

**LANDMARK NOMINATION  
PROPERTY SUMMARY REPORT**

May 10, 2004

**LAKE VISTA SUBDIVISION**

**BOUNDARIES:** Marconi Drive, Robert E. Lee Blvd. , Lake Shore Drive, Beauregard Avenue

**RECOMMENDED BY:** Bill Sandefer

**SIGNIFICANCE:** Planning

**ZONING:** RS-1, RM-2, RD-1, B-1

**ARCHITECTURAL & HISTORICAL DESCRIPTION**

**Development of the Lakeshore**

The southern shore of Lake Pontchartrain in Orleans Parish, marshy swamp land dotted with fishing camps and cypress swamps, was identified by the Orleans Levee Board during the late nineteenth century as a liability in terms of flood protection. Beginning in 1873, the Levee Board began drafting plans designed to minimize flooding of the lake shore while providing public access for recreation and development. Though much of the land had been drained as early as 1910, the remaining drenched soil was unsuitable for building and prevented development of the district. It was not until the Levee Board undertook a massive land reclamation project and a comprehensive redevelopment plan that the Lakefront we know today began to take shape. The Orleans Levee Board began the project with the construction of a seawall which was completed in 1927. At the same time, the reclaimed area behind the sea wall was drained and filled hydraulically with material from the bottom of the lake. The result was the creation of over 2000 acres of land available for development.

Such an unprecedented and mammoth undertaking required extensive planning. The Louisiana Legislature authorized the Levee Board to prepare studies for the development of the lakeshore and in 1924, Marcel Garsaud was hired as the chief engineer of the Levee Board. Garsaud was charged with creating a plan for the development of the area to include recreational, commercial and residential components. Garsaud's plan dating from 1924 was ambitious both spatially and financially. The design called for an irregularly shaped shoreline, boulevards, lagoons and five artificial lakes. Beaches were intended to line the majority of the shoreline, and a recreation center and amusement park were to be provided. With a total cost of over 27 million dollars, the original Garsaud plan would never be realized. However, the plan forced the Levee Board to realize the magnitude of the project and the infrastructure, legislation and financing that would be necessary to complete their vision of the lakefront.

**Property Summary Report**  
**Lake Vista**  
**Page 2**

The Orleans Levee Board was granted the authority to undertake the development of the Lakefront by the Louisiana State Legislature in 1928. Three alternative plans were submitted to the Levee Board for consideration. One plan emphasized the reservation of 1000 foot park along the shore for public enjoyment, comprising over 1/3 of the available land for development. The Levee Board rejected this plan based on the enormity of the park, long term maintenance costs, and security issues. The second plan called for the inclusion of a system of interconnected lakes and lagoons which would provide access for individual homeowners to the lake via boat. This plan was also rejected based on additional costs of maintenance of the lagoons and the cost associated with the bridges necessitated to traverse the various waterways.

The chosen plan represented a compromise between the three plans, and would eventually be adopted and implemented by the Orleans Levee Board. The final plan called for the inclusion of a park strip along the shore but deviated from the strict 1000 feet to accommodate other amenities. The plan called for recreational space, commercial and residential development. The projected cost of the proposed development was 41 million and eventually gained approval by the Levee Board.

**Lake Vista**

Lake Vista, New Orleans' only example of pure "Garden City" planning principals, was the first residential district built by the Orleans Levee Board. The "Garden City" movement was developed by English social reformer Ebenezer Howard and published in 1902 as: *Garden Cities of Tomorrow*. Howard's theories endorsed the creation of an ideal, self contained city for mixed incomes based upon a series of concentric circles. The inner circle would contain public buildings, commercial shops and a public park. Radiating out from the center were rings of mixed income residences and gardens. Industry, social institutions and an agricultural college formed the outer ring which linked the community with an outlying greenbelt of agricultural land. "Garden City" ideals were manifested by the English garden suburbs of Letchworth (1902) and Hampstead Gardens (1905) by Barry Parker and Raymond Unwin. These designs would prove to have a substantial impact on subdivision design in America in their unification of socially integrated communities with an emphasis upon access to sunlight, air, openspace and gardens for every inhabitant, luxuries previously only available to the middle and upper classes.

"Garden City" concepts were adopted by American planners who fused these ideas with American traditions of picturesque landscape design advocated by landscape architects Calvert Vaux and Frederick Law Olmstead during the late nineteenth century. American planners experimented with the design of suburban "Garden Cities" in plans for Guilford, outside of Baltimore, MD (1912) and Washington Highlands (1916) in Wisconsin. However the "Garden City" movement reached its apogee in the United States with the plan for of Radburn, NJ.

**Property Summary Report**  
**Lake Vista**  
**Page 3**

Designed by C. S. Stein and Henry Wright in 1928, Radburn was envisioned as a “Town for the Motor Age,” fusing Garden City ideals with accommodations for the dawning automobile era. The major premise of the neighborhood was to develop a tight sense of community within a mixed socio-economic climate that separated the automobile from the pedestrian while creating a shared communal green space. Each large residential block of the city included an interior green space which the houses fronted on. The rear of the houses faced the street and received the automobile traffic. Pedestrian walks connected the blocks and led to a central community nucleus including a shopping center, schools and community center. Curvilinear streets, cul-de sacs and underpasses allowed for a varied landscape that emphasized privacy without sacrificing community. The pathways allowed for pedestrians to reach the nucleus without ever crossing a street. Radburn, New Jersey represented the cutting edge of town planning and became a model for what coordinated, complex city and landscape planning could achieve. Radburn was never completed as the Great Depression halted development of almost one half of the plan. However, the completed portion was placed on the National Register of Historic Places in 1974. In May of 2005, Radburn was designated a National Historic Landmark, an elite group of nationally important resources based on its significance to American planning history.

