

Postmodernist and Neotraditionalist Architecture in New Orleans

Richard Campanella, *New Orleans Times-Picayune*, December 9, 2016

In last month's *Cityscapes*, we traced the rise of Modern architecture as a counter-reaction to the gaudy excesses of the late Victorian era. The bold new style started to appear on local buildings in the 1920s and peaked in the 1950s to early 1970s. By then, sleek facades, unadorned fenestration and flat roofs could be found citywide, particularly in the new oil-boom-fueled downtown skyline.

As if to symbolize Modernism's prominent place in the midcentury metropolis, in 1957 Mayor deLesseps "Chep" Morrison relocated all local government offices, including City Hall, courthouses and the library, into a gleaming Brasilia-like complex of International Style buildings along the recently widened Loyola Avenue. "The past is past," the project seemed to say; postwar New Orleans would now lean into the future, boasting the latest architecture, new bridges and expressways, even a proposed high-speed monorail. Local designers did well by the new idiom: according to Tulane Prof. John Klingman, "New Orleans was receiving national and even international attention for its then contemporary Modernist design."

But within two decades, the public mood soured on Modernism. No one building reflected this change of heart more than the ill-fated Rivergate Exhibition Hall, a stunning Expressionist marvel designed by Curtis and Davis Architects for the city's "front door" at the foot of Canal and Poydras. The daring freeform design won the admiration of architects when the hall opened in 1968, in time for the city's 250th anniversary. Initial bookings indicated the Rivergate would do well financially as well.

Yet many locals, particularly downtown work-a-day folks, saw the Rivergate in a different light. The hall's entrance faced away from the city, as if to signal who wasn't welcome inside, and its towering block-long flanks felt alienating and other-worldly. Later, event planners found alternative facilities in the Superdome (1975) and Convention Center (1985 and later expanded). By the early 1990s, gambling interests eyed the Rivergate's prime real estate, and proposed its demolition for a land-based casino.

Architects and design aficionados protested vehemently, but few others came to the Rivergate's defense, and some were even glad to see the wrecking ball swing in 1995. Four years later, Harrah's Casino opened on the site, its steamboat-like shape and historical décor flagrantly relishing the romanticized past—precisely the opposite of the design philosophy behind the futuristic Rivergate.

The rise and fall of the Rivergate mirrored how local sentiment reversed on Modernism generally. For some, the stark designs represented too radical a departure from traditional forms; to others, they were flat-out ugly. Or perhaps Modernism's time had simply come and gone, like so many styles before it. But something deeper was going on, because for the first time, a preponderance of New Orleanians were now (1980s and 1990s) not only rejecting contemporary design, but enthusiastically preferring revived historical "retro" styles—that is, new buildings made to look like old buildings.

To be sure, historical revival was nothing new in New Orleans; it had been mandated for new construction in the French Quarter since the neighborhood's official protection in 1937, and became a forte of a number of highly respected local preservation architects. It's also true, of course, that the classical designs of the nineteenth century were themselves revivals of prior styles, from Greece, Rome, and beyond. But this late-twentieth century brand of historical revival was different. It was more emphatically neo-traditionalist—that is, purely pastiche, lacking an underlying philosophy and seemingly

motivated mostly by nostalgia. It was also only skin-deep, in that only the exteriors were made to look quaint. Interiors were all up to the latest code and designed for today's needs and technologies.

For a city that for centuries had eagerly ingested the latest thinking in architecture, nostalgia-driven design was something new. Where did it come from?

I believe it arose as a reaction to a downward turn in the arc of the city's destiny. Long the largest city in the South and a major American metropolis by any measure, New Orleans saw its population decline for the first time after 1960, as school integration triggered white flight to suburban parishes. The exodus quickened in the 1970s and 1980s as divestment and a diminished tax base exacerbated social and infrastructural problems, namely crime and blight—which spurred more departures. Containerization of the shipping industry in the 1970s, meanwhile, eliminated thousands of working-class port jobs, while the oil bust of the mid-1980s decimated regional petroleum jobs or sent them back to rival Houston—which had supplanted New Orleans as the region's largest city. Worse yet, other Sun Belt metropolises, such as Atlanta, Miami, and Dallas, were seeing record growth, making New Orleans' absolute decline even worse by comparative standards.

