

## **National Register Eligibility Evaluation**

Section 106 Review Consultation, Hurricane Katrina

St. Frances Cabrini Church, 5500 Paris Avenue, New Orleans, LA 70122

Applicant: Roman Catholic Church/ Archdiocese of New Orleans

St. Frances Cabrini Church is located on the campus of St. Francis Xavier Cabrini School in the Oak Park Subdivision within the neighborhood of Gentilly. The site of St. Frances Cabrini Church was purchased by the Archdiocese in 1952 to develop a new parish in the neighborhood of New Orleans then called "Mirabeau Gardens." The parish was developed for the growing number of Catholic families settling in this area. The notable architectural firm of Curtis and Davis was commissioned to design a master plan for the site in 1961. The plan was implemented in phases with the most elaborate structure, the church, being completed last. Later that year, the church erected a prefabricated Quonset hut as a temporary church facility for Catholic services. St. Frances Cabrini Church was designed by Curtis and Davis in 1961. In 1963, St. Frances Cabrini Church was dedicated and named "Cathedral by the Lake" by Archbishop Patrick Cody.

The design of St. Frances Cabrini Church was developed to conform to the restructuring of the church in accordance with the Second Vatican Council's Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy. The design itself predates the constitution, but plans to restructure were well known within the Catholic hierarchy prior to the signing of the Sacred Liturgy. The Parish Priest Gerard Frey expressed a desire to incorporate these principles in the design of the church. The principle of the design was to create a large single space with the congregation as the focal point of the church. The interior arrangement emphasized community by the placement of the pews in a fan-like configuration. The interior focal point is the arched canopy which was constructed above the marble altar and continues through the roof ending in a 135-foot tapered spire surmounted by a cross, which can be seen throughout the neighborhood.

The three pre-stressed thin-shell concrete barrel vaults radiate from the altar creating the fan-like configuration which rests above the rectangular base of the building. The use of thin-shell concrete construction was unusual at the time of its construction, particularly in New Orleans. The use of barrel vaults was incorporated into the design to echo the shape of the Quonset hut in accordance with Father Frey's wishes. The three vaults also represent the holy trinity as well as reflect the Modernist design principles of the time. The exterior walls are textured brick with a geometric pattern contrasting with the organic smooth rounded concrete arches and spire. The architects chose brick to blend in with the neighborhood of primarily post-war one-story brick residences. Portions of original geometric stained glass windows which frame the barrel vaults have been removed, but some remain intact. There are entrances located below each arch. The entryways each retain their original large stainless steel doors and surrounds with thick leaded glass.

The plan is echoed in the building's interior and utilizes the same modern materials and forms throughout. The interior still retains its structural and design integrity despite the removal of certain fixtures. While the altar, pews and other non-permanent items have been removed from the church, the arched canopy remains intact as the focal point of the church. The baptismal font has been removed, but the pyramidal skylight illuminating the area and distinctive circular metal enclosure with a symbolic fish design still remain. In addition, the building still retains the sense of place and feelings evoked as intended by the architect.

St. Frances Cabrini Church is unique in its singular design and utilization of several different structural systems in a complex manner. Its distinctive design incorporating the geometric brick façade and thin-shell concrete roofing system make it a prominent example of modern architecture in New Orleans. According to architectural historian Arthur Scully, this is an excellent example of a Curtis and Davis structure which exemplifies "virtuosity in concrete" for which they gained recognition as the premier Modern architecture firm in New Orleans. Scully goes on to articulate, St. Frances Cabrini Church "deserves recognition as one of New Orleans modern landmarks" and calling the structure "a masterpiece." In 1962, the architectural firm of Curtis and Davis won an Honorable Mention from the Church Architectural Guild of America as well as an Award of Merit by the Louisiana Architects Association, Honor Awards Program for their design of St. Frances Cabrini Church.

