Streetcars are getting a new old look

O nly in New Orleans can a housetop schoolgirl, an honored cardinal of the Roman Catholic Church and a sophisticated townsmen rub shoulders without ever getting a second glance. In this city of masks and mirrors, everywhere rides the structure.

The streetcars of New Orleans are more than public transportation; they're an institution. They symbolize the charm and romance of the city. A running ride along the "neutral ground" of St. Charles and Carrollton avenues means rubbing shoulders with humanity; it means being a part of the city in a very real way.

The 13.2-mile route forms a crescent from Canal Street at Canal Street in the business district through the oldest and most elegant part of uptown, around the French Quarter and up Carrollton to Thebes Avenue. Along the way, the streetcar neighborhood is dotted with historic churches and Loyola and Tulane university.

People of all ages, sizes and shapes get on and off, with relaxed Southern ease toward decision that even Tennessee Williams might not have imagined.

The city's public transportation has had an unappreciated life. The New Orleans and Carrollton Railroad began operation in 1833. Steam-powered cars traveled along the Carrollton Line throughout several "territories" or suburbs to the resort town of Carrollton.

Following the Civil War, horse-drawn streetcars provided a quicker city-wide transportation network. Finally, in 1881, the first cars using overhead electricity went into operation. In 1887, a complete reorganization of all power companies and railways led to the New Orleans Public Service taking over the operation.

In 1937, the current streetcar, built by New York manufacturer Sharp and Kustrin of High Point, N.C., was introduced to the line. Beginning in the 1940s, the streetcars were gradually replaced by buses.

Streetcars in various stages of renovation at the huge streetcar barn on Willow Street in New Orleans

Mechanic Dwight Hander checks out an electric motor

and the Canal Street Line was shut down in 1964, leaving only the St. Charles Line.

In 1975, the streetcar line was named to the National Register of Historic Places. The line was declared a National Historic Mechanical Engineering Landmark in 1985.

Operated today by the Regional Transit Authority (RTA), the cars still run along St. Charles. They are getting all the attention they deserve—a complete overhaul and facility.

To a streetcar aficionado, the Parish Thomas car is as beautiful, as a vintage Rolls Royce. To the New Orleansman who can recognize these cars, they are things of beauty. Every nut and bolt, every piece of wood and steel is in precious rare gum — and deserves every bit as much attention.

The restoration of the current streetcar, part of the $20 million project that has included replacement of the track bed and new rails, restoring the 1881 Carrollton

Streetcar Barn on Willow Street and refurbishment of the cars themselves.

The total cost of the project is $47 million," says Valerie Robinson, RTA public affairs director. She explained that $55 million came from the federal government and the rest was raised by a local bond issue. After much discussion, it was agreed that the cars would be operated in New Orleans by the people who had made all of them for years. All the work is being done in the barn on Willow Street, and most of the related services are being handled by Louisiana business.

Copying Voi Duhon, general foreman of all operations, is M. Clowery and straight-forward. A native New Orleanian, he's been with RTA for 37 years, and when he starts to talk about the streetcar project, he doesn't help him being excited.

"We are using 98 people in rebuilding (Details on Page 12)"

Rolling on the Riverfront Line

S ome 5,000 people a day experience a ride on the Riverfront Streetcar Line in New Orleans.

The line, inaugurated Aug. 14, 1940, is a popular route on the streetcar transit system that has been serving the city since 1834. The six-vin-

Cabinets that originally lined the line were re-

structed by craftsmen at the Carrollton Barn as part of the Regional Transit Authority's extensive restoration project. In addition to those Per-

hey Thomas cars familiar to those seen on the St. Charles Streetcar Line, the riverfront boasts three Australian-made Mulhousen W-2 cars. They have been adapted for handicap accessibility and painted in original turn-of-the-century design.

Each riverfront car stops at locations along a 1.8-mile route, beginning at Rampart Street at the end of the French Market. Along the way, riders can hop on or off at Ursulines, Domine, Toulouse, Bienville, Canal, Poydras and Julia street stations. Eventually, the line will extend to a Bywater Station, serving the Delta Queen boat offices and docks.

The basic fare on the Riverfront Streetcar is 50 cents, and a transfer is an additional 30 cents. A transfer allows a rider to connect with RTA lines without further fare payment.