

Drafting History

Renowned Lafayette architect Steve Oubre joins the Louisiana Recovery Authority to help design a master plan for rebuilding Louisiana.

By [Mary Tutwiler](#) | 1/18/2006

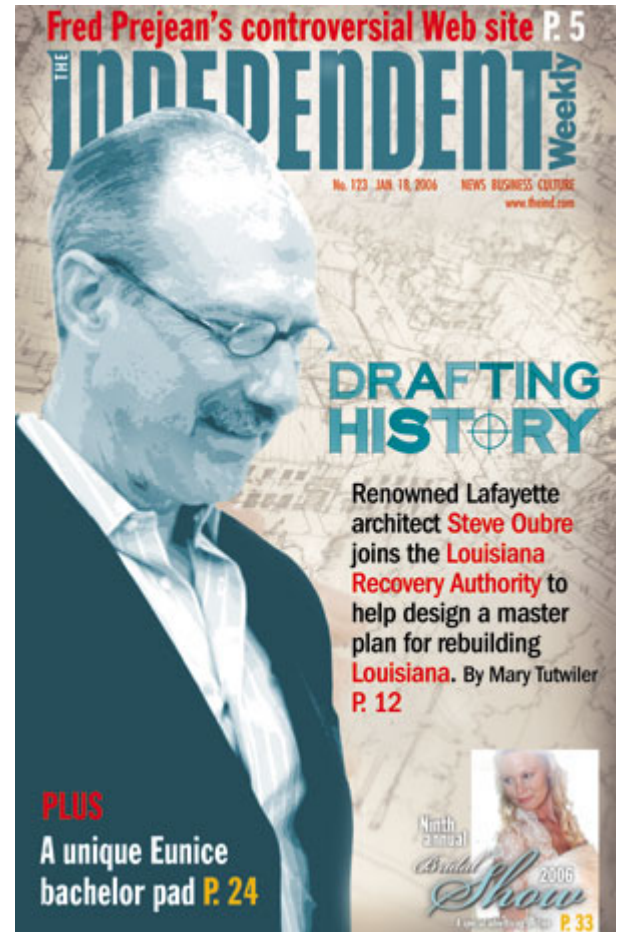


Photo by Terri Fensel



Steve Oubre designs in the early morning hours before meetings take over his day.

Photo by Terri Fensel

The port town of Cameron, with its rusting trawlers and honky-tonk bars, has always felt like the end of the earth — and that was before hurricane Rita knocked the town off its feet. While the magnitude of the devastation has hampered much of Cameron and Louisiana’s rebuilding efforts, the crisis has ignited the imagination of Lafayette architect and urban planner Steve Oubre. Sitting in his office downtown on Jefferson Street, Oubre is turning grief into a new vision for Louisiana. “The wonderful thing about Cameron, and it’s hard to say this,” he says, wincing, “is we now have a clean slate to create something special. Cameron is a phenomenal opportunity.”



Oubre drawing of a town center streetscape slated as part of a Traditional Neighborhood Development in Biloxi, Ms.

Illustration courtesy of Architects Southwest

Oubre is the only Louisiana architect to date chosen to serve on the Louisiana Recovery Authority, as part of the architectural team charged with creating a physical plan for the rebuilding of the Louisiana Gulf Coast. Gov. Kathleen Blanco created the LRA last Oct. 17 as the lead agency for the state’s rebuilding effort. The agency’s mission is to speak with a unified voice that will overcome parochial politics and turf wars. Areas of focus include housing, jobs, health care, education and transportation. One of the first steps is to generate a long-term recovery plan.

“To have a sustained recovery, you need a great plan,” says Elizabeth Thomas, president of the Center for Planning Excellence, the Baton Rouge organization that has privately raised millions for planning and urban development in the Capital City, including projects such as PLAN Baton Rouge, The Manship Theatre and the Shaw Center for the Arts. When the Louisiana Recovery Authority asked Thomas for help in creating a long range planning process, the Center for Planning Excellence set a \$15 million dollar goal dedicated to hiring the best planners in the United States.

Peter Calthorpe, a new urbanist planner from San Francisco, has been chosen as the leader of the Louisiana Recovery Authority planning process. Calthorpe teamed up with Urban Design Associates from Pittsburgh and Andrés Duany, the foremost proponent of New Urbanism in the country. Duany in turn tapped Oubre, who has been the leading voice for New Urbanism in southwest Louisiana.