Throughout their career, Curtis and Davis received over ninety-five awards and recognition for their Modernist architecture. They worked both nationally and internationally, but had their biggest impact on the City of New Orleans. They designed numerous modern structures throughout the city. Many of their designs can be found in civic institutions and commercial structures such as the Superdome, the New Orleans Public Library, the Royal Orleans and Royal Sonesta Hotels, but only a handful of churches throughout their thirty-two year partnership. Their innovative designs were extensively documented by architectural photographer Frank Lotz Miller. Despite the number of buildings designed by Curtis and Davis, St. Frances Cabrini Church is the only remaining church in New Orleans to utilize a lightweight structural concrete method in their design principles. One of their most highly acclaimed works, the Rivergate, was destroyed, leaving St. Francis Cabrini Church as the finest remaining building to incorporate these design principles. The National Trust for Historic Preservation calls the structure "a significant and unique work of the firm of Curtis and Davis." The New Orleans Chapter of American Institute of Architects recognizes it as one of the most "significant works of modern architecture in the state of Louisiana." Professor and Architectural Historian Karen Kingsley considered St. Frances Cabrini Church "a groundbreaking design in Louisiana (and probably the nation), adopting the unified plan advocated by Vatican Council between 1962 and 1965."

St. Frances Cabrini Church is of local significance deriving its primary significance from architectural distinction, making it eligible for the National Register of Historic Places under Criteria Consideration A as a religious property that derives merit from architectural value and Criteria Consideration G as a property that has achieved

significance within the last fifty years, as it was constructed 43 years ago. St. Frances Cabrini Church is eligible under Criterion C as it embodies the distinctive characteristics of the modern design movement and exemplifies the work of the prominent Louisiana architecture firm of Curtis and Davis. In addition, St. Frances Cabrini Church maintains the seven aspects of integrity required for National Register listing. Its unique design and use of materials makes this property eligible for inclusion in the National Register of Historic Places.

Prepared by: Valerie Gomez, FEMA Historic Preservation Specialist  
Date: January 22, 2007

#### Resources:

Braquet, Stephen., President of the American Institute of Architects New Orleans Chapter. Letter to Historic District Landmarks Commission. November 8, 2006

Curtis, Nathaniel. *Architectural Notebooks*, 1964

Gallas, Walter W., Director, New Orleans Field Office of the National Trust for Historic Preservation. Letter to Historic District Landmarks Commission. Dated: November 7, 2006

Historic District Landmarks Commission Nomination of St. Frances Cabrini Church. November 8, 2006

King, Ronette. Simply Dramatic: City Tour Celebrates Modern Architecture.” *Times-Picayune*, September 24, 1994

Kingsley, Karen. *Buildings of Louisiana*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2003

Program for “Saint Frances Cabrini Church 50<sup>th</sup> Anniversary Celebration: 1952-2002, Mass of Thanksgiving, November 3, 2002”

Rose, Michael S. “Did Vatican II Promote the Reform of Church Architecture?” *Architettura della Chiesa*, 2004 (<http://dellachiesa.com/-/article?a=architecture-sacrosanctum>)

Scully, Arthur. Letters to Historic Districts Landmarks Commission. Dated: October 17, 2006, November 3, 2006 and November 4, 2006.

Stroik, Duncan. "The Roots of Modernist Church Architecture." Adoremus Bulletin, Online Edition- Vol. III, No. 7: October 1997 (<http://www.adoremus.oth/1097-Stroik.html>)

Tulane University. "The Rivergate (1968 - 1995): Architecture and Politics No Strangers in Pair-A-Dice, A 20th Century Masterpiece Destroyed By Louisiana's Gambling Blitz." 2000 (<http://www.tulane.edu/~rivgate/>)

