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Urban development reflects constant interplay between myriad human actors seeking to order and reorder their relationships with the cities they inhabit. Until fairly recently, however, scholars of cities tended to ignore two other forms of agency. In examining the building and rebuilding of metropolitan areas, few devoted much attention to the role of the natural environment as a shaper of cities. William Cronon's influential book *Nature's Metropolis* provided a model for viewing cities as inextricably connected to their natural surroundings by examining the ways that the developing West exerted cultural and economic power over the shape of Chicago's spectacular growth in the latter half of the nineteenth century. In recent years, a growing number of scholars have begun to consider the environment as an active force for urban change, exploring forces of nature and human attempts to harness nature to shepherd urban expansion. Similarly neglected were the collective efforts of artists, literary figures, business boosters, and the traveling public to shape cities’ cultural image, which
became, like nature, a force that built and rebuilt cities. While anthropologists and geographers explored the fashioning of place identity, especially to suit the needs of tourism, they and a few historians who followed their lead usually examined the development of tourism related to scenic wonders or Native American cultures. Only recently have historians begun to understand the creation of marketable urban images.¹

In the wake of Hurricane Katrina, it is clear that New Orleans is a place ideally suited to the study of tensions between urban development and the natural environment. Situated precariously on the watery alluvium of the nation’s largest deltaic river, New Orleans owes its very existence to the economic bounty that came from nature and from human efforts to reengineer its perennially endangered site. Likewise, today the Crescent City, so named for the undulating river that cradles its fan-shaped grid of streets, reflects the cultural accretions of its long, unusual history and the more recent deliberate actions of those citizens and outsiders who reshaped its cultural image. Anyone who has visited the “Big Easy” understands well the role that this cultivated image has played in creating a major tourist trade.

The five books reviewed here collectively provide an understanding of environmental forces and human decisions that shaped the city devastated by the nation’s costliest hurricane. One book, geographer Peirce F. Lewis’s *New Orleans: The Making of an Urban Landscape, Second Edition*, first appeared more than three decades before its recent updating, while the others built on Lewis’s pioneering work to provide a finer grain of detail and thoughtful revisions. Most grapple with New Orleans’s unique image, and each makes a strong case that despite its peculiarities, the Crescent City illuminates themes of wider importance. The books address the connection between either the environment or culture on one hand and urban planning on the other. Thus, each clarifies the “production of space” or the ways that natural or human forces shape the building and rebuilding of urban landscapes. The books also connect large-scale forces and street-level events. None loses sight of the people of New Orleans, and despite the publication of four of the five before August 2005, all make arguments that resonate profoundly when viewed through a post-Katrina lens.

It is fitting to begin with Lewis’s second edition of his classic work of historical geography, *New Orleans: The Making of an Urban Landscape*. The first three chapters comprise the original book and trace the city’s development from the 1700s to 1975. They appear unmodified from the first edition in 1976 with the exception of a handful of new footnotes that provide timely updates. Thus, “book one” now serves as a valuable 1970s snapshot of a skillful geographer’s view of the state of the city. “Book two,” like the original text, is a rambling but engaging account of the city’s path in the last quarter of the twentieth century. Throughout, Lewis uses New Orleans’s
Lewis argues that New Orleans began as a foreign city and only gradually lost its foreignness. He describes the paradox of a city that is “simultaneously unique and not unique,” calling it a “cultural island” both regionally and nationally. If Cronon’s Chicago is an extension of the surrounding countryside, Lewis’s New Orleans lies a thousand miles south of its hinterland, which he describes whimsically as “a lollipop, with the city at the tip of the stem.” New Orleans, he notes, with slight exaggeration, resembles New York, San Francisco, and other world cities more than it reflects its surrounding coastal region. He observes that it was an “impossible but inevitable city” because its situation between the rich North American interior and the Gulf of Mexico more than compensated for its “wretched” site on the soggy delta. For Lewis, New Orleans began to lose its uniqueness at precisely the moment when drainage and pumping technologies began to overcome the limitations posed by its boggy surroundings, enabling the emergence of a typical American metropolis on newly drained swamplands.

