

Which Way is New Orleans?

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This is a story about New Orleans, told in the architecture of the city and its buildings, the form of the city reiterated in the forms of its architecture, perhaps causally and systematically, perhaps through a piling up of coincidences. Either way, it is, like much architectural theorizing, however diligent in its arguments, essentially a prospective fiction. If it is not a true story now, it may become one.

The idea that a city's architectural and urban forms might best be understood *as* stories and *through* stories, rather than as rule systems or through land use diagrams and the like, is not new. One finds it articulated by Richard Sennett, Michel de Certeau and Christine Boyer, among many others. Few such stories, however, are followed home to repeatable formal conditions — are told in such a way that an architect might pick up the thread and contribute an episode *through the formal conditions of building*. Formal determinacy is elusive. We may believe, with Churchill, that we shape our buildings and then they shape us, but we find it hard to specify how the intentional shaping of a building secures an intentional shaping of our cultural lives.

This essay is accordingly a search for formal patterns in the Crescent City that mirror patterns of temperament and behavior. These patterns have to do with the fronts of things, and more particularly with the distance between the fronts themselves and the things they are the fronts of. Sometimes that is simply a matter of depth of passage between the front and the thing. Other times it is an affair of masks, the apparent front at some remove from the actual front. Sometimes, the front is at the back.

A simple example may help. If you have visited New Orleans, you may have gone to Preservation Hall, the storefront French Quarter jazz venue. You may have gone in, or you may have simply stood outside the windows. From there, you look across the backs of the musicians to the audience, crowded into folding chairs and onto the floor of the simple space. That, at least, was how it was when I was a student there in the late seventies. For a few dollars, you could join the audience inside. You entered through a carriageway to the right of the storefront, passing down it to a door at the back of the room, and sat facing the musicians and, behind them, the windows through which you had looked. The music was louder here and clearer, you could see the musicians' faces, and you could chat with them between numbers. You were "in."

It wasn't so bad to stay "out," though. You could hear the music, you could see the musicians, and if you couldn't see their faces, you could watch the faces of the audience. You could talk to other hangers-on, you could leave when you wanted without disturbing anyone or feeling you hadn't gotten your money's worth, and with your savings you could get a big plate of red beans and rice and a beer at Buster Holmes's.

Looking in on a scene with its back to the front, seeing people like yourself beyond the scene looking back at you, finding your way into

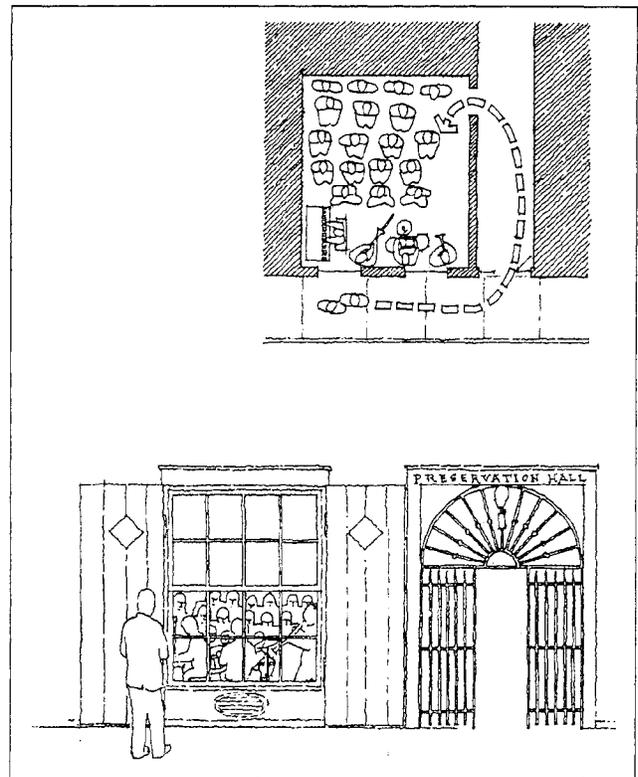


Fig. 1.

that scene through an extended passage with a final about-face, seeing the same scene from a privileged position: this scenario is characteristically New Orleanian. The pattern is repeated variously in the physical form of the city and its buildings and reiterated in the city's social constructions, particularly those of the Mardi Gras. The pattern begins with the very founding of the city.

