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TEN YEARS AFTER HURRICANE KATRINA  
A LOOK BACK AT THE  
FUND FOR NEW ORLEANS

In late August 2005, many households across America were glued to images of New Orleans on their television screens as the tragedy of Hurricane Katrina unfolded: people desperately perched on rooftops awaiting rescue, families crowded into the Superdome, houses threatened by the catastrophic failure of the levee system. It would become one of the five deadliest storms in United States history and the costliest natural disaster on record, with water covering 80 percent of the city. Since New Orleans is home to many historic buildings, museums, and art objects, the cultural heritage community waited anxiously for word regarding the condition of these resources. The unprecedented scale of the storm's destruction became clearer in the days following Hurricane Katrina. Property was damaged, numerous lives were lost, and many of the cultural institutions that defined The Big Easy faced an uncertain future.

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In the immediate aftermath, public safety was clearly the highest priority. But as the days passed, staff at the Getty began to discuss how it could play a part in the recovery of one of the country’s most iconic historic cities. Not long after the disaster, Getty Foundation Director Deborah Marrow spoke to Richard Moe, then-president of the National Trust for Historic Preservation in Washington, DC, a longtime Getty partner.

“The National Trust determined very early that this was not a local tragedy confined to New Orleans and a few other communities, but rather it was a national crisis that commanded our urgent attention and more resources than were locally available,” said Moe recently, reflecting back on the early days after Katrina. “We knew we had to raise considerable funds to marshal a creditable effort and our first thought was of the Getty Foundation because of its years of experience in helping historic communities in various ways and because we needed to enlist a respected institution that we could persuade others to follow.”

That conversation resulted in a grant to the National Trust to establish a field office in New Orleans, the aim of which was to assess damage and convince local officials that hundreds of historic structures “red-tagged” for demolition, including many in the Holy Cross neighborhood of the lower Ninth Ward, could be saved. This initial grant to the National Trust was the starting point for the Fund for New Orleans, a Getty Foundation initiative that eventually awarded \$2.9 million in grants to help the city’s cultural organizations on the difficult road to recovery.

“After the storm and as soon as a few hotels in the city had reopened for business, I asked Joan Weinstein, deputy director of the Foundation, to lead a team of staff members from all four Getty programs to go to New Orleans and talk to leaders of cultural organizations,” said Marrow. “This allowed the Getty to better understand how we might help these institutions recover and safeguard their collections and historic buildings for the future.”

#### Discovery Mission

“None of the media coverage we had seen really prepared us for what we witnessed firsthand when we arrived in New Orleans,” said Weinstein. “Long stretches of rubble more than twenty feet high, with water-soaked furniture, clothing, and children’s toys tossed willy-nilly; houses in low-lying flooded zones marked in front with a large “X” and

listing the number of live and dead bodies found inside; cars in treetops and many roads barely passable. It was heartbreaking.”

As the Getty team traveled to cultural organizations throughout the city to assess the damages and determine ways that they could make a difference through grants, they heard stories of trauma and resilience. At the New Orleans Museum of Art (NOMA), a staff member recounted how she found herself alone at the museum as the waters started to rise; she manned a boat, protecting the collection from possible looters. At Longue Vue House and Gardens, a National Historic Landmark, remediation equipment snaked out of the windows and doors, mitigating the water that had flooded the basement level, which held the mechanical systems that protected the museum’s collections. Other organizations harnessed the healing power of art to commemorate the city’s devastating losses. Less than two months after Katrina, staff at the Ogden Museum of Southern Art organized an exhibition of photographs documenting the first weeks after the storm, providing the community with a place to gather, grieve, and share.

Making their way to cultural organizations across the city during their visit, Getty staff were able to carry news along the route. Most institutions were operating with minimal staff; key personnel had evacuated the city and funds were often scarce to pay those still there. Executive directors struggled to reopen their organizations’ doors, even as they coped with personal loss and displacement. None of them, though, doubted that their organizations—and their beloved city—would come back.

#### Identifying the Needs

No one questioned the challenges of what lay ahead, but Getty staff were compelled to do what they could to help out fellow arts organizations. After the group returned to Los Angeles, two areas were identified where Getty Foundation grants could make a difference: conservation of collections and built heritage damaged in the aftermath of Katrina, and transition planning grants for key museums and cultural institutions.

Urgent conservation work was needed on several collections that had been submerged and exposed to high humidity, such as the collection of African art at Southern University of New Orleans (SUNO). The buildings that housed key collections also suffered water damage, as at Longue Vue House and Gardens and the Tulane University Art

Museum. But there were equally important needs, such as updating conservation and emergency preparedness plans, conducting condition surveys, and identifying technical expertise and facilities for a region that lacked them. Additionally, it was clear that post-Katrina New Orleans was going to be a very different place. The Foundation’s transition planning grants were designed for cultural institutions to have the time and the resources to find thoughtful ways forward, to strengthen senior leadership, and to increase collaboration across a range of arts nonprofits.

