

Theory, Place, and Opportunity:
Black Urbanism as a Design Strategy for the Potential Removal of the Claiborne Expressway in New Orleans

By
Sara Zewde

BA in Sociology
Boston University
Boston, Massachusetts (2008)

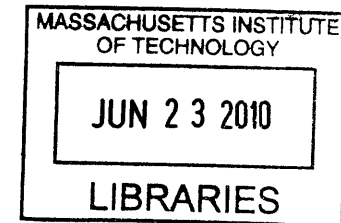
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Author _____
Department of Urban Studies and Planning
May 20, 2010

Certified by _____
Professor Brent Ryan
Department of Urban Studies and Planning
Thesis Supervisor

Accepted by _____
Professor Joseph Ferreira
Chair, MCP Committee
Department of Urban Studies and Planning

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ABSTRACT

As WEB DuBois notes in his seminal work, *The Souls of Black Folk*, “it is a peculiar sensation, this sense of always looking at one’s self through the eyes of others, of measuring one’s soul by the tape of the world that looks on in amused contempt and pity [...]” The Black person wishes to merge the double-consciousness, but “would not Africanize America, for America has too much to teach the world and Africa. He would not bleach his Negro soul in a flood of white Americanism, for he knows that Negro blood has a message for the world. He simply wishes to make it possible for a man to be both a Negro and an American...”. And, hence, it is within this space, in the chasm created by double-consciousness, within which Black Urbanism aims to draw from. A Black Urbanism discourse assumes there is a latent genius in that space, untapped by contemporary design and planning literature and practice.

My thesis aims to develop a theory of “Black Urbanism,” and derive a set of employable design principles. Black communities contribute greatly to the liveliness and culture of cities, however, their contributions are seldom engaged meaningfully by planners/designers; the framework is intended to fold Black Urban principles into a larger understanding of how cities function and thrive and to develop a tool not only for analysis, but also for the active role of designing new spaces. In light of the search for a sustainable urbanism, the retrofitting of America’s urban landscapes offers a major opportunity to apply this approach, as much of what is considered “wasted landscape” may be disproportionately located in communities of color. I explore the history of the federal interstate system, its disproportionate construction in Black neighborhoods, and the growing argument for the removal of elevated expressways in cities’ urban core. In New Orleans, the Claiborne Expressway, a spur off of Interstate 10 planned by Robert Moses, runs through the heart of what is considered America’s first Black neighborhood, and the neighborhood that birthed jazz. I explore the local manifestations of Black Urbanism on the street and describe the opportunities for a Black Urban design strategy to revive the sense of place and scale should the freeway be removed.

Thesis Supervisor: Brent Ryan
Title: Assistant Professor of Urban Design and Public Policy

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I want to recognize the support system within the MIT community that I would not have been able to do this without, especially “The Offices of Dawson, Goldenberg, and Zewde.” By the end of this process, the hammock in 3-401 felt more like home than anywhere else. Aspasia Xypolia, I do not know where I would be without your support, and I can’t thank you enough for all that you have done for me. Your love, kindness, and encouragement allowed me to keep my sanity and graduate on time.

This thesis is dedicated to the memory of my uncle, Mikre Yigebru. In 1986, the year of my birth, my uncle dedicated his masters thesis to me. In March of 2010, he passed away, as I was writing mine.

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chapter One

TOWARDS A THEORY OF BLACK URBANISM

The history of Black people and modern cities is marked by a double-consciousness. In the way that WEB DuBois describes in his seminal work, *The Souls of Black Folk*, “it is a peculiar sensation, this double-consciousness, this sense of always looking at one’s self through the eyes of others, of measuring one’s soul by the tape of the world that looks on in amused contempt and pity...” (DuBois, 2007, p. 9). The Black person wishes to merge the double-consciousness, but “would not Africanize America, for America has too much to teach the world and Africa. He would not bleach his Negro soul in a flood of white Americanism, for he knows that Negro blood has a message for the world. He simply wishes to make it possible for a man to be both a Negro and an American...” (9). And, hence, it is within this space, in the chasm created by double-consciousness, within which a Black Urbanism discourse aims to draw from. Black Urbanism assumes there is a latent genius in that space, untapped by contemporary design and planning literature and practice. A Black community can flourish in the city, escaping both poverty and isolation, and contributing to the greater understanding of how cities function and thrive, offering precedents for the design of any community.

1.1 ADDRESSING A GAP IN THE URBAN DESIGN CURRICULUM AND LITERATURE

While African and African-American communities have built and appropriated cities and urban spaces for centuries, the oral tradition has not lent itself to proper historical and academic documentation for much of that time. Despite a continued active and vibrant tradition of Black Urbanism, misconceptions about the Black public sphere have inhibited a strong, dialectic relationship between this tradition and the practice of urban design, wedged by DuBois’ concept of “double-consciousness.” Whereas elements of Black Urbanism present potential exemplars for the design and planning disciplines, exhibitions of Black Urbanism are overlooked, regarded largely as a culture of poverty and the coping mechanisms of a marginalized people (Goodwin, 2007, p.4). As such, the history of Black Urbanism, and the way in which that history can be drawn from to contemplate contemporary issues are absent from the curricula of city planning and urban design. This history is not only important to

designing in Black communities, but designing in communities in general. Black neighborhoods are often lively communities and have contributed significantly to cities around the world, both in urban form and urban culture. This thesis asserts that, in fact, there is a history and culture of Black Urbanism, and while part of what it produces is due to cultural, social, and political marginalization, there are ways in which a Black culture informs urbanism, drawing from a history older than slavery and colonization and shared experiences in the Diaspora. That Black Urbanism can then be used as a creative departure for urban designers, not only as inspiration towards creating and supporting a lively urbanism, but also to inform a process when working with communities where the history of planning has fostered a deep-seated mistrust for the profession.

1.2 CONSTRUCTING THE CONCEPT OF BLACK URBANISM

The phrase 'Black Urbanism' refers to a school of thought originating at the Centre for Urban and Community Research (CUCR) at Goldsmiths College in London. The minimal literature produced considers the "paradox of Black Urbanism," wherein the case of New Orleans, the Black City contributes heavily to the culture and identity of the city at large—through architecture, music, dance, and food—but is largely forgotten in a meaningful way in post-Katrina city design (Goodwin, 2007, p.4). While I will use CUCR's terminology, I construct the concept of Black Urbanism by assembling bits of various frameworks that range in scale and discipline in order to conceive of an employable urban design strategy.

The word "Black" in the term "Black Urbanism," refers to an ideology, as constructed in this thesis, as opposed to referring positively to the people of a race. Darell Wayne Fields (2000) constructs "Blackness" and "Whiteness" in a similar way in his discussion on architecture:

If I am to resist the Whiteness of architecture, I must formulate strategies that involve the manifestation of its functional, rather than formal, definition. Blackness resides in the functional realm and is acknowledged by the vast and broad silence that usually precedes it. The Whiteness of the architectural regime feigns that it does not know Blackness, and when it attempts to know it produces the lamest of black (seen only in terms of color versus ideological position), unthreatening "examples." Therefore the task is to formulate not on the basis of "examples", but on experience [...]. (p. 47)

The tenants of a Black Urbanism then are not exclusive to a race but are birthed from a culture considered infertile, incapable of bearing any fruitful standard for urban design.

The word "Urbanism" in the term "Black Urbanism," largely denotes scale, or lack thereof. The ambiguity of the scale of "urbanism" serves to emphasize the relationship between scales when studying or designing cities. Margaret Crawford, in the introduction to the book *Everyday Urbanism*, explains that "cities are inexhaustible and contain so many

overlapping and contradictory meanings -- aesthetic, intellectual, physical, social, political, economic, and experiential -- that they can never be reconciled into a single understanding" (Chase, 1999, p. 8) The term "urbanism" attempts to liberate conceptualizations of cities from the confines of disciplinary thinking.

1.3 THE SOCIAL CONSTRUCTION OF URBANISM

A culturally-based practice of design draws theoretical roots from Henri Lefebvre's (1992) assertion of a dialectic relationship between identity and space, both its physical form as well as the production of it. Lefebvre describes the dual axes of perceived and conceived space, or what he calls "spatial practice" and "representations of space," respectively. "Representational space" is the confluence of the two, which translates to multiple productions of space, as depicted in Figure 1. Lefebvre credits the dominance of Western capitalism with the production of "abstract space," characterized by the absence of time, a lack of regard for nature, and homogenization and hierarchization as purported by the bourgeoisie. Lefebvre's "representational space" substantiates the existence of 'other' or 'different' productions of space, in opposition to hierarchical, modern thought. But, what do those post-modernist productions of space look like? Where does Black Urbanism fit in this context?

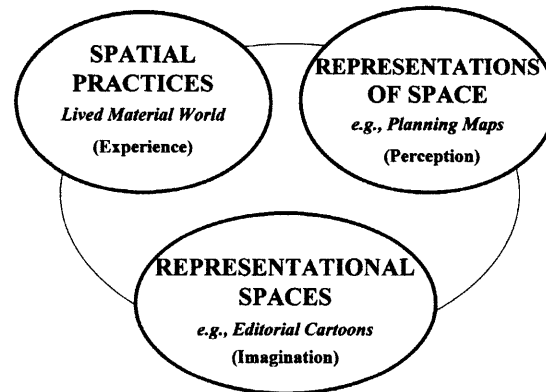


Figure 1.1: Lefebvre's Axes of Space. Source: "Race, Protest, and Public...", McCann, 2002

1.3.1 EMBRACE POST-POST-MODERNISM – AND PRAY FOR A BETTER NAME.

While the post-modernist framework makes the argument that multiple identities exist and produce space, it does so without fully articulating what a post-modernist space might be, complete with alternative time-space variety. If post-modernism is simply the assertion of the existence of the 'other,' then post-post modernism may be the exploration of that plurality (Jauhiainen, 2007). Edward Soja (1996) takes the liberty of calling this space of difference the "thirdspace," with spatial practice as "firstspace" and representation of space as "second space," aligning with

Lefebvre's concepts, and classifies thirdspace as post-modernist space. However, Bell Hooks (1999), whom Soja quotes often, hints that an articulation of this space may be the post-post-modernism many have been waiting for:

The failure to recognize a critical black presence in the culture and in most scholarship and writing on postmodernism compels a black reader, particularly a black female reader, to interrogate her interest in a subject where those who discuss and write about it seem not to know black women exist or to even consider the possibility that we might be somewhere writing or saying something that should be listened to, or producing art that should be seen, heard, approached with intellectual seriousness. This is especially the case with works that go on and on about the way in which postmodernist discourse has opened up a theoretical terrain where 'difference and otherness' can be considered legitimate issues in the academy. Confronting both the lack of recognition of black female presence that much postmodernist theory reinscribes and the resistance on the part of most black folks to

hearing about real connections between postmodernism and black experience, I enter a discourse, a practice, where there may be no ready audience for my words, no clear listener, uncertain, then, that my voice can or will be heard.

Hooks' words mark a frustration stemming from the lack of a connection between postmodernism and the real and multitude of identities that exist, including her examples of negritude, femininity, and their intersections. Black Urbanism seeks to concretize what one of those 'other' productions of space might be, and therefore, is a new development, seeming to break from or extend beyond existing post-modernist discourse.

1.4 AN OPPORTUNITY TO APPLY A BLACK URBAN DESIGN PROCESS

The planning and design disciplines now face the daunting task of searching for a sustainable urban existence, given the pitfalls of mid-20th century city planning initiatives, by which Black urban communities were

affected disproportionately. As planners and designers seek to re-envision the capacity of the urban core, a robust Black Urbanist discourse can provide design exemplars for retrofitting America's urban landscapes and inform the process for working with the communities who currently live in the urban core.

1.4.1 THE INTERSTATE HIGHWAY SYSTEM AND THE URBAN EXPRESSWAY SOLUTION

Among major 20th century planning initiatives, "few public policy initiatives have had as dramatic and lasting an impact" on American cities as the construction of the Interstate Highway System (Bauman, 2000, p. 226). As early as 1940, Mark Rose noted that "new highways, especially express highways, appeared vital in every plan for urban development" (Samuels, 2000, p. 55). At the time, three major perspectives led to the dominance of national highway building. The guiding principle was the traffic engineering approach to accommodating traffic generation, which was simply to provide it with a supply of what seemed to be the most efficient roadway. A second

guiding principle was the prospective potential to restructure the existing city. Planners and engineers concluded that inner-city freeways would support the centralization of commercial uses in the urban core, as the freeways would provide "uninterrupted vehicular access from the residential areas of the suburbs" (Masenten, 2004, p. 23). And, finally, the economic development potential of roadway construction to create jobs and also increase government budgets, aggregated with the other perspectives, fueled the growing pressure throughout the 1930s, 40s, and 50s for the federal government to pursue "a major highway-building initiative" (p. 23)

In 1956, President Dwight D. Eisenhower signed the Federal Aid Highway Act (Masenten, 2004). Construction began immediately, and although construction did not formally terminate until 1992, the national system was virtually completed in the fifteen-year period between 1956 and the early 1970s (Bauman, 2000). Rural roadways linking major metropolitan regions were constructed first as they were the easiest to build, had the least existing development along the right-of-way, along cheap land, and their construction caused minimal disruption. The urban roadway segments, the second of two

phases of construction, advanced in the early 1960s.

Elevated expressways were considered the solution to the complications of constructing a wide roadway in the dense city fabric. It was widely believed that cities were dying, as everyone seemed to be moving to the suburbs, and that frequent on and off ramps linking to the fast-moving freeways were the modern solution to the problem, inspired by Le Corbusier's modernist visions for the ideal city (Masenten, 2004). As such, the planning and design disciplines widely believed that constructing elevated roadways would "help" the people who lived alongside them (Bauman, 2000).

A few years after the commencement of the urban phase of construction, the Eisenhower administration began to notice that the plan for the interstate highway system had not detailed how the process of decision-making, construction, and design might change in the urban context (Masenten, 2004). The excessive number of on and off ramps began to obliterate existing urban neighborhoods (Bauman, 2000). The administration began to take note of the extensive devastation and called into question the necessity of expressway construction in the urban core of cities.

Eisenhower referred back to statements in early reports which stated the freeways were intended to provide uninterrupted corridors for long distance trips and for wartime purposes; therefore, frequent on-ramps seemed superfluous (Masenten, 2004).

In 1960, the Department of Public Works and Planning met with the Eisenhower administration and reported that the planning of the freeway system took no account of existing modes of transportation or any local land-use or transportation plans (Masenten, 2004). While Eisenhower expressed his regret about letting the bill pass without specifying either that freeways would not be built in the city or how they might be done so sensitively, by this time, state and local governments were hooked on the power of highway construction, particularly as it was on the federal government's dime (Bauman, 2000).

1.4.2 A HISTORY OF "WHITE MEN'S HIGHWAYS THROUGH BLACK MEN'S BEDROOMS"

For engineers the goal had always been to accommodate traffic generation, but the key to selling the vision to local leaders, citizens, developers and other

groups was to construct them in places considered "objectionable" before the freeway (Masenten, 2004). And, while the federal government provided 90% of the funding needed to construct the system, the alignments were left to state highway departments and local officials; therefore, the alignments could be used to carry out the agenda of removing "blight" and "slums" (Bauman, 2000). In many places, alignments were placed along industrial areas, dilapidated sections of the city, or low-density and waterfront areas. However, once the roadway needed to cut through a residential area to reach the central commercial core of the city, officials chose to annex land they predicted would have the least resistance. Accordingly, highway alignments were disproportionately placed in African-American communities, due to disenfranchisement from the political system at the time and their geographical location often near the central commercial core (Bauman, 2000).

It is important to note that alignments did not disproportionately affect Black communities solely because they were all perceived as blighted, because not all of the areas were unstable. I posit that the larger factor at play was the relative political ease with which local leaders could construct major

infrastructure in Black communities, given the long history and nature of political disenfranchisement in the 1950s and 60s. Before integration, there were many stable and viable mixed-income African-American communities, with commercial cores of their own near the city's central core. Examples include Overtown in Miami, Florida (Barton, 2001); West Oakland, California (Anthropological Studies Center, 2005), and Claiborne Avenue in New Orleans, Louisiana. However, the construction of roadways displaced many businesses and households and caused blight by fostering disinvestment on either side of the structure. These effects further encouraged middle and higher income Black households to move to out-lying areas, further abandoning the city. The downfall of many vibrant central city African-American communities in the United States can in some way be linked to the construction of expressways through them. The wide rights-of-way cleared large swaths of the existing development; one mile of highway required twenty-four acres of land (Masenten, 2004). But, the massive interchanges, clover leaves, and on-off ramps created "enormous areas of dead and useless space" in central parts of cities (Bauman, 2000); one interchange alone required eighty acres

(Masenten, 2004).

1.4.3 THE IRONY OF SEGREGATION

Ironically, the segregated city encouraged Black unity and consciousness and helped to boost the vitality of Black communities during the late 19th century and the first half of the 20th century (Barton, 2001). To this day, Black place consciousness is rooted in those very places that were bound together by the indignities of Jim Crow. Black identity continues to be tied to these spaces, by the people who live there, by people who have been displaced for decades, and even by people who have never lived there.

Segregation acted as a Black urban growth boundary, constraining Black communities and an eclectic mix of people and events to particular sections of town, strengthening vitality and density, and encouraging small business and economic development. "In a lot of ways, integration hurt us. We lost spirit with each other. It didn't affect white people though. They kept living their lives. When we knew the limits of our boundaries, we invested in each

other," notes Fred Johnson, a Claiborne Avenue community member in New Orleans (personal communication, Jan. 25, 2010). In no way was this violation of civil rights desirable or acceptable, however, it is important to note the affect of integration as it relates to the history of freeways in Black neighborhoods. The era of construction largely coincided with the repeal of Jim Crow Laws, and the two occurring on the heels of one another conflated the effects. With both occurring at the same time, once stable Black neighborhoods quickly fell out of balance. Freeway construction spurred blight and with it, the desire to move away; the newly segregated city encouraged higher and middle income Blacks to move to out-lying areas furthering disinvestment in

the areas of the freeway.

Awareness of this history is critical in order to avoid drawing on a false, romanticized notion of the past in re-designing places impacted the freeways. Black people were forced to endure police brutality, minimal city services and the resulting unsanitary and health conditions, and curfews and ordinances that controlled their daily activities. Despite that, in Overtown, Miami, as in many cities across America, “the people of this community are linked to the fate of this place, and their identity is tied to it, even as they flee for the suburbs” (Barton, 2001, p. 52).

1.4.4 CHANGING PARADIGMS IN SUSTAINABLE TRANSPORT AND URBANISM.

What planners and engineers of the interstate highway system had not projected in their plans was the exodus of commercial uses to the suburbs, including sprawling shopping malls and corporate parks among others, where cheaper land was available and employees and customers lived. While interstates have served their purpose in providing convenient and relatively efficient inter-city transport in a way that no alternative

mode has, the national interstate system strategy misjudged inner-city context and ended up inducing demand and development pressure further away from the central business areas of the city. By creating more freeways, the system created the need for more freeways and roadways by enabling only a single-mode of transport and undermining all others. The system failed to generate economic development, as property values along the interstate and in central areas declined.

Today, 87.7% of people drive to work, with most driving alone (Census, 2007). Personal vehicles emit 11.7 tons of carbon annually (Transportation Research Board, 2008), about 35% of total carbon emissions. In addition to compromising air quality and contributing to climate change, suburban development induced by the abundance of freeways has wreaked havoc on water management systems, diminished energy efficiency, accounted for 70% of the consumption of a finite supply of oil (Transportation Research Board, 2008), and endangered the wildlife and ecosystems that keep our Earth in balance.

With these matters increasingly requiring dramatic action, planners are beginning to rethink urban life and

have shifted to encourage denser, more compact cities that offer alternative modes of transport. These emerging priorities are compounded by a major pattern break: many of the viaducts were built with fifty-year life spans and are in need of costly repairs (F. Salvucci, personal communication, Feb. 4, 2010). Accordingly, planners are now beginning to search for ways to retrofit the freeway-dominated landscapes of America’s cities.

1.4.5 BRAESS’ PARADOX AND POTENTIAL FREEWAY RETROFITTING

When the planning of the national interstate began, traffic engineers made a strong case for the urban segments, claiming that the wide and fast roadways would accommodate the increasing number of vehicles. They argued that without the freeway, the city would be congested. Put simply, congestion is caused by a relatively simple problem: too many cars on the same road at one time. According to Braess’ Paradox, removing certain segments of a transport system may actually improve travel times, by diffusing traffic across other streets (Salvucci, 2009). This potential adds to a

growing case to re-evaluate the need for some segments of the interstate freeway in the contemporary city.

For elevated urban expressways, retrofitting the structure is an option, but given the costs for maintenance, removal should also be considered. Planners should re-visit the capacity of the surface street grid as it exists on either side of inner-city compare to that of the system with the freeway inserted. Does the grid have the capacity to manage demand? What opportunities exist to support travel demand with transit and infrastructure for non-motorized travel in lieu of the freeway? In addition to transport concerns, what land-use and economic development implications are associated with the freeway? Are they desirable, or are there other needed amenities in the surrounding neighborhoods?

1.5 MOTIVATION

The removal of urban freeways has increasingly been considered an option to save costs and to promote sustainable transportation choices and development. This growing typology requires a new approach to re-envision the spaces of and between its wide roadbeds, interchanges, and on-off

ramps when removal is proposed, with the goals of heightening the efficiency of the city and its ecological functions as well as re-energizing the senses of scale and place. These goals will often place planners and designers in the situation of working with communities who exhibit a deep-seated mistrust for the profession, given the history of planning in the urban core and its disregard for local traditions of urbanism in the construction of a modernist scheme.

As opportunities to redesign these spaces surface, urban designers should ask: is there an employable aesthetic or form rooted in the spatial knowledge of a particular culture, particularly in cases when the culture is not represented in the discipline's literature? And, how can this spatial knowledge inform the sustainable design of the new system of land made available by decommissioning urban infrastructure?

I posit that the principles to revive and re-energize the senses of scale and place demolished by freeway construction and urban renewal are often embedded in the form and uses of the spatial cultural understanding of the people who neighbor it. Designing in and for Black communities raises many issues that for a long time have not been engaged in a meaningful way in urban

design. Highway planners and designers "rarely mentioned African-Americans specifically in their discussions about blight and slums" (Bauman, 2000, p. 232), but the development of principles and process could serve to elevate both the role of the professional as well as the role of the community, in a more meaningful and relevant way than that of the symbolic, participatory planning process.

1.6 TOWARDS A THEORY OF BLACK URBANISM

1.6.1 FOUR DIMENSIONS OF DISCOURSE

There are four distinct dimensions to a Black Urbanism discourse, as charted in figure 3.

The four dimensions are derived from two sets of distinctions.

The distinction between diaspora and local context:

- a. Diasporic: a broad discussion on the loosely shared experiences of the Black diaspora
- b. Place-based: the Black experience in a specific local context

The distinction between Black Urbanism and Black Urban design:

- a. Descriptive: characteristics of Black Urbanism
- b. Employable: principles of Black Urban design

This introductory chapter will begin by exploring the diasporic-descriptive dimension, by looking at the high-level characteristics of Black

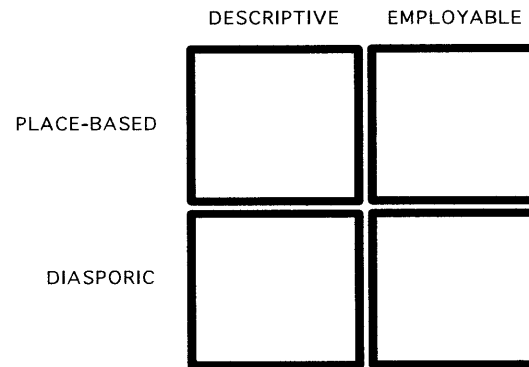


Figure 1.2: Four Dimensions of Black Urbanism. Author's Creation

Urbanism in order to develop the theoretical foundation of the discourse. From there, this chapter will introduce the diasporic-employable dimension, the set of broad design principles which emanate from the diasporic-descriptive discussion. In Chapter 3, I will explore the case of the Claiborne Expressway in New Orleans, analyzing the local manifestations of Black Urbanism (the place-based-descriptive dimension). Chapter 4 will then develop the place-based-employable Black Urban design principles.

1.6.2 KEY CHARACTERISTICS OF BLACK URBANISM (DIASPORIC-DESCRIPTIVE)

Commemoration and the Concept of African Circular Time

To revive or even create a sense of place, time is a critical fourth dimension to establishing place consciousness. Lefebvre (1992) asserts that the concept of time underpins the construction of social space, stating: "With the advent of modernity time has vanished from social space. [...] It is thus possible that the error concerning space that we have been discussing actually concerns time more directly, more intimately" (p. 95). If a post-modernist re-designing of space requires an intimate insertion of time, Black Urbanist theory is rooted in the African concept of time, as the concept of time is one of a continuum of African traditions which form the basis of Black culture (Herskovitz, 1990).

