Rendering Disaster Architecture: Remodeling Citizenship in Post-Katrina New Orleans

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ABSTRACT

The historical events of Hurricane Katrina and the flood that followed have come to symbolize systemic failures on the part of local, state, and federal governments to do right by the residents of New Orleans. The disaster of Hurricane Katrina was mediated to a national audience, setting the stage for specific responses to take place. This thesis provides a rhetorical analysis of one recovery effort waged in the wake of governmental failures to address Katrina and its aftermath. The Make It Right Foundation (MIR) offers a unique case study in the neoliberal dynamics of celebrity philanthropy as an answer to inadequate governmental support for populations adversely affected by natural and human-made disasters. I understand the work of MIR in terms of processes that I term “disaster architecture,” neoliberal in their substitution of good design for good public policy, serving to render an ideal citizen whose obligated gratefulness for aid is directed not toward the state, but toward celebrities, architects, and private donors.

This thesis intervenes primarily with the rhetorics of aid taken up by MIR and organizations like it following disasters demanding a nationwide response. I critique MIR’s rhetorics of aid as expressed in writing, visual design, and material construction of the built environment for what I deem to be its failed attempts at providing the Lower Ninth Ward with a sustainable and just path to full recovery from the unequally disastrous effects of the hurricane. With this critique, I hope to contribute to work that encourages more systemic, structurally-focused, and rhetorically responsible work in (re)development processes of philanthropic aid in the built environment.
RENDERING DISASTER ARCHITECTURE:

REMODELING CITIZENSHIP IN POST-KATRINA NEW ORLEANS

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THESIS

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INTRODUCTION
Surveying the Site and Laying Foundation

The historical events of Hurricane Katrina and the flood that followed have come to symbolize systemic failures on the part of local, state, and federal governments to do right by the residents of New Orleans. The disaster of Hurricane Katrina was mediated to a national audience, setting the stage for specific responses to take place. This thesis provides a rhetorical analysis of one recovery effort waged in the wake of governmental failures to address Katrina and its aftermath. As expressed by the organization’s name, the Make It Right Foundation (MIR)—founded by famous actor Brad Pitt and architect William McDonough—intervened in the Lower Ninth Ward as an attempt at correcting for some of the ways in which governmental offices failed the city’s people. The Make It Right Foundation offers a unique case study in the neoliberal dynamics of celebrity philanthropy as an answer to inadequate governmental support for populations adversely affected by natural and human-made disasters. I understand the work of MIR in terms of a process that I term “disaster architecture.”

This thesis intervenes primarily with the rhetorics of aid taken up by MIR and organizations like it following disasters demanding a nationwide response. I do not bemoan the loss of cultural connection and locality at the expense of people’s lives and continued displacement from their homes. Instead, I critique MIR’s rhetorics of aid as expressed in writing, visual design, and material construction of the built environment for what I deem to be its failed attempts at providing the Lower Ninth Ward with a sustainable and just path to full recovery from the unequally disastrous effects of the hurricane. With this critique, I hope to contribute to work that encourages more systemic, structurally-focused, and rhetorically responsible work be done in processes of philanthropic aid.
In this introduction, I analyze MIR’s relationship with Hurricane Katrina as it was culturally illustrated through understandings based on news media, the social injustices that this mediated illustration made exigent, and the stereotypical understanding of New Orleans and Lower Ninth Ward culture afforded by these mediations. I trace the effects of this cultural understanding on MIR’s approach to recovery and disaster architecture more broadly.

In chapter one, I describe disaster architecture according to its related processes of need identification, welfare collapse and the resulting ailing moral economy, cultural commodification, and rampant privatization. Later, in chapter two, I illustrate disaster architecture according to how it appears and the effects of those aesthetics. MIR mythologizes and spectacularizes the area’s recovery. In so doing, it renders new standards of citizenship while silencing and distracting from those still requiring aid and those unable to assimilate into white middle-class aesthetics. Through stereotypical visual representations of Lower Ninth Ward residents—clearly dissonant in architectural renderings calling for assimilationist aesthetics—I describe how MIR excludes those displaced by the storm from deliberation on how the neighborhood should be recovered and rebuilt.

Finally, in my conclusion I discuss receptions of MIR’s designs—both rendered and built—and use these responses as diagnostic clues to the errors of MIR’s approach to the Lower Ninth Ward’s recovery. MIR’s made its mistakes ultimately with its prioritization of particularly neoliberalist audiences over the displaced and with its foundation in cultural stereotypes and media representations of injustice in New Orleans. To lead into this analytic conclusion on MIR’s actions, however, I first must describe more fully where the foundation comes from and for what it claims to stand.
The Make It Right Foundation

The Make It Right Foundation (MIR) is an organization established by the actor Brad Pitt that builds homes for those displaced by the floods in the Lower Ninth Ward in an attempt to right the many wrongs at the nexus of injustices that was Katrina. Brad Pitt “channeled his visibility as an iconic persona and redirected it” (Feireiss 87) to found the organization with the help of architect William McDonough in 2007. This is an attempt to not only rebuild the Lower Ninth Ward and fill it back up with the original residents (“FAQ”), but also to make a political statement about the inadequate recovery efforts in New Orleans and the continued lack of governmental policy geared toward the welfare of citizens there.

MIR consists of teams of world-renowned architects building “revolutionary” houses focused on being “sustainable and [built] with clean [green] materials for a just quality of life” while being safe, storm resilient, and carbon-neutral in construction and operation (Feireiss 8). The homes themselves are postmodern designs (example shown in Figure 1), each a pastiche of aesthetic references, and they have been contentious for that reason (among others). Much of the controversy surrounding MIR, from sources such as architectural critics,\(^1\) journalists,\(^2\)

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\(^1\) See Rebecca Firestone’s “New Orleans Post-Katrina: Making It Right?” and its included conglomeration of architectural critiques as a useful starting point.
\(^2\) See Doug MacCash’s “Make It Right” article as well as Peter Whoriskey’s account in the Washington Post: “What happened when Brad Pitt and his architects came to rebuild New Orleans”—among many others.
scholars, and Lower Ninth Ward residents themselves, has focused primarily on appearance, style, and aesthetic as signals of a threatening change to the area. I argue that these issues signal deeper tensions in the homes and Make It Right’s role in the Lower Ninth Ward. These deeper tensions are hinted already in critical reception of the organization’s name. What does the “right” response to disaster look like? And for whom, exactly, are they “making it right”? These simple questions guided my initial look into MIR and its rhetorical orientation toward the minority populations of the Lower Ninth Ward.

The Make It Right Foundation exemplifies a historical trend whereby architectural aesthetics and design supplant public deliberation and welfare-oriented policy changes. I name this process “disaster architecture,” which I then define as a practice of reconstruction from without that attempts to recover an area from utter destruction while, in doing so, making visually and materially visible and tangible the social inequalities preceding and characterizing the disaster and its aftermath. “Disaster architecture” references the opportunistic emergence of architecture and design out of sudden crises. The term serves as a literal description of the architecture of the built environment re-constructed and as a metaphor for the sudden imposition of a new organization of a space or community.

Disaster architecture is just one expression of what Naomi Klein describes as “disaster capitalism” in Shock Doctrine. Following Klein, my rhetorical analysis of MIR as an expression of disaster architecture is attuned to the insidious functions of neoliberalism in response to national

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3 Cedric Johnson’s The Neoliberal Deluge; Vincanne Adams’ Markets of Sorrow, Labors of Faith; and John Arena’s Driven from New Orleans are each thorough and engaging texts which discuss the processes of neoliberalism in New Orleans more thoroughly than I can hope to with this project.

4 Thorough reporting on local responses to development projects in the Lower Ninth Ward—especially in response to shifting populations from historically black to newly white—can be seen with PBS’s report, “Are newcomers a mixed blessing for the Lower Ninth Ward?,” Peter Moskowitz’s “New Orleans’ Lower Ninth Ward targeted for gentrification,” and Camille Whitworth’s “Katrina tours” article, among many others.
disasters, where, in Klein’s words, “moments of collective trauma” are used “to engage in radical social and economic engineering” (9). This thesis looks to contribute to previous studies of Hurricane Katrina\(^5\) and the Make It Right Foundation (MIR)\(^6\) to provide a look into how non-profit, philanthropic architectural design has supplanted public welfare in the Lower Ninth Ward. As architect Mark English writes, “A vacuum of leadership at every level has left the task of ‘salvation’ to celebrities, and their private celebrity architects—with projects that are an exercise of vanity over practicality” (Firestone). In other words, the government’s failure to properly respond to the devastation wrought by Katrina and the flood that followed provided the ideal site for disaster architecture to take hold.

Make It Right acts within what rhetorician Joan Faber McAlister would call a kairotope, or opportune space-time (“Domesticating” 85) afforded by the culmination and intersection of a wide variety of social and material derelictions, including: the perpetuation of classed, racial slums; the pollution of the environment; and negligence of maintaining New Orleans’ levees. McAlister delineates the kairotope as capable of “addressing both the temporal and spatial dimensions of texts.... [illustrating] how space-times can discursively and materially mediate political identities and practices by negotiating the proper relations between foreign and domestic, public and private, state and citizen” (“Domesticating” 86). This concept is important for discussing Make It Right’s presence in New Orleans considering how opportunistically planners and architects approached the Lower Ninth Ward—“it was a chance to remake a city” (DePillis)—but the kairotope also helps

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\(^6\) Cedric Johnson’s edited book, The Neoliberal Deluge: Hurricane Katrina, Late Capitalism, and the Remaking of New Orleans, has a few chapters on Make It Right specifically, and its critical perspective would have been much more formative of my own work establishing the political implications of MIR, had I been able to obtain it sooner.
to explain some of the criticisms that have been levied against the foundation by citizens of the Lower Ninth Ward as well as the architectural community at large.

I argue that MIR and similar projects make the mistake of not addressing the underlying and systemic issues driving the problems they seek to cure. New Orleans and Hurricane Katrina are shaped by long histories of interwoven patterns of inequality, a painful tapestry that threatens to continue despite every landmarked step of improvement (“plus ça change, plus c’est la même chose”). MIR attempts to speak to some of this history by embracing an alternative exigence for action in response to Katrina, refusing to follow the lead of urgently impactful and immediate aid and instead adopting a longer-term timeline incapable of meeting quantitative housing goals.

Rhetorical scholar Frank Lloyd Bitzer defined exigency as “an imperfection marked by urgency; it is a defect, an obstacle, something waiting to be done, a thing which is other than it should be” (6). The defects and obstacles of Hurricane Katrina were represented for and understood by the nation through news media and continuously rolling clips of people on rooftops, of people wading through chest-deep water, and of crowds massing into the Superdome. The media representations of Hurricane Katrina rendered the event comprehensible in certain ways, making the problems needing repair clear to many, though each with different interpretations. The media renderings of the disaster framed the imaginable responses and helped to determine what would be possible.

From Naomi Klein’s detailed descriptions of how disaster capitalism works, this thesis will serve to show what that process might look like aesthetically. I call into question the implications of the fact that disaster architecture can take the form of beautiful, philanthropic houses and ask what this might tell us about the state of public deliberation in urban (re)development as it relates to public welfare and practices of citizenship. But I also want to ask why, for many, attention to
aesthetics signals a disaffected elitism. Is it the attention to aesthetics that is elitist or the adoption of aesthetics that are not universally shared that is the problem? (Should beauty be a universal human right?) But we must also agree that what Brad Pitt and his star architects find aesthetically pleasing might not suit the tastes of New Orleans residents. Recently, architect Melvin L Mitchell called for other architects to pay more attention to—and sing the praises of—black architectural aesthetics, historically and in contemporary practice. Which raises questions: What makes an architectural aesthetic black? From whose perspective is an aesthetic understood as black? And thus are the postmodernist designs employed by MIR’s teams implicitly white architectural aesthetics?

Disasters such as Hurricane Katrina strip away the façades hiding inequality and suffering and leave behind a more telling sight of the society living there. Also telling, however, are the efforts to restore the façades, to rebuild in light of what the city ought to be, as determined all too often from the perspective of the outside elite. Practices of disaster architecture are neoliberal in their substitution of good design for good public policy, serving to render an ideal citizen whose obligated gratefulness for aid is directed not toward the state, but toward celebrities, architects, and private donors. The role of social welfare is further reduced and the praise goes to the wealthy and to the famous. When the gift is not only shelter but also a chic postmodern aesthetic that stands in sharp contrast to the neighborhood’s historic, Caribbean design patterns (example shown in

Figure 2: Typical shotgun-style home, with small Creole ornamentation, shown here following Hurricane Katrina (“Design in New Orleans’ Lower Ninth Ward”).
Figure 2), then does the gift not presume obligated gratefulness and the beneficiaries’ willing assimilation to an elite aesthetic? To attempt an answer to this question, I turn to Katrina itself to see the effects of its destruction and how it was used as the grounds for MIR’s actions in the Lower Ninth Ward.

Come Hell of High Water

On the morning of August 29, 2005, Hurricane Katrina struck an unprepared New Orleans. Mayor Ray Nagin issued the evacuation order only a day before the hurricane’s landfall, relegating those who could not leave the city to the Superdome, a shelter of last resort. The hurricane itself caused some damage, but the ensuing waters bursting the levees surrounding New Orleans led to massive flooding of the poorest districts of the city, sending many to their attics and rooftops and many more to their deaths. Some estimates hold that more than 1,800 died in Louisiana alone, though the exact toll is still unclear and under dispute (Bialik).

Thousands without access to vehicles attempted to walk the bridge to Gretna, a nearby suburb, but were turned away by police officers firing guns over their heads (Burnett). The Superdome was overcrowded and hellish, described by ESPN’s Mark Schwartz as a “cesspool of human misery” (Grano & Zagacki 209) with “masses of flood victims resorting to utter depravity” and “descending into an ‘almost animalistic state,’” as Mayor Ray Nagin told Oprah Winfrey (207). False but persistent accusations of raping babies and murdering children characterized the news media’s treatment of the Superdome (207). The media coverage that ensued was “coverage of the Superdome-as-hell” (206), where all the nation’s worst nightmares of racialized Others seemed to manifest. The nation watched as New Orleans was torn apart and washed away. The nation
watched as its remaining residents formed a microcosmic spectacle of poor and predominately black suffering.

National news media blurred the line between horrific news coverage and a spectacularized entertainment event with constant coverage and speculation. By displaying the disaster as widely and obsessively consumable across the country, news stations made the structural systems of racial inequality visible, entrenching stereotypical characterizations while also allowing this project some level of analytic insight into the roots of these inequalities. By looking into how this coverage renders the disaster into a performance for the consumption of the rest of the nation, I hope to suggest connections between the rhetorics of news coverage with rhetorics of performance in order to utilize informative insights on the performativity of New Orleans, as described so well by performance scholar Joseph Roach in *Cities of the Dead: Circum-Atlantic Performance*.

News coverage—conservative channels such as Fox News and CNN as well as the more liberal-leaning MSNBC—typically takes a cold approach to dependent populations, as was seen in the wake of Hurricane Katrina. Major news networks in the United States displayed footage of black people surviving during Hurricane Katrina and captioned their gathering of otherwise destroyed foods as acts of “looting”: “Respondents noted that the media portrayed black people as looters, while white people were looking for food and water to survive,” thus signifying acceptable emotional responses as being “‘angered,’ ‘pissed,’ and ‘enraged’ at the African-American looters” (Miller & Roberts 41). This resonates with sociologist Diana Kendall’s critical analysis of representations of economically dependent individuals, particularly those of color. She describes these news media representations as “[obscuring] the problems of people who have fallen through the cracks, ultimately judging some to have slipped because of their own moral failings” (100).
Kendall continues: “Such framing may predispose media audiences to think of the issue primarily in terms of welfare dependency and to ignore larger societal conditions (structural constraints) that contribute to poverty initially” (101). On the news, then, the Lower Ninth Ward becomes a zone of anarchic amorality where looting is the natural response to disaster. Classed as well as raced, these representations perpetuate damaging conceptions of black people, triggering white flight and contributing further to Jacobs’ “vicious cycle” of slum-creation (270). In this way, visual representation and material place are intimately co-constitutive, and so the process of disaster architecture moves fluidly between these two realms.

Wealthier and whiter citizens abandoned residents of the Lower Ninth Ward to a dangerous flood-basin and represented them in the media as “helpless victim[s]” (Kahle et al 86). Images shown on the news of those needing aid “may elide the structural racism that made it difficult for African-Americans to prepare or leave prior to Katrina’s landfall, instead suggesting that those who suffered most, suffered as a result of their own irresponsibility” (86). News media represented them not only as helpless victims, however: sights of white New Orleanians “standing guard against looting... sets up a stereotypical opposition of dangerous, opportunistic, threatening African-Americans against the responsible, law-abiding, and threatened Anglos” (86). Racist portrayals such as these, which encourage oppositions and reductionary readings, generate arguments for a need to completely contain the threatening presences.

Rescue and recovery operations contained residents quite literally within the Superdome. This containment of helplessness and threat together delivered a shocking spectacle that ESPN reporter Mark Schwartz called a “cesspool of human misery” (Grano & Zagacki 209). The marginalizing effects of the slums were made manifest, embodied and redoubled, in Hurricane
Katrina; before the classed, racial tension could overflow—as it has in Ferguson; as it has in Baltimore; as it has across the country—the storm swept in, the levees broke, and the city surged with muddy waters that united denizens and cleansed differences in crisis just as it had subsequently (re)ignited tensions and—to borrow New Orleans Superdome manager Doug Thornton’s phrasing (qtd in Grano & Zagacki 210)—it had blown the roof off New Orleans.

Through concentrated, disastrous spectacle, Hurricane Katrina and the Superdome restaged a theatrical performance of—and thus revealed—racism and histories of slavery, a shocking “revived memory” of the “behavioral vortex in which human relationships could be drained of sympathetic imagination” (Roach 213), Roach’s behavioral vortex being “a kind of spatially induced carnival, a center of cultural self-invention through restoration of behavior” (28). This behavioral vortex of performative “cultural self-invention” draws in the “willing and unwilling alike” (28). In other words, memories of slavery were revived in the spectacle of Katrina, and in that spectacular space cultural behaviors of racism were rejuvenated.

With footage rolling of people wading through chest-deep water, news anchors inferred criminal behavior for black families carrying food and supplies from nearby stores and assumed noble resourcefulness for white families doing the same (Miller & Roberts 41). Meanwhile, the Coast Guard rescued approximately 34,000 people in the city alone, working in tandem with citizens who had commandeered boats to recover people stranded on their rooftops, and NBC televised the “Concert for Hurricane Relief.” A variety of celebrities and public figures performed and called for donations to be sent to the American Red Cross Disaster Relief Fund, generating $50 million from a viewership of approximately 8.5 million. During this broadcast, rapper Kanye West controversially accused the media of negatively-biased portrayals of black people in New
Orleans and then—after actor Mike Myers awkwardly finished his scripted piece—West declared that “George Bush doesn’t care about black people.” The executive producer of the broadcast would reflect on this statement ten years later: “[Kanye’s] emotion and his honesty and what he had to say, it had to be heard, because those people were not being served” (Stahl). In effect: Yes, George Bush did not care about black people.

Communication scholar Eric Scott Jenkins, in his article “Seeing Katrina: Perspectives of Judgment in a Cultural/Natural Disaster,” argued that Kanye West’s statement tapped into an “urban-minded” perspective, for whom New Orleans “recalls home,” as set apart from the suburban tourist, for whom New Orleans “was a fun place to peer at monuments [and drink],” as George W Bush characterized it (101). From within an urban identification—where Kanye West stood—lies the “possibility of a cultural explanation” for Katrina. As Jenkins explains, a “realistic frame” of the disaster (as was taken up by national news media) “creates a tendency to fall back upon (stereo-) typical assumptions and expectations that appear to match the viewer’s own conceptions of reality” (102).

The severity of the damage from Hurricane Katrina was indeed man-made, but the degree to which human action is to blame is staggering. “The Mississippi River Gulf Outlet... created by the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers to expedite shipping, had destroyed Greater New Orleans’s natural land barrier, and it created a funnel that would direct storm surges right into the city” (Adams 22). The canals prevented the replenishment of the wetlands (22)—the natural land-barrier for New Orleans. The merger between the Federal Emergency Management Authority (FEMA) and the Office of Homeland Security two years earlier caused “firms... subcontracted to the Army Corps of Engineers... [to be noncompetitively] called upon to provide disaster relief despite... no
experience or training in humanitarian assistance operations” (25). The damage of Hurricane Katrina is unequivocally the sum of all of these errors and derelictions, among doubtless others not mentioned here.

Any idea of Katrina as a “natural” disaster and, thus, a politically neutral event would have relied upon myths of such disasters as “great equalizers” (Kendall 115) and proudly held up (white) “relief workers and volunteers... [and] applauded these people for their bravery and tenacity” (138) to deny claims of it ever being about race. “Ultimately... media framing of disaster stories... overlook many problems confronting the working class and working poor” (216) just as their stereotypical working-class representation “sublates racial markers” similar to the ways criticisms of Michelle Obama’s work in the White House were related as issues of class, not race (McAlister, “_____ Trash” 312).7 Where the debates surrounding Obama’s decoration of the White House “sanitizes the standards of appraisal by displacing racial categories with class propriety” (312), discourse around black looters in New Orleans was made a matter of low-class (and thus inappropriately) behaviors, with reports calling looters “stupid” and “low” (Miller & Roberts 40). National news media cast judgments based on a perception that those looting were somehow too dense to understand the gravity of the situation, that they were “laughing” and “celebrating like it’s a carnival” (Miller & Roberts 40), deviating from the proper and acceptable emotional response, overwhelmingly determined by viewers of Katrina’s visuals as “sadness,” followed by “compassion” and “fear” (Miller & Roberts 37).

