

Cityscapes: A Geographer's View of New Orleans

By Richard Campanella

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Next time you drive up St. Charles Avenue from Lee Circle and Carrollton, take note of the eight times that the avenue slightly angles. In each case, you're crossing an old antebellum plantation line, the surveying method of which can be traced back to early colonial times.

Straight segments on the avenue, on the other hand, indicate that you are driving within a former plantation, or across a group of them that were purchased together and subdivided all at once, leading to the urbanization we have today.

Now let's head down Elysian Fields. Consider how straight this avenue runs, the only one connecting the Mississippi River and Lake Pontchartrain with perfect rectitude. Why? This was the former right-of-way of the first railway west of the Appalachians, the Pontchartrain Railroad (later affectionately known as "Smoky Mary").

When first laid out in 1831, the rail line ran mostly through vacant swamp, giving the engineers no reason whatsoever to incorporate a curve into the trackbed. Now both the railroad and the swamp are gone, but the rectitude remains in the shape of Elysian Fields Avenue, and it affected the design of all adjacent subdivisions.

Coming in from Slidell? As you drive along Interstate 10, consider that beneath you lies a little-known geological feature. It's an old barrier island — like Ship Island or Dauphine Island — known as the Pine Island Trend, a sandy deposition of the Pearl River that drifted westward with long-shore currents until the sediments of the Mississippi River smothered it over and locked it in place.

Its white sands remain three to 30 feet beneath the surface, extending from the Rigolets all the way to Old Metairie. It was this now-buried island that sectioned off a bay of the Gulf of Mexico to become what we call Lake Pontchartrain.

Geography abounds in our lives, and informs much of our daily experiences. When you add the historical dimension, a geographical look at this 300-year-old experiment called New Orleans grows all the more interesting. Why, for example, did New Orleans grow in the manner that it did? Why do some streets form radiating patterns, others orthogonal? Where did all these neighborhood names and boundaries come from, and why does everyone bicker about them? Questions like these I hope to explore in this new monthly column.

By now I hope readers understand I'm not talking about the geography you suffered in grade school — the boring what's-the-capital-of-Kansas variety, for which we invented atlases to answer. Rather, I'm talking about space in our city, and how we perceive, manage and disperse ourselves across it.

Noise ordinances, flood zones, crime and poverty, gentrification and sprawl, zoning and land use: these and other recent local controversies are all fundamentally disputes over urban space. What's at stake are notions of individual rights and property values, fairness and quality of life, and, most of all, culture.

What emerges from these civic processes, more often than not, is much grace and beauty. Witness, for example, the splendid and distinctive cityscape our ancestors built upon this soft and fluid deltaic plain, and how New Orleanians today socialize and celebrate in public space to a degree not seen in most other cities.

In fact, much of what we consider new and trendy in the use of urban space today actually has deep local roots. Take, for example, the interest in urban gardening, farmers'

markets and food trucks. Outlying areas including Gentilly and Kenner once proliferated in “truck farms,” small-scale market gardens that sold their surplus produce to inner-city populations.

Cart-based vendors and peddlers mobilized the retailing of food throughout downtown streets, so much so that it became a public health problem. Spanish administrators in the late 1700s reacted by centralizing food retail from a single point — thus the beginnings of the French Market and the origins of what would become among the largest municipal market systems in the nation.



Corner stores and grocery stores would later compete with public markets, just as food trucks today represent unwelcome competition to restaurants — hence the latest round of spatial regulation attempts.

Concerned about too many alcoholic-beverage outlets in your neighborhood? A visitor in 1802 complained that New Orleans “abounds with tippling houses. At every cross street of the town and suburbs, one sees those places of riot and intoxication crowded day and night.”

Another witness in 1850 said, “Grog shops...are found in whole blocks — on three of every four corners, where one street crosses another, and ranges of building from street to street, every door leading into a drinking house.”

Later ordinances would recognize that one person’s pleasure — or income — degraded another’s quality of life, and ever since we’ve argued about the appropriate number and location of alcoholic-beverage outlets.

As for the way New Orleanians enjoy their public space, Thomas Ashe’s description from 1806 could well describe any Saturday night in the French Quarter: “The instant the (sun) sets, animation begins to rise, the public walks are crowded(,) the inhabitants promenade on the levee(,) the billiard rooms resound, music strikes up, and life and activity resume their joyous career....”

It could also describe the grievances of a modern-day neighborhood association!

I hope to see you here on the second Friday of each month, for explorations like these of New Orleans’ urban geography.



Rich Campanella; photo by Chris Granger, The Times-Picayune/NOLA.com

Richard Campanella, a geographer with the Tulane School of Architecture and a Monroe Fellow with the New Orleans Center for the Gulf South, is the author of “Bienville’s Dilemma,” “Geographies of New Orleans,” and the forthcoming “Bourbon Street: A History” (2014). He may be reached at rcampane@tulane.edu and followed on Twitter at [@nolacampanella](https://twitter.com/nolacampanella).