The mission is familiar territory for Oubre; he’s already made his mark on Acadiana’s aesthetics and future growth. Oubre and his firm, Architects Southwest, remodeled UL Lafayette’s Dupre library, redesigned Lafayette Natural History Museum and Planetarium’s downtown building, built Vermilionville and created Lafayette’s most high-profile development, River Ranch. The 325-acre Traditional Neighborhood Development is based on New Urbanism, the innovative planning model touted as the way of the future. Since the River Ranch TND broke ground in 1998, it has received a great deal of praise and attention from outside developers and city planners and paved the way for similar local and national developments.

Thomas says having Oubre on the planning commission is integral to the Louisiana rebuilding effort. “I think Steve’s work has been a lighthouse for those that believe in smart growth principles. We can take people and show them what a well-designed development can achieve for communities. What he’s done illustrates the livability of good planning.”

A Loreauville native and USL architecture school graduate, the 52-year-old Oubre has been working in Lafayette for most of his career. After a short stint in Houston at Page Southerland Page Architects, and a year with Perry Segura’s firm in New Iberia, he began working for Lafayette community developer Dale Meaux in 1977. The following year, he became a partner in what would become Architects Southwest.

In 1983, the firm was hired to build Le Triomphe, the golf course and conventional gated community outside of Broussard. During the course of its design, Oubre attended a very unconventional architecture seminar in San Antonio conducted by Andrés Duany.

Duany and his partner, Elizabeth Plater-Zyberk, own DPZ, the Miami architecture and urban planning firm famous for its planned village of Seaside, Fla. Duany calls conventional subdivisions a misguided planning model that created urban sprawl, and he and his firm are the leading advocates of New Urbanism in the United States. Where older cities with their mixed-use neighborhoods and through streets supplied everything residents needed usually within walking or public transportation distance, residents of new cul-de-sac subdivisions that sprang up post-World War II are dependent on automobiles for transportation to work, school, shopping,

entertainment and all of the amenities zoned out of the residential subdivisions. Feeder roads from subdivisions into cities became jammed with cars, strip malls sprang up to support subdivisions, and city centers lost their vitality.

Duany seeks to create new developments that emulate the great places of the world. Modeling his designs on traditional forms from New England's town squares to the rich complexity of European cities based on civic interaction, Duany designs physical places imbued with public space, which he maintains promote a high quality of life.

Oubre was energized when he heard Duany speak. "I was just floored," remembers Oubre. "I had studied Seaside in school, but it was the only New Urbanist project in the country that was following [Duany's] theories. Oubre pitched the concept to the Le Triomphe developers, who weren't interested.

The next project he tackled was Vermilionville, a replica of an Acadian village, which is where he learned to love historic buildings. "Up to that point our whole design philosophy was modernist," he says. "Vermilionville was a project that was so much fun because it allowed us for the first time to create and design traditional architecture that had roots in where the Acadians came from."

Two years later, in 1992, he got a call from oilman Bill Doré and his wife Kay, who owned a 100-acre tract south of Lafayette along the Vermilion River. They were interested in developing the land, and Kay, who had grown up in the historic neighborhood of old Algiers in New Orleans, expressed her nostalgia for the "small town inside the big city."

"It was the first time I met Steve," she remembers. "He was a bright young architect various people had heard good things about. He came in with all this enthusiasm. He elicited from me just exactly what I would have loved, even though I didn't know it."

In Kay Doré's vision, Oubre saw the opportunity to build a TND. He told her she should hire Duany, but Doré insisted that Oubre run the project and suggested that he hire Duany as a consultant.

Oubre was daunted by the prospect but gave it a shot. "I called Duany's office, and for six weeks he never returned the call," says Oubre. "Finally, Duany calls me and invites me to a summer course at Harvard." Oubre ultimately persuaded Duany and Elizabeth Plater-Zyberk to look at the Doré property. They were enthusiastic about the development and conducted a day-long planning conference, taking in ideas from the community in order to create an indigenous design. "We were going to have the corner grocery store," Kay says of the development, dubbed New Village. "Neighborhood playgrounds. We were actually going to have an artist's row, where artists would live in little lofts above their shops downstairs. It would have been similar to River Ranch."

"It was so well received in the community," Oubre says. "It was the highlight of my career up until then. I knew intuitively it was what I wanted to do."

Shortly after the presentation, the Dorés divorced, and the project was scrapped. "I was devastated," Oubre says.

