

After the Storm, Destruction and Reconstruction: The Potential for an Archaeology of Hurricane Katrina

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ABSTRACT

Hurricane Katrina's destruction of the United States Gulf Coast in 2005 represents a recordable, archaeological landscape of contemporary history. Archaeology has the potential to serve as an interface in the study of Hurricane Katrina devastation uniting existing public history records with oral history studies to document a lost way of life. Here the practical relevance and social significance of contemporary archaeology is presented through the example of Hurricane Katrina. This paper will discuss the significance of modern ruins, the material record of the reclamation process, and the guidance needed to preserve the historic record.

Résumé: La destruction de l'ouragan Katrina de la côte du Golfe des États-Unis en 2005 représente un paysage de l'archéologie de l'histoire contemporaine. L'archéologie a le potentiel de service en tant qu'interface dans l'étude de la dévastation de l'ouragan en réunissant les rapports historiques publics avec les histoires relatées par les personnes pour documenter un mode de vie perdu. Ici la pertinence pratique et sociale de l'archéologie contemporaine est présentée par l'exemple de l'ouragan Katrina. Cet article discutera la signification de ruines modernes, le rapport matériel du processus de réclamation et les directives nécessaires pour préserver le rapport historique.

Resumen: La destrucción del huracán Katrina de la costa del Golfo de los Estados Unidos en 2005 dejó un panorama arqueológico registrable de la historia contemporánea. La arqueología tiene la capacidad de servir de medio en el estudio de la destrucción del huracán Katrina, al vincular los registros históricos públicos existentes con los estudios históricos orales para documentar una forma de vida perdida. Aquí, la relevancia práctica y el significado social de la arqueología contemporánea se presenta con el ejemplo del huracán Katrina. En este trabajo se analiza el significado de las

ruinas modernas, el registro material del proceso de reclamación y las pautas necesarias para preservar el registro histórico.

KEYWORDS

Disaster archaeology, Heritage management, Hurricane Katrina, Modern ruins

Introduction

Ruins are traditionally defined by the slow decay of structures over time. In the contemporary age, ruins are as much created by this lengthy process of decomposition as they are by swift forces of natural and human destruction (González-Ruibal 2008). The collapse of this temporal gap means modern ruins are inherently perceived more intimately. The archaeology of natural disasters offers a forum to engage the concept of modern ruins and explore their impact on local populations. The destruction of the United States Gulf Coast by Hurricane Katrina in 2005 represents a recordable, archaeological landscape of contemporary history. Since making landfall on August 29th of that year, Hurricane Katrina has been used by displaced individuals and fellow U.S. citizens to mark time. Hurricane Katrina was one of the five deadliest tropical storms in U.S. history and is the costliest storm to date. The destruction of homes and the displacement of approximately two million people left the Gulf Coast region with a visible scar of the trauma of the event that remains over 3 years later.

Although a region accustomed to hurricane devastation, the population of the Gulf Coast has experienced a cultural shift in the wake of life post-Katrina (Hartman and Squires 2006). This shift necessitates the participation of archaeologists beyond the 'normal' bounds of salvage archaeology to record and preserve a contemporary culture in danger of being forgotten in the rebuilding efforts. Currently, the history of the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina is being written through public record of post-disaster urban planning and survivor oral history projects, yet these omit the value of the material record of 'everyday life' in the pre-Katrina period as well as the material record of the post-Katrina rehabilitation period. Archaeology has the potential to unify our understanding of Hurricane Katrina as a cultural event through uniting the study of everyday life in the years leading up to the Hurricane event with the study of the new material worlds of the post-Hurricane rehabilitation period. What follows is a brief outline of some directions for future research.

Hurricane Katrina

The advent of a natural disaster propels a community to change. The converging winds of the tropical storm that would become Hurricane Katrina began to gather in the Bahamas on 23 August 2005. Six days later, on the morning of 29 August those Louisiana and Mississippi residents who had not heeded the call to evacuate braced for the Hurricane's direct impact. Sustained winds at landfall of 125 mph and a storm surge in excess of 25 ft in some regions meant the physicality of these Gulf Coast communities was significantly altered and the economy, resting largely with the sea, disrupted (Lawrimore 2005). Further, the failure of early warning systems to adequately communicate the extremity of the approaching storm and the collapse of the levees in New Orleans causing secondary flooding in the most impoverished areas compounded the severity of the initial catastrophe. Images of people stranded in public shelters like New Orleans' Superdome without adequate supplies of food and water flooded national news services. Lasting power outages and water shortages led many to draw comparisons between the devastated regions and locations in the Third World. The unparalleled calamity that was Hurricane Katrina reverberated in the oft repeated exclamation that "foreign aid [was] coming to us, not from us" (Hartman and Squires 2006:1).

