

*Times-Picayune Review of Geographies of New Orleans,*  
by Richard Campanella, 2006

## On the streets where we live

By Michael A. Ross, Contributing writer

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As Hurricane Katrina roared into the city, **Richard Campanella** remembers in "Geographies of New Orleans," he tried to convince himself that his decision to ride the storm out in his 9th Ward home "was not an emotional one, made with a clenched fist and a fanatical dedication to place, but rather a rational one based on data and reason."

He lived, after all, in a sturdy, old, raised house, seven feet above sea level, and by staying he could be present "to minimize structural damage, to mitigate, to respond to conditions before they developed into crises, to take corrective action to protect important papers and possessions, and afterwards, to guard against looters."

But when his street suddenly filled with two feet of water, he knew he had made a "big, big mistake." He and his wife were now living "literally in the Gulf of Mexico."

Although the water receded before it became life-threatening, Campanella later recognized that his "ill-advised decision" not to evacuate had never really been as rational as he'd first thought. Instead, as "the big one" approached, he simply could not bring himself to leave. He wanted to be here "to bear witness to the intricate fabrics of this cherished city, at the moment of their terrible shredding." And, after reading "Geographies of New Orleans," it is easy to empathize with his decision.

"Geographies of New Orleans: Urban Fabrics Before the Storm" is a big, striking book, filled with photographs, maps, timelines and beautifully written essays on the city's culture, environment and history. Campanella, a geographer at the Tulane Center for Bioenvironmental Research, has made understanding the nuances of New Orleans neighborhoods his life's work. "Geographies of New Orleans" is clearly a labor of love, but it is also a book stunning in its analytical precision. While Campanella knows and appreciates the lore of New Orleans, he bases all of his conclusions about the city's past and present on hard-won data, and it is, indeed, difficult to imagine just how much painstaking research went into this book.

Take, for example, his chapter on the Irish Channel, one of New Orleans' most storied neighborhoods. Anyone who has attended the St. Patrick's Day block party at Parasol's Irish Channel Bar knows the legends. The Channel, so the story goes, was once filled with Irish immigrants who worked grueling shifts on the docks and then went to corner watering holes at night to drink, fight and

sing Irish songs long into the evening. It is a rich and colorful history, and one based, in part, on truth. But, as Campanella notes, there is substantial disagreement as to whether Parasol's is in the historical Irish Channel -- or even whether the Channel of lore ever existed at all.

Some historians and old-timers say the "one and only" Irish Channel was on Adele Street, near where the Wal-Mart stands today. Others claim that Tchoupitoulas Street was the "main avenue of the Irish Channel." And while many maintain that the boundaries of the Channel were Josephine Street, Magazine Street, Louisiana Avenue and the river (the neighborhood that includes Parasol's), the 1938 WPA guide to New Orleans placed the Channel in today's Warehouse District. Father Earl Niehaus, the most famous chronicler of the Irish in New Orleans, rejected the idea that the city ever had a segregated Irish neighborhood. Instead, he suggested that people simply liked the "picturesque, though mysterious" phrase "Irish Channel," and "a myth was born."

Campanella brings a geographer's meticulousness to this debate. Rather than rely on legend, he spent countless hours mining data from primary sources in an effort to determine if there ever was a specific, predominantly Irish neighborhood known as the Irish Channel. His systematic search through old newspapers revealed that the term Irish Channel first appeared in the late 19th century but that the exact location of the neighborhood was rarely defined.

Census data from the 19th century proved to be of little help because census takers often failed to record house numbers or streets for the houses they visited. So Campanella created his own method for determining whether there was ever a neighborhood Irish enough to fit the legend of the Irish Channel. Matching addresses found in 19th century city directories with a list culled from the burial records of St. Patrick's Cemetery No. 1 of unmistakable Irish surnames -- such as Callahan, Flynn, Kelly and those starting with Fitz-, Mc-, O' -- Campanella mapped the old neighborhoods block by block.

What he found was that there was never an intensely clustered, exclusively Irish neighborhood in New Orleans. Although Irish immigrants did settle in particular districts such as the "back of town" where housing was cheap, they invariably lived side by side with Germans, Italians, African-Americans, and "a multitude of other ancestries." Assessing his research as a whole, Campanella concludes that the Irish Channel was once, most likely, a specific street -- Adele Street -- whose nickname came to be applied to a number of neighborhoods where Irish families lived. It is a cautious conclusion, one unlikely to end the long-standing debates, but in reaching it Campanella creates the most detailed account we have of where Irish immigrants to New Orleans settled and why they chose to settle where they did.

The Irish Channel is just one of many New Orleans neighborhoods Campanella explores in "Geographies of New Orleans." In other chapters he turns his expertise to the French Quarter, Uptown, the 9th Ward, Lakeview and eastern New Orleans, and it is fascinating to view the city through his eyes.

In old, seemingly unremarkable buildings, Campanella sees the settlement patterns and streetscapes created by Sicilian and German immigrants, former slaves and free persons of color, Orthodox Greeks and Jews, black and white Creoles. In newer buildings he sees the history of desegregation, man's fateful

efforts to conquer the environment, and the haphazard campaign to make New Orleans a "New South" city. He makes the architecture and topography of Gentilly and Mid-City as compelling as the famous neighborhoods frequented by tourists. And oft-ignored thoroughfares such as Elysian Fields Avenue become as interesting and worthy of preservation as St. Charles Avenue or Royal Street. "As a microcosm and barometer of two centuries of urban growth," Campanella argues convincingly, "Elysian Fields Avenue stands alone."

Because Campanella wrote almost all of "Geographies of New Orleans" before Katrina, it is also heartbreaking to read. Every page is a reminder of just how much has been lost. Given the amount of destruction the storm wrought, some may even wonder whether we should be spending so much time worrying about the city's past when there are so many questions about its future. Are long debates about the location of the Irish Channel -- and the meaning of the word Creole, and the dividing line between Uptown and downtown -- a luxury we can really afford? Perhaps New Orleanians have always been too focused on the minutia of the past rather than the problems of the present.

"Geographies of New Orleans" is a powerful refutation to such arguments. It is a dazzling book, unparalleled in its scope, precision, clarity and detail, that makes clear that what still survives of the "intricate urban fabrics woven here over the past three hundred years" is exactly what makes New Orleans worth saving.

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