



RECLAIMING THE NEUTRAL GROUND

New Construction and Healing in New Orleans

Steve Corsello

Urban highways were never a good idea. Now, as cities all over the world look to somehow ex-fill the big, tall, hulking roads that ploughed through their communities fifty years ago, the U.S. faces a reckoning. While the pandemic-stalled re-populating of America's largest metropolitan areas has at least temporarily dulled the lure of city living and working for some and the country is forced to face its racist past and present, the billions of dollars needed to take a hard, serious look at getting rid of our worst city highways has, incongruously, appeared. Hopefully, a torrent of federal dollars will begin the long overdue work needed to address the harm road building wrought on communities of color and to start the healing process.

This project takes the position that new building is key to healing, that repairing the damage from elevated highways or urban renewal schemes can't happen without construction. One place where this is particularly true is North Claiborne in New Orleans. Like many neighborhoods in many cities it saw its business district, overwhelmingly African American, wiped out by an interstate. Over the decades, as the full scope of the damage done by the highway became clear, the community mobilized behind the possibility of removing the I-10 and re-building the at grade boulevard and tree-lined neutral ground that once ran through Treme and the Seventh Ward.

Reclaiming the Neutral Ground picks up at this point. Taking I-10's removal as a given, the project proposes to turn a series of off-ramps into a campus dedicated to high skilled, vocational building arts training meant to literally create the knowledge needed to heal the built environment. A new home for the New Orleans Notorial Archives, a key resource in the sensitive work of historic preservation and restoration, and a public market will anchor the site with alternate programming.

