

Mapping the Geography of Cool

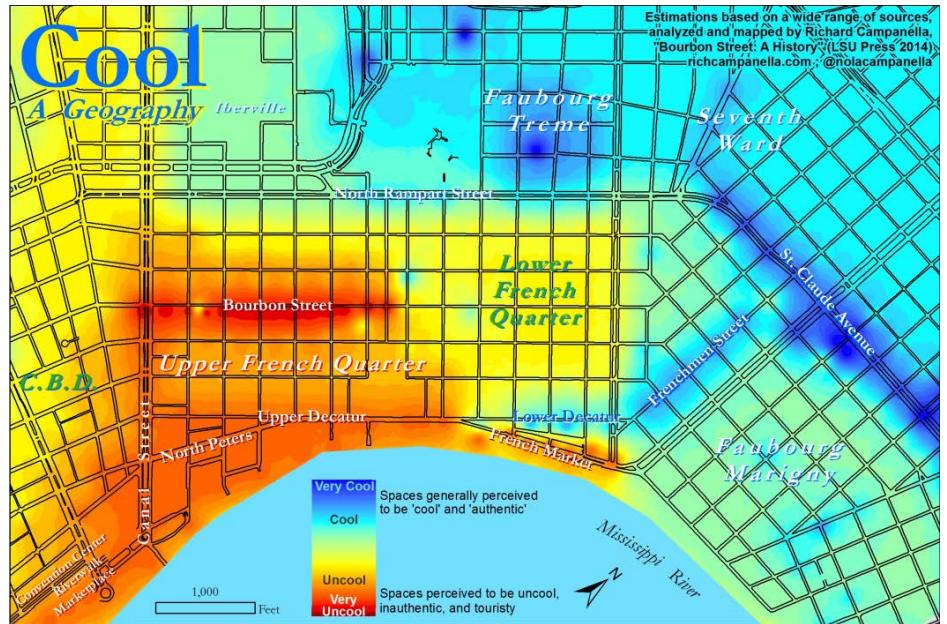
by Richard Campanella *New Orleans Times-Picayune* InsideOut section, March 14, 2014

“Location, location, location,” the real estate adage goes. In fact, a number of complex variables drive the value of land, particularly for residential areas. They range from schools and quality of life, to amenities and safety, to prejudices, perceptions and social status.

In recent decades, a new variant of social status has entered the real estate equation, and it has since transfigured downtown New Orleans and other American cities.

It’s the curious cultural phenomenon known as cool.

Neighborhoods that a decade or two ago were viewed as dirty, dangerous and disregarded now rank among the region’s hottest real estate markets, turned around courtesy of an emerging social charisma that may be described as “hip” or “cool.” Among them are Bywater and adjacent areas down St. Claude Avenue; Faubourg Tremé and St. Roch; the Irish Channel; and Mid City. A generation earlier, places like Faubourg Marigny and the Lower Garden District underwent the transformation.



True, these neighborhoods boast other advantages. They have history, architecture, walkability, high topographic elevation and favorable flood zones, not to mention proximity to resources and employment. But they had these advantages years ago, yet few came a-bidding.

What changed is that they became cool on the social scene. And that made them hot — on the real estate scene.

Coolness is elusive, and some might be inclined to scoff at the notion, as it smacks of affectation and brings to mind poseurs. To be sure, coolness is purely perceptual; it is constructed and superimposed, not innate.

But any illusion that can so thoroughly change the character, composition and property value of a neighborhood cannot be dismissed. Coolness is real in its effects, if not in its posturing, and as such, it’s a fairly recent phenomenon, though not entirely unprecedented.

New Orleanians in times past perceived certain spaces within their city to bear a particular dash, and it was based largely on class. The word “fashionable” appears in real estate ads in the 19th century, usually with respect to St. Charles Avenue or the Garden District. Other code words included “genteel” and “stylish.” *Vanity Fair* explained

in 1869 how “the Americans adopt the term of “down-town” for the [Creole quarter], and dignify their own residential quarter as ‘up-town.’”

But fashion, style and dignity are not the same as cool; if anything, coolness sneers at such bourgeois aspirations. Coolness exudes an aloof poise and a confident sense of self-possession; it is never boastful or chatty, but rather vaguely mysterious, unknowable, and, above all, separate and apart from the masses. It explains why celebrities wear sunglasses, and why the smarter ones know to act taciturn and keep themselves scarce.

