

The Luxury of Languor

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The present economy, culture, and built environment of the United States rely on efficiency and speed. The primary gage of the commodity of Time is its acceleration. The spaces we construct reflect that pace; strip malls, drive-thru windows, parking lots, and freeways. Speed spaces such as these have become the public spaces of America. As the pace of the American lifestyle increases, so does the need for temporary escapes into the opposite. People save money and accrue vacation time for the momentary opportunity to travel and experience a languid cultural landscape. In the tourism industry of Southern Louisiana, like other areas of cultural and infrastructural uniqueness, the built environment is essential to this escape. "It's buildings that give cities their identity, especially in New Orleans."¹ The area finds itself in a contemporary contradiction of preserving and promoting its 'languid spaces' of tourism within an atmosphere of convenient and immediate speed. One of the greatest commodities of the lower Mississippi river valley, from Natchez to New Orleans, is its built environment and the perceived cultural meaning that this environment holds for those who live outside of it.

Retaining and providing access to an idea of 'languid space' is one of South Louisiana's major economic products, ranked the sixth largest tourist economy in the United States. (It employs over 87,000 workers and generates 5.2 billion dollars per annum). Retained and re-used architecture of the area creates 'languid space' and it is evident at many scales. The most apparent scale is that of New Orleans and its buildings. It is a city known primarily as a tourist destination of languid escapism, even though it contains the United States' third largest port. It is the access point to four of the eleven largest U.S. ports (in foreign commerce tonnage) and they handle more than 457 million tons of U.S. waterborne commerce a year, including nearly half of all American grain exports. In its scale, style, and planning, one witnesses a direct contrast to the

normative commodity of convenience and capitalism found throughout most of the United States. Immediately adjacent to New Orleans' urban scale slowness, one finds 'languid space' at a smaller scale along the Scenic Byways. The Mississippi river, the small towns, and the singular spaces of plantations frame these routes and contribute to the region's spatial slowness. North to Natchez, these remaining restored places stand as symbols of a slower time and of languid human interaction without the distractions of modern speed.

For this paper, we define Southern Louisiana's 'languid spaces' by their differences from what is seen as the American norm. If the efficiencies in communication, convenience, and accelerated obsolescence define normative American space, then the opposite; the inefficiencies, define unique 'languid space'. Inefficiencies in communication are mostly spatial and historic: porches, porticos, and plazas. These tangible places encourage inefficient human interaction (chatting, lounging, and strolling). Inefficiencies in spatial convenience decrease acceleration: pedestrian districts, meandering byways, and tree-lined, residential thoroughfares. They encourage and sometimes force one to stop and observe. Delayed obsolescence has value in a 'languid space'. We measure the value of these spaces by the difference from what is progressive. Thusly, the older, less conformable and least similar spaces increase in value and define a 'languid space'. Through advertising, historic example, movies, books, and television commercials, the idea of languid space also increases in value and has become as important as the space itself. People are drawn to the area through promises like this byline of something other: "The small roads that traverse the countryside from Natchez to New Orleans offer access to small town America . . . charming towns and villages which still celebrate a style of life that has become increasingly elusive for many of us."²

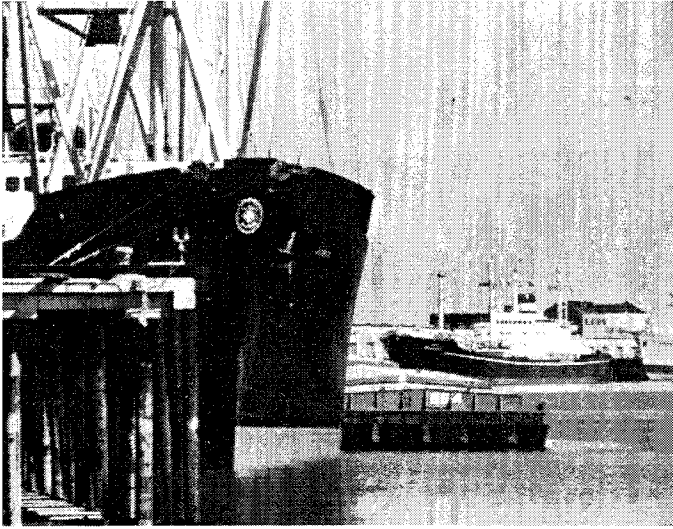


Fig. 1. Port of New Orleans.

