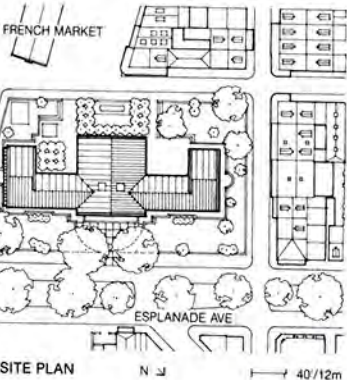


Crème de mint

Peter C. Papademetriou

In the latest of many remodelings, a Greek Revival landmark in the Vieux Carré has been prepared by the joint venture office of McNaughton, Biery, Touns, Lemann for museum and commercial use.

Peter C. Papademetriou, P/A's Houston-based correspondent, is a practicing architect and associate professor of architecture at Rice.



New Orleans, after the Louisiana Purchase of 1803, developed as three cultures in separate municipalities: the old quarter or Vieux Carré, the "Anglo" Garden District to the west, and the fashionable Creole promenade along Esplanade Avenue, the definite east edge of the quarter. Though the city was united in 1852, these social divisions remain apparent in the urban fabric today.

At the conjunction of contrasting areas stands the Old United States Branch Mint, each side facing a different use. The Greek Revival structure, designed by William Strickland and completed in 1838, symbolized the American presence, filling a full city block as the largest building in the area. The Mint turned its back on the smaller scale of the Vieux Carré and fronted the emerging Esplanade. To its south flank lies the activity of the riverfront and the French Market of 1813, sited where a turn of the Mississippi opens up the rigid grid fabric of the Vieux to create the open space of the market. This space, at the original "rear" of the Mint, has recently taken on importance as the terminus of a linear pedestrian precinct extending from Jackson Square along the riverfront, coexisting with and overcoming functional incompatibility with shipping, trucks, and railroad. Both its size and its boundary location gave the Old Mint a potential for reinforcing emerging public activities.

The Old Mint came into being as a result of Andrew Jackson's battle against control of U.S. banks from Philadelphia, through 1835 legislation creating branch mints in the South. Strickland, who had designed various government buildings including the Second Bank of the United States in Philadelphia and the New Orleans Customs House of 1819,

prepared a design similar in basic form to his Naval Asylum of 1826-1829 in Philadelphia (now called the Naval Home). He obviously never visited New Orleans, and his design left several aspects of the building somewhat unresolved. There is evidence, for instance, that Strickland thought the building would directly abut a street; consequently, rather than a monumental stair leading to the entry portico on the *piano nobile*, as at the Naval Home, twin stairs slip behind wing walls. As a result, this symbolic entry is somewhat devalued, if not reduced to a mere false front. Stairs on the interior and the galleries depart from Strickland's somewhat indefinite designs.

The basic construction was brick masonry with a few details—pilasters, base courses, and column capitals—executed in granite. Over most of the brickwork, Strickland specified plaster scored to resemble stone and painted gray. As he wrote in *Sketches of Roman Architecture* (1846), "Red is the last colour that an architect would choose in the composition of any of his designs," a thought to consider in viewing the Mint today.

Architects of the early 19th Century were concerned about fireproofing, and Strickland used masonry piers and groin vaulting for the principal interiors of the first two floors, with cast-iron columns and built-up beams for the galleries. By 1840, however, New Orleans architect James Gallier had to reinforce several vaults with tie rods, which remain today. In the 1850s, wood structure in the roof and rear portions of the building was replaced by segmental barrel vaults spanning between steel beams, and the original slate roof over heavy timber was replaced by corrugated iron on metal trusses (one of which spans 90 ft). Taste had also changed: the exterior was painted "Federal brown," a reddish terracotta hue. Also, as the south wing originally contained the superintendent's residence, a cast-iron veranda (then the rage, and now what we identify with the Vieux Carré) was added. In 1890, double steel-plate storage vaults for gold and silver were installed, as was an early Otis elevator in 1902, before minting operations ceased in 1909.

For the next two decades, the building housed an Assay Office and various other Federal offices. In 1931, it was converted into a "Prohibition prison"; yards were walled in, interior partitions removed, and three levels of cell blocks inserted in the flanking rear wings. In 1943, the building was taken over by the U.S. Coast Guard for two decades, dur-





Monumental front of Old Mint (top right and opposite) faces away from Vieux Carré. Iron galleries to rear face French Market area at edge of tightly-knit old quarter, overlook pedestrian link to city center. Photos above (top to bottom) show: filigreed veranda on south wing, memento of former superintendent's apartment; side stairs to portico entrance, with new walk and retaining wall; approach from market side.



ing which white waterproofing was applied to the exterior. In 1965, it was transferred to the State of Louisiana with the understanding that it be used for museum purposes.