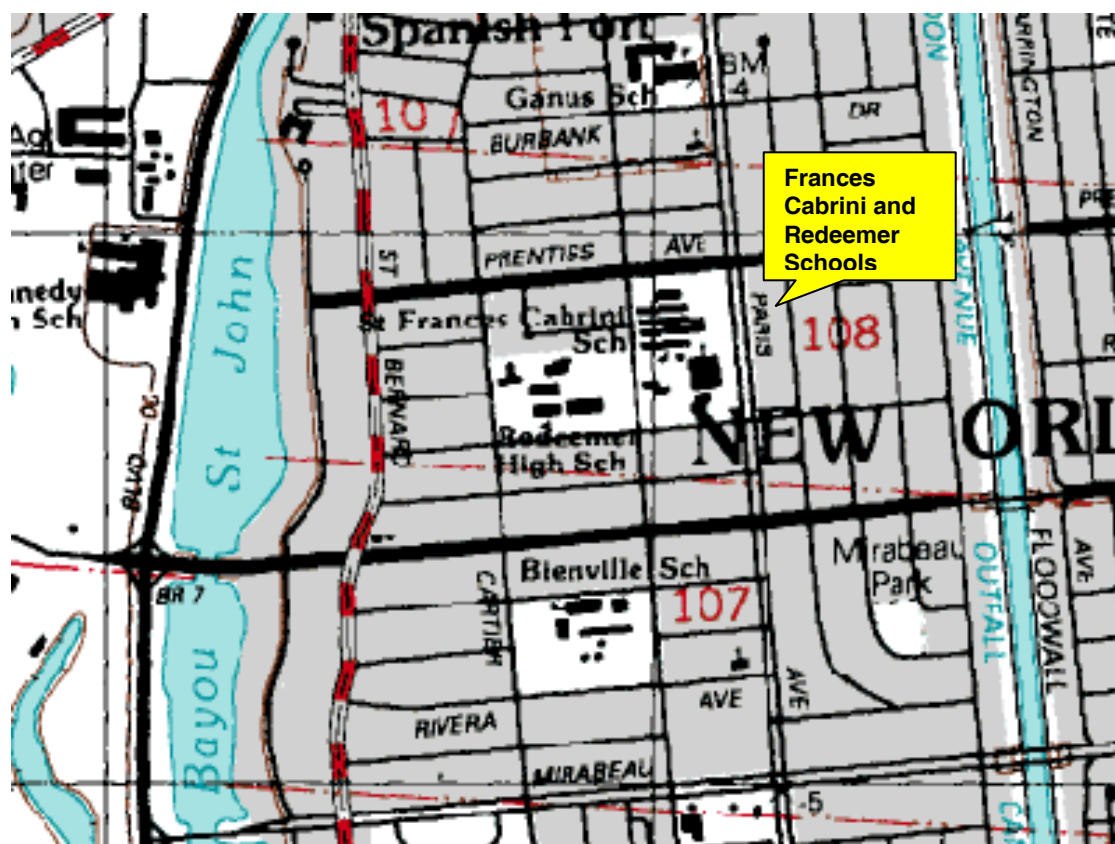
## Section 106 Review : USGS Quad Location Map

**Map Name:** USGS New Orleans East Quad

**Resource Name:** St. Frances Cabrini and Redeemer-Seton School

**Resource Address:** Bounded by Prentiss Avenue, Paris Street, Crescent Street, and Cartier Street.

**Resource Coordinates:** 30.01307 N; -90.07814 W



## Section 106 Review : Aerial View Location Map



**Resource Name:** St. Frances Cabrini Campus

**Resource Address:** 1500 Prentiss St., New Orleans, Louisiana 70122

**Resource Coordinates:** 30.01482, -90.07677











	<b>St. Frances Cabrini Church, 5500 Paris Avenue, New Orleans, LA 70122</b>
View from Paris Avenue, Pre-Katrina	 A photograph of the exterior of St. Frances Cabrini Church. The church features a prominent white, conical steeple with a cross on top, rising from a white, curved roofline. The main body of the church is constructed of red brick. Large, leafy green trees are in the foreground, partially obscuring the church. A red pickup truck is parked on the left side of the church grounds. The sky is clear and blue.
Interior facing Altar, Pre-Katrina	 A photograph of the interior of St. Frances Cabrini Church, looking down the nave towards the altar. The church has a modern design with a high, vaulted ceiling supported by white, curved structural ribs. The floor is polished and reflects the light. Rows of dark wooden pews are on either side of the central aisle. The altar area is decorated with red and white flowers and a small Christmas tree. A large, white, curved structure, possibly a sculpture or part of the architecture, is visible in the background.

	<b>St. Frances Cabrini Church, 5500 Paris Avenue, New Orleans, LA 70122</b>
Front Façade facing West (2006)	 A photograph of the front facade of St. Frances Cabrini Church, facing west. The building features a large, dark, curved concrete archway above a brick wall. The brick wall is composed of light-colored bricks with a textured, slightly irregular pattern. A red horizontal line is drawn across the brick wall, indicating a section cut. The entrance is a large, dark, rectangular opening with a metal grate.
Detail Above Front Entrance (2006)	 A close-up photograph of the brickwork above the front entrance. The brickwork is composed of light-colored bricks with a textured, slightly irregular pattern. The image shows the detail of the brickwork and the concrete archway above the entrance.





