

TREASURE

DRIVING THE CIRCUIT AROUND KINGSLEY STREET AND OCEAN AVENUE IN ASBURY PARK CAN BE A SOBERING experience. The once vibrant Palace Amusements building on Cookman Avenue lies abandoned. Looking down from its north wall, Tillie the Clown's famous smile now seems like a forced grin. The 1929 Casino and Carousel complex, considered an architectural masterpiece in its day, now resembles London after the Blitz. In any other town, these cultural landmarks would have been deemed liabilities and demolished years ago. In Asbury Park, though, Werner Baumgartner has given them a fighting chance to survive and prosper well into the next century.

Last August the city council appointed Baumgartner, 42, the first official city historian, entrusting to him the preservation of this old seaside resort's cultural monuments. The unpaid position confers a daunting responsibility in a town that tries hard to forget its past. Yet Baumgartner embraces the challenge with a fervor rarely seen in the city these days. His nose-to-the-grindstone approach helped secure a state grant to repair the theater organ in the restored Convention Hall on the boardwalk and may someday lead to a complete reawakening of the city's oceanfront.

The very word *historian* conjures an image of a tweedy professor type, hunched over volumes of archives at a university library and emerging only to speak with the likes of Ken Burns. But Baumgartner has no time for university libraries. Typically dressed in blue jeans and flannels, he more closely resembles a self-sufficient outdoorsman than an urban archivist. When not advising the city council or planning board on matters of preservation, he bounces around town inspecting once forgotten landmarks like the Paramount Theatre or the Stephen Crane house. (The author of *The Red Badge of Courage* grew up on Fourth Avenue.) He also presides over the city's historical society and has been active in Citizens for Wesley Lake—all while managing his own real estate business.


Baumgartner admits the pace can be harrowing—he hasn't had a real vacation in almost twenty years—but insists it's worth it. "I should probably quit doing all this volunteer stuff and just work on my own business," he says with a laugh. "That would probably be more profitable. But then I would feel bad that no one was speaking out for Asbury." Few people have spoken out for Asbury Park as passionately as Baumgartner, so it's ironic to learn that he had never heard of the place as a youth.

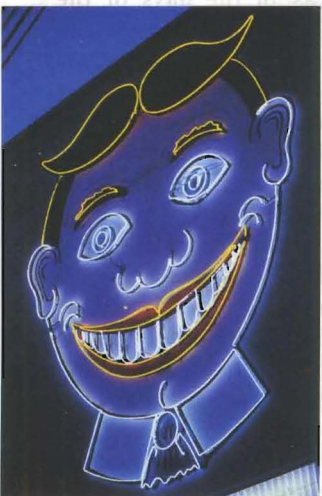
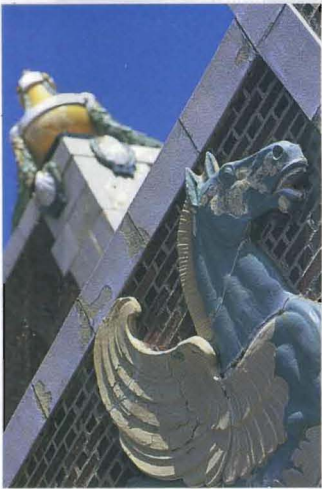
Growing up on Long Island, Baumgartner's penchant for preservation began with the antique radios he would restore to working condition. Later, he discovered that he had a knack for science and a love, as he says, of "old things." He studied electrical engineering at the State University of New York at Farmingdale and graduated at the top of his class in 1978. Technicians were in high demand at the time, and Baumgartner entertained several offers from firms such as IBM before settling on Bell Labs in Holmdel. Searching for an inexpensive place to stay in burgeoning Monmouth County, he stumbled upon Asbury Park.

When he purchased his first house, in 1981, he was surprised to find no records of its history. Devoting time at the local library, he learned that the house dated to 1880 and had remained relatively unchanged since. Intrigued, he investigated further and began to realize his new hometown's enormous wealth of history. "Once you start digging, you want to learn more," he says. "Every door you open leads to another mystery, especially in Asbury Park."

Enchanted as he was with the history of the city, getting his fellow residents excited about preservation has always been an uphill battle. "People outside of the city realize the importance of preserving Asbury Park," says Baumgartner. "It's difficult locally to have that same enthusiasm when you look at the economic situation, the amount of infrastructure that needs repair, the sheer overwhelming problems that Asbury faces." In the mid-1980s the city thought those problems could be solved by developer Joseph Carabetta's oceanfront condominium project. But today all that remains of it is the rusted skeletal frame of a high-rise and more than \$8 million in unpaid taxes.

Lessons of the past etched in their minds, city residents now listen more closely to Baumgartner. Mayor Kenneth "Butch" Saunders counts himself among the converted. Saunders admits he originally thought Baumgartner was crazy for trying to save a bunch of old buildings. "I wasn't thinking like that back then," the mayor says. "I thought we should tear everything down and start over." Baumgartner convinced him otherwise. "We wouldn't have Convention Hall running the way it is now if it wasn't for Werner," Saunders says. "He's the type of volunteer everybody should look for."

Baumgartner left Bell Labs several years ago to dedicate himself to preserving Asbury Park's treasures. The rewards have come slowly, and he has thought more than once about leaving. Yet there's something about the town—its history, its potential—that keeps him from giving up on the place. "I hope that my message has an impact on the future of Asbury," he says. "If not, so be it. But I'm going to give it a good shot." 



HUNTER

Nobody in Asbury Park seemed to care about its oldest cultural landmarks. Nobody except Werner Baumgartner.



On Baumgartner's list of buildings worth preserving is the Casino, rear right, on the boardwalk.

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