

WHEN NEW ORLEANS EMBRACED MODERNISM



St. Frances Cabrini Church, designed by architects Nathaniel Curtis and Arthur Davis and built 1963, was damaged in Hurricane Katrina. It was demolished amid controversy in 2007. *Staff archive*



The Rivergate Exhibition Hall *Photo from Richard Campanella's NOPSI Collection*

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A local joke goes: How many New Orleanians does it take to change a light bulb? Answer: three. One to change the light bulb, the other two to discuss how much better the old light bulb was. The insinuation that local society tends to glance backward for its inspiration is often invoked to explain, among other things, the apparent distaste many New Orleanians feel for Modernist architecture.

Evidence suggests, however, that Modernism was not originally spurned here. Quite the opposite: throughout the middle of the 20th century, local society embraced new thinking in architecture, as it had with earlier trends dating back to colonial times. That acceptance would completely redraw the New Orleans skyline, all within 30 or so years.

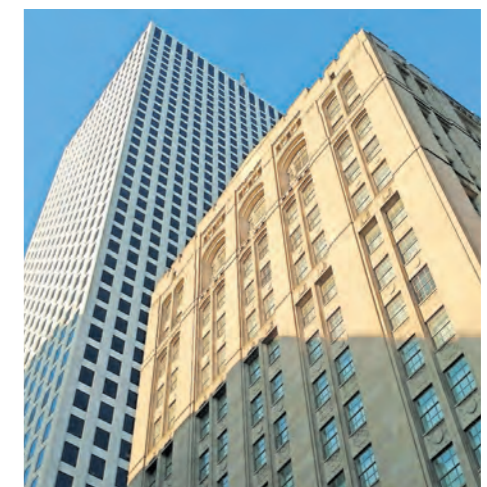
Modernism's origins may be traced to the late 1800s, when intellectuals began to challenge Western assumptions in science, religion, art, literature and beyond. They spurned Romanticism, with its glorification of the past and maudlin notions of beauty, and were ready to move on from the stalled progress of the Enlightenment. Rejecting the old and craving the new, the adherents became known as Modernists.

In subsequent decades, radical new ideas emerged, ranging from Darwinian evolution to Freudian psychology, from Pablo Picasso's Cubist paintings to James Joyce's stream-of-consciousness writing. The Modernist zeitgeist also helps explain why a New Orleans export known as jazz, which challenged Western musicality with its improvisation, syncopation and sheer style, would find receptive audiences in places like Paris and Berlin.

Architects, for their part, jettisoned Victorian gaudiness and opted for simplicity over detail, openness over clutter, function over form, and new materials like steel frames and sheet glass. The most prominent American architect advancing this new design thinking, Frank Lloyd Wright, did some of his most influential work in this turn-of-the-century era.



The Pere Marquette Building has a modernized gothic facade. *Richard Campanella*



One Shell Square, built in the International Style, stands next to the early modernized neoclassical Masonic Temple. *Richard Campanella*

Initially optimistic, the tone of Modernism intensified after World War I, which seemed to affirm every suspicion Modernists had of Western establishment. Surrealism and absurdism began to appear in the arts and philosophy; theater experimented with the avant-garde; and architects infused their profession with ever-bolder aesthetics. Chief among them was Le Corbusier of France, who spearheaded the horizontal massing of buildings and the use of flat roofs and nonload-bearing walls, which gave greater flexibility to layouts and façades and allowed for open floor plans and wide windows.

Such cutting-edge designs were a bit too much for most Americans in the 1920s, who were hardly Modernists but nonetheless open to modern thinking. For homeowners, this meant the clean, simple



The New Orleans Lakefront Airport Terminal was built in 1934.
Richard Campanella

Arts-and-Crafts feel of a California bungalow or an American “foursquare,” which were sold through catalogs and erected nationwide. For commercial and government builders, it meant a fusion of Modernist traits

with traditional architecture. Local examples include the modernized Gothic style of the Pere Marquette Building on Common and Baronne streets (1925, now the Renaissance Hotel), the former Masonic Temple on St. Charles Avenue and Perdido Street (1926, now the Hilton Hotel), and the modernized neoclassicism of the Orleans Parish Criminal Courthouse (1929) at Tulane Avenue and Broad Street.

Similarly amalgamated styles would become known as Moderne, Streamline Moderne and most famously, Art Deco, of which New Orleans boasts splendid examples, among them the Lakefront Airport Terminal (1934), the F. Edward Hebert Federal Building on Lafayette Square and the now-empty Charity Hospital, both completed in 1939.