Sensing their best days were behind them, many New Orleanians looked to their past as a source of pride and inspiration. What they found, and saw evidenced all around them, were splendid old buildings in elaborate styles and integral distributions unlike any other American city. The preservation movement gained momentum, arguing convincingly that these old buildings had both cultural and economic value. Within one generation, the tourism-dominated service sector replaced shipping and petroleum as the city's largest employer. Tourism depended largely on social memory, and social memory rested heavily on historical architecture. Even as fiscal capital fled to the suburbs, old inner-city buildings started to generate capital all their own, in both cultural and commercial terms.

In the minds of many local folks, New Orleans architecture *meant* historical architecture, and if a historical building was razed for a cutting-edge Modernist replacement, the loss was not mitigated; it was doubled. Likewise, if a new building needed to be erected, many local eyes wanted to see it adorned in a traditional façade.



The Postmodern Place St. Charles (1983) skyscraper at left, and the International Style One Shell Square (1972) at right. Photo by author.

Into this zeitgeist arrived Postmodernism, which showcased historical motifs in otherwise contemporary structures and appealed to those who found Modernism to be icy and supercilious. A notable early local specimen of Postmodernism, the Piazza d'Italia, was designed by Charles Moore, and despite that his intentions were probably more along the lines of wit and irony, his Poydras Street installation became a paragon of a global trend which would win over many local fans. Most high-rises erected in the 1980s, such as Place St. Charles and the Benson Tower, are Postmodern, their peaked summits and multifaceted exteriors pointedly departing from Modernism's minimalist conventions.

For families in the market to build a new house, pattern books increasingly featured pre-architected historical designs, making their selection convenient, and builders streamlined their construction, which lowered their costs. Historical revival became *de rigueur* in both old neighborhoods and new subdivisions, and features like faux Creole hipped roofs and Victorian turrets started popping up region-wide. Contemporary designs, meanwhile, usually entailed commissioning an architect, which might slow the process and raise the price, while possibly limiting the home's future curb appeal to only those who liked modern architecture.

Neotraditionism won further ground when the New Urbanism movement, which sought to recapture the intimacy and walkability of pre-automobile neighborhoods, extended the retro aesthetic to entire developments and fortified it with a social policy argument. By the late 1990s, blueprints for neo-shotgun houses, neo-Creole cottages, and neo-townhouses were on the drafting table slated to replace the public housing projects. The old St. Thomas complex in the Irish Channel was the first to transform to historical revival, starting in the early 2000s, and the effort is nearing completion today, having added to the cityscape hundreds of 21st-century structures designed to look like 19th-century structures.

The rebuilding after the Katrina deluge of 2005 formed an experiment of sorts in which the architectural tastes of thousands of New Orleans families might be further revealed. With such bad memories behind them, would families opt for a refreshing contemporary look? With various levels of flood risk at play, would they opt for sustainability? At stake was the architectural appearance of post-Katrina New Orleans, in the form of thousands of new houses across dozens of square miles.

To answer this question empirically, I extracted a random sample of 333 completed houses (5 percent) from the 6000-plus permits issued in Orleans Parish for new residential construction between late 2005 and 2012. With the help of Tulane architecture student Cassidy Rosen, I analyzed photographs of each sample house and gauged their appearance on a scale ranging from cutting-edge contemporary/modern design at one end, to emphatic historical revival at the other end, with gradations in between. The results were overwhelming: for every one post-Katrina new house with a contemporary or modern façade, there were 14 that exhibited a historical revival façade, many of them emphatic. That's 93 percent of homeowners opting for neotraditionalism.



Representative montage of what new houses built in New Orleans after Katrina look like, ranging from rare contemporary designs (upper left) to highly popular historical revival façades. Analysis and photos by Richard Campanella and Cassidy Rosen.

We may conclude that, for better or worse, most folks wanted the new New Orleans to look like “olde” New Orleans—despite that, from the 1720s to the 1970s, local society had a completely different sensibility, importing new ideas and experimenting with the latest design thinking, as if to say “we are confident about the future.” Only when that confidence nose-dived in the late 20th century did the architectural eyes of the average New Orleanian turn backward.

With that legacy in mind, and with the recent resurgence in civic pride and outlook, it is hoped that the worldwide interest in sustainable design—in which postdiluvian New Orleans has served as both a key impetus as well as laboratory—may once again position New Orleans as an essential city in the geography of architecture.

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