a student who’s so strong and comfortable facilitating theater, our Seventh Ward workshop would have been a lot harder to do. He’s been more like a partner than an assistant. All the university students and the kids get along great, a real lovefest, and those relationships are essential but they happen through the work. Another student, Rachael, has brought invaluable visual art skills. We need students who are proactive and use whatever their skills are. But I count on at least one or two having the skills in which the workshop is based.

RON: Yes, that’s true for us, too. The center had been trying to solve certain computer issues for a couple of weeks, and Patrick went in and fixed them right away.

Then there’s the value of racial diversity. I was talking to Donisha about her experiences in the Lakeview team [a white community site]. She’s an assertive individual and has been very good for them.

JAN: She’s the only person of color in that group?

RON: And Takako, who’s Japanese. The topic of race came up and she [Donisha] said, “Why does everybody look at me when they start talking
about race? What is your experience with black people?” She noticed how frightened some Lakeview residents were of people of color at the bus stops. Attitudes about working-class people, fear because of the way that they’re dressed, and how insulting that is . . .

The three Tulane students working with us in the Ninth Ward are white. So we’ve been able to deal with a lot of things that we wouldn’t even have been able to talk about. Actually working in a largely black neighborhood effects internal change.

JAN: Given that the students come from such different schools, experiencing commonalities, like the desire to get beyond the university into the community, as well as the differences, collaborating across race and class, is invaluable.

**How has the integration of students and faculty from the four universities worked?**

RON: The most significant part for me is that students from these universities are able to interact with each other. Even that they got to know each other’s names and called each other is important.

JAN: Yes, which is especially rare given that two of the universities are predominantly black and two are predominantly white.

RON: It’s a big step that they’re going to each other’s campuses. They had no clue where the other colleges even were, much less . . .

JAN: Right, much less having ever stepped foot on them.

AMY: But the students didn’t all make a big enough effort to get to the other institutions.

RON: True. Still, the level of engagement in class conversations deepened by the second half of the semester. We subtly started to address issues of class and race. When Jan’s colleague, Rosemary Quinn, from NYU visited with eight students and shared the work they are doing against gentrification in their neighborhood, some of our students felt that was hypocritical since they contribute to it by renting apartments there. One asked Jack [an NYU student spending the entire semester at Xavier], “When you’re done here are you just going to go back and do your own thing?” And other students said, “What are we all going to do?” It got students really thinking about their own class privilege.

JAN: It’s good the conversation took place, though it was naive for the New Orleans students to see the NYU students as more hypocritical than they are. Even when we put our energies towards what we care about, we
still have contradictions. The percentage of the resources we use in the U.S. compared to the part of the land mass that we occupy is grossly unfair, but I don’t see anyone in the class moving to another country. Reflection is part of demystifying civic engagement—seeing we might at the same time be implicated in a social problem and want to help solve it.

RON: I was encouraged that the students began to bring in their personal concerns. A couple of Xavier students talked about their recent Stomp Show, a student dance competition, which a dean shut down because he thought the moves were too sexual. The students felt hurt and powerless and still do. It led to thinking about how they could use art around their own issues, here.

JAN: That’s what the NYU students were trying to do with the gentrification project. They worked with a housing activist and made a pamphlet about how students can be more responsible renters. They performed short scenes about housing around campus and got students who were thinking about moving off campus to come to a panel with the housing activist and an NYU housing administrator on the subject.

RON: A lot of our students were very taken by the gentrification scenes those NYU students performed. Some said they felt like they were in the same situation here. It raises a question about the university’s long-term responsibility to the community, in our case to Gert Town [the low-income black neighborhood in which Xavier is situated]. As they try and develop Gert Town, what do we professors and administrators do to sustain those projects?

JAN: We have to find ways to pass the torch from one student group to another.

AMY: Even if they don’t realize it now, the students learned a hell of a lot from each other and became comfortable working together, which will serve them well when they graduate and are, I hope, working in more diverse environments. Given how segregated our universities are, getting them to work together across racial lines, on shared projects, can make an enormous difference in breaking down stereotypes. The bridging we wanted in the neighborhoods took place in class with the people from the different institutions.

JAN: The projects in each neighborhood had to be in place before we could bridge them. I think that bridging will happen as the project continues.

