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JEFF GERRITT: Rebuild hope in all U.S. cities

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BY JEFF GERRITT

Journalists and politicians have chattered a lot lately about how Hurricane Katrina exposed America's class and racial sores, as if these problems were on the down-low before the levee broke in New Orleans' Lower 9th Ward. Where have they been? Not in the hoods of the nation's big cities, where poverty and racial disparities have festered for decades without a national urban strategy.

Rebuilding New Orleans could cost \$200 billion, but investing some of that paper earlier would have prevented a lot of problems, including a failing levee. Instead, it took a natural disaster to get the attention of the nation's shot-callers.

Older big cities -- especially blue-collar, manufacturing centers like Detroit -- have crumbled slowly for 50 years. Pushed partly by federal tax and highway policies, the exodus of people and wealth started after World War II. To get a flavor of what it has done to urban America, take the short ride from Detroit's east side to Grosse Pointe. No doubt, many regions have managed a lot better than Detroit, but even comeback cities like Boston, Chicago and San Francisco have lost population since 2000.

I visited Curitiba, Brazil, last month to check out the city's famous rapid transit bus system. While there, I talked with Jaime Lerner, the internationally revered urban expert who was Curitiba's mayor during the 1970s and later governor. He's still cranked up about cities and surprisingly hopeful about them here -- if U.S. leaders stop making excuses for inaction.

With creativity and commitment, Lerner did a lot. Curitiba, with nearly 2 million people, has integrated neighborhoods laced with parks, a booming downtown and perhaps the world's only self-sufficient public transportation system. As mayor, Lerner turned a downtown shopping district into a busy pedestrian mall, gave neighborhoods a million tree seedlings to plant and tend, hired teenagers to clean the parks, diverted lowland flood-waters to create urban lakes, persuaded merchants to adopt street children in exchange for cleanup chores, and helped build a rapid transit bus system with private investment that now carries 2 million passengers a day without subsidies.

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Urban planners must first understand a city's growth and employment patterns, Lerner said. Curitiba grew along public transportation corridors, where people now live in economically mixed neighborhoods, close to where they work and shop.

Sweeping land use planning like that might not fly in America, especially in southeast Michigan, where each of more than 200 local units of government wants the last word. But neither can the region afford to subsidize building more and more sewer lines and roads farther and farther out, while old roads, sewers and bridges in Detroit and the inner suburbs need billions of dollars of work.

America's sprawling urban areas waste time and resources, Lerner said. Culturally, when cities decline, solidarity among the people disappears, triggering violence.

"The last refuge of solidarity remains in the cities," Lerner told me. "If policy makers don't have a generous view of cities, how can they have a generous view of people?"

Most U.S. leaders don't appear to have a generous view of either. While the government spends hundreds of billions in Iraq, parts of American cities look like war zones, with battered streets, vacant lots and abandoned buildings. The real bummer is what you don't see: the waste of human potential, absence of hope and lack of opportunity. My 34-year-old brother-in-law told me that, growing up, he didn't know any young man from his east-side Detroit neighborhood who hadn't spent time in jail or prison or on probation. The rebuilding strategy for U.S. cities seems to be, as the Rev. Jesse Jackson once quipped, to build more stadiums and prisons.

Bigger is not necessarily better, but really rebuilding cities, even if downsized, would help solve the problems of race and class in America. That won't happen without serious national, state and local urban policies.

Cities must matter again. They should not have to drown before the federal government throws them a line.

JEFF GERRITT is a Free Press editorial writer. Contact him at gerritt@freepress.com, 313-222-6585, or in care of the editorial page.



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