



## WHAT DEFINES SUCCESS OF A VISION?

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### Abstract

Visions can be valuable tools for guiding and uniting land use interests in a region with fragmented administration. What determines the strength of a vision and how can it effectively play its role? We tested and summarized hypotheses on the success factors of visions. We chose New Orleans, a city in a rebuilding process because that represents a most intensive and pressing vision process.

We interviewed local policymakers, designers, researchers, and journalists to find out what they would spontaneously cite as a vision's most crucial factors. We also reviewed the subsequent New Orleans recovery plans and compared our findings with hypotheses from visioning literature.

The interviewees' spontaneous answers largely confirmed the key hypotheses about success from the visioning literature. But the most frequently mentioned factors were not in the literature: a vision needs to be propagated by a powerful authority, a favorable larger political climate, and the funds to sustain the implementation process. For a vision to make a difference, it needs to be substantively persuasive but also have a favorable institutional climate to help it along.

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### 1. Introduction

What does a vision need to be effective? What factors enable people to devise a central idea about future urban form that sets the agenda for future development? Ambitions are cherished, promoted, and pursued by individuals, groups of people, or city councils who all hope that they are able to make a difference. Visions can coordinate the interdependent decisions that result from these ambitions. We chose New Orleans' post-Katrina rebuilding challenge as a specifically telling example of vision-making. This example was used to test and supplement hypotheses about the strength of visions from literature on the success of visions. This article reports our findings on vision performance, based on interviews in New Orleans.

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Our visioning perspective distinguishes our study from other work written about New Orleans and similar post-disaster rebuilding challenges, which typically take the perspective of recovery theory (Olshansky et al., 2008; Olshansky, 2006; Kates et al., 2006; Nelson et al., 2007). Recovery theorists analyze the total recovery process, often with an institutional focus and little emphasis on the contents of the recovery plans. In contrast, we specifically wanted to learn about the catalyzing power of ideas about future urban form. How does the content of a plan guide actions and succeed or fail in uniting stakeholders?

It is complicated to establish the causal link between the dynamics of societal reality (i.e., urban form, social relations, political processes) and the mental constructs (i.e., ambitions for future spatial situations) that partly explain them. First, it is difficult because the mental constructs address various parts of reality, they vary in the degrees to which they are made explicit and the degree of agreement by the wider community. But, foremost, the causal link is difficult to establish because society and vision cannot be separated – they are one, instead of separate entities. They transform simultaneously; it is impossible to divide them and point out a causal link with certainty. There is too much interdependence and too much interference from other factors.

Yet, in their pretense to guide paths of development with appealing ideas, groups in society (i.e., planners, politicians, NGOs) do seek ways to make a difference. We use the word “vision” to address the larger ideas of a city about its future development, such as strategic plans (Healey 2007). Such visions are typically in constant transformation; they are largely implicit but may be made explicit in planning documents. And although planning documents (e.g., zoning plans) will in practice have a more narrow scope than visions because they are partial operational steps designed to contribute to a broader vision, they are the only manifestations of visions that last. The rest of the mental images for the future have evaporated and cannot be reconstructed.

Post-Katrina New Orleans represents a situation where a disaster damaged the city, forcing a city that was not used to making plans to make drastic choices about how to rebuild for the future. After the devastation of 2005, the city suddenly found itself forced to choose what it wanted to look like in the future. People asked for plans that would guide the recovery and reduce uncertainty for them as individual actors. Just like Port-au-Prince, Haiti, Christchurch, New Zealand, and Asian coastal zones damaged by tsunamis (Diefendorf, 2009 even compares the New Orleans situation with war-damaged German cities), New Orleans had to choose in what form it would rise from its ashes.

Our study tests and supplements the critical factors for vision performance. Section 2 reviews the visioning literature with the purpose to extract

hypotheses on success. We describe the challenge of rebuilding New Orleans in Section 3, presenting its geographical structure and the cause and nature of the 2005 devastation. Section 4 presents our research design, aimed at unraveling the competitive struggle among visions and documenting which strengths and weaknesses key players in that process now attribute to the various visions. The results are presented in Section 5. The paper concludes with a discussion of the outcomes.

## 2 Hypotheses from vision performance literature

Our New Orleans case study is meant to test and supplement theoretical assumptions about vision performance. In the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina in 2005, opportunities for the city's future had to be explored. Given the multitude of interests, perceptions, and opinions, this case provides a unique example of upcoming and conflicting visions.

