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JUST BENEATH THE SURFACE

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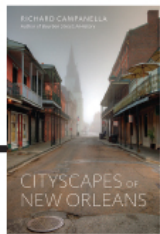
REVIEWED BY AMBER N. WILEY

THE BACK / **BOOKS**

JUST BENEATH
THE SURFACE

CITYSCAPES
OF NEW ORLEANS

BY RICHARD CAMPANELLA; BATON ROUGE, LOUISIANA:
LOUISIANA STATE UNIVERSITY PRESS, 2017; 399 PAGES, \$29.95.
REVIEWED BY AMBER N. WILEY



New Orleans is ubiquitous in our collective imagination because of its robust sense of place. Tourism brochures and conference programs essentialize the city—its food, music, architecture, and nightlife. In *Cityscapes of New Orleans*, the geographer Richard Campanella implores the reader to observe the city, mind the details, and ask questions gleaned from tiny clues. He does this by presenting a series of vignettes that span the 300-year history of New Orleans. Campanella argues that there are always new lessons to learn from each discovery, lessons that can guide us about how to exist within the particular cultural geography of New Orleans.

Cityscapes is a collection of 77 essays that Campanella published in various journals, newspapers, and venues between 2010 and 2017. These essays had specific and limited audiences: Some were published in *Preservation in Place*, the magazine of the Preservation Resource Center of New Orleans, others in *Louisiana Cultural Vistas*, the magazine of the Louisiana Endowment for the Humanities. More content was pulled from *Cityscapes*, Campanella's monthly column in *NOLA.com/The Times-Picayune*, as well as guest editorials he wrote for online journals such as *Faces* and *New Geography*.

The essays are readily accessible to any individual who has baseline knowledge of New Orleans. Campanella envisioned the book as a reader, and it is not divided into strictly defined chapters, but along permeable themes: "People, Patterns, and Place," "Architectural Geographies and the Built Environment," "Urban Geographies," "Regional Geographies," and finally, "Disaster and Recovery." The writings flow into each other in a way that makes sense—one can often find the connection between two essays in succession. The essays range from pithy, such as the two-page final musing "New Orleans as Metaphor," to quite lengthy, like the eight-page piece titled "What the Nation's Best Educated Amateur Planners Learned from Hurricane Isaac. And Gustav. And Rita and Katrina. And Cindy. Ivan. Lili. Isidore. and Georges." *Cityscapes* is richly illustrated, despite the nontraditional nature of the volume.

From this collection of essays, though not imagined as a single manuscript with an underlying argumentative stance, it is possible to extract some central arguments that ground the larger work. The main argument is that we need to unlearn what we thought we knew about the city to facilitate a more critical and holistic approach to research and discovery. The three essays that capture these feelings in the most direct manner are "The Seduction of Exceptionalism," "A Glorious Mess: A Perceptual History of New Orleans Neighborhoods," and "New Orleans as Metaphor."

"The Seduction of Exceptionalism" would have been a useful essay to start out the volume, though it is tucked away in the penultimate (and shortest) theme group, "Regional Geographies." In this essay, Campanella argues that reporting on New Orleans is tainted with confirmation bias that dilutes the nature of investigation:

FROM THE JANUARY 2019 ISSUE OF *LANDSCAPE ARCHITECTURE MAGAZINE*.

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The False River area shows three distinct land surveying systems: French (left), American (lower right), and English (upper right). *Image courtesy Google Earth.*

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“The problem is this: researchers—that is, the documenters and interpreters of historical and cultural information—all too often *start out* with the assumption that all is different here, before they analyze the data. So positioned, they usually end up confirming what they suspected all along.... Rather than resulting from critical thinking, exceptionalist interpretations all too often derive from not thinking critically. This is particularly unfortunate because it undermines the value of careful research that *does* validate exceptionalism.”

At the crux of Campanella’s work, then, is the desire to explore, collate, and interpret the history of New Orleans with the level of rigor that the city deserves. Throughout the book he takes up the important task of dispelling myths and urban legends. The Superdome was *not* built on a cemetery; there is no

written evidence that French real estate tax codes motivated the narrow lots that characterize the historic heart of the city. The French Quarter *has* flooded. Multiple times. New Orleans has *not* always been frozen in time; it is not a complete anomaly. The city went through the same architectural trends as other cities in the United States. At various times it embraced Greek Revival, Richardson Romanesque, Italianate, late-Victorian, California Bungalow, and even International Style modernism.