Southern Louisiana very efficiently and progressively caters, exaggerates, and protects both the idea and the reality of its greatest commodity: 'languid space' as an alternative to the normative. With little economic motive to modernize from the end of the civil war to the mid-20th century, there was no need to demolish the built fabric. For example, as of March 2000, 30% of Louisiana's residential structures pre-date 1950. This built spatial slowness coexists in the midst of highly evolved port/factory economy and tourism remains the primary perceived commodity of the area. This leads to the contemporary contradiction Southern Louisiana relies on: maintaining its obsolescence in order to remain viable as the alternative. Tourists flock to experience a 'languid space'. They do so, however, within such short periods of time and with such vigor, they usually only experience an idea of space, a flattened visual reference (the post card experience). The main goal seems to be a proof-of-attendance or the post card, t-shirt, and coffee mug that serve as a memory of attendance this unique space. Rarely will they experience the inefficiencies and slow value of the space that drew them there initially.

Because the value of the 'languid space' is both perceived and actual, Kevin Lynch's notions of how we come to understand our position within space becomes important. 'Imageability', or the quality of a physical environment that gives it a high probability of evoking a strong image in the mind, is essential in to understanding the value a built environment has on the escapist 'languid space'. Because of this significance in understanding and nomenclature, we will now briefly examine three examples of Lynch's elements of imageability in relation to the languid spaces of tourism of Southern Louisiana: paths, and districts/landmarks. For the purpose of this study, we will discuss them in terms of their physical space, use, and cultural meaning. Each space exists as a complex overlay/compression between the artifacts of a languid space and the contemporary efficient condition of speed space.

PATHS: Urban and Rural

Two of the most identifiable paths of the area are the urban St Charles Avenue in New Orleans, and the rural River Road. The 'languid space' of St. Charles Avenue is composed of the inefficient and obsolescent overlay of uses and scales. It is a thoroughfare for cars; it is a corridor for the outdated, slow, unreliable public transportation of the electric trolleys; it is a walking, running, bicycle path. Connecting uptown to downtown, it is both a linear public park and an important thoroughfare for the city. The use of St. Charles is all of these, and not much has changed from its intended use. The cultural meaning has also remained consistent, but a critical balance has changed. Now, the visitors, who have always come to St. Charles to view the elaborate homes of the social elite under a canopy of live oaks, view it as an artifact in a museum. The experience is singular and linear. The real urban value is not a concern nor

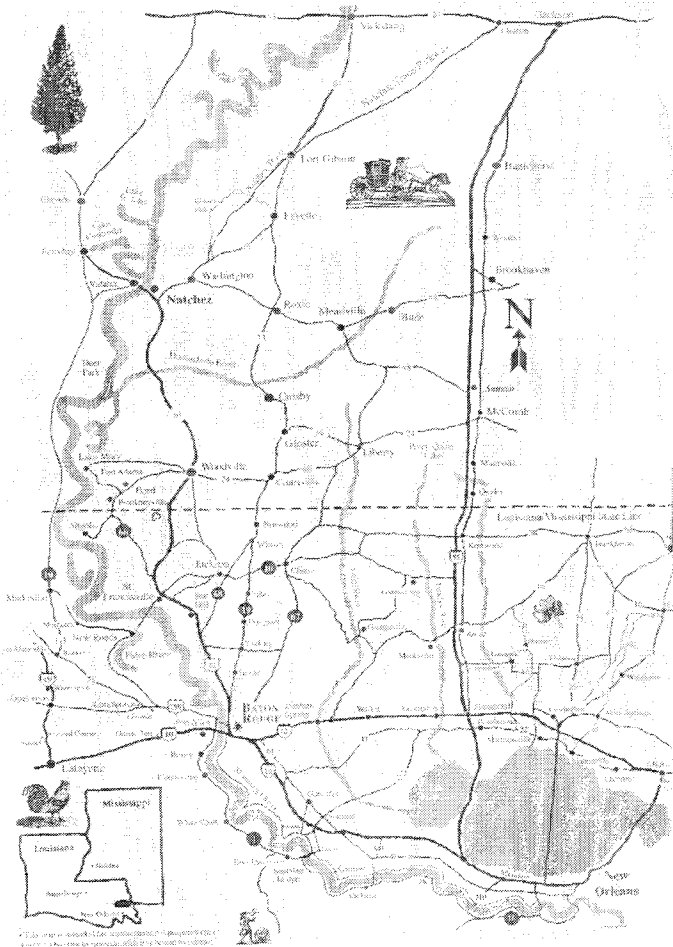


Fig. 2. Country Roads Map.

