



"The Future Belongs to Those Who Prepare For It": In the vestibule of the endangered Prudential Building, a mural's optimism has turned to irony.

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Mid-century monumental: Completed in 1952, the Prudential Building (center) was the city's first high-rise office building outside downtown.

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Modern Landmark Endangered

M.D. Anderson plans to demolish the Prudential Building

COMMERCE AND PRESERVATION often clash, but the plans for the former Prudential Building recently elbowed that contest one step further: into a conflict between history and medicine.

For M.D. Anderson Hospital, which owns the building at 1100 Holcombe Boulevard, medicine wins. The hospital plans to raze the 1952 structure — which it calls the Houston Main Building — to accommodate an outpatient cancer care complex. According to hospital officials, consultants estimate that updating the 18-story building for this new plan would cost \$140 million more than simply replacing it.

But Houston's handful of preservation activists think the hospital has misread the whole equation. Because Houston's preservation laws give scant protection to historic buildings, they say, powerful institutions have to fill that role instead. With study and resolve, they insist, M.D. Anderson could fold the building into its plans.

"Institutions have a cultural responsibility to the city not to destroy its landmarks," says Stephen Fox, an architectural historian. "You have to make a commitment, just as you make a commitment to curing cancer."

The spacious gray building was

completed in 1952 and served as the Prudential Insurance Co.'s regional headquarters. Everything about it, Fox says, reflects the era's robust outlook. The Prudential was Houston's first high-rise corporate office building outside downtown, the first to install public art, and the first to offer workers tennis courts, a swimming pool, and lush landscaping.

Along with monumental '50s architecture by Kenneth Franzheim, the building's trademark is its fountain. Mildly shocking in its day, Wheeler Williams' statue "The Family" — a cheerfully nude man, woman, and child — anchors a verdant, palm tree-dappled entrance. Inside the building, a grand rounded vestibule displays a Peter Hurd mural that proclaims, "The Future Belongs to Those Who Prepare For It."

M.D. Anderson bought the property as office space in 1975, and by all accounts the hospital cared for it meticulously. The first hint of danger surfaced in the 1980s, when two different consultants deemed it would cheaper to build new office space than renovate the existing structure. M.D. Anderson mulled turning the Prudential into an outpatient clinic. But according to hos-

pital spokesman Steve Stuyck, a third study, conducted a few years ago by the Houston architectural firm Falick Klein Partnership, showed that renovation would add \$140 million to the clinic's projected \$300 million price tag.

Meanwhile the hospital's needs were changing enormously. As cancer treatment came to rely more and more on outpatient procedures, M.D. Anderson devised a 10-year expansion project for the 22 acres where the Prudential building now sits. Just east of that building, the first structure will house a 739,000-square-foot ambulatory clinic. The plan, designed by Kaplan McLaughlin Diaz of San Francisco, in association with FKP, ultimately calls for four buildings — none higher than seven stories — in a park-like environment with easy access to offices, clinics and research buildings. When it's time to build the replacement office building, Stuyck said, the old Prudential will go.

Architect and preservation advocate William F. Stern calls the plan wasteful — and damaging to the city. "This has nothing to do with sentiment," he says. "It has to do with how you build a city. A sophisticated, intelligent organization would weave these new buildings into existing architecture."

In any other city, Stern points out, a building such as the Prudential would have achieved protective landmark status. In Houston, that status must be sought by individual owners; as a result, preservationists here can recite litanies of historic buildings supplanted by parking lots.

This summer, Stern and other activists met M.D. Anderson officials

to discuss the hospital's plans. Stern praised hospital president John Mendelsohn's attentiveness — but suggested that M.D. Anderson should carefully scrutinize estimates provided by FKP, since the same firm is in charge of the new building program.

"The problem," Stern said, "is that you can twist a feasibility study in your favor. Of course you can price a door at \$500 or \$600. You can also price a door at \$100."

Mendelsohn, though, said he weighed the Prudential's fate carefully. A board member of the Greater Houston Partnership, he said he is well aware of both the paucity of historic buildings here and the city's recent struggle to beautify. The fountain will stay in place, he points out, and the interior mural will be protected and used elsewhere in the complex.

But, Mendelsohn says, his first mission to Houston is providing cancer care that is modern — and easily accessed. "If M.D. Anderson is to grow and continue to achieve its mission to treat cancer," he says, "we think it's very important that the growth be contiguous."

The hospital's very achievements, historian Fox counters, suggest that it could accomplish both missions: caring for its patients *and* saving one of Houston's dwindling number of landmarks. "Every day at M.D. Anderson they're dedicated to doing the impossible — curing cancer," says Fox. "This is doable." — *Claudia Kolker*

Claudia Kolker is a Houston-based freelance writer.