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**+ STRUCTURAL SURVIVAL**  
Why historic preservation pays

## **History in the Making**

There's new money in old buildings. Historic preservation pay dirt is tangible, with vision and an eye toward the future. San Antonio is poised to cash in, if we can look back and see tomorrow.

### **ET CETERA**

Saying Thank You, Culinaria and SA Birthdays **38**

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Eva Longoria's new cookbook, Jim Harter's art trip and Tejano wisdom **40**

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# TO PRESERVE AND PROTECT

LEAVE BYGONE-ERA ROMANTICISM AT THE DOOR. HISTORIC PRESERVATION REQUIRES SURVIVAL OF THE FUTURIST.

BY RACHEL BENAVIDEZ

**E**xtinguishment happens fast these days. Trend-to-trash devolution comes for almost everything from chart-topping music to cutting-edge fashion. It happens, perhaps especially for aging structures that have outlived their usefulness, integrity or architectural period. And it happens every day in historic neighborhoods like Dignowity Hill, the city's first exclusive residential suburb and one of the first to be challenged by industrial encroachment—railroads, factories, mass transit.

In April, a string of Dignowity homes was given an evolutionary boost, a small nudge toward survival, when the city's Office of Historic Preservation (OHP) brought its S.T.A.R. Service Project to bear. The acronym for Students Together Achieving Revitalization holds true. With supply donations and expert volunteers working alongside students from the UTSA College of Architecture, the teams tended to minor repairs and touchups. Small fixes for windows, siding and porches, yard maintenance and painting made a big difference for homeowners who submitted applications for

assistance earlier in the year.

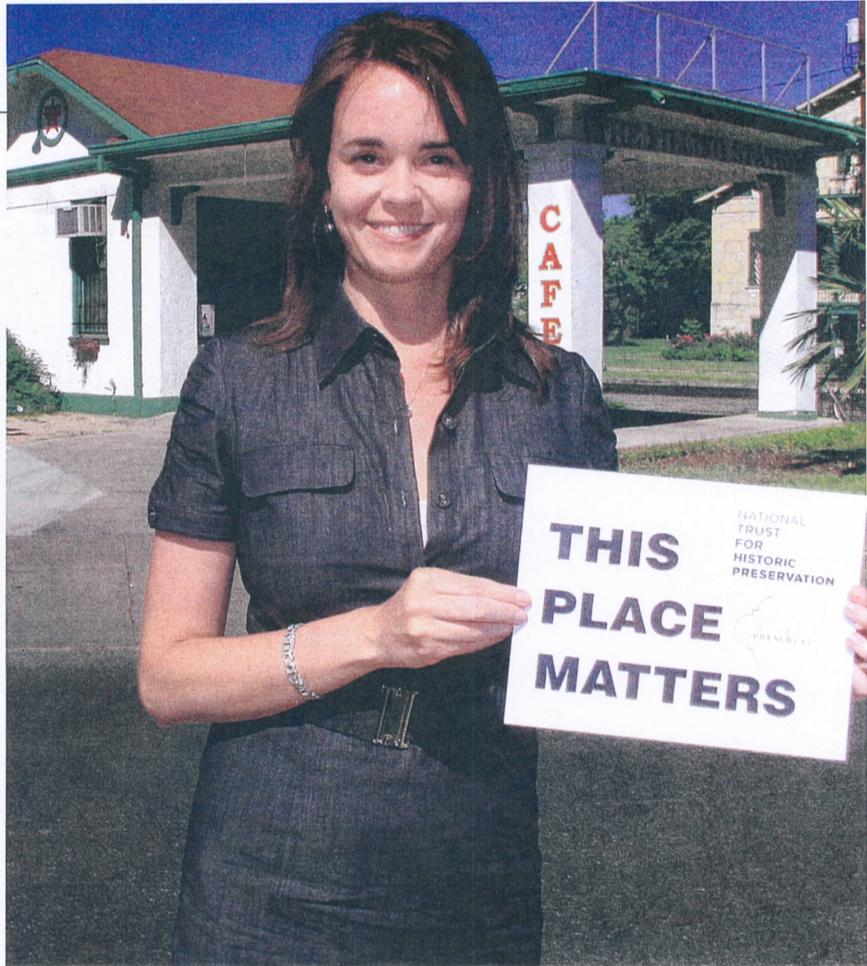
The project is part of the OHP's education and outreach efforts, it feeds the focus on revitalizing a central neighborhood, and is some of the department's "most interesting" work, according to Shanon Peterson Wasielewski, the city's historic preservation officer. "It's one of the things we did for very little money and big impact," says Wasielewski. The Texas A&M University graduate studied history and economics and earned her master's degree in public service and administration with a focus on nonprofit management. Once during a college field trip to San Antonio, she met with the historic preservation officer who explained her work, and, "I said to my friend, 'I want her job someday.'" In 2008, she got it.

