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PATCHWORK CITY; Largely Alone, Pioneers Reclaim New Orleans

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The sound of hammers and saws. New green grass. A few freshly painted facades. Birdsong piping from a young tree.

This is the Gentilly neighborhood today, once a backbone of New Orleans and all but given up for dead less than a year ago after flooding from Hurricane Katrina turned it brown and gray and silent in 2005.

Gentilly, home to about 47,000 people before the storm and a thin fraction of that now, is not dead. Haltingly, in disconnected pockets, this eight-square-mile quadrant north of the historic districts that line the Mississippi River is limping back to life, thanks to the struggles of its most determined former residents.

But they have had to do so largely on their own, because help from government at any level has been minimal, in their accounts. In recent weeks, some residents have reported getting checks from the state's Road Home rebuilding program, but four-fifths of applicants have not.

Each block still contains only a handful of occupied houses. But a beachhead has been established here, a residential area critical to this city's survival and one that before the storm was dominated by black homeowners, professionals and multigenerational citizens of New Orleans.

A similar story is unfolding in two other once-flooded family-centered neighborhoods, neither of them flashy but both equally important to this city's future: Broadmoor, in central New Orleans, and Lakeview, in the northwestern corner, show signs of life here and there along the wounded streets. Neighbors, encouraged by the earliest post-Katrina pioneers, are moving back in.

All over the city, a giant slow-motion reconstruction project is taking place. It is unplanned, fragmentary and for the isolated individuals carrying it out, often overwhelming. Those with the fortitude to persevere -- and only the hardest even try -- must battle the hopelessness brought on by a continuing sense of abandonment.

The selection process has been Darwinian, with a combination of drive, tenacity, luck and savings seeing the neo-colonizers through. New Sheetrock glimpsed through a window, often as not, was bought with scraped-together savings.

"I'm just keeping my head down," said Albert Felton, 76, a retired mechanic who has exhausted his resources on his frame house on Brutus Street in Gentilly, near one of the levee breaks. He has done most of the Sheetrocking, painting and sanding alone, and the task remains unfinished. "You don't see contractors out here," Mr. Felton said. "We can't afford them."

Reluctantly, he admitted that discouragement sometimes got the better of him: "Some mornings, I just sit on the steps for two hours, and I go right back to Baton Rouge." He is living in that city with his ailing wife and commuting over an hour each way to do the work on his house in Gentilly.

Essential residential New Orleans neighborhoods like Gentilly and Broadmoor, with their bungalows, Arts-and-Crafts and ranch-style houses, grew with the city over the course of the 20th century; their loss seemed to presage an abrupt reversion to the narrow port town along the river of the 1800s. Now, taken together, the rebuilding activity in the once-flooded neighborhoods points to a more hopeful future than might have been thought possible a year ago.

Statistics -- fragmentary and loosely bandied about by civic boosters here -- nonetheless support the idea of tentative rebirth. In Gentilly, a door-to-door survey by a Dartmouth College professor this spring found 31 percent of homes either renovated or occupied, and an additional 57 percent gutted or under construction. That meant that only 12 percent of the houses in the neighborhood had been abandoned; a year ago, block after block appeared forsaken and silent.

A few thousand hammers and nails, of course, go only so far in a city that remains stricken nearly two years after the Katrina floodwaters. With so many houses still empty, the effect of the rebuilding effort in much of New Orleans resembles a giant piece of Swiss cheese, with big gaps in settlement connected by thin strands of inhabitants. Though neighborhoods are shells of what they were, they have not disappeared.

At the same time, whole blocks in the Central Business District remain lifeless. The poorest districts, with tens of thousands of their inhabitants still stuck outside New Orleans, seem abandoned. The downtown complex of hospitals is moribund, as officials squabble over how to bring it back and as upstate legislators have plotted its relocation to another city.

The city's port, the historic mainstay of the New Orleans economy, is years behind those in neighboring states in improvements, and shippers are complaining. The murder rate, the nation's highest, is set to outpace last year's, and the school system has barely begun to recover. Nearly a third of residents polled in a University of New Orleans survey

released last month said it was very or somewhat likely they would leave the city in the next two years; the figure has dropped only slightly since last fall.

Still, the citizen-driven rebound from conditions a year ago is palpable. The old neighborhoods that stayed dry along the river, including the French Quarter, are lively. Restaurants are reopening, music spills from bars and coffeehouses, and tourists are returning in large numbers.

A Tentative Rebirth

The geographic boundaries of New Orleans have not shrunk. Residents have returned to virtually every part of the city in significant numbers, with the exception of the northern part of the Lower Ninth Ward.

Maps of mail deliveries, prepared by the Greater New Orleans Community Data Center, a local nonprofit group, show the strength of the revival. Last August, for instance, an insignificant number of households in the flooded areas were receiving mail. A map compiled this spring showed that postal customers per square mile in those neighborhoods had multiplied into the low thousands. If the overall population has also increased to about 62 percent of the pre-Katrina count -- from 49.5 percent last July, as postal deliveries have -- that means the city's current population may be up to 250,000 to 260,000.