The *Vieux Carré* — the original city — is a rectangular settlement on a curvaceous site, on the east bank of the Mississippi River ninety miles upriver from the Gulf of Mexico. It has always been a *turned around* place. It faces, if not the wrong way, at least some other way, looking over its shoulder at other towns (when it looks at them at all) with a sly grin. It was built backwards, too, considering how it got to be where it is, and how people got *to* it, in the early days, sneaking up on it from behind. Here's what I mean:

Robert Cavalier, *Sieur de La Salle*, claimed Louisiana for France in 1682. Whether he actually saw or, more significantly, noticed the

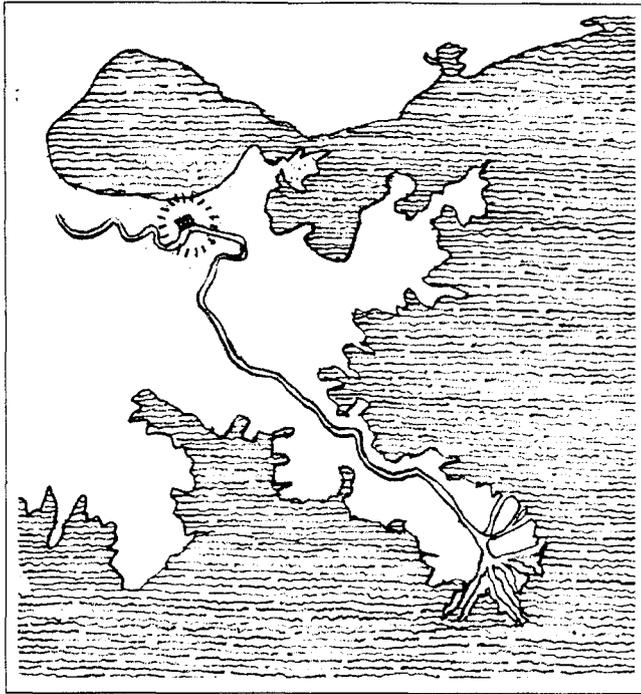


Fig. 2.

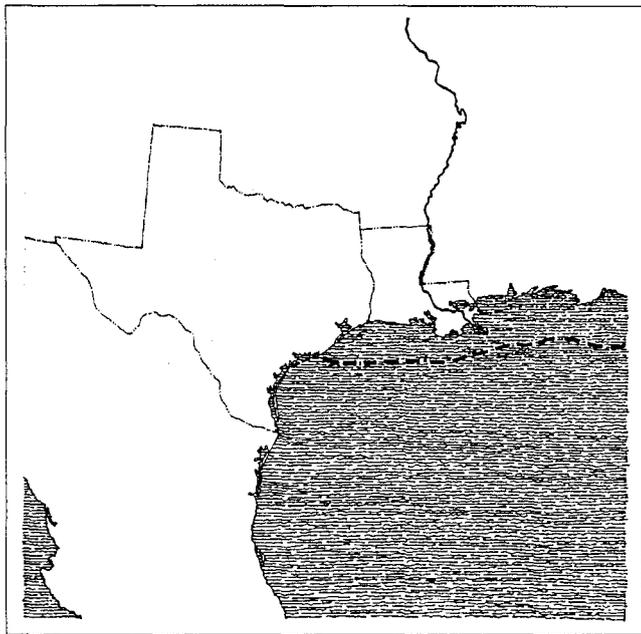


Fig. 3.

site that became New Orleans is not clear. We know that his expedition floated past it, coming down the Mississippi River from Quebec.

I have always imagined explorers coming the other way, struggling upriver against the current, the natural levee at what is now Jackson Square rising up directly before them as they push up the straight reach of river below Algiers Point. (This comes from looking always at maps with north at the top, whence also the childhood belief that all rivers flow south, or *down the wall*.) La Salle, however, was heading downstream, and saw the site of the *Vieux Carré* over his left shoulder, *en passant*, if he saw it at all.

