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MAKE A DELIRIOUS NOISE: Improvising Urbanism in New Orleans, Louisiana

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MAKE A DELIRIOUS NOISE:
Improvising Urbanism in New Orleans, Louisiana

A Thesis Presented for the
Master of Architecture
Degree
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Jason Michael Stark
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DEDICATION

To James and Betty Stark.

Without your limitless encouragement and love, none of this would have been possible.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS
....

My gratitude and thanks to:

ABSTRACT

Decades of poor urban design choices and a lack of attention to the characteristics of communities have played prominent roles in the fracturing of urban communities and the relegation of those without means to the edges of the urban fabric: poverty and powerlessness abetted by geographic location. Rather than "restitching" the urban whole back together, I argue that progress can be made through the generation of local nodes of identity: a polynucleated urban condition. The development of spaces to magnify community identity with respect to localized characteristics produces a community focus to replace the unattainable (for those without means) city center. The end result is heterogeneous nodes of identity, characterized by local conditions, that offer access to and from the surrounding nodes.

I apply this proposition to the city of New Orleans, Louisiana. Its urban division stands as an example of the ability of infrastructure, geography and socioeconomics to fracture a city. The project is an execution of a masterplan for an under-utilized portion of eastern New Orleans that generates a defined neighborhood identity. I contend that a delirious architecture magnifies neighborhood characteristics provides a place to display unique community identity.

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1. DELIRIOUSNESS AND DELIRIUM

A RHYTHM, BROKEN

What is deliriousness? It is the hidden, uncovered and
celebrated. It is the mundane, writ large and elevated
to spectacle. It is transgression rendered permissible, a
collision and subsequent synthesis of past and present, and
a co-opting of profoundly unrelated signs in the generation
of new identity. Deliriousness is both a product of the
amplification of culture and a reaction to local environment. It
is unique to the place and the people that create it.

New Orleans, more than most American cities, can claim the
mantle of deliriousness. A colonial port of trade, modernly
perceived as a location of ambiguous morality, the city's
physical and social makeup is a highly variegated mixture of
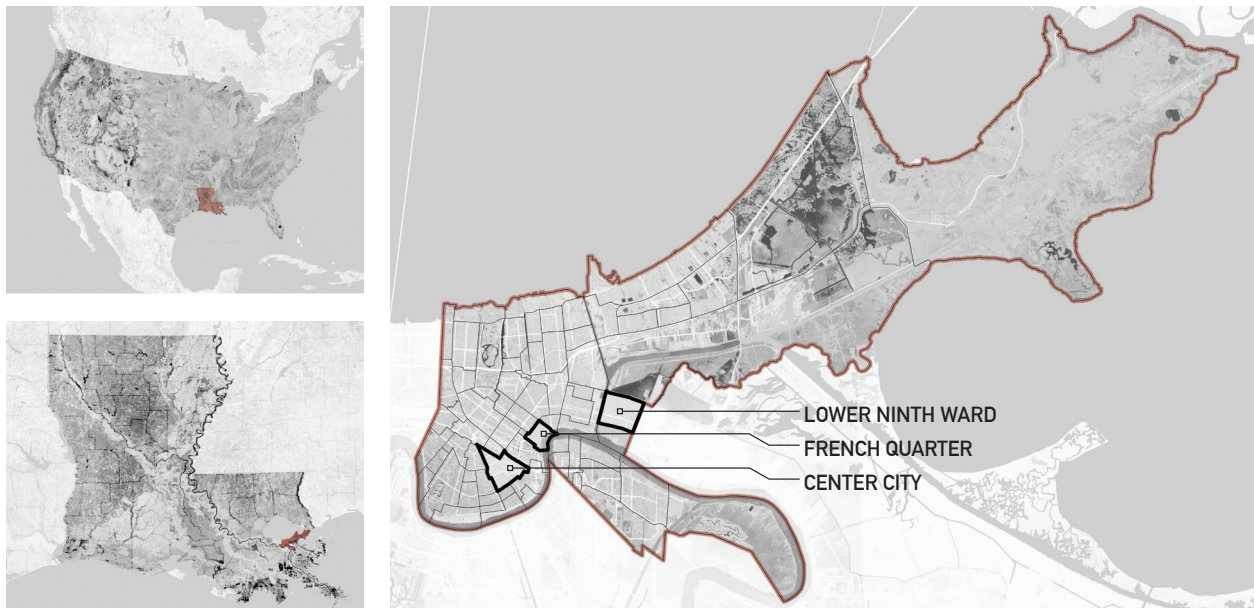
Figure 01
New Orleans, Louisiana
Source: Author & ESRI World Imagry (http://www.esri.com/data/basemaps)

identities and traditions. Presented as a haven for hedonism, New Orleans is an international tourist destination with its *genius loci* ("spirit of place") centered in the French Quarter, particularly on Bourbon Street. Here, the bars never close, public nudity is permitted, and revelers wander the area with drinks in hand to the tune of busking street musicians under the glow of neon signs. In New Orleans, "deliriousness is a civic virtue" (Verderber, x).

But New Orleans is a city of extremes. In contrast to the deliriousness of the French Quarter and Bourbon Street, many areas suffer from conditions that produce the opposite character: delirium. There are three primary factors that contribute to New Orleans' urban delirium.

First, the city is in conflict with its geography. Proximal to the Gulf of Mexico, New Orleans is both surrounded by water and sited as much as ten feet below sea level, making it dangerously susceptible to flooding caused by Atlantic storm surges (Fig 02). No single event illustrates this geographic vulnerability more than Hurricane Katrina. The surge produced by the 2005 storm caused catastrophic breaches in the levee system constructed to protect the city. Large portions of New Orleans were inundated and rendered uninhabitable. Previously considered safe, even areas of higher ground were affected by the massive storm, and

virtually no lower ground areas were spared (Fig 03).
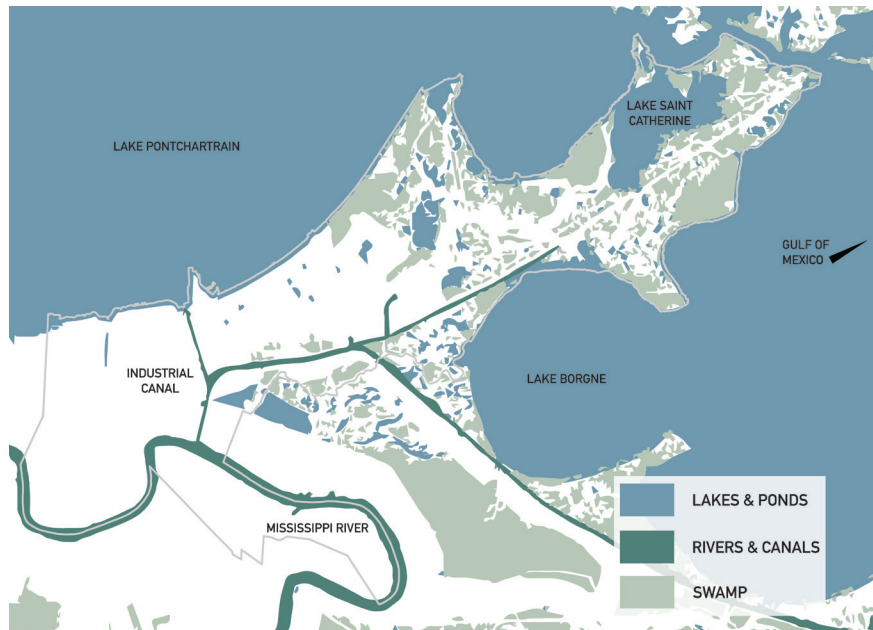
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Source: Author, USGS National Hydrography Dataset
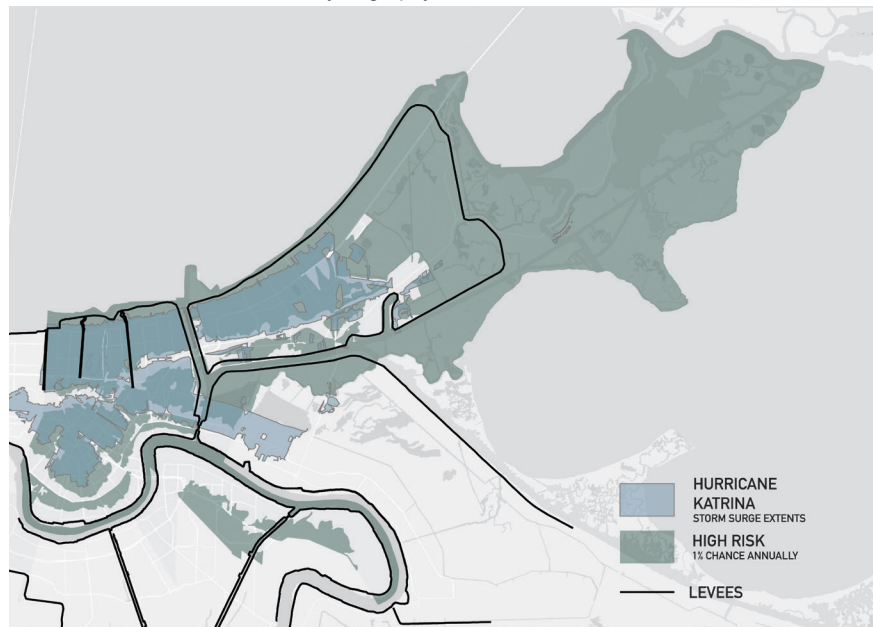
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Source: Author, ESRI World Imagry, FEMA Flood Map Service Center (https://msc.fema.
gov/portal/) and The Data Center (http://www.datacenterresearch.org/a/wp-content/
uploads/2014/02/flood_extent.png)