Much of Lewis’s first section is a history of the city spanning 1718 to 1975, beginning with Bienville’s plan for Nouvelle-Orléans, a place Lewis claims had an image of exaggerated importance from the very start. While retelling the well-known story of the American-Creole split after the Louisiana Purchase, Lewis was the first to bring a geographer’s insight into the social-spatial development of the city that resulted in the first half of the nineteenth century. He identifies a pattern of “superblocks” with majority-black cores framed by boulevards of affluent white residences.

Appropriately, Lewis calls attention to the momentous spatial changes wrought by human efforts to remake New Orleans’s site to match other American cities. In doing so, Lewis lights the way for some of the other books reviewed here. He identifies the creation of the New Orleans “Dock Board” in 1896 among the seminal events in the economic history of the city. It imposed a nearly socialistic influence over port improvements, suggesting that river trade was too important to entrust to private interests. The sudden transformation of the port, so important in offsetting railroads’ siphoning of continental trade away from the Crescent City, also portended a sudden obsolescence of these facilities several decades later. Like other interventions to enhance the Mississippi River’s enrichment of New Orleans, the Dock Board’s actions brought short-term gains with deferred liabilities. As long as the city clung to the narrow confines of the natural levee built on more than thousands of years by the Mississippi (the “sliver by the river,” as some have called it), it eluded full Americanization. A. Baldwin Wood’s invention of the screw pump in 1913, Lewis suggests, was another event that, under dictatorial direction, recast the city’s site. By greatly increasing the capacity to drain floodwaters from
even the most low-lying areas, it encouraged rampant urban expansion that created a homogenous southern California–like landscape outside the older city while exposing thousands of residents (disproportionately African Americans) to mucky, sinking land.

Even as environmental wizardry magically remade swamps into a stereotypical American suburban landscape, a very different spatial change came as a result of newfound appreciation for the older city center effectively preserved by the environmental and economic impediments that delayed New Orleans's suburban expansion until well into the twentieth century. The French Quarter, possessing great symbolic value in a time of consumer-driven cultural homogenization, began to offset what might have been a decline of the city’s downtown and surrounding neighborhoods. Tourists and newcomers showed New Orleanians “what they had and how to preserve it.” If the checkerboard racial pattern of residence in superblocks, along with racial mixing and black migration to the North, had saved New Orleans from becoming another burning city in the superheated cauldron of 1960s unrest, as Lewis suggests, the breakdown of this pattern in the third quarter of the twentieth century was threatening to undo the city’s aloofness. The arrival of freeways, segregated housing projects, and gentrification in places like the French Quarter was producing an increasingly racially divided segmented New Orleans, which Lewis then saw as perhaps the greatest threat to the city’s future.

“Book two” continues Lewis’s interrelated themes of environmental, cultural, and social change. Returning in 2002 to a city of which he is clearly fond, Lewis observed much that was unsettling. In the intervening three decades, the city continued to pull apart racially, and tourism became fully entrenched. New Orleans leaders continued to exhibit a cavalier attitude toward the growing threat posed by the surrounding waterscape.

Lewis updates the city’s alterations to its riverfront, including the abandonment of plans for a new port to the east in favor of improving wharves along the river. For him, the riverfront has become neither true public space nor fully realized economic boon for its redevelopment focused mainly on attracting tourists, and its port continued to handle mostly raw materials and finished goods on their way somewhere else. He also devotes a short chapter to tourism, arguing that while New Orleanians had begun to promote the city earlier, for the most part they took tourism for granted until the collapse of the oil industry in the mid-1980s. He correctly notes that the shift toward tourism produced mostly low-paying jobs and altered the city’s character, sometimes in damaging ways.

