Vincent Scully characterized America's urbanism of the second half of the twentieth century in no small terms: "violent and dangerous, cataclysmic, automotive, and suburban." His description speaks eloquently of the appropriation and transformation of European modernism in the design of North American cities. Post-war prosperity created a cultural climate in which modernism could flourish as a concomitant of mythic American dreams, but Modernism was a complex and often contradictory affair. Each opportunity for the growth and progress that modernism promised American cities also engendered alienation and despair. High technology, the machine, and their eminently reproducible products entered American homes in user-friendly forms—automobiles, television sets, and Tupperware bowls, but Modern architecture, by then deemed an "International Style," overtook American cities with ungenerous, oftentimes violent, attitudes toward traditional constructs of space and society. Invariably, such discourse on American urbanism brings to mind New Haven's Oak Street connector, New York's Lincoln Center, or Los Angeles's freeways: rarely does the Southern city figure in the orgy of demolition, disenfranchisement, and design for redevelopment that characterized American cities after World War II.

For New Orleans, escaping the constraints of tradition and seizing the arts and practices of modernity necessarily involved confrontation with the dialectic relationship between the mythic past and the critical present that long colored the city's history. New Orleans experienced post-war prosperity in an industrial boom and a renaissance of trade along the Mississippi, but, in the national memory, it remained "...the eatingest, drinkingest, paradingest city in the country." At home, although the city jealously protected its Vieux Carrè, its architectural legacy was no mean reminder of a distant past; it had become a vital commercial resource. So too, by the mid-1950s, Kaiser Aluminum, American Cyanamid, Monsanto, and Shell set up plants that spit smoke into the upriver landscape of live oaks, and edged dangerously close to the ante-bellum plantations that so added to the city's mystique.

The city's enduring collective history of iron grilles, Mardi Gras and bawdy houses was not so powerful that it
could not seize modernism's urban paradigms with new force, nor was its legacy of back-room politics so daunting and civic pride the city attained under the leadership of Delesseps S. Morrison, its mayor from 1946 until 1960. Ostensibly, Morrison's promises to show the voter's something tangible through improvement of the city fabric was not a dramatic leap forward. His predecessor Robert Maestri, had attained an enviable record of enhancing the public realm by establishing an aggressive program of public housing and harnessing WPA funds for a comprehensive public works program. Morrison, however, recognized that urban renewal alone would not transform New Orleans into a city for the post-war era. Modern urbanism demanded a serendipitous relationship between the inner city and the burgeoning suburbs; slum clearance, new housing, and monumental public buildings would not stand up to public scrutiny without expressways that would link the suburbs to the downtown and provide more parking spaces for commuters once they arrived in the central business district.

Before the end of his first year in office, Morrison proposed a sweeping program of reconstruction that would radically alter the appearance of New Orleans. Without the slightest reference to the pre-modern heritage that was so much a part of the city's physical and spiritual core, the mayor pledged to make New Orleans a "modern" place. In 1954, a new Union Passenger Terminal (Wogan & Bernard with Jules K. de la Vergne and August Perez & Associates) opened that replaced five "antiquated" depots and eliminated inconvenient grade crossings; Burnham's Southern Depot crumbled to the wrecker's ball in the process. City streets were widened; notable among these "improvements" was the rebirth of Basin Street, once the rail-lined spine of Storyville, as a forty-four feet wide landscaped boulevard. To the hum of spinning truck wheels and the melody of industrial cash registers, a cantilever bridge across the Mississippi to West Bank suburbs, and the Pontchartrain Expressway to Metairie and the Lake Front were constructed. Together they constituted a fortress-like wall through the inner city. Whether the collective memory embodied in the city's historic quarters and the modernity promised by rebuilding could coexist in the urban agglomerate was one of the great untouched themes of post-war urban renewal. The Civic Center, the keystone of the downtown renovation program, provides a provocative vehicle for exploring this question.

