

The Color Line in Greenbuilding
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RESIDENTS FEAR GREEN MAY TRUMP BLACK IN REBUILDING GULF COAST

The U.S. Greenbuilding Council or USGBC, which has developed building codes requiring the use of environmentally sustainable materials and energy efficiency, will hold its annual Greenbuild International Conference and Expo on November 9-11 in Atlanta. At this three-day conference, USGBC and its partners, including the Enterprise Foundation, Habitat for the Humanity, and the Trust for Public Land, have set their sights on “greening” the Gulf Coast, a region where African Americans make up a significantly large share of the population in the three states hardest hit by Katrina—Louisiana, Mississippi, and Alabama. Blacks comprise 32.5 percent of the population in Louisiana, 36.3 percent in Mississippi, and 26 percent in Alabama.

There is no question that rebuilding the Gulf Coast region should employ the best green technology available and should employ practices that are sustainable. However, it is imperative that rebuilding, green or otherwise, is fair, just, equitable, inclusive, and carried out in a nondiscriminatory way. We should not forget that the “greening” initiative is being planned in a region that has a legacy of slavery, “Jim Crow” segregation, and entrenched white supremacy.

Historically, the region has served as a haven for black land ownership, black home ownership, black businesses, and black colleges. Other than Atlanta, the host city for the Greenbuild conference, New Orleans is the only city in the U.S. that has three or more HBCUs. Atlanta has five HBCUs. Unfortunately, all three of New Orleans’ HBCUs, Dillard University, Southern University at New Orleans, and Xavier University, enrolling more than 10,500 students, went under with Katrina floodwaters. The USGC should reach out to form partnerships with impacted HBCUs in the Gulf Coast and others that are working with Katrina evacuees.

African American residents of the hardest hit areas struggle to return home as architects and real estate developers lick their chops at the lucrative opportunities of land use planning and construction in New Orleans. More than 110,000 of New Orleans 180,000 houses were flooded, and half sat for days or weeks in more than six feet of water. As many as 30,000 to 50,000 homes citywide may have to be demolished, while many others could be saved with extensive repairs.

While greenbuilding combats the use of environmentally unsustainable building materials, the USGBC must learn that African American residents in the Gulf Coast region for decades have been fighting for environmental justice. In New Orleans neighborhoods with high levels of lead exposure, toxic facilities, and waste sites, African Americans have tirelessly worked to achieve a healthy and safe environment. In fact, just last year, African American residents and churches volunteered to construct a Habitat for Humanity home that met greenbuilding standards. Clearly, the rebuilding of New Orleans and the Gulf Coast should include a concerted effort to bring together the predominantly white greenbuilding adherents and displaced African American residents, but instead there is a racial divide.

Most Katrina evacuees are not privy to the closed-door meetings that are taking place around the country where real estate decisions are being made about the future of their neighborhoods. Setting aside 30 scholarships for Katrina survivors in an international conference attended by 10,000 people smacks of tokenism. By failing to reach out to African Americans in the development and implementation of plans for the future of their neighborhoods, the USGBC begins a new chapter on racial exclusion.

Seeds are being planted for the gentrification of a city, where the remarkable contributions that African Americans have made and continue to make to the unique history, architecture, culture, music, and food of New Orleans, will be forgotten. Meeting notes from city planning subcommittees established by the New Orleans Mayor's Office to bring back the city reveal that urban designers and architects, some of whom will be attending the conference, plan to dictate how neighborhoods can and should be rebuilt and prefer the rebuilding of higher elevated areas rather than low lying areas. Much of the New Orleans' African American population is located in the low-lying areas. Also noteworthy is the fact that the several subcommittees working on city planning have few, if any, African American residents as members.

Environmental justice leaders for more than a quarter century have chided environmentalists when they plan *for* rather than plan *with* impacted communities of color. What is most pernicious is that "greenbuilding," as it currently stands, has the potential to continue the history of racial discrimination that makes homeownership and community development out of reach for many African Americans. The costs of "greenbuilding" in New Orleans and the Gulf Coast, which involves exorbitant fees for architects, materials, and construction, must address the issues of affordability, access, and equity. Safeguards are needed so that history is not repeated.

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