New Orleans is also heavily affected by transportation infrastructure, specifically Interstate 10 (Fig 04). Its construction in the mid-twentieth century cut through the city, splitting established neighborhoods and creating undesirable land at its edges. Areas surrounding the interstate and its associated infrastructure were often transformed into a no-man's land, as businesses in close proximity struggled to reconnect with customers and residents near the construction relocated. Additionally, Interstate 10 catalyzed the depopulation of urban-center neighborhoods by providing a fast and direct means of travel between the suburbs and downtown work. Proximity to place of employment was no longer necessary, and many residents seized the opportunity to relocate.
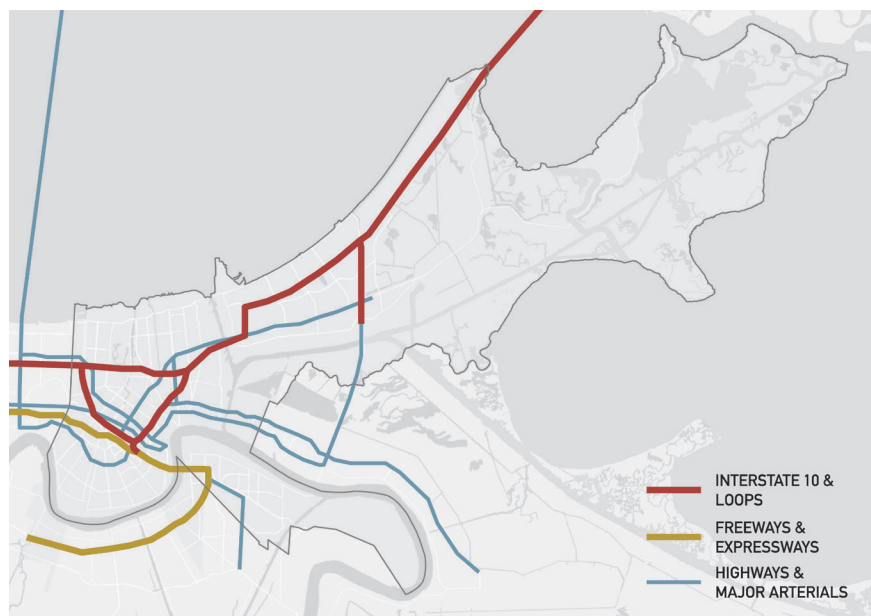
Figure 04
Major Roads
Source: Author, ESRI World Imagry

Finally, New Orleans' high incidence of poverty (Fig 05)

reveals a marked and widespread stratification between

those of means and those without. The city's median

household income is more than 30% below the nation's,

and its poverty rate is nearly double the national average.

It is no accident that areas of poverty are correlated to

geographic vulnerability and infrastructural incursion, as the

latter conditions often abet the former. Flood-susceptibility

and infrastructural adjacency make both residential and

commercial occupancy undesirable to all but the most

destitute.
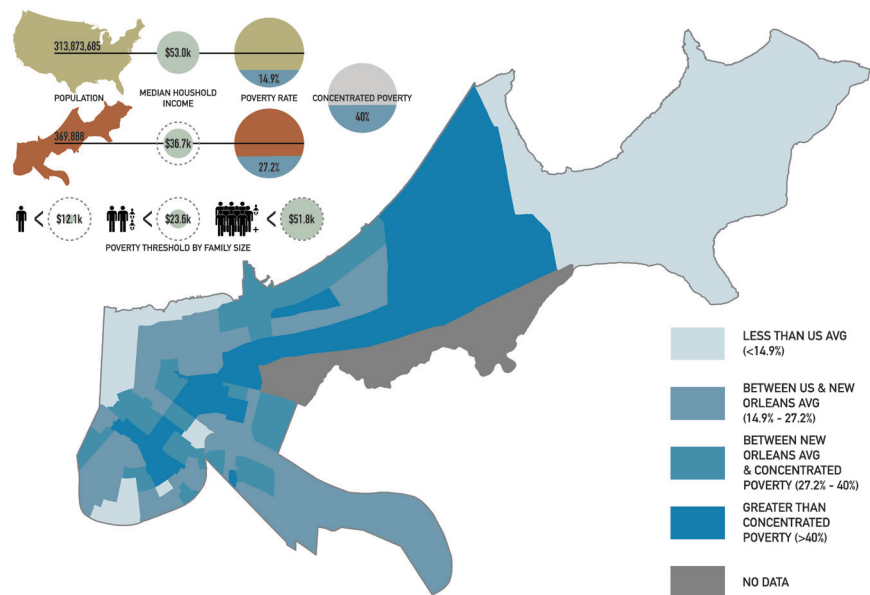
Figure 05
Poverty & National Comparison
Source: Author, The Data Center (http://www.datacenterresearch.org/maps/poverty/)

IMPROVISING

How, then, to mitigate these conditions? Decades of poor urban design and a lack of attention to the characteristics of communities have played prominent roles in the relegation of those without means to the edges of the urban fabric: poverty and powerlessness abetted by geographic location. A common strategy for the mitigation of delirium is the use of a city's center to generate identity for the whole, illustrated by New Orleans' continued "marketing" of the city in terms of the French Quarter and Bourbon Street. But this is a disservice to the character of individual neighborhoods and communities, and serves only to mute the qualities that make each unique. In effect, the city turns its back to the variegation of its constituent locales, producing a single

Figure 06
Mononucleated City
Source: Author, ESRI World Imagery

urban center with a singular identity: a mononucleated condition (Fig 06).

Rather than a homogeneous "restitching" of the urban whole by focusing attention back to the city center, I argue that progress can be made through the generation of local nodes of identity, a concept that Mark Gottdiener refers to in *The Social Production of Urban Space* as a "polynucleated" urban condition (7). Oppositional to the notion of "downtown" as the locus of identity, polynucleation allows for a relationship between both physically adjacent as well as culturally similar areas. In New Orleans, this is achieved through the generation of a delirious architecture and urban plan. But it is not enough to simply overlay the

Figure 07
Polynucleated City
Source: Author, ESRI World Imagry

characteristics of deliriousness found in New Orleans' center. Instead, an inventory of urban conditions (both negative and positive) specific to the site allows for a design reaction in which the vernacular built environment is magnified and allowed to take on new use. As a unique creation of a specific community, locations of deliriousness generate a genus loci that is a direct expression of a community's characteristics.

2. VARIATIONS ON A THEME

LOS ANGELES

Los Angeles and New Orleans share a number of characteristics. Founded in 1781 by a contingent that counted "...forty four settlers and four soldiers...eight Mulattoes, nine Indians, two Negroes, one Mestizo and one person listed as 'Chino'", it began as a far-flung colony of Spain (del Castillo, 5). New Orleans' development as a French colony places both cities, historically, in the midst of imperialist expansion, a notion Edward Said defines as "an act of geographical violence through which every space in the world is explored, charted, and finally brought under control" (Jacobs,19). The inscription of globalized power at the periphery of charted territory has formative implications for the development of urban space. Jacobs identifies
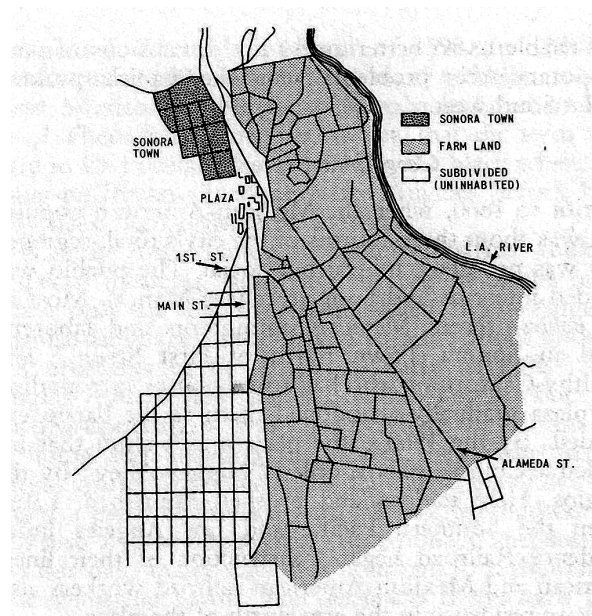
Figure 08
Early Los Angeles Land Division
Source: *The Los Angeles Barrio, 1850-1890* p.142

11

the role of the imperial "spatial imaginary" (particularly in mapping and naming, and by extent, town-planning) in the formation of a colonial identity that privileges the representatives of empire while marginalizing indigenous peoples and the labor class (19).   This stratification based on identity can be seen in Los Angeles throughout the colonial period, but becomes especially marked following the conclusion of the Mexican War in 1821. The native-born Californios, descendants of the original Spanish landed-gentry, viewed the influx of Mexican immigrants and indigenous California Indians as "little more than thieves and... virtual slaves" (del Castillo, 11). The Mexican-American War's conclusion saw the removal of Spanish-speaking Californians from the economic and political canvas regardless of status, as rapid modernization and the growth of commercial farming pushed an "American Imperialism" to the forefront (31). The insertion of this new economy diametrically opposed the Californio agricultural systems, and the late 1800's produced a rapidly marginalized and declining Spanish-speaking population (31). The Imperial remnants were culturally, economically and politically removed from urban development.

The 20th century witnessed the development of the Pacific Electric Railroad, which offered an expansive operation to and from the company's suburban developments (Fig 09).