Highways, bridges and parking spaces were harbingers of a new public realm, seen from the windshield's eye view that ultimately, would undo the traditional downtown. They were celebrated but style-less components of the modern city; they encroached upon the cityscape absent of conventional scale or grandeur. Civic Centers, in contrast, resonated with the established myths of New South urban boosters. They celebrated "high point(s) of human achievement," and objectified "the most sophisticated knowledge in a physical landscape of extraordinary complexity of power and splendor." Such visions of the city as a work of art, born of the Baroque and the Beaux Arts, reflected the grand manner of past eras. They were not the ideals of European modernists who, in the years before the war, argued that the residential component of the city was the crux of urban experience. Monumental civic centers—emblems of faith in the public realm—resonated with an earlier moment in American architecture and city planning, well exemplified by Burnham's majestic proposals for Chicago, San Francisco, and Washington, DC. Morrison's plan for the New Orleans Civic Center, announced in 1946, was caught uncomfortably between these two conceptual frameworks. Indeed, Morrison promised New Orleans, "an efficiently designed and economically planned group of modern building—", but the seeds of the Civic Center had been planted almost twenty years earlier, in Harland Bartholomew's first comprehensive master plan (1927-29).

TALE 1: THE NEW ORLEANS CIVIC CENTER PROPOSED, 1927-29

For Bartholomew, the mid-20th-century American city efficient and the early-20th-century City Beautiful were not mutually exclusive models. His Civic Center proposal, on the one hand, is remarkably visionary. Bartholomew specified key elements present in the Morrison-erasure—a new city hall, state offices, and, a new main library; emphasis was placed upon street arrangement, traffic flow, and adequate parking. On the other hand, his design criteria strongly echoed precepts of turn-of-the-century city planning. The ambitious, if anachronistic, influence of Burnham is apparent in Bartholomew's grandiose expressions of public place and implicit civic patrimony of the arts. With grand axes, Classical facades, and manicured parterres, Bartholomew brought the sensibilities of Washington DC's Mall and Philadelphia's Franklin Parkway to New Orleans, but its academic classical underpinnings were successfully tempered by the planner's appreciation of the city's historic collective. Through decades of master planning for New Orleans, Bartholomew extolled the richness of the Vieux Carré, "that distinguishing mark which sets New Orleans apart from other American cities." The 1929 Civic Center proposal mediates between its planner's regard for that heritage and his convictions about the primacy of public space. Bartholomew specified an area on the edge of the Vieux Carré including Beauregard Square and bounded by Rampart, Dauphine, St. Peter and St. Anne Streets. The Municipal Auditorium (Favrot and Livaudais, 1927-34) already under construction with WPA funds, was an obvious anchor for the proposed complex, but Bartholomew's planning had a more subtle raison d'être. Orleans Street formed the main axis of the Civic Center; so too, Orleans was the main axis within the city grid that extended from the Civic Center to Jackson...
Square where the Cabildo and the Presbytere, the city's earliest relics of civic architecture, stood. In this relationship Bartholomew perceived a resonant linkage between the city's collective memory and its modern destiny.

Bartholomew's respect for the old city's architectural heritage did not prevent him from articulating the Civic Center with buildings and public spaces that would handily overpower cherished French and Spanish colonial architecture. Anchored by the Municipal Auditorium to the southeast of the complex and the proposed City Hall to the northeast, the Orleans Street axis was a generously landscaped mall around which public buildings could be disposed harmoniously, according to the rigors of Beaux Arts planning. Each of these halls of government occupies nearly an entire block. Even in conceptual sketches, their Classically derived, though grossly inflated, proportions and facades are apparent; so is their estrangement from the traditional density and proportions of their environs. Had this City Hall been built, it would have loomed over the spire of St. Louis Cathedral. Like the then-new State Capitol in Baton Rouge, New Orleans City Hall was to be a skyscraper; both necessarily assumed exaggerated proportions to attain comprehensive visibility and monumentality in the era of skyscraper.

