



MY THOUGHTS ON THE CHURCH OF I AM THAT I AM

As a lifelong student of the built form I have learned to appreciate the peaceful, yet exhilarating moment when my mind engages if even for a moment with the underlying spirit of a 'place'. My background which is purely contemporary design and public sector architecture unexpectedly exposed me to ideas relating to social setup, culture and history. It felt like serendipity that even though untrained and not in the field I chanced upon several experiences of historical architecture- namely the measure drawing of old Goa, , India- a student voluntary effort for UNESCO and St. Martin's Church, New Delhi, India.

A short visit to the historic Bayou road was another such fortuitous adventure. Having no clue 'what to expect?' excitement prevailed as we gathered to see the sights and observe the 'culture' the best our ignorant minds could fathom.



(Author: Unaccredited WPA photographer, Works Progress Administration)

At that time unaware of the vast history that surrounds it I was infinitely drawn to the Church of 'I am'. The first reaction was of course that the architecture was so very New Orleans but it was the current occupancy by the King and Queen Emporium and the colorful display of crafts that caught my minds eye. Somehow I could sense that this place had intrigue that I could not comprehend.



Wikimedia and some of the popular journalistic sites filled in the gaps to my basic observations. This site located at the corner of Bayou Road and N. Dorgenois, New Orleans is the former LeBreton Market, built in 1867 it used to be an Indian trading center where Choctaws brought their blankets, baskets, medicinal herbs, and gumbo file to barter for guns, knives, or trinkets. St. Rose de Lima Catholic Church is visible in the background as is the once-thriving business row across from the Market.



LeBreton Market as mentioned in the same journalistic articles, I believe was a six-way intersection to be where the ancient Bayou Gentilly ended (or at least fractured into smaller arms), and as it was indisputably the historic site of an Indian Market that pre-dates Bienville and the establishment of New Orleans it must have a longstrtched story to tell. Its earliest known history from 1861 to 1880 points to its namesake after LeBreton Dorgenois, a relative of the LeMoyne brothers of Bienville and Iberville that briefly served as mayor of New Orleans in 1812 while Nicholas Girod was ill or traveling, and it was one of many public markets in the city at that time.

The LeBreton Market building hence when it opened in 1867 at the corner of Bayou Road and North Dorgenois Street literally and essentially became a corner stone for the neighborhood. The site has retained its original spirit and, I believe some locals may have continued to refer to the location as "the Indian Market" well into the 20th century. It was renovated by the Works Progress Administration in 1938-1939. The building closed as part of the City Market system in 1946, and has been used for other functions since.

Still very new to ideas of culture, and ethnography field studies, archival and repertoire I ventured forth to unravel my basic observations. I am unsure how significant this point is but currently, its usage is mixed and is housing the King and Queen Emporium Intl, Inc. which was founded in February of 1994. Sister Andaiye, who started the company with only several packs of incense, a few bottles of oil and less than a dozen pieces of hand-crafted jewelry- today, owns a business having distributors of unique domestic and imported cultural items. I am presuming the archiving of the occupants of this structure will provide the basic archival framework into which the cultural influences of all of New Orleans will add the repertoire. The intermingling of all contributions by the - Three different nations that have occupied and ruled the city and together with the Native American and black African peoples history where, each group must have contributed to its culture, language and traditions would make for an interesting story to tell.

