

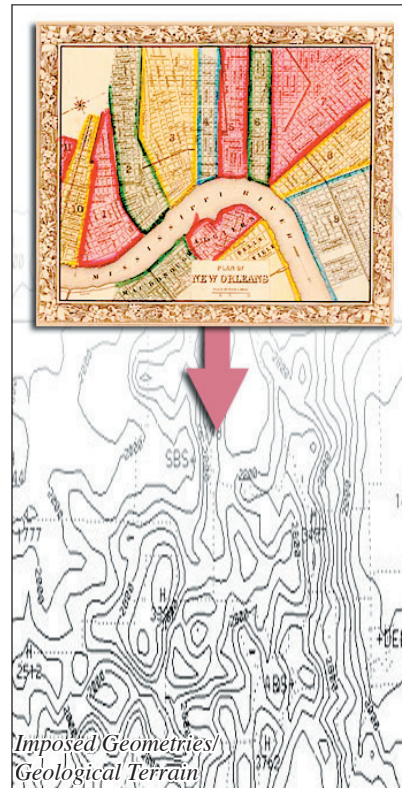
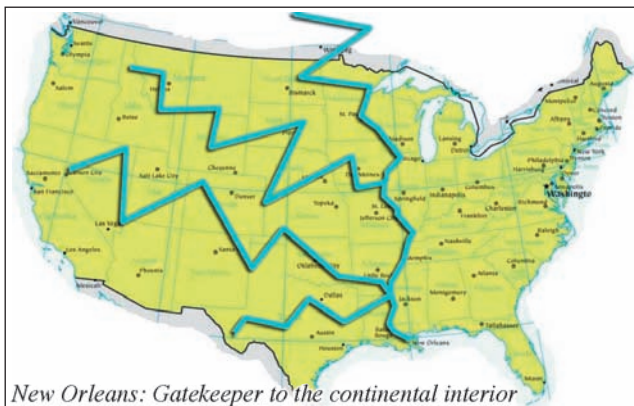


an intersection of forces, natural & man-made
A Pair of Ideal Landscapes?

Site: the geology of New Orleans “resembles a shallow clay saucer filled with layer upon layer of warm jello” (Lewis, New Orleans - The Making of an Urban Landscape 19).

Situation: “an extraordinarily important geographic location . . . [New Orleans] command of the entrance to the Mississippi . . . gatekeepers to the continental interior” (Ibid 7).

New Orleans' inauguration was predicated on political necessity – location – to control the mouth of the Mississippi and the trade that its passage enabled. Thus was born a *political landscape*, in J. B. Jackson's words, a "fictitious place" that is indifferent to the topographic and natural features of that location's terrain. This notion produces a loose-fitting system of order, which, viewed through the lens of Carol Burns in her essay "On Site," incorporates external geometries and mathematics imposed onto an irregular, geological, natural landscape. As Peirce Lewis makes clear in his Making of an Urban Landscape, the majority of southeast Louisiana is rather entirely unsuitable for any significant construction. The earth in this region is a composting, soupy, swampy mess, and only at a depth of 70 feet may driven piles begin to support larger buildings.



Yet the inauguration and maintenance of a city as a "first stop" on the Mississippi somewhere in the region was inevitable, and as the safest, driest place in the region, the high natural levee where the French Quarter stands was chosen for Bienville's inaugural grid. Over time, a division of haves and have-nots would play out accordingly, with wealthy individuals situating on the high levees, near the cosmopolitan center of town or in plantation houses, while the poor were forced to lay claim to less desirable land, backing off the levees into the below-sea level backswamps between the river and lake Pontchartrain.



