

Art

New Orleans: Boom or Bust?

By ADA LOUISE HUXTABLE

NEW ORLEANS.
A SMALL, overbought section of the hundred-odd blocks of the French Quarter is about all the tourist ever sees of this remarkable city, except for an occasional foray into the garden district. Fanning out around the Quarter are seemingly endless neighborhoods of uncommon stylistic richness, in various stages of regeneration and decay. The sheer architectural quality here is astounding.

But it is not all as safe and sound as the visitor—lulled by the protected and publicized Vieux Carré—believes. The central business district right next to the Quarter, a treasury of noteworthy structures, is currently fighting for its historical life. Rows of Greek Revival commercial buildings, of the kind New York ruthlessly demolished in lower Manhattan in the 1960's, still stand, often enhanced by the characteristic iron filigree galleries added from the 1850's on. But many are gone and more are being knocked down almost daily—as are the later Italianate, Renaissance and cast-iron structures nearby, that make up the 19th century commercial city.

What has happened is that delayed "development," sparked by the new downtown Superdome, is currently hitting New Orleans like Hurricane Camille. Without the Quarter's legal district protection—incidentally, this is all that has protection in the city except for some National Register listings—the historic commercial area is now being savaged by speculators. The "demolition derby," as it is billed locally, goes on virtually within eyesight of the waiting lines of pilgrims to Antoine's.

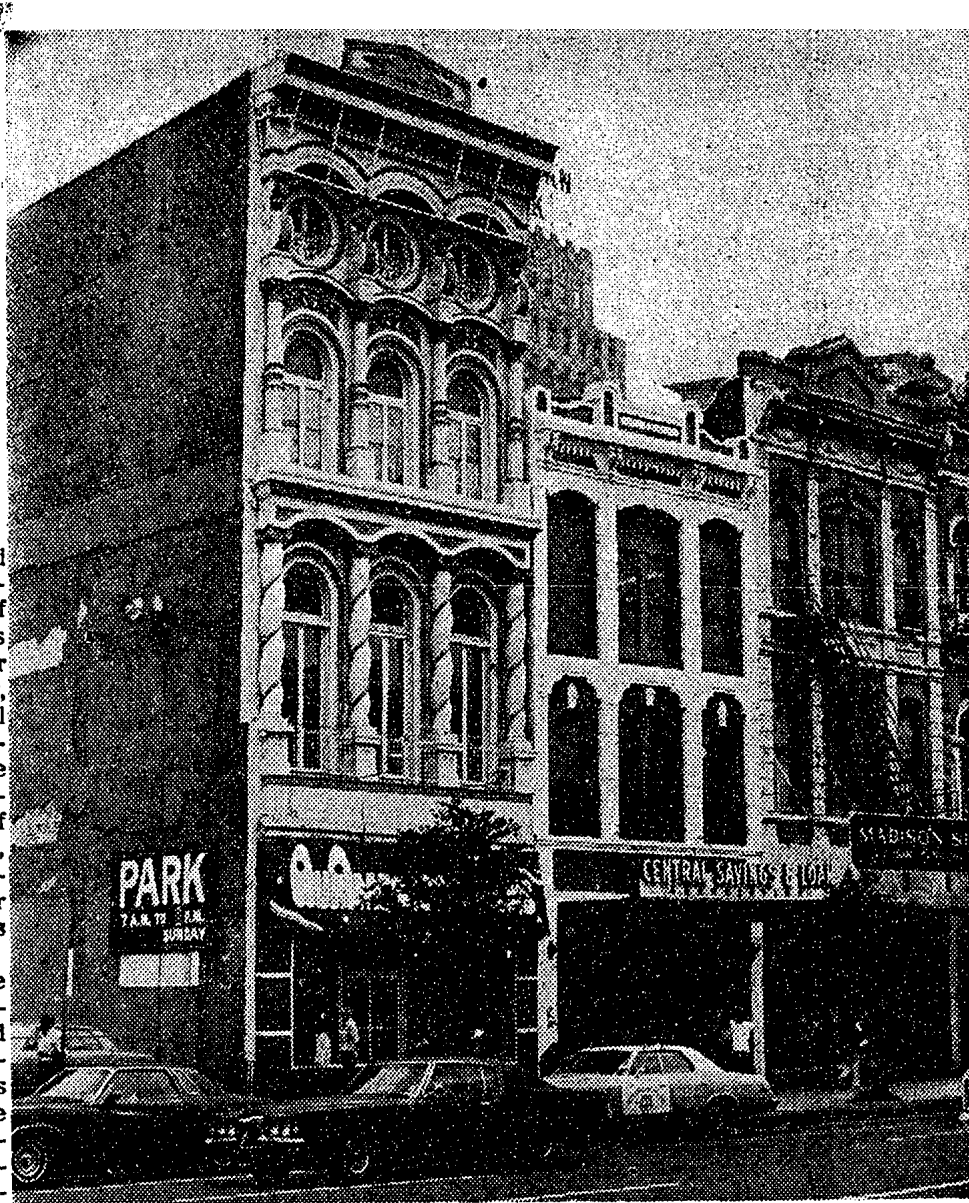
One out of every five buildings that stood in the central business district in 1970 no longer exists. Fifty-five new parking lots have been created, largely through old building demolition, and 42 per cent of the district's land is now either vacant or used for parking. Except along Poydras Avenue, a central artery of the area where the "Manhattanization" of New Orleans is now taking off from the Superdome, building owners seldom have construction plans when they bulldoze and are merely gambling on rising land values.

