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In the mid-1960s, the Louisiana Architects Association joined its colleagues in the New Orleans chapter of The American Institute of Architects in a battle to prevent "desecration of the French Quarter." The Bureau of Public Roads had decided that an expressway would be built along the Mississippi Riverfront through the historic section of the Crescent City.

Some readers might wonder why all AIA architects in Louisiana might worry about a New Orleans problem. T'was simple. To architects, the French Quarter belongs to the past, present, and future — to folks here, there, and in places forever after. It's a living symbol of "the city that care forgot." It is a priceless example of an indigenous architecture designed to fit a time and place, and to represent the folkways and mores of the people living in those times.

The issue burned so brightly that The American Institute of Architects, headquartered in Washington, D.C., became involved.

The proponents used the same old cliche of that being the price you pay for progress. Architects and their friends were asking if concrete mass and noise from endless lanes of speeding autos and rumbling trucks were progress — especially when they threatened to obscure a delightful chapter of Louisiana history.

The central question was whether to elevate the expressway (like building a bridge over the Taj Mahal); or to build it at street level (and dissect the Quarter); or to depress it (and deface the historic place).

Political Structure

Opponents tried every kind of moral, legal tactic. But, the political structure, particularly, seemed to be unified in favor of the project.

Most of us gave up after the federal government formally gave its approval, but a few dedicated people continued the lop-sided battle.

No Warning

Without warning (to the quitters at least) the lead story in the Times-Picayune one early July morning unexpectedly announced that Transportation Secretary John A. Volpe was canceling the controversial project and reallocating its interstate mileage to the proposed Metropolitan New Orleans Beltway. Volpe had dispatched Assistant Secretary James D. Bronman to New Orleans to seek to resolve the dispute, but Bronman reported the controversy "irreconcilable." Volpe told Congressman Hale Boggs he was being deluged with letters against the Expressway.

Boggs said switching the funds to the Beltway was "a just solution that meets the requirements of increased traffic while causing the least inconvenience possible." To proponents of the expressway, justice had not been served; to the opponents it had, and we think his story will record this development as truly significant — not for the sake of "progress," but in the interest of preserving a part of our rich cultural and architectural heritage for ourselves and posterity.

The members of the New Orleans Chapter of The American Institute of Architects should be pleased with the courage exhibited by some of their fellows in the face of overwhelming odds. The Chapter's faith in the democratic process, shaken at times during the fray, should now be healthily restored.

Vive le French Quarter!