

Times-Picayune Review of *Time and Place in New Orleans; Past Geographies in the Present Day*, by Richard Campanella, 2002

Time and Place in New Orleans;
Past Geographies in the Present Day,

By Susan Larson; Book editor

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Geography is often destiny. What binds us to a place more than familiar streets, beloved landscapes, a sense of having our feet firmly planted on home ground? In his new book, "Time and Place in New Orleans: Past Geographies in the Present Day," **Richard Campanella** explores the historical and contemporary geography of the Crescent City. Whether you're a New Orleans native or a recent immigrant, in this fascinating book you will learn a little bit more about the place you call home.

Campanella, assistant director of environmental analysis at the Center for Bioenvironmental Research at Tulane and Xavier Universities, is also the co-author, with his wife Marina, of "New Orleans Then and Now," a photographic comparative history of city sites published in 1999. In this new book, he continues the exploration begun then.

Campanella puts his work into three sections -- situation, topography and culture. In the section devoted to situation, we learn about the founding of New Orleans and the various site choices for the principal city of French Louisiana -- the French Quarter, Bayou Manchac, Natchez, English Turn, the lakeshore and other sites, the final choice of course being the Quarter, with its strategic position near the mouth of the Mississippi.

In the section devoted to topography, Campanella chronicles the changes in the land that is New Orleans, brought about by various strategies for preventing flooding, improving drainage, creating new land, and improving navigation.

Campanella considers the importance of the defining ridges of the city's topography -- the Metairie/Gentilly Ridge, the Bayou Road/Esplanade Ridge, the Carrollton Spur, and the natural levees of the Mississippi River -- in the development of the city, covering patterns of settlement and correlations between elevation and prosperity, patterns somewhat skewed by the river's natural levees. Covering the city's legendary drainage problems, Campanella reminds us of the yellow fever epidemic, and asserts here that bad drainage was actually not the reason for our above-ground cemeteries; that style, he says, adhered to early Spanish tradition.

Still, New Orleans has "the world's toughest drainage problem," according to Campanella. Remember when Monkey Hill was the city's highest point? Now it's the hill in the Couturie Arboretum in City Park. The lowest points are what he calls Lakefront East and Lakefront West, and the Little Woods areas.

In the culture section, the longest and for most readers probably the most interesting part of the book, Campanella describes how the city evolved, studying its radiating street pattern, the arcs of developed areas that accommodate the curves in the Mississippi River, and Canal Street's changing role as a defining thoroughway. Campanella also devotes a considerable amount of attention to places in the city bound together by a common purpose, "districts" such as the old cotton and sugar industry districts and the newspaper row on Camp Street, the warehouse district, the museum district centered at Camp and Howard streets, the shipping district, the performing arts district (originally centered in the area of Canal and Basin streets), the medical district, the Magazine Street shopping district and the "skyscraper district" along Poydras Street.

The book concludes with photographic spreads on landmarks associated with various areas of the city such as the French Quarter, the CBD, the Faubourg Tremé, New Marigny/St. Roch, Faubourg Marigny, Bywater and Holy Cross, the Lower Garden District, Irish Channel, Garden District and Magazine Street corridors, Uptown, Carrollton, Mid-City and Bayou St. John, Central City, the 6th Ward, Freret and Tulane avenues, and the lakefront and Algiers. No matter where you live in the city, you'll find a representation of some place you pass by every day. That's how comprehensive Campanella's efforts are.

Campanella has a gift for making a wealth of technical information both lively and accessible. And while the book obviously will be useful for urban planners, engineers and architects, the average citizen will come away informed and intrigued by this unusual look at the city. (Don't be put off by esoteric items in the introduction -- its chart indicating that New Orleans ranks 17th in the nation in terms of doctorates awarded in geography, and its list of dissertations on New Orleans geography. By the end of the book the reader is firmly convinced of the importance of this kind of study.) And the extensive bibliography and footnotes will guide readers to additional sources.

The book is lavishly illustrated with 120 maps, satellite images, charts and graphs, and more than 356 vintage and contemporary photos in color and black and white. Browsing through the book is as much a pleasure as reading it, but the layout is often cluttered and the photos are of wildly varying quality. Picture captions are detailed and informative. Unfortunately, the tiny type size may lead to eyestrain.

That aside, "Time and Place in New Orleans" offers a fresh way of looking at the city around us. As Campanella writes, "New Orleans as the distinct cultural and historical phenomenon we recognize today probably could not have happened just anywhere; it might only have happened upon a swath of riverside land somewhere along the lower Mississippi and maybe only at the great crescent selected by Bienville in the early eighteenth century. To those who say, 'This is no place for a major city, New Orleans should have been sited elsewhere,' one may respond, 'But then it wouldn't have become New Orleans.' Perhaps it is this notion that inspires many observers to evoke the enigmatic phrase a 'sense of place' in trying to articulate exactly what makes this city so extraordinary, and what gives even the most oblivious newcomer a tingle and a thrill upon beholding the spectacular breadth of Canal Street, or sighting the spires and cupolas above Jackson Square, or seeing the great freighters of the Mississippi bound for the sea."

Oblivious newcomer or jaded old-timer, the reader should feel that tingle and thrill. In this useful and important book, Campanella makes us understand the complexities that underlie our love of this urban landscape and the people who inhabit it.

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