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Defending Desire: Resident Activists in New Orleans" Desire Housing Project, 1956-1980

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Defending Desire: Resident Activists in New Orleans' Desire Housing Project, 1956-1980

A Thesis

Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of the
University of New Orleans
in partial fulfillment of the
requirements for the degree of

Master of Arts
in
History

by

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Abstract

The Desire Housing Project opened in 1956 as a segregated public housing development in New Orleans' Upper Ninth Ward. The Desire neighborhood, one of the few neighborhoods in the city where black homeownership had been encouraged, was transformed by the project. Hundreds of former Desire residents were displaced by the mammoth project, which became home to more than 13,000 residents by 1958. Built on what had once been a landfill, the Desire Housing Project came to epitomize the worst in public housing, before it was torn down by 2001.

Although the project was isolated from the rest of the city and lacked basic services, residents worked to create a viable community, in spite of the pitfalls of segregation. Within the context of the civil rights movement, Desire residents fought to bring in basic services, pushing local government to more fully develop their neighborhood.

Keywords: public housing, urban renewal, Desire neighborhood, Desire Housing Project, New Orleans, Ninth Ward, War on Poverty, civil rights movement

Abbreviations

AFDC	Aid to Families with Dependent Children
DACC	Desire Area Community Council
DEOC	Desire Economic Opportunity Council
DCC	Desire Community Center
DHP	Desire Housing Project
HANO	Housing Authority of New Orleans
HUD	Department of Housing and Urban Development
NCCF	National Committee to Combat Fascism
NOLAC	New Orleans Legal Assistance Corporation
NOPD	New Orleans Police Department
SWPC	Social Welfare Planning Council
TCA	Total Community Action

Introduction

In June 2007, the “new Desire,” a mixed-income public housing development located in New Orleans’ Upper Ninth Ward, opened with a small ceremony. Built on the former site of the Desire Housing Project (DHP), one of the largest and most infamous public housing complexes in the country before it was torn down by 2001, the “new Desire” was still a work in progress, with only 100 of the scheduled 500 single-family homes ready for occupancy. Whereas the old project had once been bursting at the seams, with more than 13,000 residents living in the 1,862 apartments during the 1960s, the “new Desire” featured plenty of open space in its inchoate state. The nearly 100-acre plot of land that had been home to the old DHP – the most densely populated area in New Orleans – now stood ready to be developed. While the dozen or so protestors who showed up at the event longed for the old DHP and mourned the loss of community that accompanied the demolition of the project, city officials were ready to celebrate the “new Desire.”¹

A writer for the *Times Picayune*, New Orleans’ main daily newspaper, remembered the old DHP as “nothing but brick row houses steeped in poverty,” and heralded the “new Desire” as a step forward, a place where brightly-colored shotgun homes had transformed the landscape. Mayor Ray Nagin declared that the new project would offer residents “better living.” With the protestors locked out of the event, jeering from behind a chain-link fence, Nagin said, “I don’t care what anybody says today, this is progress.” Alphonso Jackson, U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) secretary, agreed with Nagin, saying that it was time to integrate poor black families into mixed-income neighborhoods, “where their children can play safely and

¹ “New Orleans First Citizen’s Participation Program,” 1969, Box 68, Folder 732, Community Services Council of New Orleans, Louisiana and Special Collections Department, Earl K. Long Library (hereafter cited as CSC New Orleans).

the families can thrive, not in row houses that were built 30 years ago to house people to keep them away from everyone else.”²

For politicians like Jackson and Nagin, writing off the old DHP seemed natural, given that the history of the project and the Desire neighborhood has often been boiled down to segregation, isolation, unemployment, crime, and drugs. But the DHP was always more than just a mistake. While the neighborhood was beset with problems by the 1980s, with the onset of the crack epidemic and the physical deterioration of the DHP, the 1960s and 1970s had seen plenty of progress as Desire residents seized opportunities that arose within the context of the civil rights movement. Although living in a segregated and isolated environment often limited the impact of activists in the DHP, they provided an impetus for change, working to transform a project built on an old landfill into a home for tens of thousands of poor blacks. While they succeeded in making the DHP a home, in building a sense of community and bringing in basic resources, they could not keep the project from falling apart, in both a physical and an economic sense. That would have taken a broad coalition, with support from the city, state, and federal governments, which never materialized on the scale necessary to alter the trajectory of the DHP. While DHP leaders pushed for change from within, their level of commitment to rebuilding the neighborhood, to fixing the mistake that the DHP had become, went unmatched, as the project came to be seen as an inevitable failure by those living outside of the community.

The stories of those who lived in the DHP and the Desire neighborhood seem to have been swept aside along with the project. While it is important not to glorify the struggles of Desire residents, it is also important not to overlook them and replace them with a narrative that focuses solely on the physical decay of the project itself or the numerous drug addicts and criminals that set up shop in abandoned DHP apartments as the project deteriorated. The DHP

² Gwen Filosa, “New Desire Set to Open by July,” *Times Picayune*, June 6, 2007.

was home to both the single mother with eight children, working to hold down a part-time job as well as the drug-addicted thief and all shades in between. The voice of the working poor or the mother on welfare is rarely reflected in the historical record, but what is written about the DHP can only begin to resemble reality when it incorporates the daily struggle of those who made the DHP into a home. Far from a failure, their efforts to navigate the many problems associated with life in the DHP form an important but overlooked element of both the civil rights movement and the history of public housing both in New Orleans and nationally. There are indeed many projects like Desire, whose histories have been forgotten or oversimplified to the point where they are remembered as just another “ghetto.” Incorporating the perspectives of public housing residents will go a long way toward complicating the history of public housing.

Although the DHP should never be eulogized as an architectural masterpiece – it began to fall apart shortly after it opened in 1956 – it provided much-needed housing for poor blacks. While the DHP was designed as something of a warehouse for poor blacks, with the city intent on keeping building costs low and services to a minimum, residents fought to create a sense of community, constantly pushing local government to develop their neighborhood more fully. With the passage of the Voting Rights Act of 1965 and the introduction of War on Poverty programs to the Desire neighborhood, residents gained access to a political voice. Though groups representing Desire often lacked the political clout to bring capital into their neighborhood, they actively lobbied local government officials, demanding that they be provided with their basic rights, such as the right to decent housing, a safe neighborhood, medical services, and recreational facilities for their children. Women within Desire, as the key actors driving the neighborhood associations that took shape during the 1960s, were not passive but instead learned to become leaders on behalf of their community.

Naturally, these same community leaders and residents bore some of the responsibility for the problems within Desire, such as drug abuse, violence and the physical deterioration of the DHP. That being said, much of the damage was done before residents had even moved into Desire. The community leaders and residents were not the ones who designed and built the DHP as a segregated, isolated and underserviced space. When considering the subject of African Americans living in public housing, it is important to remember that it was only after neighborhoods like Desire were designated as black, their “slums” cleared, the forces of urban renewal enacted, and public housing erected, that residents could then begin the effort to make the space their own. The leaders that arose in the Desire neighborhood, many of whom arrived only after the DHP opened in 1956, were in many ways dealing with what the *Times Picayune* would call “a blueprint for disaster.” But that should not be the end of the story. For Deloris Bourgeois, who lived in the DHP for nearly 50 years, Desire residents organized and lobbied to ensure that the community had what it needed. In the words of Bourgeois, “through us getting together, by the time we finished, we had a neighborhood clinic, we had two nurseries, we had two daycares and some other things. You name, we had it, we got it; but that was a lot of work.” What becomes clear from studying the DHP is that, while the “blueprint” for the DHP may have given Desire residents little to work with, they succeeded in creating a community that grew stronger and even flourished at times, at least from the perspective of those who lived in Desire. By the 1980s, the drug problems, violence and unemployment had started taking their toll on the neighborhood and an exodus occurred.³ The struggle continues, though. Bourgeois, who now

³ Arnold Hirsch, “Second Thoughts on the Second Ghetto,” in *Journal of Urban History*, 29, no. 3 (March 2003), 302; Eig, “Desire Pays Price for Shortcuts,” *Times Picayune*, June 19, 1989; for a wonderful example of community-building in public housing, see Sudhir Alladi Venkatesh, *American Project: the Rise and Fall of a Modern Ghetto* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2000); Kenneth Kusmer, *A Ghetto Takes Shape: Black Cleveland, 1870-1930* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1978), 269-274; George Lipsitz, *Ivory Perry and the Culture of Opposition* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1988).

lives uptown – one of the many former DHP residents who have been dislocated – is itching to move into the “new Desire,” but will not until she is offered something more spacious than a one-bedroom apartment. While residents started moving into the “new Desire” back in 2007 and the community is slowly expanding, the area still does not have a recreation center, as of 2011. It took years of struggle before one was finally built in the old DHP – it arrived in 1968, 12 years after the project opened – but it was torn down with the old project. Bourgeois, though she still visits the neighborhood and attends meetings, is growing weary:

“We still waitin’ [for a new community center to be built]. I am getting tired, you know. Like I said, I am 77-years-old and you would think by now I would be tired of fighting and asking for those kind of same things over and over and over. And what I am talking about is, we need our center back up. That was a place that you could have anything you want there. We had the little bleacher seats and all that to play the games in there. We had weddings in there. We done had all kind of little concerts and different things and we had a stage. You name it; we had all that in there.”⁴

Although politicians may point to developments like the “new Desire” as evidence of progress, much remains the same. The new development is still segregated, still isolated and its leaders still need to berate city officials before basic services will be provided.

Background of Public Housing

It is important to set the DHP apart from the initial wave of public housing developments built in the 1940s, after the passage of the Housing Act of 1937. In many cases, the public housing built during this period was exceptionally good. J.M. Fuerst, a former urban studies professor at Loyola University (he has since retired), described Chicago’s Ida B. Wells Homes, which opened in 1941 as “one of the addresses most sought after by African Americans in the city.” Along with the Ida B. Wells project, the Chicago Housing Authority also had the Altgeld Gardens, Dearborn Homes, Cabrini Homes and the Leclair Courts projects, among others,

⁴ Deloris Bourgeois, interview with author, January 21, 2011, New Orleans, LA.

which Fuerst called “engines for upward mobility” and “incubators of the middle class.” For his book, *When Public Housing Was Paradise*, Fuerst focused on the Ida B. Wells project, interviewing former residents, managers, police officers and anyone else associated with the 1,600-unit complex. In doing so, Fuerst uncovered the “almost bucolic world of public housing in the 1940s and 1950s.”⁵

Rhonda Williams, historian and author of *The Politics of Public Housing*, makes a similar argument in her study of public housing in Baltimore, tracing her work back to the 1940s when housing authorities maintained strict standards for public housing and selected only “a nice class of people” as tenants. According to Williams, “the new tenants who had jobs and were handpicked by the housing authority, were attractive neighbors and they would engage in activities to maintain their pieces of heaven and to enhance their social status.”⁶

The second wave of public housing came after the passage of the Housing Act of 1949. For all its bluster of providing a “decent home and a suitable living environment” for every American family, the act created little in the way of housing opportunities for America’s poorest citizens. While Title III of the Housing Act called for the construction of 810,000 units of public housing by 1955, urban renewal and slum clearance were the real driving forces behind the new law. Title I of the law authorized massive subsidies for urban renewal and although office buildings, parking garages, apartment complexes and shopping centers would be built en masse, it took until 1972 for the proposed 810,000 units of public housing to become a reality.⁷

In cities like Chicago, Detroit, Baltimore, Philadelphia, and Atlanta, local housing authorities, city governments, realtors, and business interests combined to reinforce black

⁵ J.S. Fuerst, *When Public Housing Was Paradise* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2005), 1-7.

⁶ Rhonda Y. Williams, *The Politics of Public Housing: Black Women’s Struggles Against Urban Inequality* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), 44-45.

⁷ Roger Biles, “Public Housing and the Postwar Urban Renaissance, 1949-1973,” in *From Tenements to the Taylor Homes*, 144-159.

“ghettos” through racially-based zoning. Public housing, kept away from white neighborhoods, was used by city officials to enforce segregation, with planners making sure not to upset the racial balance of a neighborhood. Black communities, bursting with an influx of those who had migrated into cities from rural areas in search of wartime employment, saw their populations expand even further with the addition of public housing. Barriers such as racial covenants and white animosity kept blacks limited to these areas.⁸ Meanwhile, whites were being drawn to the suburbs by “powerful economic and cultural incentives,” according to historian Robert Self. The opportunity for subsidized housing markets, low taxes, and neighborhoods free of blacks lured many into the suburbs. Over time, white Americans came to “accept as natural the conflation of whiteness and property ownership with upward social mobility.”⁹ But, as Self has also argued, black communities nationwide were not merely the victims of the “second ghetto.” They envisioned and fought for something far different than what was being foisted upon them.¹⁰

In New Orleans, the first public housing developments were built in the 1940s, after the passage of the Wagner Act. The St. Thomas and the Iberville were white developments and the Magnolia, Lafitte, Calliope, and St. Bernard were for blacks. In January of 1941, more than 25,000 people came to see the opening of the Magnolia development, the first one built for blacks. Like the other public housing sites built in New Orleans under the Wagner Act, Magnolia was made of solid brick. One scholar called Magnolia and the other early developments “some of

⁸ Hirsch, *Making the Second Ghetto*; John F. Bauman, *Public Housing Race and Renewal: Urban Planning in Philadelphia, 1920-1974* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1987); Thomas Sugrue, *The Origins of the Urban Crisis: Race and Inequality in Postwar Detroit* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1996); Ronald H. Bayor, *Race and the Shaping of Twentieth-Century Atlanta* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1996); Charles E. Connerly, *The Most Segregated City in America: City Planning and Civil Rights in Birmingham, 1920-1980* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2005); Williams, *The Politics of Public Housing*.

⁹ Robert Self, *American Babylon: Race and the Struggle for Postwar Oakland* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2003), 98-99.

