

# Minnette Boesel: "INVEST IN HISTORY!"

## Houston's Preservation & Adaptive Reuse Advocate

By Silvia Celeste Martinez

What is the current building trend in Houston? Adaptive reuse of buildings has become increasingly popular in an effort to preserve existing structures and simultaneously adapt their function to their communities' needs. Since preservation activist Minnette Boesel wrote "Historic Preservation in Houston...a History?" which appeared in *The Houston Review of History and Culture* (now *Houston History*) in 2006, Houston has seen an increasing awareness of historic preservation's importance. "Preservation across the country...has become a huge movement in the last forty years...[I]n Houston, I think there is awareness, but perhaps not as much as in other cities until more recently."<sup>1</sup> Not only has the city created more incentives for people to purchase and maintain historic structures than ever before but with this newfound consciousness of history's value in our relatively young city, more people are realizing the importance of this practice to create a sustainable and economically beneficial trend for Houston's growth. Boesel, through her unwavering determination, has managed to significantly help change attitudes towards preservation locally and continues to embody Houston's can-do spirit that enchants those involved with the city.

### THE MAKINGS OF AN ADVOCATE

Minnette Boesel was born in Boston, Massachusetts. Her mother was a portrait painter and her father a corporate oil company executive with a strong interest in history. This combination of exposure to the arts and history early in her life instilled in Minnette a great appreciation for both disciplines and inspired her to pursue working as a museum curator. After graduating with an art history degree she interned in a curatorial environment at several museums. When her family moved to Atlanta, she landed a job with the Atlanta History Center as curator of the Tullie Smith House. An adaptive reuse project, the Tullie Smith House, rescued from demolition due to highway construction, is part of an 1840s farmhouse complex converted to an educational museum where visitors learn about daily life in a typical, mid-nineteenth-century "plantation plain" style home and its outbuildings. This experience yielded a profound change in her career path. Witnessing the grassroots efforts of women volunteers who took action to preserve these historic buildings for educational purposes fostered



*Minnette Boesel is a leader in preservation for the city of Houston, playing a key role in co-developing and investing in historic downtown properties and serving multiple organizations advocating for preservation and sustainability.*

Photo courtesy of Minnette Boesel.

her interest and passion for historic preservation, specifically, historic properties that faced possible elimination from the rise of urbanism.

Her newfound interest led Minnette to Columbia University where she completed a master's degree in historic preservation in the 1970s. Historic preservation as an urban planning tool to preserve existing neighborhoods was a fairly novel approach at the time. The focus of the master's program, the first of its kind in the country, highlighted a new way of thinking about historic preservation. In the 1960s support for preservation in the United States was virtually nonexistent. The *Washington Post* reported, "The post-World War II zeitgeist, or spirit of the time, was relentlessly future-oriented. Whether to save or demolish was primarily a financial choice based on real estate value, economic potential, existing physical conditions and functionality. If something was old and obsolete, the logical move was to get rid of it."<sup>2</sup> The destruction of New York's

Pennsylvania Station in 1964, along with the large scale slum clearance rapidly occurring across the nation through so-called "urban renewal," brought attention to this issue. That same year, James Marston Fitch, with other founding members, established Columbia's preservation program.

Before coming to Houston, Minnette became the first executive director of the Georgia Trust for Historic



*The nineteenth-century Tullie Smith House in Atlanta, Georgia, where Minnette Boesel served as curator, was saved from demolition and converted to an educational museum.*

Photo courtesy of Jim Bowen, Flickr.



*Families enjoy the Houston Festival at Market Square in May of 1980.*

Photo courtesy of fossilmike, Flickr.

Preservation, following a rising trend of statewide historic preservation non-profits being created, and then moved to Maryland to work for Preservation Maryland, the state's "...oldest, largest, and most effective preservation organization."<sup>3</sup> At the Georgia Trust and at Preservation Maryland Minnette was exposed to the honed strategic efforts of funding, outreach, and advocacy in organizations. With education and experience under her belt, all the preparations for her move to Texas seemed complete but what truly awaited her was an uphill battle.

### **ONE CHANGE AT A TIME**

Fate and marriage brought Minnette to Houston in the early 1980s, when oil and gas markets were soaring and the city booming. With the ongoing expansion of the interstate highway system and a laissez-faire, non-zoning approach to growth, suburbia rose along the periphery. Further development of the Texas Medical Center encouraged more people to come to Houston in search of employment. All these things ultimately affirmed the need for personal vehicles to facilitate maneuvering through the city, leading to a lack of pedestrian-friendly areas. NASA's earlier arrival and accomplishments prompted Houston to adopt a "space age" attitude that influenced the city, creating an adverse mindset toward historic preservation until the oil bust in the mid-1980s forced the public to reassess the value of conservation.<sup>4</sup>

Boesel immediately volunteered for the Greater Houston Preservation Alliance (now Preservation Houston), started a preservation consulting business with architectural historian Barrie Scardino Bradley, and later began working as executive director of a downtown civic organization, the Downtown Houston Association (DHA). Among its programs, DHA focused attention on the Market Square Historic District, the 1836 town site of Houston and Market Square Park. (Originally called Congress Square, it was

intended as the capitol site for the Republic of Texas.) DHA spearheaded a reconfiguration of the park in partnership with DiverseWorks Art Space, which coordinated and oversaw significant collaborative art installations.

