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A City's Changing Face

Wealth, Race Guiding Which New Orleanians Stay,
and Which Never Return

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NEW ORLEANS -- Block by block, this city is springing back to life. Block by block, it is receding into the past tense.

With Hurricane Katrina nearly nine months gone and about 60 percent of New Orleans's pre-storm population still somewhere else, the rebirth and the wasting away are closely tracking neighborhood patterns of race and poverty.

Disparities in wealth and in the distance of evacuees from their ruined houses are dictating, in many cases, which neighborhoods will be part of the city's future and which will be consigned to its history. For a city that was two-thirds black and nearly one-third poor before the storm, the uneven pilgrimage back to New Orleans has already changed voter turnout and seems certain to transform the culture and character of the city, making it substantially whiter, richer and less populous than before.

This article, part of an occasional series about two severely flooded streets in the city, examines an affluent white and a poor black neighborhood that appear to have reached their tipping points.

That point has clearly arrived for the 6500 block of Memphis Street in Lakeview, a white neighborhood hit hard by Katrina. It is roaring back to middle-class life, and most owners on the block have committed to coming home.

Landscapers are rolling out sod for new lawns. Granite countertops and commercial-grade stainless-steel stoves are being installed in rebuilt kitchens. There is electricity, water, gas, mail service, newspaper delivery and garbage pickup. Two neighborhood banks are up and lending. A post-Katrina restaurant, Touché, serves breakfast and lunch. Two blocks away, St. Dominic Catholic church has been refurbished and is open each morning for Mass.

"Every day and every week is better, and people need to know that," said Bea Quaintance. With the help of a trailer from the Federal Emergency Management Agency that is parked in her front yard, she and her husband, Gary, and their son, Steven, were the first family back on Memphis Street. "I think this country has done a wonderful job of providing for us."

Across town, in a 98-percent-black, mostly working-class neighborhood that was also wrecked by the storm, the 2500 block of Delery Street has tipped the other way.

Like much of the Lower Ninth Ward, the block is empty and silent, with no electricity, no drinkable water, no gas, no FEMA trailers and no signs of rebuilding on a street where many families owned their

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homes for generations.

No nearby churches, banks or restaurants are open, and no one, not even organizers from groups demanding the reconstruction of the Lower Ninth, seems to have a list of residents with firm plans to come home. Throughout the spring, bodies were found in neighborhood houses.

A sign in the window of Daphne Jones's brick house at 2531 Delery declares: "No Bulldozing. We Are Coming Home." But Jones concedes that the sign is more wish than pledge.

College students on spring break gutted her house free of charge in April, but she says she does not have enough money to rebuild. She has been trying for months to contact and mobilize her neighbors, dropping "Rebuilding Our Own Neighborhood" fliers in their abandoned houses. But such fervent, low-tech efforts have not worked.

"A lot of them are far away, and they don't know what is going on," said Jones, 55, whose two grown daughters and entire extended family have fled the Lower Ninth, mostly for Georgia. She evacuated to a shelter in Hammond, La., filtered back to New Orleans at the beginning of the year, and lives now with a disabled friend in a FEMA trailer across town. The lack of progress in re-creating her old neighborhood leaves her baffled and sad.

"If the levees are being rebuilt stronger than before, why can't we rebuild here?" she said. "It feels strange to me."

To Return or Not?

After fleeing the storm, black residents, especially poor ones from the Lower Ninth Ward and the city's public housing projects, were much more likely than whites to end up living far out of town, according to city, state and federal studies. After long bus rides, many ended up in cities such as Houston and Atlanta.

For these African Americans, generations-old networks of kinfolk, church folk and friends have been obliterated or transplanted to another state where distance and the cost of travel undermine their ability to come home, even for short visits.

Middle-class whites fled in their own cars and tended not to go so far, according to the studies. Many of them rented apartments, bought houses, or moved in with friends or relatives in the mostly white suburbs that developed as whites fled school integration. These New Orleanians have remained close enough to get building permits, deal with insurance agents, hire contractors and bird-dog the reconstruction of their houses.

"The people from Lakeview are not poor," said the Rev. Donald Dvorak, pastor at St. Dominic, the largest church in Lakeview, which is 94 percent white. "They all had the means to leave on their own terms and a place to go -- and the means to come back. That is the difference between us and the Lower Ninth Ward."

Out of 23 houses on the 6500 block of Memphis Street, three have been refurbished and are occupied. Owners of 10 others have firm plans to demolish and rebuild. Architects are finishing drawings for new and -- in some cases -- larger houses.

The block is a work in progress. Three houses are for sale, and seven owners have yet to decide whether

they are coming home. The neighborhood's storm-drainage system is damaged and clogs up after heavy rain -- a worrisome reminder of what could happen when the hurricane season starts next month.

Still, the momentum of return now seems unstoppable.

"It's not a wager, it's a sure thing," said John Pippenger, an accountant and deacon at St. Dominic. He and his wife, Linda, bought a house on Memphis Street early this year to replace one that Katrina destroyed a few blocks away.

There is a large bulletin board in the back of St. Dominic church with a computer-generated map of Lakeview. It shows that more than 1,400 families have pledged to come home. Every Sunday after Mass, worshipers wander back to the map and the pledge list grows longer.

A Toll on the Polls

The post-storm difference between the Lower Ninth and Lakeview was starkly quantified by voter turnout in the first election since Katrina, a mayoral primary held April 22.

Despite months of national publicity and an intensive effort to encourage out-of-town voting, turnout in the Lower Ninth fell 40 percent compared with the 2002 mayoral election. In the precinct that includes the 2500 block of Delery, turnout was down 50 percent. The falloff was mirrored in other black districts across the city.