¹⁰ Self, *American Babylon*, 1-3.

the most attractive and best constructed in the nation.”¹¹ The *Times Picayune* lauded the opening of Magnolia as “a new way of living... for hitherto underprivileged Negro families of New Orleans.”¹²

By 1946, however, when the Florida development opened in the Upper Ninth Ward (just south of where the DHP would eventually be built), public housing in New Orleans began to be built with an emphasis on quantity and austerity. Florida, originally intended as wartime housing for white workers, was quickly converted into low-rent housing for white veterans.¹³ The Housing Act of 1949 called for “stringent economy in construction and maintenance.”¹⁴ Concomitantly, the need for more public housing continued to grow, as HANO had 46,000 applications waiting to be addressed in the spring of 1949. Between 1940 and 1950, the white population of New Orleans had grown by 47,311, a 13 percent increase, while the black population had grown by 33,597, a 22 percent increase.¹⁵ To cope with the housing shortage, HANO used money from the Housing Act of 1949 to add cheaply-built extensions to the Magnolia, Calliope, St. Bernard, Florida, and St. Thomas developments. With license and funding to add 5,000 new units of public housing, HANO used the remaining money to build the DHP. The DHP would join St. Bernard and Florida as the only public housing projects built far from the center of the city. Florida residents, however, had much more convenient access to public transportation. Although the National Housing Agency, a federal public housing authority, had adopted guidelines recommending a “reasonable distance” to services such as public

¹¹ Marnie Mahoney, “Law and Racial Geography: Public Housing and the Economy in New Orleans,” *Stanford Law Review* 42, no. 5 (May, 1990): 1268.

¹² “Magnolia Street Units Center of Public Interest,” *Times Picayune*, January 15, 1941.

¹³ “Housing Project Completion Set,” *Times Picayune*, November 10, 1945; “Veteran’s Housing Lag,” *Times Picayune*, July 26, 1946.

¹⁴ Marnie Mahoney, “The Changing Nature of Public Housing in New Orleans, 1930-1974,” (master’s thesis, Tulane University, 1985), 56.

¹⁵ Mahoney, “Law and Racial Geography,” 1271.

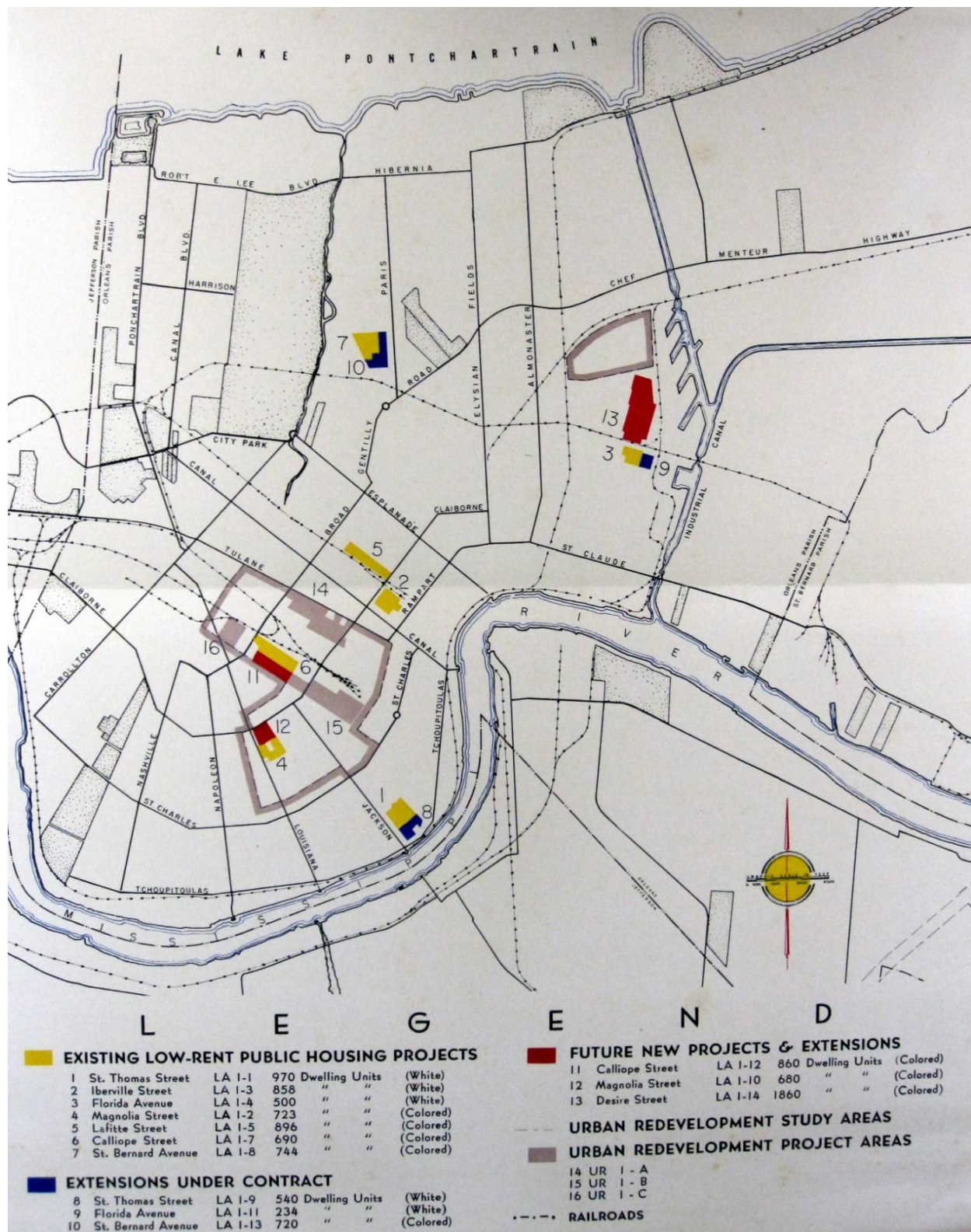


Figure 1: A map of public housing projects in New Orleans, 1951. The map includes projects slated to be built using funds from the Housing Act of 1949. Housing Authority of New Orleans, Annual Report 1951.

transportation, medical centers, schools, shopping, and jobs, to keep areas from becoming blighted, the DHP, Florida and St. Bernard certainly did not meet those standards.¹⁶

The Making of the Desire Housing Project

According to Stephanie Slates, whose master's thesis dealt with the use of public housing to meet urban renewal needs throughout New Orleans, city officials like Mayor DeLesseps S. Morrison "obsessed over clearing slum areas and preventing the spread of blight" during the 1940s and 1950s. In 1956, Morrison, who served as mayor from 1946-1961, lauded the opening of the DHP as one of his administration's key accomplishments over the past year. Using urban renewal to clear "slums" and relocating the "slum dwellers," most of who were black, in public housing projects like the DHP, Morrison had transformed the city. While Morrison was celebrating the achievements of his administration in 1956, public housing in New Orleans remained overcrowded, with HANO yet to address its extensive waiting list.¹⁷ From Morrison's perspective, the housing shortage was something of a bagatelle, as he commemorated 1956 as a year defined by progress and economic expansion. In his annual report, he made the following statement: "The results of this great boom are all around us. Our standard of living is at an all-time high. Vast public and private improvements are rearranging the physical shape of our city. Our port and industries are prospering as never before."¹⁸

Few areas of New Orleans were as radically transformed as the Desire neighborhood, in the wake of the economic boom described by Morrison. A desolate cypress swamp with bayous running through the area, the Desire neighborhood saw little in the way of development until railroad tracks were laid down around the middle of the nineteenth century, allowing trains from

¹⁶ Mahoney, "The Changing Nature of Public Housing," 51-60; Stephanie Slates, "To Clear a Rock-Bottom, Low-Density Slum" (master's thesis, University of New Orleans, 2008), 24.

¹⁷ Slates, "To Clear a Rock-Bottom, Low-Density Slum," 32; Edward F. Haas, *DeLesseps S. Morrison and the Image of Reform: New Orleans Politics, 1946-1961* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1974), 51-76.

¹⁸ "N.O. Progress, Expansion, Economic Gain Reviewed," *Times Picayune*, December 28, 1956.

the New Orleans, Mobile and Texas railroads to pass through. Even by 1939, only 187 housing structures dotted the landscape, with a little more than 500 people living in the area. Larger properties included one owned by the Colored Industrial Home and School Association. A small section of development had become a “slum area, inhabited primarily by low income whites,” who lived in small single-family homes and apartments. By the early twentieth century, a good chunk of the land started being used as a garbage dump.

Once construction on the Industrial Canal was completed in the 1920s and the Public Belt railroad was extended along the western side of the canal, industry started taking over the area. Most of the streets in the current Desire neighborhood were laid out during the 1940s and after World War II Desire became one of the first neighborhoods to encourage black homeownership, with houses priced between \$3,000 and \$4,000. Even with the postwar development, Desire remained isolated, with no streetcar or bus lines connecting the neighborhood to the rest of the city. According to a study done by the Office of Policy Planning in 1978, the main focus of the Desire area had always been industrial development, with “residential development the stepchild.”¹⁹

Construction on the DHP began in 1949 and was completed by 1956, although not without some major hitches along the way. Originally set to be finished by 1954, HANO had to delay the opening of Desire after claiming that the original contractor “had not completed his job satisfactorily.”²⁰ The Pittman Construction Company had already completed the first 508 units but HANO felt it necessary to bring in a new firm to build the remaining 1,352 units. By 1956, the DHP, consisting of 262 two story buildings containing 1,852 units was ready to welcome an

¹⁹ Office of Policy Planning, *Desire Area Neighborhood Profile* (New Orleans, 1978), 3.01-3.07.

²⁰ “Desire Housing Project Scored,” *Times Picayune*, April 12, 1956.

influx of tenants. Space would grow tighter over the years, as the new public housing development was squeezed onto a plot of land just under 100 acres in size.²¹

The DHP and its 1,852 units would open for occupancy in 1956, displacing 769 families in the process. Already, before tenants even moved into the \$23 million dollar development, it had altered the makeup of the community, evicting thousands of residents from the neighborhood. In some cases, it would take two years to relocate the families forced out of the Desire community. Key sites within the neighborhood, like the Hideaway Club where Fats Domino played, were razed to make way for the DHP. According to HANO, the relocation of residents who had been living in the Desire neighborhood “posed a rather unusual problem compared to the pattern of former experience, in that a much greater proportion of occupants owned their own homes and preferred to build or purchase homes in other outlying areas rather than accept low-rent public housing.” What HANO overlooked or ignored was why, if the neighborhood had been so “blighted,” did residents not want to move into the brand new DHP apartments that would soon be built? For a neighborhood in such need of renewal, why did so many residents want to build or buy their own homes in a different location? HANO was in fact destroying a thriving black community, as evidenced by the nearly 800 residents, 20 businesses and nine churches that were removed to make way for the DHP. Only two of the 769 displaced families were “white,” with all of the businesses and churches listed as “Negro.” According to HANO, many of the families in Desire had “raised gardens, domestic animals, fowls and pets, and preferred to locate in areas where they could continue the practice.”²² The introduction of public housing, driven by urban renewal, had in many ways weakened the area, which had been growing slowly. The focus, which had been on developing a neighborhood where African

²¹ Housing Authority of New Orleans Strategic Plan, May 26, 1995, City Archives and Special Collections, New Orleans Public Library (hereafter CASC).

²² Housing Authority of New Orleans, *Annual Report 1954*(New Orleans, 1954), 26-27.

Americans could purchase homes, would suddenly shift toward incorporating thousands of poor blacks, coming from all across the state, into what would become a much larger community. Far from cosmetic, this would be a radical makeover of the area. “Progress” was making its way to Desire, at least from the perspective of city officials.²³

City administrators did their best to sell the DHP as a success, though few went as far as HANO chairman Olin Linn. Pointing out the critical housing shortage facing poor blacks, Linn touted the construction of the DHP as one of the “most significant community improvements in the city’s history.”²⁴ Others were not as optimistic. Even before residents started moving into the DHP, HANO received complaints about the location of the project, as well as its poor construction. The Owners’ and Tenants’ Association of the Third Ward called the DHP “unsafe for human habitation,” and urged mayor Morrison to conduct an investigation. According to the association, the Desire project was “located in a swamp,” and “without transportation or community facilities.” From a structural perspective, they charged that the project was sinking, steps were falling away from the buildings and that “pavements and gas, water and sewerage mains have twisted and broken as a result.” In a statement that would prove deeply prophetic, the association promised that the results would “forever constitute a menace and a never-ending job of maintenance.” HANO officials quickly denied the allegations and responded by saying that the idea that the Desire project was located in swampland was “fanciful.” The site, according to HANO, was properly drained and “no more vulnerable to subsidence than any other area of metropolitan New Orleans. The exact meaning of that statement must have provided little in the way of assurance for skeptics. Unlike the public housing built in New Orleans during the 1940s,

²³ Office of Policy Planning, *Desire Area Neighborhood Profile* (New Orleans, 1978), 3.02; Michael Hurtt, “Fats Domino,” *Offbeat.com*, June 1, 2004, <http://www.offbeat.com/2004/06/01/fats-domino/> (accessed April 9, 2011); “Desire Development Neighborhood Snapshot,” *Greater New Orleans Community Data Center*, December 8, 2006, <http://www.gnocdc.org/orleans/7/16/snapshot.html> (accessed April 9, 2011).

²⁴ Eig, “Desire Pays Price for Shortcuts,” *Times Picayune*, June 19, 1989.

such as the Magolia and Calliope developments, the DHP was made of brick veneer, a cheaper alternative to solid brick. By 1962, HANO officials were forced to acknowledge that building the DHP as cheaply as possible was proving to be a costly mistake. According to HANO, the problems with the DHP that had already surfaced by 1962, only six years after it opened,



Figure 2: More than 11,000 children moved into the Desire Housing Project when it first opened in 1956. Housing Authority of New Orleans, *Annual Report 1956*.

“conclusively proved that housing projects should be of solid masonry construction and that the initial savings in construction costs are more than offset by the increased maintenance costs.”²⁵

²⁵ “Desire Housing Project Scored,” *Times Picayune*; Housing Authority of New Orleans, *Twenty Five Years of Community Service in the Field of Public Low-Rent Housing, 1937-1962* (New Orleans, 1962), 33-35.