He never saw it again. Returning by way of the Gulf of Mexico a few years later, he failed to find the entrance to the river altogether,

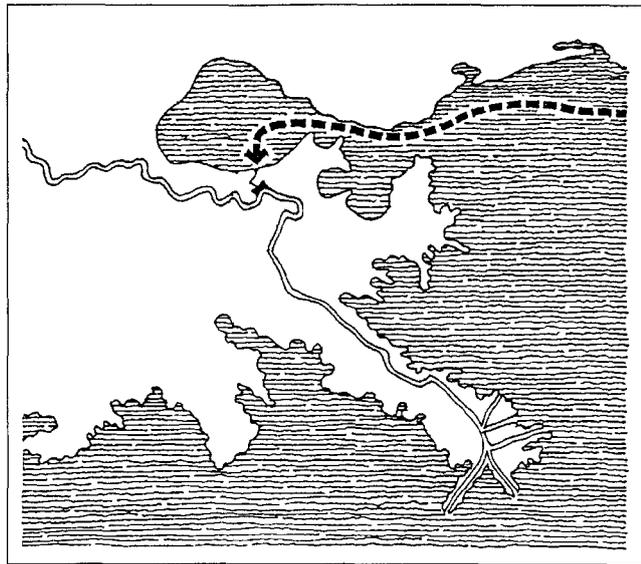


Fig. 4.

instead wandering up a bayou *cul de sac* near Matagorda, Texas. His crew, disheartened, mutinied and murdered him. This was in 1687.

That was the first French attempt to find the front door to New Orleans. They eventually found it, but it remained inconvenient. Shallow channels made the mouth of the river at the Gulf treacherous, and rapidly shifting sandbars made it constantly variable. As a front door, it resembled the cartoon mousehole that Jerry pulls aside just as Tom slams into it.²

In 1699, the Choctaw Indians showed the brothers Iberville and Bienville the smart way into the river from the Gulf. From the east, along the coast below—or, rather, *south of*—the present day city of Bay St. Louis, Mississippi, a boat can enter Lake Borgne through Chandeleur Sound. From Lake Borgne, there is clear passage into the eastern end of Lake Pontchartrain at the old Highway 90 bridge. From Lake Pontchartrain, a boat could come up the four mile length of Bayou St. John to within two miles of the river. This was the old Choctaw portage: easier and safer to carry goods and boats these two miles than to enter the river's mouth.

To make it even easier, in 1792 the Spanish (who governed the city from 1763 to 1803) dug Canal Carondelet from the upper reach of Bayou St. John to what we now think of as the back side of the *Vieux Carré*, ending in a turning basin at roughly the intersection of St. Peter and Basin Streets, eight blocks from the river.³

We refer to this route as the “back door” to the city, having grown accustomed to the “front door” of Jackson Square facing a fully navigable river. In fact, however, before the completion of the Eads Jetties at South Pass in 1879 (a feat that Le Blond de la Tour could not have anticipated when he drew the city plan in 1721), Bayou St. John was equally a “front door” for colonists and visitors who came not from inland North America—which was the wilderness (significant commerce on the Mississippi began only in the 1830s)—but from overseas.

So, while the location of the Quarter adjacent to the river was determined logically by the proximity of Bayou St. John to the high ground of the natural levee (the building up of the river's edge with the silt of repeated floodings), the location and orientation of the *Place d'Armes* itself was less obvious than it now seems. It was, of course, an idealized layout, planned not on site but from Biloxi, where Le Blond was living. Its placement makes *formal* sense, the front of the composition located against the only clear, formal element of the site, the river's edge, rather than the muddle of the backswamp.

It is the disjuncture between the formal logic of the *Place d'Armes* and the day-to-day experience of approaching the city that

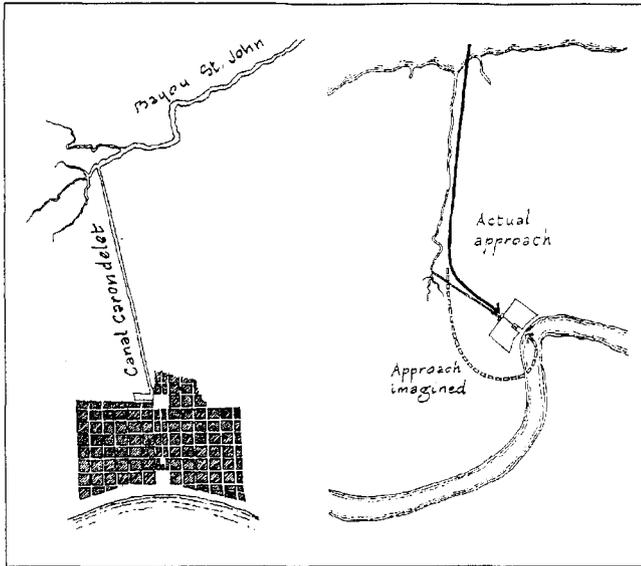


Fig. 5.

