

Thoughts on the Cultural Impact of Katrina: People and Things and a web-site status report

BY ROBERT M. CRAIG

“The past is never dead. It’s not even past.”

William Faulkner, *Requiem for a Nun*,
Act I, scene III

“I have always depended on the kindness
of strangers”

Blanche DuBois, in *A Streetcar Named Desire*

“How can we live without our lives?
How will we know it’s us without our past?”

John Steinbeck, *The Grapes of Wrath*

In a classic scene in *The Grapes of Wrath*, author John Steinbeck describes the uprooting of lives and the heart wrenching decisions of dust-bowl victims forced to abandon their homes and to leave behind the material souvenirs of their lives. Crowded into ragged vehicles which will transport them westward, desperately trying to decide what, among their belongings, they have room to carry with them, the men prepare a bonfire to burn the artifacts of their past lives, (perceived as personifications of past bitterness), while the women lament, “How can we live without our lives? How will we know it’s us without our past?”

In tragic times of displacement, whether brought about by natural or man-made disaster, our values realign to move “from sense to soul” from “things” to family, from material possessions and accumulated belongings to what really counts in life.

With the loss of life and displacement of citizens from their homes brought about by hurricanes Katrina and Rita, one hesitates to talk about lost or damaged buildings or cultural artifacts resulting from a hurricane coming ashore. Nonetheless, at times such as these, as an architectural historian whose career has focused on the study of buildings, art, and the culture of the past, I find compelling Steinbeck’s representation of Okies displaced from those “places,” as well as “objects” of their lives, and I found myself searching for news regarding the survival of historic landmark architecture, of

pottery workshops and art collections along the Gulf Coast, and of archival records of centuries of New Orleans history.

Man, for countless years, has recorded the present, with an eye that future generations will glean meaning from this documentation, records of what for our children will be their past. In *St. Mark’s Rest*, John Ruskin wrote, “Great nations write their autobiographies in three manuscripts—the book of their deeds, the book of their words, and the book of their art.” As a researcher, I questioned whether, in the palimpsest of time, Katrina had erased most of the autobiography of the Gulf Coast region and lower Mississippi Valley. I sought to learn what buildings still stood, what archival records or art collections had not flooded, and what cultural aspects of these extraordinary places called New Orleans, coastal Mississippi, bayou country, and The South, remained intact, and what had been utterly and irretrievably destroyed.

Civilization and culture mean different things to different people; our experience or knowledge of New Orleans may encourage us to focus on food, music, architecture (high style and urbane or vernacular), literature, and drama, and our interests range from Cajun culture, Voodoo, Mardi Gras, and Bourbon Street, to Spanish moss, shot-gun houses, and a sense of place that is New Orleans.

Take food, for example. We all have “tasted” New Orleans culture in the literal sense of enjoying its regional food, even if a New Orleans-style restaurant may be located on the other side of the continent. But it is not the same unless in this place. In an essay published in the *Baltimore Sun*, John Woestendiek noted, “As with so much of its culture—its music, its art, its literature—New Orleans didn’t just produce cuisine. It oozed it.” New Orleans means “beignets and crawfish bisque and jambalaya ... grillades for breakfast, a po-boy with chow-chow at bedtime, and tubs of gumbo in between.” [Tom Robbins, *Jitterbug Perfume*]. It means blackened redfish, oyster bars, and shrimp remoulade, but Katrina raised the question of the continuing supply of the very ingredients of such local cuisine: it is projected to take three years for the local shrimp and oyster industries to recover from the storm. And who has not sat at the Café du Monde sipping *café au*



Robert M. Craig

Fig.1 Bourbon Street, New Orleans, LA

lait and eating beignets, those peculiarly New Orleans fried globs of dough sprinkled with powdered sugar that cannot possibly be thought of as mere coffee and donuts? [The Café du Monde survived Katrina.]