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7 Joan Faber McAlister’s use of “sublation” is drawn from Hegelian writings on “Aufheben.” For McAlister, sublation refers to a process which “both negates and preserves the abandoned term in the new category—in this case by having class take up the place of race in ways that shore up entrenched privileges” (“_____ Trash” 312).
Judgmental characterizations of the black people dependent on aid in New Orleans continued even past sublating comments on class, however, as black bodies were contained within the Superdome to receive aid. Black New Orleans evacuees were cast as “animalistic,” committing “unthinkable atrocities like [raping] babies and [murdering] children” within the space of the Superdome, an impromptu ward arranged to protect them (207). What emerged from the “coverage of the Superdome-as-hell,” then, was a horrible spectacle of performances of “image vernaculars.... The alternate symbolic universe of the ghetto spilling over into the official space of the Superdome” (206). The ghettoization of black New Orleans was restaged—manifested within the space of the Superdome (a structure already built around spectating violence)—and functioned as inversion and reimagining of the theatrical performance illustrated in Harper’s Weekly titled, “A Slave-Pen at New Orleans—Before the Auction” (Roach 212). In other words, the Superdome-as-hell restaged a “behavioral vortex” which shocked and “revived memory” of the “slave spectacle” (Roach 213), similar to communication scholar Lilie Chouliaraki’s “theater of pity,” a “communicative structure... that, by circulating images and stories about suffering, proposes dispositions of emotion and action to the West” (1). Revived memories display suffering for the audience’s consumption but also call for corresponding actions and modes of reception. As I will discuss shortly, these modes of reception can serve to further entrench damaging and racist stereotypes among viewers of such performances and memory revivals.

In the illustrated performance from 1863, “A Slave-Pen at New Orleans—Before the Auction,” black “slaves” were dressed “in top hats and tails” to display the formerly everyday scene of the slave auction, given exposure through “extraordinary performances” triggered by the high-class outfits on who would be considered low-class people, African Americans (Roach 213). “A
Slave-Pen at New Orleans” thus exposed the commonplace injustice of slavery. The Superdome, as an inverted and heightened drama, was “revelatory” in its ability to “lay bare the sins of structural racism” (Grano & Zagacki 204). As Grano & Zagacki quoted Superdome manager Doug Thornton: “The world saw the Superdome at its worst. The roof had blown off” (210). We might expand that assessment to say that Hurricane Katrina blew the roof off a structurally racist and unjust New Orleans (and, by extension, a structurally racist and unjust nation). The horrifying spectacle that lay underneath was displayed within the Superdome, a grotesque “cesspool” (Grano & Zagacki 209) at “the eye of the vortex” (Roach 213)—not unlike the “human catch-pool” of the New Orleans slums—that “breeds social ills and requires endless outside assistance” (Jacobs 278). These concentric performances function with the Superdome as what communication scholar Ross Louis calls an “iconographic site of citizenship failure and reclamation” (281). Here and throughout this thesis I use “citizen” as “a performed enactment of locality” (281) as well as a performed enactment of one’s relation to state and institutional structures. As Louis writes, during moments of crisis “performances offer lessons about the fragility of citizenship and its relationship to an embodied, place-based identity” (281). I argue that this fragility of citizenship is partially due to its exposure of some of the underlying machinations and systemic tensions that characterize a body’s relationship to the state.

In order for more privileged citizen-witnesses to shield themselves from the uncomfortable revelations of consuming such a display, we turn to deflecting rhetorics and pitying representations of the black people suffering as less-than-human, as animalistic, and as in some way asking for it. Now that the roof has been blown off and we have seen some semblance of the festering wound beneath—the Lower Ninth Ward as a “symbol of societal failure, including persistent poverty,
crumbling homes and streets, and racial tension” (“Are Newcomers”)—we are compelled for better or worse to heal, repair, and rebuild so that it all might be in the past and comfortable cycles of oppressive inequality might continue.

*Televised Disaster: Knowing Through Media*

The tragic events of Hurricane Katrina were thoroughly televised, broadcast across the United States and beyond as a tragic representation of struggle and death. Television programs such as NBC’s “A Concert for Hurricane Relief” attempted to guide viewership toward donating money and time, but for the millions who donated neither it merely became a spectacle, something from which one could not look away. Katrina became a disturbing reenactment of centuries of inequality, similar to the “dark tourism” described by Richard Sharpley (among others) and to “toxic tourism,” as explored by rhetorical scholar Phaedra Pezzullo. Sharpley asserts that “visitors have long been attracted to places or events associated in one way or another with death, disaster and suffering” (5) and Pezzullo adds that tourism itself is associated with death, disaster, and suffering, a conclusion brought on by our cultural distaste for tourists:

it’s not just that we don’t like tourists or find tourism pointless. Our disdain belies a stronger, more powerful, underlying cultural belief: *tourism is toxic*. Tourism contaminates the people and the places where it occurs. Tourism corrodes. Tourism offends. Tourism exploits. In a sense, some might even conclude, tourism kills. (2)

As a place of disaster, New Orleans and the Lower Ninth Ward become a site of dark tourism, rendering the site itself toxic. As neoliberal processes take hold in the Lower Ninth Ward, and as
things like “Katrina Tours” become popular\(^8\)—further problematized by racist pasts associating black people with darkness and death—the space becomes increasingly uninhabitable for the working-class minorities formerly living there.

Katrina and its mediations became a spectacle of restaging historical horrors—primarily of slavery, racial violence, and decades of marginalization—onto the slums urban scholar Jane Jacobs described so well. Without addressing the historical and cultural underpinnings perpetuating urban inequality in New Orleans, attempted interventions of their effects run the risk of perpetuating and worsening the underlying currents of inequality. As urban theorist Mike Davis writes in his foreword to *New Orleans Under Reconstruction*: “Set aside Mardi Gras beads and other clichés of the Big Easy: no outsider is morally qualified to join the Second Line unless he or she is prepared to confront the generations of continuous violence committed against people of color in our most fecund and only tropical city” (Reese, Sorkin, & Fontenot ix). Understanding the historical effects of generations of continuous violence is not as easy as opening a textbook to reveal an accurate accounting of oppression. One of the primary impulses for my research of the Make It Right Foundation was a suspicion that the organization’s distance from New Orleans—the city, its culture, its people, and its histories—made it extremely difficult for MIR to understand the grounds for its response to Hurricane Katrina. My concern was that with MIR staging Katrina as the result of a series of structural injustices—which it necessarily could not fully understand—the organization’s efforts were bound to fail. Grounded in falsely constructed premises of New

\(^8\) The most popular are tours run by Gray Line, Tours by Isabelle, Free Tours by Foot, and the Louisiana Tour Company. Prices range widely: Free Tours by Foot is a resource mapping points of interest and listing information for self-guided tours (“Self Guided”), Gray Line offers guided public tours for $50/person (“Hurricane Katrina Tour”), and Tours by Isabelle lists a cost of $850 for a private group tour (“Post Katrina Tour”). Given reports that “thousands” of tourists sign up for Gray Line’s tour alone (Whitworth), one can imagine the profitability for successful dark tourism businesses.
Orleans, MIR and disaster relief efforts like it would necessarily be colonizing forces working from stereotypical characterizations of what the city was and needed.

This understanding of proximity as necessary for understanding place comes supported by rhetorician Carole Blair’s “Reflections on Criticism and Bodies: Parables from Public Places,” wherein she stressed the importance of “being there” (274). Of course, this assumption of the falseness of a distant understanding of New Orleans also presupposes some means of a whole truth of what New Orleans is or needs. Given the multitudinous positions affording even an intimate understanding of New Orleans—or the Lower Ninth Ward, for that matter—and given the fact that residents of the area are themselves not blind nor immune to the mediatized portrayals that others in the nation rely on to learn what New Orleans is all about, I had to change my approach. Local understandings of New Orleans and the Lower Ninth Ward are largely inaccessible to me for the current iteration of this project. Whether through the lens(es) of popular television or institutional (thus white and patriarchal) academia, or only in reference to the disaster of Hurricane Katrina, the mediated histories of New Orleans are all necessarily part of the incomplete whole of cultural understanding of the city. New Orleans cannot be known unless partially through the warped and speckled looking glass of its mediated illustrations.

To account for the role of media in understanding a place such as New Orleans or the Lower Ninth Ward, and to prevent a sloppy and premature invalidation of the Make It Right Foundation’s work due to “faulty” understandings of the area, I reframe mediated histories through performance studies. By use of performance studies scholar Joseph Roach and his book *Cities of the Dead: Circum-Atlantic Performance*, I celebrate the performed histories of New Orleans offered and consider them in conversation with the mediated understandings of New Orleans.
used as MIR’s foundation and exigence for action. With this introduction I attempt to better articulate the mediated (encore) performance of histories of oppression and violence that MIR and philanthropic organizations like it understand Katrina to be.

The Seeds We’ve Sown, the Roots We Bury

In Joseph Roach’s Cities of the Dead, he prefaces the book by stating that “the memories of some particular times and places have become embodied in and through performances.... But also... memories torture themselves into forgetting by disguising their collaborative interdependence across imaginary borders of race, nation, and origin” (xi, emphasis added). New Orleans is a city of the dead, and was one long before “Katrina” became a household signifier of the area’s suffering. The city embodies memories of slavery and inequality and multiple other violences; it has performed them, spectacularized them, and simultaneously tortured its memories into forgetting. Despite and/or because of their continued performance, structural inequalities and pains have been disguised; intertwined roots have been covered over to where we cannot see how rampant poverty and natural disasters relate. Hurricane Katrina washed away the soil covering machinations of inequality and suffering set in motion hundreds of years ago.

New Orleans, as a “city of the dead” which “exists not only as artifacts, such as cemeteries and commemorative landmarks, but also as behaviors” (Roach xi), is an especially “performance-saturated city” (Roach 10) considering its strong ties to cultural and ritualistic displays of civic identity. This is seen performed through Mardi Gras and (especially following Katrina) the New

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9 In this thesis I will be speaking on both the storm and the larger cultural phenomena that surrounded the storm. The name “Katrina” now has a monolithic meaning, functioning to encompass the storm, the flooding, the resulting deaths, the decade-long (and longer) attempt to recover, and more. To differentiate: I refer to the storm itself as “Hurricane Katrina,” and to the contextual cultural phenomenon and discourse as simply “Katrina.”
Orleans Saints football team. This unique, localized performance is also rather visible in terms of both the more materially constructed, built enactment of the New Orleans wards and districts as slums and the dramatically framed excess of tensions in the man-made disaster that was Hurricane Katrina and its aftermath. To begin to understand these performances of history and culture as leading up to and including the perpetuation of inequalities, tensions, and the disastrous spectacle that was Hurricane Katrina, we must look back to Louisiana’s historical roots within and beyond North American politics.

Contextualizing New Orleans, especially due to the history of the American South and the richly colonial cultures present there, is an extensive project. To consider colonial Louisiana, for instance, is to consider “a complex, changing society that responded to a great extent to international pressures. ‘National’ history must be transcended, and colonial history treated within a global context” (Gwendolyn Midlo Hall xiii). To better understand the Afro-Creole culture that flourished in New Orleans, then, we would need to historicize the Atlantic slave trade of the mid-sixteenth century and the primary source of the slaves taken to Louisiana by the French: Senegambia, the region between the Senegal and the Gambia rivers (Gwendolyn Midlo Hall 29). These “vast movements of people and commodities” generated consequences which “continue to visit themselves upon the material and human fabric of the cities inhabited by their successors” (Roach xi). Predecessor to today’s Louisiana’s culture, the French trade of slaves and goods left an indelible mark upon New Orleans history. Through the cultures of its represented African nations in conjunction with the French colonial culture constructed in Louisiana, this trade molded the formation of Afro-Creole culture (31).
Eventually, into the 1900s, the racial lines between whites, Native Americans, and African slaves were blurred. “Intimate relations among peoples of all three races flourished” (Gwendolyn Midlo Hall 238), partially due to harsh frontier conditions (240). This intermingling and growth created a relatively exclusionary and local culture where “Louisiana Creole was the only language spoken by most whites... [and] blacks, well into the twentieth century” (238). These performances of New Orleans peculiarity (as well as later performances) place it on Roach’s “two general axes of possibility” for origin performance: at the intersection of “the diasporic, which features migration, and the autochthonous, which claims indigenous roots deeper than memory itself” (42). That New Orleans laid claim to the cultural heritages of its immigrant population in conversation with its indigenous roots displays a unique allegiance to the very space of New Orleans as part of the confluence of the Mississippi River Delta, as a strategic political and economic hub (Roach 9), and as a cultural, colonial point of francophone rivalry with anglophone interests (7). New Orleans, thus, has an immense trans-Atlantic history which, when stacked with its history within the context of race relations in the United States, leads to the formation of a powder-keg of tensions and inequality.

It is then erroneous to suggest that New Orleans is or ever was a peaceful mixing pot: despite (and because of) the racial mixing which occurred, there was a crisis of purity and hierarchy. Indeed, as civil rights pioneer Louis Martinet wrote on walking the streets of New Orleans: “There are the strangest white people you ever saw here.... If you were not informed you would be sure to pick out the white for colored & the colored for white” (qtd in Roach 185). More directly articulating the problem with this confusion, Roach writes: “There are too many incommensurate objects, species, mixtures, and colors, the propinquity of which the entrepôt of New Orleans
makes continuously visible” (Roach 186). This cosmopolitan lack of clear delineation was cause for concern, and the state responded with reinforced racism. Contributing to and continuing with the racial tensions which led up to the American Civil War, “a heavy-handed repression of whites as well as blacks who opposed racism and racist terror was essential to the survival of slavery and subsequent forms of exploitation and repression in Louisiana” (Gwendolyn Midlo Hall 380). These racial tensions serve as precursors to issues of oppression up through today, cut into sharp relief as we consider the recent, astronomical rise in awareness of police brutality and murder of minority citizens in the United States.

As prime examples of New Orleans’ starring role within race-based US political controversy: it held centrality in the 1896 Plessy v Ferguson case, which legitimated the “separate but equal” doctrine and then again later, in 1954, with the federal decision from Brown v Board of Education calling for desegregation of public schools, Louisiana announced “Massive Resistance,” wherein “between 1954 and 1960, the state legislature... used a variety of methods to obstruct the desegregation.... [and] New Orleans’ schools became a political combat zone...” (Rogers 35). Systematically suppressing black voices through “Ku Klux Klan control law,” the “scrub... of black voters from registration lists,” and the exclusion of the “poorly educated” (poor, black) from voting, Louisiana placed its crown jewel of New Orleans in direct opposition with the best interests of its black population (Rogers 36).

As Mike Davis writes, there are “generations of continuous violence committed against people of color in our most fecund and only tropical city” (Reese, Sorkin, & Fontenot ix) and, “a black nouveau riche stratum... acquired a substantial stake in the politics of redevelopment” (Reese, Sorkin, & Fontenot xi). The dominance of class as gentrifying power—overcoming even
racial divides when a member of the minority can move above their typical class status—reminds us that neoliberalism, above all else, is the motivating factor behind New Orleans’ gentrification and redevelopment. This aligns cleanly with bell hooks’ treatment of the “new black elite,” where “the miseducation of all underprivileged black groups strengthens the class power of the nonprogressive black elite,” and where this “allegiance” to class origins functions as “strategic repression” (97). These tensions manifest into continued cycles of oppression and discrimination, which can be accounted for in materialist engagements with class-based social relations. As rhetorician Dana Cloud describes, “class society in general, and capitalist society in particular, is marked by an objective dialectical clash between contending classes and their interests” (“Materialist” 293). The black body in 1950s Louisiana was classed, its voice elided and in the first place refused in favor of the ruling white class’s interests in continued segregation (and thus lesser education for the lower classes).

The dominant and materially invested white class created and perpetuated conditions for the “vicious cycles” (Jacobs 270) that exist in every American city: slums. Jane Jacobs describes slums and their populations as “the victims (and the perpetrators) of seemingly endless troubles that reinforce each other” (270), where “the key link... is that too many people move out of it too fast—and in the meantime dream of getting out” (271). These are areas dependent upon the aid of the city in the first place: such as welfare zones named blatantly as “wards.” The Lower Ninth Ward, a primarily black neighborhood of New Orleans is framed along with the other “wards” and purportedly protected and custodial zones in terms of classist and racist stereotypes. More importantly, the Lower Ninth Ward was so badly destroyed that it was considered a clean slate for projects such as the Make It Right Foundation to come in and create “a template that could be
replicated at the macro level” (Pitt 8). This points to its treatment as an utter loss, cut and abandoned by the state to be picked up by opportunistic private interests.

Malpractice and neglect characterize the relationship of the city to its wards. “As far back as 1914 the government had total disregard for the property or the wishes of the residents of the Ninth Ward,” writes MIR project co-producer Nina Killeen. “...[T]hey expropriated land with homes and historical buildings—demolishing them to make way for progress, progress that still today is being debated” (Feireiss 81). Regardless of public opinion, it seems, the capitalistic machine claims land and property while deliberative processes are suspended and removed of all efficacy. This suspension of deliberation is seen most vividly in instances of disaster capitalism, as Naomi Klein describes it. Hurricane Katrina, as a disaster that triggered great social change in New Orleans, is a rich example of a site of disaster capitalism.
The wound remained open for years after Hurricane Katrina, and—depending on who you ask—it is still open today. Aid and compassion sent to New Orleans began to slow to a trickle as the nation suffered from “Katrina fatigue,” where “Katrina is like the funeral that won’t end,” described in 2009 as “nearly four years of dying” (Adams 178). Katrina fatigue, similar to the fatigue which accompanies any large-scale disaster and its long-term recovery, meant that “although ‘recovery’ had not been achieved by everyone, the disaster was in some sense ‘over’” (Adams 179). The city of New Orleans embraced this mood: “The disaster was over in the popular imagination, in the media, and even in the hearts and minds of many of those who returned” (179, emphasis original). With the “escapist... bodies of diversion [and] spectacles of forgetfulness” that were the New Orleans’ Saints (Serazio 166), for example—their return to the newly purified Superdome (Grano & Zagacki), their “newfound glory [in] winning the Super Bowl”—and with the election of a new mayor with “a fervent sense that things would finally change for the better,” New Orleans performed “out with the old, in with the new” while still being “typical New Orleans: le plus ça change, plus c’est le même chose” (Adams 180). The more things change, the more they stay the same.

This cycle is one which perpetuates the slums (Jacobs 270) and is aligned with citizenship performance “patterned by, but not reducible to, the constraints of structure or past innovation” (Perrin, qtd in Louis 282). Practices of citizenship are mostly limited to precedent, so Jacobs’ slum cycles are incredibly difficult to break. As these co-constitutive citizen/city performances continue they reinforce the “typical New Orleans” Adams speaks to (180). Considering this cyclical

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10 “Le plus ça change, plus c’est la même chose” was an epigram first written by French writer and critic Jean-Baptiste Alphonse Karr in Les Guêpes in 1866. Vincanne Adams uses it to refer to cycles of change in New Orleans which serve primarily to reinforce the social status quo. For this reason, I find the sentiment highly appropriate to discussion of neoliberal processes within the disaster zones of post-Katrina New Orleans.
reinforcing of structural issues, the question arose for some: Why rebuild at all? Why not cut the cycle and let New Orleans wither? Based partially in conceptions of the people of New Orleans as asking for it by living in a basin below sea level and by refusing to (or being unable to) evacuate the city, these questions point back to the root problem: large swaths of New Orleans had already been abandoned, neglected by the state and coldly characterized as lecherously dependent. Central to the issue of the (lack of) aid in New Orleans overall, of course, is the fact that the majority of people needing assistance in Katrina were black. Met with an insufficient response emblematic of their historical abandonment by federal and state institutions, black people struggling to survive various disasters are often simultaneously villainized (Strachan) and pitied (“Shock Therapy,” Cloud) in mass media coverage.

In a retrospective Huffington Post article on Kanye West’s controversial statement—“George Bush doesn’t care about black people”—and its rhetorical resonance with the Black Lives Matter movement today, journalist Maxwell Strachan called the statement “a moment that would lead to songs and skits, academic debates and calls to change the way Americans think and talk about race.” For my purposes in discussing Katrina and particular efforts at recovering the area of the Lower Ninth Ward—a historically and presently black-predominant neighborhood of New Orleans—Kanye West’s words represent a broad and powerful attitude, a generalizable rhetorical orientation accusing institutional powers of negligence and even willful abandonment of black Americans. I argue that West’s insight into an alternative interpretation of the rhetorical framings in media representations of black Katrina survivors and victims generated a critical Burkean consubstantiality, a sense of being “substantially one” with another to enable “an acting-together within, and defined by, a common context” (Burke 21). In this instance, consubstantiality formed
around shared identities and performances of subjugated black American relations to their national state and institutions.

FEMA, the primary federal organization for aiding Hurricane Katrina’s victims, was widely blamed for New Orleans’ sluggish recovery efforts immediately following the storm, with local news reporting, for example, that many “couldn’t find FEMA anywhere” (Singer). The then-head of FEMA, Michael Brown, wrote an editorial for Politico detailing the failure as primarily on the part of Mayor Nagin for not ordering the evacuation of the city sooner. Brown writes,

Nagin finally asked people to evacuate on Sunday morning for a storm that hit his city sometime after midnight that night. By that point, Amtrak had left the city with rail cars sans passengers. Airlines had evacuated Louis Armstrong International Airport with planes sans travelers. And school buses sat in their lots, soon to be flooded and ruined. The mayor’s incompetence cost lives.

Later found guilty of twenty counts including bribery, conspiracy, and money laundering during his two terms as mayor, Ray Nagin is currently serving a ten year sentence in federal prison (Associated Press).
Constructing Alternative Exigence

In Brad Pitt’s foreword to Architecture in Times of Need, he identifies and acknowledges the contextual and structural issues that contributed to the precarity of the Lower Ninth Ward’s infrastructure, population, and economy, rendering it largely incapable of recovery from a disaster like Hurricane Katrina. Pitt uses those issues as mold for his rhetorical response, listing a series of mandates that Make It Right would be held to: constructing sustainable, green, just, innovative, and community-driven homes using “great architectural minds” while creating jobs, preserving New Orleans culture, and taking “what was wrong and [making] it right” (8).

