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RUIN OR RESOURCE

RECONNECTING THE CITY AND THE SHIP CHANNEL

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LESS SENSATIONAL AND LESS GLAMOROUS than some of Houston's other public faces, such as the Texas Medical Center, energy corridor, and arts institutions, the Ship Channel is an exceptional series of places due to its history and for its potential. Despite a rich and wild history along its banks during the 19th century that transformed low-lying grasslands, thickets, and swamps into perpetual boomtowns, very little to virtually nothing remains of the built environment of that time. This reality echoes a frequent tragic chorus in Houston: where's the history?

This quarter-mile-wide corridor through the Ship Channel to the San Jacinto Battleground State Park is truly responsible for the region's earlier undisputable success, giving rise between 1820 and 1840 to a collection of paper cities, sawmills, warehouses, docks, and cotton compresses. The artifacts that remain in this corridor are either ruins or resources. First- and second-generation structures are long gone and even third-generation structures are ruins, replaced by tall weeds, scrappy trees, metal buildings, or liquid storage tanks. Included in this group of

structures are bridge footings that step at the edge of the bayou, factory floor slabs half covered in debris, and incinerator chimneys. The resources are those structures that are recognizable, remain intact, or have only recently been vacated. With a directed collaboration, they can effectively be rehabilitated or reused.

Reconsideration of ruins and resources along the Ship Channel corridor goes well beyond the ephemeral nostalgia of simple preservation and should continue the conversation about Houston's industries and technologies and about the city's wealth and workers, while viewing the aquatic route as a timeless symbol of opportunity. The ruins, suggesting fragments of stories, can serve as functional inspiration for other uses: a warehouse slab as a basketball court or sculpture installation; concrete footings as the beginning of an observation deck. Something should remain to ignite the historic memory of the corridor before redevelopment marches into the area, removing all remaining traces of the industries that built the region. Meanwhile, the following resources, still intact and quite functional, are chock-full of historic relevance.



EXAMPLE No 1: GRAIN ELEVATOR, 1926

The export grain elevator designed by the John S. Metcalf Company of Chicago is one of the few remaining structures that confirm the success of the Ship Channel in the early 20th century. Built in 1926 to satisfy export needs, the elevator was a public project resulting from the state-sanctified merger of the City Harbor Board and the Navigation District Commission that combined the two into a modern Port Commission and gave the port relative autonomy in operations, fundraising, and capital projects. The 1922 referendum approved by Houston voters that essentially separated the city from any port obligations was the impetus for many capital improvements along the bayou's edge. The 1926 grain elevator with its 1 million bushel storage capacity was soon enlarged in 1930 to store 3.5 million bushels. While the elevator remains one of the single most prominent landmarks on the Ship Channel and can still be seen from many points in the city, according to former Port of Houston Authority (PHA) executive director Thomas Kornegay, it is no longer functional for export grain due to the port's adoption of the ISO 14001:2004 environmental management standard. Currently, a portion of the warehouse is utilized by an importer of highly specialized, packaged whole-grain animal feed, but not much more is stored there.

In *Towards a New Architecture*, Le Corbusier presents mass as it relates to the empirical form and light using eight dramatic photographs of contemporary American and Canadian grain stores and elevators as examples. "Thus we have the American grain elevators and factories," he writes, "the magnificent first-fruits of the new age. The American engineers overwhelm with their calculations our expiring architecture." Composed of straightforward geometric cylinders and stacked cubes, the High Level Road facility at the port is just as formal and monumental as Corbusier's examples.

