New Orleans' 73 Official Neighborhoods Were Remapped 50 Years Ago

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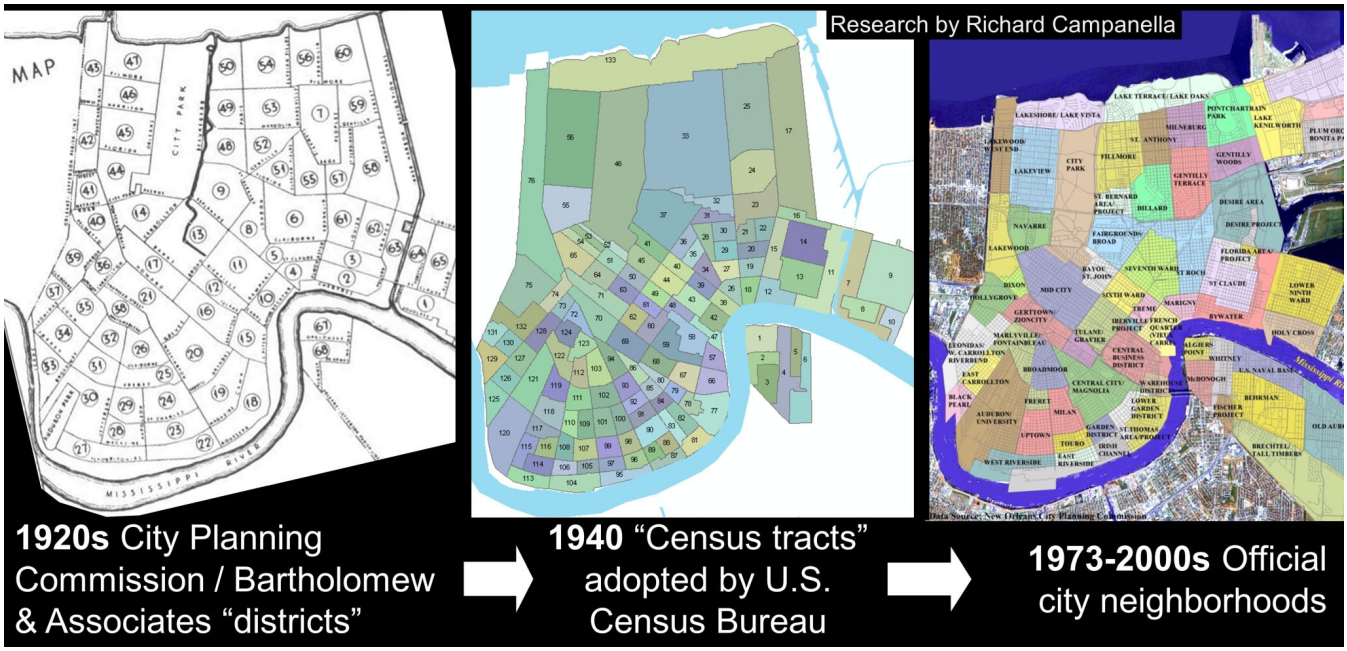

You've seen the map many times: that colorful jigsaw puzzle of nestled polygons, all neatly delineated and clearly labelled. They're New Orleans's 73 "official" neighborhoods, and while their borders and names are often questioned, the map has nevertheless become influential since its inception fifty years ago.

To understand why, consider the power of maps. For one, maps have an uncanny way of rendering their own reality. Even if the information posted is arguable, cartography has a way of imbuing it with gravitas, making it seem "real." Secondly, if you're plotting numerical data, you must draw boundaries, even if they're arbitrary. For example, if you wish to compute the total population or median income of "the South," you must first delineate what is and is not Southern—something very few people would agree on. Just like neighborhoods.

Finally, the task of plotting data demands that, once you've drawn your boundaries and crunched your numbers, now you've got to name the shapes on your map—even if very few people concur on the nomenclature, much less the boundaries.

And historically, that's where most New Orleanians stood on neighborhood identity: few concurred, and few made a fuss about it. There were no official neighborhoods; instead, everyone had an informal set of spatial perceptions of what different parts of the city were called.

Some people invoked an area's vintage to distinguish among spaces, e.g., the "old city" versus newer suburbs, else alluded to ethnic geography (the French or Creole "quarters," the "American" side of town, the "Irish Channel," "Little Saxony," etc.). Many used broad directional allusions, such as "uptown," "downtown," "back of town," "across the river," or "Chef Menteur," which implied just about all of eastern New Orleans.

Faubourgs were particularly popular as neighborhood names, as were modern real estate developments, since these subdivisions had clear boundaries with proper nouns. Marigny and Tremé are our best examples of early nineteenth-century faubourg names still in use today, while early twentieth-century subdivisions like Broadmoor, Fontainebleau, and most lakeside subdivisions trace their names to the plats of real estate developers.

Another naming convention came about courtesy of political geography. Our metropolis had an ever-changing gazetteer of municipalities, municipal districts, wards and precincts, as well as a relentless chronology of municipal incorporations, annexations, expansions, and parish line tweaks. We even had counties for a while!

Some of these political geographies made their way into neighborhood nomenclature. For example, residents below Esplanade Avenue called their neighborhood "the Third" (or "the Old Third," "the Dirty Third," or "the Glorious Third"), meaning the Third Municipality and later the Third Municipal District. Similarly, around 1900, those in today's French Quarter and Central Business District were apt to refer to "the First" and "the Second" districts. Many New Orleanians today think of their ward as their neighborhood, particularly in the Seventh Ward and Ninth Ward, whereas residents elsewhere may not even know their ward number.