In Lakeview, where most houses are also still empty, turnout dipped by only 6 percent. On the day of the primary, the neighborhood's polling center at St. Dominic became the site of a joyous homecoming party -- as cars rolled in all day long from the suburbs. In the precinct that includes the 6500 block of Memphis, turnout increased as it did in undamaged, mostly white neighborhoods such as the French Quarter and the Garden District.

Election results -- and the results of a mayoral runoff on Saturday -- will "have a big effect on what neighborhood voices are heard by city politicians," predicted John R. Logan, a sociology professor at Brown University who has begun a long-term study of demographic change in post-Katrina New Orleans.

"Lakeview is going to be an increasingly important political constituency in the future," he said. "And the Lower Ninth is almost certainly going to have less clout in coming years, and that really puts its future on the line."

The prospect of increased political power is an enticement drawing homeowners back to Lakeview, said Dvorak of St. Dominic. There is a growing certainty among returnees to the neighborhood, he said, that they will shape the future of New Orleans.

Waiting in the Suburbs

"When people don't vote, you lose your right to complain about services," said Ron Martinez, an architect who expects to move back with his family to Memphis Street by the end of the summer.

Ever since the storm, Martinez has been saying that race relations are as great a problem for New Orleans as hurricanes. But he says he can do little to redress the imbalances that have been worsened by Katrina. He and his wife, Cathy, have been preoccupied with the cost and complexities of finding a way

to bring their own family back to New Orleans.

After the storm, they agonized about the financial sense and physical risks of returning to Memphis Street. It is below sea level (lower by five feet, in fact, than the Lower Ninth Ward) and just half a mile from where a levee breached along the 17th Street Canal, flooding Lakeview.

They opted last October for a holding pattern in the suburbs, buying a house in Destrehan, a 40-minute drive west of New Orleans. Since then, Ron has been commuting to his office in the Garden District. Their children, Evan, 12, and Marcelle, 11, commute to St. Dominic's School, in its temporary location about two miles from Lakeview. Ron usually takes the children in and Cathy drives them home.

On the first day of spring, they decided enough was enough. They took a financial leap that will soon take them back to Lakeview. They bought another house on Memphis Street and will use it as a base while fixing up their larger house on that street. They have not yet sold their house in the suburbs. "We weren't risk-takers before, but after Katrina, what the hell," Cathy Martinez said.

The Martinezes said they are taking the risk because their block, their church and their neighbors are all up and running. They want to be part of it without driving in from the suburbs every day. And St. Dominic School is scheduled to reopen in August in Lakeview. The kids will need to walk only two blocks to get there.

'Look and Leave'

Until last week, the city had designated the entire Lower Ninth Ward as a "look and leave" area because city water tested unsafe for drinking. That order has now been lifted, but only for about half of the neighborhood.

There is another post-storm fact of life that is even more maddening to former neighborhood residents. Just two blocks to the east of Delery Street -- where New Orleans Parish ends and St. Bernard Parish starts -- homeowners have been back for months. Their houses and their neighborhoods were ravaged by floodwaters to the same terrible degree as the Lower Ninth, but they have electricity, drinkable water and FEMA trailers.

Most of the residents across the parish line are white and, like many white residents of New Orleans, they tended not to have fled far from the metropolitan area. Many stayed with friends or relatives, and have exerted political pressure on officials in St. Bernard Parish to restore services to their ruined neighborhoods.

"I am not a conspiracy person," said William Quigley, a professor at Loyola University Law School in New Orleans and director of its Gillis Long Poverty Law Center, "but it is pretty hard to argue with the facts on the ground. If you are black in the Lower Ninth and you don't have electricity, water or a FEMA trailer and nobody is giving you a timeline when you will, that is a hell of a lot of conspiracy dots to connect."

City, state and federal officials have repeatedly said that they do indeed want residents of the Lower Ninth to come home and rebuild -- when the neighborhood is safe and when appropriate services are available.

But nearly nine months of delays in making the Lower Ninth safe and appropriate -- as similarly flood-damaged white neighborhoods are provided with a full complement of city services -- strikes Quigley as

unfair.

"People in Lakeview have had the chance to decide whether to come home," he said. "People in the Lower Ninth have not yet had the choice. With every week that passes, it means they are less likely to come home. These delays are remaking the city."

Anna Valdery and her husband, David Stirgus, would like to go home to Delery Street.

They finally own their house, thanks to an \$84,000 flood insurance payment that allowed them to pay off their mortgage and have \$27,000 left over.

The brick house, part of what had been a highly successful project for low-income, first-time home buyers, is seven years old and, unlike most houses in the Lower Ninth, appears structurally sound.

But Stirgus, a retired truck driver, and his wife, a nursing-home aide, agree that returning is all but impossible. For one thing, their house on Delery is in the part of the Lower Ninth that remains closed to reconstruction. For another, they have only about \$16,000 left in savings from the Katrina flood insurance settlement -- not nearly enough to rebuild their gutted house.

They live now in a FEMA trailer parked in a row of 52 identical white trailers lined up along a gravel road in Gonzales, La., a small town about 50 miles west of New Orleans. They arrived there after a seven-month multi-state post-Katrina evacuation that took them by helicopter, bus and airplane to Texas, Arizona and California.

In the past month, they have been back to New Orleans for a couple of short, depressing looks at their house and the moldering, abandoned neighborhood that surrounds it.

"The feeling I got when I went back to Delery Street was: Leave it alone, forget about it, go someplace else," Stirgus said.

Database editor Sarah Cohen in Washington contributed to this report.

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