



Photo by G. Lyon Photography

## Spirits of Place

Jefferson Davis Hospital rises from the grave as an artists' haven

**ARCHITECT BILL NEUHAUS** is modest when he talks about how his firm turned the former Jefferson Davis Hospital, located just north of downtown in the First Ward, into what is now the Elder Street Lofts, a residential project of Houston's Avenue CDC and their development partner, Artspace Projects Inc. of Minneapolis. "It's not architecture the way you thought you would be doing it," Neuhaus says. "It's more like solving a mystery; putting a puzzle together."

While everything about the project was very real—the lofts are currently home for 34 tenants, most of them artists—planning and designing the renovation of Jefferson Davis Hospital also became a *de facto* exercise in revealing history.

Every site has a story to tell, but places that are haunted are especially saturated with significance. And haunted is what Jefferson Davis Hospital has long

been rumored to be. It was built in 1924 on a poorly kept parcel of land that had been Houston's second oldest cemetery. That cemetery, established in 1840 to handle an overflow of corpses from a yellow fever epidemic, also became the burial ground for victims of subsequent cholera and yellow fever epidemics in 1866 and 1867, as well as Confederate soldiers returned from the war, rich and poor, black and white.

According to descriptions from the era, Houston's zoning phobia didn't affect the cemetery's organization. It was divided into four sections, the first of these designated a potter's field "to receive the remains of all criminals and persons of infamous character such as committed suicide or come to their death from a wound received in a duel." The second section was reserved for blacks and the third for burial of persons not otherwise provided for. The fourth was

divided into small lots that were sold to the highest bidders.

This order didn't hold for long, and according to a *Houston Chronicle* article, by the end of the 1870s the cemetery was filled with several thousand corpses and closed by the city. Some people continued to bury additional family members in their plots, stacking coffins atop each other to make a single grave site into a double, even though a city ordinance forbade that practice.

Eventually the cemetery receded from the city's consciousness, becoming neglected land and then a poorly maintained park. Not everyone forgot, however, so when the city decided to erect Houston's first permanent charity hospital on the site, it honored the dead veterans buried there by naming the building for the president of the Confederacy (an honor that was later transferred to a newer Jefferson Davis

hospital built on Allen Parkway in 1937, and razed in 1999 to clear the way for the Federal Reserve Building that opened last year). An inscription on the cornerstone of the original Jefferson Davis Hospital read, in part, "in loving memory of our Confederate soldiers, whose sacred dust lies buried in the shadow of this building."

Despite this memorial, little respect was paid to the actual graves when the hospital was built, as recent mappings of the gravesites show. Prior to 1969, when the Texas Antiquities Code came into effect, no special attention was required to be given to gravesites. Even in 1986, when the Houston Fire Department began to remodel some facilities that had been built near the hospital, they began as though it were still the old days, digging anywhere they wanted to and gathering up bones in buckets. But this time the casual treatment of the one-time cemetery came to the attention of local



Photo courtesy W.O. Neuhaus and Associates

**Opposite Page:** The one-time Jefferson Davis Hospital (Wilkes Alfred Dowdy, 1924), now known as the Elder Street Lofts (renovation by W.O. Neuhaus and Associates, 2005) and a home to artists and musicians, among others.

**Left:** A graffiti-marked column in the interior of the Jefferson Davis Hospital prior to renovation beginning.

**Below:** In the years prior to its restoration, the historic hospital had fallen into a sad state of disrepair.

**Bottom:** To help maintain the hospital's traditional appearance, damaged brick on the exterior was matched and replaced.



Photo courtesy W.O. Neuhaus and Associates

BY BRUCE C. WEBB

media, and Dr. Kenneth Brown from the University of Houston's Department of Anthropology was called in to examine the site and the unearthed remains. Brown, according to newspaper reports, determined some of the remains were of Confederate soldiers and accused workers of taking "ghoulie souvenirs." Brown also held out the tantalizing possibility that some of the graves might date back to a 1600s English settlement, but that hypothesis was never fully investigated or supported.

The rough treatment of the cemetery over the years led to rumors that the area was haunted. In fact, it had the reputation of being the most haunted site in Texas, and even today a number of websites make the case with stories of paranormal adventures, frights, initiations, and Halloween parties, as well as photographs of mysterious, translucent orbs floating inside the building. Until

recently, the old Jefferson Davis Hospital was a featured stop on the High Spirit Ghost Tour of Houston. Haunted or not, for Houston architects W.O. Neuhaus and Associates, the hospital site's charnel history became a factor in the renovation plan they were called upon to produce.