But the seed was planted, and Oubre was on a mission to bring the first TND to Lafayette. He started making pitches to developers, and talked to real estate attorney Robert Daigle, one of his clients. Daigle was representing the Dugas family in a lawsuit against the city of Lafayette. "This was my first connection with the property that was to become River Ranch," Daigle says. The family owned a large tract of land they were trying to build on, but the city would not approve any development that did not accommodate the Camellia Boulevard corridor. "Kenny Bowen was mayor; he was at war with the council, and the council voted not to build the Camellia bridge. The property was being held hostage," Daigle says.

While the lawsuit was ongoing in 1994, Oubre attempted to persuade Daigle that a TND would be a great plan for the Dugas site. "I told him we could do something sensitive and really nice. Robert said, 'This isn't going to happen.'" But Oubre and Daigle met regularly for lunch, with Oubre obsessing over his newfound passion. Daigle also had an interest in architecture and urban design, and noticed residents in smart growth communities walking regularly and spending time meeting and talking to their neighbors. "I felt like our culture, where people are very friendly, was right for this kind of development. And sophisticated enough," Daigle says.

Once Walter Comeaux was elected, the parties settled the lawsuit and the family started looking for a developer. Daigle brought in B.I. Moody and Billy Trotter and asked Oubre to present his idea. Financial backers Moody, Trotter and Rocky Robin were interested, but cautious. But the partnership almost didn't get off the ground when Daigle brought in Tom Becnel. Years earlier, Architects Southwest had an assignment from the city of Lafayette to choose a site for the public safety building. Becnel submitted a building,

which was rejected. When Becnel became a member of the Dugas development board, he took personal issue with Oubre and fired Architects Southwest from the River Ranch project.

Daigle brought in another architecture firm but couldn't get the plans past the Lafayette Planning Commission or City Council. Daigle called Oubre back and asked if he could put aside any hard feelings and would still be interested.

Oubre jumped at the chance, and within six weeks his plan for River Ranch was approved. They broke ground in January 1998.

It was a significant gamble for developer Daigle. "No smart growth community had been developed in the state," he says. "Putting a brand new product out on the market was a huge risk." Planned communities require tremendous up-front investments into the public spaces that don't pay immediate returns, and Daigle and Oubre ran into a lot of opposition.

"We were proposing things that were all philosophical," says Oubre. "The idea of mixing uses, which we had all these variances to do, and the idea of building small lots hadn't been done here," he says. "Townhouses were failures in the '80s, mixing uses was the downtown methodology, which was the dead downtown and nobody would ever do that. The bankers were saying we won't finance townhouses. Realtors were saying we can't sell them. Robert said we're going to try them, and right out of the chute the first six townhouses sold. It started adding credibility to the concept, and then the little lots were all gone."

River Ranch was one of the first TNDs built in the country and has been the model developers visit when they consider an alternative to a conventional subdivision. "There's not a week that goes by that we don't get a call. There's not a month that goes by that we don't meet with a client about a new TND," Oubre says. "We've had 50 people come to River Ranch to look at it, and we've landed 25 of them as clients." All told, Architects Southwest has 22 TNDs in some form of planning or development. Sugar Mill Pond in Youngsville, which Oubre is building with Daigle, will be quadruple the size of River Ranch.

And more importantly, the development will offer homes at a much lower price than River Ranch. In keeping with New Urbanist philosophy, a healthy community is composed of mixed socio-economic development — commercial and residential, large and small houses, upstairs apartments over retail shops, open squares and public parks — allowing people with varied incomes to experience the same quality of life.

There are six more TNDs under way in Louisiana (including developer Ed Lamb's Olde Towne at Mill Creek in Lafayette), and others span Texas, Arkansas, Mississippi and Alabama. "It's beginning to feed on itself," Oubre says. "Now, there are lots of River Ranches all around."

The model resembles a village, with a town green in its center. Small shops, cottages, town houses, and a private club surround the town center. Fanning out on interlinking streets are single-family homes, built on lots that are much smaller than required in conventional subdivisions. Buildings are closer to the narrow, tree lined streets. Every block has sidewalks protected from traffic by green neutral grounds. Parks, lakes, and playgrounds abound. In River Ranch's case, the architecture is carefully regulated in a French Creole style, indigenous to south Louisiana. All architectural elements such as windows, shutters, doors and walls are defined in a set of codes that govern River Ranch.

