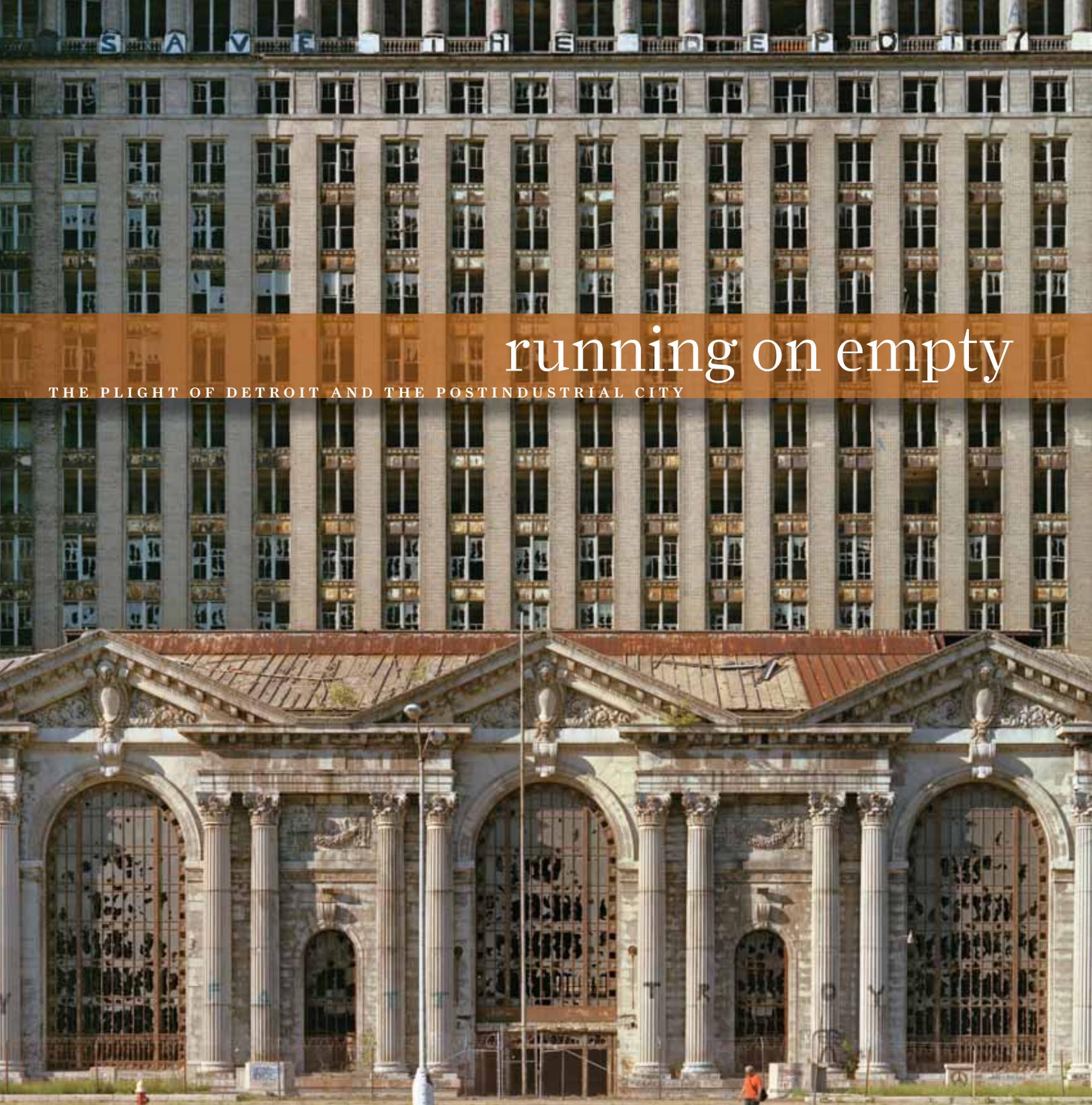




COMMON

PRESERVING OUR NATION'S HERITAGE FALL 2010

# GROUND



running on empty

THE PLIGHT OF DETROIT AND THE POSTINDUSTRIAL CITY

# FIRST WORD

BY ANTOINETTE J. LEE

## Landscapes in Transition

**AUSTIN, TEXAS, THE SITE OF THE 2010** National Preservation Conference, offers a rich laboratory for examining the next American urban landscape. This theme grew out of a think-tank meeting on energizing the conference at the headquarters of the National Trust for Historic Preservation. The discussion focused on what Austin and its landscape could bring to a national audience. **AUSTIN IS A CITY IN TRANSITION.** In 1947, the classic *American Guide* series described it as “a stately city, with broad tree-lined avenues and boulevards and imposing public edifices set in attractive grounds; a city of institutions . . . It is a tranquil city, with an air of serenity, decorum, and permanence.” **WHILE THIS DESCRIPTION** still applies, Austin today is so much more. It is a source of technological innovation, a haven for contemporary music, a magnet for a lively folk culture scene, and an attraction for the creative classes. Austin also is the center of an exploding metropolitan area that encompasses San Marcos to the south and Round Rock to the north and accommodates a population of more than 1.5 million. Even the empty space southward toward San Antonio and northward toward Waco is quickly filling in. **DEMOGRAPHIC CHANGE, TECHNOLOGY, AND THE ECONOMY** have transformed many cities like Austin, changing the functions they used to serve, functions that gave them their iconic forms. The lucky ones have evolved from centers of industry and commerce to places of innovation, entertainment, and urban life. They are considered up-and-coming cities that attract youth and investment. The less fortunate cities, severed involuntarily from their economic origins, have not found new purposes. These once proud historic urban centers have become severely downsized and are slated for serious shrinkage. **SOME OF THE MOST INNOVATIVE THINKING** about cities today is directed at the dire state of those that are most distressed. Can they rediscover their agricultural and wilderness roots in an urban form? Can new technologies or industries take hold in the available infrastructure and re-establish a city’s purpose? Can America’s urban ruins generate a new kind of tourism, similar to the kind that sustains the Roman ruins that dot Europe and the Near East? How can approaches that focus on ecological restoration be applied to an abandoned urban landscape? In his 1960 book, *In Defense of the City*, architect and preservationist James Marston Fitch wrote, “The city has always been . . . the actual generator of civilization . . . [T]here is no technological substitute for [its] germinal powers. Personal, face-to-face contact; daily friction and exposure to ideas; continual cross-fertilization from various elements in a given field—these are the

essential properties of the [city].” **WHO WILL BE THE AMERICAN CITY’S** 21st century advocates? In 2003, a group of idealistic students of the urban scene published the premiere issue of *The Next American City*. The publication is devoted to the simple goal of making cities better by “promoting socially and environmentally sustainable economic growth.” The editors also examine cultural and societal change and how it affects our built environment. Unlike many publications about urban planning, *The Next American City* offers much food for thought for those in the field of historic and cultural preservation because it examines these fields in the context of trends that shape our cities and landscapes: public safety, transportation, housing, education, art, culture—all the things that make cities livable. Historic places are integral parts of the larger whole, not isolated museum objects set upon a built landscape. **THUS, AUSTIN, HISTORICALLY RICH AND EVER-CHANGING,** became the focus of the National Trust’s examination of the next American city. But what about preservation elsewhere, in places that

### **ONE OF THE BENEFITS OF EXAMINING PRESERVATION AND THE MANAGEMENT OF CULTURAL SITES WITHIN THE CONTEXT OF NATIONAL AND GLOBAL FORCES IS THAT WE WILL BETTER UNDERSTAND THESE FORCES.**

are far removed from the dynamic forces that are transforming the nation’s cities? Remote and rural areas are now facing unprecedented change as the nation searches for new sources of energy and technology allows people to pursue livelihoods far from traditional places of work. Thus the National Trust extended the conference’s urban theme to “the next American landscape” to address preservation concerns in towns and rural areas. **ONE OF THE BENEFITS OF EXAMINING** preservation and the management of cultural sites within the context of national and global forces is that we will better understand these forces. As a result, we will more effectively connect our work with the host of vital processes that change cities and landscapes—health care, education, energy production, jobs, economic revitalization, and technological innovation. **IN RETURN, WE CAN EXPECT** that these areas of human endeavor will come to appreciate the key role that historic places play in maintaining healthy communities and reclaiming declining neighborhoods. Few other places offer so many opportunities to examine these phenomena than Austin and its environs.

Antoinette J. Lee is Assistant Associate Director, Historical Documentation Programs, National Park Service.



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**20 OUTSIDE HOUSTON** With his homage to the orange, Jeff McKissack is perhaps the progenitor of a next gen of Houston artists.

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*Above:* The former Michigan Theater in Detroit. Built in 1926, it is now used as a parking garage.  
*Front:* Detroit's abandoned Michigan Central Station, in the National Register of Historic Places.  
*Back:* Austin sculptor Elisabet Ney.

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# Latin Influence

## *National Park Service Illuminates the Impact of Hispanic Heritage*

The profound effect of Hispanic culture in American history began 500 years ago with Spanish colonial ambitions and continues today with an ever-increasing presence and influence. According to the 2000 census, Hispanic people are the largest minority group at 12.5 percent. This long association with America has produced a wealth of historic and cultural sites, some of them enjoying the highest status such places can earn for their association with our collective past. *Hispanic Reflections on the American Landscape: Identifying and Interpreting Hispanic Heritage*, a new publication from the National Park Service, takes a concise look at the Hispanic-American experience as seen through these sites.

The book addresses the history of individual groups—Salvadorans, Puerto Ricans, Cubans—in the context of their cultural affiliation with the United States. Salvadorans fled civil war in the 1980s to establish enclaves in places like San Francisco, Los Angeles, and Washington, DC (where they are now the largest Hispanic group). Cuba’s long history with the United States and proximity to Florida have made for a strong influence, particularly in Miami.

*Hispanic Reflections* examines a wide range of property types—such as Spanish missions and military posts, farms, ranches, migrant labor camps, neighborhoods, theaters, and cultural centers—listing sites on the National Register of Historic Places, national historic

**WHILE MOST HISPANIC GROUPS SHARE LANGUAGE, RELIGION, AND “CREOLIZATION”—MIXING CULTURAL INFLUENCES FROM AFRICA, THE CARIBBEAN, AND NATIVE AMERICA—THE BOOK POINTS OUT THAT THE HISPANIC IDENTITY IS MULTIFACETED, EVOLVING EVEN AS ITS PROFILE RISES ON THE AMERICAN SCENE.**

The early Spanish settlers transformed the Southwest. Today, their missions and military outposts have become icons, some of the oldest relics of the early European presence on the continent. Colonial Spanish architectural forms have had an enduring influence on the built environment, and contact with native and African peoples brought unique variations.

American enterprise was an attractive draw for migrants from Latin countries. During the 19th century, railroads, agriculture, and mining attracted people from Mexico, with Mexican-Americans coming to figure prominently in the evolution of the American labor movement. Since the latter half of the 20th century, the classification “Hispanic” has come to include other groups. “While the influence of Mexico on Hispanic culture in the U.S. cannot be overstated,” write the authors, “Spain’s other holdings in the Western Hemisphere contribute to the expanding definition of Hispanic.”

landmarks, and places documented by the Historic American Buildings Survey and Historic American Engineering Record.

The Santa Fe Hotel, a National Register property in Fresno, California, was “a home away from home for Basque shepherds and their families,” as the book describes it, a link between the newcomers and the larger world outside. Many such places sprang up in the rural West of the 19th and early 20th centuries.

Tampa’s Ybor City historic district grew up around the Cuban cigar industry of the 1880s. A company town, it was essentially self-contained, including factories, workers’ housing, and social institutions. Today it is a national historic landmark.

The Historic American Engineering Record documented the citrus landscape around Riverside, California, its irrigation canals, packing houses, and other apparatus directly connected to the presence of immigrant labor. Today the region retains a distinct Hispanic character, with 186 acres of groves preserved as California Citrus State Historic Park to commemorate the legacy.

