

Summer 2018

## Post-New Orleans Reflections

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## Abstract

CIVITAS, a student organization in the Urban Studies program at the University of Washington Tacoma, visited New Orleans for their annual Urban Excursion in March 2018. The trip provided students the opportunity to perform hands on research and experience urban settings outside of Tacoma. CIVITAS' past trips include traveling to diverse urban areas, such as San Francisco, Detroit, and Vancouver B.C., which have allowed students to witness cities with long, complex, and distinct histories of urban development. This year they visited New Orleans with the intention of studying resilient cities with the hopes that this 300 year old city would provide lessons applicable to Tacoma. This year's trip was the group's largest and furthest trip that this organization has undertaken. This occasional paper entry shares the students' reflections of the trip.

## Post-New Orleans Reflections

CIVITAS believes UWT is in the fortunate position of creating future leaders within the numerous roles and positions within Tacoma, and its vicinity. Our university advocates for sustainability, describing it as a “balance of protection for the environment, a thriving local economy and social responsibility that together lead to a high quality of life for you and future generations”. CIVITAS supports this view; we envision leaders born from UWT, with all backgrounds, degrees, and within various sectors, who possess a shared passion for equitable and sustainable development in Tacoma.

Our annual Urban Excursion has provided an exceptional opportunity for students to perform hands on research, and to experience urban settings outside of Tacoma. CIVITAS’ past trips include traveling to diverse urban areas, such as San Francisco, Detroit, and Vancouver B.C., which have allowed students to witness cities with long, complex, and distinct histories of urban development.

This year we ventured to New Orleans with the intention of studying resilient cities with the hopes that this 300 year old city would provide lessons applicable to Tacoma. This year’s trip was our largest and furthest trip that this organization has undertaken. I speak on behalf of all the CIVITAS officers when I say that it was an immense pleasure planning, coordinating and experiencing this year’s CIVITAS Urban Excursion to New Orleans. This trip was filled with emotions of excitement and anxiety as we planned, coordinated, and hoped for a successful trip in which we defined as both memorable and educational. Below are the reflections from the trip participants as you read them we hope that you feel as if you were a part of our experience. We as a student organization feel immensely humbled by how much each student gained

from this experience and honored to be a part of a university and program that supports and fosters this type of independent learning. Thank you for this opportunity and support.

### An Exciting and Humbling Experience

Alyssa Tatro

Visiting New Orleans was both an exciting and humbling experience. The first night we got to our Airbnb in the Treme-Lafitte neighborhood we tried to look for any nearby grocery food stores, and we noticed that the only walkable ones near us were either closed or they were corner stores and gas stations. The next morning Alex and I walked to the Winn Dixie grocery store, which was forty minutes each way but was one of the closest large grocery stores that offer more variety of choice and more affordable options for food. I observed that the people who live in this community are living in a food desert, due to the limited availability of quality food for the residents who lived in and around the Treme-Lafitte neighborhood. The distance to the closet chain groceries could pose problems for residents who don’t have cars, or can’t access the public transit systems. This may leave certain people with the options of walking far distances in the hot weather and on the sometimes-dangerous sidewalks, and then having to take this trip back home with groceries in hand. Or these people could pick up their food and other necessities from small corner stores and gas stations, which don’t provide many options for nutritious and healthy foods.

As we explored and walked around the city it became very obvious that the infrastructure of the streets was not up to date and not properly serving the people’s needs. Many sidewalks and streets had deep pot-

holes, cracks, and uneven degradation. There was a lack of crosswalks in many areas who could have benefitted from them for safety reasons. It became clear that the city although small and walkable in distance was not walkable by urban planning standards. They were dangerous and unkempt and pose a potential harm to residents walking around. People living with disabilities were clearly not a concern for the construction and maintenance of the streets in New Orleans. A blind person, people using wheelchairs, the elderly, children, and people with other disabilities would not be safe walking on the sidewalks or streets due to the cracks and holes that could lead to injury.

