

NEW ORLEANS IN TRANSITION, 1983-1986: *The Interactive Delivery of a Cinematic Case Study*

Glorianna Davenport
Film/Video Group
Massachusetts Institute of Technology

Revised from remarks given at:
The International Congress for Design Planning and Theory
Park Plaza Hotel, Boston, August 19, 1987.

Abstract

How does a city change? New Orleans in Transition, 1983-1986 is a 3 hour cinematic case study of urban change and design negotiation. The edited film is being released as a videodisc set and can be played linearly or accessed interactively in a workstation environment. In the interactive mode, students and researchers will be able to selectively view movie sequences. At any time during the viewing session, they can pause, take notes and review support material such as maps, architectural plans, personal or site dossiers, reports, and other relevant data. The intent of this enhanced cinematic experiment is to deepen the understanding of the subject matter and to provide students and researchers with the ability to explore the case-study material in relation to their particular interests. The first interactive implementation of this movie will take place in an introductory Urban Planning course at MIT this fall.

The Educational Dilemma

The one thing we can be certain of is change. Urban change results from a complex network of interdependencies in which human interactions conjoin with history, geography, politics, economics, and current philosophical attitudes about the relationship between culture and society. Because change is a continuing process, any particular change is difficult to analyze or to evaluate.

Kevin Lynch wrote in A Theory of Good City Form:

What makes a good city? Someone might say "I like Boston" but we all understand that this is merely a trivial preference based on personal experience. Decisions about urban policy, or the allocation of urban resources, or how to build something, must use norms of good and bad. Without some sense of better, any action is perverse. [1]

When one examines any planning effort, or planning as a tool for urban change, one quickly discovers that one is dealing with a psychological construct involving many possible and potential choices which cannot be pinned down to a single space-time relationship. Both professionals and citizens can gain a more informed perspective about their environment and how they can effect positive change by observing the experience of others.

Project History: Why New Orleans?

I first visited New Orleans for Jazz Fest in April 1982. At that time I met architect Steven Bingler, who was thinking about $m=e/c^2$ as he was dreaming up a design for renovating Deitrich Einseidel's decrepit 1896 Brew house. This massive building stands at the edge of the Mississippi River, and catty-corner across Decatur Street from Jackson Square and the St. Louis Cathedral, which is considered the "heart" of the Vieux Carre (French Quarter). Covered with tacked-on protrusions, rusting pipes and peeling paint, this relic of the industrial use of the river's edge was about to be transformed into a modern shopping mall.

In terms of height, form and materials, the architect's proposal to "incise" a 20th century glass and steel structure into the 19th century shell was antithetical to the preservation restrictions of the Vieux Carre, the second oldest historic district in the United States. Despite what appeared to be a radical design, almost anything would be an improvement to the existing abandoned state of this historic landmark. The renovation, however, represented only the first phase of a 17 acre development, most of which would involve new construction; approval of a non-conforming design could be used as a precedent in later phases of the project. The development of the entire site was coupled with the dream of a promenade along the river's edge. Without question, this development was bound to cause some amount of controversy, at least among the preservation community, many of whom were residents of the Vieux Carre and some of whom had been party to making this an historic district.

During this visit, I also learned that New Orleans would be holding a World's Fair in 1984. An 82 acre riverfront site in the Central Business District had been assembled and would be developed for this event. The site was within easy walking distance of the Vieux Carre. Although planning for the event began in 1974, the critical political and economic decisions which secured the event took place in the spring of 1982.

The major residual of the Fair would be a 400,000 square foot convention center designed for potential expansion. The Fair would be open from May through October, a period which includes the steamy August "dog days." In April 1982, total attendance to the event was projected at 18 million people.

In effect, when the city, state and private investors committed themselves to this site for the Fair, they were gambling on the fact that developing tourist areas along downtown waterfront sites was in vogue, and that large, national developers such as the Rouse Corporation might commit to a permanent development on the site following the close of the Fair. The city needed to create an environment in which the new convention center would thrive. The historic Warehouse District which bordered the site was beautiful, but the maritime related businesses for which the district was developed were moving to other parts of the city. In addition to generating increased tourism, the city hoped that activity on the riverfront would stimulate the formation of a residential community in the Warehouse district.

