

Fig. 1. Decatur Street, in front of the French Market.
(Martine Geronimi, 2000)

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Martine Geronimi

The French Market New Orleans-style: preservation of the past, patrimonial alibi and glorification of commerce

For many years, American writers have given voice to the nation's exploration of the possibility of preserving the heritage of their country, still in its first bloom of youth. The first such initiative on record is the 1827 restoration of a synagogue in Newport, *Rhode Island*. We are also aware that the *Old State House (Independence Hall)* in Philadelphia escaped demolition when it was purchased by the city in 1816, while the new Capitol was under construction in Washington.

The American restoration scenario is the polar opposite of that in Europe, where legislation quickly came into force, bolstered by a patrimonial vision born out of *patrimonial spirit*¹. Private initiative remains the driving force behind these actions in the United States – both female initiatives and large-scale philanthropic gestures². Prior to World War II, federal authority was never associated with restoration projects, and local governments only became involved much later.

Despite this individualism, so entrenched in the constitution and national attitudes, the first area of historical focus was Charleston, circa 1932: *Historic Area Zoning Ordinance*. Yet would take until 1933 before HABS (the *Historic American Buildings Survey*) was created and the *US National Trust for Historic Preservation* would only be established in 1949.

Starting around 1885, there was a growing awareness of New Orleans' potential as a tourist destination, which is made clear by writers of the many travel-guides that flourished during this important end-of-century period. Journals in north-eastern United States also helped launch this city as a fashionable destination. Between 1850 and 1900, three magazines with extensive readership regularly featured articles about New Orleans: *Harp-er's New Monthly Magazine*, *Century Magazine* and *Scribner's Monthly Magazine*³. In fact, Boston- and New York-based writers of memoirs, journalists and authors further fuelled this tourism wave by lending their pens to the Coleman guide⁴, a New York publication.

Shortly before the great depression, the business community developed a full awareness of the commercial possibilities of the nostalgia represented by the *Vieux Carré* (Brownell, Blaine A.

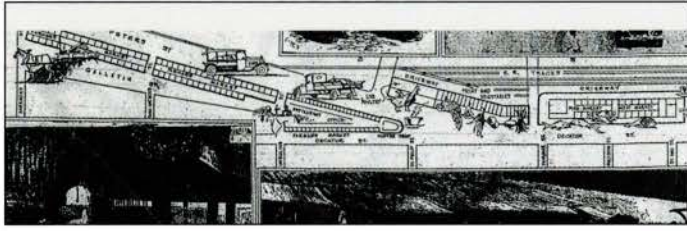


Fig. 2. French Market renovation project.
(Times-Picayune, September 1932)

1975). In 1925, the Municipal Council Commission created a precedent by forming a *Vieux Carré* preservation commission, the forerunner to the today's *Vieux Carré* Commission. The new municipal interest was sparked by a group of residents known collectively as the *petit Salon* (Galas, W. 1996).

This oscillating between a capitalist vision, always keen to use the slightest symbol for commercial gain, and a collective fervour for conserving memory, is a trend that continues today⁵.

The objectives of this article

This article illustrates how a shared past can be manipulated through concerted collective actions to shape history in accordance with present-day values. Using the French Market as an example, I would like to underscore how "collective memory" is subject to amnesia, to areas erased or disclaimed. This reflection, inspired by on-site research, may be considered as part of questioning the illusion of a shared memorial, and is presented from the urban-tourism perspective of the New Deal era.

This analysis requires a conceptual framework that draws upon the "city of collective memory" metaphor used by M.-C. Boyer⁶ borrowing from sociologist M. Halbwachs' famous collective memory concept⁷. The phrase "City of Collective Memory" here refers to urban sites with socially shared imageries of the past that also feed today's identities, themselves forged by these shared imageries. Following Halbwachs, I draw a clear distinction between collective memory and historical memory. The city's French colonial history is of less interest to me than the transformation of its space by the American imagination. This site has inherited the distilled imageries of the city fathers, travel-guide writers and other authors, who have managed to portray the French city as an object of desire, a city of delights, a consumer paradise.

The French Market, a social gathering place infused with French lifestyle, was appropriated during a rebuilding campaign spearheaded by members of the Louisiana business community with the backing, at least initially, of federal funds. This commercial site has been altered by the American modernist vision to such an extent that today's tourist can barely glean the faintest idea of the French Market as it was originally. Various initiatives undertaken by city officials and their partners to recreate the market have thoroughly diluted its glorious French past.

Another issue that must be addressed is the value and scope of such rebuilding for Americans visiting New Orleans and *Vieux Carré* residents. While Francophones may look upon the market as a staged theatrical production, the French Market's attraction for Americans is undeniable. Despite reservations raised

by certain more well-informed local residents, few among them would refute their sense of pride.