AMY: A downside of bringing the students from various universities together is I haven’t gotten to know them well. We’ve had to spend so much
time planning among ourselves that I’ve only really gotten to know the students in my little team. And attendance is so spotty I didn’t even get to know all of them. And the time it takes to do the planning. I can’t just sit alone in my office and find thirty minutes here or there. We have to get to one place, fit into each other’s schedules, and discuss so many components of the project, we often get to planning the class last. Probably all of us have done much more for this course than any of our institutions are willing to recognize.

RON: The cons are primarily logistic. Another thing that’s been difficult—I don’t know if it’s a pro or con yet—has been working across the arts and humanities. There are different uses of time in different kinds of classrooms, balancing amounts of reading and writing with practice.

JOHN: It’s been great working with senior faculty from other schools, as a junior faculty who seeks mentorship. You all have given me tips on raising money, navigating campus governance, which to some degree I’ve avoided, stayed in my zone, only surfaced when I had to. You’ve also opened my eyes to what’s important to university administrations, how you can make them interested.

RON: HNO has shifted our relationship, John, from you being a younger emerging artist to being a partner. I like that. I want to continue this partnership with you. And our schools, which have so much in common, have a way to develop a relationship at the same time.

JOHN: It’s good for our universities to have that formal relationship. The mix of students can inspire each other; it might even have been healthy to have a more competitive spirit among the teams to energize students. When all the students aren’t equally motivated, you have to create an atmosphere to get them to respond. You can also reward the ones who set a high standard for everyone to strive for.

Just living in New Orleans post-Katrina is instructive. It reminded me how the immediate aftermath of 9/11 presented an opportunity for people in the United States to understand the vulnerability with which so many people around the globe live. Every once in a while I got a taste of danger in New Orleans. I woke up early one morning after a tornado and the electricity was out. My first thought was so petty—how would I get my coffee? I felt isolated and worried about my two NYU students in the Xavier dorms, where they were living for the semester. Reaching them by cell phone, I learned they were locked down, also without electricity, and no one was telling them anything. I found out that the administration was just
keeping them all safe while they cleared up fallen electrical wires. Soon they were able to leave the dorms, and we went to a neighborhood with electricity for a good brunch.

Like anthropological fieldwork, spending time with the people with whom one is engaging civically in their everyday environments sheds invaluable light on their lives. Only by going to one of the kids’ houses who had not turned in her permission slip the day we were taking them on a field trip to a bayou did I find out that her mother did not always come home, leaving her fifteen-year-old sister in charge. Civic engagement through the arts goes beyond an after school workshop, where one is simply teaching kids a little craft, to this more holistic approach to their lives, to connect those particulars to a larger societal picture.

Such an approach makes possible the reciprocity at the heart of most successful projects. Civic engagement goes both ways, including both what I learn about other realms of human experience and what they learn about me and whatever craft I’ve been lucky enough to acquire. And we both learn from the initially surprising relationships we develop. These experiences replace the most insidious kinds of racism we all have absorbed with the joy of finding kindred spirits where we did not expect them. My partner in the Seventh Ward, Ed Buckner, who grew up in a housing project, not only cared as much about kids as anyone I’ve ever known but also was totally intrigued by theater, hungrily absorbing any new technique I tried out on them and always wanting me to push the kids farther.

How does HNO function as civic engagement and what are the curricular implications?

RON: Our emphasis on civic engagement brings up the question, “Is this a university project or a community project? Where’s the community’s voice in all of this?”

JAN: Maybe such work is better housed in a center that university people are partners in but that is located on neutral ground. Whoever controls the space and the budget controls the project whether they mean to be equitable or not.

RON: Another important part of the exchange is those people who have been on the ground for many years: community scholars. Maybe we can pay community scholars to work in these kinds of classes at the university.

JAN: It’s great for students to recognize that not all education is formal both in terms of where we find expertise, like you raise, Ron, and [in terms of] the nature of learning. In civic engagement much of the learning is em-
bodied, through the senses in real time, unlike the more condensed learning of a lecture hall.

AMY: Art as a mode of civic engagement can give students a sense of purpose in community. But non–art majors, with whom I’ve worked almost exclusively, run into issues of competence. I’m in an English department, and in another course I assigned students to Science and Math High School. They started a spoken word club to connect with the students there. They researched poetry slams even though they had never heard of them before; neither I nor the group of students who picked it up knew how to do them. But slams connected them with the high schoolers, and my students learned a lot doing it. From that we built a program, got funding, and brought in a spoken word artist who now teaches a spoken word class with me. But my current students say they don’t know how to help the high schoolers because they don’t know how to do spoken word. Students in the other class hadn’t raised that concern, I think, because the other class was about civic engagement, not spoken word. Anything they did was an occasion for civic engagement, shifting their views on excellence and competence. It was more about knowing how to interact with people from different backgrounds. It wasn’t an occasion to teach students to do spoken word but how to interact with communities in ways that were mutually beneficial.