Coolness constantly needs to be ahead of the mainstream, and if the mainstream catches up, coolness goes elsewhere. “The act of discovering what’s cool,” observed Malcolm Gladwell in an influential 1997 article entitled *The Coolhunt*, “is what causes cool to move on.” As it does, coolness often produces new cultural innovations and explores increasingly edgy terrain. Coolness thus becomes geographical: it occupies certain spaces, disdains others, and seeks new ones when uncoolness approaches.

And that’s when, and where, it affects real estate.

Decades ago, for example, Bourbon Street was considered cool. But when corporate hotels and mass tourism made the strip all too plebian and crass in the 1960s, coolness moved on to new spaces such as lower Decatur Street in the 1970s, and extended in the 1980s and 1990s across Esplanade onto Frenchmen Street. By that time, the surrounding area, along with the blocks around Coliseum Square, became the city’s coolest “new” neighborhoods. Both were rechristened, one with the revived historical moniker “Faubourg Marigny” and the other with a circa-1960s coinage “Lower Garden District.” Property values rose, renovation broke out all over, the areas gentrified, and coolness spread adjacently.

After Katrina, when a wave of youth from places like New York arrived in New Orleans in search of undiscovered bohemian coolness, they found places like Frenchmen (not to mention Bourbon) all too similar to what they had left behind. So they proceeded to push coolness into new spaces, down St. Claude Avenue, across Rampart and beyond. Those areas are now changing as Marigny and the Lower Garden District did previously.

Lovers of Frenchmen Street now openly worry that their street is “becoming like Bourbon Street,” an explicit fear that uncoolness may be knocking at its door. That’s happened before, too. When Bourbon Street became uncool, and the white middle class moved en masse to Jefferson Parish, a new cool space popped up rather spontaneously (coolness is hard to choreograph) in the heart of Metairie. It was dubbed Fat City, and it peaked in the late 1970s with more than 70 nighttime drinking, eating, music and entertainment venues.

But in the 1990s, downtown New Orleans had regained the cool advantage, and Fat City soon found itself in a wilderness of uncool, catering to an aging demographic with musical tastes ranging from hair bands to The Yat Pack. Jefferson Parish authorities hired a consultant from Manhattan to advise them on how to revive the district. His advice: “create a ‘cluster of cool’” in the heart of Fat City, “where you can really make it look and feel different.”

Managers are trying a similar strategy for the cool-challenged French Market. They’ve been running “Hip Scene, Historic Setting” ads in cool magazines like *Offbeat*, recruiting earthy craft vendors to counter the beads-and-T-shirts stigma, and piping in the very cool sounds of WWOZ into the flea market like intravenous nourishment for the ailing.

Here and elsewhere, coolness has become an urban planning strategy, and planners today wield its trappings the way their predecessors once plied golf courses and gated subdivisions. “Real” cool, meanwhile, has a mind of its own.

The ever-changing geography of cool has brought with it a cycle of neighborhood change, introducing newcomers and new wealth, sometimes displacing natives and poverty, and making the phenomenon of gentrification one of the most polemical topics in town.

Some would argue that developers and a complicit local government instigate the cool-neighborhood-cum-hot-real-estate cycle, and that may well be true in some cases (such as the Warehouse District and newly christened “South Market District”) and in other cities (such as New York). But I would argue that these forces, in most cases in New Orleans, are eagerly responding to the geography of cool, not initiating it.

Much has been written about gentrification, including by yours truly, and debates about its costs and benefits can be found elsewhere. My interest here is to contend that, while coolness is illusory, its effects upon the cityscape are quite real, and thus can be mapped.

Where is the geography of cool?

To address this question, I devised a technique entailing the distribution hundreds of points digitally throughout a Geographic Information Systems (GIS) map of downtown. Each point was then ranked 0 (uncool) through 10 (very cool) reflecting how that neighborhood, bar, restaurant or venue is generally perceived, based on a wide range of observations, readings, conversations, and vibes from the zeitgeist. I then processed the ranked points into a “heat map” and color-coded from red (uncool) to yellow to blue (cool) to dark blue (very cool).

Yes, it’s subjective; of course it’s imprecise; but after bouncing the estimates off a number of other people, I found that a general consensus prevailed.

The resulting map, which accompanies this article, does not represent my personal opinions of what’s cool or uncool. Rather, it represents my attempt to estimate everyone else’s opinions, as best as I can discern them. By no means should readers take offense at areas mapped in red which they think ought to be blue (or vice versa); personally, I am a neutral observer of coolness, and find the entire phenomenon quite interesting

Where would you map coolness? Where do you see it going next? What impact will it have? For better or worse, the geography of cool may influence the future cityscapes of New Orleans.

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