



A Place of Re-invention

By Marie-Theresa Hernández



It has been said that Houston would never have become a major city without air-conditioning. Yet it was bustling by the early twentieth century even when temperatures reached a drenching 100 degrees. Businessman Jesse H. Jones commissioned the thirty-seven-story Gulf Oil Corporation Building in 1927. Its construction was a testament to the future promise of Houston. The plans did not include air conditioning, but that did not detract from the building's success. The only thing that slowed the progress of Houston was the Depression, which came months after the building's completion.

In 2022, when University of Houston photography students from my World Cultures and Anthropology class excitedly entered downtown Houston to begin their photographic journey, they did not think so much of the past. At first, they were fascinated by the ultramodern construction of Houston's first post-modern buildings, Pennzoil Place, built in 1975, and the TC Energy Center, built in 1983 as the Republic Bank Center. Yet, eventually, they found themselves at Market Square in the oldest commercial building still in use, La Carafe. Then they moved on to the Julia Ideson Building of the Houston Public Library and marveled at the reproduction *Venus de Milo* statue on the second floor. The following week they spent one long afternoon in Sam Houston Park, which was established in 1900 as the city's second park, after Emancipation Park in Third Ward founded in 1872.

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← **The House That Would Have Been.**

In a short tunnel on Bagby Street under Houston's Bayou Place hangs an art installation by Stephen Korns, Houston Oracle in Two Parts, this being one of them. It looks like the front of a small, early house; inside the window, a video shows an archivist flipping through images of 100 Houston families from 1870 to 1970, and audio poses questions about life in Houston.

Photo by Merari Portillo.

→ **Old Clock.**

The design of the TC Energy Center, formerly the Bank of America Building, completed in 1983 is awe-inspiring. At the center of the grand lobby stands an eighteen-foot-tall clock, which was one of 300 clocks like it produced by the Seth Thomas Company in 1914.

Photo by Omar Alvarez Chavez.