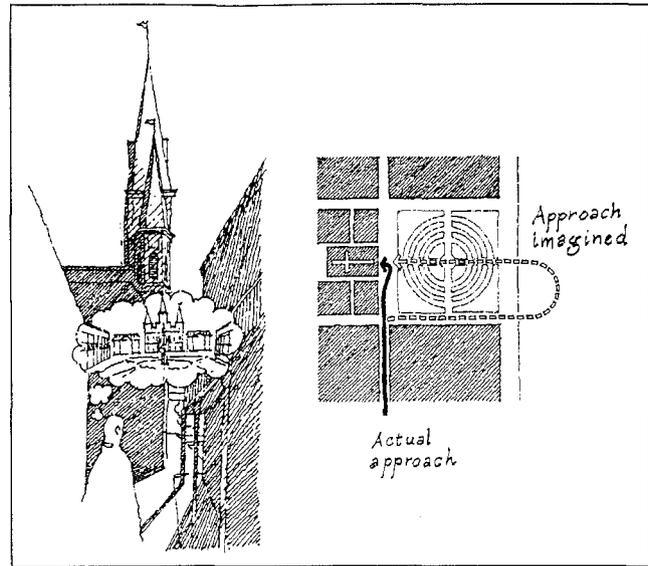


Fig. 7.

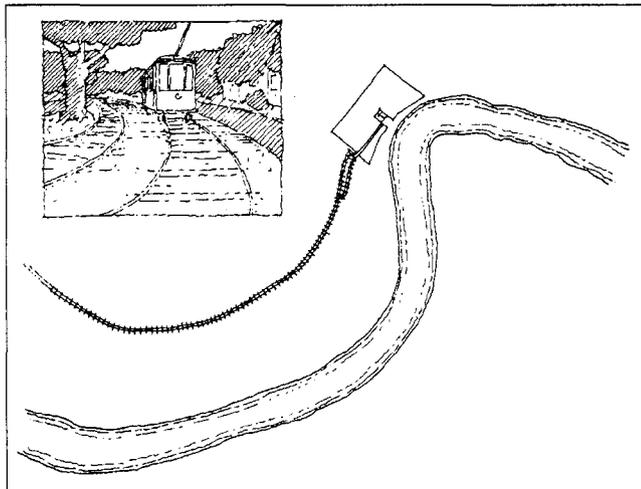


Fig. 6.

is significant for my story. Even today, one has to work at it to see the old city, as it were, face to face, by climbing the levee opposite Jackson Square or riding the Canal Street ferry to Algiers. The uptown resident approaches Jackson Square and the Cathedral laterally along Chartres Street, walking from the streetcar and bus stops along Canal.

I will risk an analogy between the experience of cities and of novels, each of which is *recursive*, doubling back on itself as we move through it. *Garden, Ashes*, a novel by Danilo Kis, opens, "Late in the morning on summer days, my mother would come into the room softly, carrying that tray of hers." William Gass, a literary critic who is also a keen observer of cities, suggests the recursive nature of reading in his approximation of this sentence as it is read—which is to say, as it echoes its way through our consciousness:

Late in the morning, late in the morning on summer days, my mother, late in the morning on summer days, would come into the room softly, late in the morning on summer days, my mother would be carrying that tray of hers, late in the morning on summer days, when my mother would come into the room, softly, with that tray.⁴

All this for the first time reader, at the opening. Imagine the more complex reading of later sentences, with their preceding pages of

context, or the complexities of a second reading. Equally recursive is any "reading" of the city, with its doubling back of memory and recognition, of increments of expectation, provisional arrival, projection.

