



# Walking to New Orleans: Ethics and the Concept of Participatory Design in Post-Disaster Reconstruction

*Robert R. N. Ross*

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Two and a half years after the devastation of Hurricanes Katrina and Rita, New Orleans and south Louisiana continue to struggle in an unsettled gumbo of environmental, social, and rebuilding chaos. Citizens await the fruition of four successive recovery and reconstruction planning processes and the realization of essential infrastructure repairs. Repopulation in Orleans Parish has slowed considerably; the parish remains at best two-thirds of its former size; thousands of former residents who wish to return face barriers of many kinds. Heroic efforts at rebuilding have occurred through the efforts of individual neighborhood associations and voluntary associations who have attempted to address serious losses in affordable housing and health care services. 'Walking to New Orleans' traces how a dominant but paradoxical model of the relation between the human and natural worlds in Western culture has informed many environmental and engineering dilemmas and has contributed to the history of social inequities and injustice that anteceded the disasters of the hurricanes and subsequent flooding. It proposes a model for collaborative recovery that links principles of ethics and engineering, in which citizens become active, ongoing participants in the process of the reconstruction and redesign of their unique locus of habitation. Equally important, it gives voice to the citizens and associations who are desperately working to rebuild their homes and lives both in urban New Orleans and in the villages of coastal Louisiana.

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