

An architect confronts the wrecking ball and locates a failure of understanding and imagination

# ON DESIGN REFORM and MEMORY

by Thomas Colbert

## THE EXPERIENCE OF KATRINA AND THEN RITA HAD AN EERIE RESEMBLANCE TO MANY PEOPLE'S CHILDHOOD MEMORIES

of Hurricane Betsy passing over New Orleans and flooding the Ninth Ward. Then there was Camille, making landfall to the east of New Orleans, washing away the city of Biloxi and leaving fully laden freighters high and dry on the beach. It's amazing how quickly these events passed from the realm of urgent public debate into anecdotal remembrance. Anecdote is usually the last resting place of shared experience, but such vignettes can also renew public awareness and discourse. They can revive history by making it personal. Hurricanes are personal. Perhaps that's why we give them names. They reach into the most intimate recesses of our lives with remarkable ease, wreaking havoc in ways that seemed unimaginable beforehand. The reality behind the statistics of risk and destruction is always personal.

**T**he house in New Orleans that my brother and sister and I grew up in was more like the modernist designs frequently published in these pages than the shotgun homes that most people associate with Katrina, but it was our family home and it was destroyed by Katrina all the same. At the time that the house was built in the 1950s, air conditioning and suburban neighborhoods had only recently been introduced, along with plate glass and "slab on grade" foundations. The levee system was also still relatively new. It had been designed by the U. S. Army Corps of Engineers, so everyone was sure that it could be counted on. As we grew up, the canals were widened using steel sheet pilings and concrete retaining walls instead of earthen levees. No one seemed to question their design or the protection that they offered, just as no one questioned the design or the urban benefits of the interstate highway system as it was rushed to completion during the same era. There were doubters, of course. But they were regarded as alarmist eccentrics, and their voices were drowned out by the roar of construction equipment. By the time our home was built, the modern world had arrived in New Orleans with full force, bringing with it an unquestioning faith in new technologies and an enthusiastic commitment



failure to imagine design solutions. In short, it was a failure of design. The technology to prevent this disaster was available but it wasn't used wisely. The answers to the problems posed by hurricanes and coastal flooding can only be found in more robust, inclusive design thinking and in more sophisticated solutions. What the people living along the Gulf Coast need is not less technology but more sophisticated technology. What is required is not neo-traditional architecture and city planning, but better-informed designs based on the appropriate use of current technology.

This issue of *Cite* is devoted to the possible effects of a hurricane hitting the Houston-Galveston region and current governmental plans to respond to such an event. The possibility of a major storm presents largely unstudied design challenges for architects, civil engineers, planners, and environmentalists. It suggests new opportunities for creative design collaborations and for the design professions to inform public policy debate, and to not only protect, but also enrich, public life. Sustainable, survivable solutions to these challenges require the active involvement of the design professions in critical but still undebated issues. ●

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to exploring the application of those technologies in the design of buildings and neighborhoods. For those of us who were born into this world, it seemed to be the way that things had always been. No one had ever talked to us about the Great Flood of 1927, or the hundreds of storms that had gone before.

After the waters of Katrina receded, my sister and I went back to our childhood house and I saw the place differently from the way I had seen it before. Its reliance on air conditioning and on the levees appeared naïve rather than progressive. Its low slab and great planes of glass seemed more like a defiant taunt to the Indian storm god Rudra than a modernist architect's reasoned rejection of historicism. As we rummaged through the damp moldy ruins of the place looking for pieces of our history, just as so many tens of thousands of other people were doing at that time, I wondered at the seemingly irrational faith in technology that this house had been built on, and at how irrelevant "good" design seemed to be to the fate of communities.

But as the extent of the levee design failure became known, and as it became clear that wetland destruction was also a factor, I realized that blaming technology is not the answer. The failure was one of understanding and imagination. It was a failure to understand the dangers posed by hurricanes and a

