

Changing Places: Las Vegas/San Francisco/New Orleans

Michael Kolster
Department of Art History
Bowdoin College, ME*

Abstract

Dates: 2001-2009

These photographs come from a long-term and ongoing project concerned with how we perceive and are affected by changes in the places we inhabit.

Each of the three places depicted here, New Orleans, Las Vegas, and San Francisco, finds itself in a precarious position relative to the “natural” demands of its geographic location. Eighty percent of New Orleans was flooded in 2005; as many of us now realize, most of the city is located below the level of the water that borders it. The probability of San Francisco experiencing a seismic event equal to or greater than the 1906 earthquake in the next 30 years, geologists tell us, is greater than 50 percent. And Las Vegas, still one of the fastest growing cities in the country, has no feasible long-term plan to keep its development from outstripping its ability to supply its inhabitants with fresh water. Due to where they are physically located, these cities in 50 years will most likely look nothing like they do now.

Coincident to or perhaps because of its location, each of these cities has developed an identity that represents a diversion from the cultural norms associated with mainstream America. Many Americans I know prefer that what happens in Las Vegas stays there. San Francisco wears proudly its identity as a place of alternative lifestyles and liberal foment. New Orleans, known as the Big Easy for the ease with which musicians could find work, displays front and center its difference from the rest of America during its celebration of Mardi Gras.

What should be an obvious truth, that a place’s physical location and features have a profound affect on the lives and outlooks of its inhabitants, is often overlooked. Saying we live “in” a place, rather than “on” or “with” it, concedes how entirely a place encompasses us physically. It acknowledges the pervasive affect the place’s external imperatives have upon our psyches, our perceptions of self and others, and the desires we pursue.

Now that popular consensus is embracing the fact that our world is growing warmer, the uncertain futures these three cities face today may well be harbingers of change facing the places we all live in. Has a sequence of events already been set in motion that will irrevocably alter how and where all of us will be able to live? And if so, how will this fact affect how we relate to each other and to the places we inhabit?

These photographs describe relationships between elements in the landscape that are specific to a particular day, hour, and fraction of a second. Some were made seven years ago, some just a few months ago. What is important to keep in mind is that each triptych (or multiple image panoramic) presented here comprises a series of individual and distinct photographs. Each individual “frame” within the triptych is its own point in time and each corresponds to a distinct piece of film that I exposed and developed. Taking in the scene presented by the triptych is

* email: mkolster@bowdoin.edu

analogous to how each of us encounters a prospect. By pausing slightly and regularly we set into motion a mental “imagining” in order to see things more completely.

I hope each piece’s particularity, its reference to a specific location in time as well as space, stimulates speculation about how different that place appears at this very moment, were you able to behold it for yourself. And more exciting is to ponder what it might look like tomorrow, next month, and 50 years hence.

Keywords: spaces, location, change, Las Vegas, San Francisco, New Orleans.



So. Broad at Banks, Mid-City District, Nov 2005

1. So Broad Ave at Banks, Mid City, New Orleans, November 2005

New Orleans is located in a place that brings with it with a measure of risk. At the edge of the Gulf of Mexico the city is infamous for being below the level of the massive bodies of water that surround it and for subsiding further as large areas the city are pumped dry and “reclaimed” for housing developments. As its citizens found out in the days following Katrina’s landfall, surviving the wrath of a hurricane’s wind and rain is not enough; the failure of the levees to withstand the surge of water brought in from the Gulf by the storm inundated its streets with water up to 12 feet deep for over three weeks. This unprecedented breach of the public trust was compounded by the egregious governmental response to the plight of its citizens in the flooding’s aftermath.



2. Ney Street, San Francisco, 2001

I lived in and photographed the city of San Francisco from 1992 to 2000 and still return often to photograph it. As I walk the city and look around I think about the risks my fellow San Franciscans take living so close to the San Andreas fault and how the city shares with New Orleans a fragile and indeterminate future.



3. Market Street at Jones and MacAllister, San Francisco, 2001

Almost all of the buildings that exist today in downtown San Francisco were built after the 1906 earthquake. Only a few structures survived the fires that burned for days after the earth stopped moving.



4. Harrison at Norfolk, SoMa, San Francisco, 1997

Rubble from the 1906 earthquake and fires was dumped into the bay bordering the South of Market Street area, or SoMa, eventually expanding the physical footprint of the city. The earth supporting certain blocks of SoMa consist solely of this rubble, which tends to liquefy during severe earthquakes and bodes poorly

for any structure built upon it.



