

New Orleans: 11 years after Katrina

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The American playwright Tennessee Williams wrote “America has only three cities: New York, San Francisco, and New Orleans. Everywhere else is Cleveland.” His most famous work “A streetcar named Desire” is set in the French Quarter of New Orleans. It is a city distinguished by its Cajun cuisine, Mardi Gras, French and Spanish influences and amazing musicians. They even claim to have invented flambéed bananas in 1951 although I suspect that the French have been doing this for much longer. It seems such a natural thing to do!

On a recent visit to New Orleans Foster Langbein and John spoke with Emeritus Professor Shirley Laska about the recovery of the city post-Katrina. The basic facts are well known: some 80% of the city had flooded to depths between 5 cm to 5 m. As many as a million residents may have responded to public calls for evacuation leaving about one quarter unable or unwilling to move.

The death toll is estimated at around 1800 but the true figure of Katrina-related deaths will never be known with any confidence because of the displacement of refugees to every state of the Union. A little over half of the reported deaths were African-Americans and these occurred primarily amongst the infirm and aged.

Afterwards high numbers of the original population did not return including some one third of those formerly living in the Lower 9th Ward. This Ward suffered badly when the levees failed or overtopped. At Shirley’s University of New Orleans student numbers are now only 50% of pre-Katrina numbers.

Large parts of the 9th Ward now comprise vacant lots. Some houses are being elevated and a flash new school has been built. Pre-Katrina, the Ward had been largely inhabited by African-Americans who in many cases owned their own homes and were thus not obliged to purchase flood insurance. The government agreed to pay these people out at the pre-Katrina value but this was a lot less than the cost of repairing the homes. The metro area now has 94% of its 2000 population of 1,337,726.

In 2004 Shirley wrote an eerily prescient article published in the *National Hazards Observer* in 2004 entitled, “What if Hurricane Ivan had Not Missed New Orleans?” (<http://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1111/j.1475-682X.2008.00232.x/pdf>). Prior to Hurricane Katrina, she testified before Congress about the dangers faced by the city of New Orleans predicting that a Category four hurricane like Hurricane Ivan directly hitting New Orleans would result in thousands of people dying, tens of thousands more being left behind and that those left behind would be disproportionately members of marginalized communities.

In Shirley's view Katrina was a socially-constructed disaster caused by the destruction of the coastal marshes and cedar forests by decades of oil extraction and the building of levee banks and canals by the Army Corp of Engineers. The latter reduce the sediment loads that once nourished the marshlands and barrier islands that formerly protected the city from damaging storm surges. As a result coastal Louisiana loses a landmass the size of Manhattan every year.

In her view, New Orleans has suffered almost three centuries of decisions that have reduced the city's vulnerability to moderately frequent floods and increased its vulnerability to very large and rare events. Over that time it has experienced some 27 major river or hurricane-induced disasters. Inequity in the location of neighbourhoods and the distribution of the flooding burden appears early in its history.

She is pessimistic that the lessons have been learnt. The City will not allow water level marks on buildings as FEMA recommends. Many now believe that the only risk is from storm water because the Army Corp of Engineers have solved the storm surge risk for which the city is in hock to the federal government for \$100 million/year for 30 years to cover the cost of construction of two large levee bank systems. Developers are also against raising floor levels as they believe this will ruin *le look* and result in a loss of cultural heritage.

Shirley's latest project is in helping an Indian tribe relocate from Isle de Jean Charles on the Gulf of Mexico some 50 miles south of New Orleans. For over 170 years it has been the historical homeland and burial ground of the Isle de Jean Charles Band of Biloxi-Chitimacha-Choctaw Indians. Residents of the Island have long been threatened by Louisiana's coastal erosion. The Island, which consisted of over 22,000 acres of land in 1955, has since lost about 98% of its land due to saltwater intrusion, subsidence, and sea level rise. In January 2016, the state of Louisiana received funding from the United States Department of Housing and Urban Development to fund the tribe's resettlement to safer ground.

The island and its semi-abandoned village are located in eroding wetlands beyond the main levee systems of south Louisiana. The oil drilling, logging and the Army Corps of Engineers' levee building on the Mississippi River have contributed to erosion of the wetlands, threatened also by sea level rise and intense hurricanes such as Katrina in 2005. In the 1950s, the island was 11 miles long and five miles wide. In 2016, it has been reduced to a quarter-mile wide and two miles long, and the causeway to it is also threatened. Today, only 25 families remain on the island, with many tribal members displaced.

The project, which is supported by the tribal Chief, is at the centre of a complicated mix of State and federal and tribal politics. For those interested in reading more here:

<http://theadvocate.com/news/15343098-86/isle-de-jean-charles-tribe-looks-at-moving-entire-community-north>

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Flambéed bananas are accepted as a legitimate breakfast food in New Orleans (though possibly only on the weekend).



Flood defences near the lower ninth ward. The area to the right was once freshwater cypress swampland offering natural flood defence. Man-made environmental change since the '60s, particularly the Mississippi River Gulf Outlet, brought saltwater to the area killing the trees and converting it to brackish open water.

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Homes are recommended to be elevated at least 5 feet off the ground, a measure opposed by developer groups.



KC King (retired Boeing Systems Engineer) is taking no chances. 'BFE' marks the 1 in 100-year flood level and 'Katrina' the maximum flood height for that event. Note the lifebuoy is above both. FEMA has revised the flood maps in light of the levee and flood wall (visible in the rear of the picture) and advised that he no longer requires flood insurance.