Los Angelenos became increasingly mobile, and the physical city center emptied to the outlying regions. This was further exacerbated by the boom in automobile ownership and usage, culminating in the construction of the city's freeway system beginning in the 1940's (Fig 10) (Clark, 82). Those "who could not drive or could not afford a car – the elderly and the poor" were left in the centralized core (84). Community identity was built not around the association of residents to the city, but rather the association of residents to their micro-locale (84). Harry Carr, a reporter for the Los Angeles Times in the 1930's, succinctly described the city's unique agglomeration, stating "You can't understand LA unless you understand that it's not a town, it's a lot of towns"(84). Los Angeles decentralization produced a geographic and socioeconomic framework of separated nodes with unique identity, owing little to the center city that birthed them. Power and wealth were distributed
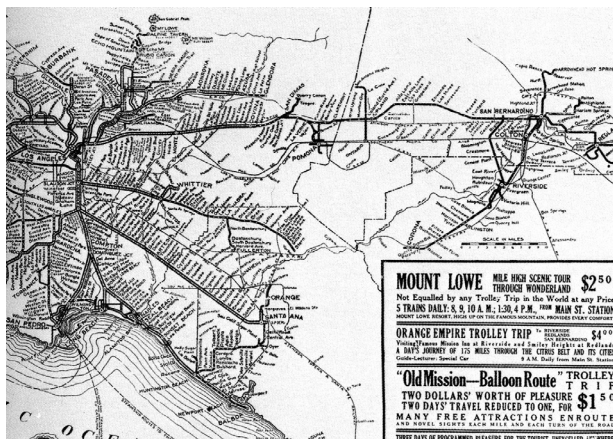
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Source: *Los Angeles, A City Apart* p.77
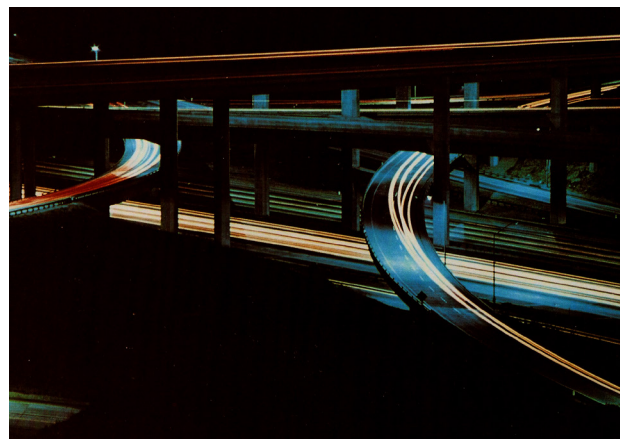
Figure 10
Los Angeles Freeway
Source: *Los Angeles, A City Apart* p.86

to the periphery towns, and access to these sources of commodity and consumption were limited to those with the means of escaping a decaying city center, a process of "spatial segregation that has liberated the vast majority of the population from responsibility for the less advantaged" due to lack of proximity (Gottdiener, 272). Affecting not only the underprivileged, the deconcentration of urban space produces communities devoid of "the street and public areas of communion" and internally reliant on localized areas of consumption – "the malls, shopping centers, singles bars... and suburban backyards" (Gottdiener, 272).

Given the reality and fixity of this situation, a forced or insinuated return to the city-center as the dominant location of community identity is less productive than looking to the micro-local. Applying this notion to the neighborhoods of Orleans Parish offers an opportunity to develop a localized identity that is no longer beholden to the centralized, and therefore out of reach, tourism and entertainment industries.

NEW YORK CITY

Whereas New Orleans and Los Angeles converge in their histories as colonial projects, New York City and New Orleans share a number of characteristics as commercial/industrial port locations.

New Orleans founding was determined by France's imperial desire to gain a mercantile foothold in the tobacco trade in the Americas (Powell, 93). Doing so would relieve the necessity of re-import of leaf from Britain and its American colonies, and would allow France to distance itself from its European rival (93). But the Lower Mississippi crop's quality was inferior, and the constant threat of hurricane, drought, and southern summer downpour led one Crown official to remark that the "country [was] subjected to such great vicissitude that one can almost not count on the crops at all" (93). The failure of New Orleans as a tobacco town turned commerce's eye toward a variegated economy, much of it illicit. The reallocation of slaves from the under-producing plantations to the city's wharves and customs houses produced an influx of Africans that, due to sheer numbers, began to move from under the distracted gaze of colonial officials (98).

The free association with trappers from Illinois Country, soldiers and sailors of the French military, and indigenous Indian populations seeping through a porous border produced a distinctly New World culture: the Creole. Ignored by imperial magistracy, the striped culture of New Orleans turned to smuggling and prostitution, under the legal auspices of the deerskin trade, in order to further remove themselves from control of French law (101). Coupled

with the geographic boundaries of river, bayou and forest, New Orleans became a densely packed port of call for those whose business relied as much on anonymity as open shipping lanes (104). At odds with Pauger and Le Blond de La Tour's original urban vision of the city as an orderly, French Enlightenment bastide (well-fortified walled town) with a Spanish grid overlay, the "underclass of three continents rubbed elbows and made merry" in the back-of-town, an area removed from the centralized view of the ruling aristocrats (62-63, 99-100).

New York, New Orleans' shipping competitor throughout the 18th & 19th centuries, developed along a systematically similar though formally distinct trajectory. As an integral part of the Dutch trading empire, New York succeeded in capturing the majority of American raw materials export through a mid 19th century consolidation of railroad and
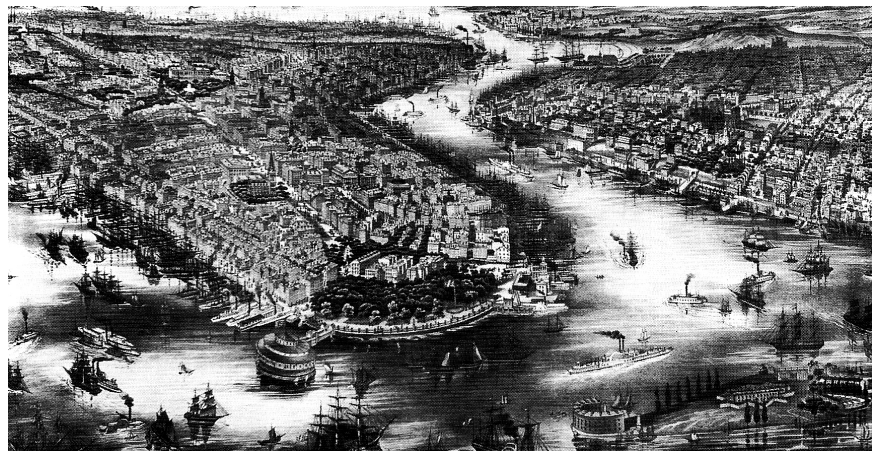
Figure 11
New York City, 1850
Source: *Invented Cities* p.17

steamship transportation that allowed free movement of commodities to and from the mid-western breadbasket and southern textile producers and a material-starved Europe (Domosh,13). A high rate of immigration to the city coupled with economic opportunity produced a relatively permeable ruling class based less on inherited status than business acumen (16). The economic boom forced a reallocation of urban space. The mixed and often vaguely delineated residential, commercial and industrial sectors became increasingly segregated as square footage below 14th street was occupied by economic concerns (19). Those of means relocated above, and the working and immigrant classes remained in tenement housing interspersed between the mills and warehouses (19).

Much like Los Angeles of the 20th century (though decidedly more hemmed-in by geography), New York's power-elite escaped the overcrowding and congestion of the economic center to establish residence on the periphery. And like Los Angeles, the flight from the center was abetted by the twentieth-century introduction and accumulation of viable mass transit and the automobile (Stern, 34). But unlike LA, New York City's class structure remained fairly heterogeneous.

Many of the wealthy remained within the city, preferring to

adopt "a two-residence pattern that combined apartments in town [with] houses in exurbia", and the 1950's witnessed a return of the middle-class from the suburbs, attracted by "convenience and cultural life" (27). Meanwhile, the city's less fortunate continued to reside in the slums between industrial and commercial areas within the center. Faltering public conditions, fear of crime and high-minded ideals on the part of civic officials produced a rehousing effort meant to clear the slums and offer viable housing to the poor, but succeeded only in concentrating areas of poverty to high-rise buildings scattered across the five boroughs (66). In his critique of the plan, Lewis Mumford identified the attempt as "shortsighted... [a view] of the shortage of low-income housing as a disease that can be cured by segregating the sufferers in an isolation ward", a "pathological condition" corrected by a "pathological remedy" (73). The ghettoization of the poor and their removal from the locations of power without regard to the infrastructural necessities of community acts as a warning for this project's progress.

INNER CITY ARTS

Michael Maltzan Architecture's Inner City Arts (Fig 12) provides an example of community focused architecture. Sited in Los Angeles' Skid Row neighborhood, the facility provides art education to underprivileged youth. Repurposed from an abandoned auto-body shop, Maltzan's project

relies on the former shop's structural skeleton to produce a construction that relates to historical occupation, and, by extension, the neighborhood. The configuration produced is one of continuous space, allowing a multipurpose and adaptable use. Programmatic elements include performance, education and administration, and the flexible space allows for the future expansion and contraction of these individual elements should the need arise (Lepik, 63).

The site's relationship with the Inner City Arts Organization provides a community focused direction for the program. Arts education, absent or limited in availability to the area's impoverished children, provides applicable skills for neighborhood's youth. It seeks to break the relationship
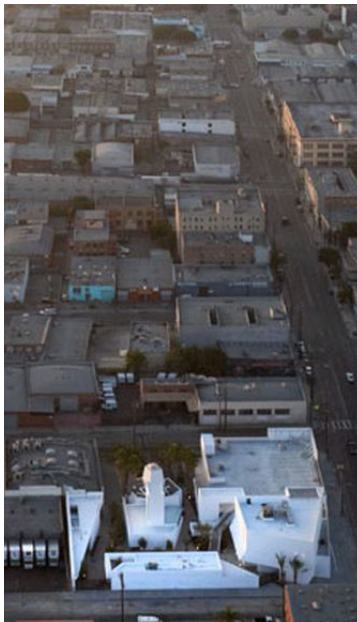
Figure 12
Inner City Arts, Los Angeles
Source: *Small Scale, Big Change* p66-68

of poverty to crime by providing alternative occupation to students, and in doing so produces a safe space for creative output (Lepik, 64).