The Western concept of time is linear, moving from the beginning of time to the end, progressing forward, whereas the African concept of time is composed of events from the past, present, and immediate future (Mbiti, 1992). The progression of time in this scheme is circular, drawing from the past, in the present, as it moves towards

the immediate future. Arguably the most prominent African symbol retained by African-Americans and African-American culture through generations of slavery was that of the sankofa, seen in figures 3 and 4, and has been adopted by numerous Black American organizations. The word 'sankofa' derives from the Akan people of West Africa, which literally means "return and pick it up" in Akan, but symbolizes "a constant reminder that the future may profitably be built on aspects of the past" (Mbiti, 1992, p. 39). In the production of a Black Urban space, Black place-consciousness is marked by strong currents of memorialization and commemoration in urban culture that celebrate the past. In the example of the Claiborne Expressway in New Orleans, a common scene is that of jazz funerals, celebrating loved ones who have passed, betwixt the supports of the viaduct, which portray images of Black history as far back as Ancient Egypt. Retrospection is critical to the conceptualization of the future, prominent in Black urban culture and aesthetics. While circular time is not exclusive to the Black diaspora, it is particularly prominent in its traditions, which consistently embody the notion that one must look back in order to move forward.

Ambiguous Delineation of Public and

Private Spheres

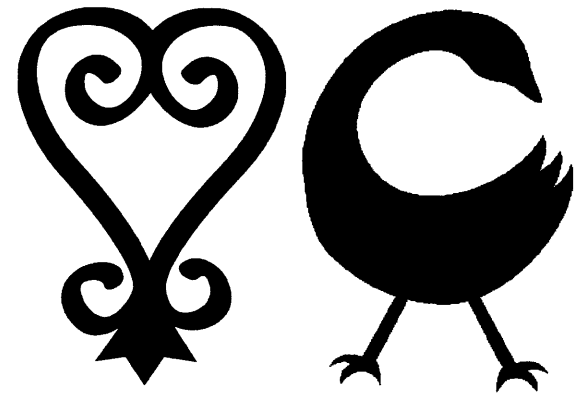
Black traditions of urbanism, outdoor space is often used or appropriated as indoor space and private space is given public functions (Sass, 1994). Outdoor private spaces such as gardens, porches, and stoops are seen as extensions of the home, co-opted into the public realm of the roadway, and public spaces, such as street corners, pocket-parks, and parking lots, frequently feature recreated living room and kitchen scenes, with uses such as cooking (in the form of barbecues), card games, and even hair-braiding. Space, with an ambiguous delineation of public and private use, brings the outside world in and the inside world out (Sass, 1994).

Black Urbanism and the Performance of Black Arts

"There's a structure to cities, a 4/4 beat. Designing is like improvisation, finding a sound for each place."

– Walter Hood (1997)

Music has played a major role in the conceptualization of Black Culture, and is a common metaphor for theorists who attempt to outline the main elements of Black urbanity. While Black Urban space is produced through experience



*Figures 1.3 & 1.4: Sankofa Symbols.
Source: africawithin.com*

and memory, it is communicated through performance (Wilkins, 2007). Music as an art has been one of the strongest vessels through which African connections throughout the Diaspora have been maintained. Africans, while diverse in culture, shared the belief that "beauty especially that created in a collective context, should be an integrated aspect of everyday life," as it enhanced the survival and development of community (Hooks, 1995). Africans, whether on the continent or displaced, free, colonized, or enslaved, brought this aesthetic with them, forming the bases for Black consciousness in various geographic contexts developed over the course of the past 400 years. This includes the African-American context, Afro-Cuban,

Afro-Brazilian, Afro-European, and contemporary African cultures, among numerous others.

Various approaches to slavery and colonization amongst European powers and the methods of behavior modification required of Blacks have resulted in varying manifestations of African aestheticism in Black Urbanism as well as varying degrees of scholarly and popular recognition. For example, North American British laws strictly prohibited African symbology, ritualism, religion, and musical instruments, and also restricted the congregation of Black people, in an effort to minimize the formation of any unity, as to avoid rebellion. The British sought slaves from as many varying tribes as possible to keep Blacks from being able to communicate with one another and organize. The French allowed slaves to maintain many of their overtly African aesthetics, and allowed Sunday as a free day for Blacks to sing, dance, and buy and sell goods in the markets. The Portuguese were of the mindset that a more unified slave population would work more efficiently on the plantation and, therefore, sought to keep African tribes together on various plantations and geographic areas of Brazil. Some groups of Brazilians can make direct links to tribes in Africa to

this day. These varying contexts heavily influenced the way in which Africanity manifested in urban form. "Artistic African cultural retentions survived long after other expressions had been lost or forgotten" (Hooks, 1995, p. 66); ergo, the unifying thread of a diasporic Black Urbanism discourse is the role of cultural production and expression that were the ways for displaced, enslaved, and/or colonized African people to maintain connections with the past and with each other. The performance arts in particular, which include dance, music, and theatre, have historically been the most accessible to Black people (Hooks, 1995, p. 67) and form the roots of the oral traditions of Africa.

Over time, the significance of Black-American art through the history of politics and place have changed; from early slavery, the antebellum era, Jim Crow, and the civil rights movement, through what some call the "post-racial" era of the Obama Presidency. "Though not remembered or cherished for political reasons, [connections with an African past] would ultimately be evoked to counter assertions by white supremacists and colonized black minds that there remained no vital living bond between the culture of African-Americans and the cultures of Africa. This historical aesthetic

legacy has proved so powerful that consumer capitalism has not been able to completely destroy artistic production in underclass black communities" (Hooks, 1995, p. 66).

The relative economic situation of the contemporary Black Diaspora has given rise to the functionality of the political Black aesthetic. My own de-emphasis of the political functions of Black art is in reaction to the over-emphasis in the literature on Black aesthetics and political oppression. Political struggle, which does preoccupy Black arts, has diverted attention away from the firm establishment and reflection on the existence of Negritude. Framing Black aesthetics in this way alone runs the risk of leading scholars to value Black creativity only when it poses as a rival to subjection.

Among the arts, music has been the least censored. Music, particularly improvised music, experiences a lesser degree of censorship than other forms of art which may require editors and publishing houses to shape it into a linear, less-experimental, and in their view, profitable work (Hooks, 1990). As such, jazz music dominates the musical allegory with which race and space theorists engage, and hip-hop has also gained increasing attention by scholars.

Hip-hop is the latest iteration of “urban cool” , the “so-called renaissance of culture in metropolitan areas: New York, London, Paris, Tokyo, etc.” once driven by the Jazz age (Goodwin, 1997, p. 4). Hip-hop exhibits many of the same qualities as jazz and other forms of Black performance arts.

Improvisation and the Art of “Making Do”

The Everyday Urbanists delight in spontaneity and the dis-organization of human activity by space. By conceptualizing “everyday space,” undefined and otherwise considered leftover spaces in the city, the “everywhere and nowhere,” becomes a “zone of possibility and potential transformation” (Mehrotra, 2005, p. 19). Drawing from Lefebvre and de Certeau, Everyday Urbanism focuses on the understanding of people’s everyday appropriation of space. The advantageous prospect of this theory is the focus on the understanding of the people who use the space. For example, de Certeau, on a North African in Paris or Roubaix, asserts that the North African super-imposes his way of functioning and “creates for himself a space in which he can find ways of using the constraining order of the place

or of the language. Without leaving the place where he has no choice but to live and which lays down its law for him, he establishes within it a degree of plurality and creativity” (de Certeau, 1984, p. 30).

While the approach is useful in redirecting attention to the user of the space, too much attention is placed on the constraining order of being in the minority position as the source of creativity. In the preceding example, de Certeau implies that it is the constraining order that squeezes the plurality and creativity out of the man. What other aspects of the man lead him to super-impose his way of functioning? And, what factors influence the very way he functions in that space? All we know about the man is that he is African. Has his Africanity not inspired, propelled, or informed this creativity? If so, how? Or, has his creativity been reduced to the intuition of a man in the minority position? This emphasis on how people use space when they have the least power is a liability in the Everyday Urbanist discourse. What were they doing before entering the oppressive, constraining order? What spatial understanding did the African participate in or help to develop before entering Paris or Roubaix? The discussion of a transformation of urban spaces from re-appropriation to “making-do,” is extremely

valuable, but the discourse potentially robs Black Urbanism from what makes it distinct.

Landscape architect Walter Hood offers visualizations of landscape design that embody this principle of improvisational, spontaneous change. Taking something that exists, changing it on the fly, and making it do something completely new is an art form that has powerful implications for sustainable design and development, in opposition to modernist architecture and planning. In contrast to the urban renewal approach, a standard and one-dimensional modus operandi, Hood emphasizes the value of improvisation in its ability to link the design process directly with the needs and context of the particular neighborhood and community of users of a site. (Hood, 1997). The connection to music is explicit here, as he diagrams improvisation staff paper in Figure 1.5. Black urbanism, by its nature as an urbanism of a historically disenfranchised people, is largely an activity-oriented and adaptive urbanism. But, Black spatial understanding does not only grow out of relative powerlessness; it has a cultural understanding drawing from common cultural experiences amongst people of African descent. The improvisers, those everyday people, have a history. What

Jazz, Improvisation, and Architecture (2006) connects improvisation and jazz music as the foil of modernist architecture and planning. He devotes a chapter to a discussion of Le Corbusier, a pioneer in modernist design, and Louis Armstrong, the only Black musician Le Corbusier ever names, using the two to represent the conflict between modernist architecture and planning and the Black American experience. In this chapter, Brown quotes Le Corbusier as he takes note of the cultural and behavioral assimilation that the Euro-centric model of order and concept of function requires of Black Americans in a pejorative way: “the rhythmic instinct of the virgin African forest has learned the lesson of the machine and that in America the rigor of exactitude is a pleasure. Idea of a masterpiece: exactitude” (pp. 66-67). To Le Corbusier, this exactitude is the highest ideal, and he aims to channel it in his own modernist conceptions of the City. Moreover, referring to this concept as “instinctual” robs the “African” of intellect and inventiveness in cultural production and Black Urbanism.

The rhythmic and improvisational proclivity Corbusier references correlates to a distinct element of Black architecture and space planning (Sass, 1994). According to Lawrence Sass (1994),

Black space planning aims to work in coordination with land and light to please the “daily palette of living,” as opposed to designing columns, pediments, stairs, elevated spaces, and building axes to excessively define space, the urbanism that Le Corbusier glorifies as the highest ideal (p. 35). In a Black Urban design strategy, conceptualizing the programming of use should perhaps be temporal as opposed to spatial, with one space hosting multiple and even overlapping uses at different times. In this scheme, an un-programmed design does not mean it the work is undersigned or unfinished. Rather, the designer is not the only performer. Black Urban design in the public sphere should incorporate the appropriation and co-opting of space as a collective performance by those who inhabit the space. The role of Black Urban design is to set a melody upon which the performance of Black Urbanism improvises.

Communication

Hip-hop music has supplanted rhythm and blues as the most desired sound among young Black people, and Hooks (1995) credits its rise to its ability to serve as a form of “testimony.” The significant respect and valuation of the

ability to tell stories emanates from a robust African oral tradition of griots and other repositories of tradition. Concepts of Black music’s orality – including toasting, call-and-response, storytelling, and improvisation— and its content – self-determination, self-naming, and entrepreneurship—should be powerfully informative in Black Urban design concepts.

The Street as the Stage for the Collective Performance of Life

Sass (1994) describes a history of tribal gatherings on pathways, deeply rooted in Black history. In contemporary Black Urbanism, the public space of the street is punctuated by extensions of the private spaces along it. Residences and businesses often extend spatial “welcome mats” through function (Sass, 1994, p. 68). As a design strategy, aspects of orientation and visibility as tools to foster the interplay between public and private, indoor and outdoor, can support the ambiguity of those designations and reinforce the street as stage.

1.5 CLAIBORNE EXPRESSWAY AS A CASE STUDY

1.5.1. FOUR DIMENSIONS OF DISCOURSE IN ACTION

I will engage with the Claiborne Avenue Expressway case study in New Orleans, an elevated whose removal has recently been proposed through the neighborhoods of the 6th, 7th, and 8th Wards, Treme, Lafitte, Iberville, and Mid-City/Gravier neighborhoods, as well as the Medical District. The case offers the opportunity to explore local adaptations of Black Urban principles, by employing the place-based-descriptive dimension of discourse, and engaging the potential of Black Urban design, through the development of design ideas for a specific place – the employable-place-based dimension.

1.5.2. A NOTE ON PROCESS

Operationalizing Black Urbanism should be done in coordination with other sustainable performance dimensions such as transport planning and policy, natural systems, participatory processes, and policies ensuring equity. Rather than parallel processes, Black Urbanism and the established body of urban planning and design practice should aim for a transcendence, as Black Urbanism, folded into a larger understanding of cities, can serve to illuminate real and valuable exemplars for urban design and planning.

To flip Le Corbusier’s words, the “melody of the soul” he witnessed in the Negro should be “joined with the rhythm of the machine” he praises as the ideal; in other words, the improvisational, Black Urbanist framework can extend to and even broaden contemporary aims of urban efficiency. But, the framework, as in any other approach to urbanism, cannot and should not work in isolation. The melody of the soul and rhythm of the machine can serve to catalyze new ideas, paralleling the double-consciousness of the Black Urbanist. The final chapter of the thesis will explore the potential of Black Urbanism as a design strategy to lend itself to the established processes of planning and development.

chapter TWO

**BLACK URBANISM IN NEW ORLEANS:
LEGACY AND CHALLENGE**

While major cultural, demographic, and economic changes have occurred since the French colonial period of New Orleans, many legacies from that time have permeated through the Spanish, antebellum, reconstruction eras, and beyond (Dawdy, 2008). The history of Black Urbanism dating back to the French colonial period through legislated segregation and the post-Katrina landscape, serves to contextualize the cultural and racial dynamics embedded in the form of the city and the high degree of neighborhood association today. Moreover, the potential for a Black Urban design strategy to enhance the success of Claiborne Avenue should the overpass be removed cannot be fully appreciated without reviewing the “onslaught” of Urban Renewal-era projects devastating the area over the last seventy years, including Louis Armstrong Park and the Lafitte and Iberville housing projects (Samuels, 2000, p. 82). This history sets the stage for the employment of a Black Urban design strategy along Claiborne Avenue.

The reputation of the city of New Orleans has been that it is sinful, disorderly, even devilish. Shannon Lee Dawdy (2008) uses the term “devilish” to denote colonialism’s “failures and its underworlds” as seen in the spatial

culture of New Orleans (p. 4). The history of devilish or disorderly urbanism, stands in opposition to what modern urbanism or “White Urbanism” might be (re: urbanism), which stresses orderliness, cleanliness, and compartmentalization. This “devilishness” supports my understanding of what Black Urbanism is in the context of New Orleans (Dawdy, 2008). I argue that to this day, this is the lore of the city, and the backbone of the \$4.1 billion tourism industry in New Orleans (“New Orleans Launches New Master Plan for Tourism,” 2010).

Aside from lofty, romantic aspirations to preserve culture and history and instill pride in distinction, it is in the city’s economic interest to understand and support this “devilish” urbanism in the major redevelopment post-Katrina and close the chapter with a case study of a freeway removal in Oakland, California and the relationship between urban design, Black Urbanism, and economic development, with lessons for the Claiborne Avenue case.

2.1 EARLY BLACK URBANISM IN NEW ORLEANS

2.1.1 THE AFRICAN URBANIST ROOTS OF THE NEW ORLEANS FRONTIER

Slaves who were brought to Louisiana brought with them an African Urbanism, drawing from their previous experiences of urbanity before capture. Colonial development on the Mississippi coincided with urban development in the Senegambian region of Africa, and “Blacks played vital roles in both processes, from positions of strength in Africa and weakness in America” (Usner, 1979, p. 36). The majority of the slaves that the French imported to Louisiana were funneled through Senegambia and the Bight of Benin from the interior of the continent where Black Africans had been building cities for over 3,000 years (Dawdy 80). While the slave trade undoubtedly caused urban growth along the coast, a long history of urban growth had existed prior to that, particularly in the late pre-colonial kingdoms of Mali, Niger and

Benin.

In addition to the urban settlements with long African histories in the interior, traders shipping slaves to Louisiana largely collected them in the coastal port-cities of Saint-Louis and Gorée in present-day Senegal, Badagri in present-day Nigeria, Ouidah in present-day Benin, and the inland port of Juffure in present-day Gambia (Dawdy, 2008). Some cities, such as Elmina in present-day Ghana, had a population of 15,000-20,000 at the time and “were significantly more urban and urbane than New Orleans in the French period” (Dawdy, 2008, p. 80). Even while slaves were held in fortified enclosures of the African port-cities, with little chance to see the large cities surrounding them, “those originating from areas near the coast or along major inland rivers would have been familiar with cosmopolitan port towns where people” mingled to trade “in an already global market.” As such, Black Africans brought to Louisiana usually had firsthand experience with African urban settlements, either living in one or living in a village nearby (Dawdy, 2008), constituting the basis of cultural spatial understanding of an early Black Urbanism in the New World port-city of

New Orleans.

2.1.2 BLACK URBANISM IN THE FRENCH COLONIAL LANDSCAPE

Black Urbanism has left an undeniably indelible imprint on New Orleans from the beginning of its colonial history. To the Europeans disdain, “... Africans and Native Americans, for whom the city was never intended, made it their market town” (Dawdy, 2008, p. 3). The improvisational, mixing of uses, spaces and places led to a perceived notion that the French were failures in colonizing and enslaving in New Orleans. According to firsthand accounts of French arriving in the colony for the first time, the perception of the city was often of a counter-colonial, creole¹ underworld where people of all colors spilled out into the muddy streets on the hot, musty Louisiana nights. The “multihued crew” of street dwellers, the revelry, the music, and the markets of Blacks and Natives, free and enslaved, was a shameful sight for Bourbon France, indicative of disorder (Dawdy, 2008, p. 181). The relative freedom people of color as compared to the rest of the South led to a higher degree of friendly and romantic or otherwise

sexual relations between people of various races, free and enslaved.

New Orleans was a creole society from the beginning, where the degree of mixing between the French, the Africans, and the Native Americans was high relative to the rest of North America and led to the formation of a new society. By 1746, Africans and African-Creoles outnumbered whites two to one in New Orleans (Verderber, 2009), and the willingness of the French to not only breed with but also to socialize, fraternize, romanticize, and engage culturally with the large number of Africans in the colony allowed the heavy influence of Black Urbanism and culture to permeate through the streets of New Orleans, its cabarets and taverns. The ban on “interracial co-habitation” was unenforced (Dawdy, 2008, p. 181); many historical documents of the city’s Creole children omitted one of the parents’ names, “suggesting the hazy legal and religious status of many relationships in the community” (Dawdy, 2008, p. 185). These were “confusing animosities and intimacies of slavery,” but the Black cultural influence worried New Orleans’ elites more than the inter-racial sexual

relations (Dawdy, 2008, p. 185).

Amidst a chaotic and ambiguous social structure, “slaves and Afro-Louisianians had even more obvious motivations for carving a space of independent action, if not freedom...” (Dawdy, 2008, p. 13). The French, as noted previously, allowed enslaved Blacks every Sunday off and some Saturdays off. Three to four hundred free Negroes and slaves would congregate on Congo Square, “for ceremony and conspiracy,” to participate in commerce, and retain African music and instrumentation. Common work and physical spaces “created opportunity for developing communication and communal identity” in an autonomous community (Usner, 1979, p. 40). There was a significant number of free Blacks as the French, unlike the rest of the nation, allowed slaves to purchase themselves out of slavery and offered freedom for fighting against the Natchez (Dawdy, 2008,). Some of the watering holes and other establishments were even owned by free people of color, offering a space for slaves to socialize with each other and with others (Dawdy, 2008). Slave owners complained that the free blacks were hosting their slaves

where “plantation and town slaves met to eat, drink and dance all night to the sound of a fiddle” (Dawdy, 2008, p. 186). The Superior Council legislated ordinances to restrict the social mixing of slaves, soldiers, and free people in these places, voicing concerns of a “‘corrupting influence’ on morals,” but these policies had negligible effects. Metropolitan officials and the colony’s city designers attempted to instill order, but failed to put clear structures governing space in this swampy port city (Dawdy, 2008, p. 13).

Early modern colonies of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries were important laboratories for the packaging of ideas and practices that may, in this context, be considered “White Urbanism” and have heavily influenced urban planning. Modernity originated in Europe and “flowed out” to the colonies in the form of “bureaucracy, legibility, planning, centralization, applied science, and a highly ordered aesthetic” (Dawdy, 2008, p. 70). While urban planning was technically still a fledgling discipline in France in 1718, the year New Orleans was founded, Louis XIV began his efforts to prevent both medical epidemics as well as the perceived social ills

through city design. Louis XIV began comprehensive programs of carving out plazas and public squares, street widenings, and street extensions in an attempt to bring in light, clean air, and water, as well as to instill order in the streets, facilitate surveillance, and “make the city more readily knowable and predictable...” (Dawdy, 2008, p. 70). The concept of the “aesthetic of order, uniformity, and clarity seen in these new urban planning initiatives resonated with other Enlightenment projects that emphasized rationality and transparency in law, economics, and science” and tied spatial control with social order (Dawdy, 2008, p. 71).

Colonial New Orleans, however, formed a cultural resistance to the mainstream Atlantic world. Note that the perception of the failure of colonial European urbanism was based on the mix of uses in the streets, and the unique freedoms and cultural fluidity of New Orleans allowed Black people the space to influence the use and spatial understanding of the city through this network of spaces. In response to this perceived chaos, the French decided to employ a system of organizing the use of space through regulations to compartmentalize activity, using the

nascent discipline of urban planning. At the height of the Enlightenment, planners and designers in New Orleans attempted to design a standard French city, irrespective of the social context of the city. And, while urban designers of New Orleans put in place the plans they had, the social order they hoped would follow the physical ordering did not take hold (Dawdy, 2008, p. 21). “The new residents of New Orleans -- Africans, Indians, Europeans, and Canadians – carried ideas of town life in their own minds, ones that did not necessarily derive from pen and ink” (Dawdy, 2008, p. 74). Their attempts failed to introduce order to the streets, as the Enlightenment-era city was not designed to control the counter-cultural spatial knowledge of the creole city. Reports in France cited “insufficient knowledge” as the reason why policies were a failure, and the influence of Black Urbanism and its public and improvisational nature remained a strong influence in the city.

The notion that New Orleans was a “mixed society” throughout the antebellum era is partly true, and critical to the influence of Black Urbanism, as Blacks were uniquely integrated in the social, economic, architectural,

agricultural, military, religious, and culinary development (Nagel, 2006); however, over time there developed a segregation of the mind, rather than the body. The nature of urban slavery in this major southern port city was such that slaves would live close to their masters, often on the narrow back streets behind the spacious homes of Whites, and freed Blacks would often work for Whites in their homes, and choose to live nearby. So while spatially integrated into the fabric of the city, the antebellum Black community in New Orleans was still concentrated and numerous, fortifying Black and colored consciousness.

2.1.3 BLACK ART, ARCHITECTURE, AND GRID TYPOLOGY IN NEW ORLEANS

Africans with experience as blacksmiths and other skilled labor in Africa were placed in apprenticeships to replace paid, inefficient white workers (Usner, 1979). Skilled artisans, particularly from the Senegambian region, with a unique aesthetic and well-developed craft were then able to become a significant influence in the built environment of Louisiana (Usner, 1979). In 1732, 15 percent “of the city’s slaves lived in artisan households and 25 percent of its tradesmen lived with slaves” (Dawdy, 2008, p. 177). Ironworking in particular was a “firmly established ancient craft” in the regions of West Africa where the French bought slaves to bring to Louisiana (Christian, 2002, p. 24). The famed ironwork of New Orleans, largely found in the French Quarter, was wrought by hand or cast by these Black artisans (Campanella, 2002), introducing African craft to the European architecture. A large concentration of those Black craftsmen lived along Claiborne Avenue. In addition to ironwork, lathing, plastering, painting, and tile setting are among

the other professional crafts that have been handed down for generations. “These lines of work availed to free men of color (to whom the doors of many other professions were closed) a level of independence, steady work, opportunities for creativity, and a sense of accomplishment. Their labors have permanently enriched the physical culture of New Orleans and much of the city’s spectacular architecture stands today as a monument to their efforts” (Campanella, 2006, p. 218).

African roots are also attributed to the introduction and spread of the shotgun home in New Orleans (Campanella, 2002, p. 135). The shotgun house derives from West Africa and was constructed by Africans in Haiti. One prominent antecedent, the two room house of the Yoruba people, is shown in Figure 2.1. Free Haitians of color introduced this housing types as they began to resettle in Louisiana in the early 19th century, and it began to spread across the American south and even northwards to cities like St. Louis and Chicago (Upton, 1986). The shotgun home is one room wide, one story tall, and several rooms deep (Upton, 1986). Its perpendicular alignment sets it apart from Euro-American housing types, as

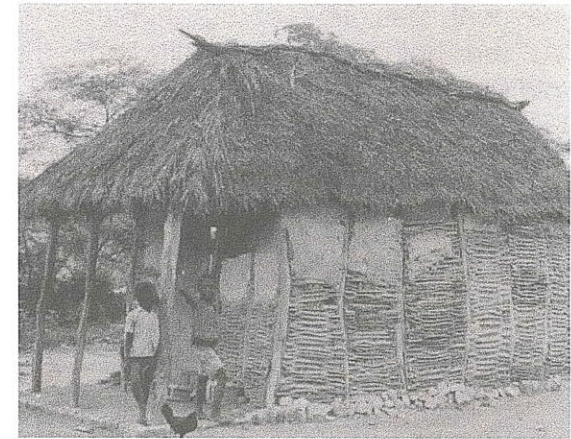


Figure 2.1: Two room house of the Yoruba People, an antecedent of the New Orleans shotgun. Source: *America’s Architectural Roots* (Upton, 1986)

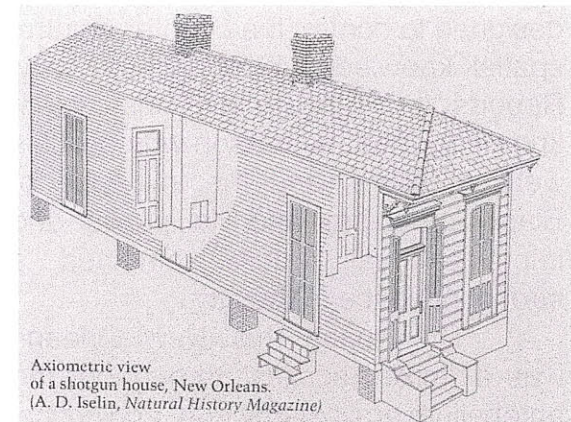


Figure 2.2: Axiometric of a New Orleans shotgun. Source: *America’s Architectural Roots* (Upton, 1986)

the shotgun's entrance is on the short side of the home. The perpendicular orientation allows for multiple residences to achieve frontage, thereby activating the street. There exists a large concentration of the housing type in the neighborhoods along Claiborne Avenue, as many free Haitians of color settled in this area upon entering the colony.