JOHN: My mentor, John Outerbridge, forfeited his art for community. I didn’t understand then his not making time for the studio, but now I see you can get so involved with these relationships that they can become your whole focus. Especially when you see results, it’s probably impossible to walk away. Our students are getting that in incremental stages. You see a transformation every time they go out into the community. They understand that their presence in the neighborhoods is valuable, even just in getting them out of their isolated world. They learn to cautiously and respectfully engage. There are not a lot of opportunities for students to be humble during their college years, and this is definitely a humbling experience.

JAN: Civic engagement is enhanced when we see the relationship between our specific project and a larger issue. Dan Etheridge said that as much as he wants the community garden in the Seventh Ward to flourish, it’s got to be about something larger, part of policy, not just one isolated garden. That garden alone doesn’t build the case that people need relationships to nature and fresh food. But once a lot of people get their hands dirty in a garden, they might think about the wetlands and the landscape; it
grows into larger issues. That’s what we’re trying to do with our neighborhood projects, get them strong individually and connect them to something bigger.

RON: Yes, I agree. All politics are local, and that’s the case with the artist, too. Something bigger begins by making the connection to you right then and there. That’s why the arts are so valuable in civic engagement, spreading into advocacy for the larger problem. As Dan also said, art can make very complicated issues very personal.

JAN: In the Seventh Ward, the people who started the Porch Cultural Organization provide our workshop with the bigger frame, improving that community without gentrifying it. New experiences can set the kids on another path, opening possibilities that serve them in deep ways, not things that just get them in trouble and that are not ultimately satisfying. I’ve heard there’s a drug problem in the Seventh Ward. I don’t know how extensive it is.

RON: Willie [Birch, the Porch cofounder] knows some of the local young men who deal drugs and believes that they don’t have other opportunities. That is the only way they know. It provides them with money but also [serves] other needs like a sense of belonging.

JAN: Right. And while some of them could get work at McDonald’s, they’re not willing to take the lowest rung on the job ladder.

RON: Yes, and it’s a matter of replacing some of those other needs, not just monetary, with ones that the larger community values.

JAN: To be sensitive to issues like this that come up on site, we need to think about what constitutes a civic engagement curriculum. Service learning is criticized for failing to teach civic skills such as learning to express one’s own point of view and working to achieve common goals. Art making offers a ready vehicle for both these skills.

AMY: The students need confidence that they’re still in college even as they do practical work in communities.

JAN: [Roadside Theatre director] Dudley Cocke, [community cultural development specialist] Arlene Goldbard, and I are working on a learning model with three elements: hands-on community engagement, disciplinary training, and study of principles and theory. Students also need to understand policies governing the issue their work addresses. In the Seventh Ward, for example, what mechanisms exist to support residents buying their own homes and staying in the neighborhood?

RON: Our students didn’t have enough time to stew in the principles and issues which actually make the doing more meaningful.

JAN: We have so much to cover for one session per week. The teams
need to meet and just getting everyone one place is chaotic, but still it’s worth it. Then the students are on all different levels; what’s necessary for one student is boring and repetitive for another. Maybe if students chose one prerequisite from an array of courses they might be better prepared for the hands-on component.

RON: Yes, since we have three different universities with three different curricula. And over time we hope to involve interested professors from other departments as well; there’s someone from communications and music at Xavier who told me they want to come in. Students from different fields will offer different skills and perspectives.

JAN: They’ll all need training in community facilitation skills: teaching a workshop is, of course, different from practicing skills yourself . . . learning how to work with the particular age group . . . adapting one’s specific skills to the workshop goals.

How does HNO compare to service-learning projects you’ve encountered?