It's a beautiful — but extremely pricey — place to live. River Ranch wasn't conceived as a financially exclusive development, but the nature of building something brand new, and the need to build-in value and its cache in Lafayette drove up the market. But the real estate agents in each of Oubre's TND cities say the market is there. "The first two years were slow," says Rod Noles, who is marketing Lake District outside of Alexandria. "But the owners stuck with the idea, and it caught on. It definitely raised the bar here. It shocked the market. Now the market comes to us."

Oubre says beauty alone won't sell the concept to a developer. "There has to be tremendous functional attribute assigned to it, or some sort of economic basis to the design. The New Urbanism has a tremendous value to the design. So it's an easy argument to make. We can convince that buyer at least 30 percent of the market will live in a TND rather than a conventional subdivision. Couple that with if you create a great place, there's more value to it, so the return is higher, so you start to make sense to the developer. The developer has always been about, 'Build it as quickly and as cheaply as possible so you can make a profit.' Now you are introducing a new dynamic to it."

Last week, while making a preliminary visit to Cameron, Vermilion and Iberia parishes to study the hurricane damage, Duany visited River Ranch for the first time. "I had knots in my stomach when we drove in with him," Oubre says. Duany had been working on his computer during the drive, but came to life when he started looking around. "'Has this been published yet?' he asked me, and I said, 'In the newspaper?'" remembers Oubre. "And he said 'No, I mean nationally. This needs to be published.'" When Oubre told Duany

that the project was seven years old, Duany was taken aback. He said, ‘You’ve got to be kidding me. We have done hundreds of TNDs, and very few have reached this level.’”

The result of Duany’s visit changed the student/mentor relationship into a joint venture on a national level. Oubre was invited to be the town architect for two projects DPZ is currently working on — one in Utah, one in Alabama, and was asked to joint venture some of Duany’s work in Mississippi and Louisiana. “It’s everything to me,” Oubre says. “That’s the most significant thing that ever could have happened.”

Oubre’s River Ranch gambit put him on the architectural map, but working with the Louisiana Recovery Authority planning team raises the bar considerably. Rather than tucking new developments into existing cities, the recovery effort will work to redesign entire towns — and ultimately the Gulf Coast region — using the New Urbanism philosophy.

“Part of the regional plan, and I don’t know if anybody understands the significance of how great that is, is to look at everything from the standpoint of what it takes to grow communities,” Oubre says. “I think [architect] Calthorpe will be looking at roads; he’ll be looking at the environment, and what it will take to grow environmentally friendly. He’ll be looking at transit, not only vehicular transit, but light rail and high speed rail and bus transit. The economics of how we grow and why we grow will be looked at. Does it make sense to grow certain communities when they could easily be destroyed again and there’s no amount of money could protect them? Those will be evaluated and become part of that plan.”

Duany and Oubre, meanwhile will tackle the layout of towns. Their focus will be to come up with models for three different size communities, a small town, such as Cameron, a mid-size city like Lake Charles, and an urban center, which is New Orleans. “We were trying to get the different elements defined and coded, so that any of these models could be plugged in,” Oubre says. Lafayette, Jennings or Lake Charles all fit the mid-size model. “It’s a planning overlay that talks about smart growth principles. And it defines them. It essentially would be creating River Ranches as standard model of growth.”

Cameron, blue collar to the core, seems to be the antithesis of River Ranch. But Oubre points out that it’s River Ranch’s design, not its architectural costs, that is the model. “Everybody believes that when places are well planned, it’s only for the wealthy,” says Oubre. “The reality is that good planning has no price point. Good planning is all about creating places for people, and it doesn’t really matter if you are lower class, middle class or upper class. The principles are all the same. It’s about human scale. It’s about how people live.

“The New Urbanism is moving toward what the people want,” Oubre continues. “Whenever we go into a community and do one, people begin to migrate toward it. And all of a sudden the entire mindset of the planning commission and the transportation department from a governmental standpoint begins to develop toward that kind of growth. At first, people fight the changes. But once it’s done, they feel really good about it.”

Oubre knows the LRA’s plan requires unprecedented cooperation between local government and residents — and there’s no guarantee that the LRA’s recommendations will be considered in New Orleans, as Mayor Ray Nagin has his own recovery commission. But Oubre is optimistic there is an opportunity for real change across Louisiana.

“I’m hopeful that the politics let the right things happen,” he says.