Nevertheless, by 1956, poor blacks from all over the state started moving into the apartments and from then on the reputation of the Desire neighborhood became synonymous with the DHP. Black families started moving into the segregated DHP on May 1, 1956 and by 1958 the population had grown to more than 13,450, giving the project the dubious distinction of being the area in New Orleans with the greatest population density. More than 11,000 of those residents were children.²⁶

Before his family moved into the DHP, Kirk Stevens remembers living on Mandeville Street in the 8th Ward, only a few yards from the Florida Canal. The house they lived in had a leaky ceiling and was infested with rats, so when Stevens (he was five years old at the time) and his family made the switch to the DHP in 1956, it stood out as a memorable day. According to Stevens, “walking in and seeing everything new...hardwood floors, cabinets, appliances, it probably was similar to moving into your own house, a brand new house.” Over the years, Stevens, his mother, and his nine younger siblings would make 3141 Desire Street, Apartment C their home. Describing his family as “pretty much the norm,” in terms of the number of children, Stevens reminisced about envying his neighbors downstairs in Apartment B, because they were part of a family that had only four children and therefore received “luxuries,” such as Oreo cookies for lunch.²⁷

Johnny Jackson, Jr., and his family moved into 3340 Pleasure Street, Apartment A in 1958, a few years after the DHP opened. Along with his parents and three siblings, Jackson Jr. moved into the three-bedroom apartment in the DHP when he was 14-years-old. In an interview,

²⁶ “New Orleans First Citizen’s Participation Program,” 1969, Box 68, Folder 732, Community Services Council of New Orleans, Louisiana and Special Collections Department, Earl K. Long Library (hereafter cited as CSC New Orleans); Housing Authority of New Orleans Strategic Plan, May 26, 1995; Maurice Stern, “Proposed Role of Social Welfare Planning Council in Community Action Program in Desire Area,” February 8, 1965, Box 32, Folder 340, CSC New Orleans.

²⁷ Stevens interview.

Jackson spoke of the relief of moving into the DHP. Being poor, his family had done quite a bit of moving around – mostly in the Uptown area of New Orleans – before settling in Desire. Though it had its problems, moving into the DHP was often better than the alternative. Here is how Jackson put it:

Public housing during those times, in the earlier days, was the best housing that was available, particularly for black folks here in New Orleans. Here you had a family of six cramped up in a living room, a bedroom, a bathroom and a kitchen, so when we came to the projects, we all had...at least the boys had their room, my parents had their room, my sister had her room. It was clean, it was decent. In fact in the early days of public housing...it was a blessing for a lot of people. Where people came from and the kind of conditions they lived under, even though it was still tight, it was decent. It was like a 100 percent improvement. We didn't have all the problems that eventually evolved. You could hang your clothes out on the line, you could go outside and play in the courtyard. Every quarter the housing authority would send an inspector by to make sure that the apartment was being kept up. You worked it out with your neighbors about who cleaned the hallways. It was a living experience that was far greater than what we had come from.²⁸

The sense of community referenced by Jackson took some time to develop. In the early years of the DHP, the city did little to foster community.

Although a HANO press release from 1956 promised that tenants would be “provided with ordinary community facilities and conveniences that insure normal, safe and decent living conditions,” the DHP began as somewhat of a desert. Tenants were expected to mow their lawns but had no place to store their tools. Garbage started piling up, as the city had failed to provide garbage chutes or dumpsters.²⁹

As the Desire neighborhood expanded, residents quickly joined forces with their neighbors in the Florida area, located just south of Desire. In October 1956, more than 400 residents of the Florida/Desire neighborhoods held a meeting at Moton elementary school. Organized by the Florida Gardens Improvement Association, the meeting was highlighted by a

²⁸ Johnny Jackson Jr., interview with author, New Orleans, LA, February 10, 2010.

²⁹ Eig, “Desire Pays Price for Shortcuts,” *Times Picayune*.

resolution asking the city to bring bus service to the area. Along with public transportation, the residents also called for streets repairs, lighting improvements and garbage collection services. Swarms of flies drawn by a public dump in the area had also forced schools to shut down for a few days during the previous week. Residents complained that drainage in the area was so poor that boats became the main mode of transportation after a heavy rain.³⁰

It is easy to see why the city spent little effort trying to bring in services for residents of the DHP. At the beginning of 1956, Willie Rainach and Leander Perez, along with eight other men, had established the Association of Citizen Councils of Louisiana, an organization bent on disfranchising blacks, maintaining segregation, and generally working against the 1954 *Brown v. Board of Education* ruling. Throughout Louisiana, white Citizens Councils began an aggressive campaign to cripple the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP). The group's lawyer, A.P. Tureaud, coming off a victory in the *Bush v. Orleans Parish* case calling for desegregation in New Orleans' schools, soon found himself in a defensive posture, as state legislators passed a series of laws enforcing segregated waiting rooms, toilets, eating facilities and water fountains. To stamp home its opposition to racial integration, the legislature mandated against interracial participation in "any dancing, social functions, entertainment, athletic training, games, sports, and other such activities, involving personal and social contacts." DHP residents were moving into their new homes at a time when white backlash against blacks was surging. With the school desegregation struggle carrying on through the 1950s and beyond, the city's black leaders were expending their energy combating segregation. The basic rights of DHP residents were little more than an afterthought until the mid-1960s.³¹

³⁰ "Protests Meet Resents City 'Neglect'," *Louisiana Weekly*, October 13, 1956.

³¹ Adam Fairclough, *Race and Democracy: the Civil Rights Struggle in Louisiana, 1915-1972* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2008), 196-207; Liva Baker, *The Second Battle of New Orleans: the Hundred-Year Struggle to Integrate the Schools* (New York: Harper Collins, 1996), 271-74; James T. Patterson, *Brown v. Board of Education: A*

The Desire neighborhood desperately needed more schools throughout 1956 and 1957, as little had been done to address the learning needs of the thousands of school-aged children moving into the area. By 1957, more than 9,180 black children in public schools were on a platoon system, meaning that they only attended school for half a day, in order to make room for other children. Once again, Moton gained notoriety for being the school with the largest number of children operating under a platoon system, at 1,667. White children in New Orleans did not have to deal with the platoon system and also benefitted from smaller class sizes. The average class size in white elementary schools was 31.0 while in black schools the average rose to 37.4. Although New Orleans was home to more than 30,000 elementary-aged black children and 25,000 white children of the same category, there existed only 34 black schools compared to 45 white schools in 1957. According to the *Louisiana Weekly*, a black newspaper, these figures indicated that it was “seemingly easier to educate Negro children than white.” In the midst of ongoing school desegregation battles and the Cold War, the *Weekly* informed city officials that if the U.S. did not start providing African Americans with better educational opportunities, Communist Russia would soon surpass their beloved country, at least in terms of producing skilled laborers.³²

In 1958, three new schools were built in the Desire neighborhood: Carver junior and senior high school, Helen S. Edwards elementary, and Henderson H. Dunn elementary, the second school to be built within the DHP.³³ Even with these new additions, Desire needed more schools, not only to handle the 3,800 school-aged children living in the project, but also to make provisions for the 4,500 children under school age living in the project. Already by 1959, city

Civil Rights Milestone and its Troubled Legacy (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), 70-85; Michael J. Klarman, “How Brown Changed Race Relations,” *The Journal of American History* 81, no. 1 (June 1994).

³² “9180 Children Get Only Half a Day’s Schooling,” *Louisiana Weekly*, April 6, 1957; “More Negro Children Victims of ‘Platoon’,” *Louisiana Weekly*, April 20, 1957.

³³ “8 New Schools to be Dedicated,” *Times Picayune*, December 9, 1958.

officials were looking at ways to expand Moton and Dunn, but realized there was a serious shortage of space for new facilities in the DHP.³⁴

While the Orleans Parish School Board had maintained the platoon system for black students since the 1920s, the lack of educational facilities in Desire seemed particularly appalling.³⁵ In terms of recreational facilities, until 1968 the DHP featured one option outside of the overcrowded schools: a small, shelterless playground with five swings, four teeter-totters, two basketball hoops and a propensity for flooding.³⁶

The lack of services in the Desire neighborhood became even more apparent in the final days of 1958. A few days after Christmas, Josephine Parker went looking for work in the morning and came home to find that two of her children had died in a fire that burned their apartment to the ground. Left unattended, her two older children had been playing with matches under a bed before it caught fire. The tragedy exposed the urgent need for more childcare services within the DHP.³⁷

Though city officials could easily ignore the problems facing those living in the DHP, they were forced to respond to the increasing militancy of African Americans throughout the city. In 1960, with the sit-in movement gaining momentum throughout the south, young black men and women in New Orleans began sitting-in at lunch counters along Canal Street in an effort to protest segregation. Mayor DeLesseps Morrison responded by having the peaceful protestors arrested. In November 1960, the school desegregation battle came to a head, just a few blocks south of the DHP, as Ruby Bridges became the first African-American child to desegregate an

³⁴ "Land Costs Major Item in School Planning," *Times Picayune*, October 4, 1959.

³⁵ Juliette Landphair, "Sewerage, Sidewalks, and Schools: The New Orleans Ninth Ward and Public School Desegregation," *Louisiana History: The Journal of the Louisiana Historical Association* 40, no. 1 (Winter 1999): 45.

³⁶ Maurice Stern to members of the Desire Project Committee, February 8, 1965, Box 32, Folder 340, CSC New Orleans.

³⁷ "2 Tiny Tots Perish in Tragic Fire," *Louisiana Weekly*, December 27, 1958.

elementary school. Although Bridges, who lived with her family in the Upper Ninth Ward, had attended the all-black Johnson Lockett elementary school (just outside of the DHP) for kindergarten, the six-year-old made the switch to the all-white William Frantz elementary school for first grade. While Bridges earned national headlines for her courage in the midst of vile protests from whites, the tide did not turn in favor of integration. Both judge J. Wright Skelly, who had mandated the school desegregation and Bridges' parents were deeply disappointed at the small number of children involved in school desegregation. In spite of all the drama, schools like Moton and Dunn elementary, both of which were located within the DHP, remained unaffected by the desegregation crisis. Given the trauma that Ruby Bridges experienced and the intensity of the protests from white parents, desegregating schools within the DHP was obviously not at the top of anyone's list. Although school desegregation continued in other parts of the city, it only resulted in token integration over the next few years.³⁸

The War on Poverty and the Voting Rights Act

While the Morrison administration had designed the DHP as a place where African Americans would receive "separate but equal" facilities and services, the election of Victor Schiro as Mayor of New Orleans signified a step in a different direction. Whereas Morrison had been somewhat of a "racial moderate," Schiro showed little interest in winning over black voters, running "one of the most vicious race-baiting political campaigns in history," according to the *Louisiana Weekly*, a black newspaper. After taking office in 1961, following the resignation of Morrison, Schiro won election in 1962 and gained a reputation for his "cynical manipulation" of

³⁸ Baker, *The Second Battle of New Orleans*, 394-408; Fairclough, *Race and Democracy*, 255-61.

racial problems. He would remain in office through the 1960s, presiding over an era where black New Orleanians finally gained a foothold in electoral politics.³⁹

It would not take long for the DHP to gain notoriety for its problems. An influx of middle-class social reformers began targeting the Desire area in the 1960s as part of the War on Poverty, a key component of President Lyndon Johnson's Great Society. A sweeping series of domestic programs, beginning with the Civil Rights Act of 1964, the Economic Opportunity Act of 1964, and the Voting Rights Act of 1965, the Great Society affected virtually all aspects of American life. As part of the War on Poverty, Medicare and Medicaid were introduced, as well as the Food Stamp program, the Elementary and Secondary Education Act, the Model Cities program, Urban Renewal projects and the Department of Housing and Urban Development. A key component of the Economic Opportunity Act became the national Community Action program, which aimed to turn the poor into "positive social forces," according to local organizers. Community action groups provided the poor with access to jobs, education and social services, under the leadership of the Total Community Action organization. In black neighborhoods, the Social Welfare Planning Council (SWPC) coordinated programs. Throughout New Orleans, more than eighty neighborhood-based councils took shape, engaging at least five thousand residents who became directly involved with the program. Taking direct aim at the Desire neighborhood, Central City, the Lower Ninth Ward, Algiers-Fischer and St. Bernard, the SWPC pushed to get poor blacks involved in uplifting their own communities. Between 1964 and 1965, the SWPC set up neighborhood development centers in each of their target areas.⁴⁰

³⁹ Arnold Hirsch, "Simply a Matter of Black and White," in *Creole New Orleans: Race and Americanization* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1992), 283-292.

⁴⁰ Germany, *New Orleans After the Promises*, 15-62.

According to historian Michael Katz, the War on Poverty was plagued by “internal contradictions.”⁴¹ In his economic report for 1964, Lyndon Johnson emphasized the structural causes of poverty. Above all, unemployment was the root of the problem, however federal antipoverty planners “deliberately avoided programs that created jobs,” and focused instead on removing the barriers that prevented poor people from competing for jobs. Equality would be defined as the “absence of barriers to individual mobility,” reflecting a key tenet of American liberalism. “Community action” would allow the government to place the emphasis on transforming the poor and serve as a “cheap strategy for attacking poverty.”⁴²

With 61 percent of families in the Desire neighborhood living below the poverty line – the highest percentage among the eight War on Poverty target areas in New Orleans – poverty warriors soon found a whole host of problems to tackle, beginning in the 1960s.⁴³ According to the 1960 census, nearly 12,000 people lived in the DHP, while more than 5,000 people lived in the Desire neighborhood, outside of the DHP. The Desire neighborhood, including the project, was home to more than 14,000 residents under the age of 18; more than 3,300 of those 14,000 were under the age of five. In the DHP alone, nearly 72 percent of the residents were under the age of 18. Of the more than 5,000 residents over the age of 25 living in the neighborhood, including the DHP, only around 8 percent were high school graduates. While poverty existed in the Desire neighborhood, most working-age residents of the community were employed. Unemployment hovered just under 10 percent for males in the DHP and around 6 percent for

⁴¹ Michael Katz, *The Undeserving Poor: From the War on Poverty to the War on Welfare* (New York: Pantheon, 1989), 91.

⁴² Katz, 79-101.

⁴³ Germany, 66.

females. Those who lived in Desire, but outside the DHP experienced unemployment rates of 8 percent for males and 5 percent for females.⁴⁴

From an economic standpoint, the challenge facing Desire residents was even bleaker than those numbers would suggest. From 1962 to 1966, New Orleans experienced what one local economist called “its most exuberant and pervasive period of prosperity since World War II.” In the midst of this surge, which saw the citywide unemployment rate plummet to 3.2 percent, Desire was one of five neighborhoods in New Orleans where the unemployment rates remained at the 10 percent mark, seemingly unaffected by the boom.⁴⁵

Although local War on Poverty officials sought to address the needs of the community, their approach mirrored the national strategy, in that job creation simply was not a priority. Much of their focus was directed toward the character of the residents themselves. Maurice Stern, chairman of the SWPC, advised his staff to exercise caution when dealing with Desire residents. Writing in February 1965, Stern opined that Desire residents “feel forgotten, bitter and helpless.” Instead of cooperating with city officials, residents appeared “suspicious of all who would minister to them,” with “neighborliness being almost non-existent.” Those who lived in Desire had “given up” and many families had “little or no potential for improving their lot.” The only way to break the chain of poverty and hopelessness was to target the children, through “intensive educational and community service efforts.” Poverty, at least in Stern’s mind, had crippled Desire residents.⁴⁶

⁴⁴ Office of Neighborhood Planning, *Desire Project Profile*; Office of Policy Planning, *Desire Area Neighborhood Profile*.