G u m b o C i t y

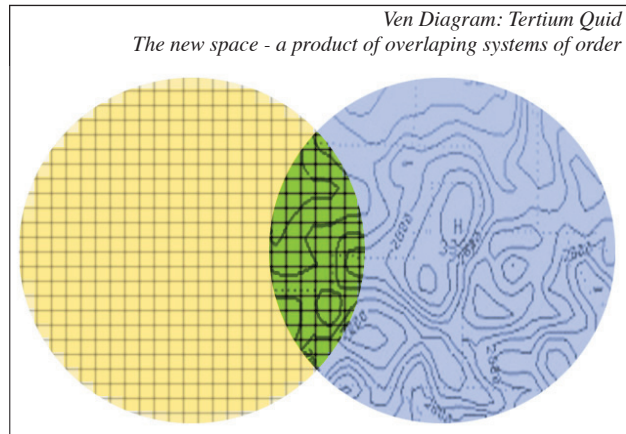
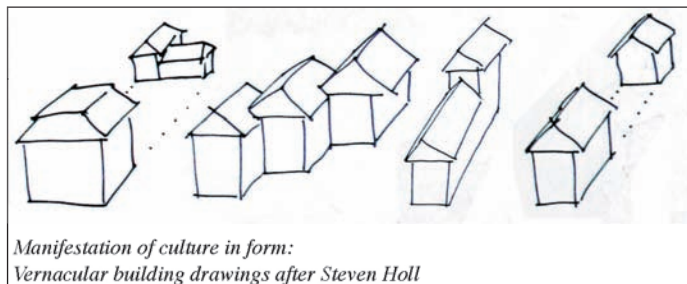
An intersection of cultural values: Theme and Variation

The values of New Orleans are particular to the city, and distinguish it from any other city in the world - at a *global scale* of perspective. A collective understanding, a cohesive aura or essence of New Orleans, is generated and perpetuated by recorded histories, personal narratives, and the media. That cohesion gives way to heterogeneity of values at the *local scale* of the city, reflecting the histories of converging cultures. The flavor or theme of the city is still evident, however, in variations on the New Orleans riff, maintained in varying interpretations of the inhabitants' diverse values.

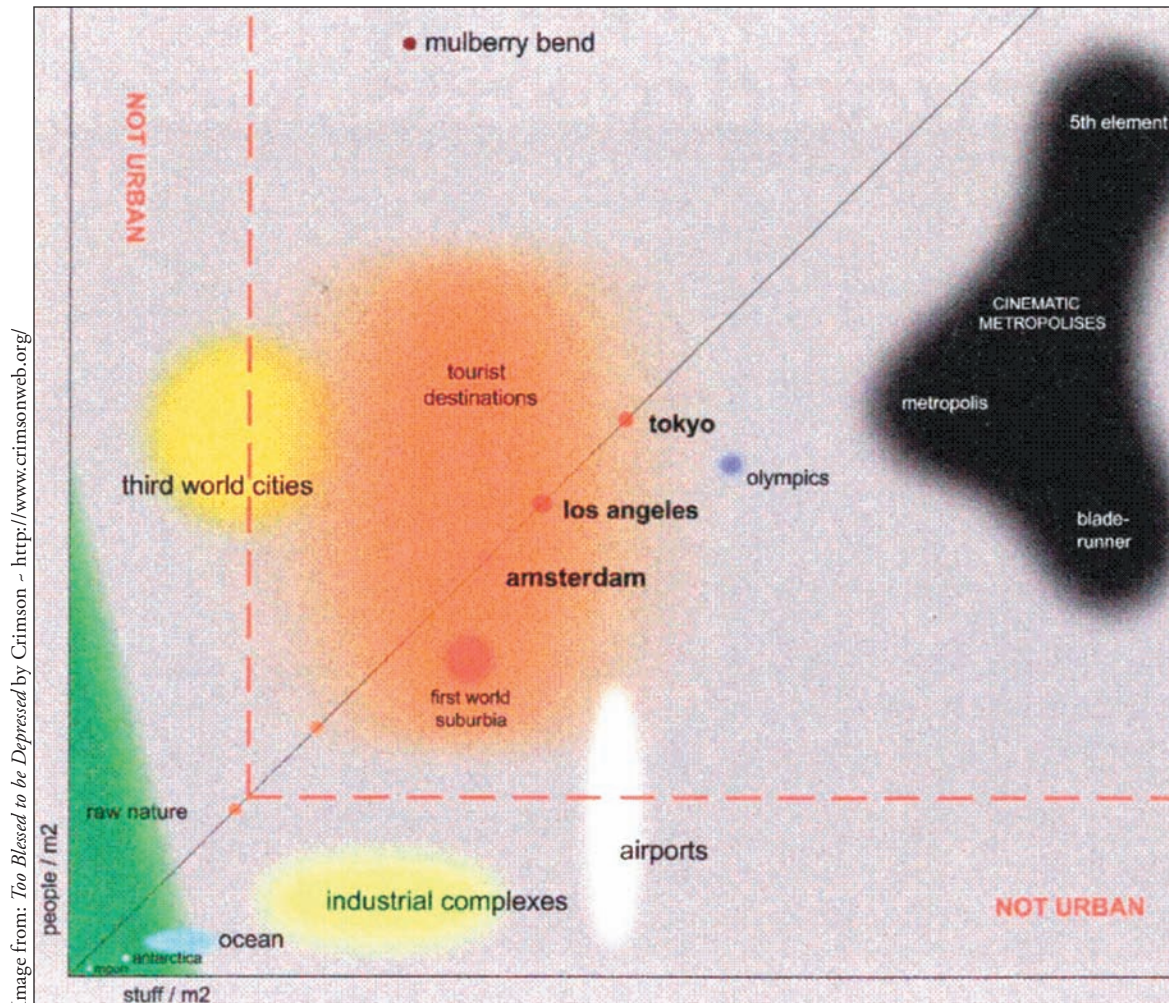
As Professor Morrish described in lecture, New Orleans' "tidal groundings" were politically shifty. Lewis, in "Stages of Metropolitan Growth" identifies the first two periods of the city's maturation in terms of changing national ownership: Initially Spanish and French, then—in an interesting parallel to D.C.—as American's "western capital." Paralleling the political shiftiness is that of a physically shifting environment: the geological conditions (limited high grounds surrounded by soggy muck) resulting from the Mississippi's historical desire to leap out of its current path and chose a more expedited route to the Gulf.