AMY: HNO is in line with how I approach service learning, which is different from many approaches you find in the literature and that are dominant at my institution—faculty and student centered. An abnormal psych professor, for example, will tell the office about his research interest in x and request a placement for his students in, say, a hospital wing for brain-damaged people to observe the effects. I’m sure it’s beneficial to the hospital, but, whereas in that case the motivation of the placement is almost entirely controlled by the pedagogical content demands of the class, I’m for a balance between community need/opportunity and discipline-based material. To the degree that the discipline base is driving the placement, it’s not reciprocal with the community, nor is it quite civic engagement. It’s just using another site for your teaching goals. I thought there was no way I could teach a canonical English class—one organized by history, genre, or theme—that would support civic engagement. So I decided to focus on civic engagement itself as the center of the class and find literature that would feed in. HNO is much more like that. I know what to say to students at predictable points such as when it feels to them like there’s not enough structure. It is very difficult to align the time frame and rhythm of the semester with the community work. No matter what you say, students expect a beginning, middle, and end to the work. I say no, you’re just taking a chunk out of something bigger or different from what you imagine.
JAN: Unlike most of their university education, students are not at the center of civic engagement. They have to think of the community constituents equally.

RON: Unlike most service learning, we as faculty are engaged in placement. Our projects don’t happen out of an office.

AMY: Yes, adding a level of work for us. We have to reinvent our relationships with the service-learning people on our campuses. One of the obstacles is that even when students understand the experiential aspect they don’t necessarily understand the serious research they need to do around the issues they are working on in the community. When they are not well thought out, these programs create experiences for students without adding value to the communities. I’ve been interested in some of the models at University of Pennsylvania. The director of their Center for Community Partnerships, Ira Harkavy, starts from developing community-based programs and then feeds university resources into those rather than starting with university needs.

RON: Service learning is also about the continuing education of faculty. That’s crucial in HNO. It’s broadening our vision, our understanding of what teaching and learning are. We are mentoring each other.

JAN: Yes, we’re actually meshing what we do together through team teaching and planning. I have to stop and think more about what I do.

RON: HNO has also necessitated different ways of interacting with students. It varies with the class, but usually we have a teacher up front. With HNO, the class is also in the neighborhoods and the learning is multisensory. The informal time we spend with students, driving to and from the sites, and when we’re presumably just waiting for something to happen, is a different kind of teaching.

JAN: Right. And the colearning as we figure out together how to shape the work in each of our neighborhood projects. It’s not like a class that we fully prepare before we enter the room. We have a plan, but how we carry it out changes in the process. The students see that as important as knowledge is; it’s constantly adapting to circumstances. And they are adapting right alongside us.

RON: Exactly. And, I think, too, we’re learning that it’s okay—we know this, but in practice we don’t always—it’s okay for things to go wrong.

Each of the neighborhood projects offers its own pleasures. The membership of the governing council of our Seventh Ward partner, the Porch, is diverse. Willie Birch is a well-known visual artist whose focus has long been black life. Helen Regis is a
cultural anthropologist who works on vernacular New Orleans culture. Mr. Hubert is a retiree interested in neighborhood initiatives that provide physical activity. Miss Carrie taught in the local schools for many years. Ed Buckner worked as a machinist, lost four fingers in an accident, and is now a baker who delivers pies from his truck. He lives in a house with his wife and three kids. He coached football for many years and was initially hired to recruit the kids and get them to and from our workshop in the back of his truck. But rather quickly he became fascinated with theater and began acting to help anchor our scenes. He is now assistant directing as well.

The entire Seventh Ward is not as united around community development as are Porch members. When the Porch began operating in January 2006, neighborhood turnout was good, with about fifty people at each meeting, but over time the numbers have dwindled. Helen thinks they don’t see enough getting accomplished, and until the Porch’s community center building is renovated meetings and other activities take place at an assortment of venues. Moreover, the neighborhood, poor to begin with, is in even further disarray. The Seventh Ward was not badly hit by Katrina, being on relatively high ground. But even modest damage is beyond the means of many landlords. So houses further deteriorate and are abandoned. Rents have gone up in the smaller stock of houses that are habitable, a secondary effect of the storm that has resulted in the continued exodus of people from the city.

Helen, who is white, observes overt institutional racism specific to post-Katrina life. For example, the Porch neighborhood, which is majority poor and black, was still not getting its trash picked up in the spring of 2006 while neighboring Marigny, especially the white middle-class section, was getting service twice a week. Helen called the responsible city agency often, certain that someone could fix the problem, in the way middle-class people, especially whites, are used to seeing problems addressed. Helen would walk the neighborhood with her cell phone and make calls: “Come to the corner of Pauger and Urquart and pick up a big pile of trash.” Neighbors would call out, “Good, you tell ’em,” but did not think their calling would have the same success.

