

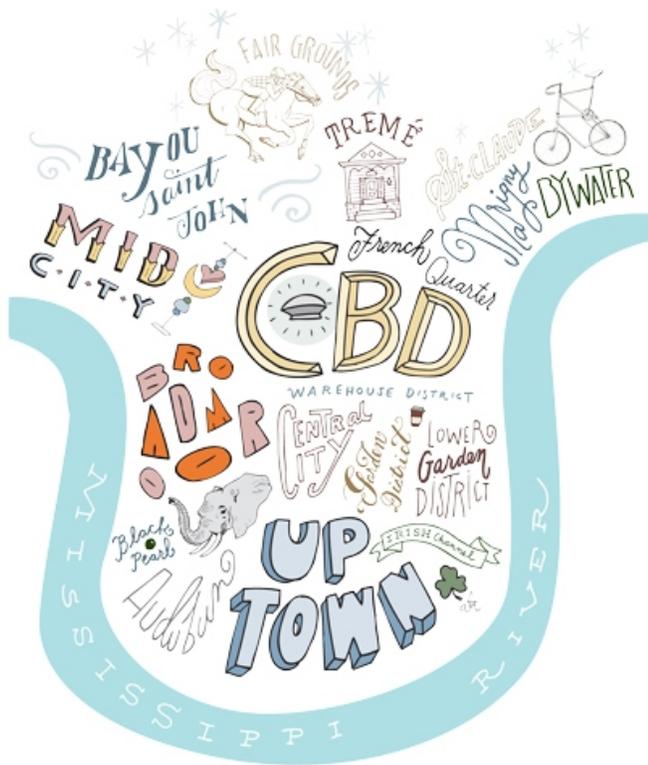
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A Glorious Mess

A perceptual history of New Orleans neighborhoods

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We allow for a certain level of ambiguity when we speak of geographical regions. References to “the South,” “the West” and “the Midwest,” for example, come with the understanding that these regions (unlike states) have no precise or official borders. We call sub-regions therein the “Deep South,” “Rockies” and “Great Plains,” assured that listeners share our mental maps, even if they might outline and label them differently.

It is an enriching ambiguity, one that’s historically, geographically and culturally accurate on account of its imprecision, rather than despite it. (Accuracy and precision are not synonymous.) Regions are largely perceptual, and therefore imprecise, and while many do embody clear geophysical or cultural distinctions – the Sonoran Desert or the Acadian Triangle, for example – their morphologies are nonetheless

subject to the vicissitudes of human discernment. Ask 10 Americans to delineate “the South,” for instance, and you’ll get 10 different maps, some including Missouri, others slicing Texas in half, still others emphatically lopping off the Florida peninsula. None are precise, yet all are accurate. It is a fascinating, glorious mess.

So, too, New Orleans neighborhoods – until recently. For two centuries, neighborhood identity emerged from bottom-up awareness rather than top-down proclamation, and mental maps of the city formed soft, loose patterns that transformed over time. Modern city planning has endeavored to “harden” these distinctions in the interest of municipal order – at the expense, I contend, of local cultural expressiveness.

But more on that later; first let us recount how New Orleanians recognized neighborhoods in times past. It is not my intent here to present a standard developmental history of New Orleans; rather I hope to capture the evolution of residents’ spatial perceptions.

Neighborhood Perception by Bourg and Faubourg

We will start with New Orleans' original neighborhood, today's French Quarter, which Adrien de Pauger laid out in 1722. Pauger's plat certainly looks like a rigid bourg absent of any ambiguity, and in terms of the street layout it was. But as a cityscape, early New Orleans had organic edges. Rear blocks remained forested in the early years, and most actual settlement clustered around the place d'armes and the Mississippi River. The urban fringes were barely distinguishable from the wilderness beyond the fortifications – which themselves were rather desultory, until a century later when new blocks replaced them.

Today, most New Orleanians see those additions – the 100 and 1300 blocks – to be “in” the French Quarter. Yet they were not in the original bourg, nor were any of the blocks riverside of what's now Decatur Street, which lay mostly in the river in the 1700s. To add more elasticity to our seemingly rigid grid, the 100 blocks today are outside the jurisdiction of the Vieux Carré Commission, the city agency charged with protecting the historic district, but inside the state-legislated French Quarter Management District. Riverside areas and the 1300 blocks, meanwhile, fall within both jurisdictional footprints. There was a time in the 1950s when parts of Royal and North Rampart streets were excluded from Commission jurisdiction, only later to be reinstated. So where exactly is New Orleans' first neighborhood, this epitome of spatial order? And what shall we call it – the Vieux Carré? French Quarter? The Quarter? The one neighborhood comes the closest to having clear boundaries and an official name has, in fact, neither.

