

The Washington Post

Five years after Hurricane Katrina, how New Orleans saved its soul

Advertisement

By Dan Baum

Sunday, August 22, 2010; B01

A month after the levees broke, when New Orleans was still a dark, damp ghost town, I ran into the saxophone player Joe Braun as he loped gloomily through the deserted French Quarter in his trademark newsboy cap. I was in a funk about the latest bad news -- the floodwaters after Hurricane Katrina had swallowed all of the city's real estate records -- and I mournfully conveyed it, half-expecting Braun to burst into tears. Instead, his face brightened. "Thank God!" he said, and hurried off as if to spread the word, the staccato of his footsteps echoing off shuttered storefronts.

It took me awhile to understand. Braun wasn't concerned about real estate, and neither were most New Orleanians, who had always regarded their houses as homes, not piggy banks. Although they correctly guessed that adequate help would never arrive, they were confident that they would physically rebuild, house by ruined house. What worried them was not the loss of deeds or titles, but the prospect of losing their culture, and with it, the city's soul.

I first got to know New Orleans when it was submerged, as I covered the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina in 2005 for the New Yorker. I spent most of the following year there, then moved to the Bywater neighborhood for half of 2007 while I researched a book about the city. Even at its low point, I could tell New Orleans was a profoundly weird place.

The longer I spent there, the clearer it became that what makes New Orleanians so different from other Americans is that they are experts at the lost art of living in the moment. They're less deadline-driven and less money-obsessed than the rest of us. Their identities are more rooted in their neighborhoods, second line clubs, and Mardi Gras krewes and Indian tribes than in their personal achievements. They don't squeeze friends and family into busy lives; they build their lives around them. Sharing a beer on the porch is not something a New Orleanian must

schedule two weeks in advance.

In time, I came to understand that it was precisely this quality of life that New Orleanians most feared losing after Katrina. Their deepest worry was not that they might have to rebuild their homes with their own hands -- this they were prepared to do -- but that the disaster would give the outside world a chance to convert New Orleans into just another city driven by the dollar and the clock. The fact that flooded real estate records made it more difficult for outside speculators to swoop in and buy up houses for pennies on the dollar was, to Braun and many others, a blessing.

Around the time of my encounter with Braun, the Urban Land Institute, the Mayors' Institute on City Design and several commissions run by local developers were setting up shop in downtown hotels, displaying plans for what they called a "bigger and better" New Orleans built on a "blank slate." They unveiled schemes to turn New Deal-era public housing into expensive condos, to open the whole city to casino gambling, to declare generations-old neighborhoods "pockets of poverty" and "clean them out" to make way for mixed-income developments. Some of them brazenly suggested that, with the people of New Orleans dispersed, they could rush their dreams to fruition. (This was back in the good old days of the real estate bubble, remember.)

Looking back, I'm startled by the hubris. One developer unrolled for me a plan for a whole new city, an "Afro-Caribbean Paris" that his company hoped to build with the help of billions of federal dollars. Other developers, members of high-level commissions and even Mayor Ray Nagin told me again and again that the Lower Ninth Ward was "over," that it was "a new day" and that people needed to accept that "certain neighborhoods" would never come back. Janet Howard, who ran a government watchdog group, told me she had seen a map covered with purple blobs representing new construction; a certain well-connected developer, it was explained to her, would be "doing" the city's center.

In church basements and coffee shops, New Orleanians met over and over, plotting to fend off plans that clashed with their neighborhoods' identities and their city's sense of self. At one gathering in a stifling church on St. Claude Avenue, I recall a woman with tears in her eyes addressing the congregation. "People like to talk about 'hard facts,' " she said, "but they don't consider social networks. We have a huge

population of single mothers, a huge population of elderly. These new buildings mean absolutely nothing to us. The social networks mean everything."

