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Public Art and Preparedness: Lessons from Katrina

MARCH 24, 2015 | [IN SPECIAL FEATURES](#) | [BY AMELIA BROWN](#)

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Practical toolkits from artists and art organizations for creative, artist-led community projects and programs.

Hurricane Katrina was one of the most deadly, destructive, and costly natural disasters in the United States. This year commemorates the 10th Anniversary of Hurricane Katrina, providing opportunity to learn and implement lessons for creative preparation and recovery from natural disasters. Innovative artist-led efforts in New Orleans, Louisiana are addressing long-standing issues in emergency management through forming grassroots organizations, developing public art installations as part of the city wide emergency system, and sustaining work through multi-sector partnerships. Emerging from one of the most destructive disasters are some of the most constructive tools for art and community development. This is the second in a series about the role of artists in disaster management and resilience. See the first story [here](#).

Crises Need Creativity

“There’s seminal moments in your life where you remember every detail: ...The levees had been breached, people were stuck on their rooftops, they were stuck outside the Superdome, outside the Convention Center... It dawned on me that that wasn’t happening somewhere in the third world, that was happening three miles from where I grew up.” Three days after the impact of Hurricane Katrina, New Orleans native David W. Morris watched his birthplace underwater after reaching the first working television since evacuating from his home in Hattiesburg, Mississippi.

Out of the many news stories, community conversations and indelible images that documented the tragedy of Katrina’s devastation, one failure stood out – the inability to effectively evacuate residents who were not able to leave the city without assistance. “Everyone remembers the Superdome and the Convention Center; believe it or not, that was actually the plan,” says Morris. “Obviously it wasn’t supposed to fail so spectacularly.”

Compelled to support New Orleans as the city rebuilt, Morris left his work as a political consultant to move back his hometown and is now the Executive Director of [Evacuteer](#), a non-profit organization. Evacuteer was established in 2009 by photographer Robert X. Fogarty, who had learned about disaster preparedness as an AmeriCorps VISTA

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member serving the role of volunteer coordinator for the City of New Orleans. In 2008, Fogarty coordinated 219 volunteers in preparation for Hurricane Gustav, assisting in the largest hurricane evacuation in United States history.

Evacuteer annually recruits, trains, and manages 500 volunteers to assist with the New Orleans City Assisted Evacuation Plan (CAE). The CAE was developed after Katrina as a public evacuation option for those without transportation. When a mandatory evacuation has been declared CAE activates with the capacity to transport 25,000-30,000 New Orleans residents. Throughout the city there are 17 emergency pick-up points along frequently-utilized public transit routes. Residents board public buses to Union Pacific Terminal bus station and are then transported to State and Federal shelters. The process reverses when it has been determined safe to return. This system works to address both safe and effective evacuation and return home in the case of severe weather (typically a Category 3 hurricane or higher).

The success of CAE depends on people utilizing the system. In order to utilize the system, people need to know the location of the pick-up points. Through outreach and recruitment efforts the Evacuteer staff realized residents were not aware of the pick-up points four years after they had been established. They needed a creative way to increase visibility and distinguish the areas as a place to meet in the case of an evacuation. Immense efforts were made post Katrina to increase the number of people who had the option to safely evacuate utilizing CAE. How could the emergency preparedness system continue to advance if people were not aware of where to go in the case of an emergency?

Art as an Answer

Many New Orleans residents taking public transportation were unaware they were standing at evacuation pick-up points marked by what resembled most parking signs in the city. Between Fogarty's disaster management work and work as the founder of [Dear World](#), a portrait project that began as a love letter to New Orleans, he had an idea.