Brad Pitt and the Make It Right Foundation want something more for New Orleans than a return to the status quo, denying the “Big Easy’s” oft-invoked phrase of “le plus ça change, plus c’est le même chose” as commentary on the nature of change in a place as rooted in traditions as New Orleans (McBrayer). If Kanye West’s “George Bush doesn’t care about black people” comment coalesced a public critical of the governmental failure to address the disaster and its aftermath, then Pitt and MIR’s framing of Katrina as a man-made disaster historicized that sentiment. Rather than considering Hurricane Katrina to be a natural disaster—one which formed due to patterns of nature and various meteorological effects as somehow divorced from human activity—MIR joins a crowd of voices determining that Katrina was man-made, the result of human action, and thus something that needs to be repaired immediately and prevented for the future. This point is made in popular press, such as in Grunwald’s 2010 piece in Time Magazine, “Katrina: A Man-Made Disaster,” as well as by Brad Pitt, who wrote: “Katrina was man-made.... Decades of reckless handling of the levees combined with a negligent lack of political effort to rectify issues that were common knowledge would ultimately kill more than 1,800 people” (7). Adams, Grunwald, and
Pitt’s well-established understanding of Katrina being man-made focuses claims of rhetorical (in)action on the political and material negligence afforded by a number of political injustices. Pitt points toward the material strain of slums as triggered by neoliberal economics and racial oppression and inequality, simply denying the uniqueness of New Orleans’ plight as primary exigence and instead treating it as microcosmically representative of greater, global issues (Pitt 7).

In his articulation of the man-made catastrophe that was (and remains) Hurricane Katrina, Brad Pitt found exigence in an apparent inability to respond in a crisis, saying “we failed—failed miserably” (Pitt 7). Predating that issue, however, he also placed blame on the man-made origin of the hurricane itself: “New Orleans is a victim of climate change given the increase in frequency and ferocity of storms...” wherein climate change is caused by human (in)action (7). In accord with rhetorical scholar Frank Lloyd Bitzer’s conceptualization, though with an unexpected twist, Pitt treats the failed response to the hurricane and flooding as rhetorical exigence, as “an exigence is rhetorical when it is capable of positive modification and when positive modification requires discourse or can be assisted by discourse” (Bitzer 6). Brad Pitt thus places Bitzer against himself, where Bitzer had stated that “natural” disasters are not rhetorical (6). Pitt spreads blame further within a complex network of housing malpractice, “oil greed,” and inequality in political protection (7). A socio-political vortex that spans centuries of racial injustice, Katrina can be framed as the manifestation of these historical and structural inequalities and as an opportunity to right those historical wrongs.

The Make It Right Foundation refused to answer the primary exigence of the need for immediate relief. Instead, it embraced an alternative and more political timeline, aiming for an alternative kairos as the “role of timing, opportunity, and situation” (“Materialist” 295) in the
context of a larger materialist dialectic, where “discourse mediates objective class relationships in the history of the struggle for hegemony” (“Materialist” 297). MIR is critical of governmental responses to Katrina that provide merely the most fundamental forms of shelter and calls for longer-term solutions. MIR responds not only to FEMA’s failure to function well but also attempts to offer an alternative to FEMA’s biopolitical orientation, which strives to find the bare minimum needed to sustain lives and sets this threshold based on a racialized norm for delineating “deserving” and “undeserving” populations. MIR also resists a crudely utilitarian model of emergency housing, which aims to provide the most houses for the most people with little to no attention to aesthetics because those are perceived as a luxury to be enjoyed by some and unnecessary to others. MIR promotes an aspirational vision of how the future might be, rather than capitulating to need-based emergency policies. This vision, in all its completeness, also profoundly limits the available means of performing citizenship for its new residents.
CHAPTER ONE
Rendering Disaster Architecture

The people of New Orleans continue to struggle to make their way home. As officials and politicians juggle blame, we are left with the question of how disaster response does (and perhaps also how it ought to) change when it becomes clear that the disaster is the result of institutional negligence (and thus a negligence that is culturally based, politically oriented, and rhetorically practiced). Identifying at least some of the contextual issues enabling a disaster on the scale of Katrina, the Make It Right Foundation attempts to provide an answer to that question.

MIR frames its broad scope and long-term focus as significant insofar as it resisted the dominant exigence of Hurricane Katrina, and did so in the interest of respecting the residents and restoring their “dignity” (Feireiss 9) as citizens, deciding not to “give in to the temptation to rush forward and provide cookie-cutter, temporary shelters” (Feireiss 9). Former and even current residents of the Lower Ninth Ward, however, might question Feireiss’s claim that MIR can bestow dignity. The complex and unequal power relationship between MIR and those it aids—as only exacerbated by paternalistic rhetorics from visionary architects—suggests that dignity would be given only from the perspective of those who have some ideological conviction that failing to own a home is somehow undignified. Citing the call for immediate solutions and instant relief as a “temptation,” Feireiss characterizes Make It Right as interestingly situated between two axes of ability and will. Presumably under the assumption that others would handle these immediate solutions, Make It Right took hesitant steps toward a future more optimistic for New Orleans than narratives of simple recovery (Feireiss 9).

Part of Make It Right’s focus on helping former inhabitants to regain their “dignity” could be a political assertion of an inherent worth of these denizens, countering systematic devaluing and
efforts at gentrification by “considering the city’s people valuable and worth retaining, right where they are, before they become middle class” (Jacobs 282, emphasis mine). Valuing the working class for what they are is part of the process of “unslumming” a city, of healing the wound of poverty, of increasing the standard of living for even (and especially) the least financially stable of its inhabitants (282). This process of elevating the working class seemingly begins, according to MIR, by attempting to make these populations assimilate to middle (or even upper) class aesthetics and values from the outside in. MIR’s contradiction in wishing to value working class citizens while trying to make them appear middle class emerges from a generally paternalistic attitude of “healing wounds” while merely asserting aesthetic solutions. In other words, by owning a postmodern home and performing their citizenship in correspondence with the aesthetics and space of that home, the homes themselves (and their residents) will “unslum” the Lower Ninth Ward. The slums are understood and recognizable according to aesthetic terms, so the project of “unslumming” is, in essence, a project of renovation, a process that may aesthetically recover the Lower Ninth Ward, but nevertheless participates in what Jacobs calls the “vicious cycle” of slum creation. If not here, elsewhere.

Any attempt at valuing the working class for what they are is undone by MIR’s architecture and aesthetics as well as the paternalistic relationship that develops between the foundation and the Lower Ninth Ward. Even organizations with the best of intentions like MIR will inadvertently perpetuate the causes of the symptoms they address, if they are not careful to address the deep history of structural inequalities in the city of New Orleans. The process by which this paternalistic relationship comes to bear on aesthetic projects of “unslumming” and renovating an area suffering from a deep, man-made ill such as Katrina is what I will be describing as “disaster architecture.” To
describe how disaster architecture arose in the Lower Ninth Ward, I turn to critiques of MIR as a means of tracing the manufacturing of local consent for its projects.

**Foundations in Times of Need**

The Make It Right Foundation was prompted and justified by media renderings of the disaster of Katrina to begin work in the Lower Ninth Ward. As they wished to be a part of the community’s recovery, however, MIR worked to gain the consent of those in the area (despite claiming a collaborative model of community work). This section addresses how consent was constructed for MIR but also the resulting challenges and critiques of the organization. By doing this, we might better understand how disaster architecture installs itself and justifies its presence in communities.

MIR has claimed local inspiration and support and argues that it has provided the public numerous opportunities to weigh in on its decisions. They claim “a collaborative, transparent approach” with the formation of the “Lower 9th Ward Stakeholders Coalition,” which consists of “a group of community leaders, neighborhood association leaders, and local stakeholders” (Green). They credit the help of a New Orleans local (white real estate professional), Nina Killeen, for advising on the character and worth of New Orleans. Brad Pitt was reported to have gone on a “listening tour” to community meetings about the Lower Ninth Ward’s recovery, where he would

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11 Nina Killeen’s excerpt in *Architecture in Times of Need* responds to the question MIR faced often: “Should New Orleans be rebuilt at all?” Killeen’s response, titled “A Chance to Come Home,” problematically describes the “modest” accommodations in the Lower Ninth Ward, saying that they “didn’t have much, but they had all they needed to be happy” and describing their remaining in the neighborhood—both at points of inheriting homes and in the face of Hurricane Katrina—as a “refusal” to leave and a “choice” to stay (Feireiss 82), failing to comment on the effects of poverty on their lack of mobility. Killeen’s argument is that the people of the Lower Ninth Ward deserve a chance to come home, no matter how “modest” the home.
stand and give his pitch for Make It Right.12 “These residents had heard so many lies that nobody was beyond intense scrutiny.... He made a direct appeal.... he had a vision.... His pure empathy beamed forth and everybody smiled” (Feireiss 16). Despite claims of engaging democratically with the Lower Ninth Ward community to inform its development, the narratives and reports sound less like democratic engagement and more like generation of consent, where decision-making powers are forfeited to select leaders.

Given the account of Brad Pitt as the Lower Ninth Ward’s otherworldly messiah—as written by author Douglas Brinkley in Architecture in Times of Need—it is clear that MIR’s primary mode of engaging the community is not one of democratic deliberation, but instead one which provides an illusion of democratic deliberation through manufactured consent. As architectural critic Rebecca Firestone reports on Make It Right’s participation in a New Orleans architectural conference before it began building, all the houses

are designed by prominent national architects, selected by invitation. This particular initiative was heavily promoted within the conference, including a carefully monitored bus tour where no contact with residents was allowed. In fact, no residents were present at the conference, either. (Firestone)

Following this, and from analysis of the architectural designs themselves, Firestone characterized MIR as “serving the vanity of its celebrity backers more than the displaced people it’s intended to help.” Pitt’s star-power cut through the slog of the community’s deliberative process of town hall discussions.

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12 Douglas Brinkley’s accounts of the “listening tours” offered the local citizens’ voices only through description of residents “livid at the callousness of the post-Katrina federal government response” and with “shell-shocked mothers [who] held children’s hands and prayed for their blocks of ruin” (Feireiss 16). According to this account, Brad Pitt sat at the back, listened to their cries, and then rose to deliver his solution and “cut through all that negativity with his heart” (Feireiss 16).
meetings and petitioning local governmental changes to policy, and offered a vision of a better future. Despite (and because of) Pitt’s star-power, reactions to the development are mixed: overwhelmed and grateful new residents—especially as reported by MIR themselves—contrast against skeptical locals and architectural critics.

Critiques of the organization range widely, from its aesthetics, its location, its construction practices, and so on. Tracing these critiques and seeing MIR’s response points to issues that might have been sidestepped had the deliberative process been more democratically open to critiques from the beginning. Accusing Make It Right of being “an exercise of vanity over practicality,” architect Mark English cites failure in attempts at cost-efficiency, authenticity to New Orleans culture, and at fostering the revival of the Lower Ninth Ward’s community (Firestone). English asks: “Are we seriously expected to believe that a handful of LEED houses will somehow create a template for the future, even while the architecture itself destroys the porch culture that formerly characterized the close-knit social life of the neighborhood?” These conflicts of interest and intentions, where models for the future are imposed upon a culture struggling to recover, continue to characterize the skepticism surrounding the foundation.

There has also been considerable push-back on MIR’s decision of what neighborhood to rebuild. Journalist Lydia DePillis authored a thorough dissent of MIR. A representative paragraph reads:

Pitt’s foundation could have chosen to put its money into a neighborhood where the compounding effects would’ve been remarkable, or at least one without the added risk and cost of building below sea level. He could also have built several hundred perfectly serviceable, weatherproof, and efficient new homes, instead of
the 90 he’s completed—like Barnes and Noble founder Leonard Riggio, who’ll build 200 new homes in a concentrated area in nearby Gentilly for about the same amount. He could even have filled in more quickly recovering neighborhoods with higher-quality traditional designs.... Instead, Pitt got an interesting architectural experiment, lots of gushy magazine coverage, and a place for [Make It Right home residents] to remember what life was like before it all floated away. (DePillis)

DePillis prioritizes tangible effects for the city of New Orleans, noting more effective areas where MIR could have built, housing and improving more people’s lives. In addition, DePillis notes the risk-factor in building in the flood-prone Lower Ninth Ward. Questions of whether the Lower Ninth Ward is a safe place to live come up again. Tulane University Geographer Richard Campanella also takes the position that the Lower Ninth Ward is too dangerous to serve as the location of recovery. He asks, “If you build sustainable structures but place them in a geographically unsustainable site, have you really ‘made it right’?” (Firestone).

Further complicating the racial tensions rooted in New Orleans, it’s been noted that “the city has become significantly whiter since the storm” and it’s been claimed that the “Make It White foundation... [has been] foisting $350,000 Frank Gehry-designed houses on poor black property owners... who may well, at some point, see an incentive to sell out and realize the nonprofit’s equity in their homes” (Matt Davis). The prestige of world-renowned architects brought MIR plenty of attention—bringing accusations of vanity, but also donations and national attention. Celebrity star-power extends to architects as well as Brad Pitt. As Peter Whoriskey points out, however, “none of [the] three most celebrated architects—Mayne, Ban and Gehry—can claim to have built any more than one prototype home out of the scores that have been built.” Citing issues
of “Alice-in-Wonderland elitism” and being “too clever to be built on a budget—that is, in reality” (Whoriskey), MIR’s star architects seem to be almost more of a liability than an asset. Coming to Make It Right’s defense, Metropolis Magazine editor Martin Pedersen writes:

Make It Right was aspirational from the start. It was never about building the most houses, the most expediently; never about rebuilding an entire neighborhood.

FEMA and the Road Home were supposed to handle that. It was about building for returning residents 150 LEED Platinum houses by some of the world’s best architects. It was also about creating a model for sustainable development.

Pedersen’s account of MIR’s aspirational orientation also establishes the foundation’s perception of exactly where institutional organizations failed. When he writes that FEMA and the Road Home were supposed to handle the basic rebuilding of New Orleans, he suggests that those institutional failures lacked the aspirational quality that MIR has.

GRAFT, one of the founding architectural firms involved in MIR, writes that “although the idea for Make It Right was sparked by a site-specific concern [Hurricane Katrina], the potency of the idea resides in its vast potential as a problem-solving model which can be utilized globally” (Feireiss 86). Make It Right’s project aspires to serve as a global model for recovery and progress. This rhetoric of global aspiration is where MIR slips into tone-deaf and even elitist discourse in relation to the people of the Lower Ninth Ward. To establish a global model, MIR must develop a generic aesthetic that is imposed upon specific sites while necessarily being imperfectly suited to each. This aspiration to solve the world’s crises through aesthetics and design corresponds with architectural theorist Mark Wigley’s statement: “it’s the job of an architect to be optimistic, to invent new forms of optimism, to contaminate us all with the possibility that we could live
differently” (Feireiss 11). The mythos surrounding the visionary architect contributes to paternalistic and elitist rhetorics which further distance MIR from the populations it is meant to be aiding.

While criticisms continue to stand against Make It Right, the foundation articulates in Architecture in Times of Need a relatively defensive negotiation of its original intentions and purposes. Pitt himself cited “misinterpretations of intent” as first among Make It Right’s “numerous complications” (Pitt 8) and Feireiss spent half a page (of a two and a half page section) detailing what the foundation is not: not just “using rich people’s resources to address poor people’s needs... but it is about a powerful long-term concept” (Feireiss 9). Rhetorical justification of needing to utilize “rich people’s resources” in order to effect change comes by way of a futurist, neoliberal orientation. The long-term concept itself justifies use and entrenchment of current capitalistic systems. Made defensive by its numerous skeptics, Architecture in Times of Need—as a rhetorical text accounting for Make It Right—is itself a fascinating balance of MIR’s self-preservation via reactionism and lofty idealism through forward-looking optimism.

Local dissent with MIR’s presence seems to signal a larger tension with recipients of aid in the Lower Ninth Ward and a general suspicion of philanthropy—especially with celebrity philanthropy, as seems relevant with the MIR neighborhood being colloquially called the “Brad Pitt houses.” This suspicion of celebrity philanthropy is particularly warranted through the lens of what Cloud calls “therapeutic discourse” (Control and Consolation), wherein celebrities appear in times of crisis on shows like Oprah Winfrey to “perform an important function as shock absorbers

13 The other complications: “complex loan structures, protection of architects’ designs, and worries about gentrification, just to name a few” (Pitt 8). MIR’s primary counter to the charge of gentrification has been its restriction of new residents to those who lived in the Lower Ninth Ward before Hurricane Katrina (later expanded to include first responders and schoolteachers) (“FAQ”).
who cushion the shock, bridge the divide between personal and political frames for tragedy, and compete and collaborate with the host during the interpretive process” (43). Cloud describes this process as “depoliticizing but not apolitical, as [Oprah Winfrey’s] program and the talk show genre thus participate in broader ideological patterns warranting new forms of colonialism and empire” (43). During times of crisis, celebrities in the media soften the blow of bad news and work to humanize the tragedy, attempting to spur action (donations, volunteering, and so on) in the audience while simultaneously rendering the political underpinnings of the crisis less visible. During NBC’s “Concert for Hurricane Relief,” an array of various celebrities appeared to speak to the audience, to promote donation and calm responses to tragedy.

According to the script, the program would never serve to point attention toward the political inequalities driving New Orleans and particularly the black bodies residing there to be particularly vulnerable to Hurricane Katrina’s destructive force. Kanye West, of course, abandoned his script and made a highly political series of statements. The impact of such statements were only heightened by the fact that they broke the conventional role of celebrity during crisis on television. The Make It Right Foundation wishes to make a similar move by shifting to an alternate kairotpe, one which addresses (even vaguely) the structural histories creating unequal geographies in New Orleans, as well as its contextual elements in the period of time just before Hurricane Katrina struck.
**Need Identification and Virtue Hunting**

When celebrity philanthropists and organizations like Make It Right assert the state’s failure to protect its citizens and step into the fray, they are responding to and acting within the vacuum left where state welfare policies and programs once stood. Members of the public might ask what difference it makes who is providing the aid. They may even believe that privatization would encourage broader dispersal of aid to people previously invisible to the state. As private interests, foundations like Make It Right do have freer reign over their selection processes. Brad Pitt limited the potential aid from MIR to those who previously lived in the Lower Ninth Ward, later expanding to include first responders and schoolteachers. Had Pitt wished, MIR could have been limited to aiding only those grievously injured by the storm, those who donated to the foundation, or those who have demonstrated an appreciation for postmodern architectural styles. As it is, MIR’s narrowing of potential aid recipients effectively limited access to who were the middle-class residents of the Lower Ninth Ward, who did not lose all of their assets in the storm. This discriminatory capacity of private interests is easily done in harmful ways, with little to nothing holding it to more fair distributions of aid. The freedom of private interests to act as they will upon fragile and disenfranchised populations is an unfortunate result of the collapse of the welfare state that further disempowers minorities and the working class while re-entrenching the dominance of the capitalistic model.

The welfare state, for decades now, has been an abandoned concept in the United States. The idea of the obligation of the state as caretaker, as responsible for the well-being of its citizens, was displaced and foisted upon the free market, where welfare and need became opportunities for profits. Direct relationships of preying upon the weak were set in place under the guise of freedom,
choice, and broadly beneficial competition. The denigration of state welfare programs, as Harvey describes, left “larger and larger segments of the population exposed to impoverishment. The social safety net [was] reduced to a bare minimum in favour of a system that emphasized personal responsibility” (76). The stability of employment and income required to make mortgage payments on a new home reveal values not only of acting and expressing one’s citizenship through the market, but also of personal responsibility and accountability for one’s own failures, regardless of social inequalities in the way. This connection between neoliberal practices and the discourses surrounding welfare deterioration allow for other facets to be illustrated, toward a more fully formed rendering of disaster architecture: societal and structural inequalities based on issues of identity, such as sexism and racism.

Nancy Fraser, in her 1987 article “Women, Welfare and the Politics of Need Interpretation,” identified cuts to social welfare programs as a necessarily feminist issue due to the fact that

[an] increasing number of women depend directly for their livelihoods on social-welfare programs; and many others benefit indirectly, since the existence of even a minimal and inadequate ‘safety net’ increases the leverage of women who are economically dependent on individual men. (88)

As is crucial in representing Katrina, Fraser’s work helps to communicate the uneven terrain and thus unequal effects of disasters on different populations. Fraser, of course, was writing during the attacks on welfare. This thesis takes part in welfare’s postmortem. A lack of effective social welfare programs is unequally damaging, biased toward hurting the more precarious state of underserved minorities in this country. As an instantiation of the private substitution of social welfare, MIR’s
disaster architecture is thus of particular feminist concern. Given the unequal distributions of aid, an adequate response to increasingly privatized systems of social aid would necessarily need to be feminist, and thus concerned with repairing unjust systems of distribution and quality of life for members of all oppressed minority groups.

The issue of welfare is of pointed concern when paired with neoliberal critiques. Fraser raises the issue of “need identification” as primary concern for the federal welfare system. “Shall the state undertake to satisfy the social needs of a given constituency and to what degree?” (Fraser 104); this is the primary question for the welfare state, and the politics of need interpretation is, at least for Fraser, “the political stake” (104). Considering MIR from this perspective raises questions of how they establish not only who may be in need but also for whom it is their mission to provide aid. Make It Right does, for instance, identify a specific recipient in its aims by opening the houses initially only to former community members of the Lower Ninth Ward and later additionally to first responders and teachers in the area. This move seems to be done as counter to accusations of gentrification—of attempting to attract a wealthier, younger, whiter, and more “hip” population of residents—but the specificity with which MIR can target its aid is a result of its privatized status.

In her call for feminist attention to welfare struggles, Fraser works “to propose a framework for inquiry which can shed light on both [structural and ideological problems] simultaneously” (104). As well as being an attempt at updating the conversation around effects of state welfare’s dissolution, a theory of disaster architecture also seeks to provide a similarly functional framework. A theory of disaster architecture attempts to address structural and ideological problems simultaneously by looking at visual and physical manifestations of these fields of problematic interaction. To understand this field where ideology and societal structure manifest into plans
for/and built environments, we must address—beyond who is most affected by such fields or unequal geographies—how it is that such populations came to be identified as unworthy of aid. Nancy Fraser identifies the “politics of need interpretation” as a point with potential for meaningful intervention (104), saying that “too often, [needs and identities] simply go without saying and are rendered immune from analysis and critique” (113). What, then, is MIR’s process for interpreting need? How are they able to narrow the population to which they seem responsible?

