

Supersaturated Solution—A Suspended Tourist Landscape

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“Southern Louisiana exists in its present form because the Mississippi River has jumped here and there within an arc about two hundred miles wide, like a pianist playing with one hand—frequently and radically changing course, surging over the left or right bank to go off in utterly new directions.” (I—John McPhee)

We believe the distinct tourist landscape of Southern Louisiana is reaching super saturation. It is not identified by the promotion of a singular or condensed character. Tourism here gains value through the suspension of numerous heterologous

characteristics that vie for importance in the solution. They are held in supersaturated suspension, on the verge, but never singly precipitating. Each is understood only through comparison to the others, and simultaneously, none change the essential nature of each other. This distinct heterologous solution describes the tourist landscape of Southern Louisiana, which in turn describes the overall landscape. It consists of many opportunities for tourism. Ecological, Cultural, and Hedonistic tourisms combine to create a hybrid that is greater than the separate parts. Any single characteristic would be sufficiently distinct at most sites of tourism, but here they



satellite image — 'terra-viscus'



combine to create a super saturation of opportunities. These observations into notions regarding the complexities and super saturation of a tourist landscape stems from a desire to teach and practice relevant architecture in Southern Louisiana. We ask ourselves; if the distinct landscape provides unique tourist experiences cannot it also provide unique opportunities to construct? What can we observe from the multiple characteristics and their suspensions to give us vantage for an appropriate contemporary architecture?

Southern Louisiana's geographical and cultural setting is a 'terra viscus': a super-saturated soil, one that is never completely solid or liquid, one that is never in stasis but in a continuous state of being made and being removed. This 'terra viscus' provides a unique medium for tourism for it is able to hold in suspension numerous and seemingly contradictory tours. If the value of a tourist economy is to provide an alternate, or other experience from the norm, Southern Louisiana has great value. 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 distinct and increasingly elusive landscape. *"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-James Fox-Smith) One of the greatest commodities of the lower Mississippi river valley, from Natchez to New Orleans, is its distinction from the normative.

ECO-TOUR

Although not universally recognized, the basis of tourism in Southern Louisiana is 'Eco-tourism'. It is the most closely aligned with the 'terra-viscus' condition. An ecological tourist must engage the peculiarities of an intense environmental condition. Usually eco-tourism thrives as a singular focus, because other tourisms would have spoiled and erased the unique condition. In the rain forests of Costa Rica, a pure eco-tourism might be found. In an area that was historically outside of the major cultures of the Americas, there remains a virgin

rain forest. Neither Aztecs from the north nor Incas from the south had strongholds in the area. If they had, it would have destroyed the ecology. Southern Louisiana through necessity, however, has kept vestiges of its unique ecology throughout its development.

Even without people, history, culture, and requisite development, the lower Mississippi River Valley and Atchafalaya Basin is a distinct viable eco-tourist site. It is landlocked by the Mississippi River, the Gulf, the Atchafalaya Basin, Lake Pontchartrain, and numerous swamps, rivers, and bayous. The hot-humid climate coupled with the rivers and swamps facilitates flora and fauna found in few places throughout the world. It is an ecology caught between tropical and temperate. Because it straddles the continental shelf, it is affected by, and changes according to, the tropical weather patterns. It also occupies a brackish condition of sea and fresh water and is affected by the tidal pulls of the gulf. Tourists, and especially eco-tourists, come to see this unique condition found in only a few locations in the world. One hundred plus year old Cypress and live oaks trees, alligators, nutria, spoonbills, egrets, etc inhabiting their swamps are the value in this tourist landscape.

