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## Interview with Patty Gay

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INTERVIEW WITH PATTY GAY

BY

SAUNDRA L. GROVES

ABSTRACT

Patty Gay is Executive Director of The Preservation Resource Center of New Orleans. She asserts that those in charge must have a thorough understanding of the historical and cultural resources of an area and their potential. These resources can add significantly to the stimulation of business, especially tourism.

HISTORIC PRESERVATION AND DEVELOPMENT

Question 1: What is one of the most important elements in considering the redevelopment of an historic area in a renewal project like a World's Fair?

Answer: The first and most important element is having in place enough legislation to protect the area in question. This usually involves the formation of an historical district and the specification of the types of development that can occur within this district. In the district where the World's Fair was located there was not full historic district control (there was only demolition review), so the City Council established temporary full design review authority, in an effort to control development. (The Louisiana Exposition was sponsored more by the state than the city.) Another important element to protective legislation is enforcing it. The organization that was to review the architectural plans of the Fair was The Historical District Landmark Commission.

Question 2: Did the historical resource interest have input into decision-making of the Fair in relation to formal studies and plans?

Answer: Yes. All work on buildings within the historic district was subject to design review by the historic district's Landmark Commission. Also, a grant from the National Trust for Historic Preservation was obtained by the PRC to do an inventory, feasibility study, and a master plan for the development of historical resources in the Warehouse

District where the World's Fair was to be developed. This was a very comprehensive study and was given and made available to all the Exposition planners and architects. If any of your readers would like a copy of the feasibility study to be used as an example for their community, we will be happy to provide them one for a fee. They would need to write directly to the PRC to obtain the copy as we do have a limited supply (address: PRC, 604 Julia Street, New Orleans, LA 70139).

Question 3: What is another major factor in considering the historical resource development?

Answer: An important element is public opinion. It is essential to insure that the public is enlightened about the significance of an area. Public opinion is one of the primary elements that will control development. An informed citizenry will make the difference when conflicts arise because it is the ultimate responsibility of the public to control development. Another aspect of public opinion is making sure that the people who have money and influence understand the historical importance of a site and its potential future contributions to the community, especially in terms of tourist dollars and redevelopment of an area that will ultimately increase property value.

Question 4: Were there any points of conflict in regard to the development of the World's Fair and historic resources?

Answer: Yes, in particular, an entire square at one corner of the Warehouse District. The plans for tearing down the property in question were approved by The Historical District and Landmark Commission. However, with federal funds being utilized in the World's Fair project, the approval for removal of historical resources must also be approved at the federal level. This was never done. This structure was a point of contention and many meetings were held with the leadership of the World's Fair. The property in dispute was right across from the gate of the World's Fair and the property was merely used for landscaping and I believe, in retrospect, that the leaders of the Fair realized that this was a bad decision because much of the historical integrity of the area has been damaged. Those who were responsible for destruction of the buildings point to the fact that it was structurally unsound. It is true that one structure was marginal but the historical value of the building was very important, and it could have been renovated and reused within developmental guidelines. This is a serious loss.

Question 5: What was the general nature of the cooperation of the World's Fair and the city in the preservation of the historical resources of this area?

Answer: We had access to all the planners and architects of the Fair and they were cooperative to a point, but they were not the decision makers. The final authority was the executive committee which seemed to lack an understanding of the importance of historic resources to the

community as well as its potential as a tourist attraction and a complement to development. The City Council was very supportive of our actions and our overall position. In fact, they have been supportive of our efforts in both the past and the present. Special temporary historic district controls were put into effect for the area.

Question 6: Given the development that has taken place on the World's Fair site, what are your perspectives on the future development of the historical resources of this district?

Answer: The hope for this area is development as a mixed-use neighborhood. Many people in New Orleans are city-dwellers and they love the history and character of the neighborhoods of the inner city. This type of development also gives the community an identity and it is this identity that is very important to the development of the area as a major tourist attraction. Tourists like to see evidence that people care about their city and have a cultural identity with the past. Residential development also will help the tax base because people are paying taxes to the city. There is a strong contingency that wants to develop this area as offices because of the higher rents. There are many office buildings in New Orleans currently that are vacant and this type of development does not make sense at the present time. With a convention center and its success and other projects that are planned, this area is going to become an anchor for urban residential and commercial development, complementing our Vieux Carre.

Question 7: What if the Fair had not been held, what would have happened to the development of the historical resources?

Answer: This site would eventually have been developed and the property values would not have gone up as fast. As a result, a different type of development would have occurred. Currently, the property values are very high in this district and the type of development that will occur is different than it would have been if the Fair had not been held. There is a general problem when development begins. There is a cycle in which the property values are very low and this encourages historical development; but after a certain period of time, property values go up and development can no longer be sustained because of the increase in property values. There is no solution for this problem short of creation of an artificial market through zoning and other legislative actions. The Fair has presented the city of New Orleans with many unique opportunities to develop. We are very excited about these opportunities especially for the development of the historical and cultural resources within the community.

Question 8: What is your assessment of the experience of the Fair upon the New Orleans area?

Answer: It was a beautiful experience for those attending. It was a cultural, entertaining event, and everyone who attended was very pleased

with the Fair experience. As a special event, it was very successful.

Question 9: Why do you think the Fair was not a success financially?

Answer: As we have just learned, the attendance projections made by the consultant were inaccurate. Had the study been more accurate, we probably would have not had the Fair. However, it was not a success primarily because the local media was so negative about the Fair from the beginning. The national press picked up this local sentiment, and the potential visitors were discouraged, especially those who only had a marginal interest in attending a World's Fair. Had the press been more positive, many obstacles would have been overcome by increased attendance, because everyone who went to the Fair loved it.

Question 10: How did you finance your exhibition at the World's Fair?

Answer: Our exhibit was financed by the selling of permanent bricks (with the individual's names on them) that were placed in the new sidewalks that remained after the Fair. The cost of a brick was \$25. We raised around \$200,000 for the development of our exhibit. Our exhibit was very well received by visitors because it was authentic, charming and informative about New Orleans' architecture and neighborhoods. We are very pleased with the publicity that we received through this effort, and that we were able to promote our city and historic preservation so successfully.

Question 11: What would you recommend to other communities as being an important factor in the success of holding a special event like the World's Fair?

Answer: There must be widespread support for such a project all the way from the city and state to the general public. The management leadership must not isolate itself from the community. In one word, there must be cooperation among all and there must be a chance for input from all segments and discussion of all issues openly because the Fair is only a six-month event and the residual of the development will be with the community for many years.