Clearly, Lewis’s larger concerns include social and environmental problems that threaten to unravel the city’s historic fabric. He calls (somewhat romantically) on “a new generation of Muckrakers” to “bring the city back to its former glory and shorn of its former defects” (p. 170). Referencing the battle over demolishing the uptown St. Thomas Housing Project to
build River Garden, a market-rate townhouse development, he demonstrates that gentrification may have tidied certain sections of New Orleans, but it also displaced poor African Americans, who increasingly occupied impoverished ghettos that had “the look of a Third World city.” Perhaps more lamentable to Lewis are the unheeded warnings of catastrophic flooding. Writing prior to Katrina, he asserts that New Orleans expanded onto flood-prone former swamps despite having built up river levees to the neglect of hurricane protection measures along the city’s other watery boundaries. At a time when experts are warning that the nation may have only a decade left to take massive remedial action to save Louisiana’s disappearing coastline, Lewis observes that “New Orleans seems to have been built in a fit of absentmindedness” (p. 169).

The book is not without flaws. For instance, Lewis gives the impression that New Orleans appeared as a simple result of an imperial venture launched in France, ignoring connections between Native Americans and Europeans in the period of contact. He also tends to minimize the importance of tourism to the city’s economy before the 1970s. At times, particularly in “book two,” he drifts far off course, with one chapter ostensibly on the 1980s oil bust morphing into a lengthy discussion of several decades of deteriorating race relations, but for the most part, his lively prose and pages laden with delicious details offset his rambling style. Brimming with rich insights and an outstanding collection of maps, tables, and photographs, New Orleans: The Making of an Urban Landscape, Second Edition, stands as the best comprehensive history of New Orleans and at least one of the finest geographical studies of any major American city. Lewis is not afraid to make sweeping assertions, which open specific points to criticism yet create a big picture of a city’s history and outline a scholarly agenda. Thus, it is no surprise that the other four books reviewed here build on themes outlined in Lewis’s initial book and elaborated in his second edition.

The authors in geographer Craig E. Colten’s multidisciplinary anthology Transforming New Orleans and Its Environs focus on environmental change and the ways it shaped southern Louisiana. Some of the essays react to Lewis’s assertion that New Orleans was an “inevitable but impossible city.” Tristram R. Kidder and Christopher Morris contend that the city’s site was never an inevitable location for a major seaport. Kidder argues that without Native American settlements that predated European arrival, the French might never have chosen the site of New Orleans. He shows that the Native Americans had transformed the landscape for millennia before the French appeared, locating the shortest portage between the Mississippi and Lake Pontchartrain and building shell middens that European settlers later mined to create roads and lime for plaster. In doing so, Native Americans also transformed the site culturally in the European imagination, making it desirable for commerce. Kidder
effectively collapses the artificial distance between nature and culture, showing that New Orleans’s development reflects the accumulated practices of diverse peoples. Likewise, Morris posits that because the French found a landscape already altered by Indians, they could easily foresee subduing the land. After failing to adapt to the hostile environment of the lower river, the French made transforming nature their goal, “an agenda of conquest that began a Sisyphean struggle with nature that continues today” (p. 22). So began the unending battle with the Mississippi that led to erecting ever higher levees that have contributed in more recent years to the disappearance of the Louisiana coast.

The second section of the anthology includes essays on the harsh realities of river trade that colonial observers had not fully anticipated in their rosy predictions. These essays highlight a widespread faith in the power of engineering to mitigate the hazards of depending on the Mississippi River as a commercial artery in the nineteenth century. Historian Ari Kelman begins with the euphoria resulting from the realization in the 1810s that steamboats could collapse travel times on the river “like an accordion,” seemingly demonstrating human mastery of the Mississippi. He argues that in their riverside deforestation initiative to remove the risk of snags (submerged trees), Mississippi Valley residents overcame a short-term obstacle to commerce while unwittingly destabilizing the riverbank. Such actions, Kelman rightly suggests, exemplified a determination to dominate nature to the neglect of ill consequences. George S. Pabis and Donald W. Davis elaborate this theme, arguing that the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, business leaders, and politicians promoted a levees-only policy, a dream that led ineluctably to the disaster resulting from the 1927 Mississippi River flood. Pabis notes that a number of state engineers tried without luck to substitute a policy that would have included retaining natural outlets and creating new ones between stretches of levees to manage river levels.