Southern Louisiana retains this ecology in the midst of human development for many reasons. The primary is out of necessity. The U.S. must control the water and flood plains of this area for the safety and economy of all those who live upriver; almost half of the U.S. Through massive infrastructure of levies, locks, and spillways, predictable terra firma has been made, and industry has grown along the entire Mississippi River watershed. In Southern Louisiana, what is inside and what is outside this infrastructure is unclear. We have walled in and made predictable the constantly variant 'terra-viscus'. The Atchafalaya Basin is now a finite area, allowed to continue as a distinct ecology, and clearly defined. It is as predictable as an exit sign on Interstate 10. Tourists know where to find it, and they know where they can find relief from it. The results of this control are greater than can be discussed in this paper, but for now the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers have ironically preserved the unique ecology. Eventually, the result will be a complete loss. Without the natural cycle of undefined silting and removal, we can now predict what land is being made and what is disappearing. Inside the levies, land is being made, and outside, without the

constant supply of silting, land is disappearing. Where humans are expected to be, land is disappearing. In the areas walled off like an ecological zoo for our viewing, land is being made, the water level is dropping, and the ecology is dying.

These observations of a human controlled, infrastructure defined, framed ecology begin to dictate certain architectural approaches. One can never view Southern Louisiana's landscape as in stasis. Any constructed contribution must find a means with which to attach and must also accept a temporal occupation. One must accept 'terra viscus' both physically and psychologically as a given and yet, at the same time, provide for continued occupation. Within this climate of extreme natural growth and decay, the constructed landscape must fight for its existence. The vantage of understanding this contrary eco-tour of preservation and ruin is requisite for the creation of contemporary architecture. Anything added to Southern Louisiana's landscape must suspend itself within the supersaturated condition of the 'terra viscus'.

CULTURAL TOUR

The human controlled, infrastructure defined, framed ecology could singly retain sufficient distinction to qualify as a tourist site, or ecological other. Alligator Bayou Swamp, Jean Lafitte State Park, Grand Isle, Avery Island (home of Tabasco), Atchafalaya Houseboats, and the Lake Martin Bird Sanctuary name just a few of the available eco-tours. However, like all aspects of Southern Louisiana, the singular eco-tourism never precipitates to act as an individual character. Instead, it is always held in suspension. It is always relative to cultural, historical, and hedonistic tourist value systems. Thus, a second reason Southern Louisiana retains its ecology depends on culture and history. The major culture to occupy the basin is the Cajun, or French Acadians, forced to live in this inhospitable land because of political expulsion. They were and are a pragmatic, fishing and farming culture from Nova Scotia. They adapted to the ecology, and made it essential to their culture. *'The Cajun's culture is this evolving heritage of resistance, an Acadian flow "willing to constantly reinvent and renegotiate their cultural affairs on their own terms."* (5 – Anuradha Mathur

and Dilip da Cunha) Activities identified with the Cajun Culture, shrimping, crawfishing, trapping, and rice farming, all depend specifically on the distinct ecology: a hot, humid, 'terra-viscus'.

The Cajun Culture, along with French Creole Culture are directly aligned with the ecology, but in themselves create the most visible tourism of the area: Cultural Tourism. A cultural tourist must engage the customary artifacts and activities of a distinct, identifiable social group. Easily identifiable cultural tourist sites usually relate to dead cultures, or are focused on a specific time-period when a culture thrived. In their purest homogeneous form, they are Anthropological sites defined in a static museum setting. The ruins of Pre-Historic cultures such as Teotihuacan and Chaco Canyon exemplify this condition. Even 'living history' sites such as Williamsburg Virginia rely on a recreation of a past cultural condition. Southern Louisiana does offer these opportunities, but in a limited manner. The areas of human inhabitation are so limited by the above-mentioned eco-infrastructure that most artifacts and activities have evolved over time. Their evolution, however, has remained distinct enough that they remain viable as tourist sites.

The French Creole and multinational influences at New Orleans offer some the most condensed examples of artifacts and activities. The activities are well known and culturally distinct. Mardi Gras, Voodoo, street café -culture, levy bonfires, and Epicureanism attract millions each year. These events are not dead, they are simultaneously historic and modern. The resident and the tourist both engage in, and find importance in, these activities even though their participation originates from opposite ends, internal and external. The artifacts establish and frame these activities. They exist at three major scales: The urban, the agrarian, and the rural. Like all other conditions of tourism in Southern Louisiana, the cultural artifacts and activities are held in suspension through the geological medium of 'terra viscus.' The urban, New Orleans, gains its density through the hardships of creating land below sea level (minus six feet.) The agrarian plantation structure of arpent measure (the French long lot) is a direct response to access to the navigable waterways. The rural Cajun structure exists as a field occupation of the 'terra viscus' itself.