⁴⁵ James R. Bobo, *The New Orleans Economy: Pro Bono Publico?*, (New Orleans: University of New Orleans, 1975), 67-86.

⁴⁶ Memorandum from Maurice Stern to Members of Desire Project Committee, February 8, 1965, Box 32, Folder 340, CSC New Orleans.

Early on in his campaign to reform Desire residents from “receivers” to “contributors,” Stern and the SWPC submitted an application to the National Institute of Mental Health, requesting a project grant that would enable the SWPC to hire three community workers and a secretary in order to “gain a perceptual field of expert knowledge concerning social problems in the Desire area.” By uncovering the issues that were plaguing the community, the SWPC would then be able to promote change within the troubled neighborhood. Referring to Desire as a “jungle full of acute social problems,” the proposal explained that one alarming finding was that mothers had begun training their children how to shoplift. Due to the supposed concentration of social problems within the Desire neighborhood, a “high rate of mental disorders [could] be anticipated.” A temporary solution, according to the proposal, would be to direct Desire residents toward the new Community Health Center located on the other side of the Mississippi River.⁴⁷

What Stern’s analysis failed to capture was that nearly a decade after the DHP had first opened, the neighborhood still lacked essential services. The Helen Adler Levy Health Center, the only health care facility in the neighborhood, served a population of more than 86,000. Its eight nurses and one supervisor had a family caseload of 2,417, with 569 of those families living in the DHP.⁴⁸

The SWPC also took note of the fact that more than 58 percent of households within the DHP were headed by women, clearly a problem for a program looking to build “healthy” families. Of the 1,075 women who were the head of a household, 453 were listed as having full-time employment, 98 were listed as having part-time employment and 543 were listed as being

⁴⁷ “Proposal Background,” Mental Health Project Grant Application, 1964, Box 71, Folder 771, CSC New Orleans.

⁴⁸ SWPC Map Collection, Box 71, Folder 774, CSC New Orleans.

unemployed. Of the employed mothers with small children, 253 did not indicate having child care of any kind while they were working.⁴⁹

From an internal perspective, the situation appeared vastly different. Vernon Shorty, who moved to the DHP in 1956 as a teenager, recalled that most families who moved into the DHP were unfamiliar with each other at first but bonded quickly. In an interview with the author in 2010, Shorty said residents felt far from isolated and that a sense of community was growing: “We had a wonderful community relationship and it developed and matured, because it replaced the family that we didn’t bring to Desire with us; we had new sisters and new brothers.” Because of the proximity between apartments and shared entrances, residents often got to know each other quite well, according to Shorty, who lived in the DHP with his mother and six siblings in a four-bedroom apartment.⁵⁰

Outside groups like the SWPC expected little out of Desire residents, but nonetheless encouraged residents to organize on behalf of their community. In February 1965, the Desire Area Community Council (DACC) was formed and started organizing block units, virtually all of which were headed by women. Though the block units varied in terms of administration and size, most were made up of presidents, vice presidents, secretaries, treasurers and chaplains. Once again, almost all of those roles were filled by women, including the position of chaplain. Deloris Bourgeois, a single mother with three children, became the vice-president of block unit number 2. Bourgeois had moved into the DHP when it opened and would end up living there until the apartments were torn down. She recalled that most of her time was spent taking care of

⁴⁹ Housing Authority of New Orleans Survey of Desire Housing Project, August 1963, Box 32, Folder 339, CSC New Orleans.

⁵⁰ Vernon Shorty, interview with the author, February 10, 2010, New Orleans, LA.

her kids. Getting involved as a community leader was a way to ensure that not only her children but all children in the community were getting what they needed.⁵¹

As a starting point, the DACC compiled a list of problems within the neighborhood. Polls taken by the DACC revealed that the most pressing social problem was the lack of recreational opportunities available to the thousands of young children living in the community. Residents lamented the lack of parks, as well as the hazardous conditions in some areas where children commonly played. Some wrote letters to the City Planning Commission and other agencies, asking when improvements would be made. Lavada Jefferson, a member of the Liberty Terrace Improvement Group, one of many community improvement groups founded in the mid 1960s, wrote the City Planning Commission asking when “our streets and sidewalks [will] be properly paved (or will our taxes go down?) with good asphalt or cement?” She also wanted to know whether the Sampson Playground, the only one in Desire, “was really a playground or an artificial pond.” Jefferson and others were also deeply concerned because some of the canals in the area remained uncovered, even though residents had been asking city officials to cover the canals for years. Pushing the issue further, Jefferson asked, “Will one or more of our children have to drown before the canals are safely and properly fenced or covered?”⁵²

With the passage of the Voting Rights Act of 1965, the DACC embarked on a successful voter registration drive, led by teachers, students, principals and neighborhood leaders. Whereas only 28 percent of blacks in New Orleans were registered voters as of 1964, by the summer of 1966, 42 percent of eligible blacks had become registered voters. Even with the rise in registered voters, blacks still only made up a little over 25 percent of the registered voters in New Orleans. As the black vote became more of a factor, black political groups like the Community

⁵¹ Deloris Bourgeois, interview with author, January 21, 2011, New Orleans, LA.

⁵² “Desire Project Block Unit Phone Directory,” March 12, 1965, Box 70, Folder 770; Lavada Jefferson to Harold Katner, August 10, 1965, Box 70, Folder 770, CSC New Orleans.

Organization for Urban Politics (COUP) and the Southern Organization for Urban Politics (COUP) took shape, looking to harness the black vote and “squeeze concessions out of the ‘system.’”⁵³ Doors also opened up for African Americans who were allies of Moon Landrieu, who was a councilman-at-large, from 1966 until 1970, before he became mayor. With mayor Victor Schiro choosing to distance himself from the Great Society programs, Landrieu began to shape social welfare programs like the SWPC on a local level, in turn building his base within the black community.⁵⁴

In May 1965, the Desire Economic Opportunity Council (DEOC) formed as the main subsidiary of Total Community Action (TCA) in Desire. Both the DACC and the DEOC had a majority female membership.⁵⁵ As in other segregated poor black areas, leaders in Desire who had been courted by poverty officials – in an effort to encourage citizen participation – were not as malleable as had been anticipated. They were well aware that they had been given an entrée into the formal political arena, though it would take some time to realize the exact nature of the new relationships. One of the first litmus tests in Desire came when Hurricane Betsy swept through New Orleans in 1965. Many Ninth Ward neighborhoods were inundated by floodwater, with parts of the Desire neighborhood covered by flood levels of up to eight feet. Tenants in both the Desire and Florida projects were besieged by water coming through damaged roofs, broken windows and under the doors. Though none of the tenants were seriously injured in the fallout from Betsy, they went days without utilities, and had to rely on relief agencies for food and other

⁵³ Hirsch, “Simply a Matter of Black and White,” 288-290.

⁵⁴ Hirsch, “Simply a Matter of Black and White,” 298.

⁵⁵ Germany, 72-75.

necessities. Between Desire and Florida, 250 apartments were damaged to the point where all contents were destroyed, everything from fridges to personal property.⁵⁶

More than six months after Betsy hit, the DACC president, Moweaner Mauldin, was still pleading with city officials to do something about the devastation wrought by the hurricane. At first, Mauldin remained optimistic after coaxing Mayor Victor Schiro into the neighborhood on a “fact-finding” mission, in the effort to secure money from the Office of Economic Opportunity to help the clean-up and rebuilding process. Mauldin “awaited with hopeful prospect the moral building and other effects that such a face-lifting project will surely have on our poverty-stricken community.” In spite of the best efforts of Mauldin and other leaders, even a year after Betsy, debris from the hurricane remained scattered throughout the Desire neighborhood and the rest of the Ninth Ward. Left unrepaired after the flooding, many of the wood floors in the DHP would slowly rot over time.⁵⁷

Though Mauldin, a teacher at Moton elementary, began to see that she was fighting an uphill battle, she continued to lobby city officials. In the wake of Betsy, Mauldin along with Duncan A. Waters, the principal at Edwards elementary school, and Frank Bivens, who would later serve as president of the DACC, insisted that the SWPC provide opportunities for local youths. Among other things, the group took issue with the SWPC for refusing to hire local youths for any role other than sweeping up the mess left by the hurricane. Johnny Jackson Jr., who grew up in the DHP, remembered working as a sweeper for the SWPC after graduating

⁵⁶ Katz, *The Undeserving Poor*, 98; “Public Housing Projects Struck by Disaster: New Orleans Housing Authority Activates Emergency Operating Procedure,” *The Journal of Housing*, 23, no. 7, (July 1966), 378-381; Housing Authority of New Orleans, *Annual Report 1965* (New Orleans, 1965), 37-40; Germany, *New Orleans After the Promises*, 68-77; HANO Strategic Plan, May 26, 1995.

⁵⁷ Germany, 75; HANO Strategic Plan, May 26, 1995.

from Southern University in New Orleans in 1965. Eventually, Mauldin, Waters and Bivens were able to convince the SWPC to hire Jackson as a community organizer.⁵⁸

Hurricane Betsy was not the first test that city officials failed, in terms of responding to the needs of Desire residents and it certainly would not be the last. Desire residents, both inside and outside of the public housing development, would become increasingly active in agitating for improved services. Alongside the DACC and the DEOC, dozens of other community groups joined in the struggle during the 1960s and the 1970s. Many of the groups focused on the deteriorating conditions within the Desire project and the lack of maintenance provided by HANO. Poor street conditions, the lack of recreation opportunities, school dropouts, poor police protection, low welfare grants, and low salaries soon made their way onto the laundry list of complaints.⁵⁹

One major concern, the safety of children in Desire, began to dominate the conversations at neighborhood meetings. Mayor Victor Schiro and District E Councilman Daniel Kelly were just a few of the city leaders invited to an emergency meeting in January 1966, following the murder of a six-year-old girl in Desire. The girl had been murdered during the Christmas holidays and the neighborhood had been roiling since then. At the meeting, Mauldin, president of the DACC, urged Schiro and his staff to take action concerning the following matters: “deserted properties”; “weeded property and trash heaps”; “poor street lighting”; “undesirable business”; the “unreasonable number of abandoned vehicles”; and “other contributing factors, such as loitering and the dire need for more police protection.” Mauldin also directed criticism toward Captain Lloyd Maestri of the NOPD, who also attended the emergency meeting. Desire residents felt like police were too slow in responding to calls and that some police officers had

⁵⁸ Johnny Jackson Jr., interview with author, New Orleans, LA, February 10, 2010.

⁵⁹ Desire Area Community Council, October 4, 1965, Box 70, Folder 770, CSC New Orleans.

“unfavorable attitudes, as reflected by their actions and expressions in dealing with community residents.” She also advised Maestri that residents needed help from the police in keeping school dropouts from loitering around schools and causing problems, as well as keeping teenage girls from being molested on their way to and from school.⁶⁰

A few months after the meeting, some street and lighting improvements were made, but those changes failed to stem the flow of complaints. By 1966, Desire residents started showing their frustration with the top-down approach of the SWPC and a meeting was called to allow residents to provide feedback for local bureaucrats. Titled, “Citizens, Speak Out,” the meeting was organized by Ollie Smith, chair of the DEOC, who promised that “the people will do the talking at this meeting and...officials from 18 agencies will be invited to be present to do the listening.” Around 600 people attended the meeting and residents continued the call for better police protection, roads, street cleaning, sanitation services, monitoring of juvenile delinquents, and more efficient thoroughfares leading in and out of the neighborhood. One woman claimed that streets were only cleaned when the mayor came to visit. Roughly eight years after the introduction of the Carver junior and senior high school complex, as well as the Dunn elementary school, residents also demanded an end to the platoon system in their schools.⁶¹

Though city officials were lethargic in their responses, residents continued pressing for change. Toward the end of 1966, Frank Bivens, chairman of the Clouet and People Improvement Group, reminded the city that the Agriculture Street Landfill continued to torment those in

⁶⁰ Moweaner Mauldin to Victor Schiro, January 7, 1966, Schiro Collection, Subject Files 1966, Folder Desire Project 1966, CASC; Moweaner Mauldin to Lloyd Maestri, January 17, 1966, Schiro Collection, Subject Files 1966, Folder Desire Project 1966, CASC.

⁶¹ Frank J. Bivens to John E. Cassreino, Sr., October 13, 1966, Schiro Collection, Subject Files 1966, Folder Desire Project 1966, CASC.

Desire, by “causing a foul odor and many other health and safety hazards.” Surrounded by weeds, high grass and full of scurrying rodents, the landfill had been a perennial headache.⁶²

Desire and the New Orleans Police Department

One of the key issues that garnered a lot of attention from community leaders in Desire was the relationship between residents and the NOPD. Historian Leonard Moore makes the compelling argument that police brutality “has been an integral part of the black urban experience” but has received little attention from historians. Moore argues that mainstream civil rights organizations “ignored the fight against police brutality, believing that police reform would be an immediate result of black political power.” Moore’s study, *Black Rage in New Orleans*, a scathing indictment of the NOPD, characterizes the local police department as the “face of the white working class,” one of the more useful tools in keeping African Americans confined to certain areas of the city.⁶³ Although the local branch of the NAACP started pushing for a civilian review board to oversee complaints lodged against the NOPD as early as 1965, it took until 1981, when mayor Dutch Morial instituted the office of municipal investigation, for a civilian review board to be instituted. In the meantime, black New Orleanians saw their complaints against the NOPD investigated by the department’s internal affairs division, which remained unaccountable to the public and rarely prosecuted officers found guilty of misconduct.⁶⁴

Nevertheless, African Americans continued protesting against the NOPD during the 1960s and 1970s. In late July 1967, as the Newark riot was in its final stages, Elizabeth Pope, the SWPC team chief for Desire, was arrested after a confrontation with NOPD patrolmen in the

⁶² Frank J. Bivens to John E. Cassreino, Sr., October 13, 1966, Schiro Collection, Subject Files 1966, Folder Desire Project 1966, CASC.