While most Hispanic groups share language, religion, and “creolization”—mixing cultural influences from Africa, the Caribbean, and Native America—the book points out that the Hispanic identity is multifaceted, evolving even as its profile rises on the American scene.

*Hispanic Reflections*, informed by the latest scholarship, offers an extensive bibliography. The publication is the third in a series, the first two on African and Asian heritage.

**RIGHT:** Folk dancer at Chamizal National Memorial, El Paso, Texas.

**contact point web** *Hispanic Reflections on the American Landscape*  
[www.nps.gov/history/crdi/publications/NPS\\_HispanicReflections.English.pdf](http://www.nps.gov/history/crdi/publications/NPS_HispanicReflections.English.pdf)





# Texas MODERN

*A Mecca for Design in the Postwar Era*

One goes by “Big D,” the other goes by “Cowntown.” One is known for its art scene, while the other directs tourists to its historic stockyards and rodeo. Only 40 miles apart, Dallas and Fort Worth may both have large populations, but they are two very different locales. One thing they do have in common is a wealth of modernist landscapes, as the Cultural Landscape Foundation recently high-

**THE WEALTH OF THE STATE BROUGHT WITH IT A DESIRE FOR TEXAS TO BE RECOGNIZED NATIONALLY, IF NOT INTERNATIONALLY, AS A PLACE OF GREAT CULTURE AND PROGRESSIVE THINKING. —KURT CULBERTSON**

lighted in its *Landscapes for Living: Post War Years in Texas* symposium, part of the foundation's ongoing *Shaping the American Landscape* series. “Texas has always been very philanthropic towards its civil spaces,” says Charles Birnbaum, foundation founder and president, and that philanthropy is amply evident in both cities.

In the state where everything is big, there's no shortage of interesting architecture. Fort Worth has an abundance of distinctive art deco-style buildings while Dallas is a hub of modernist skyscrapers. The entire oil-rich state has a history of turning to nationally known architects. Noted city planner George Kessler was commissioned for a number of projects throughout Texas in the early 20th century, as were landscape architects such as the Olmsted Brothers and prolific golf course designer A.W. Tillinghast. “The wealth of the state brought with it a desire for Texas to be recognized nationally, if not internationally, as a place of great culture and progressive thinking,” says Kurt Culbertson, a speaker at the symposium and chairman of the board at Design Workshop, a Denver-based urban planning group. “This brought an attitude of building big and building well.”

**LEFT:** *The Philip Johnson-designed Thanks-Giving Square Chapel.* **RIGHT ABOVE:** *Dan Kiley's Fountain Place.*

**contact points** web Cultural Landscape Foundation <http://tclf.org/df>  
Preservation Dallas [www.preservationdallas.org/](http://www.preservationdallas.org/)

Philip Johnson once called Texas his “favorite country,” and he left his imprint on the place. His Thanks-Giving Square—in the heart of downtown Dallas—is a genius work designed for the Thanks-Giving Foundation in 1976. The three-acre triangular site includes a sloped central plaza with roseate concrete walkways and grassy areas, the “symbol and centerpiece” being the 90-foot-tall white concrete chapel ascending upwards in a spiral. Inside, light pours down to the floor from the “Glory Window,” a spiraling ring of stained glass, and one of the largest horizontally-mounted stained-glass works in the



world. Water features at the site include a cascading waterfall underneath the bridge to the chapel entrance, water channels surrounding the plaza, and a triangular granite washboard at one side of the chapel. “It is a totally abstract space, confounding its function as a chapel for more than a few people,” writes Frank Welch in *Philip Johnson & Texas*.

**The progressive thinking in Fort Worth can be clearly seen** in two of the city's landscape treasures, both created by renowned modernists, both water-themed, and both remarkable. Johnson's Water Gardens, designed in 1974 as a gift to the city from the Amon G. Carter Foundation, is a jungle of concrete and water, composed of three pools: a quiet meditation pool featuring a still plane of water which cascades into a sunken waterway, a dancing pool with 40 aerating fountains, and the “piece de resistance,” the active pool where water cascades along 38 feet of tiered stone into a vortex, the best part being the free-standing steps which allow visitors to descend down

into it and watch the water rush around them. “An exhilarating, memorable sensory experience,” writes Welch. The park was featured in the 1976 sci-fi thriller *Logan’s Run*.

**At the other end of the town is Lawrence Halprin’s Heritage Park,** a concrete maze of rooms and pathways connected by flowing streams of water, built on a bluff that was once home to a 19th-century military fort. Water serenely makes its way down from the high points of the 112-acre site via waterfalls, pools, and channels. The site also includes oak trees, ornamental plantings, and a cantilevered overlook from which to view the bordering Trinity River. Though not one of Halprin’s better-known projects (he is better known for spaces that invite movement), it was recently listed in the National Register of Historic Places and is considered particularly significant as the predecessor to one of the architect’s most famous works of all—the Franklin Delano Roosevelt Memorial in Washington, DC. All the same design elements—outdoor rooms, narrative art, and the use of water—are present in both projects, says Birnbaum, who considers Heritage Park among Halprin’s best works. However, it has spent the last two years abandoned, after the city boarded it up in 2008 over concerns about its deteriorated condition, much to the dismay of Fort Worth preservationists who have had to fight to get it reopened, with design modifications to improve safety. “It’s just a brilliant modern plaza,” says Jerre Tracey, executive director of Historic Fort Worth. And with a few ruins of the fort still on the site, “it’s really the only place where you can touch the beginnings of the city.”

**In cosmopolitan Big D, Dan Kiley’s** Fountain Plaza surrounds the base of the city’s 60-story prism-shaped Fountain Place skyscraper, where 225 native Texas cypress trees shade a sea of waterfalls, 172 bubbler fountains, and a central fountain. Another noted Kiley work, the garden at the Dallas Museum of Art—a modernist group of rooms featuring pools, fountains, and sculptures—is just three blocks away. There is also a sizable collection of mid-century houses built in neighborhoods such as Midway Hills, Wynnewood North, and Jan Mar. “Dallas is a postwar city, by far,” says Katherine Seale, director of Preservation Dallas, a nonprofit group that inventoried 1500 modernist structures, built before 1965, as part of its city-wide Discover Dallas! Survey. “There was so much money in this city in the 1940s.”

**Among the residences her group has surveyed is Johnson’s Beck** House, the largest he ever did, in the prestigious Preston Hollow subdivision. A design of slender arches, the museum-like structure is a livable version of the six-foot-tall open-air pavilion on the pond at Johnson’s famous Glass House estate in New Canaan, Connecticut. The 12,000-square-foot mansion was built in 1964 for millionaire couple Henry and Patty Beck. Described as “a trophy house that evoked de Chirico by way of Dallas high society,” by *New York Times* design editor Pilar Viladis, it features double winding Baroque stairways, an

umbrella-vaulted dining room, and gorgeous views of the six and a half acres surrounding it. Welch says there has always been a range of opinions about the house—Viladis calls it “almost campy”—but Welch also adds “within and without, it is a handsome structure and, though redolent of the 1960s, stands in proud modern splendor among the recently built faux chateaus of its neighborhood.” Johnson’s design has stood the test of time; a recent renovation by bodron+fruit design of Dallas adapted it to today’s living, successfully turning “what could have been monumental and chilly into something that is as comfortable as it is glamorous,” says Viladis.

**Edward Durell Stone’s Oak Court** saw another recent award-winning renovation. The house, a rectangular terrazzo-screened family-sized replica of the architect’s U.S. Embassy in New Delhi, India, was built in 1956 and had endured a number of insensitive alterations over the years. In 2004, new owners decided to return to Stone’s original design, with updates in that spirit. Today Oak Court still has its white marble, luxurious Italian walnut, and hand-carved mahogany screens, but gone are the crystal chandeliers, carved rococo fireplaces, and servant’s quarters. The second-story floor plan has also been reshuffled so that its living spaces are centered around the exterior terrace, now covered with a vaulted roof. And, a spiral stair tower—the only addition—now connects the terrace to the courtyard and swimming pool below. The most eye-catching element of the renovation is undoubtedly the return of a dining lagoon, part of Stone’s design later covered with marble and carpet. Located on the first floor, it features a circular marble slab and dining table centered in the middle of it. “This is architecture that surpasses



**THE PROGRESSIVE THINKING IN FORT WORTH CAN BE CLEARLY SEEN IN TWO OF THE CITY’S LANDSCAPE TREASURES, BOTH CREATED BY RENOWNED MODERNISTS, BOTH WATER-THEMED, AND BOTH REMARKABLE.**

**ABOVE:** Lawrence Halprin’s Heritage Park. **RIGHT:** The waterfall-like entrance of the Beck House, designed by Philip Johnson.







JAMES F. WILSON

the task of mere restoration by expanding the building beyond Stone's intentions," writes Michael Malone in *Texas Architect* of the work by the Dallas-based Buchanan Architecture firm, which received a National Trust Preservation Honor Award in 2008.

**Architect O'Neil Ford was at the forefront of the state's forays** into modernism, and the foundation's symposium also showcased the lesser known postwar impact of a husband and wife landscape duo who often worked at his side. Arthur and Marie Berger brought a style all their own—once described as Texas Chiaroscuro with their manipulations of light and shadow—recognizing how air-conditioning would ultimately change outdoor living and therefore the gardens of the region. They “enhanced the intimate and fluid connections between interior and exterior spaces by means of patios, terraces, and long galleries,” writes David Dillon in *The Architecture of O'Neil Ford: Celebrating Place*. Some of their 186 projects include the DeGolyer estate, now part of the Dallas Arboretum, the city's Temple Emanu-El, and Texas Instruments Dallas headquarters.

Many other modernist landscapes were created by the Lambert Landscape Company, a firm that arrived in Dallas during the 1930s, bringing with it a knack for attracting talent from across the country including prominent Texas landscape architects Richard Myrick and

**TODAY OAK COURT STILL HAS ITS WHITE MARBLE, LUXURIOUS ITALIAN WALNUT, AND HAND-CARVED MAHOGANY SCREENS, BUT GONE ARE THE CRYSTAL CHANDELIERS, CARVED ROCOCO FIREPLACES, AND SERVANT'S QUARTERS.**

Gene Schrickel, Jr. “In terms of modern landscape heritage, the region is really a who's who of landscape architecture,” Birnbaum says.

So what does the future hold for the post-war Texas landscape? The symposium's consensus was that while Texas will probably continue to thrive architecturally, some of its mid-century works, as they start showing their age, might go the way of Heritage Park. Culbertson says one reason they are threatened is that landscapes often don't get the attention awarded to other structures of historic merit. “Nationally, we have done a good job of recognizing the significance of works of architecture and engineering, but only a small fraction of the sites listed in the National Register of Historic Places are landscapes,” he points out.

Which is why the foundation is holding its Shaping the American Landscape series in the first place—to give such sites their due.

**LEFT: Edward Durell Stone's recently restored Oak Court.**

# GRANT AT WORK

SAVE AMERICA'S TREASURES

**LA BELLE SHIPWRECK** In 1684, when French explorer Robert Cavalier Sieur de La Salle set out on his last journey to the New World, little did he know that he, his crew, and their four ships were embarking on a trip to hell. While on their way to found a colony at the mouth of the Mississippi, pirates seized one ship, one ran aground and broke apart in Matagorda Bay, Texas, and one promptly sailed back to the safety of France. The last ship, the *Belle*, was left in the bay while La Salle and some of his small group set out on foot to find the river, 400 miles away. Along the way, he was murdered by his own men and the remaining ship sank, its crew succumbing to disease, dehydration, and Indian attacks. In 1995, the *Belle* was found encased in mud, remarkably preserved for over 300 years. Restoring its more than a million artifacts was a complex feat made easier with help from a \$300,000 SAT grant to the Texas Historical Commission. The treasure conserved includes cannons, firepots, and a “mystery chest” containing an assortment of items including carpentry tools.

