

At home



By Morry Gash, AP

In Biloxi, Miss.: A sign pleads with authorities to leave a damaged home alone as fears mount that entire neighborhoods will be bulldozed.

A 'new' New Orleans?

Anxiety and debate surround the fate of historic neighborhoods

By Maria Puente
USA TODAY

Lots of major American cities have historic districts; New Orleans is the only one that is almost entirely a historic district. So now what?

What happens to the scores of structures that lay submerged in a filthy, toxic soup after Hurricane Katrina overwhelmed the Crescent City's levees and were flooded again during Hurricane Rita? Can homes be restored, or will they have to be bulldozed for safety? Who decides? Who pays?

Let the wrangling begin. In the days after Katrina struck the Gulf Coast, government was criticized for acting too slowly to rescue people and save lives. Now, as residents return to reopened neighborhoods and teams of historians, architects, preservationists, conservators and insurance adjusters inspect the damage, there's anxiety in some quarters that government will move too quickly to bulldoze huge swaths of the city.

In any other city, this might be no big deal from an architectural standpoint; in New Orleans, it's a really big deal. And not just in the French Quarter or wealthy Uptown and the Garden District, which largely escaped the flooding.

What makes New Orleans New Orleans is *le tout ensemble*, the whole package, from antebellum Greek Revival mansions to humble little shotgun houses.

"This is the only place in America where the historic neighborhoods aren't the exception, it's the non-historic neighborhoods that are the exception," says Reed Kroloff, new dean of the architecture school at Tulane University.

Preserving the past

The fine details of architecture may have escaped the attention of visitors too intoxicated by the let-the-good-times-roll atmosphere in the French Quarter to notice the singular buildings around them.

"The New Orleans most people experience is Bourbon Street, which is a tragedy because the French Quarter is one of the greatest architectural legacies in America or even the world," says Susan Sully, author of *New Orleans Style: Past & Present*. "It's the most eloquent expression of a past and exotic way of living in America."

Even though much of the most famous architectural districts survived, there's no time to celebrate, says Patricia Gay, head of the Preservation Resource Center in New Orleans. "What we're worried about is all the houses — people's homes — that have been under water for so long. It's block after block of shotgun houses, and that defines New Orleans as much as any building in the French Quarter and is just as worthy of saving."

Preservationism is practically a religion in New Orleans, so the possibility that major sections of the city will disappear is sending architecture lovers into a panic.

"A 1967 house in Dallas can be replaced with another one; an



By Robyn Beck, AFP/Getty Images

Spirits down: Skip LaGrange rests on the porch of his home in the Mid-City section of New Orleans.



By Smiley N. Pool, The Dallas Morning News, via AP

In New Orleans: High water covered entire neighborhoods after Katrina hit. Now mold is threatening the homes that survived the flood.

1867 house in New Orleans can't," Kroloff says.

Richard Moe, president of the National Trust for Historic Preservation, is even gloomier. Local and state officials, he says, can do what they think necessary, including condemn blocks of housing, in the name of public safety.

"This could be the greatest cultural catastrophe America has ever experienced," he says. "Perhaps not every old building deserves to be saved, but they're all part of the New Orleans experience, and if they can survive, they should."

But no one really knows whether they can. It's true that many homes are made of water-resistant cypress wood, but some experts say that might not matter. Out-of-control mold is likely to be a major threat. The National Association of Home Builders, some of whose members would help build new homes in New Orleans, released a study declaring that a large share of the city's 200,000-plus homes will be "permanently uninhabitable."

In the meantime, people should calm down, advises Louisiana Lt. Gov. Mitch Landrieu, who's leading an effort to ensure that tourism and cultural leaders are at the table when rebuilding decisions are made.

"A lot of water has to go under the bridge, no pun intended, before they decide to bulldoze anyplace, let alone specific neighborhoods," Landrieu says. "We are not going to wake up one morning and find that FEMA has bulldozed 15 blocks in the dark of night."

But there are so many unanswered questions about who would decide what gets rebuilt and

what doesn't — city officials, state officials, health officials, FEMA, insurance companies, or some combination of them. Will individual homeowners have a say? Since so many are scattered around the country, will they be notified before anything is decided? And how much will they be compensated?

Many homeowners are deeply worried by the rumors flying around neighborhoods. "We're hearing that if you had water up to your outlets for 48 hours or more, then your house has to be bulldozed, but we don't really know," says Bari Landry, owner of a 1920s bungalow in the South Lakeview historic district that was flooded with about 5 feet of water.

On Wednesday, she and her family broke down the door to begin cleaning up. She's determined to rebuild: "If they want to bulldoze, they're going to have to take me off the front porch."

Sense of place and heritage

Of course, New Orleans isn't the only place in the hurricane zone with significant architecture. The Gulf Coast boasted scores of lovingly restored antebellum homes, plus vernacular architecture with Caribbean influences similar to those in New Orleans. In Mississippi, it was storm winds and water surges that wreaked havoc, not after-storm flooding. Bulldozing is a lesser fear there because much of the area already has been bulldozed — by Katrina.

At least 250 buildings in Mississippi listed on national and local registers of historic structures have been demolished, says Richard

In the name of preservation, help is coming

The National Trust for Historic Preservation has established a hurricane recovery fund. It seeks to raise \$1 million to pay teams of experts on architecture, construction, history and preservation who will help communities figure out how to rebuild in a way sensitive to history.

To contribute, visit nationaltrust.org or call 1-800-944-6847.

The Preservation Resource Center, a leading preservationist organization in New Orleans, also is raising money to help with rebuilding. The group is offering homeowners free-to-affordable materials, services and resources, and lobbying Congress for homeowner tax credits.

To contribute or volunteer, visit preserveneworleans.org or send a message to info@preserveneworleans.org.

Cawthon, the state's chief architectural historian.

The question of rebuilding many is moot: There's no way to restore something that has blown away. "It's possible to reconstruct something that is relatively accurate, but it's not the original building," Cawthon says. "So to that extent, the historic building is gone forever."

Still grappling with a Herculean cleanup, most Mississippians haven't completely processed this yet, he says, but they will — and they'll be heartbroken. After a catastrophe, "preservation of historic places is a matter of re-establishing a community's identity and its sense of place and heritage."

But it has to be authentic, preservationists say. Rebuilding New Orleans' atrocious public housing may be a good thing, certainly for the occupants. But wiping away neighborhoods of antique homes and building something new — even if unavoidable — will almost certainly change the character of New Orleans, says William Mitchell, author of *Classic New Orleans*.

"That's a big issue — to keep New Orleans as we have known it, with that genuinely evolutionary flavor," he says. "We don't want to Disneyland it."

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