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GENTILLY GETS GOING

A door-to-door survey directed by Dartmouth College shows that residents have made a healthy start on reviving their neighborhood

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More than a few visitors who tour New Orleans' midsection by way of Elysian Fields and Filmore avenues still recoil at the scenes of Katrina destruction, the scarcity of people. But a Dartmouth College researcher and students who surveyed virtually every house in the sprawling Gentilly area see something else: restoration.

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A survey of every block of Gentilly and two adjacent Lakefront enclaves, covering 16,039 properties, nearly all of them residential, found that only 4 percent could be classified untouched or abandoned. The researchers classified 57 percent of the homes as gutted or under construction, while they found 31 percent occupied or restored. At 8 percent of addresses, they found vacant lots, in many instances the result of a demolition, also a sign of progress.

The survey, done in March, also tracked the presence of trailers, finding 2,546 dotting the landscape. The survey of more than 20 neighborhoods within Gentilly -- a large collection of subdivisions that before the storm fairly well mirrored the city's population as a whole -- offers the most detailed snapshot of recovery progress to date in a racially and economically diverse slice of New Orleans.

With the help of Xun Shi, an information system expert in Dartmouth's geography department, professor Quintus Jett and the students fashioned a mapped database on the project's Web site, www.gentillyproject.com, that allows a user to pull up information about the status of homes in any block of Gentilly, where a fraction of a pre-Katrina population of 47,000 has returned.

Breaking off from the ranks of college students who come to New Orleans to rebuild homes or rake debris out of drainage basins, Dartmouth teams turned to hard data-collection in their search for "nonbureaucratic organizational models," as Jett puts it, for spurring the redevelopment of torn neighborhoods.

Gert Town next?

Dartmouth representatives are considering a door-to-door survey in the badly damaged, lower-income Gert Town neighborhood, near Xavier University, and have offered to help city government gather information across much of the city.

While the notion that fewer than a third of the Gentilly area's homes are occupied 20 months after Katrina could lead to bleak forecasts about the future, Jett finds ample reason for hope.

"I was in the city in November 2005; I remember how it was. I remember the very first time when I was going to Gentilly in 2006, there were a lot of areas that had no streetlights," he said. "I actually feel very optimistic because I know, because of this data, that 95 percent of those homes have at least been gutted."

Gutting has been carried out by homeowners, neighbors, churches and other volunteer groups -- a clear sign of determination to pull together resources, block by block, and restore life to the area, the 39-year-old researcher said.

And the survey couldn't measure impacts from plans by Holy Cross School, flooded in the Lower 9th Ward, to establish a new campus in the heart of Gentilly, at the old site of St. Frances Cabrini Church. Nor could it account for the expected impact of Road Home rebuilding grants for residents who have been unable to rebuild because of financial gaps.

The Holy Cross plan -- widely praised by Gentilly property owners -- wasn't finalized until roughly the time of the survey, and the state has yet to hand out the lion's share of Road Home grants.

Correcting misconceptions

Councilwoman Cynthia Hedge-Morrell, who represents the area, said the survey helps in making the case that flooded neighborhoods are steadily improving, at the level of individual homes and blocks. It also counters a national perception that much of New Orleans remains in the same sordid state as right after the flood, the councilwoman said.

"The statistics justify a closer look at incremental changes. It just seems like more and more people are finding employment so that they can come back, or they are getting funding so that they can come back and get into their homes," Hedge-Morrell said. "You have a lot of families I've found, too, that are opening (property ownership) succession, so that a member of the family can take over the home and they can redevelop it or repair it."

Gentilly isn't the only area given close scrutiny in door-to-door surveys. Among other neighborhoods that have made heavy use of the tool are Broadmoor, which has drawn help from Harvard University and Bard College students in developing an elaborate database -- complete with front and side pictures of 2,400 properties -- and Lakeview, which uses block captains to regularly collect status reports on roughly 7,000 properties.

While they may not follow the same methodology, such data-collection efforts are critical to the recovery because they provide an almost real-time, comprehensive picture of block-level conditions that can change rapidly, said demographic analyst Gregory Rigamer.

