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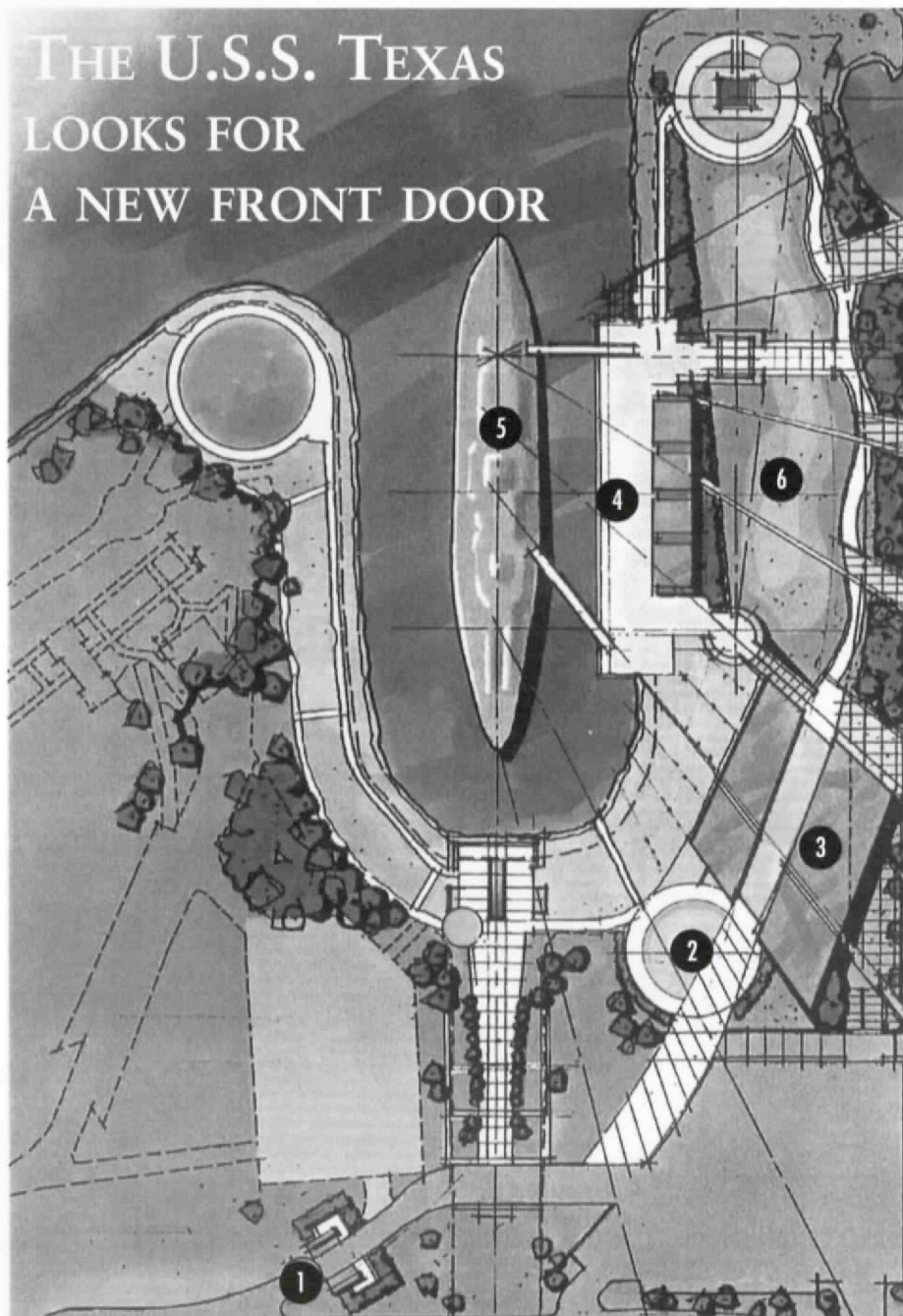


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# A Ship to Remember

## THE U.S.S. TEXAS LOOKS FOR A NEW FRONT DOOR



Site plan of proposed Battleship Texas surroundings, showing the location of: (1) sentry entrance; (2) memorial plaza; (3) interpretive center; (4) 1945-era wharf; (5) U.S.S. Texas; and (6) artifact park.

What does a 20th century battleship have to do with the Texas War of Independence? Historically, nothing. Geographically, a lot, at least in the five decades since the U.S.S. Texas was berthed in a small inlet near the San Jacinto Monument. For generations of Houston schoolchildren, the Battleship Texas has been an integral part of trips to the San Jacinto Battleground, leading some of them to wonder which general had the use of the ship's big guns, Sam Houston or Santa Anna.

As amusing as that conflation of eras may be, it pointed to a long-standing problem: dividing the space at San Jacinto State Park in such a way that

both the truth of the 1836 battle that freed Texas from Mexico, and the truth of a naval vessel that was commissioned in 1914 and fought in two world wars, could both be presented without one trampling on the other. The issue came to a head about a decade ago, when a concerted push began to restore the San Jacinto battlefield to a more natural state, one closer to what it was like in the early 19th century. To do that would require planting knee-high prairie grass where the battle was actually fought, recreating a marsh that blocked the escape of the Mexican army — and planting an oak grove where Sam Houston's soldiers camped the night before the battle.

