

Simmering mix

Peter C. Papademetriou

An ambitious effort to create an urban park with a flavor of the place shows that even carefully chosen ingredients need time to blend properly.



In Louisiana, and most particularly New Orleans, cultural blendings are the norm and the basis for a unique sense of place. The lifestyle, in fact, is much like New Orleans gumbo, made up of basic materials indigenous to the region, mixed together with the combination of the French culinary heritage, Spanish and Italian tastes, blended with a knowledge of spices derived from Black Africa and flavored with the sassafras or *kombo* brought to the old French Market by the true natives of the region, the Choctaw Indians. All of this is slowly simmered until the flavors have blended to form a new dish, and a good gumbo depends on this slow mixing. There is a special word in New Orleans that recognizes the original sources, while indicating a unique regional blend of those traditions, and that word is "Creole."

The creation of Louis Armstrong Park and the determination of its future role as an element in the urban landscape of New Orleans reflect not only a similar blending of contrasting ingredients, but also an understanding that time is crucial in the park's success in the community. Since the official opening on April 15, 1980, Armstrong Park has already played an active role in the life of New Orleans. In its present state it represents a unique urban place in a city of unique urban places. The project took nearly a decade to be realized, however, after actually two decades of activity in the area. The product to date is far different from what was originally intended, and Armstrong Park will undoubtedly take on different flavor with further passage of time.

Culture, like it or not

In the 1960s, New Orleans planning was influenced by a "centralized nodes" concept advocated by Robert Moses. As a result, the proposal for a "civic center" was advanced to develop the area surrounding the existing, Neo-Classical Italian Renaissance/WPA Mu-

nicipal Auditorium, traditional site of Mardi Gras *krewe*s or balls. Adjacent to the Auditorium was Beauregard Square (now known as Congo Square), the site of an old Spanish fort destroyed in 1803 and a public open space important to the Black community because of its constant use since the days of slavery. Redesignated the New Orleans Cultural Center, the area borders the Vieux Carré, which lies between it and the Mississippi River. Known also as the Treme (tree-MAY) area, after the planter from whom the city purchased plantation lands in the early 19th Century, this section carries its own imprint of history. Marie Taveau, the voodoo queen, was buried there; on the site of the Cultural Center was Perseverance Hall, built in 1820. By the turn of the century, the area was known in part as Storyville, a designated red-light district closed in 1917 and demolished in 1940 to make way for the nearby Iberville Housing Project. Predominantly Black and yet rich in the polyglot culture of the city, the Treme area continues the physical fabric of the Vieux Carré, although the divided boulevard of Rampart Street forms a definite edge between the two communities. Treme has gradually taken on a specific character of its own, particularly after the commercial revitalization of the Vieux Carré and its redevelopment as the tourism-oriented "French Quarter" since the 1950s.

The New Orleans Cultural Center concept was a classic instance of 1960s "urban removal." First, several blocks of residential development were demolished, and families who had lived there were displaced—a situation that created tensions, needless to say, with regard to any subsequent development. What began as a New Orleans "Lincoln Center" remained an open scar on the urban landscape and was eventually scaled down to construction of a single building, the Theatre for the Performing Arts, which opened in January 1973. Over time, the use of both the theater and the auditorium generated the habit of on-site parking for the affluent suburbanites attending events, facilitated by the open space created in the demolition of some eight city blocks. But the new theater actually had fewer seats than the old concert hall of the auditorium, charged higher rental fees, and within six weeks after its opening had run out of operating funds. The City of New Orleans found that the only groups interested in using the theater were those with city subsidies, or limited appeal groups, such

Peter C. Papademetriou, P/A's Houston-based correspondent, is a practicing architect and associate professor of architecture at Rice University.

Gateway to Armstrong Park is lit at night to resemble Tivoli Gardens; the French Quarter nearby establishes vista and scale for approach.



as the Church of Compassion.

Meanwhile, in 1971, Louis Armstrong had died. A new city administration, under the progressive Mayor "Moon" Landrieu, appointed a Citizens Committee for a memorial to Armstrong. The committee recommended recapturing the character and atmosphere of New Orleans at the turn of the century, when the jazz on which "Satchmo" was weaned had begun to "emerge as a new and dynamic music born of this continent and in this city." The recommendation specifically called for good food and live entertainment as essential ingredients for any contemplated plan. Given untouchable identification with the New Orleans-born jazz musician, Louis Armstrong Park advanced as an idea that would transform a civic center concept into an urban place designed to mix people in a variety of activities.

