

NORA

# FUTURE GROUND



Matthew Hinton The Times-Picayune



NORA

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## KEY STRATEGIES



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**NEW ORLEANS**

**VACANT**

**LAND**

# KEY STRATEGIES

Across the world, cities have conquered the vacant lot. The proof is in countless urban farms and stormwater gardens and other open spaces that have thrived in the wake of a demolished structure. But figuring out what to do with vacant land – the unwieldy sum of hundreds or thousands of small, scattered lots – has proven much more difficult. We organized the interdisciplinary design competition Future Ground to bridge this gap, helping the New Orleans Redevelopment Authority (NORA) and its counterparts in cities around the country to rethink vacant land reuse beyond the single lot and to scale up initiatives to have larger, citywide impacts.

We selected three teams that brought designers together with economists, lawyers, community engagement specialists, and brownfields experts to think creatively about policy: the procedures, regulations, and routines that shape and limit how things get done in the real world. One of the benefits of using competitions to address pressing challenges is that they generate extremely varied, unconventional approaches and ideas – that was certainly true in Future Ground. Collectively the teams tackled fundamental questions about vacant



land reuse while creating more equitable, resilient cities: How can we build new, unconventional partnerships to improve public health and establish habitat in underserved communities? How does land support businesses that can create living wage jobs for residents without college degrees? What's our vision for the future of neighborhoods with high rates of vacancy and abandonment 25 or 50 years from now, and what are the incremental steps we need to take to get there?

This document highlights key strategies from the competition that can help any city working to reuse vacant land, revitalize neighborhoods, and build city resilience. By adopting the lessons from Future Ground, New Orleans is changing the way it does business – giving communities a more creative role in decision-making processes, improving coordination across agencies and across the region, and using land strategically to realize a vision of the future city in which all residents enjoy a high quality of life.

We are deeply grateful for the work of the three teams that participated in the competition, and for the tireless efforts of so many others around the city and the country who have shared their expertise with us over the last six months.