By the twentieth century, the book suggests, assuring New Orleans’s safety necessitated going beyond river management to embrace measures that lent a false sense of security, including the displacement of environmental disasters to neighboring communities. Gay M. Gomez and Todd Shallat, looking at the 1927 flood and Hurricane Betsy in 1965, respectively, demonstrate this unrealistic notion. Gomez examines how the city’s elite business community tried to manage the impending flood, first by suppressing news reporters and then by forcing the dynamiting of the levee in neighboring St. Bernard Parish. Shallat suggests that the city’s avoidance of flooding in 1927, together with subsequent flood control systems, convinced New Orleanians that they had finally conquered nature. Engineering had seemingly made the city flood-proof until Betsy roared into the Crescent City. While the 1927 event had prompted a flurry of improvements to the system, including the abandonment of a levees-only policy, Betsy did not inspire a major reassessment of policy by the Corps
of Engineers. This confidence persuaded developers to link “hurricane engineering to tax-supported ‘land enhancement’ schemes.” Shallat argues that it was futile to expect levees “to hold a mudscape in motion.”

The final section in the anthology abandons chronological development to treat several results of a couple of centuries of rapid change along the lower Mississippi River. It also telescopes to the entire lower Mississippi River watershed below St. Francisville. Perhaps the most interesting essay in this section for planning historians is Colten’s, which identifies a transition from officials’ consideration of agricultural impacts on rural areas to industrial impacts on urban areas, notably New Orleans. *Transforming New Orleans and Its Environs* is, as anthologies go, among the more cohesive, at least up to a point. While the first three sections almost seem as if a single author had written them, the thematic and topical cohesion breaks down in the fourth section, which includes other essays on water quality and industrial pollution, and their impact on human and aquatic life. The book might have benefited from a final essay that pulled together the foregoing researchers’ findings and reached a firm conclusion. Instead, it seems to trail off and lose focus. Taken as a whole, however, the book is impressive in its chronological reach and its widening of the scope of urban studies to connect environmental and social developments.

Like Colten’s anthology, Ari Kelman’s *A River and Its City: The Nature of Landscape in New Orleans* examines the relationship between the urban and the natural, focusing on how New Orleanians understood and interacted with the Mississippi River more than a century and a half following the Louisiana Purchase. Kelman looks at who used the riverfront for what, and how conceptions of “the public” changed over time, redefining notions of what constituted “public space” along the river. One is left with the powerful conclusion that for many, the riverfront could only be conceived as a public space when that use could generate a profit.

Kelman’s book explores a series of developments that collectively trace the changing relationship between the city and its river—a court case involving the batture, or alluvial land between the river and the levee, in the early nineteenth century; the reconfiguring of the riverfront to support steamboats in the antebellum period; the yellow fever epidemic of 1853; the role of railroads and harbor improvements in the late nineteenth century; the 1927 flood; and the 1960s battle over a riverfront expressway. Each of these developments illuminates important shifts in who might be construed as “the public” and what that meant for use of the riverfront. Until the 1805 batture case that pitted an individual’s private-property rights against municipal efforts to preserve the riverfront for public use, New Orleanians had drawn on civil law to keep the riverbanks accessible to all. As Kelman argues, the case introduced some ongoing debates that resurfaced whenever control of the riverfront was at stake. Development of the riverfront, some argued, might jeopardize public health. Also, because
the riverfront was essential to both economic prosperity and a sense of place in the city, the community needed to control it.

If the batture case sketched the outlines of future debates, the arrival of steamboats a decade later promised an unprecedented transformation of the riverfront and forever altered New Orleanians’ understanding of the river. Kelman sees the steamboat as an important catalyst for making New Orleanians believe in their ability to harness the river’s potential by making the Mississippi a two-way commercial corridor. Steamboats transformed the river levee into a “symbolic landscape,” representing the power of artifice, or technology, to unite people and products from around the world. The municipal government regulated riverfront activity to bolster commercial interests. As a consequence, Kelman contends, the definition of “public” narrowed and the preeminence of trade muted nonelite citizens’ once audible voice in directing public uses of the riverfront. He points out that this protrade stance “was to render the city far less flexible in dealing with the river and the delta’s unpredictable environment” (p. 78).

