

# Three Exhibition Halls, Three Fates

*The Challenge of  
Preserving and  
Adaptively Reusing  
Large Display Spaces*

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**B**USINESS TOURISM in New Orleans predates leisure tourism. Northern businessmen in antebellum times arrived by the thousands during the city's autumn-through-spring "commercial season," and exchange hotels such as the St. Charles and the St. Louis, which were specially designed for extended-stay guests, may be considered the forerunners of modern convention hotels. For industries holding annual conferences and trade shows, need also arose for meeting and exhibition space, and investors and architects rose to the challenge of creating them. Three particular New Orleans exhibition halls, spanning from the 1870s to the 1990s, illustrate the differing purposes and designs of such structures, and sadly, the difficulties of adaptively reusing and preserving such large edifices when circumstances changed.

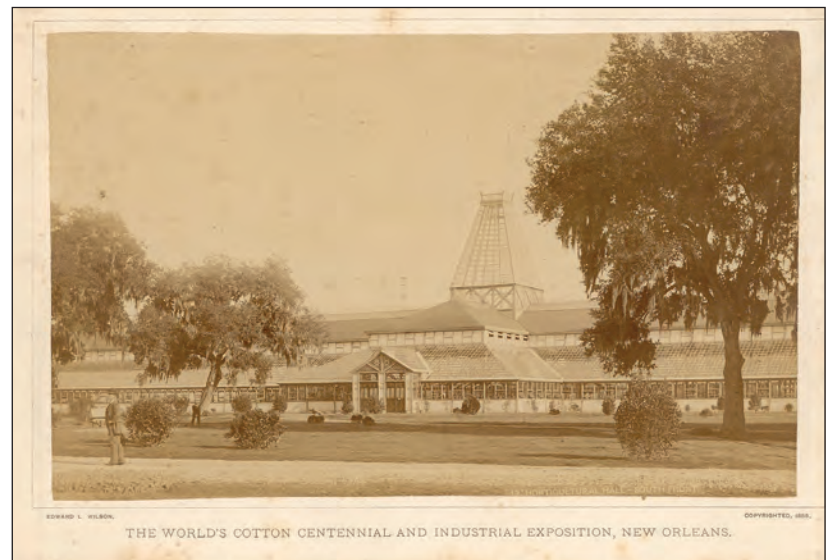
In an effort to revive industry after the Civil War, New Orleans business leaders in the late 1860s aimed to attract commerce by creating a space to convene and display wares. They conceived a vast hall where meeting may be held and, as a Picayune reporter explained, "objects of interest to the planter, the mechanic, the merchant, or the mere amateur of inventions" might be displayed "all the year round... under one roof." It would be called Exposition Hall, and it would be unlike anything New Orleanians had seen.

Designed by Albert Deitel and built by William Ames in 1870-1871, Exposition Hall measured 80 feet wide and spanned the entire 340 feet from St. Charles to Carondelet streets between Girod and Julia. Outside it exhibited "a simple but elegant adaptation of renaissance style of architecture;" inside, it was perfectly spectacular. A visitor entering from St. Charles would encounter two grand staircases leading up to vestibule separated by a glass partition. On the other side was the main Concert Hall, which at 160 feet deep and 35 feet high ranked as "the largest hall in the city;" some said the nation. On the Carondelet side was the Fine Arts Hall, 170 feet by 20 feet, and to the sides were four "refreshment rooms" (restrooms), four cloak rooms, a dining hall, and a library. Actual exhibitions, which usually entailed heavy objects, took place on the ground floor with the aid of a railway system. Huge windows allowed air and light to circulate throughout the cavernous interiors.

ABOVE: Horticulture hall. Photographs Collection, Earl K. Long Library, University of New Orleans  
RIGHT: Horticulture Hall at World's Cotton Centennial and Industrial Exposition Photographs, Mss. 0348, Louisiana and Lower Mississippi Valley Collections, LSU Libraries, Baton Rouge, La.

Part conference center, part concert venue, part ball room, Exposition Hall was a success, having landed the 1872 Grand Industrial Exposition and many other major clients. Its size and location also attracted a bidder—the Washington Artillery, the famed local battalion, which found itself in need of a headquarters and arsenal. Exposition Hall had all the right attributes, and in 1878 the organization purchased it and renamed it "Washington Artillery Hall" upstairs and "Washington Artillery Armory" downstairs. Locals also called it the "St. Charles Armory."