At 35, Wasielewski's historical perspective is more theory than anecdote, and the economic climate is dryer than in the 1990s and early 2000s, when she first visited here. But in the face of bare-bones budgets and questioning financial priorities, like investing in preservation, she knows enough to listen to good advice. "One of

my mentors always said, 'We lose our community character one reasonable decision at a time.' It's easy to say: 'It's just one house on one block. What's the big deal?' But if you allow that one and the next one and the next one, pretty soon it becomes a big deal."

There are key merits by which to measure the value of historic preservation. And none of them has to do with a longing for the past. The bottom line rests on a modern concept: sustainability. "We talk a lot these days about sustainability. Historic preservation is truly sustainable in an economical, cultural and environmental way," Wasielewski says.

It promotes recycling of building materials and the responsible reuse of existing infrastructure. It becomes an economic and business development tool because it requires more labor than new construction. It contributes to heritage tourism—a huge market in San Antonio. "People come here because we have embraced our historic character and heritage and as a result, a visitor who is traveling for that reason is statistically shown to spend more money and stay



From left: A home in historic Dignowity Hill that has been preserved; Shanon Peterson Wasielewski at The Filling Station on South St. Mary's Street during the National Trust for Historic Preservation's "This Place Matters" photo contest, going on this month.

## → NAME THIS PLACE

How well do you know your historical landmarks? Take our architectural scavenger hunt to identify these iconic San Antonio buildings. Check back every month for new clues from the Office of Historic Preservation.

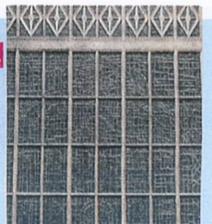
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longer,” Wasielewski says. And then, of course, it’s culturally sustainable. “Historic resources are a huge part of what makes us *San Antonio* and gives us our sense of place,” she says. “For all those reasons it’s important.” Plus, it’s really cool.

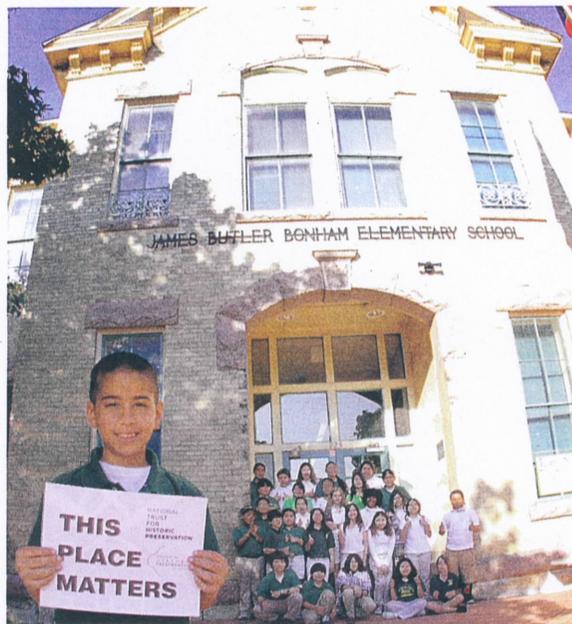
Arguably, the city’s hippest restaurants, art spaces and residential developments are being carved out of historic areas. “Exciting projects like the Pearl are creating a lot of energy and vibrancy for the city’s core areas,” Wasielewski says. The Historic Pearl Brewery is in the Museum Reach section of the River Walk—1.3 miles of reinvented public art space and linear park. Its ongoing renovation includes the introduction of La Gloria, Il Sogno and Sandbar restaurants, event space, a new concert venue and residential units inside mostly existing structures. Both the Museum Reach and the Pearl’s iconic smokestacks were honored in May 2010 at the San Antonio Conservation Society’s Historic Preservation Awards.