As a group, we visited the Louisiana State History Museum where we walked through the Hurricane Katrina exhibit. This experience was saddening and eye-opening, as I was young when Katrina happened I had not fully grasped the scope of its impact. We learned the timeline of the storm and how the city and the people in New Orleans were devastated as the hurricane destroyed their homes, took lives, and forever changed their worlds. We learned that the disastrous effects of the Hurricane could have been lessened if better planning and infrastructure was put into place. The levies that were designed to hold back floodwaters were not properly engineered to be prepared for a storm at the scope of Katrina. The degradation of natural wetlands that absorb floodwaters also contributed to the immense damage done by the storm. When considering the lack of proper resources and infrastructure in place throughout the city of New Orleans, one must understand the history of racial segregation and disinvestment within the city. When large populations in a place have lower socioeconomic status's and have high percentages of a minority population, these communities become underserved and this is how inequality and disinvestment are allowed to concentrate among these communities.

We witnessed this disinvestment and lack of resources in an area when we visited New Orleans East, where a large population of Vietnamese and African Americans lived. This area of the city was far removed from the rest of the city of New Orleans, and it was obvious that the communities in this area had a limited access to resources. There was one bus that serviced this area and it came at infrequent times, there was also a lack of sidewalks or crosswalks to safely walk this area that was located on the side of an interstate road. We met with a community development firm that spoke to us about the resiliency of the Vietnamese community after Katrina, who were the first group to come back to New Orleans after the storm. Some projects that they have been working on include placemaking, education, business development, and VEGGI Farmer's Cooperative to provide access to healthy foods.

On Thursday, we met with LINC (listen, learn, love, link) New Orleans a faith-based community development organization. There we gathered with a panel of community activists who shared their experiences during Katrina and having to rebuild their lives and homes. They shared with us how they organized volunteer teams to help restore and rebuild the neighborhoods in New Orleans. As a group, we wanted to learn about community building and empathy through the lens of those who have been on both sides of community service. When questioned on how we as planners and activists can enter into a community and properly serve their needs we were told by panel member Katy Williams, "Wherever you go to offer help you need to know the history, through history, from every perspective," Williams said. "You need to know Tacoma's history in the big picture before you do anything. Unless you respect history it will repeat itself. Learning history, learning from others and learn-

ing from the people who are already doing it.”

It was inspiring to hear the stories of the panel members who have all dedicated their lives to the betterment of communities in New Orleans and as we were told by panel member and director of community service Kathy Wendling, “Its US, not them. We’re all in this together.”

## Sense of Community

Sarah Cho

Through the Urban Excursion to New Orleans, the one thing that consistently stood out to me was the sense of community. This was evident during the LINC panel. While the members came from various backgrounds, they all agreed that New Orleans came back stronger after Katrina because of the sense of community, for those who came back to the city knew it was their home.

Throughout the entire trip, I could feel this sense of community, as people along the street would always say hello, making me feel welcomed and included. I felt safe and wanted in the city, even though I came as a visitor.

In relating this experience to the City of Tacoma, I feel that there is a lack of this sense of community, as we have not been able to form a strong identity around what the city stands for. New Orleans like Tacoma has a rich and long history, therefore it is possible for Tacoma to create their own sense of community. If Tacoma has anything that can be learned from New Orleans, it is the importance of creating networks of community groups that share similar values about the city in which they live.

## Better than a Lecture

Wesley Duncan

As the only person who isn’t an urban studies major, I believe I may have learned the most from our trip to New Orleans. Our trip began with learning all about Katrina during our visit to the Living with Hurricanes: Katrina and Beyond exhibit at The Presbytere. It was there that I learned all about how the state and city were supposed to be prepared for the next hurricane after the devastation left from Hurricane Betsy in 1965, but they were not, even 40 years later. The exhibit explained how the state and city recovered after Katrina in large part from the emergence of community activism. We were fortunate enough to meet with two of the community groups, LINC and MQVN CDC to discuss their organizations’ story and what it really means to be a resilient city that rebuilt itself from the community outward.

