

**A Katrina Weekend**  
**A Tentative Report**  
by Michael Kane

I did one thing I had dreaded until this weekend: I finally saw two sections of the city that flooded and had several feet of standing water in them for five weeks. Central City and Lakeview, polar opposites in terms of class and race, married forever in this quasi-apocalyptic destruction. Fully one fourth of the housing stock of this city will probably have to be bulldozed.

Last weekend, Marianne had accompanied our friends to help out in documenting and salvaging whatever could be rescued from their house in Gentilly. I just could not face it. She had forewarned me about how the rest of the city outside of this island of uptown had fared. It was no help. Since we do not have television at home, I had no real preview of the scene.

For two weeks prior to Friday, I was trying rather desperately to restore my center of gravity: Here we restore centers of gravity by eating out. We live in one of the great culinary gardens on the planet. FEMA and estimators and the bumbling Red Cross and the noise and soot of the bulldozers and backhoes, and the stench of the trash and the refrigerators on the side streets, and the myriad hassles of this postdiluvian city... all this complexity and drama make me hungry. I. It is how we deal with tragedy. I should mention that we eat copious amounts after funerals--enough to wake the dead.

Neither one of us attend uptown cocktail parties, nor do we belong to any carnival clubs, nor any university nor political study clubs nor churches, the major social venues of the city, the places where real history is made. We are not Republicans in a 95% republican district. Most sociologists would describe us as social isolates. One of our neighbors describes us as "that older, funky couple". We are generally clueless as to what is happening in the city, the latest political, social, or even real estate gossip. Pre-Katrina no one in New Orleans admitted to being out of the real estate inflation gossip loop. It marks a person as simply not worth knowing, not one to trust.

Our wondrously constricted social life is a few close friends, movies, my sister and her nine year old daughter, my favorite niece, a couple of odd hobbies, and--joyous passion--eating out at great cheap restaurants that dot my university neighborhood: one night middle eastern, one night good old Creole neighborhood cooking that the tourists never get to, one night Salvadoran cooking at the Taqueria, one night the world's best pizza by one of the most famous Italian families in this city, (Reginelli's) an occasional dinner or barbecue with family friends, nice bottles of cheap wine, etc. And ice cream at a place five minutes from the house that makes its own, where my niece and I--- in better times-- eat ice cream cones and play poker.

For two weeks, it had been a special joy to see old friends, to hear their stories of the (for a few lucky ones) transient diaspora, to just feel good about our amazing good fortune... we had somehow escaped the flood that devastated 80% of the city. We were

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the lucky sliver of a twice-cursed people. Vague feelings of survivor guilt invade,, and then are quickly shunted aside. A lot of nights these past couple of weeks we just sat around the house enjoying the music, the silence in the neighborhood, reading, even talking (yes, even talking).

So this weekend, Friday, I finally got around to areas of the city I had not dared to enter before now. I knew it was bad, but not as bad as what I saw. Television (I was told afterwards) actually makes it seem less devastated. Our first excursion was to Central City, hardly mentioned in the reports on storm damage in New Orleans. It had flooded and had standing water for five weeks.

Historically, Central City, all up and down the length and breadth of this huge swathe of land right across the tracks of the St. Charles Streetcar, the more or less invisible wall of apartheid that separated the haves from the have not in my neighborhood. I am talking of about five square miles of the planet here, ten minutes by car from Audubon Park. Generally, starting at around Napoleon Avenue, if you lived on the Lake side (outsiders call it south) of St. Charles, you were poor. If you lived on the River side (north) you were doing okay, probably poor by the standards of most cities, but okay and maybe even a bit better than okay.. Every one of those south of St. Charles Avenue census tracts, thousands of homes, all the way to the Central Business District downtown, showed a pre-Katrina family income of ... ballpark average.... \$10, 000 or less a year, some with an income of \$5000 for a whole census tract.. You can Google it for the exact figures.

