BAYOU TAPESTRY

In the aftermath of Katrina, a cultural disaster is looming for the once proud city of New Orleans as the opportunity to preserve the city's high-ground, historic neighbourhoods is being passed over for a new, wholly middle-class demographic

STORY BY:
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THE NAMES for New Orleans' vernacular house types are as picturesque as their carved wooden decoration: camelback, shotgun, Creole cottage, double-shotgun, steamboat. Less attractive are the painted crosses daubed on their facades in the immediate aftermath of Hurricane Katrina. Still visible, if faded, they are like medieval plague warnings on the doors of the stricken.

The marks were sprayed by rescue services going from house to house. In the top quadrant of the cross was the date, while on one side were the initials of the search agency – the New Orleans Police, for instance – and on the other, the number of survivors inside. A circle around the figure indicated the number of dead within. At least 1,500 people died statewide, and the collected stories by local journalist Chris Rose became a classic of Katrina reporting as his book, *One Dead in Attic*.

The traditional houses of New Orleans reflect almost 300 years of the city's history, a unique architectural heritage that together with jumping music has drawn generations of visitors to the Big Easy. All in all, there are 33,000 historic buildings across 20 districts – the biggest concentration in the US. It is a material culture that has survived civil war, the elevated freeways of the '60s and, to a surprising degree, storm and flood as well. What they have found harder to stand up to is the post-Katrina combination of inaction and deliberate destruction. New Orleans' heritage is in deep trouble.

August 29 will be the fourth anniversary of the tempest that flooded 80 per cent of the city to depths of up to 4.5 metres. Katrina caused storm surge waters that breached faulty levees around New Orleans and filled the below-sea-level bowl within which it sits. Chaos followed, with riots and accusations of looting by the city's own police force. There were allegations of rape and murder in public shelters and of shots fired at rescue helicopters. The evacuation was botched.

The murders, at least, were later discredited, but just how many died will never be known. Hundreds of bodies were never found – becoming food, perhaps, for swamp alligators or being swept into the Gulf of Mexico along with the coffins that bobbed up from flooded cemeteries.

To some commentators, it was time to abandon a vulnerable city that, despite or because of its party-town reputation, was also the murder capital of America. To conspiracy theorists, the Republicans' failed response to the emergency was a deliberate attempt to wipe a troublesome black majority city off the map. Yet according to Edward J. Blakely, the American-born, Sydney-based professor of planning, put in charge of the reconstruction effort two-and-a-half years ago, the project is "99 per cent" complete. That is, if you choose, generously, to overlook the fact that foundations have yet to be dug for most of the planned new buildings.

The floodwaters have receded and federal funding is finally flowing. But a clash of vision over the future character of this city is dividing conservationists and grassroots neighbourhood activists from the city council and Blakely, its chief adviser, who are using Katrina to remake the city. "New Orleans has a rare opportunity to reinvent itself," its controversial mayor, C. Ray Nagin, told a Sydney audience recently. In a city of escalating house prices and rents, undamaged housing stock is being demolished and renovations are being blocked in the name of this new New Orleans. Preservationists and advocates for the homeless are scandalised.

Not only is a huge swathe of the city still lying derelict, say the many critics of Blakely and Nagin, but economic wishful thinking, social engineering and sheer incompetence mean the complex tapestry of New Orleans' cultural identity is being swept away. What Katrina hasn't taken, the city fathers will, say the critics.

Just a stroll from the boozy French Quarter – the city's historic core, redolent of rum and voodoo lore – and the nearby genteel mansions of the Garden District, are the local neighbourhoods that make up the warp and weft of old New Orleans: Bywater, Treme, Faubourg Marigny, Esplanade Ridge and Mid-City. These are the residential communities that tourists rarely penetrated. Streets of humble weatherboard shacks and grand townhouses, home to a large proportion of the city's pre-Katrina black population that preserved an authentic cultural life.

During the last century, the city expanded into more low-lying areas further out – meaning that, as a rule, the newer the neighbourhood, the deeper the floodwaters. Today, fanning out beyond the visitors' New Orleans, in places such as the Ninth Ward, a sea of metre-high weeds grows from city blocks almost empty of houses and lined with beheaded street lights that trace the abandoned road grid. Other areas are a patchwork of restored houses, still-decaying ruins and empty lots. Immediately after the flood, red tags appeared on thousands of heritage buildings alongside the Xs marking them for demolition.

