I expressed my surprise and heard a lengthy monologue on how I-Pass doesn’t work and how my friends received duplicate bills and much more. I wasn’t that surprised; he was the second cab driver in six weeks to tell me a similar story. Personally, I think they just feared technology and change.

Of course not every cab driver is a Luddite and I doubt that there are any construction professionals who truly are, but I sometimes wonder if some people in the design and construction industries don’t feel the same way about change. While some of the resistance to interoperability is legitimate (Who will pay the engineer to actually provide complete design drawings? Who owns the drawings? What is the liability issue?), a lot of it seems to be just plain fear of the new. But Building Information Models are the wave of the future and the smart designers, builders, and owners are embracing them now—and especially on steel projects where CIS/2 translators are readily available. Right now, for the software used to design and detail the majority of projects, the technology exists to cut schedules and costs substantially. The key, of course, is a smart owner or contractor who recognizes the possibilities and is willing to pay a premium for design fees in order to realize even greater savings down the road (read Dave Ruby and Robert Aeck’s article on page 28 to learn how to do this type of benefit is possible on every project when the entire team is willing to work together).

Now more about New Orleans. If you’ve ever been a tourist in New Orleans, you probably spent most of your time in the French Quarter (I know that’s my personal experience). For the most part, that area of the city hasn’t changed. The great restaurants are open for business (though it’s easier to get in—a plus for tourists though one that will probably disappear soon enough). The beignets are still delicious. And Jackson Square is still beautiful. The bars don’t close until the wee hours of the morning and live music is beginning to return (the upcoming Jazz Fest, together with the slow return of conventioneers and tourists should speed the process). The biggest difference is the city is dirtier—pre-Katrina, the French Quarter had 52 sanitation workers; now they have 14. But come June, they’re supposed to be solving that problem.

If you go 10 to 15 minutes out of downtown, the story is completely different. I had the opportunity to tour Lakeview, a previously beautiful upper-middle-class community of $350,000+ homes. Despite having seen it on the news, it’s still a shock. Miles and miles of devastation, and in most of the community electricity still hasn’t been restored. Homes were actually shoved off their foundations. Huge trees were uprooted. Large wrecked boats are strewn about as though a giant child had gotten bored with his playthings. You could see the waterline on many homes where the water had remained at six or seven feet for a full week. And in one spot, we saw there was still leakage coming through the levees.

Almost everyone we talked to had a story to tell and I marveled how everyone could retell their tale with a small smile. The woman who drove us through Lakeview had grown up in the community and talked about her indecision about whether to rebuild and where her youngest child would go to school next year. Another told us about being in labor in downtown New Orleans as the hurricane hit and people were being evacuated. The gentleman who drove us back to the airport had only 37 inches of water in his house for a week, so mostly he needs to replace his electricity still hasn’t been restored. Homes were actually shoved off their foundations. Huge trees were uprooted. Large wrecked boats are strewn about as though a giant child had gotten bored with his playthings. You could see the waterline on many homes where the water had remained at six or seven feet for a full week. And in one spot, we saw there was still leakage coming through the levees.

Several weeks after Katrina hit, I returned to New Orleans to see for myself. There are many contrasts at this point, even if you’ve never been to New Orleans. It was a unique place to visit.

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