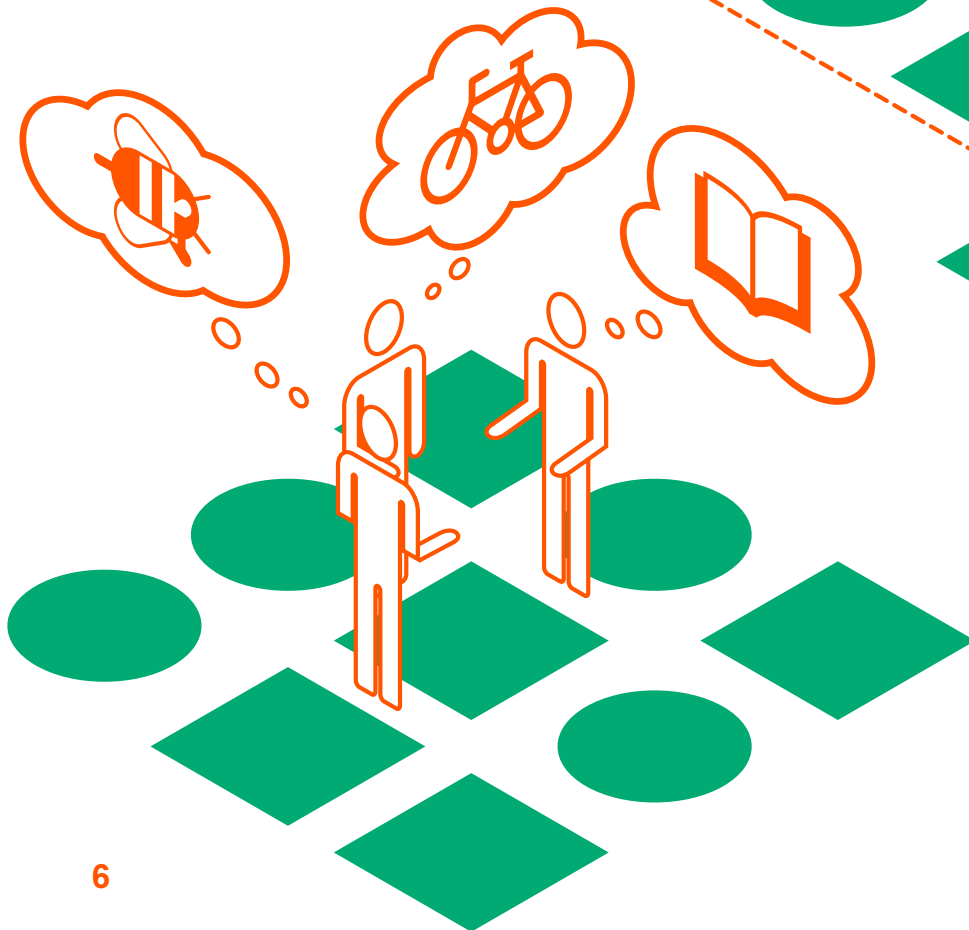
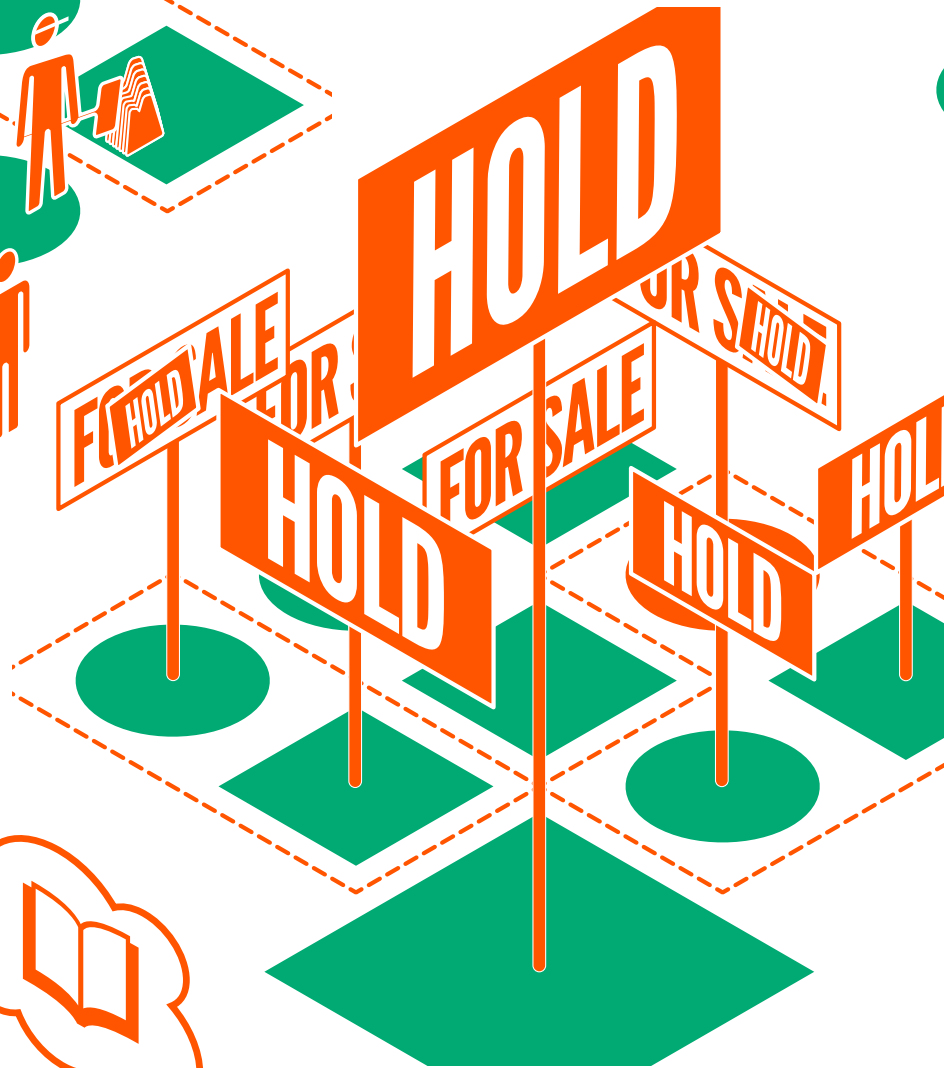


## VACANT LAND CAN HELP CITIES CREATE JOBS

p 10 – 11

## KNOW WHEN TO HOLD 'EM

p 14 – 15



## ENGAGE STAKEHOLDERS THROUGH MUTUAL INTERESTS

p 18 – 19





## LET THE PUBLIC GET CREATIVE

p 22 – 23

## LOOK AT VACANT LAND AT A REGIONAL SCALE

p 26 – 27

## CREATE NEW VISIONS FOR LOW DENSITY

p 30 – 31





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Courtesy of Sankofa

**ACROSS THE WORLD, CITIES HAVE  
CONQUERED THE VACANT LOT.**



**“LAND PROBLEMS AND ECONOMIC PROBLEMS  
ARE ONE AND THE SAME.”**



# VACANT LAND CAN HELP CITIES CREATE JOBS

Team Stoss

Vacant land is intertwined with unemployment, income inequality, and other economic problems; it can also be a foundation for economic growth. For instance, cities can offer land to recruit or support businesses that typically create living wage jobs. But in order to make vacant land a catalytic part of an economic development and jobs strategy, cities need to assemble smaller lots into large parcels.