Although the success of *Vieux Carré* is no longer a topic for debate, its urban history reveals how a common past has been erected from invented traditions and calculated modernisation.

With the New Deal era as a focal point, my article examines this modernisation project. I begin by explaining Louisiana's socio-political context at that time, as well Gallatin Street's position in the French Market. I then demonstrate the values underlying the urban-tourist mind-set that provided justification for the proposed changes. Lastly, I present the contemporary situation and highlight some lessons to be learned.

New Orleans and its modernisation projects

In September 1932, while America was undergoing the most severe crisis of its existence, modernization plans for New Orleans proposed by the city's Merchants Association were being unveiled to readers of the *Times-Picayune*⁸. These changes would alter the most well-known tourist attraction in the *Vieux Carré* - the French Market (Figure 2). The article's title and sub-title alluded to plans for converting the past into a new entity, while maintaining the site's charm: *Vieux Carré Charm Retained in New French Market Plans. Famous Mart of Past and Present and Sketches Showing Many Alterations Now Proposed*. This title evokes a transformation of the city by the partisan forces of modernity: business and its representatives.

Before continuing our discussion of the French Market restoration, it is important to bear in mind the prevailing social and political context of New Orleans during the great depression.

Louisiana in the wake of the 1929 Crash

In 1928, Louisiana, a forgotten state with only fifty kilometres of paved roads, and a 50% school-enrolment rate, was an isolated backwater, far removed from modern-day America. During a visit to Louisiana that year, President Hoover was enchanted by the picturesque setting, but mocked the myth of Evangeline as immortalized by Longfellow, even casting doubt on the heroine's name (Manchester, W. R. 1976). On the eve of the depression, the vigorous prosperity of other urban centres in the south, such as Atlanta, Memphis and Manchester, had not reached New Orleans, where the 1920s had been a time of economic recession that lowered living standards. Indeed, despite the French quarter and restaurants of renown, the city had been unable to draw the large conferences that Atlanta and Memphis attracted (Smith, D. L. 1988: 14; Runnyan, G.M. 1967).

This was an era when New Orleans embraced official segregation and the law prohibited Negroes from erecting either lodgings or work premises in White areas and vice versa⁹. By 1931, the depression had impacted twice as many Black men as White (Smith, Douglas L. 1988: 20). As a final interesting note on this subject, the Mayor of New Orleans, T. Semmes Walmsey, deemed it opportune in 1931 to resuscitate an old municipal ordinance disallowing any individual whose name did not appear on the list of voters, as picked by municipal *contractors*, to be hired. Any measure was considered acceptable to prevent Blacks from retaining employment. All federal subsidies received in 1931 and 1932 were used to ensure that Whites maintained their positions or replaced Negro employees. Moreover, all Negroes working for a large municipal cotton warehouse lost their jobs in 1930 (Smith, 1988: 21).

The City of New Orleans was teetering on the brink of financial disaster – a scenario it avoided only as a result of loans made to banks shortly before the Great Depression. The local administration was historically corrupt and political wrangling particularly complicated city management. Mayor Walmsey opposed the newly elected Louisiana Governor, a populist named Huey K. Long (also known as *the Kingfish*), who to this day is considered a hero in Louisiana. The story of his dazzling ascent to become a young, self-made Louisianan took on legendary proportions after he was assassinated in September 1935. His successful bids, first for the Governorship of Louisiana in 1928 and later for the Senate in 1932, were achieved through campaign platforms that espoused social redistribution. His slogans - *Every Man a King and A Chicken in Every Pot* - were very well-received, especially among poor Cajuns. However, his dictatorial behaviour and opposition to President Roosevelt, whom he had previously supported, did not always play in New Orleans' favour. Indeed, it is interesting that New Orleans only received federal public funds following Long's death and the election of a new mayor, Robert Maestri (Smith, 1988: 110-114; Manchester, 1976: 138).

Thus, it is hardly surprising to find in the literature that some American historians refer to the latter half of the *New Deal* as "the second Louisiana purchase" (Field, B. M 1990; 246-310; Smith, 1988: 111). The facts speak for themselves: the Governor was barely out of harm's way forever when the situation in Louisiana changed. All government-dependent projects previously halted by Mr. Ickes, in his capacity as head of internal affairs, were re-considered. In 1936, the city received 2.5 million dollars (a sum requested 2 years earlier) for improvements to the city's drainage system. From that time onward, millions of

dollars were poured into the city for modernisation. This monetary influx appeared to be directly linked to Maestri et al.'s support for the President's party. Historian Edward Haas reports Mayor Maestri's remarks as follows: "*In private conversation the Mayor often declared the WPA a money tree that he shook whenever the city needed revenue*" (Haas, Edward F. 1972)¹⁰. The honeymoon between the *New Deal* and the Louisianan administration would continue until 1939 (Kane, H. 1941).