It is a long way from the prestorm population of 450,000, but the effect of the new residents is clear in block after block.

"All it would take would be a handful of people to maintain the neighborhood," said Richard Campanella, an urban geographer at Tulane University -- and this is what is happening.

Today, even on streets devoid of residents, most houses appear gutted, their sodden Sheetrock and floors ripped out in anticipation of renovation, and many are being worked on. Trailers jut from driveways. In Broadmoor, homes are literally up in the air -- raised on concrete pilings to comply with federal flood insurance regulations -- and there is new landscaping everywhere.

In Gentilly, neighbors can occasionally be seen greeting one another across the nearly treeless streets where the magnolias were felled by Hurricane Katrina. These residents are visibly proud to have made a comeback.

The homeowners themselves -- those who have laboriously reclaimed their lives in Gentilly and elsewhere around the city -- have no doubt that their neighborhoods are alive. "It's going to come back, going to come back spotty," said Robert Morrison, a 34-year-old film industry worker in the energetic final stages of fixing up his trim two-story cottage on Western Street. "A spot here, and a spot there," Mr. Morrison said.

Mr. Felton said the change was recent. "You couldn't see nobody, a year ago," he said. "A year ago, you couldn't find people."

The optimism on the ground is measured, however, and for good reason. It is unclear how many people are actually living in Gentilly: a renovated home does not mean an inhabited one, and one possible conclusion from the Dartmouth survey, by Professor Quintus R. Jett, is that the area contains less than a third of its former inhabitants.

Gregory C. Rigamer, a local consultant who specializes in demographic estimates for government clients, puts the population in the Gentilly ZIP code at 37 percent of its prestorm total, with similar figures for Broadmoor and Lakeview. In the devastated ZIP codes of New Orleans East, Mr. Rigamer estimates the current population at just under one-third its level before Katrina.

At nights and on weekends, even blocks clearly on the rebound are silent, which suggests many of the rebuilt houses remain unoccupied. Crime, surprisingly, has stayed largely in the poor neighborhoods that did not flood as badly.

"It's still really quiet," said Sherry Snyder, a nurse who has rebuilt her house in Broadmoor. "It's really kind of strange."

Government's Erratic Course

The debate about whether New Orleans should consciously try to reduce its boundaries, however, seems to be over. When Mayor C. Ray Nagin repeated his resistance to shrinking the city's footprint in his annual State of the City speech in May, he drew approving roars and applause.

"Don't talk to me about, 'We need to be smaller,' " the mayor said. "That's like somebody breaking into your house, and they mess up your whole house, and then you get a judgment that says, all we're going to do is fix up the living room and the bathroom because that's all you need. We want the whole city fixed."

But the course the mayor has set has been erratic, with a belated \$1.1 billion rebuilding plan still unfinanced nearly three months after it was unveiled. Its author, Edward J. Blakely, a specialist brought in by Mayor Nagin to great fanfare late last year, has been bickering with a city agency over who is to oversee the plan's enactment -- assuming money is eventually found for it.

Meanwhile, the state has discovered it will not have enough money for its federally financed \$7.5 billion homeowners' aid program, Road Home, despite earlier assurances that it would, and even though only about one in five applicants -- most of them entitled to it -- have actually received money.

Mr. Felton, the retired mechanic, smiled slowly and bent his index finger and thumb into a zero when asked how much he had received. The story was similar up and down

Gentilly and in Broadmoor, though checks have begun to trickle in over the last few weeks.

When government has not been an obstacle to the rebuilders, it has rarely been a help.

"FEMA didn't help me," said Oscar Lewis, a 79-year-old retired merchant seaman who ran out of money trying to rebuild his brick two-story house in Gentilly. He waited month after month for a Road Home check. "I had to work and scrape on my own," Mr. Lewis said. Finally, a few weeks ago, after months of work, he received a \$76,000 check.

On Their Own

Harry Russell's freshly painted white-columned home on Marigny Street is a shiny beacon of normalcy. Mr. Russell, who came back before his neighbors, emphasized that he knew his way around government, having worked at City Hall as director of the mayor's office of health policy.

"For me, part of my sanity is my background," he said.

Now a professor of social work at Southern University of New Orleans, Mr. Russell used a combination of savings, insurance money and a Small Business Administration loan to restore his house. When almost all the work was done, he received about \$80,000 from Road Home a week ago. "That kind of picks us up and puts us back where we were," he said.

Closer to the spot where the levee breached, on a street still dotted with empty houses, Oliver Delacroix, 86 and sturdy, emphasized two pieces of good fortune: his eight children, who helped him bring his trim little cottage back to life, and his background as a bricklayer and mason, which allowed him to picture the reconstructed house, even when it was in ruins.

"Oh, I knew it could be done," he said. "I knew very well."