Downtown Dallas is a bustling place these days. Main Street has been recently (and very attractively) redeveloped. The Deep Ellum entertainment district had fallen on hard times in recent years, but is now in the process of being redeveloped by a single developer. Numerous buildings are being converted into lofts and condos in a variety of styles and price ranges. The list goes on. As does redevelopment, until you reach downtown’s east end, where the old Statler Hilton hotel, shuttered since 2003, looms over a perplexing cityscape.

The casual visitor might not see the question mark. Instead, a very promising development appears to be unfolding. Main Street Garden, a 1.75-acre urban park, is under development. Surrounded as it is by vintage buildings (most of them in search of new tenants), the park looks like the ideal urban green space, capable of knitting together the surrounding buildings into a lively and harmonious whole. The Mercantile National Bank Building, a substantial modernistic edifice, is being converted into housing with ground floor retail. The University of North Texas wants to convert the old Dallas City Hall (now the Municipal Building) and its adjacent annex into its law school.

“You can just picture the students out reading on the grass,” sighs Katherine Seale, executive director of Preservation Dallas.

Seale sounds wistful, as well as frustrated, because she sees the area’s hidden flaw, which involves the Statler Hilton. Because of the building’s historic significance for Dallas, and because it could be converted into hundreds of apartments, the former hotel could become the centerpiece for the east end of downtown.

But instead, the building faces the distinct possibility of demolition. In fact, the National Trust for Historic Preservation placed the Statler Hilton on its 2008 list of the most endangered historic places in the country.

All this because there’s no place to park.

A hotel brochure from 1972 touts the Stetson’s “great drinks and tray-carrying dolls in hotpants.”
and it wanted to celebrate by erecting a distinctive building. Prominent hotel architect William Tabler of New York designed a Y-shaped building with a flat-slab structural system, which limited the number of columns the building required, allowing for grand, uninterrupted interiors. The Statler Hilton was the first U.S. hotel to be faced with glass, porcelain enamel, and aluminum curtain wall.

Not unlike the unlucky Shamrock Hotel in Houston, the Statler Hilton was a social center for Dallas. Celebrities such as Gene Autry and Hedda Hopper attended its week-long opening festivities. Scale says that the hotel is iconic for Dallas, as it is both part of the skyline, and a marker from the post-war era, when “Dallas came of age.”

Finally, the hotel is one of most important Modernist buildings in Dallas. But that designation may be more curse than blessing. Twentieth-century Modernism is a period that is struggling to be recognized as architecturally significant in Dallas, Houston, and almost everywhere else. More and more people recognize the period of the mid-20th-century as beautiful and worth saving, but the consensus is tentative.

It is not stretching the matter to say that organizations such as Preservation Dallas began in an attempt to defend older styles against Modernism.

Eventually, the Statler Hilton, along with the rest of downtown Dallas, suffered the effects of suburbanization. The hotel struggled to make it to the new century as a functioning hotel. It closed in 2001, briefly reopened and then closed for good—as a hotel—in 2003. In the meantime, the Hilton chain sold its former icon to the Far East Consortium, an international real estate development corporation that, as its name indicates, is mostly active in Asian development.

Former Dallas mayor Laura Miller wanted to demolish the hotel, which she termed “ugly,” in 2003, when she began advocating for the urban park, which is now Main Street Gardens. Miller wanted the park to include the hotel grounds.

But at this point, Preservation Dallas showed its clout using Dallas zoning and design ordinances, which Houston’s preservation groups can only envy. The group’s lobbying shrank the park and spared the hotel—for the time being.

Scale looks back on this outcome with satisfaction. Because of its historic associations for the city, and its contribution to the skyline, the Statler Hilton is the “number one priority” of Preservation Dallas. But the group cannot dictate what happens with a building after they have preserved it. And because the land the Statler Hilton stands on is rising in value (or at least was before the current economic downturn), the city is under pressure.

