

FOURTH WARD: A conversation with Stephen Fox

by Tim O'Brien

The Freedmen's Town Historic District in Houston's Fourth Ward was listed in the National Register of Historic Places in 1985. Since 1995, the vast majority of its historic fabric has been demolished. The ninety-block neighborhood just west of downtown Houston was not filled with singular buildings designed by famous architects. Instead, Fourth Ward contained a rich array of historic vernacular structures. Stephen Fox, Houston architectural historian and preservationist, shared his thoughts on Fourth Ward and all that has been lost with Tim O'Brien.

ABOUT THE INTERVIEWER: Tim O'Brien is a graduate student in the Department of History at University of Houston. On April 7, 2004, he interviewed Stephen Fox, a Fellow of the Anchorage Foundation of Texas and an adjunct lecturer in architecture at Rice University and the University of Houston. Fox is also the author of numerous books on Houston's architecture.

TIM O'BRIEN (TO): *Are there any architecturally significant structures still standing?*

STEPHEN FOX (SF): Yes. But it's not so much the architectural significance of individual buildings that made the Freedmen's Town Historic District and the rest of Fourth Ward notable as it was the historical significance of vernacular architecture and the way that vernacular building types represented the lifeways of working class African American families in the segregated south during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Fourth Ward, and the Freedmen's Town Historic District within it, represented what the cultural geographer Carl Sauer called a "cultural landscape."

Fourth Ward was significant for the range of different house types it possessed (the "shotgun" cottage is one example of a vernacular house type associated with Fourth Ward). Institutional buildings—churches, businesses owned by African Americans that catered to African American clients (such as barber shops and beauty shops), fraternal organizations, and funeral homes—were part of this cultural landscape. Also, corner grocery markets, which were often owned by immigrants. Sicilian immigrants who came to Houston around 1900 lived in Fourth Ward for at least a generation as storekeepers. They were white people living in a black neighborhood during the segregation era, as M. Louise Passey discovered when doing research for her 1993 history thesis at Rice University, "Freedmantown: The Evolution of a Black Neighborhood in Houston, 1865-1880."

These vernacular building types were important because they materialized the history of Fourth Ward. In American preservation during the last quarter of the twentieth century, the issue of addressing the preservation of working class cultural landscapes, which do not usually involve exceptional, architect-designed buildings but are composed of repeated vernacular building types, emerged strongly. That was one of the exciting things about Fourth Ward: it was remarkable in being one of the few remaining segregation-era neighborhoods of late-nineteenth century origin still intact in a major southern city because Houston, with its lack of zoning, could not qualify for federal urban renewal funding,



African Americans fought for and finally achieved building a colored library in 1913. The Colored Carnegie Library grand opening (above), at the corner of Frederick and Robin Streets, was an important event for the community and was attended by many. By 1962, the building was torn down to make way for Houston's growing freeway system.

Courtesy Houston Metropolitan Research Center, Houston Public Library



Now in the shadow of downtown Houston's towering skyscrapers, much of the Freedmen's Town neighborhood (left) is falling victim to gentrification. Inner loop real estate is becoming popular once again and developers are taking advantage of this change in attitude. Older homes throughout the Fourth Ward and other neighborhoods such as Montrose are being torn down as fast as new luxury town homes are erected.

Courtesy Tim O'Brien

the funding source many other southern cities used to destroy the comparable neighborhoods in the 1950s and 1960s.

TO: Despite the importance of this neighborhood, opposition to its preservation continued from developers as well as local government.

