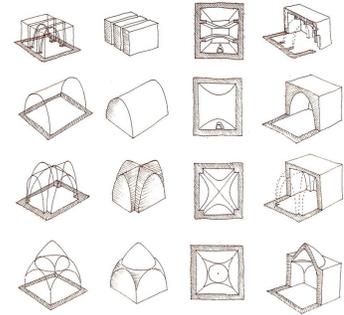


The Birth of a Festival: A First-Person Account by Founding Director, Herman Mhire

NOTES ON VILLAGE ARCHITECTURE IN JORDAN



Ammar Khammash

In January and February 1985, as Director of the University Art Museum at the University of Louisiana Lafayette, I presented an exhibition of narrative paintings from Senegal West Africa from the collection of French linguistic attaché, Maurice Dedieu. Senegalese musicians, Arfan and Kinda Diabate Kouyate, traveled to Lafayette and performed traditional Senegalese music in the University Art Museum, in Lafayette public schools, at Southern University in Baton Rouge, and were featured on a Louisiana Public Broadcasting statewide television program. Like Louisiana, Senegal is a former French colony, and I was able to communicate with the Senegalese musicians in French, the official language of Senegal, and the language of my Louisiana and French ancestors. The exhibition and performances were sponsored by the Agence de Coopération Culturelle et Technique, Paris, the Louisiana Division of Black Culture, Acadiana Arts Council, City of Lafayette, Parish of Lafayette, French Cultural Services, New Orleans, Council for the Development of French in Louisiana, and the Delegation du Québec in Louisiana.

In the summer of 1985 I traveled to Amman, Jordan where I worked with USL architecture major Ammar Khammash on an exhibition exploring nine ancient village sites in the Jordan River Valley. Returning to Lafayette from Amman, I visited museums and attended concerts in Amsterdam and New York. Amsterdam was hosting a city-wide Festival of India that summer, and a highlight of that festival was a concert of the music of India featuring a master of the sitar and a company of 30 musicians and dancers.

The overall impact of the Senegalese exhibition and Senegalese musicians, my exploration of the country and culture of Jordan, the Festival of India in Amsterdam, and museums and concerts in New York City was so powerful, that in August of 1985 I had an idea: to organize an annual visual and performing arts festival in Lafayette. I was familiar with the world class Spoleto Festival in Charleston, South Carolina, and my hope was that Lafayette could host a world-class arts festival of its own.

Lafayette and southwest Louisiana were experiencing an economic downturn in the early to mid-1980s due to dramatically lower prices for oil and natural gas. I believed staging a world-class arts festival in Lafayette had the potential to lift our community's spirits, to inspire and educate our citizens, and serve as an economic development vehicle aimed at strengthening cultural tourism.

Meetings were held in the fall of 1985 with Philippe Gustin, Director of CODOFIL, Jean Goyer, Director of the Québec Delegation in Lafayette, Phil Lank, Director of Community Development for Lafayette, Cathy Weber, Director of the Downtown Development Authority, Gerald Breaux, Director of the Lafayette Convention and Visitors Bureau, Donnie Robin, Administrative Assistant to Parish President, Walter Comeaux, and Tom Boozer, Director of the Acadiana Arts Council.

Jean Goyer informed members of our group about several well-established festivals in the province of Québec and offered to organize an official trip for representatives of our city and parish to observe these festivals and meet with festival organizers to learn first-hand how we might organize a festival of our own. 12 Lafayette representatives visited the International Folklore Festival in Drummondville, Québec, the Montreal Jazz Festival and the Festival d'été de Québec during the summer of 1986, returned to Lafayette and decided to form a non-profit organization with the goal of presenting the first Festival in the summer of 1987, celebrating the francophone heritage of Louisiana, and furthering the cultural renaissance begun by James Domengeaux, founder of CODOFIL.

The first Festival International de Louisiane was presented in downtown Lafayette from July 2 – 5, 1987, and the result was magical! The Festival organization, along with 750 volunteers and sponsors, produced a visual and performing arts festival that introduced Lafayette and Louisiana to the Francophone world; that inspired, surprised and delighted audiences; engaged all of their senses and elevated our community in a unique and fascinating way. People of all ages and from all walks of life were welcome, and they were, at the end of the day, mesmerized by the experience.

Herman Mhire
Founding President
Festival International de Louisiane



Festival International de Louisiane
Founding Executive Committee 1987

Left to right: Michael Doucet, VP Production, Programming; Julie Calzone, Public Relations, Marketing; Taylor Rock, Pavillon de Cuisine; Sally Herpin, Treasurer; Cathy Webre, Parking, Security, Site Planning; Philippe Gustin, First VP, Programming, International Relations; Herman Mhire, Founding President; Phil Lank, VP Fundraising, Hospitality; Donnie Robin, Volunteers, Communications; Tina Girouard, Coordinator; Herbert Wiltz, Ethnic Music; Lyn Bertuccini, Secretary