

Times-Picayune profile of author Richard Campanella, August 25, 2006

Magnificent Obsession

New Orleans is a source of endless fascination for geographer **Richard Campanella**, whose new book maps the city's past, present and future.

by Susan Larson, Book editor

August 25, 2006 Friday

"You can read New Orleans like a book," geographer **Richard Campanella** said. "You just have to train your eyes to look for clues of the historical and geographical complexity this city has to offer."

New Orleans is a book that opens for this researcher and writer every morning, as he bikes the 14 miles from his home in Bywater to his office at Tulane University, where he is the assistant director of the Center for Bioenvironmental Research.

"I get to bike through the absolute historical core of the city, from the 9th Ward through the Creole faubourgs, through the French Quarter, the CBD, the Lower Garden District" Campanella said. "Then I stop for coffee at Still Perkin', and go through Uptown through Audubon Park to Tulane. Then I retrace my steps each evening. It's this perfect sampling of the city that I get to do every day. I love that ride. I've been doing it for four years now.

"Biking through Uptown on an early morning, in my opinion, is one of the great experiences you can have in this country," he said. "It's right up there with hiking the Appalachian Trail or kayaking in the Pacific Northwest. Just biking through the whole historic district on an early winter dawn -- it's so quiet and magnificent. And there's so much wildlife -- there are the birds, different layers of tree canopy -- it's just magnificent."

At Tulane, he collaborates with other faculty members on such interdisciplinary projects as Dawn Wesson's research into mosquito distribution or geologist Mead Allison's study of the bed load of the Mississippi River.

"That's the beauty of geography: It's a transdisciplinary discipline," he said. "Any other discipline you can think of has a spatial aspect. We focus on spatial patterns and their meanings."

But after that bike ride home each evening, Campanella puts his passion for the city to work in his other job, as a writer. His magnificent obsession with the city has been the inspiration for three books: "Time and Place in New Orleans," "New Orleans Then and Now," and out next week, the newly published, wildly

fascinating and encyclopedic "Geographies of New Orleans: Urban Fabrics Before the Storm" (Center for Louisiana Studies, \$49.50).

"Geographies of New Orleans" represents five years of research, map-making and writing, with more than 400 pages of text, including 170 original maps, charts and graphs and approximately 400 vintage and contemporary photographs and satellite images of the city. It takes the reader through past geographies, physical geographies, urban geographies, ethnic geographies (with chapters on Creole, Irish, German, Jewish, Greek, African-American, Italian, Chinese and Vietnamese patterns of settlement in the city), as well as a chapter titled "Hurricane Katrina and the Geographies of Catastrophe."

His only regret? Not including chapters on Hispanics and Slavs, as well as the port and the drainage system, though he has written about the latter in his other books.

The book is designed for browsing, as well as in-depth reading. If you want to know why 200-year-old houses aren't built on clay, you'll find that information in a chapter about the soils of New Orleans. If your passion is the French Quarter, you'll see it through Campanella's eyes -- with a few surprises. And if you want to look for clues to your Greek heritage, Campanella's book can be a guide. There is, literally, something for almost everyone.

The work was completed last July, a mere month before Hurricane Katrina and the subsequent flood irrevocably altered the landscape. Undaunted, Campanella set to work after the storm, adding material that reflected early yet measured assessments of post-Katrina effects on ethnic groups, and including a dramatic first-person account of riding out the storm in Bywater with his wife, Marina, then their harrowing flight from the city. He even, as he put it, "underwent a bit of pride-swallowing" and kept a chapter on "Future Geographies of New Orleans That Never Were" that was written before the storm.

In the past year, New Orleanians have truly learned that geography is destiny.

"I've learned tremendous amounts -- like all of us, since Katrina," Campanella said. "New Orleanians have become experts in their city. We've all become geographers in the past year. When I gave presentations before Katrina, I used to receive a certain level of question, but now that level is way up there -- in-depth and sophisticated. Folks in general have learned a lot."

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Ask any boy or girl what they want to be when they grow up, and "geographer" is not often at the top of the list.