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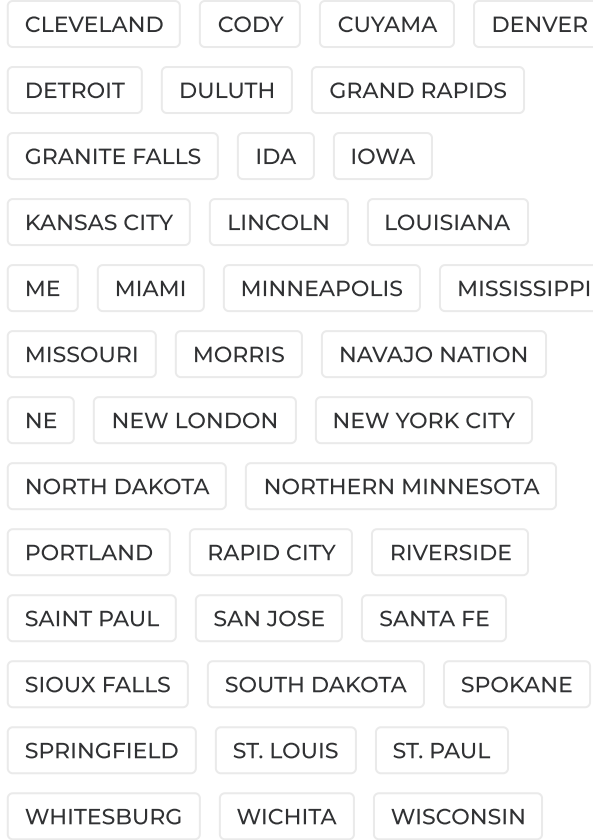
The solution to improving the visibility of evacuation pick-up points and contributing to the city’s safety: public art.

Evacuteer proposed a partnership between the Arts Council New Orleans and the Office of Homeland Security and Emergency Preparedness to commission 17 public art pieces. These art pieces would serve as identifiable markers designating gathering locations for public transportation during a mandatory evacuation. In 2011, a national RFQ was issued to select an artist to design a public art solution and more than 90 submissions were received from across the country.

Boston-based artist [Douglas Kornfeld](#) was selected to commission identical public art pieces for the evacuation sites, known as “[Evacuspots](#).” Kornfeld was immediately attracted to the RFQ because of much of his artwork is based on creating icons. The statues are similar to giant stick figures with one arm raised above the head, speaking to both the universal gesture for hailing a cab (which Kornfeld intended upon creating the art piece) and the local culture of gesturing for beads from a float in a during Mardi Gras parade (which Kornfeld discovered during his presentation to a jury panel).

The sculptures themselves are 800-pound, 14-foot-high constructions. Kornfeld stresses that the statues will be standing for 100 years as they are made of stainless steel tube, the same material used to make highway bridges. Morris adds that the sculptures are not only a sign of resilience but are incredibly resilient themselves – installed to withstand Category 5 hurricane winds.

Not only are the sculptures built to transcend time, they are built to transcend barriers. Identification of the sculpture unites typical literacy or language divisions and can be described simply in an emergency. “That’s the beauty of art. Art is universal. Art is something that can be appreciated by people of every race, religion, creed, people that speak every language, it crosses all barriers, all boundaries. So it only makes sense that in a time of emergency, we would want something so universal,” remarks Morris. Kornfeld created a piece of public art that increases the visibility of gathering points as well as decreases obstacles to evacuation. Traditionally separate entities collaborated to



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create a system and a symbol that surpasses previous evacuation signs and procedures. They are unlike any “sign” in the city and point to the power and impact of arts in emergency management.

Art as Partnership

Non-traditional partnerships have advanced evacuation produces in a post-Katrina New Orleans. Kornfeld stresses that “Negotiating with stakeholders is probably one of the most important components in public art.” Every entity including the city, the state, the arts council, Evacuteer, Homeland security, and neighborhood residents had their own requirements, questions, concerns, and comments that needed to be addressed.

Kornfeld’s biggest task was gaining approval of the sculptures from 17 different neighborhoods in which the sculptures would be placed on historic, city, and state land. Kornfeld notes, “People don’t visualize things like an artist so you have to help them to visualize it.” He worked to balance maintaining the integrity of the original vision, addressing concerns of stakeholders, and meeting the goals of the project.