Responses to the question of whether or not to rebuild New Orleans are more practical and more directly indicative of some of the systems at play there, and can reveal the particular population to which MIR feels responsible. Urban planner and architect Denise Scott Brown states that “the city’s strategic location forces the [developer’s] decision.... [no other] city can provide New Orleans’s strategic connectivity.... this city controls more relationships between the United States and the world than most Americans would imagine” (Reese, Sorkin, & Fontenot 37). New Orleans is simply too profitable to leave undeveloped. These relationships between the United States and the rest of the world are primarily based in capitalistic trade, the driving force which legitimizes recuperation of the $60 billion in material losses from Hurricane Katrina and continued geographic precariousness. That most Americans would not imagine New Orleans in terms of its international trade relationships is significant, however. The city, given its status as “one of the top tourism destinations in the country” (McClendon), is instead seen as a cultural hotspot; attracting 9.28 million visitors in 2013 (McClendon), its value to Louisiana and the country is in its cultural draw. New Orleans’ cultural attraction comes at the expense of its populace, however. To hone New Orleans’ performance as a city with cultural capital, priority is placed on profitable investments, quite the opposite of need-based aid housing.
By drawing connections with communication scholar Giorgia Aiello’s account of the urban renewal of Bologna’s *Manifattura delle Arti* (MdA), we can see how New Orleans as well is caught up in “the increasing importance of ‘culture’ as a commodity” where “industrial practices and economic relations have been reorganized around the ways in which language, aesthetics, design, and other symbolic ‘goods’ can drive the financing and production of key material structures of contemporary life” (342). New Orleans culture is a commodity in itself, as made emblematic by Mardi Gras’ performative dominance in the national imagination and even the connecting function of the localized New Orleans Saints with the nationalistic sport of football and spectacle of the Super Bowl. For this reason, New Orleans is similarly entrenched in what Aiello describes as “advanced capitalism” (342), similar to Frederic Jameson’s “late capitalism,” which implies a foretold end to capitalistic regimes due to their unsustainability.

Aiello’s “advanced capitalism” tempers Jameson’s optimism and asserts instead that capitalism is developing and progressing into more global models of functioning. As Aiello writes, “speaking of advanced capitalism entails that there is an expansion, rather than a progressive disintegration, of the capitalist mode into various areas of globalist cultural production” (362). This expansion of the capitalist mode establishes areas as valuable and profitable based in their “ability to perform a highly distinctive identity” (350) that is attractive to tourist visitors and consumers. Discovery of an area worthy and capable of performing distinctive and profitable cultural identities leads processes of disaster architecture to the next step: continuing the project of manufacturing consent by making recovery processes about virtuous individuals deserving aid and class ascension. By detailing these individuals and essentially rendering for the national audience a
human interest story of rebirth and redemption, MIR grounds its aid in sympathetic individuals receiving the dignity they deserve in the face of the injustices they endured.

*Homes for Whom?: Portraits of Inspiring Community Leaders*

In his foreword to *Architecture in Times of Need*, Brad Pitt identified quite clearly that “Katrina was man-made,” going on to touch briefly on some of the immediate structural causes for the devastation (Feireiss 7), a move that establishes Katrina firmly in the realm of injustice toward the people of the Lower Ninth Ward. Billed as “the first book to document the projects and progress made by the Make It Right Foundation,” *Architecture in Times of Need* frequently makes vague references to injustice surrounding the Lower Ninth Ward since long before Katrina. From this idea of righting injustice, MIR sets forth a rhetoric that necessarily needs to address far more expansive issues than simply a lack of housing. MIR’s houses need to avoid contributing to environmental issues which preceded Katrina and they need to not take part in the “malpractice of providing low-quality housing for low-income people” (Feireiss 7). Here and elsewhere signaling a commitment to restoring the dignity of those displaced from the Lower Ninth Ward, MIR seems also nonreflexive to the ironic dynamic of an educated few paternalistically bestowing dignity upon the disenfranchised.

Texts such as *Architecture in Times of Need*, in addition to press-statements by Brad Pitt and other founders and architects involved in the project, are rich resources for establishing an understanding of what Make It Right’s rhetoric does for their own justificatory narratives of aid and their role in the Lower Ninth Ward’s recovery. Of particular interest and concern, then, is
how MIR’s rhetoric signals their level of commitment to responding to the needs and desires of the existing community and culture in the Lower Ninth Ward.

Even beyond its identification of New Orleans’ residents as possessing a certain cultural mythos and a working-class dignity, the Make It Right Foundation reveals who it sees as worthy of building a bridge home. In Architecture in Times of Need, a section titled “People and Stories of the Lower Ninth Ward” assembles several specific examples of who MIR has helped, and the types of people they set out to help in the first place. As might be expected, these formerly displaced citizens of the Lower Ninth Ward are exemplars of hard-working black Americans, pictured in professional portraits among unkempt wild grasses, before a humble advocacy center, and on a sunny back porch with a plethora of potted plants. Their clothing is casual and comfortable as they put their arm around their husband, or hold a young girl on their lap, or survey the neighborhood. These are the people of New Orleans, a quietly dignified and familiar series of faces seemingly committed to family and community, not the “masses of flood victims resorting to utter depravity” or “descending into an ‘almost animalistic state’” that Mayor Nagin described to Oprah Winfrey (Grano & Zagacki 207).

The first story describes Elder Larry and Denise Baham (Figure 3), a married couple (the brief text reminds the reader of their marriage multiple times) who supposedly began driving back
to New Orleans from their temporary home in Plaquemine, Louisiana just half an hour “after
hearing on the radio about Make It Right’s program” (Feireiss 48). Larry has deep roots in New
Orleans: “It is the first time after Katrina that there is hope of returning to the place where Larry
Baham was born in 1958. He grew up in the house of his grandmother and moved back to the
very same house in 1998” (48). The account tells briefly of Larry and Denise’s inability to find each
other for two months after the storm, portraying Larry as active in attempting to reconnect with
his family: “In search for his family, Larry wanted to return to the Lower Ninth Ward, but the
National Guard had blocked off the entire area without mentioning a reason” (48). They
reconnected via the re-establishment of phone lines in the area and Denise began working in a
dollar store. Larry was unable to keep his job following a diagnosis with cancer, though continued
to inspire his community as a local priest.

They hold a deep commitment to marriage, family, and faith, and were thwarted by a string
of disastrous circumstances and an insurmountable obstacle placed by the state, in the form of the
National Guard. The Bahams are a near-ideal representation of the Lower Ninth Ward, perfectly
deserving of aid. “As Denise passionately squeezes the hand of her husband, he says quietly, ‘We
want to go home.’ And she answers determinedly, ‘We will.’” (48). The Bahams, among a select
few others, are the ideal recipients of philanthropic aid. They are politely quiet in their demands
and consistently positive despite the many failures of the state to render aid. There are no overt
questions posed toward the National Guard’s blockade, merely subtle concern easily shared among
Feireiss’s readers.

Characteristics of strength, charisma, and faith thread Feireiss’s profiles together. Malik
Rahim is described as “a fascinating mixture of Genghis Khan and Nelson Mandela” (50). He is
described as a “long-time housing and prison activist” in New Orleans. Rather than describe his activism, which might risk portraying him as radical or militant or demanding social justice, the written piece emphasizes his generosity and kindness: he “gathered food, drinking water, and clothes” because “Somebody had to do it” (50); he cleaned a surviving house and established a grassroots organization collecting donations for Common Ground Relief; and, in addition, he maintained and cleaned the abandoned lots to prevent New Orleans’ blighted property laws from transferring property ownership to the city. Despite his lack of overt religiosity, he epitomizes the ethic of community leadership and generosity. In the photograph, he wears an expression of kind generosity. Despite his long history as an activist, he is portrayed as gentle and silent; at his side, there is a shy smile from his wife.

Charles and Thirawer Duplessis “reacted immediately” to the first call for evacuation on August 27, 2005. Charles and Thirawer stand nobly in contrast to the much-criticized populations of New Orleans who “refused to evacuate” and instead drank warm beers on their porches (Gold, Zucchino, & Braun). A member of the Duplessis family was in the Superdome during the flooding, hoping it would be a better alternative to evacuation. He “never talked to anybody about the traumatic experience he had during his time at the Superdome” (52), his strong silence contrasting against Thirawer’s charisma: “When she is talking about her tragic experiences, she is still agitated as if it happened two weeks rather than two years ago” (52). Charles Duplessis, a pastor, surreptitiously left a Katrina tour bus one evening to see the church, then “an expanse of ruins” (52), and found a piece of Thirawer’s jewelry at their destroyed home. A token of their life waiting to be rebuilt. With their grandchild on their knee, Charles and Thirawer are steadfastly anticipating their return, saying “We will come back. We believe that God has called us back, that
the church comes back and that the community will come back” (52). Frequent framing of MIR aid recipients in personal terms, recounting their struggles and continued commitment to returning to the Lower Ninth Ward follows with rhetorician Dana Cloud’s assessment of the human interest story in news media and its ability to “restore a sense of unity and coherence, providing a ‘solution’ to the problems posed in the text’s earlier moments. The problem with this kind of news,” Cloud writes, “is that it tends to suggest that the resolution of social problems lies in individuals rather than on the structural or political causes of problems” (Control and Consolation 90). Despite MIR’s supposed orientation toward broader social problems, the organization continues to frame the solution in terms of individual action, displacing blame from structural inequalities. This contradiction emerged, perhaps, due to MIR’s need for more defensive responses to critiques of its intent—referred to as frequently “misinterpreted” (Feireiss 8). By putting human interest stories near the front of its book, MIR is able to refocus attention to their strength and determination to return.

The people MIR identifies as recipients of its aid are portrayed as noble in their resilience and commitment to commendable values of family and community, countering racist conceptualizations of Katrina as black people as undignified and wholly dependent. As described by the final subject of Feireiss’s profiles, Gertrud Leblanc (Figure 4), a grandmother frequently visited by her caregiving

Figure 4: Lower Ninth Ward resident Gertrude Leblanc (Feireiss 55).
grandson Chris: “We are givers.” She continues, calling out to Chris as he departs for the day: “Whenever you come back, I am right here ... Oh, honey” (54). Emphasis on personal relationships and support systems within the MIR homes depoliticizes the individuals living there, neutralizing any radical potential that they might demand the change or assistance they are owed.

It would make sense for MIR to select “givers” and community leaders to receive its aid (and to represent the recipients of its aid), given their purported goals of rebuilding the Lower Ninth Ward’s community-feel. However, just as these members of the MIR community are given voice to tell their stories, they oddly are not published as speaking to the causes of their disastrous displacement in the first place. The long-term housing and prison activist had no words published on civic injustices by New Orleans, no calls to repair ailing infrastructures or to amend damaging policies. Any “speaking out against” is subsumed within the voice of MIR; these residents have been rendered quiet and dignified, their various political and personal investments fit wholly within MIR’s mission.

These inspiring and deeply human subjects of Feireiss’s portraits would be difficult to deny as deserving of aid but, at the same time, they seem quite satisfied with Make It Right, even content. Each of them—the Bahams, Marik Rahim and Sharon Johnson, the Duplessises, and grandmother Leblanc—is waiting; they wait not only for their homes to be completed, but they wait for their neighbors, family members, and larger community to return. As historian Douglas Brinkley extolled: “An incremental wonderment is underway ... one house at a time” (Feireiss 17). Perhaps all we have to do now is sit back on our porches, watch, and wait. While this is perhaps the most palatable portrait of a person in need for a white audience—politely and gratefully waiting for change to happen—this does not represent the vast majority of New Orleanians calling for aid.
The Moral Economy and the Hand that Feeds

A decade following Kanye West’s famous declaration that “George Bush doesn’t care about black people,” the executive producer of NBC’s “Concert for Hurricane Relief” reflected:

“[Kanye’s] emotion and his honesty and what he had to say, it had to be heard, because those people were not being served” (Stahl). In this instance, those people who were not served and for whom Kanye’s words most strikingly resonated are the same people who are left out of Make It Right’s portraits of those gaining homes. These resonances—given the state’s relative inaction in response to the killings triggering Black Lives Matter protests across the country—have only been intensifying and spreading. The people not served by the government and not represented by MIR are those who refuse to wait for the state to fix its mistakes, who are suspicious of the influx of white celebrities attempting to rebuild their neighborhoods, and they are those who must negotiate a turn away from the state that has so frequently and so disastrously betrayed them while working to get all the aid and reparations they so desperately need. Due to deep histories and broad networks of racial inequality, these betrayals can be easily and justifiably accused of outsiders based on race. Extrapolating Kanye West’s comment creates distinctions between black Americans and George W Bush (the figurehead and general practitioner of institutional power) as well as between black Americans and white people (the complicit, favored population, represented by Bush and the institution as a whole). The nation is split.

French social scientist Didier Fassin, in his chapter “Heart of Humaneness: The Moral Economy of Humanitarian Intervention,” describes the damaging but often necessary relationship between military forces and the humanitarian organizations they help to protect. Beyond relationships of protection, of organization and logistical aids, Fassin asserts that “the two share
many more realities and values than they believe or admit to themselves” (Fassin & Pandolfi 284). This relationship of shared values and copresence is damaging for the perceptions of the humanitarian aid organizations by the recipients of their aid. I argue, stemming from Fassin’s assertions, that disaster architecture such as MIR suffers the same troubled relationship with military and institutional interventions, both seen as oppressive forces despite either’s (more or less) beneficial presence in a disaster area.

Fassin argues that humanitarian actors and military forces “share a habitus” of “linked temporalities,” with humanitarian organizations also present in periods of emergency and then absent shortly following the military’s departure (Fassin & Pandolfi 284). He continues to argue that “the organization of their work is often similar in their management of human groups” and that they share a sense of themselves “above the common law” (Fassin & Pandolfi 284). These characteristics, though here referring to larger non-governmental organizations (NGOs) in countries abroad reeling from devastating wars or natural disasters, are characteristics that can be applied to MIR’s presence in the Lower Ninth Ward. The foundation’s orientation toward justice in making it right; its aesthetic and developmental control of a neighborhood of the Lower Ninth Ward; its attempts at exceeding the status quo for disaster relief, of providing the world with a global model of green, sustainable architecture in poorer communities; and its ties with the mythos of celebrity power in Brad Pitt and MIR’s world-renowned architects all combine to establish MIR as, in many ways, “above the common law” (Fassin & Pandolfi 284).

Directly criticizing and countering state and federal failures—“Our first response in a crisis should be to help those who are the most vulnerable and at this we failed—failed miserably” (Feireiss 7)—MIR’s higher moral plane and ethical standards elevate it as better than governmental
aid organizations, eliding economic and political factors to appeal on a human level of dignity and basic human rights. The Make It Right Foundation exceeds the paltry protections provided by institutional policies (of which there are few that are efficacious) and governmental aid organizations (such as that of FEMA) to provide “a neighborhood resurrecting itself from the rubble, and the penultimate joy of families returning home” (Feireiss 8). Rather than providing rows of dehumanizing trailers, MIR is more humane in its dedication to homeownership, and it is more human in its measure of desirable results: not concerned with impersonal numbers but with community and familial values of a neighborhood and its families joyously returning home.

MIR’s organizational work for the Lower Ninth Ward (though it is seemingly more based in residents’ choices for which plots they choose and which houses they have built there) does similar work in establishing appropriate zones in which people could live, providing they meet specific criteria. Restricting the MIR neighborhood to those who lived in the Lower Ninth Ward prior to Katrina as well as to schoolteachers and first-responders served to overtly restrict the population, but also restricting the population was the cost of purchasing the homes (averaging $150,000 each) on top of the cost of returning to the ward from any of the many surrounding states used for evacuation. Despite MIR targeting the Lower Ninth Ward, a working-class area, it has been largely unable to connect to this population, having only just built 109 of its proposed 150 houses in the stretch of a full decade (“FAQ”). This tendency to attempt to contain and organize populations in need mirrors aid response by governmental forces when carried out through law enforcement and military.

Military and police force constrains movement and contains vulnerable populations in patterns similar to forces of gentrification: victims of unequal geographies are restricted to spaces
of vulnerability for fear of their spread. As Jane Jacobs writes, “Spreading slums require ever
greater amounts of public money—and not simply more money for publicly financed improvement
or to stay even, but more money to cope with ever widening retreat and regression” (270).
Strategies of containment align with neoliberal interests in investing money only where profitable
returns seem likely; one should invest only in those who participate in the market. I argue, as do
some others, that MIR is complicit in gentrifying the Lower Ninth Ward. Journalist Flavia Krause-
Jackson writes how “The post-Katrina city is richer, whiter and safer from the elements,” but at the
same time,

Katrina turned the low-lying [Lower Ninth Ward] into a wasteland... an unsettling
study in contrasts. [Make It Right] built more than 100 futuristic ultra-green homes
deeded out with wireless light switches and energy-saving refrigerators. Until last
year their owners, unserved by major public transport, didn’t even have a grocery
store. (Krause-Jackson)

A city of contrasts and inequality, New Orleans has been recovering, but not evenly. “When the
city started coming back after the storm, people noticed it was coming back differently—whiter, less
rooted in its heritage and somehow seemingly even more indifferent to its poorest residents than it
had been,” writes journalist Peter Moskowitz (“New Orleans”). Kim Ford, a former resident of the
Lower Ninth Ward, has been trying to return to the area for a decade. Looking at housing options,
however, she found a building of expensive condos being built. “[After Katrina] they were saying
they weren’t even going to rebuild this area... It was supposed to be grassland. Now to come with
this... the condos, that’s gentrification. It’s not being built for people like me” (“New Orleans,”
Moskowitz, emphasis added).
The government containing poverty by abandoning support for poorer citizens created the
gap for private interests and philanthropic humanitarian actors to intervene. Condo developments
by profit-seeking real estate companies and “futuristic ultra-green homes” (Krause-Jackson) generate
affective exclusions, feelings that “it’s not being built for people like me” (“New Orleans,”
Moskowitz). Visual-material boundaries such as these—described, for instance, Aiello’s piece on the
Bolognese Manifattura delle Arti—serve to make particular audiences unwelcome, enhancing
separation and making access “exclusive and exclusionary... it is only specific subjectivities that can
be successfully included” (Aiello 354). Boundary policing—whether through military force or
aesthetic displays of exclusion—organize bodies in potentially damaging ways and reinforce senses
of “us vs them,” whereby Katrina evacuees are treated like the “animalistic” masses in the
Superdome and figures of institutional power like George Bush are treated as overtly racist.14

When Kanye West said that “George Bush doesn’t care about black people,” he was
making a statement that resonated with victims of Hurricane Katrina—with those who were “not
being served,” as the executive producer of “A Concert for Hurricane Relief” would eventually
come to see and say (Stahl). I would argue that this resonance emerges not only from awareness of
the state’s negligence toward those needing aid in New Orleans, but also from affective experiences
of the aid that was provided. Didier Fassin discusses this phenomenon of perceiving one’s aid as a
threat:

Contrary to the image humanitarians have of themselves, and by contrast, of the
military, which they often believe local populations share, those on whose behalf
they intervene do not always see them as saviors—or at least not necessarily any

14 Of course, one of these characterizations may have much more truth behind it than the other.
more than they see the soldiers in this way—and may even consider them occupiers.

(Fassin & Pandolfi 285)

When recovery efforts in the Lower Ninth Ward appear to exclude populations, to gentrify the area, those humanitarians are (at least also) occupiers: "the organization of their work is often similar [to military interventions] in their management of human groups" (Fassin & Pandolfi 284). Military and police forces firing guns over evacuees' heads—as in the events reported by NPR’s John Burnett—show the bottom limit of just how little the self-positioned rescuers might care about those they are sent to aid, but the perception is present in less overt and more aesthetically-founded experiences of exclusion and management as well.

Disaster architecture such as Make It Right’s, despite its philanthropic orientation, suffers from a troubled relationship with military and institutional interventions, both seen as oppressive forces despite their rationalizing, organizing presence in the disastrous aftermath. Inescapably part of a series of privileged power relations over the underprivileged Lower Ninth Ward, MIR’s intervention is not solely a matter of good intentions—which Brad Pitt complained were being “misinterpreted” (Feireiss 8)—no matter how philanthropic. Instead, MIR’s relations to the Lower Ninth Ward are largely dependent on and related to deep histories and broad patterns of the privileged few acting upon underprivileged masses. By acknowledging and taking seriously the highly critical and even suspicious perspective held by some of the target audience for MIR’s aid—a perspective captured and spoken most publicly by Kanye West—I can more easily identify connections to and implications of continued and further entrenched inequality via neoliberal acts. From this perspective, I refuse to simply give philanthropic projects the benefit of the doubt and am drawn to critically interrogate any and all of their claims of progress.
“Bring New Orleans[™] Back”

Make It Right’s work in the Lower Ninth Ward is toward a project of urban recovery and renewal. “A neighborhood resurrecting itself from the rubble,” Pitt’s image of Make It Right’s impact on the Lower Ninth Ward, implies mythic strength in returning from the dead and refusing destruction, suggesting that the neighborhood is somehow rising on its own. This may speak to an inevitability in the Lower Ninth Ward’s return—it would come back whether MIR was involved or not—but MIR’s role is then to carefully shape its return, to make it right. With resonances of the myth of the phoenix rising from the ashes, MIR and other urban renewal projects make use of narratives of progress and recovery to motivate continued investment in their particular course of action. Below, I discuss renewal and recovery as bound up in capitalistic (and globalist) cultural capital as well as in mythic narratives, drawing further connection between ideological critiques and material analysis of Make It Right’s disaster architecture.

New Orleans’ importance to the national culture—as exemplar of southern cultural clout as well as in contexts of national and international tourism—provided mythic narratives and grandiose claims on the threat of a deep cultural loss, an untimely death for a constellation of performative practices and ways of living seen as crucially important to understanding the United States’ deep south, especially Louisiana. I see these mythic narratives as inextricably related to what Giorgia Aiello discusses as cultural currency. This globalized perspective on what Aiello terms “advanced capitalism” opens up new realms of critique and helps to further implicate the nonprofit MIR with civic projects of neoliberal and capitalistic gain.