5. Twin Peaks, San Francisco, 2001

To call San Francisco home is to live with the specter of a major seismic event that will, at some point, change the course of many lives and render much of the city unfamiliar and possibly uninhabitable. This eventuality does not keep people away - San Francisco remains one of the most popular, exciting, expensive, and beautiful places to live. To what extent does its location poised above one of the most active seismic faults in North America affect how its citizens greet each new day?



6. Badlands Golf Course, Las Vegas, 2001

For decades now Las Vegas has been expanding beyond the Strip to become a major metropolitan area supporting large numbers of middle class Americans and retirees. As I have witnessed the growth of Las Vegas and its expansion from Sin City to Sun Belt suburb, I wonder what will happen when this growth overwhelms its supply of fresh water.



7. Top of Bally's, Las Vegas, 2001

According to the US Census the population of Las Vegas grew by 83.3 percent, from 852,737 people in 1990 to 1,563,282 in 2000, placing it almost 20 percentage points higher than the next fastest growing metropolitan area in the US (Naples, FL, 65.3 percent).



8. Calico Basin trailhead, Red Rock Canyon, Las Vegas, 2006

The phenomenon of Las Vegas has been studied extensively due to its improbable location in the desert. Its recent explosive growth can be attributed to readily available supplies of energy to air condition and power our cars, houses, offices, and casinos, enabling settlement in such an extreme environment. Its continued success as a gaming and tourist mecca (and as a cultural oddity), has provided many workers seeking the American dream affordable housing, jobs that pay a living wage, and decent schools to educate their children. Yet the city remains an island in midst of the Mojave desert; its growing population is putting a serious strain on its supply of fresh water.



9. Lake Mead Marina, NV 2006 (B+W) and 2009 (color)

Lake Mead, formed by the damming of the Colorado River near Las Vegas, supplies the city with much of its fresh water. Its level today is one half of what it was just seven years ago. Estimates from Las Vegas's Water Authority indicate that within three years the lake's water level will be below the first of the city's water intake pipes, rendering them useless. If the current drought continues unabated shortages of water are imminent, with the equivalent of 256,000 people going without water in

2010 and, by 2011, that estimate grows to 404,000 Las Vegans without access to fresh water.



10. Las Vegas - new home construction, Patrick Lane, 2006 (left) and foreclosed house interior, 2009 (right)

Clouding any forecast of Las Vegas's future is the recent economic downturn and its effect on the housing market. Housing prices in Las Vegas fell this past year by more than a third and, while other areas in the country are beginning to see prices stabilize, they continue to fall in Las Vegas. Per capita incidence of home foreclosure in Las Vegas is one of the highest in the country.



11. Overlooking Las Vegas from Henderson, NV, 2006

One of the many questions Las Vegas faces is how much of its very existence is dependent on growth. If it keeps growing, especially at its current rate, how much longer can it be sustained? And if the growth of Las Vegas slows or reverses, what will be the effect on the city, a place so accustomed to endless expansion and defined by its sense of seemingly limitless possibilities?



No. Claiborne at Reynes, Lower Ninth Ward, Nov 2005

12. North Claiborne Ave. Lower Ninth Ward, New Orleans, November 2005

The people along the Gulf Coast of Louisiana and Mississippi suffered landfall of a category three to four hurricane on the morning of August 29, 2005. The city of New Orleans, itself spared a direct hit from the storm, experienced its worst and most lasting damage when a few of its levees protecting the city gave way. Water from Lake Ponchartrain and the Mississippi River Gulf Outlet (“MisteR GO) poured into the city through the levee breaches; pumps designed to remove the water were overwhelmed and failed. Over 80 percent of the city remained under water for up to three weeks.



13. Polk at West End Blvd. (debris), Lakeview, New Orleans, Nov 2005 (top) and Nov 2006 (bottom)

The American Red Cross, as of October 3, 2005, estimated that 310,353 single family homes were destroyed across coastal Louisiana and Mississippi due to the storm and flooding. By early October over 2 million individuals and households had registered with FEMA for disaster assistance. In New Orleans alone 75 percent of its population, over 375,000 people, were acutely affected. Piles of household and industrial debris filled parkways and “neutral zones”; a year later, with much of the debris removed to makeshift landfills, local, state, or federal government officials offered no guidance to assist citizens or businesses in their efforts to fill the empty spaces the storm and floods had caused. And four years later no coherent vision for the rebuilding of New Orleans has been established.



