



A 1964 view of Poydras Street just prior to the widening project.

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THE WIDENING OF POYDRAS STREET

By Richard Campanella
InsideOut columnist



Demolition of 19th-century buildings transformed a gritty street into the CBD's corporate corridor

Few places in our city transformed so suddenly and dramatically as Poydras Street, and it all began 50 years ago.

Poydras entered the 1960s as a four-lane commercial artery lined with 19th-century storehouses amid the occasional early-20th-century bank or office.

It ended the 1970s as a capacious corporate boulevard shadowed by Internationalist skyscrapers and anchored by two striking Modernist landmarks.

Many New Orleanians equate Poydras' redevelopment with the 1970s oil boom and the city's efforts to capture its share of Texas petroleum wealth. Indeed, much of the Poydras streetscape brings to mind the petrol-industry headquarters in and around Houston's Main, Rusk and Dallas streets, and part of the impetus for building the Louisiana Superdome was to answer Houston's Astrodome.

But the original motivation for Poydras' transformation was not a corporate showcase nor a home for

Big Oil, but as a key link in a modernized transportation system.

Calls for its widening date to 1927, when St. Louis-based design firm Bartholomew and Associates, consulting for the recently formed City Planning Commission, identified Poydras' "present width of 74 feet (as) hardly sufficient to meet the demands of trucking" and recommended broadening it to 100 feet along its downtown flank.

Bartholomew's emphasis on trucking pointed to the fact that Poydras Street, first laid out in 1788, had long been something of a blue-collar cousin to Canal Street. With its ample width, direct access to the river and circumvention of both the high-density French Quarter and the residential faubourgs, Poydras attracted gritty port-city land uses, such as wholesalers, shippers, warehousing and light industry, while repelling the sort of elegant retail trade that made Canal Street famous.

To be sure, Poydras had some retail, but hardly

was it upscale. The Poydras Market, an open-stall emporium built in 1838, had developed a reputation for being, according to the Daily Picayune in 1858, "intolerably filthy" and "so crowded as to be almost impassable," leaving shoppers "disgusted at the uncleanness."

Positioned in Poydras' extra-wide neutral ground from Penn Street to South Rampart Street, the marketplace generated lots of foot traffic and helped make intersecting Dryades Street (originally called Phillippa, now O'Keefe) home to saloons and brothels.

All this made proletariat Poydras Street that much more déclassé, and when the municipal market system declined in the 1920s, planners declared the Poydras Market "no longer needed and...a serious traffic hazard."

After the pavilion was cleared away in 1932, that part of Poydras benefited from widened lanes and ample parking, and it got planners thinking about

the street's larger potential.

After World War II, the city embarked on an ambitious transportation improvement program. Consulting for state highway authorities in 1946, New York City planner Robert Moses devised an "Arterial Plan for New Orleans," which called for the streamlining of east-west traffic flow and the construction of a Pontchartrain Expressway to access a projected Mississippi River bridge. Moses also recommended connecting Elysian Fields with the bridge courtesy of a Waterfront Expressway fronting the French Quarter.

By the time the Pontchartrain Expressway and bridge opened in 1958, local planners had revised Moses' scheme to include an interstate coming in from the east to bifurcate at North Claiborne and Elysian Fields avenues, at which point an elevated Claiborne Expressway would take motorists toward Metairie while a Riverfront Expressway (the new name for Moses' Waterfront Expressway) would take them down Elysian Fields, along the Mississippi and over the bridge.

That four-sided arterial plan positioned Poydras as a logical grade-level connector.

What sealed the deal for Poydras' widening was a concurrent plan of equal grandiosity. With the city's 250th anniversary (1968) on the horizon and a rivalry with Houston intensifying, leaders sought to enlist New Orleans as a World Trade Center. That imprimatur called for member cities to build imposing complexes for global industries to convene and establish local offices. Everyone agreed the best place for such a project was the city's front door, where Canal and Poydras met the Mississippi River.

So the city proceeded to acquire properties and, in 1965, completed the International Trade Mart (today's World Trade Center). Next came a lavish exhibition hall — but there was a problem. Federal approval of the Riverfront Expressway, which would pass right through the complex, was delayed on account of fierce resistance from preservationists for its impact on the historic French Quarter.

