

# FIRST WORD

BY ANTOINETTE J. LEE

## Landscapes in Transition

**AUSTIN, TEXAS, THE SITE OF THE 2010** National Preservation Conference, offers a rich laboratory for examining the next American urban landscape. This theme grew out of a think-tank meeting on energizing the conference at the headquarters of the National Trust for Historic Preservation. The discussion focused on what Austin and its landscape could bring to a national audience. **AUSTIN IS A CITY IN TRANSITION.** In 1947, the classic *American Guide* series described it as “a stately city, with broad tree-lined avenues and boulevards and imposing public edifices set in attractive grounds; a city of institutions . . . It is a tranquil city, with an air of serenity, decorum, and permanence.” **WHILE THIS DESCRIPTION** still applies, Austin today is so much more. It is a source of technological innovation, a haven for contemporary music, a magnet for a lively folk culture scene, and an attraction for the creative classes. Austin also is the center of an exploding metropolitan area that encompasses San Marcos to the south and Round Rock to the north and accommodates a population of more than 1.5 million. Even the empty space southward toward San Antonio and northward toward Waco is quickly filling in. **DEMOGRAPHIC CHANGE, TECHNOLOGY, AND THE ECONOMY** have transformed many cities like Austin, changing the functions they used to serve, functions that gave them their iconic forms. The lucky ones have evolved from centers of industry and commerce to places of innovation, entertainment, and urban life. They are considered up-and-coming cities that attract youth and investment. The less fortunate cities, severed involuntarily from their economic origins, have not found new purposes. These once proud historic urban centers have become severely downsized and are slated for serious shrinkage. **SOME OF THE MOST INNOVATIVE THINKING** about cities today is directed at the dire state of those that are most distressed. Can they rediscover their agricultural and wilderness roots in an urban form? Can new technologies or industries take hold in the available infrastructure and re-establish a city’s purpose? Can America’s urban ruins generate a new kind of tourism, similar to the kind that sustains the Roman ruins that dot Europe and the Near East? How can approaches that focus on ecological restoration be applied to an abandoned urban landscape? In his 1960 book, *In Defense of the City*, architect and preservationist James Marston Fitch wrote, “The city has always been . . . the actual generator of civilization . . . [T]here is no technological substitute for [its] germinal powers. Personal, face-to-face contact; daily friction and exposure to ideas; continual cross-fertilization from various elements in a given field—these are the

essential properties of the [city].” **WHO WILL BE THE AMERICAN CITY’S** 21st century advocates? In 2003, a group of idealistic students of the urban scene published the premiere issue of *The Next American City*. The publication is devoted to the simple goal of making cities better by “promoting socially and environmentally sustainable economic growth.” The editors also examine cultural and societal change and how it affects our built environment. Unlike many publications about urban planning, *The Next American City* offers much food for thought for those in the field of historic and cultural preservation because it examines these fields in the context of trends that shape our cities and landscapes: public safety, transportation, housing, education, art, culture—all the things that make cities livable. Historic places are integral parts of the larger whole, not isolated museum objects set upon a built landscape. **THUS, AUSTIN, HISTORICALLY RICH AND EVER-CHANGING,** became the focus of the National Trust’s examination of the next American city. But what about preservation elsewhere, in places that

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are far removed from the dynamic forces that are transforming the nation’s cities? Remote and rural areas are now facing unprecedented change as the nation searches for new sources of energy and technology allows people to pursue livelihoods far from traditional places of work. Thus the National Trust extended the conference’s urban theme to “the next American landscape” to address preservation concerns in towns and rural areas. **ONE OF THE BENEFITS OF EXAMINING** preservation and the management of cultural sites within the context of national and global forces is that we will better understand these forces. As a result, we will more effectively connect our work with the host of vital processes that change cities and landscapes—health care, education, energy production, jobs, economic revitalization, and technological innovation. **IN RETURN, WE CAN EXPECT** that these areas of human endeavor will come to appreciate the key role that historic places play in maintaining healthy communities and reclaiming declining neighborhoods. Few other places offer so many opportunities to examine these phenomena than Austin and its environs.

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