After initial recovery of survivors, rehabilitation programs were initiated by Mississippi and Louisiana individually in conjunction with the Federal Emergency Management Agency, FEMA. Of primary concern was providing emergency housing for those whose homes were made uninhabitable by the Hurricane. FEMA trailers, 143,000 in total, characterized this new landscape of survivor communities. Meant to be a temporary solution provided to survivors for little over a year during which redevelopment of their property was to occur, in May 2009 approximately 5,000 trailers are still occupied due to the scope of disaster and inconsistencies with the provision of monetary aid to facilitate the rebuilding process (Fausset 2009). Infamous also for problems with some trailers leaking toxic formaldehyde gas, the FEMA trailer became emblematic of the region's frustration with the federal government's response to the disaster deemed both inadequate and slow. Reclamation of property by default became more a multistep process than imagined with semi-permanent dwellings constructed on some properties to facilitate the transition from FEMA trailer to fully redeveloped sites.

Anthropologist Susanna Hoffman writes, "yet another factor about calamities has been boldly writ by Katrina... disasters are revealers. They show what has been silently going on in a society and culture, and especially who has been made most vulnerable" (2005). The legacy of the

Hurricane and the subsequent process of recovery and rehabilitation has magnified the inconsistencies of acceptable living arrangements for the United States' most impoverished populations and the continuing struggle with issues of race. Hurricane Katrina clearly stands as arguably the most nationally significant event to characterize United States' history in the new century.

Protecting the Existing Historic Record

As might be expected, the work of Louisiana and Mississippi state archaeologists in response to Hurricane Katrina has largely been limited to recording the effect of the storm on the currently recognized heritage sites and maintaining their status throughout the rebuilding process. Concerns for historic preservation in light of natural disaster is the mandate of FEMA under the National Historic Preservation Act (1966). In New Orleans, historic preservation issues following Hurricane Katrina have been dealt with by the Louisiana Division of Archaeology (McKillop 2005). Hurricane Katrina itself, as well as the post-storm reconstruction, put many recognized heritage sites in danger. Dr. Chip McGimsey, head of archaeology for the state of Louisiana, notes that since the storm his department has been in frequent consultation with FEMA and city planners to establish a plan for debris removal around these sites of historic value (McGimsey, personal communication). These negotiations between New Orleans urban planning and archaeologists currently include the development of new city hospitals within a National Register Historic District.

Though required to take these actions toward protecting national heritage sites through the entire process of disaster response, FEMA's operating procedure remains relatively undefined (Seidemann et al. 2007). In March 2009, the United States National Committee of the International Council on Monuments and Sites (US/ICOMOS) held its 12th annual International Symposium incorporating the central theme of heritage preservation in the rebuilding process following natural disasters. In a call for abstracts, US/ICOMOS stated its purpose for this theme as the following.

Without proper planning and preparedness, heritage resources that may have survived the initial disaster—and that are so vital to rebuilding community and identity—can be further harmed during rebuilding efforts or through lack of such initiatives. In addition to the community-building—or rebuilding—functions of heritage sites, many communities depend on economic activity derived from heritage tourism, rendering rapid response and recovery for heritage sites vital to the economic recovery of communities struck by disasters (Poston 2009).

Akin to the changes in emergency preparedness post-Hurricane Katrina, the heritage preservationist sector has also recognized the need for new policies to protect and maintain heritage sites in the wake of natural disasters.

Recognizing the Contemporary Material Record

Yet focusing solely on the loss to recognized sites of historic value draws our attention away from the significant attachments which individuals had to their 'everyday' landscapes prior to the Hurricane, and the dissociative effects of the Hurricane on ordinary people who found their lives transformed by the Hurricane. Unlike traditional perceptions of ruins that are site specific, the contemporary ruins of disaster archaeology exist within a broader framework. In the case of Hurricane Katrina, whole communities were ruined within a matter of hours creating vast landscapes characterized by destruction. In a landscape of ruin, a balanced understanding of what constitutes heritage and the engagement of the public in the process of evaluating communal identity is needed. In an article for *American Anthropologist*, representatives of National Heritage Sites in the United States National Park Service illuminate the inherent inequality built into the national heritage regime. Exploring the loss of heritage sites in Louisiana and Mississippi following Hurricane Katrina, they found the sites of most importance to the common citizenry were in areas "not included in such [heritage preservation] inventories and in fact, had never been considered for placement in them" (Morgan et al. 2006:707), indicating the need for a re-evaluation of what constitutes historic value, the mechanisms by which it is determined, and the people who hold the power to determine it.