Close, but no cigar

In 1973, the City Planning Commission retained Lawrence Halprin & Associates of San Francisco to develop the actual plan of the park, with Robin Riley of New Orleans acting as liaison. In the seven years that followed, the politics, programming, financing, and appraisal left the area a battlefield and the Halprin scheme stillborn.

Proponents urged that a "living memorial" concept was the most appropriate way to honor Louis Armstrong. Not only was the

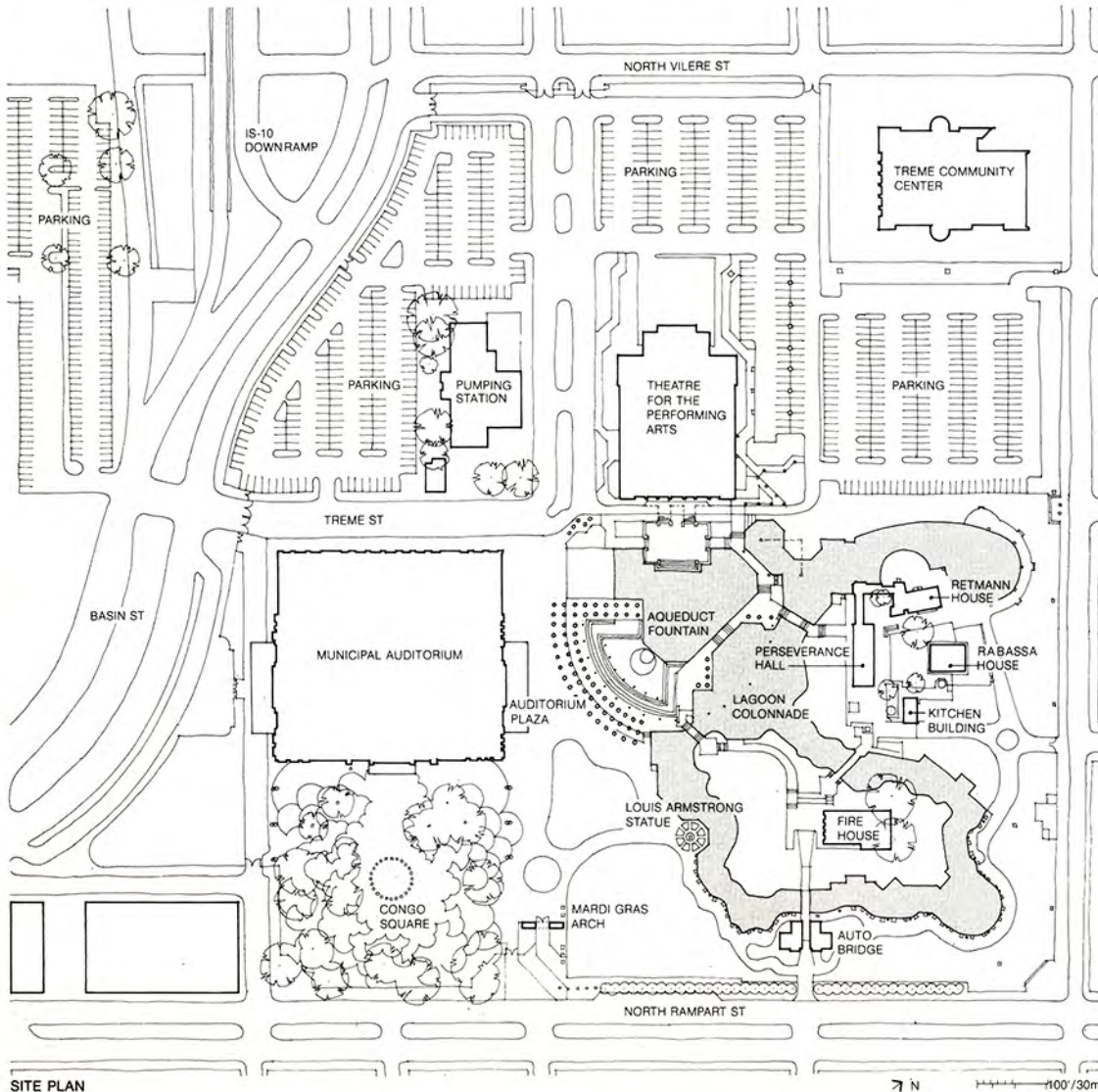
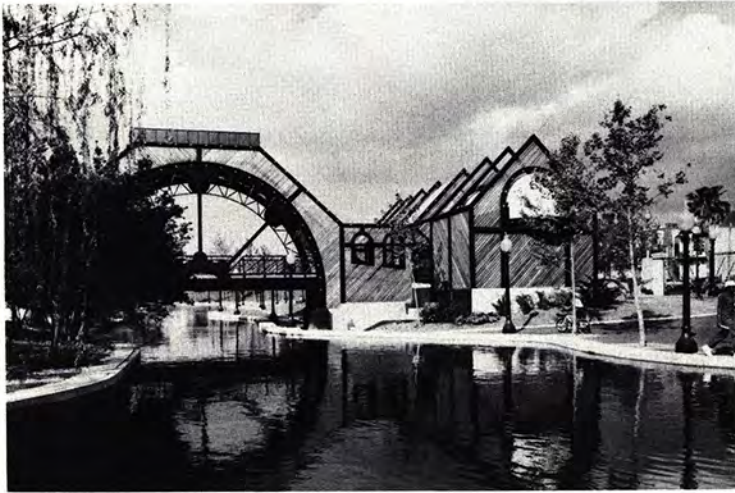
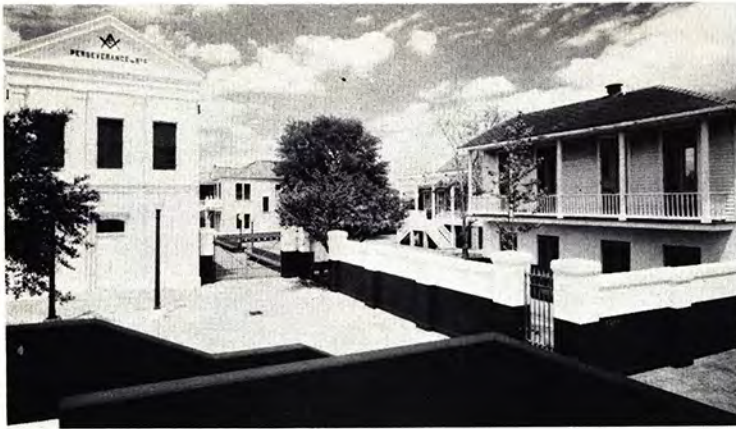
emphasis on jazz culture of benefit to local artists, but an educational purpose could be realized, and the Treme community could benefit by jobs and other development advantages. The opponents raised the specter of a highly commercialized amusement park with an exclusionary admission charge, a tourist attraction far removed from a community-oriented memorial. It would potentially operate as "a tribute to the vices" if it included an emphasis on drinking, eating, and general carrying on. The controversy over adequate parking, however, dominated discussion as the project moved closer to reality.