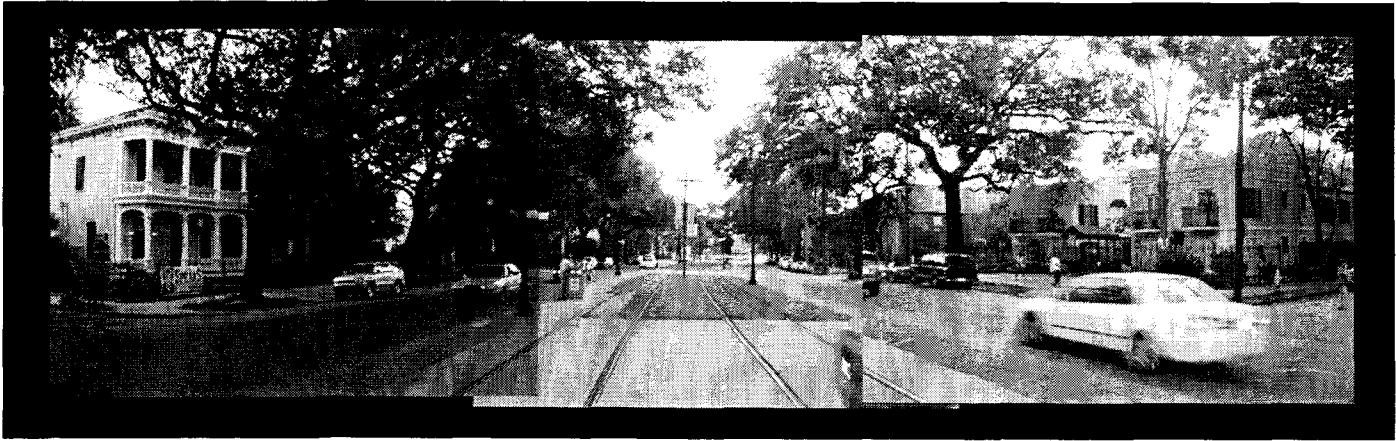


Fig. 3. St. Charles Avenue.

of value. The visitor measures the avenue's value as a forty-five minute surface tour for one dollar, not a well-established thriving urban thoroughfare.

"There was a grand feel of luxury about the streetcar. Not only was it constructed of much better material, mahogany seats, stout leather straps, solid hunks of steel, than any form of public transportation put together in the past 50 years, and not only did you pass block after block of mansions oozing romance and old prosperity, but also the ride was slow as summer."³

Another identifiable path, the River Road, is a rural languid space that has changed more dramatically from its initial condition. What was originally an efficient, modern connector of economic centers to the river, ports, and cities, Interstate 10 and several high clearance bridges over the river has replaced. The River Road's value as a 'languid space' comes now from its obsolescence. One must drive slowly through the tight curves, caught in the fixed space between the Mississippi River Levy on

one side and chemical plants and sugar cane fields on the other. Only at occasional moments does one come across a small town or remaining plantation home. The River Road may still physically link the modern chemical plants and serve as access for the vital upkeep of the levy, its meaning as a 'languid space' now occurs in segments because of the alternate routes that have replaced it. Its main use is the idea or image, not as a vital contemporary space. One can now very efficiently exit the freeway, drive a short distance along the river at an inefficient pace, tour a plantation, drive through a small town, eat a good meal, and then efficiently return to I-10.

