Purpose: Olshansky’s is conducting research for a future book on post natural disaster planning. Due to the stresses after a disaster, there often is not a process in place to respond to the disaster. Who is charge, who makes the decisions, what organizations need to start up, who coordinates the relief and the recovery planning is a mess. His interest is not in city planning forms but rather the management of recovery planning.

Research: He has been studying natural disaster management processes for awhile now. He has been researched the North Ridge, California earthquake and the Kobe, Japan earthquake. Since New Orleans is so close, he feels empowered to conduct research but also provide his services as advice to anyone who needs planning.

He would like to keep on doing research as least one more year but he has no time line. He is also teaming with Moron and Krassa to pass information.

Contacts: He has extensively traveled down to New Orleans since November 2006 to conduct interviews and be part of the process. He has worked with the University of New Orleans, Planning School, whom he visits every time he goes to New Orleans. He has worked with the National Academy of Science, worked with ACORN, done bus tours of areas, interviewed planning participants in New Orleans, and introduced a Kobe expert to the New Orleans planning team.

He is planning on attending the uniformed planning conference this coming week and interview Paul Lambert, a leading planner in New Orleans.

There might be more involvement with the University of New Orleans and University of Illinois planning schools in the upcoming semester with a workshop. The plan is not to do it alone but in conjunction with the University of New Orleans.

He keeps up with his Kobe expert because the expert serves as deep source and provides him the management status updates. He tries to work behind the scene and tries to keep an open mind. When interviewed, he puts a positive spin because he uses history to remind folks that it is a long process and New Orleans is going through the same thing as other cities.

Funding: The University of Illinois has paid his travel through existing grants and he finds funds trip by trip. Due to a possible delay of forming grants specific dedicated to New Orleans research, he searches to get funds and stay as cheaply as possible.

Support/Impact: The University of Illinois has supported his efforts and has done several news pieces via news bureau. He knows of no alumni support and might look into that area.

FEMA opinion: His opinion is that FEMA is disorganized and doesn’t have the right staffing to do the recovery planning. He does not think highly of FEMA.

Future: He stated New Orleans has been declining in economic status and will most likely be a small city than before.
CHAMPAIGN, Ill. — While post-Katrina rescue and evacuation operations continue to be the priority in New Orleans, urban planning expert Rob Olshansky says now also is the time to be staging the next phase of the city’s disaster-recovery plans. That’s one of the most critical lessons to be gained from previous experiences following major natural disasters, most notably, what happened following the 1994 earthquake in Kobe, Japan, which resulted in more than 6,300 deaths and destroyed 400,000 housing units.

“The Kobe experience is the closest to what is happening right now,” said Olshansky, a professor and associate head of the department of urban and regional planning at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign. “It offers valuable lessons, and right now is the time to start applying those lessons.”

Olshansky recently finished a lengthy review of recovery practices that occurred in Kobe, and in Los Angeles following the 1995 earthquake there. The work, which he said represents the most complete study that’s been done on the Kobe recovery, is co-written by Laurie Johnson, vice president of technical marketing and catastrophe response at the risk-modeling company RMS, and Ken Topping, former planning director for the city of Los Angeles. Their research will be documented in a forthcoming book titled “Opportunity in Chaos: Post-earthquake Rebuilding in Los Angeles and Kobe.”

Once the population of New Orleans is evacuated, Olshansky said, the community “will actually have some moments – a moratorium period – over the next three to four months automatically reserved,” for serious recovery planning. “And they need to take advantage of it,” he said. “They’re going to be handicapped since all the players will be elsewhere, but they need to do it – to get a general framework established for what needs to happen.”

“The most relevant lesson from Kobe, Los Angeles and other places,” Olshansky said, “is that it will be five to 10 years before the community fully recovers. And the first two to three years, there’s going to be chaos and despair. It’s going to feel like the residents are never going to get out of it.”

But they will, he said. That’s because after major disasters of all kinds, “people almost always rebuild in the same place because economic and social networks are what makes a city. There are usually some improvements and changes, but by and large, it will be the same place.”

In the case of New Orleans, he said, the community “is going to be challenged because there are going to be balls up in the air for sometime; the population is dispersed and the economy is on hold. But in the end, New Orleans will rise again.”

The new, improved Crescent City probably won’t be a mirror image of its former self, however. “The city is going to have to be reinvented,” he said, adding that the rebuilt community will likely be smaller.

“That’s another big lesson borrowed from looking at what happened in Kobe,” Olshansky said. Like New Orleans, Kobe is a major international port city. “The port of Kobe was the largest container port in Japan. There was a huge amount of money put
into getting it back up. And while a lot of that business did come back, other business went to other ports” while the city was rebuilding its infrastructure. As a result, he said, Kobe today has about 70 percent of its former level of port traffic.

“Another lesson from Kobe,” Olshansky said, “is where to locate temporary housing. They need to try to keep communities together, and they should also try to have those people who have nowhere else to go as close as possible to their original homes.” The rationale there, he said, is based on the expectation that “the port and tourism industries will be back up within a year, and once they’re going again, people need to be nearby.”

Still one more lesson – learned from Kobe and Los Angeles – he said, is that “those with fewer resources have more problems with recovery.” Those most at risk, he said, include “the unemployed, the underemployed, small-business owners, the elderly and renters.”

“In all these past disasters abroad and in the U.S., the immediate money goes to rebuilding infrastructure and temporary housing. That’s a good thing,” Olshansky said, “but in the longer term comes other issues, and we don’t deal with those right away. The people with means – and insurance – will ride things out. Within one to three years, most of them will move back into the city. But small-business owners can’t wait that long.”

As an example, Olshansky points to sidewalk sandwich vendors and other entrepreneurs who went under in the wake of the World Trade Center disaster. “The less well off need money thrown at them right away, but that doesn’t happen. There’s no mechanism for that.”

“And that’s one of our conclusions from the study: We need to get people thinking about recovery planning. And we need to get people thinking about having mechanisms in place to get immediate resources to people most in need.”

Those conclusions link to a final lesson Olshansky promotes for municipal officials and citizens committed to improving disaster-recovery policies and practices: recognizing the value of hiring planners who can help develop long-term solutions by working directly with community residents, in the neighborhoods.

“They need to put money into having a planning process, having employees paid to get residents together and communicating,” he said. “If they’ve had community organizations involved in planning, if they have those networks established, they can contact those people – even with those who’ve moved elsewhere temporarily.”

And, as it’s happened in the initial phases of post-Katrina recovery, “communities are going to be operating more and more over cyberspace.”

Olshansky emphasizes that the need for employing trained planners in New Orleans is “not just our generic idea – but in fact, one of the most innovative and successful actions taken in Kobe.”