The most immediate connection MIR has with profit-seeking ventures—perhaps aside from how construction director Craig Turner describes MIR as a “catalyst” for commercial development
(Sasvari)—is in its draw for tourism. According to the New York Times’ “Cultured Traveler” section, for instance, the MIR neighborhood has become “New Orleans’s newest tourist attraction” (Bernstein), admitting that “the houses seem better suited to an exhibition of avant-garde architecture than to a neighborhood struggling to recover.” MIR placed this exhibition very purposefully, hoping to replace what Brad Pitt identified as a “disaster attraction”:

‘I think it first became a 21st-century disaster attraction, unfortunately... This became the icon of the place that was hit the hardest and suffered the most, certainly in one condensed area. It certainly seemed to illustrate man's failure in this particular area. The message was to take this spot that was emblematic of such human failure and to make it a human success story on how we can build in the future, how we can build for families, how we can build with quality, and how we can build with the community under their guidelines.’ (“Brad Pitt,” MacCash)

A bright and colorful stop on the Katrina tours, the Make It Right development symbolizes the area’s recovery and future commercial success. The development has even become a popular stop on eco tours, a part of the “green tourism” circuit (Gotham & Lewis). From an illustration of “man’s failure” to “a human success story,” the very recovery of the Lower Ninth Ward becomes the tourist attraction, the story that people want to see. Urban recovery becomes a spectacle in its own right and catalyzes further commercial development. As aid is spectacularized, focus reorients to its aesthetic qualities. Projects like MIR become preoccupied with demonstrating recovery by their façades. The people they mean to attract and help are alienated and excluded by new upper to middle class aesthetics. This cycle of even well-meaning aid and exclusion points to the material effects of redesigning the Lower Ninth Ward to such a drastic extent.
All Things Through the Market, or, The Trap of Homeownership

Cultural values can be approached and understood from the starting point of the home space, so interrogation of the designs of new housing projects and real estate developments can help to signal for scholars how our values are shifting, whether in their evolution or their further entrenchment and material application. In landscape architect Dianne Harris’ Little White Houses: How the Postwar Home Constructed Race in America she analyzes architectural design trends following World War II as a means of discussing the “cultural imperatives” that are driven by and expressed in the home (113). Harris parses the effects of pressure toward a “white identity,” necessary because “white identities afforded homeownership, access to good schools and health care, proximity to outlets selling varieties of healthful foods, relative distance from toxic factories and other dangerous sites, and varying degrees of financial security” (31). Practice of white identity through the home was thus a means of attaining that which is assumed for white Americans. More than ever, identities were a performance of cultural values, a type of “passing” (32), and that performance took place not only in the home but also through its very design and construction.

The Make It Right Foundation focuses citizen participation and legitimacy on what race and political science scholar Cedric Johnson terms “one of the hallmarks of American bourgeois virtue—homeownership” (203). Being a homeowner, and thus being a proven participant in the national market, is a matter of virtue but also of “dignity,”15 which frequently enters Brad Pitt’s discourse on MIR, drawing on larger patterns of “dignity” as a key component of human rights efforts. Ties between justice, human rights, and even human dignity to neoliberal values of market-

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15 Within critiques of human rights rhetoric, the centrality of “dignity” has been criticized as weakening the “enforceability” of human rights discourse as well as individualizing the effects and response rather than addressing larger societal issues (Carpi & Usman).
participation create a trap for continued participation and reinvigoration of neoliberal cycles. By establishing homeownership as the key to practices of citizenship in the Lower Ninth Ward, MIR makes participation in the neoliberal market a prerequisite for one’s voice to be heard. By attaching the concept of “dignity” to homeownership, MIR separates neoliberal citizens needing recovery from the undignified, those less deserving of aid. Make It Right’s actions and effects in the Lower Ninth Ward are not only in keeping with neoliberal development projects, but they are informative of newer and less understood behaviors of neoliberalism.

In his 2005 book, A Brief History of Neoliberalism, David Harvey articulated neoliberalism as:

in the first instance a theory of political economic practices that proposes that human well-being can best be advanced by liberating individual entrepreneurial freedoms and skills within an institutional framework characterized by strong private property rights, free markets, and free trade.... Furthermore, if markets do not exist... then they must be created, by state action if necessary. (2)

Harvey explains a political and economic orientation of the state where the extent of its engagement with the capitalistic free market is in ensuring that markets are created, where private human action is brought “into the domain of the market” (Harvey 3), and where as many opportunities for entrepreneurial niche-seeking as can be created are created. Once they are created, as well, those markets must be protected, sometimes by extreme means; “The state must therefore use its monopoly of the means of violence to preserve these [individual] freedoms at all costs” (Harvey 64).

As noted earlier, Rachel Hall’s condensed description of the effects of neoliberalism—“shrinking government in terms of social services while expanding its law and order functions”
better addresses the effects and sensation of such a process; somehow the state is simultaneously providing less and controlling more. Drawing all citizen action into the domain of the market creates a wide field of possibilities for expression and deliberation that is nevertheless bound by necessary assimilation into neoliberal values; the neoliberal state asserts particular values through its redirection of societal needs toward the free market.

New Orleans needed to be rebuilt and recovered. Its particular position as a tourist destination and cultural capital, more even than the displaced calling for their homes to be rebuilt, made the decision inevitable. Because “the city’s strategic location forces the decision” to rebuild (Reese, Sorkin, & Fontenot 37), various forms of consent needed to be attained by the residents and displaced of New Orleans. David Harvey traces diverse routes of popular consent for a neoliberal state: “Powerful ideological influences circulated through the corporations, the media, and the numerous institutions that constitute civil society—such as the universities, schools, churches, and professional associations” (40). When discussing how neoliberalism constructed its own means of consent for its displacement of previous forms of liberalism, Harvey illustrates the central role of military coercion in international political influence. A combination of military force and indoctrination through ideological media, for Harvey, “can produce a fatalistic, even abject, acceptance of the idea that there was and is, as Margaret Thatcher kept insisting, ‘no alternative’” (40). There was little choice but to attempt to rebuild New Orleans: the market, the displaced, our cultural expectations for American resilience, and the iconic status of the city of New Orleans all called for rebuilding and recovery in the name of neoliberalism and produced no alternative.
Though not making use of coercive military force in quite the same way as the installation of neoliberal democracy in Iraq as described by Harvey (184), the reconstruction of New Orleans was rife with sudden and unquestionable neoliberal installations. Symptomatic of capitalistic processes of recovering destroyed and/or abandoned spaces for private use, MIR takes part in various legitimating aesthetic displays of progress through exploitations of disaster. Klein describes the first steps for a disaster capitalist’s intervention in places like post-Katrina New Orleans:

[T]he process deceptively called “reconstruction” began with finishing the job of the original disaster by erasing what was left of the public sphere and rooted communities, then quickly moving to replace them with a kind of corporate New Jerusalem—all before the victims of war or natural disaster were able to regroup and stake their claims to what was theirs. (10)

The disaster of lost communities became “exciting opportunities,” the “clean sheets” becoming “the preferred method of advancing corporate goals: using moments of collective trauma to engage in radical social and economic engineering” (Klein 9).

MIR, though not explicitly charged with a profiteering motive (as a non-profit foundation), takes part in a “shock doctrine” of disaster capitalism in “using moments of collective trauma to engage in radical social and economic engineering” (Klein 9). MIR, of course, does all of this under the charge of humanitarianism: making the Lower Ninth Ward just and right means establishing a new neighborhood of middle-class homeowners capable of more economically productive consumption. From a neoliberal perspective, the financially-dependent wasteland of the Lower Ninth Ward was washed clean and empty. Similar actions took place throughout various poor New Orleans neighborhoods. As described by a New Orleans citizen:
they used the disaster as a way of cleansing the neighborhood when the neighborhood is weakest. . . . This is a great location for bigger houses and condos.

The only problem is you got all these poor black people sitting on it! (Klein 524)

Unfortunately, these practices are not unique to New Orleans, or even to sites of damaging natural disasters. Cities across the United States are already in various states of crisis: homelessness, poverty, gentrification, and a plethora of other societal challenges either publicly characterize areas (“Detroit” as synonymous with a city’s failed industry, San Francisco as synonymous with overinflated rent structures, etc) or they fester under the surface, relegated to problem areas within the city, slums best avoided.
Disaster Capitalism

Though well-intentioned, MIR falls into some of the common traps of disaster architecture, which make it difficult to deliver on the promise of historically informed and lasting structural solutions to disaster. MIR participates in the very processes of gentrification it attempts to avoid, installing a new regime of living from above in ways that make explicit the origin of disaster architecture in Naomi Klein’s concept of “disaster capitalism,” while also making clear how disaster architecture is both different in its focus on aesthetic built environments and more specific in its focus on spaces built for family habitation.

Disaster architecture explores the various and often nefarious ways neoliberalism not only enters the home, but becomes the home itself. This is important for understanding the limits it sets on expressions of dissent. Through its involvement with everyday practices of home-life and domesticity, for example, a theory of disaster architecture is comparatively better suited than disaster capitalism to account for affective experiences, for changes in familial structures, in private/public formations and divisions, and to account for the very material changes that occur in a built environment. Rather than eschewing the economic and materialist ties to neo-Marxist understandings of neoliberalism’s effects on landscape and practice, disaster architecture attempts to serve as a more proximate point of engagement, connecting lived experiences and built environments with broader ideological critiques. A theory of disaster architecture is particularly focused on making these ideological effects tangible, on rendering the result of neoliberal disaster capitalism to pry open space for a variety of visual cultural and interdisciplinary critiques. This theory of disaster architecture will attempt to render the problematic results of unequal neoliberal
processes built on unequal geographies and make patterns of unequal access to identity performances more legible and easily identifiable.

Drawing its name from Naomi Klein’s “disaster capitalism,” as she described it in The Shock Doctrine: The Rise of Disaster Capitalism, disaster architecture attempts to account for the opportunistic emergence of architecture and design in places of crisis, interrogating the reasons for its emergence as well as the implications of its prevalence. As an analytic concept, disaster architecture helps to describe how the Make It Right Foundation creates legitimating displays of progress via the exploitation of disaster.

Instances of disaster architecture are found not only to the homes that MIR is building in the Lower Ninth Ward, but also in the processes of reconstruction that occur elsewhere following disaster and crisis, where the powers that be attempt to “make it right” by changing the built environment to reflect their vision of what the future for that area should (quite literally) look like. Aesthetically changing the landscape of a city or community, governmental powers and private interests invested in profitable reformations of underdeveloped or neglected areas assert their values upon spaces that may have previously enjoyed more locally-generated values and aesthetics. In other words, as spaces are “recovered” and brought back from disrepair, they are also reorganized according to dominant values informed by capitalistic and neoliberal ideologies. Disaster architecture refers here to the aesthetic result of neoliberalism leaping at the chance to remake a space. How a city recovers from disaster looks and feels is also connected to the ideologies driving the process of renovation. Disaster architectures—the design of the environments built following crises—thus vary depending on the dominant ideologies motivating their
construction. Because these designs are motivated by specific ideologies, they are also revealing of those ideologies.

Because of this understanding of design as a conduit for understanding cultural values, the analytic concept of disaster architecture also refers to a remodeling of the organizational structures of lives within the neoliberal state: citizenship, family, education, class, race, and so on—various organizational categories and hierarchies are (often forcefully) remodeled for the sake of recovery from a period or moment of crisis (to return to the pre-disaster state of things) and, because that is never enough, often for the sake of more widespread progress (to a more idealized reality).

Rendering a more idealized reality often comes at the expense of the residents of neighborhoods marked for reconstruction. One resident describes this dynamic as one in which legitimate residents are rendered as squatters in zones about to be made over by disaster architecture:

[The developers] used the disaster as a way of cleansing the neighborhood when the neighborhood is weakest.... This is a great location for bigger houses and condos. The only problem is you got all these poor black people sitting on it! (New Orleans resident, quoted in Klein 524)

This quote by a resident of the Lower Ninth Ward reveals the troubling priorities of recovery efforts. Though the developers might be quite earnest in wanting to recover the area, this recovery is not targeted to the people of the Lower Ninth Ward pre-Katrina, but to more profitable and desirable citizens of the area.

Study of disaster architecture is highly situated, located in the precise place of response to crisis, though its motivating concepts and implications can be traced across these broader practices
of neoliberalism. Disaster architecture responds to articulated and recognized disasters; it does not broadly apply across domestic architectural trends otherwise. Disaster architecture renders particular re-visions of the built environment as well as it renders models of how other built environments might be re-visioned in the aftermath of other disasters. It is historically specific as it enjoys the potential for broad applicability. Because of this, accurately rendering disaster architecture such as that in the locally-described “Make It Right neighborhood” requires contextualization among the local and regional factors of crisis unique to the site but also contextualization among other processes of disaster capitalism and recovery. The remainder of this chapter, then, expands definitional work on neoliberalism and Naomi Klein’s disaster capitalism before discussing the related processes of the welfare state’s dissolution, of humanitarian housing projects emerging from moral and emergency economies, and of urban renewal projects making use of practices of cultural commodification while mythologizing recovery work into a privatized affective experience approximating engagement. The result of the introduction’s mediated histories of New Orleans and Hurricane Katrina when combined with this chapter’s broad landscapes of neoliberalism’s development: an unequal geography not only ideal for processes of disaster architecture to take root, but also directly motivational toward those goals.

The material organization and structure of New Orleans participates in the “vicious cycle” of slum-creation which, in turn, disenfranchises minorities and encourages negligent and unjust politics both locally and beyond. As Jacobs writes, “Spreading slums require ever greater amounts of public money—and not simply more money for publicly financed improvement or to stay even, but more money to cope with ever widening retreat and regression” (270), a process implicated by and concordant with neoliberal trade and negligent engineering practices in concert. Pitt writes: “If
New Orleans had been receiving their fair share of profits from offshore drilling, they would have been able to autonomously secure their levees properly” (7), and Adams cited private-sector contractors’ growing relationship with the US Army Corps of Engineers (those in charge of maintaining the levees), stating that it generated interest only in “augmenting the oil industries in the Gulf region” (24). Pitt’s critiques, paired with the depth of Adams’ research and elaboration, are actually rather insightful and leave few of the main offenders unattended (the primary point of negligence being toward capitalistic endeavors’ influence).

To better understand how MIR participates in processes of neoliberal disaster capitalism, I will briefly expand on a few details of MIR’s own process as it emerges in its own accounts, through Architecture in Times of Need, and in press accounts. What I wish to work toward—and what interests me about MIR’s relationship with neoliberalism—is an ability to quite literally see the MIR development (its approximately 100 homes and the architectural renderings themselves) as neoliberal processes performed through architectural rhetorics, or rhetorics expressed through architecture that also serve to design, organize, and construct spatial and material realities.

Make It Right gathered teams of world-renowned architects to design and build revolutionary houses focused on being “sustainable and [built] with clean materials for a just quality of life,” as well as being safe, storm resilient, and carbon-neutral in construction and operation (Feireiss 8). Funded initially by donations from the “Pink Project,” an “art installation / political messaging device / fundraising tool” consisting of house-sized geometric frames wrapped in day-glo pink fabric, “litter[ing] the neighborhood” (Feireiss 372), MIR offsets the cost of building homes at “upwards of $400,000 per house” (DePillis) with private donations and federal
grants (“Make It Right,” MacCash) and sells the homes for an average of $150,000 while working with the residents to establish affordable mortgage structures (“FAQ”).

The noble effort of providing affordable mortgage payments for homes is undermined, however, by recognition that this is not a rebuilding of what was—not in aesthetic terms, of course, but also not in terms of residents’ expenses and lifestyles. As described by urban studies scholar Christopher Herring, before Hurricane Katrina “New Orleans’ population was comprised predominately of renters and the uneven disaster destroyed a disproportionate amount of rental housing, particularly those of low-income workers” (103). He argues,

federal, state, and local approaches to reconstruction have not alleviated or even simply reproduced the inequalities that had existed prior to the Katrina disaster, but have further eroded these gulfs of differences in a regressive fashion by pursuing a housing reconstruction strategy that is reshaping the social geography of the city. (Herring 104)

Herring’s assessment foreshadows in-depth articulations of the many benefits homeowners and wealthier property-owners were given in policy geared toward reconstruction. Community Development Block Grants (CDBGs), which were set in place in order to prevent the overwhelming seizure of land by wealthier developers following disaster and to fund low-income community building, were restricted and easily waived by the secretary of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) because “members of Congress wanted to be sure that homeowners, not landlords and renters, would be the primary recipient” of grant funds (Herring 109, emphasis added).
Federal grants such as CDBGs aided in Make It Right’s project—supposedly put forward to help lower-income citizens “return home”—but down payments and mortgages for $150,000 homes are at minimum an undue strain on the budget of a family who lost everything and had previously either only been paying rent or had inherited a property and thus owned it themselves. Those who most easily returned to the Lower Ninth Ward into the Make It Right neighborhood have been those of at least more middle-income means. This focus on property ownership came as well with simultaneous neglect to repair public housing projects that were lacking even before the storm destroyed the vast majority of them. Reconstruction efforts and their focus on creating beautiful, classy, profitable, and market-immersed communities at the expense of accessibility toward lower-income citizens thus reveal and reinforce intimate ties between the neoliberal state and the withered relationship between the state and the welfare of its people.
CHAPTER TWO
Aid and Domestication

Intended as a critical and reflexive response to the rhetorical frames offered by national news media, the Make It Right Foundation utilizes disaster architecture to install new organizations and regimes of everyday life in the Lower Ninth Ward. Despite its best intentions, MIR’s founding in highly mediated and spectacularized understandings of New Orleans and the Lower Ninth Ward confused who it is meant to aid and became more invested in political statements and displays than the well-being of its intended beneficiaries. Effectively demanding performances of assimilation of its residents, MIR perpetuates cycles of neoliberal gentrification and exclusion. Building from Chapter One’s discussion of what disaster architecture does, this chapter describes how disaster architecture appears.

To preview the chapter, I offer this brief description of disaster architecture’s appearances and the effects of its particular aesthetics. As a spectacle of recovery that launches a mythological resurrection, disaster architecture attempts to address injustices in areas ailing from disaster by making aesthetic renovations that nevertheless remind and anticipate the recurrence of said disaster. With an orientation to disaster that assumes its recurrence (and thus foregoes attempts at prevention), disaster architecture privatizes the means of survival and recovery from disaster, rendering the private household the means of survival rather than larger societal support systems. This privatization of survivability also serves to contain populations into the home, to domesticate them by encouraging practices of citizenship within the home. This practice of citizenship, exclusionary of practices previously common to the Lower Ninth Ward, fails to represent the lived realities of those in the Lower Ninth Ward before Katrina. In their stereotypical representations, pre-Katrina residents of the Lower Ninth Ward are rendered as ill-fitting in architectural
renderings and, thus, from the neighborhood itself. As deliberative voices are denied through a visual dissonance that suggests how poorly they might inhabit the space, the designs of MIR’s disaster architecture render a space hopeful for more elite inhabitants capable of better practicing a neoliberal citizenship. Each of these effects arises from specific aesthetic and design choices made by MIR and its architects, and each is a characteristic of disaster architecture’s appearance in the world. With analysis of MIR’s visuals, this chapter features explications of how disaster architecture might be identified by its aesthetics and aesthetic effects.

Recovery Myths and Spectacle

The rhetorical presentation of New Orleans’ recovery is formulated through multiple narrative placeholders, mythologies touted as symbolizing the city’s resurrection. These rhetorics divert attention from structural issues, privatize the experience of supporting the city’s recovery, and mask issues of racial issues much in the same way MIR does. The spectacularization and mythologization of recovery helps to convert aesthetic enjoyment of the homes into a privatized affect of involvement and support. This privatized affect is a key ingredient in legitimizing disaster architecture’s spread and promotion.

Affecting involvement on a private level, MIR attempted to create a movement of private citizens involved in recovering New Orleans. With the opportunity to “adopt” light fixtures, toilets, windows, and so on for a Make It Right home, recovery of the Lower Ninth Ward becomes a team effort fueled by media narratives like those discussed above. Communication scholar Michael Serazio discusses how the New Orleans Saints’ football team’s success in the 2006 National Football League (NFL) season produced “a largely uniform media narrative—one which
reliantly employed a winning team as the trope for metaphorical recovery” (156). The football
team’s victories created an atmosphere of resilience and recovery for the city of New Orleans as a
whole while providing the nation with a shared affect of involvement and support. This image,
however, was largely irreconcilable with the realities of much of the city at the time. Serazio writes,
“the city was still in need of real—not just mythic—solutions, [but] a storyline of triumph was
diffused with little critique” (156). Highly visible symbolic rhetoric of New Orleans’ “comeback”—
like the Make It Right Foundation, the Saints NFL team, or the renovation of the Superdome—
distract from the large swaths of the city that are still ailing from Katrina and spectacularize the
pieces of the city capable of producing the most tourism and profitable business.

Through the spectacle of a city reborn, New Orleans rebranded itself and sold that ideal
image to the nation at the cost of its own citizens. The benefits of this image were in keeping with
Dana Cloud’s therapeutic and unifying effects of human interest stories. MIR makes use of these
rhetorical images of recovery, found within its human interest stories as well as its goal of
projecting an image of recovery and wealth from the Lower Ninth Ward. By comparing MIR to
the Superdome, both figuring as rhetorical substitutions for the recovery of New Orleans at large, I
hope to further draw out the power of recovery mythologies in legitimizing the sudden installation
of neoliberal regimes. By establishing Make It Right, the Superdome, and the Saints as
representative of New Orleans’ recovery, each became a rallying point for affective experiences of
healing, depoliticized and personalized away from structural understandings of the city’s
inequalities.

