

After Katrina: One Year Later

Voices and impressions from a region rethinking how to build

by Don Jackson

Last August 29th, Hurricane Katrina slammed the Gulf Coast just east of New Orleans, severely damaging or destroying 250,000 homes and displacing millions of residents.

In the months since, most of those people have returned home or begun new lives elsewhere. But many — in the hundreds of thousands — are still in limbo; they're living in FEMA trailers or temporary housing, fighting for insurance settlements, and waiting for government officials to tell them how to rebuild — or whether they even can.

To see the recovery effort up close and to talk to survivors, editor Patrick McCombe and I flew to New Orleans, where remodeler and JLC author Mike Davis gave us a tour of the city. After that we explored the Mississippi coast.

Before arriving, we imagined carpenters on every street corner; what we found was a little different.

New Orleans, Lakeview, Gentilly

We start our tour in the streets surrounding City Park, neighborhoods bounded by the 17th Street Canal on the west, the London Avenue Canal on the east, and Lake Pontchartrain to the north.

As Davis points out, these empty shells — some gutted but many more simply abandoned, with ruined, moldy stuff still inside — used to be high-dollar homes. This is not a walk down Poverty Lane; this is Anywhere, U.S.A. — middle-class and

upper-middle-class neighborhoods with mature shade trees, many dead or dying, and what used to be sidewalks, which are now covered with mud and weeds. “Where are the people?” we keep asking. “Why isn’t there more work going on?”

For two hours we drive down street after street of bombed-out houses, eventually dead-ending at the block that backs up to the London Avenue Canal. Moving slowly along the deserted street, we come upon a single FEMA trailer parked in front of a house. A young man



In much of New Orleans, empty houses and desolate streets are an overwhelming reminder of Katrina. Incongruous jumbles, vestiges of the flooding, are commonplace.

In the News



Harold Weiser is living in a FEMA trailer while he renovates his water-damaged home, which backs up to New Orleans' London Avenue Canal. The concrete walls of the levee gave way almost directly behind the house, inundating the neighborhood. "For 17 days the water stayed at seven and a quarter feet. They finally got it all out at the end of October," Weiser says. At right, his son indicates the high-water mark on the next-door neighbor's house. Its contents still lie in muck. Like many in New Orleans, the owner has abandoned the house and plans to have it demolished.



sits on the steps talking on a cellphone; an older man is watering the grass.

We introduce ourselves, then listen as Harold Weiser, age 66, and his son, Harry, tell us their story.

"You caught us at a good time — I'd be working on the house right now if my power weren't off," Harold says, indicating the temporary pole next to the trailer. "Went off about an hour ago."

Rain has been scarce along the Gulf this spring and summer. Harold laments the low water pressure as he douses the parched grass in front of his badly damaged brick home. "We got more leaks than we got water, and no master plan to correct it," he says, referring to news reports that the city is losing an astonishing 80 million to 100 million gallons of potable water each day, at an estimated cost of \$200,000 per day.

We ask how he's managing, whether he was covered. "I had a lot of insurance on the hazard side — fire, theft, and so on. But it had to be a dry storm for me to collect, not a wet one. So if you get

blown down by a 150-mile-an-hour wind and there's no rain, they'll pay you. I had a little bit of flood insurance — \$23,000 — but I ran out of money paying the bricklayer."

To raise or not to raise. We ask about the 3-foot rule, released in April; it's clearly being ignored here. "It's kind of vague," says Harry. "First they said if you got a city permit, you could rebuild. And FEMA said four months ago that they were going to keep the old flood maps. But now they've changed it again.

"The thing is, you can't raise a slab home — not for the \$30,000 they're offering. You might be able to raise up some of the older homes built on brick piles. But slabs? It's not that easy. Who's going to do the work? Are there that many contractors in the country that can come in here and just raise homes, five or six homes a day?"

A tough row. Inside the Weiser home, gutted rooms and a 2-foot-tall stack of new drywall indicate the work ahead. Even though looters recently stole their



tools, Harold and his son have dug in: They're determined to save the house, and aren't about to wait for federal officials and the city government to get their stories straight.

"The government has failed," says Harold. "Mayor [C. Ray] Nagin, he's in slow motion, and Governor Kathleen Blanco, she's in no motion. So we got slow motion and no motion." He chuckles. "It's disintegrating out here, that's my worry." Then he points up the street. "This lady over here's holding out — trying to hold it together. But it's tough, you know?"

In the News

In a powerful act of faith in the future of New Orleans, Habitat for Humanity has teamed up with the Baptist Crossroads Project to help build Musicians' Village. The eight-acre site will have 81 homes for New Orleans musicians and their families, plus "a center named after Ellis Marsalis where kids can come off the street and learn the music business — recording, staging, sound, lighting," says Dewey Sampson (below right), a string bass player who will live in the village.



