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The Lower Ninth Ward in New Orleans Can't Get a Break

The neighborhood is facing an onslaught of catastrophic projects that could be more damaging than Hurricane Katrina.

[Roberta Brandes Gratz](#)



The rebuilt Industrial Canal levee wall (L) in the Lower Ninth Ward stands near restored homes in New Orleans, Louisiana, on August 6, 2025. During Hurricane Katrina in August 2005, multiple levee breaches flooded the Lower Ninth Ward, causing many deaths and destroying thousands of homes, many of which belonged to multigenerational families. (Mario Tama / Getty Images)

New Orleans, Louisiana—The Lower Ninth Ward in New Orleans can't get a break. This mostly low-income but heavily homeownership neighborhood filled with classic shotgun houses is where the levee breached 24 hours after Hurricane Katrina and engulfed the area in a toxic flood. The floodwaters reached above rooflines, leaving people stranded on

rooftops or floating to safety in makeshift boats. Now, after 20 years of a gradual but steady rebirth that politicians and experts didn't think possible, the predominantly Black neighborhood is facing an onslaught of catastrophic projects that could be more permanently damaging than the hurricane.

For a while after Hurricane Katrina, the Lower 9 was front and center in the news. Everything city and state officials did—or didn't do—reflected an unspoken desire to not see the area revived. Even a golf course was whispered as a replacement. This was the last neighborhood where residents were allowed to return, four months after the floodwaters engulfed it and three months after the water had receded. Damp and mold did more damage than the floodwaters.

The Lower 9 was not the poorest neighborhood in the city and actually boasted a home ownership rate higher than the rest of the city and probably more rooftop solar panels than elsewhere. It had its fair share of blight, abandoned properties, and drug dealing but it was by no means an impoverished wasteland. The community, filled with family networks, had a strength and deep roots that would be the envy of any place. The neighborhood was and remains a mixture of finely crafted shotgun houses and bungalows, mixed in with nondescript brick houses. The population is about 5,000 and was growing, but with the upcoming projects, nobody expects newcomers to keep coming.

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A 50-year-old plan by the Army Corps of Engineers to alter and widen the Industrial Canal paralleling the neighborhood moves ahead despite the obvious, ruinous impacts it will have during its projected 20-year duration. A drawbridge over the Canal connects the neighborhood to the rest of the city. The project is designed to speed up commercial shipping between the Inland Waterway and the Mississippi, but dates from the urban renewal days in the 1950s when plowing through Black neighborhoods for highways and other projects was customary. Here, 65 families will have to be “temporarily” relocated—to where and to what is unknown—for an incalculable time. The project's time is estimated between 13 and 20 years but, based on the history of these overscaled projects, no one believes the numbers. It is difficult to define as “temporary relocation” when a project could go way beyond its estimated time, which projects usually do.

The reported economic cost-benefit ratio of the project has gone from an original 13:1 to 1:2 and is expected to diminish more with time. Nor is there any projection of what shipping needs will be like 20 years from now.

Doron Dusua, a 34-year-old civil engineer, lives with his mother in a teal-colored bungalow converted from a shotgun a block and a half from the Canal. His father bought the house in 1996. Dusua points out the sad irony of this story. A better site exists for this allegedly necessary shipping shortcut four miles down the road in Violet, a thinly populated community in neighboring St. Bernard Parish. The problem is simply that the Corps of Engineers would have to start over not only with the paperwork but also with the politics and community engagement, all of which always takes years. But as Dusua adds, even that is questionable on both a cost-benefit analysis and added shipping advantage. Assuming that the same size barges are in use 20 years or more from now, this alteration will allow two barges to pass through the lock at one time.

“The project would also bring the canal 12 blocks deeper into the city making the whole city more vulnerable to floods,” notes Sandra Stokes, chair of Advocacy for Louisiana Landmarks Society. Stokes, on behalf of the Society, has been the city’s most aggressive voice on behalf of protecting individual and neighborhood landmarks and opposing ill-considered development. In more than a dozen letters and e-mails, Stokes has worked with numerous local residents to challenge Army Corps assumptions and plans. So far, it has been to no avail. The economic and social impact is beyond measure.

Then, further downriver on the Mississippi in Holy Cross, the Lower Ninth’s designated historic district, another overwhelming industrial project is emerging. Sunrise Foods International has made a deal with the city’s port to convert an unused historic brick wharf into a facility to unload and store grain brought from the Ukraine. It will then be shipped on a rail line that runs through the historic neighborhood with horn blasts at 27 traffic intersections. Attempts to revive a similar industrial rail line in New York City a few years ago were vociferously opposed and turned into a rail trail instead. But this one went through middle-class neighborhoods.

The carcinogen-loaded “organic” grain gives off a fine dust expected to cover residences and businesses of the area, as well as Jackson Barracks, an historic Louisiana National Guard military installation established in 1834, now a command center for emergency operations. A second 100,000-square-foot warehouse is planned for Sunrise to store salad oil.

Eliot Robinson lives with his wife and 3-year-old daughter in a historic house on Alabo Street they bought in 2022 for \$281,000. “We moved here for the quiet quality of life and the glorious advantage of living one and a half blocks from the levee. It has a quiet rural feel.” The Mississippi levee is the location of wharves. A whole crop of young families with kids have similarly moved to Alabo Street. “We’ve been blindsided by both the grain deal and

the revival of the rail line,” he says. “This is an aggressive escalation of industrial development in a peaceful residential neighborhood,” he says.

This neighborhood, Holy Cross, is a designated historic district. It lies abreast the Mississippi and is filled with Creole Cottages, shotguns and two stunning captain’s houses replete with third-story lookouts and elaborate exterior embellishments. This is the highest elevation area of the Lower 9 because of its proximity to the river. It flooded the least of the whole Lower Ninth Ward. “They lean on the fact that the grain is organic but grain dust is grain dust,” Eliot says.

“Sunrise International had a deal to use the industrial site at Avondale Shipyard 20 miles upriver in St. Bernard Parish,” said Sandra Stokes, but switched to the Alabo site. She and other opponents assume that the New Orleans port gave Sunrise a better deal. A 2023 letter of intent from Sunrise to Avondale obtained by opponents outlines in detail the plans they had with Avondale.

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