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"New Orleans Nexus"

"New Orleans Nexus"

by **Stephen Bingler**, AIA, REFP, NCARB

The recovery and long-range redevelopment of New Orleans and the Gulf Coast region is a complex undertaking requiring simultaneous planning in a wide range of disciplines. For this reason there is a paramount need to create a planning infrastructure that will enhance collaboration and reduce duplication in all of the planning disciplines moving forward. In order to accomplish this goal, the Louisiana Recovery Authority has embraced the concept of Nexus planning, and the development of comprehensive Community Nexus Centers.



Community Programs and Services

Every citizen is entitled to a wide array of support services that are currently delivered through multiple public agencies. These programs sustain basic educational, health, social, cultural, recreational, transportation, safety and other individual and institutional needs. The degree to which these services are effectively delivered is determined largely by how accessible they are to the people who need them. To a large degree the complex network of agencies and providers established to deliver these public services is inefficient and cumbersome. With respect to low-income communities, where barriers to access are at their highest, the need for physical proximity and information access to these services is especially critical.

One of the reasons why the delivery of public programs is less than adequate is because the process of their design and implementation is usually disaggregated.

For example, programs for early childhood education are managed autonomously from educational programs at the elementary, middle and high school grade levels. Programs for vocational, as well as for community college and higher education are usually administered through another independent agency, and programs for adult literacy are most often offered through yet another delivery system. For the underserved population of workers whose livelihood depends on multiple jobs, or whose technology access or literacy

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may be challenged, or whose income levels are too low to support private transportation, access to these programs and services is often severely limited. This holds true for all categories of public services, where access to programs and resources is widely dispersed and administratively complicated. It is for this reason that a new strategy for the planning and distribution of public services must be created to provide for a more equitable and effective means of program delivery.

Challenge brings Opportunity

In most cases where this disaggregated condition exists, the barriers to change are formidable. Longstanding commitments to existing physical infrastructure and administrative alliances are often among the more prominent of these obstacles. However, in the aftermath of hurricanes Katrina and Rita, these barriers have been significantly reduced by the need to rebuild at a previously unimagined scale and within an unprecedented timeframe. In the rebuilding process, close attention must be paid to how a wide spectrum of community programs and services can be provided more effectively.

Why is it called a Nexus?

The "nexus" concept advocates for a managerial, programmatic, and physical planning model that is highly integrated in its design and execution. A fully developed community Nexus center is conceived of as a place where a wide range of programs and services are effectively sited, coordinated and administered in a way that addresses the needs of the people who most need them. At the core of the concept is a cooperative governance model called the Community Trust.

The Community Trust

Community programming is typically divided among a wide assortment of elected and appointed bodies. Non-governmental organizations (NGO's) add additional programs and facilities to the mix. Each entity usually plans, funds, builds and operates its own administrative and facilities infrastructure. In order to improve efficiency and quality of service to all citizens, the Nexus planning model proposes the development of a collaborative planning entity called a Community Trust, composed of representatives from a full range of public, not-for-profit and community based organizations with responsibility for coordinating and improving the delivery of all community programs and services.

Form Follows Function

The programming and design of facilities to accommodate the full range of programs and services included in a community Nexus center must be conceived and developed as part of a common and collective whole. Included in each center could be spaces designed to serve a full spectrum of individual and community needs, such as public open space, centers for K-12 education, career and technical training, adult learning, multi-modal information access, community fitness, visual and performing arts, recycling, emergency refuge, disaster recovery, community health and other social services. With a collaborative approach to public and private planning, these community Nexus centers can also provide walkable access to localized farmers markets, community gardens, grocery and dry goods outlets, retail services, and public transit.

National Issues of Confidence and Trust

In the aftermath of hurricanes Katrina and Rita, community Nexus centers can be an important tool for engaging the community in issues related to a full range of the physical, cultural, social, economic, organizational and educational aspects of neighborhood and community planning. But the need for a more