Years ago, concrete grain elevators were a common sight along the channel and symbolized the power of grain agriculture in Harris and surrounding counties. The question of what to do with this struc-

ture is surely in play or will soon be considered by the PHA. The January 2012 PHA meeting report included this agenda item statement: "The Port Commission approved the demolition and redevelopment plan for certain obsolete properties, many of which are nearly 70 years old, on the Houston Ship Channel or near the Turning Basin Terminal." Although the 1926 grain elevator is not included, a number of sheds, warehouses, and wharves in various states of functionality in the immediate area are specified in the demolition plan. The PHA anticipates a higher and better use for all of their properties in the vicinity of the Turning Basin, which have been cycling in and out of functionality over the past two decades. How will the 1926 export elevator fare during the inevitable redevelopment? Probably no better than so many of the other grain elevators that once punctuated shipping and trucking routes in the Houston area. PHA's 6.2 million bushel Public Elevator #2 and the Cargill Elevator in Channelview are still heavily used, while two extant facilities at Westview and Lumpkin and at Highway 290 and Long Point Road are no longer used for their original purpose. Actual projects that adaptively reuse concrete grain elevators and similar structures are gaining attention in the northern U.S., Canada, and other countries, but have by no means captured Houston's attention.

The Turning Basin is a powerful and historically meaningful location along the Ship Channel, and the 1926 grain elevator and stores could potentially survive as both rehabilitated program space and a monument dedicated to the Gulf Coast's immense agricultural and industrial heritage. What better way to bring immediacy to the Ship Channel's early years than with an observation deck on the 180- to 200-foot tall silos. In addition to taking the *M/V Sam Houston* boat tour, one could visit one of the oldest remaining facilities for handling agricultural products and learn about a time when moving goods to the East Coast markets from the Brazos River valley fueled the 1820-1830s race to explore Buffalo Bayou as a deep water route.



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EXAMPLE Nº 2: UNITED STATES APPRAISERS STORES, 1939

With a commanding view of the Turning Basin atop a hill, the building at 7300 Wingate Street was built for use as the United States Appraisers Stores. Originally serving under the Department of the Treasury, the federal appraiser was responsible for documenting the values and quantities of imports and exports passing through the Ship Channel and for setting tariffs on various goods. The cornerstone reveals that the building was a project of the Federal Works Agency, to which the Works Progress Administration was assigned, under supervising architect Louis A. Simon and supervising engineer Neal A. Melick. During their career in the Federal Works Agency, both Melick and Simon were responsible for hundreds of highly functional buildings, most of which are still in use and on the National Register of Historic Places. They include Fort Knox's Bullion Depository, U.S. Border Inspection stations in Arizona—the first of a new typology—and the Santa Monica Post Office, among many others. After the appraisers building sat vacant for many years, the federal government finally sold it in the late 1990s to a local private entity.

The Neoclassical structure is very similar to other works by Melick. Veneered in tan brick, the classically organized elevations are minimally detailed. The front elevation is very flat and includes horizontal

and vertical accent banding in limestone, while the east and west elevations have faintly detectable vertical window recesses in the brick veneer. Both elevation treatments are expressively moderne. Limestone crown molding, the pared-down baroque-styled entry stair on the exterior front, and a modified hip roof with classic red clay tiles create an eclectic mix. Its siting on a natural hill as well as on an eight-foot-high concrete basement level, in part to mitigate the uneven grade, completes the elements for a classical institutional landmark.

The building is a resource for both the Ship Channel and the community of Harrisburg. Located only about 400 yards from Hidalgo Park and the Harrisburg and Sunset Rail Trails, the building has vehicular access via 75th Street, and pedestrians and bicyclists can access the property through an extension of Avenue Q to Harbor Drive. The property could conceivably serve the community. Private reuse of the building with its proximity to the channel could pose security issues for the PHA, whereas a repurposing with PHA or other maritime partners would not. For instance, the building could serve as a community outreach center or a job training center for those wishing to enter maritime or port-related jobs.



EXAMPLE Nº 3: OFFICE BUILDING, 1914

Little is known about this small, simple building that has a prominent location on the south bank of a channel barge slip near Brady's Island. Owned by the port, the building is constructed of reinforced concrete with a basement level, one main floor, and a penthouse with an outdoor roof deck. An example of early classic modernism, similar in expression to designs by Irving Gill, the exterior looks to be in its original condition. Sited at the rear of the hilltop property, the building gives its occupants a worthwhile view past the barge slip to the larger channel operations beyond.

