

New Orleans Historic District Landmarks Commission

**Landmark Designation Report
February 2010**



**Automotive Life Insurance Building
4140 Canal Street**

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Architectural Rating:	Blue
Construction Date:	1963
Architect:	Curtis & Davis Architects
Site Description:	Square 783, Lot 11-B
Municipal District:	1
Assessment District:	05
Zoning:	C-1A
Owner:	4140 Canal Street, Inc. 3164 Club Drive Destin, FL 32550
Date Nominated:	April 9, 2009

The nomination of this property was based upon its architectural and historical significance. City Ordinance No. 5992 MCS defines a Landmark or Landmark site as: A building(s) (landmark) means an unimproved parcel of ground (landmark site) or such parcel with improvements or such improvements without grounds (landmark), wheresoever located in the city, subject to the jurisdiction of the historic district landmarks commission, of particular historic, architectural, or cultural significance, which parcel plus its improvements, if any:

- (1) Exemplify or reflect the broad cultural, political, economic, or social history of the nation, state, or community;
- (2) Are identified with historic personages or with important events in national, state, or local history;
- (3) Embody distinguishing characteristics of an architectural type or specimen, inherently valuable for a study of a period, style, method of construction, or of indigenous materials or craftsmanship; or
- (4) Are representative of the notable work of a master builder, designer, or architect whose individual ability has been recognized.

History of the Property

This commercial building was built in 1963 to celebrate the Automotive Life Insurance Company's twenty-fifth anniversary. They wished for a headquarters that would reflect success and would become a landmark for the company. Located in a semi-residential area, the architects wished to preserve the historic character of the neighborhood while designing a contemporary building. They kept the scale of the building at a respectful two stories and set it back from the street, in keeping with the surrounding area. The Automotive Life Insurance building, designed by Curtis and Davis, is particularly interesting due to its curvilinear aesthetic, a design aspect they used in many of their other projects.



The most distinctive feature of the building is the two story groin vaulted portico spanning the façade and side elevations. These billowing arched vaults make the building appear to be suspended in mid air, enhancing it's almost delicate quality. Slender cross shaped columns made of precast concrete with interior steel structures support the portico roof. Each vault is twelve square feet, which is the basis of the buildings plan and is repeated throughout the interior. Five identical round arched windows, each two stories tall, create a cohesive façade.

The building is centered around a two-story interior court which accommodates the reception area. Executive offices and meeting rooms surround the

first story while the second story houses all of the general administrative offices. The interior color scheme was a restrained mixture of white, grey and black with limited color introduced in some of the office areas. The reception area was designed with black and grey terrazzo floors and slatted cypress walls. The second story offices had vinyl or felt wall coverings in blues and mustards.

Since the relationship between the interior and exterior was integral, every detail of the building was well thought out, from the landscaping to the lighting. A landscape architect planned gardens that would remain vibrant throughout the year while requiring little maintenance. The lighting was an important part of the building's finished look.



Lighting designers, Seymour Evans Associates, worked to enhance every design aspect of the building. They used three types of illumination: recessed downlights, ceiling washers to evenly illuminate the vaults, and fluorescent lighting in the office spaces. Additional lighting was used throughout the exterior illuminating the fountain and the surrounding gardens. The lighting remained on at night which allowed the building to glow, ensuring that the building would be admired both day and night.

Criteria 3- Embody distinguishing characteristics of an architectural type or specimen, inherently valuable for a study of a period, style, method of construction, or of indigenous materials or craftsmanship



Upon receiving the commission, Curtis and Davis were given a large budget and creative freedom. The Automotive Life Insurance Company's current offices were housed in a building that was over one hundred years old. Wanting their new headquarters to showcase the company in a more modern light they chose to build the new office for their twenty fifth anniversary. With unlimited freedom, Curtis and Davis designed a building that was unlike any seen in the city previously.

The building received the following awards:

Gulf States Region of the American Institute of Architects, 1963
Honor Award
Louisiana Architects Association, Honor Awards Program, 1963
Awards of Merit (Interiors)

Criteria 4- Are representative of the notable work of a master builder, designer, or architect whose individual ability has been recognized.

Curtis and Davis are widely recognized as being responsible for some of the most iconic modern buildings in the city of New Orleans and surrounding area. Over the thirty or so years that the architects worked together they were responsible for producing more than four hundred buildings worldwide. The New Orleans Main Public Library, St. Frances Cabrini Church, the Rivergate, and the Superdome are only a few of their projects. Unfortunately over the years some of their most important projects have been lost. Harrah's Casino occupies the footprint where the Rivergate once stood and Cabrini was demolished following hurricane Katrina. They were known for their fearless use of new building techniques and their interest in new building materials.

Nathaniel Curtis and Arthur Davis met while attending the Tulane School of Architecture. Curtis graduated in 1940 and went on to join the Navy where he studied naval architecture. Following graduation Davis and worked for a time with Albert Kahn before receiving his Masters degree from Harvard University under Walter Gropius. They returned to New Orleans in 1946 and formed a partnership, Curtis and Davis Architects and Planners, and made the bold decision that they would design buildings solely in the modern style. Following World War II broad social and economic changes took hold of the United States. In particular, great strides were being made in the development of new building materials which allowed for unprecedented achievements in the architecture field:

The work of Curtis and Davis Architects and Planners, 1946-1978, won ninety-five awards, thirty-four national in scope. Their work has been published not only in architectural journals but also in Time, Life, Fortune, and Business Week. Curtis and Davis set design records, nationally and internationally, with the construction of such projects as the Teaching Hospital for the Free University of Berlin, the largest hospital in Europe; the James Forrestal Building (for the Department of Defense), next to the Pentagon, the largest building in the Washington area and the first modern building to be approved by the Fine Arts Commission; Louisiana State Penitentiary, Angola, first penitentiary designed to house a rehabilitation program; Fox Lake Correctional Institution, Wisconsin, first campus type corrections center; the Louisiana Superdome, New Orleans, largest of all enclosed stadiums; and the Rivergate, the Port of New Orleans Exposition Center, longest span pre-stressed post-tensioned concrete barrel vault roof when built.¹

Staff Recommendation

The staff recommends that the Automotive Life Insurance Building be designated as a landmark. The building fulfills two of the four criteria including work of a notable architect and embodying a distinguishing building style. The building represents some of the most innovative work attributed to Curtis & Davis. It is completely modern and unique while not detracting from the historic homes adjacent to it. The Automotive Life building is not only a good example of modern architecture for the city of New Orleans but for the entire country. Presently the building is in a state of demolition by neglect and remains vacant. A landmark designation would protect the property from continued neglect and would ensure its architectural integrity would be preserved.

Bibliography

1-"The Rivergate(1968 - 1995) Architecture And Politics: No Strangers In Pair-A-Dice, A 20th Century Masterpiece Destroyed By Louisiana's Gambling Blitz" Howard-Tilton Memorial Library, Tulane New Orleans, Louisiana, USA 2000.

Interiors Magazine, 1967

Kingsley, Karen. *The Buildings of Louisiana*. Oxford University Press, 2003.