



VANISHING PLAYGROUNDS
losing land and libraries in New Orleans

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Mockingbird2K
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(photo by Darin Acosta)

BAD SPORT:

a golf course vs. nature's course in City Park

by ANDRU OKUN

THE NOTION THAT THE INDIGENT CAN MOVE UP IN CLASS BY SIMPLY MODELING THE BEHAVIOR OF THE PRIVILEGED IS A CANARD

At a groundbreaking ceremony this past February in City Park, shovels dug into earth that the wildlife of Southeast Louisiana had been steadily reclaiming for nearly a decade. Public officials swinging golf clubs provided photo ops, marking the start of construction on a \$24.5 million golf course on 250 acres of public land. Following the flood of 2005, the area had served as a beloved nature preserve for the city of New

Orleans. The erection of a construction fence around the vast swath of land has led to outcry from city residents and last-ditch efforts to save something that will not be easily retrieved once it's lost.

In spite of continued protests, construction hasn't halted. At a City Park Board of Commissioners meeting this past March, Bob Becker, City Park's CEO, opened the session by

stating that the contractors working on construction of the park's new golf course were on schedule. He also mentioned that Lloyd Boover—a New Orleans activist who had been protesting the project by sitting for twelve straight days in a tree positioned in the course's construction zone—had fallen from his perch and was at University Hospital. As the meeting was taking place and concerned citizens waited to voice their objections to the destruction happening in their public park, the large cypress tree Boover had occupied was razed.

City Park already has a 5,740 yard, 18 hole golf course. There are a number of reasons for New Orleanians to be upset about the development of a second course. Environmental damage in a region already extraordinarily susceptible to harm is unsettling; that this damage is intentional makes matters that much worse. New Orleans City Park Improvement Association (NOCPIA) is the organization responsible for approving the park's master plan. Requests to NOCPIA's Board of Commissioners to reconsider their decision have been met with indifference. In spite of the Board's claims of transparency in their operations, many feel ignored. Some question the prudence of moving

forward on a project marked with evident intimations of failure; others assert that the operation is illegal. All told, what those in opposition to the golf course are rallying against isn't the sport of golf but rather a defective case of systematic post-disaster restructuring.

The plans for a golf course slated for the green space north of I-610 are incontrovertibly linked to the elimination of public housing in New Orleans. A post-Katrina non-profit called the Bayou District Foundation (BDF) has been directly involved in the redevelopment of both. It's not a coincidence that Columbia Parc, the privately owned mixed-income development sitting on the footprint of the St. Bernard projects, is only four blocks from Wisner Boulevard, the road bordering the two-mile strip of the eastern perimeter of City Park. Between Wisner Boulevard, Filmore Avenue, Harrison Avenue, and Marconi Drive is where the golf course in the contested wilds of City Park is planned. The same organization responsible for Columbia Parc is designated to operate and manage this as-of-yet unbuilt course.

One of BDF's Honorary Chairmen is George H.W. Bush. The other is Tom Cousins, a retired real estate developer from Atlanta. While Bush lends a right-



photo by Adrienne Battistella

wing prestige to BDF, Cousins—founder of the East Lake Foundation (ELF)—provides a model: replace public housing with mixed-income residences and build a golf course next to it.

To better understand the situation in New Orleans, it would help to look at what happened in Atlanta. In 1993, ELF purchased a derelict golf course 4.5 miles east of downtown Atlanta for \$4.5 million. In 1995, the public housing known as East Lake, which sat next to the 177 acres of golf course, was demolished and replaced with mixed-income housing developed by the same organization. East Lake's public housing was essentially redeveloped by ELF into a country club community.

The book *House by House, Block by Block: The Rebirth of America's Urban Neighborhoods* (published in 2004 by Oxford University Press) has a chapter dedicated to the surge of development seen in Atlanta leading up to the 1996 Summer Olympics. ELF is described as having a “mission to assimilate poor to middle-class behavior patterns.” Similarly, in a 2010 *Baltimore Sun* article titled “A mixed-income miracle,” Cousins’ East Lake development was described as having half the units reserved “for middle-income families, the other half for poor, government-subsidized families. The idea being that middle-income people would, just in their daily doings, model for their neighbors the habits of a successful life.”