New Orleans, Musicians' Village, Upper Ninth Ward

Next morning, we head for Musicians' Village, an eight-acre site in the Upper Ninth where Habitat for Humanity, Branford Marsalis, and Harry Connick Jr. are sponsoring the construction of homes for traditional New Orleans musicians displaced by the flood.

We show up in the middle of a Habitat blitz — the group is going for 30 homes in a month. After all those hours spent walking through block after block of deserted, eerily quiet neighborhoods the day before, the sound of hammers is welcome.

I stop to talk to a guy wearing a worn nail belt who obviously knows what he's doing. Todd Yuratich is a woodworking teacher at California College of the Arts in Oakland. A New Orleans native, he's home for the summer to help with the rebuilding. He volunteered with Habitat and is now a site leader.

We talk about the extent of the destruction, the amount of work to be

done in the city. "The problem," says Yuratich, "is the insurance companies are not paying out — people want to start, but they don't have the money. They have to wait for the adjuster to even look at the damage, and sometimes different adjusters from the same insurance company give different stories.

"Someone I know — one adjuster was ready to pay out a claim and the second one said, 'I don't see any wind damage.' Well, what do you think moved that water? It's criminal — why get insurance?"

I point out the contrast between this site and the desolation we've seen in other parts of New Orleans. Here, people are working, they're happy; a radio plays traditional toe-tapping jazz in the background.

"It's very much enriching," says Yuratich. "It makes you feel like Upper Ninth is going to come back — it'll be slow, but it will come back. Already on this block there are more [inhabited] houses, because they know they're going

to have neighbors. These guys are working musicians, and the quality of musicianship is incredible."

Bringing the music back. Someone points out a tall man in a straw hat. It's Dewey T. Sampson, a string bass player who's worked in New Orleans for 20 years. He's played with the likes of Bob French, Ellis Marsalis, Freddy Cole, Zoot Sims, Milt Jackson, Harry Connick Jr. — the list goes on. While we're talking, his phone rings; it's Preservation Hall booking him for the weekend.

Sampson describes the evacuation ordeal — traveling from place to place with his wife and son, running out of money for hotels, staying with a friend in Baton Rouge, where he worked in a local shop to earn money to return home.

"We didn't get any support from the government — not the Red Cross or FEMA," he says. "When we came back to New Orleans, things were terrible. One of



Bare foundations and abandoned cars are all that remain of this once-lively neighborhood in the Lower Ninth Ward. Common Ground Relief provides assistance and a meeting place for homeowners who wish to return. But doubts remain about the condition of the nearby levee. According to one relief worker, “The man from the Army Corps responsible for rebuilding the levee said — and we have it on tape — that he would not feel comfortable living here. Hurricane season has already started, and that levee is not safe.”



my friends, a musician who also works as a mortician — he had to gather bodies from the streets. Every person here has a thousand stories to tell. So when I got back, I found someone had stolen my instruments and amplifiers. That was a loss — it's how you make your money.”

The bass Sampson lost was worth around \$30,000. Fortunately, he found a replacement through the musicians union. Then he learned he had qualified for a home in Musicians' Village.

“This” — he indicates the construction site — “is a big statement: The government cannot do it all. There are a lot of musicians that know how to play this music, but if you can't bring them back because there's no place to live, the city won't be the same.

“And it's these kids, it's the people, that are making it happen.”

New Orleans, Lower Ninth Ward

We cross the Claiborne Avenue Bridge into the Lower Ninth, where the destruction is the worst we've seen. After touring what's left of the neighborhood, we stop in at the Common Ground Relief tent. The local grassroots organization has been providing support to low-income citizens of New Orleans since the storm.

“Hard to believe, isn't it?” says Rachel Huffman, a volunteer from Kansas City, Kan. “It's a crime.”

The “crime” is that the neighborhood — one with a long, rich cultural history and where many New Orleans musicians, including Fats Domino, reside — is apparently being allowed to perish.

Land grab? A Ninth Ward homeowner whose extended family has been in the ward for three generations joins the

conversation. “The thing is,” he says, “in a sly, slick way, they're going to try to take the land from us.” He's referring to demolition deadlines issued by the city of New Orleans: Homeowners must complete the demo and mold abatement on their properties by a given date or the city will do it for them and send them the bill. If they can't pay the bill, the city will put a lien on the property.

Though an August 29th deadline was recently extended, it's not hard to see why Lower Ninth residents sense the march of gentrification. The Army Corps has lost credibility, and informed critics are arguing that it isn't right to return people to neighborhoods that are unsafe. And at a time when thousands of low-income residents have been displaced, HUD is demolishing more than 5,000 public housing apartments in four com-

In the News



Piles of debris along a street in East New Orleans (right) are a healthy sign that this neighborhood is coming back. Meanwhile, FEMA trailer parks have sprung up around the Gulf region, with about 130,000 trailers now occupied in Louisiana and Mississippi alone.



plexes, only adding to the current housing shortage.