Scholarship embracing the cultural significance of 'everyday landscapes' and the contemporary cultural record is beginning to emerge. Morris (2009), doctoral candidate for the University of Cambridge, is exploring the process of memorializing the storm, including application of traditional New Orleans jazz funeral ritual. Likewise, Otte (2007) of Tulane University in New Orleans has embraced the idea of memorialization with her study of Post-Katrina body art. A leader of this emerging scholarship, anthropologist and FEMA liaison, Dr. Shannon Dawdy's (2006a, b) proposal for the recovery of Holt Graveyard, New Orleans, appreciates both its historic heritage and contemporary cultural significance. A former resident of New Orleans, she understands the importance of the cemetery in Louisiana as a place of pilgrimage and votive offering. She suggests that in addition to restoring the human remains unearthed by the storm the votives also be considered in the recovery process as well (Schwartz 2006). Given the extent of destruction and the lengthy process of reconstruction, it is this

process of unearthing the sites of contemporary communal identity, as evidenced by the emerging fieldwork, that is potentially most compelling. Australian historian Read's study (1996) of the meaning of lost places might serve as model for further research. His method of bringing individuals back to sites of loss to record their stories could present significant findings if applied to sites in Mississippi and Louisiana. Walking through the landscape with survivors who decided to rebuild and those who chose to leave the area would present unique comparisons.

Linked with the process of reclaiming the communal landscape is the process of reclaiming personal landscapes. The ruins of Hurricane Katrina include intimate domestic spaces (Figure 1). An excavation of these contemporary archaeological sites in some way has already begun. In the first weeks following the storm, volunteers from numerous non-profit, government, and religious organizations joined displaced individuals in their return journeys to towns and cities on the Gulf Coast affected by the hurricane and resulting storm surge. Soon they began the process of "mucking out" or debris removal from homes damaged in the storm. Of course in some instances, homes were completely leveled by the storm with only foundations left standing, but much of the work conducted by volunteers involved going into water soaked homes and completely gutting the interiors.

These volunteers unfamiliar with the values of the individual or community entered the site as impromptu 'excavators.' Though perhaps lacking



Figure 1. Ruins of a home in Bay St. Louis, Mississippi, September 2005. *Source:* Photo courtesy of Schomer

the systematic process of an archaeological excavation (Holtorf 2002), relief workers like archaeological volunteers were required to perform hasty evaluations of the significance of materials recovered often without the guidance of the displaced person or persons whom they were serving. Instead of asking whether items were of historical value, volunteers attempted to assess the potential for reclamation of objects that are now all considered valuable because of the loss they represent (Read 1996). Due to the deterioration of interiors and the danger of black mold, the ‘artifacts’ excavated in this process were few and limited to those made of nonporous materials. Figure 2 represents one such collection of recovered personal materiality, artifacts of a way of life that was lost in the storm. Citing connections with garbology might help in reading these artifacts (Rathje and Murphy 2001). Tim Edensor’s elegiac prose describing the abandoned landscape of a



Figure 2. Artifacts recovered from a home in Bay St. Louis, Mississippi, December 2005. Source: Photo courtesy of Schomer

modern industrial site might be applied to descriptions of the personal waste land of a home after being gutted. Of particular interest is his connection between people, materiality, and memorial. “The material traces of people are everywhere, object-presences which conjure up the absence of those who wore, wielded, utilized, and consumed them” (2005:328).

Negotiating Modern Ruins

An important dimension to the study of this landscape of contemporary ruins is the process of post-storm recovery. The negotiation of ruins and the task of rebuilding in this instance has been particularly slow and thus a unique method of residential reclamation of property has developed. As the process of recovery is ongoing, the accompanying material record is constantly evolving, creating the potential for gaps in the archaeological record. Progress from original home to the infamous FEMA trailer is well documented because of the safety issues involved, but the values of these transitional homes (colloquially termed “tweeners”) to the contemporary community have not been considered, either from an archaeological or a heritage perspective, and little evidence beyond eyewitness accounts now exists (Figure 3). As the name suggests, “tweeners” exist as living arrangements between the FEMA trailer and building of a permanent structure on the site. Carolyn Schomer, a volunteer in Mississippi, observed that these structures appeared to be larger than the original FEMA trailer.