"It became clear that a lot of historic housing was in danger," says Kevin Mercadel, program officer at the National Trust for Historic Preservation's New Orleans field office. With professional workers gone, the city had employed people off the street to survey the damage. Hairdressers who knew nothing of architecture were condemning heritage houses. This was especially tragic because traditional buildings tend to be more robust and easier to repair than modern ones.

"There was this rush to tear everything down," explains Mercadel. "A lot of people were freaking out [about this]. We felt it was really urgent to demonstrate that there was a way we can clean this up, make it home again. We had workshops going on about how to evaluate a building's stability; how you [tackle] mould; who you deal with in the city."

The trust has focused on rebuilding the Holy Cross area in the Ninth Ward, so close to the raised Mississippi levees that glimpses of the freighters battling the current can be seen at roofline. This is a poor, mainly black community of oak-shaded, grass-verged lanes and characterful workers' homes that, pre-Katrina, had been slowly gentrifying. The area flooded because the levees at the nearby Industrial Canal failed.

Although water in Holy Cross receded after only two days, the city refused to let its inhabitants back into the Ninth for the next nine months, citing safety reasons. In the meantime, entire streets of families were evacuated to Baton Rouge or Houston. The absence of doctors, schools, grocery stores, jobs and the like helped ensure that returnees were a trickle. By some estimates, three-quarters of the city's doctors live elsewhere even today.

NO ONE has an accurate population figure post Katrina, but the city has lost some 25 per cent of its 450,000 citizens. In the hurricane's aftermath, Nagin and other politicians appealed to sentiment and their voting base with pledges to rebuild the entire city, rather than accept that some neighbourhoods were too vulnerable to flooding. The result is an unplanned pepper-potting of returnees scattered widely across empty, dark and unpoliced wastelands. Pioneers who have come home to rebuild can find themselves the only residents for blocks. Robberies and the high-profile multiple murder of an isolated family have deterred others.

Even in Holy Cross, only some 40 per cent of locals has returned. In the meantime, houses elsewhere are mouldering, and vandalism and the theft of valuable architectural items such as fireplaces, cornices and doors continues unabated. Those householders brave enough to refurbish are hampered by junkies stealing building materials and ripping out copper pipes to sell as scrap for a $20 fix.

After two years of inaction by Washington's Federal Emergency Management Agency and blundering at city level, Mayor Nagin appointed Blakely to lead the reconstruction effort. Blakely, of the University of Sydney, had worked on post-earthquake recovery in San Francisco and Kobe, Japan. He promised "cranes in the sky" as building got into full

swing. It is a promise he has repeatedly been taunted with as new buildings stubbornly fail to appear. At the time of *The AFR Magazine*'s visit in May, a crane count came up with a grand total of one in the whole downtown area.

The magazine caught up with Blakely on the day after his resignation as executive director of recovery. He was happy with the job he'd done. "This city is up and running," he says. "People are complaining about traffic jams. Two years ago there wasn't a traffic signal working between here and the place I live two miles away. When I came here the population was 200,000 and now it is 330,000 to 340,000. So obviously I have done nothing," he deadpans. "The buildings have still got to come up but when I say 99 per cent, I mean 99 per cent."

It is a wild claim given the evidence of dereliction on any casual tour of the city. What Blakely has been doing is putting a plan for recovery in place. He has identified 17 target areas for rebuilding and a number of anchor developments to give the city an economic future as a producer economy rather than solely a service one for tourists.

These include proposals for the $US1 billion ($1.25 billion) Millennium Port (a new container facility) and a revivified entertainment and creative industries district on rundown Canal Street between the restored Mahalia Jackson theatre and the splendid Saenger movie theatre. At its core is a new $US2 billion-plus hospital and biomedical sciences campus.

What Blakely's also been doing is fighting a city bureaucracy notorious for graft, incompetence and sloth. Court action is pending against a number of branches of the public service, and the housing authority has been in receivership for years. Just a year into his appointment, Blakely told *The AFR Magazine* he was considering resigning unless he was given the power to change work practices and set priorities. "The last time we spoke, I didn't have control of the list; I didn't have any idea what the projects were. If I had to rely on the existing system, it would have been a hundred-year job."