In Bartholomew's Civic Center and the monumental cities beautiful that influenced it, a well planned civic center was a public stage set for promoting municipal ideals, a noble means toward improving conditions for the "whole" public realm. It mattered little that such architectural determinism almost always engendered sacrifice. The neighborhood that would have been leveled in order to clear the site was handily dismissed, judged neither valuable nor in a good state of repair. Ironically, the original Civic Center proposal was abandoned because, in the years following World War II, property values rose and site acquisition proved prohibitive. Nevertheless, with the post-war buzz words "slum clearance" and "urban renewal" firmly planted in the American vocabulary, the scenario of design in service of the public realm would be reenacted and brought to fruition on a site across town.

TALE 2: THE NEW ORLEANS CIVIC CENTER CONSTRUCTED, 1946-57

Troubling parallels distinguish urban planning at the turn-of-the-century and during the post-war period. In both instances, dominant methods of design involved "seeking monumental grandeur and kicking the poor out of the way." Post-war New Orleans was no exception. The designation "the worst slum in the city" was systematically applied to the next area scheduled for demolition to accommodate new construction. In 1946, the "worst slum in the city" was 11 acres situated precariously close to the central business district. Here, the New Orleans Civic Center would be built. With the promise of a new Civic Center that would bring the aesthetic and cultural authority of the International

![Proposed Civic Center, New Orleans Louisiana, 1927-29. Courtesy Louisiana Collection, Howard-Tilton Library, Tulane University, New Orleans.](image-url)
Style to New Orleans, few bemoaned the wholesale destruction of blocks of blighted buildings. Even preservationists expressed little concern that with the boundaries of the site the Negro red-light district, one of the cradles of New Orleans jazz, had thrived.\textsuperscript{20}

With its prejudices against monumentality and its belief that traditional institutions of society were no longer relevant, modernism was an unlikely language for translating the strident formal and axial planning which for centuries provided a tectonic diagram of power in government authority.\textsuperscript{21} Nevertheless, in a manner reminiscent of the oft-cited paradigms of Brasilia and Chandigarh, the New Orleans Civic Center demonstrates modern planning's vulnerability to monumentality and formalism. Conceptually, Morrison's Civic Center embodies as much ideological rhetoric about public space as did the original Bartholomew scheme. Its Modern syntax of design not only symbolized reform in municipal government; it also advertised and advocated the benefits of comprehensive planning and urban renewal that the mayor advocated. On the edge of the American sector, the Civic Center would be built according to the new canons of Modernism, planning strategies which, in theory, demanded formal and spatial purity and abstraction to a degree that was wholly disharmonious with the organic growth, not only of the historic city core, but also of its early twentieth-century environs.

A closer look at the Civic Center reveals that although its anonymous plaza of grass and concrete implies a dominant axis, its buildings are sited with a subtle irregularity, influenced concomitantly by Miesian precepts of universal space and the caprices of the irregular, angular footprints of Poydras and LaSalle Streets. Nevertheless, a commanding vista is formed between City Hall (Goldstein, Parham, & Labouisse with Favrot, Reed, Mathes, & Bergman, 1956) to the southwest of the site and the New Orleans Public Library (Curtis and Davis; Goldstein; Parham, & Labouisse; Favrot, Reed, Mathes, & Bergman, 1958) to the northeast. A Civil Courts Building occupies the southwest corner of the site; the State Office Building (August Perez & Associates; Goldstein, Parham, & Labouisse with Favrot, Reed, Mathes, & Bergman, 1958) and State Supreme Court (August Perez & Associates; Goldstein, Parham, & Labouisse with Favrot, Reed, Mathes, & Bergman, 1958) define the northwest side of the plaza. In plan, the ambitious plaza opens towards the central business district across Loyola Avenue as if to offer the city it serves a front yard, but it is an empty gesture. The ambiguous plane defies occupation. So too, the broad boulevards that surround the Civic Center estrange it from its environs. Wedged precariously between the commercial, the historic, and the residential, the site is an isolated public realm alien to the dense and diverse fabric of the city.