**SOCORRO MISSION** The third time has definitely been a charm for the Socorro Mission in El Paso County, Texas, founded in 1682. Floods in 1740 and 1829 washed the church away the first two times it was built, and it looked like the third building, constructed in 1843, wasn't going to make it either. This time the culprit wasn't the Rio Grande, but the misuse of concrete in its repair. By the mid-1990s, its moisture-trapped adobe walls were at risk of imminent collapse. A “top to bottom” rehab, funded with help from a \$197,000 SAT grant, has ensured the structure will stay standing. The restoration included replacing the concrete with adobe at the base of the structure, stabilizing the bell tower, installing a new stone floor in the nave, replastering the interior with gypsum, and applying a good coating of lime wash to the exterior's plaster. The Spanish Colonial mission—known for its delicately painted wooden vigas—is now as good as new.

**contact point** **web** [www.nps.gov/hps/tps/tax/index.htm](http://www.nps.gov/hps/tps/tax/index.htm)

## Plaza Theater >>

The city of El Paso always knew it would restore its beloved Plaza Theatre; due to budget constraints, however, it just didn't know when. Thanks in part to a Save America's Treasure grant, the 16-year wait is over, the magnificent splendor restored thanks to a three-year rehab. When it was built in 1930 for a million dollars, theatergoers did not simply sit and watch during its Depression-era heyday. Rather, the Plaza



was a complete atmosphere, created before such an experience of the senses became too expensive. As the lights dimmed, the blue-painted ceiling came alive with twinkling stars and floating clouds. And then a mighty Wurlitzer rose from the orchestra pit, ready to delight. “Patrons were transported,” notes the theater's website. Unfortunately, in the '50s the Plaza started a slow decline, along with theaters across the country. More and more people moved to the suburbs, watched TV, or opted for the drive-in. Over the years, programming became sporadic, the

Wurlitzer was shipped off to a collector in Dallas, and only the El Paso Community Foundation's raising of a million dollars in 1986 saved it from becoming a parking lot. Given the hefty pricetag of restoration, the Spanish Colonial Revival-style building sat empty until 2002 when a partnership between the city and the foundation got a rehab underway. A \$198,000 SAT grant went towards expanding the stagehouse, modernizing the theatrical systems, and building a multi-use annex to attract a wider variety of productions—as well as restoring elements such as decorative plaster, tile, and lights. New wall fabrics, cushions, and curtains, with help from old photographs, were matched to the originals. The Wurlitzer, fully restored, is also back, along with the ceiling, designed to give the feel of being in a Spanish Courtyard. “It's true to its original state,” says Bryan Crowe, assistant general manager of the El Paso Convention and Performing Arts Center, which runs the theater. Since its grand reopening, the Plaza is once again the “Showplace of the Southwest,” and a showplace for the city.



LEFT, RIGHT DAVID SABAL





## << *Ney Museum*

There aren't many 19th-century sculptor studios left in America—but the only one that belonged to a woman is undergoing an SAT-funded rehab. Both rustic and classical, Formosa was the heart of inspiration for German-born Elisabet Ney, as she created life-size statues of Stephen F. Austin and Sam Houston for display in the Texas State Capitol. Built in 1892, the neoclassical structure—now known as the Elisabet Ney Museum—was a happening spot for influential Texans. When Ney wasn't sculpting a *Lady Macbeth* or *Bust of Christ*, she gathered visitors on her secluded lawn (now sur-

**BOTH RUSTIC AND CLASSICAL, FORMOSA WAS THE HEART OF INSPIRATION FOR GERMAN-BORN ELISABET NEY, AS SHE CREATED LIFE-SIZE STATUES OF STEPHEN F. AUSTIN AND SAM HOUSTON FOR DISPLAY IN THE TEXAS STATE CAPITOL.**



rounded by bustling Austin) for “stimulating discussions of politics, art, and philosophy.” Engraved on the studio facade is the word *Sursum*, a Latin word meaning “to uplift your heart,” the philosophy by which the charismatic artist led her life. Today, water damage has taken a toll on the

structure, to be ameliorated with the help of a \$203,000 SAT grant. A grounds restoration is controversial—its goal returning the site to Ney's vision—including replacing a stone wall added in the 1930s with chicken wire fence and felling some of the formal plantings including Ashe junipers and crepe myrtles that aren't original. In turn, the native prairie grass, wildflowers, and post oaks she loved are being re-planted. Although the entire restoration, still in the funding stage, won't be finished until around 2015, the completed studio work and demonstration landscaping have gotten rave reviews. “Comments are glowing,” says Mary Collins Blackmon, the museum's curator.

ABOVE AL BRADEN, RIGHT COURTESY OF ELISABET NEY MUSEUM, AUSTIN, TEXAS

# TAX CREDIT

F E D E R A L   D O L L A R S   I N   S U P P O R T   O F   P R E S E R V A T I O N

**SHERMAN BUILDING** The turn of the century brought prosperity to Corpus Christi. The rails had put it on the map and it realized its dream as a deep-water port. A boom gave rise to landmarks like the 1930 Sherman Building, designed by local architects Hardy and Curran as a 10-story high-rise ornamented with terra cotta, cast stone, and granite, its interior featuring tile wainscoting, transomed doors, terrazzo floors, and a profusion of woodwork. But when downtown began a decline in the 1960s, so did the Sherman. Today, thanks to a San Antonio developer and preservation tax credits, the building is seeing new life as Nueces Lofts Apartments, with its street-level storefront, wooden windows, tile work, and other details all restored. The two-year, \$6 million rehab also removed asbestos and lead paint.

**WACO HIGH SCHOOL** A \$12 million rehab has turned the Waco High School, listed in the National Register of Historic Places, into 104 loft-style apartments. The three-story neoclassical structure, erected in 1911, is grand and imposing, like many institutional buildings of the early 20th century, resembling a temple with four Ionic columns directly above the main entrance, topped by a pediment. The school was designed by Milton W. Scott—a self-taught draftsman with no architectural training—who is responsible for many of the city's prominent landmarks. The rise of the postwar suburbs brought about the school's demise, but it was reborn as affordable housing—along with a 1924 gym and 1955 music building—by the North Carolina-based Landmark Group. The rehab, carried out with preservation tax credits, preserved the long corridors, 12-foot-high ceilings, and original doors with transoms.

**to qualify for tax credits** *The new use must be income producing, the structure certified as historic, and the rehab in accordance with the Secretary of the Interior's Standards for Rehabilitation. The credit equals 20 percent of the qualified rehab expenses. The National Park Service administers the tax credit program with IRS.*

**contact point** **web** [www.nps.gov/history/hps/tps/tax/index.htm](http://www.nps.gov/history/hps/tps/tax/index.htm)

## Republic National Bank >>

When the Republic National Bank Tower opened in 1954, it was a prime business hub for the moneymakers of Dallas. Today though, for the people who live in the building, it's simply home. The 36-story structure—once the tallest west of the Mississippi—was converted into a rental apartment community in 2007, with help from National Park Service-administered preservation tax incentives. Ever since its construction, the bank has been one of the most notable addresses in Dallas. Its opening



was celebrated with a two-day party featuring an orchestra, can-can dancers, and ample opportunity for the local elite to marvel at all the gold, from gold curtains and rugs to gold-plated fountains and a gold-leafed serpentine balcony. "Few institutions in the humdrum world of banking could have pulled it off," once noted the *Texas Monthly*. The exterior was just as impressive. Designed by architect Wallace K. Harrison in the same vein as his Alcoa Building in Pittsburgh, its skin is clad of interlocking aluminum star-embossed panels, with a 150-foot lighted

spire crowning the top, "beckoning to North Texas like some corporate star of Bethlehem." The tower's life as a bank ended in the mid-'90s and it stood vacant until 2005. That's when Atlanta-based Gables Residential decided that with Dallas in the midst of a population boom, the futuristic building—which has weathered the years with enough steel to lay 65 miles of railroad tracks—would make a hip place to live. "The views are pretty spectacular," says Gables' regional vice president Tom Bakewell. As part of a multimillion dollar rehab, done by RTKL Associates design firm and completed in 2007, original touches such as travertine marble wall panels, Italian terrazzo flooring, and gold leafing have all been restored or replaced and the 19 original Andy Warhol prints remain. Two other towers, Republic Center Towers II and III—added to the original structure in 1964 and 1980—were also rehabilitated as part of the project, now used as office and retail space. "The property still leads the downtown market in rents," Bakewell says.



LEFT, RIGHT, JEFF STYAN

TAX  
CREDIT





COURTESY OF THE BELMONT HOTEL

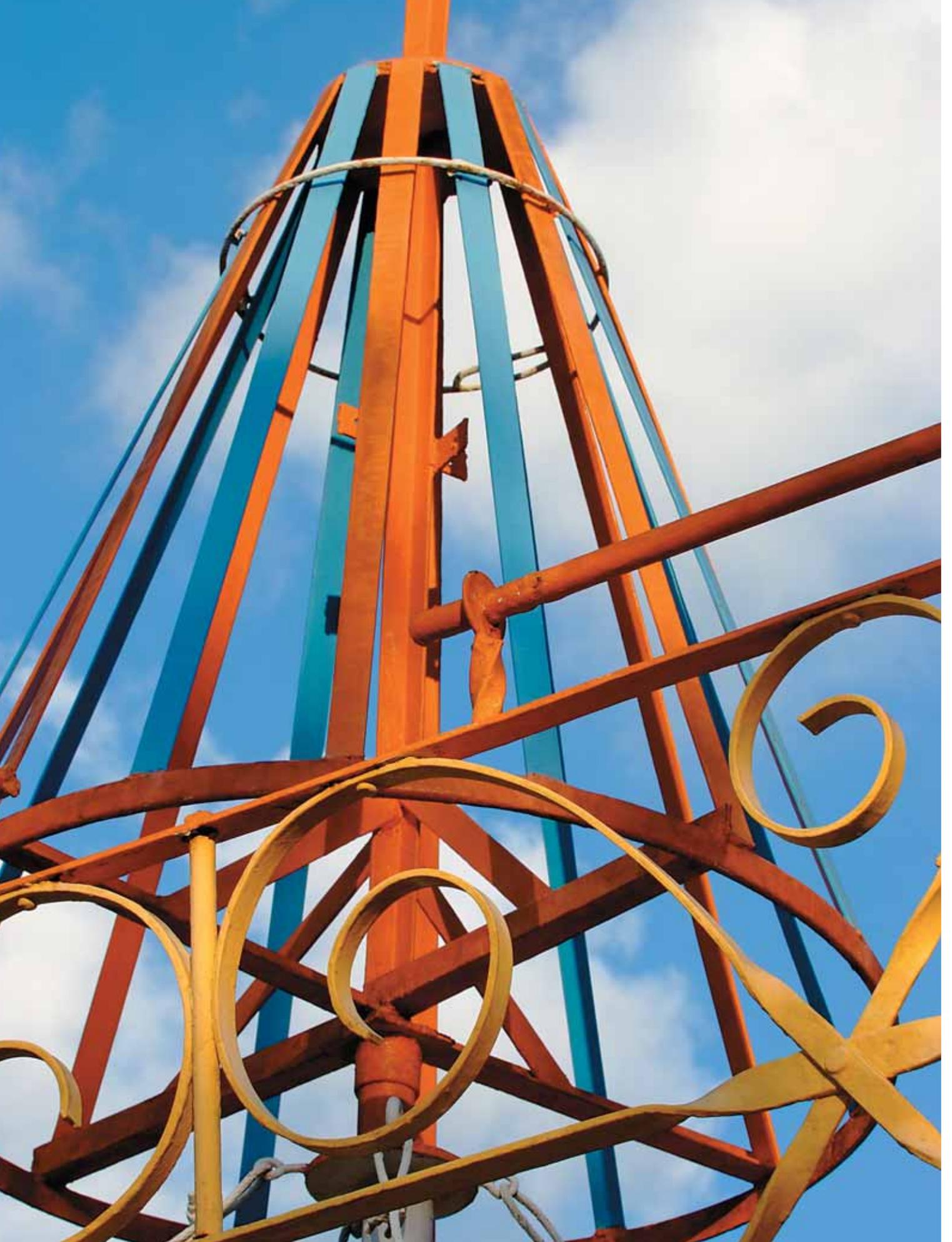
## << *Belmont Hotel*

Until just a few short years ago, the Belmont—the first luxury motor court hotel in Dallas—was just another dingy dive in a crime-ridden part of town. It had a few things going for it, though: an amazing view of the city, and a design by Charles Stevens Dilbeck. It was these things, plus childhood memories of eating at the hotel restaurant, that inspired developer Monte Anderson to transform the forlorn property into the happening 68-room hotel and bar that it is today.