Additionally, the front porch, as it is commonly found in New Orleans, is an African-derived architectural trait prominent in New Orleans and often combined with the shotgun type. There are no antecedents for the front porch in Northern England as it exists in New Orleans; "the southern front porch has owed its existence mainly to the adaptive genius of local carpenters acting on African notions of good architectural form" (Upton, 1986, p. 45). The front porches in the neighborhoods along Claiborne continue serve to support the active and multifarious use of streets in the Black Urbanism of New Orleans.

The original plan for New Orleans was based on the French grid system, in an effort to stamp the city as a purely European place in the New World. However, the grid was

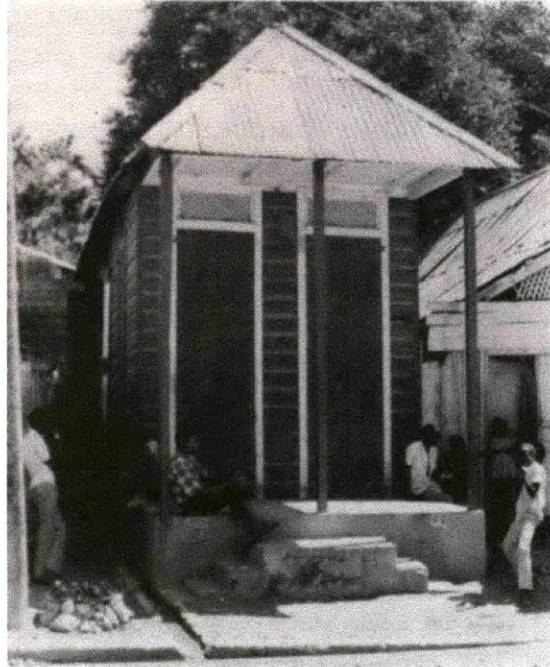


Figure 2.3: Shotgun House in Port-au-Prince with a double entrance. Source: America's Architectural Roots (Upton, 1986)

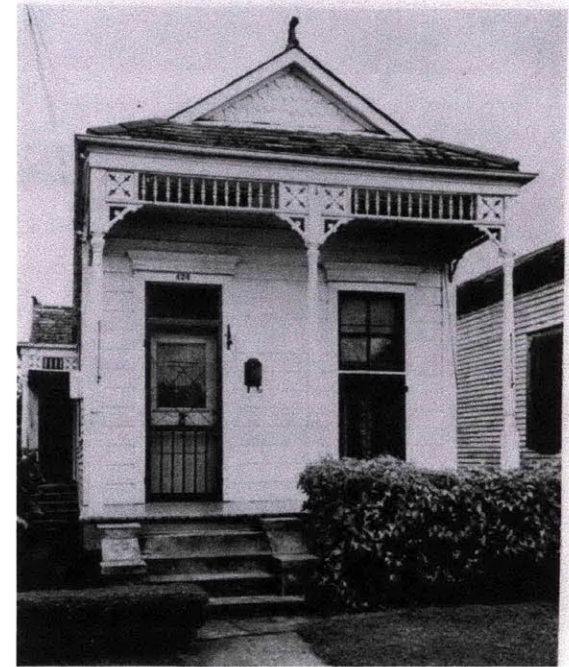


Figure 2.4: Shotgun house in New Orleans. Source: America's Architectural Roots (Upton, 1986)

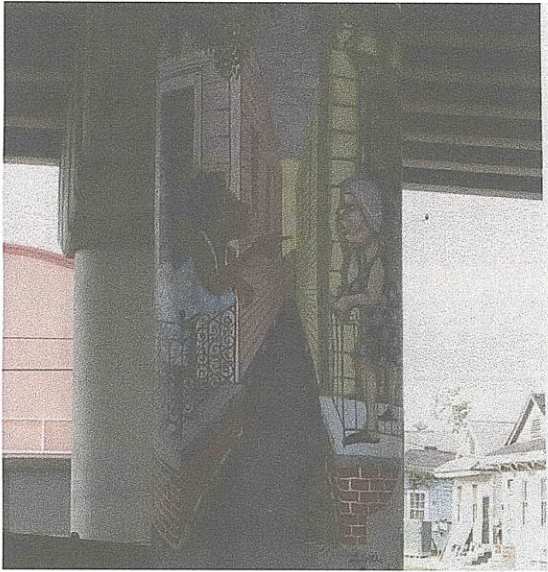


Figure 2.5: Painting under the Claiborne Expressway depicting the social interaction that happens on the front porches of shotgun homes in the area. Author's own image.

met with unforeseen circumstances, including among others, a Black cultural spatial influence. “Rather than being a European metropolis, New Orleans became a more African place, its gardens given over to slave quarters” due to a large influx of slaves that the original town planners had not conceived of space for (Dawdy, 2008, p. 98). The orientation of the shotgun home, coupled with the front porch trait, come together with the French grid system and create a setting supportive of the Black Urban uses of the streets of New Orleans.

As seen in figure 2.6, the frontage of the architecture in the downtown neighborhoods along Claiborne Avenue is forthrightly oriented towards the street, exhibiting minimal setbacks and intimately-sized gardenspace, forcing an increased intensity of use of shared public spaces, including streets, neutral grounds (local word for “median”), and public green spaces. In comparison, the Euro-American influence of the uptown neighborhoods of New Orleans demonstrates much larger setbacks, with a less focused building frontage, enveloped in a private garden and yard.

Before the construction of the

elevated expressway, the block faces of Claiborne Avenue featured a pattern of one and two story buildings, with dense street frontage and a collection of projecting porches, stoops, balconies, and galleries that energized the Black Urban streetscape (Samuels, 2000). The shotgun house type, the front porch, and the relation to gardens and public spaces come together to frame the overlapping, disorderly uses of the streets of New Orleans, borrowing architectural traits from firmly established African practices and implanting them within the grid of the French colonial city. The neutral grounds in the neighborhoods which exhibit these traits are commonly used as shared yards, including the neutral ground of Claiborne Avenue.

2.2 1780-1810: CRITICAL YEARS IN THE ESTABLISHMENT OF AMERICA'S OLDEST BLACK NEIGHBORHOOD

In 1775, Julie Moreau, a freed slave, owned much of the land along the riverside of current-day North Claiborne Avenue in the neighborhood now known as Treme. In 1780, she married Claude Tremé, who was then deeded ownership of the property (Nagel, 2006; St. Augustine Catholic Church of New Orleans, 2007). As the Carondelet Canal and St. John Canals were constructed, development pressure increased, and beginning in 1789, the Tremés subdivided their land and sold lots largely to free people of color. Careful documentation of the transactions was taken, documenting the formation of a free Black neighborhood:

Jean Louise Dolliole, free man of color and noted builder, was established in the 1500 block of Bayou Rd, on the left side, from the year 1807. One of the finest houses

built on 1253-55 N. Villere was designed by architectural firm on Gurlie and Guillot in 1839 for Nancy of Jane Milne, former slaves. Milne had freed the two women in his will with directions that our houses were to be constructed and that these would provide, through rental, for their support. Subsequently, James Milne married Gustave August Dauphin, the free man of color who owned a small habitation nearby. (Nagel, 2006, pp. 26-27)

In 1789, the bloody Haitian revolution sent thousands fleeing to Louisiana; many bought lots in the Treme and other areas along Claiborne Avenue, where there were strong communities of free coloreds and the land was nearby the center of town and above sea-level. In 1809 alone, 9,000 Haitians settled in New Orleans (Campanella, 2002); recognizing the profit potential, the Tremés liquidated all of their property in 1810 and moved to the far edges of town. The Haitians, like the Creoles of Color, also had a strong degree of African retention; at the time of the revolution a majority of Haitians fighting in the revolution were born in West Africa (Thornton, 1991). Their arrival in New Orleans

and submergence into the Creoles of Color ethnic group was an infusion of African spatial knowledge. In 1812, the city surveyor developed a street grid to match the street grid with the French Quarter, and so began the history of North Claiborne Avenue.

Congo Square, just 500 yards from Claiborne Avenue, continued to host generations of congregations and celebrations of Black New Orleans, and the wide neutral ground of North Claiborne itself became a place for the performance of identity and culture. At the turn of the 20th century, Jazz music emerged, among other musical styles, whose style influenced the world over (Campanella, 2002).

2.3 JIM CROW AND ROBERT MOSES COME TO TOWN

2.3.1 RACIALIZED SPACE CREATES DEFINITIVE BLACK NEW ORLEANS

In the 1920s, the Orleans Levee District employed modern technology to build a seawall and infill to extend developable land to the shores of Lake Pontchartrain. Two thousand acres of waterfront real estate were created, restrictive both by price as well as by explicit racial prohibitions making certain of exclusive white neighborhoods (Nagel, 2006). Amusement parks were built along the lakeshore and uptown, including 'White City' at the corner of Tulane and Carrollton, constructed in 1907 (figure 2.7) . With Jim Crow strengthening its grasp on the freedoms of Black people in the South, the Blacks living in the French Quarter were squeezed out and forced to move to the Tremé and the rest of the 6th Ward and 7th Ward neighborhoods strung along Claiborne Avenue (Bullard, 1997). Most middle-class Black families lived in the Seventh Ward, but a pioneering

few began forming new neighborhoods elsewhere as well, particularly in Gentilly after the formation of Dillard University, an Historically Black College or University (HBCU), in the 1940s (Campanella, 2006 and Pontchartrain Park in 1955. Moreover, Blacks were all-together excluded from major civic and commercial streets such as Canal Street. As such (Verderber, 2009), Claiborne became known, as it is still often referred to, as the "Black Canal Street" or the "Black Main Street."

2.3.2 URBAN RENEWAL: CLEARING HOUSING TO BUILD... HOUSING

Alderman Sydney Story, concerned about vice in the city of New Orleans, passed legislation in 1897 limiting legal prostitution and gambling to an area that would come to be known as Storyville (Nagel, 2006), one block removed from Claiborne. While the area was the legislated home of what were considered vices, prominent were Storyville's numerous benevolent halls, music venues, and social clubs "where musicians honed their craft and emerged on the national music scene"



Figure 2.7: 'White City' development in uptown New Orleans. Source: *Understanding Place After Katrina: Predatory Planning and Cultural Resistance in New Orleans Tremé' Neighborhood* (Nagel, 2006)

(Nagel, 2006, p. 35). The autonomous economic zone was often tolerated and patronized by whites, but the red light district was shut down by the federal government in 1917 (Nagel, 2006). Storyville continued to be a major economic zone and helped build up the wealth of Blacks in the area; however, within a year of the founding of the Housing Authority of New Orleans (HANO) in 1939, it purchased and demolished Storyville, the fine housing stock and mansions along its streets, and displaced the many families, artists, and craftsmen and women living there (Nagel, 2006). A total of 800 Black families were evicted in 1939 to build an

all-white public housing complex, the Iberville Public Housing Development, in 1941 (Nagel, 2006). The same year, the blocks from North Claiborne to North Rocheblave and Orleans to Lafitte were also cleared to build the Lafitte Public Housing Development for Blacks (Nagel, 2006).

2.3.3 FEDERAL HIGHWAY PROGRAM

In 1946, Robert Moses concluded that New Orleans' traffic problems were "getting into and out of the very heart of the city from the east and west, and of expansion to the south, rather than getting straight through the City" (Baumbach & Borah, 1981, p. 30). The same year, he proposed the "Arterial Plan for New Orleans," which focused on connecting the existing east and west highways to the city--Airline Highway and Chef Menteur--by constructing a new Mississippi River Bridge as well as the Claiborne, Pontchartrain, and Riverfront Expressways (Samuels, 2000, p. 60). The plans began to increasingly emphasize the need to support local urban traffic, in addition to the need to support urban/suburban

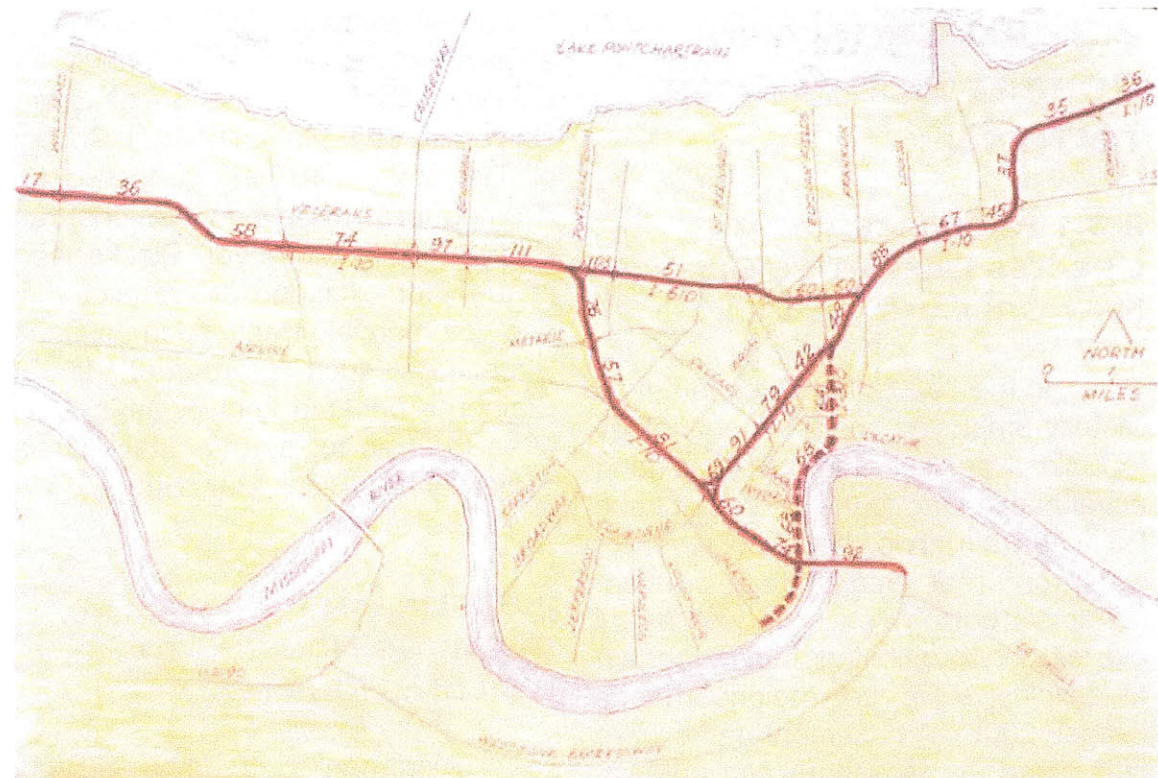


Figure 2.8: Plans for highway construction in New Orleans. The dashed line represents the Riverfront Expressway, which was never constructed due to the opposition of preservationists and environmentalists. The segment from '69' to '48' as marked on the map represents the alignment of the Claiborne Expressway, whose construction was complete as of 1966. Source: Courtesy of William Borah

travel, as reports began to predict the inability for surface to carry the load:

...because of our anticipated population increase, because of... the rapid growth that is taking place in the city, it is essential that we revise it, principally upon the theory of expressway movement. The traffic is mounting at such rapid rates that we realize that the local major streets can no longer carry it; therefore it is very important that we begin to think about an expressway system that will carry this through traffic into and out of our city... (City Planning and Zoning Commission, 1954a: 3). (Samuels, 2000, p. 60)

As compared to other potential routes linking the Central Business District, North Claiborne presented planners with at least two compelling advantages in its physicality: its proximity to the central business district and its 190 foot-wide street profile (Samuels, 2000, p. 60). A third compelling advantage was political-its population, whose political voice was relatively weak, would make the process less complicated. In contrast,

another leg of the system, the Riverfront Expressway, would also exhibit these same physical characteristics, offering an even more direct link to the heart of the city, using the under-utilized industrial areas along the riverbank. However, preservationists would mobilize to halt and eventually cancel plans to construct the Riverfront Expressway beginning their efforts in earnest in 1962 (Baumbach & Borah, 1981), citing the views of the freeway's proposed elevated structures as permanently damaging to the historic architecture of the French Quarter. Private citizens concerned that the construction would affect their investments even funded young, energetic professionals to work full time on mobilizing opposition to the Riverfront Expressway and connect with the larger national Highway Revolt movement (W. Borah, personal communication, Jan. 21, 2010); this ultimately led to the "first denial of federal funds for a highway on the basis of preserving a historic area" (Bullard, 1997, p. 131). The fight to block the Riverfront Expressway would play a major role in inspiring the writing of the National Preservation Act of 1966, which would authorize the Secretary of the Interior to maintain

a National Register of historically significant districts, sites, buildings, structures, and objects in American history, architecture, archaeology, and culture (Bullard, 1997). The news of the cancellation announced by Secretary of Transportation Volpe in 1969 was reported on the front page of *The New York Times*; articles in support of the decision also came from the *Wall Street Journal*, *The Washington Post*, *Business Week*, and the *Delta Democrat Time* in Greenville, Mississippi (Bullard, 1997).

And yet, these efforts had no bearing on the construction of the Claiborne Expressway just blocks away, in a neighborhood with equal architectural and cultural historic significance, the nation's oldest Black neighborhood. Unlike the Riverfront Expressway, "no public hearings were held to inform the black community of the Claiborne Avenue section of I-10" (Bullard, 1997, p. 133). When news came of the plans for the Claiborne Expressway, there was little organized opposition. On the one hand, the nature of Black political disenfranchisement in 1950s New Orleans meant that healthy, reciprocal communication from city leaders to the Black community was

weak-to-non-existent. And, had there been public hearings on the feasibility of the Claiborne Expressway construction, Black residents were not familiar or even aware of the channels available to get involved in the process due to nature of Black political disenfranchisement. As one Treme resident noted, “You can’t fight things like that” (Bullard, 1997, p. 134). Leah Chase, legendary chef at the nearby restaurant Dooky Chase’s, echoes similar sentiments. “Child, we didn’t know what was goin’ on. They just started building; didn’t tell us nothin’”² (L. Chase, personal communication, Jan. 21, 2010).

The young and energetic men and women who could have organized a similar opposition against the Claiborne Expressway as mounted in the French Quarter to halt the Riverfront Expressway, were fighting the battles of the Civil Rights Movement, both locally and across the South. As one elder community activist described to me, “I was running around the country, organizing with [the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee] and [The Congress of Racial Equality]. I came back to New Orleans and there was a freeway in the front yard” (R. Lombard, personal communication,



Figure 2.9: Aerial image of North Claiborne before construction of the expressway. Note the live oak trees and dense urban fabric. Source: Courtesy of William Borah



Figure 2.10: Businesses on North Claiborne, 1947. Source: Courtesy of William Borah

Jan. 21, 2010). As such, there was no discussion of the economic impact on the Black businesses that lined Claiborne Avenue, the deficiency of local residents' accessibility to the downtown core and to either side of the freeway, the aesthetic and ecological value lost with the removal of the longest stretch of live oak trees in the country and green space with an area of 13.5 acres along the neutral ground, and no discussion of the loss of cultural space and "activities that promoted neighborhood cohesiveness and family stability" (Bullard, 1997, p. 134).

This would ultimately lead to the construction of the elevated expressway and its damaging frequency of on-off ramps along Claiborne Avenue, further dismembering the tightly-knit street grid. Construction took place from 1961 to 1966.



Figure 2.11: North Claiborne Avenue's neutral ground before the freeway. Source: Courtesy of William Borah



Figure 2.12: North Claiborne Avenue as removal of the oak trees begins in 1966. Source: Courtesy of William Borah



Figure 2.13: North Claiborne Avenue after the removal of the oak trees in 1996. Source: Courtesy of William Borah

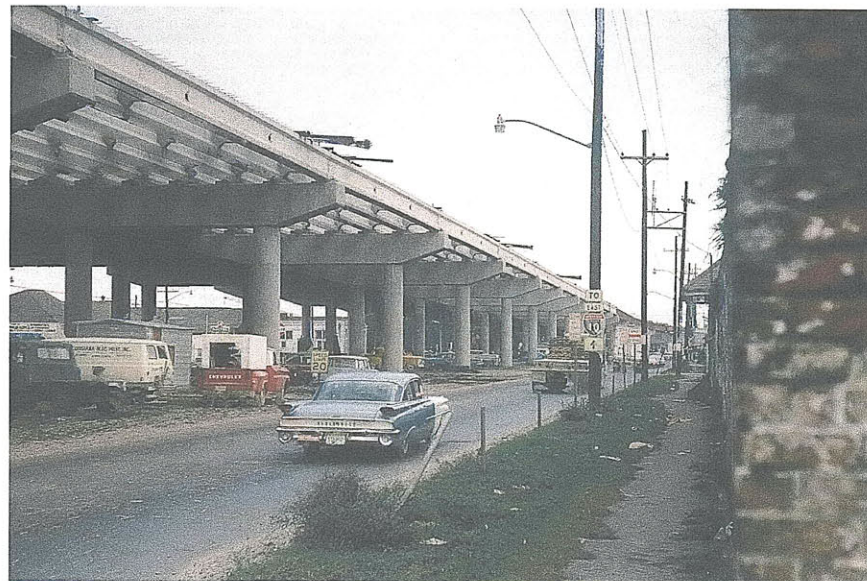


Figure 2.14: Construction of the Claiborne Expressway, 1966-1968. Source: Courtesy of William Borah



Figure 2.15: The Claiborne Expressway today.



Figure 2.16: Homes along North Claiborne face the concrete roadbed.

2.3.4 CULTURAL CENTER COMPLEX, LOUIS ARMSTRONG PARK, AND CONGO SQUARE

While Treme was the chosen site for the Municipal Auditorium back in 1926, opposition and insufficient funds kept construction from being actualized at that time (Bullard, 1997). In 1961, the plans for the auditorium were altered to align with the Urban Renewal program and qualify for the federal funds (Nagel, 2006). Despite the passing of the National Preservation Act of 1966, nine square blocks of “first-class nineteenth century architecture” were cleared in the early 1970s (Bullard, 1997, p. 139) in order to build a Cultural Center Complex, to include the auditorium and a theatre for performing arts among several other buildings (Bullard, 1997), purported to bring thousands of jobs to the declining area. After the I-10 experience, neighbors were apprehensive about the plans that again cited economic development and growth (Bullard, 1997). Finally, financing for the Cultural Center Complex project fell through, only the Municipal Auditorium and Mahalia Jackson Performing Arts Theatre had been constructed, and the city offered

the community a park in place of the other plans, to include Congo Square. The community “jumped at the chance” to honor of Louis Armstrong, after his death in 1971 and the clearance of his birthplace and neighborhood to construct the new City Hall; they “thought it was for the community to appreciate and enjoy” (Bullard, 1997, p. 139). The city then built a concrete and steel fence around it, separating the park completely from the neighborhood, and located the large entrance on the far end of the park, facing the French Quarter. Clearly, the neighborhood residents of Treme got the message that this park was not intended for their enjoyment. In total, nine square blocks were cleared for Louis Armstrong Park, uprooting a total of 410 families, virtually all of them Black, and 80% with incomes less than half the Orleans Average (Nagel, 2006).

Historically, Congo Square was the only place Black people, freed and enslaved, were allowed to gather. The space is considered the birthplace of various types of Black music including jazz, religious practices such as voodoo, cuisine, and the very place where a Black identity was cobbled together in the New World. Today, Louis Armstrong

Park is a desolate park, rarely exhibiting signs of life, and is a notorious hotbed of crime. Tourists are warned not to enter anytime near dusk and some are told to avoid it all together. Encircling Congo Square within the gates of Louis Armstrong Park further damaged the grid that had previously generated so much liveliness and cohesion.