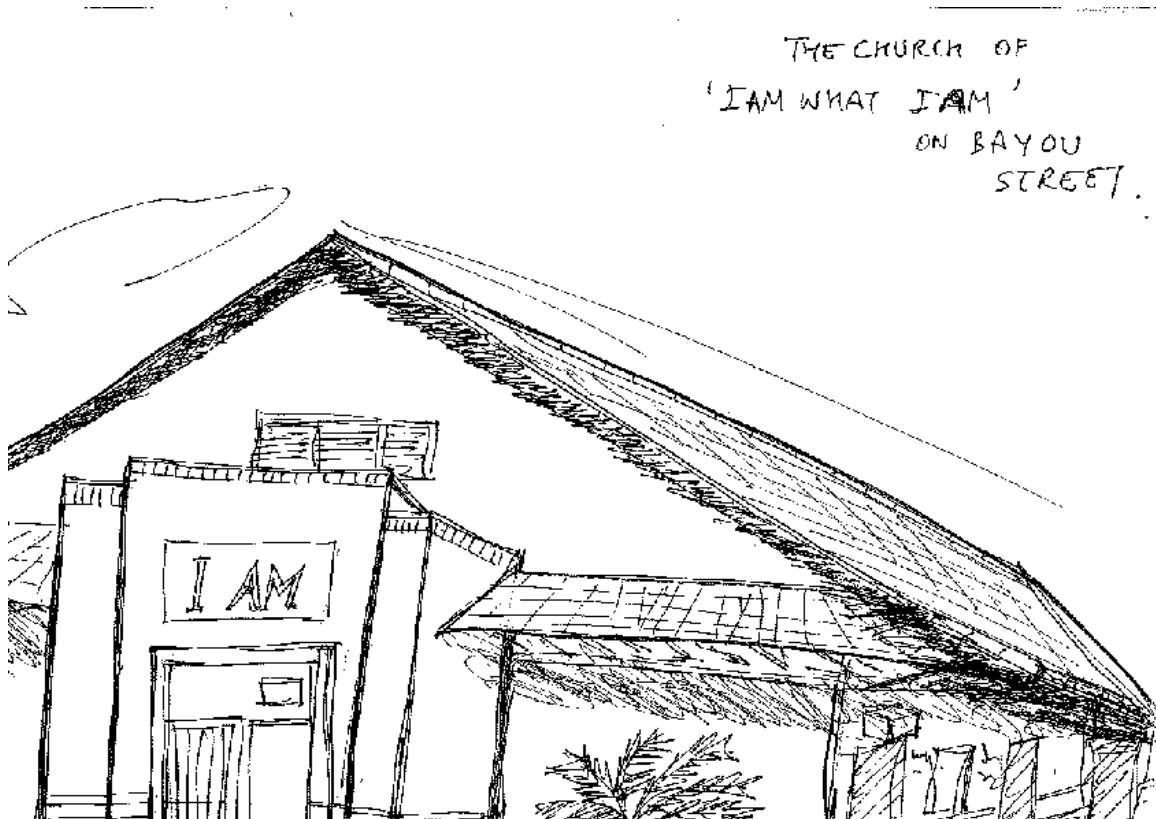
The story the church of 'I Am' is therefore of great relevance especially in New Orleans -a city that is set on the path of restoration and finding city pride. The natural disaster that shook the city five years ago has only managed to strengthen the citizens need for identity and projects like this that imbibe the rich multi-cultural past and the resilient present will pave the way for the future of New Orleans symbolism. I truly believe in all the exisitng colonial architecture, and churches and public buildings and classical architecture that are being preserved and restored, the transition and 'ethos' captured in the Indian market and the transformation it has undergone into the current day emporium shows its sustainability and adaptability to the needs of the time and will prove to be pivotal in uplifting the image of mid-city restoration projects.

The site still possess many complexities as it has evolved over a 150 years period, and would make it extremely interesting to partake this as my field work study. I have so far found this new influx of knowledge about place, cultural value and anthropology has not only supported my love for human intervention in the natural world in the form of built environments but has also changed my authentic knowledge, attitudes, and beliefs regarding the many layers that are interwoven in the task of human habitation and living. The trends apparent in the current

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redevelopment work in New Orleans are also in direct co-relation to this Bayou Road structure giving emphasis to culture, history and human inferences. I also feel that given my eight years of work experience in the public sector of the highly urbanized historical city of New Delhi, my inherent knowledge and the new understanding of my previous knowledge will prove to be an asset when I try and unravel the mysteries that lie at this unique cultural paradigm.



References:

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