The New Deal machinery and its influence on Louisiana

A clearer understanding of the funding sources can be gained from a brief overview of the New Deal mechanisms and President Roosevelt's role in handling the crash. Franklin D. Roosevelt initiated his famous radio fire-side chats, reassuring Americans and explaining to them how, in keeping with past American tradition based on a constitutional approach with Congressional approval, he would put the country back on its feet, notably pledging a billion dollars in loans to the states, counties and municipalities¹¹. He also spoke of his intention to implement large-scale projects in an effort to counter unemployment:

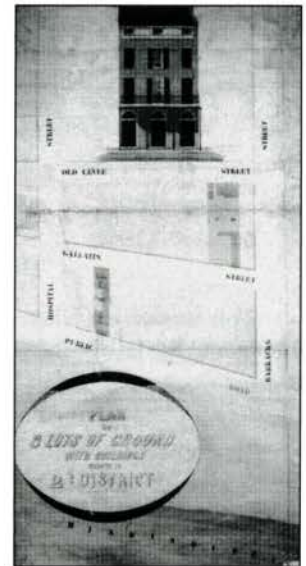
We are planning to ask the Congress for legislation to enable the Government to undertake public works, thus stimulating directly and indirectly the employment of many others in well considered projects. Further legislation has been taken up which goes much more fundamentally into our economic problems¹².

On 30 September 1934, during his sixth radio broadcast, the President emphasized the primordial role of the newly-created National Recovery Administration (NRA), responsible for trade and industry. Underscoring the good results of this administration, he announced a transformation, an adaptation to conditions:

Step by step we have created all the government agencies necessary to insure, as a general rule, industrial peace, with justice for all of those willing to use these agencies whenever their voluntary bargaining fails to produce a necessary agreement. [...] Closely allied to the NRA is the program of Public Works provided in the same Act and designed to put more men back to work, both directly on the public works themselves, and indirectly in the industries supplying the materials for these public works.

Behind the appeasing rhetoric of a head-of-state who understood how to use this modern publicity vehicle to advantage, was a return-to-work and social reform policy orchestrated by the White House (Brown, Robert J. 1998: 9-23) via a number of agencies, such as the Works Project Administration (WPA)¹³. This

Fig. 3. Gallatin Street.
(New Orleans Notarial Archives)



administration gave rise to two other agencies, the Civil Works Administration and the Federal Emergency Relief Administration, which were also known by their acronyms - CWA and FERA. This federal agency funded all Mayor Maestri's city renovation projects, in particular the Vieux Carré. In 1936, during the month of December alone, New Orleans received more than 12.5 million dollars (Smith, Douglas L. 1988: 87). In fact, by the eve of the United States' entry into war, which marked the end of the WPA, 126 million dollars had been injected into Louisiana (Smith, 1988: 87; US Federal Works Agency 1943).

Thus, it was within this financially optimistic context that the Vieux Carré remodelling, in particular the French Market renovations, transpired. Interestingly, all that remains of this story of the city's preservation is contained in a book published in 1982, which is required reading for officially designated tour guides of the Cabildo Museum and the City of New Orleans. The work is entitled *Beautiful Crescent*:

Fortunately (and in another way unfortunately), president Roosevelt's WPA almost simultaneously moved in with money and talent to recondition parts of the Quarter, giving special attention to the French Market and Jackson Square, the Cathedral, Cabildo, the Presbytère and the Pontalba Buildings. While no one would dispute the fact that a slum area was rehabilitated, and that land values began to rise, it was equally true that "progress", as envisioned by legislators in Washington, had a different definition in New Orleans. WPA "progress" involved the demolition of some of the city's earliest structures (Garvey, Joan B. and Widmer, Mary Lou 1982: 163).

This commentary, in referring to the problem of the 1930s slum districts and the thorny issue of the demolition of the earliest architectural structures, highlights the extent to which "progress" was the underlying concept for the Vieux Carré renovation. Yet the French Market modernisation was based on a doctrine that went beyond the sole notion of progress.