From this stark and placeless landscape rose elements of a new American architecture, an ensemble of steel, stone, and glass slabs. Indeed, the buildings of the Civic Center were designed in a period when the International Style emerged with post-war prosperity in the United States, but its popularization during the early 1950s came, primarily, from the corporate realm in new cathedrals of commerce for Lever House and Seagrams. Some years before Chicago's Civic Center was completed to a Miesian design and Boston City Hall became a symbol of brutalism and destruction in the inner city, the New Orleans Civic Center, finally under construction by the end of 1954, translated the idioms of modern design for mass consumption in the public realm. Linear contours and flat roofs were the shared, distinguishing characteristics of the Civic Center buildings; this was a vocabulary that offered few tectonic clues to distinguish a City Hall from a Civic Court. The \textit{brise soleil} (in the form of vertical louvers) on the side elevations of the City Hall and the overpowering aluminum sun-screen that wrapped around the Public Library were the only architectural reminders that New Orleans is a \textit{semi-tropical} climate.

Among the Civic Center buildings, the City Hall demands discrete analysis. Although its building did not attain the lofty scale of the 1927 proposal, it is, nevertheless, a formidable structure, dominated by an 10-story tower rising from a one-story base. Its principal elevation presents an unrelenting curtain wall marked by the cadence of mullions, articulating a 20 feet wide bay system, which punctuate the field of expansive windows and dull greenish-blue panels that so tie the building to the time of its construction. Limestone panels border the southeast edge and cap the facade with a self-conscious asymmetry and imposed formality. The base of the building, however, reveals subtleties in planning and expression that defy the rigor of the monolithic tower-slab. The tower meets the ground with a two-story wing to the west which projects forward from the tower block at a nearly right angle; to the east, a one-story element projects forward on a 30 degree angle. Together they frame the City Hall's formal central entrance and gesture provocatively to the plaza beyond.

City Hall was an International Style icon for the South's post-war renaissance, but its design engaged elements, albeit here abstracted elements to serve a modern ends, that recalled the classical past. Concrete box piers comprise austere colonnades, only faintly reminiscent of the cast iron...
arcades of the French Quarter, that punctuate the single story elements and wed the city hall with the trajectory of paths to the plaza. This traditional subtext is also evident in its principal entrance and formal lobby spaces, architectural elements that are uniquely susceptible to aggrandizement and representation, even in a modern civic architecture. An austere portico, featuring two highly polished red granite columns, articulates the primary entrance. Although, little distinguishes the open-planned office-spaces of City Hall from the interior landscapes of so many office towers of the era, its two-story lobby reflects traditional constructs of public space with materially rich finishes that defy the curtain walls outside.

In 1957, Architectural Forum noted, almost whimsically: "Modern buildings do not age;" New Orleans City Hall was a building that "seemed doomed to look new until the end of time." But history proceeds with astounding speed in the machine age. Not quite forty years after its completion, the Civic Center is a bleak, cheerless, and remarkably absent of place-bound associations. Curtain walls have not worn well. Louisiana rains have streaked and stained the once "gleaming" tower in the park. Signs of deterioration are everywhere apparent. A series of interventions in its landscape have not made the ambiguous International Style landscape more conducive to dwelling. They have radically changed the original meaning of the design.

FROM A UTOPIAN DREAM TO AN AMERICAN NIGHTMARE

The urban intervention that turned a New Orleans slum into a Civic Center embodies profound and overarching conditions of American cities during the post-war years. Modernism was large-scale, metropolitan, and rational; demolition was its panacea for alleviating "obsolete buildings and blighted districts" in the urban agglomerate. The city was a material base for representing social practice, and its spaces could be shaped for social purposes. It was evidence that the heroic architect...or planner...or politician...could change the way people lived by modifying their surroundings.

In the Civic Center critics saw "gleaming towers," structures of "glass and class." They also saw evidence of "the...modern anonymous blight of barrenness;" with no features to distinguish its buildings from the scores of curtain walled towers and slabs being built across the nation. New Orleans had "never looked so much like other cities as it (did then)." New Orleans cleared slums to build its Civic Center "as if building orgies would somehow wipe away the pain of sectional inferiority, regional poverty and dependence." But, the new City Hall's sleek curtain walls not only contained state-of-the-art facilities for acquiring driver's licenses and paying water bills; they housed racially segregated rest rooms. New Orleans Civic Center is a potent reminder of what architecture can and cannot do.