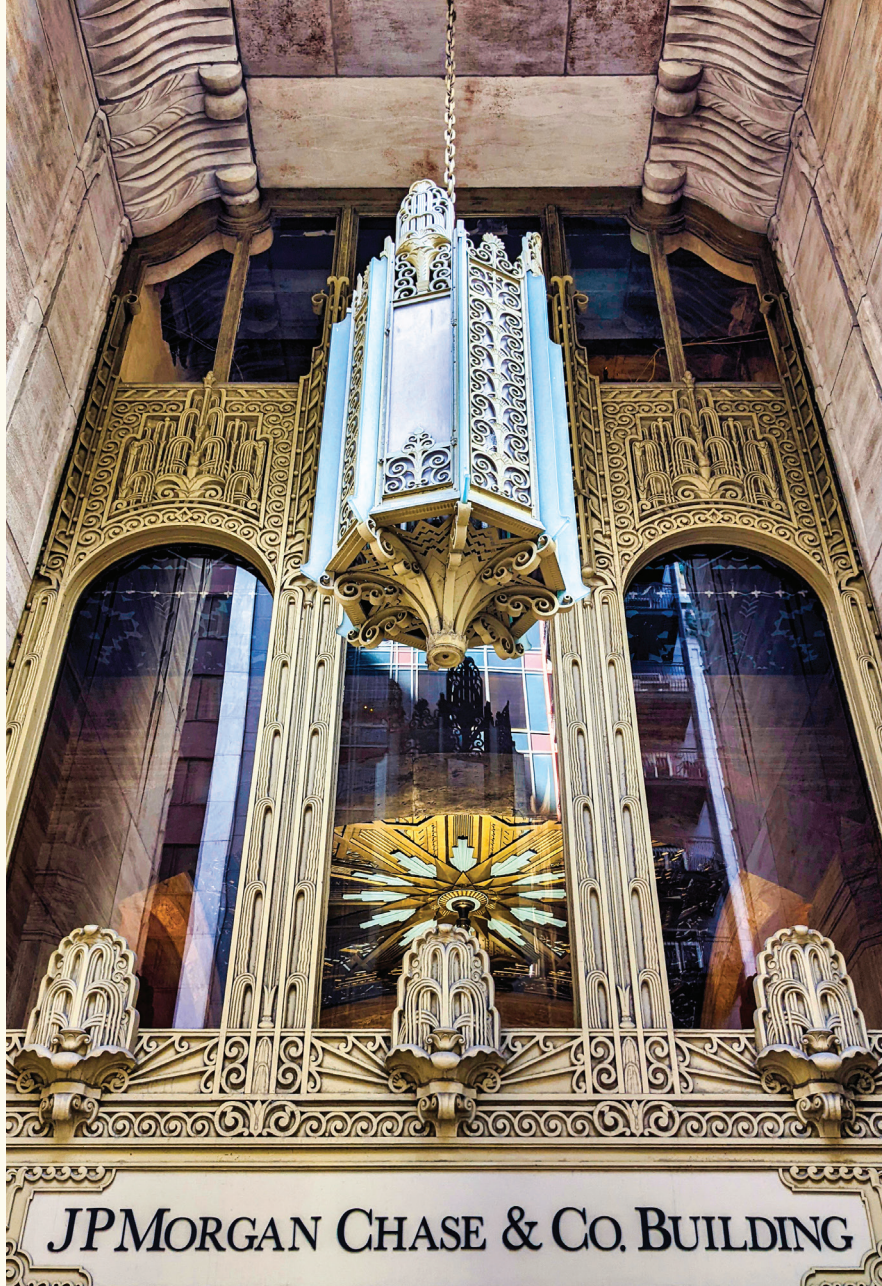
← **Two Buildings.**

Antioch Missionary Baptist Church, constructed between 1875 and 1879, sits nestled on Clay and Shaw between the 1400 Smith building and Three Allen Center. The founders probably never imagined it would exist alongside these oversized creations of glass and steel.

Photo by Merari Portillo.

*The image for this article that appears on the table of contents, **Pierced Heart**, is by Daniel Galvez-Zuniga. The stained glass at Antioch Missionary Baptist Church carries intense symbolism with a heart pierced by a sword, bringing to mind church members and visitors who lived through enslavement, Reconstruction, and Jim Crow.*





← **Chase Bank.**

The Gulf Building, now the JP Morgan Chase & Co. Building, was commissioned in 1927 and completed in 1929 by Jesse H. Jones, who named it for its largest tenant, the Gulf Oil Company. At thirty-seven stories high, it remained the tallest building in Houston until 1963.

Photo by Husnaa Muhibullah.

↑ **Amtrak in Colors.**

The current Amtrak station was erected in 1960 to replace the 1934 Houston Grand Central Station, which was demolished to make room for the central post office (now POST Houston). Students from the class were drawn to the colorful graffiti of the train cars.

Photo by Lauren Morton.

→ **Faded Memory.**

Originally opened in 1927 as The Petroleum Building, the Cambria Hotel is seen here from the Catalyst. The foggy night gave an ominous glow to the adjacent Federal Detention Center and Houston's skyline with its mixture of old and new buildings.

Photo by Beatriz Bautista.

← **The Pastor.**

Reverend Lou McElroy, pastor of the Antioch Missionary Baptist Church, stands in front of a stained-glass window with portraits of previous church leaders, urging viewers to look into the past. Community leader Jack Yates, right, established Antioch in Freedman's Town as Houston's first African American Baptist church in 1866.

Photo by Tareen Kazi.







← **La Carafe.**

La Carafe occupies Houston's oldest operating commercial building in its original location, built in 1860, and is one of the city's oldest bars. Located in Old Market Square, it is now a relic that has survived the modernization of downtown that eliminated many other landmarks and buildings.