French Market restoration, the Gallatin Street affair

This general way of thinking of the 1930s provided the underpinnings for legitimizing urban actions that led to the destruction of a section of an authentic site, as well as the pure and simple erasing of one slice of the urban landscape. Re-modeling the *French Market* made it possible to "eradicate from the face of the earth" an infamous New Orleans thoroughfare: Gallatin Street. Ten years later, in 1949, John C. Chase made the following eloquent remarks about the street's destruction:

It was a lawless street with death and damnation in residence at every address. Today Gallatin is no longer a street. Buildings on the

riverside have disappeared. [...] Even its name has been altered to French Market Place, and what buildings remain on the opposite side are of remodeled or entirely new construction. Like Sodom and Gomorrah of old, wicked Gallatin Street has been erased from the face of the earth (Chase, John C. 1949).

The heyday of this street, which had been named for a Treasury Board Secretary serving under Jefferson, had occurred long before Mr. Story legalised prostitution beyond the confines of the Vieux Carré. Between 1840 and 1870, this dockside street was an avenue of pleasure where cabarets, seedy bars and brothels catered to assiduous male patrons. A short stretch of only two city blocks, Gallatin Street was the hub of the drug trade (Rose, A. 1974: 9-11).

After sifting through city plans, guides and various archives in the search for information about this street, I asked a *Williams Research Center* archivist about the reasons behind the street's demolition. His response was curt: "We cleaned the slums, we cleaned the street." Interestingly, even the name of the street has been swept from the collective memory. Scholars at the University of New Orleans were unable to provide further insights, as the street name held no significance for them, despite the fact that they are in a good position to be well-versed in their city's history. It was in the Notarial Archives of New Orleans that I came across the first documented evidence testifying to the street's actual existence, dating from the time of its construction in the 1820's. Enclosed in the appendix are copies of various plans showing different Gallatin Street properties (Figures 3-4).

The apparent scarcity of academic literature pertaining to the *French Market* renovation further piqued my interest. The sole study summarizing the facts is a thesis written in 1979 by a Tulane University student. This document contains very informative insights to the history of the *French Market* but has never been published (Bruce, S. 1979). The data in this master's thesis, together with information from the *Williams Center* and the Notarial Archives, enabled me to present an interpretation of the project and its background. Since the "restorations" of Roosevelt's day, the *French Market* has never ceased to be a popular tourist destination. Unflagging official interest in the site eventually led to another major renovation between 1970 and 1978, under the auspicious of Mayor Landrieu.

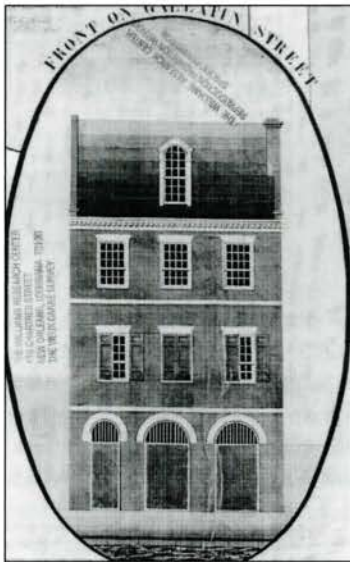


Fig. 4: Residences fronting on Gallatin Street.
(New Orleans Notarial Archives)

The glorification school of thought: blending the concepts of progress and commerce

Modernized by the hand of progress and at the same time meeting the demand of the sentimentalists that the atmosphere

of the historic mart, so interwoven with history, romance and tradition, is the most colorful food market in the world. — the New Orleans French Market.

French Market in New Orleans, La, Giant Card Co.

This caption from a 1940s post card evokes the tone of a generally accepted doctrine in the 1930s. The blending of two philosophies commonly-espoused throughout the United States at that time, namely nostalgia for a bygone era and confidence in the future and progress, would lead to the renovation of a vestige of the French colonial era - the French Market.

An analysis of this way of thinking reveals a more in-depth understanding of the problem. In fact, modernisation efforts spurred by sanitation concerns led to the convergence of contrasting dynamics that destroyed one section of the French Market. The interpretation is a complex appropriation of the site, in the form of four networks that intermingled within a short lapse of time, from 1932 to 1938.

An alliance between the municipality and the business community

An article appearing in the Times-Picayune on 11 September 1932 unveiled the proposed *French Market* renovations, and even contained a plan for readers' perusal (Figure 2). Compared with the 1897 plan (Figure 5), the anticipated alterations were extensive and carefully orchestrated, rather than a hastily-organized production based on a random, recently developed idea.

