

Mister Pink

THIS AIN'T NO MUD CLUB. **BRAD PITT'S** MAKE IT RIGHT FOUNDATION IS BREAKING GROUND FOR THE BROKENHEARTED IN NEW ORLEANS. AND, WELL, IT'S GROUNDBREAKING. **STINSON CARTER** STEPS UNDER THE TENTS.

NEW ORLEANS—It's a late Friday afternoon in the city's Lower Ninth Ward, and the hazy sunset is stretching across the Mississippi, gleaming against the 150 hot-pink tents dotting empty lots that were once a neighborhood (albeit a modest one). Although it looks like a public art project, this is no Christo exhibit. It is Brad Pitt's Pink Project. And the worldwide attention it has attracted for his green redevelopment plan has served as a pledge to those who once lived here that they have not been forgotten.

Pitt got the idea for the Pink Project while he was filming a David Fincher film in New Orleans, *The Curious Case of Benjamin Button* (a film adaptation of a 1922 F. Scott Fitzgerald story). For the film, the frame of a lone house in the middle of a field was built out of scaffolding and covered in CGI-friendly pink fabric. The actor-activist was inspired by the image, and carried around a picture he'd taken of it until he got the idea to create an art installation on the site of the houses he plans to build with his Make It Right foundation.

On this typically grim January day—where L.A. is terminally sunny, New Orleans's winters are suicidal-gray—the Pink Project is being disassembled to make way for the actual homes. And I am not the only one who traveled more than a few miles to catch it before it comes down. Two vans—one from a church group and the other from a regional college—idle slowly through the potholed streets, and then stop to eject groups of camera-toting teenagers and twenty-somethings. It wasn't all that long ago that these groups would not have ventured into this part of the city. But they, like myself, are proof that the Pink Project has done for this hurricane-leveled neighborhood what Pitt's celebrity has done for this city: given people a reason to think about it, talk about it, and in so doing, come to realize why they should care.

Sitting in a white pickup truck, an on-site worker named Dwight LeBron waits for a passenger who's lugging an armful of scaffolding pipes across a muddy road. LeBron sits at ease, an arm hanging from the outside of the driver's side

door. He scans the site. "My wife's people are from down here," he says. "Right over there used to be a sweets shop called Brother Man. All the kids would go there, get their candy. And right over there," he points across an empty field at a vacant lot, "That was Ms. Ross's Sandwich Shop... best hot sausage in the world. But they all gone now, ain't coming back neither. Old New Orleans is gone."

When Hurricane Katrina struck New Orleans and its neighboring states and shores, LeBron says, "I was on my roof for three days, waving at helicopters."

One question overshadowing the entire post-Katrina effort, but coming mostly from non-New Orleanians, is 'Why do they stay?' LeBron's answer to this question could probably answer for a few thousand people in his same situation. "I am New Orleans!" he sneers playfully. "I live here! It's my home, it's in me."

Throughout the Ninth Ward and the surrounding low-lying neighborhoods, identical white FEMA trailers are parked on lawns and in driveways, while the people living in them wait on government aid and insurance dollars to return the dilapidated houses beside them into something habitable. FEMA is only now admitting, two years after the problem surfaced, that many of these trailers contain toxic levels of formaldehyde gas, giving their residents chronic headaches and nosebleeds; and that's only the superficial damage that's being done.

With a 150-home goal, Pitt's project can't solve the housing shortage the way tens of thousands of FEMA trailers can, but the gulf between the government's *Silkwood*-esque campers and Make It Right's award-worthy blueprints highlights how mismanaged and visionless the federal response to the problem has been.

The local nucleus of Make It Right is its office a few miles away, occupying a floor of a law office building on Magazine Street, named for the part in a rifle, now a rebuilding gallery-and-antiques row. Leading the daily effort is Make It Right's 28-year-old executive director, Tom Darden. Darden and I meet in his office, where he sits behind a large, paper-strewn desk in front of a wall of avant-garde architectural blueprints: Ninth Ward zoning maps, and a white board listing minutes from a weekly meeting. "I was the first employee," says Darden, of the year-and-a-half-old Make It Right Project. "I was just going to come down



LIVING INSTALLATIONS

Varying views of the Lower Ninth Ward's soon-to-be unveiled case-study homes, built with funding from Pitt's Make It Right foundation.



to do a due diligence report on the project, but I got hooked, and decided to move down here to help make it go. Before that it was just an idea Brad Pitt had.”

Before founding Make It Right, Pitt was involved with a Global Green architecture contest, promoting eco-rebuilding in New Orleans, and decided to pursue those aims on a larger scale, starting with the area hit hardest by the hurricane. He put together a dream team.

To help steer the project, Pitt handpicked William McDonough: architect, designer, and author of the book *Cradle to Cradle*, a treatise of sustainable development that Pitt liked. To lead the development, he and McDonough chose the nonprofit arm of Cherokee Investment Partners, the world leader in eco-friendly redevelopment of contaminated real estate. To advise on the architectural elements of the project, they chose an international design firm called Graft, which had already incepted three private projects for the actor, all based in Los Angeles. (It was Graft that designed and erected the Pink Project tents.) By assembling his team from the private sector, Pitt created a template for relief that is far more visionary than any

government assistance model. “It’s important to have people working on the project who are not non-profit,” says Darden, “who are business-oriented.”