Treme and the Seventh Ward - Living with the I-10

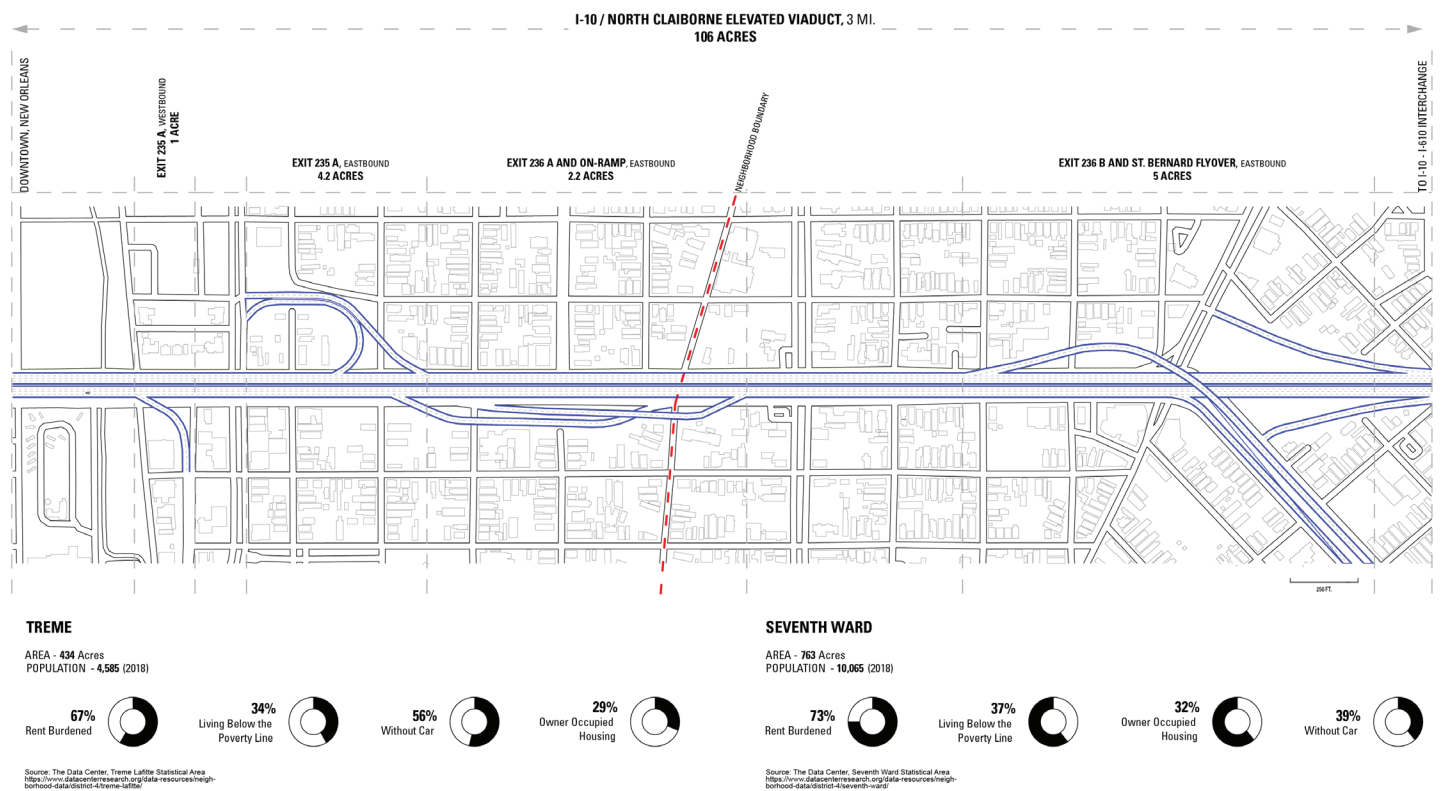


Today, Interstate Highway 10 occupies what was once the neutral ground in the North Claiborne section of Treme and the Seventh Ward. The aerial photograph, above, gives some indication of I-10's effect on adjacent blocks--vacant lots and

large cutouts for on-ramps and off-ramps. Harder to see in almost any photograph is the decades long health and economic toll wrought by 60,000 daily cars traveling 70 mph thirty feet in the air.

TOP The view looking West down I-10 with the Superdome and downtown New Orleans in the background. The 3 mile connector road, completed in 1972, was intended as a high-speed route into the city from the suburbs.

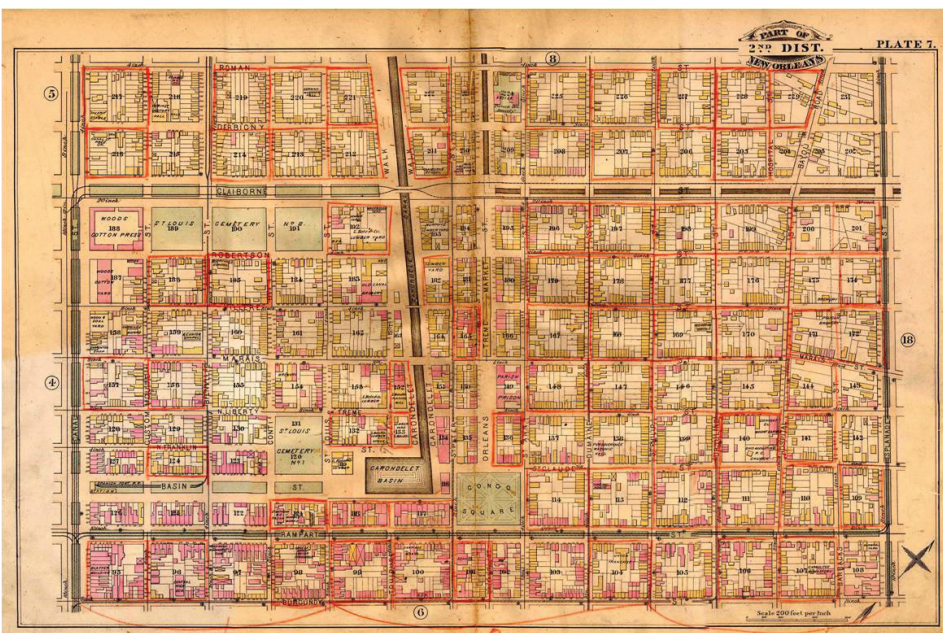
BOTTOM Claiborne's neutral ground was so wide, over 100 feet, that the six-lane I-10 could fit inside. Complicated off-ramps and flyovers, however, were a different story, eating into some 11 acres of occupied land just within the Eastern half of Treme.



North Claiborne, 1880s - 1968



CLOCKWISE FROM LEFT View of North Claiborne's Neutral Ground 1955 Source: Historic New Orleans Collection; St. Bernard Public Market and St. Bernard Circle (circa 1945) from the Historic New Orleans Collection; View of North Claiborne at Esplanade Avenue, March, 1955 Source: Historic New Orleans Collection; Source: Robinson's Atlas of the City of New Orleans, 1883, New Orleans Notarial Archives, www.notarialarchives.org.



