

More gentrification, fewer 'preservation fails': A - Times-Picayune, The: Web Edition Articles (New Orleans, LA) - September 12, 2017

September 12, 2017 | Times-Picayune, The: Web Edition Articles (New Orleans, LA) | Susan Langenhennig

What will New Orleans neighborhoods look like in 5, 10, 50 or 100 years? Will housing costs, short-term rentals and the effects of tourism on neighborhoods change the way locals live and work?

Candidates running for New Orleans mayor will face those questions during a forum Sept. 19 from 7 to 8:30 p.m. in Nunemaker Auditorium on Loyola University's campus, 6363 St. Charles Ave. The event is co-sponsored by the Preservation Resource Center, arguably the organization most visibly involved with historic preservation advocacy in New Orleans.

And change is underway at the PRC.

After four decades at the helm, Patricia "Patty" Gay retired this summer as the PRC's executive director.

Taking over for her, on an interim basis, is Jack Davis, a journalist and newspaper executive who comes with a string of preservation credentials, including stints on the boards of the National Trust for Historic Preservation and the Congress of New Urbanism.

For longtime readers of The Times-Picayune, and its fierce former competitor, The States-Item, Davis' name may ring a bell. Back in the 1970s, when he was a young journalist just starting out, Davis began drilling down on preservation issues, writing about development and urban planning during a time when the Crescent City was rapidly remaking its cityscape.

A Harvard graduate, Davis came to New Orleans in 1972 to help a friend launch the Figaro, a feisty alternative weekly that hit hard with aggressive reporting and knockout headlines.

"St. Charles Avenue is Dying," it screamed across the front page on July 8, 1972, above a story by Davis on the demolition of buildings along the city's grand avenue.

"It gets more painful every day to travel on St. Charles Avenue. One day you see the demolition men carrying out the chandeliers and carved mantels from a 19th-century mansion, and in a week, there's another empty lot," Davis wrote in the story. "In a few months, another boxy 'modern' apartment building will stand there, with a grid of identical air-conditioners hanging over an asphalt lot full of Camaros."

That article led to more, as suburbia grew, Poydras Street became a canyon of skyscrapers, and 19th-century warehouses and row houses sat empty or got demolished.

Such reporting helped Davis quickly work his way up the journalism ranks, becoming an editor at The States-Item and then The Times-Picayune, before moving on to senior positions at

newspapers in Chicago, Newport News, Va., and Hartford, Conn.

Long after he left New Orleans, Davis would continue to write -- or instruct his staff to write -- about urban planning and architecture and what he considered "preservation fails."

Successes and failures

On a blustery weekday afternoon, Davis met me for a chat about New Orleans -- past and present. I asked him to pick a spot he considered a preservation fail, so we met outside the gates of the Piazza d'Italia, the crumbling fountain and cobblestone courtyard surrounded by Roman columns, all just steps off Poydras and Tchoupitoulas streets.

Photo by Kathleen Flynn, NOLA.com | The Times-Picayune

The piazza was designed by architect Charles Moore and Perez Architects of New Orleans and, according to an inscription, dedicated in 1978.

The original plan, Davis said, was for developers to restore an "intact block of 19th-century buildings" that would surround the piazza. "You'd get into the center of the block, and there would be this fantastic surprise," he said.

But as the project was under way, the oil and gas economy collapsed. "The city ran out of gas, literally," Davis said.

The piazza would be built (and now it's under renovation), but many of the 19th-century buildings surrounding it were torn down. Today, the piazza's long columns cast shadows on an adjacent parking lot.

"I described it as a preservation fail because it was an opportunity. It had been conceptually a win -- the business community, the investors, the owners of the Lykes building, the Italian-American group, everyone wanted to use preservation to make a great place, surrounding a dramatic, surprising fountain by an architect who was one of the 20th century's leading lights," Davis said. "But what we're left with are parking lots."

As we were leaving the piazza, Davis and I continued our chat. What follows is an edited and condensed transcript of his answers to my questions.

What are the biggest challenges to historic preservation in New Orleans today?

I would say the lack of appreciation for the economic benefits that preservation brings. Preservation is economic development. That lack of appreciation by public officials, I think, though, is diminishing as there seems to be some understanding that (historic renovation) tax credits bring more benefits than the state loses in taxes.

The other challenge is the myth that preservation is gentrification, which means displacement, and the myth that preservation is in opposition to low-cost housing.

What does PRC do to make sure preservation isn't in "opposition to low-cost housing."

Rebuilding Together and Operation Comeback (two programs of the PRC that work to repair houses of low-income homeowners) are more than half of the PRC budget. They have bigger workforces, both paid and volunteer, than we allot to advocacy, which I think is very important. I wish more people would give us credit for that.

The challenge is to prove that preservation pays, and making sure that public officials and the business community understand that preservation pays.

(As a follow-up by email, Davis provided some numbers: Rebuilding Together has done restoration/renovation work on 1,500 houses for low-income homeowners, with another 15 houses in progress. Operation Comeback has completed 114 houses.)

What about the issue of gentrification?

Gentrification, to me, means making a neighborhood livable, walkable, safe and healthy, and the people who live there enjoy better economic benefits. The fear of gentrification is undermined by its direct opposite: neighborhoods where kids aren't safe, where buildings are falling down.

The way I see gentrification, we could use a lot more of it. We need safer, more livable neighborhoods -- for everybody, across all income groups and demographics.

Preservation is often tagged as being an activity of white people for the benefit of white people. I think that's so easily disprovable based on what we do and what we say, that I'm really disappointed with the persistence of that perception.

But it's coming around. We're making progress.

(I asked Davis to specifically address the idea that gentrifying neighborhoods can become less affordable to longtime residents. In a follow-up by email, he expounded on the ways the PRC tries to encourage affordable housing:

- * By opposing demolition of all historic structures, many of them modest homes of low-income residents.
- * By opposing conversion of long-term rental properties into short-term rentals, which forces out long-term residents in favor of tourists.
- * By encouraging the conversion of under-used or vacant properties in blighted historic neighborhoods into newly available housing: the greater the supply of housing, the lower the overall price.
- * By encouraging continuation of the range of important tax credits that stimulate so much of the renovation of our housing stock -- historic preservation credits, low-income credits, "New Market" credits for areas with low-income population, even solar-power tax credits.

* By assuring that all of an area's property owners share in a neighborhood's increased property value that result from blight removal and renovation. We operate on the theory that gentrification does not require removal of residents.

How does the PRC work to change the perception that "preservation is an activity of white people for the benefit of white people?"

I think the preservation movement in practice in New Orleans over the last half century has been about equitable treatment across all lines. We need a more diverse membership and a more diverse board. We've been working toward that. Patty Gay was tireless in her efforts to make the PRC a truly representative organization of New Orleans.

From your work with the National Trust, how does New Orleans compare to other cities facing these same issues?

I would say New Orleans has done only a fair job since the middle of the 20th century. We inherited nothing but opportunity, a city that was vibrant and healthy economically. It was an intact landscape of great neighborhoods and usable transportation, with churches and markets, and it's biggest, most egregious flaw was that it was segregated.

What we set to work on after World War II was not to end segregation -- which is a shame. We tried to "improve" New Orleans by modernizing it. We tore down Louis Armstrong's neighborhood for government buildings. We demolished big chunks of Treme, which is now occupied by Armstrong Park.

To me, the monument that is most racially destructive in the whole city is the Interstate 10 expressway over Claiborne Avenue. It destroyed an entire neighborhood.

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