14. Pierre Court, New Orleans East, March 2006

Most of the 310,353 houses destroyed by the storm and flooding should never been built - not necessarily because of where they were located but because their designs flouted basic considerations of the local geography. Traditional housing found in the French Quarter, the Garden District, Desire, Holy Cross, or Baywater features high ceilings and linear layouts (shotgun style) to dissipate heat; most all are raised off the ground to minimize flood damage. Many houses in recently reclaimed and developed suburban New Orleans sport low ceilings and a squarish layout making them difficult to cool; most all rest on a concrete pad, or slab, located on grade. Such a design is almost unforgivable in areas susceptible to flooding and tropical heat. Certainly these poor house designs lulled their owners into a false sense of security - but living in a place that is near and below the level of large bodies of water needs inventive solutions to mitigate the risks. The water marks on this house's exterior siding show how much the slab of this house would need to be raised off the ground to avoid a flood damage the next time around.



15. Horizon Court, New Orleans East, Nov 2005 (top) and Nov 2006 (bottom)

Sadly, raising slab houses after the fact is prohibitively expensive. Many homeowners in NOLA are still facing a decision: raise the structure and then rebuild, which requires sinking more money (that most don't even have) into the property than it will ever be worth; rebuild with the structure remaining

on grade, which disqualifies it from mortgage and flood insurance; or walk away from their homes with minimal (if any) insurance compensation. FEMA trailers remain on front lawns, now mostly empty, themselves vestiges of a time when

homeowners pondered their lack of options. One cannot blame many homeowners for feeling they were sold a bill of goods and left holding the bag.



16. Stafford Street, Lakeview, New Orleans, Nov 2006 (top triptych); Nov 2006, Oct 2007, and Sep 2008 bottom L to R

As of June 2009, almost four years after the flooding certain neighborhoods, middle class and poor alike, are reconstituting but at a glacial pace. In Lakeview, a largely middle-class neighborhood, most all of which was completely flooded in water up to ten feet deep, the number of households receiving mail in June 2009 is only 50 percent of the number recorded in June 2005. And, the Lower Ninth Ward, a poorer neighborhood immediately adjacent to the failed Industrial Canal, reported that the number of households actively receiving mail in June 2009 is only 19 percent of that recorded in the months immediately before the inundation.



17. 6068 Louisville St. (mold), Lakeview, New Orleans, November 2006

As insurers, independent investigators and governmental agencies like the Army Corp of Engineers and FEMA argue about how and why the levees failed, these same levees continue to serve as the primary safeguard against further catastrophic flooding. In the eyes of many of its displaced citizens, they remain as fallible and possibly compromised as the sections that caved under Katrina's storm surge.



18. Hay Place at Fleur de Lis Blvd., Lakeview, New Orleans, September 2008

Compounding any doubt about the integrity of the levees is the fact that Katrina was a category three storm as it made landfall east of New Orleans. Despite the recent installation of large gates at the mouths of the 17th Street, London and Orleans canals and the decision to decommission "MisteR GO," there is little reason to believe, now more than four years later, that the systems designed to protect NOLA from flooding will survive a direct hit of a more powerful storm and keep its accompanying surge of water from inundating its houses and streets again. And perhaps this is best explanation for why the rebuilding of the newer sections of New Orleans continues to proceed so slowly.



19. Church and Duboce, San Francisco, 2001

“Should New Orleans be rebuilt?” many people ask me. As any resident of New Orleans will tell you, the rebuilding of New Orleans began when individuals began to hear forecasts of Katrina’s imminent landfall. Its rebuilding continues today and will continue until the next flood hits, just as San Francisco is still being rebuilt in response to the earthquakes of 1906 and 1989.



20. Boulder Hwy. at Russell Road, Las Vegas, 2001

New Orleans, Las Vegas and San Francisco are three American cities whose future is very difficult to predict. Are there lessons to be learned from these cities as the world’s climate warms and the places we inhabit face the prospect of unprecedented change? To what degree can we label the difficulties these cities confront a result of “natural” or “man-made” forces? And, for that matter, does not such a distinction obscure our attempts to envision what our cities, towns and villages will look like in 50 or 100 years from now?