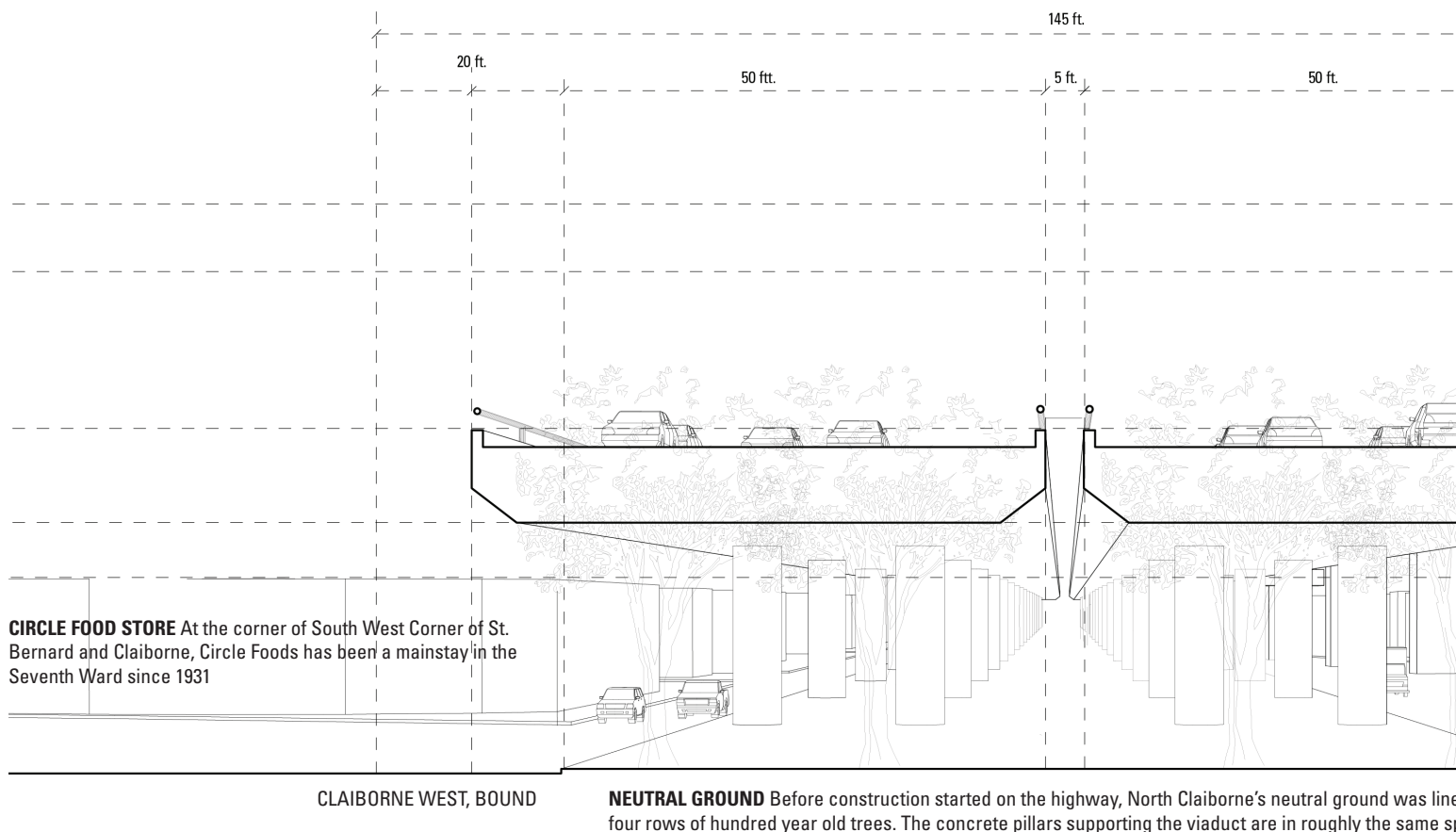
At mid-century, Claiborne Ave. East from Canal through the St. Bernard traffic circle constituted the heart of New Orleans's African-American business community and home to the oldest neighborhood of Free Persons of Color in the U.S. The Sanborn Map from the 1880s, bottom left, shows an in-tact Claiborne Ave. With its distinctive, wide neutral ground and streetcar lines.