The notion that the indigent can move up in class by simply modeling the behavior of the privileged is a canard. Equally disingenuous is the concept of class as a social status that is commonly earned rather than prescribed. The claim of a mixed-income development like East Lake is that dismantling public housing solves the problems associated with inner-city poverty. Whether we talk about a development like East Lake as a success or failure, its basic premise was to push poor people out and allow wealthier people to take

their place. Gentrification via golf.

Purpose Built Communities, a consulting group with the specific goal of replicating the East Lake model elsewhere, was formed in 2009. Among their list of advisees is New Orleans’ own Gerard Barousse Jr., Bayou District Foundation’s Chairman of the Board. Aside from being on the Board of Directors at Fidelity Bank, Barousse is president of two local real estate companies, RCB Developers and Monarch Real Estate. Additionally, he loves golf. A *Golf Digest* article from last year featured Barousse in a list of “amateur golfers who care about more than their score,” a direct reference to BDF’s partnership with the state and federal government in the development of New Orleans’ own version of East Lake.

In 2006, two years prior to the high-profile demolition of public housing in New Orleans, an article in *The Atlanta Journal-Constitution* stated that Charlie Yates had suggested the idea of turning the storm-ravaged land previously home to portions of the former East and West courses of City Park into a championship golf course. Charlie Yates’ father, of the same name, was an Atlanta-based businessman credited as having influenced Tom Cousins’ development project. The 9 hole golf course at East Lake, The Charlie Yates Golf Course, is named in his honor. The junior Yates’ interest in seeing a championship golf course in City Park was most likely related to his being the executive vice president of Zurich Insurance Group, the title sponsor of the PGA tour event at the TPC Louisiana golf course in suburban Avondale. TPC’s contract with the PGA expires in 2019, at which point it would then be available to the golf course planned for City Park.

On August 27, 2007, exactly two years after former Mayor Ray Nagin announced a state of emergency and called for a voluntary evacuation



photo by Joshua Brusted

in New Orleans, BDF was officially organized as a Louisiana non-profit. In February 2008, the St. Bernard Public Housing Development was demolished. That following summer, City Planning approved plans for Columbia Parc, a new mixed-income development created by BDF in the 52-acre footprint of what was the city’s largest public housing complex. New Orleans City Council approved the plans with a unanimous vote of 7-0. At the groundbreaking ceremony in December of that same year, Nagin asked the crowd, “Are we here for a celebration or what?”

Examining the operations of BDF raises the question of who gets to decide what community redevelopment actually looks like. Darwin BondGraham, in his essay “Building the New New Orleans: Foundation and NGO Power” (published January 2011 in *The Review of Black Political Economy*), writes “The history of foundations is rooted in elite attempts at charity, reform, and perhaps most importantly, social control.” BDF’s campaign of neighborhood

transformation extends beyond Columbia Parc. The Orleans Parish Assessor’s Office lists the organization as the owner of seven different residential addresses, all within no more than a half-mile of Columbia Parc. BDF is a perfect example of a Machiavellian non-profit. Their Board of Directors features one person of color; the other six members are hyper-wealthy white men redeveloping a predominately black New Orleans neighborhood in accordance with their own vision—an opportunistic post-Katrina land grab where the overseeing organization is allowed to consider the concerns of the public at their own discretion. BDF’s procurement of property allows them to further their agenda as self-appointed urban planners with a “blank slate” approach to a city reeling from disaster. In analyzing the conversion of the St. Bernard neighborhood into the Bayou District, BondGraham writes, “Like other black neighborhoods redeveloped in this manner, the area’s history and sense of collective identity has been wiped out by the sheer displacement of families and the subsequent re-naming



photo by Adrienne Battistella

of neighborhoods.”