The mid to late 1980s saw an economic downturn as the oil boom came to an abrupt halt. Historic buildings stood vacant and ready for purchase. At this opportune moment, Boesel knew "that if we could just hold on to the buildings, no matter what, eventually the economy would turn around and things would get better."<sup>5</sup> The strategy worked, but the area remained unappealing. With no city ordinances that addressed preservation and rising delinquency and vagrancy in the downtown area, the group faced much bigger problems. Some of the area's businesses were high-crime bars and pornographic theaters.

Recognizing an organized effort was needed to overcome some of the challenges, in 1991 the Downtown Houston Association initiated a special project, becoming its own nonprofit, the Downtown Historic District, Inc. The organization raised funds to operate, was awarded a Community Development Block Grant (CDBG) for operations from the city, and joined the Texas Main Street Program of the Texas Historical Commission. Boesel staffed the organization for the first two years and along with her board members helped initiate a facade grant program to encourage owners to repair their buildings. "We spent a lot of time cleaning the neighborhood up. It was Herculean and there was not a lot of support from people...but we were on a mission and everything we did was right," Boesel recalls.

In early 1995, working for several years with then mayor Bob Lanier, Preservation Houston and the Planning and Development Commission Houston had its first legal success with the passage of a preservation ordinance. Although it lacked much legal power, the ordinance proved to be a necessary first step for the future of preservation.

Boesel along with like-minded colleagues undertook an adaptive reuse project in the early 1990s in the Market Square Historic District. With the help of fellow preservationists, Boesel and partners Jamie Mize, Dan Tidwell, Doug Lawing, and Guy Hagstette attempted to borrow money from banks to buy and restore the 1889 W. L. Foley Dry Goods Building, which had suffered a fire in 1989, in the 200 block of Travis Street. The adjacent Kennedy-Foley Building, also impacted by the fire and built in the 1860s, was purchased for renovation by artist Lee Benner after hocking his truck for the down payment. These buildings shared a party wall so it was important for all the owners to work together. After marrying the daughter of Kennedy, William L. Foley hired noted Texas architect Eugene Heiner, who had designed the exuberantly styled Houston Cotton Exchange Building in the same block. Heine was tasked with designing Foley's dry goods store along with remodeling and incorporating the facade of the Kennedy-Foley Building because it had burned in the 1880s. W. L. Foley then went on to loan nephews Pat and James Foley \$2,000 to start the Foley Brothers' store that later grew into the Houston-based department store chain Foley's.<sup>6</sup> The buildings' resilient past made a perfect model for restoration/renovation projects.

Unfortunately, the banks declined to offer financial help despite being obligated to make a good faith effort to assist in such cases under the Community Reinvestment Act. Undeterred, the group raised the money, engaged engineers and contractors, and invested sweat equity to complete the project. Today the Kennedy-Foley Building is home to the Landmark Houston Hospitality Group's restaurant, Hearsay, which provides a unique dining experience, bringing people into the heart of historic Market Square. The W. L. Foley Building has loft apartments and a real estate office.

With this success, Boesel realized she could utilize her real estate broker license to help further preservation efforts. If historic buildings were going to be repurposed, they had to be bought and redeveloped. Seeing the profession as "a tool to make more change," she opened Minnette Boesel Properties, the first residential real estate company to locate in the downtown area.<sup>7</sup> She used her own and her partners' project, the W. L. Foley Building, as the headquarters for her business.

Boesel's next adaptive reuse endeavor was the Hermann Estate Building, built in 1917 as a part of the estate of well-known businessman and philanthropist George Hermann, who donated the land for Hermann Park and left funding in his will to establish Hermann Hospital. The Hermann Estate Building had been vacant for over twenty years and before that had served for several decades as a men's mission for the Salvation Army. The sturdy structure, the great views, and big windows offered an opportunity to create residential spaces and became the first renovation project creating loft condominiums in downtown Houston. Lead developers Doug Crosson and Wally Hultin teamed up with Boesel, as an investor and broker, and they finished the project in 1998. Boesel's broker license allowed her to work on the marketing and sales aspect of the loft condominiums. Pioneering the effort required investigating the legal framework for the project and adaptive construction



*The Hermann Estate Building (c. 1917) became the first historic structure adapted to use as loft condominiums in downtown Houston.*  
Photo courtesy of Betty Trapp Chapman.

and design techniques that had not been implemented in Houston previously.

