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Delta Sugar: Louisiana's Vanishing Plantation Landscape
(review)

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reviews



Delta Sugar

Louisiana's Vanishing Plantation Landscape

By John B. Rehder

The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1999

355 pp. Cloth \$45.00

Reviewed by **John Michael Vlach**, professor of American studies and anthropology at The George Washington University and author or editor of nine books on various aspects of folk art, vernacular architecture, and African American material culture, including *Back of the Big House: The Architecture of Plantation Slavery*, from the University of North Carolina Press, 1993.

Although it is commonplace for a recently minted Ph.D. to publish his or her dissertation soon after its completion, making of it the foundation for a scholarly reputation, cultural geographer John B. Rehder took a different approach. *Delta Sugar: Louisiana's Vanishing Plantation Landscape* is his dissertation revisited some thirty years after obtaining his doctorate. To be sure, in the interim he has used this research as the basis for a number of useful articles that describe key attributes of the sugar industry in southern Louisiana. But in this book, he tells the story of the sugar landscape in full, and, armed with insights that have been maturing for three decades, the account is much richer than any dissertation rushed into print ever could be.

Previously Rehder has presented evidence of a relic landscape, describing the features that were imposed on the land during the period of initial occupancy and summarizing the sequence of tangible developments from the nineteenth century that were still visible in 1969. Engaging in what might be termed an exercise in aboveground archaeology, he developed formal typologies for sugar plantations that allowed him to distinguish between French and Anglo-American estates. He was able, for example, to show how linear plans developed first in the Caribbean were eventually deployed by French settlers along the banks of the Mississippi. Later Americans arriving from the Tidewater areas of Virginia and the Carolinas laid claim to the bayou territories where they developed estates that were arranged in a block form. Clarifying the settlement history for large expanses of Louisiana was an impressive achievement, but finally it was a task that was largely descrip-

tive in nature. By returning to southern Louisiana after three decades, Rehder finds himself in a position to tell a more poignant story of decline and loss. *Delta Sugar* presents an ominous account of the coming of the farmerless farm in the late twentieth century. The book thus serves as a prediction for the near future of American agriculture.

Striving to maintain a stance of objective detachment, Rehder allows himself only the occasional lament about the current fate of sugar plantations. While he does refer to himself as a nostalgic professor with a tendency to wax poetically about old buildings, he is particularly clear-eyed about the forces leading to the likely demise of traditional modes of conduct in the Louisiana sugar industry. In the chapter titled "A Prescription for Landscape Decline" he points specifically to the implementation of a management model developed originally for agribusiness in California. This approach requires buildings to be leveled and people to be moved out. Whatever might be needed by way of equipment, land, and crops is obtained by lease or by contract as operational control is assumed by a group of distant management experts. An agricultural estate becomes then a factory in the field, and as a place it is transformed into corporate rather than agricultural landscape. With the eradication of traditional historic features such as sugar mills, mansion houses, barns, and other outbuildings, the distinctive human imprint of local culture is lost as well. As a consequence, the only feelings that local people can muster about their surroundings are those of alienation and estrangement. One contemporary Louisiana sugar operator told Rehder, "When I need somebody to work, I just take that sombitch truck into town and hire as many men as I need for the job that day."

Rehder provides intriguing in-depth profiles of six different plantations to illustrate the recent developments. Following the same strategy of description for each estate, he reviews how a particular plantation was founded, the stages of its growth and development, and fate at the end of the twentieth century. Some of them, like Armant and Oaklawn, were collapsed into larger corporate holdings. The land at Ashland plantation proved to be more valuable as the site for a housing development for oil workers who flooded into the area during a boom in the Louisiana petroleum industry in the 1980s; however, with the rise of the ability of OPEC to control the price of crude oil and the decline of Louisiana-based drilling, only three of the homes planned for "Ashland North" were ever built. In 1980 Whitney Plantation was optioned for almost eight million dollars to a Taiwanese firm interested in building a rayon factory. Of his six case study sites only Madewood on Bayou Lafourche was still under local ownership and still producing sugar. Rehder credits this instance of stability to the Thibaut family who purchased the estate in 1946. According to Rehder, "Madewood endures because its owners want it to endure."

While Rehder concludes that change is always inevitable and that not all of the

elements of plantation history (especially substandard workers' houses) are worthy of preservation, he does more than merely offer the usual preservationist's lament. Throughout *Delta Sugar* Rehder describes the consequences of a perilous transformation as local ownership was replaced by an aloof international corporate order. Lacking even a paternalistic feeling for the local people, this type of administration easily ignores or overlooks the consequences of its decisions. Rehder describes the impact of this new class of management in his profile of Whitney Plantation (the one replaced by a Taiwanese textile factory):

In the past forty years, 138 petrochemical plants have been built on the banks of the Mississippi River between Baton Rouge and New Orleans, an area known officially as the Chemical Corridor but locally called Cancer Alley. What difference would one more chemical plant make? Cancer Alley was no misnomer. Too many young people were sick, and many more people in the area reportedly were dying from cancer. Local citizens were worried. Could Formosa's rayon plant be an environmental problem? Many believed so because the plant would be dumping fifty-three million gallons of wastewater in the Mississippi daily.

Although Rehder did not set out to be a muckraker, contained in his thorough and detailed descriptions of six Louisiana sugar plantations are not only an account of the past but a warning about the future.

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