Campanella's path to his profession has been a fascinating one. He started out to teach English as a second language. His bachelor's degree, from Utah State University, is in economics; while he was in college, he spent summers as a wilderness ranger for the U.S. Forest Service in the High Uintas wilderness in Utah and the Cabinet Mountain wilderness in Montana. After graduation, he joined the Peace Corps and served for two years in Honduras, where he launched a protected cloud forest reserve. That experience would later serve as the topic for his master's thesis at Louisiana State University.

After receiving his master's degree in geography, Campanella worked in Vicksburg, at the Army Corps of Engineers Waterways Experiment Station. Then came a job at the NASA Stennis Space Center, where Campanella worked in National Aeronautics and Space Administration-sponsored agricultural experiments involving remote sensing and geographic information systems, "the high-tech end of geography."

In 1994, he and his wife moved to Waveland, Miss., even closer to the city that would become his life's work. And in 1995, he began researching and writing about New Orleans.

"If you were to draw a map, you'd see that we circled around the city, getting closer all the time," he said, though he notes with regret that the house in Waveland where he wrote his first book was completely demolished by the storm.

To talk with Campanella is to see New Orleans as it exists through time. Even a litany of his favorite places is revelatory:

"Bayou St. John," he said, first. "I love the historical geography I see when I go around, places right about Moss and Bell streets. That's where the Indians and the explorers disembarked from their boats, got on the Bayou Road and walked down. I love that Bayou Road-Mississippi connection. And Bayou St. John is so aesthetically beautiful now. There's so much architectural variety there. And I love the French Quarter, Uptown, Versailles.

"Most people probably wouldn't think of Chinatown, which is so completely extinct now that it almost breaks your heart," he said. "It's a very small area around the 1100 block of Tulane Avenue, around South Rampart and Elks. Not very many people have heard of it. Other people who go there might just see the library and Hibernia Bank and the computer center, which is unmarked, and Walgreens. But when I go there I see Chinatown in the 1890s and that pavilion-like structure overflowing with market goods and notions and merchants and Chinese restaurants and religious buildings all in clusters.

"And there were all these interesting groups coming together in that great 'back of town' neighborhood. No one thinks of those neighborhoods now, but you see those past neighborhoods when you study the cityscape. And now people think of it as City Hall."

And of course, Campanella is devoted to his own neighborhood, the Bywater.

"I had a topographical map in hand when we bought the house," he said. "Literally."

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Maps are Campanella's true passion. He waxes eloquent over a map created by one of his students, a 17-year-old Rabouin High School junior, which is included in his book.

"He drew a map of the city as he perceived it. He lived in the Upper 9th Ward so the map includes all kind of detail about his neighborhood. He lives beside the Industrial Canal, which for him is huge and significant. He only saw the

Mississippi once in his life. It's distant and smaller than the Industrial Canal. And there's no French Quarter or Uptown on this map. He's got the CBD on there, but he's drawn a double membrane around it, so he feels it a place apart from the city he knew," Campanella said.

"If you were to get a Newman student or a Tulane freshman to draw a similar map, you get a completely different perception of the city. Now you might say we need to teach him geography -- and I'll never be averse to that -- but we can learn a lot about New Orleans by the way he perceives his city."

Campanella's own maps are the labor-intensive result of hours of painstaking toil. One of the most interesting maps in his new book is the one showing distribution of the African-American population in New Orleans from 1939-2000. And making it was a labor of love.

"The origin of these data is a big binder of data from the 1939 WPA land use survey by Sam Carter," he said. "And there's a map in there, with the percentage of blacks per block, but it's a fold-out map, it's on onionskin, and it's extremely delicate, so it would have been very difficult to make a copy."

Campanella unfurls a large, delicate piece of paper covered with excruciatingly small pencil notations.

"So what I did was, I printed out a skeleton of the city, its street network, then I overlaid this acetate you could see through, paper-clipped it down so it couldn't move, then registered it to significant intersections, and copied the numbers over. It took a very, very long time. Then I scanned it into a large format scanner, scanned it into digital format, brought it into my geographical information system, then registered it to a satellite image, so it was geographically tied to the correct longitude and latitude. . . .

"This took a grand total of 50 hours over maybe three weeks or so."

A map of Creole settlement was largely based on an analysis of the 1842 city directory, sorting out listings with French- and Spanish-sounding names. Of course every methodology has weak spots, but what you have to do is just acknowledge them.

