

May Diary New Orleans – Andrew Golland.

1. Two gutter punks in Jackson Square.

Winston: It's gonna be 21 in New York and 19 in Chicago today.

Benji: I used to work in that City.

Winston: Which?

Benji: Chicago, down by the docks, moving fish, now that was a cold job.

Winston: Man that sounds bad, why did you do that?

Benji: I was paid, it was good money. I had an office.

Winston: Packing fish?

Benji: Moving fish. I became the super. My office was yeh wide and this long – big.

Winston: Man why would you need anything that big?

Benji: I had responsibility then.

Winston: Man you don't want that,

Benji: I sure ain't have that now.

They laugh.

2. Oyster bar consultant.

Barman: You don't want to go there.

Andrew: But it's supposed to be good.

Barman: Good for whom? Mayberry over there?

(Mayberry laughs)

Andrew: The concierge at the Hilton...

Barman: Man, he's paid to say that – his brother, his cousin or somethin', I just know, and if you know then the thing is fine – you know what I'm sayin'.

Andrew: OK so where are you suggesting?

Barman: I'm saying you oughtta be going just off Chartres, goin' to the Oceanna. They have the best Oysters you'll see in New Orleans. Best in the south too maybe. Here, I'll show you, just follow me...

3. Watching TV at the coffee bar of the Royal Sonesta Hotel on Bourbon St.

May: It's all crazy.

Andrew: Yes, like the birthers, totally. They never give him a break.

May: They just make him look bad at any opportunity. I think it's the race card all the time, cloaked in bullshit.

Andrew: Bin Laden was a momentary blip.

May: Well, I can't get into it with any of them, Obama can't win for trying but we get hit over the head here with a two hundred year old constitution and a supreme court that keeps everyone happy with their gun rights. And meanwhile education suffers and people like me come out of university with huge debts and have to work ten years to pay it off.

Andrew: You're at college here?

Yes, and I'm sitting here for an hour and a half killing time before an interview for a server position at one of those bars up the street.

Andrew: Bourbon?

May: Yup, there. This place is at least clean. Bourbon Street is disgusting.

Andrew: Trust the Dutch hotels! So what are you studying?

May: Psychology, senior next year. Then gradschool and then a Masters.

Andrew: Necessary to do all that?

May: Yup, and then some if you want to get anywhere these days.

Andrew: I was with some folks yesterday waiting to celebrate a daughter's graduation from Tulane as a doctor. She was saying she was now three hundred thousand in debt before starting her residency.

May: Well, she'll pay it back in ten like me – I shudder to say I'll be thirty thousand in debt when I am done but I won't earn as much. And Tulane – it's private and crazy expensive. Lots of very rich kids.

Andrew: Your generation has it tough. My daughter is probably your age and she hasn't started yet. She's supporting herself doing art projects commercially. Worries me but what can you do?

May: Talk to her, at least she should get started with junior colleges. And it's not so bad, though I often go hungry eating bread and all the wrong things. But I'll be all right.

Andrew: Can I offer you dinner locally? I was going to eat somewhere nearby before going to pack as I am leaving early tomorrow.

May: No, that's OK. I'll be all right, but thanks for asking and it was nice to talk to you.

Andrew: Me too, good luck with the interview.

4. With Juan to the airport.

Juan: I bin here two months as a cab driver.

Andrew: Where from?

Juan: Fro Dominican Republic.

Andrew: How did you come here?

Juan: My wife, her father has green card, now she and me now. Sorry not English.

Andrew: No, really you're doing well. Do like New Orleans?

Juan: Good city, busy now, people come. Next week one thousand people. No, sorry, one hundred thousand people. I start valet park, now I am cab driver. I first came Miami – no work. Then I go New York – no work, then my wife come here and I come here. Very busy.

Andrew: Well, I here there is a lot of investment by the government after Katrina. I keep hearing this place is going to grow.

Juan: Yes, big – but so hot. This last week good. Usually very hot. And summer, I die.

Andrew: Do you live in New Orleans?

Juan: No, Charlemagne, twenty minutes, good place. Small, no black people.

Andrew: But how can you live in this area without living with black people?

Juan: I no radical. I mean reesest. Black people who work good. But many, many don't and here in the City. I like Charlemagne, no black people. You come America to work, make life, make money. Black people stuck, no make money.

Andrew: Different life, different people – but things are improving, many schools are being built, much is going on here.

Juan: I know I see. Good for future. But though I work here make money to buy house, I will live in Charlemagne.

5. On the Gator Swamp Boat

Don: You take care there Dina or you gonna end up feedin' Ghengis. He one hungry boy there and always wants more. Heh why you wear them marshmaller shoes? You know he loves that marshmaller better than chicken. I guess he'll jest start with them tasty feet and work up. You know what that'll be like? I don't know. Hey when you done gone in the river be sure to shout and tell me. Hey here he come again, getting't onto the boat.

