

PROUD TO SWIM HOME

New Orleans After Katrina

by Karen Coyle

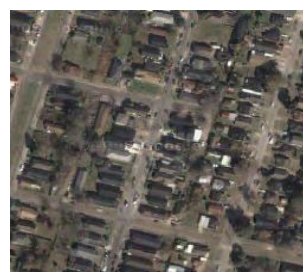
In June, 2006, the American Library Association was the first large group to hold its convention in New Orleans. The Association had declared its intention to come to New Orleans as early as fall, 2005. Because of this, many of us got our first chance to visit post-Katrina New Orleans, and to bring home our stories. This is mine.

There's great controversy about why the levees in New Orleans broke under the force of hurricane Katrina; whole books on levees and wetlands and perfect storms, and who to blame. I honestly don't care WHY the levees failed, not now that I have seen the results.

I spent one afternoon, maybe 3-4 hours, touring the devastation with a New Orleans local. One of the lucky ones, her home on higher ground near the river never took in water, although houses just two blocks away did. But even the lucky ones are now living in a devastated city with a fragile physical infrastructure and an even more fragile economy. A happy ending, if there is to be one, is many years away.

We headed out St. Claude Avenue to the famed lower 9th Ward. The lower 9th Ward, to be blunt, is gone. Just yards from the Industrial Canal levee, this area took the full force of the water, a kind of inland tsunami. Then it sat under water for weeks. Today, whole areas have been cleared so the remains of streets go past vacant lots and rubble. Some structures remain. Occasionally there is a small house of brick or cinder block that is relatively intact. Relatively, of course, because those outer walls may be all that remains. Everything inside these houses is totally ruined. No, that's not a strong enough word. Soaking for weeks in fetid water, then left for ten months to sit unprotected in the humid air of southern Louisiana. I don't have a word for that. It's hard to imagine that these will ever again be homes.

There are still the twisted remains of some wood homes, almost ribbon-like in appearance. There are houses that have clearly been picked-up and moved by the water. Two nearly identical houses nestle together at an odd angle. One that had landed on a car, was reminiscent of the Wizard of Oz.



A small section of the Lower 9th Ward, pre-Katrina.



A post-Katrina image.



At the end of one street there are hand-painted signs and a tent structure. Three houses there are fairly intact, and two have huge sunflowers growing in front. A fellow goes by with a wheel barrow. There is no heavy equipment visible, and other than this tent there are no signs of coordinated activity. The guy with the wheel barrow is incensed that we are there, being "tourists" in the disaster zone. My friend tries to explain that people need to see it; they need to see it to achieve the due force of the outrage. He's not convinced, but he's pushing a wheel barrow in 90 degree weather in the middle of total destruction. He's well-entitled to his opinion.

That's what impresses me here – the tent, the one guy with the wheelbarrow, the occasional truck. There is no action here except individual action. There is no organization but a group of volunteers. With a disaster of this magnitude, I expected some sign of... well, some sign of government, to be honest. An entire area the size of a small town, and the composition of a small town with homes and shops, streets and street lights, maybe even schools and definitely churches, is gone, and somehow the individual inhabitants are being left to boot strap something that was always more than just homes on lots. Human habitations are complex things, that require a delicate balance between people, jobs, and those things that we can't do on a one-on-one basis like provide electricity and sewers. You can't rebuild the houses without the basic services. What are these folks supposed to do?

Among the broken structures are scores of cars, and in other parts of the city you see virtual junk yards of ruined automobiles. Driving down the interstate I looked along a canal and there was a car, nose down, in the canal. It's ten months after Katrina, and there are wrecked cars all over the streets and the vacant lots. I guess that's an improvement. Right after Katrina, some of those cars were up in trees or on top of houses.

Just yards from the tent is the new levee, looking bare and stark. It's now protecting a symbol of what happens when levees fail. Folks are very jumpy about the upcoming hurricane season. It's not a totally irrational reaction, but in fact nerves are frayed. Just one more disaster and another bunch of inhabitants will snap.

