

David G. Spielman's *The Katrina Decade*—An unsentimental look at how things are now

By Christine Schofelt
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The *Katrina Decade: Images of an Altered City*, David G. Spielman, with essays by Jack Davis and John H. Lawrence, *The Historic New Orleans Collection, New Orleans, Louisiana, 2015*

Photographer David G. Spielman (born 1950) documented the immediate aftermath of the devastation in New Orleans in his previous book, *Katrinaville Chronicles* (2007). The story of that book is itself remarkable.

His publisher, Louisiana State University press, explains: “When Hurricane Katrina approached New Orleans, photographer David G. Spielman decided to stay and weather the storm, assisting his Uptown neighbors, a community of Poor Clare nuns. Katrina passed, and as the flood waters filled the city, the scope of the devastation only gradually dawned on Spielman, who was cut off from outside communication. Faced with the greatest personal and professional challenge of his life, he determined to document the scene unfolding around him. He managed to secure a generator to power his laptop computer, and in the days, weeks, and months after August 29, 2005, he transmitted e-mails to hundreds of friends and clients and cautiously traversed the city taking photographs. *Katrinaville Chronicles* gathers Spielman’s images and observations, relating his unique perspective on and experience of a historic catastrophe.”

Spielman revisits the subject in his most recent book, *The Katrina Decade*. Documenting the state of the city in black-and-white photos taken between 2009 and 2014 or so, he leaves the well-traveled paths taken by the tourist industry and Chamber of Commerce, who tout the “resilience” and supposed recovery of the city.

Unlike much of the photography devoted to New Orleans, before or after Katrina, Spielman’s work includes many more recent buildings and scenes. The

French Quarter and genteel mansions are entirely absent. Since those are well-documented elsewhere, this is not a great loss. Spielman’s focus is on the low-lying areas of the city, those most hard-hit. These areas were largely unknown, poor and unfashionable at the time of Katrina, and remain so. Very few people are present in the photos, and those who are bring out the lingering desolation.

Buildings overgrown with vines are common—whether in the Seventh Ward, Mid-City or Central City. One in particular, possibly a shotgun double in New Orleans East, is totally enveloped—its triangular outlines the only indication that humanity had any hand in things at all. In the distance sits another building seen as the glimpse of a roof in good repair. The buildings cannot be more than a few hundred yards from each other, but the distance seems unbridgeable.

The majority of the photos are of residences or infrastructure such as hospitals and retail stores. Both the storm itself and the intervening years have taken their toll. Graffiti (some quite poignant), occasional squatters and the unrelenting natural elements contribute in their various ways to push buildings that might have been salvageable into a state of irretrievable decay.

The image of Charity Hospital taken in 2014 is one of the starkest, however surrounded by traffic and life it may be. Indeed, this is the most bustling of the photos in the book, but the hospital, which never re-opened after Katrina, is caught here under a looming sky and stands as a symbol of incredible lost potential.

As the WSWS noted at the time, “The catastrophe unleashed by Katrina has unmistakably revealed that America is two countries, one for the wealthy and privileged and another in which the vast majority of

working people stand on the edge of a social precipice.” The processes of official neglect and searing poverty exposed to the world’s view by the hurricane ten years ago have continued on. This finds sharpest expression in tracts of untouched or barely touched neighborhoods to which people have not been able to return or, if they never left, have not had the resources to rehabilitate.

One notes the similarities between certain pictures of the West Bank [of the Mississippi River] or Uptown and images of de-industrialized areas from many US cities (Detroit, Cleveland, Baltimore, etc.): burned out, stripped-down cars sit in front of abandoned mid-century housing developments, children play basketball in a broken hoop set before a broken house.

Spielman is not given to the current fetish for “Ruins Photography.” There is no romanticism in these pages. A news photographer by trade, he cites the Works Project Administration’s Dust Bowl documentation in the 1930s as his chosen approach to his city, and is careful to avoid sentimentality. That the images are aesthetically effective is the result, in the first place, of the objective situation being taken for what it is. The buildings are largely shot head-on, and there is no attempt to prettify or make them approachable. If someone happens to live or work there, he or she is taken as part of the whole.

Such honesty is particularly welcome when dealing with this much-mythologized city. It is seemingly forgotten in the anniversary events marking the catastrophe that actual people lived here, or live here still--some in appalling conditions more reminiscent of the turn of the last century than this one.

The promoters who want to welcome tourists or entice investors are full of bravado and boasting. New Orleans, they say, is “back.” Much, however, is still missing and still slipping away. Spielman’s book is a quiet and potent reminder of this.

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