In May 1932, the City of New Orleans launched a call for tenders for the *French Market* renovation and for the construction of two new market stalls where farm produce and seafood would be sold¹⁴. By August 23rd 1932, a group of merchants had formed the *French Market Corporation* (still active today) and received a city charter authorising them to proceed with the renovations. Interestingly, although the Gallatin Street buildings were already slated for demolition by this time, the name had not yet been changed, as the records clearly show. Shown on the 1893 plan (Figure 6) is the *Red Store* building, erected in 1830 and

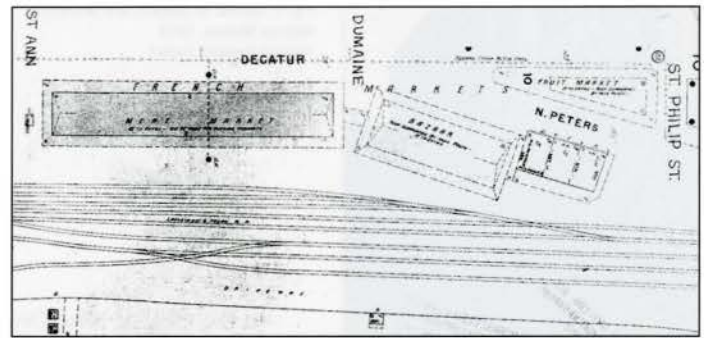


Fig. 5. French Market Plan, 1897
(Williams Research Center)

one of the oldest structures in the *Vieux Carré*. It too was sacrificed in the name of modernity, i.e. the almighty automobile. A later innovation, the *coffee shop* at the corner of Decatur and North Peter Streets is visible on the 1932 plan.

The alliance of the Mayor's office, espousing a modernist vision but mired in debt, and the profit-driven business community, made fertile terrain. However, as a result of both the crash hitting New Orleans the next year and the Governor's political embroilments, the *French Market* rebuilding was delayed until 1937.

Demolishing premises of ill repute

If the pretext for demolishing Gallatin Street was to clean up a slum, the reality of the situation was quite different.

While the Gallatin Street of 1930 was by no means a middle-class resort, when compared with other neighbourhoods, it did offer acceptable living conditions for the primarily Sicilian residents. I contacted Mr. Léo Vitale, a former Italian-American resident who was evicted with his family from their Gallatin Street apartment in July 1936. He was 13 years old at the time and retains a very detailed recollection of the event. This man spent his entire life in the *Vieux Carré*, where his father first elected domicile in 1898 during a Sicilian immigration wave.

If the truth were told, this street was the source of social unease. Apart from two pasta factories, several businesses conducted illicit operations during the prohibition years in this area. The domain of alcohol bootlegging and a stronghold of illegal gambling, this street was also home to *speakeasies* and the famous *Black Cat* nightclub.

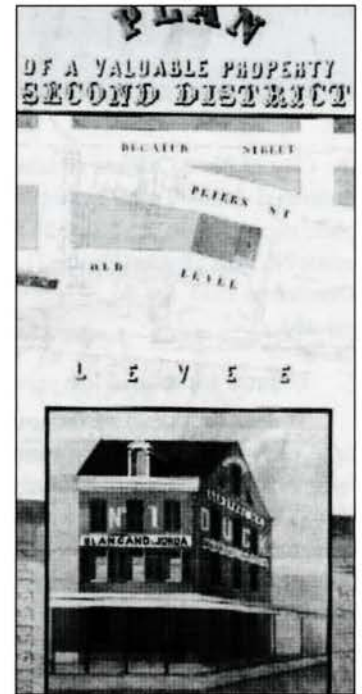


Fig. 6. Red Store, French Market.
(New Orleans Notarial Archives)



Fig. 7. Corner of Gallatin and Governor Nichols Streets, 1932 (Williams Research Center)

In the view of New Orleans' dutiful puritanical society, demolishing such a place could only benefit the sacrosanct ideal of progress that was unfurling across America. Transactions between building owners and

the City of New Orleans in late December 1935 are on record in notarised deeds¹⁵. One example is the sale of the Chris Maurer building on lot no. 2, square 15 at the corner of Gallatin and Governor Nichols Streets (Figure 7), to the City of New Orleans on 30 December 1935 for \$5,200. Six months later the tenants were evicted.

Federal funds and job creation

Timely injections of federal funds made completion of the final plan possible. In fact, total reconstruction costs reached at least \$800,000 US, funded jointly by the *Public Works Administration* (\$300,000), the *Orleans Levee Board* (\$200,000), the City of New Orleans (\$200,000) and private donors (\$100,000)¹⁶. The *New Deal* policy of large-scale projects was designed to curtail unemployment and eventually create jobs. By 1938, the unemployment rolls in New Orleans counted 30,000 persons. Most were Black and, having been relegated as unskilled labourers, only benefited from the bare minimum, which did not always allow for a decent life-style. However, this was a marked improvement over the preceding period when their only means of survival had been reliance on private charity (Smith, 1988: 42, 96-107). The *New Deal* also funded a slum demolition plan. The intention was well-grounded, but the results were so deceptive that Roosevelt shut down the programme in October 1935 (Smith, 1988: 172). Indeed, as indicated above, the pretext for rebuilding the *French Market* covered electoral strategies within the Democratic Party (Smith, 1988: 111-112).

