



Everything New Orleans

## The visionaries

**There are a number of smart, talented and acclaimed planners and architects who spend virtually all day every day thinking about a better future for New Orleans. Spend a week in the life of one, the prince of 'new urbanism,' Andres Duany.**

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**By Doug MacCash**  
**Art critic**

To hear some people talk, you'd think architect and urban planner Andrés Duany is the devil. They'd have us resist with religious zeal his designs for a newer, better post-Katrina New Orleans. Given a chance, Duany would damn the Crescent City to a future of cleanliness, orderliness and artificiality. He would do to us what he did to those poor suntanned zombies who live in Seaside, Fla., his signature 1981 ultra-planned development that made him infamous among the world's architectural aesthetes.

He must be scorned and shunned.

The trouble is, he's just so darned reasonable – not to mention charming.

He's 57 years old, born in New York, raised in Santiago, Cuba, and Barcelona, Spain; educated at Princeton, L'Ecole Des Beaux Arts and Yale. He's married to renowned architect Elizabeth Plater-Zyberk and based in Miami. For a quarter-century, he's been the prince of "new urbanism," a movement dedicated to defeating suburban sprawl. He's planned hundreds of towns and neighborhoods. He speaks with a sort of bemused authority, as if Shangri-La were easily within reach, if it weren't for the foibles of the unenlightened. His voice is a Caribbean/ Mediterranean baritone, his eyes close-set and intense, his smile blade-like and quick, his sarcasm ever-present and impeccable.

Duany is part of a wave of celebrated visionaries -- from Harry Connick Jr. (on behalf of Habitat for Humanity) to Brad Pitt (for Global Green) to Thom Mayne (for the Hyatt Hotel) to Donald Trump to Pres Kabacoff -- who've poured forth various utopian plans for the resuscitation of the storm-shattered region. He has been a regular visitor to the Gulf Coast since October 2005. Fueled with grant money from a bevy of benefactors and agencies, including former Netscape CEO Jim Barksdale, the Knight Foundation, the Rockefeller Foundation and the Louisiana Recovery Authority, he and his team of new urbanists have contributed rebuilding advice and design plans for big cities and small towns from Pascagoula, Miss., to Lake Charles.

It was Duany who proposed a slow-speed, pedestrian-friendly, oceanfront boulevard through Biloxi, Miss. It was Duany who promoted permanent, expandable, comparatively cozy Katrina Cottages to compete with emergency FEMA trailers. It was Duany who provided a vision for more genteel urban thoroughfares to replace the strip malls of St. Bernard Parish.

In the arena of post-K planning, Duany and his firm Duany Plater-Zyberk & Co. seemed to be everywhere, attempting to slow traffic, add green space, elevate and consolidate our collectively reduced footprint.

Those earlier plans for outlying areas may have been benign enough, but in early November, the devil Duany, at the invitation of Unified New Orleans Plan administrators, extended his tentacles to that holiest of holies, the Vieux Carre, which was largely unaffected by Hurricane Katrina. Duany had been called in to plan three of the 14 New Orleans planning districts: Gentilly, the Central Business District and the French Quarter. As is his custom, he conducted a four-day series of public meetings attended by preservationists, residents, developers and shop owners -- what architects call a charrette.

Duany and company absorbed the suggestions, complaints and premonitions of what one member of the staff succinctly called "stake holders," then, calling upon their collective urban planning powers, they presumably attempted to conceive broadly satisfying solutions to the French Quarter's woes. On Nov. 11, Duany presented his vision for an improved Vieux Carre.

The day before, Duany could be found in his New Orleans headquarters, a cleanly renovated Decatur Street shotgun house, purchased for the Duany team's extended stay. He multitasked as he discussed the future of the oldest section of the city, studying a computer screen, gazing through a window, and compulsively leaping upright from time to time to wander the room, tweaking the arrangement of the furniture, going so far as to wind an electrical cord more neatly around the base of a lamp.

He said the French Quarter had been an inspiration to him for decades. Despite its age, he sees the "compact, walkable, diverse" neighborhood as a model for the "energy-starved" future.

"All other cities are trending toward New Orleans," he said. "Most cities get famous by doing three blocks of French Quarter."

He traced his penchant for designing communities with only a handful of harmonious architectural styles to the French Quarter, where he discovered "the richness of what can be achieved with 12 notes."

But, he pointed out, all is not well.

"The French Quarter has been loved to death," he said, "overwhelmed by tourists. It has become an unpleasant living environment."

