



Left: Dave with Global Green's green building expert, Michael Lopez, in front of the Holy Cross Project's green demonstration home; Above: Churches, both abandoned and active, dot the lower Ninth Ward

Making Things Green

Miracle in the Big Easy: The Ninth Ward is Coming Back

by David Steinman • photos by Ana Gutierrez and David Steinman

It was only four years ago, but for many people it seems like it was only yesterday. At the time, I was on the plains of Iowa, near the Nebraska border, listening to the loud thunder claps of the storm and then waking up and visiting a plant called NatureWorks, where plastic was being manufactured from non-polluting corn and turned into all sorts of neat and useful things like beer mugs for sporting events, yellow coffee cups, and even blankets.

Half a continent away, in the Gulf of Mexico, Hurricane Katrina was looming, big, getting bigger, refusing to budge from its target: New Orleans, Louisiana. What proceeded to happen in the next few days was as devastating a natural disaster as Americans had seen in several decades, perhaps a precursor of what is to come with global climate change. I remember flying back to Los Angeles to my three children. I was alone; but not nearly as alone as the people of New Orleans would find themselves in the days following the arrival of Hurricane Katrina. We all know the story—the story of the great flood of 2005. We know about the terrible failures of the levy system that the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers constructed and of the Federal Emergency Management Administration (FEMA), in light of drowning, looting, dislocation, death and more deaths, thousands (some 1,836).

For the last four years, most Americans have talked about NOLA (New Orleans, LA) without being there. It really isn't fair, if you know what I mean, to gossip about what you don't know.

On December 30, 2009, I visited the Ninth Ward of New Orleans with my fiancée Ana. We were in a Ford F-150 pickup with Global Green's Mike Lopez, assuredly one of the most knowledgeable green builders today. The home of the future—one that is small, compact, super efficient, and affordable—might well have been invented right here in the burgeoning Holy Cross neighborhood of the Ninth



Ward by a group whose founder, Mikhail Gorbachev, was once part of the Evil Empire (that he helped to dismantle with his program of Glasnost).

On the second day there, Mike picked us up at the International House, a member of the Green Hotel Association, and we drove out of the French Quarter and Downtown. That was when he told me, “They have repainted downtown so you won’t see the waterlines,” where we drove down Claiborne.

“How was the French Quarter affected by Hurricane Katrina?” I asked.

“Not quite as bad as you might think,” Mike replied. “That’s because in their wisdom, when New Orleans was first settled, people built on the highest ground. That would be the French Quarter,” he said. But as we drove, where so many businesses and hotels lined the boulevard, he said that this section had water that was four or five feet. New Orleans, at least downtown, was back in business, some four years later. We were there for the Sugar Bowl weekend and plenty of good folks from Ohio and Florida were venturing down to support their team. But downtown was easy to get out of.

The farther away we drove from downtown, the more dilapidated the city became, and then we crossed one of the eight canals that surround New Orleans and we were in the Ninth Ward. I was witnessing something on the level of a war zone, something as devastated. We turned from Claiborne Street, which divided the Ninth Ward into two sections. We were about to enter the worst area. We drove down ironically named and nearly deserted Flood Street. We drove amidst the ruins in the lower Ninth Ward, which is thought of as the area downriver of the Industrial Canal. Unlike the Holy Cross area of the Ninth Ward, this portion is really low, below sea level. It is difficult to describe the devastation. It was so complete and thorough. It was like a flood of Biblical proportion had hit the town—but why would God attack the God-fearing people of the lower Ninth Ward? I saw churches everywhere. Some were going strong. Others were abandoned.

“Somehow over the years nobody gave a damn how people built and everyone wanted to believe the Corps,” Mike said. “But now you can see what happens; this was all a manmade disaster.” Vacant lots, overgrown with grass and weeds, covered with foundations, dominated the scene. A few homes were situated along the roads, but very few—and there were no stores, no lights, no lamps, just outcasts of homes, more frightening than being alone in the jungle. Maybe 10 percent of the people had returned—if even that. We saw roofs littered with debris. It just was not happening.

“You see where we are now is one of the lowest areas in the city.” It was difficult to imagine that where we were was once an actual community. Big spray-painted messages from the time of the flood marked many of the homes.