"People want to come back," says Huffman. "But there's such a housing crisis in the city right now; the houses that are livable aren't affordable."

Meanwhile, Ninth Ward residents — those that are still in New Orleans — hold out hope and try to maintain a presence in the battered neighborhood through Common Ground. But the pace of recovery is slow: "We have a five-month-long wait list to get houses gutted," says Huffman. "And it took the city seven months to get one streetlight on. I just wish the government was doing more."

East New Orleans, St. Bernard Parish

From the Lower Ninth, we head further east to Chalmette, a middle-class town just over the line in St. Bernard Parish, where Vincent Mamelli, an air-conditioning contractor and *JLC* subscriber, has invited us to take a look at his home. Chalmette found itself under 10 to 12 feet

of water the morning of August 29. Nearly a year later, stores, restaurants, and strip malls along the main highways still look like they've been bombed.

"I had 9 feet of water in my house, and I'm 3 feet above street level," Mamelli says.

We find the house cleanly gutted, with newly roughed-in plumbing and wiring. Excellent progress, considering Mamelli is doing this as a second job while living in a FEMA trailer. He figures he lost around a million dollars in equity, from inadequate FEMA flood insurance on his home to ruined equipment at his shop — "which was not even in a flood zone," he points out.

As soon as the storm subsided, Mamelli put his business first. He started by re-establishing good communication. "Bell South was in the Stone Age; they didn't even have the ability to call forward," he says. "So to maintain continuity, we took our numbers and put them on cellphones. Now, everyday calls go to cell; we have one land line at the shop."

Close to the edge. Mamelli didn't wait for customers to line up; there was too

much chaos. Instead, with his 20-year business on the brink of survival, he drove to Baton Rouge and personally lobbied state government officials. Others were fleeing, he told them, but he was willing to stay and work, which the region desperately needed. Could he help?

"Ten days after the storm," says Mamelli, "we were putting air conditioning in a housing unit for rescue workers — a school gym that was being renovated. We got interrupted by [Hurricane] Rita, but got right back in there."

One lesson Mamelli has drawn from the experience is to keep an eye on his future coverage.

"The agents who write this stuff don't monitor your policy. It gets paid through escrow on your mortgage," making it easy to forget about, he says. "Why didn't my agent review the policy and try to sell me an upgrade? I have a \$410,000 house, my flood insurance was \$60,000, and that's where we're at."

Before leaving Mamelli's home, I speak with his yardman, Johnny Lee Taylor, who

In the News



Gulfport firemen ponder the force of the surge that smashed through the reinforced block walls of their station and wiped clean most of the coastal development. Local beaches are considered unsafe for swimming because of the vast amounts of household furnishings carried into the sea as the floodwaters receded.



used to live in the Lower Ninth and is now renting in the Upper Ninth.

“I was renting to buy — had three years left,” he says. “But I’m not complaining. I’ll be all right. As long as I have my health and my strength and I can work, I’m going to make it.”

Gulfport, Miss.

The next day, we head down Route 90 along the coast, between Gulfport and Biloxi. Except for the huge live oaks and bare slabs, the strip of land facing the ocean — where this time last year house after house stood, many of them old mansions — is swept clean. The storm surge came in, picked up the houses, and receded, carrying much of the debris back into the ocean.

We double back, driving west toward Pass Christian, where the bridge to Bay St. Louis and Waveland is still out. Other

than a stretch of old homes that sit back from the coast on higher ground, everything looks the same: wiped out.

Here and there are signs of repair and reconstruction. Some builders are taking pains to build structures that will survive the next storm. But not all: We pause at the sight of slab-on-grade condos being framed — production style, unit by unit — on a strand that still bears witness to the power of the Gulf to make mincemeat of such structures.

Fire Station 7. Three firemen are sitting in a structure that used to be enclosed with masonry walls but now looks more like an open-air pavilion.

Gazing out on the strip of development along the beach, they’ve had time to ponder where the coastal area is heading, post-storm. They’re concerned that where many single-family homes once stood there will be nothing but expensive

high-rise condos, sold to wealthy out-of-staters. “They’re going to make it so the average person can’t afford to live here,” says mechanic Darel Crosby.

Many locals whose homes were devastated now live in FEMA trailer parks, which have sprouted up throughout the region. With their insurance claims being denied, these folks are in a tight spot, according to Crosby.

“The bottom line,” he says, “is that a lot of people lost everything they had here and can’t afford to rebuild. I would hope they would get their lives together enough to know that this is not the best place to be — it’s going to happen again. And money — what you can afford — is your safety factor.

“If you can afford to build a 12-inch-thick bunker and you want to live on the beach, well, knock yourself out. But most people can’t.”