Morrish's *Civilizing Terrain* and J. B. Jackson's "A Pair of Ideal Landscapes" provide the terms to explore the effects of these conditions:

A confluence of diverse peoples—the multiplicity of founding groups, and their constituents' diverse national and ethnic composition—took place within a particularly unstable geological zone—a space-precious environment. Ian McHarg describes a city as "a form, derived in the first instance from geological and biological evolution . . . a sum of natural processes and adapted by man." He continues to describe the use of the city by man as "a sequence of cultural adaptations," of which certain patterns, events, and traditions endure, and "enter the inventory of values" that are commonly held within that particular city.



In New Orleans, the unique combination of stage (place) and actors (cultures) engendered a wonderfully complex set of values, manifested in what J.B. Jackson calls a man-made *inhabited landscape*. In this creole city, the salad bowl fills with gumbo: rice, shrimp, beans, crawdads, vegetables and spices from differing cultures converge. Thus, naturally constrictive conditions of terrain engender the proliferation of close-fitting spaces that is evident in the city form and culture: the dense metropolitan fabric, an architectural vernacular of varied typologies, forms and ornamentation, rich and eclectic foods, innovative developments in music leading to jazz, all of which contributed to New Orleans' unique character. In his Miller Center lecture, Morrish described this cosmopolitan environment as an Eco Tone, adapting a term from environmental science that describes the zone of overlap—a ven diagram's *tertium quid*—between adjacent ecologies. Furthering the evolution of this Eco Tone, the 1884 World's Cotton Exposition extended new connections to Latin America and even Asia, and with them came an infusion of new architectures to the city. The advent of Wood's water pump and development of new infrastructure enabled greater expansion of New Orleans which cyclically ensured further expansion of infrastructure. In the 20th century, in the name of progress, the swamps would be drained and inhabited, filling out thousands of acres of land beyond the already developed natural levees.



T o u r i s t C i t y

How do cities migrate through the space of this graph as they evolve? What composes the tourist city? What are the requisite densities of people per square meter and stuff per square meter? What role does a city's cultural and commercial history play in the form and type of tourism that city sustains? What is the role of the media? Where is the line between constructed landscape and raw nature?

Peirce Lewis, in the second edition of his Making of an Urban Landscape, describes the development of new public infrastructure in New Orleans to attract tourism. The rejection of Robert Moses' riverside highway project, and the World's Fair of 1984, recalling the Cotton Expo of one-hundred years earlier, laid claim to decrepit wharves and outdated port

facilities as public spaces. As it turns out, the "public" the government and investors had in mind was an imported, business commuter and tourist population. Construction of convention centers, shopping, the streetcar, and the infrastructure

to support and access it all, was not directed at the majority of the city's permanent residents. Throughout this redevelopment, a focus was on directing attention towards the previously obscured river itself. The

placement of these "public amenities" on the constructed levee deepened the significance of that infrastructure: by reconfiguring the waterfront Identity—the Use Value of that place—maintaining the city's dependence on

the Exchange Value of that landscape of riverfront infrastructure.