The stated intent behind restoring the South Course in City Park is to create additional funds for the public park while also generating a revenue stream for BDF. The 7,500 yard course design cost \$300,000 and was paid for by BDF. The design itself is attributed to Rees Jones, the same firm that worked with the East Lake Foundation. City Park coffers alone can't produce the \$24.5 million needed to create the proposed PGA-caliber course. With the state footing \$9.5 million and FEMA \$6 million, BDF will contribute \$8.9 million, securing a 35 year contract with City Park. NOLA.com reported that City Park and BDF will split the revenue, with 75 percent of the first \$1.15 million each year going to the park. After that number is reached, BDF's take will be raised to 45 percent.

The argument that golf has historically contributed revenue to the park fails to account for City Park's contemporary financial losses from the sport. The most recent financial statements from NOCPA show that revenues from golf operations had decreased by approximately \$294,000 in 2013. To put that number into perspective, that's over a quarter of the park's \$1.1 million in operating expenses for golf that year. The park's profits from golf operations in 2013 were \$179,724. That same year's profits for "catering, restaurant, and gift shop" were \$893,601; recreational service and events generated a profit of over \$2.1 million. Evaluating City Park's

ONE OF THE BEAUTIFUL ASPECTS OF WHERE THE GOLF COURSE FOR CITY PARK IS PLANNED IS THAT, UP UNTIL RECENTLY, THE AREA HAS HAD THE ADVANTAGE OF DEVELOPING ITSELF

profits generated from golf versus other revenue sources reveal that the sport makes a relatively minor amount of money for the park.

Golf's popularity has been diminishing for a decade. Throughout the country, golf courses are closing. An increasing number of people have left the sport, a disconcerting reality considering John Hopper, City Park's Chief Development Officer and Public Affairs Director, informed me that the park intends to fund golf operations, "primarily by the golfers who play the course."

Statistically, a new golf course is a fool's bet. New Orleans' own golf revenue patterns confirm this. In Uptown New Orleans, Audubon Park Golf Course reopened in late 2002 after a \$6 million renovation. Since reopening, the course has failed to turn a profit. Golf operations have consistently posted six-digit revenue losses from 2003 to 2012, according to the Audubon Commission Combining Statement of Revenues and Expenses for 1995-2012.

Eight of those years have seen losses above \$400,000. These falling revenue numbers are consistent with national trends. A recent article in *Urban Land Magazine* titled "Golf: No Longer a Hole in One" cites findings from the National Golf Foundation (NGF) that "2013 was the eighth-consecutive year that golf course closures outpaced openings, with 158 closures and 14 openings. The foundation also reports that there had been an estimated drop of 600,000 golfers compared with the year before, reflecting a continuing decline in golfing since 2006."

Elsewhere in Louisiana, the parks commission of East Baton Rouge Parish was advised last year by the NGF to close two golf courses and convert them into parks. The concept of converting a golf course into a park isn't unprecedented. Oregon, California, Nevada, Ohio, New Jersey, and Florida have all displayed responsible and informed urban planning in repurposing former courses into public parks. Turning a golf course

into a park has the remarkable ability to free up space for an innumerable amount of purposes on a large area of land formerly used for only one. One of the beautiful aspects of where the golf course for City Park is planned is that, up until recently, the area has had the advantage of developing itself since 2005 with minimal interference, allowing the frequent visitors of the area to enjoy the actual historic function of the land: nature.

So why build a golf course? While there is readily available empirical data to support that turning 250 acres of regularly utilized, multi-purpose public land into a championship golf course is an ill-advised decision, there is little evidence to suggest the reverse. A recent statement released by City Park in response to public opposition maintains, "To fully utilize the funds from FEMA, they must be spent on the golf course." Asked to explain why funds must be spent on golf rather than on the creation of a nature preserve or other type of park amenity, Hopper reported, "FEMA makes the rules. To spend money on something other than that which was damaged (in this case a golf course) we would have to take a reduction in funding. Since our plans have always been to rebuild the golf course, we wanted to utilize all the funds FEMA was making available." Asked to provide a number for the reduction in funding were the money to be spent on something other than a golf course, Hopper declined to provide an answer.

