NEW
IN NEW ORLEANS
ARCHITECTURE

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BY JOHN P. KLINGMAN

Pelican Publishing Company
Gretna 2012

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Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Klingman, John P.
New in New Orleans architecture / by John P. Klingman.
p. cm.
ISBN 978-1-4556-1537-7 (hardcover : alk. paper) -- ISBN 978-1-4556-1538-4 (e-book)
1. Architecture--Louisiana--New Orleans--History--20th century. 2. New Orleans (La.)--Buildings, structures, etc. I. Title.
NA735.N4K59 2012
720'.9763350904--dc23
2011038691

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Printed in China
Published by Pelican Publishing Company, Inc.
1000 Burmaster Street, Gretna, Louisiana 70053

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INTRODUCTION

One of the world's best kept secrets is that New Orleans has contemporary architecture. The world knows a lot about New Orleans...

...about early jazz and current New Orleans music. It knows about street parades and Carnival. It knows about traditional and contemporary New Orleans cuisine. It knows about French Quarter and Garden District architecture from the city's rich history. It knows about the broken levees and the horrors of Katrina. But it knows nothing about the fine recent buildings here.

Ironically, sixty years ago New Orleans was receiving national and even international attention for its then contemporary Modernist design. The award-winning New Orleans Public Library by Curtis and Davis received the highest acclaim in national architecture publications. The Civic Center complex was lauded for its progressive design. And the ground-breaking Modernist schools of the city, particularly Charles Colbert's masterwork, the Wheatley Elementary School, received international attention. Eventually, another highly regarded work, Buster Curtis's Superdome of the early 1970s, closed the era of strong Modernist design.

As in much of the country in that decade, architecture languished in New Orleans. Then in the 1980s a new idea emerged that some thought was a more appropriate way to design buildings that were more sympathetic to the past. Its first manifestation here, which was noted worldwide, was the Piazza d'Italia of Charles Moore and collaborators. Endlessly photographed, discussed, and visited, it was truly larger than life; but, it was not embraced by locals as anything more than an eccentric folly, which was actually the intent of the designers! However, the idea that new buildings using traditional forms could, "wittily" in Moore's words or "ironically" in the words of architect Robert Venturi, comment on the past while embracing the future hit New Orleans particularly hard and continues to affect design in the city even today. The most egregious manifestation of this viewpoint was the destruction of Curtis and Davis's world class 1968 Rivergate Convention Center to build the retro Harrah's Casino in 1994.

Although it seems to be a responsible position, there are fundamental problems with a historicist approach to design. The first is that building technologies have changed radically in the 150 years since many of this city's significant structures were erected. This change

Gibson Hall Canopy
John P. Klingman

affects not only the structure but, of necessity, the appearance of a building, unless outmoded building practices or trickery are employed. For example, one can now design an entire exterior wall of glass, while in the early nineteenth century glass was commonly available only in sizes less than one square foot. Second, in spite of the simplicity of the concept, like nuclear power, successful design in a historicist manner is extraordinarily difficult to effectively realize. It requires a comprehensive understanding of architectural history in order to employ an architectural vocabulary from the past in a convincing manner that will stand up to the scrutiny of the twenty-first century. Thus, there is the dilemma of the Vieux Carré, in which new buildings must be virtually indistinguishable from their ancient neighbors, creating confusion for everyone regarding what is truly old. This is the most important objection to historicist or postmodern design: that it devalues the truly historic by interspersing structures that are actually new but appear to be old.

Is it not more vital for buildings in a city to take on characteristics of their time? Of the buildings presented here, some have programs of use quite different from those of the past. All of them must deal with the challenges of extreme environmental conditions, and all have the opportunities of employing current building technologies. And yet, a form too alien can be simply self-referential, not participating in the rich dialogue that particularly characterizes New Orleans. This look-at-me attitude is the problem with the famed "Make it Right" houses and the reason they are disappointing, despite their extraordinary notoriety. The thesis behind the project selection is that new work must stand up and stand out to the extent that is appropriate to the rich urban mix of the city.

To produce an outstanding work of architecture, the resources and expertise required are enormous, and the works showcased here represent eighty of the best projects over the previous decade and a half. This time interval was selected because in the last fifteen years architecture in New Orleans has awakened from the postmodern doldrums, and architects have taken on a renewed commitment to excellence. New Orleans is hardly singular in its high quality recent design. Cities with similar issues of historic/new have been flourishing, including Amsterdam, Montreal, San Francisco, and Philadelphia, among many others. However, our accomplishments are among the least well known.

