

Book Title: Cities and Disasters

Author: Davia Cox Downey

Section 4: Ethnographic Cultural and Historical Perspectives of Natural Disasters

ABSTRACT

Chapter Title: The Historical Aspect of Social Vulnerability in the Lower Ninth Ward.

Author: Nada Toueir, PhD in Environmental Design

Email: nada.toueir@umontreal.ca

Institution: University of Montreal

Keywords: Katrina, social vulnerability, recovery, Lower Ninth Ward

Since its inception, the city of New Orleans has been prone to hurricanes and floods; and over the course of history, hurricanes have become part of the local culture and history. Due to its incongruous topography, New Orleans is unevenly vulnerable to floods with neighborhoods situated at different elevations.

The Lower Ninth Ward (LNW) being 1/3 above or at sea level, and 2/3 below sea level, was the most devastated neighborhood in New Orleans after Hurricane Katrina. The levees broke at the western side of the neighborhood to open the door to massive waves that bulldozed the neighboring homes and flooded the whole area. After the hurricane, President George W. Bush promised to rebuild New Orleans, keeping the residents of the city with high hopes to rebuild of all its neighborhoods. Almost eight years after hurricane Katrina, the LNW is slowly recovering and the rebuilding process is only at its start.

Since the opening of the Industrial Canal in 1923, the LNW has been physically and economically separated from the rest of the city; and halfway through the century, what used to be a racially mixed and mixed-income neighborhood turned into a majority African-American and poor neighborhood. The LNW is surrounded by water from the North, West, and South; and to the East the Jackson Barracks separate it from St. Bernard Parish that is mainly constituted of older LNW's residents who moved there after the desegregation in 1961 and hurricane Betsy in 1965. Residents of the LNW have always been keen of their vulnerability and their high-exposure to flooding; yet Katrina brought unexpected devastation to the neighborhood, to the city of New Orleans, and the entire United States.

This chapter focuses on the historical evolution of the LNW and how it contributed to its vulnerability when Katrina hit and its slow recovery eight years after the hurricane. Therefore, to understand why the LNW is behind in the rebuilding process when

compared to the rest of the city, it is imperative to look back and trace the source of its vulnerability; and focus on the series of events that took place since Katrina.

The chapter will be divided in four parts: the first tackles the historical evolution of the neighborhood since its creation and the reasons behind it; the second part sheds the light on the differences and disparities existing within the neighborhood (Holy Cross versus Lower Ninth Ward, the Industrial Canal, social and economic exclusion, etc.); the third part presents the recovery process with all the obstacles that the residents faced and keep on facing, and who is really helping the LNW (Non-Profit Organizations, political involvement, Road Home Program, etc.); and the fourth part presents a look to the future and the importance of the cultural identity of the LNW in bringing back its residents and the neighborhood.