We reviewed hypotheses about successful visions described in literature – as explained in the introduction, we exclude post-disaster recovery literature because we chose to concentrate on the substantive side of visions. Although, largely speaking, planning literature is extensive, literature that specifically addresses how to devise and implement powerful city or regional visions is limited and fragmented. This may be because it is easier to study incremental steps of improvement, such as plans, than to study processes that address radical, innovative, large-scale, long-term transitions. Nonetheless, several attempts have been made to analyze visioning processes.

Robert Shipley's writing is most explicitly concerned with visioning. He concentrates on cities that pursue radical views to guide land use, and other policies. Many cities in Europe and the U.S. have engaged in visioning processes with varying impacts. From Shipley, we obtained a number of hypotheses about how to design the visioning process in such a way that the eventual performance of the outcome is maximized.

Storytelling literature would also be applicable to implementation of a vision. Because a vision is a compelling reflection of a possible future, the seductive force central to storytelling is of great importance in successfully using the vision to lead the way. Some books about strategic planning also hint at the phenomenon of the vision, but without choosing clear concepts and hypotheses (for instance Healey, 2007).

### Hypotheses on critical factors in visioning literature

Visioning literature presents a number of recommendations for factors that are critical to successfully devising visions. The factors we derived in our review of this literature are typical to collaborative processes in general. This is logical,

considering that visioning, like collaborative planning, refers to “processes through which parties who see different aspects of the problem can constructively explore their differences and search for solutions that go beyond their own limited vision of what is possible” (Gray, 1989, p.5). This appears to imply that a powerful vision is, by definition, an image of the future that has support from all the important actors, and that support begins when stakeholders interact while jointly drafting the vision. A powerful vision needs broad representation from stakeholders, active participation, and clarity about the terms of engagement; everybody has to contribute ideas and everybody has to eventually profit from the results.

Shipley’s attempts to develop visioning theory provide a number of clues about performance variables. Foremost, a vision has to be specific and challenging (Shipley, 2002, p.13), as “specific and challenging goals lead to better performance than ‘do your best’ goals.” Setting high goals will result in high performance. At the same time, the vision has to include specific goals with specific tasks that are explicitly assigned to actors. This is important because the vision needs to overcome the collective irresponsibility in the region that necessitated the visioning in the first place. The vision has to assign actors to take specific actions (idem, p.15) and tasks articulate the “how question” of visioning (Shipley, 2006) that is both activating and relevant in helping the community judge whether to support the vision. Support for the vision depends on the projected result but also the way it is proposed that leads up to that result.

Furthermore, people should be asked to contribute early in the process before any solution is proposed (Shipley, 2004, p.208). Preconceived solutions smother creativity but genuine participation allows participants to think freely and to later recognize their ideas in the result. Note the difference: not just participation, but participation sufficiently early in the process to affect the result.

Papers presenting case studies on selected visioning processes implicitly confirm these hypotheses to varying degrees. Helling, for instance, stresses the importance of several principles of proper collaborative planning and emphasizes that it is vital to produce sufficiently concrete targets to guide the shorter-term decisions (Helling, 1998, p.344).

Complementary to Shipley’s recommendations, Helling’s (1998) analysis of the Atlanta VISION 2020 process found the role of experts to be vital, as they can add missing information (idem, p.346) when the process is trapped in discussion about facts. Too much expert-driven process, however, can be a pitfall when attempting to build consensus and wide support among stakeholders. Helling, therefore, suggests that expert views have to be subservient to the people’s perceptions and preferences. Otherwise,

stakeholders may experience the process as merely symbolic, believing the experts have no genuine interest in what the people say but only have interest in their preconceived solutions.

Helling also mentions the danger of devising utopias instead of strategies for action, which is also the main message of Peel and Lloyd (2005). This is in line with the specific tasks Shipley (2002) mentions, but she warns against his suggestion to set “challenging goals.” Goals must not be set too high.

Helling furthermore considers it crucial for a vision to appeal to a shared sense of urgency (*idem*, p.345). It is dangerous to treat the collaborative process as a goal in itself, because that will deplete energy. The goal must be to produce a compelling image of the future that effectively guides action.

