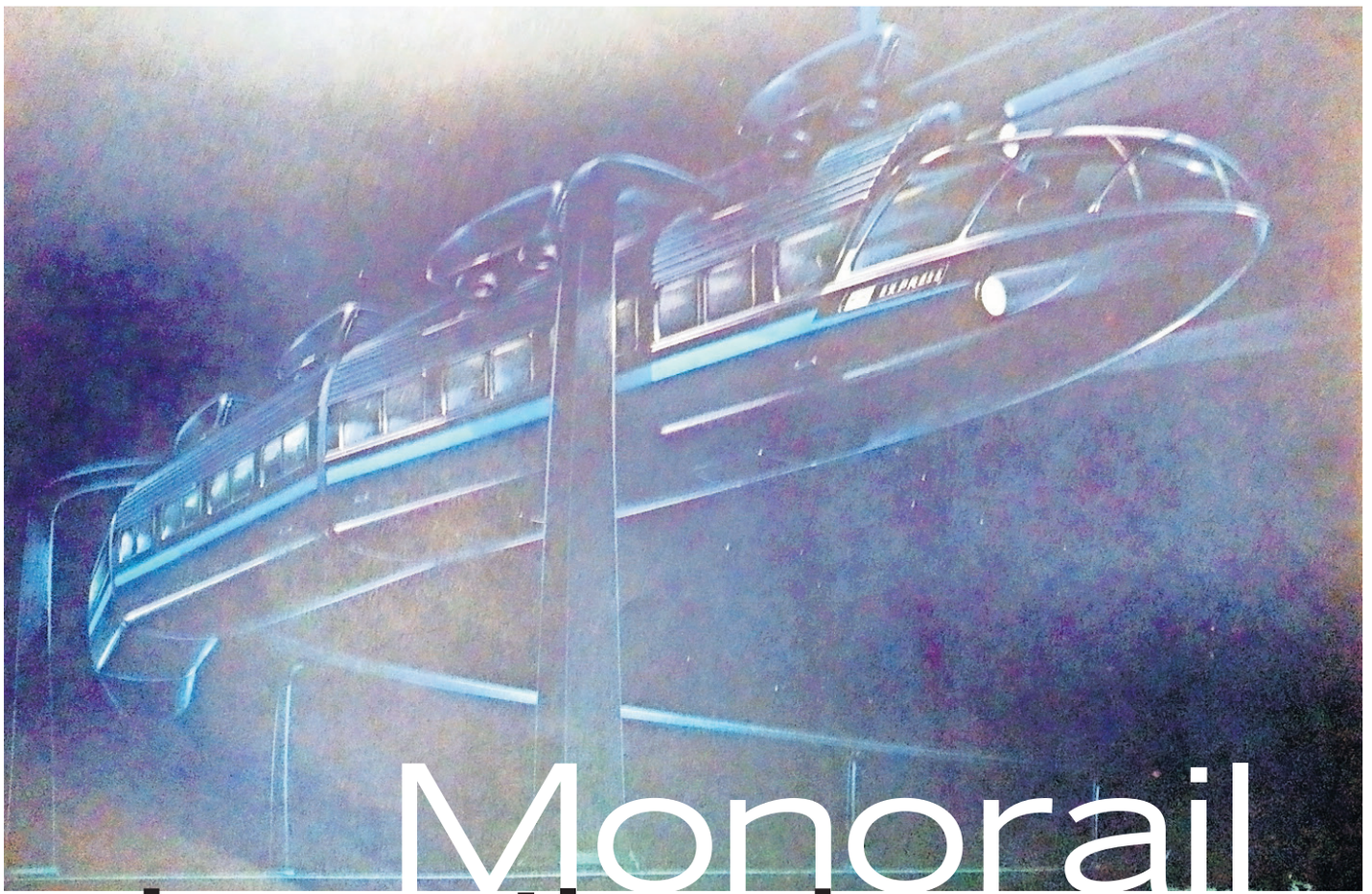

Th proposal called for an 'asymmetrically suspended type monorail' rolling on rubber wheels and powered by diesel engines. *Illustration courtesy of the Tulane University Special Collections*