This French Quarter intersection of St. Louis and Chartres Streets was once a busy site for slave auctions in the city. *Image courtesy Richard Campanella.*

In “A Glorious Mess,” the essay that starts the volume, Campanella reminds us that we (in this case I presumed the “we” to mean geographers) “allow for a certain level of ambiguity when we speak of geographical regions.” The first line of the essay asks us to accept some imprecision with regard to place-based investigation. Campanella reminds us that borders are created, sometimes haphazardly. In the case of New Orleans neighborhoods, the historic city expanded to include the plantation faubourgs, and as land switched hands among the French, Spanish, and Americans, new neighborhoods emerged. Municipality lines reflected ethnic division. The city industrialized, and previously uninhabitable swamplands were drained. (This area still carries the moniker “back-of-town.”) As the city entered the 21st century, neighborhood lines hardened in ways that did not always make sense to the residents who perceived their neighborhoods differently from the census blocks and other highly regulated mapping categories. Campanella writes that, although arbitrary, those divisions are “nonetheless consequential because they drive statistical aggregations of everything from population to crime rates, real estate values, and recovery metrics.” Campanella gives us a history of the “glorious mess” of neighborhood

formation while also acknowledging the utility of modern perceptions of neighborhoods for his work: “Officially defined neighborhoods are a necessary evil, an important delusion, a fake reality. They should be viewed as useful cartographic and statistical tools—and no more.” What is considered “official,” Campanella contends, is a social construct based on a type of rationality that does not take history into consideration. From the very beginning, Campanella is telling us to not believe everything we have been programmed to understand about the city.

Campanella also highlights the ironic in his quest to refute misconceptions about New Orleans and Louisiana. In his essay “Louisiana Radio Stations and the (Inconvenient) Local Music Lacuna,” he considers music consumption by analyzing the types of radio stations in the state. Campanella will be the first to admit that his data set is limited, but he contends that while Louisiana is known for jazz, zydeco, and Cajun music, radio stations that promote and cater to these genres are few. Adding to that analysis, he utilizes Echo Nest, (<http://the.echonest.com>) a data-mining platform, to discover that the artist listened to the most in Louisiana is not a local legend like Dr. John or the Neville Brothers, but the Canadian rapper Drake. While these results are surprising, Campanella is clear that they are not in any way damning or complete. This is one of the many strengths of Campanella’s work in this volume—his ability to be open and plain about the limits of his chosen methods and the evidence that can be drawn from his investigations. In this essay’s summation Campanella states:

“Being a geographer rather than a musicologist or music critic, I will refrain from making any sweeping conclusions from this cursory analysis. But I would point out that, to the degree that a society’s musicality implies consumption *as well as* production, an empirical look at radio station formats reveals a wide gap between (1) the perception of localism in all things musical in Louisiana, and (2) the reality that national mainstream music wins over many, many Louisiana ears [emphasis added].”

Campanella sparks curiosity about each topic, leaving unanswered questions for others to investigate. He does this often and with intentionality. This is not a weakness in the volume; it’s more an invitation for further research.

What is amazing about these vignettes is how each storyline feels complete. Every essay contains the distinct qualities that make up a good narrative: setting, introduction, rising action, climax, etc. Campanella states in the preface that each essay should be viewed as a stand-alone piece, which makes sense, given the original newspaper and magazine format. Even so, the storytelling is masterful because it is a combination of deep research and rigorous analysis that creates clarity in so many aspects of the lived and embodied New Orleans experience that are often taken for granted. Campanella treats the specifics of river deposits and soil content with the same level of detail as he does re-creating the gendered social norms of the fin de siècle city. He revisits long-held points of investigative interest, such as how to track the origins of the shotgun house, but also pushes the boundaries of the geographic practice by attempting to map the geography of cool. He gives heightened awareness to regional topographic variety, emphasizing how much difference one foot of elevation could make to the city—the difference between the quotidian and catastrophe—and supplies numerous case studies involving real people to bring the point home.

This collection of essays is not easily defined, and I would not consider it an academic book, even though an academic press published it. Nevertheless it is deeply rooted in the epistemology of the geography discipline and calls up the theories of Kevin Lynch, Carl Sauer, Yi-Fu Tuan, and others. Campanella also draws connections between this research, his work as an academic, and collaboration between Tulane preservation organizations and design firms in the city. For example, his essay “In the Ashes of the LeBeau Plantation House, a Lesson in *Carpe Diem*” discusses how his students visit an 1854 plantation house to think about ways to rehabilitate and interpret it, as well as to bring new life to the



The original New Orleans Cotton Exchange, built in 1881. *Image courtesy Library of Congress.*

structure and surrounding region. But tragedy strikes when only a few months later, it burns to the ground. Also, while arguing about the need for water remediation in the city, he points to the “Dutch Dialogues” initiative of the architecture firm Waggoner & Ball, (<https://wbae.com>) in which the Tulane School of Architecture, (<http://architecture.tulane.edu>) its faculty, and students play a pivotal role. This work speaks to the academy (and could be used in an academic setting), but not only the academy, given that the essays were not written specifically for that audience.