⁶³ Leonard K. Moore, *Black Rage in New Orleans: Police Brutality and African American Activism from World War II to Hurricane Katrina* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2010), 6-19.

⁶⁴ Moore, 55; 187.

Desire neighborhood. She had been arrested once before for intervening when she saw a young boy being clubbed by a police officer.⁶⁵ Though the details were unclear regarding her second arrest, leaders in Desire clearly felt that she had been a victim of NOPD abuse. Mauldin and the rest of the DACC were irate, demanding that NOPD chief Joseph Giarusso transfer the officers involved. Mauldin's letter, copied to mayor Schiro and a number of councilmen, warned that Desire was one of "many New Orleans neighborhoods where a tactless, overbearing policeman might trigger civilian violence." Grievances from the community against the NOPD were piling up and residents had begun to "hold them inside," according to Mauldin, taking note of the "brutality of another year." Looking to mollify Mauldin, Giarusso promised that the two officers would be re-assigned. He applauded Mauldin and the DACC, who had earned "a reputation for being deeply interested in community affairs."⁶⁶ Nearly a month later, Desire residents were fuming once again, accusing Giarusso of reneging on his promise to transfer the two officers out of the Desire area. The two officers had shot an alleged criminal and while that was understandable, according to the DACC, it seemed unconscionable that they were still assigned to patrol the community. Writing on behalf of the DACC, Frank Bivens prodded Giarusso, promising the chief that inaction would "lend weight to the charges that the city fathers statements in most instances are mere platitudes."⁶⁷

Another watchdog within the Desire community, the Concerned Parents of Desire, questioned the NOPD once again in December 1967, accusing police officers of responding to a fire at the Moton school without paying much attention to the Desire residents themselves.

⁶⁵ Germany, 131-32.

⁶⁶ Moweaner Mauldin to Joseph I. Giarrusso, August 1, 1967, Schiro Collection, Subject Files 1966, Folder Desire Project 1967, CASC; Joseph I. Giarrusso to Moweaner Mauldin, August 5, 1967, City Council District E Papers, Box 2, Folder Desire Community Housing Corporation, 1967-1971; 1975-1979; Germany, 132.

⁶⁷ Frank J. Bivens to Victor H. Schiro, August 25, 1967, Schiro Collection, Subject Files 1966, Folder Desire Project 1967, CASC.

According to the organization, NOPD officers were racing through the streets, driving on sidewalks and nearly plowed over several bystanders. The group felt that the NOPD was once again “giving impetus for the creation of a riot,” as residents were angered by what they saw as NOPD disregard for their safety.⁶⁸

Not all Desire residents felt the NOPD was doing a terrible job at protecting the community. Naophi Raphell, “speaking for the citizenry of the upper ninth ward,” penned a letter to District C councilman Philip Ciaccio after the Pope incident, expressing her gratitude for the way that the police department and city officials had handled the situation. Her complaint, however, concerned some “sore spots” within the “Negro Community that could easily become a powder keg if some attention is not soon paid.” Raphell went on to list many of the typical complaints from residents within the Desire-Florida area – the need to cover up the canals, street improvements, better lighting, etc. – but also included a lengthy proposal of ways in which the city could bring resources into the community. She called for the city to draw in banks to the area, in order to provide low-interest, long-term loans so that residents could improve their properties. As well, Raphell advised Ciaccio and city officials to “seek to interest business men to form new corporations to develop this area with homes, shopping centers, amusement, etc.” Raphell’s wide-ranging letter also called for the city to bring in a police and fire station to the area. Once these steps were taken, Raphell implied, the city would no longer have to spend so much time worrying about a powder-keg in Desire. Raphell’s nine-page letter received a warm

⁶⁸ Jean Spells to Joseph I. Giarrusso, December 8, 1967, Schiro Collection, Subject Files 1966, Folder Desire Project 1967, CASC.

response from Ciaccio, saying that “many of the items in your letter are presently under study by various City Departments, with the main problem being one of finances.”⁶⁹

It would be easy to argue that the War on Poverty, with its complicated list of underfunded programs, was simply a way to distract poor African Americans, a public relations campaign to drive attention away from the more fundamental problems. From an economic standpoint, that type of argument stands on fairly solid ground, at least in the case of New Orleans. In 1967, the U.S. Department of Labor decided to investigate the disparity that divided New Orleans, surveying five “slum areas”: Central City, the Irish Channel, the Lower Ninth Ward, Desire, and Florida Avenue. These neighborhoods, rather than benefitting from the city-wide economic expansion, were losing ground. Looking beyond the traditional unemployment rate, the Department of Labor sought to measure the rate of “sub-employment” in these five areas. The study defined “sub-employment” as including: the unemployed; those looking for work and unable to find it; those working only part-time but trying to find full-time employment; heads of household earning less than one-half the median income; all of those who are not in the labor force but should be; the underemployed; and one-half of the estimated male undercount group. According to the study, the “sub-employment” rate stood at 45 percent. These five low-income areas were home to 123,672 residents, 80 percent of whom were non-white. Sixty-eight percent of the residents did not graduate from high school and 30 percent of the unemployed did not go beyond the 8th grade. The survey also found that the five areas – Central City, the Irish Channel, the Lower Ninth Ward, Desire, and Florida Avenue – were home to an astonishing 18.2

⁶⁹ Naomi Raphell to Philip C. Ciaccio, August 3, 1967, City Council District E Papers, Box 2, Folder Desire Community Housing Corporation, 1967-1971; 1975-1979; Philip C. Ciaccio to Naomi Raphell, September 8, 1967, City Council District E Papers, Box 2, Folder Desire Community Housing Corporation, 1967-1971; 1975-1979.

percent of men in the 20-64 age group who “should have been working, but who were not working and also not looking for work.”⁷⁰

Apart from the glaring statistics, the report revealed an important aspect of life in these poor communities. Most residents were unemployed or underemployed because they lacked the requisite skills and experience, not because they were unwilling to work. Of those who had worked before being unemployed, the survey found that nearly 37 percent of those residents had been service workers, reflecting the most common type of work available to poor and uneducated African Americans and also the general shift from a goods-manufacturing economy to a service-based economy, taking place in New Orleans and throughout the country. All of the five neighborhoods surveyed – Central City, the Irish Channel, the Lower Ninth Ward, Desire, and Florida Avenue – had been target areas of the War on Poverty. Job creation, however, had never been a main priority in the War on Poverty. The effects of this neglect, however, would become increasingly clear over time, as jobs continued to be scarce in black neighborhoods like Desire.⁷¹

But the War on Poverty, for all its inability to lift Desire residents out of poverty, offered them a way to voice their concerns and bring in much-needed basic services. In doing so, some community leaders would be able to establish themselves as political leaders beyond the boundaries of Desire. The War on Poverty offered political empowerment and residents were quick to develop these new relationships with city leaders.

The Desire Community Center

Even though most requests from Desire residents were met with platitudes from city officials, the campaign to provide better opportunities for children paid off, at least in some

⁷⁰ James R. Bobo, *The New Orleans Economy: Pro Bono Publico?*, (New Orleans: University of New Orleans, 1975), 67-86.

⁷¹ Bobo, *The New Orleans Economy*, 71-73.

aspects. In the late 1960s, the Desire neighborhood would welcome two new buildings to the area, both of which were funded through the War on Poverty. First, in March 1967, the Desire Neighborhood Development Center opened in a new building, housing the following organizations: the SWPC, New Orleans Department of Welfare, Louisiana State Employment Center, the Desire area Federal Credit Union and the New Orleans Legal Assistance Corporation (NOLAC). Approved for funding in February 1967, NOLAC, soon became a crucial component in empowering the poor throughout New Orleans. Founded by Ernest N. (“Dutch”) Morial, who had recently been elected to the Louisiana legislature and would later become the first African American mayor of New Orleans in 1977, NOLAC offered government-funded legal assistance for the poor. NOLAC attorneys were immediately swamped by the number of people flooding in to their offices. Many had been duped into signing spurious documents or finagled into loans with exorbitant interest rates and needed legal help. Addressing the *Times Picayune* in 1969, NOLAC director Richard Buckley said his attorneys had only dealt with a few cases related to housing. Tenants were often unaware of their rights, according to Buckley, who would try to inform them that “landlords are responsible for maintaining a safe dwelling, or that the eviction process must go through the court.” Buckley also admitted to being rather baffled that tenants would put up with such atrocious conditions and only decide to come to NOLAC after “they’re injured, maybe when a piece of the ceiling falls down and hits them.”⁷²

One of the most important legacies left by the War on Poverty was the Desire Community Center (DCC), a 25,000 square foot project that cost \$510,000 and opened in the fall of 1968.⁷³ Johnny Jackson Jr., the former street-sweeper and then SWPC community organizer,

⁷² “Desire Center Dedication Set,” March 13, 1967, *Times Picayune*; Betsy Peterson, “Balancing the Scales of Justice,” January 19, 1969, *Times Picayune*; Germany, 35; 387.

⁷³ “Pile is Driven for New Center,” September 16, 1967, *Times Picayune*; First Annual Desire Community Center Report for November 1968-November 1969, Box 70, Folder 770, CSC New Orleans.

served as the director of the DCC from 1968 to 1976. Jackson Jr. later served in the House of Representatives, from 1972 to 1986, before becoming a city councilor from 1986-1994. For Jackson Jr., the role of DCC director presented a bridge to a political world that would extend beyond the confines of Desire. He credits his predecessors, leaders like Waters, Bivens and Mauldin who helped lay the foundation for a lengthy political career. In retrospect, Jackson Jr. remembers that he tried to run an “aggressive” program within the DCC: “Besides general recreation, we had the basketball leagues, we had the softball leagues, we had the sewing and stuff, we had adult education... I mean we did everything.” The DCC ran programs ranging from business management, to consumer education, and “black heritage.” A special education school and an early learning center were two key programs started for children.⁷⁴

Gradually, Jackson Jr. started looking to expand the range of programming. In 1969, he visited community centers in predominantly African American neighborhoods throughout the country, in order to get a sense of what could be done in a community like Desire, a place always short on funding for programs but never short on demand. First up, Jackson Jr. and a few members of his staff stopped in Boston’s Roxbury neighborhood, where the local community center ran an after-school program for children aged 6-13 that expanded into an all-day program during the summer. The Roxbury center, like many of the others that the DCC staff visited, emphasized programs pertaining to “black heritage.” Alongside these programs, Jackson Jr. also noted that staff members strove to help children preserve the style of communication that they had grown up with, in the midst of being inculcated in formal education. According to Jackson, in “most black communities whether Roxbury or Desire there exist a language form of communication totally unique,” the kind that needed to be maintained in order for children to “identify with the community.” Jackson’s comments, coming at a time when the Black Power

⁷⁴ Johnny Jackson Jr., interview with author, February 10, 2010.

movement was gaining momentum, point to the shifting attitudes of black leaders when it came to the subject of integration. As historian Jeffrey Ogbar points out, in the past, as the NAACP had argued in the *Brown v. Board of Education* case, the “implied message was that separation from white people could be deleterious,” whereas for Black Power advocates, “integration did not make black students learn better, buses ride smoother, or water fountain water taste better.” In Jackson’s mind, Desire residents had a culture all their own, something worth preserving in the face of the reformist impulses driving the War on Poverty and other Great Society programs.⁷⁵

Meanwhile, in Chicago, Jackson Jr. took note of the Chicago Economic Development Corporation’s program that saw money raised from large corporations being used to fund small businesses in black communities. The small businesses included a broom manufacturing enterprise, an advertising company, and a woodworking factory, among others. In Detroit, the DCC staff came across a community center touting a Black Conscience Library, full of material that could be used in public schools.

The “most tremendous organization and program in the nation,” according to the DCC staff, was called Operation Bootstrap, located in South Central, Los Angeles. The DCC group spent four days in South Central, watching Operation Bootstrap (OB) in action, an organization that had been started by two young black men in the wake of the Watts uprisings of 1965. With their motto, “Learn Baby Learn,” OB leaders had embarked on a number of creative ventures. The group had started a school that taught keypunch operation, after securing \$100,000 of equipment loaned by IBM. Other OB projects included an automobile mechanic training class, a clothing manufacturing company, a toy factory, started up with assistance from Mattel, two retail

⁷⁵ Jeffrey Ogbar, *Black Power: Radical Politics and African American Identity* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2004), 123-125.

clothing stores, an African Village Restaurant, as well as a service station. What the DCC committee liked most of all was that “control of all operations is and must remain in the hands of the community, no matter what assistance is given.” Upon returning from their cross-country tour, the DCC committee came up with key points to share with the rest of the staff. Not surprisingly, the need for community control topped their list, followed by the need for economic development, job training, “black awareness and culture,” housing development, community organization, and medical services.⁷⁶

Leaders in Desire were well aware of the national conversation that was taking place amongst African Americans, eager to transform poor black communities just beginning to gain a political voice. As expected, the DCC soon became the heart of the Desire community, catering to residents of all ages. The center opened at a crucial time, for Desire residents had been growing frustrated by the lack of political attention and resources devoted to their community. Securing the DCC for Desire was only half the battle, however. In the coming years, the DCC leaders would have to fight to obtain operating funds on an annual basis. When the time came for the first annual review of the DCC, John O’Neal of the Free Southern Theater, a local black theater group, wrote a letter of support that highlighted the tremendous need for the city to continue providing financial backing for the DCC. O’Neal, writing in 1969, lamented the constant need for poor black communities to battle tooth and nail for basic services, saying that it “seems we always find ourselves fighting to protect a cup of water when we need a swimming pool.”⁷⁷

Beyond the DCC, community leaders also began to push for home ownership within the Desire neighborhood. In the summer of 1968, locals started up the Desire Community

⁷⁶ Johnny Jackson Jr. to Desire Community Development Center Corporation.

⁷⁷ John O’Neal to Johnny Jackson Jr., September 8, 1969, Box 70, Folder 770, CSC New Orleans.

Development Corporation (DCDC), a non-profit organization designed to be the voice of the community in the fight for federal funds from the Model Cities program. An appendage of the War on Poverty, the Model Cities program began in 1968, signed into action by Lyndon Johnson's Demonstration Cities and Metropolitan Development Act. For New Orleans, the primary incentive of the act was the potential funding offered to transform the "total environment" of "model neighborhoods." The Desire-Florida area was chosen as one of three Model Neighborhood Areas in New Orleans.

