

## Citelines

# Preservation Update: Downtown Houston



**Mrs. Esperson entertains guests for tea in her private roof garden atop the Niels Esperson Building, February 1926.**

There are few things as good for architectural preservation as a real estate bust, but in Houston's case the bust came too late. Fifty years of wild economic growth have almost completely erased a century of downtown Houston's history. Lewis Mumford once wrote that the unrestricted proliferation of parking lots was more damaging to our cities than the bombs that devastated London during the Blitz.<sup>1</sup> In a recent aerial photograph of downtown Houston the truth of this observation becomes painfully graphic. Dozens of blocks of the city grid have been cleared to patiently await the next boom as surface parking lots. The result is almost surreal: gleaming skyscrapers emerge from fields of asphalt and weeds, while at their feet some of the city's most engaging buildings slowly deteriorate. A number of turn-of-the-century commercial structures have managed to survive along the northern edge of downtown, but without any legal mechanism to prevent their destruction their future is uncertain. Buildings as significant as the Rice Hotel (1913) and the Houston National Bank Building (1928) have been vacant and in peril for more than a decade.

Market Square, one of Houston's two original public squares laid out in 1836, has been the beneficiary of considerable efforts spearheaded by the Downtown Houston Association and DiverseWorks, whose heroic plans to transform the square with works of art and a performance space are about to bear fruit. However, a plaza is no more than a void in a city when it lacks the perimeter-defining walls that give it spatial character and the human inhabitants that are the very reason for its existence. Market Square's perimeter buildings have been falling at a disastrous rate since the late 1960s, robbing it not only of historical and spatial identity but also of vitality. On its western and southern edges not a single original building is still left standing. Last year's fire in the W. L. Foley Dry Goods Company Building endangered the square's most important corner and caused the relocation of DiverseWorks away from the neighborhood. And the corner building once occupied by the Stage Door Cafe is about to be demolished.

In 1988 a task force was formed to find ways to revitalize the Main Street/Market Square Historic District. Its efforts resulted in a master plan by Team HOU Architects that addresses the many vacant blocks in the area and a comprehensive marketing and financial strategy pieced together by a group of devoted volunteers.

One piece of good news is the imminent reopening of the Ritz Theater half a block from the southeast corner of Market Square. Completed in 1926 by William Ward Watkin, first director of Rice's

Department of Architecture, its austere classical façade was a sharp contrast to the exuberant fantasies of the great Houston movie palaces of the 1920s, which have, sadly, all disappeared. The building is being rehabilitated by developer Gary Warwick with the help of designer Kirk Eyring and architect Barry Moore as consultant. It will be renamed the Majestic Metro (in order to take advantage of an existing sign) and will initially function as a nightclub and conference center. While the rehabilitation work now nearing completion has been carried out on a very low budget and is sometimes lacking in refinement, the undertaking is admirable, and the increased traffic in the area will be enormously beneficial for neighboring restaurants.

A few blocks to the east, the reconstruction of the Pillot Building has just been completed. Built in 1860 and located diagonally across the street from the county courthouse, the building was destroyed by the neglect and indifference of the county government. The ground-floor cast-iron storefront is all that remains of the original, but the three-story brick exterior has been recreated by Morris Architects. While one may argue that a fake building is preferable to another surface parking lot, the decision to incorporate a "crumbling brick wall" design on its west façade adds insult to injury. It is ironic that the building whose intended demolition prompted the creation of the Greater Houston Preservation Alliance in the seventies has now acquired the quality of an amusement park replica.



**Above: The Pillot Building in 1983. Right: Pillot Building reconstruction, 1990, Morris Architects with Barry Moore, restoration architect. Only the cast-iron architectural elements of the 1860 building remain in place.**

In a time when Disney-style versions of urban settings are proliferating, it is essential for historic districts to retain their integrity, since authenticity is their greatest strength. The many empty sites should be filled with buildings respectful of their place and faithful to their time, not mindlessly imitative of their neighbors.

Across the bayou, the conversion of the Houston Terminal Warehouse and Cold Storage Building (1927) into a county jail is a greater example of the county government's insensitivity toward historic preser-

vation. This is not because of the new "Main Street, Texas" brick skin by Morris Architects, but because a new jail, though indispensable to the county, is the last thing the struggling warehouse-bayou district needs to encourage its development into a city attraction or viable residential and office area. No amount of expensive landscaping could possibly counterbalance the jail's detrimental effect on the future of its neighbors.

