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## 9th Ward: History, Yes, but a Future?

Race and Class Frame Debate on Rebuilding New Orleans District

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NEW ORLEANS, Oct. 2 -- No one here wants to say it aloud, but one day soon the bulldozers will come, shoving away big hunks of a neighborhood known for its poverty and its artists, its bad luck and its bounce-back resilience.

It is likely to be the largest demolition of a community in modern U.S. history -- destruction begun by hurricanes Katrina and Rita and finished by heavy machinery. On Saturday, firefighters put red tags on hundreds of homes deemed "unsafe," the first step in a wrenching debate over whether the Lower Ninth Ward should be rebuilt or whether, as some suggest, it should revert to its natural state: swamp.

A neighborhood tucked into a deep depression between two canals, railroad tracks and the Mississippi River, New Orleans's Lower Ninth has spent more of the past five weeks underwater than dry. Entire houses knocked off foundations. Barbershops and corner groceries flattened. Cars tossed inside living rooms. What remains is coated in muck -- a crusty layer of canal water, sewage and dirt. Mold is rapidly devouring interiors.

The question now is whether the Lower Ninth Ward, which was devastated 40 years ago by Hurricane Betsy, should be resuscitated again. The debate, as fervent as any facing post-hurricane New Orleans, will test this city's mettle and is sure to expose tensions over race, poverty and political power. The people willing to let the Lower Ninth fade away hew to a pragmatist's bottom line; the ones who want it to stay talk of culture and tradition.

The flooded sections "should not be put back in the real estate market," said Craig E. Colten, a geography professor at Louisiana State University. "I realize it will be an insult [to former residents], but it would be a far bigger insult to put them back in harm's way."

The notion is not without precedent. In the 1800s, cities such as New York, Boston and Chicago rebuilt on filled-in marsh. More recently, the federal government has paid to relocate homes destroyed by the Mississippi River floods of 1993; the Northridge, Calif., earthquake; and the Love Canal environmental disaster in Upstate New York.

But never on the scale being contemplated here. And never in a predominantly black, low-income community already smarting from previous wrongs, perceived or real.

"This is a natural disaster; it's nobody's fault," said Lolita Reed Glass, who grew up in the Lower Ninth with her parents and 10 siblings. "My daddy worked. He did not sit on his bottom. You're not giving us anything. What we rightfully deserve as citizens of this country is the same protection we give to other countries."

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Of the 160,000 buildings in Louisiana declared "uninhabitable" after Katrina, a majority are in the New Orleans neighborhoods that suffered extensive flooding. Mayor C. Ray Nagin, an African American who worked in the private sector before entering politics, has spelled out plans to reopen every section of the city -- except the Lower Ninth. His director of homeland security, Col. Terry Ebbert, said in an interview that most homes in the Lower Ninth "will not be able to be restored." Housing and Urban Development Secretary Alphonso Jackson told the Houston Chronicle he has advised Nagin that "it would be a mistake to rebuild the Ninth Ward."

The mayor himself has spoken ominously about the need for residents to come in, "take a peek," retrieve a few valuables and move on. Historic preservation advocates fear that the city will capitalize on a program run by the Federal Emergency Management Agency that pays to tear down damaged buildings but not to repair historic private properties.

"There is a built-in incentive to demolish," said Richard Moe, president of the National Trust for Historic Preservation. "The first instinct after natural disasters is almost always to demolish buildings. It is almost always wrong."

New Orleans, with 20 districts on the National Register of Historic Places covering half the city, has the highest concentration of historic structures in the nation, Moe said. That includes the Lower Ninth's Holy Cross section, with its shotgun houses and gems such as the Jackson Barracks, the Doullut Steamboat Houses and St. Maurice Church.

In a news conference Friday, Nagin was noncommittal about the future of the Lower Ninth, noting that portions are still flooded, there is a "significant amount of debris and mud," and environmental tests must be conducted.

"I am sensitive to the Ninth Ward and people talking about it like it's not people's homes," he said. "If we do have to do any mass demolition in the Lower Ninth Ward, I hope we figure out proper compensation" for property owners, he added.

