



Stop demolishing New Orleans' heritage

At the end of World War II, New Orleans inherited a treasure: a two-century inventory of architecture and neighborhoods — colonial rowhouses, vernacular shotgun houses, buildings from the downtown construction boom of the 1920s, and public works projects commissioned in the 1930s by Huey Long and the New Deal. With block upon block of humane houses and stores connected by a steady street grid on high ground, New Orleans owned the best cityscape in America in 1950.

We could have loved it, protected it, bragged about it. Instead, we started tearing the old place down. We have spent the last six decades subtracting from our inheritance.

Like New Orleans, Buffalo, N.Y., was strong as it entered the postwar era. But in 1950, that city leveled a remarkable building, the Larkin Soap Company office, a 1906 masterpiece by architect Frank Lloyd Wright. Its demolition caused a fuss that is credited with setting the stage for the national preservation movement. Buffalo has felt guilty about the destruction of the Larkin Building ever since. New Orleans lacks that compunction.

In the 1950s, New Orleans had Larkin Buildings to burn, and we burned them without protest. In 1954, the city tore down the world's only rail station by Louis Sullivan, the dramatic low-arched, hipped-roof 1892 Illinois Central terminal that Frank Lloyd Wright apparently worked on. With the new Union Passenger Terminal, we didn't need the old building. In 1956, the city demolished another Chicago architect's train station, Daniel Burnham's distinguished 1908 Beaux Arts building for the Southern Railway at Basin and Canal streets. We put up a new city hall and state office complex in place of "a blighted and crowded African-American neighborhood." With a new library in that same complex, we razed the Beaux Arts main library at Lee Circle. The Saulet plantation made way for a Schwegmann's supermarket on Annunciation Street. Objections were made to tearing down the Neoclassical municipal building facing Lafayette Square, so we still have Gallier Hall today.

Blocks of Treme disappeared for a never-built imitation of Lincoln Center. Interstate 10 was forced above Claiborne

Avenue, blighting Treme and the Seventh Ward. The Houston-imitation highrise corridor along Poydras Street claimed multiple blocks of worthy 19th-century commercial buildings for parking, largely empty expanses today.

Arriving here in 1972 as an editor for a new weekly newspaper, I was astounded that New Orleans tolerated demolitions of St. Charles Avenue mansions for the construction of cheap apartments. *Figaro* wrote insistently about that ("St Charles Avenue is Dying" in as big a headline as our tabloid page would allow), and later *The States-Item* covered stealthy demolitions in the Central Business District as violent crimes. A new preservation movement took root in the mid-1970s. Demolition moratoriums on St. Charles Avenue and in the CBD were declared and both the Preservation Resource Center and the Historic District Landmarks Commission were formed. Now it wasn't just the Vieux Carré that was historic; it was the whole city, so we thought. The movement helped create the environment for a cultural economy based on food, music, people, architecture and tourism.

From the 1980s onward, with the fallout from the oil bust, the city didn't have sufficient resources to destroy itself — until after Katrina. The last six years, regrettably, have been a binge of subtraction. The clear-cutting of an entire Mid-City neighborhood of potential workforce housing — about 70 acres and 25 city blocks with more than 160 valuable buildings — will provide sites for two suburban-sprawl hospitals. Though badly needed medically and economically, the hospitals could have opened by now and at a lower cost if they had been located more compactly in our desolate business district. A good-hearted effort by a new mayor to move 100 shotguns from the hospital sites to other neighborhoods has been erratically executed by the city and the state. (In November three shotgun houses moved temporarily were sent to the landfill while waiting rides to vacant lots.)

City government's clumsy fight against blight — relying on demolition — threatens to subtract hundreds of camelback and shotgun houses and Creole cottages from struggling older neighborhoods. A barren weedy lot at the corner of Washington and South Derbigny streets marks where the

city razed seven identical shotguns wrapped around a brick corner store in April 2011. These were the houses in the first-season poster for the TV show *Treme*, and they could have been pivotal to the rebirth of the Hoffman Triangle neighborhood.

We can fight blight better by keeping houses in older neighborhoods for the brave returnees and new arrivals who want to be part of the New Orleans lifestyle that can't be found in other cities. Use the backhoe as a last resort, after auctions and sheriff's sales (to get buildings in the hands of people willing to invest), urban homesteading (a nearly free house for those willing to fix it up), mothballing (boarding-up a structure until the new software engineer comes to town), or deconstruction (with a hopeless house, save the slate shingles, pine floors and cypress joists to help rebuild others.)

Since World War II, our public officials have failed to appreciate our urban assets and recognize preservation as an industry that creates jobs — more jobs than new construction. They have failed to thank the preservation movement for fighting to keep as much as we have, to bring tourists to gawk and eat, to keep film crews busy, and to attract smart new entrepreneurial residents.

Mayor Mitch Landrieu's administration never praises preservation. In fact, it depicts preservation as an obstacle and would shrink staffs of the commissions that oversee city planning and historic districts, including the Vieux Carré.

Back to Buffalo. During the National Preservation Conference there in November 2011, the *Buffalo News* quoted public officials and real estate developers on the success of their city's embrace of preservation. "Preservation should be one of our philosophical North Stars we ought to be following," said developer Howard Zemsky, "because it works to our advantage in so many ways."

In New Orleans, when the FEMA money and oil-spill payouts cease in a few years, we'll be glad we have our urban landscape, our culture, and a place for our people to be themselves. We'll have to support ourselves on that.

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