It's an environment that could be considerably improved, through modest suggestions, he said, but he saved specifics for a public presentation the following night, thereby preserving his spontaneity.

In the meantime, he turned his attention to a disagreeable e-mail from the New Orleans Building Corp. that had appeared on his screen, announcing a dramatic city-sponsored riverfront development proposal, dubbed the "Reinventing the Crescent" plan, that would stretch along the Mississippi from the French Quarter beyond Bywater, featuring architectural marvels by modernist heroes such as Frank Gehry, Zaha Hadid and Daniel Libeskind.

The development would pass immediately in front of Duany's Marigny shotgun house. He feared it would blot out the view of the well-used dog park and nearby burned warehouses that he said he found rather interesting.

He dismissed showy, big-budget projects such as the "Reinventing the Crescent" plan as "silver bullet" solutions. New Orleans, he said, is historically addicted to them. The aquarium, Convention Center and world's fair were all silver bullets meant to save the struggling city. They were high-profile substitutes for more elemental changes to the municipal codes that, he believed, would have accomplished more over time. Duany puts great stock in municipal codes.

No 'genius architects' needed

The portion of the "Reinventing the Crescent" plan that most drew his ire was the reliance on what he called "the genius architects."

"All these people are congenitally over budget," he said, damningly, adding that they had no place in a "city in crisis."

"They're totally cool things," he said of tourist attraction architectural marvels. "The point is that they don't save the city."

On the other hand, Duany pointed out that he would personally benefit from the appearance of a design by Gehry, or one of the other geniuses, a stone's throw from the Marigny shotgun house he'd recently bought for \$260,000.

"I can't wait to have a brilliant piece of architecture facing my house. It's going to do wonders for my property value," he said.

If he had his choice of Pritzker Prize architects to build outside his front window he would choose Dutch star Rem Koolhaas.

"The others are not fun," he said. "Rem has the irony, fatalism, complexity and bad taste that would work well in New Orleans."

When Duany was asked if he could be added to a list of "the genius architects" brought in to save the city, he was adamant.

"I am not one of the genius architects," he said. "I write codes. The basic theme is this: Cities require fundamentals to be in place."

Duany listed safe streets, good schools, a working water supply, walkability and transit as the sort of citywide fundamentals that need to be addressed before a project like the "Reinventing the Crescent" or the proposed Thom Mayne-designed New Orleans Jazz Park,

which he declared to be nothing more than a "doormat for the Hyatt," could be undertaken. Both plans remain entirely on the drawing board and in the imaginations of their proponents.

Though Duany's past developments had distinctly historical styles, he said he was not against the "Reinventing the Crescent" or New Orleans Jazz Park because of their avowed shiny, starkly geometric modernism.

"I'm not an ayatollah of traditional architecture," he said.

Considering that the French Quarter is a perennial lightning rod of preservationist concerns, Duany's Nov. 11 presentation could easily have become the urban planning equivalent of the shootout at the OK Corral.

He acknowledged that some people feared his influence on the sacred French Quarter.

"The monster has come," he said.

Just minutes before Duany's presentation at the Scottish Rite Temple on Carondelet Street, a member of his staff marveled that the master was so relaxed that he'd spent much of the day smoking cigars in his Decatur Street back yard -- the Marigny, he has said, reminds him of Cuba.

"I remember specifically when on a street in the Marigny," Duany recently wrote, "I came upon a colorful little house framed by banana trees. I thought, 'This is Cuba.' I realized in that instant that New Orleans is not really an American city, but rather a Caribbean one. I understood that when seen through the lens of the Caribbean, New Orleans is not among the most haphazard, poorest or misgoverned American cities, but rather the most organized, wealthiest, cleanest and competently governed of the Caribbean cities. This insight was fundamental because from that moment I understood New Orleans and began to truly sympathize."

Facing the crowd of 50 who'd gathered to hear him speak in the acrid yellow ground floor of the temple, he said, "Today, I spent all day listening to bamboo in the breeze and train sounds."

Some in the audience were grim-faced, their arms crossed over their chests. A few folding chairs were occupied by bow-tied architect types. Duany's staff of youthful acolytes eagerly awaited the revelation of their hard work -- and the master's words.

Perhaps it was the soundness of Duany's ideas, perhaps that he'd solicited public input in advance, perhaps his aforementioned charm, but his potentially heretical presentation went off without fireworks.

