

Katrina: God's plan to gentrify New Orleans?

“Over ten thousand people used to live here—” Pastor Bruce Davenport says as we gaze from the steps of St. Johns #5 church out across the street at what used to be the St. Bernard's Housing project— “and we've lost over half of our congregation.” Demolition of this housing project in the 7th Ward of New Orleans began in February and has continued to date. It is very noisy, and as we watch, dust from the rubble is being kicked up into the air.



Its nearing the 3 year anniversary of Katrina and not only are thousands of residents still recovering from the disaster, but thousands no longer have housing to come home to. Many of the displaced residents who are trying to return to New Orleans have found that they cannot stop HUD from tearing their housing (more than 4500 housing units) down. “The damage to these buildings was not that bad, this was fixable, but they decided that it would be better if they were gone,” Bruce tells us.

We often hear more from the proponents of gentrification than from the critics. The term “urban renewal” invokes images of well-to-do neighborhoods and the economic prosperity seen in gentrified communities like Haight-Asbury in San Fransico. Critics of this phenomenon often point to the human toll—dispersal of communities that can no longer afford to live there and often the costs often fall into the laps of the less-fortunate. What's happening—what's happened—to the St. Bernard Housing Project has happened before in places like Park Slope, Brooklyn (1970's) and Harlem (1980's). Future plan are to build mixed-income housing. This will include some affordable units for people with low income, but will be predominantly working-to-middle class families.

As we stood in front of the ruins of St Bernard, Bruce spoke about recent meetings with politicians and local community members regarding using water to wet-down the rubble in order to reduce the amount of airborne impurities. The demolition company continues to be out of compliance with regulations that require watering this type of debris down every time it is moved. Pastor Bruce, and his wife, Deborah, with the assistance of community advocate group, ACORN, and Lena Stewart, from City Council, are fighting back and planning legal action against the demolition company. They have not won anything yet. One small concession that the demolition company has made was to stop working on Sundays during church time, because the noise and shaking of the ground was disturbing the congregation.

Bruce is a strong presence in the community. He continues to be optimistic that his community will bounce back. As in many other communities in the 9th and 7th wards and around the country, Pastor Bruce and the church play a vital role in providing much needed support and hope in time of uncertainty and despair.

In an unabashed and disturbing comment regarding the plight of thousands from St Bernard, Representative Richard H. Baker, a Republican from Baton Rouge, reportedly said just after the hurricane: "We finally cleaned up public housing in New Orleans. We couldn't do it. But God did."ⁱ Pastor Bruce, no doubt, would have a different take.

For more information on the topic please visit the following sites (keeping in mind that they were written before the housing units were torn down):

- ["Clamoring to Come Home to New Orleans Projects", *New York Times*, 6 June 2006](#)
- ["5,000 Public Housing Units in New Orleans Are to Be Razed", *New York Times*, 15 June 2006](#)
- ["In New Orleans, Ex-Tenants Fight for Projects", *New York Times*, 26 December 2006](#)
- ["History vs. Homogeneity in New Orleans Housing Fight", *New York Times*, 22 February 2007](#)

- [survivorsvillage.com](#)
- [St. Bernard Housing Rights Rally](#)

- [Declaration of John E Fernandez](#)

ⁱ "Clamoring to Come Home to New Orleans Projects" NYTIMES June 06, 2006.