This insertion of community programming into a pre-existing neighborhood structure allows Inner City Arts to effectively re-sign itself, acting as a beacon for the neighborhood (Lepik, 64)

THE HIGH LINE

Field Operations and Diller Scofidio + Renfro's project for the repurposing of an abandoned strip of elevated rail line on Manhattan's West Side provides an example of delirious urban reprogramming (Fig 13). Constructed in the 1930's but unused since the 1980's, the High Line was envisioned and executed in 2009 as a continuous public greenspace that saved the rail infrastructure from demolition (Pearson, 84). The resulting park takes the familiar language of landscape and magnifies it, raising the occupiable surface above Manhattan's street level. From the lofted position, park-goers are exposed to an unfamiliar set of conditions. The city is viewed from a level normally reserved for those within multi-story buildings. The architects' treatment of the park's ground surface as "a continuous carpet where hard and soft blend together" furthers the surreality of the project by standing as a stark contrast to the concrete streets and sidewalks thirty

feet below (85).

Occupying the High Line translates to occupying an unfamiliar urban datum. While most city parks provide "an escape from the city... [the High Line] puts you in the middle of it" (85). At the crossing of 10th Avenue, the structure is cut away to reveal the street below. Benches provide seating in front of this "window". The mundane is rendered as spectacle as onlookers view familiar urban characteristics from an unfamiliar vantage. The High Line acts as a stage for the presentation of "otherness", and in doing so promotes the notions of surreality and deliriousness.

Figure 13
The High Line, New York City
Source: Friends of the High Line [online images] retrieved 2014 < http://www.thehighline.org/galleries/images>

STEPHEN VERDERBER'S *DELIRIOUS NEW ORLEANS*

That New Orleans shares urban development ties with New York and Los Angeles is perhaps best understood in terms of the contemporary city. In his analysis of pre- and post-Hurricane Katrina vernacular architecture, Stephen Verderber identifies New Orleans as "an excellent example of pre-auto age city that was transformed into an auto-age metropolis without ever turning its back on... its historic core" (Verderber, 73). Taken as a precedent study, Verderber's photo and prose essay *Delirious New Orleans* can begin to serve as the foil to the urban developments of New York and Los Angeles.

Like New York and Los Angeles, the decline of the centralized neighborhoods is attributed to the introduction of the automobile and the freedom it afforded those with means. But Verderber is careful to acknowledge geography's role in settlement: land closest to the Mississippi River, as the high-ground, was settled first; dredging of the back-of-town areas led to the creation of the Lower Ninth Ward, New Orleans East, Gentilly, and other neighborhoods well below the floodline and in close proximity to the river's banks (Verderber, 141). Defensible space was occupied by the wealthy, while a "combination of racism, classism" and the proximity to employment relegated lower classes to unsustainable land (141). It is in these

marginalized communities that Verderber finds the identity of the city. His photography reveals the built environment of these communities as a reaction to both climatic and socioeconomic factors. In cataloging their existence before Katrina and their damage/destruction afterward, Verderber attempts to record the character of these insular communities through their cultural production.

Figure 14
Architectural Scale Signage
Source: *Delirious New Orleans,* p10

Verderber identifies four vernacular typologies that are provide a delirious character to the city. First, and most thoroughly documented, is the prevalence of architecturally-scaled signage, specifically the neon sign. Its widespread use belies its success at both the pedestrian and automobile scales, and is furthered by its ease of adaptability to suburban settings (73). The author's documentation of the post-Katrina destruction and/or disappearance of these signs suggests their treatment as historical artifacts, and their vulnerability necessitates preserving them as a part of New Orleans' urban cultural history.

Verdeber also delineates the typology of the "masker building" as a quintessential New Orleans commercial vernacular. Originally a residence, these buildings "relinquish their initial function" through the addition of a commercial "mask" that co-opts a front yard or other setback to move the structure to a mixed use program (93).
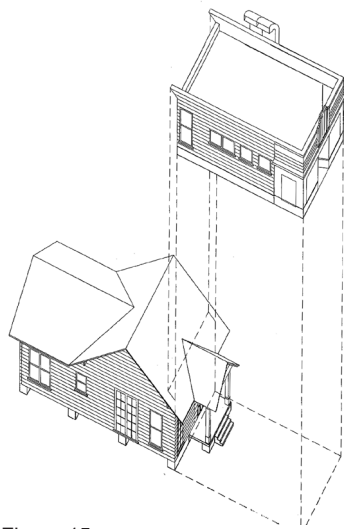
Figure 15
Masker Building
Source: *Delirious New Orleans,* p92

Verderber asserts that typical masker buildings possess five attributes: small scale due to initial function as a residence, a tight fit into the immediate site and streetscape as a consequence of the scarcity of available buildable land surrounding the original structure, owner-occupation with the residence as the masked function, construction prior to the automobile-enabled flight to the suburbs in the 1950's, and location in older residential neighborhoods depopulated by the aforementioned suburban flight (100). The scale and pedestrian/public transportation accessibility by neighborhood residents contributed to the success of the maskers, as many of the older neighborhoods' residents could not afford an automobile (100). Masker buildings provided the necessary location to operate small businesses without the increased cost of new construction, and subsequently filled the need for goods and services within the neighborhoods' boundaries.

Verderber identifies the "roadside nomad" as a third type of New Orleans vernacular, describing the trailers and mobile homes endemic to the typology as "symbols of the heroic intentions of the occupants to push on" following the devastation of Hurricane Katrina (190). In the storm's wake, thousands of residential trailers were provided by the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) in order to provide temporary emergency shelter for New Orleans'

Figure 16
Autonomous Nomad
Source: *Delirious New Orleans,* p182

Figure 17
Untethered Nomad
Source: *Delirious New Orleans,* p189

displaced residents. And though flimsy in construction and often ad-hoc in installation, the trailers' functional malleability allowed for two alternate deployments that contributed significantly in rebuilding community identity. The "autonomous installation" variants (Fig 16) are "[trailer] units installed on the site of a small business", allowing owners to return to their livelihood quickly and generating identifiable nodes of community for returning residents (183). The second variant, the "untethered nomad" (Fig 17), represents a more mobile entrepreneurial tactic. Owners operate directly from the trailer, and are able to insert the business into any appropriately sized area, often moving sites multiple times in one day (186). Their arrival is cause for celebration and gathering, as their picnic tables, colored lighting and offerings of local food and drink create "a place, an oasis, for their customers amidst the devastation" and aid in the demarcation of community for those few residents left in virtually depopulated neighborhoods (186).

Finally, Verderber identifies public mural art as a distinct cultural product of local community. Heavily influenced by soul, funk and hip-hop, the "three main visual-musical media through which urban sensibilities are expressed", the murals of New Orleans stand as "a response to urban decay" by imbuing infrastructure or mundane building with cultural significance. The "Restore the Oaks" project provides a

Figure 18
Restore the Oaks
Source: *Delirious New Orleans,* p124

useful illustration of placemaking through community artistic endeavor. The mid-1960's saw the construction of the I-10 overpass in the 7th Ward and Treme neighborhoods, resulting in the removal of four rows of mature live oak trees from the neutral ground of Claiborne Avenue (122). The interstate bisected this strip and generated a covered no-man's land, "extracting some of the neighborhoods' spirit" (122). Gone was the location of "daily rituals of life" as well as "square one for the rituals of Black Mardi Gras" (122). The undesirable area decimated the businesses adjacent, provoked residents into abandoning their homes, and spurred an increase in crime (122). In 2003, the Restore the Oaks Project was commissioned by Treme's African American Museum in an effort to reclaim the neutral ground lost in the interstate's construction. Local black artists created a series of forty murals using the interstate's support columns as their canvas (122). The columns depict the characteristics of the neighborhood and range in subject from musical heroes to long-closed businesses (122). The resulting outdoor gallery "transformed a forlorn urban space into an outdoor enclosure" through the use of locally relevant cultural imagery. The long-unused space beneath the overpass is now a site of community identity, generating an *overpass culture* through the mural-columns use as a placemaking apparatus.

It is in Verderber's survey that my project finds its grounding. The historical associations of urban development between New York, Los Angeles and New Orleles produce a groundwork for an explanation of how marginalized groups find themselves at the periphery of an abstracted city-center as a result of the decentralization of capital and geographical advantage. But to view New Orleans as merely another example of this continuity is to relegate the city to a position it does not, in fact, hold. New Orleans compact development and the demographic implications of scant defensible space have produced a polynucleated city, but one that is unable to spread too far from the center. As a result, the proximity of poverty to wealth is smaller than in either of the above examples, and the community characteristics produced are, therefore, more striking and in opposition to one another.

Verderber approaches post-Katrina New Orleans as a city of variegation, a combination of transient and temporary construction, existing viable building stock, and inserted pragmatic commercial renovation. These types coexist within close proximity, often abutting one another or, in extreme cases, applied directly to existing structures. Verderber posits that the amalgam is the vernacular for the city, co-mingling history, transience, and pragmatics.

The author's survey is careful to approach existing

vernacular produced by cultural insularity, particularly in the locations of poverty. Not coincidentally, these locations were hugely affected by the ravages of the hurricane. Neighborhoods in proximity to the Mississippi River and the levees faced the necessity of rebuilding coupled with the hindrance of poverty. Financial limitations imposed on property and business owners prevent large-scale rebuilding projects. Instead, communities utilize available materials, existing viable structure, and micro-local artistic resources to fill the absence of wealth. Verderber insists that the creation of these "folk" or "outsider" architectures creates a sense of empowerment in economically impoverished communities through cultural expression. This change demarcates disparity in wealth, but also community identity.