One of the first DCDC projects was a partnership with HANO, for the construction of the Press Park Homes (PPH), which opened in December, 1970. Located on a 12 acre tract of land in the Desire neighborhood, on the former site of the Agriculture Street Landfill, the PPH initially stood as a victory for the DCDC and the rest of the Desire community. The scattered-site housing development, to include 221 homes that could one day be owned by the low-income tenants, was seen as a step toward independence for Desire residents. Lawrence Montegut, chairman of the DCDC, told the *Times Picayune* that he was proud of the fact that the partnership marked the first time that HANO had entered into an agreement with an African American organization. In spite of the euphoria associated with the development, and the fact that the DCDC would be in charge of managing the property, Montegut remained cautiously optimistic. He explained that while townhouses probably were not the best fit for the neighborhood – residents wanted detached, single-family units – it would "still be much better than project living."⁷⁸

The DCDC had previously sets its sights on improving "project living" in Desire, but had been rebuffed by HANO. By 1967, HUD officials had begun to recognize that many public

⁷⁸ "HANO Project Work to Start," November 5, 1969, *Times Picayune*; "HANO, Desire Corp. Sign Scattered Homes Contract," December 29, 1970.

housing developments – like Desire – were in desperate need of renovations and upgrades. Also, tenant-management relations were quite heated in many cities, as tenants felt their views were being ignored by local housing officials. In 1968, HUD embarked on a modernization plan that would encourage tenant participation and also rehabilitate its deteriorating public housing stock.⁷⁹ Sensing an opportunity, the DCDC was quick to submit an audacious proposal to HANO, well before it was even clear if the local housing authority would receive any modernization funds. Montegut and the DCDC called for construction of the Press Park Homes, which of course was eventually approved. In addition, the DCDC proposed that HANO begin by turning Benefit Street, which ran through the middle of the housing project, into a street with town houses and commercial facilities on both sides, complete with off-street parking. From there, the DCDC suggested that the DHP be demolished street-by-street, with each segment being replaced by town-houses and single-family dwellings. The DCDC proposal, formulated with the help of a research team, received a short response from HANO's executive director, J. Gilbert Scheib. Unable to match the alacrity of Montegut and the DCDC, Scheib promised that the DCDC's proposal would be given "careful consideration." Scheib doubted that the housing project buildings could be demolished, "due to an outstanding bond issue on the buildings," but said he would be willing to discuss the ideas further if and when the modernization funds were made available.⁸⁰ By the time modernization funds for the Desire Housing Project trickled down from HUD to HANO, they would only be enough to cover some minor repairs and improvements on the existing structure. What makes the proposal a critical piece of evidence, is that even though the ideas of Desire residents were rejected, they were in the midst of a heated battle to transform

⁷⁹ Williams, *The Politics of Public Housing*, 171-75.

⁸⁰ Lawrence Montegut to Ronald Brignac, August 20, 1968, Schiro Collection, Subject Files 1968, Folder Desire Project 1968, CASC; J. Gilbert Scheib to Lawrence Montegut, October 25, 1968, Schiro Collection, Subject Files 1968, Folder Desire Project 1968, CASC.

the image of their neighborhood. They were essentially saying that their neighborhood could be a viable place for businesses; it could become a commercial hub. They were fighting a protracted battle against the idea that “geography is destiny,” and that “where you live determines your access to resources, job opportunities, and economic networks.”⁸¹

A critical problem within the Desire neighborhood was that, due to its location and isolation, it was a political afterthought. For example, in 1968 Moweaner Mauldin, no longer president of the DACC but still active in the community, wrote a letter to district E councilman Phillip Ciaccio, drawing attention to the fact that a voting precinct in the Desire neighborhood had been located in an “inaccessible location.” Clearly, Mauldin did not think it was an accident that the precinct was situated in the boiler room at Carver high school, writing that the “location creates a serious hazard, endangering the life and well being of the voters, as much as darkness encompasses the entire area.” In a statement dripping with sarcasm and frustration, Mauldin ended by saying: “You know that we in Desire are Desirable and can only be, when everyone exercises his right to vote and our votes are felt.”⁸²

In 1969, a group of women from Desire decided to move their fight against the city and HANO to the arena of direct protest. They marched into the HANO main office and would not leave until their protests about the abysmal conditions in the DHP were addressed. Instead of being granted a meeting, the women were hauled out of the building and arrested for refusing to leave the waiting room. Their peaceful protest soon made headlines, as they were charged with criminal trespassing. The women filed an injunction to keep from being prosecuted, however the judge decided that the law that had rendered their actions illegal was unconstitutional, because

⁸¹ Thomas Sugrue, “Revisiting the Second Ghetto,” in *Journal of Urban History*, 29, no. 3 (March 2003), 288; Douglas Massey and Nancy A. Denton, *American Apartheid: Segregation and the Making of the Underclass* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1993), 148-155; Self, *American Babylon*, 16-17.

⁸² Moweaner Mauldin to Phillip Ciaccio, December 2, 1968, City Council District E Papers, Box 2, Folder: Desire Community Housing Corporation, 1967-1971, 1975-1979, Louisiana Collection, NOPL.

the women, according to all parties involved, “did not disturb the conduct of business.” With the controversy having subsided, the women still had not had their needs addressed.⁸³

With the late 1960s rise of black political organizations like the Community Organization for Urban Politics (COUP) and the Southern Urban Leadership Conference (SOUL) that relied heavily on political patronage from white supporters, poor blacks as usual found themselves at the bottom of the priority list. When Moon Landrieu was elected as mayor in 1970, nearly sweeping the black vote in the second primary and general election, he continued to open the doors for middle-class blacks. Landrieu had been a key supporter of War on Poverty programs while a councilman-at-large and had won over both SOUL and COUP, both of which supported his campaign. By the time Landrieu vacated the position in 1978, blacks had secured major gains, especially in terms of securing civil service jobs and influencing local government.⁸⁴

When it came to the issue of economic discrimination, however, Landrieu inherited a monumental task. To be sure, the War on Poverty had resulted in some positive gains for the Desire community. Nevertheless, Landrieu stepped into a disastrous situation, in terms of the increasingly grim economic outlook facing poor blacks. Within the DHP, the population had decreased from the 1960s mark, a disturbing sign given the housing shortage in New Orleans. In 1960, close to 14,000 people lived in the DHP, but by 1970, the population base had shrunk to just over 10,000 residents. About 78 percent of families in the DHP were living below the poverty line.⁸⁵ The unemployment rate had nearly doubled, rising to 18 percent for men and 19 percent for women, compared with a 5 percent unemployment rate city-wide. As noted before, however, the official unemployment rate provided an incomplete picture. A 1970 study, based on

⁸³ “Portion of La. Criminal Statute ‘Unconstitutional’,” *Times Picayune*, December 18, 1970.

⁸⁴ Arnold Hirsch, “Simply a Matter of Black and White,” 289-297.

⁸⁵ Housing Authority of New Orleans, *Annual Report 1960* (New Orleans, 1960), 20; Housing Authority of New Orleans, *Annual Report 1970* (New Orleans, 1970), 12.

census numbers, found that nearly 90 percent of the black labor force in New Orleans lived in what were categorized as “selected low income Areas,” where the unemployment rate was nearly 13 percent. Within these areas, nearly 37 percent of black males between the ages of 16 and 21 were unemployed. Although the War on Poverty had opened up certain areas, the development of employment opportunities, especially for young black males, lagged woefully behind.⁸⁶

The Black Panthers

In the summer of 1970, the National Committee to Combat Fascism (NCCF), a Black Panther Party offshoot, set up an office on Piety Street, in the Desire neighborhood. Soon after, Jackson Jr., the director of the DCC established a friendly relationship with Panther leaders and allowed them to run a free breakfast program out of the community center, provided they leave their guns behind at their Piety Street headquarters. For Jackson Jr., the free breakfast program seemed like a natural fit and he had little trouble interacting with the Panther members, though he had no interest in joining their group, even after being recruited. Reflecting on the relationship, Jackson Jr. said, “I went to school, my parents were poor and I was taught education was the way to do it. I wasn’t going to be blowing it on confrontational politics.” Aside from the breakfast program, the Panthers also taught classes on self-determination, offered free sickle-cell testing and coordinated clean-up efforts.⁸⁷

The Panthers were not the first high-profile African American group to target the Desire neighborhood. Back in 1966, the Free Southern Theater (FST), a self-described “radical black theater” group had moved into the community, performing plays and organizing community workshops out of a run-down supermarket that had been converted into a theater. FST members viewed Desire as a “part of New Orleans comparable to Harlem in New York or Watts in Los

⁸⁶ Office of Neighborhood Planning, *Desire Project Profile*; Bobo, *The New Orleans Economy*, 74-75.

⁸⁷ Johnny Jackson Jr., interview with author, February 10, 2010; Paul Alkebulan, *Survival Pending Revolution: the History of the Black Panther Party* (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 2007), 47-54;

Angeles. Tom Dent, the leader of the FST and a native New Orleanian, would write a short play called the “Ghetto of Desire, ” labeling the DHP a “concentration camp...inherited from the progressive city of New Orleans,” and something that “could have been dreamed up by a city planner at Auschwitz.” Of the War on Poverty office in the neighborhood, Dent argued that “it doesn’t begin to deal with the enormous problems of the area; problems which stem from being black in a major American city – and being poor.” HANO officials tried in vain to keep CBS from airing the play nationally on the television program “Look Up and Live,” although the show was blacked out in New Orleans.⁸⁸

The Panthers would prove even more difficult to silence. Reacting to their free breakfast programs, NOPD chief Joseph Giarrusso warned Mayor Landrieu that the Panthers’ “hate philosophy” could have an insidious effect on the many children living in Desire. Well aware of the Panthers’ national reputation as the “most dangerous of black militant organizations,” Giarrusso kept a close watch on the group, obsessing about its every move. In August 1970, Landrieu became worried enough to send his black special assistant Robert Tucker into Desire to research the community, while living with local resident Henry Faggen. Along with the help of Faggen, Tucker received assistance from Jackson Jr., Barbara Allen, Oliver White, Andrew Joseph and Don Hubbard in completing his investigation. He reported that the DHP was a “classic study of ‘the worst’ and a living demonstration of what can happen when mere deterioration and despair break through the confines of mere rhetoric.” For example, inadequate police protection in Desire meant that food stamp recipients were constantly being robbed by

⁸⁸ Thomas C. Dent, Richard Schechner and Gilbert Moses, eds., *The Free Southern Theater by the Free Southern Theater* (Indianapolis: The Bobbs-Merrill Company, 1969), 111; and Housing Authority of New Orleans Strategic Plan, May 26, 1995, City Archives and Special Collections, New Orleans Public Library; “The Ghetto of Desire,” Tom Dent Papers, Box 31, Folder Manuscripts “Ghetto of Desire,” Amistad Research Center, Tulane University, New Orleans, LA.

junkies. Other major issues included regular burglary and vandalism complaints from a day care center, abandoned apartments in the DHP (mostly due to delays in maintenance service), a lack of transportation services, a lack of recreational facilities and inadequate drainage. To reinforce the last point, Tucker provided an image of children using the area around a clogged drain as a swimming pool. What Tucker hoped to do with his report was to create a “sense of urgency,” in order to “spark a concerted effort to begin reversing the high rates of crime, juvenile delinquency, welfare, school dropouts, and other indices of social blight that [had] now combined to make the Desire area one of the most potentially explosive in the city of New Orleans.”⁸⁹

Instead of heeding Tucker’s advice, the Landrieu administration engaged in the difficult task of trying to prove that the Panthers had no credible reason for being in Desire. Although the Panthers were able to draw in decent numbers – sometimes as many as 150 residents – to their public meetings, they certainly did not reinvent the neighborhood. Other militant groups like the Deacons for Defense, Thugs United, and the Nation of Islam, had already established relationships with Desire residents; the idea of black militant groups coming in and reaching out to the community had some precedent. What the Panthers essentially brought to Desire, in the words of writer Orissa Arend, was to “point out that simple and humane remedies to the problems facing the residents could be provided, if not by the city, then by the young revolutionaries.”⁹⁰

When the Panthers found out that two NOPD officers had infiltrated their ranks, a fight ensued, with the two officers eventually forced out of the group’s headquarters and attacked out on the street before fleeing. Apparently two little boys in the neighborhood had tipped off the

⁸⁹ Orissa Arend, *Showdown in Desire: the Black Panthers Take a Stand in New Orleans* (Fayetteville: University of Arkansas Press, 2009), 5-13; Concerned Citizens of New Orleans to Mayor Moon Landrieu, August 26, 1970, Landrieu Records, 1970-75, Box 47, Reel 60, Folder: Desire Housing Project, Louisiana Collection, NOPL.

⁹⁰ Alkebulan, *Survival Pending Revolution*, 53; Vernon Shorty, interview with author; Kalamu ya Salaam, interview with author, New Orleans, LA, January 28, 2011; Arend, *Showdown in Desire*, 6; 19.

Panthers about the informants and the Panthers had been monitoring the two officers for several weeks. After the officers were sent scrambling, the NOPD blocked off Desire later that night and sent a police helicopter overhead to monitor the neighborhood. Later that night, a Desire resident, Kenneth Borden, was shot and killed by police, who claimed that the young man had been attempting to firebomb a grocery store in the neighborhood.

The next morning, the NOPD arrived en masse, with busloads of police officers, heavily armed and ready to root out the Panthers. Although the many participants in the ensuing shootout between the Panthers and the NOPD recounted conflicting stories of the incident, the shootout ended with the arrest of 16 Panthers. Later that afternoon, Clarence Giarrusso announced that the battle was officially over and called for a “return to normalcy” in Desire. In his opinion, local authorities had provided “an excellent example of teamwork, harmony, cooperation and coordination,” in dealing with the Panthers.⁹¹

The day after the incident, WDSU, a local TV and radio station broadcast an editorial commending the city for taking notice of the multitude of problems in Desire. Although “the changes won’t happen overnight,” read the editorial, “it is to the city administration’s credit that it wants to make a start.” Desire would not be an easy fix, according to the editorial, but “it is to the city administration’s credit that it wants to make a start.”⁹²

A few days later, several Desire leaders, accompanied by Clara Prater, the mother of Kenneth Borden, held a press conference where they tore into the police, the city administration and the media for triggering the violence and endangering their community. The group, led by Johnny Jackson Jr., described the fundamental problem as the poor conditions in Desire, which

⁹¹ Arend, *Showdown in Desire*, 55-78; “11 Are Shot; 16 Arrested,” *Times Picayune*, September 16, 1970.