Margerum’s (2005) analysis on visioning in Denver also largely confirms the need to respect the principles of collaborative planning in terms of actively involving population, striving for consensus and joint learning, and managing interdependent interests. Interestingly, he believes that it would work best on the street or neighborhood level because regionally-concerted action is too hard for people to identify with and thus they would not support the result.

#### Hypotheses on critical factors in vision application

What subsequently defines the performative power of the vision in the phase after its interactive, expert-informed drafting? Visioning literature emphasizes that a vision has to be well-rooted in the region’s stakeholder agendas. The storytelling literature talks about how to disseminate the results for maximum effect. Throgmorton (1996), Sandercock (2003), and Myers and Katsuse (2000) stress the rhetorical quality of the story. Is the story consistent, elegant, and clearly positioned in time with a specified direction? Importantly, does it convey a morally compelling message?

Myers and Katsuse (2000) think a story can be successful when the reader (i.e., a stakeholder you want to persuade and activate) recognizes his position, opportunities, and responsibility. This means that stories have to be addressed to target groups to be effective. This concurs with Shipley’s emphasis on assigning specific tasks to actors.

However, it would be insufficient to just address stakeholders separately. Connecting multiple interests and separate implicit visions is the power of a good vision, according to Throgmorton (2003). A planner has to accept the stories present in the region while leaving room for newly emerging microstories, but add to that a metastory that connects multiple interests and, thus, joins multiple energies. This shared nature of visions is also the cornerstone of collaborative planning (also see Peel and Lloyd, 2005). That shared nature can emerge either from the vision-making process or from very good analysis by the storyteller.

## Conclusion

Critical factors for vision success are not just about content. The literature talks little about what information a vision should contain, but more about whose agendas it must be useful to and how, where and when to present the message. Success for a vision is about the psychological significance of its content. Does it spark stakeholders to act? For that, it has to connect to the stakeholders' perceptions. As Van Dijk (2011) describes it, every new story finds itself in a context of already present stories, leading to either rejection or adoption, but it is always transformed before being used.

Our case study tests the validity and completeness of the literature's success factors. The publications reviewed here explicitly label the following success factors: (1) setting high goals that are appealing and consistent; (2) creating a roadmap with steps and assigned tasks to reach those goals and break them down into concrete, realistic projects; (3) building on early participation; (4) including the right amount of expert knowledge; (5) maintaining a sense of urgency; and (6) connecting multiple mutually benefiting interests.

## 3 Case description

New Orleans is a mid-sized city in the state of Louisiana, sitting between the mouth of the Mississippi River, where it meets the Gulf of Mexico, and Lake Ponchartrain, which forms the northern boundary of the city. The city is located on the Gulf Coast, which is frequently hit by hurricanes that emerge above the gulf and move north. They tend to reach the U.S. mainland somewhere between Houston and Florida, where they usually lose strength rapidly.

The Gulf Coast around New Orleans consists of extensive wetlands through which the farthest downstream section of the Mississippi River has had multiple branches. Some branches disappeared due to natural reroutings of the river; other branches have lost their function because of regulation of the river that was done mostly for navigation purposes. Throughout the delta, numerous towns lie in a complicated pattern of marshes, natural levees, and tidal canals. The city of New Orleans was founded in 1718 on one of the natural levees formed by the river. The levees were the sites with firmer ground, where the Mississippi had deposited coarser sand. Their natural properties made these sites safe to live on (Ford, 2010; Campanella, 2008); floodwaters did not, and still do not, reach the houses built on the natural levees. The high, old part of the city is still the historical tourist district. From the properties at the fringe of the old town, plantations extended into the lower and wetter areas behind the city that were harder to make habitable.

This original pattern of habitation on the natural levees, from which extended a fan of plantations into the marshes north of town (Campanella, 2008, p. 131), stayed in place for 200 years. Then, as Ford (2010, p.17) notes in her account of New Orleans' development, "city leaders, however, longed to make something more of the swamps – to drain them, to recover the land and put it to a more profitable use: sell it, collect taxes. [...] in the early 1800s the city of New Orleans sponsored construction of canals meant to drain the swamps [...] using Wood's pumps [...]. [...] after World War II, the previously drained swamplands were finally – and quickly – developed all along the old drainage canals, where man-made levees shored up resident's confidence that the land they were living on was safe [...] flooding seemed 'impossible'." (Ford, 2010, p.20) As Campanella (2008, p. 158) writes: "progressive municipal activism and new technology radically rewrote the 'rules' that drove the geography of New Orleans' urban growth."