New Orleans means celebrity chefs Paul Prudhomme and Emeril Lagasse, famed restaurants like Antoine's, Commander's Palace [Katrina did not take half its facade as earlier reported; it suffered awning damage and broken windows], K-Paul's, Nola, Brennan's, Central Grocery [featuring muffuletta], Galatoire's, and Tujagures. New Orleans is the "cradle of Cajun cooking," the home of beef brisket with Creole sauce, the mecca for devotees of Oysters Rockefeller and Flaming Bananas Foster. New Orleans's famed restaurants help shape the culture of this place, and the researcher is motivated by more than academic curiosity in asking how long before these Cajun bistros and four-star kitchens may reopen? Oh, (and this is one huge "by the way") displaced food industry workers number in the fifty five thousands: in New Orleans, almost 10 percent of the labor force worked in the city's estimated 3,400 restaurants. We are at once brought back to the impact of the storm on people.

Similarly, as one contemplates the effects of Katrina on the region's culture, some of us may well ask when jazz, born in New Orleans in the late 1800s, will return to the streets. The embodiment of New Orleans jazz is the saxophone player in the open square, the brass band and funeral parade in the street, and most especially the legendary jazz institution

Preservation Hall. This building, built as a private residence in 1750, evolved into a tavern, inn, photo studio, and art gallery, today containing portraits of the musicians who first filled it with the beautiful sounds of New Orleans jazz. Opened as a jazz hall in 1961, Preservation Hall is, above all, the venue for preserving distinctive New Orleans jazz. Art museums and archives share this intention to keep art alive, and to the extent that the building symbolizes the preservation of jazz, it is noteworthy that Preservation Hall on St. Peter Street survived the storm.

The names of musicians—the people of Preservation Hall—may be less familiar to any but the most devoted jazz aficionado: John Brunious, Narvin Kimball, Joseph Lastie, Rickie Monie, Carl LeBlanc, Frank Demond, Ralph Johnson, Lester Caliste, Lucien Barbarin, Ben Jaffe, John Royen, Walter Payton. That most of our society is more familiar with Britney Spears is a phenomenon about which I dare not disclose my point of view. We (most of us) know a wide range of people associated with other sounds of New Orleans, the work and style of native-born performers Sidney Bechet, Pete Fountain, Al Hirt, Mahalia Jackson, the Neville Brothers, Louis Prima, Jelly Roll Morton, Harry Connick Jr., Wynton, Branford and Jason Marsalis, and "Louis" (Sachmo)—the inimitable Louis Armstrong. Again, we return to people. We await the return of the people's music to the streets and halls of New Orleans: the reopening of Preservation Hall would be symbolic; nonetheless, the future is uncertain for much of what we may have taken for granted as always there in this

city: the New Orleans Jazz & Heritage Festival, held every April, and the Voodoo Music Festival, held in October. The former has been cancelled this year and promises a return next year, perhaps in Baton Rouge, if the pace of recovery disallows its return to New Orleans. The New Orleans Opera has cancelled its fall productions. Members of the New Orleans Philharmonic Orchestra (one of the few symphony orchestras owned by its players) are scattered nationwide.

Given the disturbing news of the past weeks, with their horrific images televised and printed, many of us may better understand, perhaps, New Orleans's association with that related musical idiom, the blues. Associated Press writer Doug Simpson recently reported on one noted blues player who became a victim of the hurricane. Clarence "Gatemouth" Brown, born in Vinton, Louisiana, was a resident of Slidell, a low-lying dormitory suburb of New Orleans. He evacuated his residence in Slidell to return to the town in Texas where he had been raised, and on September 10th, at 81, Brown died. He was "completely devastated ...and heartbroken, both literally and figuratively," his booking agent said. A singer and guitarist who had played blues, country, jazz, and Cajun music for the past 50 years, deep-voiced "Gatemouth" Brown was known in the 1940s for such blues hits as "Okie Dokie Stomp" and "Ain't That Dandy." His subsequent career was marked by "jazz, country, Texas blues, and the zydeco and Cajun music of his native Louisiana." A Grammy Award winner (1982), Brown's other recordings include, "Boogie Rambler" and "Dirty Work at the Crossroads." We cannot help but return to people even as we think of cultural loss.