The meeting of patrimonial alibi and commercial value

It is worth bearing in mind that in 1936 Mayor Maestri established the first Commission, albeit with far less authority than future commissions. According to the April 1942 edition of *American City* magazine, there was a growing sentiment during the 1930s in favour of tighter control over landscape and public buildings, advancing the promotion of aesthetic over urban ugliness (Smith, 1988: 90). The nine-member *Vieux Carré* commission set architectural standards for preserving the historic site, working in collaboration with the *Works Project Administration* person-

nel. The *French Market* restoration plans were accepted, as both the commission members and the federal administration felt that such renovations would achieve the goal of improving the site.

The 1939 edition of the *Roosevelt Review* published the first criticism of the operation (McFadden Dufy, W. 1939: 58):

The 1930s restoration completely changed the form of the French Market. Although the designers of that period believed that they were bettering the complex by updating and pretending to restore it, they did little more than destroy and, or remodel almost beyond recognition all the various charming structures. The Market "facelift" truly made it look years younger.

At this time, the *Vieux Carré* Association, created in 1926, called for the advancement "of the civic, esthetic and material prosperity and progress of the *Vieux Carré*." Modernising the French Market appeared necessary even in the view of this Association, which became the *Vieux Carré* Property Owners Association in 1938. However, the committee members sued the city, which led to a legal ordinance acknowledging the architectural value of the "whole", rather than of only certain buildings:

The purpose of the ordinance is not only to preserve the Antiquity of the whole French and Spanish Quarter, the *Tout Ensemble*, so to speak, by defending this relic against iconoclasm or vandalism (Galas, W 1996: 26-27).

The most interesting point is that Judge O'Neil, author of this ordinance, justified the value of the "whole" in virtue of the site's commercial value:

The preservation of the *Vieux Carré* as it was originally is a benefit to the inhabitants of New Orleans generally, not only for the sentimental value of this show place but for its commercial value as well, because it attracts tourists and conventions to the city, and is in fact a justification for the slogan, America's most interesting city (Galas, W 1996: 26-27).

In a very pragmatic manner, Americans bring their claims before courts of law. Thus, the soundness of safeguarding and restoring the *Vieux Carré* must always be examined in the light of the verdict rendered by judges. As to the rest, the judge's double logic highlights the deep-rooted link between historical value and commercial value. Conserving this site "legitimizes" an idea that all America had been sold on - this is the country's most interesting city.

It is often easy to criticize actions taken in a different time than that from which we are observing the past. The demonstration pushes us to identify how obsession with an era could serve the interests of one group and how this group justified their actions by establishing a rhetoric glorifying those actions.

Fig. 8. Endpaper,
French Market Corporation, 1930
(Historic Collection)



In 1938, the *French Market Corporation* mandated two experienced publicists to draft a leaflet lauding the virtues of the most recent remodeling project (Figure 8). The title itself is a justification and statement of faith: “*Glorified French Market. Progressing with Commerce 1813-1938*” (Stier, Emile, V. and Keeling, James B., 1938). One can easily interpret it as a justification for demolishing the now-forgotten original Gallatin Street; after all, that was the goal - to purge the city of a sinister memory and make way for a parking lot:

But Gallatin Street, with all of its sinister, mysterious happenings, is no more. Even its name is now only a matter of memory. Today, its entire stretch is open to the sky. Vegetable trucks by the hundreds, there for a day or just a few hours, are now parked where its buildings stood. Then, they move away empty to make way for other loaded vehicles, motor and horse drawn, from nearby and more distant points (Stier and Keeling, 1938: 20).

This propaganda brochure for a functionalist, capitalist and progressive ideal, underscores the introduction of cutting-edge, technological advances in the field of refrigeration and lighting. During those years, the business community seemed to have been preoccupied by two ideas: food sanitation and the opening of new premises to the public. In the chapter entitled, *Perfect Illumination and Refrigeration*, these trends are made very clear; the renovated structure should be transformed into “a night show place of the French Quarter” (Stier and Keeling, 1938: 26), where clients can buy, both day and night, meat that has been stored in avant-garde, pump-driven refrigerated facilities, which maintain the even temperature required to preserve food in tropical climates. Furthermore, the French Market was outfitted with sanitary systems - the byword of the day in the United States:

The great foreword of 1938 throughout the United States is sanitation. And, in this, The Officers and Board of Managers of the French Market Corporation believe they are leading the nation in their glorification of Grand old French Market (Stier and Keeling, 1938: 25-27).