Such is the case on Chartres Street. The axial, frontal aspect of the cathedral is by no means absent in this approach. The symmetry of the façade, obliquely viewed and opening onto light, suggests the presence of the square before the square itself is seen, and lures the pedestrian with a foretaste of movement onto that axis. In architecture, movement is implied by *fixed* forms—indeed, by the *most fixed* forms: axial, symmetrical forms. The more fixed the referent, the surer our sense of movement, actual or imagined. The knowledge and memory of the frontal aspect of the cathedral accompany the walker in an interplay between the *seen* city and the *imagined* city.

For the tourist, however, the imagined and the seen are collapsed. The only public conveyances that arrive directly in front of the square are tour buses; and this is itself significant: that the formal presentation of the city to the tourist is more straightforward, spatially and sequentially, than it is to the resident.

DRAWING A CITY

Let's look at the layout of the *Vieux Carré* another way. Crossing country with map and compass, we hold the map so that our present location is closest to us and our destination is *beyond* our present location. We stand facing our destination, and orient the map to coordinate with the land. We look *from* the near edge of the map, *toward* the far edge; were we to tip the map up and hang it on the wall, we would look from the *bottom* of the map toward the *top*. We don't do that, however, because our convention is to always locate *north* at the top of the page. Consequently, when we look at a wall map we are always casting our gaze northward. Scanning the map from south to north is moving forward, moving beyond ourselves. From north to south we move backward, into ourselves.⁵

We readily imagine the *face* of places to the north of us on the map, but only the *farside* or the *backside* of places to the south. It is the southern-facing face that we see. When we draw a plan of a building, we can imagine the elevation of the side nearest our belly most easily. It requires merely a simple projection from the plan. To imagine the elevation of the side furthest from us requires that we not only project the plan, but reverse it. The draftsman's imagination looks, as it were, ever northward. This is why it's a good idea for a designer to rotate her plan from time to time: she will see the work differently as its implied projections change.

Picture Le Blonde de la Tour, sitting at a desk in Biloxi, in front of him a hand-drawn map of the Mississippi at the Bayou St. John portage. The southern edge of the map is nearest him; he looks across the page toward the north and Lake Pontchartrain. He imagines a city here. In the tradition of European colonial cities, he imagines it as a grid laid down in the wilderness, with a *place*, as well, and the houses of government and the church. Which direction should these face? Undoubtedly, they should face toward Le Blond de la Tour, the fellow with the pencil in his hand! *Voilà!*

If we imagine ourselves, instead, as the captain of a ship bearing for New Orleans in the mid-eighteenth century, we will hold our map differently. As we pass below Biloxi and Pass Christian and sail through Lake Borgne into Lake Pontchartrain, *west* will be at the top of our page. As we turn into shore at Bayou St. John, we will turn our map so that *south* is at the top of the page, because *we will be facing south*. For 150 years, many, perhaps most of us approached New Orleans from the north, facing south. The face of New Orleans we saw was its northern face, the ramparts at the northern edge of the *Vieux Carré* and, before that, the material projection of the city as cobbled together at the mouth of Bayou St. John without formal elaboration.

FROM CITY FORM TO HOUSE FORM

Such is the old city of New Orleans as a whole: a city with a clear frontal presentation that is not unambiguously its front, and never was. The French Quarter reveals a complication of fronts — the formal front at Jackson Square, the historical landing at Basin and St. Peter, the everyday approach from Canal Street.

The front is also a complicated notion in the Quarter's most characteristic building type, the Creole townhouse. These buildings, built throughout the 1800s, come to the property lines at the front and sides, leaving a substantial courtyard in the rear. The ground floor is a commercial space, entered directly from the sidewalk.⁶ One enters the dwelling above through an adjacent carriageway, passing from the street to the courtyard. The carriageway enters the courtyard beneath a loggia that comprises the courtyard façade of the building and contains the stairway up to the residence.

The representational front of the townhouse might be the upper section of the street façade; or it might be the courtyard façade; or there might be no front at all to speak of, but instead an extended passage and a spiraling ascent, somewhere in the midst of which one discovers that one has, indeed, entered. Not only the front, but the front door is in question. The carriageway gate hardly qualifies, and from the open ground floor one ascends the stairway into the loggia's glazed second floor and finds oneself already inside. Perhaps the stair itself is the front door, but instead of *it* hinging, *you* do, as you spiral up it.