City Hall opened in May 1957, on the threshold of an era of federal desegregation acts and the massive resistance that met them. Public life in New Orleans drastically changed during this frenzied period that pitted the federal courts against the mayor (a moderate who tacitly upheld segregation), the New Orleans School Board, the State Legislature and the public at large in a massive controversy over desegregation. On November 17, 1960, 3,000 teenagers marched through the Civic Center complex chanting: "Two, four, six, eight, we don't want to integrate!" The design that, only three years earlier, was "a symbol of post-war energy of the nation's cities," was the backdrop for a very different kind of national media blitz. New Orleans City Hall became an emblem of how much further the American South had to travel to attain the utopian promises of the project of modernity. That simple, place-bound truth renders the City Hall and the Civic Center it comprises potent symbols of the cultural decentering that came with post-war myths of peace and prosperity, and the modern architecture it brought to American cities at the mid-century. New Orleans City Hall is a heroic, if inelegant, work of modern architecture and a self-reflexive legacy of the municipal officials who conceived it. "Reading" New Orleans City Hall, New Orleans Civic Center. View from Loyola Avenue, October 1994.
Orleans City Hall not only recaptures history's role in the contemporary debate about modern architecture. It, moreover, underscores that such a history is the product of complex interrelationships among the compulsive utopian positivism of modernism, the historic fabric modern architecture often replaced, and most importantly, the events for which it became a tectonic stage.

NOTES


4 The Huey P. Long Bridge accommodated both railroad and automobile transportation with a system of double tracks flanked by two eighteen-feet-wide concrete roadways. For the Louisiana State University Medical Center (Weiss, Seiforth & Dreyfous, 1937) see "Louisiana State Medical Center," Southern Architect and Building News (August 1936): 6.


7 In 1947, New Orleans ranked second among the nation's ports in the value of trade; fourth in the amount of tonnage that passed through its port.


9 The Kaiserplant adjoined Bueno Retiro, one of James Gallier's plantation houses, and Cyanamid built on land that once constituted the Pelican Plantation.


11 See "Morrison Urges Slum Clearance," New Orleans Times Picayune, 1 August, 1 p. 1; "City Considers Hugh Bond Issue," New Orleans Times Picayune, 25 September 1946, 1, p. 1, 4; "Many Plans, Much Borrowing," Editorial, New Orleans Times Picayune, 26 September 1946, 1, p. 8; "Public Improvements Planned With No Tax Increase, Morrison Assures," New Orleans Times Picayune, 29 September 1946, 1 p. 1; "All Three Bond Proposals Win," New Orleans Times Picayune, 17 April 1947, 1, p. 28. Initially, Morrison sought approval of a $28,000,000 bond issue to support the Union Station project including overpasses, underpasses, and highways; street paving; and the package of new public buildings that would constitute the Civic Center.

12 See David Harvey "Monument and Myth" in his The Urban Experience (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1989), 229.


15 See Bartholomew and Associates, Comprehensive Plan, 1927-29, 22.

16 Ibid., 18.

17 Beauregard Square, located between St. Ann and St. Peter Streets was the site of the Spanish Fort St. Ferdinand, destroyed by Gov. Claiborne in 1803. Later, the square was used by slaves on half holidays on Sundays for dancing and music, thus linking it significantly with the African American heritage of the city's Treme district.

18 Scully, Architecture and Urbanism, 140.

19 The city invested approximately $1,000,000 in the acquisition and clearance of the Civic Center site. Regarding site acquisition, see especially, "Bonds to Provide Start on Proposed New Civic Center." The matter of slum clearance and alternate uses for the site, including consideration for a federal housing project, is discussed in "A Proposed Plan For A Central Municipal Center," New Orleans Real Estate Utility Department, 10 April 1945, Civic Center Vertical File, Louisiana Collection, Howard-Tilton Memorial Library, Tulane University.


21 See Kostof, The City Shaped, 175.


