SO LONG
URBAN COWBOY

The Spring Branch Stables

JUST A FEW MILES NORTH OF I-10, NESTLED IN THE heart of Spring Branch, 48 acres of undeveloped land were, until recently, home to 70 horses and a close-knit community of horse lovers. Unlike typical equestrian facilities, the Spring Branch Stables (SBS) housed an eclectic collection of tenant-built structures. A long dusty path cut through the center of the stable area, like an image of old Texas, with mismatched wooden fences demarcating the individual stables. Each stable evidenced its hand-built origins and revealed the character of its tenant.

A molded iron sign hung from a wooden beam proudly declared one place “Jenny’s Barn,” while a young goat peeked through a lonely section of chain-link fence tied onto the wooden gate of the structure. Some of the units were wrapped with corrugated metal, others with weathered plywood. Gaping holes were patched over with materials at hand. One tenant set up an improvised iced house next to his stable. Another tenant proudly hung a “Cowgirl’s Place” sign on a clapboard shed. Above the sign someone had nailed a horseshoe to catch some luck.

At the end of the path was Steven Long’s stable. He and his wife found SBS eight years ago. Long edits Horseback Magazine. That day he wore a plaid shirt with worn leather suspenders holding up his work jeans. As he talked about his years at SBS and the community of “plain folks who love to ride horses,” he began to tear up.

The tenants believe the land was first used for stables in 1933 and land ownership is verified from 1952 when Ben Fry officially opened the Spring Branch Stables. The last stable manager, Fry’s son Henry, received notice from landowner Kempsprings Investments earlier this year telling him to have his tenants move their horses and tear down their stall, and Spring Branch Stables followed the path of many other urban stables around the country. The collapse of the financial system and housing market appears to have put all plans on hold leaving the 48 acres to wildflowers and bees. Frank Liu, a developer associated with Lovett Homes and listed as a contact, communicated by email that no specific plans are ready to be discussed. Only memories of the community and the distinct culture that thrived at the site for decades remain.

Houston is often criticized for ignoring its cultural history in favor of new development. The Spring Branch Stables held that elusive architectural sense of place with its palimpsest of structures modified and adapted over 50 years of use. Russell Howard, president of Houston Mod, estimates that the city is losing about one post-war building a week.

“We’ve seen adaptive re-use of downtown buildings, but it’s the minor architecture which is being lost at a rapid rate,” Long said.

Long’s bid for the historic registry was not successful. Tenants moved their horses and tore down their stalls, and Spring Branch Stables followed the path of many other urban stables around the country. The collapse of the financial system and housing market appears to have put all plans on hold leaving the 48 acres to wildflowers and bees. Frank Liu, a developer associated with Lovett Homes and listed as a contact, communicated by email that no specific plans are ready to be discussed. Only memories of the community and the distinct culture that thrived at the site for decades remain.

Though the city hosts the largest livestock show and rodeo in the world, it is allowing remnants of its own cultural legacy to disappear. Steven Long lamented: “it’s abysmal, it’s tragic, it’s obscene, it’s outrageous, and most importantly, it’s stupid.”

—Allison Parrott