Congo Square’s placement within Louis Armstrong Park created a change in nomenclature that has altered the square’s place consciousness. “You don’t hear about Congo Square no’ mo’. Not since they built Louis Armstrong Park. You got to go through Louis Armstrong Park to get to Congo Square,” notes Sylvester Francis, a member of the nearby Fi Yi Yi Mandingo Warriors Tribe (S. Francis, personal communication, Feb. 15, 2010). “It’s cuz’ the tourists want to be able to walk out of the French Quarter and go straight into Louis Armstrong Park. This city is one big tourist attraction” (S. Francis, personal communication, Feb. 15, 2010). Pastor Dwight Webster of nearby Christian Unity Baptist Church, located at Claiborne Avenue and Conti Street, asserts that “the place will never be special, unless you give access to the people that make it special. This

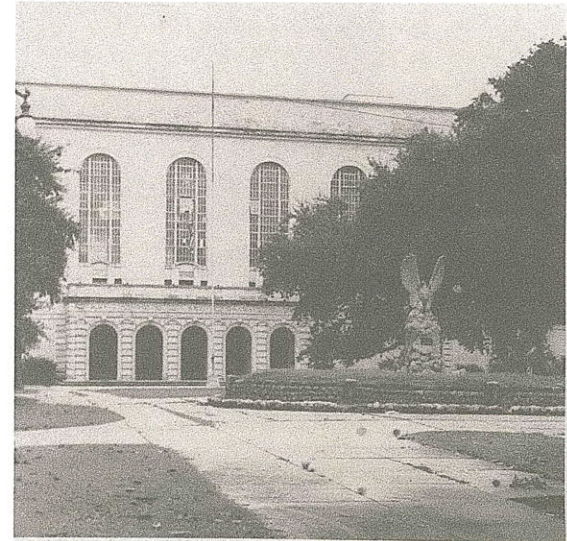


Figure 2.17: Municipal Auditorium and grounds, “where the kids used to play” (R. Lombard, personal communication, Jan. 21, 2010). Source: Claiborne Avenue Design Team Study (1976)

place is the gateway to a continent. Once the municipality shows that they value the people surrounding the park, by giving access, things in that park would change” (D. Webster, personal communication, Feb. 23, 2010).

If Claiborne Avenue was the area’s front yard, the grounds surrounding Congo Square near the Municipal Auditorium was the area’s backyard from the time it was cleared in 1930. “We used to play on the Municipal Auditorium grounds (see figure 2.17). I used to go there and play baseball when I would go to my aunt’s house. All the kids would play there. Now the gates keep them out,” (R. Lombard, personal communication, Jan. 21, 2010). While the gates do not forcibly keep the neighboring Black community members out of the park, the perception of the gate with the illuminated “Hollywood-style” (L. Elie, personal communication, Jan. 13, 2010) entrance facing the French Quarter is so strong, that the gates stop just short of that. “The wall and fence added insult to injury. You’re cutting off the community from which you took this,” notes Pastor Webster (D. Webster, personal communication, Feb. 23, 2010). “Louis Armstrong is rolling in his grave,” is a common reaction by

older community members at the state of the people’s relation to the park (D. Webster, personal communication, Feb. 23, 2010).

The landscape design of the park was set to be inspired by Tivoli Gardens in Copenhagen park (D. Webster, personal communication, Feb. 23, 2010) and was intended to be the city’s Lincoln Center (J. Davis, personal communication, Jan. 25, 2010). But, community members have largely never been satisfied with the activities, or lack thereof, that the design promotes. The manicured lawns and series of lagoons come together to feel much like one is wandering through a golf course. Pastor Webster comments that “it’s not people friendly. Too much concrete. There is green there, but it doesn’t feel green. Not inviting. I wouldn’t want to hold a church picnic there” (D. Webster, personal communication, Feb. 23, 2010). As of 2009, Mayor Ray Nagin announced a \$3 million upgrade to the park, to include a sculpture garden without publicizing the process for selection of the artists, the concept, or the plan (Devlin, 2009). Residents have begun to voice their opposition: “All of this ‘representative commemorative art’ is bullshit. Do these tributes really



Figure 2.18: Fenced out from Congo Square. Author’s own image.



Figure 2.19: Gates of Louis Armstrong Park that face the Treme community. Author’s own image.

mean you're paying tribute? Just because it's in the exact likeness of Jelly Roll Morton?" remarks Lolis Eric Elie (L. Elie, personal communication, Jan. 13, 2010). "I mean, we can't even figure out who the artists are! I don't want just some ol' Mardi Gras stuff in there. I don't want it," says Leah Chase (L. Chase, personal communication, Jan. 21, 2010). The historically significant spaces of Congo Square and the grounds surrounding it have continued to be mismanaged and under-performing, failing to include and incorporate the people who brought it to life and creating a vacuum in a place once a wellspring of culture and vitality.

2.3.5 SUBURBAN-STYLE DEVELOPMENT INDUCED BY I-10

The development of transportation infrastructure for vehicular travel increasingly shaped the geography of race and class in the city. The Mississippi River Bridges in 1958 and 1988, the Causeway in 1956, and I-10 provided new access to former marshes and swamps, and enabled the construction of new housing

developments. The construction of the lakefront area east of City Park began in earnest later in the 20th Century (Campanella, 2006), and its suburban style development drew whites by the thousands. At the same time, the forced relocation of area residents and the physical damage of their neighborhood's environs due to the construction of I-10 prompted middle class Blacks to move to the northern and eastern neighborhoods, now connected by the freeway (Campanella, 2006).

In the 1970s, Eastern New Orleans became the fastest growing section of the city, spurred by the drainage of the swamps, recent construction of I-10 connecting to Chef Menteur Highway, and a booming oil industry. Conditions of the older New Orleans' housing stock were diminishing, and, following a tide of activism, City Council and HANO began to assist public housing residents to move to East New Orleans (Nagel, 2006). However, with the growing number of Black residents in Eastern New Orleans came a tipping point in the early 1980s, sending white residents to neighboring St. Tammany Parish, who would use I-10 to drive into the CBD

to reach their place of employment. Their relocation to St. Tammany Parish devastated the city's economy through loss of tax revenues (Bullard, 1997). While some of Eastern New Orleans' luxury housing stock housed much of the city's middle-middle and upper-middle class Black families, "more and more luxury apartments were filled by poorer black New Orleanians on rent subsidies" (Bullard, 1997, p. 140). This geography of race and class in the city of New Orleans, heavily shaped by I-10, depreciated the city's ability to provide an efficient transportation system. While the city's tax base was decreasing, the need and cost of providing transport to the city's lower income residents, now spread across a much wider geographic area was increasing (Bullard, 1997). Additionally, many of the transit captive residents who lived in the East worked in the tourism sector's service industry and needed public transport to reach the large concentration of those jobs in the downtown area. Bus service declined while fares continued to rise. A number adults and children were fatally struck as they tried to walk along or across I-10 to access work, home, or commercial areas. The legacy of I-10 continued, until the new phase of Urban

Renewal began on August 29, 2005.

2.3.6 SEARCHING FOR A BLACK URBAN REDEVELOPMENT MODEL: THE 1976 CLAIBORNE AVENUE DESIGN TEAM STUDY

As soon as the freeway was constructed, members of the Black community realized the significance of what they had lost. Activist Tom Dent wrote “A Memoir of Mardi Gras” in 1968, just two years after the end of construction, writing with a voice of nostalgia for the Claiborne that was (Dent, 1977). Dr. Rudy Lombard, who had returned to the city of New Orleans after traveling around the nation with CORE and SNCC to find the Expressway on Claiborne, describes walking to work one day:

I looked at the freeway, and noticed that the archway made a chapel-like shape, like the Sistine Chapel. That’s where the idea of the Shrine of the Black Experience came about. I thought, let’s make lemonade out of this lemon. I thought that there had to be a way for kids and for people to interact with this thing, to learn

from it, and to make it an outdoor classroom. (R. Lombard, personal communication, Jan. 21, 2010)

In early 1970, a group of young Black men in the neighborhood, including Dr. Lombard, formed a Black, neighborhood based education and cultural organization, named Tambourine and Fan (T&F) to commemorate associations with carnival. Then-mayor Moon Landrieu caught wind of community members’ desires to mitigate the adverse effects

of Interstate 10 on the Expressway, and from there, connections were made with the Louisiana State Department of Highways which would fund the Claiborne Avenue Design Team (Claiborne Avenue Design Team, 1976) Study, a set of “alternate plans for developing the public land under and adjacent to the I-10 corridor in a fashion which would ‘increase the social, economic and cultural viability of the surrounding community... and provide innovative developments and

Figure 2.20: Members of Tambourine and Fan who worked on the Claiborne Avenue Design Team. Source: Claiborne Avenue Design Team Study (1976)



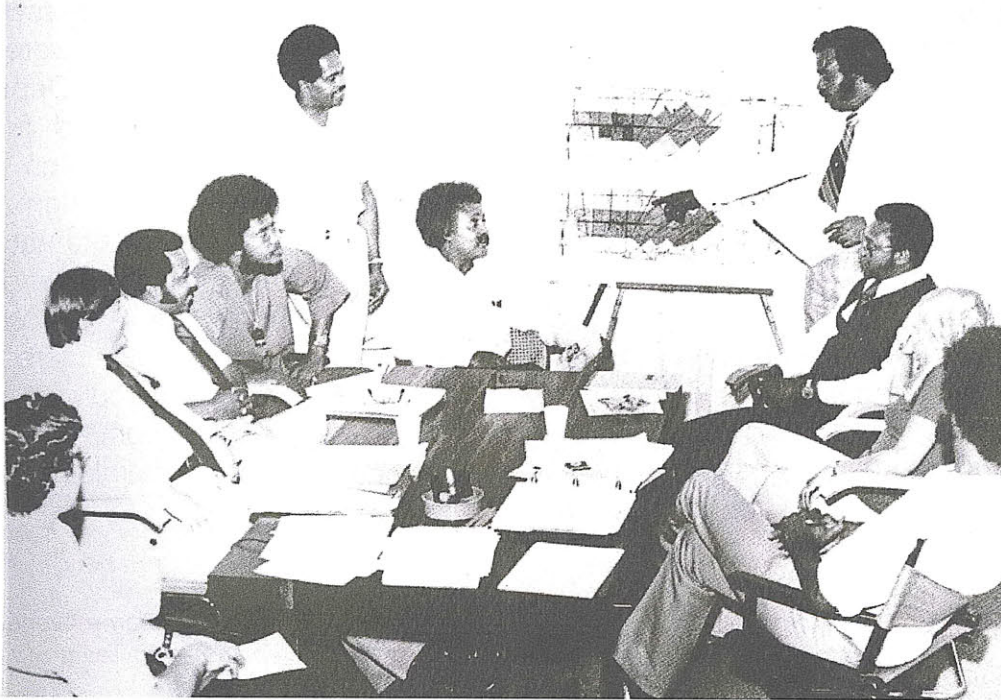


Figure 2.21: Planners working on the Claiborne Avenue Design Team. Source: *Claiborne Avenue Design Team Study (1976)*

unity between the community and said corridor” (Claiborne Avenue Design Team, 1976, p. 14).

At the time, the CADT study took an unprecedented approach. The members of T & F, as residents in the neighborhoods of the 6th and 7th Wards, were able to activate community members, encouraging residents to remember what the Avenue looked like and envision what it could be by getting involved in the study. T&F

held community meetings, conducted surveys, and hired consultants, largely Black planners from across the nation, and was able to get 5,000 signatures from community members in support of the plan. Many young people were involved in the organizing efforts. “I got involved in organizing with Tambourine and Fan at twelve years old!” pronounces Fred Johnson (personal communication, Jan. 25, 2010). The community was ready for

the transformative change because, in the words of Tom Dent (1977) the planners:

were prepared with a respect for and knowledge of Black culture and neighborhood history, [therefore] the Claiborne renovation design in not a run-of-the-mill package. It is consistently aligned to the values and needs of Black New Orleans, and the specific community surrounding the selected corridor. It was, for instance, prepared with extraordinary input from people in the neighborhood. (p. 10)

Dr. Lombard notes that T&F followed a model that they were familiar with from the civil rights movement. “CORE, SNCC, they all had a bottom-up approach and deference to people in the neighborhood” (R. Lombard, personal communication, Jan. 21, 2010).

The Department of Highways would not commission the CADT team to perform a demographic analysis in the scope of work. “But, we thought, they NEED to know this! They need to know who is in the neighborhood and need to use it as a vision, to understand



Figure 2.22: Flyer handed out to members of the community by Tambourine and Fan. Source: Courtesy of the Amistad Research Center, Tulane University.

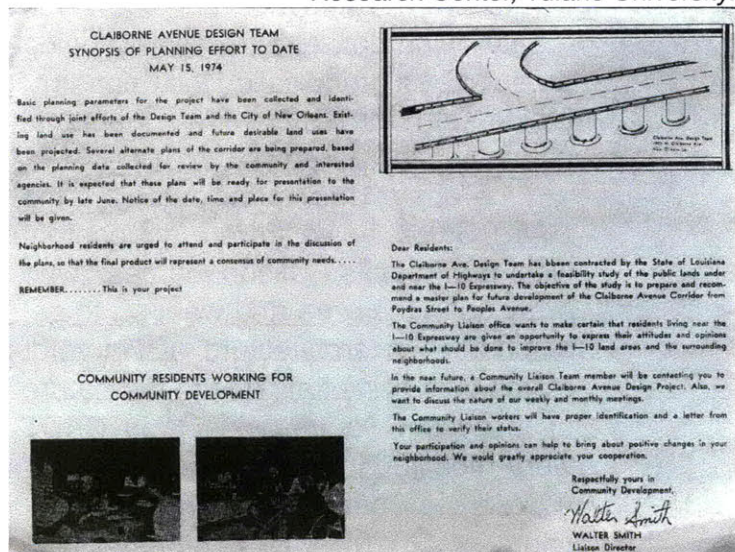


Figure 2.23: Flyer handed out to members of the community by Tambourine and Fan. Source: Courtesy of the Amistad Research Center, Tulane University.

Summary of CADT Study Recommendations:

- A. General beautification of neutral ground from Poydras to Elysian Fields
- B. Area around Poydras at Claiborne to become a major municipal parking facility
- C. Canal at Claiborne to include plazas under the expressway. Special treatment of columns describing history, architecture, and obituaries of selected individuals and benevolent societies in the cemeteries
- D. Removal Kansas City-Southern railroad tracks and conversion to a linear park, linking Armstrong Park
- E. "Shrine of the Black Experience" at St. Bernard at Claiborne

the culture you're trampling on" (R. Lombard, personal communication, Jan. 21, 2010). The resulting study and plan was pronounced by Tom Dent as the "most comprehensive Black neighborhood development proposals to ever come before the city and the state" (Dent, 1977).

Over time, a number of the recommendations have been debated and some even completed in some resemblance to the recommendations made in the CADT Study plan. Hunter's Field, a recreational area, was constructed at the intersection of St. Bernard @ Claiborne. The railroad tracks were removed, and now the "Lafitte Corridor Greenway" is being pursued by a group called the Friends of Lafitte Corridor (D. Samuels, personal communication, Feb. 12, 2010).

Today, the principals of the CADT Study, however, are not content with the results. Clifton James, who grew up in the area and went on to get a masters in architecture at Harvard, states that, first of all, due to the nature of the client, "our proposals in CADT were modified in order to be palatable" (C. James, personal communication, Jan. 22, 2010). Dr. Lombard also explains that, "we had no vision for

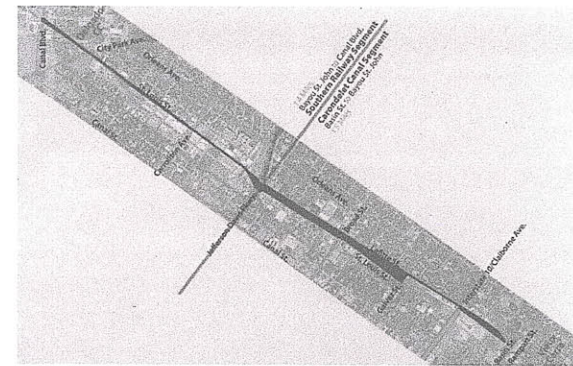


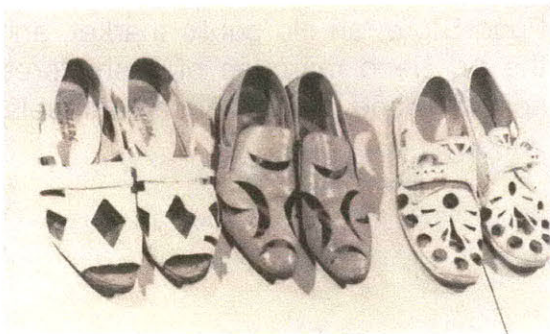
Figure 2.24: The Lafitte Greenway as presented in *The Lafitte Greenway Master Plan (2007)*, a recommendation initially made in the CADT Study, 1976.

implementation. We thought, just because you have good ideas, they would be done. But, planners have no power. The pedagogy of planning needs to address this issue. It doesn't matter if you have a vision. Planning only has a 'metaphor of inclusion.' It's always got that metaphor" (R. Lombard, personal communication, Jan. 21, 2010).

The CADT Study achieved the hefty aims of calling attention to and studying the adverse effects of the expressway on the community and the urban environment, prompting community residents to re-envision the avenue with an enhanced relationship with the structure of the overpass, and linking a bottom-up grassroots strategy

with the largely top-down practice of infrastructure planning – all of which were pioneering practices in the early-mid 1970s. Furthermore, documenting the deep traditions of the neighborhood and local institutions and postulating that they must be considered in a physical design, transportation, and engineering scheme were considered “radical” (R. Lombard, personal communication, Jan. 21, 2010) and outside the purview of the physical design and planning disciplines. The CADT Study documented local institutions, the history of music in the neighborhood, and even descriptions of customs such as “shoe pimping” as seen in figure 2.25. While the CADT team thoroughly recorded the history and current voices of the corridor, how did it transfer into the design? And, how can we expand

Figure 2.25 The custom of “shoe pimping,” as documented in the CADT Study, 1976.



the concept of community input?

Today, while scanning the history, demographics, and survey of the site is common practice, using its current everyday uses as the basis for the design is rare, particularly in Black neighborhoods. As Claiborne Avenue exhibits generous amounts of everyday activities, developing a Black Urban design strategy could be especially successful for this site. The CADT study depicts how identifying nodes of significance to the cultural consciousness of local people can fold into the general aims of an infrastructure project. However, the design retrofits recommended in the CADT study generally project 1970s-era urban planning ideals onto the site including large office parks and parking structures as seen in a rendering from the study in the image below, and in an effort for the plans to remain “palatable,” maintain that the designs could attract new recreational uses for the community under the overpass, such as tennis. The plans should be updated given not only the new developments in sustainable transportation, water and landscape, but a Black Urban design strategy supportive of the everyday uses of the local, spatial understanding within the



Figure 2.26 Office park rendering in CADT Study (1976).



2.29 Rendering of tennis park under the interstate. Source: CADT Study, 1976.

2.4 DESCRIPTION OF THE STRUCTURE

From the east, Interstate 10 enters Orleans Parish from St. Tammany as a twin bridge along the east end of Lake Pontchartrain. Once in Orleans Parish, the interstate traverses wetlands before spanning suburban-style development of Eastern New Orleans and then the industrial areas around the Inner Harbor Navigational Canal.

From there, the elevated interstate travels west as separate roadway structures in each direction, with a 20' median and a 16' opening between structures (Claiborne Avenue Design Team, 1976). Along this stretch, the interstate occupies a right of way cleared and constructed diagonally through denser, largely residential blocks, until it meets North Claiborne Avenue at St. Bernard Avenue. At this critical transportation juncture where I-10, North Claiborne, and St. Bernard converge, "the street grid of the city suddenly swings into alignment with the expressway" as the interstate occupies the Avenue's neutral ground to Gravier Street to the west (Samuels, 2000, p. 1).



Figure 2.30 Aerials of North Claiborne Avenue before and after construction of the Claiborne Expressway. Source: CADT Study, 1976

With the high-rises of the Central Business District punctuating the skyline and dominating sightlines, an unknowing visitor may never confront the vibrant world existing just below the expressway upon which they travel. And, the experience of driving on the elevated affords the option of ignoring it to those who do. Very few random landmarks along Claiborne Avenue

rise above the roadbed, among them the Mission Revival cupola of Circle Food Store, an old public market, and the Art Deco marquee of a shuttered neighborhood movie house (Samuels, 2000).

Along North Claiborne Avenue, the right of way is about 191 feet wide (Bullard, 1997), and the median is about 100 feet wide. The roadway deck is reinforced concrete at long spans on welded, steel girders, and the column diameters are 3'-5' (Claiborne Avenue Design Team, 1976). Clearance over the cross streets is from 22' – 26,' higher than is usually the case for urban, elevated expressways (Claiborne Avenue Design Team, 1976).



Figure 2.32 The bridge from a residential street in Treme. Author's own image.



Figure 2.34 Atop the Claiborne Expressway. Author's own image.



Figure 2.31 Businesses face the concrete roadbed on North Claiborne Avenue. Author's own image.



Figure 2.33 View across from under the bridge. Author's own image.



Figure 2.35 View of the neighborhoods driving along the expressway. Author's own image.

2.5 HURRICANE KATRINA: MORE URBAN RENEWAL

Analogous to the previous seventy years of development, Katrina's damage disproportionately affected the city's Black citizens, as ninety percent of people whose homes were lost were Black (Nagel, 2006). Furthermore, the neighborhoods along Claiborne Avenue were still reeling from the effects of these major developments, thirty years after the last major urban renewal project in the area. Not only did the actual destruction of the storm disproportionately affect Black residents; so, too, did the land surveying and planning post-hurricane. The plethora of public, private, and non-profit plans amidst a post-disaster "climate of trauma, mistrust, and unanswered questions" (Nagel, 2006, p. 45) amounted to a heavy-handed, hyper-development environment, with intense speed and scale, and it was looking real familiar. Tearing down the existing public housing projects of Lafitte and Iberville, the construction new Hope IV homes, shutting down existing hospitals and disrupting the

grid to build a new, 14 block medical center along Claiborne, scaling back public transport, and the construction of numerous private condominiums in the area were all projects in the North Claiborne Avenue area proposed during this planning-heavy time and have all either been accomplished or are in the works. This is all in addition to the latest project to gain steam: the proposed removal of the overpass above Claiborne. The Associated Press warned just two months after the storm that "Hurricane Katrina may prove to be the biggest, most brutal urban-renewal project Black America has ever seen" ("Gentrifying Disaster," Mother 2005; Nagel, 2006, 62). As such, the long struggles to provide affordable housing and preserve the distinct history and culture of the neighborhood that began before the storm intensified post-Katrina (Nagel, 2006).

Disappearing neighborhood places and cultural institutions and the closing of small businesses that had lost their customer base further depreciated the assets and social networks of the people along the Claiborne corridor after the devastating effects of slavery, the federal interstate program, Jim Crow, and urban renewal had run

their course. The resistance built up from decades of these struggles feeds the community's hesitation about the nature of development along North Claiborne Avenue today.

The majority of land relegated to Blacks in New Orleans was in the former backswamp, below sea-level, whose existence was supported by drainage system pumping water out when it rained and a levee system for protection. But, the neighborhoods along North Claiborne Avenue experienced a wide-range of flood-depths, as the North Claiborne segment largely straddles the last bit of land at sea-level away from the river. Therefore some of the neighborhoods along North Claiborne are still considered viable neighborhoods. The question on many residents' minds is, *For who?*

2.5.1 BLACK URBANISM AS A PROCESS: PLANNING IN A NEIGHBORHOOD WITH A DEEP-SEATED MISTRUST FOR THE PROFESSION

Despite the Claiborne Expressway's intrusive size, brutal aesthetic, and air and noise pollution, many of the area residents are expressing concern with the suggestion to remove it, and rightfully so. Their hesitation is at the confusion of professional planners. In response, one New Orleans planner who advocates for the removal asked me, "So, let me get this straight. They don't want their neighborhood to improve?" (J. Davis, personal communication, Jan. 25, 2010). Frankly, if community members do not perceive themselves as the intended beneficiaries, then they do not perceive their neighborhood as improving, in the way the plans and planners suggest. Instead of casting neighborhood residents' opinions aside when they do not align with the conclusions we as professional planners and designers have made about how to make a place better, there must be an admission that, for seventy years, the profession

has professed to communities such as this one that the intruding development will improve their neighborhood. Largely, those seventy years have been correlated with economic decline, blight, displacement, deficiency of public transport and infrastructure to support non-motorized transportation, modernist design, and associated signs of urban decay including increases in drug use and crime. Dr. Rudy Lombard, head of the 1976 CADT study and current area resident affirmed that "of course the freeway should technically come down. But, we have been trying all these years. Now, all of a sudden, they want it to come down, and they're not informing any of us what they're doing. If it's not for us, it shouldn't come down. It just shouldn't happen" (R. Lombard, personal communication, Jan. 21, 2010).

While making a strong case for the expressway's removal, early advocates of the Expressway's removal have purposely avoided community engagement, admitting a desire to "avoid the emotional reactions" before any traffic impact studies have been conducted (anonymous, personal communication, Jan. 25, 2010) and to avert inciting tension between

planners and community members, wrought with race and class divisions. Clearly, planners recognize a problem with the process, linked to an inability to communicate with the people who live there. Black Urbanism can lend itself not only design, but to process, particularly in neighborhoods where planning and development are met with warranted cynicism, through the validation of identity.

In reaction to the dearth of citizen participation in the urban planning of the first half of the century, the 1960s and 70s saw an emergence of public participation models and processes and a new role of the planner as an advocate. These public participation models largely lack a wealth of creativity and were deduced by one interviewee, architect David Waggoner, as such: "In the end, all planners do is put up pictures and maps and ask, do you want chocolate or vanilla?" (D. Waggoner, personal communication, Jan. 26, 2010). Dr. Lombard intimates that planners that want to engage community "have no power. The pedagogy of planning needs to address this issue" (R. Lombard, personal communication, Jan. 21, 2010).

The critical assumption of Black Urbanism is that there is no universal culture of spatial knowledge, and the first task is then to understand local spatial knowledge through an analysis of what exists and what has existed in its history. The people, history, and culture of the streets along Claiborne Avenue have been influenced by Black people and culture, and I maintain that this thread of history and culture is a major influence in the unique urbanism and lore of the area, and should be used to inform the design should the overpass come down. The next task is to articulate the character of the elements of local residents' spatial understanding, how these are related to the urban form, and how to support and further enhance it through design.

