

Two Years After the Storm, The Devastated City is a Boomtown of Fresh Ideas for Rebirth

The Daily Green

Much of New Orleans continues to lie abandoned and destroyed, even a full two years after Hurricane Katrina swept through the region with a vengeance. The Louisiana city still struggles with severe economic problems, dysfunctional government and the toxic residue left in place after the storm waters receded.

But, as the Los Angeles Times makes clear, the Big Easy is also an incubator of exciting change. Authorities are certainly in no position to guarantee the protection of New Orleans from a future Category 5 hurricane. Particularly with many scientists warning that the frequency and severity of great storms is likely to increase with global warming, the danger is very real. But designers and engineers are rushing to the challenge with ideas to mitigate potential damage.

One of the most original schemes is being put forth by a Harvard-educated, Louisiana State University professor named Elizabeth English, who suggests retrofitting houses with Styrofoam foundations. If high waters roll in, the houses can float. An amateur inventor has envisioned a special flood wall for his French Quarter apartment. A San Francisco architectural firm has proposed lining New Orleans' shores with giant "sponge combs" filled with baby diapers. They would expand when wet to block surging floodwaters.

None of these ideas have received widespread or government support to date, but they illustrate how the rebuilding of the Gulf Coast represents an historic opportunity to do things differently. Clearly, our built environment poses many challenges, from safety to susceptibility to natural disasters to the enormous environmental footprint. Our buildings use up more energy, and thus fossil fuels, than any other sector,

including industry and transportation. That's why so many are looking at New Orleans as a chance to shine, instead of going back to business as usual and old bad habits.

Environmental groups have ridden into town, touting the opportunity to try out the latest in affordable green housing, which will provide substantial energy and resource savings, save residents money on bills, and make for cleaner, safer living spaces. For instance, a wave of builders are repurposing salvageable materials from the destruction, which is a win-win in terms of reducing costs and cleaning up the enormous mess.

Brad Pitt is lending his star power to Global Green USA, which is working on an affordable green building project in New Orleans that will hopefully be able to generate all of its own energy. It will have solar roofs, recycled carpeting, cisterns to catch rainwater, and geothermal heat pumps. Funding support has been provided by the Home Depot Foundation.

Many innovators are hoping that good things can rise out of the devastation on the Gulf Coast.