Ultimately, most of the city's houses lay well below the level that the water in the Mississippi River and Lake Pontchartrain reached on a regular basis (Kates et al, 2006). The houses lie protected by floodwalls, manmade levees, and pumping stations, on soil that subsides because there is no longer any sedimentation and the soft soils have consolidated.

Hurricane Katrina hit the city on August 29, 2005, causing major failure of the protection system at seven or more separate locations. Dams and walls broke and vast neighborhoods were flooded in several hours by up to 3.5 meters of water, killing almost 2,000 people. None of the pre-1900 streets flooded; only the more recent, typically poorer, suburbs. The disaster proved the weakness of the protection system. The apparently insufficient standards applied by the Army Corps of Engineers, who do the civic engineering for flood protection, were criticized for causing massive failure.

After the storm, people wanted to rebuild their homes and lives. For that, they needed clarity about the recovery process. What could they expect from the future? When would services be restored in their streets? Would their streets be allowed to be rebuilt at all? Tens of thousands of city residents had fled to other parts of Louisiana and other U.S. states because their houses were uninhabitable and there was, temporarily, no employment for them. They needed certainty before making the leap back. In addition, they had become aware of the dangers of the neighborhoods they were living in. Ideas emerged about how to rebuild in a more sustainable way.

Much research has been done into the rebuilding process, but mostly from a social geographical point of view, describing developments in community resilience, social capital, place attachment, psychological health, crime rates, migration, and local economy. Initially, interest in the city's planning process was high (notably, Nelson et al., 2007; Burby, 2006; Kates et al., 2006;

Olshansky et al., 2008), however it now seems to have faded away. Our research extends the time span of the reconstruction of the planning process and uses the reconstruction as a case study to help develop theory about successful visions.

#### 4 Research design

The authors visited New Orleans to collect data in early 2011. The objective was to reconstruct New Orleans' process of finding a vision for rebuilding the city, with the purpose to test and supplement hypotheses from literature. Which visions can be pointed out throughout the process? How long did they last? And, most importantly, what explains their decay or persistence?

Because visions do not have a fixed form that allows objective direct observation, we proceeded to make this reconstruction in the following way. We took the overview provided by Ford (2010) as our first point of reference at the start of the field research. She gives a personal and partial account of the New Orleans visioning process.

We then interviewed a broad variety of people that were involved in some or all of the post-Katrina vision-development process, and who are known to have a good overview of the total post-Katrina planning process. We took their names from planning documents that listed their involvement in the process and, upon asking for an appointment, asked them who else we should talk to. We did not tell them exactly beforehand what our questions would be, because we wanted them to directly retrieve the requested information from their personal memories.

We eventually interviewed three influential designers; three researchers from Tulane University; an important civil engineering contractor; four journalists from local news networks and newspapers; and two policymakers. After each day of field research, the researchers from our team exchanged findings and, accordingly, enhanced their foreknowledge for the next interviews. This made the team increasingly more informed about the post-Katrina plans, allowing for better interpretation of answers by interviewees. When interviewees gave permission, digital recordings of the interviews were used for the final analyses when our own notes were unclear.

In all interviews, we asked the interviewees: (1) to give an overview of all subsequent or parallel post-Katrina visions; (2) to indicate in what documents these visions were articulated; (3) to approximate the time of emergence and abolition of visions; and, most importantly, (4) to explain each vision's disappearance or persistence. The answers would enable a final reconstruction of the array of visions and the reasons for their alteration. In practice, however, interviewees did not always allow the conversation to follow the predesigned structure. We also asked the interviewees what, in general, a vision needs in

order to make a difference. We wanted to know what they spontaneously think are the essential factors in creating effective visions.

So we did not project the theory on this case, but rather awaited the factors interviewees would mention spontaneously and compared them to the insights that emerged from literature afterward. This systematic and semi-quantitative way of hypothesis testing distinguishes this study from seemingly similar studies into New Orleans' rebuilding efforts.

We primarily limited our discussion to the visions about the city as a whole. There have also been several visions and plans on the level of the neighborhood or parish (a governmental layer comparable to a county in other U.S. states), as well as visions for the Mississippi delta enveloping New Orleans. The repair and reinforcement of the existing structure of levees and floodwalls around the city by the Army Corps of Engineers is, in a way, based on a vision too. Although these levels of scale are, or at least should be, interrelated (as Nelson et al., 2007, p. 24, emphasize), information about such visions was not included in our study because of their different scale in comparison to that in most of the visioning literature, and the fact that they do not touch on improving urban form.