Economist Teresa Lynch and the Team Stoss found that certain types of land (2 - 4 acre parcels zoned for light industrial, distribution, and repair activities) are critical for supporting industries that create living wage jobs for workers without college degrees, and that many of these industries could grow in New Orleans if land were available. Publicly owned vacant land could be a key resource in helping these types of activities locate in the city, but the vast majority of New Orleans' vacant land consists of thousands of former residential lots, usually around a tenth of an acre – a common condition

in cities around the country dealing with widespread abandonment. Agencies prioritizing job creation as an outcome of vacant land reuse should explore strategies for assembling smaller parcels into larger sites. But this is only a first step – agencies will still have to rezone abandoned residential lots to allow new businesses to operate there. Making sure that land assets support broad-based prosperity is a critical first step in a comprehensive and coordinated economic development strategy.





Andrea Mabry



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**FIGURING OUT WHAT TO DO WITH THE  
UNWIELDY SUM OF THOUSANDS OF SMALL,  
SCATTERED LOTS HAS PROVEN DIFFICULT.**



**“CITIES SHOULD SUSPEND SINGLE-LOT AUCTIONS IN SOME AREAS, PUTTING THEM ON HOLD TO DEVELOP PLANS TO ACHIEVE LARGER ECOLOGICAL, ECONOMIC, AND SOCIAL BENEFITS.”**



# KNOW WHEN TO HOLD ‘EM

Team Stoss

Generally, city agencies try to get vacant lots in other people’s hands as quickly as possible through auctions, partnerships with affordable housing developers, side lot sales, and other methods. But this isn’t always an optimal strategy – once these lots are sold, cities are still left with many others they can’t sell and have lost the opportunity to bind parcels together to make land available for larger impact. Cities should suspend single-lot auctions in some areas or for certain clusters of vacant land in order to achieve larger ecological, economic, and social benefits.

It’s not easy to convince mayors that instead of getting vacant lots off the city’s books and earning money from auctions, they should invest in acquisition and other strategies to create larger parcels of land. Especially in cities with huge inventories of vacant land, a targeted acquisition strategy, in combination with tools such as auctions, must be part of the policy toolkit. In some areas of the city, we need a new sense of scale – not only thinking beyond the single lot but also beyond short-term gains, to 5, 10, or 25 year horizons, and the kind of strategic planning this longer timeframe allows.