Monorail derailed

Bold 1950s plan envisioned a futuristic metro transportation system

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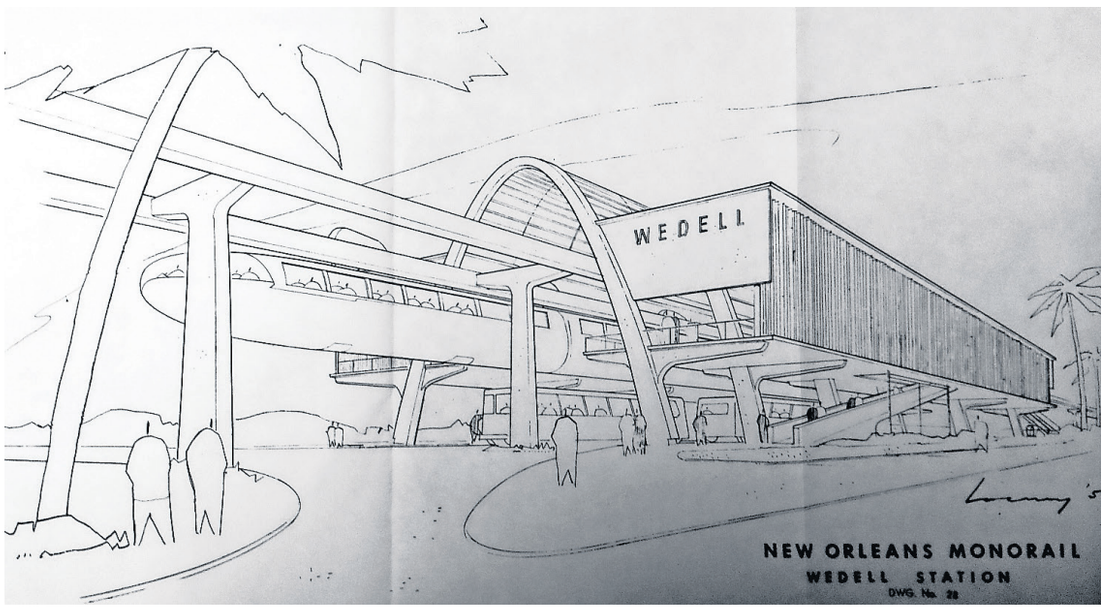
Imagine entering a spaceship-like terminal on Loyola Avenue and Poydras Street, boarding a futuristic bullet train suspended high above the street, and relaxing in sleek comfort as you speed to the airport in 14 minutes.

When might you foresee such a vision becoming a city project? The 2030s? 2050s? Never?

Try the 1950s.

New Orleans' monorail initiative, which garnered national attention in 1958, reflected a number of veins in mid-century municipal machinations, ranging from regional growth and modernization to old-fashioned rivalries and power politics.

New Orleans had since World War II embarked on strident transportation improvements, a priority for Mayor DeLesseps "Chep" Morrison as well as City



This sketch shows a proposed monorail station at the airport. *Illustration courtesy of Tulane University Special Collections*

Council President Victor "Vic" Schiro.

Both men of political ambition, Morrison cast his eyes toward the governor's mansion, while Schiro eyed the mayor's office. Everyone's eyes, meanwhile, were fixated on booming Houston, which had recently surpassed New Orleans' long-held rank as the largest city in the region and billed itself as the metropolis of the future.

In response, Morrison spoke boldly of making New Orleans the "Gateway to the Americas." He also spearheaded a new Civic Center on Loyola Avenue, oversaw the construction of the city's first Mississippi River bridge and expressway, streamlined key arteries and unified disparate train routes into the new Union Passenger Terminal.

But regional traffic circulation remained problematic. The national interstate highway system was in its infancy, and enough suburbanization had occurred by the mid-1950s to clog traffic on Airline Highway, River Road and Metairie Road.

One way to abet both downtown renewal and regional transit was to build a light rail system connecting the city and airport — and why not make it dazzling? This was, after all, the Space Age, and what better way to beat Houston at its own game than to entertain the plan of a Houston-based firm to install a first-in-the-nation monorail right here in New Orleans.

Named Monorail Inc., the company requested a 75-year franchise to build a raised track from New Orleans to Kenner, on which it would run high-speed trains funded by $16.5 million of private capital. Revenue would be earned via the 75-cent fare to the airport, $1 round trip and 50 cents for shorter legs.

To some, it sounded too good to be true.

To others, it sounded too good to pass up. Monorail Inc. hired a local frontman named Thomas J. Lupo to persuade city leaders of the latter.

Lupo, who had longtime connections in city government, found a champion in Schiro, who availed to Lupo the resources of his office.

Councilman James "Jimmy" Fitzmorris, who also had mayoral aspirations, viewed the monorail askance on practical grounds, all the more because his chief rival Schiro had endorsed it.

When Morrison threw his support behind the monorail, Fitzmorris hardened his opposition.

By early 1958, the word "monorail" was on everyone's lips. New Orleans would be first among cities again, the envy of the nation. Take that, Houston!

But the monorail also raised the eyebrows of professional planners. The Bureau of Government Research questioned the project's feasibility, and the City Planning Commission flat-out opposed it, citing its experimental nature and lack of preliminary research.

Yet the City Council voted unanimously in April 1958 to grant Monorail Inc. its conditional franchise. In deference to their colleagues' concerns, however, the legislators attached a number of no-nonsense amendments to the motion, chief among them the need for a feasibility study done by an independent expert.

Up for the challenge, Monorail Inc. hired rail transit expert Col. Sidney Bingham, a former New York City subway chief and the man who figured out how to get 3,000 locomotives and 50,000 loaded freight cars into Normandy in the wake of the D-Day invasions. Bingham investigated the technical issues, and in January 1959 submitted his "Report on the Feasibility of a Monorail System for the New Orleans Metropolitan Area."