Urban Artifacts

"It's buildings that give cities their identity, especially in New Orleans."(6-Ingrid Whitehead)

The French Quarter exemplifies an urban cultural artifact, specifically Bourbon Street and Jackson Square. They are simultaneously actual examples of cultural artifacts and intense commodifications of the idea or image for cultural tourists. The tourism is reliant on an actual built space, but the commodity has become the primary tour. The outside perception of these spaces holds their value. Bourbon Street is a dense space of multiple levels of social interaction. Its use is 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.

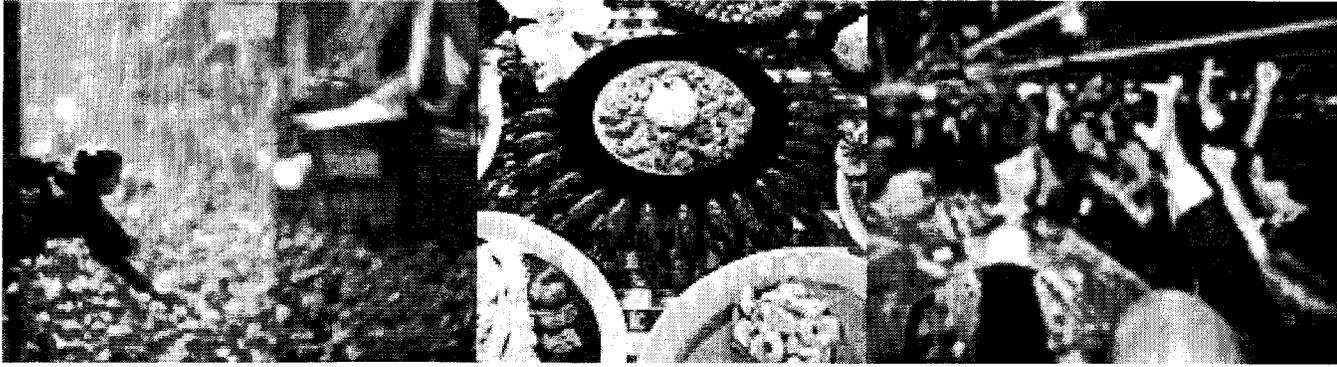
Jackson Square, or any plaza, is a rare space in the United States in both its physical form and its contemporary vitality and use. Based on the Law of the Indies with church, government, and commercial buildings occupying the sides of a central open square, Jackson Square once acted as the town center. 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 to 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. A cultural tourist now goes to the plaza to view a street performer, take a photograph, and then move on. Jackson Square is a prime example of the value of a cultural tourist artifact in today's society. These urban examples of cultural tourist sites retain their value only through their direct reliance on the 'terra-viscus' and the infrastructure it requires. It is a closed system: water pumps constantly work to keep the city from filling up with water, and levies hold the river as a separate entity as the river flows through New Orleans like a sewer line. The ecology cannot be denied or ignored relative to the cultural tourist value. Together the cultural and eco-tourist opportunities are held in suspension by necessity. Each retains their singular

value, but together they offer another super saturated tourist opportunity.

Agrarian Artifacts

"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." (7-Lyle Saxon)

Plantation sites along the river road, originally centers of economic and cultural exchange, acted as the agrarian 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 to a cultural tourist relies on their spatial characteristics, and amenities such as restaurants. An example 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"(2-James Fox-Smith) in conjunction with the lure of 'authentic' culture and epicurean distinction lures tourists to the place with the promise of the elusive opposite of what they experience in their daily environment. 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. The plantations are artifacts of the formal public façade whose vestiges remain in the public access faces of strip malls and box stores. Their 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, the cultural tourist is 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. The plantation houses survived originally through inattention and lack of better economic alternatives. Now they exist as an asset to the cultural tourist. Every plantation site is a formal reaction to the 'terra-viscus'. The home sites and support buildings always face the river and its control system, the levy. Very narrow, exceedingly deep sites originate with the rural necessity of allowing river access to the greatest number, but end with a semi-urban



condition at the river that is a distinct other. It is not urban, sub-urban, or rural, but a distinct mixture of all three. The result is distinct, and so is the cause; a cause that relies directly on the 'terra-viscus' condition and the necessities it requires.