The sprawl of suburbia beyond Lake Pontchartrain via new infrastructure—Mid-lake causeways and eastern Interstate 10—facilitated white flight from the city. Brinson's new Mississippi River port, removed from the infrastructural scaffold propping tourism facilities, accommodate the *transfer* of cargos "too numerous to mention" from

sea-going vessels to river-going barges. This reveals a lack of real local industry in New Orleans, and leaves a larger hole for the commerce of tourism to fill. These trends continue to support a city which depends on the river for its livelihood, however in ways that are strangely transformed from the city's original dependency. Thus by inventing new ways to depend on the river, the city has perpetuated the army corps increasingly complex engineering feats to keep the river in its place.

As development along the Mississippi grew and became increasingly depended upon, the maintenance of the

Mississippi in its course has become crucial. Interestingly, the river is used today in ways that it was not, originally. The image of the city—its identity—has been transformed from industrial-commerce center to tourist-

commerce center. While the Exchange Value of the Mississippi River is maintained (it still draws profit to the area) its Use Value the has changed. Thus the constructed landscape along the river, within and beyond New Orleans, continues to demand maintenance. As John McPhee describes in Atchafalaya, the

need to protect New Orleans from flooding has required incredible feats of engineering not only in that city, but in areas to the north. Locks and spillways like the "old river control" and a chain of levees define the environment.

In this transition from a "First Nature" to a "Second Nature," the

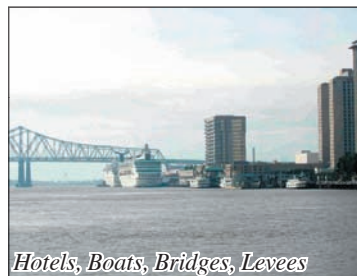
infrastructure has become the landscape. The effects of the river's containment in artificial levees has caused sediment to flow much further towards the river's delta, causing the level of the Mississippi to rise, necessitating levees improvements and additions all along its course, which continue to have the same tide-raising effects. The construction necessitates further construction. Meanwhile, the continuous draining of the backswamps in New Orleans has caused the land to sink further and further below sea level. The newly dry subsurface settles and compacts, damaging the rigid urban infrastructure and housing stock.