DISTRICTS/LANDMARKS: Urban

Along each of these paths exist districts and landmarks that identify what have now become, through historical use and the international advertising of a highly developed tourism industry, the ubiquitous 'languid spaces' of escape. The French Quarter in New Orleans, specifically Bourbon Street and

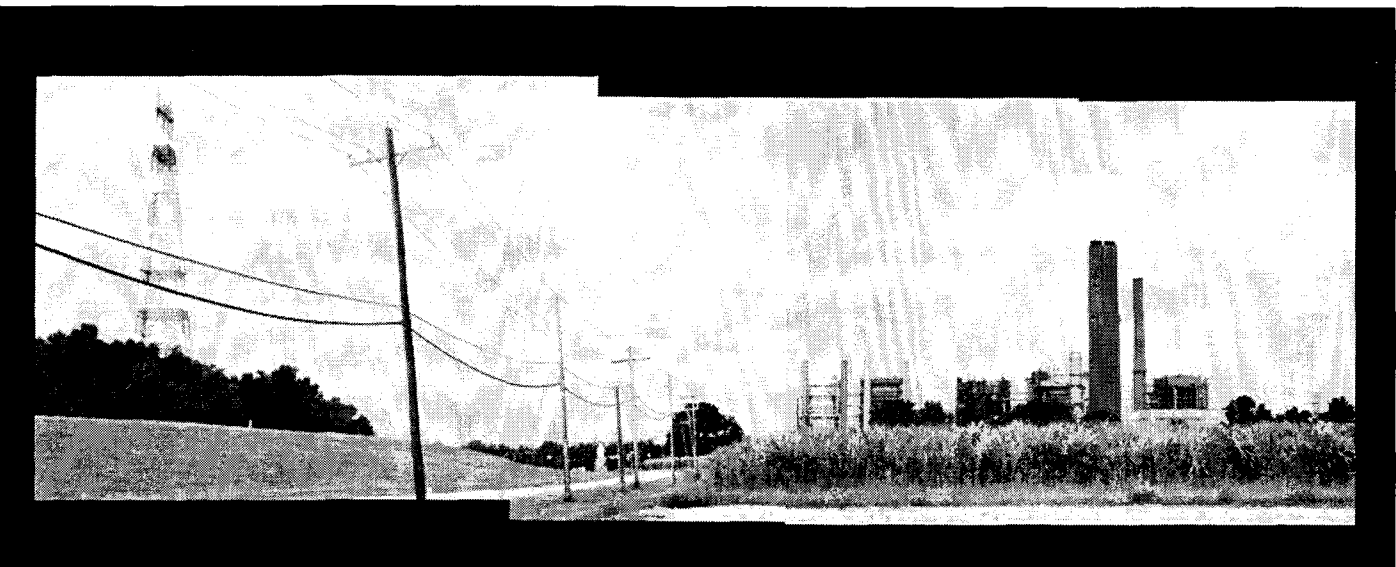


Fig. 4. Cane/Factory on the River Road.

Jackson Square, are simultaneously actual examples of 'languid space' and intense co-modifications of the idea or image. The commodity is reliant on an actual built space, but the commodity has become primary. The outside perception of these spaces holds their value. Bourbon Street has remained constant in its space, use, and cultural meaning. It is still a dense space of multiple levels of social interaction. Its use is still a place for celebration and release dependant on support spaces. Historically those support spaces were the port, city homes of country farmers, and transient housing of the city. Now those support spaces are exponentially larger, more efficient, and convenient. The New Orleans Convention center brings in 1.5 million people annually. The volume and intensity of Bourbon Street has also grown exponentially so that the idea of the 'Bourbon Street Experience' is paramount to those that occupy the space. The idea of a night on Bourbon Street has surpassed the actual experience. Both the idea and the experience however, rely on the physical space that has been preserved and re-adapted for the new reality. The proof-of-attendance shops (t-shirts, coffee mugs, etc) have become a primary program, now rivaling the bars and strip joints of the streets in leased square footage.

On the other hand, the tourism industry and contemporary speed space has changed the use and cultural meaning of Jackson Square. Any plaza is a rare space in the United States in both its physical form and contemporary vitality and use. Based on the Law of the Indies with church, government, and commercial buildings occupying the sides of a central open square. Jackson Square once acted as the town center. During the week, it served as a civic meeting place, the spatial town bulletin. On the weekends, it acted as a market and social promenade. Now that these spaces are no longer required to inform and celebrate information exchange on a daily basis, the plaza's use and cultural meaning has been transformed. The contemporary reality of use and meaning is still exchange, but the exchange has changed. Experiential value is no longer essential or valuable for society, politics, and commerce. Instead, like Bourbon Street, the post-card view is primary and the exchange is a proof of attendance. One now goes to the plaza to view a street performer, take a photograph, and then move on. Like all of the 'languid spaces' of southern Louisiana, the idea has become primary: the experience secondary. Very few locals, if any, does one find in Jackson Square. The primary change in the physical space of the plaza is a telling addition to the classic plaza formed by the Law of the Indies. What was once an open side on the square to the river is now a tourist information exchange and snapshot platform. Access to 'river walk', trolley tours, and boats to the aquarium and zoo now dominate the riverside of the plaza. Jackson Square is a prime example of the value of a 'languid space' in today's society. It still exemplifies the spatial inefficiencies of a plaza and demonstrates the tangible contradictions required for a 'languid space' of tourism.



