

Mount Vernon—adaptive re-use--Mallory

In the northeast Texas town of Mount Vernon, population 24 hundred, old is new again.

All around the courthouse square and nearby neighborhoods, historic buildings have been restored and creatively adapted to new uses.

A 1940 native-rock fire station became a county heritage museum. An 1894 railroad depot switched to a train museum. Two 1890's commercial buildings house the chamber of commerce and a genealogy archive.

There's also a library in a 1900 bank, an art museum in a 1912 jail, and a visitor center in the 1868 home of Henry Clay Thruston (THROUGHs-ten). At 7 feet 7 inches tall, he was the tallest Confederate soldier in the Civil War.

Two abandoned churches were even resurrected. A 1907 church became a music hall with monthly chamber music performances. An 1850s house of worship is now a residence.

For decades, preservationists used grants and private money to restore local structures, including 60 homes built before World War One.

Now government has made adaptive re-use a cornerstone of economic development. Funds from a half-cent sales tax and hotel-motel tax support preservation, plus grants acquired by the city. In 2009 the city adopted zoning ordinances to protect old buildings and to insure architectural compatibility in new construction.

Mount Vernon and Franklin County fueled their preservation fever through participating in programs of the Texas Historical Commission—including the Main Street and Visionaries in Preservation programs. The THC's courthouse preservation program is also restoring the exterior of the 1912 county courthouse. In 2009 the agency recognized Mount Vernon's preservation prowess with the First Lady's Texas Treasures Award.

Preservation is part of the local DNA, says B.F. Hicks, president of the county historical association.

The Depression of the 1930s devastated the local economy. Home and business owners couldn't afford new construction, so they maintained the buildings they had...the very same buildings now restored for new uses.

B.F. Hicks: "It's kind of my theme that, sure, nothing gets old if you tear it down. But in our town there was an appreciation for all these buildings spanning at least the last probably fifty years. It's before my time. I credit my parents' generation somewhat."

RESOURCES:

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