This coincided with a striking attempt by publicists to shift the focus to the site’s nostalgic appeal: “Time marches on, but the French Market is eternal. [...] City Fathers 154 years ago decreed French Market necessary to assure fair prices to the Public.” Harking back to pioneer days served as an alibi for commerce, as illustrated in a commemorative plaque erected at the time:

The architectural integrity of the historic market structures has been retained throughout. The interiors have been modernized to conform to refrigeration, and sanitary trends of 1938, but the French Market, showplace of New Orleans, the most ancient in the Mississippi Valley, remains the same (Stier and Keeling, 1938: 15).

More specifically, this coluding between a federally-funded municipality, and nine high-profile members of the business community, transformed the French Market into a large modern shopping area, partially integrated into an ancient structure with the support of the local middle-class who wished to retain the French Quarter as an entity. The Mayor viewed it as a means of attracting the greatest possible number of tourists, which indeed happened beginning in the 1940s. The French Market was not the sole beneficiary of Roosevelt’s generosity, as Jackson Square, the Cathedral, the Cabildo, the Presbytery and the Pontalba buildings were also restored at that time.

Conclusion: the completion of the shopping plaza development, known as the French Market, from the 1970s to now

In the 1970s, the renovation of the 1930s having lost its sheen, a new restoration project was planned by the young municipal team. The new mayor, Mr. Landrieu was hoping to restore this local tourist beacon - the French Market. The prevailing conditions were average and there was a pressing necessity to give tourism a shot in the arm. As of 1971, the French Market Corporation, answering directly to the Mayor, called on the services of a Los Angeles firm to conduct an economic analysis that would serve as the basis for the renovation (Urban Projects Inc., 1971).

From the 1960’s onward, the Washington-based consultant firm of Marcou and O’Leary, in collaboration with the New Orleans Bureau of Governmental Research, carried out all studies pertaining to the preservation of the Vieux Carré. In 1966, they tabled a very controversial study on the Express Highways, which nearly ripped the Vieux Carré apart. This was followed in 1968 by the “Plan and Program for the Preservation of the Vieux Carré: Historic District Demonstration Study,” a set of studies, known collectively as the Vieux Carré Demonstration Study, which sparked a chorus of passionate disapproval among the principle associations of Louisiana, especially the Friends of the Cabildo, the Louisiana Historical Society and the Louisiana Council of the Vieux Carré. Despite the strong protests, Washington accepted the plan within the framework of the Advisory Council of Historic Preservation.

The choice of a California-based firm to conduct the French Market renovation study should have appeased the outcry. That



Fig. 9. Present-day French Market portico
(Martine Geronimi, 2000)

was not
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even though local architectural firms were mandated to prepare preliminary plans both for renovating existing buildings from the "preceding restoration" and construction of new buildings¹⁷.

The first phase in the 1930s had resulted in the demolition of existing marts and a projected cost of approximately 2.5 million dollars for the renovation of a project that had cost a veritable fortune thirty years earlier (Bourgoyne, J. E. 1972). The description of the condition of the French Market provides some idea of the extent of the former renovation's failure:

Historically, the French Market was a focal point of wholesaling and retailing activities within New Orleans. In recent years, the general neglect of the surrounding properties and the French Market has resulted in the run-down appearance of the area and in the under utilization of the land and structures of the French Market (Urban Projects Inc 1971: i).

In 1939, a year after the rebuilding, eyewitness reports confirmed that only one seafood stall remained, the Halle des Boucheries (Butcher Mart) was devoid of butchers and all but two fruit stands had closed down (Bourgoyne, 1972). In fact, the only clients of this mart with its pungent smell of seafood, were tourists in search of a change of scene and the ever-popular mufalettas, a Sicilian concoction invented in the early part of the century¹⁸.

The controversy

If the initial project had announced plans for a return to the *French Market* as it had been originally, its completion was shrouded in much controversy. Preservationists and some *Vieux-Carré* residents viewed the areas negatively, judging the renovation results as bearing little resemblance to the proposed plans. The *French Market* had evolved into a vast surface area. In 1975, the *Times-Picayune* published an article with the revealing title: "*French Market Controversy Is Nothing New*" (Pitts, S. 1975):

In recent months, despite protests from preservationists and many *Vieux Carré* residents and businesses, the French Market Corporation undertook a major \$3.2 million restoration of the complex and, when the corporation's part of the project was completed and dedicated recently, Mayor Moon Landrieu praised the firm to its steadfastness in the face of the criticism and predicted that "it (the project) is going to prove to be one of the most significant things this city has ever done."

