This report would be infinitely better if I had taken photographs of New Orleans immediately after the flooding from the 2005 Hurricane Season. However, taking photographs was not a priority at the time, as we did not have running water, and Hurricane Rita was threatening to collapse our already damaged roof. Nevertheless, I did travel throughout the city over the next few months and saw much of the damage first hand. This report describes the conditions of the Gentilly-Lakeview neighborhood four years after the storm. Although both neighborhoods suffered severe flooding, the state of recovery in the two neighborhoods are quite different.

As a native New Orleanian, people from outside the city often ask me how much New Orleans has recovered from Hurricane Katrina. First, I always explain that most of the city never flooded to begin with. It is true that 80% of Orleans Parish flooded, but Orleans Parish is only one of the nine civil parishes in the Greater New Orleans Area. For example, most of the Westbank of the Mississippi River never flooded, and the business there reopened within days after the storm, as soon as power was restored.

This is a photograph of the famous St. Charles Avenue in front of Loyola University. Like the French Quarter and the Riverfront, this is one of the landmark areas of the city that never flooded during the storm. This is the only photograph in this report of a place that did not flood. Now, I was on St. Charles Ave. a few days after landfall, and there was substantial wind damage here. St. Charles Ave. was largely impassible because there were so many fallen oak tree branches. These fallen branches caused extensive damaged to the electrical lines for the St. Charles Ave. streetcars, so that the streetcar line remained closed until December of 2007.
Four Years Later.

This is a photograph of Robert E. Lee in the Lakeview neighborhood, on the northern side of Orleans Parish. Lakeview is a generally affluent section of the city, and most of the people here had at least homeowners insurance, if not also flood insurance. After four years, most of the houses in Lakeview have been rebuilt. The extent of the recovery is so complete that a visitor driving down these streets might never know that Lakeview was one of the most severely damaged areas of the city. The most visible indication of the past flooding are the empty lots that appear throughout the neighborhood.

This is an important commercial district on Robert E. Lee near West End Blvd. It was one of the busiest areas in Lakeview before the storm.

However, this commercial district is very close to 17th Street Canal and Lake Pontchartrain, and it was completely destroyed by flooding. It remained largely abandoned until just over a year ago, when the Walgreens re-opened. Over the next few months, the Subway, the Robert's Supermarket, and other business returned here. Today, the parking lot is filled with cars, and it looks very similar to what it looked like before the storm.
These houses are near the corner of Harrison Avenue and Canal Blvd. Every house in this photograph flooded during the storm. But now, most of these houses have been rebuilt are being lived in, as indicated by the cars parked in front of them. There is, however, an empty lot just off camera to the left, where a flooded house once stood.

There were many houses in Lakeview and Gentilly that never flooded. These houses were generally near a levee or on top of a ridge, where the land is naturally higher than the land around it. This was what happened in the Lake Vista subdivision of Lakeview. The houses near the levees at Lake Pontchartrain never flooded, while all of the houses near Robert E. Lee did.

This is the Lake Vista subdivision in Lakeview, along Robert E. Lee near Spanish Fort and across from City Park. Every house in this photograph also flooded. However, this is one of the most affluent neighborhoods in the city, and almost all of Lake Vista has been rebuilt.

Today, Robert E. Lee is always busy with cars, as it was before the storm. But in the year immediately after the storm, few people had moved back into this neighborhood, and much of Lakeview was virtually abandoned. Most of the street lights and signal lights were not functioning, and power had not yet been restored to many of the houses. A few cars would drive on Robert E. Lee during the day, with residents commuting from outside Orleans Parish to repair their homes. But at night, there would be almost no cars here, and a driver would be driving in almost complete darkness.
Four Years Later.

This is Robert E. Lee in the Gentilly neighborhood. This photograph was taken on the other side of the New London Ave. Canal, only one block away from Lakeview. By contrast, Gentilly is a mixed income neighborhood, similar to Mid-city, with a large elderly population before the storm.

Many families have rebuilt their homes and have returned to the neighborhood. Other houses have been rebuilt by their owners as rental properties. However, much of the elderly were on fixed incomes, almost none of them have returned to the neighborhood. Many of the neglected properties here in Gentilly belong to elderly homeowners. I have spoken to a few former residents from the area, and many have moved to apartments or out of the city entirely rather than go through the difficult process of rebuilding.

This is a close-up of the previous shot. In fact, homeowners are receiving loans, insurance money, and some help from federal, state, and parish governments. New construction and the rebuilding of existing structures are taking place here and throughout the city. However, the responsibility for rebuilding has been largely left to the individual homeowners.

Some homeowners have insurance and the financial ability to rebuild. Others do not and do not have the ability to borrow money to rebuild. Some homeowners have rebuilt, some have demolished their flood-damaged houses in hopes of rebuilding them in the future, and some given up on dealing with the insurance companies and the government have largely abandoned their properties.
These houses are on Wingate Drive near Robert E. Lee, where some of the most haphazard rebuilding has taken place. The houses on this street are in varying states of repair or disrepair.