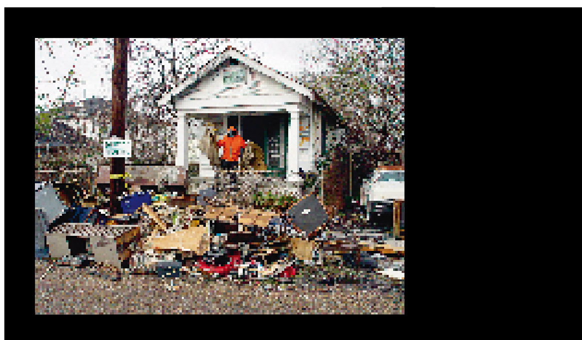
Blakely won this battle and was placed in charge of the whole shebang. He overhauled departments and bawled out staff. He brought in outside consultants. "I was given more authority to spend the money the way I wanted," he says. His critics say the mayor had made an appointment in his own image and that both men are long on talk and short on action. But the crane count is not the point, Blakely says, because buildings are not the measure of success. "Building social capital – that's the real measure. And restoring the role of government and its place in the system."

At the same time, he argues that hundreds of millions of dollars have been allocated to projects that are ready to go. "This is not a wish list. These things will happen. It will be a five-year building program [starting in November]. People here don't take well to the notion that things can take five years. The buildings will be coming up on the next mayor's watch." (Nagin's term ends in May 2010). Nagin himself says: "We are a city in total recovery." The levees are safely in place, he argues, and $US20 billion of development is in the pipeline.

Turns out, however, that Millennium Port is far from a certainty and the biomedical campus is facing stiff resistance from those who see it not as the salvation of New Orleans but as a greedy monster that will eviscerate the Mid-City historic district, just north of the French Quarter, and empty out part of the central business district. Mid-City dates in large part from New Orleans' late 19th-century 'golden age'.

At the heart of the controversy is the fate of downtown's Charity Hospital. Built in the 1930s, it was first port of call for the indigent. Its emergency department had particular expertise in knife and gunshot wounds. During Katrina, the hospital was both a refuge and a symbol of the failed evacuation, with desperate staff trying to save patients' lives after rising waters cut off electricity. It hasn't reopened its doors. The nearby VA hospital for war veterans has also closed permanently.

Plans for a new Louisiana State University facility, including a replacement for Charity and a new veterans' hospital, amount



Above: Houses restored by the National Trust. Below: The restored McDonogh No.11 School which reopened last year and Mid-City's historic South Prieur Street. Both are threatened with demolition.

to about 200,000 square metres of development across 15 city blocks. Some 249 buildings – 165 of them historic houses, some of which have already been restored post Katrina – will be bulldozed to make way for this development. With the hospital plans in mind, the city has placed a moratorium on building permits, effectively blighting the area and preventing any more resident-led restoration. A viable neighbourhood within walking distance of the downtown is slated for erasure.

The director of the National Trust for Historic Preservation's New Orleans field office, Walter Gallas is at the forefront of the fight to save Mid-City: "I think there's a vision of a handful of people that existed even prior to Katrina that New Orleans won't have arrived until it has a bright, shiny new medical facility like they do in other successful American cities. And everything has to be new. There's absolutely no interest in considering reuse of existing buildings, doing infill or a combination of both. To me, it is incredibly bad planning [and] incredibly bad leadership that sold this idea."

The trust has filed suit in Washington against federal funding for the plans and has just won a vote in the lower house of the Louisiana legislature that prevents the Louisiana State University pre-emptively seizing property to demolish and clear the site without first securing finance for the scheme. The university has already been accused of physically trashing the interior of the old Charity facility – itself a heritage building – to block refurbishment arguments there.

Patty Gay of the city's Preservation Resource Centre agrees with Gallas. The city leaders, she says, "are looking for big, cataclysmic projects … It has to do with image – they want to get away from the image of Charity Hospital. It is a suburban approach and a total disregard for the city of New Orleans." Gallas says preservationists don't disagree with the economic aims of the city fathers: "Nobody has an argument with the goal, but how do you go about [achieving] that?"

The Foundation for Historical Louisiana has spent $US600,000 on engaging respected architects and planners RMJM Hillier to come up with a counter-proposal for Mid-City. Its alternative involves refurbishing and extending the existing Charity site and building on a much smaller section of Mid-City. They say it can be delivered at a lower cost and more than four years sooner than the city-sponsored plan.