Starting in 1788, New Orleanians developed a new neighborhood nomenclature: faux bourg, or faubourg – literally, “false town,” which Spanish authorities translated as suburbia. The first, Faubourg Ste. Marie was laid out immediately after the Good Friday Fire to give the city new living space in what's now the central business district (CBD). Seventeen years passed before another faubourg would form – and then they exploded, after Americanization in 1803.

Faubourg development occurred as a free-market response to New Orleans' burgeoning population and its need for living space, which gave owners of adjacent plantations an opportunity to make more money through urbanization than agriculture. One by one they subdivided, starting with the Faubourg Marigny in 1805. Within the next five years, streets would be laid out (in chronological order by their initial platting) in faubourgs named Delord, Duplantier, La Course, L'Annunciation, Plaisance, St. John, Tremé, Saulet (Solet) and des Religieuses – today's upper CBD, Lower Garden District, Tremé and Bayou St. John.

It took many more years for these lots to be fully developed; some were used for working or pleasure gardens, or simply remained vacant, for decades. But even as houses arose, new faubourgs appeared downriver – Washington, Daunois, Montegut, Clouet, Montreuil, Cariby and deLesseps, in today's Bywater, 1807-1840s – as well as upriver and toward Bayou St. John, with the faubourgs Lafayette, Nouvelle Marigny and Franklin, Livaudais, Carrollton, Bouligny, Hurstville, Delassize, Greenville, Friburg, Bloomingdale, Hagan, Avart, St. Joseph, Rickerville, Burtheville and Delachaise. By the Civil War, most of the crescent had been gridded with streets, and faubourgs predominated in the lexicon of place.

Neighborhood Perceptions by Physical and Human Geography

New Orleanians 200 years ago used various other spatial references. Topography and shipping attracted most human activity to settle near the Mississippi River; ergo, areas closer to the river came to be perceived as the town's “front” while areas farther away, and topographically lower, came to be known as the “back” of town, a phrase still heard today.

Potable water needs and maritime activity dictated that river flow direction bore significance, and New Orleanians internalized that “up”/“down” vector in their spatial orientation.

Everyone knows that “upriver”/“downriver,” or “uptown”/“downtown,” are the local equivalents of “west” and “east,” but fewer may know that, before there was Uptown and downtown (Americanisms imported from Manhattan), there was the upper and lower banlieu (French for outskirts). A carriage ride from the old city to the upper banlieu would get you to the “Chapitoulas Coast,” meaning the deep-water bend in the Mississippi River around the present-day Orleans/Jefferson parish line. That indigenous word lent itself to the road accessing that area, a “T” having been added for the benefit of Francophone tongues. This is today’s Tchoupitoulas Street. Keep going “up” and you’d reach Cannes Brule (“Burnt Cane”), which referred to the present-day Old Town Kenner area. Continue upriver and you’d be on what Abraham Lincoln called Louisiana’s “Sugar Coast,” what we now call the River Road region.

The lowlands behind the city were known variously as “the woods,” “the swamp,” “the backswamp,” *la ciperiere*, or if marshy rather than forested, prairies *tremblantes*, for the way the mucky gumbo shifted and consolidated. The swamps were transected by topographic ridges followed by important roads; the one that wended westward got named for its numerous little farms and dairies – *Metairie* – whereas the eastern ridge, which boasted a number of estates outside of New Orleans proper, gained the name of a comparable estate outside Paris – “Chantilly,” our *Gentilly*.

As that ridge continued to the eastern marshes, where for reasons unknown it gained the name *Chef Menteur* (“Big Liar”), its scrubby tide-washed vegetation earned it the French name *Petit Bois* – today’s Little Woods neighborhood. Later, when railroads rimmed what’s now New Orleans East, nomenclature derived from train stations, many of which were adjoined by tiny enclaves of fishermen, hunters, gardeners and orchard-growers – places with names like Seabrook, Citrus, Edge Lake, South Point, Lee, Mischeaud (*Michoud*), an outpost called *Chef Menteur* by Fort Macomb and a deep channel (*Rigolets*) by Fort Pike. Half these names persist in the lexicon today, though not necessarily at the same spots – testimony to the fluidity and caprice of place identity.