A few years back, Avenue CDC, a Houston non-profit organization dedicated to revitalizing Washington Avenue and the Near Northside community, fixed its sights on the old Jefferson Davis Hospital. By that time it bore little resemblance to the building that, when it opened, was praised as one of America's most modern hospitals. Over the years the original Jefferson Davis Hospital building had been used as a clinic, as a residential addiction treatment facility, and for records storage. Then for nearly two decades it went empty, left to slide into disrepair.

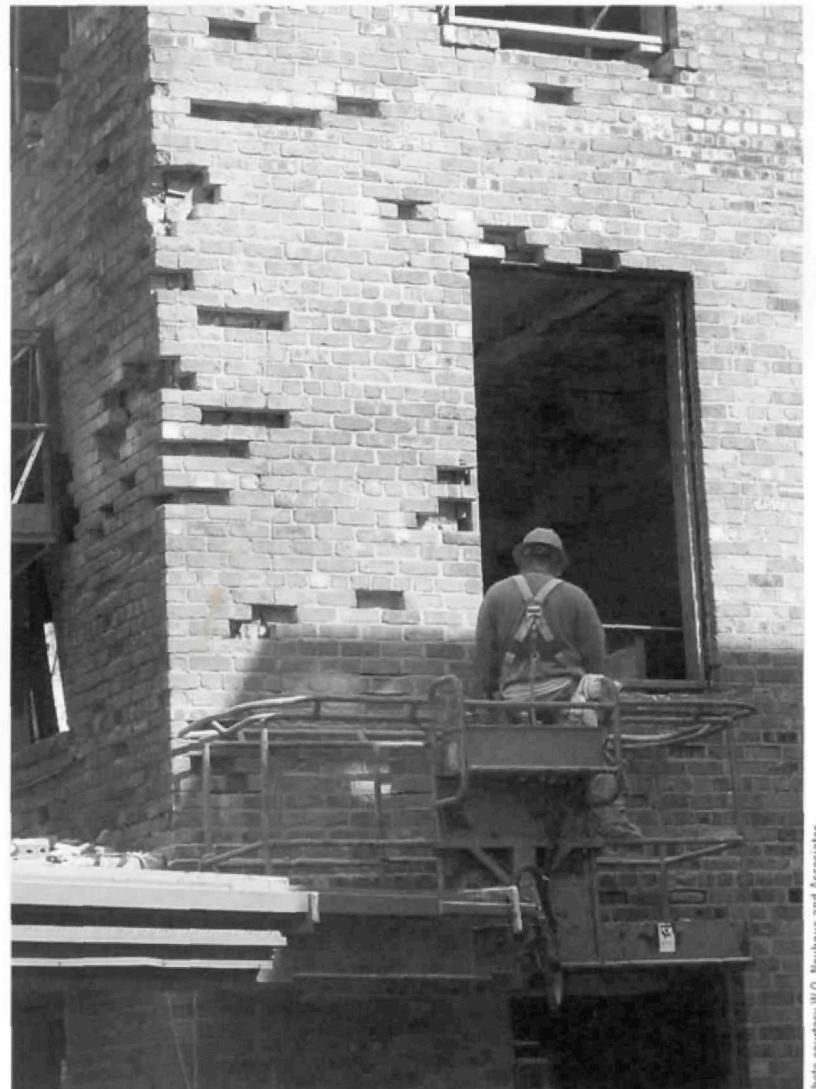


Photo courtesy W.O. Neuhaus and Associates



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**Top Right:** One of the few new additions to the former hospital was this rear stairway.  
**Top:** A corridor in the Jefferson Davis before renovations.  
**Above:** The first floor corridor following renovation. This corridor has become an ad hoc art gallery, featuring works created by residents.

What Avenue CDC saw when they looked at the old hospital was not particularly pretty, though it retained an elegant façade and entryway, as well as a structure that seemed solid despite its years. It had been designed by architect Wilkes Alfred Dowdy in the Georgian style, and elements of that style still poked through. But in general Jefferson Davis Hospital presented a gloomy aspect, one reminiscent of the description Edgar Allen Poe devised for the House of Usher: “bleak walls, vacant eye-like windows, a few rank sedges.” Twenty years vacant it was rotting around the edges, with disintegrating brick and a crumbling interior softened and melted away by Houston’s insidious climate. The only signs of life were the spirited graffiti that was nearly everywhere and the gang members and homeless people who used the building.