The time period immediately after Hurricane Katrina was one of great hardship for all of New Orleans, and although the Fund for New Orleans only represented a small fraction of the enormous cost of the recovery, the Getty grants still had a significant impact. In particular, the early first grant to the National Trust for Historic Preservation helped to signal clearly to the arts and cultural heritage communities in the US that there was an enormous challenge in New Orleans, and that the institutions there needed immediate assistance from the whole country.

#### Key Outcomes

Ten years on, the accomplishments of New Orleans’ arts organizations are impressive. All of the institutions that received Getty grants have survived, and most are thriving. This was not an obvious outcome in the fall of 2005, when many organizations had reduced their staff levels, had lost audiences and donors, and faced compromises to their physical structures and collections at a time when many of their leaders were dealing with the loss of their own homes or other personal tragedies. Now a decade later, virtually every one of the organizations supported by the Foundation has undergone a successful leadership change, and arts and heritage professionals in the city are very positive about the future.

A critical outcome of many Getty grants is the improved safety of important collections. The damaged African collections of the Center for African and African American Studies at SUNO were stabilized and conserved. The project proved to be galvanizing for the small historically black college, and the Center’s collection has tripled in size since 2005, with some works loaned for exhibition outside the city. The fact that the collection has grown by over 300 percent since Katrina is a testament to the faith that others have placed in the Center’s stewardship of their collection. Prior

Opposite, top: Home exterior in the Holy Cross neighborhood of the Lower Ninth Ward

Middle: Mardi Gras beads in the wreckage

Bottom: Dehumidification at Longue Vue House and Gardens in New Orleans following Hurricane Katrina. Photo: Longue Vue House and Gardens

to Katrina, there were no plans or protocols for disaster preparedness for the collection. As a result of the grant, there is now a plan in place.

Similar success has been earned by the New Orleans Jazz and Heritage Foundation. Acting on a recommendation of a grant-funded study, the organization has catalogued and rehoused its archival collections, including moving parts of the collection to climate-controlled, off-site storage. Likewise, the conservation work supported by a grant at the garden at St. Louis Cathedral touched off an extraordinary series of discoveries about the early history of New Orleans, which will be highlighted in an upcoming exhibition at the

Ursuline Convent in 2018. The garden has been restored and a partnership with the National Landscape Institute in Versailles, organized through the French Heritage Society, now brings an intern to the garden every summer.

Another important result of the Fund for New Orleans was the damage assessment and recovery campaign spearheaded by the National Trust. Overall, National Trust staff inspected nearly four hundred properties and ultimately saved close to 150 buildings that had been slated for demolition. The Fund was also transformative for the way the National Trust approached its projects thereafter—focusing all its resources and departments in order to

SUNO Graduate Student Erika Witt holds her favorite mask in the university's African Art Collection in preparation for a 2015 exhibition on campus as part of her graduate degree in Museum Studies. Photo: Master of Arts in Museums Studies Program, Center for African and African American Studies, SUNO



A view of Jackson Square and St. Louis Cathedral in New Orleans, Louisiana. Photo: iStock.com/Spondylolithesis

develop a comprehensive and cohesive preservation strategy.

The recovery effort also gave rise to the successful Prospect New Orleans international art biennial, which began in November 2008, funded in part by a Getty grant (the Foundation joined leading national funders in this effort). Now in preparation of its fifth iteration, the biennial continues to attract leading artists from the international art scene, enhance the city's reputation as a cultural destination, and boost the reputation of key arts organizations in the city.

#### Challenges Remain

Even with these positive outcomes, there is more work to be done. For example, there is still a need for a regional conservation facility to serve the Gulf Coast, as well as additional climate-controlled storage that would help protect collections should another severe storm hit the region. But the

inspired arts leaders in the city, and their dedicated staff, have created one of the most vibrant art scenes in the country, situated in a historic built environment that preserves the city's distinctive mix of cultures.

In the immediate aftermath of Katrina, it was not clear that many of the cultural institutions in the city would endure. The Getty Foundation's support in the earliest transition stages contributed to the ability of arts organizations in New Orleans to rebound and contemplate a future. The outcomes demonstrate that relatively small grants in the face of a disaster of this hurricane's magnitude, if well designed and executed, can make a difference.

For a complete list of Fund for New Orleans grants and to read the summary report, visit the Foundation's website at [getty.edu/foundation](http://getty.edu/foundation).