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New list of endangered sites released

Nonprofit selects 'New Orleans' Nine' in need of attention

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FILE PHOTO

The old Holy Cross School sits derelict in the Lower 9th Ward in New Orleans in 2018.

The old Holy Cross School, St. Alphonsus Arts and Cultural Center, jazz great Buddy Bolden's home and several original buildings in the B.W. Cooper housing development are among the historic sites that the Louisiana Landmarks Society deems to be most at risk in New Orleans.

For the past 15 years, the nonprofit preservation group has issued an annual list dubbed "New Orleans' Nine" to bring attention to the factors that threaten the existence of the city's built environment.

Announced Saturday, the list for 2020 includes the original Holy Cross School in the Lower 9th Ward, St. Alphonsus in the Lower Garden District, the B.W. Cooper buildings along Earhart Boulevard and the Bolden home in Central City, plus an 1860s-era cottage on St. Andrew Street in Central City and the French Benevolent Society tomb in Lafayette Cemetery No. 2 on Washington Avenue.

In a twist, three of the nine relate to nonsite-specific threats to the city's cultural and architectural heritage:

- Issues with code enforcement and inspections at the city's Department of Safety and Permits
- The proposal for expanding the pedestrian mall in the French Quarter
- The trend in the University area of turning houses into de facto dormitories for college students.

The overarching concern

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PHOTO PROVIDED BY LOUISIANA LANDMARKS SOCIETY

Preservationists are focusing attention on the decaying French Benevolent Society tomb in Lafayette Cemetery No. 2 on Washington Avenue in New Orleans.

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about code enforcement and building inspections affects every neighborhood, the Landmarks Society said, adding that the Department of Safety and Permits might have played a role in the deadly collapse of the Hard Rock Hotel in October 2019.

News reports have shown that some inspectors were unqualified and record-keeping from some inspections was suspect. The nonprofit cites underfunding and restructuring at City Hall as factors frustrating the department's efforts.

In the French Quarter, the society perceives a proposal to turn much of the neighborhood into a car-free environment as a threat to the residential quality of life. The Landmarks Society views the proposal as catering to tourists to the detriment of full-time residents.

"Pedestrian malls already exist at Jackson Square and on Royal and Bourbon streets," the group opined. "Further restricting personal vehicles, delivery trucks and emergency vehicles would hinder the viability of the Quarter as an authentic mixed-use neighborhood."

The home of Bolden, the trailblazing jazz trumpeter, is at severe and continued risk, according to the society. The modest double shotgun house in the 2300 block of First Street was bought by Greater St. Stephens Full Gospel Baptist Church in 2008.

The church originally filed for demolition, until Maroon 5 keyboardist and Grammy-winning solo artist PJ Morton, son of the church ministers, stepped up. The Preservation Resource Center assisted Morton in raising awareness of the importance of the structure, and a permit for stabilizing the building was issued in December.

Said the Landmarks Society: "The building remains vacant, and an adjacent building also owned by the church burned in April. Bolden's former home continues to languish." However, Danielle del Sol, director of the Preservation Resource Center, said, "I fully believe that he (PJ Morton) will restore the house," and added: "I want to support them and get this project done."

A building many thought was safe in the hands of a nonprofit appears on the 2020 list: the St. Alphonsus Art and Cultural Center, formerly St. Alphonsus Roman Catholic Church. The Landmarks Society said although the Friends of St. Alphonsus group has for years worked to bring the structure back from a long period of deferred maintenance, it hasn't been entirely successful.

"Plaster walls and stunning fresco ceilings are crumbling and falling off the wooden lath skeleton," the group said. Among the repairs now needed for the building, which dates from 1855 and is listed on the National Register of Historic Places: roof replacement, wall repainting and stained-glass window restoration.

After Holy Cross School moved to Gentilly, hopes were high that a suitable developer would emerge for the former campus, especially because of the elegantly designed administration building. Dating from 1895 and designed by New Orleans architect James Freret, the building is the only surviving remnant of the institution for which the Holy Cross neighborhood is named.

But as time has worn on, the risk to the building has grown. "Since 2012 the developer has promised the building would be rehabilitated as the centerpiece for a redeveloped site," the society said. "Eight years later, the building continues to deteriorate. The owner now refers to the property as a 'burden,' as the roof and interior areas have been allowed to partially collapse. With no solid plans to begin the redevelopment, the Holy Cross building sits in real danger of collapse — a fate suffered last year by the historic Semmes School just blocks away."

The Landmarks Society annually issues a citywide call to residents, neighborhood associations, and historic and architectural organizations for nominations to the list. Led by Sally Kittredge Reeves, the society's president, a panel of experts selects the final choices based on "historic, architectural and cultural value, the severity of the threat and the degree of community commitment to save the property."