From there we moved east into Chalmette. This is an area of apartment buildings, mini-malls, of suburban-like appearance. The entire area flooded, although not as badly as the 9th ward. Water lines on the buildings looked to be up at the 5-6 foot level, and all of the buildings that I could see from the road were clearly unoccupied.

This is a very different situation from the 9th ward – that latter was single-family homes with a high level of home ownership. This area that we had crossed into was clearly the world of rentals. At most complexes there was no obvious restoration activity going on. We drove past these rather uninspiring housing units for miles. Although the 9th ward is more symbolic and more devastated, the number of people displaced from this area must be huge. Huge also because I would assume that this area would house the young and employed; white collar workers that populated the banks and businesses of the busy port city that is New Orleans.



The "Blue House", the organizing point for Common Ground in the Lower 9th Ward. They provide a variety of services including Internet Access. They need volunteers.

The area nearest the lake, which is where University of New Orleans sits, shows another side of the flood. Here are the homes of the solid middle-class for much of the area. Water rose mid-way up the first floors of many homes, but in general the homes, newer mostly and often with outer walls of brick, are intact, although the occasional wood structure is either collapsed or very badly damaged. The work in these areas is to deal with the water damage, along with the damage wrought by the weeks without electricity in an environment where molds and fungi thrive even when buildings are well-kept. These people will have lost all or most of their furniture, many of their possessions. If they had a second story, those things are probably salvageable. Many of these houses have work going on, and some have already been refurbished. A surprising number of those latter have For Sale signs on them. Those who can cash out appear to be doing so. Who would buy a house in New Orleans today? Well, there are all of those people who can't live in their own homes at the moment – housing is scarce, and because of the influx of construction and restoration workers, is going for premium prices. But much property is being purchased by speculators, those who think that they can get a property today for a song, and will be able to wait the decade or two for New Orleans to come back to life.

This is also the area where I saw the first FEMA trailers. These are the controversial trailers that either were not delivered when promised, or delivered without the necessary parts to make them inhabitable, or, as I was told, delivered but no one can find the keys so the new "owners" can't get into them. You also need a place to put a trailer, and in this neighborhood, with their fairly ample lots, the trailers are set neatly on front or side yards. The trailers have newly and neatly constructed wood steps (or, on occasion, handicap ramps) going up to the doors. Every white trailer became a symbol of hope to me as we drove through these and other neighborhoods. I soon had the feeling that the potential success of the neighborhood was directly related to the number of trailers in sight. The soggy, mold-laden homes were not livable, but if families could stay in place, occupying their piece of the community and thereby creating or sustaining that community while the building took place, then there was continuity. If you want a city to live, you need the people, they are the key. But the people need houses, and so the houses must be restored. But if you rebuilt the houses without the people, well, you might as well not. Just being there, occupying the human space that is a community, is the most important thing today. (In other parts of town, the small lots don't allow room for a trailer. This makes it harder for those people to come back and work on their homes.)

From the lake to very near to the river, in other words the entire width of the city, the picture of destruction continues. In older areas, some wood buildings are collapsed or nearly destroyed. What remains is almost invariably heavily damaged, although the damage may not show on the outside. But you can tell what happened by looking at the water line on the buildings – five feet, six feet, eight feet. Sometimes it is six feet on one side of a street and three feet on the other. It makes no sense, not in a "justice" sense but in terms of physics, yet the physical evidence is there. All over the sidewalks are piles of debris. These are new piles. The city and various others have been hauling away debris for 9 months now. Clothes, furniture, soggy wall-board. Try removing the entire first floor from a whole city and hauling it away. Bit by bit, residents are returning and starting to try to get their lives back together. Each new wave brings a new wave of cleaning out and throwing away. The ecological disaster of this flood should also be measured in landfill tonnage.