Avoid the metaphor of inclusion.

In attempts to supercede the reformist attitude of modernist planning, post-modernist participatory planning models have largely amounted to nothing more than a metaphor of inclusion. In order to develop the post-modernist philosophy of planning beyond a representational act, the design principles and process of Black

Urbanism elevate the role of planner and urban designer to interpreter. While there are diasporic principles and process, there is no standard Black Urbanist aesthetic. Instead, the aesthetic is rooted in the activities and spatial understanding of the specific community residing in a place; the design emanates from here through the planner's skilled and thorough interpretation. A design proposal that validates the current uses, activities, aesthetics, cultural and spatial understanding of the existing community can mitigate deep-seated mistrust compounded over the decades of development that blatantly disregarded these critical elements of urbanism and communicate to its members that their way of life is a valuable part of the city's revitalization. Moreover, its people are a perceptible part of the process, beyond simply pointing to a picture of the figurative "chocolate or vanilla;" through their actual, unique, everyday use of the space, serve as the creative departure for the design of its physical elements (D. Waggoner, personal communication, Jan. 26, 2010). While this is important to any urban design practice, this is of particular significance in a Black Urban design process, as

the activities of Black communities are often considered signs of a less-than-ideal urban life. So to validate these activities is perhaps counter to the culture promoted by urban design ideals.

From my interviews of residents, business owners and employees, church members, patrons, cultural producers and revelers, among others, who make up the community of Claiborne Avenue, many of course had not grappled with the larger urban and regional ramifications of removing the freeway, and some attempted to evaluate the economic, transportation, and environmental impacts. Community members' evaluations at this scale are not the point of departure for the improvisational process depicted in the preceding chapter. The evaluation of these impacts is the task of the professional planner. Instead, their actions and evaluations are critical to interpreting the everyday uses, those micro-economic, cultural activities and uses of spaces, the significance of actors and the relevance of institutions both formal and informal of the site.

Incorporate scale and speed considerations.

The synergistic damage accumulated over time by the neighbors of the Claiborne Expressway largely exhibits the following scenario:

A + B + C + X

Each large-scale planning process is compounded by the next (Nagel, 6006).

However, the simultaneity of numerous major planning processes post-Katrina may multiply the damage accumulation, due to a high degree of uncertainty:

A * B * C * X

In light of this, the scale and speed of new developments must be sensitive to the volatile forces playing out in redevelopment (Nagel, 2006). Phasing redevelopment and implementing measures to mitigate the disruption of residents and other community members through design can attenuate disjuncture in redeveloping these neighborhoods.

While the issue of damage accumulation is particularly evident in the case of post-Katrina Claiborne Avenue, retrofitting and redesigning urban renewal and urban expressways in general should also incorporate these considerations in an effort to conjoin the urban fabric on their side of the development.

2.5.2 LACK OF CLARITY AND ACCOUNTABILITY IN THE CLAIBORNE AVENUE PLANNING PROCESS SO FAR

Unclear set of actors.

The suggestion to study the removal of the overpass was included in the draft of the City of New Orleans Master Plan, “Plan for the 21st Century: New Orleans 2030” (2010), but currently, no city agency has pursued the recommendation. Instead, a working group of about ten people has been formed privately, largely made up of non-profit representatives, architects, and planners who have expressed interest in the revitalization of the North Claiborne Avenue over the years (C. James, personal communication, Jan. 22, 2010; D. Waggoner, personal communication,

Jan. 26, 2010; W. Borah, personal communication, Jan. 21, 2010; anonymous, personal communication, Jan. 25, 2010; J. Schwartz, personal communication, Jan. 14, 2010; Daniel Samuels, personal communication, Feb. 12, 2010). The group, which calls themselves the “Claiborne Corridor Improvement Coalition” (anonymous, personal communication, Jan. 25, 2010), has a mission statement that downplays the issue of the elevated expressway:

The mission of the Claiborne Corridor Improvement Coalition is to plan and advocate for the transformation of the North Claiborne Avenue into a healthy, vibrant corridor. It will be the catalyst for city and region-wide development initiatives and foster unprecedented inter-parish cooperation, planning and development for the avenue’s neighborhoods and city of New Orleans. [...] The studies will include, but are not limited to a traffic study for North Claiborne, the I-10, the city and the region. (Claiborne Corridor Improvement Coalition, 2010).

With the help of the Congress of New Urbanism, the working group won a \$50,000 grant from the Ford Foundation and has released a Request for Proposal (RFP) for \$25,000 to conduct a preliminary study of the removal option (C. James, personal communication, Jan. 22, 2010; anonymous, personal communication, Jan. 25, 2010; J. Schwartz, personal communication, Jan. 14, 2010). As of March 2010, New Orleans city planning commissioners were unaware of the RFP (C. James, personal communication, Jan. 22, 2010; anonymous, personal communication, Jan. 25, 2010; J. Davis, personal communication, Jan. 25, 2010).

Unclear set of priorities.

In an interview with a representative of a non-profit organization (which requested to remain anonymous) that leads the Claiborne Expressway working group, the representative cited the need for a traffic study to be conducted before any conversations with the public take place.

“We don’t want people getting emotional

without the facts. We don’t really have any facts on commute times yet. Once we have that, then we can start a discussion about potential removal” (anonymous, personal communication, Jan. 25, 2010).

Well, which facts do you deem important? Why are commute times the lynchpin to the study, if environmental, economic, and social sustainability are the keys to the rebirth and resilience of post-Katrina New Orleans? And, if the study concludes that commute times actually increase, will the group not pursue removal?

“Well, we haven’t talked about that” (anonymous, personal communication, Jan. 25, 2010).

The failures of modern urban transportation can largely be attributed to the assumption that transportation plans should aim to pursue the shortest regional commute times. This assumption led to the construction of the Claiborne Expressway in this neighborhood in the first place. However, in pursuing a cost-efficient, energy-efficient transportation scheme, a bundle of other factors such as

vehicle miles traveled (VMT), cost of maintenance, opportunities to enhance inter-modal transport, and potential to impact local residents should inform transportation plans.

Unclear vision.

Does the group have any vision for what the street could look like?

“No, we haven’t discussed that. That stuff should come later” (anonymous, personal communication, Jan. 25, 2010).

When I asked another member of the group separately, he responded: “A vision? Oh, that’s the easy part!” And promptly showed me a set of plans and designs he had in mind for the area (C. James, personal communication, Jan. 22, 2010).

Yet another member of the working group expressed his frustration with the lack of visioning early on in the process. “If we don’t have a vision for how design can make this place better, why pursue a study at all?” (D. Waggoner, personal communication, Jan. 26, 2010).

Planners at times feel that images and drawings make it too easy for residents to oppose what they see in the images, and that the use of visual representation evokes the problem, as opposed to the actual design proposal. On the other hand, there is no other way but visually to communicate to the general public, who is not interested in reading jargon-riddled reports. Lack of a vision at the inset of the planning process can block the general public from being a part of the process.

“I need a vision, so I can tell you if I like it. I need to tell my people what’s goin’ on. We can’t even figure out what they’re trying to do!” proclaimed chef, Leah Chase (personal communication,

impact studies for the removal of Claiborne Avenue (Goody Clancy, 2010). The text assumes that the best design for the space is to restore the tree-lined boulevard as it was before the freeway construction. However, an image included in the inset shows high-rise residential development and new retail buildings, with no corresponding explanation to support that vision for Claiborne Avenue, seen here in figure 36.

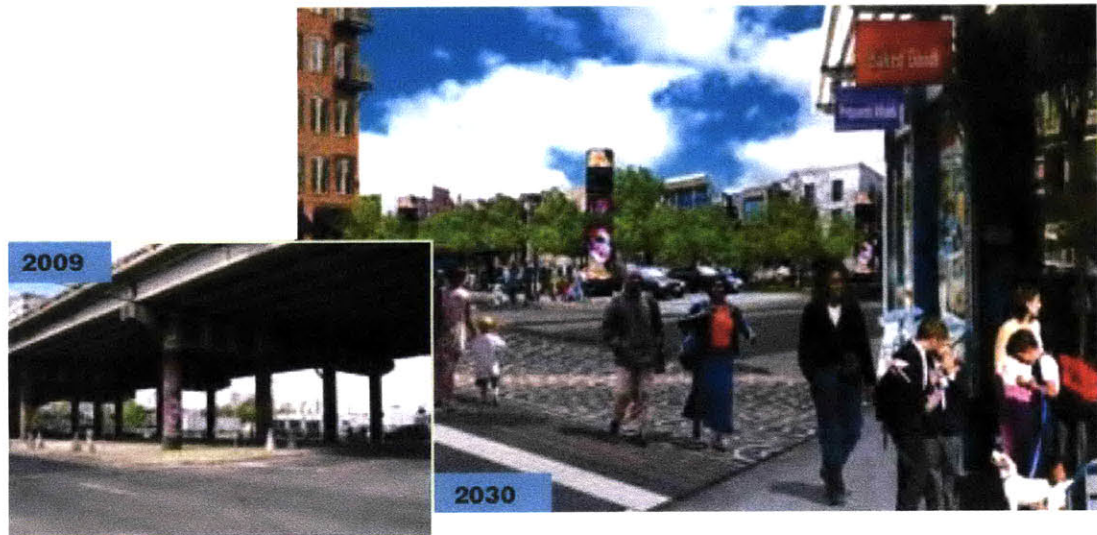
New discussions of “livability” and “livable communities” generally do not make room for alternate ways of life and tend to espouse a universal set

of cultural assumption. The concept of livability has largely drawn from the neo-traditional school of New Urbanism, which exacts a specific spatial form. Jan Gehl, an influential urban designer, explicitly states his desire to “copenhagenize” cities, and touts that an important measure of the “livability” of a neighborhood is how many coffee shops there are per square block. Aren’t there certain cultural underpinnings to this assumption? What if the people in this neighborhood don’t drink coffee? What about other forms of social spaces that support livability, such as barber shops and porches?

Figure 2.36 Vignette of North Claiborne Avenue featured in draft of New Orleans’ master plan. Source: Summary of March 20th Working Draft Master Plan, 2010.

2.5.3 THE THREAT OF A BANAL AND GENERIC “LIVABLE NEIGHBORHOOD”

The draft of the City of New Orleans Master Plan, “Plan for the 21st Century: New Orleans 2030”, includes an inset asserting that the city should pursue federal funds in order to conduct feasibility and environmental-



It is important to note that the Congress of New Urbanism (CNU) helped the working group to secure the funds for their preliminary study. CNU now has a stake in this place, and it would not be farfetched to assume they will influence the design of Claiborne Avenue should the overpass be removed.

But, the image in the inset of the master plan evokes a placeless, generic, banal image of a livable city. The streetscape could be anywhere; Boston, Philadelphia, San Francisco and is devoid of that which makes New Orleans and specifically this street unique. Black Urbanism should play a role in developing a vision for the new Claiborne Avenue.

2.5.4 CASE STUDY: THE NELSON MANDELA PARKWAY

In Oakland, California, the Cypress Street Viaduct, a double-decked viaduct originally part of the Nimitz Freeway, was designed in 1949 to ease traffic on local streets (Anthropological Studies Center). The clashing of two economic development plans comes to a head after the design of the land uncovered proves

underwhelming. The case exhibits a number of parallels to the potential removal of the Claiborne Expressway and offers an opportunity to consider approaches to implementing urban design supportive of economic development in a Black ethnic enclave.

Urban Renewal and Black Self-Determination

When Oakland became the terminus of the transcontinental railroad in 1869, West Oakland became a polyglot, as many railroad workers and their families decided to settle in the neighborhood (Anthropological Studies Center). However, the external forces of segregation and red-lining, racism, and police intimidation fostered a heightened, insular Black social life, and “the railroad’s economic base fueled and sustained the growth of an urban black enclave – a kind of black world” (Anthropological Studies Center, p. 290)

Much like the building trades and craftwork in Black New Orleans, the “economic foothold” afforded by railroad work in Oakland allowed Black men the ability to branch out into other jobs such as carpentry, painting,

carpet-laying, barbering, hotel work, and bartending; and to Black women working as hairdressers, dressmakers, boardinghouse keepers, domestics, nurses, and midwives (Anthropological Studies Center, p. 288). A Black business district formed along Seventh Street similar to Claiborne Avenue, serving the ethnically diverse West Oakland community with various neighborhood serviced and amenities, but also offering services catered to Black clientele, such as barber and beauty shops, or drawing from Black culture, such as music and entertainment (Anthropological Studies Center). Urban planners slated for the demolition of small cottages, houses, and businesses to build freeways and urban renewal development, including housing projects, a large Post Office facility and parking lot, a Bay Area Transit (BART) transit station with its own parking lot, and an elevated BART line that “assaulted the remaining integrity of the historic Seventh Street corridor” (Anthropological Studies Center, p. 46).

Among the planning projects of this era was the Cypress Freeway, connecting the Nimitz Freeway with the Bay Bridge, which also required

the clearing of homes – among them, the boyhood home of Huey Newton, future co-founder and leader of the Black Panther Party for Self Defense (Anthropological Studies Center, 2005). Residents that were relocated to public housing projects began to carve out family spaces of the feature-less yards between public housing buildings; as part of the federal government’s Beautify America program, the Oakland Housing Authority tore out the residents’ garden features (Anthropological Studies Center). The next year, the Black Panther Party was born in West Oakland, fighting for the self-determination of the Black community, locating their headquarters on Peralta Street, near the postal facility, a major urban renewal project. An archeological study of the area along the Cypress Freeway cites the impact of the Black Panther Movement and Headquarters’ impact in the neighborhood as such:

The Black Power movement may be said to have originated, in part, in the powerlessness of West Oaklanders to save their homes, businesses, and vibrant culture from what were seen as the arbitrary ravages of a distant bureaucracy... The Black Power

movement of the 1960s and 1970s had transformed Oakland politics, resulting in greater representation in City government and on powerful planning agencies by African Americans. (Anthropological Studies Center, p. 301)

Loma Prieta Earthquake

In 1989, portions of the elevated, double-deck Cypress Expressway were destroyed during the Loma Prieta earthquake. At the time of the earthquake, Blacks made up 77.3% of West Oakland, with Whites making up 11%, Hispanics 5.7%, and Asians and Pacific Islanders at 3.5% (U.S. Census, 1990). When the California Department of Transportation (Caltrans) announced they wanted to rebuild the freeway, community members formed the Citizens’ Emergency Response Team (CERT), and together with the city, demanded that the freeway be rerouted away from the West Oakland neighborhood it divided and to clean up the land along the right-of-way or that had fallen into disrepair or was lead-contaminated (Matier & Ross, 2004). The state legislature approved a bill that covered the \$12.5 M cost in

2000 (Matier & Ross, 2004). While the rerouting of the freeway outside of the neighborhood was a victory, the plans for the land uncovered by the freeway, renamed the Nelson Mandela Parkway after the South African leader, have yet to transform the neighborhood.

Two Visions for Economic Development

While there are a few housing developments under way, the freeway removal has not been a major catalyst for economic growth, in part because two opposing views on economic development strategies are coming to a head.

1. Attract new major industries to the area. City officials believe that the area can become a clean-technology, manufacturing, and industrial hub to bring the area much needed jobs. The city says that the companies they have reached out to are reluctant to relocate to West Oakland “until a better infrastructure is in place” (White, 2010). This would require property owners in the area to “upgrade their facilities,” but no incentives exist for them to do so.

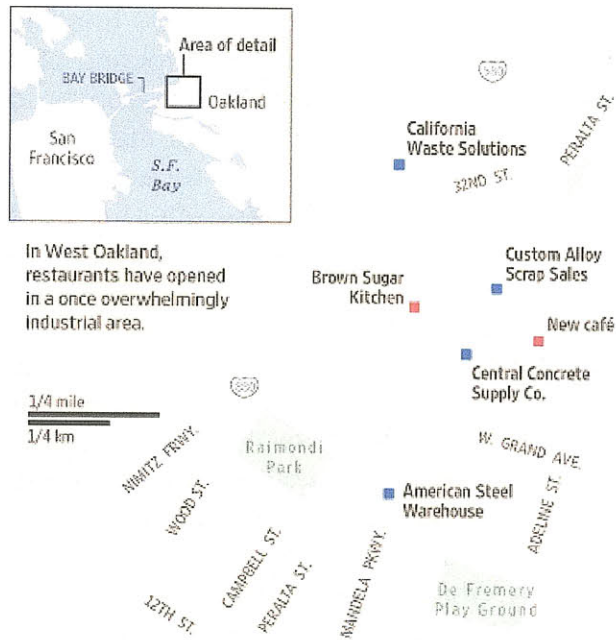


Figure 2.37 Map of the Nelson Mandela Parkway and two of the new small businesses, marked by red, that have begun since the Cypress Viaduct removal. Source: *The Wall Street Journal*, March 24, 2010

2. Attract businesses that serve local residents. Tanya Holland opened Brown Sugar Kitchen along the Nelson Mandela Parkway five years after the Parkway opened in 2002 (White, 2010). The 50-seat restaurant, which serves Southern and Caribbean cuisines, had what the *Wall Street Journal* called a “dramatic effect on the neighborhood,” where there are many blocks in the area that otherwise have little to no economic activity (White, 2010).

Representing the West Oakland neighborhood were three community members called the Landscape Subcommittee of the Community Advisory Board, who regularly attended



meetings throughout the design process and still give their input. They are a prominent sculpture artist, a local realtor and a local property owner and longtime community activist (White, 2010). The restaurant's success inspired the West Oakland Project Area Committee to push for the addition of street lights near the restaurant and roadway repairs nearby, as well. Soon, two Oakland residents decided to open up a café four blocks down and asked Holland for advice on how to do so (White, 2010). (See figure 2.37 for a map of the businesses and parkway.)

When additional success prompted Holland to seek more seating

and landscaping outside her restaurant on the Parkway, the City claimed that the business catered to a narrow audience (White, 2010). Margot Lederer Prado economic development planner for the City Oakland said, "We have to take into account a lot more than just the needs of the neighborhood. We have to think about what will help greater Oakland" (White, 2010).

2.5.5 LESSONS FROM THE NELSON MANDELA PARKWAY FOR THE FUTURE OF THE CLAIBORNE COMMERCIAL CORRIDOR

Mediocre Design

Pastor Dwight Webster preaches near Mandela Parkway in West Oakland as well as at Christian Unity Baptist Church on Claiborne Avenue in New Orleans. "I can understand why they want to tear down the Claiborne Expressway. Now that the freeway came down in Oakland, it's brighter, you feel like you can get air, it's wide open. It's beautiful. But, it's not really safer. Not a lot of people using the median" (D. Webster, personal communication, Feb. 23, 2010; White, 2010). While there are a multitude of infrastructural, environmental, and financial reasons

Figure 2.38 Landscaping of the Nelson Mandela Parkway. Source: GoogleEarth.



for the removal of elevated viaducts such as the Cypress Street Viaduct and the Claiborne Expressway, the general public chiefly measures the value and success of the endeavor by the re-design of the land uncovered, especially because of the high-profile nature of such a project (Masenten, 2004). A critical part of redesigning the streetscapes of major corridors such as the Mandela Parkway and Claiborne Avenue after the removal of a freeway is encouraging people to use the space. After decades of prioritizing vehicles, the street will need to make an explicit invitation to people through design. The Office of Landscape Architecture within CalTrans decided that because West Oakland is home to the “largest collection of intact Victorian houses in North America,” they would employ this vernacular as the creative departure for the design of the uncovered land (CalTrans, 2004). Established urban design practice is more likely to lead practitioners to draw from the Victorian houses of the area as the basis for a design scheme. On the other hand, Black Urban design asserts that the people standing on the street corner in front of the Victorian homes hold part of the answer, as re-energizing a

streetscape requires people.

Economic Development

With reference to the two opposing economic development visions at play in West Oakland, the latter vision is already proving more successful than the former, despite the lack of support from the City of Oakland. Brown Sugar Café is one of the biggest successes on the Mandela Parkway, by both drawing from the unique demographic of the neighborhood and also catering to people across the city (D. Webster, personal communication, Feb. 23, 2010; White, 2010). A Black Urban design strategy can work in lockstep with goals for economic development by providing anchoring the unique cultural and spatial consciousness of the immediate area to the space of the median. The City of Oakland claims that the business caters to a “narrow audience,” as it serves a remix of Southern soul food and Caribbean food, but the Wall Street Journal reports that “Brown Sugar has become a favorite of Oakland executive, politicians and community leaders” (White, 2010). Designing on the basis of a local, cultural spatial understanding

in the way that Black Urban discourse suggests, the Black Urban design strategy has the potential to support the development of a Black ethnic enclave: offering a sense of scale and place, drawing from the way people currently use the space along the right of way, and supporting synergy between the right of way and the businesses which face it, to create an atmosphere that a diversity of people will appreciate. This serves to attract outside capital as is currently happening with Brown Sugar Café on Mandela Parkway and seed new economic opportunities along the corridor.

In order to leverage the increase in mobility and access after freeway removal, a Black Urban design strategy that focuses on local activity for economic development should also be linked to an increase transit options to areas in the region of major industry where jobs are already growing, will continue to grow, and have the ability to withstand recessions, such as medical centers, manufacturing, central business districts, and education hubs (F. Salvucci, personal communication, Feb. 4, 2010).

Uniquely Claiborne

While community activists in Oakland won the battle to remove the freeway from the neighborhood, the urban design of the street has not done the community justice. In the contemporary urban landscape, concentrations of Blackness are stigmatized and their potential contribution to the creation of a new urban landscape overlooked.

However, the culture of Black urban communities produce have economic value, through cuisine like the example of Brown Sugar Cafe, music, a sense of place and community, art, and beyond. In New Orleans, the economic viability of culture is certainly capitalized on in tourist-oriented areas like the French Quarter and Louis Armstrong Park, but not in a way that relates to people's everyday lives or to their economic well-being. In speaking about the potential for Claiborne Avenue to become an economically viable enclave, Dr. Rudy Lombard acknowledges that "this culture can be produced, but it can't be owned" (personal communication, Jan. 21, 2010). Applying Black Urban design principles and adapting them within the context of a commercial corridor can be

a leverage point for the neighborhoods alongside a potential freeway removal.

chapter three

**MANIFESTATIONS OF BLACK URBANISM
ON CLAIBORNE AVENUE**

3.1 BLACK BUSINESS AS BLACK URBANISM: COMMERCE ON CLAIBORNE

Claiborne Avenue is often cited as what “was the heart of Black business,” (Sylvester Francis interview, Fred Johnson interview). North Claiborne between St. Bernard and Orleans Avenues “harbored a tradition of African American entrepreneurship and autonomy that remains a source of great pride in the communities of Treme and the Seventh Ward” (Samuels) While 100% of the businesses on the Avenue were not owned by Black people, a large majority of them were (personal interview, Rudy Lombard). John Sibley Butler cites a lack of literature documenting the history Black business enterprise and asserts that the study of “the sociology of entrepreneurship has not utilized the Afro-American experience in the theory building process” (Butler 34). In the potential reconstruction of Claiborne Avenue after the removal of the expressway, leveraging the history and continued tradition of Black entrepreneurial spirit through urban design can serve to sustain and develop further the qualities of urban life that

endure on Claiborne Avenue. Currently, the high level of business ownership fosters a sense of ownership of the street, spurring distinct activities and use of the public sphere. Black Urban design should aim to support the activities that are fostered by the high levels of business ownership.

3.1.1 THE EXPRESSWAY AS A CURRENT BARRIER TO ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT

While the corridor exhibits some remnants of its previous life as the heart of Black business, it may never reach its potential with the freeway structure in place. By its very nature the overpass is not conducive to local commercial activity, as it shuttles an approximate 75,000 average daily vehicles 30 feet above the street’s businesses, left in the shadow of the elevated overpass (LADOT data). “If you’re on that overpass, you are not going to patronize the local businesses on Claiborne Avenue,” insists Treme resident and former Times Picayune columnist Lolis Eric Elie. In addition to carrying vehicular traffic along the elevated, the I-10 spur has also co-opted the avenue below as a frontage road. As such, Claiborne Avenue serves local

traffic as well as having to accommodate through traffic.

A number of the business owners I interviewed along Claiborne expressed concern that a diversion of traffic caused by the expressway removal may lead to a decrease in their business. However, the current configuration of Claiborne as an interstate spur discourages through traffic from stopping to patronize local businesses along Claiborne Avenue. It appears as though very few vehicles, relative to the whole of traffic, pause to visit local establishments aside from the few regional draws.