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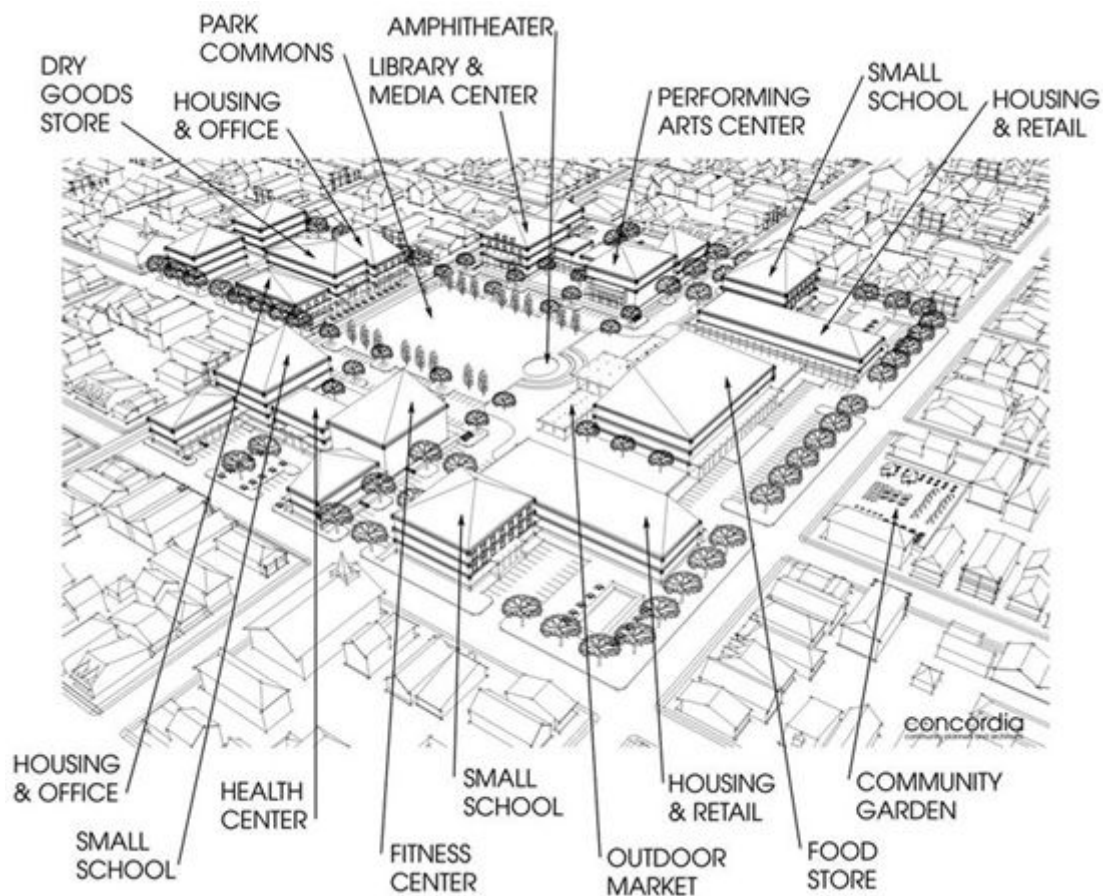
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collaborative approach to planning is also endemic to cities and neighborhoods across the nation. Gaps in public confidence exist in many urban and rural communities, resulting in things like high turnover rates of local political officials, school superintendents and their key administrative staff. In this environment it is often difficult for communities to maintain a common vision for the planning and implementation of integrated community services. A more democratic model that is authentically implemented at the scale of rural villages and urban neighborhoods could help to foster more inclusion and stability. It is in this way that the Nexus planning concept could be useful for collaborative planning in neighborhoods and communities throughout the nation.

Prototype Community Nexus Center Design

Following is a visual illustration of how a Community Nexus Center might be organized for a hypothetical small town or urban neighborhood:



About the author:

Steven Binger, AIA, REFP, NCARB, an active member of CEFPI (Council of Educational Facility Planners International), is the founding principal of Concordia llc., a community planning and architectural design firm in New Orleans, Louisiana.

Under Steve's leadership, Concordia's award winning work has appeared in a wide range of national publications, including



Progressive Architecture, Architecture, Interiors, Architectural Digest, Newsweek, the Los Angeles Times, the New York Times, USA Today and the Wall Street Journal.

In recent years, Steven has undertaken projects focused principally on the planning and design of environments for living and learning. He served as a special consultant to the Office of the Secretary of the U.S. Department of Education for policy related to the design of schools as centers of the community. His educational papers have been published in a wide range of books and journals in the fields of urban planning, architectural design, education, public health and smart growth. A new book "2076: A Democratic Revolution in Progress" - is currently in progress. Additionally, Steven frequently speaks at national symposia and conferences related to innovations in community-based and small school planning and design.

Steven has been involved in many notable research and development projects concerning educational issues around small schools. Most recently, Concordia was a partner in the research and publication of *Dollars and Sense: The Cost Effectiveness of Small Schools*, a collaboration with the KnowledgeWorks Foundation, Rural Schools and Community Trust, and Dr. Craig Howley of Ohio University. At the behest of the KnowledgeWorks Foundation and the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation, Steven co-authored the second release, *Dollars & Sense II: Lessons from Good, Cost-Effective Small Schools*.

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About [Concordia, Ilc.](#):

Concordia is currently engaged as a consultant to the New Orleans Community Support Foundation to identify, oversee and coordinate the work of sixteen neighborhood and city wide planning teams focused on recovery and rebuilding planning in the aftermath of hurricanes Katrina and Rita.

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