Helen lives in and contributes actively to the neighborhood and has good relations with most of the residents. But some people resent middle-class white people moving there. A teenager said to her, “One day we gonna buy our house back.” It seems that his grandmother rented the house years earlier and moved out before Helen bought it. She says that how she feels as a middle-class white person in the neighborhood depends on the day. She doesn’t like the gunshots she hears and commented on teenage drug sellers cutting though her backyard as they are chased by police. “You unnerstand,” one smiled to her as he jumped her fence.
The Porch members make for fabulous partners in a university-based civic engagement project because they are united around improving the neighborhood, not around homogeneity of race, class, or education level. Reminiscent of early settlement house founders such as Jane Addams, they live in the neighborhoods to which they contribute and thus gain from improvements along with other residents.

Wanting to bring people together was one of the big goals for the project, as was helping rebuild communities. How did we do, and what could we be doing better?

RON: We are almost at the point of bringing people from the different neighborhood projects together, particularly those dealing with common issues. The kids in the Seventh and the Ninth Wards may find much to talk about given their shared interest in identity and community. Sometimes finding that common point, as simple as it seems, is the most difficult part. Even though we know in our hearts that coming together is very important.

JAN: True. Willie says that people try to get him to bring the Porch community into things they want to do, like yoga. He responded, “Why do you want me to do yoga, I have my own thing.” It’s not for us to mandate what people should come together to do. We need to approach community building as an inquiry: “What would you like?”

RON: Which is crucial. Initially I thought people from different communities would see what each other is doing and that would lead to a healthy competition: “Wow, look what they did. We can do the same or we can do better.” I grew up with sports, where there’s definitely a winner and a loser, but even if you win you know that you could’ve been the loser. As you develop your skill, you know that you have better odds of winning. That kind of competition can be an ego booster. Young people’s egos are often based on things that aren’t real, so to have their egos boosted based on what they can actually do . . . and doing other things together, maybe as simple as music sharing or a dance competition, where you have a younger and an older partner.

JAN: So having structured a bridging team into HOME, New Orleans, that’s the kind of activity it can organize, now that all the projects are up and running.

JOHN: Our Central City team made a solid partner out of the Economic Opportunity Center, and art was a catalyst for that. But we’re not rebuilding community yet. Naively I imagined the project being more easily pro-
moted throughout the neighborhood; people would just hold hands and do it. If that were so, they could just rebuild their connections through making the quilt. But I think we’re building opportunities for people to connect. People don’t really know each other, so it’s not rebuilding, partly because people haven’t come back, partly because people are pretty segregated. Ed Blakely [New Orleans director of the recovery effort] has made insightful comments about cultural domination in this city: if whites or blacks are planning something from a policy standpoint, one side or the other takes over. There are community, cultural, behavioral, and personal habits that make it difficult to meet a lot of goals under the conditions of a partly destroyed city. The bad habits get expanded upon, like the tendency for an insular point of view. Even before the storm, it was common not to know people even a block over. HNO being racially integrated is valuable even in itself.

Change is imminent. In August ’07 the FEMA trailers must all be returned to the government. That will be a big factor in who will be able to stay here. The real work can’t happen until we know who’s staying and what newcomers are helping reshape the city. Then we can build new connections through the arts.

RON: It’s a slow building process. Being seen and just saying hi is a big step. It’s really important to make that contact; even if it feels like nothing’s happening, it is. Maybe it’s a southern thing. What we’re doing with these projects takes a lot of contact.

JOHN: You don’t glow in the dark as much when you really spend time in the neighborhood. You’re not in the spotlight anymore, like you don’t belong there, even if you’re just hanging out.

RON: We do a lot of that at the NENA Center, and then we’re there if something concrete does come up. Like someone came in and didn’t know how to work the computer and our students were there to show them.

In the Seventh Ward, our first show, Local Heroes, was a rousing success. It accompanied the poster project Porch member artists Willie Birch and Ron Bechet conducted about local heroes. First Ron and his Xavier printmaking class created images of ten black New Orleanians who contributed in a variety of ways to local life. Then, early one morning in February (Black History Month), they hung copies of each one on every block. Two weeks later we performed our play, which identified and brought the ten people to life. Nearly fifty people attended, half of them community folks. Not all the kids had family members there. One ten year old said to me softly, as the audience was gathering, “I don’t know anyone here.”
asked if she would like to meet people, and she said yes, so we went around introducing ourselves and shaking everyone's hands. We began the show by inviting people to join our warm-up circle, or watch around us if they preferred, to see the sort of thing we'd been doing with the kids. Ranging in age from five to seventy-five, and diverse in race, class, and neighborhood, everyone was happy to connect with each other. Then we did the show followed by a barbecue.