Ethnic settlement patterns deeply informed antebellum neighborhood perceptions. The Francophone Creole population generally resided in the lower half of the metropolis, namely the French Quarter, Bayou Road toward Bayou St. John, faubourgs Tremé and Marigny and those of the lower banlieu. The incoming Anglophone American population generally preferred the Faubourg St. Mary (dubbed the “American sector” or “quarter”) and the faubourgs of the upper banlieu. Throughout both banlieus as well as the back-of-town settled large numbers of immigrants, mostly Irish and German, so much so that upper riverfront areas came to be known as the “Irish Channel” while areas downriver were nicknamed “Little Saxony” and “Soxahaus.” All three, however, could have swapped monikers, on account of their thorough ethnic intermixing. Smaller numbers of newcomers from myriad other states and nations also co-resided, such that there was no one hegemonic culture – but instead two predominating ones, Creole and Anglo.

Neighborhood Perceptions by Municipalities, Municipal Districts, Wards and Ethnic Enclaves

Creole and Anglo rivalry led to neighborhood enmity and ultimately to economic and political discord. Either compromise or violence could have won the day; instead, a spatial solution was devised, and in 1836 New Orleans divided itself into three semi-autonomous “municipalities,” each with its own governmental apparatus ostensibly united under a single mayor and general council. For the next 16 years, “neighborhoods” in New Orleans meant municipalities – even as faubourgs, banlieus and sundry other spatial allusions flew about.

Because Canal Street generally separated Anglo and Creole residences, that corridor became the logical dividing line for the two new municipalities in which each ethnicity dominated. The mostly Francophone Creole area from Canal and Esplanade avenues was labeled as the First Municipality, and the mostly Anglophone American area from Canal to Felicity streets (New Orleans' upper limit at the time) became the Second Municipality. Because Esplanade Avenue divided the Creole roughly evenly, that prominent thoroughfare became the line between the First and Third municipalities. Farthest from the urban core, the Third Municipality found itself on the losing end of most local maneuverings. Wags dubbed it "The Poor Third," "The Dirty Third," and at its sardonic best, "The Glorious Third."

The inefficient municipality system was abandoned in 1852, after which another wave of spatialization ensued. It entailed the renaming of the old First Municipality as the Second Municipal District and the Second Municipality as the First Municipal District, while the Third remained the Third. It also added a Fourth Municipal District by annexing the former Faubourg Lafayette, hitherto a separate city in Jefferson Parish, now today's Garden District and Irish Channel.

The 1852 reunification also devised a new ward system, which survives today as a premier spatial reference – but alas, not the only one. Because Felicity Street had previously marked the Jefferson/Orleans parish line, the new wards were enumerated starting from Felicity (the 1st Ward) and continuing downriver to the St. Bernard Parish line. Each ward extended from the front of town to the backswamp. To equalize populations, the high-density French Quarter was sliced into the narrowest wards – the 4th, 5th and 6th – while lower-density faubourgs were sized broader. The lowermost banlieu was so vacant that a single mega-ward, the 9th, enveloped the entire area, which explains why Bywater and the wild marshes of the Rigolets share the same ward today. City fathers then swung around above Felicity and sliced newly annexed Lafayette into wards 10 and 11. The enumeration continued upriver as more Jefferson Parish communities merged with New Orleans: Jefferson City became wards 12, 13 and 14 (aka the Sixth Municipal District) in 1870, shortly after Algiers on the West Bank (often called the "right bank" by mariners) was annexed as Ward 15 – or the Fifth Municipal District. Upriver expansion concluded when New Orleans annexed Carrollton in 1874, which became wards 16 and 17 – aka the Seventh Municipal District. As development later spread toward the lake into today's Lakeview and Gentilly, the circa-1852 spatial divisions emanating from the curvaceous river were extended rather awkwardly to converge against the smooth lakeshore. The modern-day map of New Orleans' municipal districts and wards, unchanged since the 1880s, thus reflects the city's piecemeal growth since 1852. In a capricious way, some units, such as the 7th Ward and 9th Ward, found their way into the modern neighborhood vernacular, while others did so among some people, or during certain times, or not at all.

