Heart of Third Ward: Texas Southern University

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The campus of Texas Southern University was established in 1947 when the state of Texas allocated $3.2 million to build and operate a segregated college for black Texans in Houston — an outgrowth of the bitter-sweet Sweatt v. Painter ruling that denied Herman M. Sweatt, an African-American college graduate and World War II veteran, admission to the University of Texas Law School in Austin. Since its first building, the Thornton B. Fairchild Building (1947-48), was constructed, the TSU campus not only has served its university but also has been the cultural and community center of Third Ward.

The Fairchild Building housed everything at first — classes and administration. Early faculty members recall the wilderness in which the campus evolved, complete with raccoons, opossums, and an occasional alligator. The faculty was provided housing in temporary buildings on campus, while the surrounding neighborhoods were undergoing a rapid transition from white to brown. These housing


School of Education and Behavioral Sciences Building, Texas Southern University, John S. Chase, architect (1983).
pattern changes had a major impact on the social structure of Third Ward and its schools — Johnston Junior High, Sutton Elementary (later Miller Junior High), and Turner Elementary.

In the midst of this transformation, Texas Southern steadily began to take on a physical presence in its neighborhood. Following the Fairchild Building, the three-part Mack H. Hannah Hall and Auditorium (Lamar Q. Cato, architect, 1950) was constructed in what was then the center of the campus. Early on we thought of Hannah Hall as imposing, with its high, broad stairs, hard Texas shell limestone sheathing, and great industrial steel-sash windows (now bronze solar glass). The north colonnade connecting the administration building and the auditorium is still one of the most serene spaces on campus. During the fifties the north campus on Cleburne was the site of commencement exercises beneath the pines.

Two major factors have defined TSU's identity: the physical boundaries that mark the periphery of the campus and divisions within it; and the arts program and the widely acclaimed art it has installed throughout the campus.

During the presidency of Dr. Samuel Nabrit, several new buildings were constructed, including two dormitories, Lanier Hall for Men and Lanier Hall for Women, and the Student Union. These were quickly joined by the Science Building, now named the Samuel M. Nabrit Science Center (Wyatt C. Hedrick, architect, 1958), which became, after Hannah Hall, the major building on campus. The new library (John S. Chase, architect, 1958), added near Hannah Hall, enclosed a cloisterlike area that created a formal outdoor public space for the first time, but one that was unfortunately weakened by its use for faculty parking. After student protests in 1968, Wheeler Avenue was closed. Without the intrusion of through traffic, TSU became more of a pedestrian campus. The construction of the Ernest Sterling Student Center (John S. Chase, architect, 1976) facing Hannah Hall completed the enclosure of the "quadrangle" in front of Hannah Hall, giving the campus a useful space for student gatherings and other outdoor events.

Just as closing Wheeler Avenue created a sense of wholeness on the campus, the removal of the railway track separating the east and west ends of the campus created more cohesion. That the arts were always "on the other side of the tracks" was an ironic situation that was not lost on the fine arts faculty. Still, many of us miss the railroad track because of the way it defined the Third Ward experience. It was down that track that I walked to visit my father after school, and it was, down that track that I would later walk to talk to John T. Biggers about teaching art history at TSU.

It was Biggers who began the astounding mural program at TSU. More than 114 murals exist on the campus today, and they are viewed frequently during the academic year by elementary and high school groups and visitors from around the world. The murals that John Biggers created — The Web of Life on the interior of the Nabrit Science Center and those in the Sterling Student Center — are among Houston’s art treasures. Similarly, Carroll Simms’s relief sculpture, Man and the Universe, next to the main entrance of the Science Center, and her sculpture, African Queen Mother, in front of the Martin Luther King Humanities Center (John S. Chase, architect, 1969), are familiar. These art works define the Texas Southern campus as a unique community.

The addition of the Health and Physical Education (HPE) Building (Haywood John McCowan, architect, 1989) has provided a second structure on campus that allows for massive public gatherings. Hannah Hall during the fifties was the site of many events — concerts by pianist Phillips Steels and Don Shelly and the University Lyceum, the eagerly awaited Ebony Fashion Fair, and the annual Shakespearean productions. Because there were few auditoriums open for public performances by African American artists, Hannah Hall assumed this role in Houston, bringing the black community together on the TSU campus. Now the HPE Building, with its spacious sports arena, has become the center for African American cultural and political events. It has in recent years seen memorable appearances by Nelson Mandela, the Dalai Lama, and Louis Farrakhan, and has been the site of poignant memorial services for United States representatives Mickey Leland and Barbara Jordan that were attended by international dignitaries as well as Third Ward residents.

There really is no clear division between TSU and the community, and that is a good thing. The recent renovation of Cuney Homes by the Housing Authority of the City of Houston and construction of the TSU lab school that community an even more visible extension of the campus. A TSU student mural painted on the side of a Cuney Homes unit is an inspiring symbol of the fundamental relationship between TSU and Third Ward.