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FEATURE STORY

## KATRINA RECOVERY

### *A Tale of Two Cities*

*by Bart Bettiga*

**December 13, 2006: New Orleans**

I am sitting in a restaurant called Mittendorf's, about 50 miles north of New Orleans, enjoying a steaming bowl of their famous gumbo and some fried catfish. I am about to enter the Big Easy for the first time since Hurricane Katrina wreaked its devastation upon this quaint and beautiful city. I have made several trips to the Mississippi coast, so I know what to expect. At least I think I do. My goal is to meet with a few of our members to get a feel for what is happening with the rebuilding of the area and the current building climate. We have gotten many inquiries from readers who are struggling to find work in some areas around the country where housing has slowed to a crawl. They want to know if there is an opportunity to temporarily relocate to the coast to help in the rebuilding efforts and to make potentially some significant income.

After checking in to my hotel in the French Quarter, I take a long walk to see how this famous area has been affected. I stop in Jackson Square, watching aspiring artists who are looking to caricature anyone stopping by. I talk with a few of the psychics and artists and ask them if the city is getting back to normal. They roll their eyes as if I have two heads, saying it is going to be at least ten years before any

Damage from Katrina is still evident all over New Orleans.

sense of normalcy will take place. I am struck by their determination and spirit. They are in this for the long haul. New Orleans is home to them, and they have no intention of going anywhere else.

Just a few blocks away from the Quarter, I find a side street I immediately notice several trailers prominently parked in the front yard of homes. Construction workers hammer away at rotting and flooded-out dwellings. Piles of garbage are heaped on sidewalks, trees are still lying on top of several homes, waiting for someone to find the time to cut and haul them away.

I notice several people staring at me with lost and vacant eyes. I think to myself, "I am a long way from the Upper Peninsula of Michigan," where I grew up. And this isn't even the area of the city hit the hardest by the storm. This is just down the road from the Quarter! I don't need to go any farther. I have seen enough. Then I pause in the road and it hits me. Hurricane Katrina came cascading into this famous city 16 months ago, inexorably changing lives forever! These people have endured this torture for that long! I can't even imagine what it was like during those first fateful days of the storm. I take a moment to thank God for the blessings he has given me and say a silent prayer for the survivors of this infamous catastrophe.

That evening, I take in dinner on Bourbon Street and stroll the area for a couple of hours. I enjoy listening to a grandfather and grandson blues duo in one of the many establishments in this irreplaceable city. Certainly, the crowds are nowhere near what they were pre-Katrina, but they will come back. The city has too much to offer for them not to.

**December 14: La Place**

I drive out to La Place, a suburb of New Orleans, hit hard by the winds of the storm but not as much by the flooding. There I meet with Todd Duhe of Performance Tile and Marble, a delightful and charismatic native and a dedicated member of the NTCA. We sit down for some time in his office and discuss the present situation.

"There are all kinds of work to be had right now, but nobody wants to pay you for it," Todd said. "It is really hard to describe the type of work I am seeing in some homes, and I am not talking about starter projects. I am talking about \$500,000 and up! But there is light at the end of the tunnel, I believe. Money is being released to people soon, and they will do it right and hire quality specialty workers. Presently, this has been a real problem."

Todd goes on to tell me he recently spoke to someone from the local home builders association, and they predict a real quality housing boom starting in June or July 2007. Long-awaited monies are starting to free up and the new wave of rebuilding should focus on quality construction methods.

Todd takes me out to a subdivision where his company is currently installing natural stone and ceramic tile in several areas, including a foyer and dining room and several bathrooms. He explains each installation method planned for each area in explicit detail. In the foyer, his men are keying



Quality contracting companies are not necessarily being hired to re-tile Katrina damaged homes.



the mortar into the uncoupling DITRA membrane, supplied by Schluter Systems. It is refreshing to see the mortar being applied in this way, as too often this is a step that is skipped in the field, often with negative results.



