

Preservation in Print

SEPTEMBER 2018

DOWNTOWN GLAMOUR

HISTORIC CBD BUILDINGS TRANSFORMED
INTO CHIC APARTMENTS

PUBLISHED BY THE PRESERVATION RESOURCE
CENTER OF NEW ORLEANS AND THE LOUISIANA
STATE HISTORIC PRESERVATION OFFICE

THE RISE, RAZING AND REVIVAL OF THE Orue-Pontalba House

BY Richard Campanella

one of the busiest corners at the nucleus of New Orleans' hood. It anchors the single most Spanish Colonial street in es one of the region's most historic buildings. It's the com- ay as Le Petit Théâtre and Dickie Brennan's Tableau, at 616 mer of Chartres, across from the Cabildo.

ater and restaurant buildings are 20th-century reconstruc- homage to the circa-1790s Orue-Pontalba House and tell reservationist story.

Orue-Pontalba House, based on the property's chain of title document- Carré Survey, was at least the fourth structure to occupy these leader buildings had many illustrious inhabitants, including survivor and engineer for the Spanish government.

Good Friday Fire would destroy many structures in the building at this location. A year later, work began on which itself was damaged in another fire on Dec. 8, 1794. of that period, a series of transactions transferred owner- sory from Joseph de Orue to Andres Almonester y Rosas de Pontalba.

1796, Pontalba signed a contract with Hilario Bouteir "to finish at the corner of the Plaza." As to who originally designed

office, indications point to French architect Gilberto Goul-

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Despite its prominent appearance and location, the Orue-Pontalba House had a mix of occupants and uses, some of them rather ordinary. At times a saloon or eatery operated on the ground floor, while the upper floors had residential apartments, either for transient lodging or long-term leasehold- ers. Among the tenants were possibly the bishop of the cathedral and officials of the Cabildo (City Hall), according to records unearthed by the late archi- tectural historian Samuel Wilson Jr. (1911-1993).

In the early 1900s, buildings on the adjacent lot on St. Peter Street were demolished, which opened up an opportunity for a group of uptown- based theatrical performers, first organized in 1916, to build a playhouse. Named the Little Theater, the organization purchased the open lot as well as the Orue-Pontalba House and commissioned architect Richard Koch of the firm Armstrong and Koch to design Le Petit Théâtre du Vieux Carré. Perhaps the most influential local architectural historian of the time, Koch (1889-1971) would single-handedly photograph and document scores of old buildings while also articulating the *tout ensemble* vision of an integral, protected French Quarter. Passionate as he was about historicism, Koch was more pragmatist than purist, feeling, in the words of researcher Ab- bye Alexander Gorin, that "old buildings, in order to survive, needed to be adapted for reuse [and] modern needs," and that only a select few ought to "be preserved as they were originally built.... in museum status."

That philosophy made Koch, himself a theater member, the right man for this job. According to Koch's protégé and colleague Sam- uel Wilson, Koch's design for Le Petit Théâtre was the first new French Quarter building designed "in the character of the older structures in the area.... a reduc- tion of the 18th cen- tury Orue-Pontalba House at the corner, (also) owned by the theater and attached to the new building by a one-story foyer," according to a 1980 interview of Wilson by Gorin.

Wilson added that "although traditional in character, [Koch's]



This building, a 1963 reconstruction, anchors the single most integral Spanish Colonial streetscape in New Orleans, 600 Chartres. Photo by Randy Schmidt, courtesy of Tableau restaurant.

building is not in any way a copy of any older structure but an adaptation of traditional forms to meet the requirement of a new structure in a historic set- ting." A few years later, wrote Gorin, "Koch connected the old and new build- ings by a loggia and also designed a patio," and in 1956, "Wilson increased the seating capacity of the theater by extending the upper balcony." In this manner, Le Petit Théâtre set a historical precedent for what the late Malcolm Heard would later describe as "Vieux Carré Revival," reflecting the sentiment "that new construction should be essentially scenographic and that it should fill in gaps...an inconspicuously as possible, leaving the linelight for older buildings."

Unfortunately, costly maintenance for the aging landmark got deferred, and the Orue-Pontalba House gradually fell into serious structural disrepair. What ensued was a dispute among strange bedfellows. On the one side was theater director Monroe Lipmann and his colleagues, who had long sought a different configuration of rooms for the expansion of their operation, while also balking at the cost and complexity of the renovation of the Orue-Pontalba House. Lipmann threatened to relocate the theater out of the French Quarter if the Vieux Carré Commission would not grant a demolition permit, something that, at the time, was unprecedented for truly significant historic structures.

Surprisingly, some leading preservationists supported deconstruction and reconstruction, albeit reluctantly, in part for the building's advanced deterioration but also because they wanted the French Quarter to remain a living cultural space. They worried that Le Petit's departure would diminish the neighborhood's civic vibrancy.

Still skeptical, the Vieux Carré Commission pressed for a written com- mitment stating that reconstruction would indeed be forthcoming, and finally drew up the demolition permit. As the 173-year-old building was disassembled in 1962, "bill but a thousand of the old Louisiana red bricks," wrote Gorin, "tumbled to powder."

Koch and Wilson, who by this time were professionally partnered, won the commission to rebuild the Orue-Pontalba House. They aimed to blend its fa- cade into the Spanish Colonial aesthetics of its surrounding streetscape while accommodating the needs of the theater. Since the original plans were never found, Koch and Wilson drew conjectural inspiration from comparable build- ings of that era. But when the client called for a facade-altering side-space on the

upper Chartres flank, Wilson resisted and withdrew from the reconstruction, completed in 1963, is thus attributed to Koch.

Many people today — including architects, preservation- al historians and theater aficionados — tend to agree that the Orue-Pontalba House was an unfortunate necessity, and a generally successful, particularly since it succeeded in Théâtre in the Vieux Carré. Financial struggles in the another controversial change — of incorporating Dickie Brennan restaurant into the theater's space — and it is a credit to Koch as the renovation by Brookmoor LLC, that the designs ac- two very different programs quite well.

Best of all, the Spanish Colonial aesthetics of the build- ing's patina of age it has since developed, allows all three corner of Chartres and St. Peter — the 1962 reconstruction Orue-Pontalba house, the 1925 foyer and the 1922 Le Petit help complete the single most Spanish Colonial streetscape in the region. By my count, the lake-side block of 600 Chartres is the French Quarter's 39 surviving buildings from the Spa- six when we include the Cabildo across the street.

street

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George Francis Mugnier photographed the Orue-Pontalba House in the 1880s. Image courtesy of the Louisiana State Museum.