A Passion to Preserve
Fellows, Will

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Curt Greska

Preservation architect Curt Greska was born in central Louisiana in 1940 and has lived in New Orleans since the 1970s. His name is a pseudonym.

I HAD KIND OF A CRAZY CHILDHOOD, all tied up in old buildings and ghosts and a sense of place. One night my dad sent me to the place where the cows danced when the full moon came out. We went to this big field and saw the cows looking up at the moon and kind of swaying. All throughout my childhood there was this thing about nature worship. My grandmother and my mom believed in the spirit world. My dad was kind of an atheist. I was the one in my family who brought in religion by joining the Southern Baptist Church.

We lived near Alexandria, which is right in the heart of Louisiana. If I was a good boy and took my nap in the afternoon, I was able to go out with the big people to the huge Hotel Bentley, a wonderful, grand, turn-of-the-century hotel in Alexandria. It’s been saved, a national landmark. Alexandria still has a lot of pretty areas, but it was once a really beautiful town, with a downtown that looked a lot like old New Orleans. But in the 1930s they took down all the iron balconies and made other changes to widen the streets for automobiles.

One of my first memories in New Orleans is sitting on top of Jewel’s Bar, which is in a wonderful old building on Decatur Street in the French Quarter. I was maybe three, having a little sip of beer and eating boiled shrimp with my father. My parents were very much into historic preservation; they believed that good civilizations keep the good stuff. A lot of our family trips on the weekends were to go looking for old houses. We spent many an hour visiting ancient structures and the old people who shared their stories and wisdom. And we said good-bye to many old buildings that were going to be demolished. My parents felt these were acts of barbarism, not progress. These experiences inspired many of my early drawings and writings.

I went to a country school, grades one through twelve. I’ve been a teacher since I was in the sixth grade, when I started teaching art to the second-graders. It was always kind of expected that I would be an architect. My father’s dad was an architect, my dad’s brother was an architect, and my dad wanted to be an architect, but he could never sit still long enough to do an internship or go to school.

I always knew I was different from everybody else because I liked to draw and read, and I was very sensitive and all that good stuff that gays often
are. My mom and dad were open about everything and had a lot of gay friends, so I grew up around many guys who were also that way. My dad, particularly concerned about one of these guys, would say to me, “Mr. So-and-so is coming over tonight, and he’s just a little bit different. If he starts getting too friendly, you just let daddy know, and I’ll take care of it.” As it turns out, my dad had quite a wild reputation in the French Quarter. I’m not so sure he wasn’t playing on both sides of the fence. He was good-looking and well known in the community as a bad boy, but the reputation seemed to turn the ladies on more than off. My mom and dad and my sisters lived on-and-off in the French Quarter before I was born. My father’s father considered New Orleans, particularly the Vieux Carré, to be the most civilized place to live in the New World.

I did an undergraduate degree in architecture at Louisiana State University. My teachers didn’t put a whole lot of emphasis on preservation, but when I could choose a design project, I would usually choose adaptive reuse. A group of us fell in love with the River Road between Baton Rouge and New Orleans, and we had some of our early preservation battles right there in Baton Rouge. We did a lot of sketching, usually finding an old house somewhere to draw. One wonderful old place became infamous because the dirty old man who lived there would try to take you up on the roof.

I had a marvelous professor at LSU, third-year design. With him we would go look at old buildings and photograph them. He had grown up at Uncle Sam plantation, the largest plantation complex ever built in the United States. If it were still there today, it would be a triple-historic landmark, just incredible. Everything was Greek Revival. He and his aunt with whom he was living watched it being destroyed when the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers blew it up to change the bed of the levee after the 1927 flood.

I minored in landscape architecture, fine arts, and English. One of my favorite English professors was a rather notorious gay man who tried to steer me toward a writing career. People would say, “Has he made a move on you yet?” He never did, but he was a really interesting man from New Orleans who would tell me all kinds of tales. In my last year at LSU, I began to get strange, confusing feelings—sort of like music and architecture and my emotions were all tied up together. It wasn’t until graduate school in Boston that I began to realize I was “a member of the church.”

I hated Boston at first: I didn’t think the people there had very good manners. But then I got to like the place and thought I might stay. I studied city planning and urban design, emphasizing preservation planning and children’s perceptions of the changing urban environment. I began to develop a strong interest in environmental social psychology and an understanding of why historic preservation is important. Then I went to Europe to
get a doctorate in historic preservation. In my dissertation I wrote about change and growth: how do you mix the old and the new, how do you accommodate both traffic and pedestrian ways in the old cities. I loved Amsterdam and would go there often. That’s where I began the game of going to gay bars, but I never really did anything, because I couldn’t cope with it.

After finishing my doctorate, I went to Greece in the summer of 1967. I arrived on the day of the coup, when they deposed the king. The streets were filled with soldiers. I’d walk around among all these great old things I’d seen in history books, and I’d see all these good-looking Greek soldiers carrying on among all these incredible ruins. Aughh! It seems my sexuality has always been tied up with old architecture.