These features were key parts of the communities fabric, business and social. The neutral ground wasn't merely an amenity--it was a cultural forum for events like Black Mardi Gras, stunning frontage for shops and restaurants, and a linear, walkable transportation corridor that supplied the patrons for area businesses. This would be lost in the mid-60s when New Orleans's brokers, all white, defeated a plan to put an arterial highway system through the French Quarter--they chose an African American neighborhood instead.

The Highway Replaces the Neutral Ground - Effects

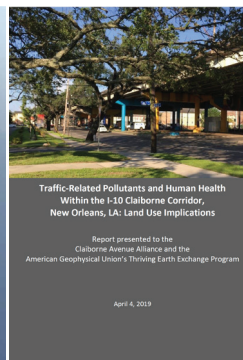
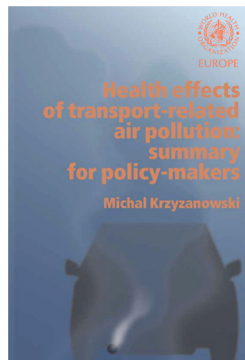
The elevated I-10 would almost completely wipe out North Claiborne's African American business community, affecting the shops and restaurants closest to the highway first and then cascading out to blocks farther away. With the neutral ground gone and car traffic by-passing the neighborhood, the foot traffic that sustained Claiborne's businesses disappeared.

Years after the highway opened, it would become clear that the I-10 also affecting the community's health. Tremé and the Seventh Ward, the highest rates of lung and heart disease in the city, the highest heart attack and stroke, and, at 55 years, the lowest life expectancy.



TRAFFIC RELATED AIR POLLUTION (TRAP)

Men, women, and children living within a third of a mile from an highway are more likely to suffer from **heart disease, lung disease, and asthma**; more likely to have a **heart attack or stroke**; and **more likely to die from COVID-19**.

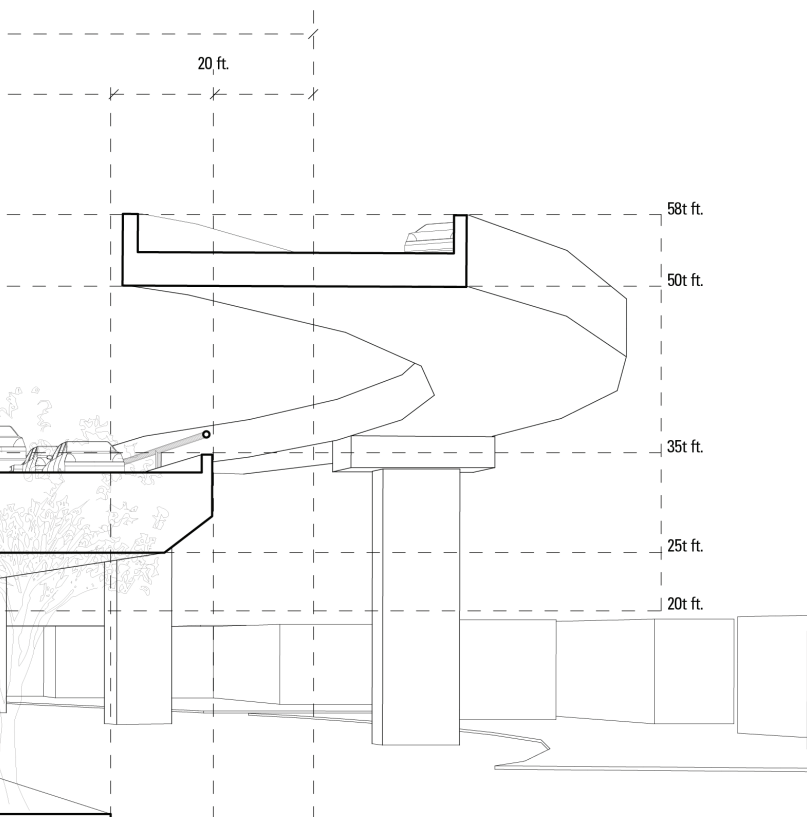


VEHICULAR CARBON EMISSIONS

Car and truck traffic is the largest source of **green house gas emissions** in the city.

