

Fifty Years After Riverfront Expressway Cancellation, Shuddering at the New Orleans That Could Have Been

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Fifty years ago this summer, reports from Washington D.C. reached New Orleans that John Volpe, secretary of the Department of Transportation under President Richard Nixon, had cancelled the Riverfront Expressway—the high-speed, elevated interstate slated for the French Quarter.

The stunning news, about a wildly controversial plan that had divided the community for years, was met with elation by the city's growing preservationist movement, and head-shaking disappointment by local leaders in both the public and private sectors.

A half-century on, the cancellation and the original proposal invite speculation —part mental exercise, part cautionary tale—about what greater New Orleans might look like today had the Riverfront Expressway gone forward. And it very nearly did: conventional wisdom at the time saw the new infrastructure as an inevitable step toward progress, following the lead of many other waterfront cities, including New York, San Francisco, and Seattle.

But first, a recap on how the New Orleans plan got to Volpe's desk.



Rendering from Robert Moses' Arterial Plan for New Orleans, 1946, page 11, courtesy collection of R. Campanella

The initial concept for the Riverfront Expressway emerged from a post-World War II effort among state and city leaders to modernize New Orleans' antiquated regional transportation system. Toward that end, the state Department of Highways hired the famous—many would say infamous—New York master planner Robert Moses, who along with Andrews & Clark Consulting Engineers, released in 1946 his *Arterial Plan for New Orleans*.

Moses' report tackled the full array of transportation infrastructure, from highways and bridges to trains, airports, and shipping canals. His proposals rested on predictions about the future of the metropolis, including a key forecast for the West Bank. "The natural area of residential expansion of New Orleans," wrote Moses, "is in the direction of Algiers and Gretna, [where] the land is fairly high, reasonably cheap, and ripe for further development." No bridge yet connected that region to downtown, thus much of the West Bank remained semi-rural.

How to get there? Moses envisioned, for the East Bank, east-west traffic flowing upon widened versions of existing grade-level arteries, including Florida Avenue, Claiborne Avenue, Tchoupitoulas Street, and Airline Highway. These routes would intercept two new elevated expressways, the "Pontchartrain" and the "Waterfront." The Pontchartrain Expressway would come into downtown along the soon-to-be-filled New Basin Canal corridor and onto Calliope Street, while the Waterfront Expressway would come down Elysian Fields Avenue, curve around the Old U.S. Mint, and parallel the Mississippi fronting the French Market and Jackson Square (at the time lined with wharf sheds and railroads), past the foot of Canal and Poydras, to Calliope Street. There, it would circle up and merge with the Pontchartrain Expressway, cross a new bridge into Algiers, and continue onto what would later become the West Bank Expressway.

Readers will note that three components of this four-part strategy — the Pontchartrain and West Bank expressways and the first downtown Mississippi River bridge (1958) came to fruition. So too did Moses' proposal to unify old passenger train stations into a new Union Passenger Terminal (1954), improve airport access, address downtown parking needs, and plan for the shift of port activity into eastern New Orleans with the envisioned "Tidewater Ship Channel," which would eventually become the Mississippi River-Gulf Outlet (MR-GO) Canal. Much of his *Arterial Plan for New Orleans*, in short, was executed.

Moses, the eponymous villain in Robert Caro's exhaustive biography, "The Power Broker," is widely viewed today as a megalomaniac, and for good reason. He prioritized for Promethean infrastructure with flagrant disregard for residents and neighborhoods. But even he had his restraints. "Never build a tunnel if you can build anything else," he wrote, quashing talk of a subterranean cross-bank connection. He bucked a national trend and argued that New Orleans "would gain nothing by shifting from street cars to buses and giving up a unique and on the whole very successful local rapid transit trolley system." (This advice was largely ignored.) He also put to rest the outlandish notion of extending the Mississippi River bridge into a 50-mile causeway across the Barataria Basin to Grand Isle, where a state park would await vacationers — the original bridge to nowhere. "It is difficult for outsiders, however imaginative and park-minded," he wrote tersely, "to see any economic justification for this proposal."

Nor can Moses be blamed for the Claiborne Expressway, as he erroneously often is. That idea came years later, after the federal government allocated funds to construct the interstate highway system. The money put future Interstate 10 on the planning table, which called for a new way to connect with downtown traffic flow. In 1957, a Chamber of Commerce-backed committee updated Moses' original scheme; it now included an elevated expressway on Claiborne Avenue, forming a triangle with the Pontchartrain Expressway and Waterfront Expressway (by now called the "Riverfront" Expressway). The

state updated its official plan in the early 1960s, by which time the Pontchartrain Expressway and Mississippi River Bridge were already completed and open for traffic.