A \$3 million rehab, with the help of preservation tax credits, included new windows appropriate to the historic character, new HVAC and electrical systems, and repairs to the decorative metalwork and stucco. Today the Belmont stands as one of the city's most popular boutique hotels. Dilbeck, one of the most prolific architects in the history of Dallas, often did

**DILBECK, ONE OF THE MOST PROLIFIC ARCHITECTS IN THE HISTORY OF DALLAS, OFTEN DID NOT FOLLOW THE DICTATES OF ANY ONE STYLE, AND THE BELMONT, WITH ITS FUSION OF STREAMLINED AND SPANISH ECLECTIC ELEMENTS, IS NO EXCEPTION.**

not follow the dictates of any one style, and the Belmont, with its fusion of Streamlined and Spanish Eclectic elements, is no exception. When he designed it in 1946, the emphasis was “on horizontal lines, rounded corners and stucco facades.” With a \$400,000 construction cost, no expense was spared to make it a standout. The Belmont offered air-conditioned rooms all year long, and almost 8,000 cubic yards of earth were carved out of the limestone cliffs to create the view of downtown. Among a group of five buildings, guests today have a choice of staying in bungalows, loft suites, garden suites, or the moderne building. And even if you just want to sip a cocktail at the bar, you can enjoy the view. Better than the view though, might be what the rehab has meant for the community. Hotel, food, and beverage sales in the surrounding area are up, says Anderson, and so is reinvestment. “And the Belmont has been the flagship,” he adds.



ALL PHOTOS DAVID ANDREWS/NPS

# OUTSIDE



# HOUSTON

**preserving outsider art at the orange show and beer can house** [written and photographed by david andrews](#)

I'm waiting for the sun to shine on El Destino Club—a shuttered nightclub outside Houston—when up walks a man whose chiseled face recalls my wife's father. What are you doing, he says. Soy un hombre fotografico. Why photograph this place? The happy colors and flaking paint. He ponders that. I ask him why it closed. La economia. Satisfied, he heads on up the road. ● And when the sun does shine, it is powerfully crystalline, illuminating all the facets of the place where anything goes. It's the nation's largest city without a zoning code, so you get a nightclub next to a scrap yard, a church next to a check-cashing establishment, a six-story building next to a one-story. Above-ground archeology if you will—with all the layers intermingled. ● “If juxtaposition and discontinuity may be said to characterize evolving cities such as Houston, in no area are they so dramatic and intensified than in this one,” notes *Houston: An Architectural Guide*. Some parts date to the very beginnings of the city, others point to what's yet to come. ● Telephone Road, where I've got my camera poised, was once home of the wildcatters and the honky tonks, lined with metal enamel billboards for Grand Prize Beer. Now, next to what's left, the signs say “su palabra es su credito” (your word is your credit) or “compre aqui, pague aqui” (compare here, buy here), in a piñata palette that dazzles the eye. Nuzzled in between are the likes of Gigi's Party Rentals, a weathered survivor of the '50s, and Bodhi's Zen Garden and Veggie, its day already done.

**LEFT AND ABOVE:** *Orange Show moments. Creator Jeff McKissack had no written plans. Cutting metal, he saw a scrap in the shape of a wing, and decided to go with it.*



**JUST A FEW MILES EAST OF DOWNTOWN'S LOOMING SKYSCRAPERS—WEDGED BETWEEN RUN-DOWN ASBESTOS-SIDED HOUSES AND A FREIGHT COMPANY, FREEWAY ABUZZ A BLOCK AWAY—RESIDES THE KEY TO LIFE.**

MARKETING DIRECTOR STEPHEN BRIDGES TELLS ME, HALF IN JEST, THAT ALL OF HOUSTON is only a backdrop for the Orange Show. He has a point. Mexicali colors. Check. Anything goes. Check. Quirky context. Check. Just a few miles east of downtown's looming skyscrapers—wedged between run-down asbestos-sided houses and a freight company, freeway abuzz a block away—resides the key to life. Indeed, just a quick visit, writes Joseph Lomax in *Folk Art in Texas*, “will more than convince anyone that within the pithy orange rind lie the secrets of health, longevity, and happiness.”

But before the convincing sets in, you have to take a breath, because you're flat-out agog. The product of postal worker Jeff McKissack—its architect, mason, welder, carpenter, engineer, tilesetter, and general mastermind—the Orange Show gives going postal a whole new twist. “Once inside you think you're seeing the impossible, carefully, even lovingly engineered to become felicitously possible,” says art critic Ann Holmes. “It probably doesn't really threaten the laws of Newton, it just seems to.”

Ventilators whizzing, wind vanes gyrating, flags cracking—the Gulf breeze animates the place even before you set foot inside. From out front it's a pint-size Alamo, surrounded by a white wall, with a pair of stone lions to guard the entrance. Through a turnstile, you enter into a labyrinth of pretzel-twist staircases, up, down, and around a seemingly unending series of improbable attractions. An oasis festooned with plastic orange tree limbs. Small fountains with frogs spouting water. A wishing well. A diorama on all the good chemicals you get from eating an orange. A diorama with diminutive dinosaurs. Two steam engines—one posing as a tractor that powers a boat round and round a pocket-size stadium. All intersected by a maze of passageways. And I'm just getting started. Luckily I've made it to an observation deck where I can take a break in one of the tutti-frutti-painted metal tractor seats. Rows of tutti-frutti-painted metal tractor seats. One wasn't enough. One wasn't enough either when it came to wagon-wheel balconies, in eye-popping jelly-bean colors.

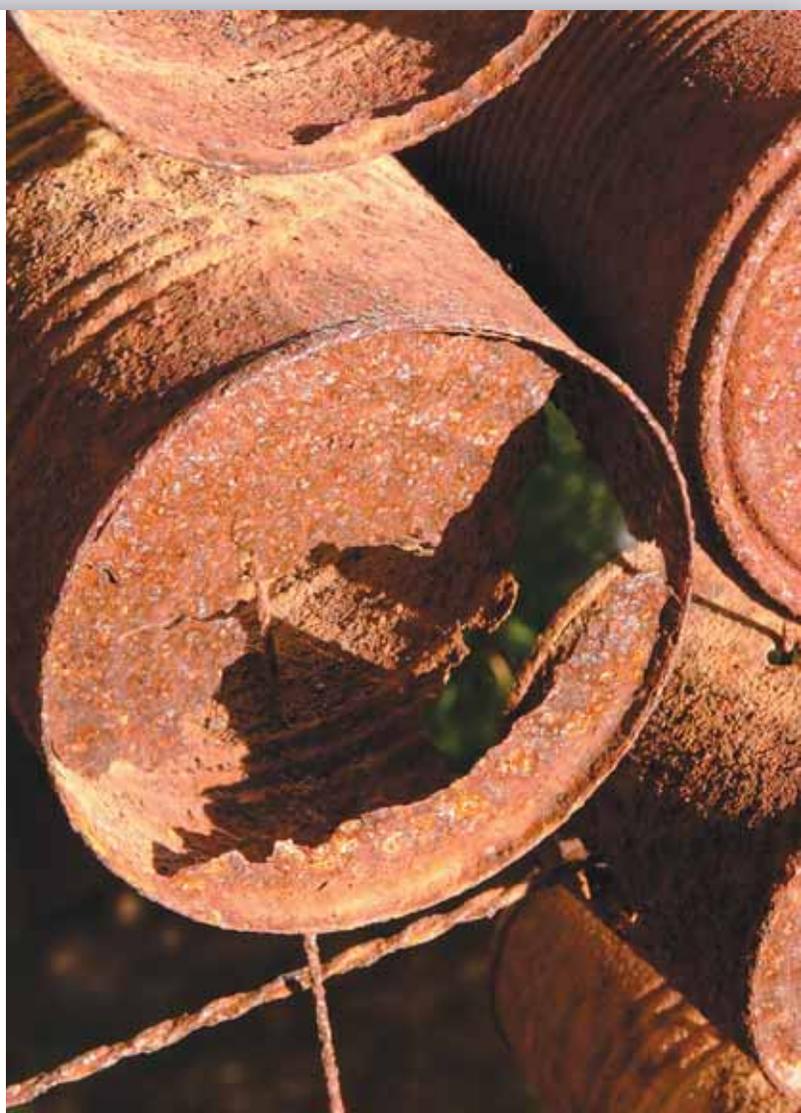


**BELOW LEFT:** “There are places that hold our interest because they seem to compress time and space into a picture of the city in miniature,” writes Bruce Webb in *Ephemeral City*. The Orange Show is such a place. **BELOW RIGHT:** Cans knitted into fencing at the Beer Can House.

The circle is the main motif in McKissack’s brand of art, a strain particularly virulent in the Lone Star State. The circle represents perfection, “the form most satisfying to innate desire for order and predictability,” writes Edward Abernethy in *Folk Art in Texas*. Wheels and tires adorn yards throughout the state—demarcating flower beds, substituting for gates and fencing, standing sentinel along driveways. “Only the wheel can be rotated through 360 degrees and maintain the same form,” Abernethy writes. “It can also be moved through all its planes and always be symmetrical.” The tractor seat is another favorite, along with whirligigs, walking drills, go-devils, cultivators, and wagons of all sizes—resurrected discards, junk to most us, that form a romantic bond with the rural past, where something as simple as a bleached skull can conjure up the longhorn mystique. Some scholars say that this sort of improv—combining do-it-yourself with recycling—is proof that inventive America still exists.

McKissack was all nostalgic over steam, which vies with the orange for airplay at the site. In a city that was freewayed almost overnight, he looked back longingly to the years of his youth, watching the last of the great paddleboats along the banks of the Chattahoochee.

**ACROSS THE STREET AT THE ORANGE SHOW CENTER FOR VISIONARY ART, STEPHEN SITS** happily behind his computer creating a self-propelled tour of Houston—by car, naturally—so I can take his thesis out for a spin. The center, a house of wisdom whose archives draw the learned worldwide, was established to protect the show—which recently joined the National Register of Historic Places—and similar sites. And it is literally a house, one of several just like it on the street. The show is now prime performance space, with alt bands and theater, Carmen Miranda look-alike contests, swimming in the pool with Esther Williams movies, and kids taking in puppet shows from the candy-colored seats. Such fare may be a foretaste of my tour, says the mischievous look on Stephen’s face.







**"AM I THE ONLY ONE WHOSE MOTHER USED TO TAKE THOSE CANNED PEARS OR PEACHES** and set them on a lettuce leaf with grated Velveeta on top as a garnish, or cottage cheese?" It's a question to ponder, posed online by a pleased patron of the Dinner Bell, Jeff McKissack's lunchtime haunt. Every day, after retirement, he braved a tangle of freeway ramps and cross streets—on a bike no less—to get to its temptations. Hulking slabs of meatloaf. Marshmallow salad. Chicken and dumplings in brown gravy. Beef stew and sides of okra. And for dessert, chocolate icebox pie with whipped cream on top. All under glass, cafeteria-style, deliciously lit with green florescent. Plus '50s throwback decor with boomerang tables, southern hospitality, and portions so huge a truck driver wouldn't come away hungry.