Reported by Sports Illustrated’s Tim Layden, the first football game played at the
Superdome (just over a year after Katrina) “was a tremendous moment of rebirth for the city,”
creating a sense of a monumental step toward New Orleans’ fresh start (Littlefield). Responding to the criticism that the $200 million spent on reconstructing the Superdome could have been spent on housing, Layden said,

> We have seen sports serve as a rallying point in many ways in America... I think that the Superdome and the Saints served that same purpose. It would be disingenuous to say that that was all encompassing for the people of New Orleans, those that were obviously killed or misplaced, but at the same time it was certainly an emotional high for the city and I think in many ways remains so. (Littlefield)

The “rallying point” of football in New Orleans is reduced to an “emotional high,” depoliticized away from an actual space for demanding change and converted into a masculine affect, athletic fandoms of hope and optimism. Make It Right makes use of similar optimism through its architecture. Architectural theorist Mark Wigley is overt in the centrality of optimism in architecture: “I think it’s the job of an architect to be optimistic, to invent new forms of optimism, to contaminate us all with the possibility that we could live differently” (Feireiss 11). Imagining new homes and observing beautiful architecture generates an optimistic orientation toward change, possibly inhibiting critical consideration of the Lower Ninth Ward’s many injustices. The “incremental wonderment” (Feireiss 17) of Make It Right lies in the organization’s dedication: “Like huddled football players before kickoff, hands clasped together in a circle, they essentially shouted ‘Let’s Go’” (Feireiss 17). Rhetorics of MIR’s teamwork and the “wonderment” of its work spectacularizes the recovery effort as worth watching, extending symbols of healing to mask the continued suffering of the working class black citizens within the city as well as those who remain displaced, unable to make it back to their former homes.
Mythological spectacles and symbols create diversions from the underlying issues. Cheering for and purchasing tickets and regalia for the New Orleans Saints became a substitute for involvement in the city’s recovery from Katrina. The fantasy, of course, is that money spent on the New Orleans Saints is money spent on New Orleans’ rebuilding. As Dana Cloud discusses, “the rhetoric of privatization and individual responsibility has intensified neoliberalism’s progress, justified in a fantasy of free trade,” one which—according to political scientist Jodi Dean—“captures our political interventions, formatting them as contributions to its circuits of affect and entertainment—we feel political, involved, like contributors who really matter” (qtd in “Shock Therapy,” Cloud 45). Affects of recovery emerging from these mythical rhetorics—though “infectious” and beneficial for the small businesses immediately surrounding the Superdome (Fanta)—further help in “privatizing the experience of privatization” (“Shock Therapy,” Cloud 46) and masking the need for the address of systemic neoliberal inequalities.

The privatization of support for New Orleans’ recovery as organized under the larger rhetorical mythos of a local identity or team affiliation depoliticizes the city and even renders its population more uniform. Phil Frazier, the co-founder of the Rebirth Brass Band and 2006 candidate for New Orleans’ mayor, was struck colorblind by Saints support: he “looked around the stage [during a performance], at everyone wearing Saints shirts and hats and scarves, and realized he couldn’t tell black from white anymore” (Carpenter). This erasure of race mirrors Brad Pitt’s own rhetoric when introducing Architecture in Times of Need. Racial indicators are masked by classed terms, though the implicit values are carried through: Make It Right is about helping “low-income people” and “poor people” (Feireiss 7-8), not necessarily black people. The New Orleans Saints, as analyzed by Serazio, are ripe for critiques of cultural commodification due to the element
of spectatorship in football and tourism to the reopened Superdome, and MIR’s mythic rhetorics of not only recovery but also jump-started progress contribute directly to the perception that New Orleans’ (far from complete) recovery from Katrina makes it a continued destination for spectacles like Mardi Gras and NFL games.

Rhetorical constructions such as the mythic Superdome and the idealistic Make It Right development project help to illustrate a primary function of disaster architecture, of making mythic spectacle of recovery efforts which are themselves capable of inspiring and serving as a model for globalized disaster response while distracting from a more historical understanding of the entrenched structural inequalities that continue to hold black working class residents of New Orleans in positions of precarity—financial and bodily.
Shortly following Hurricane Katrina, New Orleans mayor Ray Nagin established the Bring New Orleans Back Commission, consisting of a half-black and half-white committee (with the noted exception of a single Hispanic member). The members are businessmen, activists, developers, religious leaders, musicians, professors, and local government officials, all from the New Orleans area. With 19 members (of which, only 2 are women) ranging across various professional disciplines, the commission requested and reviewed reports from over 50 urban development experts from the Urban Land Institute (BringNewOrleansBack.org) and submitted studied recommendations while proposing funding structures for redevelopment.

According to their submitted action plan, made accessible through NPR, New Orleans needed to be rebuilt because, “unlike the rest of the Gulf coast, only New Orleans has been protected by an extensive levee system—it is imperative to protect this valuable asset” (“Bring New Orleans Back” 8), because “New Orleans is the center of a metropolitan area with over $500 billion in real estate assets, excluding petrochemical and other industries” (9), and because it holds “National Historic and Cultural Importance” with “19 National Register Districts with 38,000 properties: as many as 25,000 damaged” (9). These justifications are oriented specifically around language of assets (levee systems, real estate, industry, and national tourism), aligning with a framework and perspective of advanced capitalism. I hope to demonstrate how emphasis on aesthetics and architecture in neoliberal rebuilding projects couple a rhetorical framing of the reconstruction with material processes directed at producing particular aesthetic effects. The aesthetics of rebuilding and/or renovating cities is highly political insofar as it requires a negotiation of the past, present, and future structural realities lending form to the site. As
architectural historians Massey, TenHoor, & Korsh argue, “violence against people of color requires architectural analysis” and “responses to this crisis of space and state can untangle, critique, and resist the conditions that have made Black life too precarious in the United States.” This study of disaster architecture endeavors to understand how MIR is attempting to utilize mythic recovery narratives to reconstruct the Lower Ninth Ward from the outside in—with architectural and aesthetic influences rendering a new society, as cultural values and lived realities are informed and shaped by formal alterations to the neighborhood. To begin, however, we must consider what can be built in the first place. What was destroyed and what of this was allowed to be rebuilt.

Even before Katrina, the precarity of black lives in the Lower Ninth Ward was acutely felt. As described by journalist Gary Rivlin: “Prior to Katrina... the average resident survived on $16,000 a year, and more than one in every three residents lived below the poverty line.” This precarity was informed and sustained by “a mix of misperceptions and racially informed myths” that “set the stage for one misguided policy choice after another, at all levels of government” (Rivlin). Calling the desolation of the Lower Ninth Ward “a self-fulfilling prophecy,” Rivlin then describes the city’s emergency-operations director telling a reporter that, despite the Holy Cross area within the Lower Ninth Ward looking better than much of the city, “there’s nothing out there that can be saved at all.” True, the majority of the Lower Ninth Ward now consisted of acres of rubble and blank foundations, but areas such as Holy Cross featured many surviving historic buildings, though nevertheless water damaged. Federal funding for rebuilding efforts, such as with the $9 billion Road Home Program, diverted away from Lower Ninth Ward residents.
Payouts were based on the cost to repair one’s home or the pre-storm market value, whichever was less. Because homes in the Lower Ninth Ward were damaged the most (in some cases, totally washed away), they needed the most money for repairs. But because their homes were valued less than in other areas, most didn’t get enough money to repair them. (Byrne)

Alphonso Jackson, the secretary of housing and urban development, stated that “it would be a mistake to rebuild the Ninth Ward,” as it was a blighted area that remains unsafe (Rivlin). City officials were willing to abandon the Lower Ninth Ward and its people, deeming the area a lost cause.

Treated as a “run-down slum on the edge of some city in the developing world” (Rivlin), it was characterized as far more hopeless place than it actually was, and some local residents say this was done to discourage efforts to return. “There was a growing sense that, as a number of people put it, ‘They don’t want us back’... There was money to be made from re-configuring New Orleans as a ‘boutique city’ with a ‘new economy’” (Wolff). Rather than invest the money to bring the working class back to the Lower Ninth Ward, the federal government put money into developments like the “massive high-rise and high-price condo project” in the Holy Cross neighborhood of the Lower Ninth Ward (Wolff), developments that have a better chance of yielding some monetary return whether through the individual citizens or the cultural capital gained from such worldly projects.

As counterpart to the pattern of a district once abandoned before being converted into a neoliberal aesthetic of revitalization, Aiello describes the Bolognese Manifattura delle Arti’s recent history: “For decades before the reconversion, this area had been bleeding copiously—and quite
literally—from the needles and lives left behind by heroin addicts, and from the cracked walls and broken windows of locked-up buildings steadily eroding towards condemnation" (348).

Characterized as a broken neighborhood, the MdA was a wound beyond healing. Aiello asserts that the “renewal” which took place did not remove the wound from Bologna so much as transform it into an enclave, where now “the MdA interrupts the city.... The MdA is in line with contemporary strategies of global(ist) communication,” stating that it now “reinforces some of the very same spatial and social divisions that predated the area’s conversion” (349). Advanced capitalism thus functions as a structural mold which perpetuates forms of cultural and local interruption—whether by wound or enclave—a system made manifest in its performance of renewal and recovery. Drawing from Aiello, advanced capitalism becomes the architectural organization which encourages city officials and private developers to consider their actions mutually beneficial, spurring partnerships and executive decisions made outside of the influence of the locals affected.

From “several decades of being a metaphorical and literal wound in the heart of the city, to becoming... an enclave of global(ist) communication” (342-3, emphases added), the MdA is in some ways the ideal model for New Orleans’ transformation from a ravaged site of disaster to the site of resurrection and cultural consumption. Aiello’s article provides an effective framework for talking about the broader publicity of these spaces, into global capitalistic relations, as well as their relation to their immediate surroundings. Aiello describes the MdA neighborhood as it was before the urban renewal project as “an oozing split in the flesh of the [larger area] and a major ‘break’ in the already uneven fabric of Bologna’s centro storico” (348). The Lower Ninth Ward, as well, was considered a wound for the city of New Orleans by those on the outside. It was a blight, an area to be avoided. This view by the New Orleans middle-class and elite is the result of a palimpsestic
history of exploitation, oppression, and violation with multiple cultural powers imposing their influence (Roach 6). The Lower Ninth Ward was seen as a socioeconomic slum, which Jane Jacobs describes as something that “breeds social ills and requires endless outside assistance” (278). The Lower Ninth Ward’s constant dependence on the government was met with neglect until, ultimately, at the opportunity to start anew, the area began to change into an enclave.

The MdA as a wound and its key characteristic of disrupting the city “entails the subversion of normative spatiality for social change, through the assertive affirmation of a political presence” (349). For the pre-renewal MdA, the wound on the city, there is space and reason for non-normativity and dissent, as well as there is impetus for intervention. The intervention that took place, however, was one which rendered the MdA neighborhood into an exclusive enclave of globalist communication (351). The buildings themselves were lit, resurfaced to include what Aiello terms “visual-material boundaries” such as “five tall Plexiglas posts” whose “appearance... points to the MdA’s distinctive identity and appeal of high culture” (352). “Textural boundaries,” such as repaving of the street from one “patched up and ridden with small potholes” to feature “leveled cobblestone, as to add an old-time feel while also polishing up the area” (353), to sleek “brushed metal and LED lighting” in façades on the neighborhood buildings (354) continue the pattern of an exclusionary culture. This retouching, while not dramatically altering the structures themselves to the point of levelling and (re)building, creates an interruption of the typical Bolognese space that commodifies the historical appearance of the neighborhood for a specific population of affluence. As an enclave, the renewed MdA is “de facto... severed from the exigencies of the local community, and exclude[s] a host of nonprofitable and/or unbecoming presences” (343).
The MIR development, with sleek postmodern aesthetics and bright geometric forms, excludes “nonprofitable and/or unbecoming presences” (Aiello 343) that formerly lived in that neighborhood. The neighborhood is restricted to the MIR homeowners partially through a visual-material performance of stark contrast from the rest of New Orleans—an enclavic interruption of the space—and partially through a simple lack of community space, consisting of private domestic spaces suitable only for family. The homes interrupt the area with their bright pastel colors, sharp silhouettes, and unique geometric forms (see Figure 5). Their high-quality build materials stand out among other homes with faded and water-damaged plastic siding, and their plentitude of windows reflect a higher quality of living. There is stark contrast between the MIR home and its non-MIR neighbor, with the increased attention to the MIR home’s design suggesting (if it is not clearly visible) increased attention to the build quality.

Despite its enclavic nature, the MdA joins the MIR development in orienting toward a global audience. As Aiello writes,

The divide between the area and the surrounding neighborhood is now made even starker by visual-material resources that invoke not only their architectural and overall physical difference, but also a disparity in cultural and social capital. And
the same resources are also mobilized as symbolic capital, as visual-material currency, for the global marketplace. (354-5)

The Lower Ninth Ward makes similar use of the visual-material symbolic currency to a global market, though instead focused toward a globalist tourism market. In addition, Brad Pitt figures the MIR homes as a “template that could be replicated at the macro level” (Feireiss 8), an example for the world of a better way of living. The globalist orientation works for New Orleans in attracting renewed tourism and establishing a global model for progress and in Bologna in establishing an international prestige and respectability. New Orleans and Bologna are both attempting to regain the prestigious status of being a world-recognized city, attractive for its sights, experiences, and other cultural offerings, and they do so through adoption of advanced capitalist and neoliberal ideologies.

What Aiello identified as visual-material efforts at establishing and securing Bologna as a “world-class city” (355) highlight a counterintuitive simultaneity of performing stylistic referencing... a semiotic resource aimed at invoking the cultural cachet of given forms of architectural denotation... to connotations of historical and local identity on the one hand, and those appealing to meaning potentials of contemporaneity and cosmopolitism on the other. (356)

For Bologna, the new MdA signifies a cosmopolitanism previously unavailable for the socioeconomic classes living there. For New Orleans, the new Lower Ninth Ward signifies an aestheticized progress, a moving forward away from the horrors of Hurricane Katrina. The renewal and recovery process for both the MdA and the Lower Ninth Ward are recoveries from a wound, a
rhetorical process of healing that prefigures a dramatic and necessary exigence in the previous space, of “dangerous ruptures in the ‘body’ of a city” (Aiello 348).

Narratives of healing, renewal, and reconstruction help to participate in mythologizing change and providing the more comprehensible structure of a narrative. As these narratives take hold, they offer more palatable understandings of a tourist’s possible destinations: an antiquated and slum-riddled Bologna is a body needing healing; a disaster-swept New Orleans is a cultural gem needing recovery, to be put back on display. These connections between narrative mythologies and the material changes which result from their adoption follow processes of neoliberal development and, I argue, disaster architecture. Serving at the intersection of ideology and the material built environment, rhetorics of architecture are well-suited to visualize processes of capitalism on our surroundings.
Orientations of Disaster

Disaster architecture is a modification of what Naomi Klein identified as “disaster capitalism,” where disaster architecture generates legitimizing displays of progress via the capitalistic exploitation of disaster, participating in modes of cultural commodification and depoliticized public engagement. By identifying the various similarities contained within processes of disaster architecture, this chapter defines disaster architecture by its rhetorical construction of and material actions within scenes of “recovery.” Historically situated as response to a local disaster in the vacuum of a nonexistent welfare state (discussed in Chapter One: Need Identification and Virtue Hunting), disaster architecture creates aesthetic expectations for neoliberal performances of middle-to-upper-class (white) identity with potential for broad applicability (as discussed in Chapter One: Disaster Capitalism).

As an analytic framework, the concept of disaster architecture is focused on the proposed and constructed structures in the built environment. My use of the concept attempts to render visible the effects of privatized humanitarian disaster response. Analysis of disaster architecture makes these neoliberal processes of philanthropic remodeling and renovation visible. By looking at the architectural renderings provided by MIR, we can see how the designs themselves practice enactments of neoliberal disaster architecture while positioning the Lower Ninth Ward’s citizens in specific relationalities according to the cultural stereotypes that emerge from a lack of adequate representation. The remainder of this thesis is dedicated to analyzing how disaster architecture appears, also addressing the question of to whom it appears and in what ways. Analyzing the deliberative processes involved in disaster architecture’s appearance in a community, and discussing the effects of postmodern aesthetics on a traditional district of New Orleans, I look to
better understand how to interpret the structures built in response to disaster, how to identify their aesthetic qualities and patterns.

In what follows, I identify key aesthetic features of disaster architecture by analyzing the architectural renderings provided in Make It Right’s *Architecture in Times of Need* and, at times, comparing them to examples of disaster architecture found elsewhere. Within *Architecture in Times of Need* are two adjacent sections of architectural renderings and proposals with brief descriptions written by the architects. These sections, preceded by descriptions of the architectural firms whose renderings are contained within, are the centerpiece of the book, a vivid display of what the future of the Lower Ninth Ward might look like, should MIR attain its goal.

From analyzing these renderings, I have identified common characteristics and features shared among many of MIR’s designs as well as those from elsewhere around the world. From these characteristic features I have determined a number of primary motivations and aims. In disaster architecture—as well as in architecture in general—ideology is more or less covertly smuggled into spaces through aesthetics and how formal choices materially structure what is possible in those spaces. I consider the architectural renderings to be rhetorical and interrogate the attractions and presumptions of specific aesthetic choices.

As described previously, the neoliberal ideologies smuggled in through the houses’ designs serve to privatize and individualize disasters and survivability. Disaster architecture orients its inhabitants as well as its audience (through renderings and witness to the buildings themselves) toward the inevitability of disaster. This orientation justifies the existence of disaster architecture by appealing to arguments of preparedness while continuing to avoid conversations of prevention. Through safety and survivability features, the MIR homes maintain an assumption of inevitability
toward disaster, which is particularly troubling given MIR’s articulation of Katrina as a man-made disaster. An assumption of inevitability helps to neglect larger structural causes of disasters such as Katrina and provides individualized solutions instead, ways to make the home “survivable.” From the presumption that they are necessary life-saving features of a home in the Lower Ninth ward, ladders to the roof, built-in storm shutters, reinforced stilts, and emergency water reserves feature in many of the renderings. Drawing from recent memory of water levels rising several feet up the wall in homes and of residents rushing to their rooftops to escape the flooding and gathering food and fresh water from grocery stores, the MIR architects participate in creating the grounds for the necessity of these survivability features. By featuring them, MIR helps to establish the Lower Ninth Ward as a place of disaster while simultaneously attempting to protect MIR’s residents (exclusively) from such dangers on an individual basis by exposing them to the recognition and power of the state.

On page 212 of *Architecture in Times of Need*, a line of translucent house shapes extends beyond the frame, suggesting alternative iterations of the house foregrounded: a full-color shotgun-style form with a striking difference: its two ends—one facing the street—
are tilted upward, elevated on legs that create space for a vintage truck to be parked beneath the near end (Figure 6). This form is possible due to the otherwise straight roofline being broken in the middle, collapsed onto the ground. It appears as though the raised shotgun house had its middle stilts kicked away, the middle collapsing under the weight. The windows are installed at a slant to match the pitch of the collapsed form. Only the front door, located at the middle point of the slanted ends, is level with the ground, accessible via several outdoor steps.

This broken home is one of multiple versions of Rotterdam-based architectural firm MVRDV’s “Escape Houses,” one of the more striking options for people wanting to build a Make It Right home. As MVRDV describes it in a brief column beside its initial image, the Escape Houses are political and explicit messages: “The primary task is to repair the levees in such a way that they guarantee for this safety. But how long can the population wait for that? Wouldn’t they lose even more, namely the ground value, due to that? So: why not starting? With that message every building activity becomes political. Why not stressing that? Why not showing this contradiction explicitly? [sic]” (Feireiss 213). MVRDV’s political message in these housing designs renders a visuality of ruin within material survivability, all pointedly being constructed while the levees remain precariously unable to handle another serious hurricane. Playing with the temporal series of events, the house evokes both the ruins it replaces as well as the anticipated destruction of homes in the Lower Ninth Ward, given continued neglect of the levee systems.

With acknowledgment of this neglect, MVRDV prefers to visually render the flawed world that citizens of the Lower Ninth Ward must live in to simply return home: “Since the height and quality of the levees as the connection with surrounding levees is not sufficient to reduce the risk of flooding, living there means living in danger” (Feireiss 213, emphasis added). The architects
acknowledge and admit to the fact that living in the Lower Ninth Ward means living in danger. They address these dangers as stemming from societal issues (lack of funding and attention placed on repairing the levees), but they protect against these dangers on a wholly individualized level.

MIR and its architects privatize survivability with homes like those in MVRDV’s “Escape House” series. This privatization and individualization of MIR’s residents is made possible from a perspective of the Lower Ninth Ward residents as what Ariella Azoulay terms “flawed citizens,” whose flaws “prevent the disaster from turning into an exception and empties the situation of urgency, making of it, in some cases, a matter of routine” (“Citizens of Disaster” 108). For Azoulay, dominant society considers flawed citizens to be citizens to whom disaster cannot happen because they are already understood to live (appropriately) on the edge of disaster at all times. Precarity is the timeless condition of existence for flawed citizens. By building survivability features into their homes, MIR renders disaster as quotidian and routine. Closing storm shutters, climbing the convenient ladder to the roof, activating water pumps, tapping into private rainwater reservoirs—all of these actions are convenient and highly visible within MIR’s designs. Of course, these are still homes from which the residents would need to be rescued (as subtly addressed with the roof access present in most homes). However, as these features are publicized and celebrated, those without access to disaster architecture’s survivability designs are further marginalized. With the next hurricane, disaster relief might rest easy knowing that the highly publicized Brad Pitt houses are safely shuttered and standing high above water level with reinforced stilts. They might rest easy, of course, at the expense of the thousands more lives. If you are not in one of MIR’s houses, your home is far less of a refuge from the storm. As a resident of MIR’s houses, disaster is no longer an exception, but the rule that organizes everyday living.
Despite the detailed renderings focusing on quiet summer scenes, with few clouds and no flooding, the stilts and other disaster survivability features orient the renderings toward disaster, anticipating rising waters and calling the viewer to imagine the woman on the porch—raised into the air and presiding over the block—as standing safely while the storm surges around her. Denizens of these architectural representations (and perhaps citizens of the Lower Ninth Ward upon MIR’s completion of the development) are rendered as citizens of disaster, as they reside within an area of disaster. This citizenship is not one that affords the typical protections by the state; they are in some ways mere citizens, as “they are first and foremost governed, a status that precedes any distinction between them” (Civil Contract, Azoulay 31). Their relationship to disaster merely precludes any protections, allowing only an exposure to the power of the state apparatus. The fundamental organizational logic and architecture of citizenship and of MIR’s efforts at empowerment through homeownership is one of retaining and increasing exposure to the neoliberal state’s power. Before Katrina, the Lower Ninth Ward retained some everyday dissident autonomy from the capitalistic state by being an ignored and marginalized community under the radar—a wound on the city’s oppressiveness, they considered themselves “a community of activists” (Svenson). Politically neglected, citizens of the pre-Katrina Lower Ninth Ward felt they could freely oppose and (at least locally) subvert the expectations of citizenship that reached them. Post-Katrina, MIR and nonprofits like it have been working to make the denizens of the area seen and recognized by the state as deserving further protection from the disaster that characterizes them to the outside. In some ways, then, MIR’s installations are their attempt at jump-starting the Lower Ninth Ward’s compliance with the demands to which other governed neighborhoods are subjected.
Opportunistic views toward the “blank slate” of the post-Katrina Lower Ninth Ward are legitimized through MIR’s representations of black fragility in the area—exemplified in MVRDV’s rendering—and efforts to install structures and architectures of neoliberalism are considered to be the “silver lining,” as architect Michael Sorkin hesitated (performatively) to describe it (Pogrebin). Angela O’Byrne, the American Institute of Architects’ New Orleans chapter president, urged Katrina as “an opportunity to rethink some of the urban planning” as “some of the blighted areas probably needed to be bulldozed anyway” (Pogrebin). O’Byrne’s statements share all of the blundering attitude toward areas like the Lower Ninth Ward that politicians have been caught expressing immediately following Katrina. For example, 10-term Republican Rep Richard H Baker of Baton Rouge “was overheard telling lobbyists: ‘We finally cleaned up public housing in New Orleans. We couldn’t do it, but God did’” (Babington). Perceiving an exaggerated silver lining to the death of more than 1,500 people, a quite generous interpretation is that Rep Baker simply failed to see the people housed in such a blighted environment, seeing only the structures that were so difficult to rehabilitate. A less generous interpretation, of course, would be that he did indeed see the people there. Rep Baker’s response to the controversy was: “What I remember expressing, in a private conversation with a housing advocate and member of my staff, was that ‘We have been trying for decades to clean up New Orleans public housing to provide decent housing for residents, and now it looks like God is finally making us do it’” (Babington). Gaffes aside, racist political sentiments such as these were not uncommon.¹⁶

Perhaps due to her expertise, O’Byrne’s statement on the area needing to be bulldozed seems to share little of the impropriety, and was followed with none of the outrage. The prompt to

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¹⁶ As reported and discussed by CBS News’ Sean Alfano, the Social Science Research Center’s Nils Gilman, and Jacobin’s Joan Walters, among others.
bulldoze entire communities, whose people are forgotten so quickly following their displacement that only their “blighted” surroundings remain, originates from the architectural and planning perspective primarily geared toward retaining (the palatable qualities of) New Orleans culture, of taking the chance “to look at the street system, public open space, to ask ourselves what are the things there we want to keep of great historic and cultural significance” (Garvin, as quoted in Pogrebin). We may not want to keep the former Lower Ninth Ward’s low standard of living, lack of jobs, inadequate police and fire protection, and exposure to faulty levees, but the impulse toward bulldozing an area completely leaves out consideration of uprooting “a community... rich in family networks, embedded in stable neighborhoods, anchored by affordable homes and a deep Christian faith” (Svenson). These features of the pre-Katrina community are dismissed in favor of addressing the blight of their environment. Renderings of disaster architecture like MIR’s orient the community toward disaster in defiance, placing them in an area of disaster and preparedness.

