

# A Brazilian Pays Visit to New Orleans But Only Finds the Ghost of a City

Contributed by Eduardo Belmont Correia  
Monday, 14 January 2008

What would it be like to live in a city that has lost half of its population, much of its economic infrastructure, has heightened crime, and has had many of its neighborhoods destroyed by a hurricane and subsequent flooding? New Orleans is one of the cultural charms of the U.S. and it has been badly marred. I am curious to see how it is responding to the terrible problems it has encountered.

I arrive in the city at nine in the morning, and it is too early to check into the hotel so I go first to the Garden District which wasn't damaged as much. It is a very rich old residential area and includes Tulane University and Loyola University.

The main street running from downtown to the universities is called St. Charles Avenue. The street is flanked with historic mansions. The Christmas decoration is elaborate on the fronts of many houses. The major part of the houses are three stories or even more, painted white, with a beautiful yard in front.

The architecture is Victorian or Southern Gothic or Romanesque. There are huge stone mansions that look like forts. I don't see anyone walking around as I drive past in my rented car. The trolley tracks run down the center of the street, but the trollies are not working. The traffic is crowded.

I park the rented Chevrolet Impala and walk along the street. The air is clear and pure. The huge oak trees are impressive. Their branches stretch out far and their limbs and trucks are wide. As I reach Tulane University, the buildings are old, Gothic white stone, with curved and arched windows. They are made of limestone. There is a paved yard with concrete tables and chairs. It is Christmas holiday and there are not many students.

My first impression of this area is that the narrow streets and mansions and trees and the quiet are relaxing and yet exciting and create a special atmosphere. When I see the huge houses I wonder what life was like here so many years ago. New Orleans is different from most cities in the U.S. because of its age. It was founded in 1718 by the French. What was the U.S. like with the kind of lifestyle that built these graceful mansions? The newer buildings are not nearly so large or beautiful.

I cross the street from Tulane University and walk into a wide, ambling park called Centennial Park. At one end of it is the zoo. There is a stream with ducks flying across the water. The huge oaks are plentiful. I see a squirrel nestled on a long limb, sleeping.

The light coming through the park makes shadows around the trees. There is a lane for runners and strollers. The air is warm yet cool, very comfortable. Dried leaves cover the short greenish grass. I am sitting at a cupola, looking out. A young girl is walking quickly past.

Another squirrel is jumping on the grass. The squirrel in the tree moves very fast and is hidden on another limb. He is looking for food. The park is so quiet and calm. It reminds me of Parque Farroupilha in Porto Alegre. Every person who comes to this park brings his or her own individual life.

I am bringing mine and a Brazilian perspective. I will always remember when I was a kid and went to a park with my mother to ride a bike and stayed for the entire day playing. This park reminds me of that. The squirrel now is visible and its legs are splayed. Now I see two of the squirrels. It is pleasant here, so natural and easy.

This area, the Garden District, is on higher ground and while it received damage, it was not so badly hurt. The occupants obviously are wealthy and most of the damage has been repaired. The most obvious result of the hurricane is the trolley service which is not working, but which will be resumed in a few weeks.

Running parallel to St. Charles Street is a street of small, unusual shops called Magazine Street. It is fashionable but not expensive, with stores in old French and Spanish style houses. I stop at the Fuel Coffee on Magazine St to have lunch. I see that the new and old buildings together make this street very attractive.

After my coffee, I drive to the 8th ward of New Orleans. This area was devastated by Katrina. I follow the access road of Interstate 10 and arrive at an old, badly damaged neighborhood. I park my car and get out and walk along the street.

I see a middle aged black woman, Delle, who has rebuilt her house. The house has beautiful slate steps and porch which she has polished. She says that she was in Dallas for the hurricane and when she came back, water was five feet high or more and her house was flooded. Wrecked cars and trash were everywhere. One car had bashed in her fence and hit her house.

She had to wait two months for the water to recede, then she began to clean up and repair her property. Hers is the only house that looks new again. The rest of the block looks like a ghost neighborhood. Trash is everywhere. The electricity is still problematic. The windows are boarded up and broken; the roofs have gaping holes. The foundations are high but the water rose above them.

I stop in front of a two story white house. There is no porch anymore. The door is locked with a new lock. The fence is missing pieces. It used to be a nice house with two lions in front. The stairs are moldy. The cornice is broken. There is writing on the side of the house to identify it. There is a for sale sign in front. The front door has been replaced. The window is boarded up. The awning is filthy. The family has left.

One of the tragedies of the aftermath is that many insurance companies have refused to honor their policies. They say that the houses were not damaged by the hurricane - the breaking of the levees and the flooding that resulted ruined the homes and stores.

As a result most people who lost their homes have received no insurance money. The federal government gave each inhabitant \$2,000.00, and finally brought in trailers for some people to live, but not enough. New Orleans has lost much of its population. The poorest areas were hit worst. These people cannot come back.

On the next lot the house has been torn down and a trailer is in its place.

The grass in the next yard is waist high. The doors are open; it is a duplex. No one lives here. There is a yellow caution sign in front. Everything is broken: there is a little window in the roof that is broken out. The iron work on the porch is rusted. I cannot see inside so I get out of the car and walk up to the porch and look.

The roof inside has fallen in. Inside is dirty and dark. All the furniture is gone. No one could live here again. The house must be torn down. Months after the hurricane it became clear that all of the filthy refrigerators were ruined and creating mold and disease. Almost every roof in the city was ruined or blown away.