If districts and wards didn't work, residents used an extemporized vocabulary of pathways, nodes and landmarks to reference space. "Magazine Street" or "Esplanade," for example, might be used not just to refer to those arteries but for the swath of blocks paralleling them. Public markets like the Poydras or St. Mary, churches like St. Teresa's or "the Italian Church," business clusters such as "the cotton district" or "the sugar landing" and salient features like "the Old Shot Tower" or "the Fair Grounds" formed a spatial language as universally understood as it was inexactly delineated. Ethnic enclaves were also used: there was "the Jewish neighborhood" along Dryades Street and "the Greek neighborhood" around North Dorgenois Street – which others thought of as "the Creole area," or alternately, as the 6th and 7th wards. There was "Chinatown" around Tulane Avenue and South Rampart Street, which some folks called the "3rd Ward" and others, including Louis Armstrong, called the "back o' town." And there was Little Palermo, the mostly Sicilian parts of the 5th and 6th wards, which could just as well be called the lower French Quarter – also home to a Filipino enclave. As for Vieux Carré, that term had died out with the French language, but was revived in the 1910s by the nascent tourism industry and preservation movement.

Well into the 20th century, neighborhood identity in New Orleans remained flexible and nebulous. To be sure, some areas did self-identify clearly and consistently in ways we would recognize today; people spoke

regularly of “Carrollton,” “Algiers” or “the Garden District,” and fought over land use and nuisances – though not as much as today, because property value didn’t constitute as large a portion of household equity. But there were far fewer neighborhood associations and almost no agreement, indeed hardly any debate, about exact neighborhood limits and names.

The Hardening of Neighborhood Identity

This began to change with the advent of professional planning in the 1920s. American cities had become complex and contentious by the new century, and homeowners vexed over the potential impact of an unwanted neighbor on property values. Rather than leaving the fate of cities to market forces and reactionary ordinances, a new generation of urban planners began to proactively manage urban growth and zone potentially antagonistic land uses to minimize conflict and maximize property values – not to mention real estate taxes. They brought science to the task, in the form of data analysis, which required precise lines and official names on maps. You cannot know how many people live in Gentilly, for example, unless you demarcate a certain space and declare it to be Gentilly.

The first full attempt at planner-driven neighborhood delineation appeared in the 1929 Handbook to Comprehensive Zone Law. Its compilers borrowed lines devised by the U.S. Census Bureau as part of its nationwide experiment to aggregate population data at finer levels than the wards previously used. These early “census tracts” were adopted by the City Planning and Zoning Commission, which called them “districts” and used them for cartographic and planning purposes starting in the ’30s. The Census Bureau in Washington, meanwhile, officially adopted census tracts for the ’40 Census, making those semi-arbitrary puzzle pieces increasingly useful for local planners. Hardly, however, did they reach the masses, and residents of mid-century New Orleans continued to spatialize their city in their own vernacular ways.

As evidence, consider Pontchartrain Beach’s “Neighborhood Night” beauty contests, which were all the rage during 1949-’51. The segregated amusement park’s management designated special nights for a cross-section of white middle-class neighborhoods throughout the metro area, using the sobriquets Gentilly, Freret Street, Magazine Street, Carrollton, Broadmoor, Metairie, Bywater and Westside – that is, Algiers and Gretna. The nomenclature denotes the influence of historical tradition, subdivision names, principal arteries and their merchant associations’ names, and even telephone exchanges (BYwater).

Beauty contests can endure spatial imprecision; bureaucracy cannot. The next major official effort to “harden” New Orleans neighborhoods came during the 1960s-’70s, when initiatives traceable to President Lyndon B. Johnson’s Model Cities Program manifested themselves in the ’74 Housing and Community Development Act. Foreseeing a need to target Community Development Block Grant funds slated to be allocated by the Act, the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development partnered with Mayor Moon Landrieu’s Office of Policy Planning (OPP) and the New Orleans-based Curtis and Davis Architects to delineate and name “planning areas” through the city. Toward this end, OPP pollster Allen Rosenzweig surveyed residents on issues of quality-of-life and needs, as well as “the name they used to describe the neighborhood where they lived,” as Rosenzweig recounted in a recent email to me. He and his colleagues in City Hall passed the results to Curtis and Davis, which proceeded to delineate and name 73 “planning areas” from the survey responses. Some areas, like Carrollton and Algiers, formed consensus and handily won selection as official names, as did modern tract-housing subdivisions such as Pontchartrain Park and Plum Orchard, which had been branded since inception. But many older and less-famous areas had a plurality of folk monikers, in which case the team either revived historical names or christened their own. “Black Pearl,” for example, was coined by Chief OPP Planner Marion Greenup in recognition of a hitherto-unnamed Uptown riverfront area’s predominantly black population through which ran a street named Pearl. Areas that simply defied nomenclature were named arbitrarily: the blocks bounded by La Salle Street, Napoleon Avenue, Magazine Street and Jefferson Avenue, for example, were officially called “Uptown,” which is a little like renaming Wyoming “The West.” It was surrounded by neighborhoods