And yet, New Orleans is also "brick and mortar," and mostly wood frame. As we contemplate the *physical* city in our mind's eye, we may readily question whether that peculiar ambiance of New Orleans as a place, its streets and neighborhoods and the character of the ensemble, will be lost forever. The streets around Elysian Fields Avenue, for instance, were described by Tennessee Williams in "A Streetcar Named Desire" as "poor but, unlike corresponding sections of other American cities, it has a raffish charm." That character, somehow conveyed by the everyday whole more than by "high style" parts, is often best known to us in literature and drama, in vernacular architecture and popular culture, and in poetry and song. William Faulkner decided in New Orleans to become a writer of fiction, and the South is richer for it. Other writers, born in New Orleans, include Truman Capote, Anne Rice, Lillian Hellman, Elmore Leonard, and John Kennedy Toole.

Recognizing the raffish charm of New Orleans, a September 1st *New York Times* article observed that Katrina ushered in "A Sad Day, Too, for Architecture." The city "faces the loss of some of America's most notable historic architecture...in neighborhoods like Tremé and Mid-City, which extend along Bayou Road toward Lake Pontchartrain and are rich in 18th- and 19th-century homes, shops, churches and social

halls." The survival of more elevated sections of New Orleans conveys a lesson about the wisdom of selecting building sites on higher ground, an issue which informed French colonial and nineteenth-century builders' decisions but which has not always motivated 20th century developers. All this is to say nothing about broken levees and the "bowl effect," Gulf Coast beachfront condos, historic districts on the beach, or even ordinary towns along the Gulf. Architectural research must make renewed inquiries into issues of design and regional aesthetics, structure and constructional materials, and behavioral psychology and sociology in order to define a new future for the Ninth Ward neighborhood, the beach house, and development in the wetlands.

As the winds died down, the initial focus for me was to obtain a status report on people and things. Therefore, research for this Georgia Tech researcher, involved activities different from those more typically associated with an institute of technology: my research went beyond test tubes, microelectronics, and laboratory or computer findings measured in nanoseconds. With undiminished concern for the people of Louisiana and Mississippi whom I don't know personally, I, like most of you, initially sought information about a small coterie of friends we do know from the region. I was concerned for the safety of academic colleagues at Tulane, at Loyola, at the University of Southeastern Louisiana, and at University of New Orleans, Lakefront, and so research focused on people. Karen Kingsley, the author of the recently published and award-winning *Buildings of Louisiana* lives in New Orleans and was recently retired from Tulane. Jessie Poesch, author of *The Art of The Old South: Painting, Sculpture, Architecture & the Products of Craftsmen, 1560-1860*, evacuated with Karen to Jackson, Mississippi. Former SECAC President Peggy McDowell of the University of New Orleans lives in Slidell, Louisiana, and left for Memphis. Nancy Fix Anderson of the History Department of Loyola was found in San Antonio—she had been local chair three years ago when the Nineteenth Century Studies Association met in New Orleans. David Hanson, editor of the scholarly journal *Nineteenth Century Studies* stayed home in Hammond, Louisiana, and experienced a harrowing night as Katrina came ashore. These colleagues represented our personal links to Katrina.

My focus then shifted from people to things, and I began to inquire about the survival of houses, especially historic landmarks. As an historian focused on architecture considered as an embodiment and expression of culture, and as a researcher vitally interested in the survival of documentary records of the past, I was immediately interested in the *cultural* impact of Katrina. I investigated the status of art collections, archives, museums, historical records, forts, lighthouses, plantation "out buildings" (including preserved slave cabins), 300-year-old oak allées, an aquarium, a zoo, and even noteworthy modern buildings. I learned of the



Christopher Kyle Craig

Fig. 2 Gulfport, MS, after Katrina.



Christopher Kyle Craig

Fig. 3. First Baptist Church, Gulfport, MS

survival of nineteenth century plantation houses, and the complete destruction of other historic residences.

How did the architectural landmarks of Louisiana and Mississippi, in and around New Orleans and the beachfront neighborhoods along the Gulf Coast to Mobile, fare? Beyond observing obvious flood damage to low-lying districts (and as I write, this is further exacerbated by Rita's over-topping of repaired levees and the re-flooding of the Ninth Ward), one may readily note that it will be a long time before one knows the full extent of water damage to New Orleans cemeteries, to the city's infrastructure, and to the presumed more substantial structures of even relatively recent date.

