



MONTE VISTA

120 YEARS OF HISTORY IN THE MAKING

article and photos by Elizabeth Porterfield

The Monte Vista Historic District provides a glimpse back into San Antonio's magnificent residential development of the early 20th century. Located slightly north of downtown and bounded by US Hwy 281, Hildebrand, San Pedro, and Ashby Place, Monte Vista boasts some of the city's finest homes built between 1890 and the 1930s. Architectural styles within the neighborhood include Georgian and Renaissance Revival, Classical Revival, Spanish Eclectic, Tudor Revival and many more. Some of the city's premier architects of the 1920s, including J. Riely Gordon (designer of the Bexar County Courthouse) and Atlee B. Ayres (whose prolific work includes the downtown Tower Life Building and the "Taj Mahal" at Randolph Air Force Base), constructed homes in the neighborhood. The range of house styles, nestled among magnificent oak trees and lushly landscaped lawns,

is striking and well worth a visit. The shaded streets are perfect for walking or taking a short driving tour.

San Antonio was the largest city in Texas by 1920, and the decades of the early 20th century were the city's "Gilded Age." Streetcars played a significant role in neighborhood development, beginning with mule-drawn cars in 1878. Electric trolleys soon replaced these, and streetcar neighborhoods were constructed across San Antonio. Monte Vista was no exception, with streetcar routes along San Pedro and McCullough Avenue providing easy access to downtown. Monte Vista's significant collection of historic homes, ranging from Craftsman bungalows and Tudor cottages to palatial estates, remains a lasting tribute to this time of great growth and development in San Antonio.

The Monte Vista Historic District encompasses fourteen subdivisions that were platted throughout the early decades of the 20th century. Laurel Heights, the first of these subdivisions, was developed in 1890 and remains reflected in the street name of Laurel Heights Place and the Laurel Heights United Methodist Church on Woodlawn Avenue. Other early plats within the neighborhood included Summit Place, Summit Terrace, and Gramercy Place among others. Historic brick entrance gates at Gramercy Place denote the original subdivision. Monte Vista was the largest of these subdivisions and is today the name of the entire 100-block historic district.

Just a few of the "must see" places within the Monte Vista Historic District include the Landa Library, the Bushnell Apartments, and Kings Highway. The Landa Library, at 233 Bushnell, was built in 1928 as a residence for Harry and Hannah Landa. The grand Mediterranean style home on five acres was donated to the City of San Antonio in 1946 for use as a public library. Today, the property serves as the Landa Library and is open to the public. The beautifully landscaped grounds were recently redesigned and include a public playground. The interior of the home is well worth a stop and features original decorative tile work and marble floors.

Across the street from the Landa Library is the Bushnell. Completed in 1926 as a luxury apartment house, the Bushnell is one of only a few high-rise apartment buildings constructed in San Antonio during this time. Today, the elegant interior retains the original elevators, black and white marble floors, and ballroom. The roof boasts a large terrace with spectacular views of the San Antonio skyline.

Kings Highway, located slightly south of Bushnell between McCullough and San Pedro, is one of the streets in Monte Vista that you won't want to miss. The homes range in age from pre-World War I to the 1930s and reflect a wide variety of styles. Known as the "Avenue of the Cattle Barons," some of the most significant homes of the city were constructed here for many of San Antonio's prominent families.

Today, Monte Vista is protected as a historic district, but in the 1960s and 70s a number of significant historic homes at the southern end of the neighborhood were demolished. As a result, neighborhood residents pledged to protect the neighborhood from further loss. Monte Vista became San Antonio's third local historic district in 1975. The Monte Vista Historic District is also listed in the National Register of Historic Places.

The Monte Vista Historic District, with its stunning collection of historic homes, reflects the story of San Antonio's past. Take some time to enjoy the quiet beauty of the historic neighborhood, either on foot or by car, and enjoy a glimpse back into San Antonio's "Gilded Age."

For more information on the Monte Vista Historic District, visit the Monte Vista Historical Association website at www.montevista-sa.org.