To help with Jefferson Davis’ revitalization, Avenue CDC got in touch with Artspace Projects of Minneapolis, which has found a niche in the development game by helping create affordable living

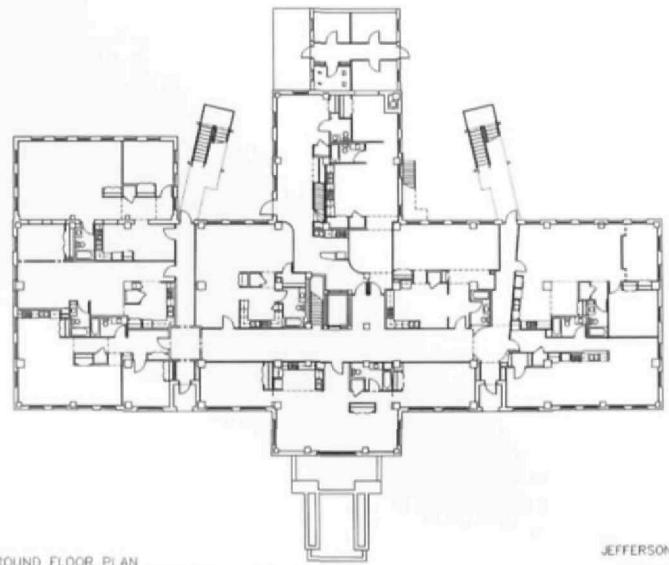
space for artists and arts organizations. Artspace is drawn to older, abandoned buildings such as the original Jefferson Davis Hospital. By being preserved and revitalized rather than demolished, by being put to new uses, such buildings can, Artspace believes, contribute to the cultural and economic vitality of the surrounding community.

Artists can be great agents for urban recovery and building urban character. They are natural pioneers, often willing to move into unwanted parts of cities such as warehouse districts, industrial buildings, and other places that haven’t yet found a spot in the real estate market. Using sweat equity and an iconoclastic sensibility, artists carve out places to live and studios in which to work, and attract little restaurants, coffee shops, and bars—sometimes all of them in one. Best of all, they do this without creating gentrified, historical “plasticvilles.” Few places in modern cities seem as colorful or have as much homemade appeal as artists’ neighborhoods.



**Below:** Residents inside one of the apartments at the renovated hospital.

**Right:** Floor plans of the former Jefferson Davis Hospital, showing the layout of the new apartments on the ground floor (top), first floor (middle), and second floor (bottom).

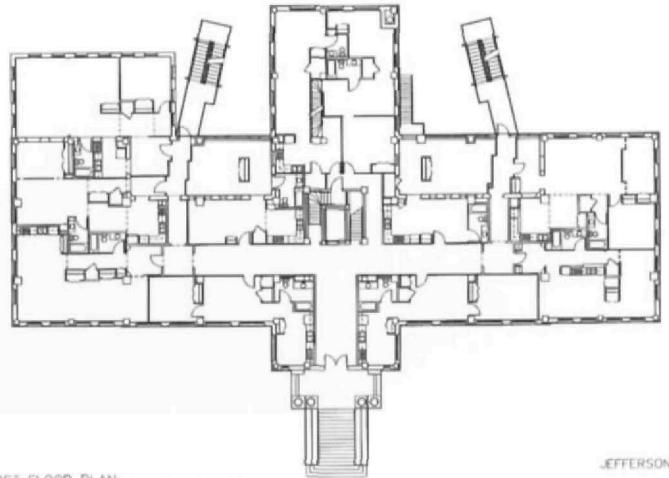


GROUND FLOOR PLAN  
1/16"=1'-0"

JEFFERSON DAVIS HOSPITAL  
W. O. NEUHAUS ASSOCIATES

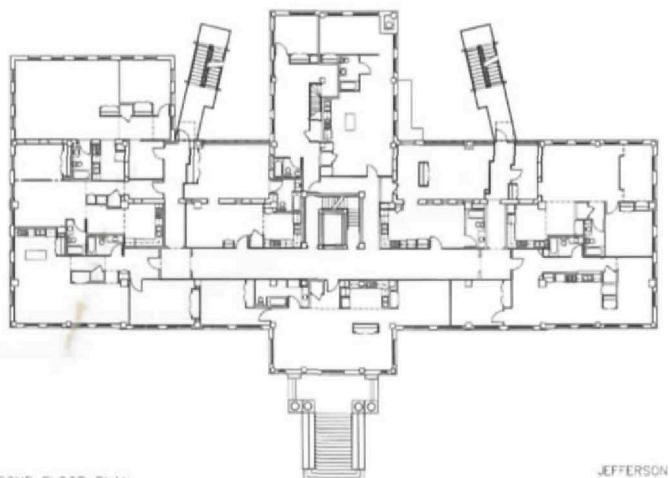


Photo courtesy W.O. Neuhaus and Associates



FIRST FLOOR PLAN  
1/16"=1'-0"

