Neighborhoods:

**Faubourg Marigny’s Inner City Functionalism**

Five years ago, researchers from the Tulane University School of Architecture scoured New Orleans in search of the kind of place that urban planners like to call a “functional inner city neighborhood.”

That, in layman’s terms, means the kind of neighborhood that most New Orleanians grew up in—a generation or two ago, back before the days of six-lane expressways, high-rise apartments and tract houses in the suburbs. Back in the days when you walked to the corner grocery store, rode the streetcar to work and sat out on the stoop in the soft, familiar dusk of a place you had known from birth, talking to your next-door neighbors.

Those days, Tulane discovered, still survived in the Faubourg Marigny. And not only was Marigny a functional inner city neighborhood, it was also historic—old, stable, and intact, still offering hope for civilized life in an increasingly unfun-]

cional city.

So Marigny became the subject of a study, which led to more studies. What was this miracle, this functional inner city neighborhood? Where did it come from and how and why did it work?

One answer that clearly emerges from all the studies is that the basic design of Marigny has not been significantly tampered with since the days when the neighborhood was first carved out of the plantation of Bernard Xavier Philippe de Marigny de Mandeville, immediately downriver from the Vieux Carre, back in 1805.

Street names have changed and successive waves of new residents have been assimilated, but the neighborhood is still predominantly made up of finely crafted 19th-century structures housing a population that remains as ethnically diverse as the city itself. The neighborhood’s few 20th-century intrusions—the seven-story Philippe Inn at Washington Square, a sprinkling of “Mansard Revival” apartments—have barely dented Marigny’s distinctly Creole facade, and the only forms of urban renewal the neighborhood has undergone are the kinds of restoration and rehabilitation that proud homeowners do for themselves.

What the Marigny experience suggests, in fact, is the extreme folly of meddling with functional inner city neighborhoods. And in this case, it is reasonably safe to report, the technocrats who shape the city’s physical destiny are going to have to leave well enough alone, like it or not.

For as a result of Marigny’s rediscovery—and as a result, too, of highly effective neighborhood organizing—the proud old section has been added to the federal National Register of Historic Places. Securely designated as a “historic place,” Marigny can now be effectively preserved from the kind of rape and pillage that all but destroyed the Central Business District and gouged great swaths through functional inner city neighborhoods all over our urban landscape.

The specific threat to Marigny was the proposal for construction of a new bridge across the Mississippi River at Press Street, with a massive elevated roadway cutting through the heart of the neighborhood and with access ramps tying the bridge to Rampart Street. December’s announcement that Marigny had won designation as an historic place helped to force official planners to settle for a span proposal immediately parallel to the present Greater New Orleans Bridge.

Much of the credit for that victory goes to Eugene D. Cizek, the 34-year-old Tulane architecture professor who not only discovered Marigny as a functional inner city neighborhood but also decided to live there. As head of the Faubourg Marigny Improvement Association, Cizek has lobbied unstintingly for the neighborhood’s preservation. As a trained architect, urban planner and social psychologist, he knows how to use skills and language of a technocrat in behalf of non-technocratic values. And as a resident of Marigny, he has proved—in his innovative restoration of his own properties at 926-932 Kerlerec Street—that “preservation” does not have to be dull.

“Faubourg Marigny shows,” says Cizek, “is that you don’t have to have high rises for reasonably high density. And Marigny is a real ‘people place,’ unlike the Vieux Carre, which is increasingly becoming a ‘people place’ mostly for tourists. I think it’s very nice for a city to be able to share its architecture and history, but I don’t think that that sharing should be done at the expense of the people who live in the area.”

Well, people most emphatically do live in Marigny, and people do plan to stay there, because they have no intention of moving somewhere else. That is probably the best definition of a functional inner city neighborhood, and of a functional city as well.

In the meantime, says Cizek, “All we need is a drug store.” And a cherry phosphate, a banana split and a nickel for the trolley, clear out to Carrollton.

—Philip D. Carter