A chapter on "What the Yellow Pages Reveals About New Orleans" -- just one of Campanella's creative and revelatory research methods -- will have readers pondering over maps of "Ratios of Bars and Nightclubs to Bookstore and Health Food Stores" and "Bars per 100,000 Population" (we lead the nation) and "Number of National Newspaper Articles on Music of Specified Cities" and "Jazz-named Businesses per 100,000 Population."

Again, the appeal of clusters to Campanella is obvious. "That's what drives my analysis -- it's all about spatial patterns, why things are where they are," he said.

"It makes driving down the most mundane street -- even the most picked-over one with nothing but parking lots -- the most exciting adventure because there is so much to read there. It might be a tile at the entryway to a store that no longer exists, but it has the name in it. It might be a Greek key doorway that has been added to an otherwise Creole building.

"But let me tell you what I don't see. I do not see a saxophonist leaning against a lamppost, such an overused cliché image. It's a fabricated icon. But we have so many other elements of the cityscape that you can read if you've trained your eye."

Does he remember his first sight of New Orleans?

"Absolutely!" he said. "I remember everything I did that day. It was Sept. 15, 1991. I was going to look at LSU graduate school, and I took a bus into town and arrived at the bus station early Sunday morning. I didn't know anything about this city, except that the cluster of interesting stuff was in this area that was probably around Bourbon Street."

He laughs at his own naiveté, but continues. "So I found that on a map, and worked my way down Loyola Avenue, past the Poydras Plaza sign and the Cuban-American statue, then down Carondelet because I saw that lined up with Bourbon, then I went down Bourbon.

"I didn't even realize that there was a French Quarter, I just knew it was the intensive cluster of that which distinguished New Orleans. It was an amazing day. I found Jackson Square and spent about 18 hours exploring. After two years in Central America, I was very tuned into West Indian, Caribbean, Spanish and French colonial ambiance, and to discover this place just floored me. I was just transfixed by it."

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But studying other cityscapes began at an early age for Campanella. His father, who ran a motor shop in Brooklyn for 50 years, introduced his two sons to the geography of upstate New York, and his mother frequently took the boys into Manhattan. Campanella's brother, Thomas, is a professor of urban planning at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill and the editor of an important anthology, "The Resilient City: How Great Cities Recover From Disaster."

"My father was a true Renaissance man," Campanella said. "He had a four-year degree in electrical engineering and a four-year degree in English literature. So I guess you could say my brother and I are apples who fell close to the tree."

In a recent appearance here, Thomas Campanella described a phenomenon he called "topophilia," "love of place," and **Richard Campanella** certainly exemplifies the New Orleans version.

"I've gone through three phases of being highly interested in place," he said. "The first was the Rocky Mountains, where I was wilderness ranger, and the second is Honduras, where I studied the cloud forests. And the third is New Orleans, and that will probably last the rest of my life . . . I consider myself a student of this city."

As he writes in "Geographies of New Orleans," shifting perceptions of the city -- both from without and within -- may save us in the future:

"The once-arcane subjects of New Orleans geography, topography and sociology became the topic of conversation nationwide; the public is now better-educated about, and possibly more interested in visiting, New Orleans than ever before.

Tragedy knocked the city down; 'tragedy tourism' may help it back on its feet. Katrina and the human suffering of its aftermath may add poignancy and depth to the perception of New Orleans as a place of frivolity and indulgence.

"Finally, it is worth noting the value of positive place-based perceptions and iconic imagery. In countless public service announcements, editorials, and conversations throughout the autumn of 2005, popular characteristics and symbols of New Orleans were called upon explicitly and repeatedly to the cause of reconstruction. The oaks of St. Charles Avenue. The balconies of the French Quarter. Mardi Gras. Jazz Fest. Beignets at Café du Monde. Dinner at Antoine's. The clanging of the streetcars. The bells of St. Louis Cathedral.

"All that imparts character to place -- in other words, all that constitutes the geography of New Orleans -- was invoked nostalgically, provocatively and highly effectively, to encourage perseverance in the long road ahead. Other American cities might have been hard-pressed to draw upon such a deep reservoir of cherished symbols to unify and motivate their scattered citizens. In its darkest hour, New Orleans discovered its most precious asset -- itself."

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