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The Demolition Continues

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The Demolition Continues



Huntsville has been practicing the teardown for years, but the practice has gained in popularity since 1950 when the city's most spectacular economic transformation and period of expansion began. In addition to those losses already discussed, we have traded the city's premier example of an Italianate villa for a metal box, demolished two neoclassical courthouses for an oversized glass tower that obliterates the scale of the Square, replaced the historic Carnegie library with a parking garage, and torn down Cotton Row (West Side Square) for a hulking office building, leaving a gaping hole in the West Side Square building wall. Urban renewal made Swiss cheese of the downtown, tearing down the significant and the insignificant alike.

Now the Madison County Health Center building is slated to become a teardown. This will not be Huntsville's biggest architectural loss but perhaps its most embar-

“Any reigning style is in its own time excessively praised and, in the next, excessively denigrated. Each era says to the preceding, “How could you?” So with Modern. Style-conscious people back in the 1940s looked at Academic styles with disdain and took up Modern as a sacred cause; in the late 1970s Modern in its turn began to be derided.”

—Alan Gowans

rassing. This building, unlike the others cited, sits in a historic district that is both locally designated and listed on the National Register of Historic Places. This district was established to preserve a living archive of Huntsville architecture from the city’s founding into the 1970s. The Health Center building is now 54 years old—old enough to qualify for the National Register on its own merits without being part of a historic district. Yet it is not being protected nor preserved.

The building was opened just as Huntsville’s star was taking off. Local officials hoped for great things and were desirous of demonstrating that Huntsville was not unsophisticated, but was in synch with both the times and its new destiny. Wilmot C. Douglas, an architect known for favoring Modern design, was commissioned to prepare plans for a building for the health department. He received his architectural degree from the Georgia Institute of Technology and practiced in several seaboard states prior to settling in Birmingham in the late 1930s. For Huntsville, he produced a plan that was Modern in design, scaled to its surround-

ings, easy to construct (a necessity to stay within a public budget), but not without those features that placed it squarely within its time. The entrance is recessed in a porch created by intersecting wall and roof planes and articulated by a textural pattern of projecting brick headers. The double doors are glazed and flanked by large, single panels of vertically ribbed glass. Both the first floor window to the west of the entry and the ribbon of windows above are set off by broad, shallow, slanting brick reveals on either end that subtly enliven the wall surface. The buff-colored brick,



Huntsville's previous U.S. Courthouse and Post Office was an imposing structure completed in 1890 on the west side of Greene Street between Eustis and Randolph avenues. It became a teardown in 1954 to make way for a surface parking lot, thereby setting a dangerous precedent for future public buildings. Courtesy Huntsville-Madison County Public Library

the metal casement windows, the flat roof, the ribbed glass sidelights, the asymmetrical front, and the lack of classical ornament make this a building that is a true, unaltered expression of its age.

It is the only remaining public building from the early 1950s that retains its distinctive character, a character that was emblematic of the city's space mission. Still, it is destined for the landfill. The half block that it sits on will soon be owned by churches, and nothing is so valuable to churches as seas of parking. So the Twickenham Historic District will exchange a significant public structure for one more blank parking lot.

What alternative could there be for this building? It is too small to continue serving its intended use. Its years of being operated with insufficient funding have left its interior in a dilapidated state, although the exterior needs only cleaning. Other Huntsville buildings, far more deteriorated, have been renovated and put to new uses and are now a focus of community pride. The unfortunate reality is that when a new structure is erected on the site of a historic teardown, it is almost always inferior in design, materials, and craftsmanship. When the intended new use is parking, the insult to the neighborhood and community is shocking.

The world that emerged after World War II embraced many new ideas. The visual arts, music, dance, drama, furniture, automobiles, and architecture all evolved in new and modern directions. Huntsville tentatively stuck its toe into this exotic pool, with the Health Center and Huntsville Utilities buildings being the most notable public structures dating from the 1950s. With the demolition of the health department building, we will have obliterated the evidence that Huntsville participated in this new, modern age—an age in which the city, ironically, achieved its most significant identity.

Future generations of Huntsvillians will look at photos of the health department building and wonder what we could have been thinking when we razed it for parking—just as many today question the loss of the third Madison County courthouse and of Cotton Row.

THE QUARTERLY EDITORS

Note

Alan Gowans, *Styles and Types of North American Architecture, Social Function and Cultural Expression* (New York, New York: Harper Collins, 1992), 271.