declared to be “Milan,” “Touro,” “West Riverside,” “Audubon/University” and “Freret” – likely news to most of their residents.

The new neighborhood map appeared in Curtis and Davis’ widely distributed New Orleans Housing and Neighborhood Preservation Study of 1974. The OPP, however, hesitated to accept the map because it “found that data could not be collected in the neighborhood units proposed by Curtis and Davis,” due to their non-alignment with U.S. Census Bureau census tracts. So the OPP and the City Planning Commission in ’75 redefined Curtis and Davis’ 73 units, based, according to city documents, on “historical definition, natural barriers, major arteries and socioeconomic homogeneity.” What resulted were 87 modified neighborhoods. When another citizen survey was added to the mix in ’77 and the process repeated, more than 100 neighborhoods resulted. According to a ’81 DAU Report, “a compromise set of 70 neighborhoods was derived ... by taking the ‘best set’ [from previous versions] and moving boundaries to the closest census tract lines” of the ’80 Census. Those latest modifications rendered, among other things, a neighborhood dubbed Country Club/Dixon (“North Hollygrove”) being separated from “Lakewood South,” and the conflation and/or distinction of various housing projects with adjacent areas. OPP planner Darlene Walk, who’s credited with many of the neighborhood boundaries, crunched raw census data and produced hundreds of demographic pamphlets organized by the new neighborhood shapes and names, thus concretizing them. Her Neighborhood Profiles publications, valuable synopses of human geography from an era when data were difficult to tabulate and distribute, are the ancestors of the various Web-based compendia we have at our fingertips today.

A perusal of city planning documents from the 1970s to ’80s shows a progression of neighborhood iterations, from as few as 62 to as many as 104 units, their boundaries and names shifting in an irreconcilable dance between ad-hoc localism and rigid officialdom. Eventually the number settled to the 73 we have today, the same total that Curtis and Davis enumerated 40 years ago. Each one is a carefully drawn polygon with straight lines and measured angles, with zero ambiguity, just as a scientist would want. As if to illustrate the empiricist’s conviction that neighborhoods are the products of hard numerical data rather than soft human perception, one map in a ’82 OPP report was titled “Major Neighborhood Boundary Changes Caused By 1980 Census Tract Definitions” (emphasis added), a revelation that might give pause to a modern-day cultural advocate who might have presumed official neighborhood units to be organic in their provenance.

This era also saw the rise of the preservation movement, which in its quest to draw attention to impending demolitions or heavy-handed development endeavored to rebrand decaying old neighborhoods. “Few people ever heard of the Lower Garden District,” wrote one Times-Picayune reporter in 1974, “until somebody said they were going to build a bridge there.” When that proposed span was contemplated instead for Press Street, it became clear that “a lot of people who live in New Orleans have no concept of where Press Street is, and a lot more people have never heard of ‘Bywater.’” After architectural historians adopted “Lower Garden District” as the title of the first volume in the influential New Orleans Architecture series, the public came to value anew that Coliseum Square area, and later volumes had a similar effect on the “American Sector,” “The Creole Faubourgs” and “Faubourge Tremé and the Bayou Road.” Now eight volumes strong, that series has helped revive historical faubourg names, some of which have found their way onto the official map – to the delight of real estate agents, who benefitted from the subsequent rise of property values. Here and elsewhere, historic renovation and gentrification walk hand-in-hand with name changes and social advocates for those who find themselves at the wrong end of the transformations have come to view neighborhood rebranding as a sinister harbinger.