With regard to the Gulfport and Biloxi beachfronts, my "research" took me to my son, Christopher, and his personal experience and impressions as part of the relief effort. Christopher is a member of a North Carolina "Special Operations Response Team" which was staged in the Mississippi Valley two days before Katrina came ashore, and was soon moved to the Gulf Coast. Based on first hand observations along the beach at Biloxi and Gulfport, Christopher described 3-6 blocks deep of a virtual "war zone" in Gulfport, property lots now only sand, and city block after block of piles of broken lumber. This devastation extended east all the way to Pascagoula.

Steel frame didn't help, as post-Katrina images of the First Baptist Church in Gulfport suggests. Whole walls were blown out leaving exposed steel framing as though the building were under construction, rather than post-Katrina deconstruction. As historians and practitioners of art in the southeast, we all recognize that although there are national consequences, this storm hit in our region, damaged our landmarks, displaced our neighbors, and destroyed art and craft and culture which we know intimately. This extended report to my colleagues of the Southeastern College Art Conference makes audible some thoughts I suspect you share, but also provides a status



Robert M. Craig

Fig. 4. Algiers Neighborhood, New Orleans, LA

report. There are some among us who know more about particular sites, or neighborhoods, or art collections than I do. What this status report seeks to do is to gather in one place some of what I learned during the weeks following Katrina. The information includes testimony from directors of house museums and owners of notable architecture in the region, material from web sites, local and national newspapers, public radio, and colleagues who know other colleagues. Some offer disturbing perspective. For example, Ed Able, president of the American Association of Museums, based in Washington, said, "It is the largest loss and damage to this country's cultural patrimony in history." He continues. "We have never experienced a natural disaster or any disaster that affected so many museums and collections. And many of the collections are irreplaceable."

Without seeking to underplay the human tragedy, this



Christopher Kyle Craig

Fig. 5. Gulf Coast of Mississippi after Katrina

inquiry into the impact of Katrina on regional landmarks of nineteenth-century culture brings focus to historic architecture, to museums and repositories of nineteenth-century artifacts and art, to archives and collections and libraries. I can report some good news, and, unfortunately some very bad news.

The status report on specific buildings, neighborhoods, and cultural resources in the region is to be found on the SECAC website, although in the “print” space remaining, I’d like to offer a few additional preliminary comments and a concluding observation.

Since Hurricane Katrina hit in late August, I have mentally walked the streets of New Orleans, calling to mind the topographical locations of such sites as Madame John’s Legacy (1789), Charles Moore’s Piazza d’Italia (1978), and landmark buildings of historic date in between (such as those designed by noted architects James Gallier or James Dakin). Vernacular neighborhoods on both sides of the river were dwarfed by adjacent earthen levees, I recall, and whole neighborhoods had been built in areas that I would not know—until the “plug was pulled”—were as low-lying as they are.

Television news showed disturbing images of flood waters victimizing an entire city. At the same time, some good news soon emerged concerning the relatively dry French Quarter as well as the Algiers residential neighborhood across the river, and reports described lesser degrees of damage on

Canal Street and in the adjacent Garden District, than in many low lying districts elsewhere in the city.

I found a website that presented a map of New Orleans and then color-coded the flood depths. It was shocking to see so dramatically illustrated how much of the city was under 8 feet (first floor) or 16-18 feet (eave of roof) of water. It is hard to imagine the horror some endured. My son Christopher, at age 26, found himself trying to console a Mississippi man who had found himself trapped in his house with his family as the water rose. They moved to the attic, as the water reached the first floor ceiling of their house. In horror, they moved to the center of the attic, as the water rose further, until the family found themselves chest high in water, with their heads in the triangle of air at the peak of the attic gable; then it appeared the flooding had leveled off. The husband knew no one could know they were trapped inside, so he thought in desperation how he might get outside to get onto the rooftop to flag down some help. There was a hole, at the corner of the attic floor, where the gable created a roof eave and where he knew the soffit was broken. After three attempts, diving underwater to try to squeeze through the hole and resurface outside the house, the man was able to crawl onto the peak of the roof outside. He soon flagged down a helicopter, whose relief workers took an axe to the roof to free the man’s family, only to find the flood had risen