When viewing disaster architecture—whether in person, images, or renderings—one is asked to imagine the disaster that made it possible as well as the future disasters that justify its existence. Beyond existing as articulations for how the future should be, a rendering of disaster architecture calls for the viewer’s action in not only seeing its overt contents but also imagining its context and implications. These qualities are what make the scene and agent of disaster architecture—with renderings as medium—particularly rhetorical pieces of a globalized trend of neoliberal development.
A powerful image of the future for domesticity in the Lower Ninth Ward can be found in the interior of MVRDV’s Bent House rendering (Figure 7). A woman stands at the front “porch” (raised deck) of the home, standing confidently in a power-pose: her high-heeled feet (shown elsewhere) are firmly planted more than shoulder-width apart, her hands are on her hips, and she is dressed in contrasting black and white with a large and neat afro. Evoking Blaxploitation divas like Foxy Brown, this woman exudes self-assuredness and defiance of her surrounding scalies’ stereotypes. A black man, marked by his over-sized short-sleeved button-down, baseball cap, and small sport sunglasses as working-class, stands inert behind the dining room table, fully facing the viewer with arms at his sides. Whereas the diva on the balcony has turned around and is looking through the doorway at the viewer to communicate her empowerment, the man in the kitchen seems helpless, trapped by his surroundings. His expression is neither sorrowful nor strong, but silent.

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17 Foxy Brown was the titular character of a 1974 film starring Pam Grier. It is an important entry in the Blaxploitation genre, which was controversial for its representation of black people in the US, and often made political statements (implicit or explicit) about racial inequality as well as the Women’s Power Movement. Some initial resources on Blaxploitation include: film scholar Mia Mask’s Divas on Screen; black Marxist scholar Cedric J Robinson’s “Blaxploitation and the Misrepresentation of Liberation;” pop culture scholar Yvonne Sims’ Women of Blaxploitation; respective writer, journalist, and director Walker, Rausch, & Watson’s Reflections on Blaxploitation; and American history scholar Joshua K Wright’s “Black Outlaws and the Struggle for Empowerment in Blaxploitation Cinema.”
If it is MVRDV’s intention to communicate a political message with its renderings, then this argument resonates with racist liberal arguments that black men need to be restricted to the home, “brought to heel” from wandering outside and failing to support their families. Rather than locating issues of black men’s increased inability to support their families in structural inequalities—and rather than interrogating the assumption of that gendered and heteronormative power dynamic—MVRDV and MIR interpret “making it right” as attempting to correct and contain undesirable behaviors by minority groups. I argue that MIR’s renderings signal a process of domestication, in multiple senses of the word.

Domestication in disaster architecture occurs when populations are reoriented toward and placed into domestic spaces and roles. If one’s community consists only of homes and not also schools, shops, and other resources—as does the Lower Ninth Ward—one’s home becomes the only means of practicing citizenship and subjectivity. Domestication is simultaneously a practice of containing and training. With animals, domestication trains and breeds out undesirable or uncivilized behaviors. By changing their environment and policing their behavior, black citizens are “brought to heel” and subjugated by neoliberal architectures—both in the sense of organizational apparatuses and built environments. Domesticating black citizens by containing them within clean new aesthetics, the men are restrained and rendered inert and the women are narrowly empowered, funneled into traditional gender roles.

18 The phrase “brought to heel” is here referencing an infamous remark by Hillary Clinton. In 1996, in support of the Violent Crime Control Act, Clinton delivered an address at Keene State College, saying: “They are not just gangs of kids anymore. They are often the kinds of kids that are called ‘superpredators.’ No conscience, no empathy. We can talk about why they ended up that way, but first we have to bring them to heel” (Capehart). These remarks signal a liberal political approach to crime that seems to dismiss structural causes for crime just as leaders imply awareness of those causes. Furthermore, deeming youths “superpredators” and saying they need to be “brought to heel” dehumanizes them, evoking the image of wild animals being tamed and domesticated by civilized (wealthy) people and institutions through assimilation into acceptable normative culture.
The process of domestication is described by rhetorician Joan Faber McAlister in her article “Domesticating Citizenship: The Kairotopics of America’s Post-9/11 Home Makeover.” In it, McAlister marks a reorientation of citizenship “around particular national, economic, and familial forms... [that mediates] citizenship in ways that exclude other histories, places, and models of political subjectivity and agency” (86). McAlister argues recognition of this reorientation via media such as Extreme Makeover: Home Edition, a reality television show which “[gives] an actual family in tragic circumstances a newly-remodeled (or constructed) house” (91). I argue that not only did Hurricane Katrina participate in generating the call to return home that rose to consciousness with 9/11, but MIR enacted similar efforts at targeting specific, deserving citizens unable to have a proper home and providing them with extreme reconstructions of their homes and makeovers of their home lives.

This process of reorientation centralizes the domestic space as the primary available arena for practice of political subjectivity, containing MIR residents to assimilationist ways of being and leaving those unable to afford MIR’s houses with no legitimate means of practicing citizenship. Similar to the ways in which the spectacle of Extreme Makeover: Home Edition “restages a public rebuilding of the American Dream in the form of the private family home that is to be the future dwelling place of deserving American citizen-subjects” (McAlister, “Domesticating” 91), the Make It Right Foundation restages a privatized humanitarian response to devastating disaster with the makeover of a postmodern, assimilationist aesthetic afforded by the resources of celebrity (not only with Brad Pitt’s publicity, but also with the world-renowned architects involved). By containing legitimate practices of citizenship to the home, and by rendering that home as in close
correspondence with aesthetics of success and independence in a neoliberal state, MIR renovates citizenship—what it means, how it is practiced, and how we identify it.

*Failures of Representation*

With MIR and other disaster architecture projects, there is an absence of real citizenry despite the foregrounding of danger and precarity (to bodies, presumably). I am interested in the inhumanity of placing select minority citizens into an admittedly dangerous living situation to communicate a political message about their precarity while also testing and marketing innovative survivability designs. Disaster architecture enacts this experimentation on real people for the sake of innovatively progressive aesthetics and political statements with renderings that suffer from pointed tone-deafness, such as with Michael Sorkin’s proposal for a “habitable levee” to protect New York City from storms like Hurricane Sandy (Figure 8). Sorkin’s “28+” proposal—named this way for the “elevation above which the city is safe from floods” (Furuto)—features a line of stacked cuboid structures, a “barrier” that would be “self-financing” with “highly desirable places to live” that “allow strategies of mixing that could help redress high levels of residential segregation” (Furuto). Tellingly, the renderings only feature people from behind the barrier and on the beach during a peacefully sunny day.

The people for whom the levee itself is home are not

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Figure 8: Michael Sorkin’s “28+” proposal, a habitable levee for New York City. Each of the cuboid structures pictured would be a residence (Furuto).
 pictured, lest we too readily imagine who we consider to be candidates for human shields. Sorkin places citizens in similar structural architectures to MVRDV’s Escape Houses. Should these plans come to fruition, actual people will be housed in structures whose purposes are to make political statements about precarity. Both sets of renderings fail to accurately represent the people who would be inhabiting these structures: Sorkin’s fails by excluding them from the renderings entirely, and MVRDV’s fails by simplifying citizens into stereotypical representations that are functional enough to render inhabitants recognizable to state power, but not accurate or open enough to allow citizens to recognize and relate to the suggested ways of being in these proposed spaces.

Stereotyping, as defined by Stuart Hall, takes place within a visual “politics of representation” (226) that renders Others silent; it “reduces people to a few, simple, essential characteristics, which are represented as fixed by Nature” (257). As “part of the maintenance of social and symbolic order” (258), stereotypical representations of black citizens of MIR’s development serve to make the rendered figures recognizable, relatable, and non-threateningly fixed (or contained, located, and domesticated). These stereotypical figures are comprehensible substitutions for actual people, placeholders that are predictable and legible to most anyone looking. Due to this generalizability, however, renderings populated by representations of people are also vacant, empty of actual inhabitants. I argue that the emptiness of MIR’s homes in renderings correlates to a citizenship desert; without real representation in these images of future spaces, inhabitants of MIR’s homes have no model for practicable means of enacting their citizenship. Because they do not correspond with the stereotypical representations pictured in MIR’s renderings, they are not the intended inhabitants.
This absence of actual citizenry is represented in Make It Right’s renderings through scalies—pasted in representations of people, used both for a clearer sense of scale as well as suggesting uses for the rendered spaces. For MIR’s architects, the great majority of these scalies are of working class black people. The type of scalies being used by MIR’s architects reflects a reality of the rhetorical relationship between black Americans and architecture, and while a quick scan of renderings for similarly new architectural projects reveals a wealth of hip young white people, a resource for scalies being out of date in providing images of black Americans reveals that black Americans are not typical audiences for architectural renderings. As (potential) members of a deliberating public, black citizens are largely excluded. The result may be different for renderings featuring primarily young scalies—marketing for malls, college campuses, and apartments, for instance, benefit from appearing diverse, but working class black families are not typically represented.
Deliberative Exclusion

MIR’s scalies draw from and reiterate stereotypical ideas of Lower Ninth Ward residents and/or black working class Americans in ways that preclude any affordance of performing real subjectivity and citizenship. In addition, it makes it clear that black voices were not well incorporated into the processes of rendering, and that working class black individuals may not even be the intended audience for these renderings. First, to argue the point of black voices being largely absent from MIR’s deliberative process: of the 38 architects listed in Architecture in Times of Need as working with MIR, only 2 are black—David Adjaye of Adjaye Associates in London and Joe Osae-Addo of Constructs LLC in Ghana. Though an international assemblage of architects, the vast majority are white. This follows trends reported by various studies of an utter lack of diversity in the field of architecture. The National Association of Minority Architects reports fewer than 2% are African-American, the dominating population being white males (Oguntoyinbo). The designers and builders of our world are white, and thus ill-equipped to construct according to the needs and aesthetic preferences of minority communities.

The foundation’s staffing shows some effort in including local black voices, though the majority of black employees work as mediators and guides for the Lower Ninth Ward residents wishing to assimilate into capitalistic roles of citizenship. Of the 24 listed in MIR’s staff, 4 are black locals, working in various administrative roles and as community outreach (“Staff”). Beyond office administration, these locals work to help “families into realizing their dream of homeownership and obtain[ing] financial freedom,” “pursuing a better quality of life,” while they also assessed “obstacles faced by clients and [help] them become mortgage ready buyers” (“Staff”). Financial “freedom” and independence is valued and assumed to be the goal of MIR customers,
while homeownership (aka being “mortgage ready”) is given as the means by which this financial freedom happens.

By prepping Lower Ninth Ward residents for capitalistic domestication—realizing homeownership and growing a credit history—these black local employees of MIR are at risk of becoming complicit in what bell hooks described as the “new black elite,” who emerge when “the miseducation of all underprivileged black groups strengthens the class power of the nonprogressive black elite,” a “strategic repression” into continued cycles of capitalistic oppression (97).

Throughout their efforts in New Orleans, MIR has been displacing race with class, stepping away from an acknowledgement of the overt racism involved in the oppression of the Lower Ninth Ward while simultaneously embracing discourses of class difference (and thus the desirability of class ascension). Employing black locals with college degrees as liaisons between capitalism and the working class public implicates MIR in processes of generating and constructing consent rather than asking the community’s participation and input.

As discussed earlier, Brad Pitt was reported as having gone on a “listening tour” of the Lower Ninth Ward community prior to MIR’s constructions. By MIR’s accounts, this listening tour is the primary means by which MIR included the voices of black locals. In Architecture in Times of Need, Douglas Brinkley describes Pitt’s tours:

Shell-shocked mothers held children’s hands and prayed for their blocks of ruin.
These residents had heard so many lies that nobody was beyond intense scrutiny.
Brad Pitt cut through all that negativity with his heart. He made a direct appeal.
Like Jimmy Stewart in Mr. Smith Goes to Washington he told the locals that he had a vision. That he cared. That he could help them Make It Right!! His pure empathy
beamed forth and everybody smiled. This was the Missouri kid having a love affair with New Orleans, not a Hollywood sorcerer peddling tricks. After being ignored and defiled, Pitt was offering the Lower Ninth residents a sincere helping hand in the Judeo-Christian tradition. Everybody intuited he was for real. (Feireiss 16)

What Brad Pitt heard on his listening tours was despair and distrust. Not reported are any signs of the community organizing itself or working to get what it is they need. Brinkley provides an odd (and dated) comparison with Jimmy Stewart acting in a 1939 movie where his character is “a naive man [who] is appointed to fill a vacancy in the United States Senate [and whose] plans promptly collide with political corruption” (IMDb summary). Signaling a confusion between actor and character—the actor Jimmy Stewart, of course, did not make an appeal to locals, but his character Jefferson Smith did act an appeal to a crowd of actors—Brinkley seems to have fallen prey to exactly what he claimed Brad Pitt was not: “a Hollywood sorcerer peddling tricks.” While I have no reason to find Pitt’s intentions to be anything less than genuine—though certainly uncritical of neoliberalism—there is a clear issue of opacity and misdirection when Brinkley’s starstruck account of celebrity Brad Pitt’s community engagement is the primary resource for assessing MIR’s deliberative involvement with locals. It seems that even after decades of racism insisted that black Americans needed to be restrained, contained, civilized, and rescued from themselves, residents of the Lower Ninth Ward continue to be misrepresented through constructions of consent in the deliberative process. What they need has been decided for them by flashy white leaders.

The US Census Bureau reports a percentage of black architects at 3.4% (Lam), and the exigence is the same: minority representation within and thus created by the field of architecture is terribly lacking, a problem made all the more damaging when majority-white architects dictate the
spaces for minority neighborhoods. Reiterating these statistics, American Prospect senior correspondent Courtney Martin advocates for increased diversity in the field of architecture, stating “the more diverse the nation’s architects are, the more varied and exciting our cityscapes will be.” Beyond variation and excitement, however, diversity in the architectural field would increase the status of an architect who “cares whether the building serves the community in and around it, rather than whether it is another ‘fetishized object’ that is beloved by critics but not by the people who use it every day” (Martin). The home must serve a particular purpose to the community in and around it, not serve as a substitution for latent desires of colonization. For a home to be for the displaced of the Lower Ninth Ward, it cannot also be for architectural scholars and critics and the white onlookers hoping to consume New Orleans culture at first sign of its habitability.

Martin’s mention of fetishism invokes Stuart Hall’s definition and serves to help explain the representational failures of MIR: “Fetishism takes us into the realm where fantasy intervenes in representation; to the level where what is shown or seen, in representation, can only be understood in relation to what cannot be seen, what cannot be shown” (266). In reference to an unrepresentable outside figure, the fetishized object Martin speaks of is a skyscraper symbolizing, referring to, and enacting the domineering power of the (white, male) architect—phallic, oppressive, sublime, and so on. “Fetishism involves the substitution of an ‘object’ for some dangerous and powerful but forbidden force” (Stuart Hall 266). For MIR, the fetishized home renderings displace and disavow—or simultaneously indulge and deny (Stuart Hall 267)—desires for the Lower Ninth Ward to be populated and enjoyed by wealthier white citizens. A more generous
reading: the fetishized MIR home displaces and disavows desires for an ascendant, capitalist, and liberal class of black elites to gain a foothold in the Lower Ninth Ward.

**Visual Dissonance**

By invoking the Blaxploitation genre in their renderings, MVRDV further mythologizes the class ascension simulated by MIR while also calling to mind white savior narratives, gendered and raced as white men save black women from black men, empowering them to the position of proper, civilized housewife. The dissonance in representing a domesticated Blaxploitation diva is complemented by her visual elevation over the despondent black man standing in the kitchen and dining area.

By rendering the elite black woman as expressive and powerful, but through reference to a highly mediatized stereotype of female empowerment, race anxieties are displaced through comfortable and familiar narratives of black women being freed from the burden of black men by white men (like celebrities, architects, etc). By rendering the working-class black man as inert and powerless, race anxieties are disavowed through visual communication of the figure’s dissonance in the space, through a modeled failure to work in the home. As Netherlands-based MVRDV wrote in their description for the Escape House renderings: “every building activity becomes political. Why not stressing that? Why not showing this contradiction explicitly? [sic]” (Feireiss 213). The political

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19 This narrative trope of the white savior, as often explored through filmic representations, makes its sexist implications more explicit by arguing that white men can save/are the solution for black women whose lives are threatened or destabilized by black men. This narrative has not quite fully entered critical consciousness, given Stanford Law professor Ralph Richard Banks’ 2011 article in the Wall Street Journal, “An Interracial Fix for Black Marriage.” The article asserts that if black women marry non-black men, “they might find themselves in better relationships. Some professional black women would no doubt discover that they are more compatible with a white, Asian or Latino coworker or college classmate than with the black guy they grew up with, who now works at the auto shop.” Stereotypes of the undignified black male can legitimate fantasies of white saviors and black villains.
messages in MVRDV’s renderings are made explicit through a visual showing of contradictions. The elite black woman is empowered by and proud of her home. The working-class black man is powerless, silent, and trapped in the domestic space.

Dissonant figures feature prominently throughout MIR’s renderings. Within the typical vernacular of marketing images—architectural renderings are often forgotten as being included in this—many scalies seem to express wonder and enjoyment at their surroundings. A man stands atop the house proposed by Adjaye Associates, looking out from the outdoor roof area and seeming to wonder what type of home is shaped like a brown cube (Feireiss 140). Taking the stairs up to that same roof, a black man in a full tracksuit, jacket slung over his shoulder, hat and glasses obscuring his eyes, smiles in disbelief at the strange inverted pyramid descending from above (Feireiss 144). A more prevalent scalie, popping up at multiple times across the renderings of multiple architects, is a black woman in a simple, pale green dress that ends mid-thigh (Figure 9). She appears walking diagonally away from the viewer, her hair in a small ponytail, holding a phone up to her ear. Her interrupted gait, the position of her head, and the way her arms seem to be pulling away from her body indicate that she is taken aback upon seeing the brown cube of a house (Feireiss 140). She is similarly taken aback by the architecture from NOLA-based concordia
(Feireiss 170) and Santa Monica-based Pugh+Scarpa Architects (Feireiss 221 & 224), as if brought to a halt, her conversation cut short at the sight of such buildings.

Regardless of her specific reaction to the buildings—whether it be wonderment, surprise, horror, etc—the response read from her body language signals the dissonant presence of the houses in that neighborhood. Their imposition upon the traditional architectural landscape of the area—described as “alien upstarts” (“Brad Pitt,” MacCash) and “alien, sometimes even insulting” (Bernstein)—interrupts typical community life, halting passersby. Performing the aesthetic and material effects of MIR’s interruptive cultural enclave (as discussed earlier with Aiello’s work on Bologna’s Manifattura delle Arti) while demonstrating the dissonance of working-class black people in presence of such upscale architecture, the renderings are once again political statements on who and what belongs in the futuristic built environment.

Not just between the architecture and its pasted-in inhabitants, visual dissonance is also demonstrated within the house’s presentation as well. In NOLA-based Eskew+Dumez+Ripple’s rendering, the closed storm shutters of a sleek white rectangle bear the smiling face of local jazz legend Fats Domino (Feireiss 184). In the foreground, a blurred scalie struggles to maintain her grip on an umbrella violently broken backwards (Figure 10). Dark storm-clouds swirl in the background, but the house seems secure, even the long grasses sheltered by its front stoop remaining still and...
upright in the wind. This demonstration of the MIR as a sanctuary in a dangerous place is typical of disaster architecture. Michael Sorkin’s habitable levee, 28+, is rendered standing memorably against rushing ocean waves, the image occluded by torrential rain and split by a bold bolt of lightning stretching across the sky (Furuto). One must presume the homes of 28+ are dry and safe during all of this, but also—and perhaps more importantly—that the city streets behind the human levee are free of flooding and the dangerous rush of apocalyptic waves. Such overt visual reminders of the hurricane that prompted the designs are not featured in MIR’s renderings, as the renderings themselves are, at worst, experiencing bursts of wind (Feireiss 184). MIR’s homes do show survivability features; however, many homes also feature aesthetic and ornamental reminders of their origin in disaster in what would otherwise be dissonant design choices.