I still can't explain exactly how they did it, but the exhausted people in that room -- and people like them all over the city -- drove the barbarians from the gate. Some combination of meetings and marches; T-shirts, fliers and spray-paint on sodden houses ("I'm not leaving for any \$\$\$!"); and occasional hollering at council members and planning commissioners got the message across. The people of New Orleans weren't going to play along. The big plans quietly faded, the blueprints were rolled up and stashed away, and the city grew back organically, street by street, neighborhood by neighborhood, the way its people wanted.

When I was in New Orleans this May, I was dumbstruck by the extent of its physical recovery. I could remember the terrible silence of Katrina's aftermath, but now I had to go looking for traces of its destruction. Even in the Lower Ninth Ward, so often deemed unsalvageable after the crisis, businesses are open, homes are under construction, and eye-popping houses built by Brad Pitt's Make It Right foundation fill block after block.

The city didn't reject outsiders indiscriminately; it accepted lots of help, particularly in overhauling a school system that was blighted long before Katrina. Campuses are being refurbished and the school district reorganized; Teach for America has infused the system with idealistic young instructors; and test scores have risen by almost a quarter since the days before Katrina.

But even while it was busy rebuilding its homes and transforming its schools, New Orleans held on to its character, its culture and its soul. Life may be harder now than it was before the disaster, but it's no speedier. New Orleanians still wander in and out of each other's houses, plan second lines, create Indian suits for Mardi Gras. The Ernie K-Doe Mother-in-Law Lounge, whose roof I once passed over in a boat, is rocking.

New Orleans, in other words, is still New Orleans. It did not succumb to external pressures to become bigger and supposedly better. Compared with those other cities that seem, increasingly, to live with a BlackBerry in one hand and a paper cup of coffee in the other, its way of life almost feels like an act of civil disobedience.

There was a time when the Big Easy's culture seemed likely to work against its recovery. "You pay for your blessings, man," the New Orleans organizer Jacques Morial told me in the dark days after Katrina. "Sometimes you overpay, sometimes you underpay. Right now, we're in an overpay cycle." What we didn't know then was that the city's culture would ultimately see it through. The I'll-help-you-gut-your-house-if-you-help-me-gut-mine communalism, the parties thrown in a neighborhood's first reopened house in the hopes of encouraging others to return, the palpable sense that nobody was alone -- these are the things that brought people home.

Of course, I don't live in New Orleans. If my perspective seems glass-half-full, it's because I don't face daily the glass-half-empty aspects of the city's post-Katrina life: the businesses that haven't reopened, the public housing communities that remain scattered, the shuttered Charity Hospital and the abandoned public health system with which it was associated. In a city still trembling with the post-traumatic stress that followed the flood, mental health services are almost nonexistent. Infrastructure is falling apart. The crime rate is terrible; my trip in May was to attend the funeral of a beautiful young bandleader whose murder was the city's 61st this year. And the [BP oil spill](#) has shaken two of the legs on which New Orleans still stands: seafood and tourism.

Five years after Katrina, living in the Big Easy is not for the weak of spirit. It's a triumph that the place continues at all; that it's still the singular city it was borders on the miraculous. As we mark Katrina's anniversary next weekend, it will surely be a time for mourning and for taking stock of the challenges ahead. But since this is New Orleans we're talking about, it's a time for celebration, too. As a wise old man of the Lower Ninth Ward once told me, "We're capable here of holding more than one thought in our heads."

danbaum@me.com

Dan Baum is the author of "Nine Lives: Mystery, Magic, Death and Life in New Orleans."

Post a Comment

[View all comments](#) that have been posted about this article.

or material will be removed from the site. Additionally, entries that are unsigned or contain "signatures" by someone other than the actual author will be removed. Finally, we will take steps to block users who violate any of our posting standards, terms of use or privacy policies or any other policies governing this site. Please review the [full rules](#) governing commentaries and discussions. You are fully responsible for the content that you post.

© 2010 The Washington Post Company