

'I don't think our goal is to evict them. It's probably too late for that. We just want them to be responsible neighbors.'

—Neighborhood leader

'But if they'd just sit down and talk to us, they'd see we have two arms and two legs like everyone else. We're not from Mars.'

—Krishna leader

Krishnas atypical neighbors along Esplanade

By RICK RABER

Shortly before 7 a.m., the Mid-City area around Esplanade Avenue and Gayoso Street begins to stir; it looks like a Norman Rockwell painting coming to life.

Catholic schoolgirls in plaid skirts wait at a bus stop, giggling at joggers. A grocer sweeps his sidewalk while smoking the day's first cigar. Neatly dressed men, fresh with aftershave, emerge from front doors to reach for newspapers lying near wrought iron gates.

"It's a good neighborhood, very nice," a man said one Thursday morning, standing on his porch, tightening the knot in his tie. "But, honestly, we do have an unusual problem."

He identified the problem by pointing his folded newspaper toward the Hare Krishna Temple at 2936 Esplanade Ave., about a block away. Two men with shaved heads and peach-colored robes beat drums at the doorway, chanting softly as other Krishnas filed up the steps of the gothic villa.

"You could say those people don't fit into the neighborhood picture," the man said.

The Hare Krishnas' Louisiana headquarters has been in the heart of the Faubourg St. John neighborhood for a decade. The members of the religious sect are known best for soliciting in airports and other public places where they often chant mantras, seeking converts and coins.

IN RECENT YEARS, their numbers in this quiet area have grown, as have the number of buildings they occupy. Their presence has caused a neighborhood controversy.

Residents claim the Krishnas have caused parking problems, committed building code violations, stripped gardens to decorate their altar and brought transients into the neighborhood with their free meal program.

They also say property values may have decreased because of the Krishnas and their unusual lifestyle, which includes wearing Indian tunics and rising at 4 a.m. for the first of six daily religious services.

However, the Krishnas contend the neighbors' charges are a guise for religious persecution.

In recent years, the Krishnas say, their temple has been a target of zealous Christians who occasionally have smashed windows and defaced walls.

Reaction from neighbors has not been violent, but it has been negative, the Krishnas say.

"Some of the people here, especially the elderly, are determined not to accept us because we are different," said Vic Mistretta, president of the New Orleans sect of the International Society of Krishna Consciousness. "Everything we do, no matter what it is, they complain about."

On Sept. 19, the Krishnas appeared before the Board of Zoning Adjustments asking to build a small addition to their temple. The board denied the request, in part because the addition would have extended over the Krishna's property line.

MEMBERS OF the Faubourg St. John Neighborhood Association appeared at the meeting with a petition signed by 46 residents, saying the Krishnas are a detriment to the neighborhood. The petition said any addition to the temple would "add insult to injury."

"I don't think our goal is to evict them. It's probably too late for that," said Patricia Gomez, president of the association. "We just want them to be responsible neighbors."

"The Krishnas just don't belong here," said David Gano, who has lived next door to the temple for three years.

The Krishnas own the Esplanade temple and rent 22 apartments in 10 buildings in the vicinity, most of them on Gayoso, DeSoto and Crete streets, Mistretta said.

Sixty adult Krishnas live in the neighborhood and spend most of their time distributing Krishna literature and worshipping. About 15 Krishna children live with their parents. All the Krishna children are sent out of state at age 5 to attend one of ISKCON's boarding schools.

Five years ago, only 10 Krishnas lived in the neighborhood. But Mistretta said the Krishnas have no plans for more expansion.

"People here accuse us of being dirty or weird or whatever because they see we dress differently, and they don't understand us," he said. "But if they'd just sit down and talk to us, they'd see we have two arms and two



—Staff photos by G.E. Arnold

Victor Mistretta, president of the New Orleans International Society for Krishna Consciousness, stands in front of the temple



Worshippers at morning services at the temple

legs like everyone else. We're not from Mars."

MISTRETTA, 34, WAS raised a Catholic in New Orleans and attended the University of New Orleans after serving three years in the Air Force. In 1972, he became a Hare Krishna, about a year after he met some members of the sect in Jackson Square and began to study the Hindu religion.

Hinduism is the major religion of India. It is divided into many sects, the most popular of which is the worship of Krishna, the incarnation of the chief god Vishnu.

Hare Krishna sects forbid meat, alcohol, tobacco, and sex other than to conceive children. However, there are Krishnas in America and India who occasionally worship at the temples but do not adhere to the ancient precepts or wear the traditional clothing.

The adults in the Esplanade area consider themselves orthodox Krishnas, or the priests of the religion. Many of their neighbors refer to them as a bizarre cult.

"This is an old neighborhood and some of the people do not have open minds," Mistretta said. "If we lived in a university area, a younger intellectual area, I don't think there would be this problem."

The neighborhood is one of the oldest in New Orleans. It is between Orleans Avenue and the Fair Grounds, Bayou

St. John and Broad Street. Some historians claim Europeans lived there even before settlement occurred in the French Quarter.

Most of the houses along the oak-shaded avenue are large, and the architectural styles vary. The paint on many has faded from years in the sun, but few are peeling; most have gardens that are well-tended, but not manicured.

THE STREETS ON EITHER side of the avenue are lined with smaller houses, many of them Creole cottages set amid crape myrtle trees. Elderly men and women, blue collar workers and young professionals are among the mixture of people who live in close quarters on these streets.

