

In the five years since Rockets star Hakeem Olajuwon purchased the opulent 1928 Houston National Bank Building and announced plans to transform it into an Islamic education facility, downtown watchers have been wondering what would become of the showpiece structure. As elements of the 202 Main Street property were removed, rained on, stolen, and, in some instances, even sold to local antique dealers, preservationists became alarmed. Since last spring, renovation has appeared to be at a standstill, and more recently, rumors have circulated that perhaps the mosque project had been moved to another part of the city, and even that Olajuwon was considering selling the historic building.

The rumors have spread in part because plans for the National Bank Building, which is officially owned by the Hakeem Olajuwon Islamic Da'wah Institute, have been purposefully kept under wraps out of what representatives of the institute say is fear of anti-Muslim sentiments.

Unfortunately, by keeping quiet, the institute has further inflamed the apprehensions of preservationists. In November, though, the silence was at least partially broken when the project's architect and engineer, Anon Quaddumi of Interfield Engineering Company, said that buildout of the National Bank Building had been scheduled to begin before the end of 1999 and would be completed by the end of 2000 — opening to the public for the first time in 25 years one of the city's most important buildings.

Still, officials at the Downtown Historic District, the principal watchdog group shepherding downtown preservation issues, remain skeptical that the project is actually underway, and that all will be done with a careful eye to preservation. "Honestly, I've heard everything," says DHD executive director Jim Maxwell. "I've learned very quickly that unless you actually see someone moving in, you never know what's really going to happen."

A large part of the problem has apparently been a lack of communication. The DHD claims they've had trouble reaching the Da'wah Institute; they say they've even gone so far as to have one of Olajuwon's bodyguards deliver a letter of appeal to the basketball player during a game. But the problems that have surrounded the National Bank Building also reflect the conflicts that can arise when-

ever a historic structure is renovated for a use different from its original one. Preservationists, looking to history, may push for minimal changes, while the new owners, looking to current concerns, may want more extensive alterations.

To allay concerns, Quaddumi and the Da'wah Institute offer assurances that all will be carefully tended when the doors of the National Bank Building open again at year's end. And if completed as described, the Islamic facility could make a significant contribution to the richness of downtown's cultural landscape. While many traditional mosques are closed to non-believers, the Da'wah Institute plans to make the National Bank Building into a multi-purpose Islamic educational facility open to all.

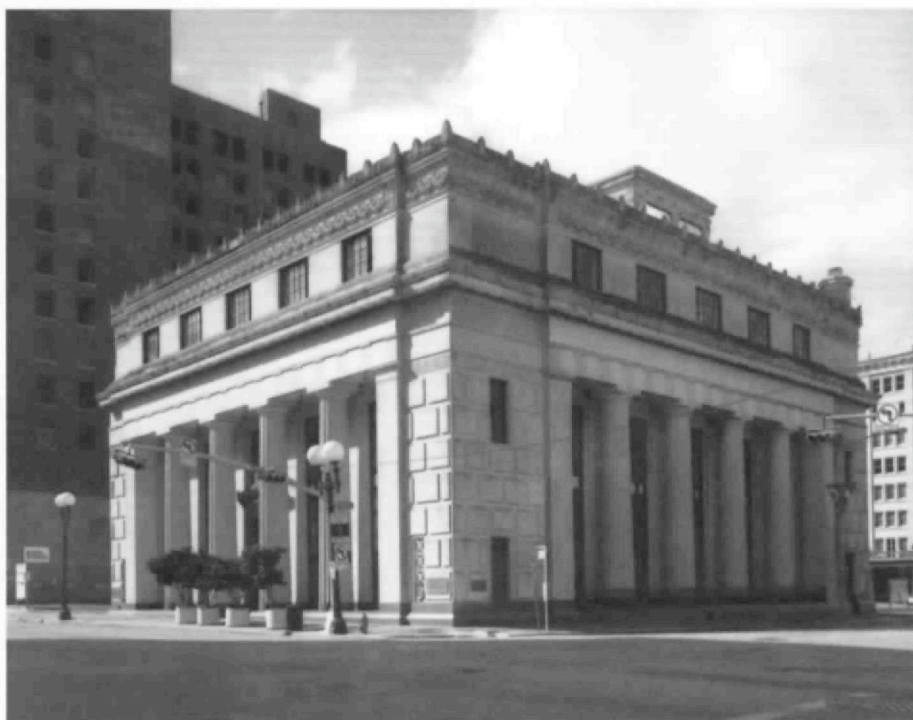
"It is a very sensitive project, and we have potential enemies," Quaddumi says. "Islam doesn't have the best image in the West — there are a lot of stereotypes. That is what this building is going to try to alleviate, try to remove some of those stereotypes.... It addresses the multicultural fabric of the city, representing a primarily immigrant group that up until now has not been that involved in civic affairs or viewed as an integral part of the society.... It will be as much an educational facility for non-Muslims as for Muslims."

