

From the  
**DIRECTOR**

Patricia Gay, executive director  
Preservation Resource Center of New Orleans

— PRC 1974-2009 —  
**How And Why**

Why historic preservation? And how did PRC grow to have such an impact on the city over a 35-year period? I would like to elaborate on the need, and to express tremendous gratitude to those who have worked with us and supported us over the years as we undertook projects and developed programs as a citywide preservation organization to counter the urban decline suffered by cities throughout the country since the mid-20th century as a result of public programs and policies.

There are places throughout the world where the value of the historic built environment is understood as an economic and cultural resource. In these places it was not necessary to develop creative and effective programs to prevent destruction of the historic built environment and to encourage preservation. It was, and is, a given. This is not true everywhere, to be sure, and destruction of the historic built environment is increasing worldwide. But certainly it is true of the places that attract visitors today and of the places that retain their livability and appeal to business investment. Throughout Europe, following massive destruction during World War II, citizens did not hesitate to rebuild their towns and cities, generally to the same scale and to the best quality possible.

The opposite happened in the United States following World War II. Public funding of elevated expressways across urban neighborhoods, urban renewal programs, and public policies encouraging suburban growth generated massive destruction of historic built environments across the country, with a tragic decline of urban populations resulting in major sociological problems. Economically we erroneously celebrated “new housing starts” without any consideration of equal or greater housing losses.

Fortunately, preservationists rose to the occasion and the National Preservation Act of 1966 was enacted. With minimal annual funding, administered through the National Park Service within the Department of the Interior, every state established an office of historic preservation to work in partner-

ship with various federal agencies to implement National Register listings, a review process, federal grants and tax incentives, and other programs. The National Trust for Historic Preservation was designated as the official national organization for historic preservation. We must remember with gratitude Interior Secretary Stewart Udall and Park Service Director George Hartzog for their work in getting this act passed.

Amazingly, given the limited funding compared to other government programs, towns and cities across the country began to experience revitalization. The National Preservation Act of 1966 was not created to “save cities” per se, but actually had that effect as historic preservation programs were put in place. Even small towns benefited, as the National Trust proceeded to create the Main Street program, which brought abandoned small town main streets alive. Other effective programs have been established, often a new one with each new president. (Unfortunately, while decline of cities is a major national problem and could even be said to be a factor in the current economic crisis, there has never been any action taken at the federal level to rebuild cities. HUD was not created to do that in the first place, in spite of its name, and in fact cities declined more after HUD was established.)

With this leadership at the national level, preservationists everywhere began to organize, whether to save their neighborhood, particular buildings, or to promote preservation protection and incentives locally. Certainly this was going on prior to 1966, but from that time on there was more awareness and more inspiration, and more confidence that big government would not randomly come in with the bulldozer. At least there would be a review process. Living in an older neighborhood was becoming less of an anathema, at least for some people.

Population growth in New Orleans peaked in 1960, at 628,000 (and within a much smaller footprint than today). Population decline only generates enormous problems: business and school

closures, vacant buildings, blight, and decline in tax revenues and city services — all great detriments to attracting business investment and residents. The most visible sign of decline is demolition; by the late 1960s, impressive mansions on St. Charles Avenue were coming down, and there were signs of decline in other neighborhoods. At the same time, there was also a growing awareness of the value and appeal of inner-city living — as opposed to daily commuting from suburbs that just did not have as much to offer in the first place — and, quite simply, a growing awareness of the irreplaceable value of older buildings.

New Orleans had a lot going for it, however. While St. Louis, for example, lost two-thirds of its population, New Orleans was in the process of losing ultimately only one-fourth (between 1960 and Katrina). By establishing the Vieux Carré Commission in 1936 with authority to protect this unique urban treasure, the inner city and adjacent older neighborhoods were anchored. The St. Charles Avenue streetcar also helped to assure the preservation of that magnificent urban corridor. Demolition and population loss was not quite so rampant as in other cities. New Orleans had much to work with, in spite of new overhead expressways and failed urban renewal projects.

More action was called for. As at the federal level, New Orleans preservationists — active civically from the 1920s but never quite so challenged as in the 1960s and '70s — rallied and a neighborhood preservation effort

was initiated. Roulhac Toledano and Mary Louise Christovich persuaded the Friends of the Cabildo to sponsor the New Orleans Architecture Series, and the first volume, *The Lower Garden District*, was produced. This was followed by Building Watchers Tours for civic leaders and interested citizens, and soon the Junior League decided to fund an organization that would promote the preservation of the historic architecture and neighborhoods of New Orleans. In 1974, the PRC came into being, with funding for an office and an executive director. By acquiring the beautiful yet derelict 1832 townhouse at 604 Julia St. in 1976, PRC was formulating a pattern that still works today — bricks-and-mortar projects combined with citywide advocacy, education and outreach.

What lies ahead? A great hope that I have is that by the time PRC is 50 years old, there will be a general civic awareness — public, private, all ages and walks of life — of the value of the existing built environment, to environmental conservation, the city's economy, our culture and quality of life. Preferably sooner than later, we will see that demolition is failure, not progress, and that demolition damages the environment and destroys irreplaceable economic and cultural resources. Surely there will be new construction, but the historic built environment is again essential, as the best model. Preservationists have produced evidence that decline of cities, i.e. our very civilization, can be reversed, and that the historic built environment is the best tool for a better future for all.

## In Memoriam

**Judith Bethea**, long-time Preservation Resource Center supporter, passed away March 30 after a courageous battle with cancer. “Her knowledge of historical research and her willingness to share it with PRC have been invaluable over the years,” said Patricia Gay, PRC executive director. For years Judith has been uncovering the most amazing details about the Holiday Home Tour featured houses and the families who have occupied and altered them. As an independent house historian, Judith used her knowledge of databases and archives to help many homeowners and developers determine the original footprint and floor plans of their buildings — an invaluable resource when embarking on a renovation. Beginning with the study of her own house, Judith turned an investigative talent into a second career. She not only wrote hundreds of histories, she also contributed to books and documentaries on the subject. We will miss her.

**Marc Cooper**, a sixth-generation New Orleanian, Francophile, self-taught contractor, former member of the Historic District Landmarks Commission, director of the Vieux Carré Commission and founder of the Bywater Neighborhood Association, passed away of Pick's Disease April 5. “He loved New Orleans and was always searching for ways to champion its cause,” remembers photographer Richard Sexton who shot many scenes for *New Orleans Elegance and Decadence* in Bywater. “The highlight of his professional life was when he became director of the Vieux Carré Commission. It was a triumph for grass roots activism, which is what Marc devoted his life to. I've never met anyone in the preservation movement quite like him.” PRC worked closely with Marc on many projects including the PRC Neighborhood Council, which he helped get off the ground. He will be remembered by preservationists for his many years of neighborhood activism.