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The El Dorado Ballroom will again become the cultural center of the Third Ward, thanks to owner Row House Community Development Corporation.

Howling on Dowling

A revamping is in the works for one of Houston's most important cultural landmarks. The El Dorado Ballroom, on Dowling at Elgin in the center of the historic Third Ward, may soon be restored to its former elegance. From its very beginning "the 'Rado" was a symbol of the community's pride as well as its most prestigious focal point, especially for musicians.

The El Dorado Ballroom was built in 1939 by philanthropist Anna Dupree and her jazz impresario husband Clarence to establish a "class" venue for black social clubs and general entertainment. They hired architect Lenard Gabert, a graduate of Rice's first architecture class in 1916, who produced a streamlined modernistic building with a rounded corner facing the intersection. Large plate glass windows in the second floor ballroom (later shrunk to a horizontal band of glass after a fire in 1952) looked out on Emancipation Park. The first floor was filled with commercial leases, originally featuring a restaurant, clothing store, appliance shop, and a photographer. Later tenants included a diner, barbershop, beauty shop, insurance agency, and a tailor—just what the neighborhood would have needed at its main commercial crossroads.

When it opened, black musicians had plenty of honky tonks and low class joints to play in; the El Dorado was one of the few high class, jacket-and-tie, white tablecloth establishments available to blacks this side of New Orleans. Patrons could expect to enjoy the big band sounds of big stars as well as the work of local talent. The establishment served beer and set-ups, and patrons brought harder stuff in paper sacks, just like at all the white clubs.

El Dorado, the "Home of Happy Feet," was the first showcase in Texas for black music. In the late 1930s and '40s it was the venue of choice for blues, jazz, talent shows, and dances. The club was

closed on Mondays and Tuesdays, but on Wednesday nights ladies got in free. In the 1950s the 'Rado lineup featured Pluma Davis's Eight Piece Band, T. Bone Walker, Jimmy Reed, Guitar Slim, Charles Brown, Bill Doggett, Etta James, and the superstar Ray Charles.

Roger Wood's *Down in Houston*, a great book about Houston's jazz and blues legacy, quotes trumpet player Calvin Owens: "Playing the El Dorado—I mean that's like saying, OK, I've made it." And impresario John Green adds, "The El Dorado Ballroom was top of the line. Oh yeah, back in those days, people would really get dressed to hear a band there!" The site was celebrated in Conrad Johnson's 1947 single, "Howling on Dowling," recorded in Houston's Gold Star Record Studio.

The late 1960s and early '70s marked the steady decline of the El Dorado as a live music venue. The enterprise was crippled, like so many other black-owned businesses, by the negative economic impact of desegregation—a phenomenon repeated all over the South.

Sometimes it takes a while for good things to happen to historic places. In 1999 Row House Community Development Corporation bought the El Dorado building and the vacant lot next door on Dowling. According to Executive Director Antoine Bryant, the El Dorado will function once again as the cultural center of the Third Ward. Long-range plans include a mix of neighborhood-friendly retail on the first floor, including a restaurant with outdoor dining. In the short term, the organization is raising funds to install an elevator and a new fire stair; the air conditioning and roof are in great shape. Meanwhile the ballroom is open and available for rentals and special events.

Before long we'll all again be hearing the howling on Dowling. — *Barry Moore*

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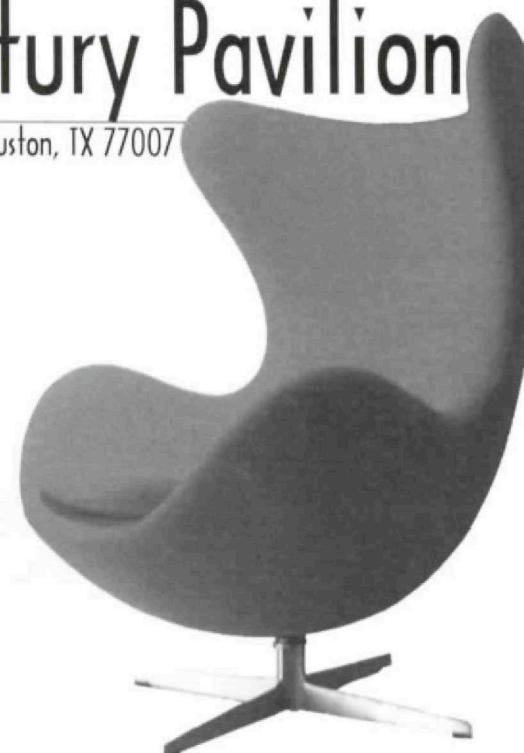


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