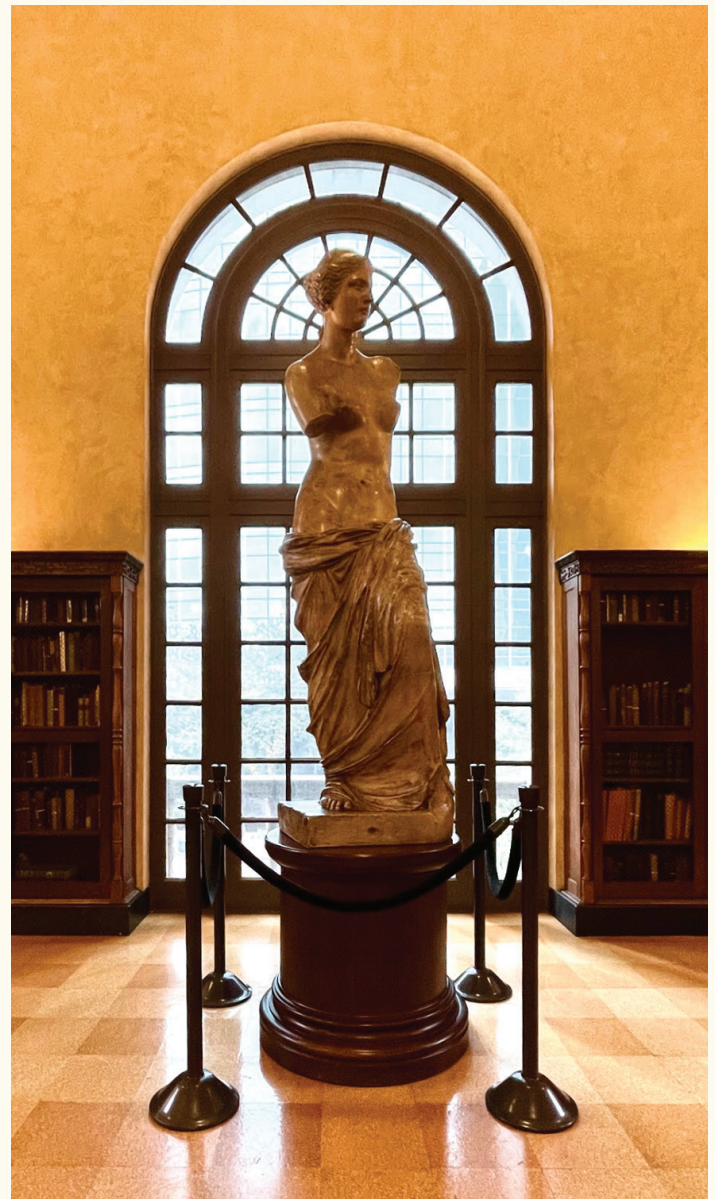
Photo by Danny Olivares.

↓ **Venus de Milo Statue.**

Women in the Public School Art League, as part of its art education program, purchased this reproduction of the Venus de Milo statue for Houston schools 119 years ago. Victorian values of that era made the statue too controversial, and the all-male school board rejected the gift. The league then presented it to the Houston Public Library, where it eventually came to reside in the Julia Ideson Building.

Photo by Candida Letitia Okomo Esono.

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In our conversations, the students often talked of downtown's corporate life, which differed significantly from theirs as students. While they took many abstract photographs of the newer buildings, they became almost obsessed with photographing the few traces of the past that they could find. They wondered why Houston did not save more of its old buildings. Why is there such a need to destroy the past and construct skyscrapers with so much glass?

The answer probably lies in Houston's drive for survival and success. It was a dangerous place in its early years, known for its often-violent frontier culture and frequent yellow fever epidemics. Nevertheless, people held on and built a stable economy based on cotton. Once oil was discovered at Spindletop, near Beaumont, in 1901, Houston took the lead. The money flowed to Houston like water. Civic leaders worked to clean up downtown, and many working families moved closer to the industrial centers. Throughout the twentieth century, developers constructed new buildings, but downtown only had so much room, which often meant the old buildings had to go to make space for the shiny new ones. Oil and natural gas kept Houston's economy vibrant, and this wealth produced tall glass skyscrapers surging past economic downturns.

It has only been a century since Houston realized its possibilities as a place of wealth and power. Walking the downtown thoroughfares, my students wondered if the city would rather forget its past and only think about its future. ■■