While there were several amazing things we experienced, we also experienced a number of flaws. We saw a number of no Airbnb signs around the Tremelafitte neighborhood we were staying at. There was even one directly across the street from the house we stayed in. I learned that Airbnb rental is an issue of contention in the city, for Airbnb rentals are kicking renters and potential homeowners out of their homes in order to support the tourist demand. Another issue related to tourism was the number of homeless people passed out in major tourist attractions such as Bourbon and Frenchmen Street. While I saw many of these issues while walking, it was the people that we met and interacted with in New Orleans that really educated me on how big these issues really are.

My peers also educated me about some of the things

we were experiencing, particularly about food deserts. New Orleans is a huge food desert for those who rely on public transit like we did. The “grocery” store within walking distance, 0.75 miles, from the Airbnb only sold snacks, beer, and eggs. Majority of the store was supplied with beer and other various types of alcohol. The food desert became even more apparent when we had to plan as a group of ten how we were going to get to a Walmart and buy groceries using public transit. This resulted in a 2-mile walk to a bus station, a 30-minute ride to the Walmart across town, 40 minutes to shop and a sprint back on the bus with an hour ride home. This leads me into a discussion on the transit system. The buses and the expansive system found online made it seem that transit would be great and an affordable alternative to Uber/Lyft and taxis, but there were so many issues. Buses arriving late, breaking down, telling passengers to evacuate so the bus could get back on schedule, taking unscheduled breaks and so much more. In the end, I know that I learned more from the good and bad experiences of this trip than I ever would have from a lecture or reading. This is a trip that I will never forget.

## A Resilient City with an Everlasting Bond

Miles Cameron

It is difficult to put into words how wonderful, enriching, and thought-provoking the CIVITAS urban excursion to New Orleans was. New Orleans is a beautiful city with beautiful people and a long history that is both admirable and interesting. I was continuously amazed by the city’s unique sense of place and the citizen’s unconditional love for the city itself. Having the freedom and luxury to walk around the various neighborhoods on my own, I was able to learn first-hand from residents about their amazing city. I was perplexed by how friendly New Orleanians were. Walking down the streets, it is very normal for passersby to greet you and ask how your day is going with

genuine interest. As someone who has grown up in the Seattle area my whole life and is accustomed to the “Seattle freeze”, this was a very pleasant surprise to me. I realized that total strangers showing interest in you and approaching you with a non-judgmental front is a pleasant experience. These personal interactions allowed me to see that New Orleanians have an everlasting bond with their home; time after time, they have faced setbacks, but they have bounced back even stronger than what was before. For these reasons, New Orleans is a perfect example of a “resilient city”, especially in the wake of Hurricane Katrina.

## Katrina’s affects Beyond Infrastructure

Clara Le

I remember people talking about Hurricane Katrina when I was younger. I was about 10 years old at this time. I remember watching the news and seeing reports of warnings. I remember emailing my cousin, asking if they were safe. I remember Katrina, in its wake. What I don’t remember is the horror it left many families and the stories and scars it left behind.

During the third day of our trip, we met with a panel of New Orleanians, where they told us about their experience of Katrina’s aftermath. After hearing these stories, it left me speechless. I never knew the true wrath of Katrina, and how it destroyed many families and neighborhoods. I had a question that I wanted to ask the panel, and at the time it seemed to be mundane. Lo and behold it would leave me with a million other questions later.

Me: So what did they do with prisons and hospitals? What was the evacuation process like?



Panel: They didn't, there were no evacuations. Many people died in their jail cell and drowned. There were also doctors euthanizing patients.

That answer changed my entire trip. I could not believe what I just heard. After a few seconds of processing that answer, and my classmates also in awe, we dissected this answer further. "What happened to the doctors?" "What hospital did this happen in?" Questions came flooding in. It was not until after the meeting did I look more into the situations.