The remarks of the interviewees, which obviously were worded in all kinds of ways, had to be aggregated into one-liners that represent a variety of exact statements. Because of the potentially distorting effect of this aggregation, it was done as soon as possible after the actual interview by the researchers that held the interview, possibly in interaction with the lead author.

Aside from conducting interviews, we also screened the archives of one of the city's main newspapers, "The Louisiana Weekly." We analyzed articles about visions for the recovery of New Orleans for indications of flaws and strengths of visions. We compared these with the outcomes of the interviews to see if additional factors were mentioned. Information from websites was treated with caution, as their information could be colored by contemporary interpretations of the actual process. We used newspaper archives and websites only for orientation but not for primary data collection.

## 5 Results

Before presenting the precise data we sought to collect, some unusual features of the New Orleans case must be explained. Every case that is selected to explore the questions we asked would be unique. The interviewees mentioned three important aspects that make New Orleans an uncommon site for visioning: lack of previous planning culture, displaced people ultimately not returning, and the role of the trauma from the hurricane.

Several interviewees indicated that New Orleans did not have an actual planning culture prior to the Katrina disaster. City government and residents were not used to engaging in thinking about the city's future (also see Olshansky, 2008, p. 278). This caused the first plans to encounter an audience that was not used to, or even hostile to, the idea of governmental interference in urban form. This may mean that the first plans had no real chance of succeeding. Timing, therefore, turns out to be an important issue. Plans, in terms of content, form, and level of ambition, are not good or bad, but rather either appropriate or not for the situation at that point in time.

Visioning is further complicated because an estimated 125,000 people still had not returned to the city by 2011. These people fled the city because of their damaged properties or the lack of opportunities to generate an income. It is hard to rebuild a city when these displaced people cannot join the process; this means you have to make decisions about properties whose owners are absent and sometimes cannot even be contacted. It also means the city does not receive their taxes to pay for public services.

And then there is the trauma of the hurricane. The sudden massive devastation, displacement, and the subsequent despair are likely to make people less inclined to think in terms of the bright new futures of a better city. Even though the disaster showed the dangers of the post-Katrina urban form, traumatized people tend to crave a return to "how it used to be" (Kates et al., 2006, p.14656). Visions in that case meet a conservative attitude, which was also said to be the New Orleans culture before Katrina. That does not necessarily mean that no vision is accepted, but rather that visions need to make an explicit connection to local identity and heritage in an effort to further reinforce what is cherished locally, while simultaneously solving important problems. The answers given in the interviews are summarized in Table 1. The plans were the most practical points of reference during the interviews and it was hard to make the interviewees discern between vision (i.e., the philosophy behind choices) and plans (i.e., the operational translation of visions) that did not necessarily coincide. That caused all interviewees to structure their account of the vision process around the most important plans. However, we concentrated on the content of the ideas.

The table lists the plans in chronological order with the success factors the interviewees indicated. The information we received from the policymakers and the contractor was not systematic enough to include in the results. Although, given the research questions, we did not intend to be quantitative, the table does give numbers for how many interviewees mentioned that factor. It is an indication of the perception of that factor's importance. It also shows which groups of interviewees mentioned a factor and which did not. The last column shows whether that factor is already mentioned in the literature.

|   | Presented by   | Timeframe  | Crucial factors for success or failure according to interviewees   | Also found in literature (Yes/No and number of hypotheses) |
|---|--|--|--|--|
| Bring New Orleans Back Plan (BNOB) ("A Strategy for Rebuilding New Orleans" by the Urban Land Institute was enveloped in this plan) | Bring New Orleans Back Commission, commissioned by Mayor Ray Nagin         | Start of work: October 2005<br>Presented: March 2006 | Lack of communication, public involvement<br>1   0   1<br>Flawed leadership<br>1   1   0<br>People not being used to planning<br>0   0   2<br>Timing was not right; too soon to design new futures, content did not answer people's direct needs<br>1   0   2<br>No phasing or practical steps for getting from present to future<br>1   0   1 | Y (3)<br><br>N<br>Y (5)<br>Y (5)<br><br>Y (2)              |
| Laissez faire strategy  |  | March 2006-October 2006                              |  |  |
| Unified New Orleans Plan (UNOP) (executed through the Blakely Plan, named after the experts' chairman)                              | Teams of independent planning consultants, commissioned by Mayor Ray Nagin | Start: October 2006<br>Presented: January 2007       | Incoherent, complicated list of projects without much appeal -   1   0<br>Participation, however without creativity -   0   0<br>Leadership -   0   0<br>Missing link to federal government -   1   0<br>Too big and expensive to be realistic -   0   1   | Y (1)<br><br>Y (3)<br><br>N<br>N<br><br>Y (2)              |
| Master Plan   |  | 2008-now   | Timing: capitalizes  | Y (5)  |

