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In Post-Quake San Francisco, Lessons for New Orleans After the Flood

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WHEN a magnitude 7.9 earthquake struck San Francisco 100 years ago Tuesday and the city — like New Orleans last year — lay in ruins, Theodore Roosevelt was president and cars were just a plaything of the rich.

By the time San Francisco regained its past glory, at least according to some historians here, the automobile had started to reshape America's cities, Roosevelt was dead and, four presidents later, the country was on the precipice of the Great Depression.

"It took San Francisco something like 20 years to fully recover" from the 1906 earthquake, said Mary C. Comerio, a professor of architecture at the University of California, Berkeley.

"That might seem a really long time," said Ms. Comerio, author of "Disaster Hits Home," a book examining the post-disaster recovery of cities around the globe, "but social scientists who follow this kind of thing find that's pretty much the norm, whatever era we're talking about."

And then there are those who believe San Francisco, which, like New Orleans, had lost more than half its housing stock, never fully recovered. "The city never really recaptured that same dominance over the West that it had before the earthquake," said Philip L. Fradkin, author of "The Great Earthquake and Firestorms of 1906."

The earthquake lasted 40 seconds; the firestorms fueled by cracked gas mains blazed for three days. Together they killed at least 3,000 people and left 225,000 homeless in what was long regarded as the worst natural disaster to befall an American city — that is, until Hurricane Katrina.

Though the two disasters occurred 99 years apart, academics and writers who have studied the great quake of 1906 see parallels between these bejeweled European-style cities and the events that crippled them. And they see a prime opportunity to peer into the future to understand better the fate that most likely awaits New Orleans, a city still reeling nearly eight months after it was struck.

New Orleans can be the most parochial of cities, an inward looking burg whose residents take a kind of perverse pride in their benighted view of happenings outside its borders. That might be just as well right now given the prognosis offered by those like Ms. Comerio who have viewed New Orleans through the prism of San Francisco and other large-scale disasters.

They have little in the way of heartening news.

"Maybe New Orleans will astound everyone, but I wouldn't be honest if I said the prospects were overwhelmingly good for New Orleans coming back anything like its old self," said Joel Kotkin, a scholar with the New America Foundation who studied the 1906 quake when writing "The City: A Global History."

Both San Francisco and New Orleans were swashbuckling cities with 400,000 to 500,000 people when disaster struck, and both had reputations for permissiveness and bawdy fun. Just as New Orleans has the French Quarter, San Francisco at the start of the 20th century had the rough-and-tumble, anything-goes Barbary Coast.

One was built atop what Simon Winchester, author of "A Crack in the Edge of the World," described as "undeniably the most dangerous plate boundary in the Pacific region"; the other might be even more precariously situated: much of New Orleans lies below sea level in a region known for flooding and hurricanes.

"The queen city of the far West" was the way the historian Kevin Starr, who has written half a dozen books about California, characterized San Francisco circa 1906 — a pretty good descriptor if looking for a phrase to capture New Orleans's place in the Deep South.

Even the shorthand used to refer to each disaster is, if not wrong, not quite right, either. The great quake was as much the great fire that followed; the great hurricane, a great flood.

One major difference between the cities — a difference that may well hurt New Orleans in its recovery — boils down to the ambition and dreams of each when disaster struck. San Francisco was a relatively new metropolis, one crackling with energy and optimism. Then the most populous city west of the Mississippi (today its 777,000 residents rank it fourth among California cities), San Francisco harbored dreams of growing into a metropolis of two million that would reign as the undisputed financial and cultural capital of the West.

New Orleans, by contrast, was approaching 300 years old when Katrina struck; it was a city that might be compared to a once glorious mansion occupied by a few generations of descendants who could not quite handle the cost of upkeep. "New Orleans was a city that was in its dotage when disaster struck," Mr. Kotkin said. "It was a city that had been in decline for decades."

What Mr. Kotkin described as an "absence of upward energy" could prove critical as New Orleans slogs through a recovery that promises to take years. "I'm not sure we'll see the same level of investment in New Orleans," he said.

Such is the nature of disasters that they bring existing problems into sharper relief. "What we've learned studying San Francisco and other disasters is that a city responds to a catastrophe with the same level of functionalism and dysfunctionalism that it had before the catastrophe," Mr. Starr said. "And as we all found out in New Orleans, a catastrophe brings to the surface those dysfunctions."

Catastrophe brings some dangerous impulses to the fore as well. In 1906, the city fathers did not tighten the municipal safety codes so as to prevent future catastrophes but instead used their collective power to play

down the earthquake's destructiveness.

"The business community and politicians decided an earthquake would be bad news for the city and its future," said Peter J. Flagg, director of the Society of California Pioneers, based in San Francisco, which recently unveiled an exhibit called "Shake, Bake and Spin." "So after the first few days you see in newspaper accounts references to the fire or conflagration, and a downplaying of the earthquake as minor, when it wasn't minor at all."

Yet there was no countering the lingering effects of the earthquake and the images carried in newspapers around the country. Almost instantly the '06 quake transformed Oakland, which sits directly across the bay (a city that, it turns out, sits atop an even more volatile fault line), "from a kind of pastoral suburb into a city," according to Mr. Starr, the former state librarian and now a professor of history at the University of Southern California. And in short order, he said, Los Angeles, and to a lesser extent Seattle and Portland, began to encroach on San Francisco's primacy.

New Orleans long ago ceded its primacy to Houston and Atlanta. It was confronting any number of challenges before it became a prime subject of study for those who might best be described as sociologists of disaster. And now, just as 1906 forever changed perceptions of San Francisco, so, too, will the indelible images of a city sitting under water play a factor as the city seeks new investments to make up for all those businesses that fled the city or simply shuttered their doors for good — and all those residents who are too old or too poor to return or simply see better opportunities elsewhere.

"I think this all adds up to terribly bad news for New Orleans," Ms. Comerio of Berkeley said. "I look into the future and see a city half its size."