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Architects Ponder Rebuilding of Biloxi

By [ROBIN POGREBIN](#)

BILOXI, Miss., Oct. 14 - It's like the Three Little Pigs fable, said Stefanos Polyzoides, an architect from Pasadena, Calif. If you rebuild hurricane-flattened houses out of brick, they will have a better chance of withstanding any repeat of the 30-foot surges that churned this city into what looks like a war zone today. But brick is expensive. And it does not necessarily reflect the wood-porch aesthetic that Gulf Coast residents so treasure.

This and other questions of form and function - from how many stories houses should have to how far casinos should penetrate the downtown - were debated during a daylong tour of Biloxi by a group of architects and planners as part of a rebuilding forum this week in the wake of Hurricane Katrina.

The remainder of the some 200 professionals who gathered here, including regional planning and environmental teams, went off to survey other coastal areas - Ocean Springs and Pascagoula to the east and Gulfport, Long Beach, Pass Christian and Bay St. Louis toward New Orleans and the west.

Armed with box lunches, the Biloxi troupe boarded a bus in the morning. First stop: City Hall. "We need to get housing back, businesses open, people working," Mayor A. J. Holloway of Biloxi said.

Asked what he imagined would emerge from the forum, Mr. Holloway said: "I hope some good ideas. Because I've got a lot of problems."

George Lawrence, the councilman for the First Ward, asked the group to keep the waterfront needs of the shrimping industry in mind. Leland Speed, of the [Mississippi](#) Development Authority, said there was tremendous time pressure to avoid haphazard real estate development and speculation. "We've got to do this fast, before other plans are gelled," he said. "The two big things we need on the Mississippi Coast are housing and hope."

The mayor joined the tour for the duration of the day. He led it through the downtown area, with stops at the damaged town green, where the city's Mardi Gras parade concludes; historic tourist sites like the flooded Magnolia Hotel and Mary Mahoney's Old French House restaurant, now a shell, though an ancient live oak nearby survived.

Mr. Polyzoides said the downtown's proximity to the waterfront hotel strip presented a significant opportunity. The city should move away from "vast, dead buildings" like the federal courthouse, the architect said, and bring in a variety of retail "to make active ground floors."

"Main Street needs to be ripped out and recast as a serious walkable main street," he added. "There's so little left."

Next, the group drove to Eagle Point in the Woolmarket area, north of downtown, where wealthy homes lining the Biloxi River are now mere skeletons. A couple of pleasure boats were visible, tossed high on a nearby hill. "I venture to say everyone will build back here," the mayor said.

The neighborhood clearly illustrates a post-hurricane puzzle: Should houses be built three stories high so water can rush through a ground floor devoted to storage and garage space? It's an unusual height for a single-family home, said Elizabeth Moule, Mr. Polyzoides's wife and business partner. It could result in "mansionizing everything in the area," she said.

Mr. Polyzoides, who said Woolmarket suffered from "old-fashioned sprawl," speculated about creating more density as both a protective and revitalizing measure. "I wonder what would happen if you had an Italian or French village here, with 400 homes close together," he said. But owners of one- to three-acre plots tend to resist living close together, he added; they want independence and privacy. For their part, developers prefer selling larger tracts at a time.

The group also visited a school; Keesler Air Force Base, to the north on the bay side; Beach Boulevard, or Route 90, the coastal highway that is now an eerie strip of devastated casino hotels; and Howard Avenue, a poor area a block or two north of Beach Boulevard, where the houses now look like heartbreaking piles of pickup sticks.

After a break for dinner, the Biloxi group met to confer. "The big question is, What do we do?," Ms. Moule said. "We need to establish what we're going to work on."

Over the next two and a half hours, the participants grappled with priorities: neighborhood rezoning, downtown, museums and culture, casinos, beachfront, road system, building codes, transit development.

They knew they could not do it all, but it was hard not to try. The topics addressed were literally all over the Biloxi map. David J. Hardy, of Guild Hardy Architects in Biloxi, said the emphasis should be on low-income housing: "Howard Avenue, Howard Avenue," he said.

Ms. Moule said the group should try to figure out how to make the Air Force base a more integrated part of the city. "I say we treat Keesler like a campus - we make a town-gown relationship to Keesler," she said. "We need to think about a concentrated retail area where these people walk off the base and start to spend some of their dollars out in the town, and we take that economic energy. I think that's a huge opportunity."

Walter Bolton, a Biloxi architect, countered that people who work on the base don't have that much money to spend.

The talk turned to how to transform the beachfront strip into something closer to the French Riviera and whether to establish a stronger north-south artery connecting Biloxi to Interstate 10 to the north.

As the planners scribbled on large maps spread out on tables, envisioning bright casinos, quaint homes, charming streets - a vibrant and healthy city - it was almost possible to forget the eviscerated landscape they had traveled through all day.

But Mr. Polyzoides said he was still trying to adjust to what his eyes had taken in. "I haven't seen destruction like this my entire life," he said. "The nature of this devastation is completely overwhelming. It's a tremendous task to bring back neighborhoods. They need to be brought back one building at a time."