The area’s economic shortcomings can also be attributed to the poor aesthetic quality of and around the overpass structure, traffic configuration, and minimal transit and pedestrian access. In 1976, the CADT study executed a survey of fifty area businesses to determine what improvements could be made along the corridor assuming the elevated structure was to remain (CADT 60). Landscaping, lighting, and maintenance of the space under the elevated freeway were oft cited, in addition to clean up of the debris that is otherwise allowed to collect there. Smaller businesses also suggested increases in transit. Sixty-three percent said they would not invest in another business in the Claiborne area

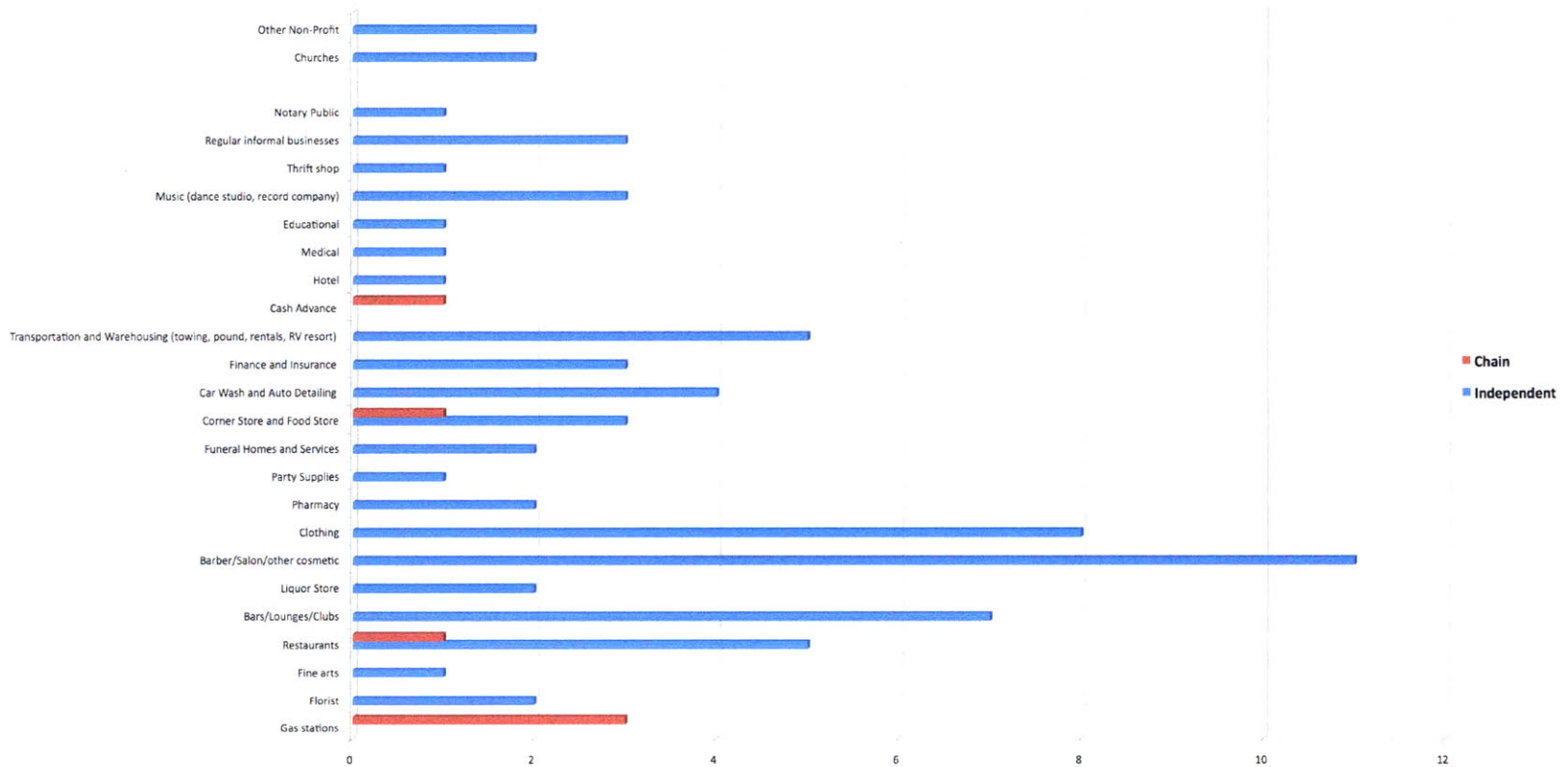


Figure 3.1: Taking stock of existing businesses on North Claiborne Avenue. Author's own image.

due to the lack of physical attractiveness and high crime rate and twenty-seven percent said they would relocate to another area if the opportunity existed. The sentiments expressed through the survey were confirmed by my interviews of current business owners, patrons, and other community members (Leah Chase interview, Dr. Lombard interview,

Clif James interview, Daniel Samuels interview). Local architect David Waggoner described showing a visitor around town and arriving at Claiborne Avenue. "It was a beautiful, sunny day. And, we stepped out of the car at Canal and Claiborne, but the mood was dark. The shadow is just...there is no doubt the area is sick" (Waggoner interview).

3.1.2 EXISTING COMMERCE

Figure 3.1 charts existing businesses on North Claiborne from Poydras to Elysian Fields. The businesses that do exist can largely be categorized into two main groups: a) businesses that

have regional draw and b) businesses that largely serve people who live in the neighborhood.

Regional draw

Those businesses that have a regional draw are higher in number than those that serve local residents for three reasons:

1. Commuter patrons as a function of the freeway. As a spur of Interstate 10, the Claiborne corridor serves its function as a regional connector better than its function as a local street, and is much easier to access by automobile than as a pedestrian or transit rider locally. The regional draws that attract many people include the Claiborne Auto Pound located under the freeway (a largely undesired use cited by many community members interviewed), the Discount Zone gas station, Cajun Seafood (a popular food store), Wing Snack, All Star Party Supplies, and the medical services offered by the medical district, among others. Relative to Claiborne's potential as a result of its strategic location, there are a high number of low-density uses, such as transportation and warehousing businesses, among others, which find that locating along the interstate spur to

be advantageous for the long distance trips their business or their customers need to make. In speaking with the owner of All Star Party Supplies about the relationship between his business and the street, he noted: "We don't rely on people seeing our store. They don't need to. We been here for 15 years, and our customers don't live out here. But, they know where we are," (personal interview).

2. Satellite Black community. A number of Claiborne's businesses offer retail and services catered to the Black community, which attract customers from across the region, such as the many barbers, salons, clothing and accessories, tee shirt printing, funeral homes and services, and churches, among others. In this way, the street's long history as the "mecca for Black social life" (personal interview, Fred Johnson) still feeds its commercial activity, despite the expressway and the displacement and outmigration of Black residents.

3. Cultural Appeal. The appeal of the culture along Claiborne also attracts regional business as well as tourists and also supports a seasonal and temporal informal sector around major events and festivals. One example is the Mother-

In-Law Lounge, shown in figures 3.2 and 3.3, a popular bar that began in commemoration of local musician Ernie K-Doe. It acts as a staging ground for many Black Mardi Gras and other cultural events, and spurs informal vendors in the area. Informal vendors in this category sell everything from umbrellas for second lines, bottled water, and tees around events.

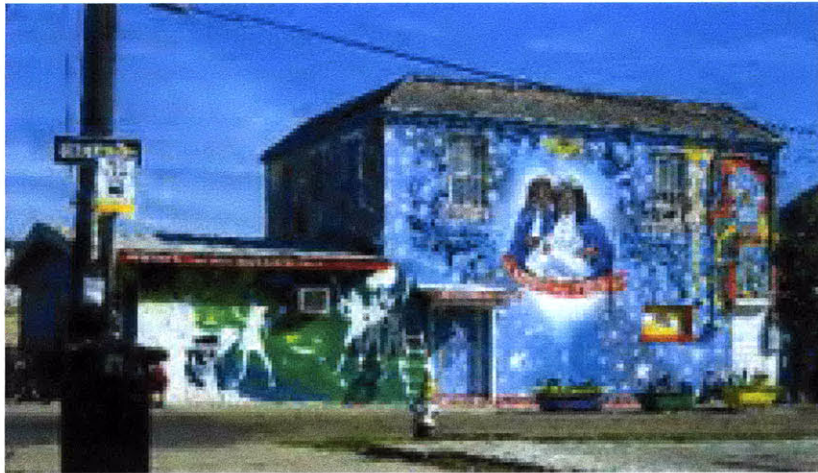


Figure 3.2: The facade of Ernie K-Doe's Mother-In-Law Lounge on North Claiborne Avenue. Author's own image.

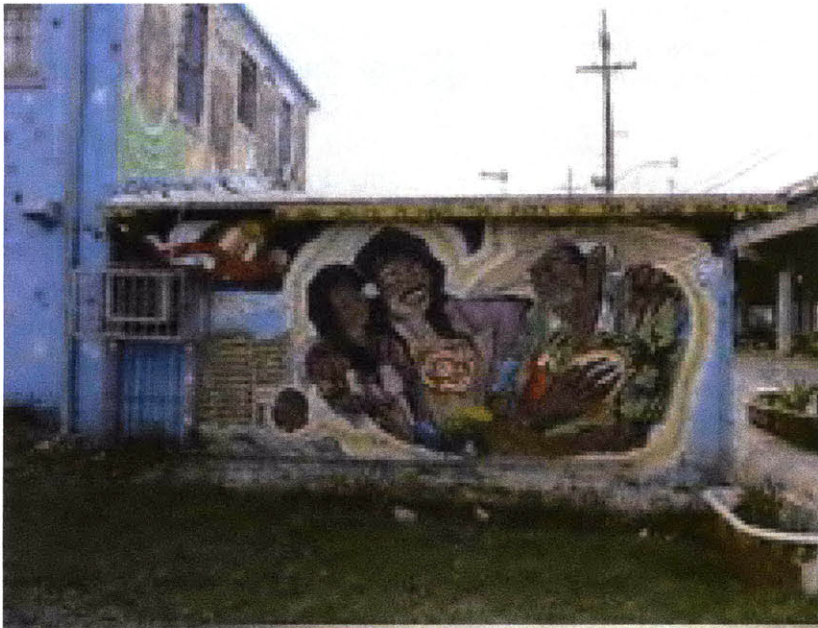


Figure 3.3: The side of Ernie K-Doe's Mother-In-Law Lounge on North Claiborne Ave. Source: *Delirious New Orleans*, Verderber, 2009

Neighborhood Amenities

There appears to be a demand and need for businesses that serve local residents. While regional draws and events-oriented commerce bring in outside capital that otherwise would not be spent on Claiborne, the trick to maintaining and stabilizing the area as a viable neighborhood is to provide services and amenities for the people who live there. Generally, these neighborhood businesses were the most adversely affected by the construction of the freeway and its prioritization of regional traffic and its obstruction of local accessibility and visibility. Additionally, many small businesses have struggled to return after Hurricane Katrina, as they continue to locate funding, including neighborhood staples such as Circle Food Store at the corner of Claiborne and St. Bernard Avenues .

As it exists, the physical environment the overpass creates prevents the avenue from achieving its potential, restricting major growth of formalized, local businesses that serve

the neighborhoods and provide places for community gathering. Claiborne Avenue continues to be a lively place, despite the concrete bed flailing in the sky, and its advantageous location along a nexus of historic neighborhoods and business centers, connected to the major regional east/west connectors, places it in a position to once again become a strong commercial corridor should the overpass be removed. In the event that the overpass is removed, there will be a massive reorganization of the public sphere, and by looking at the unique interplay between the commercial realm and the public sphere in the Black Urban framework, we can develop design strategies to support and even encourage Black Urbanism on the Avenue.

3.1.2 SYNERGISM BETWEEN EXISTING COMMERCE AND BLACK URBANISM

A critical and re-occurring node in the Black public sphere is the confluence of two conceptual planes: the horizontal surfaces of the roadway and sidewalk and the vertical surfaces of residential and commercial facades (Rose, 1987). In the Black Urbanism of Claiborne Avenue specifically, the intersection of

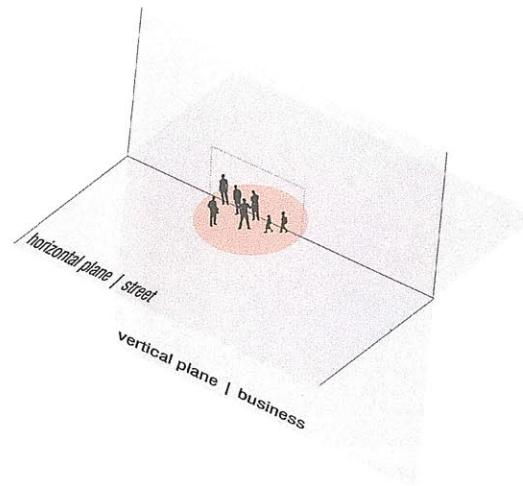


Figure 3.4 Confluence of planes on North Claiborne Avenue and its side streets tends to signal an activity node. Author's own image.

commercial uses and the street tends to indicate activity. The “Be For Real Lounge” on Orleans Avenue, two blocks riverside of Claiborne Avenue, has a regular customer base. I interviewed the owner of the building, one of the renters of the residential units above the lounge, and eight of the regular customers over time. Often times, while there were many patrons, the bar was completely empty aside from the bartender. Chairs from inside the bar are posted outside, along the facade of the building. Along

the secondary streets which feed off of Claiborne, much of the use of space around convenience stores, bars/lounges, and barber shops function similarly; the inside of the business is often a secondary space. Cajun Willis nearby on Orleans similarly leaves chairs along the façade of the building, extending the experience of the commercial space to the street.

Some of the businesses that serve food either do not have any seating or operate as a “food store” and only minimally cater to indoor consumption, such as Wing Snack on Claiborne near Orleans Avenue and Cajun Seafood at Claiborne and Columbus. As such, while some patrons consume their food and beverages along the façade of the building, under the freeway using the curbs, concrete blocks, or freeway supports as makeshift seating, parking their car under the freeway and eating there, often with the doors open, conversing with others.

Another option, common among regional and tourist patrons, is to take the food and beverages purchased on Claiborne and consume them elsewhere. I interviewed a group of customers at Cajun Seafood who bought a few pounds of fresh seafood and had stocked up on utensils where they were going to eat.



Figure 3.5 Cajun Seafood on North Claiborne. Consumption, congregation, and informal vending tends to occur in its parking lot or under the bridge across from the front of the store. Author's own image.

They quickly confessed they were tourists from the Midwest who make a note to eat at Cajun Seafood each time they vacation in New Orleans. They bought a pack of beers and were bringing their food to Louis Armstrong Park to eat.

Not only do patrons of the private business inhabit the public space, but it is also inviting of non-patrons to take part in this improvisational assemblage of private space. This outside seating often lines the façade so that patrons are oriented towards the street, making no secret that the goings-on of the street are a performance, and placing the patron in the position to easily interact with people passing through the street, entering the

business, or inhabiting the space in a similar fashion. Patrons can interact with others occupying stoops, porches, galleries, and balconies along the street.

Comparatively, the nature of the urban form and architecture of neighborhoods in cities like New York City and Philadelphia lend themselves to a more vertical orientation of public street life. Verticality is not as influential in the Black Urbanism along Claiborne, where most buildings do not exceed two stories. Should the overpass be removed, Black Urban design efforts should focus on supporting the areas where the confluence of the vertical and physical planes allows public and private spaces to penetrate one another.

Informal vendors

Informal vendors have long done business along Claiborne, even before the construction of the freeway, when the street was heavily populated with formal businesses (personal interview, Sylvester Francis). While some vendors regularly or semi-regularly locate on Claiborne, the number of vendors skyrockets seasonally around major events.

As stated previously, consumption and gathering often happens outside businesses along the façade or under the

bridge near businesses. As the formalized businesses feed activity on the street, informal vendors tend to focus their efforts in these areas of activity, creating a concentration of commercial activity that combines the formal and informal economies. Residual spaces pepper the formalized businesses, institutions, and residential buildings, and by doing so, pull together the people and activities of the formal with the informal institutions and the private with the public spheres. Currently, these residual spaces include large street corners, parking spaces and lots, vacant lots, even the corners of formalized businesses. Without a stand or a set-up of any kind, some vendors simply walk around to various formal businesses selling items, including commemorative tees for events and festivals and funerals. Outside of Wing Snack, people who consume Wing Snack's products, congregate, and converse on the sidewalk and under the bridge across from the store also informally vend tees or mixtapes out of plastic bags or hand out flyers and advertisements for events and businesses they run out of their home. Promotional CD's are often handed out in the parking lots of Cajun Seafood and the strip malls between Columbus and St. Bernard. Regular vendors with a less improvisational

setup use tables or the back of personal vehicles to sell their products. Fruits and vegetables are sold out of the back of a truck on North Claiborne at Touro; tee shirts, incense, and mixtapes are often sold atop a table set up on the corner of Claiborne and Kerlerec Street; and, CJ's Truck sells hot dogs, nachos and cheese on a lot at Claiborne and Frenchmen Street. Reconfiguring the avenue after the removal of the Expressway should include design that incorporates a checkerboard of designed residual space to further encourage this communion.

As a boulevard that transforms into a venue during major carnival and festival celebrations, Claiborne attracts a large number of vendors on its sidewalks, underneath the shade of the on and off ramps and underneath the bridge. Second lines, various krewes' carnival parades, Super Sunday, Essence Festival, the New Orleans Jazz and Heritage Festival, and the Congo Square Festival, among others, brings people to Claiborne. During events that do not have programming on Claiborne but are nearby, parking under the bridge continues to bring large numbers of people to the avenue. Neighborhood, regional, and in some cases even national vendors come out to take advantage of the outpouring of people,



Figure 3.6 Street corner vending on North Claiborne. Author's own image.



Figure 3.7 Preaching on an empty lot. Author's own image.

including food and beverage vendors and men and women selling trinkets, souvenirs, clothing, and accessories. The extra fervor surrounding the carnival season of 2010 due to the first ever Saints World Championship proved to be a boon for vendors. One service that was extremely popular this carnival season was picture taking, as residents sought to have keep sakes. The owner of one informal business this carnival season, Kenneth Briggs of Flickin' and Mixin', painted backgrounds for pictures that were Saints related, as it "seemed like a safe bet that those would appeal to the most people" (Powell, 2010), as seen in figure 3.8.

As distinct from the French Quarter, the residential character of the neighborhood is not seasonal (many of the French Quarter's residents do not live there full time). Many of the businesses in the French Quarter cater to visitors of the neighborhood. Claiborne on the other hand, needs to fulfill its roles as the central meeting place of a confluence of residential neighborhoods, meet the demands for commercial activity and goods both for the neighborhoods as well as regional customers, and host large events such as Black Carnival and second lines, among others. Accordingly, flexibility of the urban design is essential

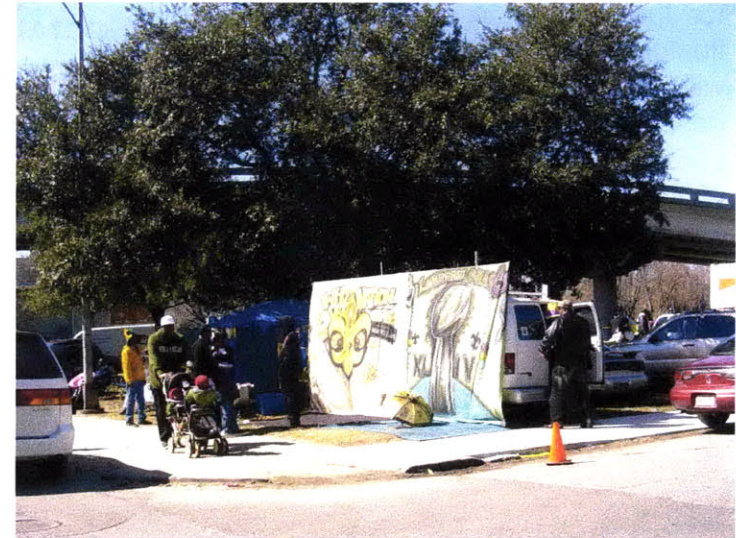


Figure 3.8: Picture-taking businesses near Claiborne Expressway ramp set up during carnival season, 2010. Author's own image.



Figure 3.9: Business set up under the interstate during carnival season, 2010. Author's own image.

for the avenue to accommodate these fluctuating and temporal demands and will virtually ensure an informal economy despite the removal of the freeway.

3.1.3 CLAIBORNE'S COMMERCIAL AND INSTITUTIONAL USE: THE

SOCIAL SIGNIFICANCE OF A PLACE TO BE

Real or perceived, Black men and women, particularly youth, often cite a feeling that they are not welcome in certain places. A few businesses and institutions in the shadow of the I-10

overpass have become a gathering place for Black men and women “who don’t have anywhere else to be,” (Rose, 2008). The plans for the land uncovered by the freeway removal should aim to increase the number of places to be: to hang out, to speak, to play, without judgment. In addition, as a



Figure 3.10 and 3.11: Events-oriented vending under the interstate. Author's own images.

valuable expansion of safely accessible public lands, the newly designed spaces should augment the current businesses and institutions which provide a unique sense of belonging by creating spaces for activities that these businesses and institutions promote. Coordinating design strategies with established entities that serve important economic and social roles in the Black community along Claiborne Avenue reinforces the Black Urban synergism between the public and private realms by extending the vitality of these indoor, private spaces where people currently congregate into the spaces opened up by the expressway removal. For example, interviews I conducted shed light on the vital role faith-based institutions and businesses which cater to Black clientele play in the sense of place embedded in the avenue.

Barber Shops and Salons

Note the relatively high number of barber shops and salons in Figure 3.1. Black hair products and services cater to a Black population, due to the degree of specialization it may require. Accordingly, high numbers of Black residents elevate the demand for shops

to serve the needs of Black people, as these shops can be successful serving a predominantly black clientele. Based on an informal sampling of Black men and women, young and old, low-income, middle class, and upper class, the concentration of hair products and services along Claiborne is a major draw for Black residents in the region who, otherwise, may only infrequently patronize Claiborne Avenue businesses (personal communication, Byron Mercier; John Moore; Robert F. Moore).

Across the country, black barbers and salons often play a central role in the economic and social life of Black urban communities, and have historically offered families “a means to achieve a stable income, investments, and a level of financial security unobtainable in many other occupations. Barbering and hairdressing was, in a sense, economic freedom” (Anthropological Studies Center, 302). “The black community’s griots and jokesters haunt the twirling seats and share their troubles, lessons on manhood and life, and information on any- and everything going down in the community,” (Hannah-Jones, 2009). In barbershops and salons, there is relatively little fear of the opposite sex crossing the threshold, and it is one

place where every type of black man or woman – “young and old, wealthy and struggling, high school dropout and college graduate -- gathers regularly” (Hannah-Jones, 2009). The frequency by which Black men generally visit barber shops, on average about once every two weeks (G. Hunter, personal communication, April 20, 2010), heightens the role of the shop for Black men particularly.

Churches

Similar to barbershops and hairdressers, churches nationally tend to serve Black or White congregations. The Black church demonstrates “the concrete need for Black freedom and opportunity in this world” (Baker 24). By my count (which was extensive but cannot claim to be exhaustive), there are only two churches located directly on North Claiborne Avenue from Poydras to Elysian Fields: Christian Unity Baptist Church and St. Joseph Baptist Church (whose technical address is on Touro Street). However, Pastor Dwight Webster of Christian Unity, a Black Baptist church at the corner of Claiborne and Conti, cites a number upwards of twelve churches in the general area of

the corridor (personal communication, Feb. 23, 2010).

Also similar to barber shops and salons and other regional Black draws, Pastor Webster notes that his congregation, which is almost 100% Black, is a mix of residents from the general Claiborne Avenue area and “commuters,” who he notes probably largely uses the Claiborne Expressway to reach the church from the 7th ward, Gentilly, and New Orleans East, including himself.

He noted that while there was a notable decrease of families in the area after the construction of the freeway, there did still remain a visible presence of families. The change in his congregation is part of the proof that Katrina diminished this number further. “We don’t have a Black niche, spatially. A holistic Black niche, including space for faith-based, and intergenerational activities” (personal communication, Feb. 23, 2010). I attended service at Christian Unity with Pastor Webster the Sunday after the interview, and as part of his sermon, he preached about the significance of Claiborne Avenue and the future of the expressway to the church, the congregation, and the neighborhood’s health and wealth,

urging people to get involved should there be an opportunity to do so. As the church is yet another central meeting place for people in the neighborhood as well as regional community members, creating family-friendly space, protected play space, and greenspace inviting to local faith-based organizations will ultimately activate the space through activities and give families the right to return.

3.2 CLAIBORNE AVENUE AS PERFORMANCE SPACE

Despite the concrete superstructure barging through the center of Claiborne Avenue, a collection of recurring rituals under the overpass provide cultural coherence amidst the dismembered street grid (Samuels, 2000; Skakeeny, 2010). Most literature on cultural performance makes the distinction between everyday use and performance (Loukaitou-Sideris & Ehrenfeucht, 2009); however, Claiborne Avenue's use as a performance space, as perhaps the most enduring practice, largely overlaps with the concept of everyday use on Claiborne. The diasporic characteristic of 'Black Urbanism and Black Performance Arts', which maintains that Black performance arts are integral to Black spatial production, is highly influential, in the local manifestation of Black Urbanism on Claiborne Avenue. Its frequency and influence on the daily lives and local economy virtually

qualify performance as part of the everyday Claiborne Avenue landscape. Moreover, most of the other everyday uses other than commerce have been eliminated due to the atmosphere induced by the construction of an interstate spur atop a neighborhood avenue. As such, the use of Claiborne as a performance space is the most common use, whereas all other uses, besides driving atop it, are minimized. Additionally, when in play, the use of the space for performance by and large either dictates or overrides most other everyday functions of the street. Black Urbanism as a performance art embraces and transforms all other uses of the street (Loukaitou-Sideris & Ehrenfeucht, 2009, p. 67). By overriding the vehicle as the main determinate of the space, performance has a function of actually creating a safe space for associated everyday uses, that are otherwise eliminated by the heavy traffic flow stemming from I-10.