Upstairs, Todd shows me the shower system he is installing, utilizing the Kerdi System and drain from Schluter. Todd and a few of his employees attended a customized course offered by Schluter at the Ceramic Tile Education Foundation (CTEF) in Clemson, S.C., and he takes pride in putting to practice what he learned in those courses. This is what I find so important for all contractors. It does not matter what company you use, or what product line, but it does matter that you follow their recommendations and installation instructions. Todd and his employees are doing just that.

Finally, Todd and I walk across the dirt road to a beautiful residential structure that sits on the golf course adjacent to the housing development. The home looks to be almost completely finished. My eyes are about to be opened.

First and foremost, Todd informs me he did not do this work. He persuades the building superintendent to show us the home because he is frustrated with the workmanship in a project of this caliber. This is an understatement. Tile and natural stone are installed in numerous areas throughout the home. Todd points out several major flaws in the installation.

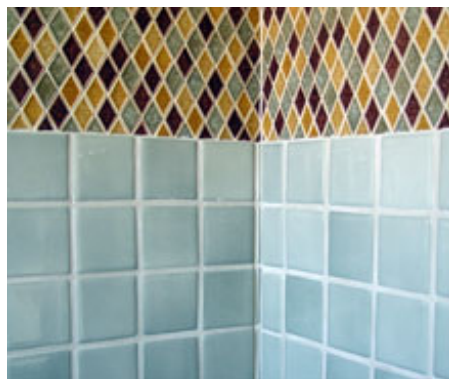
The main floor area, encompassing large spans on a concrete slab, lack expansion joints in the installation, and the tile is laid up directly against the molding with no room to expand or contract and no soft joint applied. This is in contrast to what is called for in the TCA Handbook method EJ-171.

Several bathrooms, installed in beautiful natural stone, have unfinished and rough edges that easily could have been polished. Grout has dried over many of the areas, and it is going to be very difficult to get it off.

A beautiful onyx bathroom was sealed over the polished material, basically ruining the material. An access panel that should have been made in the mosaic section of the onyx was made in the tiles, causing the finished product and design to look confusing and irregular.



In one tub area, the long wall entails a full tile on the left side, with a narrow cut on the right side. To compound the problem, the wall is not square, causing a very narrow cut on the bottom of the wall, slowly gaining in size up to the top of the tiled area. It is so obvious and poorly done it is almost incomprehensible. Basic layout strategies of this type are covered in do-it-yourself courses.



The shower curbs are completely out of square, causing confusing layout to the naked eye.

Mold is already growing on an inside wall. This wall is part of the exterior deck, overlooking the golf course. This deck is not properly flashed, and pools of water are standing on the system. (This is a building problem)

Grout joint width in some areas varies significantly, causing a visual nightmare.



I could go on further. The homeowners have not moved in. The tile contractor is no longer on the job. It is going to cost a fortune to replace. Quite frankly, the house is an absolute



disaster. So, while one builder across the street pays a premium for a properly-installed foyer, kitchen, and multiple bathrooms, the other builder gets a very low price for a sub-quality installation. Who do you think got the better deal?

I thank Todd for the tour of the homes, and we have lunch together before I depart for home in Jackson. I promise to return when things start to heat up in June or July. I hope that I can reach the local homebuilders association to share my story, and urge the builders in the area to use quality subcontractors with a proven track record of performance.



After enduring the wrath of all that Hurricane Katrina has to offer to an individual, can you imagine what it would feel like to have your new home ruined due to poor workmanship? This would be enough to throw many people over the edge. And I wouldn't blame them.

#### **Reflections on the drive home**

As I drive home, I am struck by several thoughts. If I am forced to wait for the government to provide the funds I need to replace my home properly, wouldn't I hire just about anyone to come in to provide assistance to me? Certainly.

No one is at fault here. There are areas that are so damaged that simply hauling away the refuse and installing commodity products is understandable. Who am I to judge what is going on in some of these areas?

But if I am one of the homeowners building a quality home in the area, I deserve much better than I may be currently getting. If I can help cause awareness of what is happening, and contribute to a push for employing quality contractors, my trip will have been worth it. I vow to come back on report on the progress that is taking place very soon.

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