Kelman’s treatment of the 1853 yellow fever outbreak and the series of infrastructure improvements along the Mississippi in the ensuing decades sets the stage for what he sees as a critical juncture in the shifting relationship between city and river—the 1927 flood. As yellow fever spread in the summer of 1853, journalists and physicians, in a fit of blind boosterism, suppressed news of the scourge to safeguard the city’s business reputation. Elites defined “the public” in ways that conflated business interests with citizens’ interests. As the outbreak claimed thousands of lives, New Orleanians were forced to rethink their assumption that New Orleans was “nature’s chosen city.”

Just as citizens shied from the riverfront, which they viewed as the hazardous center of what Kelman calls a necropolis, they also rebuilt the batture in a manner that further isolated the city from the Mississippi. Following the civil war, municipal leaders cheerfully granted riverfront land rights to railroad companies in hopes of resuscitating a languishing economy. “Privatization of urban space,” Kelman writes, “had become public-spirited in an age of industry.” While citizens grew angry with the aesthetic and social costs of having railroads along the river, their complaints led not to a resumption of free access to the river but rather to a convenient redefinition of public access to the river. In the final dozen years of the century, Kelman observes, the city formed the Public Belt Railroad Commission and New Orleans Dock Board, both of which consolidated and organized rail and dock facilities under the aegis of agencies that purportedly had the public interest at heart. Business interests emerged even more firmly in control of the river, creating the illusion that New Orleans had completely tamed the river and enlisted its powerful currents to carry the city’s economy. Kelman speculates that this transformation of the riverfront from a combined market, port, and promenade to purely a domain of commerce went largely
uncontested because the drainage of the backswamp was meanwhile opening up vast parts of the city, enabling people to move away from the river. By 1927, most New Orleanians had turned away from the capricious river and thus were oblivious to its danger.

The 1927 flood, Kelman argues, was both the culmination of misplaced faith in containing the Mississippi River with levees, and a lesson only partially learned. As with the yellow fever epidemic three-quarters of a century earlier, elites squelched news of the impending flood until they could no longer manage the crisis. Far from an “act of God,” as elites styled it, the disaster reflected their decision to dynamite the levee downriver to save the city, underscoring the favoring of business interests at the expense of any more broadly defined public interest. While the city’s narrow escape opened the way for discussion of a levees-and-spillways policy, public officials still clung to the belief that, with the right plan in place, engineers could tame the great river. Because New Orleans never filled with river water after 1927 (or after the 1890s, for that matter), public confidence in an engineered urban–natural relationship grew while the perceived connection between the city and its river eroded further. Nevertheless, events in the mid-twentieth century brought the first robust debate in many years over who the public was and how it related to the riverfront. If citizens had long conceded responsibility for the river to politicians, businessmen, and engineers, they did not stand by idly when highway officials hatched a plan for a riverfront expressway beside the French Quarter. Environmentalists and historic preservationists united against the expressway, arguing that it would sever the city from the river. Kelman’s story ends with the observation that the city’s waterfront today is, as in the eighteenth century, a market, port, and promenade, albeit “more a commercial carnival than an idealized public space.” Just as city leaders had handed over the riverfront to accommodate steamboats, railroads, and wharf sheds and almost reallocated it as a conduit for automotive traffic, they ultimately created a “public” space that appealed primarily to tourists.

Kelman’s case studies provide a needed corrective to the focus on urban spaces and landscapes as mere products of social interactions. Clearly, the natural environment and human understandings (and misunderstandings) of it have played a crucial role in urban development. His work yields useful insights into how the New Orleans case, far from unique, may reflect the contours of other cities’ land-use debates, questions about the uses of public space, and efforts to accommodate new transportation technologies and respond to natural (or unnatural) disasters.