Rural Artifacts

The rural artifacts are more difficult to exhibit separate from the ecology as the Cajun culture fully occupies the 'terra viscus'. Where the urban and agrarian cultural artifacts relate to the 'terra-viscus' through separation, the rural Cajun cultural artifacts are part of the field condition. They are, like the culture that created them, pragmatic and singular. They are direct results of sustaining a culture in the face of great hardship. Cultural tourists often find these artifacts the most elusive. They are searching for an 'authentic' Cajun culture that is condensed and easily consumed. These artifacts are not condensed or easily consumed. They are part of a living culture that only recently began reacting to the modern world. Both the hunting and fishing shacks remotely scattered and the formal Acadian Cottages seen in the small linear towns hugging the bayous were produced from the rural and singular conditions of the isolated swamp. They are formal versions of the four room rural house raised on stilts, a house that accepted the ever-variant water level. The front porch is the main room; it is a dock, a kitchen, and an exterior space where the land offers none. The flat bottom boats, or pirogues, offer both transportation and occupation of a predominantly water landscape. The basic foods that identify the culture are also decentralized and singular. Before the modern advent of commercial farming of crawfish, rice, and sugar cane, these crops grew as part of the larger eco-system. Rice and sugar cane were introduced into the swamp, but quickly found their position in this ecology at very localized and specific areas of the larger condition. New Orleans is not the center of the Cajun Culture. Lafayette, the economic and geographic center of the culture is not the center of Cajun Culture. The swamp, the 'terra-viscus' is the center of the culture. These artifacts, maybe more than the aforementioned, exemplify the distinct heterologous solution that describes the tourist landscape of Southern Louisiana. They are held in a supersaturated suspension within the 'terra viscus', on the verge, but never singly precipitating as they are understood only in comparison to the urban and agrarian artifacts.

These observations of the cultural tours and their relationships to the ecology lead to some wary conclusions in relation to our desire to teach and practice relevant architecture in Southern Louisiana. If our distinction requires the preservation of a past cultural image, how does a contemporary practice develop? Our observations would conclude that one merely find ways to reprogram historical space with new occupations or that one practice mimicry and become a copyist of culturally relevant forms. We believe, however, much like the multiple tours, the 'terra viscus' can accept contemporary character. That is the value of the supersaturated solution; every characteristic is understood only through comparison to another, and simultaneously, no characteristic changes the essential nature of each other. We can contribute new character to the landscape, however, not without first understanding the 'terra viscus' and all its attributes.

HEDONISTIC TOUR

"Lean Kentuckians, floating down the Mississippi on flat boats, loaded with merchandise, used to speak of New Orleans as the 'city of sin'. And at the mention of sweet sinning, they pushed harder at the sweeps, urging the cumbersome boats downstream. Protestant Ministers in far away New England preached sermons on the new Sodom at the Rivers Mouth – A city they had never seen, but of which they had heard fabulous stories."(8-Lyle Saxon)

Completely reliant on ecological and cultural tours, the third type of tourism in Southern Louisiana is the most economically powerful: hedonistic tourism. Hedonistic tourists pursue pleasure and happiness as their sole goal. Tourism in itself could be considered a form of hedonism, but we are referring directly to the opportunities offered the tourist regarding escape from the puritanical norm: sex, alcohol, gambling, and other excesses. There are many sites of hedonistic tourism; the most apparent are the sites developed solely for this purpose. Atlantic City and Las Vegas. These sites create activities and artifacts that foster excess from nothing. They do not rely on ecological or cultural distinction. Southern Louisiana's hedonism begins with the

cultural motto 'laissez les bon temps rouler' or 'let the good times roll'. This is a definitive cultural notion. It has been developed through the mestizo and Creole mixing of cultures and specific socio-economic settlement. This idea was further exaggerated by the geographic hardships. One must work hard just to find a place to live and maintain it; afterwards you live in constant peril of the ecology taking back over. "*Society required artifice to survive in a region where nature might reasonable have asked a few more eons to finish a work of creation that was incomplete.*"(9-John McPhee) An attitude of working hard and then playing hard was established for all that lived in Southern Louisiana.

