



# RICHARD CAMPANELLA PLEASURE ATLAS

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+ GEOGRAPHY, HISTORY, PLANNING

As New Orleans' post-Hurricane Katrina recovery of the late 2000s morphed into a rather unexpected economic and cultural renaissance in the 2010s, new faces appeared in new areas, new conversations circulated, and new pleasure spaces began to open. The changes reflect a mounting trend affecting the downtowns of most major American cities, and New Orleans, for all its alleged distinction, is no exception. It is the spatial diffusion of gentrification, and it is drafting the latest cartography in this city's ample atlas of pleasure.

Few American cities make space for pleasure like New Orleans. In some cases the space-making is a byproduct of the architectural past: witness the use of iron-lace balconies, porches, and stoops for relaxing and interacting between private and public space, or the lovely neighborhood squares and neutral grounds (medians) that draw bench-sitters and domino-players. In other cases, spaces are professionally planned for pleasure, as in the case of the Olmsted-designed Audubon Park, the recently beautified City Park, and in the facilities of the New Orleans Recreational Department, which once ranked top in the nation.

More famously, New Orleans' pleasure spaces are products of an ongoing negotiation between an ordinance-wielding municipality acting on behalf of civic order and a particularly revelrous citizenry with a penchant for public festivity. Any given Mardi Gras parade during 'Carnival season,' or festival during 'festival season,' or second line during 'second-lining season' (New Orleans has a distinct sense of time as well as place) abounds with examples of these sorts of spatial pleasures and tensions. The pleasure map—and the calendar—seem to get more and more crowded with each passing year; nowadays, few are the weekends without special events, and many are the weekends



with more than one. But the underlying phenomenon is as old as the city.

New Orleans did not originally find space for pleasure; rather, pleasure found New Orleans. Port cities historically drew a steady stream of transients who, liberated by their anonymity and removed from the responsibilities of home, craved opportunities for gratification in distant entrepôts, to which local entrepreneurs eagerly responded with everything from bars to ballrooms to brothels. Add to this the cultural influences of the so-called Global South, the theory goes, and what resulted in lower Louisiana was a society more inclined to tolerate, and often incorporate, behavior condemned elsewhere. New Orleans' indulgences—'continental Sabbaths,' inebriety, gastronomy, sexuality, miscegeny, musicality—did not form independently or internally, but rather orbited as a social characteristic throughout the global littoral of the 18th and 19th centuries. What distinguished it was its geographical positioning at the northernmost apogee of the South Atlantic-Caribbean subsystem and, after the Louisiana Purchase in 1803, within the expanding borders of the United States – the *southern* United States, a region of traditionalism against which New Orleans' culture of tolerance stood out in stark contrast and set it up for hyperbole and stigma.

New Orleans thus earned an unenviable reputation for debauchery in the minds of other Americans, and

written evidence of it can be found ad nauseam in any number of flowery, judgmental 19th-century travelogues and editorials. Not entirely deserved, nor erroneous, nor burdensome, the stigma nonetheless worked against the city's efforts to convince the rest of the nation that it was a decent place to live and a safe place to invest – that it was, in essence, just another good old American city.

Chief among the evidence to the contrary were antebellum pleasure spaces such as the infamous Gallatin Street and Sanctity Row near the French Market ("filled with low groggeries, the resort of the worst and most abandoned of both sexes"), and 'The Swamp' and flatboat wharf on the sketchy fringes of uptown ("huckster shops, pigpens [and] gambling-shops"<sup>2</sup>). French social geographer Elisée Réclus estimated "more than twenty-five hundred taverns" in New Orleans during his 1853 visit, and found them "always filled with drinkers...especially during election time."<sup>3</sup>

In postbellum times, New Orleans' brand of sensuality found an address on streets such as Basin and Franklin, which one source described as "slums and dives [with] the most loathsome, filthy, hotbeds of vice and debauchery ever permitted to befall...any city," hosting "orgies...throughout the livelong night."<sup>4</sup> By 1897, pleasure had so broadly diffused that the city adopted a spatial solution to the sex trade as well as concert saloons (rollicking venues for music, dance, and drink) by legally limiting them to around the Basin and Franklin area. There, for the next 20 years, the nation's only legal red-light district, dubbed Storyville in sardonic honor of the alderman Sidney Story who came up with the idea, cinched New Orleans' reputation for decadence.