	<b>St. Frances Cabrini Church, 5500 Paris Avenue, New Orleans, LA 70122</b>
View facing Southwest (2006)	
View facing East (2006)	



	<b>St. Frances Cabrini Church, 5500 Paris Avenue, New Orleans, LA 70122</b>	
Interior Detail of Arched Canopy (2006)		
Interior Facing Altar (2006)		

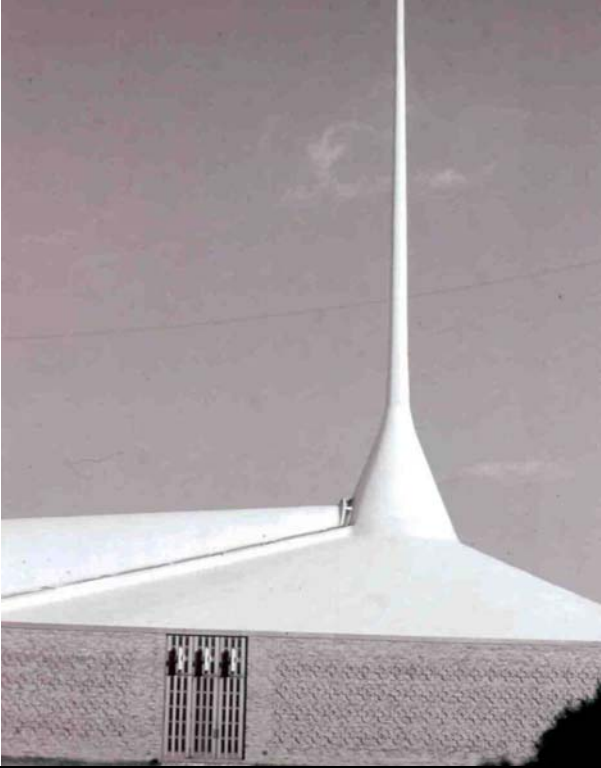
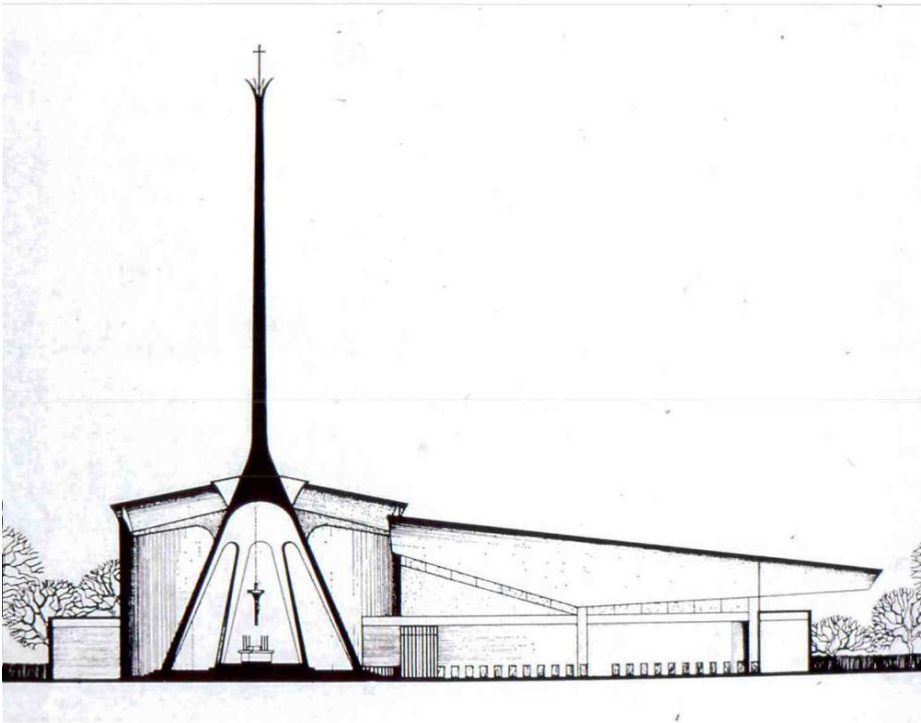
	<b>St. Frances Cabrini Church, 5500 Paris Avenue, New Orleans, LA 70122</b>
Detail of Baptismal Font Area (2006)	
Detail of Decorative Fish Enclosure (2006)	