Andrea Mabry

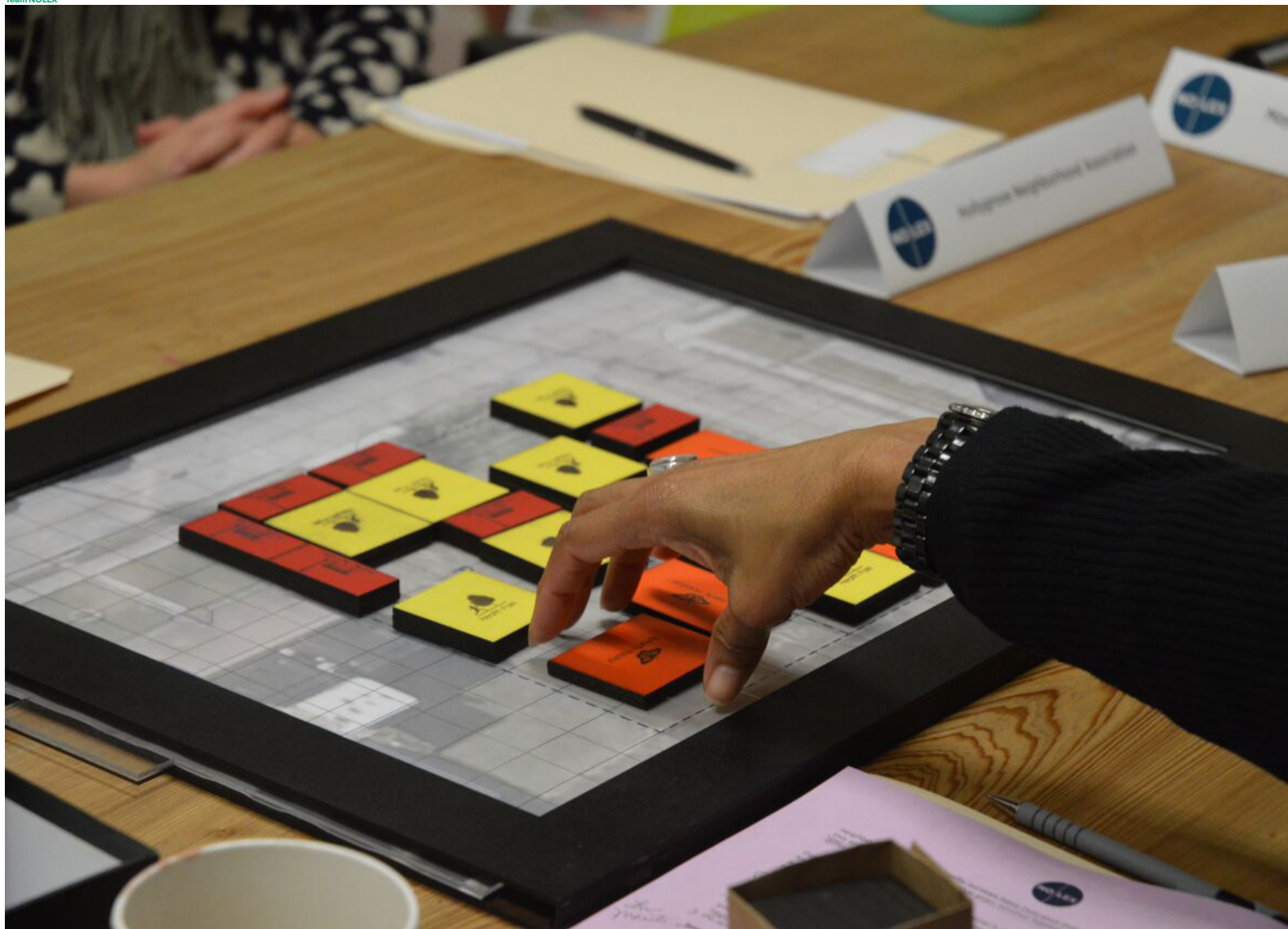


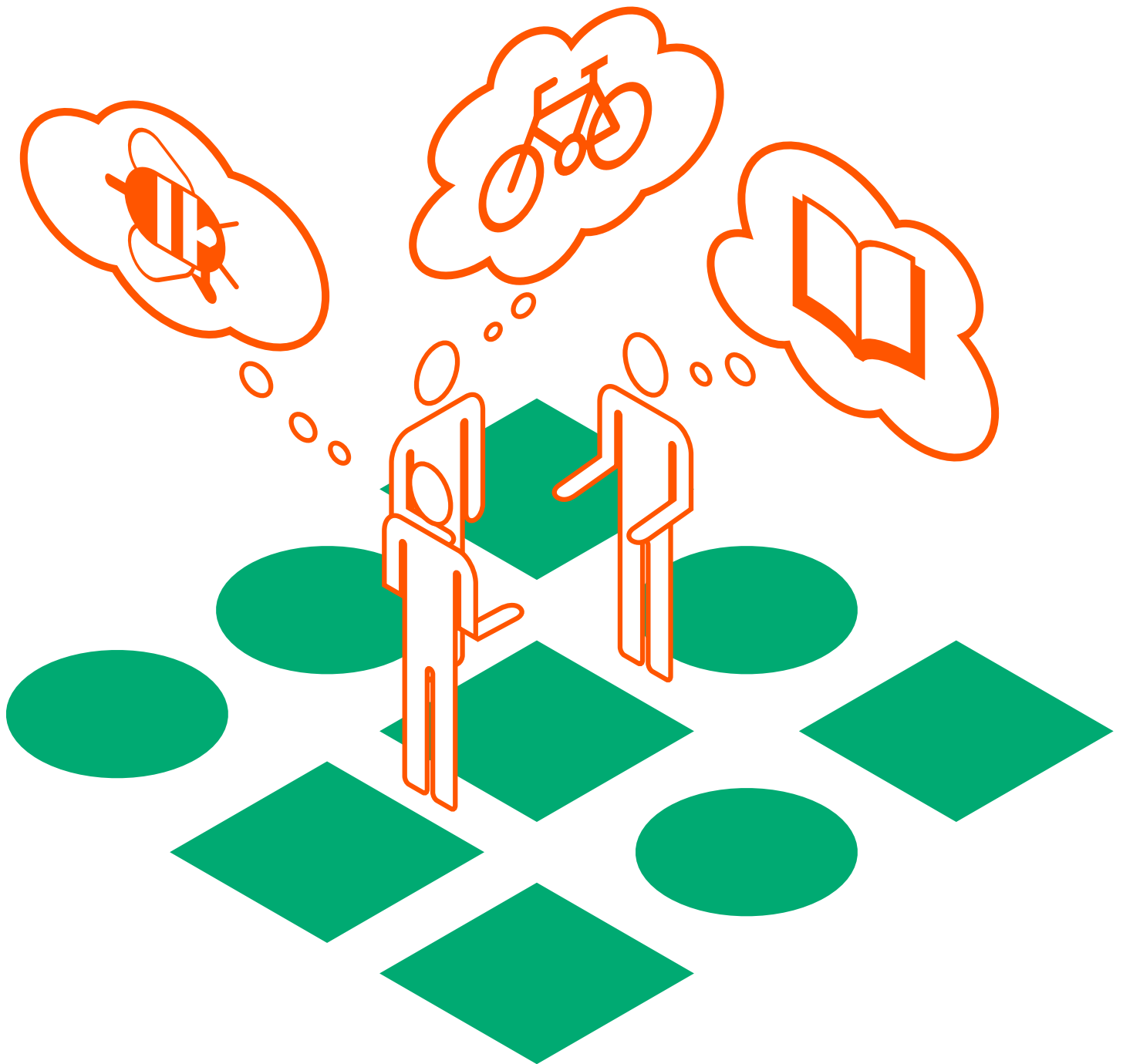
Courtesy of Team NOLEX



**WE BROUGHT DESIGNERS TOGETHER  
WITH ECONOMISTS, LAWYERS,  
COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT SPECIALISTS,  
AND BROWNFIELDS EXPERTS TO THINK  
CREATIVELY ABOUT POLICY.**

Team NOLEX





**“TO FIND UNCONVENTIONAL PARTNERS IN REUSING  
VACANT LAND, DON’T FOCUS ON THE LAND,  
BUT ON WHAT THE PARTNERS ARE INTERESTED IN.”**



# ENGAGE STAKEHOLDERS THROUGH MUTUAL INTERESTS

Team NOLEX

What do a public health official, an urban wildlife advocate, and a city official in charge of stormwater management have in common? None of them consider vacant land reuse part of their core mission. But chances are they want something that vacant land could help provide – they just don't know it yet. By focusing not on the land itself, but on what various groups could use land for, cities can enlist a lot of new partners to join the effort to reuse vacant land.

Team NOLEX proposed a simple model for agencies such as NORA to take an active role as a matchmaker:

**Step 1** Reach out to many unlikely suspects (e.g. bike advocates, arts organizations, and disaster preparedness groups) and identify what these stakeholders' priorities are (e.g. low-cost, visible places for events or safe, active urban corridors).

**Step 2** Using readily available data on residents' health, soil quality, elevation and many other conditions, locate specific areas of the city and clusters of vacant lots that could serve stakeholders' needs – and see where these groups' needs overlap.

**Step 3** Bring these groups together, showing them how they could use city-owned vacant land to address common interests.

The team's proposal would require that cities dedicate staff and resources to a new form of outreach. But this investment could greatly expand the pool of stakeholders who can lend a hand in vacant land reuse, bringing in new ideas and resources.

REINVENT BASICS

- infrastructure + lighting  
as link/corridor for action
- softer streets
- How NORCA communicates itself
- Diagram of capacity/program  
across agencies
- NPN capacity college
- BROADENING pool of stakeholders
- DATA + mapping
- engagement

VE (PaD)  
ACE → District  
ross Agencies  
low density  
OT → Block → Neighborhood → District  
ECONOMIC OPPORTUNITY + LAND USE POLICY  
N AS organizing principle → BUT for  
what is needed