JEFFERSON DAVIS HOSPITAL  
W. O. NEUHAUS ASSOCIATES



SECOND FLOOR PLAN  
1/16"=1'-0"

JEFFERSON DAVIS HOSPITAL  
W. O. NEUHAUS ASSOCIATES

Artspace, as its name implies, helps artists get the space to start this ball rolling. To do its work, Artspace relies on the assistance of various federal and state agencies as well as private donations and local support and incentive programs. They have a long list of success stories, among them the 2001 development of the National Hotel Lofts on Market Street in Galveston, created from a building that had a glorious beginning as an opera house.

It takes vision to see the possibilities in an old building that has been wrecked by years of neglect and deterioration. Preservation specialist Anna Mod, who researched the Jefferson Davis Hospital and ensured that the architect and developer followed established historic preservation standards in its redevelopment, notes that when it was built it was quite up to date and incorporated many architectural elements then popular in hospital design, including an emphasis on sunlight and ventilation. Its location on a slight rise, away from other structures and pol-

lution, was advantageous and enhanced the effect of the prevailing breezes.

Original architect Dowdy included two screened, fresh-air balconies on the west façade of the second and third floors. Other then-modern provisions included a pair of operating rooms with overhead skylights, a clinic, a radiographic and fluoroscopic room, and two large spaces that are listed on the plan as the men's and women's "insane wards." The facility was also fully segregated: on the ground floor a partition divided the corridor into separate wards and clinics for blacks and whites, an historical fact that the present-day architects noted by replacing the partition with a stripe on the floor.

W.O. Neuhaus' task was to create 34 modern apartments from this medical maze, while at the same time following the U.S. Secretary of the Interior's Standards for the Rehabilitation of Historic Buildings. Contrary to popular belief, a building's being listed on the National Register of Historic Places, as

Plans courtesy W.O. Neuhaus and Associates

**Below:** This boiler room is scheduled to be remade into a communal space, perhaps a gallery or a studio open to all the residents of Elder Street Lofts.

**Right:** The green roof installation seen here is a first for an Artspace project. Though small, it suggests more to come.

**Next Page:** The view of downtown from the former hospital is one of the renovated building's best features.



Photo courtesy W.O. Neuhaus and Associates



Photo by G. Lyon Photography

the Jefferson Davis Hospital is, does not mean the state or federal government can dictate what's done to it. If a private person owns a listed building and uses no federal funds on it, there are no mandates for him to follow. In this case, however, since Artspace, which acted as the developer, wanted to take advantage of a 20 percent rehabilitation tax credit for historic buildings, the project was reviewed by both the Texas Historical Commission and the National Park Service. If you want the carrot, you have to follow the rules.

As it happens, what an architect or his client might want to do with an old building doesn't always correspond to what the agencies charged with protecting our heritage insist on. Participation in the investment tax credit program obligates architect and developer to follow guidelines that require historic buildings be rehabilitated for continued use and to preserve character defining features. Preservation of such things as an interior floor plan, the arrangement and sequence of spaces and built in features, and applied finishes are all-important to a building's historic character and are

reviewed. The U.S. Department of the Interior, which supervises the historic buildings program in conjunction with the Texas Historical Commission, insists on a three-step process of identifying, retaining, and preserving whenever possible. The regulations are as much about restoring and preserving an historic setting as they are about protecting notable architecture.

Since Jefferson Davis was originally built as a hospital for indigents, its interior was Spartan; with the exception of terrazzo floors there wasn't much of architectural note inside. Early plans proposed by W.O. Neuhaus and Associates would have simplified the building's interior organization by running a corridor down one side and dividing the other into side-by-side apartments. Reviewers at the federal level nixed the idea because it would have obliterated the hospital's original corridor plan, and with it the building's etymological roots. Similarly, many architects have a penchant for exposing the brick in these older buildings, a penchant at odds with preservationists' desire to restore plaster walls

where there was plaster in the original. This usually means sheet rock. In the Jefferson Davis Hospital there were also details that needed to be restored or replicated, notably the curved-cornered interior window frames and the modillion blocks at the eaves. Many of the exterior bricks were replaced and the wall re-pointed. The roof, originally tile, was replaced with asphalt of a similar color.

