

NEW ORLEANS.

architectural amnesia.

s.mcguire

"Language has unmistakably made plain that memory is not an instrument for exploring the past, but rather a medium. It is the medium of that which is experienced, just as the earth is the medium in which ancient cities lie buried"

WALTER BENJAMIN

(in *Excavation and Memory*)

Strolling down the streets of Royal and Bourbon, and observing a crowd of revellers occupying wrought iron balconies and hidden flowered courtyards, Walt Disney once exclaimed, "where else can you find iniquity and antiquity so close together?" New Orleans is, perhaps unhealthy, obsessed with both.

A city defined by its nostalgic architectural narrative, sealed with an 18th-19th century French and Spanish pedigree, it was once a highly prized and industrious port city in the antebellum south.

The city's decline throughout the 20th century, and its subsequent dependence on a tourist-driven economy, has fuelled the urge amongst residents to romanticise its past glory. It is hardly surprising this romanticisation has quickly led to imitation; in a sense, the fake spray-painted patina covering "Preservation" Hall, or the polystyrene Corinthian columns of the uptown "plantation" homes, are typical of our era (one in which iPhones post-process images to look like those of a 1970s Minolta). These buildings, the "fake old," are regressive lapses that obscure reality by replicating a fantasised past. The translation of generational experiences through the built environment (what might be called an "architectural narrative") dies at the moment innovation and progress are rejected. For New Orleans, this nostalgia is emblematic of a city unsure of its contemporary identity, though increasingly confident of its past.

The manufacture of the "fake old" is complimented by the wholesale destruction of the "recently new", made permissible by the wake of Hurricane Katrina.

This category generally encompasses the 20th century, traversing the Art Deco of Louisiana's brief flirtation with populist socialism (under Huey P Long), the grand New Deal public projects of the Works Progress Administration, bookended by the OPEC-fueled Brutalist and Modernist boom of the 1960's and 70's.

THE INFILTRATION OF MODERN ARCHITECTURE INTO THE URBAN LANDSCAPE OF NEW ORLEANS HAS BEEN VILIFIED, DENOUNCED AS FOREIGN OBJECTS AND EXPERIMENTAL MISTAKES THAT REJECTED STYLISTIC OBEDIENCE TO THE CITY'S STORIED PAST.

Just as London's own post-war Brutalist holdovers, like Robin Hood Gardens, are emblematic of an era of architectural activism, relics such as St. Francis Cabrini Church in New Orleans should be preserved – if not for their many design merits, then at least for their value as cultural monuments. Unfortunately, Cabrini Church has been demolished and, at the time of writing, the same destiny awaits Robin Hood Gardens.

Buildings in general, and this category of buildings particularly, stand as pivotal artefacts that accurately testify to a real and unalterable past. Their elimination not only redacts some of the city's most polarising icons but erases the ideas and spirit of an epoch from collective memory, effectively lobotomising the urban narrative. The result can only be a kind of architectural amnesia.

Or something worse: the disfigured and Disneyfied past, reformed perennially and recycled in perpetuity, and which refers ultimately to its own image.

Sean McGuire is a Master's of Architecture student at Tulane University and will be a returning Diploma student at the AA.

NEW ORLEANS.

an apolitical art?

g.newman

"Our entire linear and accumulative culture would collapse if we did not stockpile the past in plain view."

JEAN BAUDRILLARD

(in *The Procession of Simulacra*)

The summer of 2011 saw the destruction of one of New Orleans' great modernist icons: the Phyllis Wheatley Elementary School.

Designed in 1954 by famed regional modernist Charles Colbert in the historically black Treme neighbourhood, Wheatley was an innovative structure that immediately gained the attention of the architectural press and awards circuits.

Designed as a series of elevated steel trusses, the classrooms spanned the cantilevered cross-section [see overleaf] to create an amenable microclimate, and ample covered play space, below the building. (This height was what ultimately saved the building from flooding after Hurricane Katrina). In the storm's aftermath, as public institutions surveyed the damage done to their facilities, Wheatley was placed on the chopping block. The explanation given by the School Board was that the building was hardly fit to function as a school for the twenty-first century, and that it was an eyesore blighting an already struggling neighbourhood. The precise relationship between that reasoning and the actual damage to the complex following Katrina has never been made clear.

Regardless, the struggle to preservation Wheatley became highly publicised, and attracted attention from both national news outlets and global preservation organisations. Fighting for the school were two major factions: New Orleans' design community, and a diverse association of neighbourhood residents and former students of the school, each with their own argument.

The architectural community lifted up Wheatley as an example of excellent Modernist design, and a significant icon to the city.

The residents and former students took a different approach. In 1954, the year of Wheatley's construction, the Supreme Court struck down racial segregation in public schools. Subsequently, southern states (where racial segregation was still an accepted mode of everyday life) began the slow process of racial integration.

Of the 30 modernist schools built in New Orleans between the end of World War II and the abolition of segregation, only two remain, and only one will ultimately survive. What these residents argued for, and what became increasingly evident in light of the discourse that emerged, was the value of the school as a material witness to a significant moment in the struggle for racial equality, in the U.S. and New Orleans. With architectural legitimation might it have survived as a monument? Maybe, but this discussion never took place.