Figs. 6 & 7. Louis Sullivan Cottage, Ocean Springs, MS



Before Katrina, Photo: Robert M. Craig



After Katrina, Photo: Mississippi Heritage Trust

Frank Lloyd Wright came to the Gulf Coast in the late 19th century and built two shingle houses in 1890 during the period Wright worked for Adler and Sullivan. The Ocean Springs vacation cottages, one for Louis Sullivan himself, and the second next door for James Charnley, are about as “early Wright” as you can get—he had begun his architectural career only three years earlier. Sullivan fell in love with the Gulf Coast and the beauty of the natural landscape, and a 1905 *Architectural Record* description of the veranda of the Sullivan bungalow speaks of “great clusters of white wisteria hanging from the roof” and the view “across the stretch of water of the bay glittering with countless gems beyond the ransom of kings.” When Katrina hit Ocean Springs, the Louis Sullivan House was “vaporized,” according to its owner, and Louis’s “paradise, the poem of spring, Louis’ other self” [as he wrote in *An Autobiography of an Idea*] was simply gone.

further and filled the last air pocket under the peak. His wife and children had drowned, and the body of one child, who may have tried to follow him out the soffit hole, was nowhere to be found.

In such circumstances, the best and the worst in human character emerges, and while politics and sensationalism are too often the filter through which we learn selected details about the experiences of post-Katrina New Orleans or problems of evacuation or relief work, there are more positive

stories as well. A recreational fishing boat, scarred and partially crushed, was found high and dry along the beach of coastal Mississippi, and in bold black letters a note intended for the owner was scrawled on the boat’s dashboard. “Sorry about your boat,” it read. “It saved five lives.”

Please continue on the SECAC web site where you will find extensive information on the status of buildings, archives, museums, and other cultural resources affected by Katrina, at www.furman.edu/secac.



Robert M. Craig

Fig. 8 Florence, Italy: The Arno & Ponte Vecchio



Robert M. Craig

Fig. 9 The Ponte Vecchio the day after the 1966 flood

John Grisham provides a more positive note on which to close. In a recent piece in the *New York Times* entitled, “The Gulf Will Rise Again,” Grisham commented, “the task of rebuilding is monumental and disheartening to the outsider. But to the battle-scarred survivors of the Gulf Coast, today is better than yesterday, and tomorrow something good will happen.” I can tell you all, as you can tell me, that I’ve been touched by this tragedy personally, by learning of colleagues we know who have lost much, beyond what we can conceive in our own lives, perhaps.

When my son sent me images from Gulfport, MS, those first weeks after Katrina, it brought back memories from 1966, when perhaps I came the closest in my own life to experiencing first hand the devastation of flood waters. But on that occasion in 1966, I was merely a tourist. In November of that year I was a graduate student on a study tour in Italy with about 30 fellow students excited about visiting for the first time Renaissance sites in Florence. We had been in the city for five days. Late one evening, my roommate and I were walking along the Arno, remarking at how high the river was

getting and how fast the current was moving—certainly not the placid, light reflecting stream depicted in the painting of the Meeting of Dante and Beatrice reproduced in the opening pages of my guidebook to Florence.

What neither of us knew was that overnight the now famous Florence Flood would inundate the city, and that the next morning at day break, we would be wading in knee high water, abandoning our already flood-damaged hotel at the Ponte Vecchio to find shelter in another hotel further from the river. Our second hotel was located near the church of San Lorenzo, and as we considered what further activities might fill the rest of our day, the overflowing river had spread through the city and had reached our second hotel where it was rising up the lobby staircase. We spent the day watching the street outside fill with ever-deeper floodwaters and a rushing torrent that swept away personal belongings, appliances, and even automobiles.

The next day, perhaps not unlike our concerns about the survival of art and architecture after Katrina and my search for information about the impact of the flood on cultural



Robert M. Craig

Fig. 10 Florence during the 1966 flood.