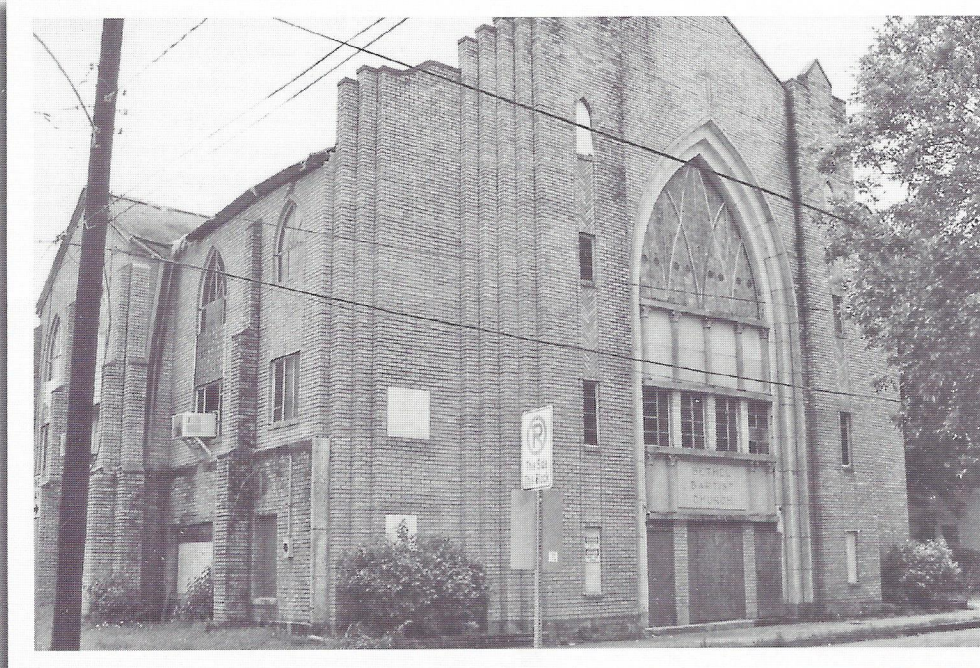
SF: The powers that be were never willing to concede that Fourth Ward had any cultural importance; that buildings, streets, the people who lived there in any way contributed to the identity of Houston. There was never any opportunity at the top to address the situation in a positive way. They—city officials, officials of the public housing authority, prominent citizens involved with a series of redevelopment initiatives—were all so sure that they could come in and sweep everything away. When they encountered resistance, they would never make any substantive compromise to achieve what they wanted... It was very frustrating; the unwillingness of the city government and the civic elite to revise their

conviction that Houston had no history worth preserving and that if it did, it wasn't to be found in Fourth Ward.

TO: Do you see any success in Freedmen's Town?

SF: For the most part, no. I'm too aware of what was lost. I guess the good thing is the city maintained the historic widths of the streets, one of the most unusual features of Fourth Ward, rather than widening them. In other nineteenth-century Houston neighborhoods, you find isolated instances of unusually narrow streets, but no other neighborhood where all the streets were consistently narrow. Some houses and institutional buildings in Fourth Ward have survived. The Housing Authority of the City of Houston created a "historic district" of moved and rehabilitated houses in the 1500 and 1600 blocks of Andrews Street. The Rutherford B. H. Yates Museum, a non-profit neighborhood preservation group begun by Catherine Roberts, has succeeded against great odds and

continuing tribulations in preserving several significant buildings and carrying out archaeological and historical research. But tragically, the Freedmen's Town Historic District has lost its integrity. This is not simply an issue of the loss of buildings but of a cultural landscape preserved by generations of Houstonians of color who made Fourth Ward, in the words of writer Olive Hershey, the "soul of Houston." ♦



Bethel Baptist Church on Andrews St. was founded by Rev. Jack Yates in 1891. The current structure was erected in 1923 and over seventy years later was listed in the National Register of Historic Places. Over the past several years, the church has fallen into disrepair as the congregation's members could not afford the upkeep. On January 24, 2005, fire gutted the already damaged church and the wrecking ball quickly arrived. Community and church leaders immediately stepped in and saved the building's walls from total demolition. Efforts continue to create a feasible plan that would preserve this historic structure.

Courtesy Tim O'Brien

Freedmen's Town in the 1920s has been described as Houston's Harlem. Restaurants, jazz spots, and night clubs dotted the landscape, and were frequented by Houston's white citizens as well. The main commercial strip was along West Dallas Street.

Since its heyday, most of Freedmen's Town, like the Rainbow Theatre seen here at 907 W. Dallas St., has been demolished.

Courtesy Houston Metropolitan Research Center, Houston Public Library