City Park has had a tremendous amount of recovery to contend with since its devastation in 2005. In the words of City Park CEO Becker, Hurricane Katrina and the federal levee failures “annihilated the park.” The park was the last area of the city to be pumped by the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers and saw over \$40 million in damages. Only 15 percent of the park’s revenue comes from taxes. The other 85 percent is raised by the park itself. Prior to the flood, City Park created a master plan requiring \$115 million in raised funds. After damages, that number was upped to \$150 million. City Park’s unfortunate funding model coupled with the renovation price tag has resulted in the park directing much of its energy into the development of revenue-generating facilities.

The park’s current master plan was developed in 2005 with extensive input from the public. The process included a telephone survey, an online survey through a redeveloped master plan website, and two well-attended public meetings. One of the needs expressed by the community and listed in the master plan is “to increase the amount of undeveloped space available to the public.” By re-categorizing areas of the park—e.g., the tennis courts, the frisbee golf course, and the waste dump—in the master plan as “open areas,” the plan boasts an addition of 184 acres of “open space.” If the dubious categorization of “open areas” is changed to a more fitting category such as “active and passive recreation uses,” City Park’s 2018 master plan actually outlines a

reduction of open space in the park. The present day construction of the 18-hole golf course contradicts the demand for undeveloped space and serves as proof of City Park’s lack of concern for the public input they themselves collected.

An even more egregious display of willful disregard is the destruction of 5.5 acres of Couturie Forest. In an area listed in City Park’s master plan as a “natural resource area,” a portion of undeveloped canopied forest has been flattened. This area was not part of the former golf course. In one of the four proposed actions listed in FEMA’s Draft Environmental Assessment from May 2013, the document calls for the golf course to be built in “essentially the same location.” This type of imprecise language has resulted in a grave loss. While City Park claims to be building a golf course in the footprint of the course that came before it, this just isn’t true.

One of the few outspoken advocates of the course has been Chip Patterson, executive director of The First Tee of Greater New Orleans, a non-profit organization and part of a nationwide network initiated by the World Golf Foundation. In an open letter defending the course (featured on Noladefender.com), Patterson writes, “The First Tee of Greater New Orleans will be introducing over 35,000 youth participants to the inherent life skills, core values and healthy habits associated with the game of golf.” At a NOCPIA Board of Commissioners meeting last March, Patterson was