|            |   |   |   |   |
|------------|---|---|---|---|
|            |   |   | <p>on people's awareness of need for planning 0   0   0</p> <p>Uses good ideas from former plans 1   2   0</p> <p>Was granted "the force of law" (the eventual actual power of that is questioned) 2   2   1</p> <p>Flexible 0   0   2</p> <p>Did not propose big changes 2   1   1</p> <p>Communicative, involved citizens 1   2   0</p>   | <p>N</p> <p>N</p> <p>N</p> <p>N</p> <p>Y (3)</p>  |
| In general | - | - | <p>Ambitious, appealing 2   1   1</p> <p>But the realistic budget makes it believable 2   1   3</p> <p>Genuine connection to people 2   3   2</p> <p>Serves multiple interests but avoids favoring some and damaging others 1   0   2</p> <p>Right timing, using the sense of urgency and willingness to allow change to pay for it and to cooperate 3   1   1</p> <p>Connection to government system, aligned political will 2   3   1</p> <p>Leadership: clear central actor(s) with power and potential 3   3   1</p> <p>Incremental steps</p> | <p>Y (1)</p> <p>N</p> <p>Y (3)</p> <p>Y (6)</p> <p>Y (5)</p> <p>N</p> <p>N</p> <p>Y (2)</p> |

|  |  |  |   |   |
|--|--|--|---|---|
|  |  |  | help make planning tangible 1   1   1<br>But, danger of missing the big picture 1   0   0 | N |
|--|--|--|---|---|

Table 1. Overview of the results. These factors were mentioned by the interviewees as vital to success. Some were linked to specific plans and some were general. Although this is not intended to be a quantitative study, we indicate in superscripts the number of interviewees that mentioned this factor, given respectively in number from: the researchers (out of 3) | designers (out of 3) | journalists (out of 4). A dash (-) means that the plan was not discussed in sufficient detail by that group.

The Bring New Orleans Back Plan (BNOB) was the first plan to be presented after the havoc wrought by the hurricane. A commission of expert consultants installed by Mayor Ray Nagin drafted the plan. It included ideas from a plan by the Urban Land Institute. The vision of the BNOB plan was to make the city more compact on its higher parts and make lower parts suitable for controlled flooding in case of emergencies. Shrinking the footprint of New Orleans would make the city less vulnerable, less costly to provide services to, and more realistic given the projected population decline.

The public response to BNOB was very negative (also see Ford, 2010, p. 30-33 and 52, and Campanella, 2008, p. 68, 344-350). Our interviewees were, however, unanimous that the plan's vision was not a bad one at all. And it did try to fulfill the prerequisites for collaborative planning with interactive websites, public meetings, and a grand presentation to the public in March 2006.

The plan's main flaw, as indicated by our interviewees, was the bad connection to the needs of the city's people at that moment. Timing was described as a very important factor here. Only six months after the storm, the people were presented an image of a city they did not recognize, and they were not ready to cope with the idea that some of their streets would not be rebuilt at all. The communication about the plan did not address citizens' short-term needs, making them more insecure than they already were. What would this vision mean for them in the short term? When and how would they be rebuilding their lives when their original street was wiped off the map? The plan lacked a vision for getting from the present to the projected future state. In addition to this, two interviewees (in contrast with Ford's [2010] much more intensive criticism) lamented the lack of leadership by the mayor for this plan specifically. That person stated that the mayor did not seem to be on top of it or even care about people's personal futures.

After that, according to Ford (2010, pp. 33-36) and Campanella (2008, p. 353), there was a short period where the mayor pushed a non-vision, meaning that recovery of the city would be left to market forces. This laissez faire vision was not officially documented and most of our interviewees do not recall this as a distinct phase in the process. It did, however, spark neighborhood-level planning attempts.