It detailed three proposed routes, all with termini downtown and at the airport but with spur lines as far out as River Ridge, Gentilly and the Lower Ninth Ward. Routes included Veterans Boulevard and the lower Canal Street shopping district, Orleans Avenue through the Fifth Ward, even the French Quarter riverfront. Each would be lined with gigantic concrete pillars upholding a single track 40 feet above grade, from which would hang an "asymmetrically suspended type monorail" rolling on rubber wheels and powered by diesel engines.

More than 50,000 people per day would use four trains from predawn to midnight, Bingham estimated, bringing in more than $3.7 million annually. Numerous stops suggested the vision had grown beyond that of a mere airport connection to become a true metropolitan light-rail transit system.

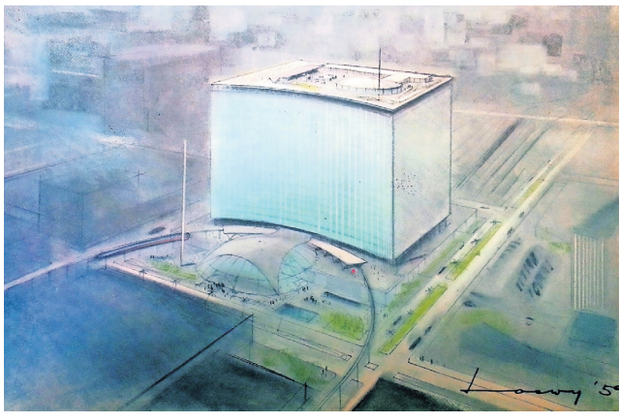
Bingham declared the project feasible and finished off his report with futuristic graphics inspired by the heady days of the Space Race.

But to hear doubters tell it, the whole notion might well have been phoned in from outer space.

Led by Fitzmorris, council members questioned the routes and predicted vociferous public dissent. Engineers challenged the design, and planners recoiled at the inter-jurisdictional complexity. The whole concept seemed a bit too ahead of its time — to which supporters responded, well, that was the point.

The monorail's Achilles' Heel was its business plan. "Simple arithmetic" exposed the flaw, explained one Times-Picayune editorialist. "If one million Moisant Airport passengers ... take one express trip each (year), the gross revenue ... will amount to only $750,000, which will be less than the interest on (the) $16.5 million." Local ridership would hardly make up the difference. "Clearly, the promoters of the venture propose to use New Orleans as a showcase," wrote the editorialist, "from which to display their product...to sell it to other communities." If Monorail Inc. went bankrupt, what then?

Many saw an imbroglio in the making, and Morrison seemed to admit as much when he diffidently sought public financing for the project, ratcheting up the risk to be borne by tax payers.



A proposed monorail terminal would be located at Loyola Avenue and Poydras Street. *Illustration courtesy of the Tulane University Special Collections.*

Nearly every city department hardened its opposition, and when the City Planning Commission cast a vote of no confidence, the monorail lost momentum.

On Aug. 20, 1959, the Council voted 4-to-3 to terminate the project. Fitzmorris performed the coup de grâce, writing with relish "that the aerial rail transportation system...is infeasible and contrary to the public interest."

After the monorail derailed, Morrison saw his local political interests wane in favor of national service. He went on to become a globe-trotting diplomat until his death in a 1964 plane crash. Fitzmorris, meanwhile, would be frustrated in multiple runs for executive office, and ended up serving twice as lieutenant governor.

Schiro succeeded in his quest to be mayor, and although he rode no monorail to his inauguration, he did install an old colleague as chair of the newly formed Regional Planning Commission: the same Thomas J. Lupo who lobbied for the monorail.

Paging through the 1959 study today, one feels a tinge of melancholy, in part for the dazzling dreams dashed, but more so because we now know the rest of the story.

The completion of the interstate system, coupled with massive suburbanization and automobile dependency, likely would have deprived the monorail of its ridership, while its bulky infrastructure might have blighted boulevards and exacerbated divestment. Houston, we now know, would pull far ahead of New Orleans, whose troubles would only multiply.

Some might surmise that the monorail was a speculative pipe dream by an out-of-state firm seeking to exploit New Orleans' supposedly pliable government and use the city as a testbed for an unproven technology. But others might offer a more generous assessment: that an initially impractical idea had morphed into a bold vision for a metro-wide light-rail system, which may have staved off later divestment and made New Orleans more the modern metropolis Morrison and Schiro had anticipated.

"Sooner or later," cautioned Morrison in his final arguments to keep the monorail alive, "we are going to have to provide the people of this city with some additional form of transportation. The time is now."

Richard Campanella, a geographer with the Tulane School of Architecture, is the author of "Bourbon Street: A History," "Bienville's Dilemma," "Geographies of New Orleans" and other books.