"We're trying to build bridges between us and other religions," adds Fayeze Ghwari, general secretary of the Da'wah Institute. "We want to open up to other communities and build cooperation."

Although the facility will include two separate mosques, one for men and one for women, they will make up only part of the building's overall structure. According to Quaddumi, the bank's spectacular, 6,000-foot domed lobby will be kept largely intact, and its space given to the public for prayer or quiet contemplation. The main entrance will be moved to the rear of the building and face onto a Travis Street parking lot that is part of the property. "It will be very open to the public," Quaddumi says. "I would say that similar to Saint Patrick's Cathedral in New York, it will be a quiet area in the middle of the city."

The building Olajuwon and his organization plan to offer as a temple to Allah began its life as a temple to money. The Houston National Bank Building was built in 1928 by Humble Oil co-founder Ross

THE MOSQUE ON MAIN



From a temple of commerce to a temple, plain and simple: The Houston National Bank Building at 202 Main.

AS THE HOUSTON NATIONAL BANK BUILDING IS PREPARED FOR A SPIRITUAL LIFE, PRESERVATIONISTS WORRY IT MIGHT LOSE ITS SOUL.

BY ANN WALTON SIEBER



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To make the bank's ornate interior suitable for a mosque, all representational images had to be removed or covered.

Sterling. Designed by Sterling's son-in-law Wyatt C. Hedrig, and Hedrig's Houston partner R.D. Gottlieb, to be a showplace of 1920s high-flung wealth, the bank has a massive exterior that sports limestone, black granite, and a perimeter of huge, five-foot-wide fluted Doric columns. Inside, a large, silver Texas star surrounded by intricate gold leaf designs presides over a huge, 56-foot-high domed hall lined with royal purple marble imported from Europe. Located near the foot of Main Street, the Houston National Bank Building was built in what was then the heart of Houston's financial district. It was to be the last great bank building in Houston for decades to come, thanks to the stock market crash the following year.

The Houston National Bank remained

at its Main Street location until 1964, when its operations were moved into the Tenneco Building. Six years later, Franklin Bank took over the property and occupied it until 1975, when Franklin was shut down by the FDIC. Developer Harvin Moore bought the building in 1978, but could not come up with a successful use for it. Since it is basically a huge lobby, the building cannot easily be carved up into offices or apartments, which limited its redevelopment options. In 1988, the Houston Pops floated a plan to turn the building into a theater, keeping the grand hall as a lobby and building an addition with a stage and seating in the parking lot out back. But financing was never secured, and in 1991 Dick Knight bought the property. His

City Partnership group tried to find a suitable restoration project, but also had no success. The space was used as a set for a few movies, *I Come in Peace* (1990) and *The Trust* (1992) among them, and some organizations used its grand backdrop for their galas. But basically, the building languished.

So when Olajuwon announced in April 1994 that he was going to buy the property, preservationists were jubilant. They were happy that the National Bank Building was to be purchased by what appeared to be an appreciative patron with enough money to do it justice. Olajuwon, reportedly overwhelmed by the bank's interior, was quoted as saying, "That building is like a museum... I will buy this for God." "Rescued from Ruin," announced a *Houston Chronicle* headline, while another story proclaimed, "Downtown revitalization got a slam dunk!"

But the first hint of trouble came only a few months later, when the new owners removed the 15 round bronze medallions that lined the bank's exterior frieze. The bronze disks portrayed scenes of Greek gods and heroes; the Da'wah Institute said they conflicted with Islam's religious strictures, which forbid animate figures representational of humans or animals on or within a religious building.