Now Southern Louisiana exaggerates and promotes their hedonistic tourism. Many of the previous examples of cultural tours such as Mardi Gras and Bourbon Street can be re-evaluated according to their value for hedonistic tourists. Continuous festivals and conventions are promoted on the promise of the pursuit of pleasure. The state government plays an active role in this promotion. All state offices and state institutions are closed for a state mandated party at Lundi Gras and Mardi Gras. Through lenient liquor and gambling laws as well as an aggressive legislation, 'laissez les bon temps rouler' is cultivated as the popular norm. A localized system of 'other' for internal escapes has become an icon of escapism for the rest of the world.

The new hybrid building, Harrah's Casino in downtown New Orleans, is a prime example of the recent promotion of hedonistic tourism. This archetype of spatial escapism, replication, and efficient captured audience is familiar and can be seen at its purest in Las Vegas. 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 cultural 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 cultural tour, and the contradictions/ overlays/ ironies of the supersaturated tourist solution are enormous. There exists suspended tourist opportunities within tourist opportunities. Each is reliant and distinct from the other, and builds upon their relative value. Harrah's Casino's internal program, and external relationship to the original exemplifies the 'terra-viscus' condition.

From our observations of the hedonistic tour and the characteristics that define it within the tourist landscape, we draw our most relevant conclusion. The 'terra viscus' of Southern

Louisiana cultivates the event and builds space accordingly. If an event is a phenomena that follows and is caused by some previous phenomena and a phenomena is anything that is extremely unusual or extraordinary, then in order to practice relevant architecture we must learn to build the event spaces of the extremely unusual, the unique. It is our responsibility to contribute to the suspension of the supersaturated landscape and preserve the distinct heterologous solution. It is the solution that creates the distinct tourist landscape, and in turn creates the overall landscape.

"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."(10 -Flannery O'Connor)

Southern Louisiana presents a distinct heterologous mixture typical of the contemporary global environment and capitalizes on the idea and the experience of super saturation. Retaining and providing access to the super saturated landscape 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). Its 'terra-viscus' is the built environment and geographical environment that continuously alters itself through adaptation, reuse, preservation, contemporary economy, and replication. If we are to contribute to the built environment and cultural identity of Southern Louisiana, it is necessary we understand the influential flux of the physical and psychological 'terra-viscus' condition. The condition is saturated, but has proven an ability to approach super-saturation. Our goal is to gain vantage on the multiple characteristics and their suspensions for greater opportunities in our search for an appropriate contemporary architecture.

NOTES

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² Fox-Smith, James. "Country Roads Area Map," *Country Roads Magazine* (every issue)

³ Noah Webster. *Webster's Unabridged Dictionary* (New York: Simon and Schuster. 1913).

⁴ McPhee, John. *The Control of Nature*. New York. Farrar, Strauss, and Giroux. 1989.

⁵ Mathur. Anuradha and Cunha da, Dilip. *Mississippi Floods. Defining a Shifting Landscape*. New Haven. Yale University Press. 2001.

⁶ Whitehead, Ingrid. "Patricia Gay: Working Hard for preservation in the Big Easy," *Architecture Record* (08.02): 256

⁷ Saxon, Lyle. *Old Louisiana*. Gretna, LA: Pelican Publishing Company. 1998.

⁸ Ibid

⁹ McPhee, John. *The Control of Nature*. New York. Farrar, Strauss, and Giroux. 1989.

¹⁰ O'Connor, Flannery. *Mystery and Manners*. New York: The Noonday Press, 1997.

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5. www.lded.state.la.us

6. www.census.gov/epcd/susb/2000/la/LA-.htm

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