

Search for New Orleans' historic population centers

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Doug MacCash / The Times-Picayune
Richard Campanella at the pre-flood population centroid.

Geographer Richard Campanella leads a tour of New Orleans' shifting population centers through time

I love the word centroid — it sounds so “Star Trek.” I’d never encountered the term until August when I read a [guest op-ed column in the Times-Picayune written by Richard Campanella](#), an assistant research professor at Tulane University. In it, the respected geographer explained that a population centroid is “the theoretical center of balance around which residents are evenly distributed.”

He pointed out that after Katrina the New Orleans approximate population centroid slid about six blocks southwest, a reversal of the city's general northeastern growth in the past 150 years. Why? Because much of eastern New Orleans, the Lower 9th Ward, Gentilly and Lakeview were devastated by the 2005 flood and have not completely bounced back.

What, I wondered, do New Orleans' historic population centroids look like? I envisioned a series of telling “daVinci Code”-style symbols that could be used to uncover some hidden wisdom: long-lost Atlantean statues, a striped column like the one at the North Pole, that sort of thing.

From the beginning, Campanella warned me that population centroids are simply geographical/social abstractions that don't necessarily look like anything special. In his words: “Paradoxically they represent everyone en masse and no one in particular.”

Nonetheless, he agreed to be my guide through centroid after centroid after centroid (imagine a time-travel echo) dating back almost to Bienville. Since Campanella and I are bicycle riders, we decided to trace the development of the city in peddle revolutions. Here's what we found.

At our almost-too-good-to-be-true first stop, the 1700s centroid at the corner of Royal and St. Peter streets in the French Quarter, a Dixieland band played jauntily, the colonial architecture rose in pastel elegance around us, and tourists passed by with a baby carriage. Picturesquely predictable.

The 1850s centroid is a stony mercantile chasm on Carondelet and Common streets in the Central Business District, dominated by a sign that reads — with some irony considering recent economic conditions — “The Security Center.”

The 1910 centroid is at the roaring intersection of Tulane and South Claiborne avenues — call it the ambulance siren centroid, or the grimy carbon footprint centroid.

At the 1930-40 centroid, where North Galvez and Iberville streets intersect, someone had set up a small table and chairs on the neutral ground, in the shade, maybe to play checkers. I suspect that whoever sits there might remember the era. There’s an empty lot nearby.

Just a block before, we had bicycled through the 1960 centroid at Canal and Galvez streets, but I don’t remember stopping to talk about it; Campanella and I may have been lost in conversation and just forgot. People say the 1960s were like that.

Near the 2000 centroid at Iberville and North Dorgenois streets, where the population center edged nearest Lake Pontchartrain, we spotted a totally head-turning hotel decorated with yellow concrete lions and a row of outdoor terrariums brimming with painted foliage. And another empty lot.

The last centroid before the flood, determined by the number of households receiving mail in pre-Katrina 2005, is a lovely residential intersection at North Miro and Kerlerec streets. It’s the easternmost centroid, marked with an unintentionally existential “Dead End” sign.

Then came the six-block post-Katrina southwestern backtrack to the 2009 centroid at North Miro and Dumaine streets. The current centroid is a stark confrontation between old and new (or old and older). The intersection is surrounded by a typical post-Civil War shotgun and cottage neighborhood, but nearby stands the severe, space-age 1954 Phillis Wheatley School that’s been placed on the World Monument Fund’s “watch list” of at-risk cultural heritage sites.

Truth is, there were plenty of sights at the various centroids just begging to become metaphors. But in the end, the prevailing symbol at the Crescent City’s many historic population centers wasn’t something we found. It was something that happened, something that happened again and again.

From time to time through the afternoon we’d been chased under overhangs by rain. Far from complaining, Campanella took the weather in stride. During one downpour, he commented on how rich the scent of wet earth was that day.

It may have been a bit less dramatic than the mythical Atlantean statues and North Pole marker I’d hope for, but symbolically speaking, it was hard to beat the rain.

After all, our route was largely guided by the Crescent City's sibling rivalry with the surrounding water. As Campanella explained it, the first centroids were on the high ground near the river where the soggy city was founded. With drainage and flood control, the centroids began their fateful crawl toward the lake and the rising sun. After the cataclysmic levee failures, the population centroid retreated a few blocks back.

During our centroid tour, Campanella and I got wet, we dried off, we got wet, we dried off. Symbolically speaking, in New Orleans that's just the way we roll.

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captainswallow February 24, 2010 at 8:30AM

Interesting bit on the city's social/neighborhood history - thanks!

satchmo55 February 24, 2010 at 9:12AM

Campanella is a genius.

misplacedyat February 24, 2010 at 7:58PM

What a fascinating way to look at the city's history! Thanks for the insights. A link to this article has been submitted to Good News Now (<http://GoodNewsNow.com/>).

5inchheels March 24, 2010 at 8:25AM

Doug, I just saw this, a month late. Fascinating. Thanks to you and Dr Campanella. Hope he writes a book.