Another favorite preservationist tool is the historic district. “National register districts” from the U.S. Department of the Interior influence neighborhood perceptions in part because the Preservation Resource Center features them prominently in their maps and literature. Each usage reifies spatial perceptions of architectural value and historicity, despite that the National Register District lines rarely coincide with those of the 73 OPP/Curtis and Davis neighborhoods – or for that matter, local historic districts, which

are overseen by the Historic District Landmarks Commission. Neighborhoods, no matter how we demarcate them, simply defy accord.

“The 73” nonetheless gained momentum with the growth of Geographic Information Systems (GIS) computer mapping software in the 1990s. GIS files of official neighborhoods from the City Planning Commission carried with them an ordained sense of indisputable truth that won over many insiders and nearly all outsiders, among them journalists and researchers. This was particularly the case immediately after Hurricane Katrina, when legions of confused newcomers seeking spatial clarity in the unfathomable city found them in The 73, and embraced them unquestioningly. Recovery planners went further and aggregated them into 13 new “planning districts” for the Unified New Orleans Plan, which are still used by the City Planning Commission today. Needless to say, neither The 73 nor the planning districts accord with municipal districts, wards, precincts, national historic register districts, local historical districts, police districts or city council districts – which, by the way, were redrawn after the 2010 Census.

The 73 now circulate in GIS files downloaded freely over the Internet, and have been ingested into countless projects and adopted by media, academia and nonprofits. As for the public, newcomers love them; old-timers, not so much. “As a child of the ’50s and ’60s,” wrote a perplexed Yvonne Hiller to a local newspaper, “all I ever heard about was Uptown, downtown, Kenner, Metairie and “out by the lake.” Now I hear about Bywater, Carrollton, Gert town, etc.” The 73 are here to stay, though they may well be modified again. And, frankly, they do a decent job of enabling analysts to aggregate and report large amounts of raw data in a readable fashion.

Official Neighborhoods: Some Problems

So what’s the problem?

The problem is we read too much reality into The 73. They originated from a technical need on the part of planners. But we’ve come to view them as cultural-geographical gospel, even as most New Orleanians would be at a loss to identify half of them, much less trace their outlines.

By privileging for the power of official maps, we’ve come to view neighborhoods not as the richly tenuous perceptual spaces emergent from the bottom up, but as doctrine ordained from the top down. We have over-empowered what are, for the most part, arbitrary polygons traceable originally to federal offices and tossed out our own local awareness as ill-informed and erroneous.

Reading too much into The 73 perpetuates the notion that cities are the products of the authorities that manage them, and that space and place are best left to the professionals to inscribe with character. It accommodates the dubious philosophy that those at the top control society’s narrative. It is the same dogma that, in other contexts, leads to the insistence that there’s only one correct way to pronounce “New Orleans,” only one definition of “Creole” and only one valid version of the city’s history.

Official neighborhoods, arbitrary as they are, are nonetheless consequential because they drive statistical aggregations of everything from population to crime rates, real estate values and recovery metrics. They produce their own reality, and I myself recognize that they are necessary. The statistical tables published by the Greater New Orleans Community Data Center, the reporting of local media and my own geo-statistical number-crunching all require that unsightly patches be stitched over beautiful urban fabric. Through the process of reification – that is, the concretization of an abstraction – official neighborhoods influence policy, politics and resource allocation – as well as the formation of neighborhood associations, with their notoriously uneven levels of civic clout. 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.

Because they're defined by their perimeters, official delineations also perpetuate the problematic premise that neighborhoods have strong peripheries and weak cores. In fact, the opposite is the case, both nationally and locally. Nearly all Americans, for example, would agree that the State of Illinois and Grand Teton National Park are in the Midwest and the Rockies, respectively. And nearly every New Orleanian would agree that Coliseum Square forms the heart of the Lower Garden District, and that the Canal/Carrollton intersection forms the core of Mid-City. But hardly anyone agrees on the peripheries of all four of these spaces. So be it! Let your neighborhood perception extend outwardly from a universally recognized core and bleed gradually into adjacent areas. Similarly, official delineations often use grand avenues and boulevards to divide neighborhoods. In fact, they unite them, in the same way that the Mississippi, Ohio and Missouri rivers unify their respective valleys. We once understood this, and described entire neighborhoods by the arteries that transected them. Think how different Bywater would be today if we considered St. Claude Avenue to be its linear axis, rather than its divisive edge.

Such enriching ambiguity, while imprecise, accurately reflects how urban residents truly sense their surroundings – and we have 300 years of evidence that it's usually a glorious mess.

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