Fig. 5. T-Shirt Shack on Bourbon.



Fig. 6. Jackson Square.

DISTRICTS/LANDMARKS: Rural

The same contradictions in the conditions of adaptive re-use and adaptive re-meaning can be seen in the rural 'languid



Fig. 7. Bocage Plantation.

spaces' of tourism. Plantation sites along the river road may have experienced the greatest change in their use, meaning, and space. "Their self-sufficiency seems strange today, when distance is so easily bridged; but in those days the houses were remote indeed. Some of them stood a day's long journey from the nearest town."⁴ Originally centers of economic and cultural exchange, they acted as the rural versions of Jackson Square. Now House Museums, the remaining grand homes and few support buildings provide an extremely limited vantage into the spatial and cultural space of a working rural factory and social center. Their value still relies on their spatial characteristics. The plantation's remote and infrequent locations along the Mississippi continue to accurately provide an experience of a slower, non-connected, self-reliant space as a comparative escape from the norm. The hierarchies of spaces, formal to informal and public to private also provide an example not seen in today's non-hierarchical architecture of instant total access and convenience. They are artifacts of the formal public façade whose vestiges remain in the public access faces of strip malls and box stores. These porches, however, are spatial, not merely a flat sign located on the street façade, much like plazas are spatial artifacts whose vestiges can still be seen in food courts and parking lots. The porches provide the public threshold to the ground floor, which consists of the social gathering spaces: ballrooms, parlors, and grand dining rooms. These over-scaled

interior rooms coupled with the deep, occupied facades are unique. They give the spaces value in the escapist, tourism economy. To continue the illusion we are expected to ignore the contemporary extended landscape for history has removed the vast, exterior support spaces of fields, docks, barns, slave, and workers quarters. Chemical factories, large corporate fields, and suburban developments now occupy the once essential, extended landscape spaces of plantations. Like the entire remaining valuable 'languid spaces' of Louisiana, the plantation houses survived originally through inattention and lack of better economic alternatives. Now they exist as an asset because of their low availability to the rest of the country.

The small towns along the River Road exemplify some of the last 'languid spaces' that the tourist industry has not transformed. They continue to operate in much the same inefficient and isolated manner that they originated. The towns along the river between New Orleans and Natchez were originally local centers for the Plantation culture outside of the three larger cities. Free plantation workforce lived in these towns and a commercial center formed to serve the immediate area. Now, the workers are employed mostly at the chemical factories (the contemporary plantation crop), but the towns serve the same function. The towns about the river levy with low-density

residential blocks adjacent to denser commercial streets with shaded sidewalks and they still mostly serve the local population. They have not been incorporated yet into the tourist economy through the overlay of efficiency and convenience. The exceptions are few. One is the recent opening of high-end Cajun/Creole restaurants with bed and breakfasts. Most notable is Lafitte's Landing operated by one of southern Louisiana's most famous gourmet chefs, John Folse. This restaurant's prices and cuisine are well above the scale that the small community population should support. Again, "access to small town America"²² in conjunction with the lure of 'authentic' or high-end cuisine lures visitors to the place with the promise of the opposite of what they experience in their daily environment.