As the Riverfront Expressway became increasingly “inevitable,” backed by regional power-players as a way to keep downtown relevant amid sprawling suburbanization, opposition also mounted. Preservationists shuddered at the expressway’s impact on the *tout ensemble* of the French Quarter. The city’s oldest neighborhood, by this time nationally famous and protected as a historic district, had many defenders, and while their fight was uphill, they proved to have the political clout and economic wherewithal to stage an ultimately successful fight.

The same cannot be said for Treme residents living along North Claiborne Avenue, many of them disenfranchised African-Americans with far less political and economic power. One day in 1966, workers arrived to start clearcutting the beautiful full-canopy live oaks from 18 blocks of the Claiborne neutral ground. Pilings were driven in 1968, and work proceeded on the elevated roadbed during 1969, with the full expectation that it would complement the Riverfront Expressway.

Instead, on July 1, Secretary Volpe shocked both sides and cancelled the Riverfront Expressway. His decision invoked Section 106 of the National Historic Preservation Act, which deemed that the roadway would do irreversible damage to the French Quarter — exactly as preservationists had argued. Funds instead would be transferred to the “Metropolitan New Orleans Beltway,” which would never be fully executed — but we’ll save that for another time.

Fifty years later, the significance of the 1969 cancellation of the Riverfront Expressway comes to light when we contemplate what downtown New Orleans might look like today had the “inevitable” been just that.

For one, there probably would not have been a circa-1970s revitalization of the Faubourg Marigny, because lower Elysian Fields Avenue would have been cleaved with a noisy, looming overpass—much like North Claiborne is today. It’s also unlikely that a music scene would have materialized on Frenchmen Street in the 1980s, much less on St. Claude Avenue in the 2010s, with the expressway just a block away. Less reinvestment in Marigny would likely mean even less in Bywater, St. Roch, and Holy Cross today. The gentrification we now see in those neighborhoods, for better or worse, would be markedly different.

Likewise, the French Market, Jax Brewery, and Riverwalk would probably not have become the festival marketplaces they are today, and it’s hard to imagine that Canal Place, with its high-end retail, offices, and hotel, would have found a home at lower Canal Street. That’s where high-speed expressway traffic would have dived underground into a 700-foot-long tunnel which, incredibly, the city had preemptively installed with its own funds in 1965 to ensure that construction of the International Trade Mart and Rivergate Exhibition Hall would not disrupt plans for the Riverfront Expressway. (The tunnel is still there today, used for valet parking by Harrah’s Casino.) That same year also saw the widening of Poydras Street, to allow traffic to flow between the Claiborne and Riverfront expressways once both were in place.

The Riverfront Expressway would have made today’s Moon Walk, Woldenberg Park, Spanish Plaza, and the Riverfront Streetcar difficult to envision. The Aquarium of the Americas would likely be elsewhere—or nowhere. The 1984 World’s Fair, which celebrated water and embraced its riverfront perch, would probably have been sited elsewhere, if it happened at all — which would call into question the subsequent revitalization of the Warehouse District.

No Warehouse District would mean that projects like the Ogden Museum and World War II Museum would have played out differently, to say the least. No World's Fair would also mean no Convention Center — whose very footprint would have been transected by the six-lane expressway.

What about Jackson Square? The constant din of heavy traffic would have drowned out music, and breezes coming off the river would instead convey fumes. Panoramic views from the upper floors of the Cabildo, the Presbytere, and the Pontalba apartment buildings would feature rolling trucks instead of rolling water.

All of this would have made the costly commitment to maintain historic buildings in the French Quarter, for either residence or commerce, less appealing, which would have lowered property values.

The expressway might also have motivated some dubious mitigation efforts. One proposal featured in a 1966 edition of a magazine billed as the "Official Monthly Publication of the Chamber of Commerce of the New Orleans Area" suggested erecting a "Third Pontalba" apartment along Decatur Street, to "shield historic Jackson Square from the proposed roadway and form a *taut ensemble* [sic] of the existing buildings."

All the more reason to cherish what we have today, and hope citizens exhibit equal foresight in assessing comparable proposals in the future.

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Drone photo by Lorenzo Serafini Boni, March 2017