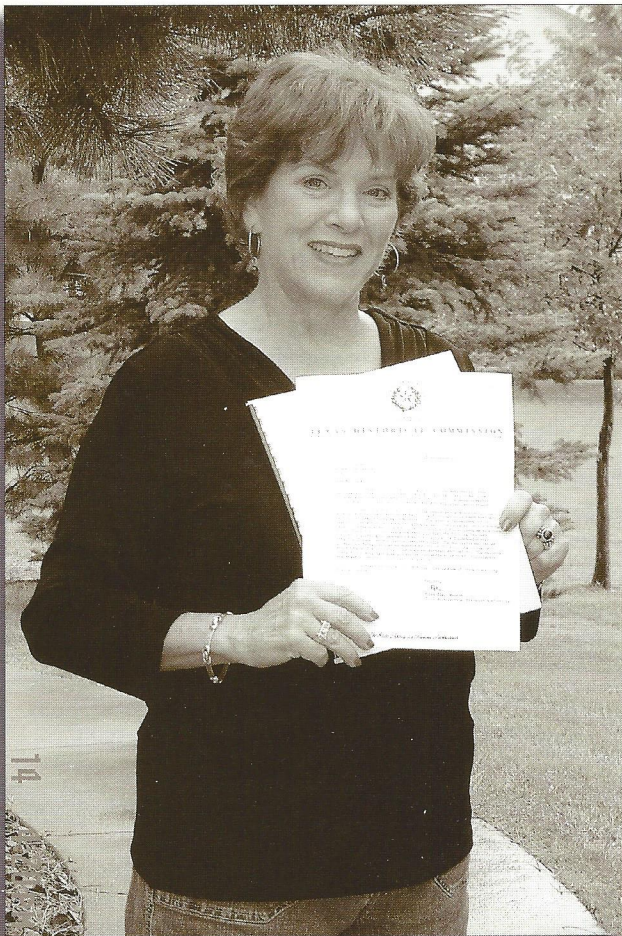


Preserving Temple Beth Israel:

The story of one woman making a difference

By Carol Krauss Mark



Carol Mark proudly displaying a letter from the Texas Historical Commission informing her of the progress made towards her goal of preserving the old Temple Beth Israel building.

“Architecture is the printing-press of all ages and gives a history of the state of society in which the structure was erected.”¹ This is the tale of a monument to religious freedom and my efforts to preserve this landmark.

The story begins with the discovery of the New World and the very first Jews to arrive in America. Documents show that Jews were working as part of the crew for Christopher Columbus in 1492. By 1776 and the War for Independence, there were an estimated 2,000 Jews residing in America and taking part in all facets of everyday life. The first Jewish synagogue had been dedicated in Newport, Rhode Island just a few years earlier in 1763.

Severe persecution of the Jewish people in the 1830s in Eastern Europe encouraged a major immigration of those “poor and oppressed” to America. They settled in various towns and cities throughout the country. Due to the small population of Jews in Texas, there were no synagogues or Jewish cemeteries. Back then, rabbis traveled between towns to perform services commonly known as “marrying ‘em and burying ‘em.”

By 1844, the Jewish population in Houston had grown large enough to support the creation of the “Hebrew Cemetery,” later renamed the Beth Israel Cemetery. The population continued to grow and ten years later, Congregation Beth Israel was formed, making it the first Jewish house of worship in Texas.

Needing a permanent meeting place, Congregation Beth Israel built its first synagogue on Franklin Street in the original Second Ward in 1874, just 29 years after Texas became a state. When the building became too small for their needs, the members of the congregation built a second temple several blocks south on Lamar at Crawford Street. Congregation Beth Israel’s presiding rabbi, Dr. Henry Barnston, described the structure as, “the handsomest Temple in the States and one of the finest in the South.”²

ABOUT THE AUTHOR: Carol Mark, a native Houstonian, has been recognized for her volunteer work and her courageous stance in the Jewish community. She is an award winning photographer, attending photography schools such as the Glassel School at the Museum of Fine Arts, Houston and Anderson Ranch, Snowmass. Carol has two children and four grandchildren. Presently, Carol resides in Colorado.



The second temple building on Crawford Street displayed majestic Roman and Byzantine influences, as seen in the photograph. The building was vacated in 1948 and demolished in the early 1950s.

During his 49-year tenure, Rabbi Barnston became one of Houston's outstanding leaders, and was instrumental in forming the Houston Symphony Society and the Museum of Fine Arts, Houston.³ He worked alongside such notable Houstonians as Miss Ima Hogg. The Congregation included several prominent Houstonians, who were also integrated into the larger business and cultural communities in the city. Among those were the Levy family, large donors to the Congregation and community. Miss Harriet Levy contributed significantly to the cultural life of Houston. Haskell and Abe Levy founded Levy Brothers, one of Houston's first department stores, located in downtown Houston. Another congregant, Simon Sakowitz, co-founded Sakowitz Brothers and also chaired the Beth Israel Building Committee.

