

A NEW New Orleans Forget crawfish étouffée -- look to ugly Houston for a vibrant economic model. By Joel Kotkin Joel Kotkin, an Irvine Senior Fellow at the New America Foundation, is the author of "The City: A Global History" (Modern Library, 2005) September 4, 2005 BECAUSE THE OLD New Orleans is no more, it could resurrect itself as the great new American city of the 21st century. Or as an impoverished tourist trap. Founded by the French in 1718, site of the first U.S. mint in the Western United States, this one-time pride of the South, this one-time queen of the Gulf Coast, had been declining for decades, slowly becoming an antiquated museum. Now New Orleans must decide how to be reborn. Its choices could foretell the future of urbanism. The sheer human tragedy — and the fact that the Gulf Coast is critical to the nation's economy as well as the Republican Party's base — guarantee that there will be money to start the project.

Private corporations, churches and nonprofits will pitch in with the government. But what kind of city will the builders create on the sodden ruins? The wrong approach would be to preserve a chimera of the past, producing a touristic faux New Orleans, a Cajun Disneyland. Sadly, even before Hurricane Katrina's devastation, local leaders seemed convinced that being a "port of cool" should be the city's policy. Adopting a page from Richard Florida's "creative class" theory, city leaders held a conference just a month before the disaster promoting a cultural strategy as the primary way to bring in high-end industry. This would be the easy, bankable way to go now: Reconstruct the French Quarter, Garden District and other historic areas while sprucing up the convention center and other tourist facilities.

This, however, would squander a greater opportunity. A tourism-based economy is no way to generate a broadly successful economy. For decades before this latest hurricane, public life, including the police force, were battered by corruption and eroded by inefficiency. Now Katrina has brought into public view the once-invisible masses of desperately poor people whom New Orleans' tourist economy and political system have so clearly failed. Although the number of hotel rooms in the city has grown by about 50% over the last few years, tourism produces relatively few high-wage jobs. It encourages people to learn extraordinary slide trombone technique, develop 100 exquisite recipes for crawfish and keep swarms of conventioners happy — none of which are easy or unimportant tasks. But this economy does little to nurture the array of skills that sustain a large and diverse workforce.

Contrary to Florida's precepts, having a strong gay community, lively street culture, great food, tremendous music and lively arts have not been enough to lure the "creative class" to New Orleans. The city has been at best a marginal player in the evolving tech and information economy. Meanwhile, the tourism/entertainment industry is constantly under pressure from competitors. Once, being the Big Easy in the Bible Belt gave New Orleans a trademark advantage. But the spread of gambling along the Gulf has eroded that semi-sinful allure. Mississippi's flattened casinos, with their massive private investment, will almost certainly rise years ahead of New Orleans' touristic icons. For all these reasons, New Orleans should take its destruction as an opportunity to change course. There is no law that says a Southern city must

be forever undereducated, impoverished, corrupt and regressive. Instead of trying to refashion what wasn't working, New Orleans should craft a future for itself as a better, more progressive metropolis.

Look a few hundred miles to the west, at Houston — a well-run city with a widely diversified economy. Without much in the way of old culture, charm or tradition, it has far outshone New Orleans as a beacon for enterprising migrants from other countries as well as other parts of the United States — including New Orleans. Houston has succeeded by sticking to the basics, by focusing on the practical aspects of urbanism rather than the glamorous. Under the inspired leadership of former Mayor Bob Lanier and the current chief executive, Bill White, the city has invested heavily in port facilities, drainage, sanitation, freeways and other infrastructure. At least in part as a result of this investment, this superficially less-than-lovely city has managed to siphon industries — including energy and international trade — from New Orleans.

With its massive Texas Medical Center, it has emerged as the primary healthcare center in the Caribbean basin — something New Orleans, with Tulane University's well-regarded medical school, should have been able to pull off. Attention to fundamentals has always been important to cities. Hellenistic Alexandria was built in brick to reduce fire dangers that terrified ancient urbanites, and it lived off its huge new man-made harbor. Rome built stupendous, elaborate water systems and port facilities to support its huge population. Amsterdam and the Netherlands provide particularly relevant examples, as they offer great urban culture at or below sea level. For centuries the Dutch have coped with rising water levels with ingenious engineering. In this century, the most notable example was the determined response to the devastating 1953 North Sea storm, which killed more than 1,800 people.

Responding with traditional efficiency, the Dutch built a massive system of dikes, completed in 1998, which has helped them to remain among the most economically and culturally vibrant regions in Europe. Giving priority to basic infrastructure may not appeal to those who would prefer to patch the structural problems and spend money on rebuilding New Orleans as a museum, or by adding splashy concert halls, art museums and other iconic cultural structures. Ultimately, the people of the New Orleans region will have to decide whether to focus on resuscitating the Big Easy zeitgeist — which includes a wink-and-nod attitude toward corruption — or to begin drawing upon inner resources of discipline, rigor and ingenuity. Some may argue that such a shift would diminish New Orleans' status in cultural folklore as a corrupt but charming waif. Yet that old ghost is probably already gone. Even a rebuilt, reconfigured Latin Quarter would no doubt seem more Anaheim than anti-bellum. In contrast, a new New Orleans — a city with a thriving economy, a city of aspiration as well as memory — would in time create its own cultural efflorescence, this time linked as much to the future as the past. This should be the goal of the great rebuilding process about to begin.