Under the management of the Washington Artillery, the building had two distinct programs. Upstairs continued to be used for elegant society balls, including for Rex and other carnival organizations, and for reunions, expositions, political conventions, conferences, fraternal get-togethers, and any other clubby merriment willing to pay the rent. Downstairs, however, was reserved for the business of war. There the battalion stocked rifles, cannon, uniforms, ammunition, and materiel of all sorts; it even had a live shooting range — in the heart of downtown New Orleans, in this era of rudimentary safety codes and no zoning.





ABOVE: The interior of Exposition Hall, later known as Washington Artillery Armory. Courtesy The Charles L. Franck Studio Collection at The Historic New Orleans Collection, Acc. No. 1979.325.409. RIGHT: The building's exterior. It was located at 740 St. Charles Ave. Courtesy The Charles L. Franck Studio Collection at The Historic New Orleans Collection, Acc. No. 1979.325.195.



What pushed the arsenal out of downtown was the congestion of a modern central business district. In 1922, the Washington Artillery moved its equipment to Jackson Barracks at the lower city limits, and reserved the St. Charles building for social uses. After World War II, it moved all of its functions to Jackson Barracks and sold the landmark. Drafty, capacious, costly to maintain, difficult to adapt, and without the advocacy of the nascent preservationist community, the eighty-year-old hall entered that tenuous phase when the land is worth more than the building. A Buick dealership was its last tenant, and in 1952 the former Exposition Hall was demolished. Today a stout Modernist office building now occupies the site.

Five miles upriver, a comparable hall built in a very different design arose in what is now Audubon Zoo. It was called Horticultural Hall, and it was one of the most notable buildings in uptown New Orleans.

Much like Exposition Hall, Horticultural Hall came about as an attempt by commerce interests — in this case the National Cotton Planters' Association — to put to rest rumors of lingering postbellum turmoil by shining light on the city's incipient modernization. The association's idea, approved by Congress in 1883, was to stage a World's Industrial and Cotton Centennial Exposition at Upper City Park, today's Audubon Park. Construction delays, sparse funds, erratic participation, and a "sadly unfinished" opening day got the event off to a rocky start in 1884, and matters got only worse during the fair's main run in 1885. But the fair had its share of wonders, and Horticultural Hall topped the list.

Described by one visitor's guide as "the crowning glory of the Exposition," Horticultural Hall was not the largest nor most elaborate structure at the fair; the Main Building measured ten times its size. Nor did it hold the most extravagant attractions. But it was likely the most beautiful, a gigantic glass conservatory reminiscent of the Crystal Palace built for London's Great Exhibition of 1851. Over 600 feet long, 120 feet wide and 46 feet high with a 105-foot tower, the wood-timbered greenhouse-like hall housed displays of plants from throughout the Western Hemisphere, and with newfangled electrical lights above, live oaks all around, and a grand illuminated fountain in the center, it cut a splendid sight, particularly at night. Inside, everything from tropical ferns to Sonoran cacti to "bananas, coconuts, palms, coffee trees, pineapple and cotton plants, ginger plants, cinnamon and clove trees, vanilla plants [as well as] apples, oranges and other fruits" were displayed. Horticulturalists from all over the world met in the hall and inspected each other's handiwork for awards for "best variety," "handsomest plate," and "best collection," a sort of scientific conference and competition amid the festivities.

Because of its beautiful design and price tag of \$100,000, Horticultural Hall,

unlike the other fair buildings, was designed for long-term use. Organizers struck a deal with the City Council to donate the conservatory to the newly renamed Audubon Park after the exposition closed. For the next two decades, Horticultural Hall would continue to serve as an indoor botanical garden around which many of the park's new recreational features would cluster.

What doomed Horticultural Hall was three episodes of fierce wind: a storm in 1906, a tornado in 1909, and the Great Storm of 1915, which utterly destroyed it and buried its collections. Some members of the public advocated for its reconstruction, but the \$10,000 insurance claim was used instead to build a dedicated flight cage for birds. To that initial aviary would be added larger displays for birds and animals, and from them would grow today's lovely Audubon Zoological Gardens. The footprint of Horticultural Hall today lies between the Audubon Tea Room and the Sea Lion Exhibit. Nothing remains except for some underground foundations.