We passed by the home where Fats Domino had long lived and recorded. “His story is interesting,” Mike said. “It was a few days after Katrina when friends realized they hadn’t heard from him. He was 77 at that time, and he had taken refuge in his attic and there’s a cut in the side of his home, which also used to be his recording studio, where he was pulled out. In that heat and humidity it was amazing that he survived. People say he was emaciated. He lives on the North Shore now.

“The strange thing for the people of the Ninth Ward was that when the storm came and passed, at first they thought everything would be all right, but as you can see, this area is very low lying and surrounded by levees. The storm came and went and everyone came out on the street and then they heard or saw the wall of water coming, rising fifteen feet in some areas, which is why you still see debris on the roofs of homes, but the surge that came

Resources

- www.globalgreen.org
- www.fatsdominomusic.com
- Hear a podcast of Beth Galante of Global Green discuss the Holy Cross Project at www.greenpatriotradio.com



Fats Domino's home survived the flood, although the artist has moved to a different neighborhood.

from the Gulf had only begun. The eight canals that criss-crossed the fish-bowl city became conduits for the surge, a frightening overload. Water from the Gulf went up through Lake Pontchartrain. That was when the levees failed. People had been assured by the Army Corps of Engineers that the levees would never fail, but the water kept coming (from some two miles away). The floodwaters were eight to ten feet high. As the water came up, people could not



Global Green's sustainable green homes will be sold only to people who were living in the Ninth Ward as of August 29, 2005.



Debris from the flood remains on roofs



Home owners can monitor their energy usage daily or even hourly with new smart home technology of the future.

escape, and there was no way to escape through the roof, either. They drowned inside their attics.”

Up ahead of Ana and me were the levees themselves, covered with grass, looking fairly lethal. The Corps always assured the people they would be safe, he said. “But recently the court held the Corps liable for what happened. Sure they will appeal and it will take years, but maybe justice will be done. The Corps is powerful, and it isn’t usual that a decision goes against them.”

The impact on the City of New Orleans has been substantial. When people leave, business leaves. There were no stores. There was about one home per block. Nobody had really returned. Schools were closed down. Churches were closed down. Buildings were boarded.

“But don’t think of this as a socioeconomic issue,” Mike warned. “A lot of people were affected.” Nonetheless, lower income minorities were tremendously adversely affected. It was clear. Still, I understood where he was coming from. Something like this hurts everyone living on low ground.

As we finally made our way across Claiborne and we entered the Holy Cross neighborhood, only the name remained. “The school decided to move,” Mike said.

Yet, the Holy Cross neighborhood is coming back. It is on slightly higher ground and that makes all the difference. In fact, Mike had come from Austin, Texas, where he was overseeing a state-based regional green building initiative, to show how a sustainable community could be built here in the Ninth Ward. The homes that we saw were remarkable and for sale at a very reasonable \$175,000 for a fully sustainable 1,100 square feet. What makes the homes remarkable is how energy efficient they are. The demonstration home was completely energy independent.

There were so many innovative features about the home. Consider that it is drawing all of its power and energy from the sun and geothermal. The floor was made with recycled local wood. The home supplies much of its own water by capturing rain. There was a huge underground water cistern. The geothermal system was impressive because you can actually use the stable temperature of the earth to either warm or cool a home, depending on your needs, and it is free, and there is a renewable and endless supply. The solar panels supplied all of the rest of the energy. There was a control panel on the wall that Mike showed me that you touched to learn about your power usage. You can tell when you use peak power or just a little and relate it back to what you are doing, he said. The entire home was Energy Star-certified. It was actually reducing its carbon footprint to a net negative, going beyond “carbon neutral.”

If there is a take-home lesson from Global Green's The Holy Cross Project, it is that we can make a difference even here. I turned to Mike and asked: “I mean, couldn't some of all that money that went to Wall Street have helped Global Green to do its job better and improve a neighborhood in a city that Americans love and need?” He just smiled at me.

New Orleans is a great town. There's a lot of opportunity. Where the new homes are located is the rebirth of a vibrant neighborhood. The homes are selling for excellent prices and this part of the Ninth Ward is going to emerge stronger than ever. The green shoots are sending hope into the community. Michael Lopez and Global Green are part of the hope. Global Green is conducting tours regularly so that everybody can learn from these homes and “take what they learn to their own projects,” Mike said. “That is what it is all about, man. Spreading the message far and wide—and, of course, helping this community.” ■