I am at a corner half a block away. On the right is a devastated house. In front is a pile of trash: wood, paper, buckets, iron, pipes, plastic, bricks. The windows are boarded up. The fence is ruined. The doors are opened to try to get air into the place. On the left across the street is a refurbished place with shutters and nice painted porch. The fence is perfect. The yard is kept. Someone has reclaimed their place and is cleaning it up. The house is decorated for Christmas.

I stop in front of a deserted school. The windows are boarded up. The main door is covered with wood. The windows are broken. It is a total loss. The yard is kept. There is a high fence around it. No one will be able to go to this school for years if ever again. It is a real loss to the neighborhood.

This entire neighborhood is in total disrepair after two years. Most people could not go back to their houses for months. Rats were everywhere in the houses. The house in front of me has a trailer parked in front while they work on repairs.

What a disaster for a beautiful city and for the country as a whole.

Next is an area of trailers provided by the government. They are close together and impersonal.

Later I drive to the devastated area where Brad Pitt has pumped in money to rehabilitate houses. He is an avid architect as well as an actor. He has given five million dollars and much of his time to help.

I check into my hotel, the traditional Monteleone. It has been refurbished and is beautiful. The room has expensive swag draperies. The wallpaper, carpet, and bathroom fixtures are all new. I go out into the French Quarter, the historic district which did not receive so much damage. It is the tourist center.

I am going to the Central Grocery to try a muffuletta. It was recommended by a friend. These buildings are the oldest in the city: some were built by the French, some by the Spanish, others by the early settlers. There are small stores, night clubs, bars.

Artists are in the streets showing their works, trying to make some money. Others are selling souvenirs. The place has atmosphere with the authentic architecture. There is a beautiful tall, white Gothic church and in front a well kept park. There are several homeless around asking for money.

Ahead of me is the grocery store. It is a typical Italian grocery with salami hanging from the ceiling. The aisles are packed with imports from Italy. The Italians who work behind the counter take my order: one whole muffuletta.

I open it first and see the ingredients: huge slices of bread with cheese, and the special sauce of olive oil, olives, onions. The meats are different kinds of salami and some bologna. I eat at a small counter at the back of the store with other customers. The sandwich is delicious. It has an olive flavor.

After lunch I cross the street and walk to the Mississippi River. It is broad and flat, huge. There are several barges and boats on it. A bridge is in the distance. I take pictures and walk to where the Aquarium which was badly damaged, was. I return to the shopping area.

Royal Street has store after store with elegant antiques-sculptures, chandeliers, sofas, chairs, paintings. All of them are elaborate and very southern. They also are expensive. One small sculpture shaped like a Greek god sells for US\$ 3,000.00. It is on sale. It used to be US\$ 6,000.00.

Next I cross to Bourbon Street. It is interesting with bar after bar. It has a special charm, but it is not big. It is a narrow, crowded street. During the day most of the places are closed. I plan to return that evening. Tourists are walking along with me. I am told that before Katrina all the stores were open and the streets were crowded. Maybe half of them are open now.

That evening I eat at one of the most historic restaurants in the French Quarter: Antoine's. The restaurant is huge with four or five major rooms for eating and also with special rooms for meetings. The first room has tables with white table cloths and with chandeliers. The middle room where I sit has photographs along the wall-behind me is one of Jean Paul II. Other photographs are of the famous who ate at Antoine's.

The menu is elaborate. They have chateaubriand for two for one hundred dollars. The other offerings are southern-heavy

saucers with everything. I order potato puffs which are rather long, like fried potatoes yet puffed out. Only seven tables are occupied in my room. It is almost empty, which is difficult for a restaurant and the diners.

The steak itself is really good. The food is not contemporary but is like it has been served for a hundred years. The total bill is expensive. As I leave, I walk through the rooms and I think that the restaurant could not be making money with so few diners. The food is also overpriced.

I choose to walk down Bourbon Street on my way back to the hotel. A few years ago one million people would come to New Orleans for Mardi Gras (Fat Tuesday). Most of them were under twenty and the French Quarter was a riotous place. Now, I pass a jazz bar with a singer, and quickly pass another one. There is a talented man on the street; he is playing a saxophone. In the shop windows there are signs about voodoo. There is one store devoted to voodoo.

I go into a bar and see a very fat black man who is singing jazz. He sings well. The bar is filled with tourists, all middle aged. Back on the street, there are many people. Walking on Bourbon is a unique experience: the jazz atmosphere has glamour; the strip tease clubs are open; the shops are lighted and busy.

There are a few homeless mixed in. The rumor is that it is easy to get robbed now, but it isn't evident. The street seems safe. Earlier I passed the Superdome which at one point during the hurricane was a center of violence and problems. But it is quiet now. New Orleans is definitely rising again.

Ahead of me as I turn left I see several younger guys who are very drunk. They are having a good time and are loud. When I see them I feel how much they like being in New Orleans drinking and relaxing and listening to music. Small bands of jazz are playing well along the streets. I could go into any of the clubs and listen for a long while if I wanted. This is integral to New Orleans.

When I go back to my city, Porto Alegre in Brazil, what will I remember about New Orleans? It is an unusual city in the world, unique, with a rich southern heritage of jazz and restaurants and sexual expression. It has elaborate antique stores and great hotels. But it has been hit, hard, and will have to work to rebuild what it had.

Eduardo Belmonte, who lives in Los Angeles, is working on a book about his experiences in the United States. The work should be published by Tabloid Books. Comments are welcome at [eduardobcorreia@hotmail.com](mailto:eduardobcorreia@hotmail.com).