As an observational filmmaker, I was aware that there exist certain constraints on what will make a good story. Ordinarily, urban change would be too diffuse a subject and, in most cases, it would be difficult to gain access to intelligible material. New Orleans presented some optimal conditions: the city was fairly small; my partner, Richard Leacock, had filmed there on earlier occasions; our potential characters were willing to give us access; the 2 1/2 miles of Mississippi riverfront was a compact area; the timeline, a World's Fair which was due to open in two years, was tight. Added to these advantages was the potential for open controversy about what was "good" for the city.

Luckily for us, the National Endowment for the Arts and MIT also felt that the subject was worthwhile. They were joined shortly by USAir and the Sheraton-New Orleans Hotel. Later, the National Trust for Historic Preservation also committed some resources to the project. In all, we visited New Orleans 18 times and recorded 30 plus hours of meetings, site visits, and interviews over the three year period. In the final videodisc version, well over 40 characters are highlighted; and major story-lines, such as the Jax Brewery development, the Louisiana World Exposition, and the Riverfront Development Plan prepared by Edaw, Inc. have multiple sub-plots which intertwine.

Documentary and Education

I am an observer. My tools are my eyes, my mind, the camera, the tape recorder, and display technologies. The dream is that cinematic documentation can offer insights into how people think and interact. The critical ingredient to the success of this kind of film is access, particularly access to human interactions. The crucial ingredient following completion of a movie is an audience.

Two things which are perhaps interrelated have always puzzled me: the first is why observational documentaries are not used more in education. A rich movie heritage of real people -not only in the areas of anthropology, history, cultural studies, but also in science, philosophy and the arts - already exists and is constantly expanding. Glimpses of real people making decisions about their lives and our environment is exciting fodder and

can hone a student's understanding of what is really happening in a negotiation or a moment of discovery, on or off camera. Secondly, and I do not think I am unique in this regard, whenever I view a documentary that really interests me, I want to know more.

With the introduction of optical videodiscs to the market in 1979, the idea of an augmented information environment for observational movies became feasible. [2] This environment would incorporate expertise which I could offer as a researcher /filmmaker and video editor. What I envisioned then is now gaining credibility; and interactive movies such New Orleans in Transition are referred to as "hypermedia" or "multimedia" applications.[3]

For the last four years, in anticipation of the New Orleans project and other similarly complex documentaries, I have been working with MIT's Project Athena [4] to develop a visual courseware environment for observational documentary. Last year, Project Athena finalized the hardware and standard software for their visual workstation: a Microvax II or IBM RT with a Parallax high-resolution graphics board running X-windows. For the New Orleans application, the workstation will be configured with two videodisc players and a vertical interval switcher to permit seamless edits between some scenes. In this configuration, live video from the optical videodisc is routed through the Parallax and is displayed in a window. In the New Orleans project, other windows are used for icons, supporting data, notes, etc.

This "hyper-media" environment permits students easy access to surround information, such as maps, personal dossiers, reports, site histories or pertinent legislation, which informed decisions made by our subjects. A database cross-links all this information. When possible, the information in the database can be augmented or annotated by individual users. Specialized software programs are currently being developed to transparently search the database and display machine-generated linked lists of movie sequences and data. The student or researcher is invited to browse through the movie and the surround information. At any time the viewer can break out (or pause) in the process of viewing to make notes or retrieve more specialized information.

As we have just begun work on the fully configured workstation and are in the process inputting the supporting data and mastering the videodisc set, I cannot draw conclusions at this time regarding the use of this augmented case study by specific students. However, I can suggest some linked scenarios which might be pursued. Bear in mind that this is not a branched structure but a sort of free form, associative information resource, and therefore the likelihood of two paths being the same is minimal. Ultimately, the responsibility of determining the merit, ethics, and professional expertise of the characters and their actions rests with the student or researcher.

Augmented Delivery and the New Orleans Project

At the beginning of any session, a student or researcher will choose from a menu of options, which include linear viewing, a predetermined edit (by a professor, researcher, or student), browse, or query. In one window, live video is displayed; in another window, character icons change dynamically with scene changes. Other icons allow the viewer to

expand a map, or look through references. Once familiar with the story, or if a viewer is researching a particular issue in a larger context, he/she can build queries by mousing a sequence of icons or typing a series of key words.

Let us assume that a viewer has watched a sequence in which the development team is discussing the design of Phase II of the Jackson Brewery site and wishes to know more about citizen reaction to the proposed scheme. At this point several options exist: these include typing something like "citizen reaction", opening the reference window, or perhaps constructing a query from visual icons which are displayed when he/she breaks out of the design session. Instead of listing a set of unrelated scenes, the database search might suggest that there are several scenes which feature Mary Morrison and which, together can provide a conflict/resolution scenario. The student or researcher can choose to view these scenes as a "mini-movie" or select any of these scenes individually.