Meanwhile, in 1908, a Jewish Austrian immigrant, Joseph Finger (1887-1953) arrived in Houston. He opened his own architecture firm in 1913, and embarked on a forty-year career as one of Houston's most successful architects. His distinctive works greatly affected the architectural landscape of the city. He designed such prominent buildings as the Plaza Apartment Hotel, the Beth Israel Mausoleum, and West House in Clear Lake, which is now the Lunar Science Institute. He also designed Jefferson Davis Hospital (with Alfred C. Finn), Houston City Hall, Houston Municipal Airport Terminal, the Harris County Courthouse, several

distinctive homes, as well as Levy's and Battelstein's department stores in downtown Houston.

Congregation Beth Israel commissioned him to design their third temple building. His design exemplified a proto-modern style of architecture, which he himself described as a Greek and Egyptian motif. This design reflected the nineteenth-century tradition of Jewish religious architecture. Completed in 1924, the new temple building was located at Austin and Holman, an area where a large population of the Jewish community resided. Most Jews lived in surrounding neighborhoods, such as the Riverside/MacGregor area. The Jewish Community Center was later built nearby on Hermann Drive at Almeda Road.

In the 1950s, the growth of the Congregation and the issue of "block busting" caused the migration of the Jews once again. This time the trend was to southwest Houston where Congregation Beth Israel followed with yet another new temple, at their present day location on South Braeswood.

This is where I entered the picture...

In 1984, while taking photography classes at the Glassell School at Museum of Fine Arts, Houston, I was looking for interesting subjects. Something different I thought would be to photograph the lovely old temple building where my family and I had attended synagogue while I was growing up. The building, Mr. Finger's proto-modern structure, had been purchased by the Houston Independent School District/Houston Community



The third Beth Israel building located on Austin Street was built in 1925 by renowned architect, Joseph Finger. Today, the building has been given a second life as the Heinen Theatre, a part of the Fine Arts Department at Houston Community College.

Courtesy Houston Metropolitan Research Center, Houston Public Library

College, which used it for their Performing Arts theater.

While trying to get permission to enter and photograph the building, I found out that it was going to be defaced and made to look like the adjacent San Jacinto High School building. The high school was comprised of the South End Junior High School, which had been built between 1912-1914, and the two wings built in 1936 by none other than Joseph Finger. Many notable Houstonians attended San Jacinto High School throughout the years, including David Westheimer, Marvin Zindler, Denton Cooley, and Walter Cronkite. My mom, Beverly Nussbaum Krauss Sheer Painter, and I also graduated from there.

The Temple defaced! I was enraged! This building was not only part of our country's heritage, but it was part of my family's heritage. After all, my grandmother, Regina Nussbaum, served twice as President of the Sisterhood, and both my grandmother and my mother had taught religious school there. It was the hub of our social and family life.

I decided to find out more about the building, which led to an investigation into the history of Jews in Houston. Through my research I discovered that my mother's great-grandfather was one of the first rabbis in Texas—and for Congregation Beth Israel.

I began talking with various organizations trying to find 'the' group that shared my belief that the old temple building must be preserved and would work toward that end. Naively, I thought there must have been some group that could take over my crusade. All of the organizations I contacted offered vocal support for my efforts, but none offered to lead my crusade.

Phone conversations and meetings became my way of life. Through my grassroots movement I gained support from the following groups:

National Register Department, Texas Historical
Commission, Peter F. Maxson
Texas Antiquities Committee, Texas Historical
Commission, R. S. Mabry
Congregation Beth Israel
American Institute of Architects
The Heritage Society
Greater Houston Preservation Alliance
South Main Center Association
Historical Office of Rice University
Save the Arts, Restore
Students Group, HCC
Chief of Protocol, Mayor's Office
Women of Hadassah
Larry Mers, Head, Fine Arts Department, HCC
National Council of Jewish Women
Second Generation Holocaust Survivors
Texas Jewish Historical Society
Jewish Herald-Voice
Jewish Federation of Greater Houston
Midtown Civic Club
B'nai B'rith Youth Organization

I learned that even a building placed on the National Register of Historic Places could easily be altered or destroyed. If the owner decided to change the physical integrity of that building, it would simply be removed from the National Register. If, however, the building were accepted as a State Archaeological Landmark by the Texas Antiquities Committee, it would be protected. By the

Nostalgic visit prompts effort to save temple

Woman focuses on heritage thanks to photography course

time I arrived on the scene, the temple was already on the National Register of Historic Places, but did not have the State designation. So I set out to have the building nominated for Texas recognition as a landmark. The designation would also make state funds available to help keep the building in good repair, which proved to be an added attraction.