Mayor Tom Leppert held a press conference to discuss the status of a number of vacant downtown buildings. Leppert took the aggressive step of sending out “Chapter 54” letters to several owners, essentially telling them they needed to either sell or redevelop their buildings, or begin paying stiff fines for code violations.

He was specifically pessimistic about the Statler Hilton. “He told me it may not be savable,” says Scale. “He says there are pigeons roosting inside the building.”

Scale does not assign much weight to this observation. “It’s not unusual to find pigeons inside abandoned buildings,” she says. “It doesn’t mean it can’t be saved.”

She acknowledges that the Statler Hilton has challenges beyond shooing away the birds. The hotel has environmental issues, chiefly concerning asbestos abatement. The rooms are small, and the ceilings low, by current standards. And Far East Consortium is asking for a lot of money—$20 million. That is a challenging number because of the single biggest challenge facing the building’s survival—a potentially fatal lack of parking.

The hotel’s parking garage was demolished to make way for Main Street Gardens. The building’s advocates hoped that the new park would include underground parking, as does Houston’s Discovery Green. But the city’s contract with Forest City, the developers of the adjacent Mercantile Building, forced them to begin park construction in October, before a plan for putting in underground parking could be finalized. The contract does call for the park to be designed so that its western end could later be converted to underground parking. But, as Scale says, it is not likely that the city will ante up for a multi-million dollar park, and then shortly thereafter demolish that same park to put in parking.

The Statler Hilton looks to be behind the eight ball, but Scale does not despair. The city can offer “very strong” tax incentives that make redevelopment feasible, and indeed a number of prospective buyers have considered making an offer. (Scale recently told Cite that “a contract may be in play.”)

In any event, Preservation Dallas will not wring its hands while the old hotel is demolished. Scale says that, depending on the details of any possible redevelopment plan, the organization is prepared to push to designate the Statler Hilton as a landmark, and therefore protected building, even over owner objections. That protection would save the former hotel from demolition for two years, at which point the designation could be renewed. This protection, in combination with tax incentives, is obviously a very powerful city-building tool—one that Houston preservationists simply do not have in their meager toolbox.

Resurrection or Demolition?

Downtown Hotels in Houston and San Antonio

Finding new life for shuttered hotels built in the 1950s and later is not easy, according to Bob Eury, President of Central Houston. “If the hotel is old enough, then the funky parts are part of the charm,” he says. But for Modernist buildings such as downtown Houston’s Holiday Inn and Sheraton-Lincoln, the low ceilings and small rooms (by today’s standards) are seen as merely unacceptable. And their floor plans do not lend themselves to conversion. “It’s not economical to join two rooms. Maybe you can make three rooms into two.”

But the need for more downtown hotel rooms is so pressing that last fall, the Houston City Council and Mayor White passed an ordinance offering “very meaningful” (in Eury’s words) tax rebates to hoteliers who either put up new construction or bring an old hotel back to life.

Eury says that developers are currently trying to redevelop the Sheraton-Lincoln as “100 percent hotel,” while it is unclear what the new owners of the Holiday Inn plan for their structure.

Among major Texas cities, San Antonio probably has the easiest time of keeping old hotels functioning as hotels. The recent (and ongoing) redevelopment of El Tropicano Hotel Riverwalk serves as an example.

Unlike in Houston and Dallas, tourism is so strong in downtown San Antonio that “There’s no problem attracting hoteliers,” according to Bruce MacDougal, executive director of the San Antonio Conservation Society. The Tropicano’s developers took a novel and financially prudent approach to their work. According to MacDougal, instead of closing and gutting the hotel, which had been “limping along” under its previous management, they redeveloped it incrementally without ever completely closing it. They have also been clever about publicizing each phase of the re-do, as when they debuted the restoration of the hotel’s trademark 60-foot-tall mural.

Aesthetically and commercially, El Tropicano stands as an example of intelligent redevelopment.