When I left New Orleans, a young, white, local theater director (and one of my former NYU students), Andrew Larimer, joined the Seventh Ward workshop leadership team. Larimer imagines a youth theater festival presenting the work of our kids, who are all black, with white theater youth groups with which he is familiar. McKee looks forward to developing leadership skills with the older participants and involving students' parents. Tria Beechet of Neighborhood Housing Services, another Porch partner, is pursuing city youth jobs money so the older kids in our group can be paid to assist a theater workshop in the Porch’s summer camp. Touring the plays has also been discussed. Emerging is a little theater troupe that is able to present a positive and varied view of the Seventh Ward.

Do you plan to continue HNO? If so, what do you want to do differently during the next phase?

AMY: Of course, I intend to continue. It’s an incredibly powerful concept on many levels. The biggest issue for me is what, if any, level of institutional support am I going to get for doing this? My chair, administrators, dean, have no idea how time consuming it is. They assume I should just volunteer my time on top of everything else I’m doing rather than see it as integral to what we are supposed to be doing as educators. This approach is not viable. A faculty member said to me, “I’m interested in doing something about civic engagement, but that’s what my third book is going to be about and I’m on my first.” From an institutional perspective, they are probably right; this kind of work won’t get them there. So the reward structure at institutions has to change for faculty to be able to do HNO.

RON: Yes, we have opportunities for release time, but it’s competitive with scientists and everyone else. I didn’t even apply for it. Junior faculty shouldn’t do this, I hate to say it, unless it is their research. It will be detrimental to their advancement.

JOHN: I definitely need some money to be able to do it again.

JAN: So each of us is just getting credit for HNO as one of our courses.

JOHN: Right. And on top of that we come from institutions with completely different compensation systems. At historically black colleges, it’s a
given that you’ll get 30 percent lower salary than [at] predominantly white ones with similar degrees.

RON: Right. But I can’t imagine doing the typical thing my professors did: go to class and do their personal work separately. That I wouldn’t include my students in what I do. Training in visual arts is important, but I’m also committed to students understanding more possibilities of what they can do with their training.

AMY: We need money but also support from upper-level administration. You need to sort of be anointed.

RON: Would our institutions have allowed us to do this without Katrina?

AMY: They think I’m a loose cannon anyway . . . so you get this kind of exemption . . . but Katrina and the rhetoric of partnership made it easier for them to accept it as worthwhile. It has shifted attitudes somewhat. It might shift the culture of the students eventually, though hasn’t yet.

RON: Our department has been pushing to get out of the box. Even though what we do with civic engagement and community partnerships fits Xavier’s mission: “educating leaders toward a more just and humane society.”

JAN: NYU describes itself as “a private university in the public interest.” That doesn’t go as far as Xavier, but it does suggest the value of something beyond self-interest.

AMY: What bothered me most post-Katrina was the gap between my experience as an employee of my institution and its rhetoric.

RON: Our president is fairly conscious of outside communities and is very active himself. That’s why we are able to do some of the things we do. The history in our department has been toward community arts. In the late fifties, one of our students, Victor Labat, used to sit on neighborhood kids’ porches and talk with them. And the Sisters encouraged that. [Xavier is a Catholic school.] They even had an arts center at the time working with [the] community around the school.

AMY: I don’t think Tulane has a history of civic engagement. It’s been serving the white elite of the city, even though it does house Cactus, one of the oldest student-run community service organizations in the United States.

JAN: There are, of course, different traditions—the “noblesse oblige” to give charity to the poor is one and social justice is another—those who see the problem with the social structure making it incumbent on all of us to work for equity.
AMY: I don’t want to devalue charity. If you have a lot it’s better to give something than not. But there’s also that saying, “If you’ve come to help me, I don’t want you there. But if you see your liberation as bound up with mine we can work together.” That means an attitudinal shift. These different underlying philosophies are significant in how you approach, understand, and measure the success of the work.

