

New Orleans: Die Tode Stadt?

By **Stephen Dankner**

Note: This column was written three months after Hurricane Katrina devastated New Orleans.

Is New Orleans a dead city, an expressionistic Tode Stadt? Parts of it certainly are, with miles upon miles of streets filled with the ghostly detritus of ruination, as if the hand of God had angrily swept away and scattered all life, all nature, all semblance of surface reality and the order of people's lives and reassembled everything every which-way, as in a nightmare. I saw houses torn from their foundations, split asunder by the roiling waters, thrown against weakened trees that were ready at any moment to fall; more trees – giant oaks with root systems thirty feet wide - lifted from their sockets of earth and tossed, like matchsticks, blocks away; boats inside houses, when the brick walls, front and back, were blown out; cars turned over and lifted by the floodwaters into the upper branches of the few trees left standing...

It was a beautiful day – 72 degrees, no humidity, a nip of fall weather in the air. A good day to travel to New Orleans, to see it from above. Typically, planes approach the city from the northwest, flying over Lake Pontchartrain and the 26-mile long two-lane ribbon of road – the Lake Pontchartrain causeway below, which is the main artery from the city to the suburban North Shore. From there, you fly to the south, crossing the Mississippi River and the marshland to the west. It's a beautiful sight on a sunny day, with the Superdome and buildings in the CBD (Central Business District) clearly visible. New Orleans, though a small city, looms large at this low approach, because there's really nothing en route to compare with the grandeur of the lake as it appears from above, and the few skyscrapers look relatively impressive as you first see them. The lake is huge; 26 miles across, it's really an inland sea. All this natural beauty, with man's small and slender footprint upon nature, makes for a spectacularly beautiful first glimpse of the Crescent City (so named because of the semi-circular pathway the Mississippi River has carved out of the land, creating the port of New Orleans). All this changed after August 29th.

The lake was now a putrid color, some kind of awful gray-glaucous-brown, and looked like a toxic dump. Three-quarters of one trillion (!) gallons of

water had entered the city with Katrina, and was pumped back into the lake a month later with all the chemicals, waste and debris accumulated. All the trees in the marshes, visible from above, were dead and denuded of leaves, and the remnants of the wonderful Spanish moss that covers all the old live oaks and cypresses clung like desiccated cobwebs to the branches of the shredded tree limbs. The entire lake was a dead zone - a ghoulish swampland of brown filth and malodorous decay...

We drove to Lakeview, along Canal Boulevard, to the lakeshore where the levees broke. This was an upscale neighborhood of two-story family homes and stately mansions. In the 1920s, when Lakeview was built, it was a showcase of urban planning; houses were set far apart – a rarity in New Orleans where land is at a premium. The architecture was distinctive. Spanish red-roof tile mixed with arts and crafts bungalows. People took pride in this neighborhood. The lake offered an informal, recreational lifestyle far removed from the formal elegance of the mansions on St. Charles Avenue, nestled along the river. Over the years, you had to take care to drive slowly in Lakeview. The neighborhood was built on sand dredged from the lake bottom, and the potholes and crumbling asphalt let you know that this land was never a good place for people to build their homes. Even now, after the storm and repair of the levees by the Army Corps of Engineers, sub-surface water is still visibly seeping into the area.

Now, Lake Pontchartrain has reclaimed its resources. People may re-build here again, but it won't be anytime soon. Would you return to an urban desert, after all you have owned and loved has been destroyed? Peer inside the broken windows of the derelict houses, and what do you see? Walls encrusted with black mold, the fingers of the fungus like an alien life form, florets blooming like fleurs du mal, reaching out and absorbing/consuming everything. Pick up a cherished book or a photo album and watch it crumble in your hands. Hold your breath while you look; you don't want to pollute your lungs and get sick, as some have, with a raging cough and fever. Better wear a breathing mask, like the EPA workers stomping through the ruins still looking for the dead bodies of people and animals...

The Orpheum Theatre, in the CBD, where the Louisiana Philharmonic played, had twelve feet of water, up to the stage and orchestra-seating levels. The owners estimate it will cost \$3,000,000 to rebuild, and they say they can't afford it. Honestly, the place was a crumbling mess before Katrina, and the owners were horrible landlords to the LPO, overcharging them for the

rental of the facility. If the orchestra returns, it will be in the Mahalia Jackson Theatre of the Performing Arts, which seats 2500. This is a much too big venue for a struggling orchestra like the Louisiana Philharmonic. Typically, they could count on an audience of 750 per concert. The cost of renting this performance facility may do them in, when Katrina didn't. Many of the players lost everything: homes, cars, instruments, music scores and of course, their jobs in the orchestra and outside teaching positions. Is there anything to come home to? Is there a home to which to return? The answer for now is, no, nothing...

The New Orleans pre-Katrina is gone forever. The city will come back, but it will never be the same. I've asked many friends and colleagues about how they feel. Are they hopeful? Not really. They're thankful for their lives, but they have no real hopes for the future. The consensus seems to be, if you have gotten out or can leave, then go; it's going to take a long, long time before hope and opportunity return, if it ever does...

The hurricane season finally ends November 30th after six months. For years to come, while the Gulf and East coasts are in the target zone of these deadly storms, people will anxiously watch and wait to see what brews in the tropical Atlantic, Gulf of Mexico or Caribbean Sea. What would be your threshold of apprehension? For me, after 26 years in the Big Easy, this was it.

The experts say we're now at the beginning of a new and hyperactive storm cycle that could last 10-20 years.

The 2006 hurricane season starts June 1...