Cherishing Old New Orleans and Louisiana

Lloyd Sensat

The premise of Lloyd Sensat’s Education through Historic Preservation program is simple: Historic buildings have a future if young people become interested in them. Through the program, started in 1977, hundreds of students in grade school and high school have studied and interpreted Louisiana’s historic buildings through art, drama, creative writing, and historical research. “Knowing our past helps us to understand the present and see the way toward a more meaningful and environmentally responsible future,” Sensat has written. “Old is good and provides the context for the new. Old things, buildings, trees, as well as people, provide the link to a complete education.” Sensat lives in the Faubourg Marigny district of New Orleans.

I’VE ALWAYS HAD this fascination and obsession with old buildings. New Orleans to me was the epitome of the place to live in Louisiana, particularly the French Quarter. I was born in 1944 and grew up in Crowley, which is in south Louisiana, Cajun country. Of course, I loved New Orleans because of the freedom and the gay scene and all, but it was the architecture that really drew me here.

From about the seventh grade until I was a senior in high school, I would save articles pertaining to Louisiana buildings, particularly plantations. We got the New Orleans paper every Sunday, the Times-Picayune, and just about every week in the Dixie Roto section there would be a feature article about some old building in New Orleans or some plantation or whatever, with color photos. A neighbor got the Baton Rouge paper, which often had feature stories on the River Road plantations. I ended up with probably a dozen scrapbooks. They’re still in my bedroom at my mother’s house. Crowley is just a little over a hundred years old. It had beautiful Victorian buildings but nothing older. I would go to the library and check out the books on plantations. Harnett Kane’s Plantation Parade was wonderful, giving me the stories of life behind the columns. My favorite book was Ghosts along the Mississippi: fabulous, haunting black-and-white photographs of plantation houses in ruin. Lyle Saxon’s Old Louisiana and Fabulous New Orleans also fueled my imagination and my love for old buildings. The librarian told me I was too young to be reading Frances Parkinson Keyes’s romantic novels with Louisiana settings.

My dad and mom took me to see my first plantations—Parlange near New Roads and Shadows-on-the-Tecche in New Iberia. I saw Shadows-on-the-Tecche right after Weeks Hall died, when I was in high school. There was
Cherishing Old New Orleans and Louisiana

an article about him in the Dixie Roto magazine: “The Man Who Married a House.” I was so excited, I showed it to my English teacher, one of my favorite teachers. She was always very interested. Some of my friends overheard the conversation, and of course, they thought it was hysterical—who would marry a house!? Those horny high school boys, it was beyond their comprehension.

Weeks Hall was an artist, a bachelor, never married. The house actually became his whole life. When the National Trust first restored Shadows-on-the-Teche, they put it back to what it looked like in the 1850s, 1860s, totally ignoring Weeks Hall, even to the extent of redesigning the gardens. Now they’re restoring the gardens to the way he had them. His gardens were fabulous. And now they also have a studio room with examples of his paintings. Some of his better pieces are his portraits of black men.

My mom always encouraged me to draw and write, even though my father thought I should be outside playing ball. I went to a small Catholic school that didn’t have an art program. I always liked to draw, and once the nuns recognized that I had some ability, they would have me draw things for them. When I was in the second grade, my all-time favorite teacher told me that I would be an artist. Katy Keene was also a major influence, a very popular comic book that folded when I was in high school. Katy Keene was a fashion model aspiring to be a movie star, and many of the comic-book stories about her were based on drawings or ideas that kids would send in. They would always dress Katy Keene in outfits her fans would design. The story would say, “Fashions by so-and-so . . .” When I was fourteen, they published a story I did called “Katy Keene Meets Jean Lafitte.” It was all involved with my obsession with old buildings and characters from Louisiana history.

In the 1920s, when New Orleans witnessed a renaissance in art and literature, The Double Dealer made its appearance, a little magazine that discovered and published such writers as Sherwood Anderson, William Faulkner, and Ernest Hemingway. One of the magazine’s founders, John McClure, was the husband of an elderly cousin of mine. Dear Cousin Joyce was always inviting me to spend the summer with her at her home on Pirates Alley, but my father would never let me go because of all those queers who lived in the Quarter. One of my greatest regrets is that my dad did not let me meet Joyce’s neighborhood pals or experience the wonders of the Quarter when I was growing up.