Such data can help identify sections ripe for major redevelopment because few people are returning, or other areas with large numbers of cleaned-up and gutted homes, where owners

simply need help in moving their project forward, he said.

"This type of on-the-ground verification is very important," Rigamer said.

Free crawfish

Using the University of New Orleans College of Sciences as an operational base, the Dartmouth students and Jett set out to collect valuable information for residents facing a setting of drastic change, one in which governmental institutions often prove slow or misdirected in their responses.

The Los Angeles native's interest in New Orleans recovery can be linked, oddly, to Jett's research as a Stanford University doctoral student into the management of change in high-tech industries. For a core group of 13 Dartmouth students and 22 others -- in town for other projects -- who briefly added to the survey workforce, the spring break project allowed for friendly, personal interaction with storm survivors.

"It was common for residents to call out to us with their inquisitive looks or voices," graduate student David Nyweide wrote in a project blog. "We were encouraged to approach them and explain why a pair of us was traipsing around their neighborhood with a clipboard. After a little explanation, they were often effusive with thoughts and information. They'd share their frustrations, their blessings. We'd write down any needs they mentioned."

One of the residents, retired clinical social worker Gwendolyn Hawkins, admired the students' effort in covering eight square miles of the city.

Jett mentioned to Hawkins that he had overheard students talking about their willingness to pool their money, giving up a few other meals, if they could buy a batch of crawfish -- and the Gentilly veteran, helped by her family, donated a crawfish boil to the group. Because she's still living in a FEMA trailer, her house only partly restored, she held the boil at a relative's house.

Vital data

Hawkins said she needs the data the students collected.

"It's helping me to identify the properties in my area, to find out those that are blighted, those that have recovered, people returning, people not returning," she said. "It gives me incentive to continue working to support the community."

Although Jett is just beginning to distribute survey results, Scott Darrah, a founder of the Gentilly Civic Improvement Association, said the data has drawn interest among far-flung developers trying to make decisions on where to invest and how to invest, and among still-displaced residents who are wrestling with decisions about how to return.

"Once they see the data and see that it's fact-based -- that it's a door-to-door survey -- it makes them more hopeful," Darrah said.

Survey results point to sharp differences in the recovery track of different enclaves within Gentilly, depending largely on the depth of flooding in each section, but also on the economic strength and age of residents, and the design of older housing.

The Lakefront neighborhoods Lake Oaks and Lake Terrace, which saw relatively light flooding and have many affluent residents, have the highest percentage of occupied or rebuilt homes, at 88 percent, and the lowest incidence -- none -- of homes that appear abandoned.

Neighborhoods along the Gentilly Ridge's higher ground, such as Gentilly Terrace, are on a

quicker recovery track. The students found the lowest rate of occupied or rebuilt homes, 16 percent, in the Pontchartrain Park and Gentilly Woods section, reflecting, many say, myriad struggles of an older pre-Katrina population.

Gentilly residents aren't surprised by the variation in numbers, having seen them up close, or heard about them through relatives and friends. As he stood in the driveway of his badly damaged St. Roch Avenue home in Gentilly Terrace one recent evening, talking with his contractor, truck driver Michael James, 36, pointed north, saying for many blocks "it's kind of sketchy here and there, because that's where you had eight or 10 feet of water."

Closer to Gentilly Boulevard, on the other hand, it seems that nearly all homes are occupied, he said. James said a lack of financial resources and fear of crime seem to be slowing the recovery, but he was bullish about potential repercussions from the Holy Cross project and building projects at the University of New Orleans, on the lakefront.

"This summer is going to bring a lot of people back in, as the end of school terms give displaced families more freedom to move," he said.

Sitting on the porch of a newly renovated home she rents on Harrison Avenue, near City Park, Gwen Sanchez, a custodian who still aches over the loss of cherished pictures during the flood, said three families have moved back to her block, and most homes in her area have at least been gutted. But several on her block are still virtually untouched.

"Gentilly overall, I don't think it's getting up fast enough, because it got hit real hard. It's still just creeping along to me," she said. "Hopefully next year it'll be a lot better than it is. A lot of people want to come home."

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