The ride back to our Airbnb, I started googling about the hospital and stumbled across a New York Times article Sheri Fink wrote back in 2009, just four years after Katrina. She gathered all the information she could about the horror that happened at Memorial Medical Center in Uptown New Orleans. After the wake of Katrina, Memorial Medical Center became marooned for days, leaving only a few doctors and nurses to care for the many patients that were left behind. Where the hospital stands it was in one of the lowest points of New Orleans, at a mere three feet below sea level. For years, this hospital served as a shelter during hurricanes. After the hurricane hit, the hospital's power failed, including critical equipment, and air-conditioning systems. Memorial had sustained damages but remained functional.

At this time, Memorial would have about 180 patients they would need to evacuate. The doctors that were left behind gathered to make critical decisions for their remaining patients. They agreed that babies in the neonatal intensive-care unit, pregnant mothers and critically ill adults I.C.U patients would be at great risk from the heat, so they should get first priority of evacuation. Richard Deichmann suggested that all patients with Do Not Resuscitate (DNR) order should go last. The Memorial hospital also had another hospital within it; LifeCenter Hospital of New Orleans had leased out the seventh floor at Memori-

al. This hospital housed critically ill or injured patients in need of 24-hour care and intensive therapy over a long period.

After days of sweltering heat, non-stop care, and little to no hope of getting help. The doctors were faced with decisions that ultimately lead them to euthanize their remaining patients, out of "mercy". There is still disagreement to this day if the doctors were murders, or they were heroes, staying behind to tend to the remaining patients. The article continued to shake my view of humanity and Katrina. After the discussion with the Panel, I realized how much Katrina affected New Orleans. Not just the infrastructure of the city, but the struggles it left for many of the citizens.

Related Article: <https://www.nytimes.com/2009/08/30/magazine/30doctors.html>

## NOLA's Knowledge is South Sound's Gain

Alex Alderman

The Urban Excursion to New Orleans has been one of the best experiences of my life because it has afforded me insight and knowledge that I otherwise would never have been able to gain. When Hurricane Katrina hit New Orleans, I was only nine years old and wasn't able to fully grasp the severity of what had happened. Visiting the Louisiana State Museum, and specifically, the Katrina exhibit was really eye-opening for me because it was my first time seeing the news footage and seeing artifacts from the storm aftermath. I feel I was able to better grasp just how resilient New Orleans is, and how through that resiliency they are able to rebuild and continue being the most unique city in the U.S. My favorite part of the excursion was meeting with the panel of community leaders and

activists from LINC & MQNV CDC. Listening to them discuss the issues their communities face and the strategies they are implementing. I felt it was especially valuable because they were such a wide array of people, from faith-based nonprofits to an urban studies professor, and each person had so much insight and knowledge to share. Conversing with these wonderful people helped me gather information on the different ways we can help our community and the ways we can learn from New Orleans and implement their strategies back home.

I could reflect on many different phenomena that I observed throughout the Urban Excursion but the one that stuck out to me most was the absence of a full-service grocery store in close proximity to where we were staying. When looking for a walkable grocery store, we found it very difficult. For the residents living in what appears to be a food desert, this absence surely affects their lives greatly in the ways of access to nutritional and culturally relevant food. Upon reflecting on this absence of healthful food within a New Orleans neighborhood, I think about the areas within our region that are underserved and have limited access to food and other resources. This experience has inspired me to research and discover where food deserts are within the South Sound region and what programs or initiatives are helping these residents. More importantly, it has inspired me to see what ways I can help these underserved areas as a student, and even more so as I go on to gain employment within the urban studies field. The Urban Excursion has been a priceless experience for me and the knowledge and insight that I gained on this trip will be used to help better serve my community throughout my academic and professional career.

## Treme Neighborhood: Historical Context

Margo Knight

Nearly 2 weeks ago, my fellow Civitas members and I spent our first full day in New Orleans navigating our way through the city, largely on foot. After visiting the Katrina museum, Jackson Square, and the waterfront, our team broke into smaller clusters to explore the city. As we set out in search of some authentic Jambalaya within the French quarter, we ran into another individual from our team who had already earned himself a reputation for wandering. Our friend was on his way to a local restaurant that had great recommendations online, and we joined him readily given his penchant for adventure and chance encounters. After we found that the restaurant was closed, we started off in the direction of the same crawfish store our friend had visited the day before, which coincidentally was just a few blocks away from our Airbnb rental, also located in the Treme district. However, because of the palpable disinvestment in the immediate area surrounding the store, and the two sections being separated by a large neutral ground beneath a bridge, that part of the neighborhood was a discernably different environment from the gentrifying block on which we were staying.

