



A rendering of the anticipated look of the new New Orleans Center for Creative Arts complex that faces Press Street. Rendering by John Williams Architects, LLC

# NOCCA POISED TO REAWAKEN LONG DORMANT PRESS STREET

BY BRANDON DUGHMAN

ASIDE FROM THE CHUGS AND WHISTLES of the trains that regularly pass through, Press Street, the demarcating line between the Faubourg Marigny and Bywater neighborhoods, is largely a quiet corridor.

There's little along that strip of asphalt: only a pair of run-down looking, 19th-century red brick warehouses, last used by Habitat for Humanity and Aunt Sally's, and a few scrubby parcels of land distinguished only by a historical marker. For neighbors, this street serves as the railroad track, an unofficial dog park and sometime practice ground for Mardi Gras dance troupes — but little else. And that's about to change.

In fact, it already has — construction is underway on what will eventually be a major expansion for the New Orleans Center for Creative Arts, a state-owned, public arts high school. The two dilapidated warehouses mentioned above are currently undergoing a transformation to house research-caliber labs for science and math instruction, a fabrication studio for subjects like robotics and engineering, a culinary arts center including a professional kitchen, butchery and bakery, and a café and art gallery that will be open to the public. The site will also house a living memorial and museum honoring the site of Homer Plessy's 1892 arrest, which happened in that very building during its life as a train depot and led to the landmark *Plessy v. Ferguson* Supreme Court case. Additionally, a half-acre production garden, located on formerly vacant lots, will serve as the home base of a NOCCA-run food truck.

And that's just the plans for one phase of redevelopment. In coming years, a 16,000-square-foot Hubig's Pie's Factory and commercial building on the corner of St. Claude and Press will be constructed, as will other buildings, although the Hubig's Pie Factory is currently on hold due to a dispute between the owners, according to a recent article in the *Times-Picayune*.

This revitalization promises a bright new future for a stretch of land that has existed as a sort of dead zone in recent years. For Marigny and Bywater residents who

are used to the quiet, underutilized Press Street, the scale of NOCCA's new construction might seem overwhelming. However, one has only to look back at the variety of transformations that the property has undergone in the last 300 years to

realize that the NOCCA Forum, the Press Street Gardens and Plessy Project, as the three phases of NOCCA's new construction will be known, are only the most recent in a long line of complete redevelopments for Press Street.

Almost as soon as New Orleans was founded, early settlers put a high value on this stretch of land, convenient as it was to the city's core. According to

## PROJECT DOSSIER

**WHAT:** 65,000 sq. ft. addition to NOCCA housing a culinary school expansion, café, art gallery, classrooms, offices and commercial space

**WHERE:** Press Street between Chartres Street and St. Claude Avenue

**WHEN:** September 2014 is the scheduled completion date of the current phase

**DEVELOPER:** Partnership between The NOCCA Institute and Joe Jaeger/the MCC Group

**COST:** \$26 million

**ARCHITECT:** John Williams Architects

**GENERAL CONTRACTOR:** The McDonnell Group



The same view of the new NOCCA complex as is pictured in the rendering above as it looks today. Construction has begun and has an anticipated end date of September 2014.



An inside view of the 19th-century warehouses being restored for NOCCA's new complex (left) and a rendering showing its future look. Rendering by John Williams Architects, LLC

famed New Orleans architect Samuel Wilson in *New Orleans Architecture Volume IV: The Creole Faubourgs*, the site boasted some of the earliest manufacturing in the area, a brewery having been established there by Pierre Dreux in the early 1720s. Over the course of the next hundred years the land changed uses and hands many times thanks to its prime location. Many of its owners were bold faced names in early New Orleans history, including Joseph Dubreuil, official contractor for the King of France and builder of the Ursulines Convent in the Vieux Carré, and Spanish Governor Don Bernardo de Galvez.

Another famous name associated with the property, Macarty, belonged to both a father and daughter — Louis and Delphine Macarty — the former having bought and sold the property in 1794-1795 and the latter having inherited the property upon the death of her second husband in 1816. In fact, Press Street was formerly known as Rue Delphine, named after Delphine Macarty. If her name doesn't ring a bell, that's because she is best known by the last name of her third husband, Lalaurie, and she was none other than the infamous owner of the house at 1140 Royal St., where legend purports that she tortured and killed slaves. According to Wilson, Delphine Lalaurie owned half of the property located between St. Ferdinand Street and Rue Delphine along the river. The other half was owned by Daniel Warburg, who sold his share to the Architect's Company in 1833 for the construction of 15 row houses. Although none of these particular row houses remain, two built by the same company, located

half a block away on the 2700 block of Chartres Street, still stand. Though the houses are gone, granite columns from the former buildings can still be seen today as one drives down N. Peters and curves left onto St. Ferdinand Street, and the brick walls themselves, which were converted into the walls of the warehouse that occupied the space next, can also still be seen.

When Madame Lalaurie sold her half of the property to the Levee Steam Cotton Press in 1832, Rue Delphine became known as Press Street, and it was the redevelopment of the former plantation into a cotton press that resulted in the construction of the historic buildings where NOCCA is now housed.

