

# WELCOME TO THE LOWER 9TH WARD



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PHOTOGRAPHS

It's too easy to bring a camera to New Orleans, even now, years after Katrina, to the Lower 9th Ward or St. Bernards Parish, Lakeview, or any of the other places where flood waters swallowed the town in mud and silt and river and think you're taking momentous photos. But the truth and the tragedy is that you're not really, you're just following up on the lee side of a disaster like a carpetbagger. Your photos are striking because they're incongruous: because there are cars in trees or trees in cars

or cars and trees in houses or houses on top of other houses — it's hard to not feel that you're coming home with something special, but this place is special without you and without your camera. The only thing you can really do is stare dumbly and wonder what you would do, how you would behave if your world was turned upside down and crushed under a billion gallons of water and government bureaucracy. It's easy to see the overturned car and to frame it in your viewfinder, but what's more dif-



difficult is to breathe in and realize that behind every scene of destruction there's a person who lived or died in that wreckage and a story maybe too horrible to tell. It's easy to photograph a crushed car, or a disintegrating teddy bear, it's more difficult to realize that car belonged to someone who lived and worked and drove it. People down here have been living with this for so long now I'd imagine they're tired of outsiders coming down to take a \$60 tour of "New Orleans' Most Devastated Ar-



east” (it’s three hours, you can catch it right outside of Jackson Square). But I underestimated the power of that event — underestimated how it’s changed people here and how much personal narration is a part of our healing process — how strong the desire is, the need to tell one’s own story. And so, to meet someone from New Orleans is to hear their Katrina story. So many of them written down, expressed in art, an exploding photographic community. There is a need to record, to remember.

Indeed, even now, three years after the event, many homes still bear the spray painted X codes that rescuers tagged when looking for survivors, bodies, and pets — people don't want to forget, they leave the graffiti as a badge or a memento. **The Lower Ninth Ward** was one of the most ravaged areas in the path of the Hurricane, but it wasn't the wind that destroyed the neighborhood — storm surge, pushed back up the Industrial Canal by the winds first lapped over the top of the flood walls, and then





finally broke it open, deluging the area in a dozen feet of water. Add to this a 200 foot barge, the ING 4727, which had been anchored in the Mississippi river, tearing loose from its moorings and blindly making its way up the Industrial Canal, crashing through the breach in the levee and then floating around the neighborhood crushing cars and houses and uprooting trees, finally coming to rest on a group of houses and a school bus along Jordan Avenue. Some houses miraculously survived the flood wa-

ters and remain standing, but many were torn from their foundations or turned to rubble where they stood. Today, there are a few ruined structures and the constant sounds of new construction — crews every few blocks can be seen erecting new houses, but for the most part, the Lower Ninth Ward is vacant. Concrete sidewalks, foundations and front steps remain, marking the outline of houses that no longer exist. Inexplicably, and eerily, the water hasn't been turned off and pipes in front of houses









spew water out onto the ground or into the air, the city estimates fifty million gallons of potable water a day are leaking out of uncapped pipes. In many places all this water has undermined the lawns causing cave-ins. **There are people in the Lower Ninth**, not just out of town tourists with cameras, but former residents come to look through the foundation for personal items pressed into the soil, and people just visiting the spaces, standing where walls had once been, or watching from the windows of parked cars



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the yards the grew up in. A steady trickle of people coming to reflect. “I canoed in nine days after the hurricane,” one person tells me, “I had to come at night and sneak in because they weren’t letting people back in, but I was looking for my cat. I was pretty sure he was dead, but he wasn’t. He was hanging onto a box floating in the second floor of my house with just his head out of water. We were both pretty happy to see one another.” One of the strangest things about this place is how well mani-





cured most of the lawns are, cut like a golf green, weeds whacked around protruding foundation stones and the occasional gas meter. Indeed, some, sport multi-foot weeds, but many are immaculately tended. **There are some strange new houses going up** — in part thanks to Brad Pitt and his *Make it Right* foundation, they're odd looking multi-angled things on stilts with carports underneath and solar panels on the roof, painted bright colors. Life returns, but so slowly who wants to live again beneath



the shoulder of a giant that's rolled over before? So you know that your photos aren't anything special, you're even embarrassed to take them — but you have to do it anyway, because you're there and you want to remember what you saw and you want to believe in the indomitability of the human spirit.







THANKS TO ALL THE PEOPLE WHO MADE MY TRIP TO LOUISIANA POSSIBLE — TRILLIAN STARS, LORI WASELCHUCK & PHOTO NOLA, CHRIS AND LISA WILLIAMS, JEFF SMITH, AND ALL THE PEOPLE WHO SHARED THEIR STORIES WITH ME. YOU CAN FIND MORE OF MY TRAVEL DIARIES AT

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