On the left, we have an empty lot where a flood-damaged house has been demolished. Next to this, we have a boarded-up house that is otherwise neglected. Behind the trees, we have a house that has been rebuilt to what it was before the storm. And, all the houses behind it are new elevated structures that have been raised and could survive a catastrophic flood.

These houses are on Wildair Drive. Again, we have a rebuilt house on the left, a gutted but empty house next to it, a gutted but overgrown house next to it, a house that has been elevated on concrete pilings next to it, and another elevated house next to it.

Houses elevated a few feet above street level are a common sight throughout Orleans Parish. However, houses on concrete pilings were unheard of until after the storm. They still remain uncommon, although many homeowners are now elevating existing houses or building new houses on pilings.
Four Years Later.

These houses are on Warrington Drive near Filmore. The house on the left has been rebuilt and is being lived in. The house of the right is literally falling apart. You can imagine what it must be like to be a homeowner in this neighborhood. You have rebuilt your property, but the property next door may be neglected and have become a breeding ground for rodents, termites, and other hazards. This is an extreme example, but it is a common and serious problem faced by property-owners in Gentilly and the rest of New Orleans.

The house on the right has been gutted in the past, and the lawn is being mowed. There is large a hole in the ceiling, although I didn't see any fire damage or fallen branches when I was there. This damage may be recent. It may not be visible, but there are fringed blue fibers hanging from the gutters of this house. I have seen this on a few other houses in the city. These are the remains of a blue-tarp roof. Most of wind-damaged houses that were once covered with blue-tarp have already been repaired, and the few blue-tarp roofs that remain are left are now disintegrating.

There are some sections of Gentilly that may revert to forest because they are so overgrown. This photograph is from Warrington Drive near Robert E. Lee. There is a gutted house on the left, an empty lot, and a gutted house that is now completely enclosed by trees. Nevertheless, there are few properties that are this badly overgrown, and most property owners have been making some attempt to maintain their property.
This is a concrete slab which was once the foundation of a house on Wildair Drive near Robert E. Lee. Both lots around it are overgrown lots with slabs. On the other hand, the street in the background is Wingate Drive, where many homes have been rebuilt and elevated.

While I was taking these photograph, I spoke to a Martin O'Connell, a professor of Earth and Environmental Sciences at the University of New Orleans and a permanent resident in Gentilly. His wife is a member of the Gentilly Civic Improvement Association. Professor O'Connell talked about the rise in home burglaries and trash dumping in the neighborhood over the past four years. Some people see the abandoned homes and assume that the entire neighborhood has been abandoned by the city government. Ironically, these problems have facilitated the growth of civic associations throughout the city, bringing neighbors together in order to protect their neighborhoods and enforce city ordinances.

Of course, homeowners and businesses are not the only property-owners struggling to rebuild over the past four years. Institutions and even government agencies have also been struggling to rebuild. This is Holy Cross School, as it appears in September of 2009. Holy Cross is a Catholic middle and high school originally located in the Bywater neighborhood. Its campus was destroyed by flooding from the Industrial Canal in 2005, and its new campus is on the former site of St. Francis Cabrini Catholic Church, on Paris Avenue in Gentilly.

Although the school is still under construction, the school is already open and operating from classrooms in temporary trailers, off picture to the right of the camera.
The 17th Street Canal and the New London Ave. Canal are drainage canals, which normally channel rainwater away from the city and into Lake Pontchartrain. During Hurricane Katrina, storm surge from Lake Pontchartrain flowed into the canals, collapsed sections of flood wall along the canals, and flooded the city.

This is the pumping station and flood gate at the end of the New London Ave. Canal, adjacent to the campus of the University of New Orleans. There is a similar pumping station and gate at the end of the 17th Street Canal. Neither pumping station existed before Hurricane Katrina. In the year immediately after the storm, the Army Corp of Engineers worked non-stop for months to build these stations. There were literally construction taking place under stadium lighting at all times of the day to complete this pumping station.

This house is a gutted house on Wickfield Drive near Robert E. Lee. I did not originally intend this report to be so long, but this was the first time that I had extensively looked at houses in the neighborhood since Orleans Parish was reopened in late October of 2005. I was genuinely surprised by what I found. There are no completely abandoned streets anywhere in Gentilly. On every street, there was at least one homeowner who had rebuilt and had moved back in. This might be one house surrounded by ten abandoned houses, but there was always at least one inhabited house everywhere I went.

I also found out that there are almost no houses in Gentilly that had remained untouched since the storm. Nearly every house I saw had been either gutted or had a mowed lawn around it. Even the abandoned houses had been gutted at some point in the past. I can't speak for other heavily damaged neighborhoods, such as New Orleans East or the Ninth Ward. But in Gentilly at least, almost every homeowner had made an attempt to reclaim their house.
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