

## Modern masters

No US city looks to its history more than New Orleans, but even here modernity has found a foothold. In the 1970s New Orleans enjoyed a booming oil-based economy and corporate construction exploded in the old American sector of the city, just above Canal Street. Poydras Street, in particular, became a canyon of high-rise office buildings in mirrored glass and marble, which were in large measure indistinguishable from buildings of similar vintage in Dallas, Houston or Atlanta. At either end of the new corporate row are two structures of architectural importance, both for their own characteristics and because they

define the struggle between cultural uniqueness and homogenisation in New Orleans architecture: the Louisiana Superdome and the Piazza d'Italia.

Near the river end of Poydras Street, on Commerce Street, the Piazza d'Italia was designed by Charles W Moore, Allen Eskew and Ron Filson to celebrate the contribution of the Italian (particularly the Sicilian) community to the culture of New Orleans. Completed in 1978, it is walled on one side with a series of overlapping building façades that suggest abstractly both the Italianate features of much of New Orleans architecture and genuine Old World architectural components. A fountain delivers water to a pool in the shape of Italy, surrounded by concentric tile circles implying the spread of Italian influence throughout the world. Every sort of construction material was used to decorate the plaza: brightly painted stucco, chrome, glazed tiles, marble, brick and coloured lights. The design is deliberately lively, even gaudy in its decorative excess. But there is a certain harmony in the visual racket, and above all, the Piazza certainly reflects the riotous spirit of life in New Orleans.

The architects' decoration of the plaza soon earned it a place in textbooks as an example of postmodern architectural sensibility. However, shops and restaurants did not spring up around the plaza as was originally envisioned and within a very short time (coincident with the bust in the oil industry) the Piazza d'Italia fell into disrepair. It's still creating a buzz in architectural circles but as a classic case of remove or restore. The little park is turning into a genuine ruin with its non-functioning fountain, vandalised lighting system and haphazard maintenance.



The new NOCCA campus.

gin and tonic. Incidentally, the building was neither a blacksmith's shop nor a meeting place for Lafitte (the pirate) and Jackson (the future president) to plot the defence of the city against its English invaders. Again, the fiction of George Washington Cable has become popular history.

Built in 1792, the **Merieult House** (533 Royal Street, at St Louis Street; *see also page 83*) is an early example of the most typical of French Quarter architecture: the Spanish Colonial-style townhouse. This two-storey

structure has a ground floor dedicated to storefronts, a deep balcony, an upper storey for living quarters and an arched carriageway that leads from the street to the stairs and rear courtyard. However, like so many other Vieux Carré structures, the Merieult House does not abide by any strict set of stylistic rules. The stepped roof, for instance, is more typical of the French Colonial period, and the lower façade was redesigned in the early 19th century in a crisp geometric style suggesting Greek Revival taste.