But there's more—an icing of tone on top. I'm thinking of the cakes and pies of pop artist Wayne Thiebaud, paint slathered thick like luscious frosting, metaphors for abundance and America's ceaseless appetite.



**ONCE INSIDE YOU THINK YOU'RE SEEING THE IMPOSSIBLE, CAREFULLY, EVEN LOVINGLY ENGINEERED TO BECOME FELICITOUSLY POSSIBLE. IT PROBABLY DOESN'T REALLY THREATEN THE LAWS OF NEWTON, IT JUST SEEMS TO. —CRITIC ANN HOLMES**

And, in Thiebaud's words, "a stereotypical this-can-be-found-anywhere-in-the-country-but-only-in-this-country quality." Except this is real, and it tastes like mom.

Jeff McKissack ate his last meal at the Dinner Bell, on the afternoon of January 20, 1980. On his way back to the Orange Show, he got off his bike, went in a bank, and collapsed from a stroke. He left the show to his nephew, who soon learned it was worthless.

McKissack thought the show would make him rich—"the biggest thing to hit Houston since the Astrodome"—with 300,000 visitors a year. Here he is at the opening, May 5, 1979, with wide grin, orange pants, and panama hat. Only 150 showed up, then visitation slowed to a trickle. He withdrew into his house across the street, and was dead in seven months, eight days before his 78th birthday. The show had been the focus of his every moment for over two decades.

**MCKISSACK HAD A HUCK FINN CHILDHOOD—IN A TOWN ON THE ALABAMA-GEORGIA** border—running barefoot along the riverbanks. He got a business degree from Mercer, went to Columbia grad school, and worked on Wall Street in the 1920s. He got to shake hands with legendary inventor

Thomas Edison, a lifelong inspiration. During the Depression, he trucked oranges from Florida to Atlanta, discovering his mission to serve the orange growers of America; he came to believe that every part of his life was proof of that mission. He never married.

During the war he was a welder with the Navy, taking a Houston postal job at the height of the oil boom, in 1954. As he made downtown deliveries, he started to forage for materials—chipped bricks or pieces of scrap metal from razed buildings. His yard quickly filled up, then his house, with only a trail through it. He bought two lots across the way, where he labored alone on his orange homage, full time after retiring in 1968. Every morning, he pushed his wheelbarrow across the street and went to work.

What he built is elusive. It's like a kid's game. I keep expecting to find the treasure at the end of each twist-

ing passage. But there is no treasure, no focal point, just a never-ending succession of gewgaws—windmills aping planetary movement, a woodsman restrained by his female companion ("spare that orange tree"), a metal scarecrow with a homily on life's fears. Around the bend will surely be a reason for this joy ride. But the joke's on me, a clown seems to say. The orange connection proves occasionally tenuous, and I laugh out loud at signs like "love oranges and live," "love me, orange, please love me," and "clown found happiness by drinking cold fresh orange juice every day." And when the orange isn't front and center, it's anything goes. An owl perched on a pedestal bears the inscription, "The less he said, the more he heard. Why can't we all be like that wise old bird?"

When asked why he created the place, McKissack always shrugged and gave a vague or seemingly whimsical answer. But here stands the Orange Show, a better monument than any tombstone.

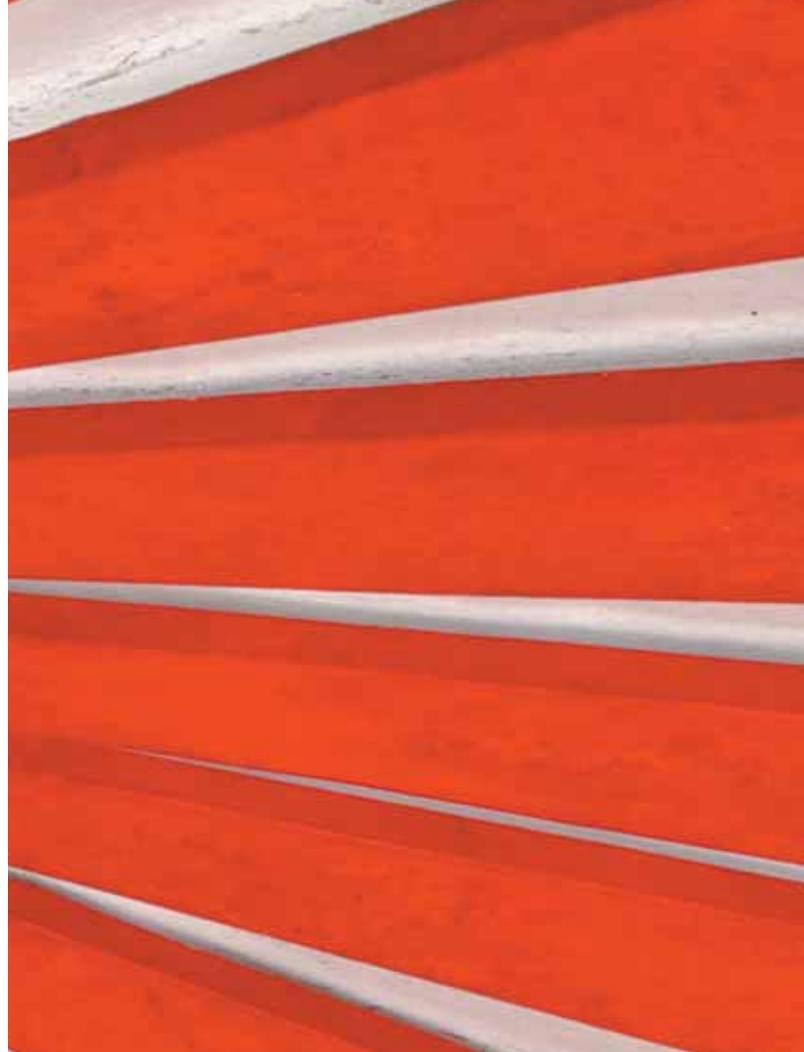
**STEPHEN HAS ME OUT ON THE FREEWAY, HEADING TOWARD DOWNTOWN IN PURSUIT OF THE** larger context for McKissack's creation. Houston's anything-goes image, highly visible along this road, harkens back to the city's invention by a pair of New York sharpies who—in the late 1830s—sold the idea of a great Texas emporium on the swampy site. The mercantile ethic has been coin of the realm ever since. Add in a maverick attitude and a hunkering for growth, and you get the picture. The 20th century saw Houston gallop toward its destiny as the petrochemical capital of the world, a position it still holds. Today, its landscape of refineries mingles with pockets of historic charm and masterworks by architects from Philip Johnson to Cesar Pelli.

Downtown glimmers like Emerald City, washed clean as great pinnacles of cloud race off to reveal a sky of regal blue. Weather stands in for nature in Houston, drama delivered daily from the Gulf. Its bayous, once a source of romantic endearment, were concreted over to cope with floods. The city

**LEFT: A diorama at the Orange Show explains that the body is a chemical converter. ABOVE LEFT: Bottles glow at the Beer Can House. ABOVE RIGHT: Under glass at the Dinner Bell Cafeteria, Jeff McKissack's lunchtime haunt, a profoundly delicious slice of Americana.**



AS OLD HOUSTON WENT DOWN, THE **ORANGE SHOW** WENT UP. MCKISSACK WAS IN THE CHIPS, NETTING **ROOF TILES FROM THE OLD CAPITOL THEATER**, **A RAILING FROM A FURNITURE COMPANY FIRE ESCAPE**, AND AN **OBELISK FROM THE TEXAS STATE HOTEL**.



embraced growth in a big way after World War II. As old Houston went down, the Orange Show went up. McKissack was in the chips, netting roof tiles from the Old Capitol Theater, a railing from a furniture company fire escape, and an obelisk from the Texas State Hotel.

The skyline's transformation was exhilarating. One after the next—in glass or porcelain enamel, marble or anodized aluminum—the skyscrapers rose like sober sentries over a new urban order. “Ground-level plazas finished with elegant paving, planting, and fountains seemed to represent a tasteful, enlightened alternative to the crowding of drug stores, beauty parlors, coffee shops, and shoe repair stands up to the sidewalk,” writes William Stern in *Ephemeral City*. “Such services were tucked discreetly into the basement if their presences were deemed necessary.” Parking lots, paved over the rubble, waited their turn to host a high-rise marvel, a turn that never came. “Collectively, these buildings, isolated in their plazas, tended to erode rather than relieve the fabric of downtown Houston, which, under the impact of retail flight and the economics of speculation, slowly came unraveled,” writes Stern. Today, the interstitial spaces, multiplying as development burst willy-nilly into the burbs, suggest both placelessness and unlimited, elastic possibility, a no-man’s-land of vacant lots between the railyards and the warehouses, the strip malls and the subdivisions. Here lies a city perennially on the edge of town, hid-



den in fissures unseen from the freeway. Since the 1970s, notes the Houston architectural guide, painters, sculptors, and writers have begun to explore these cracks and grooves as “an archeology, a compilation of urban experiences heretofore unexcavated and unanalyzed.”

This next generation of artist sometimes follows directly in McKissack’s footsteps, with creations that are personal and highly idiosyncratic. Like

McKissack, they work in the vein of the outsider artist, who eschews the commercial gallery and often the very idea of work for sale. The difference is, this artist is aware—and embraces—the role. Also unlike McKissack, this artist is frequently not self-taught, but highly trained.

Dolan Smith, who boasts a master’s degree in fine arts, has made the cover of *Houston Magazine* with his Museum of the Weird. As affable as Gary Cooper in *Mr. Deeds Goes to Town*, he gives me a tour of his collection, the museum

housed in a charming little bungalow. I step inside and greet a menagerie that runs the gamut of quirk—from horns to doll heads—along with his own pieces. An ominous sensation hovers over it all, leavened with a layer of humor and Smith’s boyish charm as docent. He shows me a cabinet with instructions on how to make an American clown, including

**TOP:** McKissack could and would offer provenance for all the items at the Orange Show—like this umbrella—whether scavenged from wrecked buildings or acquired at antique and junk shops. **ABOVE:** Mannequins find a new life at the show.



**WHEN ASKED WHY HE CREATED THE PLACE, MCKISSACK ALWAYS SHRUGGED AND GAVE A VAGUE OR SEEMINGLY WHIMSICAL ANSWER. BUT HERE STANDS THE ORANGE SHOW, A BETTER MONUMENT THAN ANY TOMBSTONE.**



**ABOVE:** *Wishing well at the Orange Show. Self-taught artists like McKissack, not concerned with pleasing critics, feel free to combine unusual materials. RIGHT:* *Looking down from a wagon-wheel balcony at the show. "Welders as a class seem to be creative," writes Francis Edward Abernethy in *Folk Art in Texas*. A knowledge of the craft gives the welder power of expression.*

"10 to 12 years of aimless wandering, bad booze, cigarettes, drugs, unsanitary conditions, and abuse from strangers." Most of Smith's own pieces relate to egregious childhood experiences, his afflictions inventoried in a gazebo called "the Scar Room." Canines also have a place in his art. Smith performs dog weddings and, when the litter arrives, baptisms, too. His work is part performance, part his collection—like the Orange Show, a collaged experience—and part traditional media such as painting and sculpture, with a twist. His dogs accompany us into the alley for a look at his rust-encrusted pickup, a work of art on wheels. He's transformed the bed into an armored orifice—with padded seats around the rim and a bulbous membrane where the rear window used to be.

Art cars are big in this city. The annual Art Car Parade, produced by the Orange Show, draws attendees worldwide, and has also spun off its own museum. Dan Akroyd was this year's master of ceremonies.

