

KEEPING THE GHOSTS HAPPY

William B. Travis Elementary School

I MOVED TO HOUSTON SIGHT UNSEEN IN 1989. MY FIRST HOUSE IN

Houston was a 1926 bungalow in Woodland Heights. The name “Heights” always struck me as misleading—the area is hill-free as far as your eye can see—until Tropical Storm Allison hit in 2001. Then I learned that height is relative and that Woodland Heights was high enough.

The neighborhood reminded me of the part of New Orleans I had lived in before. All the porches faced the street, and every evening unleashed a promenade of people and pets, bikes and strollers. The neighborhood school, Travis Elementary, originally built in 1908, was three blocks away. Its most eye-catching feature was the playground. Instead of the standard boxy swing sets and monkey bars, the outdoor play structures were all replicas of dinosaur fossils. I liked the whimsy of it.

My work with Writers in the Schools (WITS) brought me inside the school once or twice a year, and I always had a good feeling about the place. The teachers were smart, loving, and creative, and the children seemed happy. Unlike most public schools, there were no uniforms, so you got a sense of each individual child. And although there was no one type of student, I tend to think of Travis as a place where tie-dyed shirts and Converse sneakers never go out of style.

In 2005 Travis closed for expansion and remodeling, reopening its doors in 2006. Danny Samuels and John Casbarian of Taft Architects led the redesign project. The new Travis Elementary incorporated the original building and built out from it. The added sections had high ceilings and natural light, giving the space a sense of freedom. The architects consciously created spaces that encourage conversation and community.

The WITS writer who was teaching at Travis that year, Kiki Przewlocki, partnered with classroom teacher Nancy Brown. They wanted to do a meaningful project with the third grade students that would both celebrate the new school and help the students see 3311 Beauchamp in a new way. First, they gave each student a camera and sent them on a quest. The

students were to photograph interesting details in the building, both inside and out. The kids zoomed in on door knobs, banisters, light fixtures, and windows. Each student then chose one object to use for the project. First they painted pictures of the object using watercolors, studying the photo and bringing it to life in a new light. Next they wrote about the object using Pablo Neruda’s poetry collection *Odes to Common Things* as a model. Next they labeled the object. And finally, as a kind of signature, they added photos of themselves. The children assembled their work onto poster board, and the project was exhibited at the opening ceremony of the school. According to Travis Principal Susan Walker, when she showed the project to the architects, they spent a long while studying the children’s work, and it literally made them cry. The kids “got it.”

The most compelling aspect of the new Travis Elementary building is how it highlights the old. Inside you see exposed brick walls mottled by a hundred years of use. You see high arched windows with their original glass panes. The classrooms of the original building are now used for the kindergarten. From the science lab, in the upstairs southeast corner of the original building, you can see the Houston skyline. Studying the exterior, you realize the façade of the old building is still intact. Houston is a city with no zoning. Often the old buildings, however historic and preserved, are destroyed and replaced without remorse. But at Travis the contemporary design actually serves to honor its past.

My daughter Pearl is in her second year at Travis, where her favorite subjects are writing and science. After school, she and her friends often play a game on the playground, among the sculpted bones, in which they are detectives tracking a ghost. They gather clues, analyze them, and follow their leads, but the ghost is elusive. They never capture it because it escapes back into the school through openings that are not accessible to them.

Schools are buildings, and they take on the character of the people who inhabit them. Over the course of a hundred years, a building absorbs many ghosts. What does one do to keep them happy? c