Architectural design is often based on simple concepts, almost in the realm of common sense. However, that doesn't mean it is easy to do well. Over fifteen years as a member and chairman of the Architectural Review Committee of the New Orleans Historic District Landmarks Commission, I have attempted to assist in integrating new design into historic neighborhoods. Some of the included projects were part of this process. In these building reviews, my task is relatively straightforward: to describe and assess the salient characteristics of each project and the degree to which these are successful.

It could be argued that the following discussions of the projects are more affirmative than critical. This is true, and it arises from two conditions. First, my own nine years of professional practice in Boston taught me how difficult it is to realize a good project in the face of numerous and complex constraints. Second, in teaching architecture in New Orleans since 1983, I was initially discouraged by the scarcity of exemplary local projects that I could point out to and discuss with students. Now, I am particularly encouraged by the design energy and multiple directions that the included projects demonstrate. These are instructive examples for students, practicing architects, actual and potential clients, and the informed public.

In an intense high school English class, our teacher posited, "a critic is a legless runner." Therefore, to further explain principles underlying the critiques that follow, here are three of my own attempts, as a New Orleans architect, to address the issues I have outlined here. These are small projects; therefore, they are not included within the body of this volume (although one larger project, the Loyola West Garage wall, does appear).

The Gibson Hall canopy was commissioned in 2000 by Tulane's University College to mark its entrance on the side of the university's 1894 main administration building. The new canopy contrasts the heaviness of

Streetcar Terminus Rendering
Garrett Jacobs

the original Richardsonian Romanesque limestone mass with a light, flaring steel structure. Influences range from the round arches of the original openings, to the typical New Orleans barrel-vaulted fabric awnings, to contemporary vernacular construction and to Hector Guimard's work in Paris that was contemporaneous with the original building. The structure can be recognized as new but in a sympathetic dialogue with its historic host. (Ramiro Diaz assisted on the project)

A current project, for the Regional Transit Authority (RTA), is the design of a shelter for the terminus of the St. Charles Streetcar line at Carrollton and Claiborne avenues. The concept is to create a simple form with some iconic character that complements the historic Perley Thomas streetcars and provides amenity to passengers as they are waiting at this location. Although the streetcar line is historic, there were no shelters along the line; and replicating historic shelter designs from elsewhere would devalue the uniqueness of the St. Charles line. Therefore, the design evokes the traditional concept of shelter with its pitched roof forms while the triangular shapes provide a dynamic emphasis. (The project was designed through the Tulane City Center of the Tulane University School of Architecture. Garrett Jacobs was the student assistant on the project.)

Another project at Tulane was the Monroe Facade Redesign of 2004-5. Tulane University's tallest dormitory required a curtain wall replacement in 2004. Not all of the city's Midcentury Modernist design was strong, and this building was an example of a banal original

Monroe Hall West Facade
John P. Klingman

exterior treatment. So the project offered a great opportunity to improve the appearance and explore concepts of sustainable design: increased attention to durability, efficient use of resources, and enhanced attention to issues of health and well-being. Because of the repetitive nature of the facade, it was important to introduce a dynamic emphasis while providing amenity at the scale of the individual room. To accomplish this were two primary concepts: utilizing continuous glass under the existing horizontal sunshade to provide shaded daylight and an opaque panel vertically adjacent to one side of each column. Both of these ideas were important to minimize solar heat gain on the long facades, which are east and west facing. The specified glass is high performance to provide more interior daylight while rejecting heat. A bright silver panel at the lower corner of each room shields a desk and provides a visual accent. An operable awning window is positioned very low on the wall to enable visual contact with human activity on the quad below, which is perhaps important for freshmen leaving home for the first time. The other major design initiative was to reconsider four original balconies, unused and locked, located at lounges in the center of upper floors. Here, the curtain wall was relocated to the outer edge of the former balconies. This captured usable interior space and generated long "bay windows" to enliven the facade. These sport a series of brightly colored panels, perhaps to offset the grey flannel business school building across the quad. (Architect of Record was KDK of New Orleans)

Today in New Orleans almost any conversation will commonly contain a reference either to "before Katrina" or "after Katrina." This is not so much the case in the projects presented here; though some were related to the disaster, the architecture displays no seismic shift. All of this work points toward the future, one in which contemporary New Orleans is understood to be as vital and worthy of attention as its illustrious past.