

### The Selling of the Soul of Oak Cliff

“Oak Cliff derives its name from the massive oaks that crown the soft green cliffs” (Elliott). This advertisement from the earliest days of the emerging community rang true for over one hundred years. People who live in Oak Cliff are intentional residents. We have mature trees and great swaths of green spaces that provide habitats for a diversity of wildlife. We choose to live here because of the affordability and small town feel that has made our area different from others in Dallas.

That uniqueness is a result of city negligence for decades. Oak Cliff, beginning as an elite development in the late nineteenth century, was once a jewel south of the Trinity River. In the aftermath of the 1893 financial crisis, economic hardships persisted and a new trolley line opened that sparked property sales to the working and middle classes. Residents voted to annex Oak Cliff into the City of Dallas in 1903 (Nall). White flight of the desegregated 1970s and misconceptions of racial influences regarding safety and blight led to declined property values. By the 1980s, Oak Cliff was the most ethnically diverse community of Dallas, but it was not predominantly white. So most Caucasian Dallasites, scared for their lives, stayed away and left us alone to live our preferred small-town existence within the city. The gross neglect was so bad with potholed streets, weedy medians, and general civic disregard that, in 1990, Oak Cliff residents threatened to secede from the City of Dallas (Earle). All we wanted was to receive city services we were due as taxpaying citizens. The secession effort failed but began a slow motion, almost imperceptible, rejuvenation of Oak Cliff.

During the 1990s and 2000s, local developers, proud of this area, breathed new life into older buildings by rescuing, repurposing, and retaining the character of the

historic community. More people started visiting the restaurants and shops in the Bishop Arts District. Due to the success of the revitalization, Oak Cliff is now under assault by outside developers and city officials, who recognize financial bonanzas for the taking but have no context or concern for our history or lifestyle. And longtime residents are the ones losing out from, what feels like, exploitation.

As a thirty-five-year Oak Cliff resident, I am distressed and angry at the wanton destruction of our historic architecture in favor of generic, boxy, overpriced high-rise apartments built right up to the sidewalks, creating urban canyons of our narrow side streets with no green spaces. Mature oaks are mowed down and replaced by spindly saplings. Many of us feel powerless in the struggle to retain the character and charm of our community as we helplessly watch whole blocks of affordable, single- and multi-family structures fall under the bulldozers' blades. The result is that our cultural diversity diminishes as longtime residents are displaced.

David Noguera, City of Dallas Director of Housing and Neighborhood Revitalization, said in a panel discussion recently that people are moving to Dallas at a rate of 1500 a day, and the city needs to provide places for them to live--that means increasing population density in as many places as possible (Noguera). As a result, apartment buildings spring up like mushrooms with no official aesthetic oversight as to how they blend with established architecture outside of historic designations. Another panelist at the discussion, Andreea Udrea, Assistant Director of the city's Planning and Urban Design Department's Current Planning team, said that Dallas's zoning and building requirements have not been updated since 1987. Residents who want to

preserve their neighborhoods need to pressure the city to update those codes and to mobilize their neighbors in order to create more conservation districts (Noguera).

It is too late for the demolition orders already approved. Too much historic architecture and charm have been permanently lost. What Oak Cliff needs is a preservation warrior to take up the charge to city hall. Ruth Chenoweth, we sure could use you now.



One of the many tree-lined streets in the Winnetka Heights Historic District, one of the largest residential historic districts in Dallas and in Texas (Seale). Created in the 1970s when the City of Dallas proposed to extend a road, blocks of these 1900-era Craftsman-style homes were in the path of demolition. Oak Cliff realtor and “grand dame of preservation” Ruth Chenoweth marshaled residents to save the neighborhood and protected fifty residential blocks from destruction with the historic designation (Simnacher; Farewell).



The abandoned Winnetka Congregational Church sat vacant and crumbling for almost fifteen years. Finally purchased in 2015, owners Todd and Lola Lott resurrected and restored the 1929 structure and won a historic preservation award. It is now Arts Mission Oak Cliff, an arts education and performance venue in a corner of the Winnetka Heights Historic District. During the sale process, three developers bid for the property with plans to demolish it and build replica historic homes on the three-lot site (Lott).



Local real estate developer and Oak Cliff native Monte Anderson repurposed the decades-empty 1924 Dixie Wax Paper Company factory into an entertainment, office, and storefront destination for Oak Cliff residents called Tyler Station. Located at the Tyler Street Dart Rail Station, guests can visit locally-owned businesses like a brewery, coworking space, designer and artist studios, bookstore, bike shop, and more. Co-founder of the national Incremental Development Alliance, Anderson believes in organic development to meet the needs of established residents that does not include government subsidies or tax credits. "What subsidies do in my opinion is create unnatural things on the earth" (Schutze).



The private home of former Dallas mayor George Sergeant (1935-1937) was almost lost to the bulldozers. After Sergeant's death in 1971, the 1910 structure was eventually abandoned with scrapbooks, artifacts, and letters still inside, including a handwritten note from First Lady Eleanor Roosevelt after the President's Texas Centennial visit to Dallas. Local developer Jim Lake purchased the property, rescued the contents, and restored the building. Although the "unnatural" developments (Schutze) surround the property near Zang and Davis Streets, the old house is gaining new life as a restaurant opening soon (Stone).



Around the corner from the Mayor's House, this row of shops is in the heart of the Bishop Arts District, the area that sparked the Oak Cliff land rush. In the 1970s, rent was low and light from the picture windows, exceptional, so artists moved in and used some of the storefronts as studios (Elliott). Refurbished and revitalized, the historic area is now home to over sixty locally-owned shops and restaurants. It is the most recognizable tourist destination in Oak Cliff. This is also the area where the most destruction of historic structures has occurred.





A contrast of old and new in the Bishop Arts District, demolition and construction lands on random blocks like alien spaceships. A new apartment building is in progress in the distance, on the right.



A couple of blocks east of the historic Bishop Arts District shops, in the middle of a residential neighborhood, two blocks along Eighth Street are cordoned off for demolition. The MacDonald family, who owned all the properties, sold them to a single developer (England). Neighbors are angry that affordable single- and multi- family homes are going to be destroyed for another set of boxy, generic, high-rise apartment buildings that continue to homogenize this unique area.



This 1920s Tudor-style home is one of the endearing structures set for demolition along Eighth Street. Local developer David Spence salvages the bricks, doors, and other historic features for his preservation/restoration projects in the area (England).

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