Most recently occupied in 1999 by Gantt Marine Service, Inc., a mooring operation, the building was previously occupied for some time by the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers. The Corps' presence on the Ship Channel is plausible when one realizes that this segment of the channel underwent dramatic improvements in the early 20th century. The Corps' involvement with the Ship Channel, however, goes back to Reconstruction, when it was finally settled that the "national government should invest in internal improvements," as noted by Marilyn Sibley in her history of the port, and the first U.S. survey of the channel was made. Longtime Houston boosters lobbied for a port of entry for Houston in direct competition with landowners further downstream toward Galveston Bay. In the end, the engineers deemed the economic

and environmental costs, such as constant and heavy erosion, were too great and risky to cut a deep-water access from Harrisburg to downtown Houston. Instead the huge amount of cutting and dredging approved in 1870 extended from Constitution Bend (the present day Turning Basin) to Galveston Bay. In 1903, the first million-dollar appropriation was made to dredge, straighten, and widen the bayou, and by 1912 capital improvements were in full force from the Turning Basin to Bolivar Point, uniformly widening and deepening the channel to 25 feet deep. In addition to the monumental scope of work of dredging the channel, the 52-mile project was a collaboration led by Jesse H. Jones between the Federal government and the local community represented by the City of Houston Harbor Board, the Harris County Houston Ship Channel Navigation District, and local private businesses in what would be the first-ever public-private partnership. Completed in September 1914, the same year the Panama Canal was finished, Houston's "modern" Ship Channel started at the Turning Basin, cut Morgan's Point, and cleared Red Fish Bar in Galveston Bay.

Of many buildings that popped up along the channel corridor at this catalytic time, the gem at 8200 Cypress still stands. By the way, the PHA is looking for a tenant for the office building.



EXAMPLE No 4: WORLD TRADE BUILDING, 1962

The PHA's World Trade Building is a curious example of what unique directions an adaptive reuse can take. In the 1960s the PHA had a presence in downtown, and in 1962 it commissioned Wilson Morris Crain + Anderson (WMCA) to design the World Trade Building at 1520 Texas Avenue. In the formal tradition of Kenneth Franzheim's Bank of the Southwest Building (1956), Skidmore, Owings & Merrill's First City National Bank Building (1960), both in Houston and completed before Emery Roth + Sons Pan Am Building (1963) in New York City, WMCA designed a modest, two-volume complex: an office tower and an engaged pavilion-style platform. Owned and operated by the port, the complex served as the first World Trade Building (Center) in the U.S. In an attempt to promote the Ship Channel, international trade, and worldwide cultural exchange, the offices of the Houston World Trade Association were located there, as were offices for shipping companies, freight forwarders, and foreign consulates. This was a time when Humble, Shell, Sinclair, Gulf, and other petroleum companies were consolidating their

administrative operations to Houston, creating one of the largest concentrations of petroleum business in the U.S. Amenities for trade members included offices, interpreters, administrative services, and a trade-reference library. In the platform volume was the main lobby, an auditorium, and meeting rooms, while the plinth top floor housed the private World Trade Club, with a restaurant where shipping and business executives and agents often lunched.

The port's executive offices were located in a small, separate three-story building on Capitol Avenue behind the World Trade Building. According to Kornegay, the PHA personnel were scattered: "The port director's office and the boardroom were on the third floor of the building. Purchasing, Trade Development, General Counsel, and Engineering were also in the building. Operations, Security, and Accounting were located at the Turning Basin Terminal in a small one-story building. Addi-

tionally, the Engineering department had grown and was moved to the World Trade Building in 1987." It was obvious that the two sites were impeding efficiency within the PHA, and a new administrative building was commissioned at High Ridge Road at the port in 1992. This was a critical act of separation between the port and the central business district.

Afterwards, the Houston Ship Channel's daily presence disappeared from the public's eyes. What happened to the International Style modern building that strived to bring a vibrant international energy to downtown Houston? After a couple of sales transactions, the renovated building, with a pseudo-classical makeover, is now a hotel near Minute Maid Park, while the World Trade Association operates under the auspices of the Greater Houston Partnership in their Smith Street offices. 🚫

