

*Times-Picayune Review of Bienville's Dilemma" A Historical Geography of New Orleans*, by Richard Campanella, 2008

## The Poet Geographer

**Richard Campanella** chronicles the history of New Orleans' landscape

by Susan Larson, Book editor

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Everyone in New Orleans will recognize the truth behind the title of geographer **Richard Campanella's** new history of the city. "Bienville's Dilemma" -- which he succinctly distills to "questionable geography, questionable future" -- has been an issue since the city's 1718 founding. And "dilemma," defined by the dictionary as "a problem involving a difficult or unpleasant choice which will bring undesirable consequences," characterizes the state in which all New Orleanians find themselves post-Katrina.

For Campanella, who is the associate director of Tulane University's Center for Bioenvironmental Research and a research professor with Tulane's Department of Earth and Environmental Sciences, New Orleans has been a case of obsession at first sight.

He is the author of "New Orleans Then and Now" (1999), "Time and Place in New Orleans" (2002) and "Geographies of New Orleans" (2006). His new book, "Bienville's Dilemma," includes 68 brief articles and essays written in his characteristic lucid and straightforward style, all describing various human interactions with the local landscape -- forming it, settling it, urbanizing it, populating it, manipulating it, humanizing it -- and its eventual devastation and ongoing restoration. He draws from rich readings in travelers' accounts, newspaper articles and previous geographies, as well as his own observations, so important in the sections dealing with Katrina and its aftermath. The result is an immensely readable treasure trove of history, one a reader could open to any page for a source of enlightenment, education or pure delight. And the 58-page timeline of the city's history is an invaluable reference in itself.

"The idea of a dilemma," Campanella said, "has helped me come to terms with our challenges here, mostly in issues of land loss and natural hazard risks, if you think of them as dilemmas first and problems second. First and foremost, there are the choices we have to make based on value judgments, and once the difficult choice is made you have a problem that can be solved by good science and engineering. But your first choice may render an unforeseen consequence. I find all this intellectually stimulating as well as morally challenging."

Campanella is such a riveting writer that he can make anything fascinating -- the composition of soil; the battle for control of water; patterns of settlement in the city; the history of Creolism, which he calls "our home-grown ethnicity"; the

ways in which we have "scored and scoured" the land, with canals and levees, structures that were originally designed for our safety but have become sources of hazard; the way we have made groceries since the very beginning; the pride of being a New Orleans native; the developments of wards and faubourgs.

In a chapter called "Devastating the Landscape," he writes of storms and fires and floods, cautioning of the "truism long recognized by hazard planners: the aftermath of one disaster becomes the prelude to the next." Time and time again, he sees the patterns in the city's problems.

One of the most fascinating chapters -- and Campanella originally hoped that it would serve as the title for his book -- tells the story of "Manuel's Dilemma" for the first time. During the hurricane of 1915, forecaster Isaac M. Cline warned Manuel Marquez, the caretaker at the Anglers' Lodge in the Rigolets, that people there should be evacuated on the last train. Desperation grew as Manuel was forced to choose between saving himself or his people. Marquez went off to search for his people, missed the train, and perished. "This is one of the chapters that I enjoyed contributing to the public record," Campanella said.

Here's how Campanella describes the implications of "Manuel's Dilemma":

"Colossal decisions -- involving evacuating, relocating, hunkering down, giving up, resisting, conceding, fighting, accepting -- confront citizens of New Orleans and southeastern Louisiana, oftentimes to the exasperated and impatient disbelief of Americans elsewhere. Should we remain in eroding marshes and continue centuries of tradition, or end our way of life and move inland so that aggressive coastal restoration may commence? Should we maintain all low-lying, far-flung neighborhoods and trust that levees will protect us? Or should we concede these areas to nature and build only on higher ground? Should we try to save everyone, at the risk of losing everyone? Or should we ask some to sacrifice everything so that others may maintain something? Shall we strive toward the probable survival of half the society, or the possible survival of the entire society?"

Citing the arguments of the abandonists, the concessionists and the maintainers in the heated arguments about the city's future after Katrina, Campanella writes that the answer was, apparently, "Let the people return and rebuild as they can, as they wish, and we'll act on the patterns as they fall in place."

One underlying theme of this book is the rich inspiration New Orleans has provided to its citizens and its visitors, its provocative situation in the national consciousness. Everyone, informed or not, feels he can pronounce on the city. And we have learned from those pronouncements, as Campanella notes about the rich contributions of 18th century Ursuline nun Marie-Madeleine Hachard, whose letters offer a wealth of information useful to a geographer.

"Every time I bike past the Bienville (and Chartres) intersection, I look up at the second floor of the building -- and that building is from the 1800s, the original building is long gone -- and I picture her sitting up there, making those amazing observations," he said. "I think about how much we know about 1727 New Orleans because of her articulate and amazing letters."

New Orleans has benefited from the rich records left during its heyday, when it was the third largest city in the country and an obligatory stop during a grand tour of America.

"There's the instinct to pass judgment on New Orleans," Campanella said. "Many times it's flattering. There are so many, myself included, who are so enthralled by this city on first sight. And others who are repelled."

And then there are those who are both.

"Well, there's your dilemma!" Campanella said, laughing.

As he writes, "Ask an informed American citizen today to ruminate on Dallas or Atlanta or Phoenix, and you will probably get small talk, lukewarm pleasantries, and a brief conversation. Ask them what they think about New Orleans, and you are in for not only an opinionated retort, but a sentimental smile, a scolding finger or a treasured memory, a shaking head, or an exasperated shrug over the course of a conversation spanning the spectrum of the human experience. This enigmatic capacity to rile and inspire, to scandalize and charm, to liberate and fascinate, helps explain why thousands of people have rejected the amenities and opportunities of the lukewarm Dallases and Atlantas and Phoenixes of the world, and chosen instead to cast their lot with this troubled old port -- embracing all its splendors and dilemmas, all its booms and busts, all its joys and tragedies."

One of the most provocative chapters looks at the contributions of transplants to the city, and the difference between transplants and natives.

"Nativity as ethnicity is one of the most neglected areas of research in the social sciences," Campanella said. "There's little research on how people who have deep roots in a place differ from their neighbors who have moved there. We have plenty of research on immigration and immigrants. But you see different patterns of human geography when you ascribe patterns of nativity."

One of his more interesting observations is that "Transplants are more likely to listen to National Public Radio and listener-supported WWOZ than commercial radio, and tend to be 'Jazzfest people' rather than 'Mardi Gras people.' They predominate disproportionately at events involving the arts, culture, and social, urban, and environmental causes."

Campanella says that his book "takes a very frank look at the city. Some readers may be uncomfortable with the documentation of things like decline, but this is not an advocacy piece."

Campanella, who bikes from his home in the Bywater to Tulane each day on what he calls the "bicycle business tour," often stops to photograph interesting images along the way. One of the most striking pictures in the book, included in the 48-page section of maps and photos and graphs, depicts the graffiti on the side of a building in the Bayou St. John neighborhood: "You'll find your way by the mileposts of hope." It's perfect poetry.

"The city writes it," he said. "I just document it."

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