Having devoured some boiled shrimp, two pounds of crawfish and red beans and rice at the convenience store which doubled as a community center, we found ourselves standing beside North Claiborne Avenue awaiting the start of a second line. We had been extended an invitation to the event by a local we'd met inside the convenience store, and as we did not know what we were getting into, we were relieved when we spotted the same gentleman outside. He explained to us that a second line was a jazz funeral

and a celebration of life that manifested in a parade, dancing and the playing of a lively funeral dirge. As we took photos with the horse-drawn carriage carrying the empty casket, scores of people began to arrive, parking their cars on the neutral ground, beneath the bridge with the painted pillars. As we observed the various forms of informal economy and community interactions taking place we were also preoccupied with predicting how the parade was to begin, who would signal its start, and what authority would ensure pedestrian safety as we crossed into the road. Then suddenly, a man stepped in front of some cars with his tuba and the parade began. Immediately everyone rushed into the street and the music started, the carriage pulling the casket along and we too were swept up into the second line. We were elated that we had stumbled across such a unique experience, but after a few blocks of jubilation, we reluctantly pulled ourselves away from the parade to return to our Airbnb for dinner with the rest of our team.

As we took our leave from the music, dancing and celebration, in awe of what we had just encountered, I remained immersed in my thoughts. I was taken aback by the confidence by which the tuba player had strode into the street, clearly lacking a healthy fear of moving vehicles, which was apparently an attribute shared by several other community members who had parked on the neutral ground and crossed defiantly and without hesitation to the sidewalk on the other side of the road prior to the start of the second line.

While we visited the many stops on our itinerary during the rest of the trip, I was ruminating over the significance of the neutral ground under the bridge, the boldly painted pillars, and Claiborne Avenue, on which drivers would patiently tolerate a parade interrupting their Monday evening commute. On our last morning in town we grabbed a coffee from a local café down the block, where I noticed an article, framed and hung on the wall, which focused on the

historic significance of the Treme neighborhood. The New Orleans Advocate piece revealed that Treme not only contained the earliest established African American Catholic church in the United States, but it was also the first African-American neighborhood established in the United States. Furthermore, Treme's historic center, Congo square, where both free men and those enslaved would congregate to dance and trade goods, is credited as the birthplace of jazz (2017, May 22).

Further exploration into the neighborhood's history revealed that the bridge with the painted pillars, was really the I-10 expressway, one of the most contentious structures in the city. Prior to I-10's construction, the area possessed a viable business district, and North Claiborne Avenue was a wide, vibrant boulevard, with mature oak trees and green space dispersed throughout its neutral ground. Its grandeur was comparable to that of Canal Street, and many Mardi Gras events ended there. When the interstate was built, both the oak trees and 500 homes were cleared and relocated to other parts of the city, facilitating the loss of physical, environmental, financial, cultural, and social capital in the neighborhood. The interstate project, originally slated to run along the waterfront of the French Quarter, faced great opposition from preservationists, and was eventually terminated. However, Robert Moses, the proposal's originator, would not be deterred, and the plan soon evolved into the I-10 / Claiborne expressway, and in the absence of effective community organizing and sufficient political capital, the Treme neighborhood had lost one of its most vital community spaces (<https://www.cnu.org/highways-boulevards/campaign-cities/new-orleans>).

