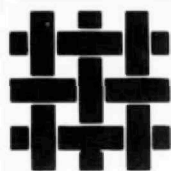


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## Preservation: The Last Stand



Paul Hester, Houston

Bethje Lang Building, 1904; demolished 1988

### Mike Davis

Houston will be lucky to have any historic downtown buildings left in the year 2000. The city's remaining collection of late 18th- and early 19th-century buildings that make up the Main Street/Market Square Historic District are constantly under siege. The district has been listed on the National Register of Historic Places since 1982 and boasts 50 historic structures within an area of 16 city blocks at the north end of downtown from about Texas Avenue to Buffalo Bayou. Over the past decades this stock of historic buildings has been depleted to make way for larger structures and countless parking lots. If eight additional buildings are lost, the district will lose its National Register status.

These sobering facts motivated the recent symposium, *Reclaiming Houston Downtown: New Directions for the Main Street/Market Square District*. The conclusion of this de-facto public goal-setting session was simple: the historic district can survive if the actions of the public and private sectors are coordinated through careful planning.

The well-attended symposium generated much needed enthusiasm for the future of the beleaguered historic district. There is a pervasive assumption that if lower Main Street and Market Square are to be saved, it will be through reviving the retail spaces and night life the area has hosted, off and on, for the last 150-plus years.

There are some signs that the district may be experiencing a recovery. The long-awaited restoration of the three-story, cast-iron front Pillot Building (1016 Congress; c. 1860, Barry Moore, architect for rehabilitation) is forthcoming. Preservationists have fended off attacks upon this building for more than a decade. During the symposium it was announced that the Ritz Theater at 911 Preston (1926, William Ward Watkin, architect), Houston's only surviving movie palace, would also be restored for live theater performances. DiverseWorks is currently raising funds to implement a new design for Market Square Park with commissioned artworks (see "The New Market Square," *Cite*, Spring 1987). And Central Houston Civic Improvement, Inc. has initiated a "Clean Streets" maintenance program to improve Main Street's image.

Still, there are conflicting visions. In January, public protest and direct intervention temporarily spared Market

Square's Bethje Lang Building (316 Milam; 1904), the former home of Warren's Inn, from a scheduled Friday night demolition. In response, the owner entertained lease proposals for the building. The building was demolished without warning in March. Also in January, preservationists joined with local environmentalists at Harris County Commissioner's Court to protest the proposed conversion of the Houston Terminal Warehouse and Cold Storage Building (701 N. San Jacinto; 1927, Engineering Service Corporation) into a county jail. The warehouse is located at the confluence of Buffalo and White Oak bayous, on the shore opposite Allen's Landing. Also, concerns are being voiced about the plans for Market Square Park, particularly the exclusion of the clock which once crowned the City Hall building on the square from the DiverseWorks scheme.

This wildly diverse range of actions occurring in the historic district exposes a critical need for someone to organize the disparate interests that influence the fate of Main Street/Market Square. Whether this leadership is through a private developer, such as in John Hannah's restoration of the Cotton Exchange Building (1884, Eugene T. Heiner, architect; Graham B. Luhn, architect for restoration, 1974), or a public/private commercial revitalization corporation, someone must take charge. Many of those who organized the symposium are hoping for a combination of the two approaches. There is a common-sense awareness that a single individual or entity cannot tackle an area with such disjointed ownership and outrageous property values. And formula commercial revitalization programs will not survive the economic realities of downtown Houston.

This much is clear: what remains of the district in the 21st century will depend upon individual acts by enlightened property owners in response to public and private historic preservation incentives. A sense of the past is still evident downtown. But if the city's past is to remain a visible and vital part of Main Street and around Market Square, lovers of history, architectural quality, and economic return must join together in a collaborative effort. ■