3.2.1 SECOND LINES

As Sylvester Francis explains it, the practice of the jazz funeral began is rooted in the tradition of social



Figure 3.11: Music on the streets of New Orleans. Source: flickr.com

societies in New Orleans (S. Francis, personal communication, Feb. 15, 2010). Black New Orleanians formed mutual aid and benevolent societies as a form of communal health and life insurance. When someone passed away, it was common for the family to receive money from their benevolent aid society, mutual aid organization, or their neighbors to help with the associated costs of a proper burial. With any additional money left over, the family of the deceased would arrange for a band to thank those who helped pay for the funeral (S. Francis, personal communication, Feb. 15, 2010). The family of the deceased formed the “first line” of the funeral, following the casket in procession. Those members of the community that followed the band in the procession formed a “second line” behind the family. The brass band accompanying the second line draws on the African-rooted bamboula rhythm, “derived from Congo Square, where enslaved Africans were once permitted to dance and drum on Sundays” (Blumenfield, 2008).

Over time, the second line evolved into an activity of its own, often occurring without the funeral. Additionally, the significance of mutual

aid and benevolent societies diminished with the introduction of subsidized medical care, and membership in social aid and pleasure clubs increased (Crutcher, 2001). Today, these social aid and pleasure clubs host anniversary celebrations that often prompt the second lines that fill the streets along Claiborne Avenue.

As the tradition now is considered quintessentially New Orleans, second lines occur both spontaneously and planned, for birthdays, funerals, in support of political candidates, to make political statements (for example, to bring awareness to the issue of global warming or to stop demolition of a building), a host of other festivals and holidays, and on many Sundays during the summertime.

3.2.2 SOUNDSCAPE

The shade and the acoustic under the bridge actually support many major activities and musical traditions on Claiborne Avenue. The bridge hosts such annual competitions as the “Best Band Under the Bridge” and “Loudest Band Under the Bridge” between area high schools (Bandhead, 2010). A second liner will commonly yell “Under the Bridge! Take it to the Bridge!” and the



Figure 3.12: The space “under the bridge,” a soundmark in the soundscape of North Claiborne Avenue, amplifying the sounds and offering shade from the heat of the sun. Author’s own image.



Figure 3.13: Taking it to the bridge. Source: flickr.com

procession will find its way to Claiborne. The second lines in the neighborhood often stop their procession under the bridge, as the concrete shell of the overpass has tremendous acoustic quality and provides shade from the heat for revelers (F. Johnson, personal communication, Jan. 25, 2010). The sounds of the second line are amplified and carry across the streets, permeating the neighborhoods on either side of the freeway, begging others to join in.

The column supports of the elevated viaduct create a gallery,

which lends itself to a processional performance, and envelop the collective nature of these rituals. The second line is very much a collective performance, an attribute of Black performance arts. The second line does not separate the performer from the audience, as is more common within western concepts of performance. Instead, the audience is part of the performance, contributing to and building up its intensity, often employing a call-and-response between segments of the group*.

To be clear, the use of Claiborne Avenue as a performance space occurs despite the bridge and not because of it. Since the freeway's construction, what was once remembered as Claiborne culture, is now commonly referred to as the "Under the Bridge" culture.

"It used to always be, 'Where you goin' to?'

'Claiborne!'

'Where you goin' to?'

'Claiborne!'

Now it's, 'Where you goin' to?'

'Under the bridge!'" (F. Johnson, personal communication, Jan. 25, 2010).

But, Black Urbanism performs the art of making do, by heightening, reinventing, and improvising on the insertion of the interstate on the avenue – manifesting the art of making do. Matt Sakakeeny (2010) describes this phenomenon as the following:

For traditions to continue to provide coherence and a culturally particular sense of place, they cannot remain static but must march in step with the motion of time and space. As the environment is remapped by planners, residents, and "nature," musicians play faster and louder to correspond to the speed and noise of the cars traveling above on the Interstate; they compose and curate a body of repertoire that represents their experiences; and they make the acoustics of the built environment work to suit their purposes and preferences. (p. 13)

Through the recurring performative uses, space and Black identity are inextricably linked. Acting Black Urbanism in the crevices of the freeway, Claiborne, despite the interstate, continues to be marked as local space, tied to Black culture

(Loukaitou-Sideris & Ehrenfeucht, 2009).

The public performance of life is a strong characteristic of diasporic Black Urbanism, and the local manifestations of this characteristic are blatant in the use of North Claiborne as a performance space. Collective performance, as seen through the traditions such as second lines, has profound meanings for urban design. In its use as a performance space, Claiborne Avenue does not have a stage during a second line and does not need one. The stage separates the performer from the audience. Rather, the street itself is the stage for the collective performance. Note that the roadway of Claiborne Avenue is much more widely used for performance than the stage constructed in Hunter's Field, an open space built under the freeway to mitigate the effects of the freeway.

3.2.3 CARNIVAL ON CLAIBORNE

Mardi Gras is really made up. Cuz white people will give you one day to be what you want to be. That day was carnival. (S. Francis, personal interview, Feb. 15, 2010).

Throughout the nineteenth



Figure 3.14: The stage in Hunter's Field at the corner of St. Bernard Avenue and North Claiborne Avenue tends to remain unused while the streets host most performances. Source: Author's own image.



Figure 3.15: The performance of life on St. Bernard Avenue near North Claiborne Avenue, marked by collective performance. Source: Author's own image.

century, Black people were forbidden from Mardi Gras krewes, and legislation even restricted Blacks from participating in the city's carnival celebrations. It was not until 1991 that the city required krewes or carnival societies to integrate if they were to parade on public streets or participate in public festivities that received public funds (Loukaitou-Sideris & Ehrenfeucht, 2009). Black Carnival is unmistakably different than the mainline carnival processions of the Mardi Gras krewes that historically did not allow Blacks to participate. The modern day old-line processions of the Mardi Gras krewes continue to embody the western concept of performance, separating the performer from the audience. Throughout the procession, there remains a clear distinction between performer and audience, as the performers, usually on floats, travel through the street and the audience lines the sides of the streets, at times even barricaded.

Through the development of the concept of Black Urbanism and the exploration of its local manifestations on Claiborne, I posit that, while there are clear counterproductions of space that are rooted in a reaction to segregation, there are on the other hand different

concepts of space, namely Black Urbanism in this case, wherein a wholly separate narrative and spatial culture is practiced. The Zulu parade is an example of a counterproduction of space. This demonstrates that there is a distinction between Black people and Black Urbanism, as discussed in the first chapter. Zulu historian Clarence Becknell even states that, "Mardi Gras wasn't created for Blacks in this city. We weren't part of the plan. But you've got this big affair going on, and you've got to do something" (Curtis, 2009). In reaction to the ban on Blacks in the White society's Mardi Gras krewes, the Krewe of Zulu was formed, largely maintaining the same performance structure of White krewes' parades, but performing in Blackface and throwing coconuts as a caricature of negritude (R. Lombard, personal communication, Jan. 21, 2010).

Aside from the Zulus, the carnival traditions of Claiborne Avenue are commonly known as "Black Mardi Gras." Put simply, "anything that walks, we call that Black Carnival" (S. Francis, personal communication, Feb. 15, 2010).

Among the traditions North Claiborne Avenue continues to host,



Figure 3.16: Masking Indian on North Claiborne Avenue. Source: flickr.com



Figure 3.17: Parading towards Orleans and North Claiborne. Source: Author's own image.

using the street as a venue for Black Urban traditions, is the tradition of masking Indian. The Mardi Gras Indian tradition dates back at least to the mid-1800s, possibly before (Whorisky, 2007; S. Francis, personal communication, Feb. 15, 2010). People who 'mask Indian' dress either as Native Americans or as Africans, commemorating Native Americans who sheltered runaway slaves, their own African roots, and in both cases the spirit of resistance (Whorisky, 2007; S. Francis, personal communication, Feb. 15, 2010). Mardi Gras Indians parade usually on three days of the year: carnival day, Super Sunday (the Sunday just before St. Joseph's Day), and during the Jazz and Heritage Festival. Currently, there are about 30 tribes around the city, each with about 8-10 people. Most tribes parade on Claiborne. "Your day ain't complete till you get to Claiborne," notes Fred Johnson of the Yellow Pocahontas tribe (F. Johnson, personal communication, Jan. 25, 2010). The chants of the Indians is rooted in the same bamboula rhythm as the second lines that is derived from the African song and dance that took place in early Congo Square (Blumenfield, 2008).

The intersection of Orleans and

Claiborne Avenues is considered the heart of Black Mardi Gras tradition, "tied to the African American celebration of Mardi Gras for over a century" (Whorisky, 2007). In Black Carnival tradition, everyone is involved, harking back to collective performance as a Black Urban principle with paraders such as the Mardi Gras Indians, the skeletons, the Baby Dolls, the Money Wasters, a number of second lines, DJs, and the like. One local radio station hosts a bona fide "Mardi Gras Under the Bridge," and families, social aid and pleasure clubs and other social organizations camp out in under the bridge for the full day's worth of festivities, sometimes setting up days in advance in order to secure space under the freeway. The demand for space under the elevated expressway around carnival time continues despite the loss of population after Hurricane Katrina. The Washington Post estimated in 2007 that 200,000 revelers had congregated on Claiborne for Black Mardi Gras (Whorisky, 2007). Carnival on Claiborne allows the street the space to foster a multitude of other uses, such as promenading, selling, barbequing, congregating, and so forth. Since the construction of the



Figure 3.18: The intersection of Orleans and North Claiborne Avenues on carnival day, 2010. Source: Author's own image.



Figure 3.19: Skeletons under the bridge on carnival day, 2010 -- a practice directly derived from voodoo and African spirituality. Source: Author's own image.

freeway, Claiborne Avenue is generally not supportive of these uses other than when the street is co-opted by its use as a performance space, recreating the opportunity for people to get together on Claiborne Avenue temporarily.

Black Urban traditions under the Claiborne Expressway make evident the City's inability or choice not to address this spatial culture. Whereas mainline parades are supported and

even hosted by the mayor, "instead of promoting jazz in many of the Black neighborhoods where it thrived, the city chose to support jazz piped through 'safe cultural channels' such as staged performances, and passively experienced museums and archives" (Crutcher, 2001, p. 119). While Crutcher (2001) makes the argument that this is directly related to the city's attitude towards

"economic development, its political and demographic constitution, and its economy," without a design strategy for the very spatial performances of Black Urbanism, the city cannot draw from an existing practice of Black Urban design should it want to support the neighborhoods that produce its culture. As Fred Johnson declares, "All of that cement and steel are not stronger than the spirit we have there. With all that

cement, we still got something special. With a little assistance, the history of the street holds its own” (personal communication, Jan. 25, 2010).



Figure 3.20, 3.21, 3.22: Many everyday uses on North Claiborne Avenue which used to happen regularly before the construction of I-10 now largely occur around large scale events such as Mardi Gras and the NFL playoffs, including young children hanging out, barbequeing, and tailgating. Figures 3.20 & 3.21 source: Author's own images. Figure 3.22: The Times-Picayune, Dec. 19, 2009

chapter FOUR

PRINCIPLES, PROCESS, AND POLITICS

This chapter will discuss the potential of Black Urban strategy to create prosperous, lively, and sustainable spaces out of the land uncovered by freeway removals and consider the history and politics of urban design in Black communities through the case of the Claiborne Expressway in New Orleans.

4.1 DESIGN PRINCIPLES FOR CLAIBORNE

4.1.1 DESIGNING A BLACK ETHNIC ENCLAVE

Black Urban design does not have a specific aesthetic. Conversely, one of its four characteristics is the ability to improvise based on local context. In this way, a Black Urban design strategy focuses on the style of uses of the street. On Claiborne, the culture of entrepreneurship along the commercial corridor of Claiborne could increasingly draw on its appeal as a Black ethnic enclave with the increased visibility afforded to it without the expressway. The ethnic enclave “creates a certain amount of solidarity which also enhances the development of small business” (Butler, 2001). While many ethnic enclaves in various cities across the nation generate tourism, commerce, culture, and a strong sense of place, the concept of a Black ethnic enclave as a healthy and vibrant commercial corridor has

not been pursued due to the stigma of Black urban communities as crime-ridden and dangerous. Most of the Claiborne Avenue area’s professional entrepreneurial enterprises, such as lawyers, doctors, and pharmacists have left since the construction of the Claiborne Expressway, relocating to Gentilly or further into Eastern New Orleans. But, in an ethnic enclave entrepreneurial professionals find a heightened solidarity with the vendor selling teas or the owner of a fruit stand (Butler, 2001).

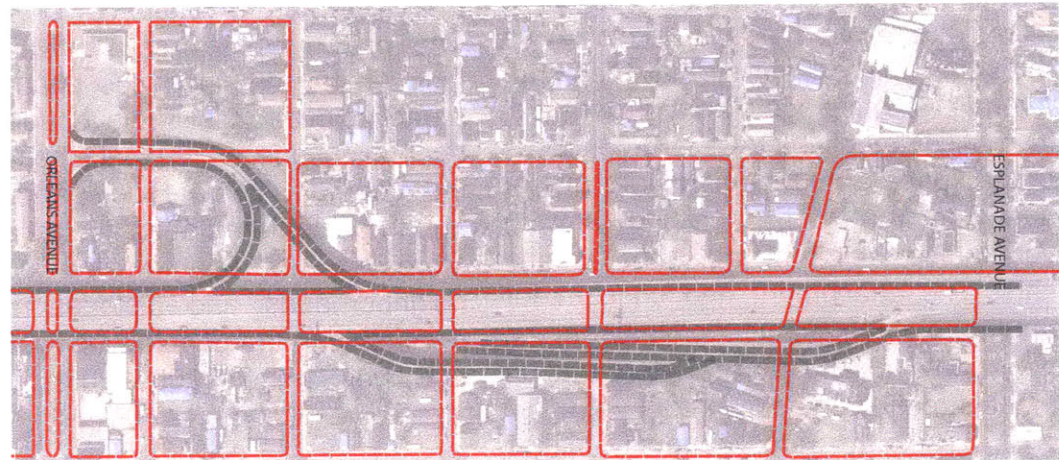
Black Urbanist design on Claiborne can support the growth of informal, micro, and small businesses -- segments critical to the New Orleans’ economy -- through the development of a commercial corridor which offers neighborhood services and amenities for nearby residents, supports the strong culture of entrepreneurialism in the Black community, and boasts regional draws, leveraging its cultural assets. This approach serves the economic development of the city as a whole, through the support of Claiborne’s craftsmanship and the arts of ironwork and architecture, cuisine, food, and music -- major reasons why people visit New Orleans. As

sociologist Max Weber notes, there is a tendency for minorities, likely excluded from entering established spheres of influences, to be drawn to entrepreneurialism in search of self-determination. There are urban design outcomes of self-determination and ownership of enterprise on Claiborne, as the proprietorship of the business often extends out into the public spaces of the streets and even the roadways. Should the overpass be removed, the frontage of commercial buildings will experience a new relationship with the street. For

example, many existing buildings along North Claiborne between Orleans Avenue and Esplanade Avenue, shown below in figures 4.1A-B, will no longer face a ramp, but now face a street or a piece of land that once held a ramp. Designing or promoting public art or street furniture in coordination with the zones of influence which appear at the confluence of commercial facade and street could support the relationship between the private spaces of the businesses and the public arena of the avenue when the freeway is removed.

For example, installing a public art piece, designed without an explicit use so that it can function flexibly as seating, as art, as a table, or for a multiple of uses at multiple times, or at the same time could serve as an ode to existing activity and suggest it continue, near the confluence of building facades and the sidewalk where people currently congregate. Black Urban design should aim to support the existing synergy between business ownership and activity on the street with the aim to anchor the liveliness that exists.

Figure 4.1A: aerial image of Orleans to Esplanade Avenues along North Claiborne in reference to the French Quarter and the many ramps along the expressway alignment. Figure 4.1B: Several street blocks between Orleans and Esplanade will be affected by the removal of the expressway. Design should encourage the activities that the commercial uses in this area currently attract to extend out to the street.



4.1.2 LEVERAGING THE BLACK URBAN CHARACTERISTIC OF PUBLIC/PRIVATE AMBIGUITY IN DESIGN

One of the reasons why North Claiborne Avenue's neutral ground was so successful was partly due to its support of the Black Urban characteristic of public/private ambiguity. This notion of North Claiborne as a "front yard" was readily apparent in my research. Continuously, community members refer to Claiborne Avenue in its state before the freeway construction as the "front yard" (Dr. Lombard, Leah Chase, Clifton James, Fred Johnson, Louis Charbonnet, Lolis Eric Elie, personal communication; Bullard, 1997). The 1976 CADT study explicitly states that the "purposes of this study is to revive that land and to revive the community's spirit so that Claiborne Avenue will once again be a 'Front Yard' for that community" (CADT, 43). The uses of the space of the median were that of a private front yard, including growing vegetables, hair braiding, and washing cars. The attachment and concern for the future of the avenue derives from the very personal and private interpretation of the street as one's own front yard.

The term "yard" "generally implies

more value than something called a lot" (Barton, 2001, p. 125). In the broader culture of American urban landscape, it has been said that there is a triad of landscape types: the lot, yard, and garden, seeming to escalate in value and reverence (Barton, 2001). However, as distinct from this triad, Black cultural conceptions of landscape conceive of the yard as a hybrid in meaning and use "inferring that it is a landscape valued for functional purposes and also a treasured garden landscape" (Westmacott, 1992; Barton, 2001, p. 125).

On Claiborne, the width across the grassy median, at 100 feet, functioned as a front yard for the buildings that faced it. However, its length, stretching 6100 feet in length, meant that it simultaneously functioned as a public park system, with an area of 13.5 acres from Canal Street to St. Bernard Avenue (CADT, 1976). The dual functions of a private yard fostered ownership of the space while attracting public use. The avenue's public orientation due to its scale begged for the grand displays of Black performance arts to be centered at its neutral ground. Moreover, its length tied together neighborhoods and histories, offering ownership to the people who lived along it. Daniel Samuels (2000) notes:

It is particularly striking that, although North Claiborne transects both Treme and the Seventh Ward, it was never referred to as an edge that divided, or defined distinct zones; but rather as the spine that connected these neighborhoods, and that provided a common frame of reference and continuity. p. 35

Black Urbanism thrived amidst this hybrid yard/park landscape. The Black Urban production of space improvised on the dimensions of the neutral ground. Personal uses spontaneously came together with the public performance of life, presenting a wide array of uses for the single space of the neutral ground.

The strong "yard" metaphor signals the reasons why the avenue still holds the functions of a yard without the landscape qualities as such. And, despite the concrete bed 25 feet high and the concrete floor below, the reverence of the hybrid yard still holds true, not only through people's favorable memories but also by the current uses of the site and centrality it holds for Black New Orleans. Reviving this hybrid and ambiguous delineation of public versus private is key to the success of the neutral ground should the overpass be removed.

A Black Urban design strategy

can be applied by incorporating similar yard/park hybridity of the neutral ground to the wide-open swaths of land between ramps and interchanges that will be uncovered and unprogrammed should the expressway be removed. Figures 4.2A-C shows an example at the intersection of North Claiborne and St. Bernard Avenues. Spaces such as this exist along North Claiborne, that originally had buildings, but were cleared for the construction of the expressway, and as such, were not originally part of the park system of the neutral ground. In order to recreate public and private ambiguity, reworking these pieces of land should focus orientation to existing buildings and activities in order to invite personal, private uses and bridge the culture of ownership of the businesses along the side of the street to a culture of ownership of this new found land.

At the same time, a strong continuity to the larger neutral ground of Claiborne Avenue should be encouraged. By employing the Black Urban design principle of 'the public sphere as the stage for the collective performance of life,' these residual spaces, with unique shapes and sizes, can reintroduce the concept of a public, spatial 'welcome mat.' I also recommend that maintaining the dimensions of the Claiborne Avenue

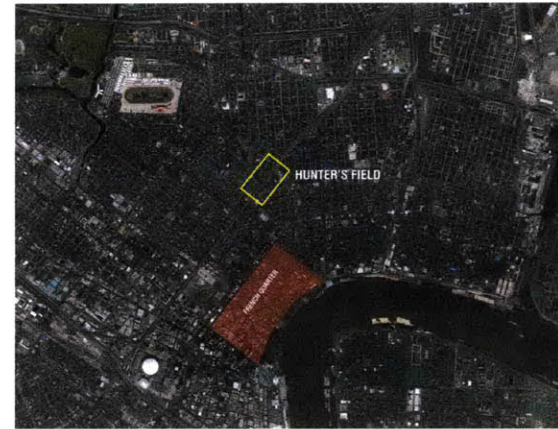


Figure 4.2A



Figure 4.2B

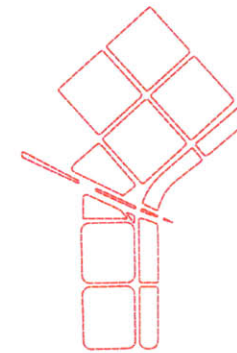


Figure 4.2C

Figures 4.2A-C: The intersection of North Claiborne and St. Bernard Avenues will present large swaths of land when the freeway is removed. Figure 4.2C shows what the intersection configuration may look like if re-integrated into the street grid. Leveraging a design scheme that promotes a hybrid of public and private-like uses will encourage ownership of the recovered land area and integrate them into the uses that currently exist on the avenue.

neutral ground are critical to reviving this characteristic.

The Black Urban design principle of ‘communication’ is critical in the case of the Claiborne Expressway, particularly as it is already so strongly demonstrated on the columns of elevated viaduct. The columns serve as visual testimonies of history, and are easily adaptable to relay new messages over time. Bringing this Black Urban principle home, Dr. Lombard mentions:

You don’t see chains, and you don’t see nooses. It’s as if slavery didn’t even happen. It would really be a shame if the entire structure was torn down, and no pieces were left. It would be as if this didn’t happen to our community.

Reworking the columns into the new landscape of the neutral ground, without the concrete bed, serves to ‘celebrate the past in view of the future’ as sketched in Figure 4.3.

Connecting the existing spatial nodes of cultural consciousness to future designs will help to support the perpetuation of street tradition should the freeway be removed. For instance, after the roadbed is removed, a structure could be built atop the

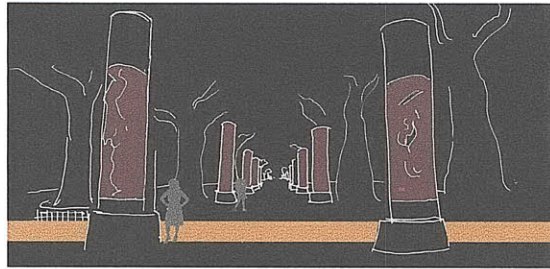


Figure 4.3: Sketch of what Claiborne’s neutral ground could look like with the roadbed removed, the columns preserved, and live oaks trees planted.

columns at the intersection of Orleans and Claiborne, considered the heart of Black New Orleans street tradition. The structure could mimic the qualities of the expressway limited to that intersection, and provide acoustic support, shade, and a gallery-type space encouraging unity among the participants, while integrating the aesthetics and scale of the street.

Given the deep sense of place and history embedded in the street, programming the space can be achieved through gestures in the landscape, such as visibility, sightlines, and orientation. For example, the seating currently in Hunter’s Field rarely sees action. The orientation of the seating is forthrightly



Figure 4.4: Black Urbanism stresses the performance of life happens on the street. This existing seating on North Claiborne Avenue faces inward and rarely sees users. The expressway’s removal offers the opportunity to design public places in the local, spatial culture.

inwards, away from the life on the street as seen in Figure 4.4. While the park boasts large amounts of seating, nearby residents and patrons still prefer to bring their chairs from inside to face the performance of life on the street. Rearrangement and orientation should focus on bridging either side of the freeway and framing the performance of life on the street.

In a similar way, while the Claiborne neutral ground is the area’s “front yard,” Congo Square and its grounds were considered the “back yard.” Opening the park up by design, removing the fences and gates that surround it, and implementing Black Urban design

principles will encourage synergy between the new Claiborne Avenue and Congo Square. This has the potential to also influence both crime as well as the perception of crime, inviting both community members as well as tourists to the treasured space. These principles are not exclusive to black urban design but have a heightened significance.

4.2 DESIGN PROCESS: THE EMPLOYMENT OF BLACK URBANISM TO REDESIGN LAND UNCOVERED BY FREEWAY

Some residents of the neighborhood, particularly younger people who lived their whole lives in the shadows of the elevated viaduct, exhibit strong attachments to the structure, and relate the traditions and culture of the street to the concrete:

“You betta’ not tear down that bridge! If it wasn’t for the on-ramp right there (Orleans at Claiborne), man that damn thing saved my life when ‘dat water was comin’!” (anonymous; personal communication, Jan. 25, 2010).

Another younger man, who also requested to remain anonymous:

“Look, I was born in Charity. Now, they want to close down Charity. I grew up in Laffite; now, they tore that down. My

mama ‘nem grew up round the corner; they done to’ that down. Don’t tear it down; that’s my culture! (personal communication, date).

A patron at the Be For Real Lounge on Orleans, also requesting anonymity:

“Man, we not gon’ have no second lines anymore. [goes inside and comes back out to show pictures of him and his friends under the bridge]. They want to kill all that? Oh hell no, man!” (personal communication, date).

Even the older generation of folks, who had lived in the area before the freeway construction, exhibited suspicions with regards to both the potential to recreate a sense of scale and place as well as the motives for removal. I spoke to Mardi Gras Indian, Sylvester Francis, about how he envisions the potential of the avenue if the freeway were to come down.

“Claiborne? Baaaby, das’ gone. It ain’t never gon’ be what it was. You just don’t have those people no’ mo’. It’s not gon’ be that. All them people done moved out when the businesses died when they put that interstate on it.”