I loved both Joyce and her sister, Dottie, who lived in Opelousas, Louisiana. I was allowed to visit both of them there, and we would go on day trips to see the plantations in the vicinity. Many of the old houses had been owned by our ancestors, so my cousins’ stories made the history so real and personal for me. Then we would return to Dottie’s house, which was filled with family
heirlooms, and look through the old photo album while the stories continued. It was such a magic time.

I started my teaching career at a high school near my hometown, but I did want to move to New Orleans. A friend of mine who was working in Saint Charles Parish, just outside New Orleans, told me they were starting a new school. I was offered a job there as an art specialist. I’d never worked with elementary kids and didn’t think I’d like it, but the new principal was very dynamic and really wanted me to do it, so I took the job. It would get me to New Orleans. When I moved to the city in 1975, I lived on Burgundy Street, a block and a half from where I live now.

Homeplace Plantation was near the school in Saint Charles Parish. Built about 1790, it was considered one of the finest surviving examples of French Colonial architecture in America. A national historic landmark, but instead of getting better over time it had regressed. I figured that unless you got young people interested in these buildings, they were not going to have a future. So I applied to the state for a grant and we started the Education through Historic Preservation program. Part of the students’ experience that year was working with an eighty-five-year-old man who was born and raised at Homeplace. They were introduced to the idea that old can be important, and that even though you are young, you can have relationships with things that are old, buildings as well as people.

Each year all of the hundreds of kids in the school would do a drawing of whatever building we were going to be working with. From those drawings I would select fifteen to twenty kids who I thought had a natural ability in art. They became part of the program. Each historic building we adopted was interpreted through art, drama, historical research, and creative writing. Over the past twenty-plus years we’ve worked with some of the state’s most important landmarks.

Kids who were identified as intellectually gifted would do role playing, becoming characters associated with the history of the house. When we would have our openings, they would introduce themselves as the people who had lived there and would give tours as if they were those people. Sometimes we would involve kids with dramatic talent. In addition to writing and acting in the play, the students designed the costumes, sets, posters, and playbills. We wanted the magic, beauty, and mystery of the old houses of Louisiana to inspire and motivate our student artists.

Gays are not given enough credit for saving America’s inner cities and historic neighborhoods. Most gays can take anything and make it beautiful. They’re not afraid to tackle these old buildings and do this transformation, and they’re not afraid to move into areas that might be a little risky.
The buildings, the visual evidence of where we’ve been, mean so much to me. It gives me a comforting sense of continuity to go back to Crowley and see the houses that were there when I was growing up. I hate how everything is throwaway now. And some of the new things really aren’t worth saving. But if you live in New Orleans, it’s different because there’s so much history. The whole thing is to make people, particularly young people, realize the importance of these old buildings. No one really owns them. We’re just their caretakers while we exist, and then someone else has to take over when we’re gone.

Robert Florence, the author of *New Orleans Cemeteries*, has a passion for our historic cities of the dead. He is sort of a one-man campaign to save them, and one of his obsessions is to reintroduce color to the cemeteries. Originally the ancient Creole burial grounds with their aboveground vaults were lime-washed in reds, grays, blues, and yellows. But the church likes the lily-white purity of the currently whitewashed tombs. One day Rob went to Saint Louis Cemetery Number One with a bucket of newly prepared red-lime wash made from an old formula using crushed bricks. As he surveyed the cemetery and began to paint, all the gladness left him: there were hundreds of tombs to be lime-washed, and he was all by himself. Then an inspiration burst upon him: the tale of Tom Sawyer and the whitewashed fence. He grabbed his cell phone and began to call friends.

“Lloyd, I’m here at Saint Louis Number One painting tombs. Why not come join me? . . . Work? It’s not work, it’s great fun! . . . Experience? That’s why I asked you! You know the archdiocese is awfully particular about the cemetery.”

“Oh, Rob, I’m an artist. You know I can do it. Please let me help!”

“Oh, okay, Lloyd, I’ll give you a try.”

When I arrived, Rob already had an entourage sweating under the brutal Louisiana sun. After all, it’s not every day that a person gets the chance to lime-wash tombs. They were splattered in red, drinking wine and eating pizza, totally engrossed in the task at hand. Their major distractions were tourists asking for directions to Marie Laveau’s tomb. Soon I was involved with brush, paint, and talent for the cause. On this day another New Orleans tradition had begun: Rob Florence had founded the Friends of New Orleans Cemeteries. (This may not be the way it really happened, but if it didn’t, it should have!) My partner and I are now hooked. We’re hoping to reclaim and restore an abandoned family vault in Saint Louis Number One and to be buried there. Then we really will be kindred spirits.