*An Unnatural Metropolis: Wresting New Orleans from Nature* by Craig Colten also examines engineered modifications to the city’s environment, focusing on hydrology more broadly than Kelman’s riparian emphasis. Colten suggests that New Orleans followed the economic theory of “path dependence” for human technological responses to the environment.
a century or more ago hindered the effectiveness of later alternative responses. New Orleanians’ decisions about how to keep the river at bay and how to keep city streets from flooding, for instance, continue to shape the city today. Unlike Cronon’s *Nature’s Metropolis*, which inspired its name, *An Unnatural Metropolis* focuses on the city’s site itself rather than on connections between city and far-flung hinterland. Like Ari Kelman, Colten sees urbanization as an environmental process but goes further in showing the social implications of efforts to create a city in an inhospitable setting. Colten examines the city’s social inequity in the context of an elusive environmental equity, finding a close spatial connection between the two.

Colten spends considerable time on the city’s responses to chronic floods, including the largely unchallenged practice of building higher levees. He shows how levees advanced from the responsibility of private landholders in the eighteenth century to state and federal oversight by the late nineteenth century. Colten argues that the city’s levee-building policies were “remarkably successful” in overcoming one of the central problems of New Orleans’s site, but, like Lewis and Kelman, he acknowledges that the resulting urban expansion onto surrounding swamplands came with escalating costs.

Along with flood control, *An Unnatural Metropolis* concentrates on efforts to remove “nuisances” such as sewage, garbage, cemeteries, and offensive industries from the city’s environment. Until New Orleans was able to expand onto newly drained cypress swamps, nuisances were difficult to avoid in the spatially constrained city. City government tried regulating nuisances (usually by banishing them to the urban fringe) while introducing amenities such as parks and landscaped boulevards. “As long as the city relied on geographic isolation of nuisances,” Colten argues, “it would reencounter the activities it exiled.”

Among Colten’s key contributions is his focus on the social costs of trying to build a city in a swamp. Although the natural levee became a checkerboard of black and white residences, even in the nineteenth century, the wealthiest citizens of New Orleans lived on relatively high ground, shifting the burden of poor drainage to the poor, including a large segment of the African American population. It is well known that in New Orleans as in other cities, whites tended to occupy more favorable ground than African Americans, but Colten also illustrates how projects to alter hydrology and topography enabled whites to engineer social inequities into the urban landscape in “the bowl” surrounded by the city’s natural levees. As Progressive Era projects and Jim Crow practices emerged and intertwined, the unveiling of the Wood screw pump granted New Orleans whites the power to change the city’s racial geography. Colten attempts, with only partial success, to disentangle the convoluted connections between racism and public works projects. He concludes that, if racism did not supersede
greater civic concerns in driving efforts to provide better drainage, sewer-
age, and water supply citywide, the way in which these provisions were
made at least added a new spatial dimension to racism by giving whites
greater opportunities to determine where and how they lived in a city
belatedly able to expand. Racial residential segregation was not merely a
result of the manner in which projects operated but rather occurred in
tandem with them.

While Kelman’s book dwells primarily on the century or so leading up to
the 1927 flood, An Unnatural Metropolis is unique in detailing a shift in
the twentieth century from trying to repel wetlands and expunge water
from the urban environment to attempting to reintroduce wetlands to
the hydrologically overengineered metropolis. In an interesting twist, New
Orleanians sought in the 1970s and 1980s to restore public awareness of
the city’s watery setting by creating Audubon Zoo’s Louisiana Swamp
exhibit, the Audubon Louisiana Nature Center, Barataria Preserve, and
Bayou Sauvage National Wildlife Refuge. These sites blended “nature and
artifice” and mirrored a national trend toward greater open-space preser-
vation. One wonders, in the wake of Katrina, whether the newfound aware-
ness of New Orleans’s swampy midst will prompt greater stewardship of
surrounding wetlands.