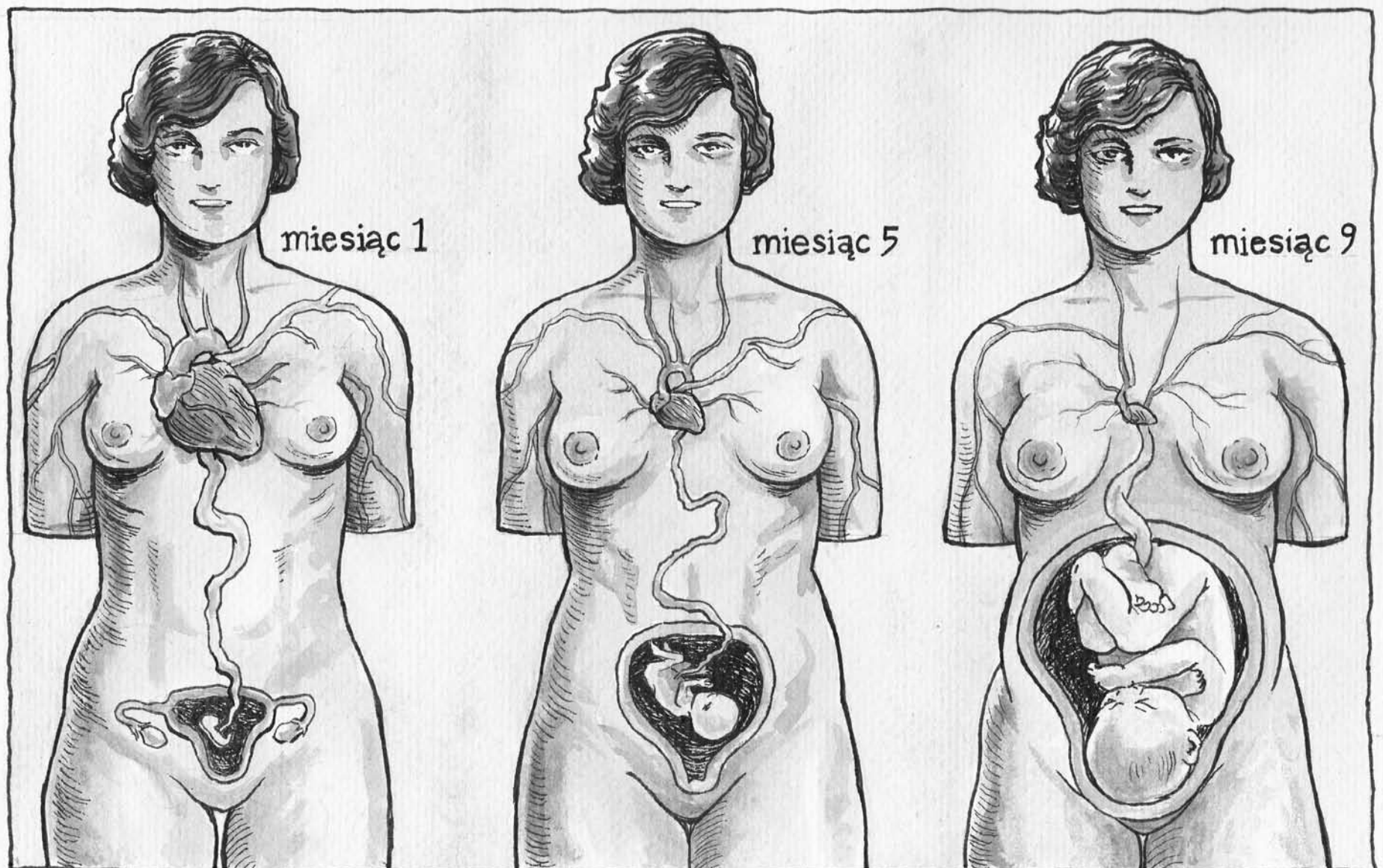
one of two individuals to express his endorsement of the course. What Patterson failed to reveal in his repeated promotion of the course is that The First Tee of Greater New Orleans receives funding from the organization building the course, BDF. ACME Oyster House is also among First Tee’s list of sponsors, a business owned by Mike Rodrigue, a member of BDF’s Board of Directors. Patterson’s advocacy for golf in City Park is directly related to the fact that the organization building the course also provides funds to the organization of which he’s executive director.

The pleas to reverse the decision to supplant uninhibited nature with a manicured lawn have been ignored by NOCPIA. Connections between NOCPIA Board members and BDF indicate this is unlikely to change. At the very least, several NOCPIA Board members have indirect affiliations with the private organization involved in building the course, suggesting Board members’ vested interests in ignoring the general public. Paul Masinter is listed on City’s Park Board of Commissioners. On a charity crowdfunding page for BDF’s CEO, the name “Mr. Paul Masinter” is registered as having contributed \$250,000, suggesting that Masinter and Barousse are at least acquaintances. Edmund Schrenk, NOCPIA Board member and president of the consulting engineer group Schrenk and Peterson, features on his business’ online project photo gallery McDonogh 35 High School. This school is expected to open in August

in the Bayou District neighborhood and is highlighted on BDF’s website. Additionally, NOCPIA Board member Leigh M. Thorpe’s LinkedIn page lists her as Director of Development for BDF from January 2011–October 2012.

In writing this article, an attempt to contact J.T. Hannan, BDF’s Director of Public and Governmental Affairs, was made. The reply received was, “BDF does not have a comment at this time.” As a private organization, BDF evades accountability, operating with an unchecked authority and an air of inaccessibility. The organization’s credo of development entails expropriating land while shrugging off the public from whom they’ve taken it.

The arguments against the golf course are substantiated by serious transgressions. Appeals to stop development of the course are a collective attempt to retain that which is precious and irreplaceable. The past ten years created an unadulterated and wondrous landscape in City Park; to turn the area over to golf will be to regress. But ultimately, this golf course will be provisional. Nature always wins.



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