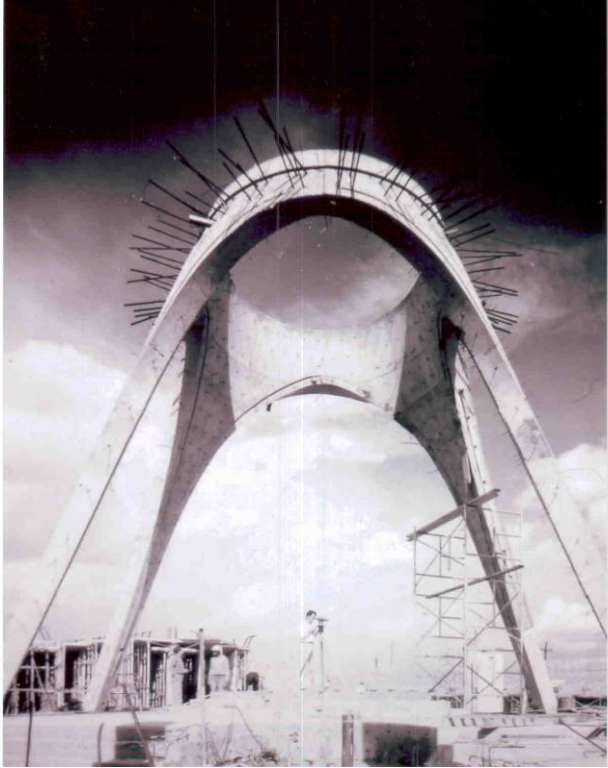
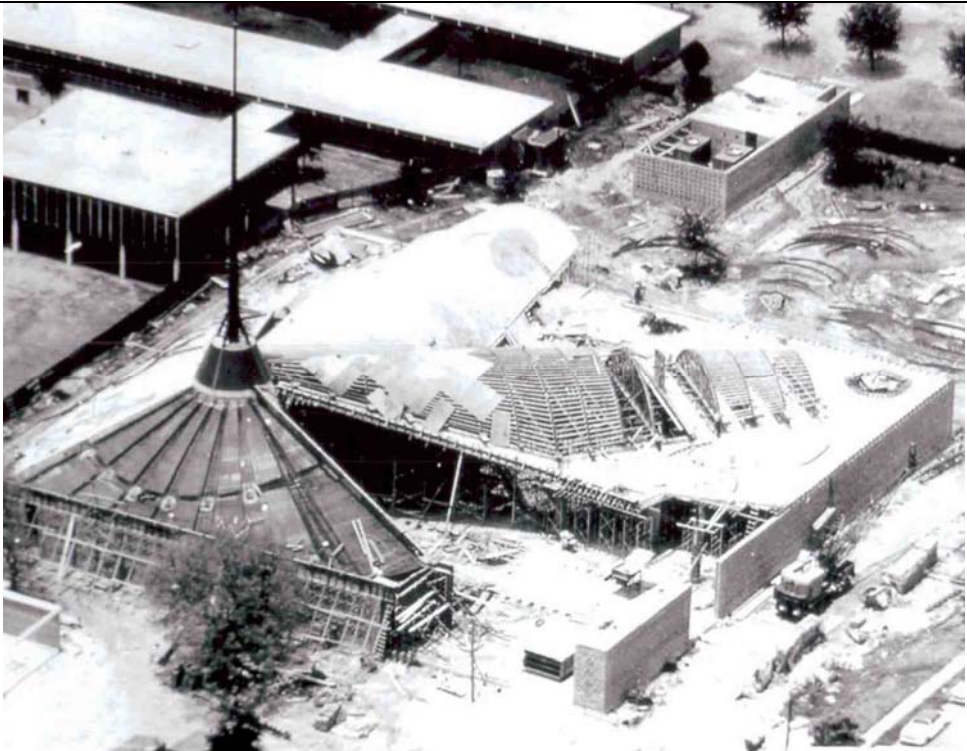