In 1996, an urban planner, currently involved in the *Vieux Carré*, gave a scathing review of Mayor Landrieu's actions re-

garding, among other things, the French Market restoration (Galas, 1996: 122):

The French Market was totally rebuilt over a five-year period. Upon its completion, local neighborhood businesses and services did not return, driven away by high rents. In the place of vegetable and seafood stalls, boutiques and restaurants opened.

In his view, tourist promotion was the sole motivation of a mayor who only wanted to exploit history because it was "profitable." However, Landrieu was not acting in a singular manner, as several cities in the Southern United States were doing the same (Goldfield, D.R. and Brownell, B.A. 1990: 417).

The lessons

In conclusion, I believe that the *French Market* initiative attained its goal: to attract more tourists to the area. It was not strictly the layout of the new *French Market* that led visitors to flock to the sector, but the combined actions of several other operations carried out over time, such as the restoration of the Ursuline Convent, the splendid renovation of the *Musée Mint*, the creation of a vantage point overlooking the Mississippi, as well as the installation of a riverside boardwalk, aptly named *Moon Walk*¹⁹.

The recycling of a social gathering place à *la Française* into an American-style setting appears to be the common denominator in all policies aimed at condensing a site into a coherent image of a culture's complexities and internal conflicts. The French Market is one example of a visual, quasi-universal, consumable, cultural product that can be reproduced, interpreted and sold to tourists.

Notes

1 In France, this patrimonial sentiment was initially sparked by the famous author and precursor to the romantic period, Chateaubriand.

2 Ann Pamela Cunningham of South Carolina founded a patriotic women's movement throughout the South, and later the entire country, for the preservation of the Mount Vernon Manoir: *Mount Vernon Ladies Association of the Union*. Cf Martine Geronimi (1996) *Vieux Québec au passé indéfini*.

3 Lafcadio Hearn was a regular contributor to Harper's and Century Magazines. George Washington Cable's writings were frequently published in the Century and Scribner's Magazines. In 1887, Charles Dudley Warner wrote a famous article, entitled *Sui Generis*, which also appeared in Scribner's.

4 The Coleman guide is the archetypical New Orleans guide, published for the Great Cotton Exhibition of 1885.

5 Citizen committees are very active and battling on many fronts

against excessive gentrification, the sale of condominiums and illegal hotel accommodations.

6 After completing a review of literature on the city, Boyer wrote eloquently on New Orleans in his book: *The City of Collective Memory: Its Historical Imagery and Architectural Entertainments*. His work was suggested to me by Sharon Zukin during a very productive on-line discussion on the H-Urban network.

7 Halbwachs is an inestimable thinker, who draws from a socialisation theory based on the sociology of memory. The problem of amnesia, i.e. reconstructing the past through the present, is taken into account by Halbwachs in applying the nuance of experience and social morphology. For more on this topic see: Marcel J.-C. and Mucchielli L. 1999 "Un fondement du lien social: la mémoire collective selon Maurice Halbwachs, Technologies, Idéologies, Pratiques". *Revue d'Anthropologie des connaissances*, 13 (2): 63-88 and Sabourin, P.L. 1997, "Perspective de la mémoire sociale de Maurice Halbwachs." *Sociologie et Sociétés*, 29 (2): 139-161.

8 Times-Picayune, 12 September 1932, page B insert 2

9 Christian Marcus Archives, University of New Orleans, series XIII, Box 13

10 Haas, Edward F. (1972) New Orleans on the Half-Shell: the Maestri Era. *Louisiana History*, XIII, 283-310.

11 The exact wording of the English text is as follows: "This was constitutional and in keeping with the past American Tradition." radio broadcast, 7 May 1933 and "The legislation which has been passed or in the process of enactment can properly be considered as part of a well-grounded plan."

12 Roosevelt Archives on-line: <http://www.nisk.k12.ny.us/fdr/FDRsearch.html>

13 FEDERAL WRITERS' PRO-

JECT OF LOUISIANA OF THE WPA (1938 ed.) *New Orleans City Guide* Cambridge, Riverside Press. It is worth noting that in order to provide work to local intellectuals the federal administration asked them to develop a tourist guide.

14 Commission Council for the City of New Orleans, Ordinance n°13693 CCS, 12 May 1932.

15 Transaction records, such as the one mentioned in the text, are on file in the archives of the Williams Research Center.

16 Times-Picayune, 19 March 1938.

17 This refers to the very famous architectural historian, Sam Wilson and the firms of Nolan, Norman & Nolan, Richard Koch.

18 Restaurateur Battistella invented this enormous cold meat sandwich in his Gallatin Street restaurant. The restaurant moved into the new mart location. After the 1970s renovation, a boutique opened on Decatur under the same name. It seems that rents had become prohibitive.

19 Mayor Landrieu's nickname was "Moon" Landrieu.

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