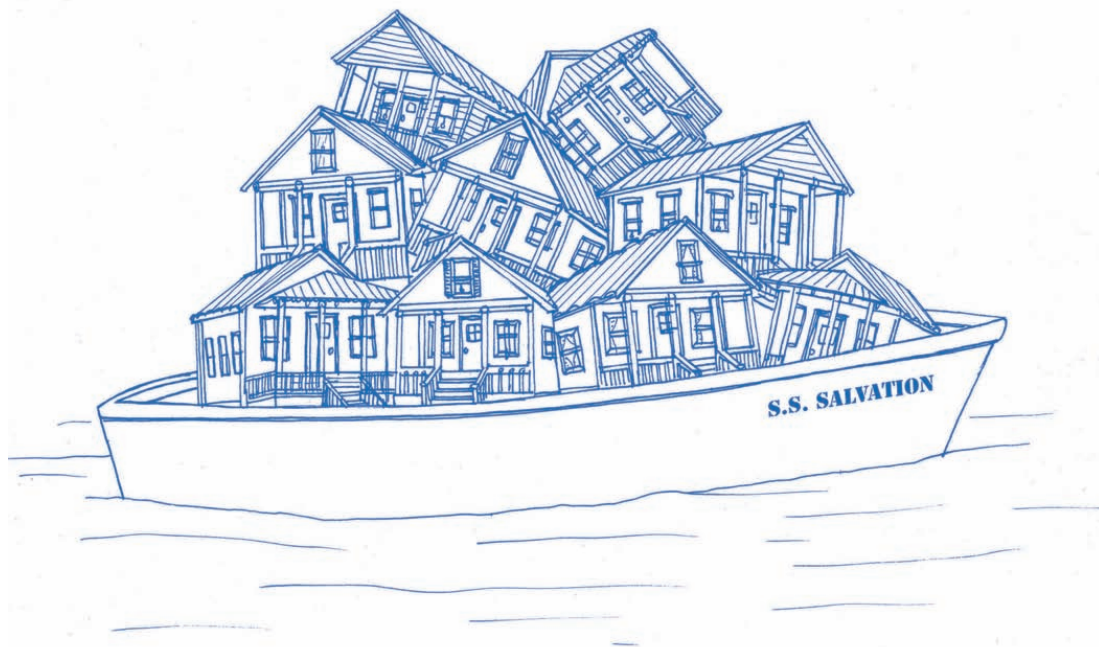


WHAT BECOMES A LEGEND MOST?

Andrei Codrescu reflects on his [New Orleans](#)
in a [letter](#) to Houstonians

by Andrei Codrescu
illustration Kiersten Essenpreis



I LIVE IN THE “SLAVE QUARTERS” OF A FRENCH QUARTER BUILDING AT THE BACK OF A COURTYARD IN WHICH STANDS A WATER-SPEWING ANGEL.

The angel has starred in photographs, movies, and extremely vivid memories. At the turn of the millennium my beautiful friend Michelle, who resembles the aquatic putto, stood nude in the fountain at the stroke of midnight and sang the Chinese national anthem—in Mandarin. How prophetic was that? This may well be the Chinese millennium, as Wal-Mart keeps reminding us.

In the hallway of the “big house,” through which you reach my cobblestoned courtyard, there are my neighbor’s photographs of jazz musicians who played here over the years. My neighbors gave some doozy parties in this yard: “Doc” Cheatham, the great trumpet player, played his next-to-last gig here. The musicians set up under the stairs to my pad, so I gingerly stepped over jazz greats to get upstairs.

The doorway to my tiny place is low because people were short in the 19th century and because servants’ doors were humbler than their masters’. Inside, there are the mementos of artistic French Quarter living: a tree-of-life rug from Romania, paintings by friends, a variety of demons crafted for Mardi Gras past, masks, and towers of poetry books. The apartment itself starred in my novel *Wakefield*, about a guy who just wants to stay home and read, with the windows on the balcony wide open while it rains and the scents of magnolia and sweet olive drifting in. In *Wakefield*, the devil makes the guy a proposition: If you can find your “true life” in one year, I’ll let you live.

Then Katrina came. No, wait, one more thing: My building is the first condo in New Orleans. When I bought it, my Realtor told me, “I don’t know if this condo thing will work in the French Quarter.” Since then, the area went condo all over. Most of them were snapped up by out-of-towners who found the idea of spending some time in America’s most historically rich city charming and sexy. During the condoification of the old Quarter,

the full-time resident population dropped by half. Grocery stores and inexpensive eateries serving residents closed down, and T-shirt shops sprouted in their stead.

French Quarter real estate heated up, way above the generally hot market in America. The charm of the old buildings added greatly to their value. It didn’t hurt that movie stars bought mansions and restored them, and filmmakers found New Orleans an ideal set. Just before the Storm, I had the unaccustomed (but not unpleasant) thought that not only was I living a fantasy life in America’s last bohemia, but also that I had a considerable investment. One day, when I tired of intense young artistes with smoldering eyes and leather sacks full of poetry, I could retire to, let’s say, Houston, and build me one of those great art houses that look like toys.

And then Katrina came. The great Jesus behind the St. Louis Cathedral saved the French Quarter by

finding any “true life,” or even just life, the way it used to be. Many of our former residents are in your city, making your lives more interesting—or more miserable, if you believe the crime stats. At this point, I think that we should simply exchange cities. Move here, Houstonians, and bring your urban visions, if not your actual houses, with you. I’ll tell you why (besides the obvious, which is that we breathe high drama and our ghosts are groovy). Since the Storm we’ve been descended upon by a plague of “visionaries” ready to “rebuild our city.” The worst of these are the New Urbanists who’d revision us as something New Orleans-like, a city of new houses themed around a French Quarter “look.” This vision fits well with the bigger plans of the casino industry and other tourist concerns to make the city corporate friendly, like Las Vegas and Disney. If y’all moved here and brought your well-known “no zoning” spirit, we might have something entirely different.

Here is what I propose: Eliminate all zoning regulations to allow nightclubs in any house in the city. Legalize drugs, prostitution, and street theater. Subsidize nationally and internationally any artist willing to work here.

snapping the fingers of His left hand and pushing the storm off by ten miles to make landfall in Mississippi. The fingers are still missing and there is a reward out for them. I’ve met people who claim they know who has them. My building survived with only a few shingles ripped off the roof, but the neighborhood, like the entire city, went into a deep funk. For over a week, everyone (with the blessed exception of some river rats of the sort who like to dance when the world ends) left town. The empty streets were occupied by the U.S. Army and several states’ National Guards. The soldiers marched around and around, bored, nervous, and ready for anything. But there was nothing, nothing to shoot at, nothing to do; no music, no food, no strippers.

It is now nearly two years later, dear people of Houston, one year more than the Devil gave *Wakefield*, and there is no sign of New Orleans

Here is what I propose. See if you can live with this: Return all low-lying areas of New Orleans to floodplain. If anyone wants to live there, give them pontoons. Also allow water dwellings on Lake Ponchartrain and the Mississippi River. Eliminate all zoning regulations to allow any sort of business, but especially nightclubs, in any house in the city. Legalize drugs, prostitution, and street theater. Subsidize nationally and internationally any artist willing to work here; artists working in New Orleans should be exempt from local and federal taxes. Declare New Orleans a PAZ (Permanent Autonomous Zone) and an International City, to be administered lightly by every nation on earth in alphabetical order. (This last one is negotiable because I know how patriotic you are, but doesn’t the rest sound good?) ●