

spring 2005



AIA

Underconstruction

editorial



Downtown Tulsa was recently the recipient of a distinctly inauspicious award, when earlier this year Preservation Oklahoma placed the entire Tulsa Central Business District at the top of their annual 11 "Most Endangered Properties" list. The public announcement of the 2005 list was highlighted in a full-page article in the February 1 issue of the Tulsa World. POk has been assembling and publicizing this list for over 10 years and bases it on a similar model used by the National Trust for Historic Preservation. The publication of this annual list holds up to the public eye those buildings and properties of intrinsic significance that have suffered such long term neglect and abandonment that their continued existence is perilous, and their destruction is often imminent. This action in turn exposes any parties planning the demolition of such properties, and also galvanizes communities to take action to ensure the preservation and successful reuse of those properties. Given that Preservation Oklahoma's annual list has, to date, mainly named individual buildings, their identification of our entire downtown core emphasizes the gravity of our downtown's ongoing dismemberment.

If the news of our downtown's dubious new status were not enough of a blow, then the deafening silence that has followed has been even more damning. Very little public acknowledgement has been made by any of our

local politicians, nor from our various city and urban development entities, nor from any of our local citizen groups, and the protests following the announcement from a small group of concerned individuals were largely ignored. One can only

CONTINUED ON PAGE 5

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GRAB THE WRECKING BALL

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PHOTOS: NATHAN HARMON PHOTOGRAPHY



CONTINUED FROM PAGE 1

infer from such visible inaction an overwhelming apathy and ennui to this issue throughout our city, or that this is considered by many - elected representatives in particular - to be a thorny and unpopular issue. In fact, this is perhaps one of the best and most critical of all times to embrace this as an opportunity with substantial reward. Alternatively to ignore the issue at this of all times will surely cause the ultimate demise of our urban landscape, even with our planned new downtown facilities.

What we are talking about here is a fundamental urban planning issue that may quite literally determine the success or failure of our citizen-approved Vision 2025 projects slated for downtown Tulsa. The new structures and infrastructures intended to help spark our urban redevelopment will materially effect our downtown's urban fabric - its vehicular flow, its overall infrastructure, its appearance, its visual impact - such that they become in themselves tools of urban planning. Any effort devoted to an urban revitalization is in effect an urban planning effort. And, effective downtown building preservation is the first and simplest component of effective urban planning. Every city has its own unique character that distinguishes it from every other city. That uniqueness is found in the geography, climate, natural amenities, citizens, and its history and development made physical and real in the structures of commerce, government and entertainment built over the generations of time. Tulsa has its own very unique character embodied and best revealed in its own downtown buildings. Tulsans know well our city's proud legacy of one of the country's most extensive collections of American Art Deco architecture (even with our abysmal record of christening so many with a wrecking ball). We virtually defined that era with our architecture. For this city and its citizens to meekly allow the ongoing denuding of our downtown's irreplaceable character will severely compromise our very best efforts to breathe new life in our downtown. The new arena, renovated convention center and other planned downtown improvements will most assuredly not reach their intended mark of affecting any turnaround if they are sitting in the middle of a vacant, fractured and dismantled urban core, and robbed of the foundation of elegant older structures that best tell the story of Tulsa's history and growth.

During the city's process of selecting the design team for the Vision 2025 arena and convention improvements, Mayor LaFortune issued a mandate that expanded the scope of work for the winning team to include the development and presentation of a comprehensive long range master plan for downtown Tulsa, which was called the Mayor's Challenge. In a 2003 interview I conducted with our mayor, he intelligently suggested that the master plan should include the identification of all older downtown buildings of significance within the Interdispersal Loop, and a proposed use for any that are vacant or in disrepair and deemed of sufficient importance to be saved. Disappointingly, the Mayor's Challenge has yet to be realized. However, when it was still alive, Cesar Pelli, the world-renowned architect in charge of designing the arena, was asked what he would suggest as a first measure in a comprehensive downtown master plan for Tulsa. His response was to

put an absolute moratorium for three years on any further building demolition until such a master plan was completed and codified.