Every house, every structure, in New Orleans has its symbolic "x" marked by the crews who checked them for inhabitants after the waters receded. Along one street I could watch the progress of those crews by the dates written by the mark: 9/14, 9/15/, 9/21. In parts of town that flooded only mildly (can you say that?), the marks are all identical: an "x", a date, and a zero. In other parts of town, the marks are each eerie statements of the storm's devastation: "Possible body." "1 inside, 1 outside." "SPCA – 2 dogs," and later "dog DOA." Other signs are testaments to human spirit: "June & Bill are OK!" or with addresses in Texas.



Signs spray-painted on houses have also become a means of expression of frustration and anger. "Fuck Houston," says a sign on one wall in the lower 9th ward. Many buildings there carried a spray-painted "Baghdad," which I can't say that I understand, except for the analogy of the destruction of people's lives and government incompetence. Other than the Baghdad signs, I saw no signs about Bush or the government, and not even ones relating to FEMA. Is it possible that these people are not angry ENOUGH? I suspect it's that they haven't the energy to expend on anger; there's just too much to do and it's all so overwhelming.





Of course, what Katrina and the flooding destroyed was not primarily property. The very ability of the city to survive economically is at risk. I think that all of us at the conference felt that the spirit of New Orleans is absolutely inspiring. But a city can't live on spirit alone. Rebuilding an economic base when the energy of the city is tied up in reconstruction, when workers have no place to live and those who wish to return have no work, this is the real challenge. During the conference the city librarian announced that he would be leaving; his wife could not find work there and they had to relocate. People who came back after Katrina ready to start anew are growing weary.

Those who can get money out of their insurance companies are hiring a motley crew of construction companies that have flocked to New Orleans for the work. In one upscale bar in the French Quarter I chatted with a fellow from Ohio who does high end historical restoration, and who has been there for eight months. The Esplanade end of the French Quarter where I was staying is a paean to the wealthy appreciation of local architecture, with small but absolutely impeccably maintained cottages, freshly painted and sporting new roofs. In the less affluent ends of town, the workers are much more proletariat, and definitely not local. My friend and I stopped on our route at an outreach trailer run by her church, just by the 9th ward. Of the people picking up bottled water and paper towels was a Spanish-speaking man who probably represents one of those many who have come from central America to work under unheard of conditions for low wages while living in tents (if they are lucky).



Much of the support for residents in the hard-hit areas is being supplied by church groups. Giving out water is not so much about thirst, although in this heat people are thirsty, but about being there and caring.

The streets are lined with cheaply-made signs for every kind of construction (and destruction) service: roofing, demolition, mold removal, plastering. Yet it's every man for himself. The only organized efforts that are visible are those of church groups and the neighborhood groups that are forming. Although their efforts are heartwarming, and greatly needed and appreciated, the city cannot be rebuilt by hard-working citizens and enthusiastic volunteers. This is not a "barn raising" situation, folks, it is a disaster on a huge scale. It is an ONGOING disaster, and the longer it goes on the less likely that the city will be able to recover.

Thinking again about those signs in the 9th ward that said "Baghdad," I myself would modify those. It's more like Pakistan after the earthquake, or maybe the Sudan (without the warfare but with all of the rest of the problems of poverty, displacement, poor public health, and lack of infrastructure). Of course it is absolutely shameful that we have this on our own shores.

OK, we came, we saw, we ate, we spent. Now we need to figure out what we can really do. The volunteer group in the Lower 9th is providing free Internet access, but they need equipment and volunteers. I'm thinking: Internet Room, 2006. I'm thinking: mobile access points. I'm thinking that we could apply our knowledge of running stable public access and help these folks. It's not going to rebuild someone's home or get the sewers working, but it's what we know how to do, and they need it. Let me know if you're in, and I'll start making the calls.

Meanwhile, I'm going to meditate daily on my newly-acquired bumper sticker, purchased in a sleazy tourist shop in the French Quarter:

NEW ORLEANS PROUD TO SWIM HOME



*Me, by the X on my friend's home.
A lucky one.*