Perhaps the most significant current rehabilitation project involves the Niels Esperson Building (John Ebersson, 1927), once the tallest building in Houston, and the adjoining Mellie Esperson Building (John and Drew Ebersson, 1941). Suzanne LaBarthe and William E. Boswell, Jr., of Gensler and Associates/Architects are reconfiguring the ground-floor lobbies and storefronts close to the original plan and redoing the upper-floor corridors in period style. There are no plans yet to reinstate the dramatic double-height main lobby of the Niels Esperson Building, but one hopes the owners will decide to restore this once exuberant entry. A delightful secret of the building is Mrs. Esperson's 13th-floor office, maintained since her death as a virtual time capsule.

Houston desperately needs a legal mechanism to preserve historically significant buildings. Presently there is nothing that can legally prevent an owner from demolishing even a designated historic landmark, and the penalty for demolishing any building without a permit is an insignificant fine. It is imperative that every legal avenue be explored in order to decelerate the destruction of the city's architectural heritage. A significant increase in the penalties for demolishing buildings without a demolition permit, combined with a moratorium on the granting of such permits for historic landmarks, could be a useful interim safeguard until a strong preservation ordinance is enacted.

*Raphael Longoria*

#### Notes

- 1 *The City in History* (New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, 1961), p. 47.



## V. Nia Dorian Becnel

1949-1990

Veronica Nia Dorian Becnel, assistant professor of architecture at the University of Houston, died Saturday, 10 November 1990, at St. Joseph's Hospital after suffering a stroke. She was 41 years old. Nia Becnel was a leader in the preservation movement in Texas. Since 1985 she had directed the preservation studies program at the University of Houston's College of Architecture. She served on the Minority Heritage Task Force of the National Trust for Historic Preservation, the Task Force on Preservation of Historically Black Colleges and Universities of the U.S. Department of the Interior, the City of Houston Archeological and Historical Commission, and the board of directors and advisory board of the Greater Houston Preservation Alliance. Her broad interests were reflected in her memberships on the boards of directors of DiverseWorks Artspace, the Acres Homes Community Development Corporation, and the Rice Design Alliance. At the University of Houston she was a member and former chair of the University Undergraduate Admission Review Committee, president of the Black Leadership Network, and a member of the university's Undergraduate Council. At the time of her death, she was involved in the organization of the Freedmen's Town/Fourth Ward Neighborhood Association.

Nia Becnel was a passionate advocate of preserving the historic heritage of African-Americans. Much of her scholarly research was devoted to tracing continuities between West African ornamental design and building typologies and those of Texas and the southern United States. She was instrumental in numerous efforts to document, preserve, and interpret the African-American cultural heritage of Texas, including the history of slave-built buildings on the Legg-Ervin Plantation near Nacogdoches, and of African-American-built buildings relocated from Liberty County to the plantation and ranch museum at Baylor University. During 1988 and 1989 she supervised the reconstruction of the Reis log cabin on the campus of Kolter Elementary School in Houston. She had in preparation a book on slave-built architecture in Texas, which Texas A&M Press will publish. Mrs. Becnel was a graduate of the University of Houston. As a student, she participated in the organization of SHAPE Community Center.

Nia Becnel's dedication to preservation was activist rather than antiquarian in nature. As Omawali Lithuli observed in a eulogy delivered at her funeral, "Nia Becnel was not a bystander." She bitterly opposed the efforts of the city of Houston and the Housing Authority of the City of Houston to destroy Fourth Ward and Allen Parkway Village, and she organized opposition to these efforts by bringing together concerned members of the Fourth Ward community with students and professionals who shared her recognition of the critical importance this neighborhood holds for Houston. Mrs. Becnel's intense sense of community loyalty grew out of her connections to Acres Homes, the lower-income, semi-rural black community on Little York Road where she grew up. In 1989 she, her husband, Edwin Robert Becnel, and their children, Sheshe Malkia Taylor and Anza Falme Becnel, moved from Third Ward, near the University of Houston, back to Acres Homes. Her funeral, held in the crowded confines of the Boyd Funeral Home, was followed by burial in the Dorian family plot at Paradise Cemetery in Acres Homes.

*Stephen Fox*