Reading An Unnatural Metropolis following Hurricane Katrina, one is
struck by New Orleans’s chronic endangerment, suffering repeated floods
that easily qualified as formidable obstacles to urban growth. In response,
the city has always planned by reacting to past disasters, relying on struc-
tural measures “to alleviate socially constructed hazards created by pre-
vious municipal works” rather than adopting sound policies of floodplain
management. It is startling to learn how in the second third of the twen-
tieth century (a period with few major tests of its drainage capacity), New
Orleans blindly chased the national trend of suburbanization, expanding
not only into “the bowl” but also across the below-sea-level stretches of
neighboring Jefferson Parish. Increased use of street paving (which pro-
duced severe runoff during storms) and the city’s slowly sinking topogra-
phy (exacerbated by the compacting of soil from drained swamps)
compromised the city’s pumping system in much the same way that build-
hing higher levees only heightened the flooding stages of the Mississippi
River. Ironically, as the central city has lost population, more and more of
the metropolitan area’s people opted to live in areas requiring artificial
drainage. Apart from a series of hurricanes that breached levees and sea-
walls in limited sections of the city, New Orleanians soon had to face a
resumption of chronic widespread floods resulting from poor drainage
during heavy thunderstorms after 1978. Colten’s long view of a city that
failed to learn from past mistakes makes Hurricane Katrina appear a char-
acteristic rather than an aberrant event.
An Unnatural Metropolis is a fine book that reveals much about how New Orleans’s development over the past two hundred years produced a city that once again is struggling to “wrest” itself from nature. Colten’s narrow focus on New Orleans itself enables him to present in great detail how seemingly mundane struggles against hazards and nuisances actually have great bearing on how the city developed. Though less narrative in style than A River and Its City, Colten’s book might well provide the most comprehensive account of precisely how the city, through two centuries of fighting nature, was complicit in its own destruction in the most recent unnatural disaster in 2005.

Anthony Stanonis’s Creating the Big Easy: New Orleans and the Emergence of Modern Tourism, 1918–1945 considers another aspect of planning—the cultivation of an urban image. While Lewis’s book includes a chapter on tourism and Kelman and Colten allude to the importance of the tourist trade in the city, Creating the Big Easy is the first book devoted to an understanding of how the “cultural island” that Lewis describes resulted at least as much from careful plans as from cultural peculiarities. If businessmen, city officials, and engineers vied with the natural environment to shape New Orleans’s economic development, as Kelman and Colten argue, politicians, preservationists, businessmen, literary figures, and tourists also shaped its image. Far from being a natural destination that required no promotion, New Orleans as a tourist city reflected conscious, deliberate cultural and social exploitation and a skillful repackaging of both New Orleans’s cityscape and its culture.

Stanonis centers his attention on the interwar period as the crucible in which the modern tourist trade materialized in New Orleans. Between the Progressive Era modernization of the city and the transformative years of World War II, he argues, the city underwent an important shift from disdaining to embracing tourism promotion and began its dependence on tourism as an economic engine. In particular, the Great Depression, coupled with growing American appetites for regional curiosities amid a homogenized national culture, pushed the Crescent City toward becoming tourism dependent. Before the Great Depression, he contends, the city’s leaders sought to minimize New Orleans’s cultural peculiarities and pursued industrial and commercial investment along the lines of other cities.

Stanonis’s book argues that, into the 1920s, boosters segregated and minimized leisure spaces because they wanted New Orleans to be viewed as a serious commercial center. Responding to growing national demand for unusual places, however, businessmen began “to embrace the foreign, romantic images of New Orleans that many local leaders had previously attempted to erase” (p. 63). By the early 1930s, politicians and business leaders alike seized on mass tourism as an antidote to economic hardship wrought by the Great Depression and Governor Huey Long’s efforts to starve the city of resources. Stanonis chronicles how the city government
used taxes aimed at tourists to generate revenue. He reveals how Mayor Robert Maestri lent city hall's full support to tourism promotion, sponsoring spectator-sporting events, undertaking civic beautification and historic preservation efforts, and leveraging WPA funds.

The transformation of the city into a tourist city, Stanonis suggests, required more than new attitudes about economic development. It also required recasting how women saw the city and how whites experienced black culture. In the years following the official closure of the Storyville red-light district in 1917, city officials and civic leaders “wanted the memories of Storyville to fade into a romanticized haze” (p. 137). They undertook moral reform measures, making city streets and sidewalks appear safe and appealing while concealing the ongoing presence of the sex trade now contained by hotels, dance halls, and speakeasies. Likewise, the emerging tourist economy relied on either caricaturing or erasing black culture. It meant creating attractions “constructed by and for whites.” Stanonis argues convincingly that white image makers concocted the myth of Creoles as racially pure whites to bring “New Orleans and its past into the mainstream of American thought on race” (p. 220). Additionally, white promoters and musicians appropriated jazz from African Americans, whitening the art form for tourists, and they welcomed the Zulu parade, which to their minds represented African Americans in stereotypical ways.

