

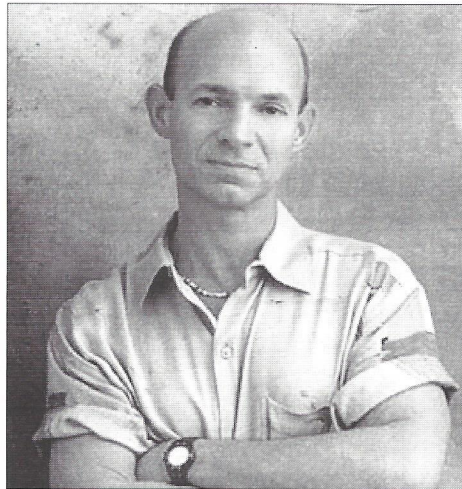
An Interview with Bart Truxillo

Bart J. Truxillo first came to Houston with his family in the early 1950s. He attended Mt. Carmel High School and then the University of Houston. He graduated from the College of Architecture at UH in 1965 and put his training to use as an architect. He now resides in his 1890s restored Victorian home in the Houston Heights and has helped lead the fight for preservation in this city.

BART TRUXILLO (BJT): In 1974, a friend of mine told me to drive out to a neighborhood I had not had any experience with, called the Heights. Before that I had been working almost continuously in architecture. I had worked in Charles Tapley's office, and Fred Buxton's, and I very quickly after that went out on my own, working for a group of investors. We started remodeling. The earliest remodelings of Montrose—in other words, Banks Street and Vassar and Bonnie Brae and the streets nearby. I did a lot of renovation. So for a long time, I was doing remodeling—not really restoration but renovation of Montrose bungalows.

When I first saw this house at 1802 Harvard, it struck me. One of those moments in life when the light bulb goes: Bing! It had been for sale for a year, but I didn't know about it. It was completely insane, and only an off-balanced person [laughs] would take this house on, because it was in really desperately bad shape. That was the bad part. But the good part was that it had not been "remodeled." It had not been "remuddled." It hadn't changed much since 1894. It was almost exactly the way it had always been. And the few renovations to the original floor plan were done in the 1920s, so in a sense it hadn't been touched. It's pretty much intact today except for some changes around the kitchen area.

I really got involved with historic preservation after falling in love and restoring the house at 1802 Harvard. Although I had already purchased the historic Magnolia Brewery Building in



1969 and renovated it, my involvement with the house taught me even more about preservation—you know, on-the-job training, so to speak. Also, I adopted the neighborhood. I found this neighborhood that had extraordinary trees; it had beautiful old houses; it was convenient to downtown Houston, five and six minutes; it was neighborhood-y. And I started getting involved in the city's preservation movement as well.

But this house is what really got me going. I had a wonderful old carpenter and a carpenter's helper, and we just went at it. It was a two-year-long process. And in 1974 restorations of this sort were very rare, certainly in this state. People just weren't

doing them. Now you have catalogs full of all kinds of materials that are much more suited to this sort of work, and replacement materials, and antique stores where you can find this and that. In those days, the materials were not so available. So it was kind of a winging-it situation for me. It was like taking a lengthy course at the University of Houston in historic preservation because I was just doing it. I had my architectural background, and I had a great carpenter who knew what he was doing, and we taught each other about what to do about historic preservation.

Living in the Heights

BJT: To me, the Heights felt like a little town. It had people that knew each other. It was going, certainly, through a downturn, and it was depressed, and in some cases people would consider it a slum, but I saw it as a huge resource. And in a city with no zoning, the only way to



In 1974, Bart Truxillo saw the potential in the Heights neighborhood and purchased the Victorian house on Harvard St. Thus began his on-the-job training in historic preservation.



Intersection of Milam and Franklin on August 9, 1928, with the Magnolia Brewery in the forefront right side.

get involved in trying to do something good is to get the neighborhood involved. And so, through the Houston Heights Association, we banded together and did some amazing things.

The Heights Association started early, like, say—well, I came here in 1974 to start work. Seventy-six was the bicentennial year and when I had my first Rice Design Alliance tour through the house. From that, we kind of got the idea that one of the ways for the Heights Association to make money was to have home tours, to bring people into these little Victorian houses and show it off. That was one of the biggest things that we could possibly do, because people would come on the tours, and they'd go, "This is neat! I could live here!" They'd "get it." And the next week, the realtors in the neighborhood would be selling the bungalows like crazy.

We realized that the home tour was one of our biggest assets, and we continue to do that. Marcella Perry, with Heights Savings and Loan, was our angel. Although she didn't exactly live in the neighborhood, this was her neighborhood, and she was a great support. She called me up and said, "I want you to be a part of the Heights Association." She knew that I was a renovator and architect and that I had moved into the Heights, so she called me. She was a wonderful go-getter lady, I tell you, just right in your face.

She also had pull downtown.

With Marcella's power and prestige, and the Association's hard work as a squeaky wheel, we finally were attaining some success. We had home tours; we were making money; we purchased pieces of property that were in danger of being turned into truck repair facilities or horrible things that would blight the neighborhood. We put our money where our mouth was, and purchased them and turned them into something special. We organized an annual street festival on Heights Boulevard each October. And we went to City Hall and spoke about everything that we wanted to have happen. We would yell and scream and carry on and call up people and bother them and complain, and it worked.

We said that "we were voting citizens and we would corner our councilmen. You gotta listen to us. We're doing good stuff out here. You gotta help us." And what's happened is the Heights Association became one of the strongest civic organizations in the city because we were coming from so far behind, and we knew that you had to be organized. We saw the injustice of it all, so people learned that preservation was important, and it was our only avenue.

JOSEPH PRATT (JP): *Have there been high-profile political figures who lived in the Heights?*

BJT: Oh, yes. Oh, yes. Heart surgeon Denton A. Cooley, M.D. and—oh, a lot of

people. A lot of people who come through on tours and—oh, yes, lots of high-profile people. People have a love of it. Throughout all this, we qualified the neighborhood as a National Register Multiple Resource Historic District, and did what we could do to try to enhance the Heights and then, as success came to us, try to prevent the developers from destroying what it was that we had preserved. So that's one thing. You know, I adopted a neighborhood and was president of the Association two times. During our centennial celebration, I wore a lot of top hats and cut ribbons and all kinds of things like that. It was wonderful.

Magnolia Brewery Building

My purchase of the property at 715 Franklin, which is the Magnolia Brewery Building [Houston Ice and Brewing Company Building] came from my college days at the University of Houston, raising beers and having great visits at the La Carafe Bar on Congress Street. I'm happy to say it is still there and at the time was the most colorful mix of characters and the best juke box in town. It was a hangout. It's much the same today.

The whole area was beginning to emerge as Houston's version of the French Quarter. I saw the brewery building as a unique opportunity and negotiated for almost an entire year to purchase the