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A bit more
skygazing
might calm an
anxious world

A few weeks ago, rising from bed in the middle of the night, I silently scolded myself for neglecting to turn off the patio light. Brightness illuminated the bedroom curtains, making the drapes shimmer like a paper lantern.

But a quick look out the door revealed a different story. The brilliance beyond our threshold came from a full moon that gave things the softened clarity of dusk. I saw the far reaches of the yard as clearly as I might in late afternoon. Each branch of our oak could be read like a sentence floating across the page.

Moonlight tinted everything silver: the rails of the fence, the Japanese magnolia, a rusty shovel perched against the wall. Presiding over this small pageant of wonders was the moon itself, so large and close that it seemed ready to rest, like a balloon returning to ground, in the canopy of our Drake elm.

I stood a while and gave it a look, its whiteness blemished here and there with the kinds of imperfections that made it real. Otherwise, I might have assumed that my wee-hours encounter with a full moon had all been a dream. It was strange for a man past middle age to be standing outside in his bathrobe a few hours before dawn, looking up at the sky.

But there was a peace in the looking that made me wonder why I don't do it more often. And this got me thinking about William Beebe, who's best known for working with an American engineer named Otis Barton to invent the bathysphere, a hollow steel ball that allowed them to explore the ocean depths. Beebe's Depression-era adventures are the heart of author Brad Fox's beautiful "The Bathysphere Book," an adventure yarn that ended up on my summer reading list this year.

Though Beebe is most famous for diving to the bottom of the sea, he loved all kinds of nature, including the night sky. One of his quirky ideas was that every toothbrush should carry inside it a miniature telescope as a kind of prompt to look up each night as you're going to bed.

Beebe thought, Fox writes, "that if every king, president, congressperson, mayor, lawyer, soldier, merchant, farmer, and student would be required to spend five minutes every evening staring through an opera glass at the night sky," then the world would be a better place.

As luck would have it, just a few blocks away from Louisiana's State Capitol in Baton Rouge, the Louisiana Art & Science Museum has a new exhibit, "The Art of Looking Up," that features paintings and photographs inspired by scanning the heavens. It's worth checking out.

Skygazing is necessarily an exercise in humility, reminding us how small we are in the scheme of things. We'd all probably be calmer, in these anxious times, if we looked at the moon as often as we brushed our teeth.

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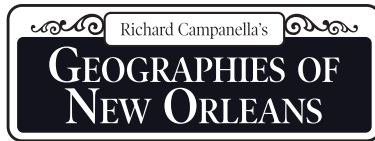


This 1927 aerial photo from NOPSI shows the future Duncan Plaza area at right, with the gas plant at left and Old Criminal Courthouse at center. PROVIDED PHOTO BY NOPSI

CAUGHT in the MIDDLE

How New Orleans' Duncan Plaza, once the 'back of town,' became today's land-swap target

BY RICHARD CAMPANELLA
Contributing writer



A possible city/state land swap at Duncan Plaza could pave the way for a new City Hall and Civil District Court to be built in downtown New Orleans. If the plan succeeds, it would write the next chapter in a story that goes back nearly a century, when planners first contemplated unifying government facilities at a specially designed "civic center."

The Duncan Plaza area first urbanized in the 1810s, when city surveyor Jacques Tanes extended two existing street grids into what he called the Banlieue (outskirts) du Faubourg Ste. Marie (today's Central Business District).

Despite the substantial width of Basin Street and Rampart Street on the other side of Canal Street, Tan-

esse decided to narrow their counterparts in the new subdivision. As for those streets being extended from the river — Common, Gravier, Perdido and Poydras — their angles had the effect of spreading their extensions further apart.

The design yielded a neighborhood of oversized blocks with undersized streets. A century hence, as these "outskirts" developed into the "back" of downtown New Orleans, that urban geography would invite proposals for land-use change.

The back-of-town

What put the "back" into this part of town was its distance from the bustling riverfront, and its proximity to the backswamp. Lower in

elevation, inconvenient to services and last on the list for improvements, back-of-town areas in New Orleans tended to get whatever the front-of-town did not want in its backyard.

That included everything from industry to cemeteries to hospitals (which were associated with disease), as well as drainage discharge and garbage dumps. All this depreciated land values, which made the back-of-town disproportionately impoverished.

During the 1820s and 1830s, the future Duncan Plaza area got a full suite of such land uses. Within a few blocks were the eerie Girod Street Cemetery; the roughneck turning basin of the New Basin Canal; a notorious vice lair known as "the Swamp"; the Canal Gravier drainage discharge; Charity Hospital; and the New-Orleans Gas

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When will the Rampart-St. Claude streetcar return?

A streetcar on Canal Street passes Rampart Street in New Orleans in 2022.



STAFF FILE
PHOTO BY SOPHIA GERMER

BY ANNETTE SISCO
Staff writer

When the half-finished Hard Rock Hotel collapsed in New Orleans on Oct. 12, 2019, concrete floors pancaked and steel rebar tore away, leaving a ragged heap of debris on the construction site. Nearby buildings were damaged, and parts of Rampart Street and Canal Street would be closed for the next year and a half.