"The neighborhood is like a quaint little village," Gomez said. "People take pride in the area as a whole. It has a lot of character and diversity."

The Hare Krishnas moved from a small Uptown house on Spruce Street to the large, 120-year-old villa in 1973.

In May of that year, Nico Kuyt, a member of ISKCON, wrote the city's Board of Zoning Adjustments proposing an addition to the house.

"A playroom and bedroom for the children, a hobby room and a den with a TV and bar," was what Kuyt said he wanted to build. "Nothing really extravagant."

The city approved the plan, and a

short time later a large, windowless building was raised in the yard facing the avenue. The addition was used as a room for religious services.

Soon after, the entire structure was painted electric shades of blue and yellow and a big sign saying "International Society of Krishna Consciousness, Visitors Welcome" was posted in the front yard.

"Lord knows, we gave them a chance even though they came here deceitfully," recalled an elderly woman, watering her front yard near the temple. "I even lent them our lawnmower when I saw them pulling grass by hand. They never returned the lawnmower, by the way."

"ONCE I CAUGHT ONE of their women picking my gladiolas," added another woman, who stopped while passing on the sidewalk. "She got positively indignant when I shouted at her. She said, 'These are God's gladiolas.' I said, 'They're my gladiolas.'"

Neighborhood activism developed slowly in the area. It wasn't until the late 1970s that the neighborhood association gained support, mostly from young couples who had recently started to move to the area.

In February 1979, the association asked the city's Department of Safety and Permits to inspect the temple. The department's inspector filed a report citing seven building code violations. They included operating a temple on too small a lot and without offstreet parking, and erecting a sign and corridor without a permit.

Eventually the Krishnas took down the sign and repainted most of the blue-and-yellow house. But the temple and its additions remain.

"Legally, that temple shouldn't be where it is," said Paul May, zoning administrator for Safety and Permits. "But the two-year statute of limitations on the site expired in 1975. There's nothing we can do about it now. Unfortunately, it looks like they're there for good."

Events in recent weeks, however, make the temple's permanence seem less assured.

On Sept. 29, a California court told ISKCON it could turn some of its assets, including the Esplanade temple, over to a receiver while the group is

appealing a \$9.7 million judgment against it. The assets in four states are being used in lieu of a bond that sect members say they cannot afford to post. The judgment was awarded earlier this year to 22-year-old Robin George.

GEORGE CLAIMS IN A suit that the Krishnas brainwashed her and hid her from her family for a year when she was 15. George's mother, a co-plaintiff, contends her husband died of a stroke brought on by a cross-country search for his daughter.

George lived at the New Orleans temple for about six months. Mistretta said he does not remember her. He said no one is held at the temple against his will.

If ISKCON loses its appeal, the receiver can sell the ISKCON properties.

David Lieberman, an attorney at ISKCON national headquarters in Los Angeles, said a settlement is several years away. "The plaintiff claimed that she could not leave the temple because of fear what would happen in her afterlife," Lieberman said. "If we don't win this appeal, it would mean the end of the Krishna movement. Any kid could make that claim."

At 4 a.m. the New Orleans Krishnas file into the temple for the first of the day's six services. The walls are painted powder-blue and purple with white clouds. Four knee-high, plastic figures dressed in rhinestone gowns stand on an ornate mahogany altar. Incense sticks burn between the gypsy-like figures.

A barefoot man, dressed like the others in the holy Indian garb of tunic and dhoti, blows a conch shell and the Krishnas press their foreheads to the pink-and-black marble floor, or lie face down with arms stretched over their heads. Recorded sitar music plays through a small amplifier.

FOR MOST OF THE one-hour service, the Krishnas chant, dance, play drums and cymbals and bow to a life-size clay sculpture or some of the dozens of framed snapshots of A.C. Baktivedanta Prabhupada, the ISKCON leader who died in 1977.

Prabhupada founded ISKCON in New York in 1965, shortly after he

arrived from Calcutta with only \$50 in rupees and a pair of cymbals. His aim was to spread the teachings of Lord Krishna.

The swami arrived in America when young people were beginning to disassociate themselves from conventional society and experiment with drugs.

He reached out to those in the East Village, offering them a relatively ascetic life of devotion to religion and proselytizing.

There are now 82 Krishna temples in America. A spokesman for ISKCON estimated the number of full-time devotees at 5,000, and congregation members to number more than 1 million.

Other cities have reported tension between native residents and Krishnas. At a Krishna temple in Moundsville, W.Va., for instance, there recently have been gunbattles and house burnings.

"They've been here 13 years and still nobody likes them," said Marshall County Sheriff Robert L. Lightner. "It's trouble having them here. There's been a lot of feuding. I wish they'd go back where they came from."

MOST OF THE MONEY for the Krishna movement in New Orleans and the rest of the country comes from donations from members who have regular jobs and use the temple only as a church. The Krishna congregation in New Orleans is about 5,000 people, Mistretta said.

In one Wednesday morning service, a 29-year-old stockbroker from Metairie chanted amid the barefoot Krishnas. He wore a gray three-piece suit and a blue tie that grazed the floor as he bowed to the altar.

"I grew up in New Orleans, and when I was about 19, I went to California. You know, to try to find myself, that whole bit," he said. "I became a Hare Krishna there. I come here once or twice a week because I like their philosophy."

"It's very pure," he said. "What we do is sing our praises to God. Simple as that. But don't use my name please. People won't understand."