SHOTGUNS AND CAMELBACKS

Although we identify New Orleans with the French Quarter, the Quarter is hardly representative of the city as a whole. To understand the analogous conditions of the form of some of the wider city's more characteristic houses, we might take a step back and, beginning again with the river, trace how the shotgun house comes to be lodged in the fabric of the city.

As an organizing principle for trade and transportation, a river is simply a line. One defines property along this line by segmenting it and striking imaginary boundaries at right angles to the ends of the segments. The actual Mississippi bends back and forth upon itself like a snake. Property lines perpendicular to these banks splay in and out. This circumstance would have complicated things, had the property not sunk into useless swamp before the lines converged.

Even before the levees were built, the land at the river's banks was highest. Successive floods had built up these banks with layers of silt, washed down from Minneapolis and Memphis. From the

river's banks, the land slopes down into swamp. What are now the major radial avenues of uptown New Orleans and of the Creole *faubourgs* downriver were then the boundaries between plantations. Parallel to the river, roads developed on ridges of high ground formed over time by deposition from the oft-flooding river.

The land acquisition patterns of river-bound farming gave New Orleans its accordion fold of streets and a residential pattern in which the larger street becomes the boundary of an extended private domain. The large blocks of land bounded by the major roads were subdivided as farms gave way to a growing urban population. Wealthy families built on these roads, and their retainers moved into speculatively built housing on smaller streets within the subdivided superblocks. The superblock itself had therefore a civic face along the roads (now become avenues) and a less ceremonial, more domestic, hidden interior.

This pattern of civic perimeter surrounding a closed, domestic interior is repeated in the individual block. For the late nineteenth and early twentieth century developer, street frontage was as dear as river frontage had been to the farmer/trader. Blocks were subdivided into lots eighteen feet wide (for single houses; thirty feet wide for doubles) and 120 feet deep, a pattern that allows the standard 300 by 300 foot block to accommodate ten double lots on opposing streets, with two, thirty by 150 foot "key lots" squeezed in on the perpendicular, more minor streets.

Along the principal faces of the block, deep, narrow "shotgun" houses were built six feet apart, forming a street front of similarly if not identically ornamented façades. Dominant gable or semi-hipped roofs, derived from the French colonial raised plantation house, give figural autonomy to these highly compressed serial elements.

The origin of the shotgun type is an unsettled question, but one compelling theory locates it as a rural type which, stretched across the land one room deep, would take fullest advantage of breezes. In the urban setting, and particularly in its double form, the shotgun house loses any climatic logic. The pattern of fenestration remains, however, and in repetitive units placed side by side provokes the residents to seek, even in this hot and humid climate, privacy behind flush-fitting shutters and heavy drapes. The shotgun type is, in the city, consolidated as a closed container — a box or a string of boxes.

In this string, the kitchen opens, logically and traditionally, onto the back yard. Like the kitchen of a central hall mansion of the Garden District or a Creole townhouse, the kitchen of the shotgun house extends to the rear, placed to be near the garden and to keep the heat of cooking out of the rest of the house. So located, it establishes the deepest reach of the house as the social destination.

While one might imagine the movement in the house to be from public in the front to private in the back, the location of the kitchen at the back of the house complicates that movement. The most private rooms are in the middle of the *enfilade*, hardly private at all — as anyone who has shared a shotgun (or its northern relative, the railroad flat) with a roommate can attest. These rooms achieve a sort of phantom privacy by being neither beginnings nor destinations, but rooms to be passed by. On the way to the kitchen, the visitor practices polite inattention.

Formally, the middle rooms are ciphers, placeholders between the front parlor, where the uninitiated are received, and the kitchen, where family and initiated friends gather while the *roux* is browning. The social space of the kitchen emerges from the rigid *enfilade* of rooms at the point at which the house meets the returning wildness of vegetation at the heart of the block. New Orleans is a humid and sultry city, and as a work of civilization it stays just one step ahead of the incorporating tendrils of the swamp flora. It takes diligence to keep a backyard tame. What life in New Orleans requires is just enough space among the banana plants for the bag of oysters, a small table on which to shuck them, and a tub of ice and beer.