	<b>St. Frances Cabrini Church, 5500 Paris Avenue, New Orleans, LA 70122</b>
Detail of Stained Glass Windows Removed (2006)	
Detail of Gold Leaf under Canopy (2006)	


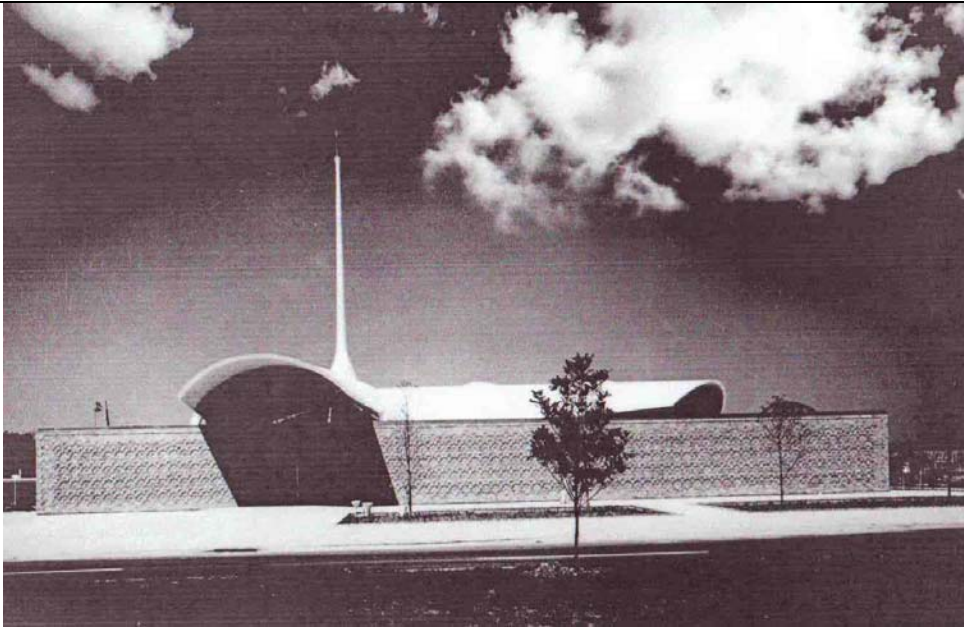


	<b>St. Frances Cabrini Church, 5500 Paris Avenue, New Orleans, LA 70122</b>
View facing Northwest (2006)	 <p>A photograph of the exterior of St. Frances Cabrini Church, viewed from the northwest in 2006. The church features a prominent, large, white, curved roof that extends over the entrance area. The main facade is constructed of brick with a textured, patterned design. A central entrance is visible, flanked by brick walls. The foreground is a paved area, and a red date stamp "NOV 17 2006" is visible in the bottom right corner of the photo.</p>
View facing Southwest (2006)	 <p>A photograph of the exterior of St. Frances Cabrini Church, viewed from the southwest in 2006. The image shows a long, low brick wall with a textured, patterned design. A small, triangular roof structure is visible on the right side of the wall. The foreground is a paved area, and some trees are visible on the left side of the frame.</p>

	<b>St. Frances Cabrini Church, 5500 Paris Avenue, New Orleans, LA 70122</b>
<p>View facing East, Photograph by Frank Lotz Miller (1963)</p>	
<p>Plan Elevation by Curtis and Davis (circa 1962)</p>	

	<b>St. Frances Cabrini Church, 5500 Paris Avenue, New Orleans, LA 70122</b>
Construction of the Interior Canopy (circa 1962)	
Under Construction (1963)	



	<b>St. Frances Cabrini Church, 5500 Paris Avenue, New Orleans, LA 70122</b>
<p>View facing Northeast, Photograph by Frank Lotz Miller (1963)</p>	 A black and white photograph showing a side view of the church building. The structure is long and rectangular with a series of decorative, perforated metal screens or grilles along its length. A tall, slender, white spire rises from the roofline. In the foreground, there are several potted plants and a low, white, modern-looking bench or planter box.
<p>View facing West from Paris Avenue, Photograph by Frank Lotz Miller (1963)</p>	 A black and white photograph showing the church from a distance, facing west. The building has a low, wide profile with a series of decorative screens. A tall, slender spire rises from the center. The sky is filled with large, dramatic clouds. A few small trees are visible in the foreground.