Courtesy: ACUMEN



Today, that campground is home to the entrance ramp to the Battleship Texas, rest rooms, and a parking lot.

At first, representatives of the San Jacinto Museum of History suggested moving the battleship, but backed away from the notion when area community groups objected. Instead, it was decided to try to use landscape architecture to create a separation between the park's two historic elements, to basically create two parks within one. To help do this, a new organization, the Battleship Texas Foundation, was formed, and proposals for reworking the battleship site solicited. The idea that rose to the top came from Acumen, a young Houston architectural and design firm that saw the abandonment of the Battleship Texas' current entrance as an opportunity to completely rethink the way the ship is presented to visitors.

One of the requirements of the new approach to the battleship was that it be moved from the starboard, or right, side to the port side, which today faces an abandoned restaurant across a small stretch of water. Acumen's plan called for turning the land the restaurant sits on into something of a theme park time machine that would move people from the present into the middle 1940s, when the Battleship Texas was returning from its service in World War II. The redesigned access to the ship would begin with sentry posts to suggest to visitors that they're entering a military facility; it

would lead through a memorial plaza complete with flags and sounds of the '40s broadcast over loudspeakers, a preshow for what follows. From the memorial plaza a ramp would lead to an interpretive center organized along a timeline to show the ship's history, and the history of the world into which it fit. Next would be a wharf designed to replicate a wharf from 1945 and lead into the battleship itself. Finally, there would be an artifact park anchored by various items from the ship, including a propeller, a 14-inch gun, projectiles, and an anchor, among other items.

Compared to what's currently at the Battleship Texas, it's a grandiose scheme. And it carries a fairly grandiose price tag of \$7.7 million. Still, compared to the cost of the San Jacinto Battleground restoration, which has been estimated at between \$45 and \$67 million, it's almost modest. And the state, through the auspices of the Parks and Wildlife Department, has already given its nod of approval and a seed grant of \$600,000. With that in hand, the Battleship Texas Foundation commissioned a feasibility study to determine if the remaining \$7 million plus is a reachable goal; once that's done, fundraising will begin in earnest. If all goes as the Battleship's supporters hope, construction could get underway in a couple of years. It is, they know, an uphill fight. But the U.S.S. Texas has faced battles before, and so far, at least, it has won them all. — Mitchell J. Shields



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## Grant Program Targets Historic Courthouses

Texas' historic courthouses were given a boost in November when the state legislature agreed to ante up \$50 million to help restore and revitalize the often endangered structures. The money will be distributed under the aegis of the Texas Historic Courthouse Preservation Program, which will be operated by the Texas Historical Commission. The Courthouse Preservation Program will provide partial matching grants to groups attempting to restore one of the state's approximately 220 historic courthouses. The first round of grants will be awarded in April, and it's hoped that restoration projects will begin shortly thereafter.

Though the funding is substantial, it's still considerably less than most experts think it will take to breathe new life into the state's courthouses. THC architects estimate that the cost to repair and restore all of the state's historic courthouses could be upwards of \$750 million. Still, it's a start and, the THC hopes, may help generate other funds.

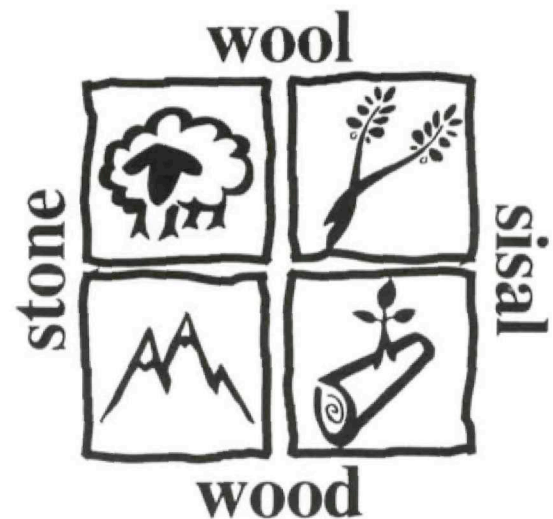
To the THC, courthouses older than 50 years are considered historic; in Texas, they range in architectural style from Romanesque to Art Deco. Preserving them has been a concern since at least 1972, when the legislation requiring that all work on historic courthouses be approved by the THC was passed. Texas is the only state that requires counties to secure clearance from state preservation officials before making changes to historic courthouses.

A turning point in the drive to save the state's courthouses came in 1993, when a fire severely damaged the Hill County Courthouse in Hillsboro. Reconstruction there was difficult because of the lack of current or original architectural drawings. In response, the THC created the Courthouse Alliance to research and document 55 of the state's historic courthouses. The plight of the state's courthouses gained national attention in 1998, when the National Trust for Historic Preservation named Texas courthouses to its list of America's 11 most endangered historic places.

The deadline to submit a master plan for the first round of grants is February 1, 2000, with an application deadline of March 7. Contingent on additional funding from the legislature, the THC plans to continue the program with several more rounds of grant opportunities. — MJS

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