Fifty years after Horticultural Hall's demise, New Orleans once again found itself in need of display space. What resulted, the Rivergate Exhibition Hall, tells a story of mid-century optimism, progressive planning, and architectural daring. That it is now disappeared tells a very different story.

In the years after World War II, New Orleans ambitiously modernized its infrastructure, building new bridges, unifying rail lines, widening arteries and separating grade crossings, and constructing a bold new Civic Center. By the 1960s, in the midst of a petroleum boom, leaders sought to lure big industries, for conventions as well as for permanent offices, by putting New Orleans on the map as a "World Trade Center." The designation, among other things, entailed the building of a complex dedicated to international visitation, exhibition, and commerce.

So motivated, the City of New Orleans and the state-run Port of New Orleans eyed the most valuable land in town, six parallelogram-shaped blocks between lower Canal and Poydras, for an office skyscraper paired with an exhibition hall. Convoluted land titles led to an arrangement in which the Port would own the lion's share of the facility, and the city the remainder — but the Port alone would bear the cost of operation.

Starting in 1964, the area was cleared, pilings were driven, and workers erected the International Trade Mart, designed by Edward Durell Stone and one of New Orleans' first two truly modern skyscrapers. What arose subsequently across the street would stun the collective eye of the city: an enormous pavilion of sweeping freeform arches and vaulted ceilings, designed by the stellar local architectural firm of Nathaniel Curtis and Arthur Q. Davis and representing a rebirth of Expressionism within the context of Modernist architecture.

Officially known as the Port of New Orleans Rivergate Exhibition Hall, the space was designed for floor shows as well as Carnival events, such that trucks and floats could drive into the hall. Because of its affiliation with the International Trade Mart overlooking the Mississippi, the hall faced the not the city but the mart and the river. Built over a period of three years, the Rivergate and Trade Mart were known together as the International Center, and both got an elaborate dedication ceremony on April 30, 1968 themed to the city's 250th anniversary.

A steady stream of bookings got the Rivergate off to a good start; by one estimate reported by Wilbur Meneray, the hall generated \$170 million during its first five years. The next decade, however, would see the completion of the Louisiana Superdome (1975) and Louisiana World Exposition (1984), whose Great Hall would afterwards become a full-service conference center complete with exhibition floors, food facilities, and even a theater. Business tourism did well as a result, but the new venues outcompeted the Rivergate, and its bookings dropped.

The hall had other problems. From the perspective of pedestrians downtown, the Rivergate's towering block-long flanks and river-facing orientation made it seem inaccessible and overwhelming, as if reminding locals they had no business there. Worse, some architects in this era were casting their eyes away from Modernism and toward Postmodernism, while preservationists never warmed to Modernism in the first place and remained enamored with historicity. As the Rivergate lost fans, it also lost clients; revenues declined, and, stuck as it was with cost of operations, the Port looked to get out of the exhibition business. Economically, the city in the 1980s suffered the worst oil bust in memory, costing the state vital revenue and wiping out petroleum jobs on Poydras Street. Leaders looked to new ways to fill the gap, and legalized gambling rose to the top of the list. Promoters sought not the tacky barges moored along the riverfronts of second-tier cities, but rather a big Vegas-style land-based casino in the heart of downtown.

What ensued in the early 1990s was a complex caper involving chicanery on the part of promoters and politicians and a gross overestimate of just how successful a downtown casino might be. What got sacrificed was the Rivergate Exhibition Hall, whose prime location and ample footprint had the casino people salivating. The architecture community spoke passionately of the building's remarkable design and argued for adaptive reuse, but they failed to inspire many rank-and-file preservationists, not to mention government and business interests. Sadly, the battle to save the Rivergate marked the last chapter in the six-decade career of the



A view of downtown New Orleans' riverfront in 1970 with Rivergate visible in front of the World Trade Center building. Courtesy Entergy

father of architectural history and preservation in New Orleans, Samuel Wilson, Jr., who died shortly before testifying to the City Council to save it.

In January 1995, demolition began on the barely 27-year-old building to make way for Harrah's new casino. By April, the Rivergate joined Exposition and Horticultural in the halls of architectural memory.

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