3. UNPLAYED MEASURES

Three primary factors have been identified as producing New Orleans' fragmented urban condition. The city's proximity to water and susceptibility to flooding, the construction of Interstate 10, and the high incidence of poverty all contribute to a character of delirium. It stands to reason that an intersection of these factors proves an ideal location to test the ability of delirious architecture and urban design to replace delirium with magnified community identity. One such convergence occurs in the eastern portion of the city, between the neighborhoods of Gentilly Woods and Desire Area. The presence of the Industrial Canal, a spur of Interstate 10, and high poverty rates have contributed to the stagnation of these two neighborhoods by virtue of isolation.

Figure 19
Gentilly Woods and Desire Area
Source: Author, ESRI World Imagery

A close examination of the site reveals the locations of delirium produced by these factors, but also locates areas of opportunity that can be utilized to mitigate these negatives.

GENTILLY WOODS

Gentilly Woods is a predominately (69%) African-American neighborhood that developed in the 1940's around the Higgins Shipyards, a building operation supplying the US Navy with landing craft during World War II Following the end of hostilities, the neighborhood was expanded and further developed to house returning veterans (Data Center). The homes are primarily owner-occupied. One quarter of the neighborhood's residents live below the poverty level, and while this figure is less than New Orleans' average 27% poverty rate, it still resides well above the US national average of 15% (Data Center). The demographic picture presented is one of a middle income suburban area. Spatially, the neighborhood conforms to typical notions of suburban development. Housing is modest in scale and situated on lots that provide both front and backyard areas. A predominant feature of the neighborhood, in terms of land occupied, is the New Orleans Baptist Theological Seminary. Relocated from New Orleans' Garden District in 1953, the seminary's campus occupies Gentilly Woods' western edge and spans the entirety of its north-south axis.

DESIRE

Desire is also a predominately African-American neighborhood, but to a much greater extent than Gentilly Woods, at 95%. Desire's development followed a similar trajectory as Gentilly Woods', though in a much more limited scope due to the area's focus on the support of industry generated by the construction of the Industrial Canal in 1923 (Data Center). One half of the neighborhoods' homes are owner occupied, but poverty levels surpass that of Gentilly Woods, New Orleans and US averages, with 56% of the population living in poverty (Data Center). Residential clustering is predominant, as the majority of homes occupy the western half and southern edge of the area, removed from the industrial activities along the canal.

INDUSTRIAL CANAL

Bounding the site to the east is the Industrial Canal, which connects the Mississippi River, Lake Pontchartrain and the Gulf Intracoastal Waterway. Used primarily for shipping and the transport of industrial materials, the canal's construction between 1918 and 1923 effectively cut New Orleans in two (Dabney, 17). Development along the canal's banks was limited to the support of the shipping industry, and docks and landings converted the waterway into a makeshift harbor. The proximity to transportation sparked an influx of manufacturing and materials processing firms and generated

an industrial corridor that extends the length of the canal. During the 2005 Hurricane Katrina storm surge, the canal's waters breached the floodwalls and levees surrounding them and inundated portions of Desire and Gentilly Woods in addition to the catastrophic flooding of the Ninth Ward to the south.

CHEF MENTEUR HIGHWAY AND INTERSTATE 10

Splitting Gentilly Woods and Desire, Chef Menteur Highway originally served as an "eastern counterpart to [western New Orleans'] Airline Highway" (Verderber, 24). Connecting the city to Biloxi, Mississippi and Mobile, Alabama, Chef Menteur also served as a thoroughfare to downtown. The four lane arterial is at grade on the majority of the site, elevating over the Industrial Canal by way of the Danziger Lift Bridge, and direction of travel is separated by an approximately twenty foot wide neutral ground median.

Interstate 10 provides a second line of demarcation to the south, though elevated between thirty and ninety feet at all points on site before rising to a full 120 foot clearance over the Industrial Canal. A single eastbound exit connects to the site at Louisa Street, and westbound on-ramp provides access from Old Gentilly Road.

SITE LOCATION

It is in the interstitial space between these elements that this project finds its site (Fig 20). Situated on both sides of Chef Menteur Highway and north of Interstate 10, an overscaled and underutilized retail strip provides an ideal location to test a delirious design strategy. Within these confines are a number examples of what Verderber lauds as "… contaminated building types: the gas station, the drive-in motel, the neon sign… [and] the vanishing architecture of the road" (Verderber, ix). The site provides an intersection of transient, suburban and industrial typologies that begs for magnification in order to present a unique image of place. The vacant Gentilly Woods Shopping Center and its attached surface parking offer a direct association to the Gentilly Woods neighborhood, though at mitigated by a drastic change in scale. Similarly, the motels and travel plaza at the eastern edge of the site are an opportunity to celebrate nomadicism and transience, as well as to draw travelers onto the site.
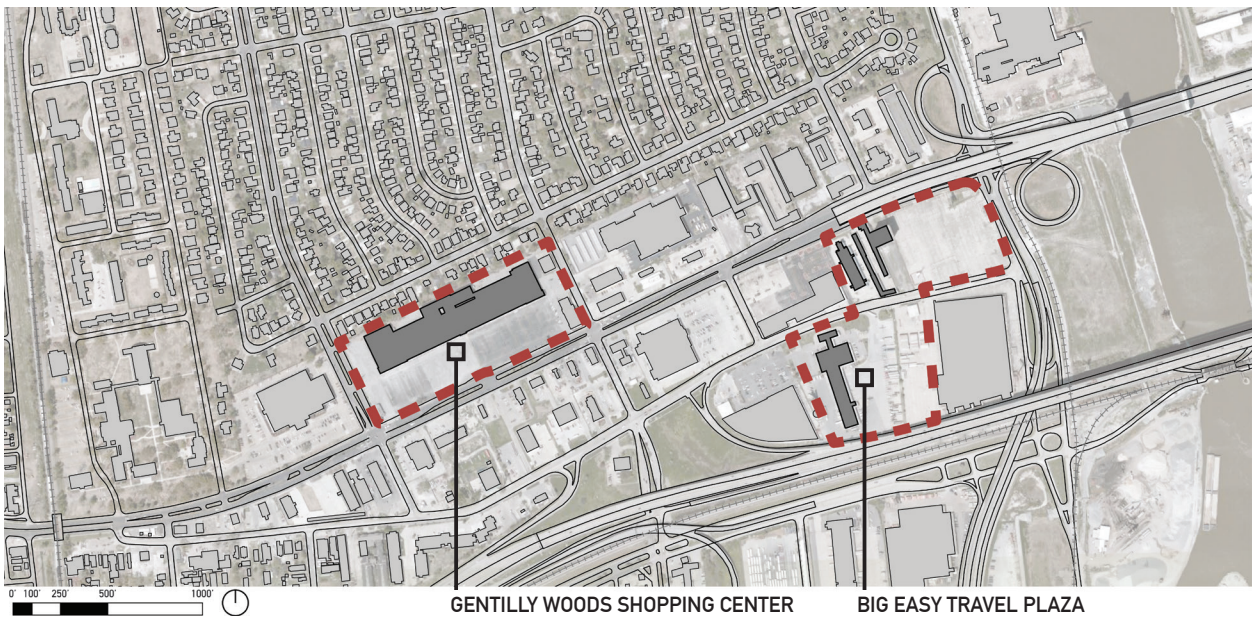
Figure 20
Project Site
Source: Author, ESRI World Imagery

GENTILLY WOODS SHOPPING CENTER   BIG EASY TRAVEL PLAZA

0' 100' 250'   500'   1000'

5. A DELIRIOUS NOISE

The creation of deliriousness requires delirious design strategies. Attention to five principles is necessary in order to magnify the character of the site to the level of unique identity.

REPURPOSE FOUND OBJECTS

Community identity manifests itself in the form of vernacular architecture of a site. Its construction and use relates directly to the needs of the immediate neighborhood and reflects its historical memory. By treating these structures as found objects, their role is eleveated from pragmatic to iconic. Through preservation, these spaces become artifacts on display within the design and serve the role of placemakers.

Gentilly Woods Shopping Center, the Chef Menteur overpass, the Big Easy Travel Plaza and the surface lot to its north are found objects worthy of preservation. Repurposing rather than demolishing marks these locations as significant. They show the site for what it is: a collision of unrelated and sometimes adversarial programs. Conversion of the shopping center into a multi-use space magnifies its association with the adjacent neighborhood. A program consisting of skateboard park, music venue, market hall, artist studios and café draws primarily local interest, but also establishes a destination for those outside of the neighborhood. The Chef Menteur overpass and adjacent

surface lot play the role of bridge between north and south portions of the site. Transforming the lot into a public landscape connects the travel plaza and overpass, with the overpass serving as gateway between two experiences of the site. Continuing the notion of found objects, the park becomes a container for local artifacts, specifically displaced New Orleans signage.

CREATE SPECTACLE

Spectacle serves as a becon for the community by generating interest at both the local and extra-local levels. These nodes of interest project and magnify community idenity not only through the subject matter presented, but also by operating as catch-basins and wayfinding apparati for users of the site.

Both the shopping center and the travel plaza create opportunities for spectacle. Automobile-scaled billboard signage in both areas serves as advertisement for the strip to those passing via interstate or highway. At the site level, these signs relate directly to use. The travel plaza billboard doubles as a projection screen for a drive-in theater adjacent, and the shopping center's billboard marks the location of a skateboard park and music venue. Use is extended to both locals and travelers, and promotes interaction between the two.