By the 1920s, however, as leisure tourism grew into an important economic sector, that nasty old reputation, viewed through the sepia lens of romanticism and nostalgia, started to look less red and more green. What drew social condemnation in the 1800s now, in the 1900s, converted into valuable fiscal currency. The myth of carefree living, for example, became marketable as “The City That Care Forgot.” Mardi Gras revelry became sellable as “America’s Winter Wonderland.” Musicality became profitable as “the birthplace of jazz,” and local cooking customs found their way into pricey restaurants and became entertainment. Entrepreneurs in what we now call the hospitality industry joined forces with history lovers and municipal authorities to make space for this selectively remembered past. What resulted was a planned, zoned, and officially administered landscape of pleasure, with the architecturally protected French Quarter (Vieux Carre) and bawdy Bourbon Street gaining nationwide notoriety from the 1920s to 1940s. Even as the city as a whole benefitted from the economics behind the pleasure, many citizens were incensed by the vulgarity. “Look what they’ve done to one of the Vieux Carre’s quiet thoroughfares!” beseeched a 1948 article titled “What’s Happened to Bourbon Street?” “Bourbon’s a bedlam...It’s dirty, noisy and lusty...Every day and night there’s a Mardi Gras going on somewhere along Bourbon street...If New Orleans is [the] ‘city care forgot,’ then this is [the] street where much forgetting took place!”<sup>5</sup>

By the 1970s to 2000s, pleasure spaces had expanded—courtesy historic renovation and gentrification, major events such as the 1984 Louisiana World Exposition, and the ever-growing tourism industry—such that by the new millennium, significant portions of the downtown cityscape were devoted to some form or another of the business of pleasure. In 2004, for the first time, visitation to New Orleans topped 10 million people, most of whom came seeking indulgence, even those ostensibly on business.

The flood following Hurricane Katrina in 2005 brought into relief just how intrinsic all this historical and contemporary pleasure mythology had become to the ethos of the city.<sup>6</sup> Nearly every mournful homage paid to the wrecked metropolis in the weeks after the deluge made some sort of reference to the city’s *joie de vivre* (that French loanword making it all the more felicitous), and many subsequent arguments for rebuilding the city rested upon it (read Tom Piazza’s *Why New Orleans Matters*). So fundamental had pleasure become to the city’s culture and economy that, even as floodwaters remained in some neighborhoods, Mayor C. Ray Nagin proposed making more space for pleasure by inviting Vegas-style casinos into the urban core – on the highest and least-damaged terrain, no less. That idea got shot down, but the thinking behind it—of leveraging New Orleans’ legacy of civic pleasure into cultural resilience and commercial opportunity—informed and illustrated the recovery. Find any post-Katrina planning document or



Early-Mid 1800s



Late 1800s-Early 1900s



1900s-2000s



1990s-2010s

website of 2005–2006 vintage and you'll see profuse stock imagery of parading, drinking, eating, music-making, and dancing.

The recovery got off to a rough start, but eventually dollars started to arrive, opportunities started to open, and things began to change. A few thousand young planners, architects, urbanists, environmentalists, and social workers took leave from their graduate studies and nascent careers and headed south to be a part of something big, something important. Many took positions in the recovery efforts, or an alphabet soup of new nonprofits; some parlayed their experiences into Master's theses or PhD dissertations. This cohort largely moved on around 2008–2009, as recovery monies petered out and “new” became “new normal.”<sup>7</sup>

By that time, however, a second wave began arriving. Enticed by the relatively robust regional economy compared to the rest of the recession-reeling nation, these newcomers were greater in number than the first wave, more specially skilled, and serious about planting roots here. They included a fair number of artists, musicians, chefs, and creative types who had turned their backs on homogenized mainstream America and resettled, like expatriates, in what they perceived to be an undiscovered bohemia somewhere south of the South and north of the Caribbean. Playing a key role in that perception was the city's legacy of exoticism and pleasure – the common denominator unifying everything from festivals, Carnival, and second-lines to bars, restaurants, and music venues.