Most tragically, three workers were killed. It took months to recover their bodies from the unstable wreckage of the building.

Lost in the mayhem was a relatively new addition to Rampart Street: the streetcar line, which

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DUNCAN PLAZA

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Light Co. plant, where coal was super-heated to produce “syngas” for illumination.

Located one block behind today’s Duncan Plaza, the enormous gasification plant emitted noxious odors and toxic waste, further depreciating livability in the vicinity.

In 1844, a fire ravaged the blocks across Common Street (today’s Tulane Avenue), destroying nearly 300 wooden cottages and leaving more than 2,000 people homeless—“a greater portion of whom,” wrote the New Orleans Bee, “are of the poorer class of society.” While the future Duncan Plaza area was spared destruction, the blaze brought attention to the lack of hydrants and water access in the back of town, among other risks.

Yet as the city grew, the area became densely populated, mostly on account of its proximity to the urban core, and also because mechanized drainage had partially drawn down swampwaters, allowing development to extend further inland.

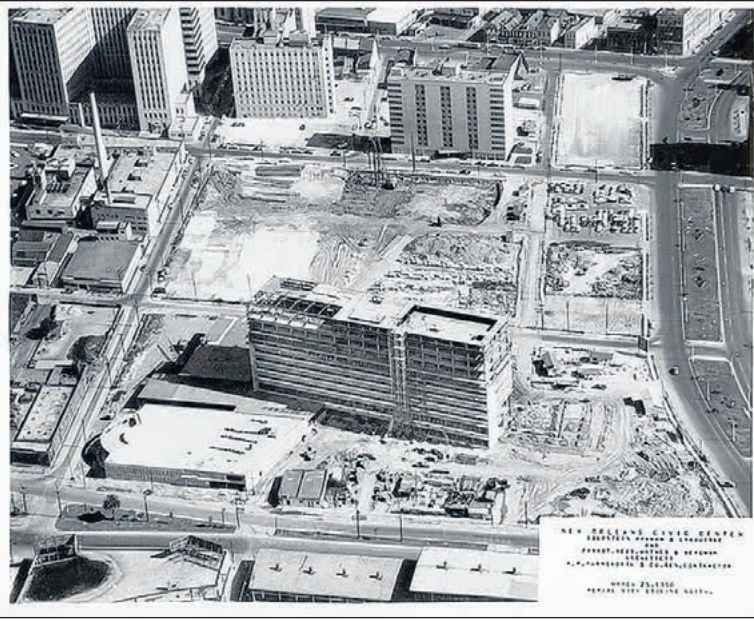
By the mid-to-late 1800s, the area became part of the 3rd Ward, though locals continued to call it the back-of-town, among them Louis Armstrong, who grew up here. Later in life, Armstrong recollected how “the neighborhood was consisted of Negroes, Jewish people and lots of Chinese, (who) moved into a little section of their own and called it China Town,” now 1100 Tulane Avenue. Others dubbed the area “the Battleground,” though it would later become appreciated for its key role in the development of jazz and other cultural contributions.

Wary of the neighborhood, the city in the early 1890s selected the block adjacent to today’s Duncan Plaza for a new criminal courthouse, police station, parish prison and morgue. In 1893, workers completed construction of the fortress-like compound on South Saratoga Street, marking an early attempt to use this area to centralize governmental functions.

Throughout the early 1900s, this area ranked among the most diverse and spirited parts of the city, with such landmarks as the Knights of Pythias Temple, said to be the largest Black-owned building in the nation, and the South Rampart corridor, known as “the Harlem of New Orleans” for its rich cultural life.

Decade of progress

Following World War II, modernization became the mantra of newly elected Mayor deLesseps



NOPL PHOTO

City Hall under construction and Civic Center under site preparation in 1956.

“Chep” Morrison — modernization in governance, in urbanization and in transportation, which he promised to carry out during a “Decade of Progress.”

A key part of modernizing governance was an idea conceived by Brooke Helm Duncan, a real estate developer and the first director of the City Planning and Zoning Commission, to centralize public offices and courts for the convenience of citizens. Involving city and state facilities and perhaps federal as well, a gleaming new Civic Center would be all the better if it replaced unsightly “slums” — which, to many people, meant the back-of-town.

Similar plans to raze old neighborhoods for new government facilities were moving forward nationwide, and they would come to be known as “slum clearance” and “urban renewal.” More often than not, the targeted residential neighborhoods were similar to New Orleans’ back-of-town: impoverished, culturally rich, and predominantly African American.

The envisioned Civic Center dovetailed with recommended transportation improvements of the Decade of Progress, among them a new train station to unify passenger lines, grade separations of roads and rails, re-engineered traffic interchanges and an expressway planned for the soon-to-be-filled New Basin Canal connecting with a new bridge over the Mississippi River.