In late 2006, work started on the Unified New Orleans Plan (UNOP). It was infused by ideas from the community-based Lambert Plans on recovering flooded areas (compiled throughout 2006) and implemented via the Blakely Plans in 2008. The initial idea was to cover the entire city and interactively develop out-of-the-box ideas with citizens, both those still living in the city and those displaced to other cities. This, obviously, was a reaction to the BNOB's failure. The UNOP's vision was not so much to create a specific new urban form but, foremost, to create a set of pragmatic objectives that would be acceptable to citizens and that would attract recovery funds from the federal government. It was successful in generating government funds in early 2007.

The plan evolved into a list of conservative objectives and projects centering around 17 key investment areas with a focus on acquiring funds from governments, developers, and businesses that would be needed for neighborhood recovery. The plan is clearly tuned to restoring the pre-Katrina situation, using words like "repair," "improve," and "revise" in relation to flood walls, infrastructure, and housing. There are no maps and only minor hints at an adapted urban form: for instance, "help encourage and facilitate the redevelopment of higher elevation areas of the City that were underutilized prior to Katrina" (City of New Orleans, 2007, p.74).

The plan's main flaw, as indicated by our interviewees, was its lack of appeal. It was called an uninspiring list of projects that nobody could disagree on, but that did not spark enthusiasm either. It had no story to it at all. Though the plan indicated some priorities, its massive set of goals (Appendix B's table alone covered 78 pages) may have reduced action.

The current Master Plan (officially titled "Plan for the 21st Century: New Orleans 2030"; see [www.nolamasterplan.org](http://www.nolamasterplan.org)) was positively assessed by all interviewees. This comprehensive plan is hundreds of pages long and filled with numerous artistic impressions and analytical and visionary maps. It also includes extensive accounts of citizen involvement and has been well received by the citizens. The plan explicitly and convincingly presents a vision for the future that includes livability (mainly history, green space, and health), opportunity (climate for entrepreneurship), and sustainability (resilience, energy, and drinking water). Each objective is elaborated in image, text, maps indicating impacts on urban form, and lists of recommended projects. It mainly reinforces existing qualities rather than proposing radically new structures.

Though we perceive its substantial appeal as stemming from its elegant images of the future, the interviewees mainly attributed its success to the force of law, its flexibility, and the moderate change it proposes. They noted that the low level of intrusiveness would make it more acceptable to the people and they gave it the force of law because the wards can choose to reconsider aspects of the plan when they have difficulties implementing them. Together with the moderate changes it proposes, people tend to accept its authority because the plans accept their autonomy.

When we asked the interviewees for the most important success factors regardless of specific New Orleans visions, several strongly-felt ideas were expressed, most of which were not mentioned when talking about the plans in particular. Authority, political will, and a realistic budget scored very high. That appears to have been a lesson for those involved in the New Orleans visioning experience.

## 6 Discussion

New Orleans represents an unusual situation, whereby a city was hit by a natural disaster and forced to make radical choices for its future urban form. Extensive flooding caused massive damage to properties but also to faith in the ability of water management technology to counter the risks of living below sea level. It caused a flurry of planning efforts that were hard to research; we found partly contradictory information on dates, objectives, and content.

We sought to supplement existing hypotheses in literature about vision performance. Comparison of the literature with the case interviews shows that five out of six factors derived from the literature in Section 2 were actively mentioned by the interviewees. They are once again validated. Factor 1, setting high goals that are appealing and consistent, was frequently mentioned by all groups of interviewees as a general success factor. The need for a realistic roadmap with steps and assigned tasks to reach those goals (Factor 2) was mentioned as one of the reasons the BNOB plan failed, and mentioned by many interviewees as a crucial factor in general. Factor 3, building on early participation, was mentioned in relation to the BNOB and the Master Plan and was considered to be a crucial factor by almost all interviewees. Factor 5, the sense of urgency, was mentioned as a general factor, but it also could be related to answers about timing. Because sense of urgency is constantly changing in intensity and focus (for instance, first to extending services to damaged neighborhoods and later to protection against new hurricanes), sense of urgency conflates to the frequently mentioned issue of timing. Sense of urgency, then, is something you need to make use of by proposing the right ideas at the right moment. Factor 6, connecting multiple mutually benefitting interests, was mentioned as a general factor. The one

factor from literature that was not heard in the answers of the interviewees was Factor 4, applying the proper amount of expert knowledge.

