

Cracks hint at fate of shattered city

By Paul Adams BBC News, Port-au-Prince 8 Feb 10

Slowly, bit by bit, a city is being demolished. Across Port-au-Prince men with hammers, and the occasional bulldozer, complete what nature began.

But on Rue Valiant, on the slopes above the city centre, the days drift by.

This was once a middle-class neighbourhood, but the quake has reduced the people here to a meagre existence. The atmosphere is passive, dazed.

A long line of white tents occupies one half of the street. People here still don't trust their homes, even the ones that look intact.

Some families have left to find safety in the countryside, or abroad.

A dusty jeep is home for Emeline Desert, a veteran volunteer with a local charity.

She juggles several cell phones and casts a critical eye over her topsy-turvy world.

"Some people are rebuilding in the ruins," she tells me. "It's because they lack education. They still don't understand it was nature. They think it was God."

Ominous cracks

Ms Desert shows me where she has placed sticky tape across an ominous crack in a community centre wall. She checks the tape from time to time, to see if it has come apart. If it does, it means the building is still moving.

Across the road, Berline Liline doesn't linger inside her modest home. There are cracks on the walls, but it doesn't look badly damaged. However, as far as she's concerned, it's a death trap.

"No! It's very dangerous to go inside," she protests, when I ask if she has contemplated moving back in.

Is this house finished, I wonder? "Maybe."

When she pushes open the back door, there's a gaping hole



Most residents of Rue Valiant now live in tents



Community worker Emeline Desert lives in a jeep

and piles of rubble where the adjoining house used to be.

The people of Rue Valiant are waiting - for the aftershocks to stop, for someone to come and tell them what's safe, what can be salvaged.

Or whether this all has to be knocked down and rebuilt from scratch.

Rebuilding dilemma

Architect and developer Yves Francois has a keen eye for this kind of thing.

A Haitian living in America, he has left his New York business behind for now and is working flat out, assessing damaged buildings.

We visit an airy villa, high above the city, bought by a client just a month ago, but now damaged beyond repair.

Daylight is visible through cracks in the walls and Mr Francois shows me how the wrong mixture of sand and concrete causes load-bearing columns to crumble.

“ It's almost criminal that this kind of construction is allowed to happen ”

Yves Francois
Architect and developer

"Looking at the amount of damage that was done throughout Port-au-Prince, it's almost criminal that this kind of construction is allowed to happen," he says.

He has strong views on how the city should be rebuilt.

"We need to get people in temporary housing. But temporary housing. And take our time.

"Put a plan together for proper urban planning, construction and giving people a set of codes to build by," Mr Francois says.

It's a dilemma. Build quickly, before the rain and the wind, or take time to make sure that Port-au-Prince can withstand another earthquake.

Somehow, Haiti needs to do both.

Back on Rue Valiant, a tasty-looking meal for 200 people is being cooked up in a makeshift soup kitchen in a dingy courtyard at the back of Emeline Desert's community centre.

The people of Rue Valiant will depend on it, and their tents, for the foreseeable future. The first rains are due in April. Hurricanes could follow by mid-year.

Rebuilding, temporary or permanent, still seems a very remote prospect.