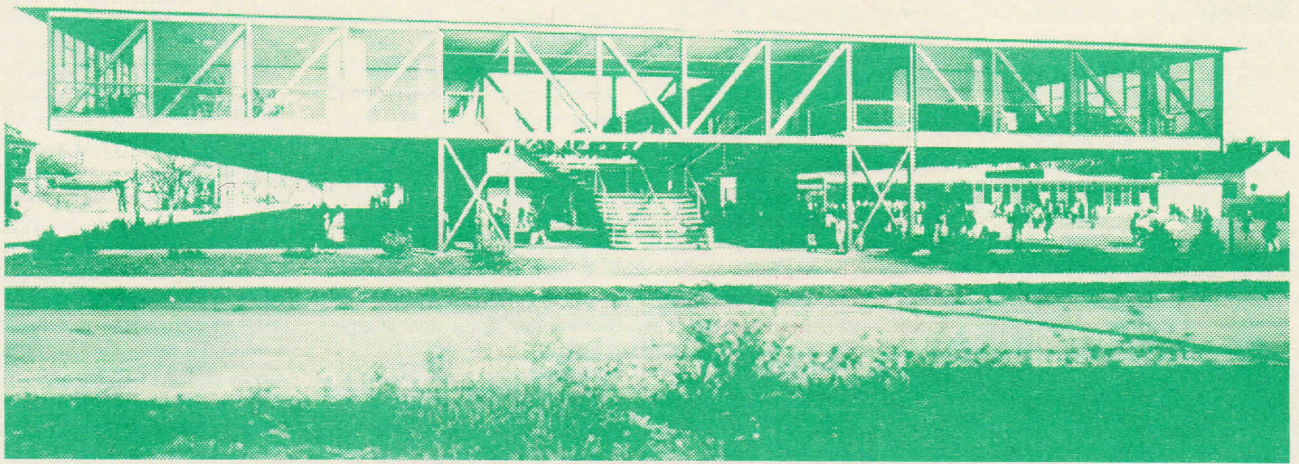
THE DESIGN COMMUNITY WAS UNABLE TO ENGAGE WITH THIS ARCHITECTURE IN POLITICAL OR SOCIAL TERMS, BUT TREATED IT AS IF IN STUDIO: AS A HYPOTHETICAL DESIGN EXERCISE.

Architects avoided the larger context, instinctively opining that architecture is an apolitical art, and arguing for Wheatley as a thing rather than as a place.

Some element of this thinking is embedded in the project itself: how could Charles Colbert have actively supported the status quo of racial segregation if he was not able to approach his architecture as an end in itself?

The design exercise approach in such a politically charged climate failed; the relevant position was ignored, and the building fell. As it turns out, architectural gems mean little to communities suffering from generational neglect.

Gavin Newman is a fifth year architecture student at Tulane.



Above: Phillis Wheatley Elementary School (segregated), New Orleans, Louisiana. Charles R. Colbert, architect: 1954 (demolished 2011).

TWO TALES OF A CITY: A PARADOXICAL IRONY OF EVENTS

"It was the best of times, it was the worst of times, it was the age of wisdom, it was the age of foolishness, it was the epoch of belief, it was the epoch of incredulity... we had everything before us, we had nothing before us..."

CHARLES DICKENS

New Orleans, considered the last bastion of authentic Bohemia in the United States, is waver- ing in blind indecision, uncertain whether it should attempt to retain its "New Orleansness" (becom- ing its own parody) or accept globalization to gradually become a more generic city.

The trajectory leading to this dilemma was established nearly 25 years ago by the World's Fair, which inadvertently embedded in the city's psyche such a power- ful caricature of itself it was only fully revealed as the flood waters receded after Hurricane Katrina.

The collective memory of the 1984 Fair is one of pleasure. How- ever, much like the local cuisine, what tastes best is often the worst for you; an event steeped in nostalgia (timed as it was to co- incide with the centenary of New Orleans' 1894 World's Fair) but a financial disaster (it remains the only Fair to go bankrupt).

While these types of Universal Expositions may be dismissed as short and singular events, they have a strange potential to shape history. Take the 1893 Chicago World's Fair, which instigated the City Beautiful movement, an urban philosophy that argued for monumental grandeur in cities as a tool to promote moral and civic virtue. According to Louis Sullivan, this Fair set the devel- opment of architectural ideas back by 40 years, through its endorsement of neoclassicism. Similarly, the Beijing Olympics and Shanghai World's Fair have increased design and construc- tion quality expectations for local

architects, keeping China's doors open to international offices while legitimising China globally. For New Orleans, it was show- casing the postmodern design of Charles Moore. Popular support for postmodernist architecture as the proper and logical response to building new in an historic city was firmly set in place – though Postmodernism, like all styles, was quickly misunderstood, creat- ing faux historic projects lacking in either Venturi's complexity or Moore's playfulness.

Because the city had to bail out the failed Fair, the following decade saw budgets slashed on recreation, infrastructure, and education. The Modernist build- ings of the 60's and 70's fell into disrepair, crime rates soared, and infrastructural issues were ig- nored as the city's economic focus switched to tourism. When Hurri- cane Katrina struck 20 years after the Fair it washed away the rug under which all of the city's prob- lems had been swept, revealing

all. Since then major investments in education, infrastructure, and new public buildings are being im- plemented across the city. But in a post-World's Fair tourist-centric New Orleans "new" is a dirty word. New doesn't sell like in other cit- ies. The Bilbao Effect doesn't work here; even Gehry's river- front auditorium was stripped of him mid-design, watered down, and eventually demolished.

Unlike the 1812 Battle of New Orleans (at which the Americans defeated the British) the out- come between globalization and the farcical fake old will in either case result in a victory for the outsiders.

Thaddeus Zarse is a professor at Tulane school of Architecture.

Fulcrum returns for another round, taking as its mascot the humble hummingbird. To suggest an issue topic, for back issues or other comments please write to us at the email below. **Ed.**