Nagin defends his record to *The AFR Magazine*: "I think we have been trying to maintain the architectural integrity of the city." The conservationists "have a right to be a little concerned", he concedes, but "New Orleans is a place that is change-averse".

Blakely concurs. "These preservationists don't get the big picture," he counters. "Everything hinges on the port and the medical centre. If we don't do those, the city will just sink. They would like the outcome without any sacrifice – 165 houses is a very small price to pay." He argues that the opponents are thinking in terms of a local hospital instead of a medical science facility that can incubate Nobel laureates.

It is not just the medical campus that is dividing the city, however. The top-down grand gesture versus grassroots approach to regeneration is also being fought over in the housing sector. House and rental prices have risen sharply, as has homelessness – now about 12,000 people. There have been many programs to restore owner-occupied homes but few, if any, that cater to the needs of the very poorest – the sort of New Orleanians who relied on Charity's emergency services.

Instead, at least 3,000 affordable rental public housing dwellings, once home to 20,000 people, have been demolished. Evacuated during the hurricane, the Lafitte estate, which had a history of drug-related violence, was not flooded, but returning residents were refused entry anyway. Instead it was wiped off the map: 896 homes bulldozed with their former inhabitants' possessions still inside.

Dating from the Second World War, Lafitte's buildings were not that old, but its pastiche historic

BEFORE AND AFTER PHOTOGRAPHS COURTESY OF PRESERVATION RESOURCE CENTER AND THE NATIONAL TRUST; GETTY IMAGES

"This could be more than a human tragedy. If the city is lost, it could be a cultural tragedy too."

People gather to listen to music in front of a home at the Musicians' Village in May. The village was constructed by Habitat for Humanity for older 'music masters' of New Orleans.

architecture was attractive. "It was heartbreaking," says Mercadel of the destruction. "None of it was recycled or salvaged. The windows, the doors, the ironwork – they just took the bulldozers to it … [The flood] was an opportunity to get rid of these folks. It wasn't the buildings that were causing the crime. It was a social problem, not an architectural one."

The last of the Lafitte blocks are due for imminent demolition and a further 1,500 affordable units face the wrecker's ball. Replacements, which are yet to materialise, are to be far fewer. To neighbourhood activists, this is social engineering, ethnic cleansing even. Figures from last year suggest about 57 per cent of black people have yet to return home, compared with 36 per cent of whites. The difference has lessened since, but suspicion is understandable given the rhetoric of politicians such as Republican congressman Richard Baker, who in the wake of Katrina declared: "We cleaned up public housing in New Orleans. We couldn't do it, but God did."

Despite Nagin's ambitions to protect the black identity of the place, everyone acknowledges New Orleans is going to be whiter, wealthier and better educated as a result of Katrina and Nagin's decisions. A significant shift in identity is under way. Blakely believes that the city has to accept some home truths: "Low-income housing is going to be hard because the cost of building and the cost of land is so high. People were living in shacks before and we won't allow you to build a shack.

"There are quite a few people in the middle class who don't want any more of that housing here at all. When they say they don't want the housing, they really don't want those residents back who were in low-wage, dead-end jobs, most of whom are African American. And we don't have that many jobs for them even if they came back." The city has to change, he says, from a service economy where just two wealthy postcodes (one, Lakeview, deluged by Katrina) subsidised the rest.

The business community shares Blakely's aspirations for an educated, prosperous New Orleans but not all its members are convinced by the chosen methods. The managing director of the Business Council of New Orleans, Bob Brown says government efforts to find affordable housing for the employees that business owners desperately need are "completely ineffectual" and are compounded by the city's failure to issue the permits required by businesses to reopen and rebuild. "You could almost accept that in the first three to 10 months, but after three years?"

Brown is bewildered by some reconstruction priorities – his own quiet side street has been resurfaced while Elysian Fields – a major avenue – is still "like Haiti". He calls it "the perfect storm of ineptitude. I think the landscape has been stacked towards advantaging new construction. We will pay a cultural price in not trying to rescue the unique and salvageable housing stock." People loved New Orleans, he says, for its "clever, imaginative architecture. It spans the social spectrum; there's the elegant mansion on Saint Charles [Avenue] and there's the little shotgun." Although Brown sees crime as New Orleans' principal problem and the concentration of poverty as a bad thing, he agrees that there is an "element of social engineering" to the city's reconstruction effort.