The project proved to be a success and served as a catalyst for other similar renovations, for which Boesel's company helped market the condominium lofts, including Bayou Lofts, housed in the Southern Pacific Railroad Building, built in 1911; and Franklin Lofts, originally the First National Bank Building, built between 1909 and 1925. Reflecting, Minnette explains, "Somebody had to go out on a limb to do these projects. We were going to be first, to show that it could be done. It was a huge risk and I'm really proud to be a part of the change that has come about."<sup>8</sup>

## **CELEBRATING ADAPTIVE REUSE AND PRESERVATION IN HOUSTON**

Continuing preservation efforts, Boesel served as a board member and chair of the Downtown Redevelopment Authority/Tax Increment Reinvestment Zone #3, which among many projects funded a redesign of Market Square Park that opened in 2010 and included a dog park, large grassy lawn, and a restaurant kiosk. A facade grant program was also initiated for historic buildings. Additionally, she was a founding board member, along with preservation

colleague Phoebe Tudor who served as board chair, of the Julia Ideson Library Preservation Partners, an organization that helped raise \$32 million in private and public monies to restore, renovate, and expand Houston's oldest extant library located in downtown and home of the Houston Metropolitan Research Center, one of the largest archives in Texas.

The evidence of Boesel's and others' efforts and their impact on the Houston area can be observed in the track record of Preservation Houston's annual Good Brick Awards. For thirty-nine years the organization has aimed to "recognize local contributions to the preservation, restoration and enhancement of Houston's architectural and cultural heritage."<sup>9</sup> At its founding in 1978 the organization averaged from one to four special mentions for preservation efforts throughout the city annually, the first including the restoration of Antioch Baptist Church, the Hogg Building, the Old Cotton Exchange building, and the Kirby Mansion. As the years passed, the number of recipients grew. Today the number of awardees is about fifteen per year. An interesting trend can be observed in the list of past recipients. As the awareness of preservation increased, more and more residential properties gained a second chance through restoration efforts. "There is huge added value in purchasing historic homes," Boesel points out. "People need to remem-

ber that the materials used in older buildings are better. Usually: the wood is better, the structures were built for ventilation...materials have more longevity."<sup>10</sup>

Minnette Boesel Properties expanded to the east side of Houston and began, with a partner, restoring historic residential properties. She recalls, "I started the company to affect positive change in the Market Square Historic District and then we kind of spanned into other neighborhoods...and all of a sudden we had this business that was making enough money for ourselves but at the same time making positive change."<sup>11</sup>

## THE IMPORTANCE OF RESIDENTIAL

Preservation of residential historic neighborhoods is one of Boesel's main concerns for a developing Houston, "I think awareness has gotten much better in Houston but at the same time we are losing historic fabric and buildings because they are not declared historic...so there needs to be a greater awareness and effort to identify neighborhoods that need to be protected and work with those neighborhoods to try and get historic designation."<sup>12</sup>

The number of downtown residential units built, planned, or under construction doubled between 2010 and 2016 to almost 7,600 units. In addition six historic buildings have been converted into hotels utilizing the federal historic tax credit program, the city's historic tax exemption program, and, in some cases, the new state historic tax credits. Today tools that continue to offer protection for at-risk neighborhoods include prevailing lot size and prevailing setbacks, but the challenge lies in getting residents to take action and initiate the process of designation with the city. "In order to get historic activities going, we need residents to participate!" Boesel exclaims.<sup>13</sup>

Under Houston's Historic Preservation Ordinance today, the city has increased its individually designated landmarks and protected landmarks to over 400. The city now has twenty-two city historic districts containing over 6,600 historic properties. Still this small percentage only covers 2.5 square miles of the 656 square miles in Houston. Former Houston City Council member Sue Lovell asserted that the most critical improvement made to the 2010 preservation ordinance was the "... prevention of property owners from demolishing or altering the exterior of historic buildings in designated districts without the approval of the Houston Archaeological and Historical Commission. Previously, owners simply had to wait 90 days — even if the commission denied their request."<sup>14</sup>

Under Mayor Annise Parker, in 2010 and 2015 ordinance revisions were approved by City Council to create a more "... streamlined process for project approvals and refine the list of projects eligible to receive City of Houston preservation tax incentives."<sup>15</sup> Among these new revisions were improved solutions for the enforcement of infringement of the preservation ordinance. Other revisions included the lowering of the minimum renovation investment to qualify for all or a partial city property tax exemption in a historic structure from 50% to 25% of its base value. Increasing the legal power of the preservation ordinance makes it easier to give protection to the historic neighborhoods seeking it. Boesel contends, "There needs to be a movement in