Mark Bradford, aka Scrap Daddy, is always a headliner. He is clearly in the McKissack camp, working outside traditional venues and expectations. I park just across from his studio, in a sleepy historic neighborhood called the Heights, next to a broad concrete channel. A TV sensation, Bradford has hosted shows from *Scrap Yard Scavenger* to *Guinness Book of Records*, *Prime Time*. He tells me about his creations. A payphone station launched down a ski slope at 75 miles an hour. A guillotine that cut a Camaro in half. A crossbow the size of an 18-wheeler. A medieval-style catapult that flung a refrigerator 314 feet. And the Spoonazoid, with its armor scale of kitchen spoons acquired hours before shipping for meltdown, as American Airlines got rid of its silverware post-911. His favorite finds are full-mades like forklifts that can be readily born again. Art car artists have a natural home in Houston, he says, an industrial city with tons of stuff to hunt. Besides, he likes recycling.

**A ROOSTER EYES ME THROUGH THE CHICKEN WIRE AS SOME BURLY GUYS HAUL** sacks of Mighty Good Goat Pellets. Maybe Stephen has seen fit to include Petticoat Junction on my trip-tik. Actually it's the Wabash Antique and Feed Store (mere blocks from the Beer Can House, the Orange Show's other property) where you can find all you need to feed your chick, cow, horse, bunny, or peacock. And if you don't have one, you can get one here, along with a lop-eared rabbit, pygmy goat, or miniature pot-bellied pig.

Canines and their accoutrements are a big draw; Wabash places about 200 homeless pets a year. "I'm looking for thick-cushioned doggie beds that are nice and not offensive when I put my house on the market," writes a potential patron online. "I ran across this place and can't wait to stop by this weekend." He can make his dog's day by bringing home a tasty pig knuckle or cow femur.

Antiques nuzzle up next to the bags of feed, mainly country-kitchen and farm items like crocks, churns, cow skulls, linens, and lanterns. Outside is a haven for handmade yard art, from boot-shaped planters to a turquoise-and-red-metal rooster with his tongue hanging out. All lorded over by a statue of Saint Francis of Assisi.





**THE LIFE OF JOHN MILKOVISCH CAME TO A HEAD IN 1968, WHEN HE RETIRED FROM HIS JOB AS AN upholsterer with the Southern Pacific Railroad. He was tired of taking care of his three-bedroom bungalow west of Houston, what with the painting and the mowing. So he amassed an estimated 50,000 empty cans of Texas Pride, Buckhorn, and Falstaff—whatever was on special—and commenced to re-side his house, garnished with garland curtains made from the tops. It took him 17 years, but look at the result.**

First came a patio with a fence; 40 holes a slat, embedded with marbles. “It was real pretty with the sun sparkling through there in the morning,” his wife Mary told interviewer Joseph Lomax in *Folk Art in Texas*. Then he paved the driveway, and the front yard, too. While drinking the beer. He flattened the cans, stored them in the garage, in the attic, hung around trees. He dangled plastic from the six packs off the eaves.

The pop-tops tinkle in the breeze as I point and click in the late day sun. What’s it like in a hurricane, Mary is asked. “Well, wild!” It’s date night and couples stream by for a hoot. In between shots I point out the resemblance to an Andy





**THE POP-TOPS TINKLE IN THE BREEZE AS I POINT AND CLICK IN THE LATE DAY SUN. WHAT'S IT LIKE IN A HURRICANE, MARY IS ASKED. "WELL, WILD!" IT'S DATE NIGHT AND COUPLES STREAM BY FOR A HOOT.**

Warhol. Except instead of multiple Jackies, it's doppelganger Budweiser. The entire abode is covered in cans. You can't find the door bell. Out back a wall of colored beer bottles sparkles in the light.

Milkovisch cut the cans with upholstery tools like linoleum knives, doubled over as "bricks" to rivet into sheets. The precision is impressive. "You know, in 17 years it don't take much to accumulate all these cans," he told Lomax—what with wife, grown kids, and their spouses all imbibing out on the porch. "He was always the type that didn't want to throw anything away," Mary said. After she passed in 2001, the Orange Show acquired the place. Restoration took seven years and \$250,000 in donations. Volunteers generated their own empties to patch the siding.

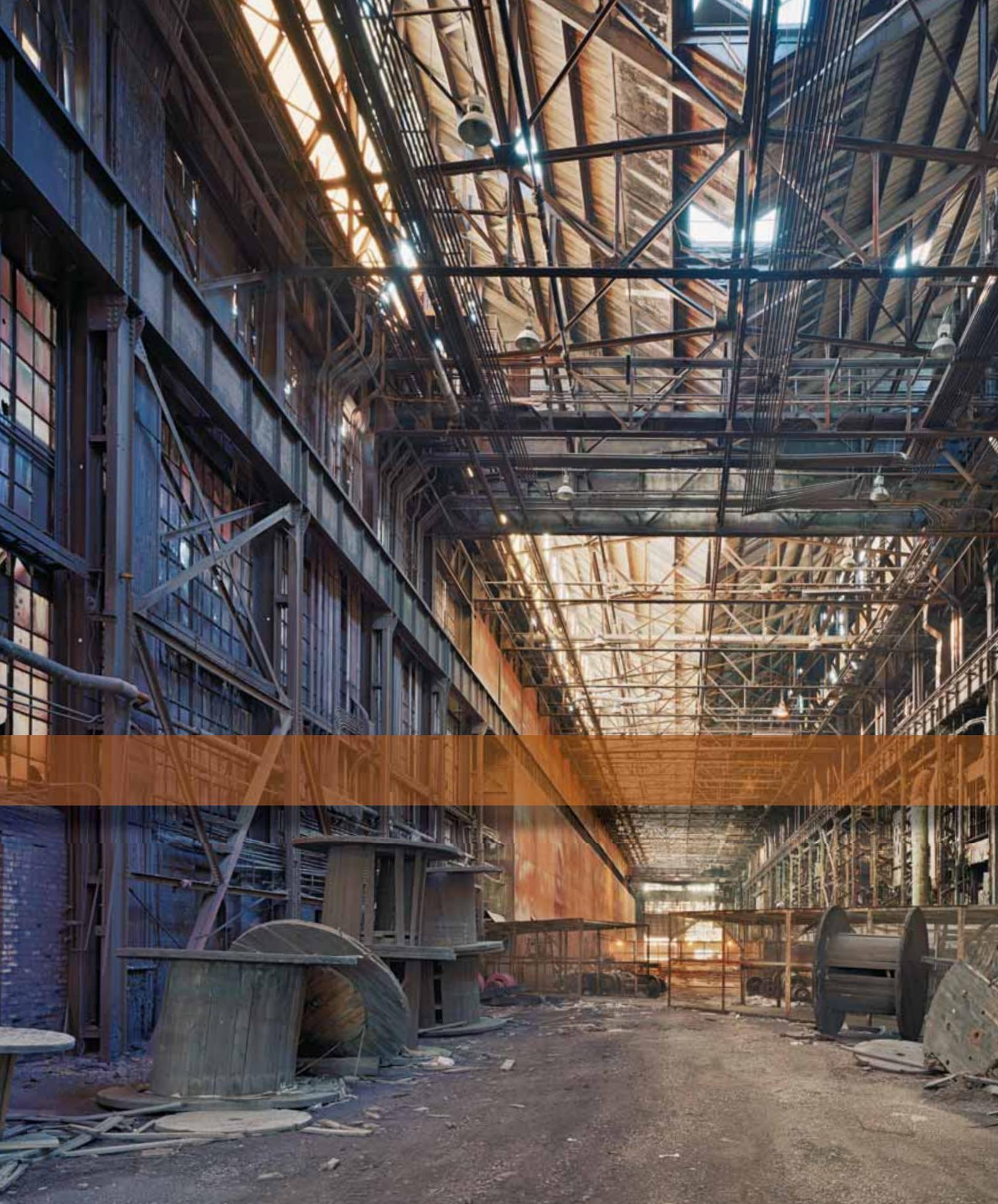
**WHEN I ROLL BACK INTO THE ORANGE SHOW, STEPHEN IS BEHIND HIS DESK WITH A SEE-what-I-mean look on his face. "With the freeways, the palm trees, and the attitude, Houston's a lot like L.A.," he says. "Without the fun parts." Well, I beg to differ, Stephen. No one makes fun like Houston.**

*Two final notes from the Ephemeral City: Stephen Bridges has gone on to life after the Orange Show, and Dolan Smith has sold his house to another artist.*

**contact points** Orange Show Center for Visionary Art **web** [www.orangeshow.org/](http://www.orangeshow.org/)  
**email** [ashley@orangeshow.org](mailto:ashley@orangeshow.org)

**LEFT:** Tops dangle in the breeze on the front porch of the Beer Can House. **LEFT BELOW:** Fence detail with tops sparkling behind. **RIGHT BELOW:** A Warhol moment. Bridges says that preservation is "just now coming into consciousness" in Houston, a particular challenge with places like the Orange Show and Beer Can House. "How do you preserve what wasn't meant to last?" he says. The city, through its cultural arts council, helps keep the show going with money from its hotel-motel tax.







*by joe flanagan  
photographs  
by andrew  
moore*

# running on empty

the plight of detroit and the postindustrial city



ALL PHOTOS © ANDREW MOORE

**DETROIT STRETCHES OUT ALONG THE RIVER LIKE AN INDUSTRIAL AGE POMPEII. IN THE** one-time Mecca of American car culture and symbol of economic might, everything looks emphatically *once* and *former*. Vacant and blighted, shockingly empty, Detroit is the most vivid example of what is being called the postindustrial city. Cleveland, New Orleans, St. Louis, and Newark are emptying, too. But none has fallen as far—or from such a height—as Detroit.

The decline of the city's manufacturing base—the automobile industry and its related businesses—is the root cause. The white flight that started in the 1950s set in motion a self-perpetuating atrophy. About a third of Detroit's buildings are abandoned. At its most prosperous, in 1955, there were almost two million residents in Detroit. Now there are fewer than 800,000. The sprawling city whose very name evoked prosperity and industrial might now looks more like a ruin left by another civilization.

The city is conducting a demolition campaign, seeded by \$20 million in federal funds. Its scope is massive: 10,000 structures by the end of Mayor



## CLEVELAND, NEW ORLEANS, ST. LOUIS, AND NEWARK ARE

Dave Bing's first term, if things go according to plan. Since there are some 90,000 vacant homes and lots, the effort will just scratch the surface. Still, it is welcome news to many Detroiters. Block after block of empty, decaying buildings attract crime and discourage home buyers. And it makes sense financially, since maintaining an infrastructure once intended to support millions is a drain on a city whose tax base is evaporating.

