

Eleanor Burke

Architectural Historian, Historic District Landmarks Commission

BY KATHERINE COBBS

PHOTOGRAPH BY HELEN HARMON

Walk with Eleanor Burke, principal architectural historian of the Historic District Landmarks Commission (HDLC) through her Faubourg St. John neighborhood, and one can't help but be jarred by the piles of decaying debris heaped at the curbside of every home, a visual reminder of Katrina. But the sensation is tempered by the buzz of saws, the pounding of hammers, and the cheerful greetings of neighbors at every turn. Residents are heady with the possibilities of the "new" New Orleans, and many of the city's residents have come together to make sure the rebuilding does not happen haphazardly, but is conducted in accord with the city's rich history and character.

Which is where Burke comes in. She admits she is actually excited by some of the repercussions of Katrina. "It has certainly motivated people, especially women, to participate in the process," she notes, referring to such organizations as Women of the Storm, the Krewe of Katrina, and other grassroots organizations that have sprung up across the city, proving that people, even those who have never been involved in public service, city government, or even their neighborhood associations, suddenly feel driven to be involved in the redevelopment process.

At the HDLC, Burke's job is to regulate work to the exterior of buildings located within the city's 13 local historic districts. A master's degree in historic preservation from Columbia University was the culmination of years of interest in the history and architecture of New Orleans, a passion fostered by her father. One point he always hammered home to his daughter was the importance of living on higher ground, along the ridges and rises that snake through the city: "If you live on a ridge, you'll never flood," he constantly reminded Burke.

Those years of paternal advice guided Eleanor and her husband Billy to a two-unit shotgun house in this quaint, historic community situated on a rise between the bayou and Gentilly along Esplanade Ridge. When the hurricane hit, Burke felt confident her neighborhood would fare better than most. "We got water up to our third porch stair," she says. "Most shotguns are elevated about three feet, to protect them from flooding and to allow for air circulation in our wet climate. Had we been on ground level, we'd have had much more serious damage." (Her father's old Metairie home, also on high ground, flooded because of the 17th Street Canal breach: "Dad is a bit disillusioned now. He'd prided himself on never flooding.")

Houses on the lower sides of Esplanade sustained more damage. "To one side of us is Bayou St. John, which is one of the reasons New Orleans was founded," Burke explains. "The bayou connects to the lake, which connects to the north shore, and this high ground [Esplanade] was the only route connecting the river and the Quarter to the bayou.



"This particular ridge has been inhabited since New Orleans' very beginnings. The house across the street is an old Creole cottage, there are some original plantation homes along the bayou, and one of the oldest buildings, The Spanish Custom House, built in 1789, is right up the road. This area has an immensely rich architectural history."

Just one percent of the city's historic homes—about 200 structures—sustained damage beyond repair and are slated for demolition, which speaks to how soundly these original homes were constructed, and why the remaining homes' architectural integrity must be maintained as the city moves forward.

Such extraordinary progress has been made in Eleanor's neighborhood that it is easy to overlook the hurdles residents faced just after the storm. "When I first came back to get our cat, everything in the house and all around was dark and stunk and it was hard to imagine ever living here. But it was also a hopeful time. One by one, all of the neighborhood restaurants reopened, and we made a point to be at most openings. As we sat and ate at Liuzza's by the Track on opening day, someone would come in who hadn't been seen since the storm and the entire place would break out in cheers and a round of toasts would follow. You know, it was a struggle for these restaurants to even be open at all. There might be just one cook, but still they chose to open their doors and we had to support them."

Now it seems that New Orleans is at a critical crossroads, and Burke's job has never been more necessary or important. There are many ways for New Orleans to rebuild; Burke and others like her are working to ensure that it is done with care and consideration, so that the city's unique architectural heritage, and inherent character, don't get washed away. **ET**