Because the Houston National Bank Building is part of the city-designated Main Street/Market Square Historic District, changes to its exterior are not supposed to be made without the approval of the Houston Archeological and Historical Commission or the Texas Historical Commission. A member of the commission says they've been told that the removed medallions are being stored in a warehouse, but that as of late last year commission representatives and representatives of the Da'wah Institute had not been able to coordinate a visit to see them. According to the institute, five of the medallions are gone, stolen from the building. In addition,

the lighting sconces that were on the columns in the lobby have been stolen.

There have been other concerns as well. Preservationists have been alarmed by the removal of certain items from the building during renovation. When the basement was gutted, a hand-carved white marble staircase was taken away to clear space for classrooms. As of late last year, the stairway was for sale at Pasternak's Emporium on Morse, as was the bank's revolving brass door. Such discoveries do little to calm preservationists. "Parts of that building are in every chop shop in Houston," laments Courtney Key, associate director of the DHD.

Key and others have also expressed concern about broken windows in the building that allow rain and humidity to pour in. Key has been particularly worried about the murals that surround the lobby's interior dome; one has already fallen, and another has been threatening to follow suit.

Whether the planned increase in construction activity at the Houston National Bank Building will alleviate or deepen these concerns remains to be seen. Now that the buildout has been announced, preservationists wonder what will be done with the representational figures that are inside the bank building. For his part, Quaddumi says that all taboo figures will be covered up in such a way that they can later be restored, should the bank building at some point no longer be an Islamic institution. "It will stay totally intact," he says of the bank's interior. "Very little will be changed."

If that's the case, then some prayers will have been answered. "This is probably one of the most important buildings in the state of Texas, both historically and architecturally," says DHD board member Minnette Boesel. "When you buy something like that, you are the owner, but it's an artwork, and you're a public custodian of it." ■

More Good Bricks

In 1979, when the Greater Houston Preservation Alliance came up with the idea for the Good Brick Awards, it was working with a simple premise — if you pat people on the back a bit for rescuing buildings rather than tearing them down, then perhaps more of Houston's architectural heritage would be saved.

At the time, combining the words "Houston" and "Preservation" seemed something of a stretch. But today, while it's still not uncommon for a valuable piece of history to fall to the wrecking ball, the idea that rehabilitating buildings is generally better than razing them has gained a foothold in the city. Renovation has become the mantra of downtown's rebirth, and as a result, the judges for the 1999 Good Brick Awards,

which were awarded November 29 at a ceremony in the Brown Auditorium of the Museum of Fine Arts, Houston, had an unusually large selection of projects to choose from. They included everything from the redesign of a pair of shotgun houses in the Fifth Ward, to the restoration of 912 Prairie Avenue, to the repaving of the 1500 block of Michigan Street with historically accurate brick pavers.

The Good Brick Awards are presented annually in recognition of leadership and excellence in historic preservation, including project planning, publications, renovation, restoration, and adaptive reuse for commercial and residential structures, historic monuments, parks, and landscapes. For 1999 there were ten winners, among them the Prairie Group, L.L.C., for the façade restoration of 912

Prairie; Pentasafe, Inc., for its corporate commitment to preservation in the restoration and adaptive reuse of 530 Lovett Boulevard; Tripoli Development Ltd. and the Mirador Group for the facade restoration of 306 Main Street (the Guaranty National Bank Building); Kyle D. Smith for the restoration of the 1915 Italianate-style Macatee House at 1220 Southmore Avenue in the Binz subdivision; the Houston Area Urban League, Inc., for its commitment to the 1921 Federal Reserve Bank at 1301 Texas Avenue; Ostlind Thomas, Inc., for building compatible new housing in a bungalow and cottage neighborhood at 448, 452, and 456 West 24th Street in the Heights; and the residents of the 1500 block of Michigan Street for neighborhood preservation of the historic landscape by pressuring a develop-

er to replace the brick pavers removed during infrastructure work.

The President's Award went to John Hannah, who helped start the Endangered Buildings Fund, for his commitment to preservation efforts in the city, while the Stewart Title Award was presented to Brett Zamore for his adaptive reuse of two shotgun houses at 4739 Buck Street, cited as an example of community building and building a cross-cultural partnership in the context of historic preservation. The winner of the Preservation Program Award, given for research, education, and creating a climate for historic preservation, was the Texas Trailblazer Preservation Association, which researches and documents the history of African Americans in Texas. ■