The Civic Center also complemented the long-held idea of building a Cultural Center around the Municipal Auditorium by Congo (then Beauregard) Square. So positioned, the city’s civic and cultural

embodiments would face each other along a beautifully landscaped Basin Street all the way up to the new train station.

In the late 1940s, workers removed the circa-1830s gas plant and demolished the 1893 courthouse, while officials began buying or expropriating properties for the Civic Center. Elsewhere, workers made improvements along Tulane Avenue, and began filling in the New Basin Canal for the construction of the expressway to the new bridge.

In 1951, planners prepared to widen the narrow streets laid out in the 1810s, namely South Saratoga Street, to match capacious Elk Place and Basin Street. To be named Loyola Avenue, the extension would then be angled to join the already-broad segment of South Saratoga above Poydras Street. The resulting dogleg would make a perfect site for the new city hall, allowing it to face the future Cultural Center nearly a mile downriver.

The Decade of Progress was well underway. Work began on the Union Passenger Terminal, which opened in 1954. Demolition proceeded on the back-of-town, including the former homes of jazz greats Buddy Bolden and Armstrong as well as the famed Funky Butt Hall.

In 1955, the city of New Orleans sold parcels to the Louisiana State Building Authority to build the State Office Building and State Supreme Court — a transaction that would also give the state control over half of future Duncan Plaza.

Plans were also made to deconsecrate the circa-1820s Girod Street Cemetery, relocate the human

remains and raze the tombs. Elsewhere, planners called for a Riverfront Expressway and a Claiborne Expressway to connect to the Pontchartrain Expressway, as well as a new airport, port facilities and even a monorail.

The Civic Center at Duncan Plaza

Designs were then sketched for the Civic Center, including City Hall, council chambers, civil and state supreme courts, government offices, main library branch and parking lots. “The firms that collaborated on the design,” wrote architectural historian Kate Holliday in a 2009 article, “came from respectable New Orleans families with names easily recognizable in the city’s romanticized Creole past. But the plans nevertheless embodied 20th-century discomfort with the old city” in favor of Modernist styles, “well in keeping with the urban renewal plans ... in Detroit, Chicago, and New York.”

Reflecting “the tower-in-the-park international style” of the Swiss-French architect Le Corbusier, who had helped design the United Nations Secretariat Building in Manhattan, each edifice would face a green space, as had New Orleans’ previous city halls at Jackson Square and Lafayette Square. In December 1954, the city dedicated the new green space to the late Brooke Duncan for his advocacy of the Civic Center.

The new City Hall opened in May 1957 with a ceremony at Duncan Plaza. “Here in this beautiful building,” beamed Mayor Morrison, “are located all of the city offices formerly scattered in many obsolete buildings. ... Here the citizen can conduct his business with the city government in one single convenient location. Here, city employees can work in pleasant and comfortable surroundings.” As for the green space, “this Duncan Plaza will be for this section of our city what Jackson Square is for the Vieux Carre.” A year later, the Main Branch of the New Orleans Public Library opened on the opposite side of Duncan Plaza, completing the Civic Center.

The finishing touch came in the 1980s, when Arthur Q. Davis, whose architectural firm played a major role in the effort, re-landscaped Duncan Plaza with promenades, berms, trees and a central pavilion inspired by the Africa House on the Melrose Plantation near Natchitoches.

What went wrong?

Decades later, assessments of the Civic Center pale in comparison to the heady visions of the Decade of Progress. What went wrong is a matter of intense dis-

pute involving everything from politics to architecture, to history and geography.

Many blame mismanagement and deferred maintenance, while others point to population decline ongoing since 1960, which reduced the city’s tax base and created pressing problems elsewhere.

Aficionados of traditional architecture pointed to the Modernist design as part of the problem, while employees found many facilities to be inadequate, forcing the creation of annexes elsewhere.

A case can also be made that the centralization of government in fact led to its isolation, in that folks ventured to the Civic Center only when they had to. Few came to enjoy Duncan Plaza, in part because those high berms ensconced activities therein, creating a sense of danger.

As for the Cultural Center, it only partly came to fruition, and its line-of-sight connection to the Civic Center never really resonated.

By the late 2000s, growing numbers felt that New Orleans’ government needed a new city hall, though others called for the renovation of the 1957 building, now considered historic. Three proposals have since circulated to relocate the seat of city government, but each was shot down, one vociferously.

Land swap at Duncan Plaza?

In 2023, the idea arose for the city and state to exchange parcels first divvied up in 1955 during the development of the Civic Center. A new City Hall and Civil District Courts would be built on the state-owned sections of Duncan Plaza, including parts of where the two state structures had been demolished during 2009-10. After completion of the two new buildings, their 1950s counterparts would be razed, and their city-owned parcels would switch to state ownership. In October, the City Planning Commission endorsed the idea.

If the complex arrangement moves ahead, it would form the next chapter in a story that goes back to Mayor Morrison’s Decade of Progress, to Armstrong’s back-of-town and to Tanessee’s Banlieue du Faubourg Ste. Marie.

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