In addition to the rehabilitation requirements there were the issues of the cemetery to contend with. In 1995 the site had been listed as a State Archeological Landmark, which meant an archeological survey of the property was required before any new construction took place. Prewitt and Associates, a cultural resources firm from Austin, investigated all areas where subsurface disturbances would occur, such as proposed locations of sewer lines, sidewalks, parking areas, stairways and water tanks, both inside and outside the building. In other words, the architect would make proposals and then the investigation team would dig around to see if those proposals would disturb anything.

Fifteen areas on the grounds outside the hospital building were investigated using mechanical trenching, and the findings helped determine the location of new stair towers as well as the surface treatment of paved areas. Inside the building the investigators cut and removed portions of the concrete slab and dug into the floor with a small track hoe to guide the location of new sewer and utility lines.

All in all the archeological investigation resulted in the discovery of 64 previously unknown graves beneath and around the building. A Texas Historical Commission official visited the site periodically to check on the work; excavations were aborted when unmarked graves were found, and some construction plans were changed to avoid disturbing the burial sites. New construction had to work around the existing graves. This required some ingenuity: the architects located new underground utility lines inside an old utility trench rather than snake them through the labyrinth of gravesites. According to the archeology consultants, careful planning allowed the rehabilitation work



Photo by G. Lyon Photography

to proceed with no graves having to be exhumed and moved.

What Avenue CDC and Artspace got for the \$6.4 million dollars they spent on the project is an accommodating, no frills residential facility—a place with a genuine proletarian spirit to it. Restored, the exterior is a handsome example of a period style, while inside the building retains most of its institutional hospital feel. The best features of the building are all circumstantial, and it is to the credit of the renovation architects that they didn't try to impose a new will on the building, but instead allowed new readings to emerge from what was there.

The eccentricities of the building plan resulted in nearly every apartment being different, with dozens of individual, purpose-built kitchen and bathroom installations. The exposed concrete ceilings are crisscrossed with an intricate weaving of utility conduits, the surest sign of loft modern updates. Unexpected room arrangements and shapes, and occasional isolated architectural characters, add up to a building that is a bit of a *wun-*

*derkammer*. The tenants are predominantly artists, and not surprisingly, as a result the apartments come alive with quirky decoration and plenty of iconoclastic collections. Despite the thickness of the plans, most of the apartments are surprisingly bright. By contrast the corridors and stairwells are austere. The exception is the first floor hallway, which has been turned into an ad hoc gallery that hosts work by residents.

One of the site's best amenities is a splendid view of downtown Houston, a vista perhaps best seen from the roof, although some of the choicest locations from which to take in the panorama are occupied by neat rows of humming air conditioning units. Nonetheless, this would be a great vantage point from which to watch the fourth of July fireworks.

Elder Street Lofts features the first green roof installation on an Artspace project, as well as the first on an historic tax credit project in Texas. The green roof covers an area about the size of a three-car garage. Though small, it suggests more to come. Sustainability is a new interest of ArtSpace, which recently drafted a pro-

ocol statement and formed an advisory committee to better address the interest in sustainability of many of the communities it serves. The Brown Foundation, reflecting its own interest in sustainability, funded the green roof construction.

The Elder Street Lofts building is currently hemmed in by a Fire Department maintenance facility, the same one that caused an uproar over disturbing gravesites during its 1986 renovation. The site is flanked on two sides by trees, but the maintenance facility gives it a back-lot feeling. There are other buildings on the property that remain to be renovated: a boiler building that's slated to become a community space (perhaps a gallery or communal studio) and a nurses quarters, now a Harris County Probation Office, that is envisioned as being transformed into elderly housing. A community vegetable garden has been started, and according to Marty Lawler, executive director of Avenue CDC, there are plans for a memorial garden.

The building is full and lively. It opened in October 2005 and got an unexpected boost through an influx of

artists and musicians from New Orleans who had been driven from their city by Katrina. Though the lofts were originally intended exclusively for artists, certain contributors to the project (including the City of Houston) insisted they be open to the community at large.

Cemetery-hospital-artists lofts make for a juicy mixed metaphor. Jefferson Davis Hospital was a badly wounded facility, and what W.O. Neuhaus and Associates and the Artspace/Avenue CDC team have done is heal some of those wounds and return the place to the city more whole, and more useful, than it has been since the early part of the last century.

David Crowell of Artspace said as much in an open letter he wrote on September 9, 2004: "People ask, 'How can you build housing on a cemetery?' Well you can't, except JDH was already built and we are only renovating it and bringing it back to life. I can't speak for the dearly departed, but if I were interred at JDH I'd prefer to have Life, Hope, Creativity, and Love above me as opposed to crackheads, haters, and bangers." ■