Within the historical context of the Treme neighbor-

hood, the physical environment and community response seem logical and justifiable. The convenience store, the sidewalk in front of it, and the neutral ground below the expressway, act as public spaces where community members can connect and generate social capital, while the informal economy allows for some additional financial capital. The paintings on the pillars beneath the expressway depict images and serve as reminders of cultural and environmental capital that were lost, for example, establishments and events that were integral to the community are painted on the inside pillars, while the outer pillars depict images of the oak trees that were removed. Lastly, the loss of cultural capital which occurred as a result of community disinvestment and displacement is addressed in the act of forming the second line, which also originated in Congo Square, as a way of remembering that Mardi Gras was once celebrated on Claiborne and is a step towards reclaiming ownership of the avenue that was once an ideal place for gathering.

## References

[The Congress for the New Urbanism](https://www.cnu.org/highways-boulevards/campaign-cities/new-orleans). New Orleans: Claiborne Expressway. Retrieved from <https://www.cnu.org/highways-boulevards/campaign-cities/new-orleans>

[The New Orleans Advocate](#) (2017, May 22). If the French Quarter Is New Orleans' Heart, the Treme Is Its Soul. Print.

## Street Level Viewpoint

Rafael Regen

This year's urban excursion definitely did not disappoint. I really had no idea what to expect other than my own preconceived judgments about southern parts of the United States and from what I have heard of the region. Although this was true, as soon as we

landed at the Louis Armstrong International Airport, I was immediately filled with excitement. The very first thing I noticed when we entered the city was the friendliness of everyone around us. No matter who I interacted with whether it be a homeless individual or a business person walking down the street, everyone acknowledged each other with a smile, nod or pleantry. Me, being interested in public transportation, I also noticed the many types of infrastructure (or lack thereof in some places) New Orleans offered. Taking the bus to many of our destinations was eye opening because it let us see the city from a very 'street level' point of view. This was very helpful as well when we were able to talk to community leaders and people from New Orleans because I feel as though I was able to connect and relate to them on a deeper level, having experienced the street culture of the city.

## Applications for Resilience

Emily Casebeer

Throughout the Urban Excursion there was proof of resiliency and efforts that can be translated to Tacoma, and the Hilltop neighborhood more specifically.

During our last night in New Orleans the group had split up so that everyone was able to do what they wanted for their last night. But as the night went on, we all happened to end up in the same place, an open-air night art market on Frenchmen Street. This art market supported many local artists and offered a mix of medias. Being perfectly located right on Frenchmen Street and by only being open at night, the market is catered to the large crowds of tourists that visit Frenchmen Street at night, like our group. This art market is a perfect example of the resiliency and continuation of New Orleans' identity as a place

of art, music, and culture.

On our last day in New Orleans I joined a group of six as we visited the final places on our to do list. The one and only Saints fan in Washington State, Katie, had to visit the Superdome and get here Saints gear which she now proudly sports in the midst of Seahawk nation. For lunch, we made our way to Café Reconcile, a workforce development program I had researched before we had left for New Orleans. This program is completely free for its students and even supplies clothes, transportation, and food as well as offering pay for those that meet expectations in the program. They offer hands-on job training as well as life skills classes to ensure their students are employable at the end of the program. One of the main teachings is the Eight Habits of Success:

1. Be on time
2. Be present all day, every day
3. Accept and follow direction
4. Work well with others, even when it's difficult
5. Have a positive, not negative, attitude towards the work
6. Take care of personal appearance every day
7. Get things done within the expected time
8. Do a quality job at each and every task

While focusing on community economic development, this workforce development program assists in creating resilient youth and young adults. Not to mention we ate some of the best food we've had since our time in New Orleans. Compared to the touristy restaurants, this food seemed more authentic and meaningful.

While waiting for an Uber to take us back across town to meet up with the rest of the group, we noticed a

cute little lot across the street. Lot 1701 is an open-air market and event space with seven tiny houses/pods that act as pop-up storefronts to be rented out by local entrepreneurs, artists and small-business owners. Their goal is to help local entrepreneurs get started so they are able to grow and establish permanent storefronts in the neighborhood.

These examples of community, workforce, and entrepreneurial development and support can be learned from and applied in a way that makes sense in Tacoma's Hilltop neighborhood. Facing impending gentrification, the Hilltop community needs programs that will help to permanently tie them to the area and allow them to benefit from the new developments to come rather than being pushed out.