JOHN: I like the principles of the class, the texts, and the large group of students meeting. I wish it were easier. Maybe if class met on the weekend and at neutral sites, in the neighborhoods where we are working with no problem with parking. The universities enforce barriers, attitudes that are part of the academic indoctrination process, and create a false impression of their individual greatness. When the students come into class together they realize they have more in common than they think.

RON: I’d love to have it run in the spring again. We can’t do it every semester. Maybe we could have a theory class in the fall which they basically apply in the spring.

JAN: Maybe each of you can teach your own theory courses at your own schools and bring students from the three schools together for the course in the spring.

RON: Maybe do a few seminars with the students from all three schools over the fall semester. One might be a panel in a quasi-debate format, presenting and defending their ideas.

JAN: But can we get enough students to commit to a two-semester sequence consisting of two different but connected courses? Students have such a smorgasbord of possibilities. We’d have to design a really rigorous recruitment plan.

RON: Service-learning offices can help us with a strategy for students who are interested in community service and how academics can address policy issues.

JAN: We could work more closely with other teachers who do public scholarship.

RON: And pitch HNO not just to humanities students but also to science students.

JOHN: The lion’s share of the work is done—the mechanics are in place, the partnerships are established. In Central City next time, the old man we met on the porch could be one of our guides through the neighborhood. It’ll take us a couple more excursions to know who’s there, but once we do it’ll be easier to carry out the project.
RON: Most students want to know that they’re going into a successful situation before it begins and what to expect. So we could get testimonials from students who have gone through it. And do shorter sessions: once a week all together to discuss readings and a second time each week in the teams to troubleshoot our own projects using class ideas.

JAN: Are you worried about the logistics of students meeting twice a week in class and then a third time a week to do the internship?

RON: No. They’re meeting a lot this semester. I’m really impressed.

JAN: I offer students extra credit because it’s so many hours.

RON: We’re looking again at our minor, community arts management—

JAN: To make it community arts more broadly?

RON: Right, and rethinking the courses that fulfill that minor.

JAN: We require an internship in our minor in applied theater at NYU.

RON: Which makes a lot of sense. Another issue for me is keeping students motivated. The story circles boosted student involvement every time we did them. They’re wonderful opportunities for sharing.

AMY: We also need to work more on understanding each other’s processes. I don’t have a sense of what processes artists go through to make their work. I read things and write things. I know that process. So this is another issue in our collaboration.

RON: On the artist end, we know about the doing but need to know more about what’s out there that students need to read.

JOHN: Post-Katrina is so busy, with layers of challenge in New Orleans now. It’s very difficult to coordinate things. Still, the young people in Central City, who are descending into chaos, got something good from seeing us come in and vice versa, hearing each other’s points of view. It’s been a great cross-cultural exchange.

Students are used to being in positions with power, but they had limited control of this environment. It’s healthy to be vulnerable like that from time to time. It breaks students out of their shell and introduces them to a larger world. That’s going to lack even more as college education becomes even more expensive, more class based. You’re gonna see very few students exposed to people who aren’t in their same category, which creates people who make policies like no child left behind . . . they haven’t seen the recipients of those policies . . . that’s who we see in the neighborhoods. I wonder if any of the students will independently seek other situations like this. In spite of some of the reasons students took the class—thought they were
gonna get on a bus and gut houses, hand out T-shirts, polish their egos—it's becoming a badge of ego to “spend spring break in NOLA” kind of thing. A lot of our conversations brought them beyond themselves.

RON: Now that we’re at the end of the semester and the students are getting it, I think it just takes a certain amount of time. Like a basketball team, we had to play together for a while. Makes me think some of the problems we thought we were having we weren’t. Practice reinforced the theory and vice versa; we didn’t think the theory was getting through, but I think we actually were on the right path.

JAN: So where are you now about how the arts can help rebuild?

RON: The effect of one person on another person, which I experience with the children at King School. I’ve been working with one young man doing a self-portrait and talking about how to, first of all. That was so important to him, to get it right. I asked what that meant. He said he wants everyone to see him the right way. Each week we talked about this right way thing and his identity. I told him any way he does it is his right way. He’s finally coming around to seeing he can make his own statement.

And how difficult this process is. Even more so since the storm. The stress level. It’s almost as if there’s a big clock ticking, pushing us. There’s a timeline to get our city back to where it was. That’s the FEMA model: you can’t do any further building on what wasn’t there before. Which makes no sense to me. So if you have a broken pipe you can fix it but not improve it even if it may be less efficient and more expensive. I really don’t want the city back where it was, but better.