Volumetrically, the house is closed on the sides to immediate neighbors and on the top and bottom to the formidable elements. It is a classically tripartite building, with the plinth replaced by pier

which lift the container of rooms above the occasional floods (most of New Orleans is below sea level; almost all of it is below river level) and allow the water to pass underneath, unresisted. It is held under the spreading roof, in that fecund zone between the canopy of the live oaks and the dark ground: a vessel raised and roofed.

Each of the elements that separates the shotgun house from ground, sky, and adjacent houses is a simple thing: the twin row of stubby brick piers, the flush-shuttered walls, the long fold of the gable. By contrast, even in these cheap, speculative houses, the separation between the public and private realms at the front façade is complex and ceremonious. Here, scrollwork flowers. This compressed zone of display pushes into the public realm, outside the front wall of the container, but is held to the simple form behind by the partial hip roof extended over the stoop on turned columns or jigsaw brackets. A small garden and a shallow porch, the porch alone or sometimes merely two or three wooden boxed steps placed directly on the sidewalk form the threshold between the two realms.

With its mail-ordered filigree, the stoop of the shotgun house is decorated *beyond all proportion to its shallow depth*.⁷ The elaborated front of the shotgun not only meets the street vivaciously, it shapes it as well, the profile of brackets and stoop articulating the space of the sidewalk.

In the two-story variant of the double (or, rarely, single) shotgun, the sidewalk-gathering stoop is surmounted by a second-story gallery, a reemergence of semi-public space out of the private space of the house. The stoop is a place to greet the immediate passerby on the sidewalk; while on the gallery above one enjoys a streetwide survey, over the heads of pedestrians, a world removed but negotiable in seasons of revelry, when every second-floor party seems to take up someone — acquaintance or stranger — from the street below.

To be taken up into one of these parties is to experience first-hand the movement from the front of that scene of revelry to the scene itself. That movement is *the* movement of cultural discovery in New Orleans, and the distance traveled is the measure of the cultural depth, however close to the point of entry one reemerges.

An odd and short-lived variation of the shotgun house, known locally as a “camelback,” assumes a telling stance amidst its neighbors. The hump that distinguishes this peculiar type purportedly arose as a vernacular response to what, if it indeed existed, is one of the more naive property tax laws ever enacted. That law *taxed fronts* — that is, it based the property tax rate on the height of the building at, or within a specified distance from, the front property line.

Such a law defines the limit of civic obligation according to distance from the face of the public way. It limits, as well, the civic privilege afforded the second-story streetfront prospect. The free public spirit — a pastoral spirit, if somewhat rowdy for the genre — it drives from the street, forces back through the rigid, conservative structure of the *enfilade*, and releases, finally, deep in the interior of the block. The hump rises, a tower in the garden, no longer frontal but radial in outlook, recovering both the breeze and the privacy lost to the urban shotgun, recovering, in a sense, the rural countryside. More importantly, for the purpose of our story, the camelback places the foremost celebrations of the household — lovemaking and

dining — one above the other at the deepest reach from the only celebratory representation in the architecture: the flamboyant façade.

RECAPITULATION

We have seen, then, a complication of fronts that includes:

- a disjunction in which the representation of front does not correspond with the route of approach; in experience, the effect is that the approach opens up in both an *actual* prospect and an *imagined or remembered* prospect, which are simultaneously available to the mind only, and not to the body; and in which the imagination typically overshoots the path the body will actually take: out to the levee side of Jackson Square to look back at the cathedral, in to the back of the courtyard to view the townhouse’s loggia;
- a stretching out of the moment of arrival, along the length of Bayou St. John, the Carondelet Canal, Orleans Street; or along Chartres Street; or along the carriage way of the Creole townhouse or the *enfilade* of the shotgun;
- a turn or circling in the movement of approach that tightens toward the final destination, at Jackson Square or the townhouse loggia or the camelback’s stair; and, finally,
- the sense that one has arrived *en passant*, has slipped past the destination to arrive at it. The consequence of this experience following upon the preceding deferral is that you first think you are there, but you’re not; then you think you’re not yet there, but you are.