Because the city ardently desired the Riverfront Expressway to proceed, it paid to install a 700-foot tunnel beneath the exhibition hall and trade mart. Workers then set about erecting the hall above.

The optimal way to access all these new improvements was to widen Poydras Street, thus giving, as one Times-Picayune reporter put it, "the somewhat bottled-up wholesale district an inlet and outlet."

In March 1964, voters passed a bond issue, and with a budget of \$3.4 million, the Department of Streets got to work acquiring 47 properties fronting the lower side of Poydras from Penn to Delta Street (now Convention Center Boulevard) — just as Bartholomew had recommended back in 1927.

On Nov. 23, 1964, Mayor Victor H. "Vic" Schiro swung a ceremonial "crash ball" into old buildings at Poydras and



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Bulldozers work on the widening project in 1965.



JENNIFER ZDON / STAFF ARCHIVE

Restaurateur Simon Landry, resigned to losing his property in the widening project, devised a clever back-up plan. Landry owned Mother's Restaurant and an adjacent building on Magazine Street. By moving his restaurant into the adjacent space, he retained its 401 Poydras address after the widening. The maneuver explains why the ever-popular diner today is on Poydras despite the fact that its structure faces Magazine. Patrons queuing outside the Poydras door are standing in the space of Mother's original building, established in 1938 and razed in March 1965.

South Peters Street, officially kicking off the widening. The scene epitomized an era when large-scale demolition of historical structures was almost universally viewed as a sign of progress.

But there were some voices of dissent. On a building marked DEMO in big red letters, one proto-urbanist scrawled "Memo to Vic, One widened avenue makes two more necessary, increases traffic congestion and decreases the life of a city."

Ricca Demolishing Co. used a

bulldozer rather than a wrecking ball to push over old walls, so as to salvage architectural components and not threaten adjoining buildings. Some bricks were destined for an LSU fraternity house, while doors and window frames ended up in Ricca's salvage store.

The corridor now cleared, the Sewerage and Water Board proceeded to install drainage while New Orleans Public Service connected underground utilities. In November 1965, Boh Brothers began paving the street with concrete

and asphalt, followed by sidewalk construction and landscaping.

After an Aug. 16, 1966, dedication ceremony featuring a parade of antique cars, the 132-foot-wide Poydras boasted six traffic lanes, two parking lanes and a 16-foot-wide neutral ground — not for greenery but indented turning lanes. Traffic, after all, drove the entire project.

During that same ceremony, however, the chairman of the Chamber of Commerce alluded to another reason. "The land on either side of Poydras," he said, "should be developed [as] a 'promenade,' as a favorite and...important site for buildings that need to be 'seen.'"

For a while, the expectation was that Loyola Avenue would become the city's new skyscraper boulevard. But after the 1967 decision to erect the Louisiana Superdome at one end of Poydras, followed by the 1968 opening of the Expressionist-style Rivergate Exhibition Hall at the river end, the momentum swung in favor of Poydras.

This remained the case even after the U.S. Department of Transportation stunned the city in 1969 by canceling the Riverfront Expressway, agreeing with preservationists that it would do irreversible damage to the French Quarter.

The reversal of fortune repurposed the already-widened Poydras Street as less of a traffic thoroughway (complete with an obsolete tunnel) and more of a corporate corridor, a character cinched with the 1972 opening of One Shell Square, the city's tallest building at 697 feet.

In subsequent years, 16 other high-rises arose along Poydras, more so than any other local street, most of them directly or indirectly fueled by the oil boom.

Many downtown property owners eagerly cleared their parcels of old buildings to capitalize on the rising land values — for new skyscrapers, for parking lots or sometimes simply to preempt a demolition moratorium sought by the growing preservationist movement.

The oil bust of the mid-1980s put an end to the Poydras boom, and during the bleak era that followed, New Orleans found itself with a surplus of downtown office space, a deficit of white-collar jobs and a petrol industry regrouping in Houston.

But when the downtown real estate market heated up again in the 2010s, construction resumed on Poydras, this time with hotels, residences and restaurants, along with a larger number of smaller and more diversified tenants in its office buildings.

And unlike the days of the wholesale district, when 74-foot-wide Poydras ranked as Canal Street's blue-collar cousin, modern Poydras Street — all 132 feet of it — is now decidedly upscale.

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