PROMOTE OVERPASS CULTURE

Overpass culture is a mitigation of and reaction to the fragmentation of neighborhoods caused by transportation infrastructure. Its improvisational nature points to the necessity of maintaining community connection. Rendering undesirable space as a location for gathering subverts the intended function of the overpass and imbues it with cultural significance. The hidden and mundane space is elevated to a location of interaction, creating a defined and useful place from a seemingly useless condition.

The space beneath Chef Menteur Highway as it rises to meet the Danziger Bridge is, pragmatically, a means of connecting the north and south sections of the site. It also provides an opportunity for delirious placemaking. The structural columns supporting the span become surfaces for mural painting. Used as an organizing element, the columns are replicated in the adjacent park to extend the space and connect overpass and park.

PROMOTE ROADSIDE NOMADICISM

Roadside nomadicism is a celebration of transience and the ephemeral. The ability of these mobile operations to insert themselves into a given space, regardless of intended function, allows for a beneficial hybridization of program.

A space associated with nomads is a guessing game, and with their arrival transforms from its intended use to one determined by the nature of the nomad's business. The roadside nomad is able to construct a temporary place wholly different and sometimes at odds with the space they occupy.

The provision of space for these commercial vehicles on the site invites further association with transience, but also allows transformation of that space depending on presence or absence of nomads. A ring of food trucks in the park creates a carnival atmosphere, while their absence allows for a focus on the signage-artifacts the park contains.

ENGAGE IN TRANSPROGRAMMATICS

Underlying these design strategies is the notion of transprogrammatic space. Verderber identifies this in relation to masker buildings as the ability of a structure's program to change according to the needs of its occupant (93). This suggests the treatment of a building as a malleable container. Anticipating this change is important to the maintainence of vernacular architecture as a sign of local identity. Programming within these spaces becomes necessarily loose in order to promote the repurposing of existing buildings instead of new construction. This strategy allows for the application of layers of significance to a given

structure.

The design for this site co-opts this idea by creating spaces that not only facilitate program changes, but also welcome them. Program flexibility allows the design to change as the needs and characteristics of the neighborhood change, without requiring a wholesale redesign.

DESIGN PROPOSAL

In light of the constraints and opportunities offered by the selected site, and in conjunction with the enumerated design strategies and associated tactics, I propose an urban plan for the no-man's land delirium between the Gentilly Woods and Desire neighborhoods (Fig 21). Two distinct areas form the anchors for a delirious operation: the Big Easy Travel Plaza and adjacent surface lot at the south-eastern edge of the site, and the vacant Gentilly Woods Shopping Center at the north-western edge. Connecting the two areas forms an armature that catalyzes the occupation and repurposing of vacant and underutilized space within the site, and promotes the intersection of travelers and locals at the site level.
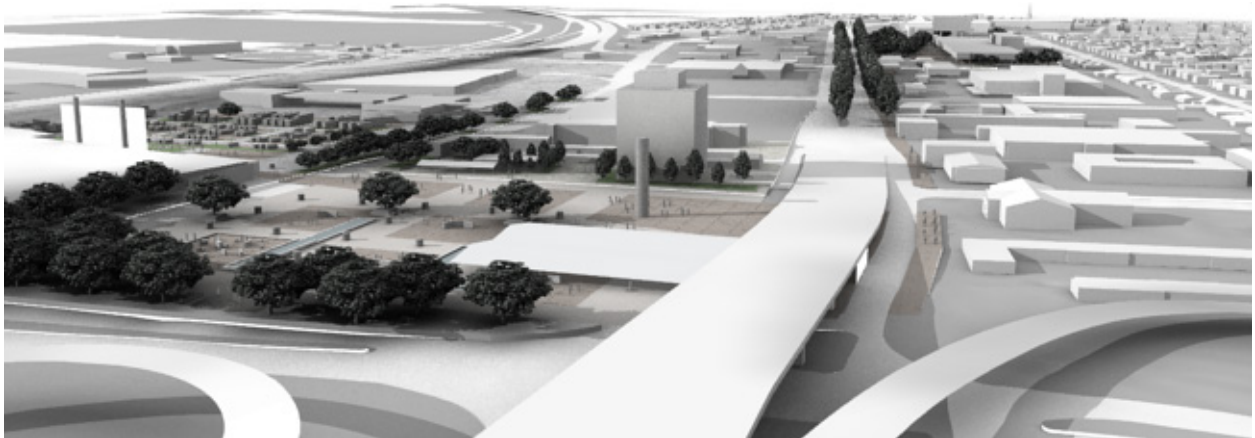
Figure 21
Site Plan
Source: Author

Figure 22
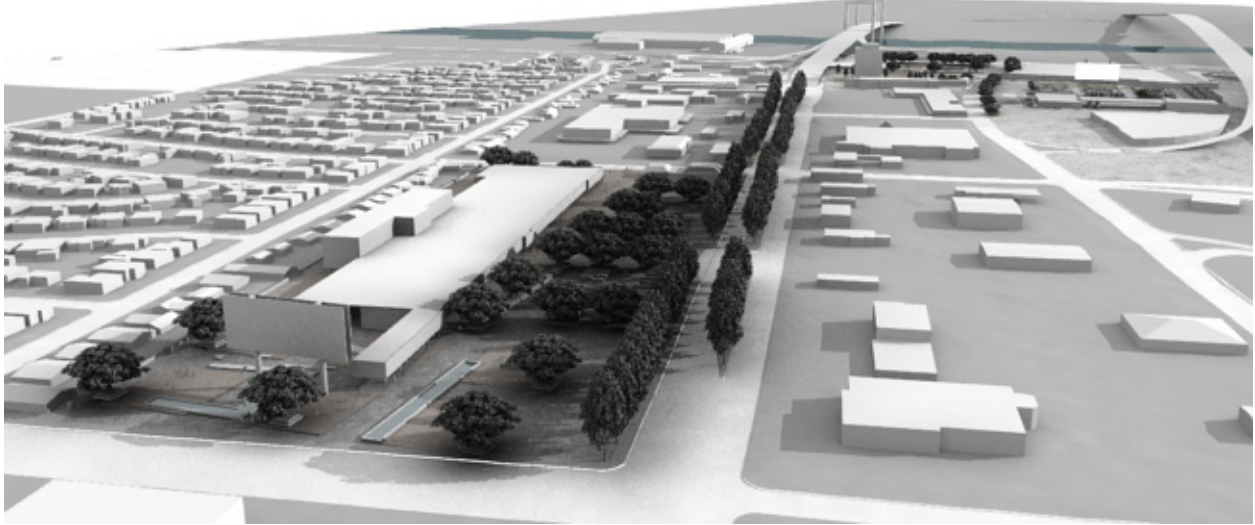Aerial - West View
Source: Author

Figure 23
Aerial - East View
Source: Author

TRAVEL PLAZA AND SIGN PARK

The Big Easy Travel Plaza, as found, is a refuling center
and convenience store serving vehicular traffic from both
Interstate 10 and local access roads. An adjacent parking
lot provides spaces for both semi-trucks and cars, and abuts
the neighboring storage facility. This parking lot provides
an opportunity for the creation of deliriousness through a
repurposing of the space into a drive-in movie theater. This
is accomplished by simply re-orienting existing parking
toward the elevated screen to provide unobstructed views.
The lot supports 165 vehicles, with dedicated semi-truck
parking ringing the outer edges due to their increased height.
Viewing areas are delineated by a change in material from
the in-situ blacktop of the existing travel plaza to colored
concrete pads. Greenspace medians serve to denote the
change in parking type from semi-truck to automobile, and

restrict the movements of the larger vehicles to the edge
of the space. Adjacent to the movie screen, a pedestrian
lawn provides occupiable space to those coming to the site
without a vehicle. Additionally, it begins to direct foot traffic
toward the park to the north through the use of an extended
park element repeated in the drive in: the art column.

Reconfiguring the travel plaza to a drive-in theater serves
several purposes. First, visibility from Interstate 10 and
the plaza's status as a destination for travellers makes
this an ideal location for the intersection of local and extra-
local site-users. The plaza becomes an entry point for the
neighborhood area and extends its use to both the transient
user and the resident. Second, it populates an underused
space by offering a transprogrammatic experience. By day,
the lot serves its initial function in housing customers of
the travel plaza business. But the lot transforms at night,
becoming a location of entertainment and spectacle. It
presents a juxtaposition. A traveller arriving at the plaza is
confronted with an unusual configuration of parking spaces
oriented to a billboard. Interest is developed in the space
through the location's otherness. For an overnighting truck
driver, the travel plaza offers a welcome refuge from a dark
parking lot devoid of activity. Deliriousness is produced
through the application of a entertainment and spectacle
to a seemingly mundane setting, and the drive-in becomes

a marker for the uniqueness of the neighborhood. The travel plaza becomes a found object in two forms. It is an artifact of the neighborhood, created as a reaction to the conditions of adjacent travel infrastructure and transience. But it also serves as a found object to those experiencing it because of the juxatposition of unrelated program. Travellers discovering the plaza and its dual nature associate the site with a revelatory experience, and mark the area as a future destination.