The Louisiana State Museum, based in New Orleans and operating several historic properties in the Vieux Carré, undertook a feasibility study in 1974. Joint venture architects E. Eean McNaughton & Associates,

Biery & Toups, and Bernard Lemann as architectural historian were selected in 1976, and in 1977 funding was finally assured.

A mix of uses was fundamental to regeneration of the Old Mint; income from commercial spaces would cover operating costs, and initial improvements to those areas could be minimal. Restaurants and shops on all levels, which are easily reached by outdoor gallery stairs, would energize the whole complex over a different and longer cycle than pure museum activities.

Old U.S. Branch Mint, New Orleans

In locating various functions, the architects sought to capitalize on existing eccentricities of the building. Because of the existing foundations for minting machinery in the ground floor of the central block, they urged placing the Mint Museum there. The main museum galleries occupy the central portion of the second floor, with museum offices, archives, and an auditorium above on the third floor. The south wing still contains three levels of jail cells, as yet undeveloped. The north wing houses the Amistad Institute of Dillard University, a black history collection, and was developed independently of the basic building budget.

At this time, museum installations are nearly a year from completion; a multimedia Louisiana Experience show in the central block will be flanked by artifact displays on the hardly surprising themes of Mardi Gras and jazz. Commercial activities to complement the museum are now being evaluated.

In view of the site conditions and potential urban design impact, the architects decided early that the Old Mint would have to undergo a *volte-face*, as its "rear" became a new "front" to terminate the pedestrian sequence of the Vieux Carré. The E shape of the building footprint provided the plazas to receive this movement, and the gallery tiers could provide an active backdrop.

Significant site work had to be done to reorganize drainage. Several feet of fill were pulled back from the building, in part to alleviate interior dampness problems. A retaining wall now defines a path around the entire building, which connects the old front with the new and eases handicapped access.

The building's architectural history suggested a strategy mixing renovation, restoration, and adaptive reuse. Lacking funds for either a historic structure survey or site archaeology, the architects wound up essentially winging it as they made discoveries. Among these was the foundation for the large boiler stack that dominated a rear court until 1931; this is now an accent element in the landscaping. No real structural changes were made, but inserted walls and floor areas were removed to restore a central well linking interior levels. Final bids came in \$200,000 below four-year-old budget figures, giving the design team a chance to select from their "wish list."

No single time period is represented in the new complex. Selected elements revealing the building's past are enhanced—even drama-

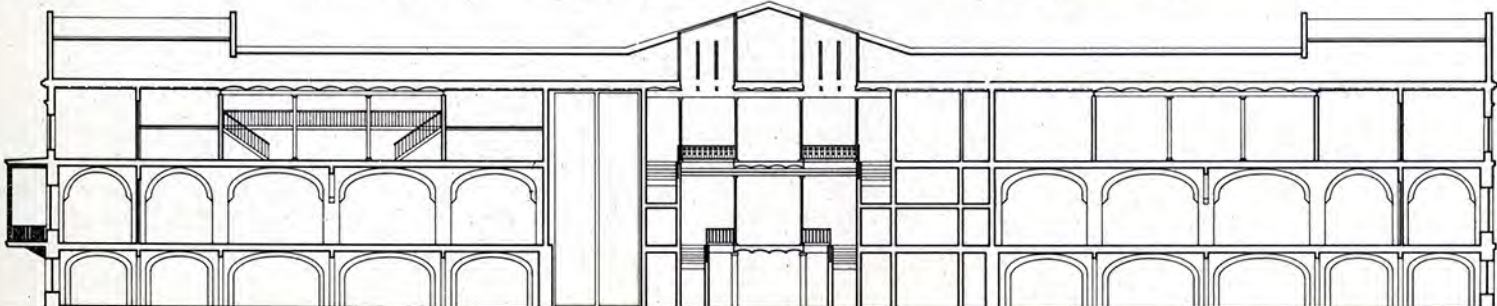
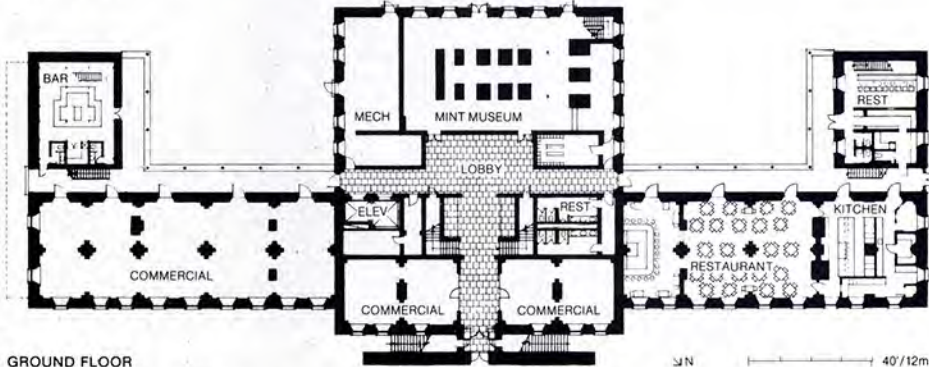
tized. Security gates from prison days have been relocated as gates to the Mint Museum. A wired-glass partition in the same space reveals a wonderful cast-iron stair retained to serve as fire exit for the assembly spaces above. Balustrades for the gallery were long gone and no designs existed, so those of the Naval Home were replicated and fit the aesthetic theme of the Mint. The provision of bathrooms may have been the most fun: on lower levels, they were incorporated into vaulted spaces; on upper levels, they were cut out of old silver and gold vaults.