The city's move toward tourism also paralleled a trend in historic preservation, which in turn bolstered tourism in the famed French Quarter. Along with packaging the cityscape for tourists, boosters found ways to revamp Mardi Gras festivities in ways that made them appear spontaneous expressions of the city's character. Stanonis argues that Carnival was anything but spontaneous, relying on business leaders' initiatives to fill the calendar with new parades to keep tourists in town longer, promote citizen and tourist masking in the streets to create the appearance of a grassroots celebration, and expand tourists' access to behind-the-scenes rituals such as masked balls.

Creating the Big Easy posits that tourism became a “vital pillar” of the New Orleans economy in the 1920s to 1930s and that a “foundation had clearly been laid” for the transformation of New Orleans into a tourism-dependent city. Stanonis tends to overstate the extent to which tourism drove the city's economy before the second half of the century. He gives the impression that New Orleanians chose a tourism-dominated path before 1945, when in fact it took much longer to foreclose other options for economic development, including the city's port and its oil and gas industry. To be sure, measuring the impact of tourism is always a difficult enterprise, for it is impossible fully to isolate and identify tourist activities. This is particularly true for the period about which Stanonis writes, when tourism statistics were scant. Nonetheless, the New Orleans Association of Commerce promoted tourism only as a secondary activity right up to the
creation of a separate tourism organization in 1960, which was founded precisely because of the paltry budgets allocated to attracting conventions and tourists. If tourism began to change the face of the city’s economy, culture, and landscape before World War II, the postwar decades clearly saw a more wholesale transformation. While it is unclear that the Big Easy owes its patrimony chiefly to events in the interwar period, *Creating the Big Easy* convincingly demonstrates that some of the foundations of the city’s tourist image and infrastructure crystallized in the 1920s and 1930s. Despite some differences in emphasis and interpretation of the degree to which tourism transformed New Orleans, Stanonis’s *Creating the Big Easy*, Alecia Long’s *The Great Southern Babylon*, and my *New Orleans on Parade* provide a comprehensive understanding of the role of tourism in a major twentieth-century American city. Stanonis has succeeded in showing us an interwar New Orleans that is at once recognizable and full of surprises, and his book is among the very best histories of the city published in the last decade.

The history of New Orleans, like that of other cities, encompasses waves of building and rebuilding. As the Crescent City struggles with its most challenging rebuilding task to date, it is well for planners to reflect on the ways that nature and culture have shaped the construction of New Orleans. Such patterns, of course, extend well beyond New Orleans. From Baltimore to San Francisco to Charleston, South Carolina, promoters have channeled tourist interest toward narrow swaths of cities, neglecting social and economic conditions in those areas hidden from tourists. The five million people of Miami–Fort Lauderdale occupy a sliver of real estate between the hurricane-prone Atlantic and the vast Everglades in a time of rising sea levels, while numerous cities continue to grow unchecked in places threatened by earthquakes, hurricanes, and other natural events. The books reviewed here afford a clearer view of the processes of city building that entailed artificial manipulations of culture and environment and join a bevy of recent scholarship on the city. Buttressed by levees and seawalls, New Orleans overcame tremendous odds to become a commercial entrepot and urban icon. It also exhibited attitudes toward nature and culture that compromised its ability to handle problems of race and class, economic dependency, and destructive weather events. From a post-Katrina vantage point, amid lingering uncertainties about New Orleans’s future, it is refreshing to find books that help us historicize Katrina’s impact apart from the many books about the disaster and the resilience of the city in its aftermath. The issues raised in these studies should be required reading for anyone who would try to correct the mistakes of the past.

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Notes