New Orleans, like many other cities, is overwhelmingly car dependent. Without an induced modality shift in transportation, its carbon footprint will remain out of reach.

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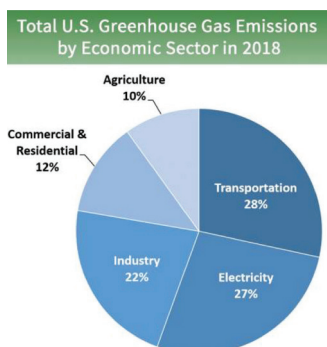


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MISSIONS

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CAR BURDENED

The lowest 2/5ths of earners in the U.S. spend roughly **23% of their incomes** annually on owning and maintaining a vehicle overwhelmingly for the purposes of commuting to a job.

Despite the lack of a reliable public transportation system, many Treme and Seventh Ward residents cannot afford to own a car.



FROM TOP When compared to the pictures of Claiborne's neutral ground on the previous pages, the effects of the highway at street-level become clear. The spaces underneath the elevated are in turns forlorn, parking, and a dumping ground.

Metropolitan Policy Program at BROOKINGS

Table 2. Housing and Transportation Choices and Burdens for Select Metro Areas

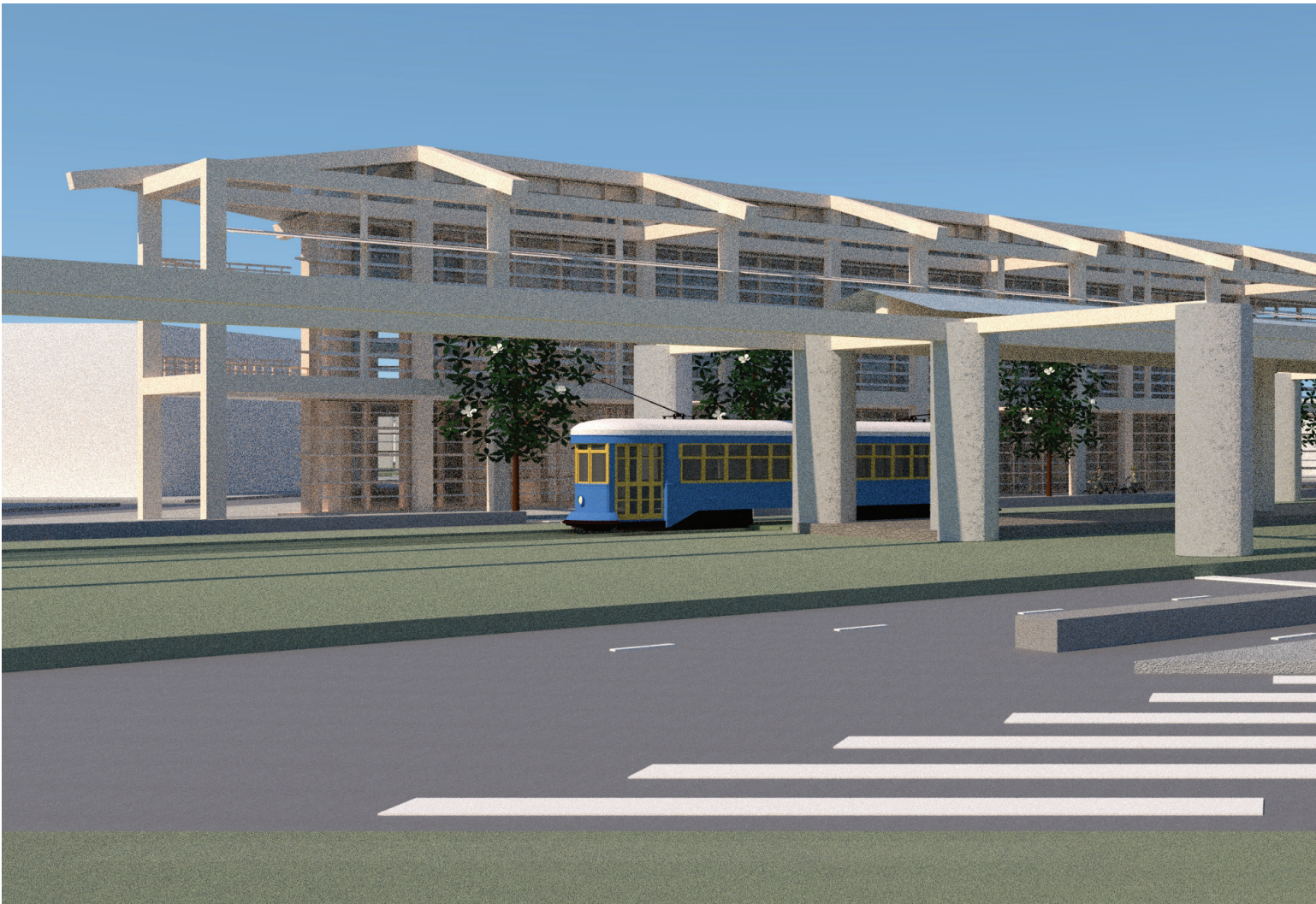
Metro Area	Affordable Housing Shortage	Type of Residence Transportation Choice	Expenditures of Households Earning \$20,000- \leq \$49,999		
			in Housing	in Transportation	in Combined
Atlanta, GA MSA	Medium	Rail Transit System/Small	32	24	55
Boston, MA CMSA	Medium	Extensive Rail	27	29	56
Chicago, IL CMSA	Medium	Extensive Rail	35	27	61
Dallas, TX CMSA	Medium	Medium Rail	24	31	56
Detroit, MI CMSA	Low	No Rail	26	31	57
Houston, TX CMSA	Medium	Small Expanding Rail	24	31	56
Los Angeles, CA CMSA	High	Large Rail	24	32	56
Miami, FL CMSA	High	Medium Rail	28	27	55
New York, NY CMSA	High	Extensive Rail	29	32	61
Philadelphia, PA CMSA	Medium	Extensive Rail	31	28	59
San Francisco, CA CMSA	High	Extensive Rail	31	30	60
Washington, DC CMSA	Medium	Large Rail	27	29	56
Baltimore, MD MSA	Low	Medium Rail	23	32	55