Among their decisions, the architects opted for restoring the vibrant Federal brown exterior of the 1850s, reasonably the Mint's most significant period. A sample of the original color was discovered as fill was dug away from the building. This is complemented by exterior iron work painted a dark blue-green common in New Orleans, "Voodoo green" or the "introduction of local color," as characterized by Bob Biery. A more neutral white-gray treatment is used on the interior.

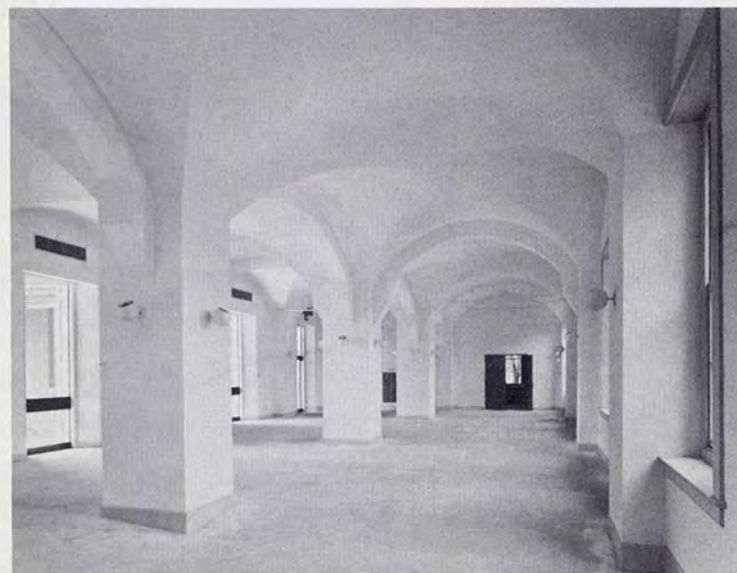
A diverse history, full of alterations: how should one respect the past and further complicate the narrative with new and diverse uses? William Strickland would have been sympathetic to the problems faced by McNaughton, Biery, Toups, and Lemann, as he wrote in 1844, "... I have had more difficulty in reconnecting the proportions of ancient architecture to modern purposes of utility than any one thing else in my profession." □



"Rear" galleries (above) form lighted backdrop for garden and market area. Core block of Mint includes (near right, top to bottom): top-floor auditorium; ground-floor Mint Museum, with main ducts from mechanical room passing around massive foundations for old machinery; restrooms in old vaulted vaults. Central stairwell and skylight (far right), sealed over during prison use, were opened and restored. Vaulted loft space in wings (bottom photo) is for commercial use.



LONGITUDINAL SECTION



Data

Project: Old United States Branch Mint, New Orleans, La.

Architects: McNaughton, Biery, Toups, Lemann—a joint venture of E. Eean McNaughton, architects; Biery & Toups, architects; Bernard Lemann, architectural historian.

Original architect: William Strickland.

Client: State of Louisiana, Louisiana State Museum.

Site: 70,000-sq-ft flat site at east edge of Vieux Carré historic quarter.

Program: restoration/adaptation of existing building, with site, for museum, library/archives, and commercial use.

Structural system: existing load-bearing masonry; iron columns; brick vaulting.

Major materials: restored stucco on brick; granite pilasters, etc.; interior plaster on brick.

Mechanical system: decentralized air-handling and fan coil units, with electric heating and chilled water from central chillers (218 tons); humidity control in museum, archives.

Consultants: EDAW, landscape; E. Eean McNaughton & Associates, interiors and exhibits; Morphy, Makofsky & Masson, structural; Harold E. Faller & Associates, mechanical; Zervigon & Associates, electrical; Chambers & Chambers, paint/mortar analysis.

General contractor: J.A. Jones Construction Co.

Costs: \$3,048,000 (actual, 1979) including site work.

Photography: Alan Karchmer.