Currently, a Growth Management Program is being studied by the Philadelphia firm of Wallace, McHarg, Roberts and Todd for City Hall and the Chamber of Commerce. The consultants have already indicated that there is more than enough vacant land to accommodate any future development needs. It is just a step across Canal Street from the Quarter to the gaping holes.

Pending completion of the study, a nine-month moratorium on further demolition has been proposed. When the moratorium hearing was held by the City Council two weeks ago, it drew an immediate and overwhelming rash of before-the-deadline demolition requests from landowners. In a desperate and commendable response, Mayor Moon Landrieu called a special Council meeting and imposed a temporary moratorium on all demolition permits until the formal proposal could be acted upon, which is probably happening as this goes to press. But enough permits had already been granted to blitz some of the best remaining blocks.

Curiously, while this tragic destruction takes place, other New Orleans neighborhoods are being spontaneously salvaged. In-city residential districts, each one a marvelous potpourri of characteristic regional housing styles, are coming back spectacularly. Just beyond the central business district is the lower garden district, a child of the neighboring garden district. Almost every street there seems to be undergoing extensive restoration. The antebellum houses, ranging from modest to quite grand, are mixed with later Victorian houses and industrial and commercial buildings.

The restoration boom is solidly entrenched in New Orleans older residential sec-



Canal Street buildings in New Orleans's business district
Next to the French Quarter, a demolition derby

ions, which seem to go on mile after fascinating mile. The old house revival is due partly to the execrable quality of the city's suburbs and the New Orleanian conviction that New Orleans is a fine place to live.

Success, however, breeds uneasy questions. How does the city propose to keep already mixed neighborhoods integrated as they are up-graded? How does one balance the problematic equilibrium of poor and black displacement against rescue and revival of sound housing stock? Some answers are being sought now in a neighborhood conservation study by the New Orleans firm of Curtis and Davis.

On the other side of the French Quarter are two very old districts as fascinating as the Quarter itself, but without any of the creeping preservation sickness. In Tremé, to the northwest, and Marigny, to the east, buildings range from the oldest house type, the dormered creole cottage, to the raised cottage and the post-Civil War "shotgun" dwelling (railroad plan flat) with limitless lacy filigree and brackets. Then there are the long avenues, such as the incomparable Magazine Street, with its vital commercial mix in modest structures sometimes arcaded or galleried for the length of a block or more, and Tchoupitoulas, with its miles of cotton and other warehouses along the river. And there are also, of course, St. Charles, where the streetcar has been placed on the National Register, and Esplanade, and farther afield, Bayou St. John.

The tourist sees little of all this unless he has city-proud friends or family. New Orleans as a whole can only be sampled in the average visit; it cannot be fully seen or savored in weeks, months, or even years.

And so New Orleans is not at all what it seems from the souvenir shops of the

Quarter's Chartres Street or the antique snops along Royale (moving out to Magazine as the fashionable rents get too high) — but something vaster, more complex, and infinitely more varied and real.

Not that the Quarter isn't real; its charm is just somewhat glossed. It is a rare and genuine slice of cultural and urban history. But at this moment there is some recognizable handwriting on the wall. It is more than the commercial veneer of tourism. The Morning Call — traditional home of French corsets and beignets for generations — has left to move to an improbable suburban imitation called, equally improbably, Fat City. The open French Market is being prettily glassed in to house still more candle shops. There has been such a rash of hotel construction—the real Trojan horse within the gates—that new ones are no longer allowed to be built in the Quarter, although they can still be assembled out of old blocks.

With hindsight it is obvious that hotels should never have been added to the Vieux Carré or even placed at its immediate edge, as witness the visual bomb of the new monster highrise Marriott. The city's mistake has been in treating the area primarily as a business bonanza rather than as an environmental trust, something not achieved automatically or guaranteed by esthetic restrictions. It would draw tourism just as profitably without building it in. There are more ways to destroy than with the bulldozer.

But this is quibbling in the face of the demolition crisis in the adjoining business district. The new skyscrapers do little to curb one's distress. One Shell Square, a properly pristine tower by Skidmore, Owings and Merrill, must be credited with the unlikely achievement of looking totally deserted day

or night. There is no visible life behind its obscure, dark glass windows or on its equally blank and torridly formal stepped plaza, graced only occasionally by a casual wino.

Philip Johnson and John Burgee are scheduled for another highrise directly next to it on Poydras Street—already being called Park Avenue—the Pan American Life insurance building. Considering the sensitive urban and esthetic nature of their recent work that sounds promising, but it is less promising when one realizes that the architect and the client have knowingly destroyed one of New Orleans's irreplaceable "alleys" at the rear of the site, in spite of local pleas to save it, with the intention of "replacement" street level activity. For those who have walked the intimate alleys with their humanly scaled old structures there is no replacement for the real thing, even in the most suave big-city style.

Beyond that, there are the conventional horrors: a Hyatt House supercomplex scheduled to tie in with the Superdome; a 56-story office building and hotel grouping to zoom past everything just announced for the site of the historic and handsome St. Charles Hotel, currently being demolished. It is possible under existing zoning to build a larger structure on an equivalent piece of land than is permitted in Manhattan right now and someone is obviously about to do it in a no-win game of can you top this. The sad irony is that recent technical innovations have made the sky the limit in spite of marshy soil.

What price New Orleans? Only a few hundred million in local, Texas and other investment dollars. States-Item reporter and columnist Jack Davis has raised the critical question. Does anyone really have the right to destroy a city because he owns the land it stands on?