Although it is less than two miles northeast of the French Quarter, the Lower Ninth Ward is far removed from the money and clout pulsating through downtown. From the high ground along the banks of the Mississippi River, the ward gradually slopes down. Closest to the river, the flood was five or six or seven feet deep; farther down into the neighborhood -- away from the river -- the water lapped at rooftops.

Firefighters, called in by the New Orleans Department of Safety and Permits to help decide what should stay and what should go, peered up at those ruined roofs over the weekend. They left behind the fluorescent red warning tags on the worst hulks.

"If you go in the house, you are entering at your own risk," said Jamie Grant, area leader for the Buxton, Maine, fire department, one of several out-of-state teams brought in for the unpleasant task. City Attorney Sherry Landry said "full structural assessments" have not been conducted on the tagged houses, but the damage appears so severe it "could make occupancy dangerous."

Originally a cypress swamp, the community of 20,000 is overwhelmingly black; more than one-third of residents live below the poverty line, according to the 2000 census. The people of the Lower Ninth are the maids, bellhops and busboys who care for New Orleans tourists. They are also the clerks and cops now helping to get the city back on its feet. The ward is home to carpenters, sculptors, musicians and retirees. Fats Domino still has a house in the Lower Ninth. Kermit Ruffins -- a quintessential New

Orleanian trumpeter whose band likes to grill up some barbecue between sets -- attended local schools. About half the houses are rentals.

"It's a scrappy place where people don't take a lot of guff, but a place where people really respect each other," said Pam Dashiell, president of the Holy Cross Neighborhood Association. "It has heart and soul and beauty."

Dashiell is annoyed by comments by House Speaker J. Dennis Hastert (R-Ill.) and some developers suggesting there is no point in restoring the most flood-prone parts of the city -- the Lower Ninth, everyone knows, even if it is not mentioned by name. She wants "an independent expert who can be trusted" to assess the condition of buildings there and a hefty investment in levees that can withstand a Category 5 hurricane.

Yet even some liberal activists, people who have worked to buoy the fortunes of the Lower Ninth, are beginning to talk favorably about clearing it away -- if residents are well compensated and given suitable housing elsewhere.

"It would be negligent homicide to put people in the Lower Ninth," said Russell Henderson, a veteran community organizer who has formed the Rebuilding Louisiana Coalition. "If you put people back in there, they're going to die."

But scraping away the Lower Ninth would most certainly change the already delicate equations of racial and economic politics in one of America's poorest cities, a city that was 67 percent black but is likely to have a smaller black majority once it is resettled. LSU's Colten fears middle-class Gentilly and wealthy Lakeview -- just as prone to severe flooding -- will nevertheless be rebuilt, while the Lower Ninth is abandoned.

The temptation will be to "open up spaces where there has been a lot of poverty," similar to the urban renewal projects of the 1960s, he said: "Those were seen as a way of cleansing a problem. It didn't eliminate poverty; it just moved it."

Lolita Reed Glass is suspicious that property owners such as her mother will be offered \$5,000 for land that is resold for \$500,000. Dubbed a "Betsy baby" because she was born nine months after that hurricane brought water to the eaves in the Lower Ninth in 1965, Glass grew up hearing how her mother and seven older siblings punched a hole in the roof to escape the deluge. When they returned, her father added three bedrooms, a bath and laundry onto the pale-blue shotgun house to accommodate his growing family.

"We weren't rich; we weren't poor," she said, but those things did not seem to matter to the family. All they knew was what they had. The day before Katrina swept through, Glass evacuated with her husband and three children, her mother, six siblings and an aunt. More than a month later, they are waiting to go back.

"My mother's thoughts and prayers are that she can go home," Glass said. But if that is impossible, she at least wants to give her goodbyes to a structure built in part with her father's own hands. "I've not seen my history, not seen where I come from," she said. "We need to have an opportunity to do that."

Katrina ripped off the front porch and laundry room. The floodwaters tossed the contents like a salad, still moist. The house next door floated away. But 1939 Lamanche St. is there. And for now at least, without a red tag.

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