“The best part about these places is seeing them have *new* use,” Wasielewski says. “There are people out there and there are impressions out there that it’s about freezing something in time and going back, and it’s really not about that. In order for historic resources to be valuable, they have to be viable, contributing properties to today’s life. So they kind of evolve, over time.”

The best examples of viable historic properties stand downtown, where hotels, offices, restaurants, parks and living spaces are teeming with traffic. In 2010, when Mayor Julián Castro declared this the “Decade of Downtown” (earning him the “Downtowner of the Year” title), it spurred a flurry of activity and new attention for Center City projects, overseen by the new-ish Center City Development Office (CCDO).

Center City encompasses the more traditional neighborhoods—Dignowity, Monte Vista, Tobin Hill, Monticello, Avenida Guadalupe, downtown, Southtown—what’s inside Loop 410, in a general sense. “Pre-interstate,” Wasielewski explains. The goal of the OHP, CCDO and conservation/preservation groups they partner with is to make it easier to develop or operate a business within this urban core. “Certainly there is quality development in all parts of our city. But it’s easy to go out and find an empty tract of land and develop something on it,” she says. “It’s harder, from a staging standpoint, to deal with existing infrastructure, so really what we want to do is level the playing field, at least.”

Modernizing historic amenities and attractions so that vintage meets avant-garde is the new equalizer. In late March, Wasielewski could be found on a barge in the river, mapping a smartphone tour of the original Robert. H. H. Hugman features along the River Walk, including his office and the Hugman Bridge. Hugman is the visionary and architect of the River Walk, which opened in 1941. The interactive digital tour (May 10) is one of several planned for Historic Preservation Month in May. It will allow



Above: Bonham Elementary students in the King William Historic District declare that their place matters; Below: The San Antonio Museum of Art in the Museum Reach of the river; a preservation workshop in progress.



independent tours, marked by bronze plaques that resemble the stamps Hugman put on his original River Walk drawings. Other events include guided running, walking and cycling tours, the Amazing Preservation Race and the “This Place Matters” photo contest with the National Trust for Historic Preservation (complete schedule at [sanantoniomag.com](http://sanantoniomag.com)).

“To see the original fabric that people love, and how it has had to evolve to accommodate new use, to comply with ADA accessibility, and how it’s done in a way that still respects the original intent but is accessible to everyone, that’s what I love the most,” Wasielewski says. “We’re preparing for a better future because we’re protecting what is unique and desirable about our city... Once we let a property go or make a significant change, we aren’t able to get it back.” ★

## Preservation Month Events

### May 5

State of Preservation Announcement and Reception at Spanish Governor’s Palace, 105 Plaza de Armas

### May 7

High School Student Infill Design Competition Awards at AIA Offices at Pearl, 200 E. Grayson, Ste. 110

Los Bexarenos Genealogical Society Presentation at Central Library, 600 Soledad

Westside Cultural Resource Survey

SA Historical Architectural Styles Presentation at Central Library, 600 Soledad

### May 8

Guided Running/Walking Tour of Downtown, [saconservation.org](http://saconservation.org)

### May 10

Unveiling of Hugman Features Tour on the River Walk

### May 13

The Amazing Preservation Race, Start/Finish at Market Square

### May 21

Kids’ Amazing Preservation Race in King William Historic District

### May 24

Unveiling of updated Texas Star Trail Walking Tour of Downtown

### May 26

Guided Running/Walking Tour in Brackenridge Park

### Ongoing

“This Place Matters” photo contest ([sanantonio.gov/historic](http://sanantonio.gov/historic) for more information)