CONCLUSION

To further substantiate Southern Louisiana's built environment is not just a time capsule of artifacts from a slower time, but a complex overlap and collision of the speed and slow, one must only look to the new hybrid building of the area, Harrah's Casino in downtown New Orleans. This archetype of spatial escapism, replication, and efficient captured audience is famil-

iar and can be seen at its purest in Las Vegas. A compression of languid and speed space can be seen in Las Vegas and any other tourist area that originated for those who journey for pleasure. The difference in areas such as Southern Louisiana is the existence and re-established meaning of the original artifacts. True, Harrah's Casino is a modern American casino. Its program and spaces perform in the same complex manner as the newest and most contemporary Las Vegas Casino. Harrah's in New Orleans is unique because of its adjacency to the original artifact. One can find spatial replicas of the canyons of New York and the canals of Venice in Las Vegas. However, the Las Vegas replications are far removed from the originals. One could visit the Vegas Venice and never have seen the original. This is not possible in New Orleans. One experiences Harrah's flattened imitation of the French Quarter within the view of the spatial original. Couple this with the contemporary condition of the French Quarter, itself a contemporary flattened experience of its original spatial, and the contradictions/overlays/ironies of the new languid space are enormous.

The New York Historian, Kenneth Jackson, at a lecture given at the College of Art and Design at Louisiana State University, concluded his lecture regarding New Orleans by drawing comparisons between modern day New Orleans to turn of the