You heard them talkin’ ‘bout removin’ it?

“Man, you not gon’ have the essence, that nitty gritty. It’s gone, baby.”

Pastor Webster also doubts the potential of the expressway removal to change the trajectory of the neighborhood: “Whether the freeway comes down or not, it is still a barrier. They got all of these other developments going on; they are boxing us out regardless” (personal communication, Feb. 23, 2010).

A business owner on Claiborne hollered when I told him the news that people are talking about removing the freeway:

“People gon’ be shocked if they tear down that freeway. That’s where the people hang out!”

He told me to speak with the owner of the store next door, who reacted calmly, grounded in his disbelief:

“People ‘round here gon’ talk about the African foundation and all that. They’ll be scared of messing it up.[...] Only way they’ll do it is if the whites want to move in. Otherwise, I’ll be dead in my grave before they tear that thing down” (anonymous, personal communication, Jan. 25, 2010).

A North Claiborne Avenue resident’s comment indicate the perceived racial implications of freeway removal:

“Oh lord, you heard about these white people want to remove the overpass now? Must mean they want to live here now.”

In light of the mistrust, skepticism, suspicion, and strong emotions tied to the freeway, its construction, and its potential removal, process is critical.

4.2.1 LITTLE VICTORIES

Given the scale and speed considerations recommended as part of the Black Urban design process in Chapter 1, “little victories” should be pursued when coordinating urban design strategies with freeway removals in an existing and historic urban fabric, particularly when the community exhibits mistrust towards planning and design developments (F. Salvucci, personal communication, Feb. 4, 2010).

Test the affect on traffic by barricading the elevated expressway temporarily. For example, test the effect of the freeway’s removal on traffic before deconstruction of the freeway to ease suspicions. This can be done simply by

barricading traffic on the expressway temporarily for a specified amount of time. Building trust and comfort levels around the project should be done sensibly as a result of decades of development practices which

Push for the removal of a couple of sets of ramps initially. Due to the incisions to Claiborne frontage and the tightly knit urban fabric around the avenue as well as their location near or at cultural nodes, I recommend that three sets of ramps specifically be removed, one-by-one over time, to mitigate the scale and speed of deconstruction. This will allow the city and the area’s community members as well as the larger city to become familiar with the benefits of removing the structure. I recommend three sets of ramps for the initial phases of removal: the scissor ramps along North Claiborne Avenue that cut from Esplanade to Dumaine, the scissor ramps at Claiborne and St. Bernard Avenue, the circular ramp at Orleans Avenue, and

4.2.2 THE THREAT OF GENTRIFICATION

In my interview with Frederick Salvucci, who oversaw the removal of the Central Artery in Boston as

Secretary of Transportation for the State of Massachusetts, he stated, “it was a myth that the freeway preserved affordable housing. It was gentrifying anyways before the freeway and is gentrifying now.” To say that the removal of the freeway did not have anything to do with making the neighborhood more attractive, which therefore lead to an increase in property values is a stretch of an argument to make, however the departure of Italians and other longtime residents of the neighborhood is a factor of other changes as well. “People were already moving out because there were not a lot of jobs or wanted a better place to live.” The inconvenience of construction actually mitigated further gentrification.

Rent is already has increased in the neighborhood dramatically since Katrina (look at Fred’s paperwork) and was already beginning to increase before the hurricane in the Treme neighborhood, due to its adjacency to the French Quarter and Central Business District.

I asked one business owner what he thought might happen to his business:

“I live uptown but rent two stores for my businesses selling t-shirts and images. See? Ain’t they nice? I found cheap rent here, that’s why my store is here. The

price was right. And, my clientele is here.”

What if the rent increases? Would you leave?

“If you’re making more money when the freeway comes down, rent won’t be a problem! I’m doing good on the business I have with my downtown clientele, but if more people are going to stop here, I’m good! I’ll stay!” Owner of T Shirt Designs Plus

His comments align with the vision for the development of a potential Black ethnic enclave, growing in commercial viability. By supporting the activities of the people who currently live there as described in Chapter 3, Black Urbanism can help toe the line of gentrification.

4.3 DESIGN POLITICS

4.3.1 BLACK URBAN CONSCIOUSNESS AND THE STREET AS A REPRESENTATIONAL SPACE

Claiborne Avenue essentially represents Black Urban consciousness. Shortly after the New Orleans Saints Superbowl

parade, he noted:

“Me personally? See, I don’t like the Saints no’ mo’. That parade should have not gone down Poydras. It should have gone down Claiborne. The Saints ain’t just white. Why they only goin’ up and through the CBD? Saints supposed to be White and Black.”

Moreover, from various interviews, I gathered that a developer came to the neighborhood with the idea for Claiborne Avenue to become the “Gateway to Paris.” This comment offended many people in the neighborhood and speaks to a fundamental consciousness of the existence of a Black Urbanism. As Pastor Dwight Webster told the story:

He had this vision of Claiborne and Canal as a gateway. He said, “in Paris, you can walk 65-75 blocks in one direction and have interesting experiences along the way. They wanted to have this voodoo epigram as you get on to Claiborne. You know, they are stuck on this voodoo thing. They got Voodoo Fest, VoodooBBQ. So, basically, their model for development is Euro-centric, but they’re exploiting the African part. I said, call us Paris-Dakar. I been to Dakar. I know we’re a lot more like Dakar than Paris. In the end, they

decided on a Caribbean Paris theme. And, they're going to put a fluer-de-lis. Which is, you know, not lethal. (personal communication, Feb. 23, 2010).

A resident, referencing the same comment, remarked:

"But, Claiborne Avenue is not a gateway! It's a destination! For us, this is our destination."

In the way that Lefebvre discusses the concept of perceived and conceived space, spatial culture is clear and in the forefront of the consciousness of the people who produce it. The planning and design professions need to confront the issue in a meaningful way.

4.3.2 HOPE AND THE POLITICS OF THE PLANNER

Despite the decline of the area and transportation problems that the construction of the Claiborne Expressway induced as well as the other failed urban planning projects in the neighborhood, hope remains. I asked Dr. Lombard if he knew of any precedents wherein there was large-scale infrastructural upgrades to a neighborhood that had a freeway or other urban renewal projects

deconstructed or retrofitted that didn't displace residents. "Nope. But, Claiborne Avenue better be the first."

Pastor Dwight echoed similar sentiments of hope. "My yesterdays so far outnumber my tomorrows. But, if I think this neighborhood is going in the right direction, I can close my eyes in peace. I know it's going to get better. My faith tells me so." He made sure to add: "If you don't have a faith, which I'm sure you do, you better find one if you're going to do this. You're going to need it."

It is important to note that having planners and designers of color and, even further, local planners and designers of color, could go a long way in the process of redevelopment. As a Black woman having grown up in Slidell, itself a community spurred by the construction of I-10, and having lived and worked in New Orleans proper, I was able to access candid opinions and a significant degree of trust and encouragement. I do believe that the depth and candidness of the interviews I was able to conduct with neighborhood residents is powered by this very human connection. While this is thesis is to some degree a philosophical and academic exercise, I hope to shape the discussion on the ongoing plans surrounding Claiborne Avenue as well as

the nature of redevelopment in the larger post-urban renewal redevelopment and interstate removal growing discussion and believe that my experiences can contribute to the perspective of urban design and do not take the responsibility lightly.

"A lot of people are not going to look at a book. Most people can't read plans, or don't understand. When things disappear, they say 'oh, that's what that meant.' Most people around here are not going to read about the history of our culture or about this street. Yes, they are involved in the culture, they produce it. They like the surface; don't know the substance," says longtime community member and activist Fred Johnson. "The exception is people like you."

CONCLUDING THOUGHTS

“The corner was our magic, our music,
our politics.

Fires raised as tribal dancers and
war cries broke out on different
corners [...].

The corner was our Rock of Gibraltar,
our Stonehenge

Our Taj Mahal, our monument,
Our testimonial to freedom, to peace
and to love.” – *The Last Poets*

While the sidewalk is designed to serve the purpose of movement towards a destination, the street corner often is a destination in Black Urban neighborhoods. In Black urban history and political movements, literature, consciousness, and art, the street corner is perceived as a central part of identity, self-determination, and self-consciousness, as demonstrated by the words of The Last Poets quoted above (Common featuring the Last Poets, 2005, track 2). It stands as the ultimate dilemma in Black Urbanism, wherein the sight of Black people hanging out on the street is often seen as a sign of crime and vice so much so that urban economic models

such as the Tipping Point even allude to it as a sign of impending property value depreciation and out-migration of white people. In the historic Black communities along North Claiborne Avenue, the earliest of which were built by Black architects in the late 1700s, establishing a lexicon of Black Urbanism may help to re-stitch and invigorate the neighborhoods along Claiborne Avenue’s 190 foot wide right-of-way by validating the activities that currently exist and turning a dilemma of Black Urbanism into a new design paradigm.

The historic Black architecture and urban design in the nation’s earliest Black neighborhoods bolstered the nature of the social, cultural, celebratory, and recreational interactions and activities enlivening the avenue and its feeder streets, which in turn supported commerce and entrepreneurship. The Black spatial knowledge powered a distinct relationship between public and private, the street as a place of performance, the deeply engrained improvisational art-of-making do, and the tradition of fine craftsmanship and decorative arts. Much of the cuisine, architecture, music, and culture sold to tourists in other parts of town are produced and serviced by the people of Black communities such as 6th, 7th, and

8th Wards Treme, Lafitte, Iberville, and Mid-City/Gravier neighborhoods along North Claiborne Avenue. The strengths of the existing production of Black space can serve to empower the avenue if the freeway is removed, a critical lynchpin in the city’s revival.

This thesis explored dimensions, characteristics, and design principles of Black Urbanism to envision a contemporary Black Urban design strategy on North Claiborne Avenue, assuming the overpass is removed. It is, of course, the final urban design of the street that will be the metric used to assess the failure or success of the freeway removal by the general public. The process of planning and civic engagement should begin to meaningfully engage residents in the envisioning of the street, beyond simply a representational seat at the decision-making table. But, an urban design which envelopes the spatial production of the neighborhood, beyond the metaphor of inclusion.

With improvisation and the art of making do at the very core of Black culture, it strikes me that cultural traditions die hard. A block of concrete was constructed above the Claiborne Expressway, and 75,000 vehicles per day fly atop it. The people and the culture have suffered. Yet, resilience continues

to endure. Perhaps, no matter what you do to North Claiborne Avenue, the culture will not die. But, applying a Black Urban design process to sustainable urban redevelopment is about doing it right. Through these design strategies, there exists the potential to create jobs, preserve social networks, and allow culture to create a new landscape and vision for economic development, and ultimately, allow people to see themselves in the design of their city.

Figure 4.5: New Orleanians atop the Claiborne Expressway in the days after Hurricane Katrina.



Figure 4.6: Living under the freeway after Hurricane Katrina.



Appendices

APPENDIX A: SUSTAINABLE TRANSPORTATION ON NORTH CLAIBORNE AVENUE

Traffic Flow and Function

North Claiborne is integral to regional mobility. Under free flowing conditions, capacity of the elevated viaduct is at least 90,000 vehicles per day and about 100,000 to 110,000 vehicles per day with moderate congestion (CADT 43).

East of the Central Business District: Due to the severe impact of Hurricane Katrina on central New Orleans, Eastern New Orleans, as well as Slidell along the lakeshore, traffic along Interstate 10 and North Claiborne east of the Central Business District have dropped significantly.

I-10 east of St. Bernard

The twin bridge of the I-10 over Lake Pontchartrain was decimated from the direct impact of the hurricane and, despite the subsequent construction of a new Twin Span, there remains a serious offset in current volumes as compared to capacity. Average Daily Traffic Counts for

Interstate 10 @ Music Street, just west of I-10's juncture with 610, has dropped 38% since 2004 (LADOT data). For the ten years prior to Hurricane Katrina, Interstate 10 @ Music Street had not seen more than 1% change in growth or decline of average daily counts (LADOT data). From this point east to the Orleans / St. Tammany Parish line, I-10 is operating averages of 58% to 74% of its capacity (LADOT data).

North Claiborne east of St. Bernard

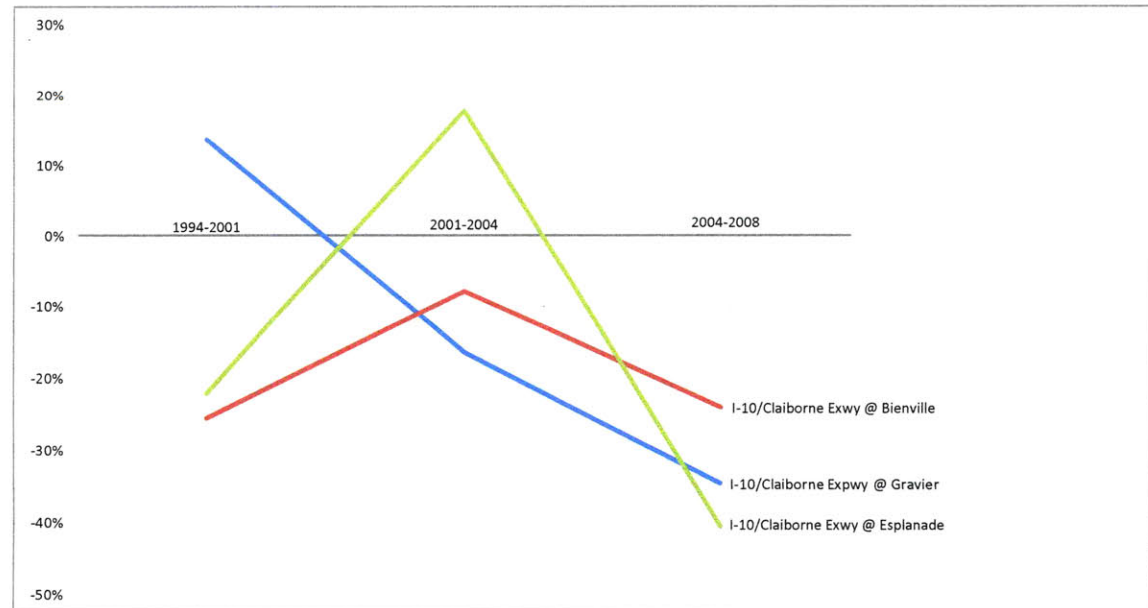
Along North Claiborne east of St. Ber-

nard Avenue, traffic counts were actually decreasing before Hurricane Katrina, with an 8% decrease from 1993 to 2005. Since 2004, there has been an additional 47% decrease. (LADOT)

The Claiborne Expressway: I-10 + Claiborne, west of St. Bernard

From 1996-2001, the only segment of the Claiborne Expressway (specifically, the elevated viaduct where the interstate occupies Claiborne Avenue's right of way) to exhibit increases in average daily count is

Appendix Figure 1: Traffic Count changes on I-10



that segment in the heart of the Medical District, where a 14% increase can be seen on Claiborne at Gravier Street. The other more residential segments, the Treme (counted on Claiborne @ Bienville) and the 7th Ward (counted on Claiborne @ Esplanade), saw 26% and 22% declines during that same time frame.

From 2001 to 2005, the years leading up to Hurricane Katrina, traffic on the Expressway in the Treme continued to decline another 8% and the Medical Center also declined 18%, leaving it at about 1996 levels of traffic. The eastern segment however, the 7th Ward, saw an increase of 18%. In 2000, I-10's interchange with 610 was reconstructed to improve traffic flow between the two freeways and widen the eastbound mainline to three lanes.

Today, on average, the Claiborne Expressway, supports a volume of traffic only 67.814% of its capacity* (calculated by averaging the most recent average daily count numbers at three places along the CE, divided by the average capacity of 100,000).

Regional Traffic Implications

The Regional Planning Commission (RPC),

the metropolitan planning organization of the region, projects that as population and employment rebound in the eastern areas, trip making in those areas will tend to stay closer to home. The spatial patterns of redevelopment in Eastern New Orleans, exhibiting significant stretches of land that lack major residential or commercial redevelopment, contribute to this trend of shorter trip making. Accordingly, the I-10/ Claiborne corridor volumes east of the Central Business District may only grow marginally, and in fact, the RPC's forecasting model for Claiborne east of St. Bernard Avenue indicates almost no growth in volumes as a whole. Ergo, the Interstate 10/ Claiborne Corridor may continue to hover at about a .65 volume to capacity ratio well into the future.

According to Frederick Salvucci, former Secretary of Transportation of Massachusetts and leader of the Big Dig megaproject which removed Boston's elevated Interstate 93 and tunneled it underground, many of the elevated expressways built during the inner-city phase of federal interstate system's construction have about a fifty year life span. Many of the nation's urban viaducts that have recently undergone inspection are either in chronic or structural trouble (Salvucci, personal

interview). The Claiborne Expressway, whose construction was completed in 1966, reaches the fifty year mark six years from the print date. Moreover, supporting the high costs of maintaining an elevated structure that only operates at 67.8% of capacity should be investigated. Removing the elevated structure could actually make financial sense; as, over time, the cost of maintaining the structure is likely higher than the cost of its removal (Salvucci, personal interview).

Given that Interstate 10 remains critical to regional mobility in connecting the eastern and western portions of the region, maintaining its route from St. Tammany Parish, through the neighborhoods of Eastern New Orleans, and west of the Industrial Canal is necessary. Rerouting Interstate 10's regional traffic to 610 to maintain east/west regional mobility towards points west and Jefferson Parish can restore and revive the functions of local, urban streets within the dense fabric of New Orleans, where alternative modes of transport besides the personal vehicle function at a higher efficiency than in suburban densities.

Recently, former Councilwoman Cynthia Willard-Lewis, stated that "to shift the

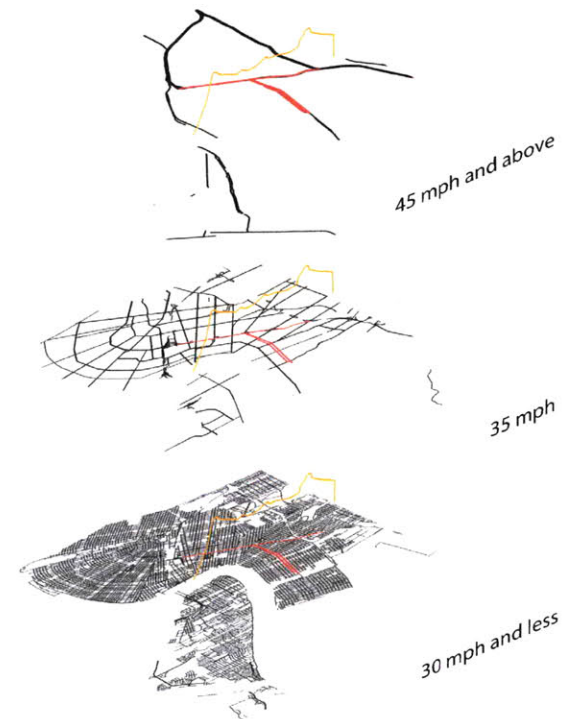
traffic -- such highly congested traffic, such voluminous traffic -- and put it into the 610 corridor would require wider lanes and larger ramps.” The analysis above concludes that the Claiborne Expressway is generally not highly congested. Having been elected by District E, which includes most of eastern New Orleans, Willard-Lewis voices the concerns of commuters to downtown that commute times may increase and/or further threaten the redevelopment and viability of their neighborhoods, which have struggled to repopulate since Katrina. Additionally, residents who live along 610 are worried about the construction associated with its expansion. According to transportation planner Robert Tannen of New Orleans, residual space exists along 610’s right of way to expand if necessary, so that minimal, if any, removal of existing properties.

The segment of Interstate 10 in question, the Claiborne Expressway, is only a two-mile spur; the Interstate 10 commute route and out of the city will remain in this scheme. The draft of the city’s master plan estimates that commute times from the East would increase eight minutes, an average including peak and off-peak. However, if Braess’ Paradox, discussed in chapter 1, can be applied to east/west travel in

New Orleans, the removal of the Claiborne Expressway segment of Interstate 10 has the potential to actually decrease travel times during the congestion periods of peak times and large events, as local traffic will be diffused across the porous surface street system of the area, diluting congestion. Traffic will be traveling at slower speeds on surface streets, but will avoid peak-time congestion of the freeway and restore the functions of local streets. During off-peak periods, commute times may increase without the free flowing conditions of the Claiborne Expressway.

Additionally, Interstate 12, a six-lane intrastate highway from I-10 in Slidell to I-10 Baton Rouge, was constructed to act effectively as a short-cut for vehicles traveling through the region. I-12 between Slidell and Baton Rouge is 85 miles, while I-10 is 108 miles between the same two points. In this way, traffic traveling through southeastern Louisiana can bypass the inner-city traffic. Currently, traffic along I-12 is “moderate at best,” and will not require expansion if the Claiborne Expressway is removed.

A number of other considerations will need to be made should the overpass be removed, among them, truckload freight,



Appendix Figure 2: New Orleans exhibits a porous street network.

particularly traveling to and from the Port of New Orleans. Specified truck routes should be designated to the various terminals and container facilities of the Port, sensitive to the effect that truck vibrations have on subsidence and quality of life for residents.

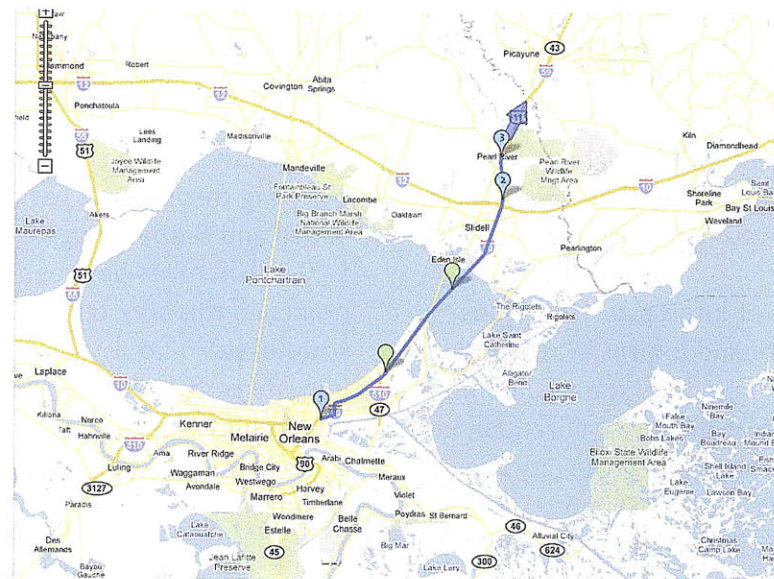
The Claiborne Expressway currently links to a major evacuation route, I-59, which heads north, away from the Gulf, to Hattiesburg, Mississippi. Due to the highly congested traffic on freeways during evacuation, their high speed design largely only accommodates bumper-to-bumper traffic. In this way, Braess' Paradox should be tested as a framework for inquiring about the capacity of the numerous surface streets parallel North Claiborne Avenue for the potential of actually increasing the system's efficiency during an evacuation. Removing the segment and diffusing the traffic along surface streets will allow parallel streets to enter Elysian Fields at I-10 to then connect to what will be contraflow during an evacuation on I-59 heading North. Moreover, with some ramp reconfiguration, St. Bernard Avenue, Elysian Fields, and what would be an I-10 spur between Franklin and Elysian Fields Avenues can provide access to 610 heading west, connecting to the other major

contraband evacuation routes heading north Jackson, Mississippi on I-55 and West to Baton Rouge on I-10.

Given this analysis, I recommend that a removal of the Claiborne Expressway coincide with an increase in transit to supplement surface street volume and regional mobility and accessibility, which proves to be more efficient and flexible for normal traffic conditions as well as evacuation.

Ultimately, the removal of the spur will retain critical regional inter-city and intra-

regional links, with the potential to add efficiency during peak-times, large events, and evacuation, and at the same time encourage more sustainable travel and development patterns for the future of the region by avoiding any further induced development demand in flood-prone areas and along the wetlands of Southeast Louisiana. "In reality the street system is operating far below its design expectations in many instances. Reasons for this include road surface conditions, poor traffic signal timing/phasing, school zones, etc." I conclude that there will be no need to



Appendix Figure 3: The Claiborne Expressway currently links to an evacuation route

expand surface streets in the area, as their former functions as local streets, before the expressway's construction, will largely be restored. But, the significance, in terms of transportation as well as visibility, of the urban streets near freeways will increase, and we know that these streets are disproportionately Black and communities of color.

APPENDIX B. WATER ON NORTH CLAIBORNE AVENUE

Water management is particularly key along this nexus, as it straddles valuable sea-level land. Currently, the drainage system along Claiborne collects surface water and whisks the water to its underground system. Drainage pipes under the street lead to an extensive network of drainage canals, from which water is pumped into the Mississippi River or Lake Pontchartrain, and almost every drop of rainfall, plus groundwater that seeps under the levees, must be pumped out of the city. An increase in the number of high-precipitation events is projected to occur, and sea level rise is projected to increase flooding, as the capacity for natural drain-

age diminishes with higher groundtables decreasing the ability of rainwater to percolate into the soil and higher tailwaters slowing the flow of streams. The most cost-effective and life-saving approach to adapting to these changes is to “prepare for these consequences before they occur and possibly before people are certain that they will occur.”

Accordingly, landscape design for water on the site should include residual space for potential future widening and should ensure that buildings and roads are not too close. Residual spaces often have temporal use in the Black Urban landscape; therefore, designing with Black Urbanism as a creative departure lends itself to an important overlay in conceptualizing the improvisational and flexible uses of these spaces.

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