In the absence of an adequate public housing program, charities have provided the bulk of new dwellings. The myriad initiatives include actor Brad Pitt's eco-led Make It Right project, which is building a handful of houses in the devastated Ninth Ward (some would say in the wrong place) and Habitat for Humanity's Musicians' Village, also in the Ninth.

At the latter, the rebuilding effort over five blocks is being coupled with an attempt to gather back the diaspora of New Orleans' musicians, whose incomes weren't the steadiest even before Katrina. More than 25,000 volunteers have helped prospective home owners build affordable new homes, for purchase at $US75,000 for a three-bedder. The cultural importance of the project is hard to underestimate. "Bob on the corner is a jazz drummer; Smokey at the end of the block was Fats Domino's drummer for 26 years," reels off Habitat's New Orleans spokesman, Aleis Tusa. Al 'Carnival Time' Johnson strolls up the street for a chat past some of the 216 houses the charity has built. "For the past three years, we have been the largest house builder in New Orleans," says Tusa.

The lolly-coloured houses feel raw but their front porches are being worn in and an affable, community feel is palpable. One hammer-wielding volunteer, 24-year-old Dan Skord, a graduate in international studies at the University of Vermont who has been working on the project for two years, is clear about what it means: "If you lose the musicians, you lose the music, then you lose the tourism, then you lose New Orleans."

Truth be told, New Orleans was in decline long before Katrina peeled back roofs and crashed iron barges into historic timbers. And jazz alone will not save the city. Since the 1960s, the population has dropped from a peak of some 650,000. It is a shrinkage that accelerated with the departure of Gulf Oil's headquarters in the 1980s. Only Shell remains downtown, where claims of 80 per cent occupancy seem dubious on the half-empty CBD streets.

Before the storm hit, the next-door French Quarter had already begun to sell its body and soul cheap to a new wave of souvenir T-shirt shops, pole-dancing emporiums and storefront bars selling takeaway frozen daiquiris from industrial rows of rotating ice machines. In the wider city, there were thousands of vacant or poorly maintained heritage buildings.

"For 300 years, New Orleans has been a wide open place," observes Gallas. "It is a port city, it is live and let live, but it has turned into this tawdry, 'whatever makes a buck' place. The pitch is that it is Mardi Gras every day; that it is jazz bands every day. What the casual tourist missed is the richness of our neighbourhoods." To Gallas and many like him, it is the locals and not government who will steer the city's future somewhere between the Scylla of Disneyfication and the Charybdis of a failed city state. "You know, the neighbourhoods [communities] have got really sophisticated after Katrina," says Gallas. "They have been empowered in a way, and people have decided, because of the perceived vacuum of leadership at the top, to step in and take things into their own hands."

It also makes financial sense to concentrate resources in viable historic neighbourhoods rather than rebuild community facilities across sparsely populated wastelands. Nagin may be adamantly opposed to this notion of shrinking the city's footprint but Blakeley is more nuanced: "It is a shrinking that's occurring [anyway] because of investment decisions. I think the city will reach some 500,000 without adding anything to its periphery."

To some extent, where the city rebuilds should not matter as long as the reinforced levees are resistant to future hurricanes and the buffer of marshland between the city and the gulf that has in part been destroyed by the oil industry has been reinstated. This is not the case. The astonishing truth is that it could happen all over again. This is perhaps the greatest rebuilding failure of all and the ultimate threat to the city's heritage.

Blakely himself is not reassured: "I'm not confident that New Orleans could withstand another Katrina," he admits. "The levees are these thin walls. It still seems flimsy to me. We seem to have taken the cheap way [out]. Only a part of the system is in and only for a one-in-100 event. And if we had a one-in-500 event – which is quite possible with global climate change – we would be back to the place we are."

For Blakely the last phase of his strategy is, he says, to "exit with dignity". He is back in Sydney to take up an academic post at the United States Studies Centre. He ends with a nip at the hand that feeds and a last hurrah: "What we have here is politics without leadership," he says. "This has been an enormously successful recovery but a very poorly communicated one."

Gallas, however, wants to send a warning: "The message we have been trying to carry, really, from just days after Katrina, is that this could be more than a human tragedy. If the city is lost, it could be a cultural tragedy too." ■