Andrea Mabry

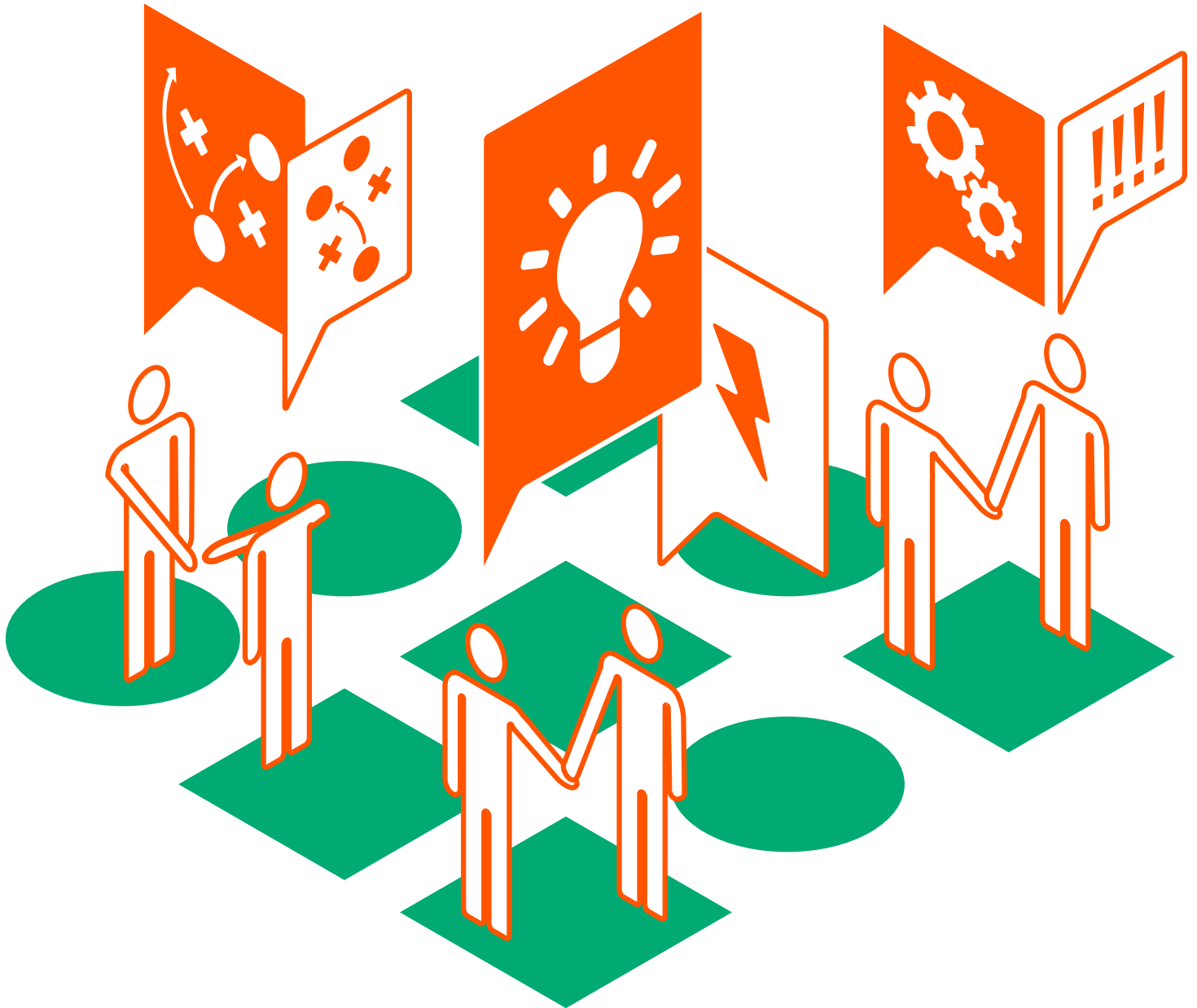
**GENERATE EXTREMELY VARIED,  
UNCONVENTIONAL APPROACHES AND IDEAS.**



Andrea Mabry



Andrea Mabry



**“IT’S TIME TO REINVENT CONVENTIONAL MODELS FOR  
ENGAGEMENT BY MAKING THEM MORE, WELL, ENGAGING.”**



# LET THE PUBLIC GET CREATIVE

Team NOLEX

Community engagement processes often look the same no matter where you go – they take place toward the end of a project, and ask the public to provide feedback to proposals using post-it notes and large maps. It's time to reinvent conventional models for engagement by making them more, well, engaging, and by integrating the processes into decision-making and evaluation processes.

Through a pilot engagement process, Team NOLEX brought together a broad range of real world stakeholders to role play in a negotiation around a vacant lot: for example, a city official took the role of a wildlife conservationist who wanted to establish butterfly habitat, while a public health expert acted as community association president trying to pave the lot over. The “game” helped people build new, unexpected coalitions, and to learn about technical issues in a fun way.

Team Stoss recommended that NORA and other agencies use engagement as an opportunity to rethink how they

develop projects, programs, and policy. For example, when starting work in a given neighborhood, agencies could engage community leaders to identify the best ways to reach the broadest cross-section of people living in the area, rather than use the usual, one-size-fits all approaches.

These examples demonstrate ways that engagement initiatives don't have to be a final hurdle to getting to a built project. When the process is more creative and collaborative, the results will be too.