I made an appointment with Tarrant Fendley, Chairman of the Board of Trustees for the Houston Community College System, to discuss the situation. He was very helpful and even arranged for Houston Independent School District Board/Houston Community College (HISD/HCC) to give some artifacts from the old temple building to Congregation Beth Israel for its new location. Most importantly, he explained that our meeting was very timely since there was going to be an open Board meeting with the architect, Charles Boelson, the next morning to finalize plans for Mr. Finger's temple building. The architect intended to make the entire campus of the Houston Independent School District, including our beloved temple, architecturally congruent. Mr. Fendley put me on the docket to go before the Board to state my case.

At the next morning's meeting, HISD/HCC planned to give their final approval of Mr. Boelson's architectural plans, as the money had already been allocated, with plans drawn. I had five minutes in front of the HISD Board to explain my desire to save the building. I was to address the HISD/HCC Board chaired by Superintendent Dr. Billy Reagen. Others present at that time were Dr. J.B. Whiteley, President of HCC Systems, and Board Member Kathy Whitmire, just to name a few. With little public speaking experience, I dreaded going in front of an audience of such prominent individuals. But I convinced myself that my cause was of the utmost importance. After a sleepless, angst-filled night, I went before the Board, stated my case, and even survived a long question and answer period.

I must have said something right, because the HISD Board and the architect asked for a meeting the next morning at the temple site for further discussions. Eventually the HISD Board agreed to preserve this old temple building. As a bonus, since there was enough money saved from sealing the brick instead of applying the marblecrete, a much-needed elevator could be purchased.

I was elated. The temple building is now a State Archaeological Landmark as well as listed in the National Register

of Historic Places, Antiquities National Registry, and on the Texas Registry for Historical Buildings. I think that my ultimate success in saving the Temple building from defacement was in getting so many diverse groups and organizations to back my endeavor. Not only did each group inspire me in its own way to continue my pursuit, but also, collectively the various groups presented an impressive coalition of support that the Board could not ignore.

Most excitingly, the building's adaptive re-use has brought it full circle. Throughout history, temples were not only places of worship; they were also used as cultural centers. With pride,

this temple building serves a purpose every day as a cultural art center for the Houston Independent School District/ Houston Community College System. Renamed the E.R. Heinen Theater, the building now serves as a home for the Fine Arts Department's music, dance, and drama programs.

This landmark stands as a reminder that as temples in Europe were being destroyed and millions of Jews were being murdered, we Americans prospered and worshipped in freedom. This building is a monument to the liberty of all Americans and a reminder of the importance of preserving structures that symbolize that liberty. ♦

100 YEARS OF DOMINICAN TRADITION AND EXCELLENCE

This year marks the 100th anniversary of St. Agnes Academy and the 50th anniversary of St. Pius X High School, two Dominican high schools in the Houston area. This year Dominican institutions all over the world will commemorate 800 years of collaboration with families and communities of faith and learning. Mutuality, equality, and respect between men and women engaged in a common mission of praising, blessing, and preaching have been practiced and renewed in institutions of study and prayer all over the world. It is the essence of Dominican spirituality and lifestyle and is taught as the four pillars of Dominican charism: study, prayer, community, and preaching.

This important milestone year is dedicated to the memory of the sisters who founded St. Agnes Academy in 1906 and St. Pius X High School in 1956,



St. Agnes Academy, 1906-2006. Learning Today, Leading Tomorrow

including Mothers Agnes Magevny, Mary Pauline Gannon, Catherine Kenney, Angela O'Kane, and Adeline Tierney. Under the current direction of heads of school Jane

Meyer O.P. and Donna Pollard O.P., the faculty and students of both schools continue to flourish in an environment of reciprocal respect and support in all areas of academic and extra-curricular activity.

The history of these schools and the lives of the sisters who built them were recorded in rich detail by Sister Sheila Hackett in her book, *Dominican Women in Texas*. The St. Agnes Academy centennial book, *St. Agnes Academy: 100 Years of Dominican Tradition & Excellence*, edited by Megan Clark Dillingham, further illustrated a tradition and memory beloved and honored by tens of thousands of benefactors, faculty, and students. This tribute is offered on their behalf with profound gratitude. ♦

—The Dominican Community of Houston



St. Pius X High School, 1956-2006. Teaching Truth, Preaching Justice