Upon settling into local society, this vivacious lot, enamored by the city's mystique and self-selected for traits of Epicureanism and hedonism, returned the favor by, rather inevitably, creating their own pleasure spaces. What has resulted in the past few years is an ever-expanding landscape of hip live-music venues, trendy new eateries, coffee shops and bars, pop-ups, guerrilla performance venues, art spaces, gourmet food trucks, and street festivals (sanctioned or otherwise) appearing in neighborhoods that previously were the hard-scrapple domain of working-class families with neither the disposable income, nor the time, nor the cultural compatibility for such niceties. The most notable example, Bywater, has been described as “the Williamsburg of the South,” and its adjacent artery of St. Claude has been called “the hippest avenue in America, according to *The New York Times*...hipsters with their tattoos and skinny jeans are everywhere...”<sup>8</sup> Restaurants with names like Sui Generis and bars such as Siberia have imported foodie and indie-music influences, while “a group of bohemian artists [created] ‘The Music Box: A Shantytown Sound Laboratory’” and kindred spirits have sprinkled the lower faubourgs with stuff like “The Tree House,” a “healing center,” yoga studios galore, “The Art House,” and “a proposed Marigny ball pit house” derided as “a hipster Romper Room.”<sup>9</sup>

Such are the newest features on New Orleans' 21st-century pleasure map. To be sure, few derive from local culture and many natives scorn them as the grating intrusions of outspoken outsiders from the rest of America. But then again, that's the sort of thing locals said about incoming Americans 200 years ago, after the Louisiana Purchase. That's the sort of thing disapproving travelogues said about Gallatin Street, Sanctity Row, and the flatboat wharf 150 years ago. And that's what many New Orleanians said about Basin Street, Storyville, and Bourbon Street in the past 100 years. What we have today is in fact the latest cartography in New Orleans' 300-year-old atlas of pleasure.

<sup>1</sup> Judith Kelleher Schafer, *Brothels, Depravity, and Abandoned Women: Illegal Sex in Antebellum New Orleans* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2009), 6.

<sup>2</sup> Journal of Welcome A. Greene, reproduced in “Being the Journal of a Quaker Merchant Who Visited N.O. in 1823,” *Times-Picayune* [October 16, 1921], 6; James Stuart, *Three Years in North America*, Vol. II (1833), 232.

<sup>3</sup> Elisé Réclus, *A Voyage to New Orleans*, eds. John Clark & Camille Martin [Thetford, Vermont, 2004 translation of 1855 original], 56–57.

<sup>4</sup> “Some Sights in New Orleans the Harpers Didn't See,” *The Mascot* [January 22, 1887], 2.

<sup>5</sup> Ray Samuel, “What's Happened to Bourbon Street?,” *Times-Picayune Magazine* [November 28, 1948], 8–11.

<sup>6</sup> I use ‘myth’ here not to mean a falsehood, but rather a construct or perception that becomes ‘real’ over time through professional marketing, endless repetition, and sheer appeal.

<sup>7</sup> I borrow here from my earlier article “Gentrification and Its Discontents: Notes from New Orleans,” *New Geography* [March 1, 2013], <http://www.newgeography.com/content/003526-gentrification-and-its-discontents-notes-new-orleans>.

<sup>8</sup> Susan Olasky, “New Orleans' New Identity, Nine Years After Katrina,” *World* [August 29, 2014], <http://www.worldmag.com/2014/08/new-orleans-new-identity-nine-years-after-katrina>.

<sup>9</sup> Doug MacCash, “A Bywater Lot Becomes ‘The Music Box,’ A Bohemian Musical Playground,” *nola.com/The Times-Picayune* [October 20, 2011], [http://www.nola.com/arts/index.ssf/2011/10/a\\_piety\\_street\\_lot\\_becomes\\_the.html](http://www.nola.com/arts/index.ssf/2011/10/a_piety_street_lot_becomes_the.html); Kevin Allman, “More on the Marigny Ball Pit House,” *Gambit* [April 25, 2012], <http://www.bestofneworleans.com/blogofneworleans/archives/2012/04/25/more-on-the-marigny-ball-pit-house>.