The Halprin "Tivoli Garden" concept proposed keeping Perseverance Hall plus the old pumping station and fire house. The hall would be the focus for a jazz complex, with a lagoon created as a basic amenity and visual connector between existing and new elements. But among the nearly 32 acres and its seven education- or entertainment-oriented subcenters was the highly provocative "Place des Fêtes." Fairly remote in character from New Orleans jazz culture, it was dominated by a large Ferris wheel. Also subject to some controversy was the proposal for a 2000-car garage across the highway from the park. When Robin Riley took over responsibility for implementation and design, specific elements of the Halprin concept remained, such as the lagoon, now cut from four acres to one, and development of the jazz complex.

A group of historic structures (opposite, top right) slated for demolition were relocated to form the Jazz Complex—Perseverance Hall (left in photo), The Reimann House (center rear), the Rabassa House (center right), and the Kitchen Building (right). The Lagoon Colonnade (photo, right) features old lamp standards rescued from warehouse; the Auto Bridge connects to island in the park.

An overview of Armstrong Park shows scale of open space.





Data
 Project: *Louis Armstrong Park, New Orleans, La.*
 Architects: *Robin Riley, architect; Cashio Cochran & Associates, landscape architects; F. Monroe Labouisse, Jr., architect for Jazz Museum restoration and tower; Mathes, Bergman & Associates, production architects.*
 Client: *City of New Orleans, Stephen Villavaso, director, Analysis and Planning.*
 Site: *32 acres adjacent to French Quarter includes Congo Square and the area in the Treme neighborhood where land was cleared for New Orleans cultural center composed of Municipal Auditorium and Theater for Performing Arts. The Jazz Museum, built in conjunction with the park, completes center.*
 Program: *landscape design and restoration of four historic buildings for Jazz Museum to provide a place where visitors can hear music. Phase I development includes a 2¾-acre lagoon, fountains, five bridges, Cultural Center plaza, Aqueduct Fountain, outdoor performing areas, lights, walks, planting, parking. Phase II will have restaurants, shops.*
 Structural system: *Mardi Gras Arch, steel frame; Theater Bridge, Bridge Bridge, and Jazz*