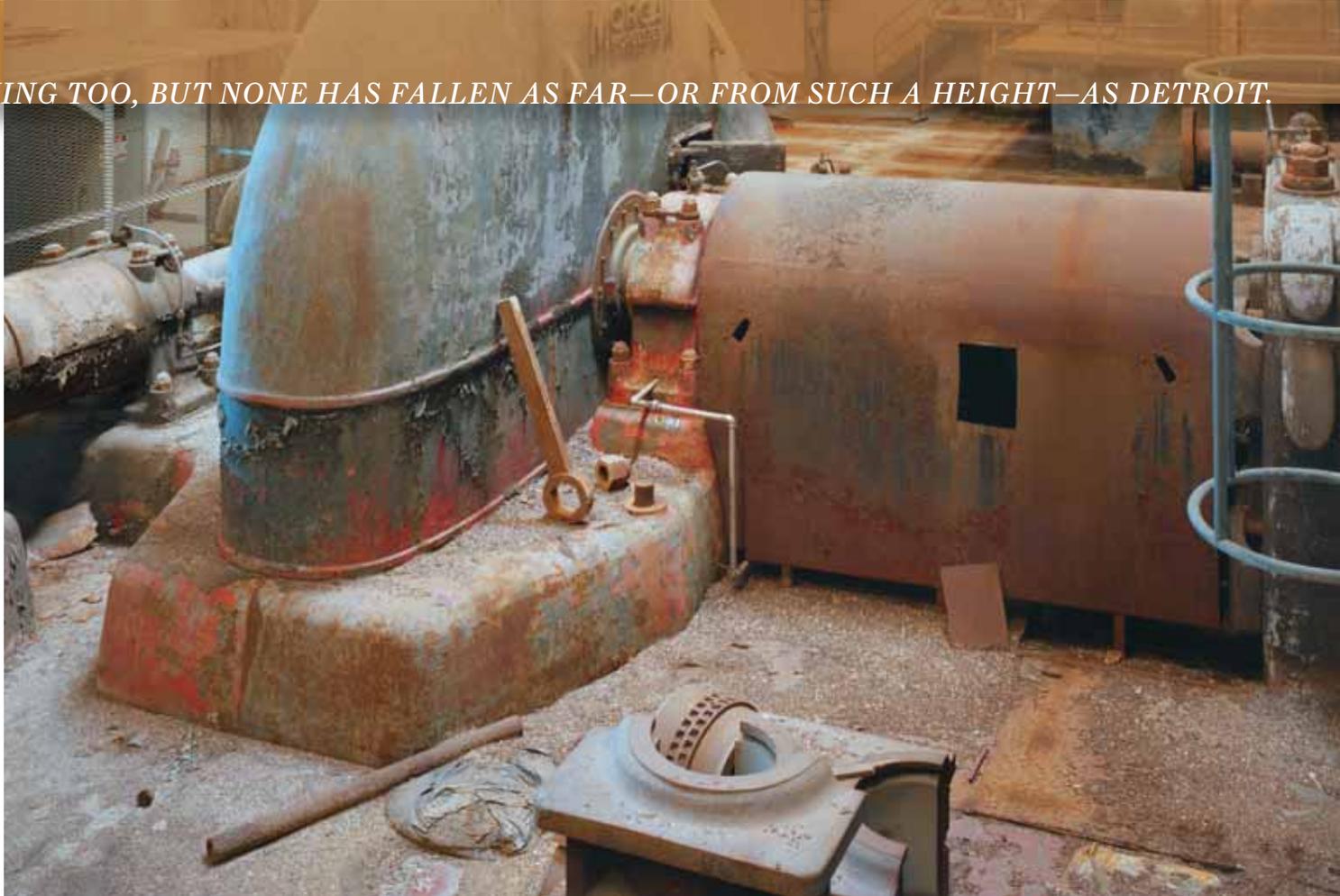
What the shrinking city phenomenon means for Detroit's rich architectural heritage is something different altogether. The city's Gilded Age mansions, the homes of industrial barons and auto company executives, its simple workers' housing, and its grand public spaces comprise a vast and remarkable historic record of the city. Detroit was once called "the Paris of the West" because of its architecture. Since 2005, a number of its old buildings have been on the National Trust for Historic Preservation's most endangered list, but it's not just individual structures, it's the entire historic downtown. According to commentary on the web site of Preservation Wayne (an advocacy group active in Wayne county, where Detroit is located), the city is losing one of the few assets that make it attractive, buildings that are "irreplaceable . . . a stock of wealth unique to Detroit that we squander at tremendous peril."

In a city whose needs are so profound, the idea of saving historic buildings would seem like a luxury it simply cannot afford, if not a case of misplaced priorities. "The fundamental problem is poverty," says Robin Boyle, chair of the urban planning department at Wayne State University. "Poverty in a city that is extremely large for the remaining population and their businesses. It can't afford to provide services to cover 140 square miles."

Detroit's strategic location on a waterway connecting Lakes Erie and Huron dictated its future as a transportation hub, center of commerce, and, later, an industrial giant. Throughout the 19th century it grew as shipping, shipbuilding, and manufacturing transformed the city. Detroit had a major carriage-building industry, which, with the advent of the internal combustion engine, began turning out the first automobiles. Henry Ford's work in a rented shop on Mack Avenue changed history.

While the city is synonymous with the auto industry, it was the setting for other historical events as well. Detroit's proximity to the Canadian border made it a critical place in the chain of clandestine sites known as the Underground Railroad. This was the last stop for many formerly enslaved people who continued on to Canada and freedom. A large African American population established itself and would shape the city's culture. Industry-heavy Detroit was the scene of some of the defining moments in the history of American labor. Through two world wars, the city served as one of the most prolific sources of matériel. Detroit's contribution to America's effort in World War II was so important, President Roosevelt named it "the arsenal of democracy."

**PREVIOUS PAGES:** Ford plant in Dearborn; oil tank at the once-bustling Ford River Rouge facility. **ABOVE:** Clock at Cass Technical High School in Detroit. **RIGHT:** Silent equipment at River Rouge.



*EMPTYING TOO, BUT NONE HAS FALLEN AS FAR—OR FROM SUCH A HEIGHT—AS DETROIT.*



*“ONCE DETROIT’S BUILDING STOCK IS LOST, IT WILL BE NEARLY*





**THE WAR BROUGHT RAPID CHANGE. A RELATIVELY SMALL CITY WAS TRANSFORMED AS** billions of dollars in defense contracts and hundreds of thousands of migrant workers from the South flowed in. Suddenly, Detroit was overcrowded and tense. Federally built worker housing was pushed to its limits. What's more, the city was segregated. The situation touched off riots and generated an enduring atmosphere of distrust and resentment.

In postwar America, Detroit, like other cities, was looking to the future. President Eisenhower's interstate highway system was seen as a great modernizing force. The auto industry put its lobbying weight behind the system since it encouraged car ownership. In Detroit, the highway gave

*IMPOSSIBLE TO CREATE A LIVELY AND EXCITING DOWNTOWN.* —PRESERVATION WAYNE



birth to suburbs and white flight. Between 1950 and 1980, about a million people left. Plummeting property values fostered the exodus. The automobile, which put Detroit on the map, also precipitated its decline. Says Karen Nagher of Preservation Wayne, "When you focus your whole economy on one industry, it's dangerous. People were warning Detroit about this in the '50s and '60s." Indeed, a 1961 *Time* article said the city's decline was already underway: "Auto production soared to an all-time peak in 1955—but there were already worrisome signs. In the face of growing foreign and domestic competition, auto companies merged, or quit, or moved out of town to get closer to markets. Automation began replacing workers in the plants that remained." Writes Don Keko of examiner.com, "People left Detroit for greener pastures and took their money with them."

Detroit's experience—while extreme—is similar to that of other former industrial cities. Reviewing a book on the subject—*Beyond the Ruins: The Meanings of Deindustrialization*—historian Thomas Lassman writes, "By the 1970s, the American economy was in the midst of a wrenching transformation that eviscerated once-venerable manufacturing industries on a scale not seen since the Great Depression." Layoffs and closings crippled cities like Pittsburgh, Buffalo, Cleveland, and Baltimore. The economy had gone global, where "more nimble" foreign companies could thrive.

As Detroit turned out the stars of the auto industry's golden age, the city saw the emergence of Motown Records. In the 1960s, Detroit became the unlikely capital of independent music. Motown became a force in American culture even as Detroit added social strife to its ills. The city proper was predominantly black, with most whites in the suburbs. While inner city schools enrolled more underprivileged children, the tax base continued to erode. Positive things were happening—education and police reform, federally funded improvements, revitalization plans, a prosperous African American middle class, and blacks in leadership positions. The *New York Times* said that Detroit had more going for it than most northern cities.

**LEFT:** *Detroit's Michigan Central Station, built in 1913.*

## AT ITS MOST PROSPEROUS, IN 1955, THERE WERE ALM

**BUT IN 1967, ONE OF THE WORST RIOTS IN AMERICAN HISTORY BROKE OUT. A POLICE** raid on an after-hours club touched off five days of violence. Authorities called in the National Guard and the Army. When it was over, there were 43 people dead and more than 2,000 buildings destroyed. The riot is often called a turning point in Detroit's history and the root of many of its problems today, though the claim is debated.

Court-ordered busing encouraged white flight further still, while the gasoline crises of the 1970s were a blow to an auto industry that was already on the ropes. Small, fuel-efficient foreign models were suddenly the rage. Foreign car companies got a purchase on the American market, and would command more of it as the decades wore on. In the 1980s, the city began knocking down abandoned structures because they attracted drug dealers. The result was entire sections that looked like what one writer described as "an urban prairie."

Most recently, the foreclosure crisis and the recession delivered another blow, inciting more departures. Yet, there is no shortage of ideas on how to stabilize the city. Community groups, nonprofits, and trade organizations have all come up with strategies. They all involve re-thinking the space and how people occupy it. Some advocate triage for the traditionally stable neighborhoods to act as anchors for growth. One suggestion is to go for rural appeal. With so much space reclaimed by nature, why not have urban homesteading where residents live in a country-like setting and pay lower taxes in exchange for going without some utilities? John Hantz, a Detroit businessman, plans to invest millions in urban agriculture. This would be a large-scale, for-profit enterprise, intended to take advantage of the empty space and the trend to locally grown food. The plans are grand and include raised multi-level terraces and entire blocks of corn. The American Institute of Architects says the city is a good candidate for it. While the plan has its critics, the Garden Resource Program, a cooperative working with Michigan State University, has been supporting almost 900 urban gardens and farms.

In the wake of downtown buildings being named to the National Trust's most-endangered list, a number of preservation groups formed a coalition. Their plan is to ensure preservation's place in the city's future, bringing the message to developers, businesses, communities, and local politicians. In 2008, the 84-year-old Book-Cadillac hotel was re-

stored thanks to \$8 million from developer John J. Ferchill combined with funds from almost two dozen other sources. Today, the downtown landmark houses condos, a hotel, restaurants, and a spa. Though by no means a trend, preservationists would like to see more of this. "We've lost a lot," says Nagher. She runs down a list of landmarks: the Statler, the Madison-Lennox, Tiger Stadium. No one seems to be under the illusion that historic preservation will turn things around, but some believe the leaders don't realize the role preservation can play. According

to Preservation Wayne's blog—called *Speramus Meliora*, Latin for "We hope for better things"—"Once Detroit's building stock is lost, it will be nearly impossible to create a lively and exciting downtown." The city's historic structures are a sustainable resource in a world in need of sustainability.

Cities such as Buffalo and Pittsburgh have managed not only to survive, but to keep their historic cores thriving. Pittsburgh has diversified, embracing the health care industry, research, and technology; Buffalo has marketed its waterfront, Olmsted-designed parks, and its many historic neighborhoods.