Lake Vista was the first subdivision designed, planned and implemented by the Orleans Levee Board. Following the stock crash of 1929 and the ensuing depression, the Works Progress Administration (WPA) undertook the installation of the complex drainage, plumbing and electrical systems required for the reclaimed land. Streets were paved in anticipation of the coming development, the first lots of which were not sold until 1938.

Lake Vista , like Radburn, was “...conceived a model community providing home sites and a high quality living environment for residents of all ages. The planning was based on the philosophy that the physical layout would elicit from residents a feeling of identity with their community...”<sup>1</sup> The unique, organic design of Lake Vista pushed the envelope of the concepts endorsed Ebenezer Howard, Stern and Wright. The seemingly ad-hoc layout of streets of the Radburn plan seem haphazard in comparison to the modern, formal, almost futuristic plan for Lake Vista. Viewed from above, its easy to recognize that the geometric motif of the streets, cul-de-sacs and parks drove the design of the community. The formal beauty of the plan overrides the practicality of its organization and results in an anachronistic subdivision that is unique.

The heart of the subdivision is the oval center that is accessed by automobile via two cul-de-sacs. This nucleus contains two schools, two churches, a community center and a shopping center. Radiating from the nucleus are five main green “boulevards” or greenways with names such as Foliage, Ozone, Floral and Breeze, and the only road that leads to the center, Spanish Fort Blvd. The five greenways provide the shared common green space and are connected to each other and

---

<sup>1</sup>Judy Filiovich and Lee Taylor, Lakefront New Orleans, Planning and Development, 1926-1971, Urban Studies Institute, Louisiana State University in New Orleans, 1971.

**Property Summary Report**  
**Lake Vista**  
**Page 4**

the nucleus by pathways and lanes. Between these green spaces, five to seven cul-de-sacks resembling seahorse tails are arranged with a spine of roadway allowing access to the rear of the residences. The formal entrances to the residences face the greenways, allowing for an automobile free, scenic landscape designed to provide tranquility, fresh air, and a heightened sense of community. The formality of the design recalls late Renaissance and Baroque principals of urban design emphasizing radial and axial components that provide an orderly hierarchy. The organic aspects of the plan form evoke the art nouveau period in art in architecture. The confluence of these traditions presents a unique, anomalous approach to garden city planning.

Sale of lots in Lake Vista declined with the onset of WWII and the last lots were not sold until 1946. Several problems erupted from the design of Lake Vista which caused the Orleans Levee Board to abandon their innovative and experimental approach to subdivision planning. The central shopping area, placed to be within walking distance of every home, proved to be unpopular in the age of the automobile, and is no longer used for such purposes. The cul-de-sacs, revered for the varied landscape they provide, proved unpopular with the fire department which complained of difficulty in maneuvering fire trucks around the tight circles. The multi-family residences and apartment houses face a constant shortage of parking. Filipovitch and Taylor state that: "It should be noted that upon the completion of Lake Vista, the officials of the City Planning Commission objected strongly to the Levee Board designing a subdivision with similar Lake Vista elements. In fact, the Levee Board, reflecting on the design of Lake Vista, felt that it had learned what not to do in planning a residential subdivision. The subsequent communities built on the lakefront incorporated few of the lake Vista design features."<sup>2</sup> Despite this, Lake Vista is beloved by its inhabitants and has proved to be a stable, successful neighborhood. In time, the major tenets of the "Garden City" model would regain popularity and be reinterpreted through the New Urbanism planning movement in new towns such as Seaside, Florida.

One must imagine the over crowded and debilitating conditions of the post-industrial inner city in order to grasp the revolutionary nature of "garden city" planning. Previous planned subdivisions were the designed to be enclaves of the rich fleeing the pestilence and stench of the city. Providing better conditions for the working class proved a greater challenge to social reformers and urban planners interested in improving the quality of life for all Americans. Subdivisions such as Radburn, New Jersey and Lake Vista, New Orleans are testaments to the progressive era of urban planning. They remain today vital and vibrant communities which are deeply loved by their inhabitants, and highly successful models for community development.

---

<sup>2</sup>Ibid, p.43.

**Property Summary Report**  
**Lake Vista**  
**Page 4**

Sources

Filiovich, Judy and Lee Taylor. *Lakefront New Orleans, Planning and Development, 1926-1971*.  
New Orleans: Urban Studies Institute, Louisiana State University in New Orleans, 1971.

[WWW.lakevistapropertyowners.com](http://WWW.lakevistapropertyowners.com)

Lewis, Pierce F., *New Orleans, The Making of an Urban Landscape*. Cambridge, MA: Ballinger  
Publishing Co.. 1976. Pgs. 62-67.

National Park Service, *National Register Bulletin: Historic Residential Suburbs, Guidelines for  
Evaluation and Documentation for the National Register of Historic Places*. Washington  
DC: US. Department of the Interior, National Park Service, 2002.

New Orleans City Planning Commission. *1999 Land Use Plan: Planning District 5*. New Orleans:  
City Planning Commission, 1999.

[WWW.Radburn.org](http://WWW.Radburn.org)