Andrea Mabry



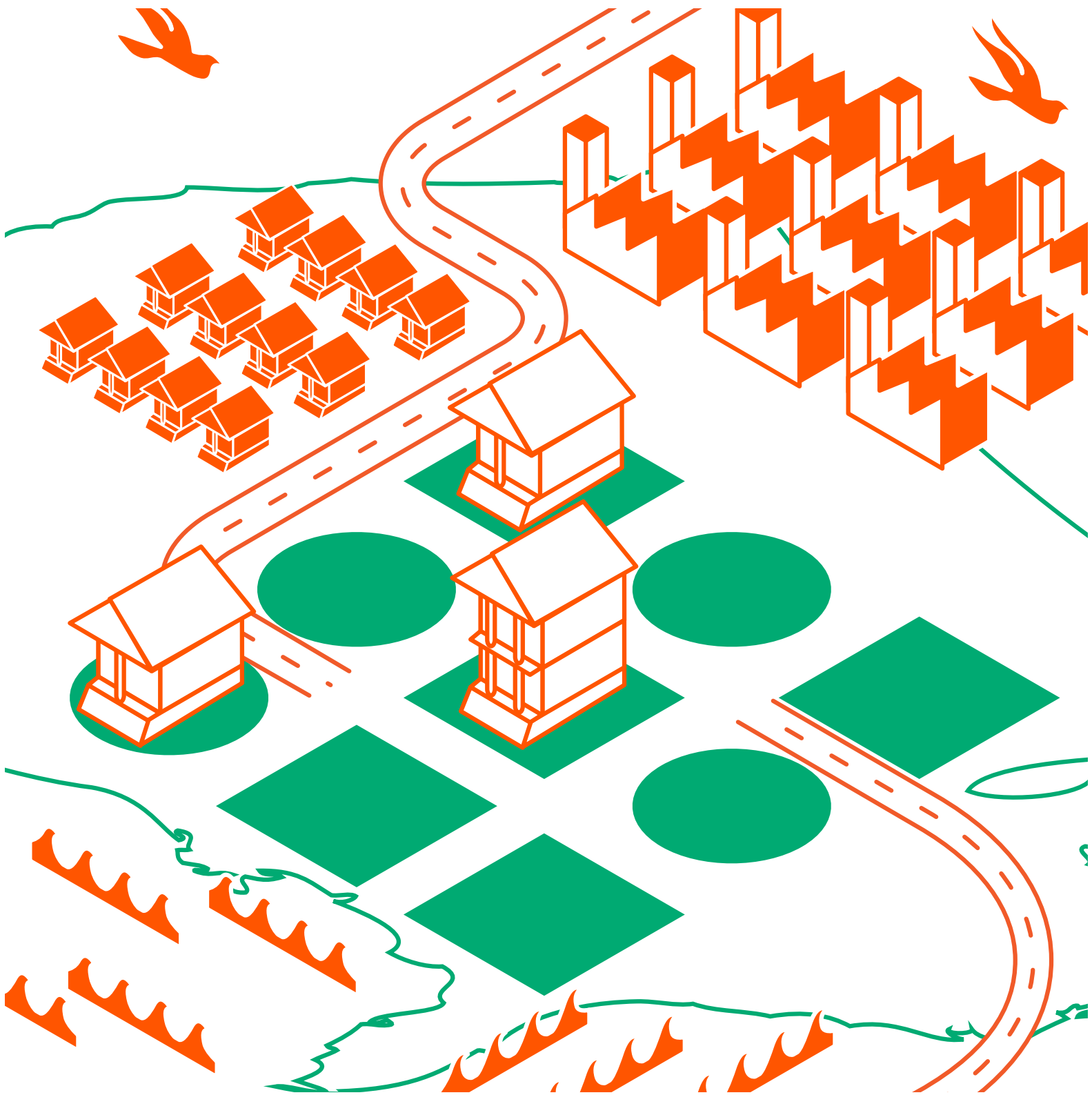
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**HOW CAN WE BUILD NEW,  
UNCONVENTIONAL PARTNERSHIPS  
TO IMPROVE PUBLIC HEALTH AND  
ESTABLISH HABITAT IN  
UNDERSERVED COMMUNITIES?**



**“TO OPEN UP NEW POSSIBILITIES FOR VACANT LAND,  
CITIES NEED TO LOOK BEYOND THEIR BORDERS.”**



# LOOK AT VACANT LAND AT A REGIONAL SCALE

Team PaD

We're used to thinking about vacant land at a city scale: it's Cleveland's problem, or St. Louis', or Detroit's. To open up new possibilities for vacant land, cities need to look beyond their borders. At the regional scale, a neighborhood's vacant lots fit into a bigger picture of investment and organizing around roads, wildlife areas, waterways, and tourism.