Old River Control



Tourist-centric Riverfront Uses

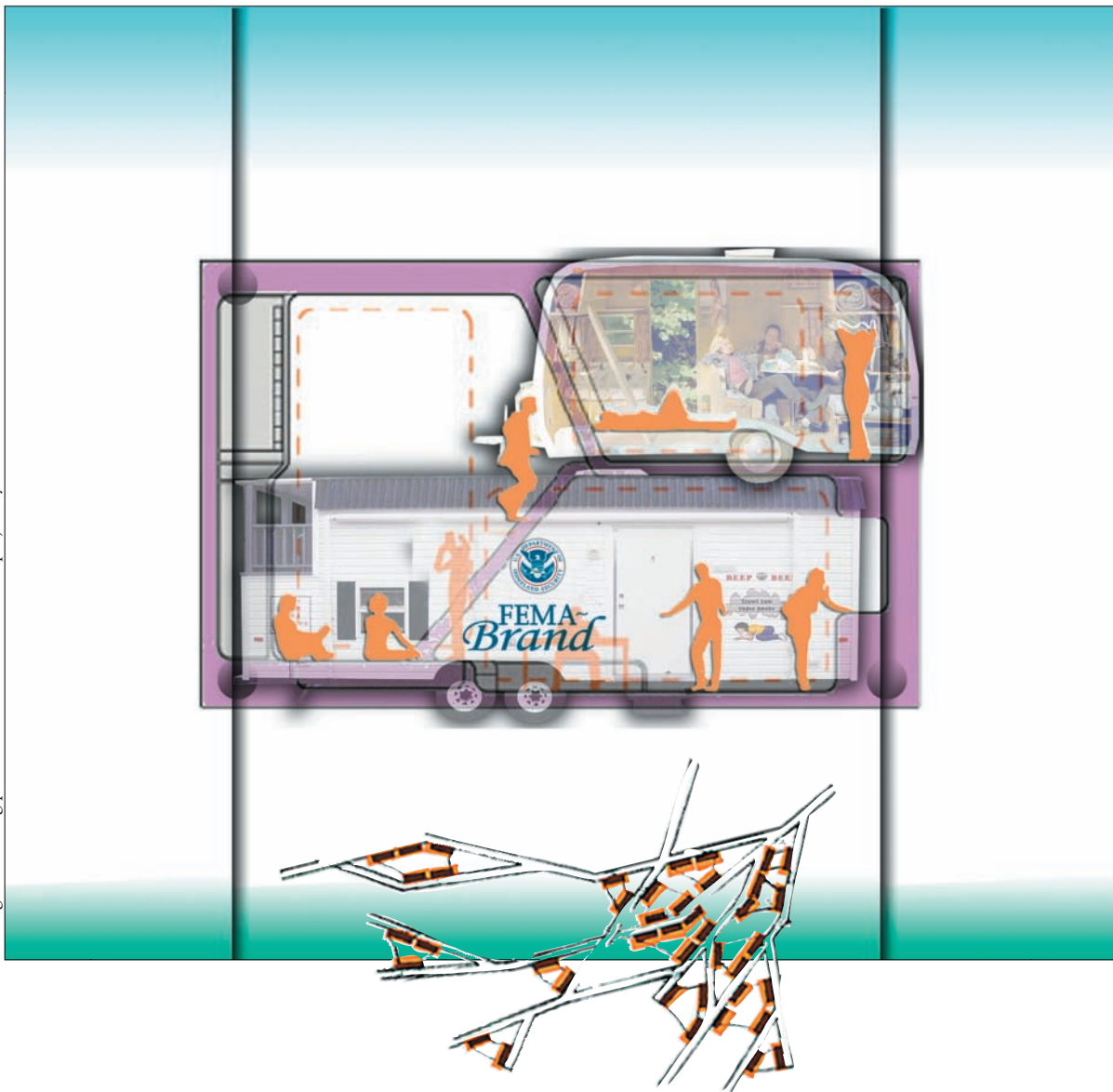


Hotels, Boats, Bridges, Levees



Tourist-centric urban infrastructure

Montage containing plan and section from BOASE project by Force4 - www.force4.dk



The Single Family Detached American Dream

Finding solutions to the immediate crises in the Flood-Damaged Gulf Region is crucial. However, intelligent planning now could make re-acclimatizing to "normal" life easier down the road. We must think about how best to construct a new, more equitable "normal" as well. One that takes cues from the origins of New Orleans: Mixed use and mixed income. Central to this notion is the development of win-win initiatives, in which symbiotic relationships are drawn between social, economic, and environmental solutions.

Boase Project by Force4: www.force4.dk



"A big success story, a week or so ago, is the Folgers Coffee plant in New Orleans. They went out and established an area for a trailer park there and were able to take folks from East New Orleans and St. Bernards Parish and put them in travel trailers at the work site. That is a win-win situation, the workers were in a better housing situation and we all have Folgers Coffee."

—from FEMA briefing October 12, 2005

fema.gov/txt/media/101205_briefing.txt

FEMA is attempting to generate as much transitional housing as possible. The watch word in this initiative, according to the briefing, is "privacy," a core component of the Single-Family Detached American Dream. The desire is to get displaced individuals and especially families, out of shelters and hotels, and into Bridge Housing. In the New Orleans area, the solution being employed is centered around the introduction of trailer parks, coordinated closely with each parish president to create appropriate densities for the damage levels, and ecological, infrastructural, social, and economic conditions in each specific area. FEMA has stated its commitment to repopulating New Orleans as quickly as is feasible, without putting people in harm's way. In the briefing, talk about getting workers is encouraging, but one hopes those workers are displaced residents, and that they have a job waiting for them upon their return. Creating FEMA cities is a shaky investment and renders a given site dangerous in which no provisions for employment are available. One wonders about the opportunity of jobs working to remediate damaged sites,

rebuilding infrastructure and schools, repairing damaged housing stock, etc., can be made available—whether a win-win solution can be envisioned in which communities are rebuilt in temporary forms, strengthened by the duty of a local rebuilding project. Can training be organized to give skills to the unskilled which they can take with them into the private market following the relief efforts? Perhaps it is a bit outrageous to propose a pattern of reuse for the trailers after the parks are cleared, but it is a proposal of the bold, unusual sort that may offer unique opportunities—not just for rebuilding the city of New Orleans—but for reinventing it. Force4 www.force4.dk is a group of Danish designers who created a project for inhabiting brownfield sites while they are remediated. It incorporates residential units that are pinned on columns, raised above the ground, and accessed by a web of ramps and elevated pathways. Taking the FEMA trailer as a given, self-sufficient residential unit, and elevating it on a columnar system, the model

could be appropriated for New Orleans in a surprising and historically reflexive manner.