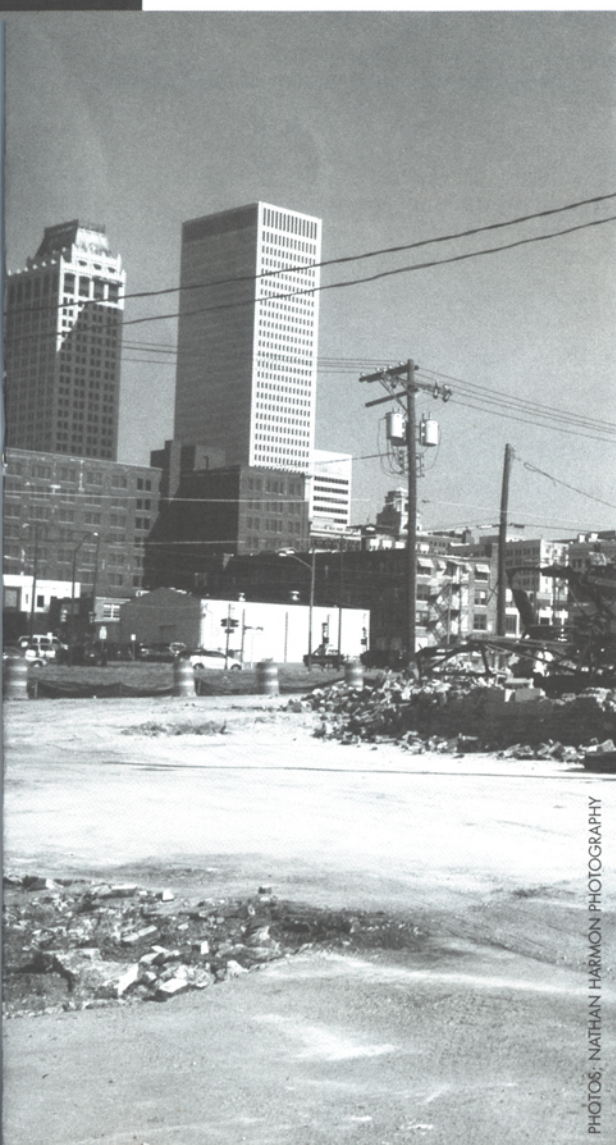
So, where do we go from here? Here are a few thoughts and suggestions from one avowed brick hugger:

- Tulsa's public officials, politicians and citizens need to absorb the gravity of POK's announcement. Preservation Oklahoma is one of a few organizations that are the litmus paper that exposes often discomfiting truths in our culture, and in this case in our own community.
- Our elected and appointed representatives in charge of the Vision 2025 process must include in our efforts the development of a current single document comprehensive downtown master plan that incorporates all construction improvements either confirmed, planned or envisioned, and all existing buildings within the IDL, denoting current use and if currently abandoned, denoting possibilities for future use.
- Attractive state and local tax credits to encourage the adaptive reuse or improvement of buildings meeting the criteria of historic, architectural or other significance should be made available. This will enhance the economic viability of rehabilitating older vacant buildings over scraping them for more surface parking.
- Tulsa must adopt a document of tough protective regulations for all buildings within the IDL, as many other cities have done with success - regulations with sharp teeth - and a designated review board to consider valid exceptions much like the Board of Adjustments that reviews potential valid exceptions to the local zoning ordinances. Much could be accomplished in this regard by allowing the Tulsa Preservation Commission more authority to operate within its original ordinance.

Currently there are a scant few protections of any kind for any buildings within the IDL, thus allowing any building owner or developer the right to tear down any downtown building regardless of its size, beauty, or architectural significance, and that can happen without triggering so much as a preliminary review by any municipal body.

- All citizens who are impassioned to see and/or participate in creating this kind of paradigm shift should write letters to the Mayor's Office, or better yet to our local newspaper. Our elected representatives and downtown development entities will be forced to take notice when citizens are voicing their concern and anger in a public forum.

Preservation Oklahoma is the latest of many entities sending Tulsa an S.O.S., and we will only expose our ongoing willful ignorance if we continue to look the other way. We and our elected bodies and their appointed boards have vapidly allowed for too long the unchecked dismemberment of the spirit of our downtown, and it is time - and an excellent time - to adopt some intelligent and balanced measures to preserve the remaining fraction of our built history. At a time when all of us have committed our own tax money to rebuilding our urban core, it is utterly senseless that we allow a clear path for anybody to destroy any building within the urban core as they please without question. If Tulsa is truly committed to a revitalized downtown, we must couple the positive new construction efforts underway with a committed public/private partnership to preserving the remaining valuable urban fabric and seeking alternative uses for those buildings in danger of being demolished. If we do not, all we may have to show future generations is a 10 volume set of Tulsa Art Deco books with beautiful photographs of what we used to have.



PHOTOS: NATHAN HARMON PHOTOGRAPHY

GRAB THE WRECKING BALL

Tulsa gets another S.O.S.