Vacant land is part of a regional system, existing within and connecting to regional economies, highways, rivers, and wildlife areas. Team PaD examined the Lower Ninth Ward not only as a neighborhood in New Orleans, but as a storm water management zone and urban habitat that could be scaled up regionally via cross-parish collaboration. This framework places the neighborhood in the context of state parks and other natural resources within a 50-mile radius, as well as a host of potential partners pursuing federal ecological restoration efforts and planning for eco-tourism in the region.



Andrea Mabry

**BY ADOPTING THE LESSONS FROM FUTURE GROUND,  
NEW ORLEANS IS CHANGING THE WAY IT DOES  
BUSINESS – GIVING COMMUNITIES A MORE CREATIVE  
ROLE IN DECISION-MAKING PROCESSES**







**“DESIGNERS AND OTHERS CAN HELP SHOW  
WHAT THE NEW, LOW-DENSITY CITY CAN BE.”**



# CREATE NEW VISIONS FOR LOW DENSITY

Team PaD

Too often, vacant land has been seen only as a remnant of what used to be. But both the people who have stayed and those who have recently arrived in these neighborhoods are creating a new kind of city - one with far fewer buildings and businesses than before, and much more space, trees, and wildlife. Designers and others can help show what this new city could be, why people might still want to call it home, and how government and other partners could support them.

Focusing on the Lower Ninth Ward, Team PaD developed a long-range vision for a low-density neighborhood of homes settled in a network of farms, tree nurseries, unpaved trails, and other forms of urban nature. The team also proposed a series of small, incremental steps to get there, beginning with the street – that simple piece of infrastructure that ties people together to a common public space, and is a highly visible symbol of either municipal investment or neglect. Modest streetscape improvements such as new planting, paving, and lighting can be made while adjacent lots are used for farming, stormwater management, and open spaces.

Low-density visions for vacant land were also key to Team Stoss' economic development strategy. In contexts where physically aggregating nearby parcels would be impossible, the team proposed linking scattered sites operationally. For example, lots used for farming or industrial activities could be managed collaboratively for greater productive impact.











# THE TEAMS



## TEAM STOSS

Led by Chris Reed and Amy Whitesides of the Boston-based design firm Stoss Landscape Urbanism, with Teresa Lynch of Mass-Economics, Jonathan Tate of OJT, Liz Ogbu, Ann Yoachim, Jill Desimini, Mike Brady, Byron Stigge, and Kate Kennen. Team Stoss developed proposals for unlocking the economic value of vacant land through job-creating land use strategies on aggregated and assembled lots.



## TEAM PAD

POLICY AS DESIGN

Led by James Dart of the New Orleans-based design firm DARCH with Deborah Gans, LoriAnn Girvan, and Marc Norman. Team PaD's proposal demonstrated how collaborations across agencies, organizations, and communities could accelerate vacant lot reuse initiatives ability to scale to achieve greater ecological, social, and economic impacts in the region.



## TEAM NOLEX

THE NEW ORLEANS LAND EXCHANGE

Led by Kristi Cheramie of Ohio State University, with Jacob Boswell, Mattijs van Maasakkers, and Jennie Miller, NOLEX created a collaborative site-planning framework designed to bring stakeholders together around land parcels and shared interests – a process that builds capacity, facilitates decision-making, and creates an opportunity for pooling resources.



# PARTNERS

## ABOUT VAN ALLEN INSTITUTE

At Van Alen Institute, we believe design can transform cities, landscapes, and regions to improve people's lives. We collaborate with communities, scholars, policymakers, and professionals on local and global initiatives that rigorously investigate the most pressing social, cultural, and ecological challenges of tomorrow. Building on more than a century of experience, we develop cross-disciplinary research, provocative public programs, and inventive design competitions.

Since 1894, we have created and managed public design competitions in New York City and across the country, producing solutions to critical social, economic, and environmental issues—including vacant and underutilized land. In 1996 our competition Public Property was the first initiative to re-imagine the grounds of the decommissioned military base on Governor's Island as a public space. In 2006 Van Alen Institute and City Parks Association of Philadelphia invited participants from around the world to propose compelling ideas for Philadelphia's vacant land in Urban Voids: Grounds for Change.

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ALLEN  
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## ABOUT NORA

The New Orleans Redevelopment Authority is a catalyst for the revitalization of the city, partnering in strategic developments that celebrate the city's neighborhoods and honor its traditions. Our work addresses three core community needs: affordable housing, commercial revitalization, and land stewardship.



# FUTURE GROUND

# THANK YOU

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REDEVELOPMENT AUTHORITY

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