



Courtesy Barry Moore

Good Riddance

Sometimes our cities are better off without important historic structures of the past. Not often, but sometimes. The Municipal Auditorium is Houston's best case in point.

Designed in 1910 by St. Louis architects Mauran & Russell (they would stick around to design the Rice Hotel two years later), the city auditorium could seat 7,000 comfortably, or 10,000 not so comfortably. There was also a huge banquet hall with a commercial kitchen seating 1,000. The elegant main façade that

faced west on Louisiana was composed of truncated arched openings at the sidewalk with large Romanesque windows above, all under a heavy Greek revival cornice. The ramped exit towers marked each corner of the big space within.

By 1914 Houston was seriously into the convention business, boasting seven modern hotels—six of them recently completed—plus the cavernous auditorium. In its 50 years of service to the citizens of Houston, the auditorium hosted the touring Metropolitan Opera, the fledgling Houston Symphony Orchestra, wrestling, boxing, concerts, scout jamborees, shows, and conventions of every description.

So what was not to like? Well, to begin with, it was just too big to accommodate all those events well. The sight lines were terrible, with many "obstructed view" seats, and the acoustics were even worse. It was hideously hot in the summer and drafty and cold in the winter—not surprising given the technology of 1910. The large windows, necessary for what ventilation there was, wiped out the possibility of dramatic effects during matinee performances.

When the Music Hall and Coliseum opened in 1928 on the site of the 1928 Democratic National Convention Hall (and now of the Hobby Center), the

majors switched their allegiances, leaving B-list attractions to the old auditorium. A notable exception was the 1951 national touring production of *South Pacific*, presumably because the management expected to sell more seats—not better, just more.

One of the last rentals, in the spring of 1961, was the Rice Architectural Society's annual Archi-Arts Ball. The theme of "Evil" seemed appropriate for the big, dirty, dark auditorium. Within months the wrecking ball knocked, clearing the site for the Jones Hall for the Performing Arts.

Jones Hall was one of the most successful and handsome of the multipurpose performing arts centers built in the 1960s and '70s, and its architects, Caudill Rowlett Scott, collected an American Institute of Architects Honor Award for their success. Considering what Houston now has standing on Louisiana between Texas and Capitol, it is a blessing that Houston's preservation community was spared the burden of trying to save the old, unlovely and unloved white elephant.

If only architecture were so well served every time an old one comes down and a new one goes up. It can happen, but we should never count on it. — *Barry Moore*



Unrest Collection, Houston Metropolitan Research Center, Houston Public Library

The Grandeur of Adaptive Reuse

For over 100 years Market Square (bounded by Preston and Congress avenues and Travis and Milam streets) was the center of commercial and public life in Houston because four successive city halls and city markets were located there. The fourth and last of these was this handsome Victorian Romanesque building designed by the accomplished Houston architect George E. Dickey. Even though it was stylistically outdated by the time it was constructed in 1904, the Dickey City Hall and Market House remained a beloved Houston landmark until it was demolished in 1960. When the current City Hall was completed in 1939, the old City Hall and Market was leased to the Bowen Bus Center, which occupied most of the ground floor with small shops in the remainder of the building. The landscaped grounds were paved and a large awning was constructed. This photograph, circa 1942, shows the building as it was adapted for the bus station. The only remaining artifacts are the 1904 four-face clock and the 1878 City Fire Bell, now incorporated into the Friedman Clock Tower across the street (designed by Barry Moore in 1998). — *Barrie Scardino*