

The view from the sidewalk



PHOTOS BY STEPHANIE BRUNO / THE TIMES PICAYUNE

Of these houses in the 2400 block of North Villere Street, three are part of the Prospect.1 art exhibit and two are occupied residences. Each has its own appeal.

## ART INTERSECTS LIFE IN ST. ROCH



**THE NEIGHBORHOOD:** St. Roch, called the New Marigny Historic District on the National Register of Historic Places. Roughly bounded by North Tonti Street on the north, St. Claude Avenue on the south, the Press Street railroad tracks on the east and St. Bernard Avenue on the west, although the neighborhood association uses different boundaries. When added to the register in 1994, the district combined three former faubourgs: Nouvelle Marigny, Franklin and Daunois. Oak-lined St. Roch Avenue — its prime thoroughfare — is a lovely boulevard lined with historic homes, a marvelous fire station (not in use) and St. Roch Cemetery, with its whitewashed walls and votive chapel. Other landmarks that imbue the neighborhood with its distinct personality are the St. Roch Market on St. Claude Avenue and Our Lady Star of the Sea Church.

**THE BLOCK:** The 2400 block of North Villere Street on the odd, or north, side of the street, between Arts Street on the east and Music Street on the west. It's just a block and a half from St. Roch Avenue in one direction, Franklin Avenue in the other.

**THE HOUSES:** One of the more interesting collections of houses in the city right now, thanks to the Prospect.1 citywide art exhibition and installations sponsored by KK Projects. Of the six houses on the north side of the block, three are part of the exhibition; two others are occupied residences and one is a garage with living area above. Each has architectural interest independent of the immediate artistic hook, and the activity on the street is lively.

By **Stephanie Bruno**  
Contributing writer

How many times have I heard in the last week, “I haven’t seen any of Prospect.1, and it’s almost over!”

Determined not to join the chorus and trying to beat Sunday’s closing date, I get out of the house and onto a shuttle bus. And I discover that the 2400 block of North Villere makes a fabulous block for a Street Walk.

First, of course, I am enchanted by the art installations: The pierced house; the lopsided side-hall shotgun with the rowboat poking out of the window; and the dazzling white “Safehouse” with its gargantuan steel locking mechanism.

Before they became actors in an art drama, the houses had a history. Someone lived there; someone may have died there. And though I don’t know how they became cultural attractions, it’s the layering of their present-day incarnations over their past lives that really gets me. Around them, life goes on.

### Anatomy of the block

At the corner of North Villere and Music streets is a single shotgun with a long ell extending toward Music. And though the house faces North Villere, it could just as easily have a front door on the other street. I see that a fence is being installed. Posts are up, but only a tall iron gate is present so far. For a minute, I consider whether this gate — superfluous without a fence — is part of a sly art installation. It isn’t, of course, but it could be.

Next door, cat’s claw vines creep up the sides, over the roof and down the front of a cottage. Its doors are flung open to reveal the interior, where a spiral iron stair reaches upward. Very long poles with cloth on the ends pierce the roof and structure from every direction. The artist intended something else, no doubt. But for me, the martyred St. Sebastian, riddled with arrows, comes to mind.

The side-hall shotgun next door leans precipitously toward the pierced house. You get the feeling that one strong push would send it toppling. It’s like a lot of abandoned houses — you can still discern the beauty of the slate roof and the faded millwork — but here, the prow of a rowboat protrudes through the broken window.

I hear music drifting toward me from inside the house, and it is sad. I look in and see roots reaching down through the ceiling of the front room. From the sidewalk, I see the hallway floor is covered in dirt. It’s an old, old house (much older than the Victorian millwork would suggest), and the installation underscores the organic qualities of a house that has stood for more than a century.

The popular “Safehouse” is adjacent. I have seen photos of the white house and its giant bank-vault door, but nothing beats seeing it in person, along with its neighbors. Unlike the three I have just passed, it is set back from the sidewalk, and the plantings in front frame the approach to the door, establishing a sense of anticipation.

A few steps closer to Arts Street, a Neo-classical revival side-hall shotgun stands straight and plumb, unlike the boat house or even the corner-store house across the street. All of its details are intact, and that fact makes it an excellent foil for the houses that have deteriorated and given themselves over to art. With its round, tapered columns, elaborate gable window, modillions over the entry and dentils on the gable rakes, this one is just another breed of artwork.

The last “house” really isn’t a house but a handsome, Craftsman-style two-story garage in the backyard of the shotgun house facing Arts Street. There is a living space over the garage, and it features a columned balcony cantilevered out over the sidewalk. Deep eaves and exposed rafter tails are distinguishing features, and I especially like the dormer window — exceptionally wide and filled with small square panes of stained and

### PROSPECT.1

**WHAT:** A large-scale exhibit of world-class conceptual art, presented in most major art institutions and scattered locations across the city — considered by many to be the biggest international contemporary art exhibition ever in the United States

**WHEN:** Today and Sunday; closing events include a ‘Sunday Salon & Jazz Funeral,’ 4-7 p.m., at the Hefler Welcome Center, 851 Magazine St.

**WHERE:** A free shuttle will ferry locals and visitors from place to place.

**TICKETS:** Free, but required for entry. Pick up tickets at the Welcome Center, Contemporary Arts Center, 900 Camp St.; New Orleans Museum of Art, City Park; and The Old U.S. Mint, 400 Esplanade Ave.; or download passes at [www.prospectneworleans.org](http://www.prospectneworleans.org). Call 504.715.3968.

mill glass in a glorious array of colors.

### Life on the street

There is no calm on the block during my visit. Some cars whiz by, seemingly oblivious to the extraordinary streetscape. Others slow to a crawl and passengers peer and squint and snap pictures. A taxi pulls up, and a couple emerges, camera in hand, and begins exploring. Boys ride by on bikes, someone pulls over and talks to a man on the stoop. Then a mother and two daughters walk by, heading toward Franklin Avenue; they walk back a few minutes later, carrying empty boxes. They tell me they are collecting boxes from the nearby LB Saints Grocery because they are moving.

I am lost in thought when two men walk by. I ask them what they think. “About this?” one of the men answers, his arm sweeping toward the houses as he and his pal keep walking. “It’s hip. You know, some people don’t think it’s art, but I know what art is.”

Stephanie Bruno can be reached at [housewatcher@hotmail.com](mailto:housewatcher@hotmail.com). For more pictures of the 2400 block of North Villere Street and other blocks profiled in this column, go to <http://www.flickr.com/photos/housewatchertp>.