**“The Marigny and Bywater neighborhoods seemed like a great fit for NOCCA because of the creative types that embodied the neighborhood.” -Richard Read**

Construction of the Levee Steam Cotton Press transformed what was at that time a rural plantation complex that included a raised Creole-style home, a carriage house, a pigeonier and a garden and fruit orchard into a brick cotton press capable of turning out 200,000 bales of cotton per year, according to Gibson's 1838 “City Directory and Historical

Epitome,” reprinted by Wilson in *The Creole Faubourgs*. It was reported at the time to be the largest cotton press in the world, according to Tulane School of Architecture professor Eugene Cizek. It operated for two and a half decades before succumbing to a pair of fires in 1838 and 1859 that left standing only a few warehouses that were separated from the main body of the cotton press. A portion of the remaining warehouses and land was purchased in 1870 by the New Orleans Railroad, which at the time was merging with the North Eastern Railroad Co. The railroad company further transformed the site, repurposing the remaining cotton press warehouses into a rail terminal and storage facility. The train depot, located on the corner of Press and Chartres Streets, was the exact location where, in 1892, Homer Plessy staged his famous protest of the Louisiana Separate Car Act.

According to a 1976 research paper by then-graduate student at Tulane School of Architecture Larry Jones titled “The Last of the Levee Steam Cotton Press Buildings: Historic Warehouse Group,” the railroad company purchased the remaining land and warehouses in 1907; however, Sanborn Fire Insurance maps show that by 1937, the buildings were already being leased to Kirschman's Furniture Company. According to Jones, a variety of companies leased the warehouses from the railroad for moving and storage throughout the 20th century, including the Dennis Sheen Transfer Company, John Leckert and the Herwitz-Mintz Furniture Company. Indeed, by 1954, all other railroad passenger terminals stopped operating when Union Passenger Terminal opened on Loyola Street downtown. On Press Street, despite the myriad of lessees, the land and warehouses were still owned by the railroad, now called Norfolk Southern, when NOCCA began negotiations for the property in the early 1990s. The school had been operating Uptown on Perrier Street since 1974 and, knowing they needed to expand, school administrators searched the city for a new campus location. “The Marigny and Bywater neighborhoods seemed like a great fit for us because of the creative types that embodied the neighborhood,” said Richard Read, Director of Marketing for the NOCCA Institute. “Their energy and the patina of the buildings made a lot of sense for the type of training that we do.”

The State of Louisiana purchased five acres of land for the school site and the railroad donated the five historic warehouses located there. The adaptive reuse project cost \$23 million and re-



A view down Press Street as it looks today. A historical marker about the Plessy v. Ferguson case can be seen on the far left.

sulted in 136,000 square feet of space including a culinary arts studio, recording studio, four dance studios, two theaters, a jazz studio, a choral/orchestral hall, 26 practice rooms, a scenic shop and editing rooms. When the new campus opened in 2000, the 170-year-old buildings entered into their fifth use, having begun as the brick townhomes developed by the Architect's company, been redeveloped into the Levee Steam Press, converted into a railroad terminal for the New Orleans Railroad, used as warehouse space for Herwitz Mintz and others, and finally rehabbed into a school by NOCCA, who brought 277 students with them from their Uptown campus. That student population has now swelled to 630.

As transformative as NOCCA's first phase was, it is this current phase which might have the most impact of all. The site's former uses were somewhat insular. Not many people had daily interactions with the townhomes, cotton press, and railroad storage facility, apart from the homeowners and employees themselves. Even the current NOCCA campus, for understandable reasons like security and student well-being, is mostly closed to the general public. But the NOCCA Institute's new vision for Press Street will impact and engage the neighborhood on a scale that no other previous occupant of the site has done. "Our vision for Press Street is a cultural and creative promenade," said Sally Perry, executive director of the NOCCA Institute. "We want it to be a pedestrian friendly row where you can shop at the retail space on St. Claude, walk through the gardens, eat at the café and the food truck, check out student art at the gallery. Even Hubig's has agreed



A view of Chartres Street with the existing NOCCA campus on the right and the in-progress adaptive reuse complex on the left.

to do tours of the factory and a retail shop as a part of their interactive experience, and we plan to host cooking and gardening classes, too," she said. The \$26 million expansion is a partnership between NOCCA and Joe Jaeger of the MCC Group. It is being financed with funding from federal and state historic rehabilitation tax credits, New Markets Tax Credits and \$10 million of private money fund-raised by the NOCCA Institute.

Just like NOCCA's first expansion in 2000, the surrounding neighborhoods are once again prepared to welcome the new campus. According to

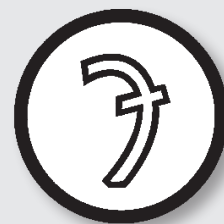
John Guarnieri, Bywater Neighborhood Association (BNA) board member, the BNA, in a letter to the City Planning Commission dated September 19, 2012, supported a change in the City's Master Plan for the NOCCA properties along Press Street from 'Parkland and Open Space to Mixed Use Low Density,' which was adopted. As this land abuts the Bywater neighborhood, it was their belief that the development envisioned by NOCCA can only benefit the residents of the neighborhood, especially considering the school's exemplary track record of historic preservation and adaptive reuse.



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