Source: Peter W. Niles and others, "Housing and Transportation Cost Trade-Offs and Burdens of Working Households in 28 Metros," Chicago and Brookings, 1/8. Center for Neighborhood Technology and Engineering Tech, 2006.
Note: Results are listed for only 12 of the 28 metro areas in the CHTV study. Selection was based on congruence with metro areas included in this study.

Imagining North Claiborne after the Highway

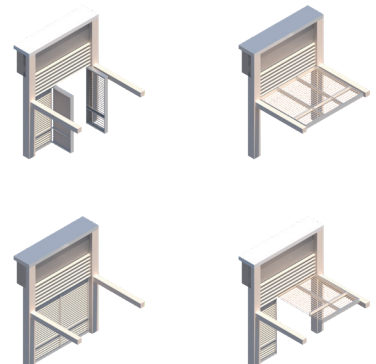
Taking the removal of I-10 as the starting point, the project re-imagines the five acre site now occupied by the St. Bernard flyover as a campus for a building arts vocational school, a new home for the New Orleans Notorial Archives, and public market along both sides of the Claiborne Avenue Neutral ground. It also proposes to turn North Claiborne back into a public transportation corridor-re-building the long defunct street car line, maintaining dedicated bus rapid transit lanes, and adding protected bike lines.

Treme and the Seventh Ward are home to so many are in dire need of repair. The purpose ties the opportunity to participate in the phys



NEW ORLEANS STORM SHUTTER

Shutters are one of New Orleans most distinctive architectural elements and a key part of the project's buildings. In the new Notorial Archives, above, shutters of with progressive apertures block direct sunlight and provide an indirect weather barrier to a space that needs to be full climate controlled. In the public market across the street, the shutter becomes a front door for stall operators as well as a security enclosure.



me of New Orleans most important structures and
of the school is to give residents of both communi-
cal rebuilding of their neighborhoods.



LEFT The shutters that wrap the public market double as front door and shade, easily communicating when stall vendor is open.

RIGHT View from the Notorial Archive's atrium through the building's system of shutters onto the neutral ground.

