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Dissecting the 'Heart of Orange'

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ORANGE



Juan Arredondo for The New York Times

HERE'S WHAT THE CITY NEEDS

Michel Cantal-Dupart, a French planner, was invited to Orange by a group called Hands.



Aaron Houston for The New York Times

Hands remakes houses like this one, in Newark.

A GLOBAL economic crisis provides the perfect opportunity to rethink the design of an old city — be it Paris or Orange — said a French urbanist who has been engaged in doing that recently, both there and here.

“Cities have this time to consider intelligently what they are going to be in the future,” said the urbanist, Michel Cantal-Dupart, through an interpreter, as he conducted a walking tour on a rainy day in early April along the streets of Orange’s mostly dreary downtown section. “Then, when things improve,” he said, “the cities will know what to do.”

Mr. Cantal-Dupart received energetic nods of agreement from a group of Orange residents, planners and students who accompanied him as part of a conference on reinventing the “heart of Orange.” Among those taking part was Valerie Jackson, the city’s director of planning and economic development.

Mr. Cantal-Dupart recently served on a team of architects and planners commissioned by the French government to re-envision the master plan for Paris, which at the age of 2,000 faces special challenges in becoming a “sustainable” city of the future. The team’s proposals were unveiled in March.

This month, he was asked to help to do something similar for 200-year-old Orange, at the behest of a nonprofit development corporation called Hands Inc. Harnessing federal, state and private grant money to rebuild troubled neighborhoods in Essex County, the group has been based here since the early 1980s.

Until now, it has relied mostly on a strategy of “finding the worst houses on the block, and turning them around one by one,” said Patrick Morrissy, the group’s executive director.

In fact, several days before the activity in Orange, Hands expanded on its primary strategy with the announcement of a nonprofit alliance to buy 47 abandoned and neglected houses in Essex County — all foreclosure properties owned by the former [Washington Mutual](#) Bank.

The houses are in Orange, West Orange, Newark and Irvington, all communities hit especially hard by foreclosures.

“We have to keep up this critical work,” Mr. Morrissy said, “because the current crisis is threatening the impact of all we have done in the last 25 years.”

The downturn is also delaying — if not threatening — the success of several community redevelopment projects that Hands (an acronym for Housing and Neighborhood Development Services) has initiated with the approval of city officials. The projects include the conversion of several vacant factories into housing, and the establishment of an arts district within walking distance of downtown Orange.

“You’ve got to open a city up and bind it together,” Mr. Cantal-Dupart said as he stood with Ms. Jackson of the city’s planning and economic development office in the parking lot of the Orange train station, which is only one block off Main Street yet seemingly isolated from it.

“Look what you see here when you get off the train,” he said. “You are in a ‘box’, looking at cars, and viewing the backs of some boring buildings, and you have no idea where Main Street is, because it is cut off from view.”

Mr. Cantal-Dupart proposed that a parking deck be built near the station, thereby freeing the parking lot for use as a plaza with a performance stage, quick-service carts, public art, and visual cues pointing the way toward shops and restaurants.

“As soon as tomorrow,” Mr. Cantal-Dupart said, local musicians looking for a showcase could be encouraged to see the parking lot as performance space, particularly on weekends when there are fewer cars parked in it.

More broadly, though — as a first, easy step in a somewhat forbidding economic climate — Mr. Cantal-Dupart suggested putting up large and cheerful signs welcoming people to Orange and making a feature of its history. He followed that with a series of low-cost ideas to change the ambience without having to depend on financing to become available for reconstruction work:

- He urged city planners to summon the spirit of [Thomas Edison](#), who invented the phonograph in his laboratory in nearby West Orange, by broadcasting music in the streets, in addition to using the train station parking lot and the steps of the public library on Main Street as live performance venues.

- Noting the few trees in the planters along Main Street, he said: “This is the Garden State. There are not enough trees to reflect your history.”

- Gazing at shop windows covered with placards and stickers, he called for a cleanup, followed by a competition to provide art for Main Street windows.

Mr. Cantal-Dupart pointed out that the city had been “scarred” twice across its middle by its railroad line and Interstate 280, creating a sort of dead zone where the “beating heart” should be.

He suggested installing colored lights along the underside of the pedestrian bridges over the highway to give those crossing over them a more pleasant experience, and also to provide Orange with a recognizable signature for

those driving under them. The same thing could be done to illuminate the pedestrian bridges under the elevated sections of the rail lines, he said.

As for any other redevelopment plans, the architect said, they should adhere strictly to the principle of “openness.”

Stopping on the group tour at Monte Irvin County Park, some blocks south of the tracks, Mr. Cantal-Dupart and Ms. Jackson discussed how fencing on three sides had helped foster “racial and social segregation.”

“We have an enormous responsibility to understand the evil of segregation by architecture,” said Mr. Cantal-Dupart, whose remarks were translated by his friend Robert Fullilove, a professor of public health at [Columbia University](#). (His wife, Mindy, a fellow professor who has written several books about segregation and its causes and effects in cities, was another participant.)

“Closing things off kills a city,” Mr. Cantal-Dupart declared. “It leads to ghettos and crime, and then we have to spend money to combat problems.”