The viewer might at this point query the system in order to review the history of the 50' height limitation in the French Quarter and the proposal in the new "Central Riverfront Area Study" to create a "special district" for this riverfront portion of the Vieux Carre. If the viewer does not know who Mary Morrison is, he/she can mouse Mary's icon and get a short biographical sketch. As this sketch will show, Mary Morrison is a long-time resident of the Vieux Carre and has been actively involved in preservation of the Vieux Carre for over 50 years. In addition, her late husband wrote what is still the definitive book on preservation law. Armed with this information, the user might wish to view the opinion of some other citizen who has been less prominent in the preservation movement or might wish to review some of the litigation cases in which the Morrisons played a role.

The additive aspect of this kind of information allows students to make valuable and pragmatic observations of their own. In this particular case, a student might begin to evaluate the effectiveness of the Vieux Carre Commission as a development control agency. Simultaneously, the student might discover the advantages of entering any negotiation with an informed perspective on the background of each participant. While the latter may not be evident by observing a single negotiation sequence, over the course of the entire movie it becomes clear that a single individual may wear different hats at different times, and, as a result, hidden agendas will frequently become apparent to the discerning researcher.

Conclusion

The New Orleans project is a particularly interesting model for interactive delivery in education because the story spans many disciplines including American studies, architecture, management, and political science. In fact, the first academic who expressed interest in the New Orleans project was an "environmental psychologist". Although I had never heard of the field, I was able, after a brief explanation, to show three scenes which generated two hours of discussion. This session quickly led me to understand that the really exciting aspect of this "hypermedia" or "multimedia" environment was that it could keep growing.

What I as a filmmaker know and can pass on to others is to a large extent factual knowledge about what happened: who talked to whom when, what the budget was, how was it modified, what a particular report stated. Our characters can provide insight into what they knew and, to the extent they remember, the circumstances which surrounded their agenda. As this footage circulates, experts in many areas will identify themselves; we hope that many of them will be students. The scope of potential research topics is broad; for instance, someone who has collected material on Worlds Fairs since 1936 recently approached me and asked if I would be interested in reviewing his material. Historical documentation of this kind will allow us to put the New Orleans experience into a larger perspective. Important aspects of the database, therefore, are provisions which link it to other databases and which allow it to be expanded, not just by an individual viewer for himself or herself, but permanently. The difficulty here, of course, is space and sifting the valuable, new information of a valid expert from personal commentary. In the long run, I have no solution to this problem. In the shorter term, individual professors will be able to make annotations in our permanent database, and hopefully will include in those annotations research generated by students.

Over the past few years I have also been concerned with how a project like this could gain the widest possible distribution. The critical problem, here, is in identifying a hardware/software configuration which is inexpensive, attractive to educational institutions, and which promotes the flexible association of ideas. This August I was pleasantly surprised by the release of "HyperCard" for the newer Macintosh computers and by Apple's commitment to several educational videodisc projects. Although we have not yet had a chance to work with the New Orleans material using this software, I believe from my limited explorations that "HyperCard" will support the kinds of linking which are so critical to documentary movies and to the humanities in general. Although this system will not usually include the "bells and whistles" of our current workstation (such as single screen display, video frame-grabbing, and CAD overlays), it does address the current problem of allowing students and researchers to better organize their ideas and observations about human problems. In this context, documentary projects, such as New Orleans in Transition, which explore real-world problem-solving situations can become a substantive resource for students at all levels. Through the incorporation of these movies in educational contexts, these projects can help bring the human element, from whom and for whom the problems exist to begin with, back into balance with technology.

[1] Kevin Lynch, *A Theory of Good City Form*, MIT Press, 1981.

[2] One side of a CAV-constant angular velocity -optical videodisc can store 54,000 still frames or 1/2 hour of movie information. The players have an RS232 port, and access time between any two frames on the disc is now less than 3 seconds.

[3] A recent publication, "Multimedia in Education: Learning Tomorrow," The Journal of the Apple Education Advisory Council, Spring 1987, provides an excellent overview of the history of the conceptual aspects of software development and current applications in this area.

[4] Created through a grant from Digital Equipment Corporation and IBM in 1983, Project Athena is an MIT-wide computer network designed to integrate computing in all phases of the educational process.