I never thought I would come back to Louisiana to live, but I got really homesick. I taught briefly in the architecture school at LSU, then went to landscape architecture. All kinds of important buildings were about to be torn down in the city and along River Road. I did a lot of paintings and drawings and exhibited them to protest the destruction, to call people’s attention to what we were doing to our environment. I was really involved in the ecology movement early on.

With a bachelor’s degree, two master’s degrees, and a doctorate, I decided for some ungodly reason to get a doctorate in environmental social psychology. I was going to be living in New Orleans, so I got an apartment on Dumaine Street, right next to the French Market, when it was still a French market.

My last couple years at LSU, the faculty in landscape architecture did a study of the riverfront expressway. That led me to get involved with other preservationists at the Louisiana Landmarks Society, many of whom were gay men. Along with a number of women, they were trying to make some sense of what modern culture was doing to a wonderful old city. Harnett Kane kind of put me under his wing, was always inviting me to do things. As a kid I was fascinated by his book, Plantation Parade, its stories and photographs of Louisiana, this exotic country in which we lived. Harnett believed in the preservation of old and good customs in addition to old houses. At Louisiana Landmarks Society meetings in the early 1970s, we would have formal receiving lines to welcome old friends and new members.

Over the last thirty years I’ve been in the middle of and sometimes the leader of several major preservation projects, both in the city and along River Road. I’ve seen a lot of buildings saved. I’ve been involved with the New Orleans Preservation Resource Center and the Historic District Landmarks Commission. Many of the men who’ve worked with me on these projects have been gay. There’s also a large tradition of married men who play on both sides of the fence, and a lot of them are involved in historic
I really do think that, in general, gay men are much more creative than straight men. And there’s a sensitivity to things that are worth being sensitive about. It goes back to rootedness, a sense of place, and to what historic architecture represents in terms of creativity. I don’t totally go along with the idea that you have to be gay to be a really good architect or artist, but I do think that the majority of them are, or at least have leanings that way.

Weeks Hall was rather notorious. My partner and I were over at Shadows-on-the-Teche in New Iberia photographing it one day after they had done some major work on it. One of the gardeners, a black man, was telling us about “Mr. Weeks’s boys”—all these good-looking, tall black men who had worked for him. Lyle Saxon and other gentlemen friends of Weeks Hall would bring their servants along when they came to visit. And then of course that whole group of preservation people that ran around with Lyle Saxon was just wonderful, all the way up into Natchitoches. There were a couple of artist colonies up there, with many gay men. There was such a wonderful group of people here in the 1930s and 1940s, when all this incredible preservation activity was taking place. Gay men and creative straight women were a very large part of that group. There were even a few lesbians involved, but not nearly as many as gay men.

After about my first year in New Orleans, I bought an old house in the Faubourg Marigny neighborhood, which is where I still live, though not in that same house. One weekend I was in Lafayette for my niece’s wedding, and after it was all over I went to a dance bar in Lafayette. I noticed a guy with close-cropped hair who was shipping out with the Air Force to Korea in a few days. This was during the Vietnam War. I mentioned to somebody at the bar that I had just bought an old Creole cottage, and those were the magic words for this guy I had noticed. We started talking, and one thing led to another. We got to be very good friends for the night. The next morning I packed up and went back to New Orleans, and my new friend went off to Korea, never to be seen again. Or so I thought.

Eventually this guy moved into a house right down the street from me in New Orleans. I would see him around, but I didn’t remember him. But he remembered me. He was best friends with one of my best friends, and this woman kept trying to fix us up, but it never really happened. Then one Easter, twenty-three years ago, we met again, and as soon as he started describing the night we met in Lafayette, I remembered who he was. Before long I asked him to move in with me.

“I have very little furniture or anything,” he said. Three truckloads later he was moved in. For some ungodly reason I had sold the pristine,
beautiful, early Creole cottage that I had restored and had moved further into the neighborhood, into a house that was in horrible condition. It took about five years to get that place together and fixed up. I bought the triple cottage where we live now in 1976, and three years later we finished fixing it up and rented it out. After five years of that I said to hell with being a landlord; I sold the house we were living in, and we moved into the triple. It’s a one-and-a-half-story Creole house built in 1807 and remodeled in 1836, with three beautiful cypress and mahogany spiral staircases and all sorts of interesting characters related to it. The house’s history reflects the complex ethnic and social mix that is New Orleans.

Life doesn’t make any sense unless you have a context in which to live it. The wanton destruction of things of beauty, whether they’re natural or man made, robs future generations of the pleasure and the knowledge of those things, those places. I really hate it that asshole lumbermen have cut down all the giant cypress trees. There may be one or two left in the entire state of Louisiana. They used to be everywhere, like the redwoods of California. When I see lumber trucks hauling trees that are eight hundred or one thousand years old, I want to become violent. I’ve been a protester in many ways, but usually kind of quietly. I’ve carried a few signs in my life. But mostly I’m an educator, and to me part of being an environmental educator is being a preservationist. The two go hand in hand.