Shriek

Dina: Oh lord get him off the boat now, get him off!

Desiree: But we can get better pictures when he's on the boat, anyway girl you wanted to come and you made me come with you!

Dina: Get him off now you hear. Oh god he's coming for me.

Don: It's those marshmaller feet, I told you. Take off the white shoes Dina, Take em off.

Dina: You got to be kidding – get him off the boat.

Don: Ah ain't kiddin' I guess you'd make the tastiest dish – if we have to let someone go to make the boat float better.

Shriek

6. The Architectural Visitation.

USA based British architects celebrated the annual RIBA-USA conference in the “Big Easy” holding our “fringe” event to the behemoth AIA Expo almost next door at the New Orleans “Aquarium of the Americas”. Ours was a both a fish and fowl kind of experience with a backdrop of wildly wonderful junior high school kids and an enthusiastic and thought provoking lecture by Christine Sheppard, manager of the American Bird Conservancy's campaign against bird collisions, (into windows).

Though we had not planned it, some of us were excited at the prospect of a visit to the Lower Ninth Ward to see housing being built to replace the thousands decimated by Katrina. One of the most publicized efforts is the laudable one by Brad Pitt's “Make It Right” group to provide 150 raised architecturally designed “Shotgun” houses to re-house a fraction of the people who lost everything when the levees broke. Shotgun houses are tall and narrow, traditionally all the rooms lead one to another and you could fire a gun through the keyholes front to back. (No-one explained to us how often that might have been tried).

A hard core of RIBA attendees decided to make the visit to the Ninth Ward. Ruth Reed, RIBA President, Selma Harrington President of the Architects' Council of

Europe (ACE) from Dublin and Leyla Hilmi and Andrew Golland from the RIBA-USA San Francisco Chapter.

As all official tours were booked long in advance by the AIA members planning ahead, we rented a car and were blessed with a local guide, discovered by Ruth, in the person of Patrick Edwards, an architectural graduate of University of Colorado, Boulder, who has worked through much of the recovery effort along the Gulf Coast as a Team Leader with Americorps National Civilian Community Corps and lives in New Orleans.

Early in our tour, Patrick told us we would cross from the Ninth Ward, already several feet below the Mississippi, down into the Lower Ninth (actually much, much lower than the Ninth Ward. As we arrived after crossing the only bridge currently left linking the two districts, I was immediately struck by the silent eeriness of the place. A sea of green met our gaze. Down street after street lots are overgrown with four foot weeds and grass. Tennessee Street and others were generally devoid of any structures, just the odd remaining front stoop, overgrown and surrounded by weeds but in a few cases carefully maintained with flowers ornaments and dolls, perhaps as shrines to former residents lost to the inundation. And as we walked from our car to examine some of the new bright houses sprouting sporadically from the weeds, I was constantly aware of the backdrop of the repaired levee, raised twenty feet above the land on which we stood. Ships drift silently past along the top edge like ornaments on a mantle-piece. Patrick explained that the Lower Ninth was flooded to a depth of eighteen or nineteen feet. We all walked gingerly across the exposed bare concrete slabs left behind as the houses departed violently, hallowed ground where families had lived sometimes for a hundred years.

At the center of the Make It Right development Patrick described another vulgarity of that awful aftermath of the storm. As the levee broke, a large barge had broken through and onto the flooded houses, sweeping away scores of them and their remaining sheltering residents. I felt uncomfortable, ghoulish almost. Visiting architects looking at well designed buildings – and busloads of AIA visitors following on our heels. But soon the atmosphere changed. This was quite different. Here were some of the returned residents, please and happy to explain why they chose their new home, pleased to indulge the latest tourists to an area that surely

would never have seen them prior to Katrina. And in the sense of pride they felt there was strength, even in the seeming illogicality of sitting here at the whim of the mighty river.

One lady explained she had chosen the Kieran Timberlake design for the screens, which one day will be covered with vines, and the roof deck from which she could look across to the City. Another resident described how it much he had enjoyed the selection process. (Who could not be happy to be able to choose a home from a catalogue filled with some of the best sustainable designs of the day from architects such as Gehry Partners, William McDonough, BNIM and Concordia?)

The projects here have caught the imagination and attention of the whole city. Even the riverboat tour guides are pointing out the twinkling solar panels on the taller roofs as you pass lazily by, half listening to the tales of the river, the British defeat in the Battle of New Orleans in 1812 and plantation days gone by.

So one can both admire the resilience and at the same time the madness of rebuilding here. None of the stilts that we saw are more than a story high. And those riverboats keep winking at us as the bright sunlight catches their navigation lights.