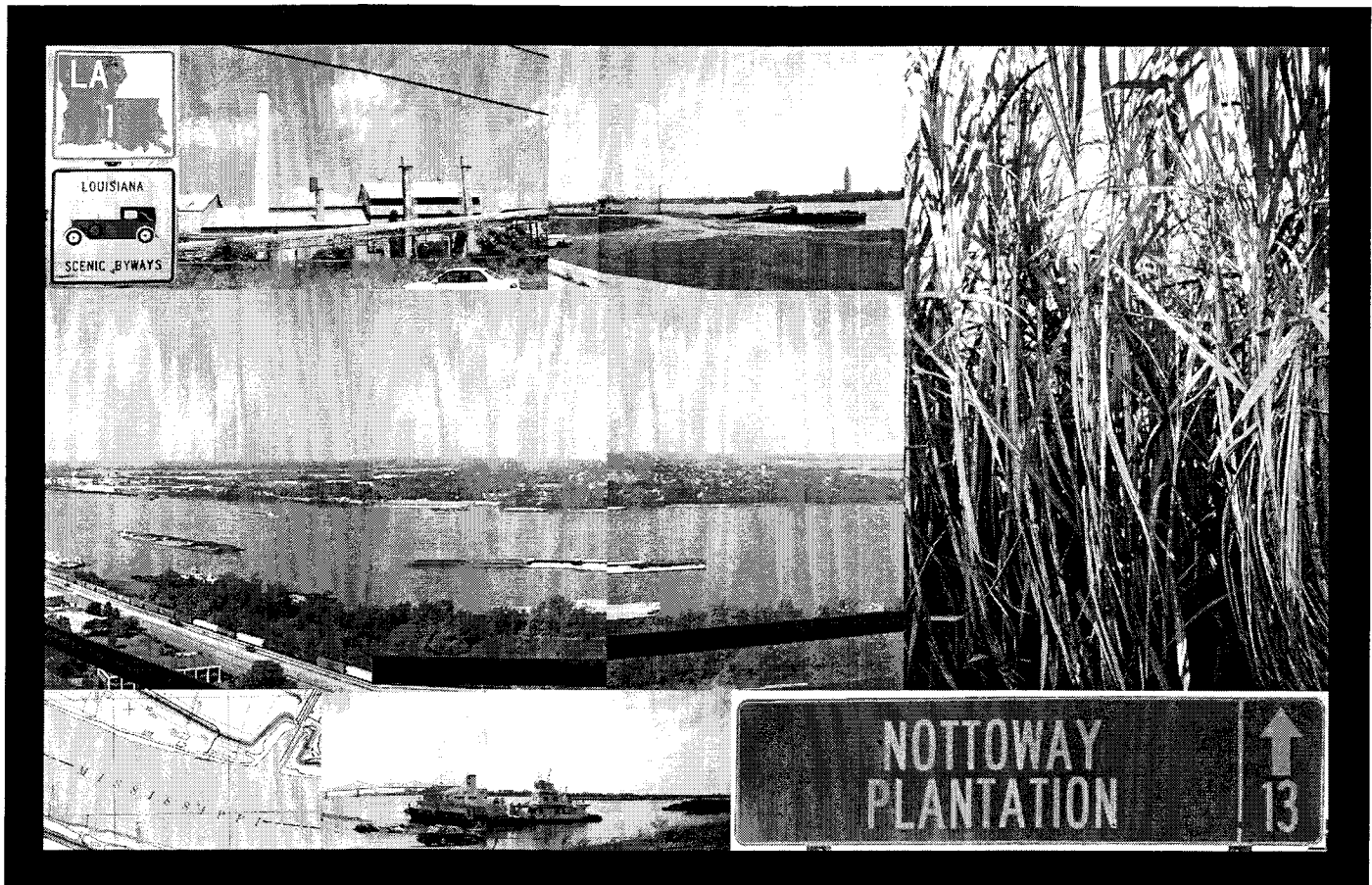


Fig. 8. Louisiana.

century Venice, Italy. He asked the question whether or not New Orleans had given up its role as a vital progressive urban environment, or if, like Venice, it had become an artifact frozen in time, valued only as a past thing. Many similarities exist between the two cities regarding the value of architecture, urbanism, and space within its economic viability as something other. However, New Orleans and Southern Louisiana differ from other historic tourism centers like Venice, Italy. That difference exists in the vast compression and complexities of space, economy, time, culture, and tourism. The overlay of inefficiencies and efficiencies and of inconvenience and convenience seem to demand a unique hybrid building like Harrah's Casino. It is a tourism space that replicates a re-use and re-interpreted original only blocks away. It is a contemporary architecture that relies on imitation. This same notion of compression allows the chemical plants to hold the same economic positions within their rural landscapes that their neighboring Plantation Homes once did, seemingly without conflict. The homes exist now as museums of what was once an efficient culture, but now is outdated. Southern Louisiana has kept its architectural detritus. It is not in a zone or area separated from modernity. This detritus is its own unique progressiveness reliant on ideas of regression. The two co-exist simultaneously. It is not a simplified and sanitized version of entertainment (Disneyland) or a regressive capsule of the past (Williamsburg, Virginia), or a vibrant contemporary cultural and economic center (New York, Chicago). It is partly all of these, and not really any of them.

"Art requires a delicate adjustment of the outer and inner worlds in such a way that, without changing their nature, they can be seen through each other. To know oneself is to know one's region. It is also to know the world, and it is also, paradoxically, a form of exile from that world."⁵ This investigation into notions regarding the complexities of space, economy, time, culture, and tourism, stems from a desire to teach and practice relevant architecture in Southern Louisiana. Southern Louisiana presents a unique microcosm of the conditions found in contemporary global environment. Its 'languid space' is a speed space that capitalizes on the idea and the experience of the regressive. Its built environment consists simultaneously of adaptive reuse, preservation, contemporary industry and replication. It is landlocked by the Mississippi River, the Gulf, the Atchafalaya Basin, Lake Pontchartrain, and the numerous swamps, rivers, and bayous. The compression and overlay of

these infinite influences and their lack of clear hierarchy epitomizes the contemporary "culture of congestion".⁶ If we are to contribute to the built environment and cultural identity of Southern Louisiana (or anywhere), it is necessary we understand the constant influences of everything and nothing at all. To understand oneself and environment is dependent on these influences vying for relevance. The process is fluid, dynamic, and non-hierarchical. In a time when hierarchies are fluid, should not the practices and pedagogies that attempt to translate them into the built environment be fluid as well?

We ask ourselves these questions.

Can a contemporary practice be critical and/or relevant within the "culture of congestion", specifically a viable languid space?

What type of practice can relevantly negotiate in any of the infinite unique landscapes?

Can it be simultaneously local and global?

NOTES

- ¹ Whitehead, Ingrid. "Patricia Gay: Working Hard for preservation in the Big Easy." *Architecture Record* (08.02): 256
- ² Fox-Smith, James. "Country Roads Area Map," *Country Roads Magazine* (every issue)
- ³ Dunbar, Tony. *City of Beads*. New York: G.P. Putnam's Sons, 1995
- ⁴ Saxon, Lyle. *Old Louisiana*. Gretna, LA: Pelican Publishing Company, 1998.
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- ⁶ Koolhaas, Rem. *delirious new york*. New York: Monacelli Press, 1994.

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4. www.metrovision.org/table4-6.htm/table4-90.htm
5. www.lded.state.la.us
6. www.census.gov/epcd/susb/2000/la/LA-.htm