SITE PLAN

100' / 30m

All that jazz

In the subsequent six years, until the park was opened on April 15, 1980, Robin Riley worked to interject among the spaces and physical elements a series of references to the tradition of New Orleans. Part of this process involved discoveries and seat-of-the-pants design decisions. For example, a trove of old cast-iron street lamp standards, rescued from a warehouse, now form the Lagoon Colonnade that defines the edge of the amphitheater and connects the space across to the so-called Bridge Bridge. Several old buildings slated for demolition were relocated on site as components of the Jazz Complex, thereby neatly resolving the question of what architectural treatment should be rendered in harmony with Perseverance Hall. The Kitchen Building, Rabasso House, and Reimann House group together to define an intimate courtyard; the latter is linked to the Hall by a two-story arcade and the Jazz Tower.

The focus on jazz creates a potentially active zone of activity deep in the fabric of the park, leaving the outer edges to operate as more passive open spaces. Not all the time are these spaces passive; the newly designed Congo Square, with its sequential circle of water spouts, has become a great playground for neighborhood children and appears to have taken on the role of a free public "bike wash." Of all the elements Riley designed, the Mardi Gras Arch, a principal entry point actually used annually for the passage of the parade floats on their way to the Auditorium, evokes the image of jazz in its bold, jaunty form (the arch looks as if it could strut) and in its pulsating pattern of neon lighting. The Arch extends the image of Armstrong Park into the Vieux Carré itself, since it is directly on the axis of Saint Ann Street and can be seen from as far away as Jackson Square and the French Market.

Indigenous and traditional materials are used throughout the park, including walkways paved in the porous wood-mold brick seen throughout New Orleans. The treatment of architectural elements, such as the various bridges, suggests the "resort tradition" of the city, and the slightly seedy overgrown vegetation of City Park was recalled by the choice of certain tropical plant materials. Specific motifs, such as arch forms and latticelike infill elements, directly refer to a specific New Orleans vernacular. Client committees also wanted a Classical feeling in the design, with understood images that still evoked a sense of fantasy and whimsy, and Riley's bold forms were intended to respond to this need.

Looking forward to 1984

Completion of Armstrong Park turned around the bad planning of the 1960s and brought this neighborhood back as a positive amenity. The Tremé community uses the park, and little vandalism has occurred in the year since its opening. Armstrong must become self-supporting, however, to assure proper maintenance, ongoing programs, and potential expansion. The city has contracted



with Halcyon, Ltd., to explore public/private management and the sorts of development possible.

Halcyon's recommendations, recently submitted to city review, analyzed multiple options including a jazz culture "theme park." There is also discussion of a nominal admission charge and of a special tax district. Because of the current money market, private developers have stayed away from expressing a direct interest in leasing options, but siting of the 1984 World's Fair in New Orleans now presents the best opportunity to evolve a strategy for long-range implementation.

New Orleans is a place where people have to get used to things before they accept them. Armstrong Park is just another case in point, as it has begun to enjoy recurring use by the community and become an extension of activities in the Vieux Carré. Part of its success undoubtedly is due to drawing from local traditions and evolving recollections of things already familiar. But as any good Creole cook knows, gumbo has to simmer and be slowly stirred until the ingredients not only blend, but enhance each other. Then, and only then, the ground sassafras filé is added to give it a special punch. The 1984 Fair may be that needed added ingredient. □

Data continued

Bridge, poured concrete; Island Bridge, laminated wood arches; Auto Bridge, steel frame.

Major materials: poured concrete raised walks and fence posts; salvaged cast iron for light standards; granite and crushed marble for Congo Square; cedar, redwood for decks, handrails, seating, and lattice; asphalt for walkways; wood-mold brick for sidewalks; stucco for building exteriors and Jazz Complex fence. Mechanical system: chilled water system with heating elements at each air-handling unit in Jazz Museum.

Consultants: Neil Jeffrey & Associates, structural; Cappel, Tousley, Montgomery, Moses, structural; Morphy, Makofsky & Masson, structural; Leo S. Weil, mechanical; Walter B. Moses & Associates, mechanical; Burke & Associates, water ecology; University of New Orleans, Dr.

Richard Schenkle, archeological survey; James Lamantia, planning; Thomas Koenig, planning; William Rogan, architectural; Lawrence Halprin & Associates, planning.

Cost: app. \$10 million.

Photography: Alan Karchmer.