Campanella is methodologically instructive. He tells the reader which archives he visited and how he came to his conclusions. He consistently asks the reader to start by developing observational skills, to take nothing in the landscape for granted. He even instructs us on how to read and interpret a photograph—in this case a 1928 photograph by Arnold Genthe of the Delord-Sarpy House (1814–1818) that is accessible online through the Library of Congress.

Campanella also encourages readers to peruse historical artifacts in archives and collections, sparking questions about societal, economic, geographic, or architectural decisions that led to landscape changes

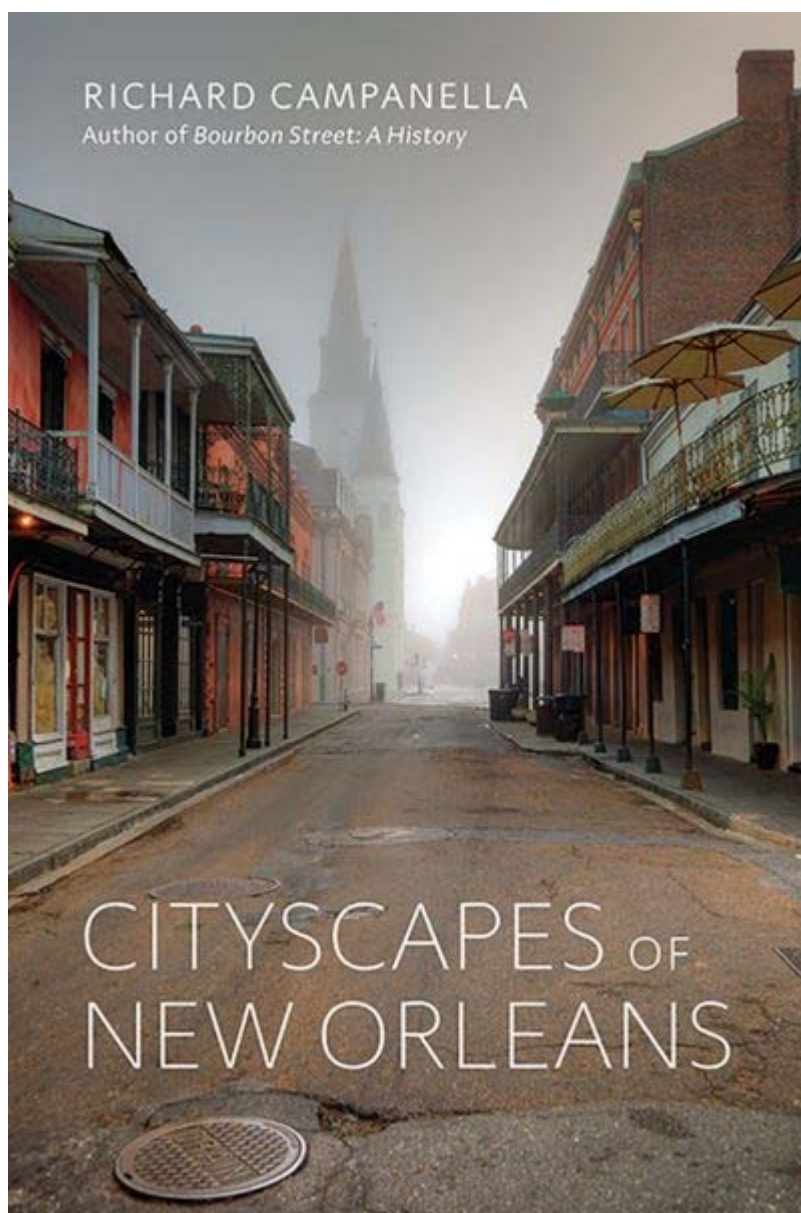
still visible in today's New Orleans. In his essay "Arnaud Cazenave and the Reinvention of Bourbon Street," Campanella is transparent with his methodologies, showing how one can mix new technology with the old. He wants to answer the question "When did nightclubs first appear on Bourbon Street?" By his definition, nightclubs were a different typology of social setting from concert saloons, restaurants, and supper clubs. To track down the origin of the word itself, he looks to digitized newspaper archives, conducting keyword searches to find the first printed instance of the word in the popular press. While this is a common tactic for researchers, they do not often show their hand in their manuscripts.