Most commonly, New Orleanians dubbed their neighborhoods by nearby parks, squares, waterbodies, public markets, or commercial arteries. People would say they lived "by Annunciation Square" or "near Coliseum Square" to mean today's Lower Garden District. Others would reference their neighborhood as "Magazine Street," "Dryades," "Freret," "St. Claude," or "Broad," because everyone understood you meant the general vicinity of those bustling shopping corridors. Depending on context and participants, people mixed and matched spatial references, and the vernacular all seemed to work.

That began to change with the rise of city planning, following the era of modernization that brought us drainage, potable water, sewerage, electrification, and auto transportation. City managers now started to adopt the techniques of empirical science, and planners realized they needed to back their decisions with hard data.

That required new maps—maps with clear borders and names. "The Dirty Third" wasn't going to cut it anymore.

To create something better suiting quantitative needs, local planners turned to the U.S. Census Bureau, which starting in 1910 began experimenting with posting data within more detailed shapes called "census tracts." After enumerators went door-to-door collecting residents' information, analysts in Washington tabulated the raw data to create precise aggregations within these standardized, mappable tracts. In 1940, census tracts became a standard dataset for cities nationwide, and later for the entire country.

City planning came to New Orleans in 1923, whereupon planners set to work adapting early tract boundaries and using them in documents such as the 1929 *Handbook to Comprehensive Zone Law*. The City Planning and Zoning Commission called these units "districts," but did not assign proper names to them. Most New Orleanians continued to speak of their neighborhoods using their traditional *sui generis* vernacular.

In the 1950s and 1960s, the development of mainframe computers triggered quantitative revolutions in fields such as sociology, geography, and urban planning, and produced a new generation of map-savvy data analysts. The advances coincided with President Lyndon B. Johnson's vision for a "Great Society," which, among other things, spawned the Model Cities Program in 1966.

Model Cities endeavored to revitalize inner cities through infrastructure investments and social programs. One of its legislative offshoots was the Housing and Community Development Act, which empowered the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) to distribute Community Development Block Grants for cities and towns to fight poverty and improve local conditions. Obtaining those grants required demographic data on neighborhoods, which meant that planners had to create "official" neighborhood maps—and those newly minted computer-savvy researchers were eager to get started.

The act passed in 1974, but because of the legislation's long lead-up time, the neighborhood mapping research in New Orleans started in 1973, an auspicious date because it happened to mark fifty years since the launch of the City Planning Commission back in 1923.

In March 1973, Mayor Moon Landrieu announced a $200,000 study to be conducted by the architectural and planning firm Curtis and Davis, to "zero in on the best methods of preserving and upgrading the city's unusual neighborhoods," according to a report in the *Times-Picayune*. That effort was predicated on mapping, for which a collaboration formed among planners with Curtis and Davis planners, HUD, and the city's Office of Policy Planning (OPP), to devise "planning areas."

One of the OPP pollsters was Allen Rosenzweig, who in an interview with me a few years ago, recounted how he had surveyed residents about "the name they used to describe the neighborhood where they lived." Rosenzweig and his colleagues passed the responses to Curtis and Davis, who used them the sketch out and name 73 planning areas.

Some areas were easier to map than others. Historical neighborhoods like Carrollton and Algiers had universally agreed-upon names, while modern subdivisions such as Lake Vista and Pontchartrain Park had set appellations as well as boundaries. Most other areas, however, had a plurality of folk monikers, for which planners had to revive historical names or christened their own. They released the new neighborhood map in Curtis and Davis's New Orleans Housing and Neighborhood Preservation Study of 1974.

The OPP, however, balked at accepting the map. According to Rosenzweig, the city agency "found that data could not be collected in the neighborhood units proposed by Curtis and Davis," because too many boundaries did not align with the U.S. Census Bureau tracts, complicating data tabulation.

Over the next year, planners regrouped and reworked Curtis and Davis' 73 units, based on "historical definition, natural barriers, major arteries and socioeconomic homogeneity," according to city documents. What resulted was a bemusing array of revisions yielding anywhere from 62 to 104 neighborhoods.

According to a 1981 DAU Report, "a compromise set of 70 neighborhoods was derived … by taking the 'best set' [from previous versions] and moving boundaries to the closest census tract lines" of the 1980 Census. Eventually the number settled at the 73 we have today.

OPP planner Darlene Walk, who refined many boundaries, went on to produce scores of "Neighborhood Profiles" loaded with maps and data tables. These pamphlets, which were distributed to various civic and government organizations, are the ancestors of the various online compendia we have at our fingertips today, all of which have helped concretize neighborhood perceptions which for generations prior had been as soft as delta mud.

As sensitive as the analysts were in respecting local tradition, they understood that bureaucratic exigency undergirded the formalization of neighborhood identity. One graphic from a 1982 OPP report was revealingly titled "Major Neighborhood Boundary Changes Caused By 1980 Census Tract Definitions"—an explicit acknowledgment that bureaucracy played a key role in mapping culture.

The 73 neighborhoods gained further traction with the rise of GIS software and online maps. All have reified the names and borders of those urban spaces, a processed furthered hardened during the Katrina recovery, when legions of baffled out-of-town planners found order and clarity in the downloadable polygons, even if it was largely a cartographic illusion. At one point, recovery planners aggregated the 73 neighborhoods into 13 "planning districts," which continue to be used by the city today, inscribing ever more "reality" to that pragmatic jigsaw puzzle first devised fifty years ago.

Warts and all, their names and shapes have "become true," so to speak—testimony to the uncanny power of maps.

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