Two truths here: Much of the housing, pre-Katrina, is one story wooden structures, dilapidated, with lots of boards hanging off the structure, rusting hinges on the houses that have doors, most streetlights out ( before the storms) or government housing project, no doors on the 4-plex dilapidated brick structures, blocks and blocks of huge population densities. If you think a flatter Guayaquil Ecuador or maybe the favelas/slums of Rio here, you would not be far wrong. And much of that same Central City is vacant land, reminding one of the largely absent center of Detroit, returning to vast fenced pastures of green, owned by absentee landlords, who were apparently waiting for a renaissance that never happened.. All this is Pre-Katrina.

Central City is no accident. It's a visible blueprint of race and economics in this city. You only have to look: If a tourist takes the St. Charles Streetcar, that tourist will see hundreds of stately mansions gracing both sides of the streetcar tracks. It is one of the most poetic visions of the city, that makes the tour guides gush with superlatives.. Mile upon mile of beautiful mansions reflecting all kinds of architectural styles that make New Orleans an urban marvel. The dwellings of Central City were historically the houses of the "infrastructure" for those mansions, the poor maids and gardeners, and drivers,, who were housed close to the Big House so that they could be summoned at a moment's notice, or kept late at night and then could walk back to their housing,, always close, always to be watched but not noticed. Discreet. Hidden. Yet always there.

I might be wrong, but I think it was our first ghetto. My memory doesn't have the full story of Central City, but I dimly remember from childhood that it was home to another

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hidden community. The Jewish community, which has always been integral to the history of this city, was one of the first communities to populate this area, close to the rich in the St. Charles mansions. It became the shopping center for the mansions and in the fifties was the alternative to downtown marked-up department store shopping. They built department stores and grocery stores, and Army surplus stores all over Dryades Street. As a child in the 1950s you went to Dryades ( now Oretha Castle Haley) to get cheaper school uniforms and dry goods of all sorts that easily beat the downtown department store prices. Several synagogues which are now black Baptist and Pentecostal gospel churches, formed the spiritual nexus of the area. Now there are no synagogues left in Central City. Recycled buildings serve newer forms of religion.

It is a truism blathered about endlessly by the tour guides that we didn't historically have the rigid segregated patterns of the north, that everybody in New Orleans lives side by side. Just one big happy family gumbo. One could say, with most observations about this city, the generalization is again both true and not true.... (There is a glaring exception by the Industrial Canal, Desire, the Ninth Ward, surrounded by water and railroad tracks, where a bridge is the only way in... the areas of the city that suffered the worst flooding).

But a sharper eye will note the invisible walls of income, class, and race, all worked out in visible housing patterns. We locals know this.

Each neighborhood, or ward, has its own traditions, its own colors, its own language, completely separated duchies. When I was a child you knew which neighborhood never to go in without your gang. The Germans settled in one neighborhood, the Irish in the others, the Italians had and still have their neighborhoods, each with a separate way of speaking the argot, the special urban patois of this city.. Racial segregation trumped all of these ethnic neighborhoods. Blacks were simply invisible. Ralph Ellison invisible. I take friends from other cities or countries into Central City on quick tours, then wind in two car minutes back to mansions. It's my way of giving synoptic flashes of our life here. They never cease to be amazed at the juxtaposition and the interweaving of huge wealth and shattering poverty, all within one mile of this earth. It is exactly the view I want them to have.

In most of the cities of the world, poverty is in the "cinturones de miseria", the misery bands, concentric circles or sectors that surround the urban core....Paris, when one arrive by train, has its thousands of ugly high-rises, the banlieux, , and cramped streets teeming with people, that are the tourists first introduction to the real City of Lights...

What I saw Friday in Central City left me speechless.

We rode around in silence for awhile. Then I started taking pictures of the devastation...The camera saw miles upon miles of houses that had the bombed out feel of the day after World War II. The only thing I could think of , the almost indescribable scenes:: the opening scenes of Fellini's La Strada, Dolce Vita, Or any number of those post World War 2 movies that opened up on a grey , dry, bombed out city with a little

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child rolling a wheel down the road with a small stick? A grey sky overhead matches the road and the rubble. Alone, vacant, bombed out buildings on both sides of the road. Silent. That was Central City on Friday. We saw a total of seven African Americans in a vast area that was teeming with life before the 29<sup>th</sup> of August. Dust and abandonment were everywhere. No street life, no dogs, no cats, no birds. Just dust and the flood lines on the homes and furniture tossed about like fiddlesticks all over the streets. These were houses that sat for five weeks in floodwaters that lapped at the windows. A fine dust lay on every one of hundreds of abandoned cars, silent markers of water levels.

