Randy Plaisance

Randy Plaisance was born in New Orleans in 1964 and grew up mostly in suburban Marrero, in Jefferson Parish. He lives in New Orleans, where he is a preservation architect.

MY FATHER’S FAMILY is from Nova Scotia, originally from France. During the English occupation of Canada in the 1700s, they went down the Mississippi to the other French territory, Louisiana, and settled on Bayou Lafourche down toward the Gulf. My mother’s family settled on Bayou Lafourche as well, but near where it meets the river. My mother’s family came directly to Louisiana from France, so they’re considered Creoles. My father’s family were Cajuns.

I was always interested in Louisiana history, and I loved going with my parents to see the big plantation homes along the river. Coming from a suburban home, I was especially dazzled by these houses that are like palaces, fifteen or twenty thousand square feet with sixteen-foot ceilings, crystal chandeliers, marble mantels, and fancy furniture. As I got older and read more about the plantations, I was fascinated not just by the big house but by what went on behind it in the slave quarters and the barns and the kitchen and the many other buildings that for some reason were gone. When we traveled to the Smoky Mountains, I was intrigued by the little log cabins that had been built by settlers.

As a child I would sit on the floor in my room and draw floor plans for hours. How I even knew what floor plans were, I don’t know. Sometimes they were houses; sometimes they were caves. I had a fascination with caves, maybe from Batman comic books. I would draw a huge cave in section, and then I would build it out; floors would be cut out of the stone, and there were secret passages and stairs.

In high school I wanted to be an architect, but for some reason I let people talk me out of it. They said it involved lots of math and science, my weak points. Later, my first long-term boyfriend was an architecture student at Tulane, and I would help him with his projects. He told me I really had an aptitude for architecture and should consider studying it. So I quit my job, got rid of my house, moved into a one-bedroom apartment with my boyfriend, and went back to school.

At first I didn’t think New Orleans was much of a city for architecture because we didn’t have many skyscrapers. Then one day during my second year I saw an exhibit at school by one of the professors who had done a Historic American Buildings Survey project on a plantation home.
The measured drawings were on display, and I thought they were the most beautiful drawings I’d ever seen. Standing there with a friend, I said, “Do you know who this professor is? I would love to meet this man.” He said he knew him and would introduce me.

The professor and I hit it off right away. Whenever he planned a field trip with his class to visit a plantation home or a historic or architecturally significant building that wasn’t open to the public, he invited me to come. And he invited me to parties at his house, where I met more people who were involved in preservation. The next semester he offered a platform to do a HABS project for Madame John’s Legacy, probably the oldest original residential building in the Quarter. I started doing the project and fell in love with the work. He got me so interested in HABS drawings that every summer I would work on a project for the HABS office in Washington, D.C. I’ve done drawings in Harper’s Ferry, West Virginia, and was project captain on the Martin Van Buren estate in Kinderhook, New York. In Huntsville, Alabama, we documented buildings from the 1950s and 1960s that were used to design, build, and test the rockets that went to the moon. A lot of them are made of metal, just sitting idle and rusting, and they could collapse who knows when. Many HABS projects are done because the buildings are in imminent danger.

Whenever I get a chance to go into a building that I’ve never been into before, I always jump on the opportunity. Doing the fieldwork for these HABS drawings is the best way to get to know a building intimately. You measure every little piece of wood in each door and window. You’re crawling around in attics and basements and under buildings, hand-measuring every inch of the structure. I like doing the fieldwork, and I like coming back and looking at my notes and trying to piece the puzzle together: Why doesn’t this look right? What did I do wrong? Sometimes I have to go back and find my mistake.

My boyfriend, Derek, has lived in the Quarter since he moved to New Orleans and loves architecture as much as I do. When we first met and he came over to my apartment, he went into my study where the walls are lined with architecture books. “Oh, my God,” he said, “you’re cute and you have an interest in architecture. This must be my lucky day.” We really love our apartment, the slave-quarters wing of an 1840s townhouse. It’s got a nice courtyard, and it’s close to everything. We’re on the corner of Esplanade and Dauphine, in the Marigny. Derek and I will be moving into the Quarter within the next month or so, so we’ll be moving to the official gay section of the city. We’re looking for a place where we can walk home from the bars at 3:30 or 4:00 in the morning without feeling endangered.
I’ve always wanted to live in the Quarter, even if it’s only for a year, just to say I lived in the most historic section of the city. We want to live in something that’s at least one hundred years old. And we want to stay in the predominantly gay section, so that means looking between Saint Ann and Esplanade. We saw a beautiful place on Bourbon owned by a preservationist. It has nice wooden floors and high ceilings, all the millwork trim is original, original fireplace mantels, everything’s well maintained, just impeccable. The doors open right onto the street, so we would have a little bit more of a problem with drunk people passing by, screaming and hollering. But that’s our first choice.

One of my uncles once commented that he would never go to New Orleans because it was filled with nothing but niggers and faggots. Almost all my gay friends grew up in suburbia or small towns and came to the city. I would like to think that gay men who come to New Orleans from Nowheresville, or from cities that have no historical context like this city does, appreciate what they find around them and pick up a sense of preservation. It tends to be people from out of town who know more about the city than the people who have lived here all their lives.

For me moving into the city offered a little bit of anonymity; my parents are only ten to fifteen minutes away, but that’s another world. I’d say that at least half of the people who live in my neighborhood are gay. The gay section of New Orleans is in the most historic and architecturally significant part of the city. There’s a lesbian couple who restored a beautiful camelback double house at the end of Bourbon, but in New Orleans 99 percent of the gays in preservation are men. The lesbians around here tend to be suburbanites, I guess because they tend to be much more practical than gay men. They just don’t see the benefit of restoring an old building. But I’m so glad I’m a gay man. The lesbians I know tend to be so drab and boring. Maybe they’re happy, but I don’t see how they possibly could be.

The two biggest focuses of my life are my being gay and architectural preservation. Through my work I’ve met the people who are working to save the architecture of New Orleans from collapse, and we do have a lot of blighted property. At meetings of the Vieux Carré Property Owners and the Marigny Association, I see lots of gay men—mostly couples, because they tend to be more settled-down, and they’re in a period of their lives when they can afford to buy and restore a piece of property.

It was women who organized the preservation movement here in the early 1900s when an entire square block was torn down to build the court building, that white marble Beaux Arts monolith in the middle of the Quarter. The plan was to level the blocks between the river and this building and put in a big formal garden leading up to it. When people realized they could
tear down the whole Quarter, a movement was organized that led to the founding of the Vieux Carré Property Owners’ Association. Elizabeth Werlein was one of the big movers, and I’m sure there were lots of confirmed bachelors, as they used to refer to us.

The Marigny was built almost entirely by free women of color, and it has been restored almost entirely by gay men. It was a slum back in the 1970s. The Quarter was becoming so expensive; a lot of people couldn’t afford to own property there. So they moved into the Marigny. It was crime-ridden, and the buildings were run-down. Gay men started buying up these properties and moving in. When I was in high school, I saw an article in the newspaper about two men who restored a house in the Marigny. It was a whorehouse and a deplorable mess when they bought it, termite damage and holes in the floor that you could crawl through. A photograph showed the two sitting on the front porch. These guys are gay, I said to myself at the time. Now I’m good friends with that couple.

My best friend, whom I graduated college with, who happens to be a straight preservationist, used to joke that he was the token straight boy in preservation. Gay men and preservation just seem to go hand in hand. I think it’s because we tend to have a greater appreciation for aesthetics, for history, for architecture, and for the arts, whether it be music or literature or painting or sculpture. Gay men just seem to be more in tune to that side of things.