North of the travel plaza, an empty concrete surface lot formerly used to store large industrial machinery is repurposed to a public park space. The park serves as a container for another type of found object: rescued and restored New Orleans architectural-scale signage. The organizing principle of the park are gridlines created by the Chef Menteur overpass structural columns to the north. These columns are reiterated as pillars within the space, providing a blank canvas for mural painting. The park is highly visible from the travel plaza and serves as a satellite component to draw travellers onto the site. Shade is provided both by trees interspersed throughout the park and the deployment of a shed structure that extends from the Chef Menteur overpass. Six rectangular pads constructed from the same introduced concrete found in the travel plaza house the signs, which present themselves as park

follies. The western pads also welcome the presence of roadside nomads in the form of food trucks by maintaining a connection to the streets bounding the north and south of the park. The resultant design is one of loose program that promotes a delirious experience.
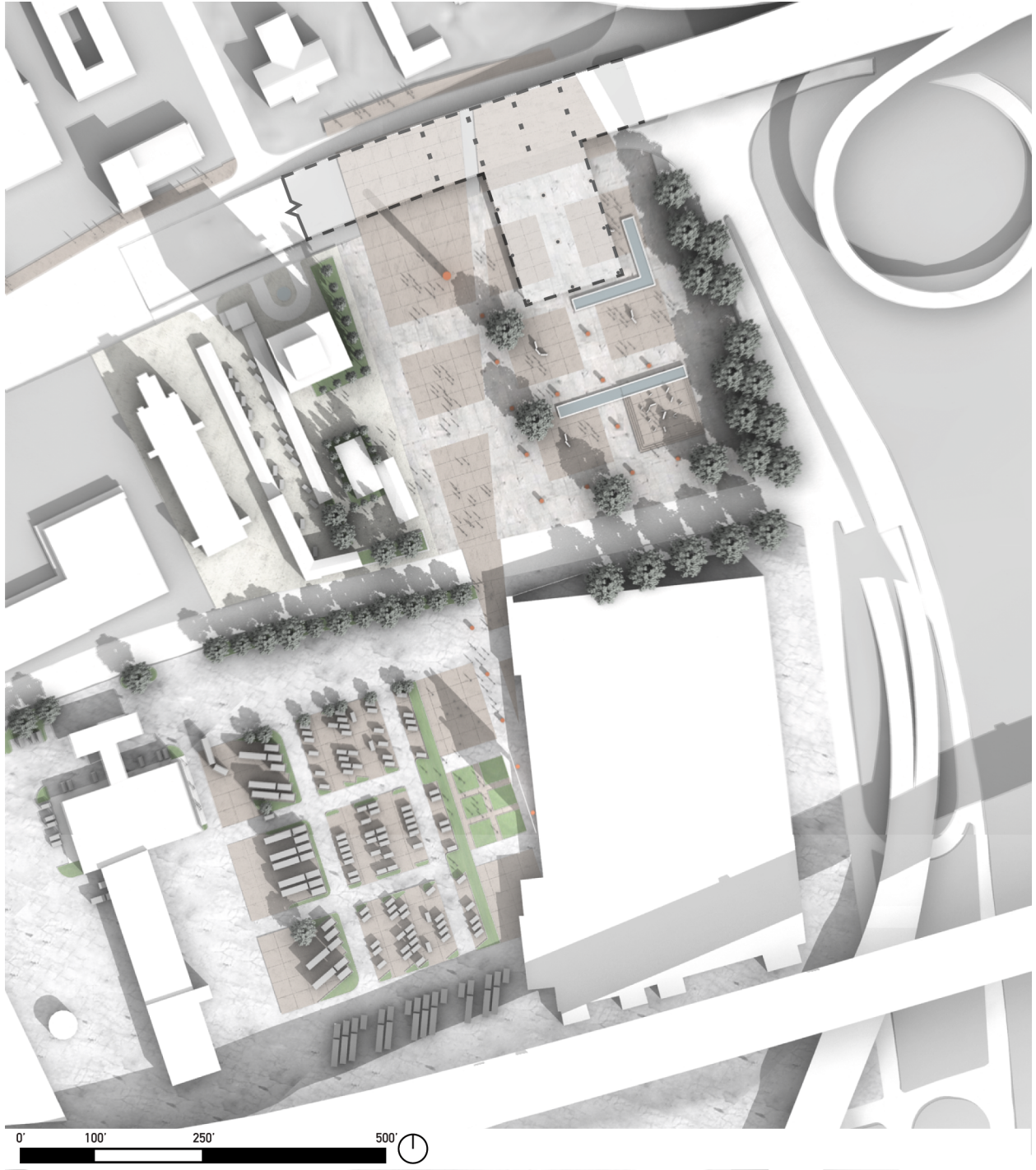
Figure 24
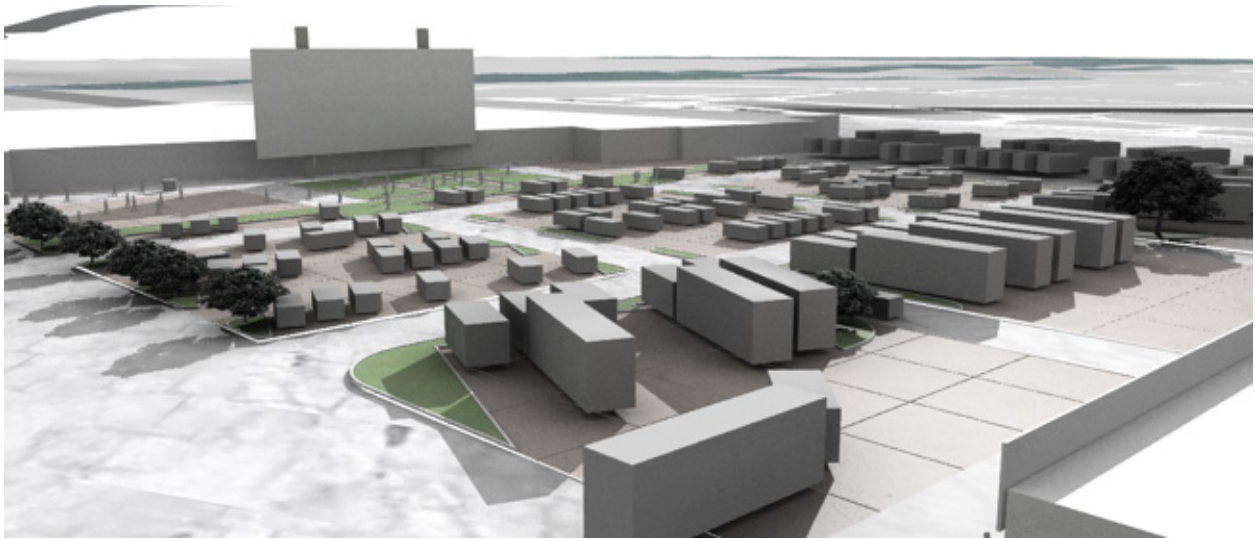Travel Plaza and Sign Park Plan
Source: Author

Figure 25
Travel Plaza Perspective 1
Source: Author

Figure 26
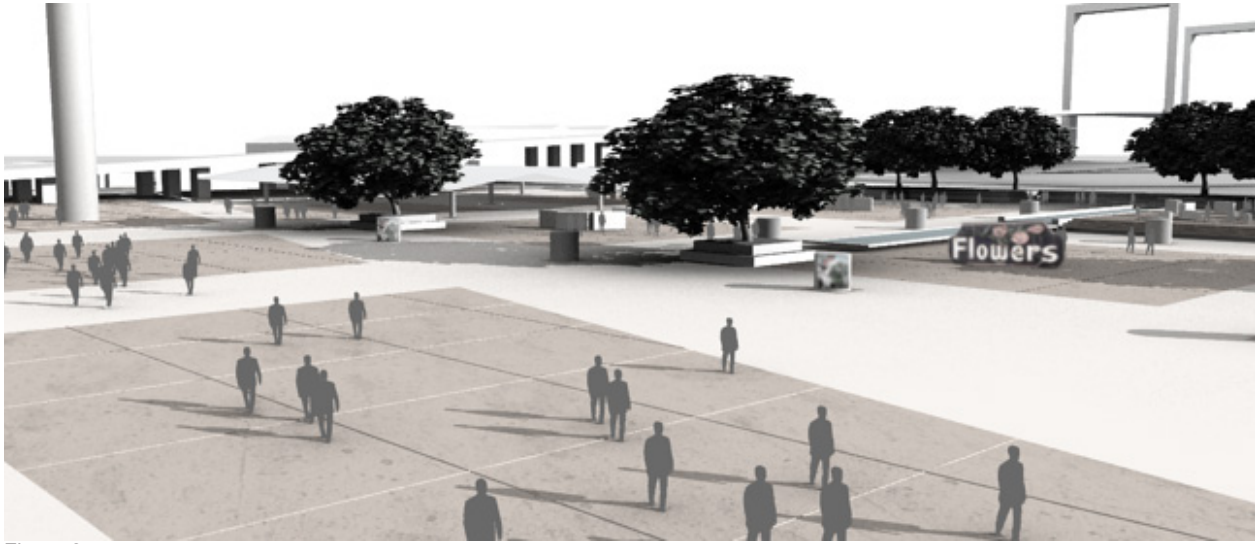Travel Plaza Perspective 2
Source: Author

Figure 27
Sign Park Perspective 1
Source: Author

Figure 28
Sign Park Perspective 2
Source: Author

GENTILLY MARKET

The design for the Gentilly Market at the north-western edge of the site utilizes the existing structure of the Gentilly Shopping Center, a vacant large-scale strip mall and adjacent surface parking lot. Sharing the site is a small bank and adjacent parking. Removal of the street-side facade of the shopping center allows for the creation of a colonnade walkway that connects the western and eastern edges of the immediate site. Maintenance of the original structural system and roof engenders familiarity while simultaneously pointing to the reprogramming of the building. The western portion of the roof is removed to reveal an open-air skateboard park that blends with the landscape treatment surrounding it. This program situates a spectacle at the far western edge of the site and invites pedestrian traffic from the neighborhood to the north. Adjacent to the skate park and located within the building are cordoned spaces arranged for use as artist studios and galleries. Occupying the central portion of the structure is a covered hall space serving as a public market for ad-hoc retail. It is designed to accommodate a variety of vendors through the use of counterspace located at the edges, clearly demarcating the vendor and customer areas. East of the market space are a hybrid music venue and cafe, which share a common kitchen and bar area. The cafe provides both indoor and outdoor seating, spilling into the adjacent public space to the east of the site. This outdoor

seating serves to generate interest from both pedestrian and vehicular traffic abutting the site, and marks the entry to the cross-programmed venue. A public plaza separates the building from the necessary parking to the south, utilizing the concrete construction from the sign park and travel plaza.