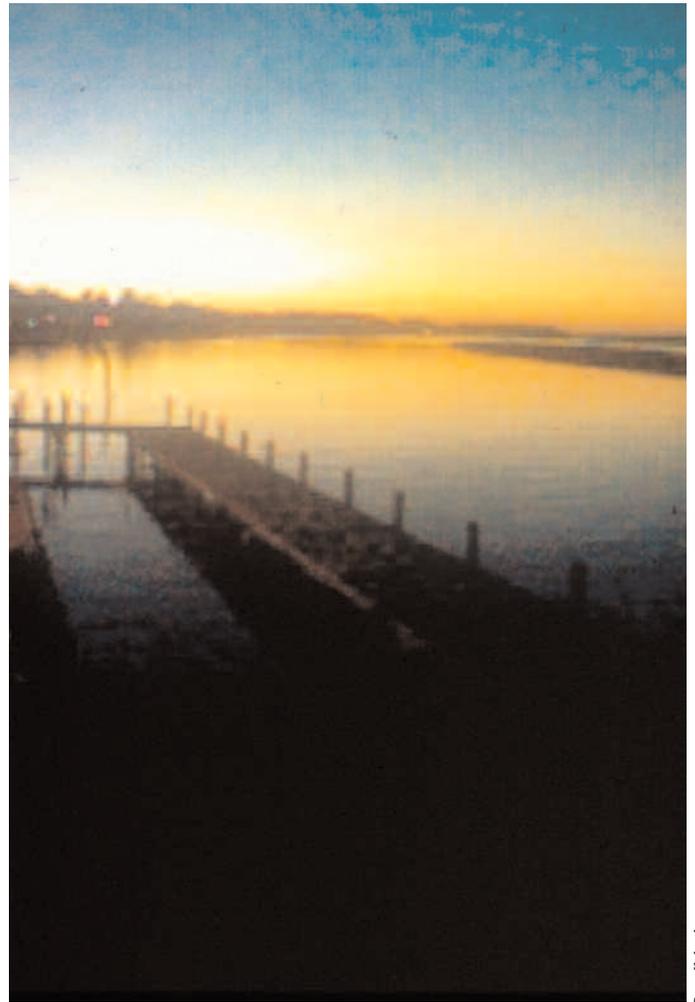
Robert M. Craig

Fig. 11 Florence, street near Santa Croce



Robert M. Craig

Fig. 12. Ghiberti's Bronze Door panels, day after the flood.



Dana Habeeb

Fig. 13. Anthony's Pier, Pascagoula, MS

resources in our own region, I was drawn to the Florence Duomo and its Baptistery. The current of the flood had swept around the church and slammed headlong into the Ghiberti bronze doors. As I stood, as Michelangelo had stood before what he called the door of paradise, I was horrified to see five of the ten panels dislodged from their place on the doors and in a heap in the oil-infused river mud at my feet.

Later I stood outside Santa Croce observing there the oily river stain marking the level of the flood some ten to fifteen feet above my head, realizing the Pazzi Chapel must have been totally underwater. This was one of the lowest spots in Florence, and the site of the severely damaged Cimabue. As I turned to leave the tiny piazza, I witnessed a family carrying, shoulder high, an old man's body laid out on an antique paneled door.

John Grisham would remind us that Katrina's wind and flood was just as real to a Gulf Coast culture—perhaps in its small neighborhoods less well known to the western world,

compared to Renaissance Florence, but one in which an art, and a regional vernacular architecture, and a regional pottery craft, and an environment and ecology have defined a place no less distinctive. Grisham reminds us further that hope does not come from handouts or legislation, from photo ops and political promises. Hope, in Southern Mississippi and Louisiana “comes from the people and their remarkable belief that, if we all stick together, we'll survive,” as Grisham expressed it. Grisham reminded me, finally, of the spirit of this place we call our southeast region, our SECAC region.

He quotes William Faulkner, from the novelist's remarks in accepting the Nobel Prize in 1950, and with these remarks I will close. “I believe,” Faulkner commented, “that man will not merely endure: he will prevail. He is immortal, not because he alone among creatures has an inexhaustible voice, but because he has a soul, a spirit capable of compassion, sacrifice, and endurance.”