He began with what he called "a 'Tom and Jerry' cartoon," a plan for the Marigny that he'd prepared of his own volition as an alternative to the New Orleans Building Corp.'s "genius architect" plan. To maximize usable space, he proposed a great wave of buried parking garages applied to the Marigny riverfront. St. Peters Street and the riverfront railroad tracks would tunnel through the landscaped garage berm. Atop the riverfront rise would be three stories of densely packed, brightly colored, quasi-Creole-style apartments and shops opening onto a promenade atop the existing docks. Dwellers and visitors would enjoy an unparalleled view of the river. His laser pointer slashed sword-like across the projected illustrations.

Residents put at ease

If there was dissent in the audience, it went largely unspoken.

"I've never found a place that needed my services less," Duany said of the French Quarter as he launched into the feature presentation, setting the crowd immediately at ease.

He proposed five-story buildings along the French Quarter riverfront, arguing the space was too valuable for the current, ground-level parking lots -- enhanced parking would be integrated into the designs. He proposed that Rampart Street be transformed into a leafy Parisian-style boulevard, with multilevel parking garages to better accommodate French Quarter visitors. Parking, parking, parking: Duany seemed obsessed with the issue. As he later explained, the No. 1 complaint among French Quarter residents was lack of street parking. All of his plans were dedicated in part to "liberating on-street parking for people living there."

One audience member questioned Duany's reliance on automobiles in his plans. After all, new urbanism eschews individual vehicles for public transportation and pedestrians.

"I'm a ruthless realist," he said in response. "I don't want to force people not to drive. I want to invite them to walk."

Another audience member assailed Duany's assertion that the Iberville public housing development should be saved, equating the complex with French Quarter crime.

"I believe the Iberville project is beautiful," he said, side-stepping the audience member's political thrust.

Another questioned the height of the French Quarter riverfront structures.

Duany assured them that properly designed structures needn't be as tall or as blank as the towering Wyndham New Orleans Hotel near the river at Canal Street, which he described as a "big oaf of a building."

With each critical stab, Duany parried deftly.

He concluded his presentation, true to his word, by suggesting a revamping of current French Quarter codes covering trash disposal, noise, litter, the destruction of buildings, parking lots and spilled liquid garbage, what he called the "yellow ooze in the cracks." More importantly, he said, there needed to be a way to enforce existing code violations.

The seeming mantra of New Orleans is, he said: "We shall not enforce anything."

His solution to the enforcement problem is a parking-ticket-style "quality of life" citation with such violations as "building modification without permit," "illegal demolition by neglect," "improper signage," "trash out on incorrect days" and "trash in general."

"Even people who handle a great deal of money get upset when they get a ticket," he said. "One good \$80 'trash in the wrong place' violation and you've got a cop paid for the whole morning."

And then the presentation was over. His laser was extinguished. It was time for a scotch.

Duany had been hired to consult. The job of implementing his ideas would remain in the hands of New Orleans leaders. His ideas would be passed through a chain of district and citywide planners, to be presented to the City Council as early as January.

An hour after the French Quarter presentation, at Duany's Decatur Street headquarters, an enormous pot of gumbo was ready, and grace was about to be said. It was the custom during Duany's stay in New Orleans, instigated by the team's Cajun cook, to dedicate a suppertime prayer to one member of the planning team. That night, the last night of their two-week stay in New Orleans, grace was dedicated for the first time to Duany.

"Finally," he said.

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### The Andres Duany File

Born Sept. 7, 1946, in New York City -- a Virgo.

Lived in Santiago, Cuba, until 1960 -- one year after Fidel Castro took power -- then moved to Barcelona, Spain, then Miami.

Graduated from Princeton, 1971; Ecole de Beaux Arts, Paris, 1972; Yale School of Architecture, 1974.

Co-founded Miami Arquitectonica architecture firm in 1976 with wife Elizabeth Plater-Zyberk and others.

Co-founded Duany Plater-Zyberk & Co. in 1980 -- designs Seaside, the 80-acre resort village in Northwest Florida. Some call it charming, others diabolical. Seaside would eventually be featured in the movie "The Truman Show."

Designed scores of planned communities across the country: Kentlands in Maryland, Habersham in South Carolina, Rosemary Beach near Seaside, and Prospect New Town in Colorado and just New Town in Missouri. Due to his reliance on traditional design, Duany came to be seen as anti-modern.

Co-founded the Congress for the New Urbanism in 1993, an association of city planners and architects dedicated to providing a more fuel-efficient alternative to suburban sprawl. New urbanists advocate smaller, more compact towns and cities, reliant on walking and public transportation.

Took a prominent role in the post-Katrina rebuilding planning in Mississippi and Louisiana.