



All photos courtesy GHA

## BUILDING BRICKS

AT ENRON FIELD,  
THE GOOD BRICKS AWARDS

*remember the best of the past*

grandeur about it, enough so that van Pelt decided it deserved saving. Though modest, the building is important in that it represents a way of life common in Midtown in the 1920s and 1930s. Other buildings like it are scattered through Midtown and Montrose, but so far few of them have captured the public's imagination. The restoration of 1218 Webster, the Good Bricks jurors felt, might serve as an example for others to follow.

Another example was found in the winner of the second Good Bricks award, Harry Gendel Architects for the adaptive reuse of the Philip M. Helfrich House in the Sixth Ward. The house was built in 1885 as a four-room Victorian, but had been remodeled in 1924 to a Craftsman-style bungalow. Harry Gendel decided to restore the house to its 1924 state and move it to Decatur Street, where it became the new office for his architectural firm.

The evening's third award went to Norman Kirk Speck for the restoration of the Penn B. Thornton Home at 327 West 16th Street in the Heights. Speck, a third-generation Houston dentist, bought the house in 1989 when it was in a sad state of repair. Over the next decade he carefully returned it to its original 1905 appearance, removing inappropriate improvements, no matter how recently they had been made, and replacing them with period details that he discovered in historic photos.

Buildings were not the only things recognized by the Good Bricks jurors; organizations received their due as well. One award was presented to the Proctor Plaza Neighborhood Association for its work in establishing the Norhill Historic District, a picturesque community located just north and west of downtown. Filled with bungalows and cottages, the Norhill neighborhood was developed in the mid-1920s by Varner Realty. In 1996, the residents of the area decided they wanted a historic designation, beginning a four year struggle that, on June 14, 2000, resulted in Norhill becoming Houston's seventh, and biggest, historic district. By pushing for the creation of this district, the Proctor Plaza Neighborhood Association helped double the number of historic properties now desig-

**IN EARLY FEBRUARY**, members and guests of the Greater Houston Preservation Alliance gathered in one of the concourses that circle the stands at Enron Field for the Good Bricks Awards, the annual event in which attention is paid to the people and projects that best represent the spirit of preservation in Houston, however faint or flickering it may seem at times. The setting was unusual. In the past, the awards have tended to be handed out in auditoriums and meeting halls. But on this occasion an object of preservation — the old Union Station that had been transformed to become part of the Houston Astros' new home field — was chosen as the site where the idea of preservation would be honored.

Still, given that this was the first Good Bricks Awards of a new century, perhaps something a little different was perhaps called for. Certain things, though, remained

the same. From the beginning, it has been clear that the Good Bricks Awards are about more than simply honoring old buildings; they are also about honoring memory, and a connection to the past. And the ten awards that were presented for the year 2000 — given to projects ranging from apartments rescued from the wrecking ball to a book that rescued the memory of a community from obscurity — made that dual purpose clear.

The first award went to the Mid-Continent Companies, Limited, and Patrick van Pelt for the restoration and adaptive reuse of 1218 Webster Street, a 1924 apartment building by architect Alfred Finn. When van Pelt first saw the building a few years ago, it was, he remembers, "sad looking." Still, it had a certain



Among the 2000 Good Bricks Awards winners were (clockwise from top): Enron Field, seen top with restored section of Union Station, and top left the same area prior to restoration; the 1905 Penn B. Thornton Home in the Heights; the 1924 apartment building at 1218 Webster Street; the 1951 Blue Triangle Branch YMCA building; and Addie Dixon, author of *East of the River*.





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A similar decisive doggedness could be found in the Avenue Community Development Corporation, which was honored for its Move Home project, which rescues, relocates, and revitalizes small, vintage homes that have been targeted for destruction, then makes them available to low- and moderate-income first-time homebuyers. Begun in 1996, the Move Home project has rescued 18 houses, brought a preservation ethic to areas in which it had not been present before, and helped create a market for preserved houses.

Unlike the Proctor Plaza Neighborhood Association or the Avenue CDC, Addie Dixon didn't rescue houses. Instead, she rescued memory. But she did that so successfully in her book *East of the River* that it moved some on the Good Bricks jurors to tears. *East of the River* is the story of freed slave Harrison Barrett and his descendants. In June 1875, Barrett, together with 12 other former slaves, settled east of the San Jacinto River near Crosby, Texas, in a community that came to be known as Barretts' Settlement. The settlement had only a spring and Ricket's Gully for water, and the families who had settled there doubted that they would survive.

Yet survive they did, and seven generations eventually traced their roots to what emerged from Harrison Barrett's vision of life as a free man. Then it appeared that a road might pave over both the community and its memory. That threat, though, spawned a preservation movement. As Dixon, a granddaughter of Harrison Barrett, says in the preface to her book, "The history of a family or a community cannot survive for a century solely on the basis of its oral traditions.... We needed historical preservation." And she set out to get it, researching, documenting, and

recording the family's story — finding out who the people were, their dreams, and their fears. Their interactions with family, neighbors, and townspeople evolved into the "great stories" of Barretts' Settlement, 20 of which are retold in Dixon's book.

As part of her research, Dixon asked her interview subjects to draw the homestead as they remembered it, and the resulting artwork is now on display in a museum that she established on the surviving Barrett homestead. Through her work, Dixon preserved that most intangible piece of the past — the history of a family and a people. In the process, she made clear that preservation is not only about buildings, but also about people and their lives.

The last Good Bricks Awards of the evening were awarded to Bart Truxillo for Outstanding Service or Leadership in Historic Preservation and the Blue Triangle Multi-Cultural Association for the renovation of the 1951 Blue Triangle Branch YWCA Building in the Fourth Ward, a building designed by Hiram A. Salisbury and Birdsall Briscoe. The AIA's Houston 25-Year Award, designed to honor enduring architectural landmarks and presented for the first time in concert with the Greater Houston Preservation Alliance, went to the City of Houston for Miller Outdoor Theater in Hermann Park.

Which left only the Greater Houston Preservation Alliance President's Award, given to an individual or organization that has made an exceptional contribution to preservation in Houston. The recipient for 200 was, not surprisingly, Drayton McLane of the Houston Astros and the members of the Harris County Houston Sports Authority for the restoration and adaptive reuse of Union Station as part of Enron Field. It was an award for an awards venue, and in this case, it seemed appropriate. — Mitchell J. Shields

## Public Library's Archives Director Retires

AFTER TWO DECADES in the position, Louis Marchiafava has retired as the manager of the Archives Department of the Houston Metropolitan Research Center, Houston Public Library.

Marchiafava obtained his Ph.D. from Rice University and worked with the HMRC from the time of its founding in 1974, when it was housed in the Fendren Library of Rice University. He became the manager of the department in 1980 after HMRC had moved to its

present location in the Houston Public Library's Julia Ideson Building. One of the principal components of the Archives Department is the Architectural Archive, which is one of the two largest depositories of architectural records in the state of Texas, the other being the Alexander Architectural Archive at the University of Texas at Austin.

As of press time, Marchiafava's vacant position had not been filled. — Steven R. Strom