Pugh+Scarpa Architects included “recycled wooden pallets” in its design, “repositioned here as a patch-worked shade screen wrapping the building, an innovative alternative to expensive façade materials that lends its own unique character and texture” (Feireiss 221, seen in Figure 9). The wooden pallets also evoke the material scavenging necessary following disaster, as shown most explicitly in Baltimore Sun photojournalist Karl Merton Ferron’s photograph (Figure 11) of survivors crossing a makeshift bridge of wooden pallets to an evacuation bus. The pallets also resemble the wooden debris that swirled

Figure 11: “Survivors step on wooden pallets as they cross through standing water on their way to waiting buses that carried them away from Mid City” (Baltimore Sun).
around New Orleans following the hurricane, as well as the reclaimed wood furniture and art that grew in popularity as a result. Participating in an aesthetic of salvaging and reclamation, the architects and MIR align themselves with supposed celebrators of New Orleans culture and mourners of Katrina, sometimes appropriating political stances made by locals as well. For instance: a graffitied levee wall in the background of Pugh+Scarpa’s rendering (Feireiss 220, seen in Figure 9) reading “AMERIKKKA” (the A’s circled, as in the anarchist symbol, and triple K’s evoking the Ku Klux Klan) communicates negative interpretation of the nation’s racist norms and institutions. Curiously, none of the architects included the famous sign (Figure 12) in the Lower Ninth Ward that condemns disaster tourism (Terdiman; Wade).

The rhetorical devices of dissonant imagery and juxtaposition as used in MIR’s renderings has been employed more overtly through artistic renderings of domestic interiors by visual artists such as Martha Rosler. An American artist, Rosler utilizes multiple media to make politicized statements on everyday life in the public sphere, women’s experiences, media and war, architecture, and the built environment (“Martha Rosler”). Relevant comparisons to the MIR renderings can be found through a large swath of her works, primarily with her photo-collages in House Beautiful: Bringing the War Home. An ongoing series begun in the late 1960s, House Beautiful consists of jarring

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20 Primarily outsiders interested in consuming authentic New Orleans culture and having a material connection to pre-Katrina NOLA began gathering the wooden wreckage from destroyed homes and making furniture and other decor from it. Notable examples of this are Alex Geriner of Dooorman Designs (Signer; Evans), the Katrina Furniture Project by University of Texas and Art Center College of Design students and faculty (“Katrina Furniture Project”), and the “Celtic Woodshop,” which advertises “HURRICANE WOOD” in the form of tables, bowls, and other decorative items (“HURRICANE WOOD”).
representations of peaceful domestic interiors disrupted by pasted-in representations of non-American Others suffering violent consequences of war overseas. In “Balloons” (Figure 13) a Vietnamese woman rushes her dying child up a half-flight of stairs, out of a family room painted and decorated in an array of clean whites. A minimalist glass-framed coffee table fades into the bleach-white shag rug, surrounded and accented by squared floral chairs and a whimsical arrangement of colorful balloons. Outside, a hanging rattan chair evokes crisp mornings among the sunlight streaming through deciduous shade. And inside, a Vietnamese child is dying in a warzone.

The mother, in mourning-black, holds her mostly-nude child, a piece of fabric wrapped around its shoulder. She does not bother looking to the photographer for help. Dislocating the trauma of war and making American “peace” on the homefront more explicitly connected with trauma and suffering abroad, Rosler’s piece burdens the viewer with an uncomfortable juxtaposition. American guilt ascends the stairs with bloody hands and full arms and, assuming our complicity with her suffering, passes us by.

The visual dissonance of a Vietnamese woman and her child rushing for help taking place within the calm domestic interior of a House Beautiful Magazine cover highlights the average American’s distance from the suffering and war with which that citizen is perhaps even
unknowingly complicit. A more recent example of Rosler’s pieces, 2008’s “The Gray Drape” (Figure 14) makes a more explicit nod to efforts at aestheticizing and covering awareness of disasters made against others, with an elegantly dressed woman holding a flowing gray drape over walls of windows looking out at Iraq under siege. The disjointed insertion of a traditionally-beautiful woman in anachronistic formalwear juxtaposed against the war-zone just beyond the deck emphasize the superficial boundaries and façades American society erects to distance itself from acknowledging its complicity in others’ suffering.

Rhetorical constructions such as MIR’s utopian development project demonstrate one of disaster architecture’s primary functions: making mythic spectacle of recovery efforts. In addition, disaster architecture helps to disavow—or simultaneously indulge and deny (Stuart Hall 267)—complicity in oppression power structures through aestheticization and touristic spectacle, distracting from what journalist Daniel Terdiman calls “the ignored nonrecovery of New Orleans.” As he describes it: “the less the image of the destruction that’s still everywhere is spread around, the less people will care about helping—or ensuring that such a disaster doesn’t happen again.”

With projects like MIR drawing attention to New Orleans and the Lower Ninth Ward only through the rosy tint of its own beauty and success in housing a small block of families, the miles of neglect remain unseen, and the displaced people who fail to fit MIR’s stereotypical
representations of citizenry are even further rendered invisible. Given the unlikeliness of a
displaced Lower Ninth Ward citizen to be able to return, purchase a $150,000 home, and inhabit
it according to the expectations and assimilationist aesthetics of the designs themselves, exactly
who or what is MIR helping in the end?

Articulating political messages and co-opting dissent against unjust structures of
governance, MIR architects nonetheless market their houses to liberal capitalism, demonstrating
an ability to draw in assimilationist black elites and well-intentioned volunteers and housing
advocates at the expense of gentrifying a ravaged community. Failing to represent the people of the
Lower Ninth Ward (pre- or post-Katrina) while attempting to draw that same population, only to
fail to provide feasible models for performing citizenship within those spaces: the Make It Right
Foundation attempts and flounders to maintain the displaced of the Lower Ninth Ward as its
audience despite its commitments to neoliberal organizational structures and systems, like
homeownership and governance by a privatized sovereign state.
CONCLUSION
Private Homes in the Public Eye

The homes constructed by MIR are private residences on a national, public stage of New Orleans recovery narratives and architectural controversy. As homes, they provide refuge from the storm while offering the space for new beginnings, though those beginnings are limited to specific aesthetic and political values of neoliberalism. As public pieces of architecture, they draw tourism, contribute to the mythos of New Orleans’ comeback, and distract from the continued ailing of other New Orleans districts and neighborhoods. I have argued that, despite MIR’s declared audience of displaced Lower Ninth Ward residents, the organization nevertheless holds itself more accountable to the demands of the installation of neoliberal processes in places of disaster than for-profit developers. When it comes down to the particular aesthetics of the homes that MIR built, however, understandings of an intended audience can help to parse the ideological contents smuggled in through the design elements of the homes.

The question of audience and clientele arises in ways troubled by MIR’s use of architects famous for buildings that have become worldwide attractions, Frank Gehry being the most notable and celebrated example. Tensions between building public attractions and private homes can be seen in many of MIR’s renderings, and these tensions follow those around the other homes built by these world-renowned architects. The deconstruction of conventional domestic values of the area in favor of more high-minded designs and theoretical ways of living oriented toward outside critics rather than toward inhabitants is a quality that follows from recruiting architects whose renown holds them responsible to the critics, not the uneducated masses. To build a home according to an underprivileged and underrepresented family’s needs within the context of an
integral community, a famous architect would need to betray and/or neglect his or her public image and ignore the criticisms of architect peers.

Frank Gehry’s own home (Figure 15), for comparison, is a quaint Dutch colonial renovated on the inside and supplemented around the outside with a deconstructivist shell in 1978 (though it has since undergone expansion and renovations, keeping the same deconstructivist spirit). Gehry is quoted as saying, “I loved the idea of leaving the house intact... I came up with the idea of building the new house around it. We were told there were ghosts in the house... I decided they were the ghosts of Cubism” (“Gehry Residence”). Haunted by Cubist deconstructivism, Gehry’s home appears as an unfinished compound, constructed defensively against the then-newly-generated disruption of private property with national attraction. Gehry’s renown and the house’s unconventional appearance disrupted the anonymity of the neighborhood home and rendered it a hybrid: private residence in use, national attraction in reception. This tense hybridity threatens the privacy and normalcy of surrounding homes as well, however. Described by Architect Magazine writer Alex Hoyt as “the world’s most famous—and most misunderstood—bungalow,” Gehry’s house has attracted the acclaim of gushing critics and the ire of neighbors: “One neighbor threatened to sue. Another vowed to have Gehry jailed by the city’s building department” (Hoyt). Seeming to threaten the very integrity of the surrounding Figure 15: Gehry Residence in Santa Monica, CA (“Gehry Residence”).
neighborhood, Gehry’s high-minded statement had no place in a community of private homes. “Neighbors hated it, but that did not change the fact that the house was a statement of art entwined with architecture” (“Gehry Residence”). Gehry’s statement of art entwined with architecture is here taken as a model for understanding the (possible) effects of MIR’s homes. As simultaneous private residence and public attraction, the Gehry house and the MIR homes must negotiate tensions of audience that are annoying for Gehry and his neighbors and damning of neoliberal oppression for MIR.

Reception and Readings

The house that Frank Gehry’s architecture firm (Gehry Partners, LLP) designed for MIR has yet to be selected by incoming residents (Figure 16). A model was constructed and has been purchased by Linda Santi, who works for the Neighborhood Housing Services of New Orleans, a nonprofit organization. The iteration that has been built and—with design compromises such as flush windows to lower the building costs and an enlargement of the “owner’s side”—it has been praised for adding “even more star power” to the neighborhood just as it has met criticisms online. It is a two-family home, split in a zig-zag down the middle to create front- and rear-facing

Figure 16: MIR’s house designed by Frank Gehry and Partners (“Our Homes in New Orleans”).

Those who care enough to submit comments to *Times-Picayune* remain unimpressed by the home and unswayed by Gehry’s renown, questioning the design for its aesthetics as well as its impracticality and price. On MacCash’s article on Gehry, commenter “sazerac1” called Gehry an “abomination of an architect” who is “in love with making his structures as odd as possible.” “joegunn” expressed gratitude that the “monstrosity isn’t within sight” of his home. “noodlebrain” said, “Ugly is ugly even if it is Gehry. Will it withstand a Cat[egory] 5 [hurricane]? How quickly can a family get it back up and running after an 8’ flood? Are we building a tourist destination or true sustainable housing?” Many commented (often sarcastically) on the seeming danger of the flat roofs over the porches: “The hurricane projectile solar panel roof is a nice finishing touch on that beach house!” (“nolabackwards”) and “I hope someone is around with a videocam when the next hurricane hits” (“atlantawatch”). In response, though, “dougmaccash” and “Make It Right” (real or fake is difficult to discern) commented that the roof modules “are engineered to withstand winds up to 130mph.” Finally, others commented on the price tag: “$200,000 for a duplex in the Lower Ninth Ward? LMAO...” (“navycpo”) and “$200,000 for ONE property in the 1700 block of Tennessee Street! The old adage ‘There’s a sucker born every minute’ has been proved once and for all. One the novelty and chicness of living here wears off, he’ll be lucky to get $55k for it [sic]” (“oneadamtwelve”).
Despite what commenter “Robert1969” diagnoses as “anti-intellectual reverse-snobbery,” these comments at least signal some public sentiment that the house’s design is incongruous with the community’s expectation, that the house’s claim to sustainability and survivability is not visually demonstrated in the design, and that the house’s price tag is unrealistic, alienating members of the Lower Ninth Ward community and threatening gentrification. As “Ridethewildsurf” commented: “All these houses have been built in the 9th ward for the Germans/European artsy folk to come in five years and buy for two to thr[ee]e times the value thus, killing a neighborhood.” Fears of the community being pushed out in what “Ridethewildsurf” calls a “domino effect” seem to underlie each expression of surprise at the price, and fear of the Lower Ninth Ward’s community being destroyed by Gehry’s aesthetic underlie each complaint of its “monstrousness,” resonating with complaints toward Gehry’s personal residence in California.

The stark differences between the community’s expectation for the homes and the actualized, built structure cannot be passed off as mere “anti-intellectual reverse-snobbery,” however. Indeed, Frank Gehry’s MIR house is not even quite the one he designed, according to the plans. Practical alterations and compromises subdued his design and lowered the construction costs. According to architectural theorist Witold Rybczynski, this tension between the idealistic plans and the practicalities that get in the way is central to the study and practice of architecture:

Architecture, grounded firmly as it is in the world, is not an academic discipline, and attempts to impose intellectual theories on buildings always run up against these irritating practicalities... architecture emerges from the act of building; theories, if they have any place at all, are an indulgence of the scholar, not the need of the practitioner. (15-6)
Indeed, the architect seems without theory, simply practicing where he pleases. If Rybczynski will allow an indulgence: between ideologically-based identification of needs in society, theoretical renderings of great buildings that “are often the result of a single—and sometimes very simple—idea” (Rybczynski 17), and the material enactments of those simplified renderings and simple ideas, there exist areas of translation and slippage. Between a problem, the proposed solution, and the built “solution” are liminal zones, access points for unexamined ideological spread and influence. When architecture is assumed anti-academic and anti-theoretical, criticism of its results becomes a matter of taste. But with built environments quite materially and undeniably contributing to the marginalization and oppression of minorities in the United States by limiting their available practices of citizenship, their mobility, and their access to resources and aid in event of disaster, architecture must become suspect of its driving ideologies in every enacted practice.

Following critiques of irresponsible architectural practices, American artist Gordon Matta-Clark (Figure 17) attempted to “address form and architectural object together; as a technique, it cut against not only the surface formalism of his Cornell education, nor modernism’s close liaison with form, but with a far longer architectural tradition that sought to separate architectural form from built object” (Walker 38). Denying this separation brought Matta-Clark to practices of “creative questioning” (Walker 39), performative and aesthetic practices of criticism that “attempted to

Figure 17: “Splitting,” Gordon Matta-Clark’s 1974 piece commenting on decay in American cities (Ouroussoff).
carry over principles from the realm of the intellect and maintain them in things: ‘THE IDEA IS TO SUPERIMPOSE DRAWING ON STRUCTURE.’ Drawing thus became a property of the thing itself, and not just a generating principle” (Walker 41). This is not to say that Matta-Clark contained and streamlined the translation of ideological rendering to ideologically-consistent material, but that his consideration of the mistranslations that occur are used to critically reflect and make statements on the unexamined ideological forces influencing material constructions.

The Make It Right Foundation’s constructions are decidedly ideological. Based in liberal theories of justice and ecological sustainability, the homes reflect their ideological points of origin. What has failed to translate has been their foundational motivation to help the pre-Katrina Lower Ninth Ward’s community and ethos to recover and grow again. Precluded by neoliberal ideas of private homeownership as the sole means of practicing citizenship, the community spirit once enjoyed in the Lower Ninth Ward—despite and because of the collapsed welfare state—is struggling to recover. To borrow and alter Brad Pitt’s rhetorical construction: the neighborhood is not resurrecting itself from the rubble. A housing development is being installed on ravaged lands and new representations of citizens consistent with a neoliberal state are being born. This is not the same neighborhood, but a process of domestication that changes how citizenship is performed from the outside in—a domestic(ating) renovation of citizenship.
Praise and Condemnation

The Make It Right Foundation, as an organization founded by a high-profile celebrity with the resources to gather the world’s top architects to try to do some good in the wake of an unmitigated disaster, has built over 109 homes for those displaced and is expected to reach its goal of 150 within the next few years. 109 families, neighbors, teachers, and community members have been able to return to the Lower Ninth Ward thanks to the Make It Right Foundation’s efforts. Despite all that I have written here, I do not take these acts lightly. Appeals to humanity and appeals to political responsibilities vie for dominance in recognizing what MIR has done for these people—the good and the bad. I have no reason to believe that Brad Pitt is intentionally taking advantage of or benefiting from the people of the Lower Ninth Ward in any way, but complicity in a system of oppression—when one has the resources to help perpetuate and spread that system—is also not something that I can take lightly.

What Brad Pitt is attempting to do with MIR is quite noble: he is attempting to address what he identifies as a series of injustices against the people of the Lower Ninth Ward. He astutely identified Katrina as a man-made disaster at the nexus of rampant climate change, reckless neglect of infrastructure, and a lack of substantive policies to aid those living near or below the poverty line (Feireiss 7). MIR’s architects designed homes which did more than simply replace the rows of cheaply-constructed and low-build-quality homes that held the Lower Ninth Ward’s population in a zone of precarity. Aesthetically interesting (if not pleasing), storm-resilient, and with Platinum LEED certification that drastically lowers utility costs, the MIR homes are not in themselves wholly condemnable. However, as a response to a locally-specific political situation, without thorough respect toward the racial dynamics at play, and without adequate input by the communities
drastically affected, the MIR development becomes complicit in repeated cycles of oppression and marginalization.

Should we even pretend to put politics aside, there perhaps were better choices that could have been made for the people of the Lower Ninth Ward. Habitat for Humanity’s Musicians’ Village has been relatively non-controversial, in good ways and bad. Holding much less of the nation’s attention while still aesthetically revitalizing a relatively small area of the Lower Ninth Ward, Musicians’ Village risks complying with the silencing of national attention to New Orleans’ recovery needs. Oprah Winfrey’s Angel Lane—despite its funding support dropping abruptly as media attention withered—proposed avoidance of the dangers of living in the New Orleans basin, given the continued lack of adequate attention to the levees (George; “Oprah,” Moskowitz).

But as MIR held itself responsible to more than just the needs and desires of the displaced, its message became more difficult to decipher, its homes became less palatable for the locals, and its politics became less clearly focused on making the lives of the Lower Ninth Ward better and more secure on their terms. Clouded by the multiple desires of the many who generously invested in the Make It Right Foundation—emotionally and materials—it became a confused and forced attempt at a utopian panacea quickly picked up and marketed for the rest of the ailing world. Magnified by the often tone-deaf and alienating rhetoric of high-minded architects, MIR became a site of great contestation on many levels of the public: intellectuals, members of the industry, national spectators, and locals. Perhaps unfortunately, MIR did not take advantage of this kairotopic positioning with relatively accessible points of deliberative contestation and enact a more locally democratically accessible process. Locals of all sorts have weighed in on MIR through various media, but executive agency remains in the hands of MIR’s largely white and highly-
educated assemblage of professionals, the vast majority of which having little to no connection to
the city of New Orleans pre- or post-Katrina, much less the Lower Ninth Ward.

*Plans for the Future*

Though I would argue that attempts at a truly exhaustive account of any rhetorical event
are necessarily utopian, the Make It Right Foundation and Katrina are especially outside the
bounds of a mere Master’s thesis. There are many directions I would have liked to have taken that
I did not, for various reasons, and there are directions I could have taken (and some might say
*should* have taken) that I avoided or of which I was simply ignorant. I consider this thesis the first
foray into a more extensive and demanding project. At the risk of exposing too many of the
glaringly unaddressed issues in a study of the Make It Right Foundation and Katrina, I will briefly
address avenues of future research (for myself and/or others), whether they introduce a wholly new
approach or are simply extensions of an approach glossed in the text above.

First and foremost, with this thesis I attempted to better articulate how ideology is attached
to, smuggled within, and extrapolated from the aesthetics of architecture. This goal was both aided
and limited by my selection of the Make It Right Foundation, for its narrow focus and contextual
situation provided easier means of identifying audience and purpose while it also risked a
limitation of applicability across other types of architecture built in different places and for
different purposes. This would be my first issue to address: Are the processes identified above in
disaster architecture limited to physical locations and areas recently ravaged by disaster? For
instance, would the national crisis narratives emboldened by 9/11, perpetuated by political
punditry, and acknowledged by recently popularized civil rights debates render the entire nation a
location of disaster? Can the patterns of disaster architecture be seen in public built environments across the nation due to increased fear of terrorist attacks? In order to address this, my formulations of disaster architecture would need to be more thoroughly compared with and contrasted against various theorizations of space and place that have been forwarded by current scholars in rhetoric and beyond.

Next, though there are clear connections to be made, my thesis fails to adequately address feminist concerns of domesticity and homeownership as access to practices of citizenship. Doreen Massey’s work on gendered mobility in *Space, Place, and Gender*, for instance, would be useful for broadening analysis of architectural renderings as proposing gender dynamics in the home or other built environments. Intersectionally related to racial critiques of architectural renderings, a more clearly feminist approach would provide a means of expanding the conversation into other forms of public housing, for example, and who is prioritized as recipient of that housing.

And finally, though there are many more possible avenues of research, further attention toward aesthetics of ruin and opportunity in the disaster zone would provide entry into more interdisciplinary conversations. As MIR’s homes grapple with and feature aesthetic acknowledgment of the destruction wrought by Katrina (some even making its reference a key design feature), ruin becomes part of the design and part of the beauty, attraction, or power of the building. What this does for a supposedly safe home space, especially, deserves more attention and close analysis. For now, however, I hope to have helped trouble the foundations, the rhetorics of philanthropic aid that provide the justification for increased and perpetuated inequality in our urban built environments.


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VITA AUCTORIS

Dylan Edward Rollo was born on February 14, 1992 in St Charles, Missouri before growing up in Olathe, Kansas. Upon graduation from Olathe East High School in 2010 he attended Drake University in Des Moines, Iowa until 2014, graduating summa cum laude in the Honors program to receive a Bachelor of Arts with a double-major in Writing and Rhetoric and Communication Studies. During the latter half of his undergraduate career and into his first years of graduate school he also worked as an editorial assistant for Women’s Studies in Communication. For his Master of Arts degree he attended Syracuse University’s Communication and Rhetorical Studies program from 2014 to 2016, also receiving a Certificate in University Teaching from the Future Professoriate Program. Following graduation from Syracuse University, he will join Northwestern University’s doctoral program in Rhetoric and Public Culture in Evanston, Illinois.