Deliriousness is created at the market location through the development of spectacle in the skateboard park. A blurred distinction between the park and the surrounding landscape extends the notion of playfulness to the surrounding area. The skateboard park is not clearly delineated, and it is inferred that the activity will extend to the surround spaces. The wide plaza space also provides a site for the deployment of roadside nomads whose mobile retail operations compliment the established program of the market hall and provide a site of interest for those utilizing only the walkway and not engaged in with the building's program. Finally, the program of the market complex remains a malleable. Maintaining flexibility allows for the possibly of change in use due to fluctuating community needs.
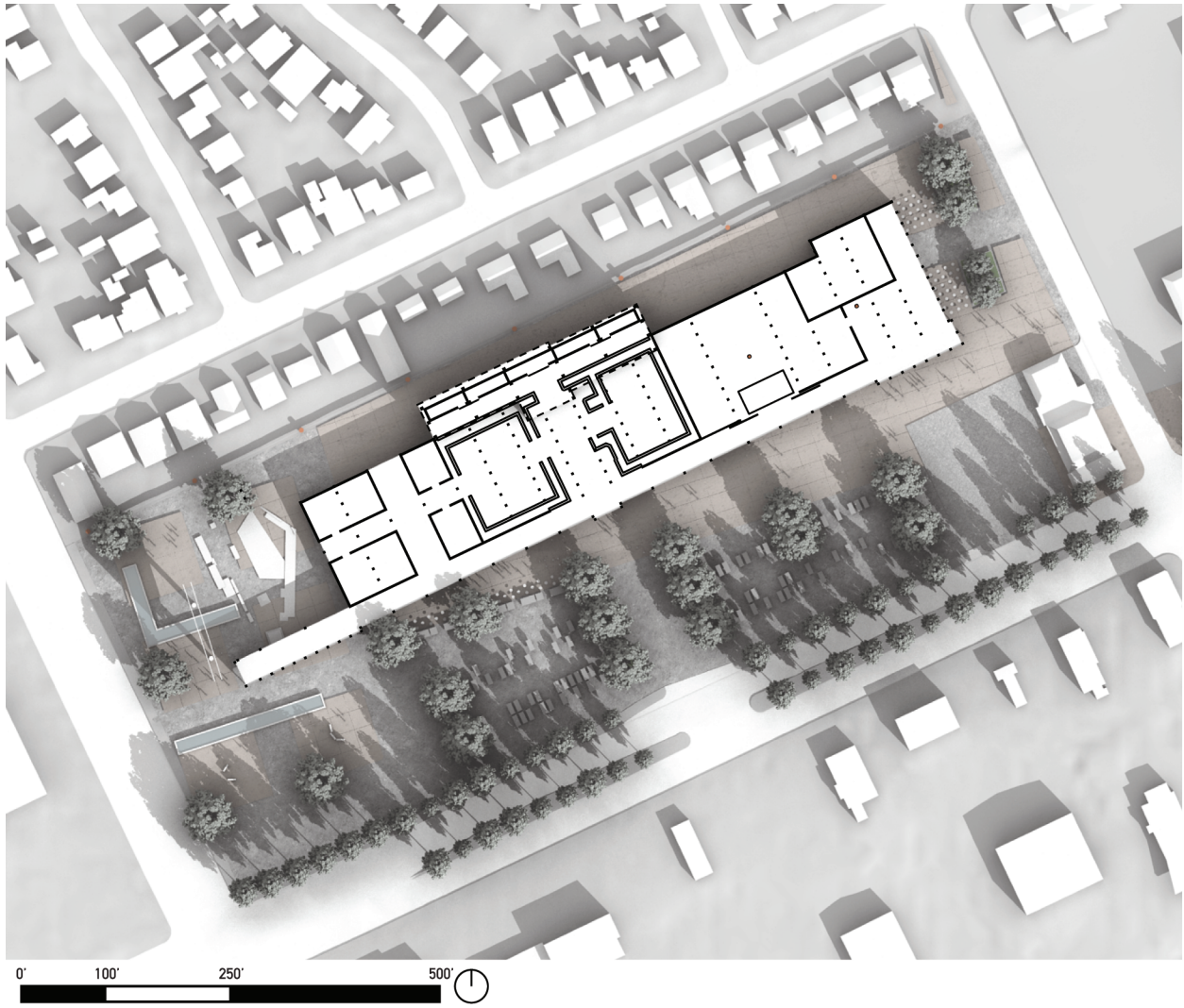
Figure 29
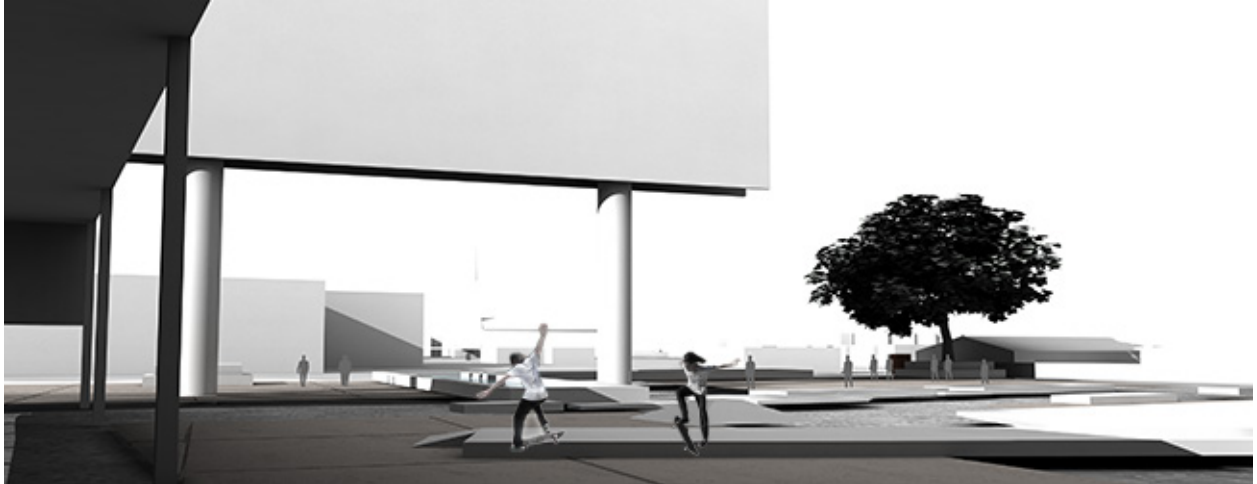Gentilly Market Plan
Source: Author
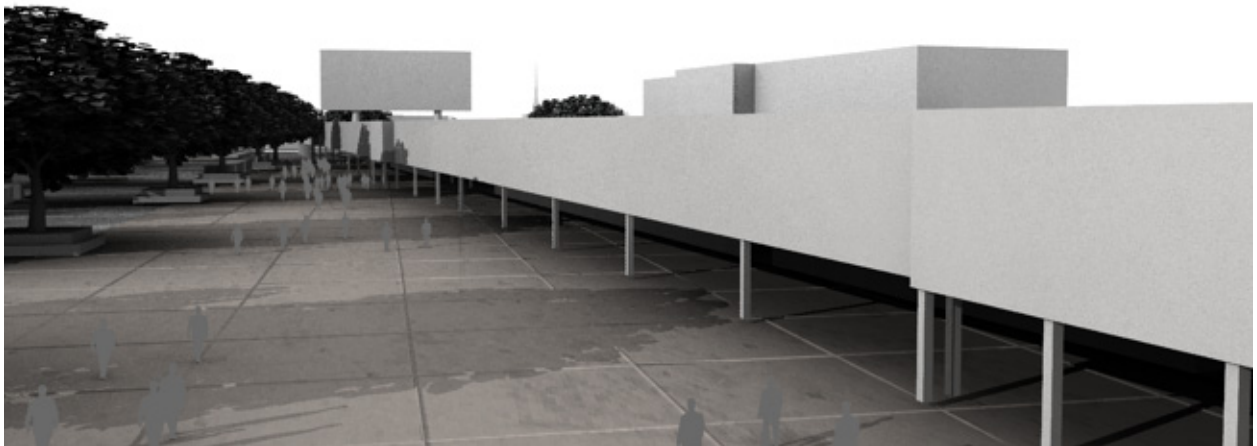
Figure 30
Gentilly Market Perspective 1
Source: Author

Figure 31
Gentilly Market Perspective 2
Source: Author

6. CODA

CONCLUSIONS

The generation of community identity through the use of deliriousness is a project well worth exploring. Approaching the rejuvenation of local identity in terms of infill and economic development is a dangerous proposition, as the character of individual communities is not relfected in the resulting construction. Attention to vernacular architecture and working within existing site conditions allows for a more wholistic reaction to context by placing significance on the needs of the community that generated that context.

The project's success, however, is defined by the simple fact that in the creation of a delirious architecture in a specific neighborhood of a polynucleated city, the design began to take on a polynucleated condition of its own. The travel plaza, sign park and market, though sharing similar strategies and tactics, were realized as individual nodes bearing strikingly different characters. The travel plaza and sign park, by virtue of distance from residential neighborhoods and adjacency to unscaled infrastructure, were renedered as areas of constant fluctuation and unpurposed space. In contrast, the market, because of its close association with Gentilly Woods, was rendered more normative and purposeful. The variation between the two is a surprising outcome, but one that insinuates the usefulness of deliriousness as a design strategy.

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VITA

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