By creating a systematic approach to reinhabiting the areas of New Orleans that are below sea level that allows the intricacies and unintentional, organic relationships and connections to appear, the historical spirit of overlapping cultures takes on physical form. Units could vary in size and

amenities to accommodate differing levels of wealth, they could attach to large buildings, and touch down on the high ground, without having to rely on the back-swamp levels for transportation.

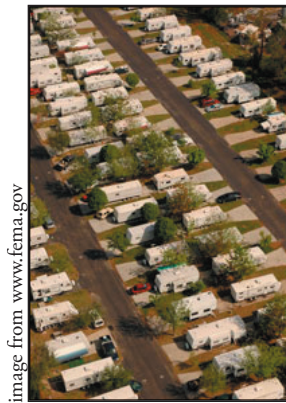


image from www.fema.gov

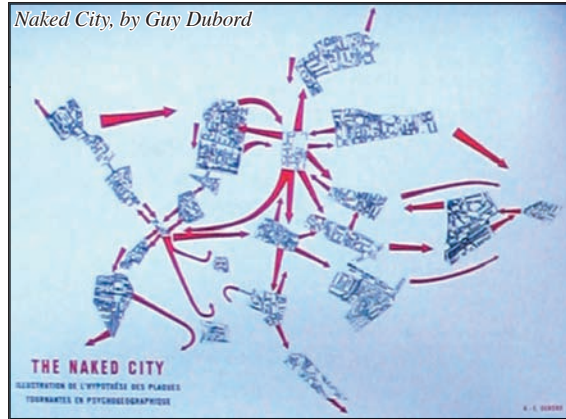


Boase Project by Force4: www.force4.dk

The visit to Washington D.C. reminded me of the rich and complex intricacies of a city. I am thinking of Kevin Lynch's book, *The Image of the City*, in which he introduces the concept of "place legibility" and "mental representations"—paths, edges, districts, nodes, and landmarks. By identifying and extracting these city-building elements, a person can learn how the physical intricacies of the city combine to compose its richness and complexity. My understanding of New Orleans is academic, not experiential. Despite some excellent narrative accounts of the city, my understanding remains largely general: I can comprehend the layout, orientation, topography, flows, infrastructure, in a generic mind-map. But this image of the city is not personal. On the tour of Washington D.C., we made numerous stops. Granted, the route we followed was premeditated by Morrish to present several specific views of "the Nation's Capital." Still, at several of the stops I picked out certain things to draw, producing a personal mind-map of the city. Reflecting on the experience retrospectively, with my drawing as a literal map of my memories, I can begin to break down my "gut reactions" to the city, by looking at the Lynch's mental representations: the components of those places I chose to draw. They include the Edges of the rivers: the Anacostia's separation and distinction of discrete Districts, and the Potomac's connection between the Crystal City and K-Street area, via the Path of the Key Bridge. The nexus of paths and infrastructure in the Node of Union Station, and the confluence of political agendas at the node of the National Mall, as well as the significance of Landmarks

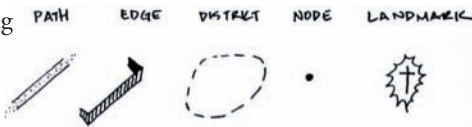


New Babylon, by Constant



like the stone district markers, the Vietnam Memorial and the Washington Monument. I hope to be able to have a similar experience in New Orleans someday, enriching my academic understanding of the city with a personal, narrative investigation. Still, a visitor's image of the city can only approximate the resident's image of the city. I am inspired by the Situationists' psychogeographic maps: Paris, "The Naked City," by Guy Debord and New Babylon,

by the artist Constant, found in *Situationists: Art, Politics, Urbanism*. These maps, collages of the political landscape—capital buildings, major boulevards—and the inhabited landscape—personal, primary routes through the politically secondary roads, between special, personal destinations. When an inhabitant customizes his use of the city, he reinvents its image. The political landscape of the city begins to take on the image of an inhabited landscape. My understanding of both New Orleans and Washington D.C. are academic and informed by the political landscape. I don't have a good hold on the inhabited landscape that exists within and under the surface of the political landscape. That comes with time. Purposefully, I sat next to Kathy Cacciola, who lived in D.C. for 7 years, so she could tell me all about her personal, inhabited landscape as we crossed its path in our tour bus: the good late night food, the best live music, "her" bridge, "her" park, "her" building. I wonder how personal narratives can inform the rebuilding of New Orleans. Can parts of residents' experiences live on in new forms? And can opportunities be made in the new image of the city, for equally rich narratives to begin once again to unfold?



Mental Representations, after Kevin Lynch