Despite the clarity in research methodology, the book has no footnotes for the essays; finding the original sources can grow cumbersome for those who happen upon a topic they want to study further. To compensate for this lack, Campanella includes "Source Notes" in the back matter. These provide the original place of publication for the essay, which might hold additional information, as well as heavily annotated references to his previous books (of which there are plenty). So the process for finding original sources is not straightforward, and potentially not easy, but the path at least is clear.

Two other problems arise with the format of the collection. First is the seemingly arbitrary nature of two of the thematic categories. The relationship between the essays in "Urban Geographies" and "Regional Geographies" feels more nebulous and less cohesive than the other three themes. "People, Patterns, and Place" reads as a place-based social history. "Architectural Geographies and the Built Environment," the most substantial of all his themes, is a force. "Disaster and Recovery," the final theme, is decidedly the strongest in terms of an argumentative stance. Also, because the essays were published independently, some background information that might have been mentioned in one becomes the focal point in another, and vice versa. Specific facts, figures, and storylines are mentioned multiple times in the volume, making it a bit unnecessarily repetitive.

Campanella avoids falling into the common trap of judging the city and its inhabitants. Instead he looks at the city for what it was and what it is, and to help shape what it could be. For example, the essay "Cityscapes of the New Orleans Slave Trade" was astounding in the details put forth—not as propaganda, but as fact. Campanella argues:

"A visitor to New Orleans arriving any time prior to the Civil War could not help but witness an entire



cityscape of slave trading. Visitors today, however, would be hard-pressed to find any substantial, identified physical evidence remaining; it's all been cleared away by demolition, conflagration, or the ravages of time. Lacking preserved clues in the cityscape of this historical reality enables social memory to falter."

He calls this a "case study of...absence," and pushes the reader to consider what is lost when the physical remnants of the slave trade are obfuscated. His author's note for this piece recognizes the recent work to erect historical markers regarding the slave trade in the city.

Along the same lines, Campanella speaks plainly of the sex trade, mapping its spatial restrictions and the city's attempt to profit off the business. The lives of madams are not eroticized. The places they inhabited are relayed as a matter of fact. City ordinances and architectural changes in the landscape that supported or tried to render the trade invisible are discussed with the same seriousness as other restrictive laws that attempted to mold social norms.



Aerial views of Canal and Poydras Streets from 1952, 1989, and 1999 show changes from heavy industry to tourism and finance as indicated by the presence of the Rivergate Exhibition Hall and the World Trade Center of New Orleans. Finally, gambling and entertainment take over, as Harrah's now occupies the site. *Image courtesy Richard Campanella.*

Race. Ethnicity. Immigration. Religion. Sex. Politics. Slavery. Death. Disease. Disaster. The heavy topics are intermingled with discussions on suburbia, monorails, public drinking, coastal environments, street patterns, and house design. Campanella does not shy away from the tough stuff, nor does he exploit the stories or sensationalize. He puts forward history in the hope that it can teach lessons. He requires of us a certain humility. This is particularly evident in his writings on bayou restoration and the future of New Orleans. In his essay "Katrina: An Alternative History—or Rather, Geography," written for the 10th anniversary of Hurricane Katrina, he reminds us of our folly in thinking we know all there is to know about the city and its region: "We imposed engineering and architectural rigidity on a deltaic environment that is fundamentally fluid, and convinced ourselves we had mastered it even as it collapsed." Heavy words, but powerful and necessary to heed, nonetheless.

Campanella ends the collection on a positive note with "New Orleans as Metaphor." Ever the optimist,

he sees promise in the future of New Orleans, most likely because he knows so much about its past. That essay was written in 2010 as the Saints were gearing up to head to the Super Bowl. The fervor of the “Who Dat Nation” illustrated the return of the civic pride that was damaged in the wake of Katrina. Campanella describes this as a “metaphorical nationality in which citizenship depends not on borders or birthplace, but passionate love of the Saints—and, right behind that, of New Orleans.” Campanella’s love of New Orleans is obvious. He has studied the city and written extensively about it for two decades. Along with that love he carries a civic responsibility that becomes apparent in his research and writing. This book aims not only to deepen readers’ knowledge and love of the city’s past, but also to remind us that we, too, are responsible for its future.

Cityscapes of New Orleans, (<https://lsupress.org/books/detail/cityscapes-of-new-orleans/>) by *Richard Campanella*; Baton Rouge, Louisiana: Louisiana State University Press, 2017; 399 pages, \$29.95.

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