But Detroit is a huge metropolis designed for three times the number of people who live there. As Boyle points out, it all comes down to economics. "Detroit is a poor city because people with income have moved away." The preservation groups know that basic needs must be met. Tied to the preservation message are the ideas of attracting investment and jobs, intelligent urban planning, effective transit, sensible tax policies, and sustainable de-

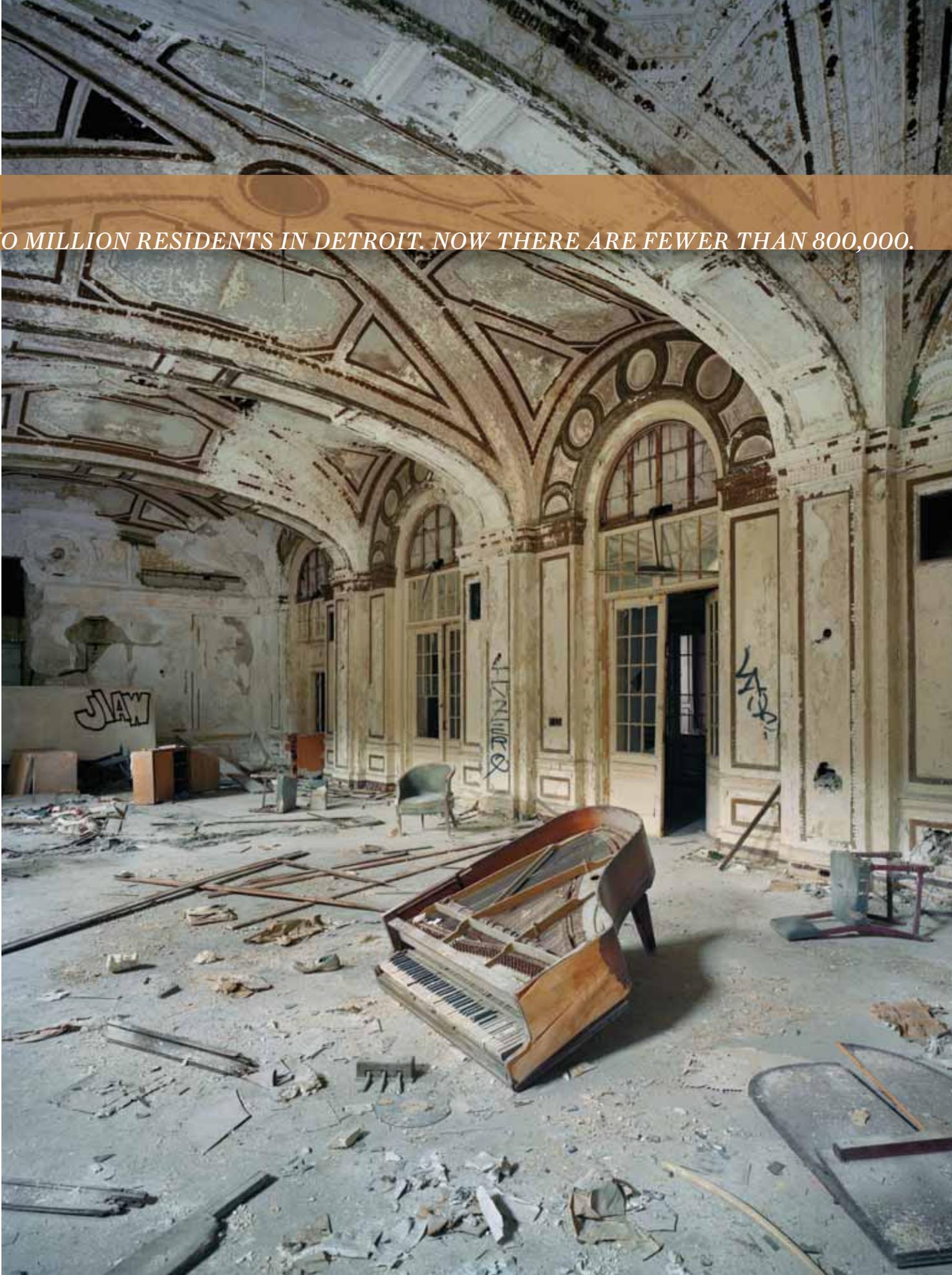
velopment. In the meantime, the depressed economy works to preserve the city's historic fabric. "From a preservation standpoint, the city may be blessed to have been on its heels for so long," says an article in *The Next American City*. Little investment equates to fewer teardowns.

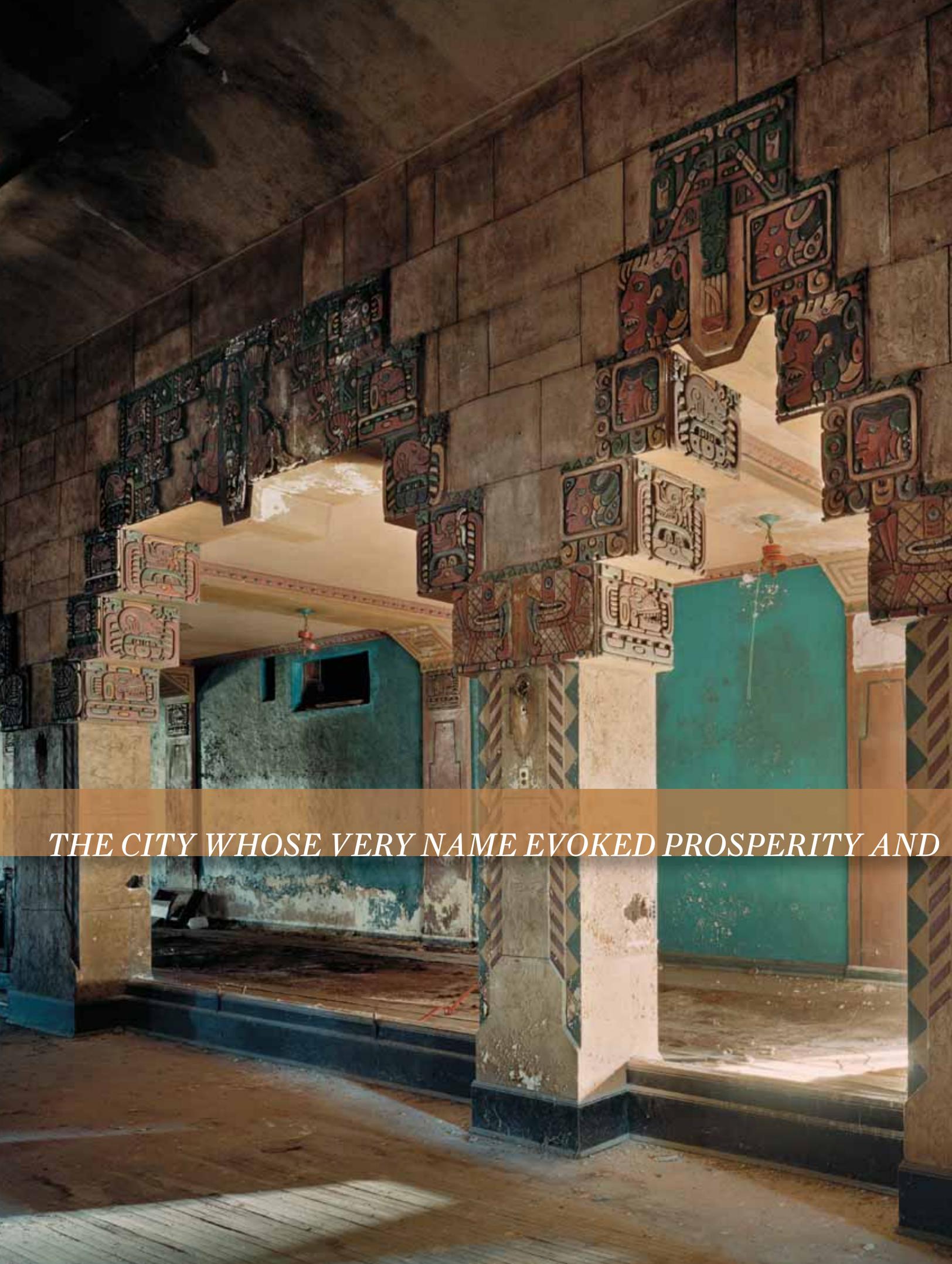
Buildings bought in the hopes of a rebound sit vacant—a familiar story in a city that has undergone several unsuccessful attempts at revitalization. Just because there are no plans to demolish them does not mean they are out of danger. If not secured properly—and many of them are not—they fall prey to vandalism, fire, and weather. As Nagher says, "Water always wins." She recounts the story of the 1923 Lafayette Building in downtown. Empty for a decade, the building was in limbo. There was a movement to have it designated a local historic landmark, but the city government was on the fence. The Lafayette wasn't properly se-



**ABOVE:** Tiger Stadium, built 1912, listed in the *National Register of Historic Places*, demolished 1999. **RIGHT:** The Lee Plaza Hotel.

*MOST TWO MILLION RESIDENTS IN DETROIT. NOW THERE ARE FEWER THAN 800,000.*





*THE CITY WHOSE VERY NAME EVOKED PROSPERITY AND*



cured and a large water tank on the roof rusted through to drain its contents throughout the building. It wasn't the coup de grace for the Lafayette, but it nudged the building closer to its demise. The city spent \$1.4 million to demolish it in 2009.

Unsecured buildings attract vandals and thieves who pilfer copper and other valuable items. They also attract "urban explorers" who enter abandoned buildings and post photographs of their exploits on the internet. The activity is known as "urban spelunking" and "building hacking." The empty buildings of Detroit have become a hot destination for explorers from around the world. "Pictures," says Nagher, "aren't the only thing they take."

Preservation advocates are looking at ways to convince developers and property owners that money spent mothballing is actually an investment in the future, when these structures could be the showpieces of a revitalized city. Preservation Wayne has compiled an historic building inventory and conducts guided walking tours of Detroit's historic districts. Michigan recently established a historic preservation tax credit program—similar to that administered by the National Park Service—that offers financial incentives to developers who agree to restore old buildings. Working with the city's historic district commission and its historic designation advisory board, advocates have tried to introduce preservation into the wider dialogue of addressing the city's problems. While the issue has gained a higher profile over the past 20 years, preservation seems an unlikely prospect in a place that the documentary *Requiem for Detroit* describes as the victim of "a slow-motion Katrina." But there is idealism in the act of preserving an old building, and if nothing else, advocates for Detroit's heritage have shown a tenacious idealism. It serves as instruction for other cities that are trying to remake themselves in postindustrial America.

## INDUSTRIAL MIGHT NOW LOOKS LIKE A RUIN LEFT BY ANOTHER CIVILIZATION.

**contact points** **web** Detroit Historic Designation Advisory Board [www.detroitmi.gov/CityCouncil/LegislativeAgencies/HistoricDesignationAdvisoryBoard/tabid/2531/Default.aspx](http://www.detroitmi.gov/CityCouncil/LegislativeAgencies/HistoricDesignationAdvisoryBoard/tabid/2531/Default.aspx)  
Preservation Wayne [www.preservationwayne.org/](http://www.preservationwayne.org/) Our Shared National Heritage  
Travel Itinerary [www.nps.gov/nr/travel/detroit/](http://www.nps.gov/nr/travel/detroit/).

**LEFT:** The Vanity Ballroom, built just after the stock market crash of 1929.

# ARTI FACT

## Caddo Capital



**WHEN THE LAND AROUND ONE OF THE MOST IMPORTANT** archeological sites in Texas went on the market in 2003, the Caddo immediately took action. Their heritage is literally in the soil of Hatchel Mound, located in an area that was once like “a capital,” says Robert Cast, the tribe’s preservation officer. Working with property owners, the tribe established a preservation covenant to ensure the mound’s safety and, thanks to an investigation funded with a \$50,000 grant from the National Park Service Tribal Preservation Program, learned new insights. **ALTHOUGH THE TRIBE TODAY RESIDES IN THE SOONER STATE,** centuries ago its people roamed the still unclaimed lands of Texas, Louisiana, and Arkansas. The bend of the Red River in Texas was home to the bustling clan of Upper Nasoni Caddo. An affable group, in the 16th and 17th centuries they began welcoming the French and Spanish explorers into their villages—a sprawling network of huts and mounds surrounded by game-filled woods and fertile prairies—and exchanging valuable goods such as beads, guns, and animal hides. For their generosity they paid the ultimate price: death from foreign diseases. **BY THE EARLY 1800S, THE VILLAGES WERE EMPTY WITH ONLY** a few European accounts to verify their existence. Some clues remained, however, the largest being the mound, built as a place for religious ceremonies and significant for its association with “important moments in the Caddo’s native history, as well as the history of the first European exploration and colonization of Texas in the late 17th century,” says Timothy K. Perttula, who conducted the investigation of the five villages once surrounding it. **UNEARTHED ARTIFACTS SUCH AS CERAMIC SHERDS, STONE TOOLS,** and cooking jars told of the “diverse social and ritual activities” found within the villages, and OCR dating proved the Caddo had been on the land since A.D. 1200, much earlier than previously thought. “This just went to emphasize how important the site was to Caddo peoples,” Perttula says.

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