These are formal, physical conditions of the architecture of the city and its buildings, but they are also characteristics of the city’s temperament, its culture. The camelback house is a type in a very particular sense — a tangible upwelling of the underlying dynamic of New Orleans culture. That structure consists of a shallow layer of performance, the performance of the city that is clown, mock royalty, exotic dancer and musical accompanist to the nation. Beneath that layer of performance extends what may well be the most profoundly conservative economic and political framework of any major American city, wherein nevertheless resides a rich, strangely beautiful, gently excessive spirit, the distorted image of which the city offers up to the tourist in its tinny, pathetically comic, Bourbon Street revues. What is most intriguing and elusive about the city is that the casual visitor often cannot know whether it is the city’s face that she is seeing, or its mask. One thinks of Lestat’s recollection of “the tableaux of the old Theater of the Vampires in the Paris where the fiends had pretended to be actors pretending to be fiends on a remote and gaslighted stage.”⁸

It was E. D. Hirsch, I believe, who remarked that the only thing changed by the presence of irony in a text is the text’s fundamental meaning; some such relationship exists between the inner life of New Orleans and its outer appearance, and can be found recorded in the form of the city and its buildings: the *Vieux Carré*, the Creole townhouse, the camelback, Preservation Hall.

NOTES

¹ I call the original settlement the *Vieux Carré* and the French Quarter interchangeably, as do residents of the city; similarly, *Place d’Armes* and Jackson Square are two names for the same place.

² Even today, with the continuous activity of the Army Corps of Engineers, the delta of the Mississippi River (not to be confused with the Mississippi Delta, which, for consistency’s sake, is somewhere else altogether) remains difficult, and special pilots are required to guide ships in through South Pass as far as Pilottown, where the main river pilots take over.

³ Malcolm Heard, *French Quarter Manual: an Architectural Guide to New Orleans’ Vieux Carré* (New Orleans: Tulane School of Architecture, 1997), p. 4. (One old map of the city shows a naively imagined canal opening directly onto the river,

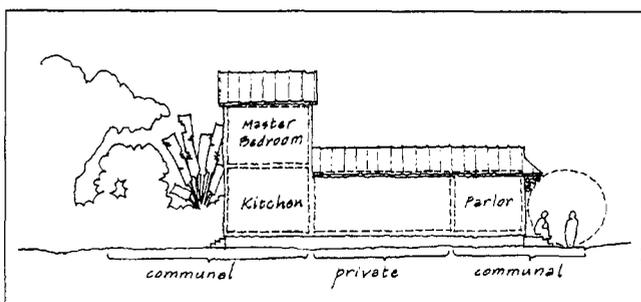


Fig. 8.

without a lock, merely a single gate. The mapmaker hadn't thought very carefully about how water flows. See John W. Reys, *Cities of the Mississippi: Nineteenth-Century Images of Urban Development* (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 1994.) Heard's *Manual* has been my principal resource for understanding the architecture of the French Quarter. Pierce F. Lewis's *New Orleans: The Making of an Urban Landscape* (Cambridge, Mass.: Ballinger Publishing Company, 1976) is the seminal description of the geographical development of the city.

⁴ William H. Gass, "Representation and the War for Reality," *Habitations of the Word* (NY: Simon & Schuster, Inc., 1985), pp. 80-81.

⁵ Funny that the city that chafed under the thumb of General Butler all those years never bucked the convention that puts North at the top of the page.

⁶ Heard notes, "Early records refer to the blocks in French as *iles*,

not literally meaning islands, but a suggestive term when frequent rains and floods and difficult drainage conditions turned streets into canals. Straining the metaphor (beyond discreet limits, perhaps) the sidewalk occurred on the 'bank,' and is still occasionally called the *banquette* (pronounced BANK-et) in local usage." *Op cit.*, p. 10.

⁷ Metaphor flourishes at the border, as Franco Moretti notes (about nations, not buildings, but I believe the analogy holds). In historical novels, like Scott's *Waverley*, Moretti observes language becoming more metaphorical as the action approaches borders, while at the center of the nation, away from the border, action is rendered in analytical predicates. The parallel with the shotgun house is striking. See Franco Moretti, *Atlas of the European Novel, 1800-1900* (London: Verso, 1998), pp. 40-46.

⁸ Anne Rice, *The Vampire Lestat* (New York: Alfred A Knopf, 1993), p. 15.