New factors the interviewees mentioned that we did not come across in our reviewed literature are: (7) an actor with authority that appropriates and embodies the vision; (8) a supportive political climate for the central idea; and (9) money to fund at least the first steps in realizing the vision. In our New Orleans study, these factors scored very highly in terms of the number of people that mentioned them (respectively, 7 out of 10, 6 out of 10, and 6 out of 10) – also all much higher than all the factors found in the literature. Only the importance of genuinely connecting to people ranked equally high (7 out of 10). This supplementary set of factors helps us to better understand the power of visioning processes.

Shortly after Katrina, the first visions were launched under the supervision of a mayor who was criticized for being too little involved. The appointment of Mayor Landrieu is considered to have been a big help for effective planning and the success of the Master Plan, not least because of his sister, a U.S. senator. This, together with the advent of the Obama administration in Washington, created a very different political climate for rebuilding New Orleans. Interviewees saw this as a vital prerequisite for vision performance. The availability of funds that make a vision viable, to an important extent a result of authority and politics, was also considered essential for effective visioning.

Interestingly, these three interrelated factors are central in the post-disaster recovery literature (summarized in Olshansky, 2008, p. 274) that we chose not to concentrate on because it focuses on process and institutions. In the case of New Orleans, it is obvious that lessons about successful visions should be informed by insights from recovery processes. But we feel that our results are relevant to wider spheres than just post-disaster planning. Leadership, funds, and political climate boost the performance of any vision. We agree with Olshansky (*idem*, p.279) when he says “post-disaster planning is just a more intense version of normal planning.” We therefore propose to combine the insights from these two fields of literature. Whereas recovery literature may profit from becoming stronger on plan content, visioning literature may improve by including process more strongly. No idea is effective without a good process, and vice versa.

Surprisingly, several factors that were indicated as crucial to plan performance were mentioned as a negative and a positive factor at the same time. For instance, flexibility, in terms of being able to reconsider decisions in case of future changes in insight, was mentioned as an advantage for the Master Plan. It was also mentioned as a danger, as the plan could eventually cease to make a real difference. Integrating multiple interests in the plan was also mentioned as being both an advantage for aligning several sources of power and a

disadvantage for inadvertently excluding some groups from benefitting. This suggests that it is not about having that factor, but about having the right amount of that factor.

So it is partly a matter of degree: a vision needs the proper amount of many factors. And is a matter of combination: several factors are simultaneously indispensable. It is about subtle differences: timing, influence of government and strength of vision. A high score on one does not compensate for a low score on another. In the case of the UNOP, all the community involvement in the world could not make up for its lack of inspiration. It was replaced by the Master Plan, but it did succeed in convincing authorities to extend hundreds of millions of dollars for recovery funding, illustrating a chain reaction between subsequent plans as well.

One thing that emerges from these findings is that the less vision a plan has, the better it will be accepted. This was most explicitly discussed in the interviews with the designers. The first plan for rebuilding New Orleans was very visionary with relevant ideas for how to build a more resilient city. Interviewees say it lacked proper timing, but even were it presented today, we question whether it would be accepted by the residents of New Orleans. Its vision was to make a better city, but the people seem to want the same city. The UNOP and the Master Plan seem less visionary and more in line with the people's urge to turn back time. Therefore, they are accepted and considered more successful. Here, the tension between Shipley's high goal setting and Helling's realism becomes evident.

The question therefore remains how to define "success." A vision may be accepted, adopted, adored, generating action, and granted the force of law; a success in short-term performance in terms of output of the democratic and formal process. Despite that success, its content may fail to address the deeper, long-term issues that were the real cause of the city's problems. A vision with high performance power could be poor or average in terms of its capacity to solve the underlying problems, or vice versa. One interviewee from the group of designers put it this way: "[Many] plans stop where they should start. They were made to please everyone."

This brings us back to the question we started out with. How can an idea make a difference? As it turns out, effective visionary planning is a balancing act: you have to go with the flow, because when you try to stop it you will be ignored. But to what extent can planning bend the trends? Our study shows that the most important factors for bending the trends are connecting to people, authority, a supportive political climate, and sufficient financial resources. A bit of coincidence is needed for all these factors to come together, but a plan that is sufficiently relevant, elegant, and persuasive to help create a favorable

environment for itself. A favorable environment will at least partly be the merit of a persuasive vision too.

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