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A House for Healing

In 1924, the Ku Klux Klan built a large meeting hall on North Main Street. Today, there's a fight for that building to become a museum and community and arts center named in honor of Fred Rouse, a Black man who was lynched by a mob of white people in 1921.

BY BRIAN KENDALL



PHOTO BY OLAF GROWALD

It is said that, after purchasing the building that sits at 1012 N. Main St., the then-owners took down the metal sign that reads “Ellis Pecan Co.” only to quickly put it back up.

What they revealed were the words “Ku Klux Klan” embossed in the building’s bricks. The building, the third largest in the city when built, is thought to be the only building remaining in the world that was erected for the sole purpose of housing the white supremacist hate group.

Built in 1921 — and rebuilt in 1924 after a fire — the large bricked structure sits halfway between downtown and the Stockyards, easily within view of the Tarrant County Courthouse. Stand on your toes, and you can get a glimpse of its façade from the famed Joe T. Garcia’s. In other words, this building that once housed hate wasn’t tucked away on the fringes of the city — it was constructed in the middle of one of Fort Worth’s busiest streets.

According to Fort Worth historian Richard Selcer, while most old Klan halls were small storefronts or borrowed meeting places, this building was raised for the purpose of intimidation. And the building remains one of the biggest structures on the North Side — a part of town that has a large immigrant, Black, and Latino population. It has for nearly 100 years cast a large, daunting shadow.

After serving as the Klan’s Fort Worth headquarters for three years, the building exchanged hands several times. It served as a professional wrestling arena, a home for a local boxing team, and a hall for dance marathons before being sold to the Ellis Pecan Company in 1946. The company kept it as a warehouse until 1991, and it has since remained vacant — a canvas for graffiti artists and a makeshift shelter for homeless.

Sugarplum Holdings LP bought the building as an investment opportunity in 2004 and applied for a Certificate of Appropriateness for demolition in the summer of 2019. The owners were granted the COA at a public hearing on July 8, 2019 — albeit with a 180-day delay — which ultimately restored conversation around the fate of the historic structure.

At the city meeting was Daniel Banks and Adam McKinney, co-founders of DNAWORKS, an organization that not only wants to save the structure but, in a rare form of poetic justice, turn the building into a community and arts center named after Fred Rouse — a Black man who was lynched by a mob of white people in 1921.

“At that time, it felt serendipitous to use our creative problem-solving skills, as artists and as activists, to develop some plans to think about the acquisition and transformation of that space,” Banks says. “1012 N. Main St. is something that Adam and I lit the match to. To transform that building into not just an art center

but a museum and an incubator for micro businesses, serving both the culture and opportunity and economics of the North Side and other communities that were disenfranchised by being historically targeted by the Klan and by hate.”

According to its website, DNAWORKS is “an arts and service organization dedicated to furthering artistic expression and dialogue, focusing on issues of identity, culture, class, and heritage.” Banks and McKinney hope to begin difficult conversations and open community dialogue through an arts process that includes dance, theater, and film. The group recently started the Fort Worth Lynching Tour, where participants bike or drive through various stops throughout the city and experience the final hours of Fred Rouse’s life before he was lynched on the corner of Commerce and East Third streets in 1921.

Banks and McKinney, who moved to Fort Worth from Santa Fe, New Mexico, in 2016, saw the importance of including different groups, organizations, and businesses in their quest to purchase, renovate, repurpose, and rename the structure.

“We knew that the two of us coming from outside of Texas, it was not a project that should be a DNAWORKS project,” Banks says. “It was never DNAWORKS’ intention to own that building. We wanted to catalyze a community conversation and create a community conversation and bring people together to figure out what should happen to this building.”

Ultimately, they created the 1012 Coalition, which includes the Welman Project, Juneteenth Museum, Tarrant County Coalition for Peace and Justice, Sol Ballet Folklórico, Window to Your World, Mass Design Group, and the Projects Group.

While it’s still very early, the process is well underway to purchase the site and begin its transformation. The coalition meets monthly, and some preliminary renderings of the renovation are already making the rounds. Following the expiration of the delay of the demolition, in February of 2020, Transform 1012

N. Main St. was a finalist for a North Texas Community Foundation ToolBox grant and appeared in the foundation’s subsequent donor catalog. Fundraising efforts to acquire the land are expected to begin sometime this year.

According to a brochure provided to us by the coalition, the Fred Rouse Center and Museum for Arts and Community Healing will include an amphitheater, park, pop-up event space, museum and exhibit space, theater, and a makerspace.

Freddy Cantu, who’s the co-founder and artistic director of Sol Ballet Folklórico and member of the 1012 Coalition, hopes to capitalize on the center’s theater

“We’re hoping that this place could function as a space where groups like [Sol Ballet Folklórico] or other groups in the city could come to as a refuge.”

Freddy Cantu, co-founder and artistic director of Sol Ballet Folklórico and member of the 1012 Coalition



space by promoting different cultures through dance and, ultimately, help raise funds for dance groups.

"We're hoping that this place could function as a space where groups like [Sol Ballet Folklórico] or other groups in the city could come to as a refuge," Cantu says. "As somewhere where they could share their art, collaborate with other dance teachers, make it multicultural, multiethnic style location for people to come and use the resources that we can give them."

Similarly, the Welman Project, an organization that repurposes surplus materials for education purposes, looks to have an open-to-the-public makerspace that would make tools and equipment accessible to everyone.

Each partner brings something different and unique to the table that will ultimately make the Fred Rouse Center a fuller more realized community space.

"Together, we represent all the groups that the Klan targeted in the early 20s," Banks says. "And we bring our full cultures and our full selves to this building and to this project ... It's a model whereby every culture is fully represented, and our hope is that when you have that kind of model, then you also have lots of people from different cultures coming to the space or gathering."

The coalition understands that some may feel the building, with its dark history, should be demolished. But, the coalition argues, an awareness of the city's history is important to create the dialogue necessary for Fort Worth to reach its full potential.

"The people in Fort Worth, I think we're so laid back and we're so busy trying to survive in some instances that we're not aware of our history and the things that have occurred down through the years," Opal Lee, activist and member of the 1012 Coalition, says. "It's like it never happened because they don't know about it."

And, as for the proponents of demolition, the group is also open to the dialogue.

"We are aware that there are, in some corners of the city, people who still have questions about the philosophy of the project," Banks says. "But really, nobody has brought it to us directly. We hope to engage with folks. We don't want to just push this through. We've not had the opportunity to share the vision with people beyond the philosophical vision, to actually share what the building will provide for these communities."

The word "healing" is used a lot in conversations with Banks, McKinney, and the rest of those who make up the coalition. There is a strong sense that saving and transforming 1012 N. Main St. would go a long way toward the city acknowledging and reckoning with its dark past.

"I'm thinking about what racism does, and it separates, it dehumanizes," McKinney says. "A contradiction to racism is community-building and relationship-building with people, with whom or from whom we've been separated. Demolishing the building won't get rid of racism. Developing relationships with people with whom we've been taught are not our allies might get rid of racism." **fw**