⁹² “Life in the Desire Project,” WDSU, September 16, 1970, Landrieu Records, 1970-75, Box 47, Reel 60, Folder: Desire Housing Project, Louisiana Collection, NOPL.

had led the Panthers to empathize with the residents. Prater claimed her son had been out getting a beer and was unarmed when shot.

The confrontation between the Panthers and the NOPD cast the Desire neighborhood into the national spotlight once again, further reinforcing its public image as a wasteland. A reporter from *Time* magazine, writing about the incident, described Desire as a “place torn by frustrations and passions,” and “as dirty, crime-ridden and crowded as any black ghetto in the North.”⁹³

By the end of October 1970, the Panthers had moved into the DHP, with the support of the community. After it became clear that eviction notices from HANO and ongoing negotiations with the NOPD would not convince the Panthers to leave, the police showed up at the Panther headquarters in the DHP with an armored tank, hell-bent on forcing the organization out of the community. When a crowd of Panther supporters from the neighborhood formed a wall protecting the Panther building, police were eventually forced to abandon their mission, for the time being. The drama between the NOPD and the Panthers would end later in November 1970 when officers, disguised as priests and postal workers gained entry into the Panther stronghold and arrested the group.⁹⁴ For Desire residents like Vernon Shorty, the police crackdown on the Panthers showed how easy it was for the city, led by the NOPD to control the Desire neighborhood, shutting off all access points when necessary and attempting to control the dynamics of the community. Looking back on the incidents, Shorty recalled that the Panthers “certainly was angry with the system and they had what they felt were legitimate reasons to be angry with the system, but their whole focus was on building the community. They might have been mad with the system but that didn’t stop them from feeding the community and doing

⁹³ “Races: Death in Desire,” *TIME*, September 28, 1970.

⁹⁴ Arend, *Showdown in Desire*, 101-111; Donald Hughes, “29 Still Held After Arrests in Alleged Panther Activity,” *Times Picayune*, November 27, 1970.

workshops.”⁹⁵ Much has been written about the Panthers’ time in Desire, with some going so far as to say that the “city administration did not become concerned about the plight of the people in Desire” until the Panthers set up their office in the community. In reality, the local administration, had always been “concerned” with the plight of Desire residents, though before and after the Panther shootouts, the Schiro and the Landrieu administrations lacked the will or the capability to address the fundamental problems in the community.⁹⁶

Political Representation for Desire

The Panther incident would solidify Johnny Jackson Jr.’s reputation as the leading political light in Desire. In Jackson’s first campaign for the Louisiana House of Representatives, 1971, his stiffest test came from Melverleane Banks Gaines, who challenged him in the democratic primary. A widowed mother of six, who had lived in the DHP since the late 1950s, Gaines had been highly active in Desire and seemed to have an outside shot at winning the district 101 seat (representing precincts in the 8th and 9th Ward). A former housemaid for the family of Moon Landrieu, Gaines told the *Louisiana Weekly* newspaper that she was “well aware of the trials and tribulations that confront the poor everyday existence of poor black mothers.” Her resume was impressive, to say the least, as she volunteered for a lengthy list of organizations, serving as chairman for the Women Against Crime group, and also as a member of the Parent-Teacher Association at Henderson Dunn elementary in the DHP. Gaines had also worked as a home maintenance counselor for HANO and through these various endeavors she had become a well-known figure within the community. Along with an endorsement from Landrieu, Gaines’

⁹⁵ Vernon Shorty, interview with author, New Orleans, LA, February 10, 2010.

⁹⁶ Arend, 6.

campaign was backed by the *Louisiana Weekly*, the Orleans Parish Progressive Voters League, the American Federation of Labor and the Congress of Industrial Organizations.⁹⁷

In the end, Gaines would come up short, winning 1,530 votes, compared with the 3,544

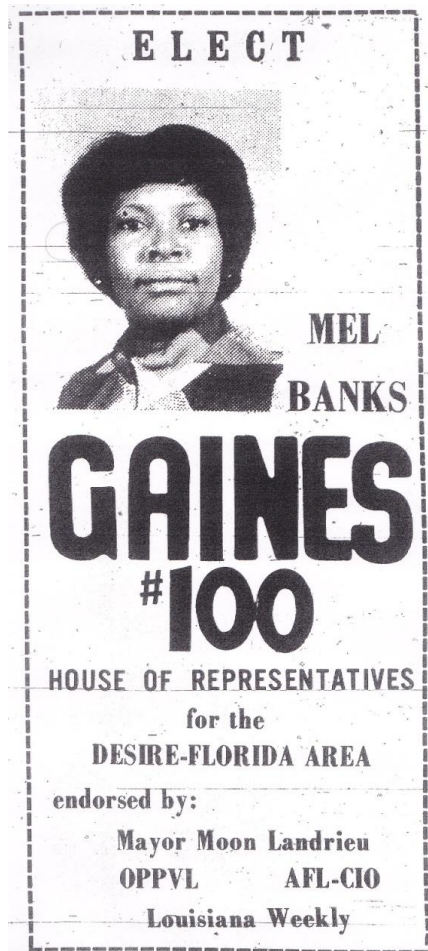


Figure 3: A Louisiana Weekly campaign advertisement for Melverleane Banks Gaines, who ran for the District 101 seat in the Louisiana House of Representatives in 1971. Gaines lived in the Desire Housing Project. *Louisiana Weekly*, November 6, 1971.

in favor of Jackson Jr. Though she knew she had little chance and lacked the support of coalitions, Gaines once again challenged Jackson Jr. for the district 101 seat in 1975, losing by an even wider margin. Although she was unable to win a political office at the state level, Gaines who risen through the ranks of neighborhood programs, many of which had their roots in the War on Poverty, was nevertheless an influential figure in her community, one of the many women working to improve Desire.⁹⁸

Jackson Jr., on the other hand, would serve as a state representative from 1972 to 1986, before winning a spot on city council, where he represented District E from 1986 to 1994. His election, as momentous as it was for the neighborhood, could not radically alter the fortunes of Desire residents.

In 1974, funds from HUD's project modernization program were set aside to finally renovate Desire. The \$8.4 million "modernization" program, which took place from

⁹⁷ "Mrs. Gaines is Candidate for House Seat," *Louisiana Weekly*, October 2, 1971; "More Announcements for State Senate, House," *Times Picayune*, October 7, 1971.

⁹⁸ "Four Win N.O. Primaries Outright," *Times Picayune*, November 8, 1971.

1975 to 1978, saw apartment buildings outfitted with new steel doors, while residents received new kitchen sinks and cabinets. Decorative iron bars were installed on second-floor windows. Once again, the city had ignored the fundamental problems. The DHP had been given a makeover that would not last.⁹⁹

In 1974, the Louisiana Advisory Committee to the U.S. Commission on Civil Rights issued a report outlining the many issues that plagued public housing in New Orleans. Perhaps the most pressing problem was that HANO “lacked the sufficient funds to maintain and operate the current public housing stock due to recent cutbacks in HUD subsidies” enacted under the Nixon administration. With the enactment of the Brooke Amendment in 1968, mandating that no public housing resident be required to pay more than 25 percent of their income for rent, HANO officials had seen revenues from rent decrease, leaving less money for repairs. Without additional subsidies, HANO would be forced to declare bankruptcy. With 60,000 tenants living in 13,000 public housing units throughout the city and a waiting list of more than 3,000 families, HANO was being stretched beyond its capacities.

The report also cited numerous complaints from residents who were fed up with HANO’s heavy-handed eviction policy, which was most often enforced because of unpaid rent. Public housing residents in New Orleans, 95 percent of whom were black, had come to view HANO as the “oppressive landlord,” slow to make repairs and reluctant to provide basic services but eager to evict. Given the serious shortage of low-income housing in New Orleans and the fact that blacks typically paid 8 to 17 percent more for rent than white families for equivalent housing, blacks were forced to deal with the inconveniences of public housing. The fact that the median income for black families in Orleans Parish dwindled at \$4,745, as opposed to \$7,445 for non-

⁹⁹ “Desire Pays Price for Shortcuts,” *Times Picayune*, June 19, 1989.

black families mean that public housing would continue to remain a necessity for many black families.¹⁰⁰

By 1976, HANO started keeping more detailed records of its public housing developments. According to HANO records, the DHP, which was now home to 9,336 residents, had only 448 residents listed as employed. Though there were undoubtedly some who were involved in the underground economy – whether the growing drug trade or those who did odd jobs that never made their way into the books – the numbers were alarming. Although unemployment had always been a problem for those living in the DHP, the situation had grown worse over the years.¹⁰¹

By the mid-1970s, the majority of the population within the DHP received federal aid from the Aid to Families with Dependent Children (AFDC) program, or other assistance programs. To be precise, 1,345 DHP residents were supported by AFDC funds in 1975. Given that there were 2,060 adults living in the DHP at the time, it had clearly become the main source of income within the project. Citywide, roughly 70 percent of HANO's tenants were young female heads of household, of which half of the women depended on AFDC as their primary source of income.¹⁰²

In 1978, the office of “Dutch” Morial, the man who had just been elected as the first black mayor of New Orleans, embarked on a series of neighborhood studies that provided a helpful outline of where the city stood. Morial, who had won 95 percent of the black vote and nearly 20 percent of the white vote, pushed for immediate reform in a city characterized by corruption and racial division. According to historian Arnold Hirsch, Morial “pursued neither

¹⁰⁰ Louisiana Advisory Committee to the U.S. Commission on Civil Rights, *The Quest for Housing: A Study of Housing Conditions in New Orleans* (Washington: U.S. Commission on Civil Rights, 1974), 7-29.

¹⁰¹ Housing Authority of New Orleans, *Annual Report 1976* (New Orleans, 1976), 4-5.

¹⁰² Peggy A. Lentz, “Public Housing in New Orleans: Public Castles?” in *A Place to Live: Housing in New Orleans*, ed. James R. Bobo (New Orleans: University of New Orleans, 1978), 189.

black separatism nor chauvinism but a single society, open to all on the basis of merit.” Morial found himself at odds with black organizations like COUP and SOUL that had come to rely on white patronage.¹⁰³

By the time Morial took office, the DHP had officially become a haven for single mothers and their children. More than 65 percent of all households in the DHP were headed by single mothers with children. The average household income in the DHP was \$9,749, well below the citywide average of \$16,469, a statistic directly related to the fact that nearly 44 percent of all heads of households were jobless. While back in the late 1960s, residents had been pushing to redevelop the DHP and bring in more businesses into the neighborhood, the study counted only 6 commercial establishments in the DHP. Another major issue, according to the study was that 83 percent of residents lacked automobiles, making the fact that there were no shopping centers “within easy access,” all the more of a problem. With only one public bus line running through the area – it did not operate during late night hours – the study described the DHP as a “very isolated neighborhood.”¹⁰⁴

Lawsuit Against HANO and HUD

On August 10, 1979, Shirley Lee was bathing her grandson, a toddler, when her bathroom ceiling caved in. Lee dodged the falling debris, but a 24-square inch chunk from the ceiling struck her grandson on the head. The blow left her grandson with seizures. Lee, who had lived in the DHP since it first opened in 1956, reported the incident to HANO. In response, a HANO repairman came and sealed up the hole with mesh wiring.

¹⁰³ Hirsch, *Simply a Matter of Black and White*, 304-309.

¹⁰⁴ Housing Authority of New Orleans, *Annual Report 1975* (New Orleans, 1975), 20-23; “Neighborhood 8D-Desire Project,” Office of Planning and Development, 1978, Box J17, Folder Planning and Development – Economic Development Series (Neighborhood Development), Area-Desire Project), Housing Series, Office of Planning and Development, Morial Papers 1977-1986, CASC.

In mid-October 1979, Lee and eight other women from the DHP filed a class-action lawsuit against HANO and HUD, claiming that conditions in the 1,852-unit public housing complex had deteriorated to the point where their health and safety had been jeopardized. The suit, filed on behalf of some 2,000 residents, claimed that the apartments in the DHP were not “decent, safe, and sanitary places to live,” because of the failures of HANO and HUD to “fulfill their legal obligations.”¹⁰⁵

Lee’s story, found in her affidavit, continued with further allegations. For several years, Lee managed to avoid a gaping hole in her kitchen floor. In 1978, her foot became snagged in the hole and she was left with a broken toe. HANO covered the hole with plaster, but it disintegrated and the hole returned. She again broke her toe in the hole. Eventually, HANO repairmen placed a piece of wood over the hole.

Morrice Duncan, who lived in the DHP with her husband and five grandchildren, signed off on an affidavit that gave a disturbing account of her struggles with HANO. Ever since her husband had suffered a stroke a few years back, Duncan had dealt with housing repairs. First, the ceiling in her bathroom caved in, and though HANO patched it up, water was soaking through. With the ceiling on the verge of collapse yet again, Duncan sensed she had found the root of the problem, notifying HANO of a water leak behind a wall. HANO did not respond, and over time a perennial flood of water covered her bathroom floor. Her husband, who by that time had started walking again after the stroke, slipped on one of the loose, wet tiles and hit his head. Though he did not suffer another stroke, he was no longer able to walk and “perform any normal functions, many of which he had performed subsequent to his stroke.”

¹⁰⁵ Alexander v. Landrieu, 79 F. 4040 (E.D. La. 1979).

Duncan went on to claim that due to complications with the toilet upstairs (she lived in a ground level apartment) her toilet and bath tub clogged and overflowed from time to time, leaving her apartment flooded with excrement. After a two week delay, HANO finally responded to her request to have the area recovered, but did not replace the wood underneath. The noisome smell was left to linger. Along with Duncan's horror stories, the women complained about having to deal with broken window panes, cracked steps, a variety of insects and rodents, bedroom lights that "spit fire," gaping holes in floors, buckled floors, toilets that flooded, and broken pipes. One woman barricaded her front door with furniture, after her requests to have HANO send over a repairman to fix the broken locks on her front and back doors had been ignored.