The catastrophe of World War II further pushed Modernist thinking. Art Deco and any hint of neoclassicism came to look ominous for its association with fascism, whereas its antitheses—taut surfaces of aluminum and glass, crisp edges and smooth curves, capacious sun-lit interiors—looked refreshing, even liberating. The International Style of buildings, though it originated before the Second World War, became the primary Modernist aesthetic, and it found good terror in postwar New Orleans.

The city at the time strove to modernize and expand. Projects included new bridges and highways, a new railroad station and a proposed monorail, the replacement of streetcars with buses, and an ambitious Civic Center featuring a new City Hall,

courthouses and library, all built in the International Modernist style. Commercial interests also were gearing up for the future — this was the beginning of the oil boom — and they, too, wanted the latest look.

Over the next two decades, writes Tulane architecture Professor John Klingman in his 2012 book “New in New Orleans Architecture,” “New Orleans was receiving national and even international attention for its then contemporary Modernist design” — quite contrary to the stereotype of backward-looking New Orleanians resisting new ideas.

Modernism in New Orleans had a variety of geographies. Its skyline signature was the array of CBD skyscrapers erected starting in 1965, when a new technique of coupling concrete pilings allowed engineers to build higher by driving supports deeper into the hard-clay suballuvial surface. Three prominent examples were the Plaza Tower (1965), designed by Leonard Spangenberg; the International Trade Mart (1965, now the World Trade Center), designed by Edward Durrell Stone; and One Shell Square (1972), by Skidmore, Owings and Merrill, the city’s tallest building at 697 feet. All were International in style, as were most other new office buildings erected in the 1950s through 1970s, and together they gave the city a new Modernist skyline, particularly after the visually astounding Curtis and Davis-designed Louisiana Superdome opened in 1975.

The French Quarter, by contrast, was a Modernist lacuna, because its legal preservation in 1937 had officially prohibited contemporary exteriors. But even here, Modernism made inroads, in its Art Deco and Commercial Style forms, in interiors not covered by Vieux Carré Commission regulations and in certain North Rampart blocks removed from commission jurisdiction from 1946 to 1964. One striking Modernist example built in 1955 is the WWL-TV Studio at 1024 North Rampart St.

Modernism and the International style also appeared in public housing, such as the Guste apartments, as well as religious, educational and civic structures. The Catholic Church was a particularly amenable client, as the ecclesiastic changes set forth by the Second Vatican Council (1962) seemed to call for a new parochial look. Perhaps the best example was St. Frances Cabrini Church (1963, demolished amid controversy in 2007) on Paris Avenue in Gentilly. Its worship space was designed by architects Nathaniel Curtis and Arthur Davis to accommodate greater liturgical participation.

If there is one neighborhood where Midcentury Modern came the closest to forming an integral cityscape, it's Lake Vista. Designed by the Orleans Levee District in 1936 upon artificial land pumped in from Lake Pontchartrain a decade earlier, Lake Vista reflected "Garden City" concepts in its layout: long, curving super blocks in a radial pattern, with centralized greenspace and community amenities, plus varied lot shapes designed to diversify the housing stock. Dozens of Modernist homes were built here in the 1950s and 1960s. Some have since been demolished, but the streetscapes still exude the aesthetic spirit of Modernism's midcentury zenith.

If there was one building that symbolized that spirit — and as well as its subsequent souring — it was the Rivergate Exhibition Hall. Designed by Curtis and Davis in the Expressionist style of Modernism and sited dramatically where Canal and Poydras streets met the Mississippi River, the great pavilion opened in 1968 in time for the city's 250th anniversary.

At first, the Rivergate was a success. Architects here and elsewhere admired its stunning freeform arches and vaulted ceilings, and the business community saw both the exhibition hall and the adjacent International Trade Mart as a sign of New Orleans reasserting itself on the world stage. By one estimate,

a steady stream of bookings for floor shows, special events and Carnival balls at the Rivergate generated \$170 million during the first five years. Yet only 27 years after its celebrated opening, the Rivergate Exhibition Hall met the wrecking ball, to be replaced by a building whose design was the

utter antithesis of Modernism: Harrah's Casino. While architectural aficionados were outraged by the loss of the Rivergate, many New Orleanians, including some historical preservationists, were indifferent if not glad to see it go.

What had happened to popular sentiment during

the 1970s and 1980s, and to local architecture during and after that era, is the topic of next month's Cityscapes. Suffice to say for now that more and more New Orleanians found themselves agreeing "how much better the older light bulb was."

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