They [“tweeners”] were also “shotgun” type design (long and narrow) but could be one or two bedrooms. They were on wheels, but had solid supports which could be lowered to the ground and gave the home a more solid feel than the trailers. I think the kitchens were larger with regular size refrigerators and stoves rather than the camping size. (Schomer, personal communication)

“Tweener” houses are considered to be semi-permanent structures, although it is likely they will remain in situ for some time following their use as primary residence serving different functions as more permanent housing becomes available. It is possible that further study of the reconstruction process may reveal additional structures and materials unique to this transient period.

Artistic synthesis post-Katrina presents additional evidence of the cultural shift initiated by the disaster. The Gulf Coast region, specifically New Orleans, is well known nationally as a center of musical cultivation. For many former residential musicians, like Stephen Bohren, the storm has provided new inspirations.



Figure 3. “Tweener” house near Gulfside, Mississippi, February 2008. *Source:* Photo courtesy of Schomer

The people comin’ back, no tellin’ what they’ll find,
 One thing will be waitin’ there, the long black line...
 The media is black and white, politicians whine,
 Everything is broken except the long black line. (Bohren 2007)

“The long black line” referenced here refers to the mark of the height of the flood waters emblematic of the event for all survivors and volunteers. Further, Lori K. Gordon (2008), an artist and resident of Bay St. Louis, Mississippi, has seen her artwork marked by the changing landscape. Originally a painter of Gulf Coast landscapes she now symbolically reflects the rebirth of Mississippi from the ruins through her mixed media collages. Refuse from the storm is being used to tell public history. As she describes it, “her series is about ‘rebirth’ and ‘rebuilding’ and ‘taking whatever it is you have left—even if you have lost everything—taking whatever it is you can find and starting again” (Berkes 2006). In Figure 4 hurricane debris, ‘reclaimed materiality,’ is incorporated into a multilevel piece reflecting the coast, both a source of identity for residents of Bay St. Louis and, as evidenced by Hurricane Katrina, a destructive force.

Discussion and Conclusion

Hurricane Katrina has altered life in the U.S. Gulf Coast region. Communities, though being rebuilt, are not the same. Absences exist where once stood



Figure 4. *Low Tide* by L. K. Gordon, painting mounted on scrap metal and wood salvaged from debris piles in Bay St. Louis, Mississippi. Source: Photo courtesy of artist

houses. On a personal level, cherished materials have been lost or destroyed. A general misunderstanding of how to memorialize these cultural changes exists. “How can assessors or friends gauge the significance of a place to people who may scarcely realize its value to them until that place is threatened?” (Read 1996:196). Websites like *Grief-Tourism.com* which highlighted the Gulf Coast as a key location for “disaster tourism” less than a year after Hurricane Katrina made landfall, indicates the public’s desire to experience this historic event (Slayton 2006). It is the responsibility of social historians, anthropologists, and archaeologists to facilitate the interpretation of sites and elevate them beyond that of tourist attractions of the ‘grotesque.’ Archaeology’s unique interdisciplinary perspective and ability to unite history, sociology, art history, and anthropology is needed to usher in a comprehensive study of what constitutes contemporary heritage in these regions.

Victor Buchli and Gavin Lucas write, “the archaeology of the contemporary past can happen only at certain times and in certain contexts in different parts of the world” (2001:15). That time and context now exists for the archaeological record left by Hurricane Katrina on the U.S. Gulf Coast. Archaeological investigations of Hurricane Katrina sites have the possibility to chart the catastrophic event, resulting human and economic loss, and ensuing response for the historical record. Studies of Hurricane Katrina ruins might expound upon the limited analysis of the existing and created material record presented above or expand to include analysis of aerial photographic records of communities along the Gulf Coast pre-Katrina

and at various stages within the rebuilding process and studies of the phenomenon of object displacement. If nothing else, archaeologists must act as historic preservationists to consider how best to communicate the archaeological record left by Hurricane Katrina and give voice to the story of what has been lost.

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