Make It Right is not just another way of saying “movie star giving away free houses.” As Pitt explains, “It’s not about a handout, it’s about a ‘hand up.’” It’s a financing entity coupled with a green design component that will bridge the gap between homeowners’

resources and the price of the homes. The “homeowners’ resources” include anything from federal and state aid and insurance money to traditional mortgage loans and the homeowner’s available cash. If—and with our economy, when—these resources fluctuate over time, Make It Right has set a limit on house payments at no greater than 30 percent of the owner’s gross household income. The vulnerability of this plan is that, as their website states, “The ability to provide gap financing and to meet affordability goals is wholly contingent upon the level of charitable contributions made to the Make It Right foundation.” That said, even in a worst-case scenario—a drying up of private donations—it would be hard to imagine Pitt or any of his partners letting anyone get upside-down in their houses.

“I get emails from him almost every day,” says Tom Darden, of Pitt’s involvement in the daily affairs. Pitt’s primary interests seem to lie in the architecture and the community relations; not surprising for an actor who is known to be both an architecture buff and a humanitarian of sorts.

“Brad was the driving force behind the selection of the 13 architects,” says Darden, referring to firms whose proposals were winnowed down to one blueprint each after a careful selection process, during which the displaced homeowners themselves were given a say in the selection of the designs. It isn’t the architecture, but this close relationship between the project and the people, that appears to be Pitt’s greatest source of passion for his project. “Usually when he calls,” says Darden, of Pitt, “he’s checking in to make sure everything’s going okay with the communities. He’s very concerned about our relationship with the community partners that we’ve developed.” (As he should: New Orleans has a long history of corruption on every level, which continues to this day.)

Make It Right’s community partners are their primary interface with prospective homeowners. Local non-profits such as NENA (Neighborhood Empowerment Network Association) help gather a consensus of hopes and needs so that Make It Right can ensure that they never let the “project” become the focus, but keep it on the people they intend to help. “We vet all of our decisions through our community partners,” says Darden. Valuing the people’s opinions is just as important in putting roofs over their heads as two-by-fours and drywall.

And what the government fails to recognize, but what Make It Right is founded upon, is the notion that if you don’t rebuild for them, then there’s no point in rebuilding.

Finding residents for these homes has been a challenge in itself. “It’s difficult because some of the people we’re trying to work with have been displaced all over the country,” says Ajamu Kitwana, a senior associate at Make It Right whose task is to work with community groups and prospective residents, while overseeing the housing application process. “Some people have applied, but they aren’t from our target area. And right now, we’re working with people who lived within our target area and want to move back and contract with Make It Right to build a new home on their existing property,” Kitwana explains. This matching of residents with lots is crucial because Make It Right does not own the land within their target area; it will be acting as contractor and financier but not as landlord.

The “target area” isn’t arbitrary, as it lies immediately next to one of the major

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levee breaches that caused some of worst devastation in the city—but nor is it comprehensive. With just eight housing applications accepted at press time, Pitt’s plan is, at the moment, more symbolic than an out-and-out solution. Their pilot group will be 20 homes, during which they will assess the best way of meeting their goal of building a total of 150 homes. But once these are completed, Kitwana says, “We hope to be able to expand within the Lower Ninth Ward. The idea behind Make It Right is that it will be a catalyst for greater redevelopment.”

Tom Darden echoes this hope. “The stated goal is to build 150 homes, so we’re going to at least do that. We’re not going to just build those, though, and stop. It’s primarily a fundraising concern; if the money’s there, we’ll just keep going.”

A key question remains: Is it a good idea to rebuild on this precarious stretch of sub-sea level land? “I wouldn’t say that I’m putting full trust in those levees.” Darden admits, “I certainly believe them to be in better condition than they were before the storm. But it’s important to us that we build structures that will be safe regardless, so they’re all elevated at least 5 feet, which is above the flood levels.” The essential difference between the government’s plan and Make It Right’s plan lies more in foresight than funding. One focuses on repair, while the other focuses on progress; one simply repairs the levees and rebuilds the houses, while the other designs new houses that can safely withstand another flood.

The 150 families who become part of Make It Right will have houses you’d expect to see in the Hollywood Hills with a Porsche in the driveway. But they won’t have many neighborhood stores to speak of, and they won’t have decent schools or hospitals. Make It Right is certainly a positive step founded on noble ideals, but this city needs a lot more than houses to bring it back to life.

For starters, the city needs people. Antoine’s still serves the same Oysters Rockefeller; Galatoire’s, the same Trout Meuniere; Port of Call, the same juicy burger; and Preservation Hall, the same nightly live jazz (albeit with many new players) for standing-room-only crowds. And on. And on. Coming down here to appreciate what hasn’t changed is a good way to begin helping those places that really have.



CARBON FOOTPRINTS

Renderings of some of Make It Right's eco-friendly housing units, as imagined by various architects.