*The Kennedy Corner Building (c.1860) served as a Confederate arsenal during the Civil War. Although the Greater Houston Preservation Alliance and the Downtown Historic District persuaded the city to commit \$126,000 to the owner, the building was demolished in 1991. Left to right: Jill Sewell, Kent Millard, Margie Elliott, Guy Hagstette, and Minnette Boesel.*



*In the early twentieth century, Houston celebrated its prosperity as a cotton market center with the No-Tsu-Oh (Houston) Carnival and the crowning of King Nottoc (Cotton). In 2015 Houston Arts and Media revived the tradition 100 years after the final festival with the crowning of a new king, Truett Latimer, and its first queen, Queen Ailongam (Magnolia), Minnette Boesel. She received her crown from Randy Pace in recognition of her many contributions to preserving Houston's past.*

Photo courtesy of The Heritage Society, Houston, Texas.

Houston to work with neighborhoods...it would take a huge educational initiative...but as with any of these preservationist movements, you have to prove that it can help you.”<sup>16</sup>

## TWO BIRDS, ONE STONE

Clearly preservation awareness is becoming an established notion in Houston, especially as issues of sustainability can no longer be as easily bypassed. As Boesel explains, “Sustainability is recycling materials. Preservation is the best form of sustainability.”<sup>17</sup> In a young progressive city like Houston, it is no shock that the public consciousness is rapidly encouraging more eco-friendly practices in the realm of architecture, especially in regards to housing and the recent migration back into inner-city areas. More incentives exist than ever before to revitalize the inner city. The efforts to restore and activate the Bayou Greenways and give people a more pedestrian/bike-friendly city is what will keep the people coming in the long run. “If you want to attract and keep a good workforce...you need to have that infrastructure. Park space, bike trails, art and cultural activities, historic neighborhoods with character — all these things that work together to make a good city,” Boesel adds.<sup>18</sup>

The significance of the migration into the inner city lies in the ability to offer the public a sense of history, a place of belonging, knowing they are inhabiting the buildings that

have existed in Houston for over a century. Adaptive reuse offers people one solution to both problems. By adapting the existing fabric to the needs of contemporary society, preservation and sustainability are addressed simultaneously. Not only is adaptive reuse a tool for downtown redevelopment but it educates the coming generations about the importance of preservation and preservation's role in a developing city. “I worry sometimes that people don't know or forget what it took to get from the beginnings in the eighties when preservation was hardly acknowledged,” Boesel observes.<sup>19</sup> Though she faced many challenges from the government, developers, and even the public, she and many others have given Houston an awareness of preservation's importance and a substantial push for the ordinances that offer protection for historic landmarks today.

## THE FUTURE OF PRESERVATION

The National Trust for Historic Preservation's National Conference came to Houston in November 2016. Having the conference in Houston was an affirmation that the city is preservation-minded and reinforced the fact that preservation is of economic and community benefit. Boesel continues to be a front-running advocate of preservation as a volunteer. She still invests in personal projects, one being a 1920s duplex in the East End that she renovated entirely and, on the same block, a two-story 1920s corner store that still has more work to be done. Although she and other preservationists' efforts were met with resistance in the beginning, the fruit of their labor has changed Houston's stance on preservation. One focus of the conference was the stock of mid-century modern (specifically 1940s-1980s) architecture available in Houston, both in the residential and commercial areas of the city. Houston's Astrodome is one of the world's most recognized mid-century structures. In 2016 the Astrodome Conservancy, chaired by Phoebe Tudor with Minnette as vice-chair, was formed to help preserve and activate this iconic marvel. With these structures representing the future debate over historic preservation and adaptive reuse, it will be interesting to see how people respond to this topic in today's age.

As the younger generation becomes increasingly aware of preservation, new organizations are appearing like Pier & Beam, a “group of next-generation preservationists [affiliated with Preservation Houston] who share a passion for Houston's architecture, art, history and culture...who believe in preserving and giving new life to significant buildings and landscapes, promoting sustainability and smart growth, and fostering vibrant, livable neighborhoods.”<sup>20</sup> They are reaching out to a previously overlooked demographic. As the succeeding generation of preservationists emerge in this bustling city, Minnette Boesel offers some concluding words of guidance: “You have to know in your heart you're doing the right thing and you just keep moving, and in the end it is always the right thing to do.”<sup>21</sup>

**Silvia Celeste Martinez** received her degree in 2017 from the University of Houston Gerald D. Hines College of Architecture and Design. One of the ten students who comprise the third graduating class from the Interior Architecture program, she is interested in pursuing preservation and adaptive reuse as a means of generating awareness about this growing field.