One estimate is that one hundred thousand homes will have to be demolished.

*And then in this strangely juxtaposed reality all out of synch with time, we left the devastated area, found parking in the French Quarter (rarer than winning Powerball), walked around Jackson Square, went into a few shops that were open, saw people eating beignets at Cafe Du Monde, stopped into the cathedral to read the grave markers of the archbishops, landed at our favorite place in the Quarter for most of our lives, Napoleon House, had a muffaletta and an Abita beer, got in the car and went back uptown. Just like we have done thousands of nice cool days before.....to watch the tourists watching us, the natives, in their habitat. For a brief moment in the chaos, we both felt a return to peace and something like normal.*

*Until Lakeview, our second mystery tour, the next day, shocked us one more time.*

*I believe that one of the core, iconic, post-Katrina memories will be one sight on West End Blvd near the Lake. You come off the west end exit on the interstate and the first sight you see is a mountain of millions of pounds of debris reaching up four stories to the sky, which for the moment makes it the highest natural structure on the Gulf Coast. Lakeview, bordered on the north by the south shore of huge Lake Pontchartrain---26 miles across by a causeway -- is a complex mix of multimillion dollar mansions and hundreds of modest livable taxpaying homes near Lake Pontchartrain. This area is the solid rich and middle class core of the east Bank of New Orleans. Real estate values had been sky high the day before Katrina's floods. The area pays 34% of the property taxes in the city of New Orleans. Today it is a pile of rubble. Dust and a musty odor of mold fill your nasal passages so thoroughly that it takes your breath away. The refrigerators full of their rotten food are just now multiplying on the abandoned streets. At least, though, you see activity, people. Not so in other areas where not even the birds fly.*

*On the Sunday we were there in Lakeview, it was waking up from the shock of the first couple of weeks. A handful of people already had set up trailers for living on their property; the place was teeming with bulldozers and adjusters. This huge area of the city has a lot of subsections that were less devastated by the floods than others. The geometric axiom which determines one's fate? Those*

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*closer to the 17<sup>th</sup> street Canal suffered most from the flooding. I need to remind myself, while viewing the total destruction, that the Lakeview population has resources. It can afford to rebuild and everyone says it will. Here among the devastation of block upon block of rubble and dirt, there is hope and anger, almost in equal measure. The Lakeview folks tend to be concentrating on the height of the levees. Makes sense.*

*This is in contrast to the three lower income areas in the region: Central City, Ninth Ward, and St. Bernard Parish. These are simply not as resource rich. Yet all the areas- rich and poor- were devastated by the flood. What is it that they share now that separated them so thoroughly before? Race, class, wealth, social position, education, nutrition, early death rates, diseases: every social and metaphysical dichotomy known to epidemiologists separates the miniscule slice of humanity that occupies this space on the planet.*

*What is it that could unite us?*

*It is not a very poetic image for most people: One thing common to all the flooded areas is the dull, dirty, but almost perfectly drawn straight line over 80% of the city and the flooded parishes south of new Orleans all the way to the Gulf.: It is the place where the water sat undisturbed on the front walls of every building for weeks at a time ; it is the flood line that is the marker of everyone's tragedy, the mark of our collective fate, the symbol of our unity as a people.; it varies only in height, depending on the elevation of your house from the flood plain.. It is one of the sorriest scenes in this*

*One image from a printers block off Old Testament scenes from the hand of that mad prophet of modern life, the poet William Blake, keeps showing up in my dreams: I see an angel of the Lord descending on the house of the Israelites, marking the doors of the faithful, so that the inhabitants are spared the plague which took the firstborn of the people of Egypt.. It was, I think, the last of the plagues., the big wallop, the dealmaker, After that, the Pharaoh said: Let them go.*

*I hope this city has a kinder angel still left in the lord's army. The watermarks on the doors are all over this land.. But we are just now beginning to face even greater plagues than the death of the firstborns.*