The award for the commission was granted to Kornfeld in January 2013 and the first statue was placed in the city on June 2013. “This went by very quickly by public art standards,” states Kornfeld. He attributed this to the commitment of all the stakeholders and is adamant that artists need the support of their partners. Kornfeld had never worked with Homeland Security and there was no roadmap to guide these exact partnerships in how they could form and sustain themselves.

A large contributor to the process was Evacuteer’s commitment to community engagement. “I definitely think that played a role in introducing these sculptures,” says Morris. Partnering with existing organizations to increase the number of volunteers and those who are aware of CAE as an option in the case of emergency helped transition evacuation art into the neighborhoods. Morris advises artists, city officials, and residents to begin working with one another now. “Don’t wait until the emergency management situation, start to develop those relationships before you need them,”

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Today on [@CreateExchange](#), [@BLCKPress](#) writer Chioma Uwagwu talks with Springboard Creative Economy Fellow Duaba Unenra about imagining a better world through art.

Read the full story: springboardexchange.org/duaba-unenra/

Audio interview via BLCK Press:
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“I imagine, and move towards a future where oppressed people who have been displaced from their ancestral land can have self-determination, autonomy and liberation...For me, that means we have complete and total responsibility to take care of ourselves and make sure that we stay free.”



- DUABA UNENRA
CREATIVE ECONOMY FELLOW

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Morris cautions. “Part of that is creating the opportunities for people to get to know one another...it opens the door for future collaborations on projects.” Relationships and systems once established can be executed when an emergency occurs.

One of Kornfeld’s biggest challenges of the project is now one of its biggest successes. “What is really important to me is acceptance by the community...That’s the sign of success for a piece of public art,” concludes Kornfeld. The Evacuspots sculptures are not only planted in the ground but replicas can be seen throughout the city – leading the way on the front of a Mardi Gras float or pinned to a transit driver’s uniform when taking a streetcar or bus. In addition, the term “Evacuspot” has been adopted into emergency management planning and [documentation](#), evacuation spots are marked on [maps](#) with the sculpture, and the art is integrated into the system. Morris affirms, “When I say the city has been a tremendous partner, they have truly bought into this as a way to expand the reach of traditional emergency management.” Partnerships utilizing arts have proven successful in advancing evacuation preparation and implementing lessons learned from Hurricane Katrina.

Looking Back, Moving Forward

Evacuspots are a replicable solution to a critical weakness in our city’s safety by replacing previously overlooked evacuation signs with public art evacuation gathering points. These public art gathering places work to increase the number of people that know the location to evacuate utilizing public transportation in the case of CAE. Artists, organizations, and residents can bring this to their communities by “identifying in existing emergency management plans those locations that are crucial to humanitarian aide and using this...human figure to clearly mark that place,” states Morris.

This innovative work has [brought recognition](#) in many forms including being selected by the [CDC Foundation](#) and the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention’s (CDC) Office of Public Health Preparedness and Response’s (OPHPR) Learning Office as “one of seven communities that are promising examples of community efforts that reflect

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and embody FEMA’s Whole Community approach to emergency management.”

Evacuteer is maintaining a cross-sector approach as they advance to installing lights to illuminate the public art at night. Morris reveals, “Recognizing that this is an art project even though it serves a very practical, very important life saving function, we want to make sure that anything we do to modify it, up to and including the type of light we shine on it is done with that in mind.”

Morris shares, “We want this symbol that we have in New Orleans to become a nationally and internationally recognizable icon of refuge and resilience.” Morris continues, “As we work towards the 10th anniversary of Katrina, Evacupots can serve as “almost as a thank you for the way the rest of the country, the rest of the world, rallied around New Orleans in the days, months, and years after Hurricane Katrina.” This work points to the advancements that have taken place in the past 10 years while recognizing the need for creative approaches to address unresolved challenges in the years to come.

Amelia Brown is an artist and consultant with more than 20 years of community development experience spanning four continents. [Emergency Arts](#) is a central resource dedicated to building a cross-sector network, strengthening community resilience, and advancing arts as integral to emergency management.

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