HANO and HUD both denied the claims made in the lawsuit. The federal housing authority blamed HANO, while the local housing authority claimed that it was "limited by the resources made available" by HUD. Despite outlining a litany of complaints within their affidavits, these nine women never asked for financial compensation, eventually agreeing to a settlement. The settlement, requiring HANO to carry out a detailed maintenance plan, which included repairs on 40 apartments per month, bore little weight in the long run as the apartments continued to deteriorate and HANO continued to defer repairs.¹⁰⁶ Had the women taken the case to trial, they might have found themselves enmeshed in a Gordian knot of litigation, similar to the one that had begun in Chicago just a few years ago. In August, 1966, Dorothy Gautreaux and three other black Chicago Housing Authority tenants sued the local housing authority for using

¹⁰⁶ Alexander v. Landrieu.

public housing to perpetuate segregation. The litigation carried on for years, as the courts wrestled over the right remedy for discrimination in public housing.¹⁰⁷

The class action lawsuit filed by DHP residents tells an important story, bringing light to a number of different aspects concerning the relationship between residents and the state, in this case represented by the local and federal housing authorities. Firstly, it speaks to the relative powerlessness of the residents, in comparison with HANO and HUD, two organizations that could have dragged on litigation for a number of years. Secondly, it illustrates that DHP residents, even when they took their grievances to court, were usually left to handle the problems that developed in their communities on their own, with little help from government. Thirdly, the lawsuit shows the important role played by women in Desire, who became community leaders under trying conditions.

At least one plaintiff, Morrice Duncan, had served as a block unit leader when the War on Poverty first came to Desire in 1965, filling the role of president for block unit number 2. The lawyer representing the women, William Patrick Quigley, worked for the New Orleans Legal Assistance Corporation, a key component of the War on Poverty that provided free counsel for the poor. The War on Poverty had indeed made a profound impact on Desire, though perhaps not in the way policy-makers had intended.¹⁰⁸

Conclusion

According to Moon Landrieu, mayor of New Orleans from 1970 to 1978 and the secretary of HUD from 1979 to 1981, the DHP was one of many public housing problems that he inherited during his lengthy political career. Interviewed by the author in 2011, Landrieu described the DHP as a project built with noble intentions – to provide housing for poor blacks –

¹⁰⁷ Arnold Hirsch, *Making the Second Ghetto: Race and Housing in Chicago, 1940-1960* (Cambridge: University of Cambridge Press, 1983), 265-75.

¹⁰⁸ Alexander v. Landrieu.

that ultimately became a failure because of its location. From Landrieu's perspective, the decision to locate the DHP in such an isolated area was "sinful," and contributed to the development becoming "a place where people got stuck." As secretary of HUD, he dealt with many projects like the DHP that had become permanent homes for generations of poor blacks. As Landrieu put it, "the secretary of HUD was the biggest slumlord in America. I wasn't proud of it but I'm there trying to do something about it. But what do you do? Close them down? We could have solved the problem that the federal government had. Just close Desire, but now what happens? Where do the people go?"¹⁰⁹

Part of the problem, according to Landrieu, was that suburbs like Jefferson Parish, St. Bernard and St. Tammany refused to allow public housing to be built in their neighborhoods, making it difficult for poor blacks to extend their search for affordable housing outside of the central city. Low income levels and discrimination kept many blacks from being able to find housing in the private market. With New Orleans second only to Atlanta in the rate per capita of federally subsidized public housing, the city already housed approximately 10 percent of its residents in public housing.¹¹⁰ Yet, by 1978, an estimated 150,000 to 175,000 people were still in need of housing assistance. But, as economist James R. Bobo noted in his study of the housing market in New Orleans, public housing simply could not "breach the exclusionary walls of the fortress suburbia" and Orleans parish was reluctant to add more developments, feeling that "more public housing would only attract more poor people, of which they currently have a disproportionate share."¹¹¹ Without help from the suburbs, New Orleans would remain one of the

¹⁰⁹ Moon Landrieu, interview with author, April 27, 2011, New Orleans, LA.

¹¹⁰ Moon Landrieu, interview; Lentz, *Public Housing in New Orleans*, 176.

¹¹¹ Bobo, *A Place to Live: Housing in New Orleans*, 212-222.

most overcrowded major cities in the country, behind only Newark, Honolulu, Miami and San Antonio.¹¹²

By 1980, the *Times Picayune*, the main daily newspaper in New Orleans, wrote off the DHP as the “worst” of the “urban cancers” that constituted New Orleans’ ten public housing projects. Of the thousands of children living in Desire, the *Times Picayune* mourned their fate, saying “They don’t know what a neighborhood is, or what success means, or how it feels to walk the streets unafraid.” Economic stagnation, the crack epidemic, and violent crime had come to dominate life in the DHP, according to the article.¹¹³ A 1986 *Newsweek* exposé offered a glimpse into a world where “twelve-year-old girls, pretending to be older turn tricks to earn ‘chumpchange’” and young boys “don prison chic – gray T shirt and trousers – in mock deference to where they expect to end up.”¹¹⁴

African Americans such as Kalamu ya Salaam, a longtime civil rights activist, were also quick to critique Desire. A product of the Lower Ninth Ward, ya Salaam, a poet and author, unleashed a torrent of violent imagery to describe conditions in the DHP. In an article that appeared in a local magazine in 1988, ya Salaam characterized the DHP as a place where black New Orleanians “languish on this killing-room floor, like out-takes from a slave/horror snuff flick; a routinely iced, enchained cast of thousands.” According to ya Salaam, residents of the Desire project were “sinisterly misled and underfed, emotionally lobotomized and educationally traumatized into a near-catatonic state of self-deprecation, and constantly kept groveling under the gun of a colonial army.” The main culprit, according to ya Salaam, was the “Euro-American

¹¹² Bobo, *A Place to Live*, 26-27.

¹¹³ Lovell Beaulieu, “Life is Crime, Poverty, Fear, For Housing Project Dwellers,” *Times Picayune*, January 7, 1980.

¹¹⁴ Vern E. Smith, “Starting Out Poor: A World Called Desire,” *Newsweek*, June 2, 1986, 23-24.

controlled power structure, which has, regardless of counterfeit promises to the contrary, no intention of helping the majority of us become free and independent.”¹¹⁵

In 1989, the *Times Picayune* ran a three-part series on the DHP that read as an obituary. The behemoth that “had a way of trapping people, stifling ambition, snuffing out dreams,” was crumbling. While the problems that befell Desire could be found in other public housing developments throughout the city, Desire’s “desolation” was “worse by every measure.” In 1988, nineteen people were killed in the DHP, more than the combined murder count at the Fischer, Florida, St. Thomas and Iberville public housing developments. The per capita murder rate had risen to seven times the citywide average. With eight out of ten families in the DHP living in poverty and six out of ten heads of household unemployed, Desire had been designated “The Reservation” by one federal housing official. Unlike other public housing developments, Desire was not an example of “a once-tidy housing project fallen on hard times.” It had always been a “spectacular failure.” The *Times Picayune* series was the product of a month-long investigation, consisting of interviews with former residents, former housing officials and a review of city records. Ed Arceneaux, a former manager of the DHP, speculated that the project “wasn’t designed for people to live in,” but operated as something of a warehouse for the poor.¹¹⁶

For some former DHP residents, those who lived in the old project before it was torn down and replaced by the “new Desire,” the mixed-income public housing development, the newspaper stories were not too far off. Frozine Thomas, did not grow up in the DHP but moved there on two occasions, using public housing as a way-station. According to Thomas, a single mother who moved into the DHP with her three children in the early 1970s, the project in many

¹¹⁵ Kalamu ya Salaam, “Notes from a Banana Republic,” *Dialogue*, October-November, 1988.

¹¹⁶ Jonathan Eig, “Decaying Homes, Blighted Hopes,” *Times Picayune*, June 18, 1989; Jonathan Eig, “Desire Pays Price for Shortcuts,” *Times Picayune*, June 19, 1989; Jonathan Eig, “Try to Build it Up or Tear it Down?” *Times Picayune*, June 20, 1989.

ways represented a “haven” for poor black women. But, as the years progressed and she returned to the DHP for a few years in the early 1980s, Thomas’ perception changed. According to Thomas, the DHP in the 1980s seemed like a “government-sanctioned plantation,” where “you could put a whole bunch of black folk, know what they’re doing at all times, have complete control over them, and you can lock ‘em in.” While Thomas spent only a handful of years living in the DHP, she developed a great respect for some of the women in Desire. Unlike the image portrayed in the media, Thomas felt that living in the DHP “made geniuses out of a lot of uneducated, totally illiterate people, who were forced to reach inside themselves and find resources that I don’t know if many of us knew that we even had.” In particular, Thomas pointed to one woman who lived in the DHP and raised nine children as a single mother, all of whom would later become college graduates, as one of those who did “so much with so little.”¹¹⁷ Those who grew up in the DHP, and the Desire neighborhood more generally, bring a much different perspective to the subject. Kirk Stevens, who grew up in the DHP before moving out by the 1980s, said that stereotypical portrayals of Desire have always bothered him. Here is how Stevens put it:

People would say you’re from *that* project. And whatever they saw in the news, they just assumed that everybody that lived there were like that. It’s dirty, it’s filthy, they’re criminals, they’re uneducated, there are women back there just makin’ babies. The guys that lived under me, one of them got a scholarship to Yale. There are lots of blacks who made it, who passed through Desire at some point in time. There are some of us who end up staying a lot longer than others, but at the time, and in the mid ‘50s, there were a lot of black families who weren’t doing great and Desire was a refuge for them.¹¹⁸

While the young man who earned a scholarship to Yale, now known as New Orleans’ Civil Court Judge Michael Bagneris, stands out as an exceptional case, Stevens’ comments provide evidence that, for at least some, the DHP fulfilled its intended function as a stepping stone. At

¹¹⁷ Frozine Thomas, interview with author, New Orleans, LA, January 27, 2011.

¹¹⁸ Kirk Stevens, interview by author, New Orleans, LA, October 8, 2010.

the same time, however, Stevens was quick to point out that the credit must go to the individuals who were able to work hard and move out of the DHP, referring to the project itself as a “horrible idea,” in terms of its isolated, industrial location, high density, and lack of services.¹¹⁹

A year after Hurricane Katrina destroyed vast swaths of New Orleans, members of the Nine Times Social Aid and Pleasure Club, a mutual aid society founded by former DHP residents in 1998, published a collection of stories and photos recounting life in the infamous project. The group’s book, *Coming out the Door for the Ninth Ward*, was in many ways a rebuttal to the negative portrayals often associated with the DHP. According to the Nine Times’ members, “images of drug dealers and violence are regularly put on projects all over the world. Until you actually go and see, you will never know the love, the family, and the potential that exists in there – not only in sports, but educationally and culturally as well.”¹²⁰

Along with the members of the Nine Times club, there are other former DHP residents working to reshape the way their community is remembered. Clarence Nero, who grew up in the DHP in the 1970s before moving to the St. Claude neighborhood in 1982, has written two fictional novels that focus on his experiences as a young boy in the DHP. A graduate of Howard University, Nero worked as a chemist in the D.C. area before becoming a writer and eventually returning to New Orleans. Though he had fond memories of life in the DHP during the 1970s and early 1980s, he found the stories coming out of Desire in the 1990s deeply disturbing. Two of his cousins living in Desire were murdered, while his cousin was raped violently. Although it did not take place in the Desire neighborhood, his brother was murdered in 1995. Buffeted by

¹¹⁹ Mary Landrieu, “Landrieu Recommends Bagneris, Letten, May for Key Federal Appointments in Eastern District,” Senator Mary Landrieu, <http://landrieu.senate.gov/mediacenter/pressreleases/04-27-2009-3.cfm> (accessed February 10, 2011); Stevens interview.

¹²⁰ Nine Times Social and Pleasure Club, *Coming Out the Door for the Ninth Ward* (New Orleans: Neighborhood Story Project, 2006), 8.

these events, Nero decided to write about the neighborhood where he grew up. Though shocked and saddened by the increase in violence, Nero decided to focus his first novel, *Cheekie: A Child Out of the Desire*, on what he had experienced in Desire: “I had a lot to get off my chest and off my heart. I just felt like I came from that place. People were talking about how bad it is, but I was like I came from there. So my mindset was I’m going to tell this story because it wasn’t all bad, I wasn’t bad. I made it and a lot of other people did too, so I’m going to write about it, the way that I saw it.”¹²¹

The history of the DHP, full of mistakes, failures and setbacks, is richer when its residents are included in the discussion. As with other public housing developments throughout the country, living in a segregated, high-density environment did not cause all DHP residents to abandon hope. Residents of the DHP, and public housing more generally, make up more than just the “underclass” or a set of statistics, they represent people with stories that have yet to be fully incorporated into the historical narrative. By listening to their insights it should become obvious that public housing developments like the DHP can no longer be seen as unequivocal failures. The DHP was always more than just a cluster of “brick row houses steeped in poverty.”¹²²

¹²¹ Clarence Nero, *Cheekie: A Child Out of Desire* (Tulsa: Council Oak Books, 1998); Clarence Nero, interview with author, New Orleans, LA, January 20, 2011.

¹²² Filosa, “New Desire Set to Open by July,” *Times Picayune*, June 6, 2007.

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Appendix

University Committee for the Protection of Human Subjects in Research University of New Orleans

Campus Correspondence

Principal Investigator: Takashi Michael Matsumaru

Co-Investigator:

Date: September 30, 2010

Protocol Title: Thesis: The history of the Desire Housing Project, from
roughly 1956-2002

IRB#: 11Sep10

The IRB has deemed that the research and procedures described in this protocol application are exempt from federal regulations under 45 CFR 46.101 category 2 due to the fact that this research will involve the use of interview procedures. Although information obtained is recorded in such a manner that human subjects can be identified, directly or through identifiers linked to the subjects, any disclosure of the human subjects' responses outside the research wouldn't reasonably place the subjects at risk of criminal or civil liability or be damaging to the subjects' financial standing, employability, or reputation.

Exempt protocols do not have an expiration date; however, if there are any changes made to this protocol that may cause it to be no longer exempt from CFR 46, the IRB requires another standard application from the investigator(s) which should provide the same information that is in this application with changes that may have changed the exempt status.

If an adverse, unforeseen event occurs (e.g., physical, social, or emotional harm), you are required to inform the IRB as soon as possible after the event.

Best wishes on your project!

Sincerely,

Robert D. Laird, Chair
UNO Committee for the Protection of Human Subjects in Research

Vita

The author grew up in North Delta, B.C. In 2008, he received his Bachelor of Arts from the University of Oregon, where he majored in journalism and minored in history. From there, he went on to study at the University of New Orleans, where he earned a Master of Arts in history.