

THE TEXAS SCHOOL BOOK DEPOSITORY BUILDING: PRESERVING THE DARK SIDE OF HISTORY

by Richard West Sellars

From a sixth floor corner window of the Texas School Book Depository Building in Dallas, the traffic below seems surprisingly close—a slow-moving car makes an easy target. Lee Harvey Oswald had the same view as he crouched at this sixth floor window to watch the presidential motorcade approach on Houston Street and turn down Elm Street, passing through Dealey Plaza. Then he shot and killed President Kennedy.

With the assassination on November 22, 1963, ordinary urban features here on the west edge of downtown Dallas suddenly became infamous landmarks, known worldwide—the grassy knoll, the triple underpass, the School Book Depository. Centered around Dealey Plaza, this area forms a kind of amphitheater—open to the west, ringed on other sides by buildings of medium height, including the depository on the north. This was the stage on which “Camelot” ended.

In November 1963, the sixth floor of the depository was a single, large storeroom almost completely filled with boxes of school books, which provided Oswald ample seclusion while he fired shots from the window. Following the assassination, the room remained closed to the public and was virtually unchanged from its 1963 appearance. Now, a quarter of a century after the assassination, the Dallas County Historical Foundation is opening an exhibit on the sixth floor to explain why President Kennedy came to Dallas, to describe the assassination, and to discuss the controversy and official investigations that followed.



President and Mrs. Kennedy arriving at the Dallas Airport. John F. Kennedy Library.

The Historical Foundation is using the murderer's roost to interpret a traumatic event still painful for many people. One might logically question whether this is a proper response to the assassination. It focuses on the president's death, not his life. In fact, the sixth floor exhibit raises questions central to why and how we preserve our past, in Dallas or anywhere. What is appropriate? What part of our past are we obligated or willing to preserve? Are we to keep only the remnants of “safe” history—high-style architecture, abandoned military forts, homes of pioneers, or warehouses to be converted into restaurants and condominiums? Or do we dare preserve what still hurts?

A Controversial Presence

With the assassination, the depository became a troubling and controversial presence—a touch-me-not: tear it down and then regret it, or preserve it and be called tasteless. Initially, there were proposals to destroy the building—in a sense, to salt the earth, to get rid of this shameful site. But the building survived. Now known as the Dallas County Administration Building, it was purchased by the county in 1977 and adapted for use by the Commissioner's Court. This ensured the building's continued use and preservation and led to making the sixth floor available for the exhibit.

In addition to the depository, other features of this historic site have survived, either by chance or by design. Dealey Plaza and its environs have changed remarkably little since 1963—two additional flagpoles, new lampposts, small historical markers describing the assassination, new directional signs for traffic. The trees along the grassy knoll have grown taller. The most striking visual change lies a quarter-mile southwest of the plaza—a towering complex of glass and steel structures built in the 1970s.

One block east of the plaza, but not visible from it, stands a memorial to John Fitzgerald Kennedy, designed by architect Philip Johnson and dedicated in 1970, a tribute by the citizens of Dallas County. Construction of the memorial avoided questions of appropriateness, for it was built on untainted ground and did not involve preserving the scene of the crime. When Kennedy passed near the place where the memorial now stands, his life was open to the future. In the plaza, beneath the south facade of the depository building, his life and presidency were terminated. Preserving the assassination site raises more difficult questions than did building the memorial.

Other Sites, Other Responses

Response to other assassination sites indicates that this preservation effort in Dallas is not altogether unique. The closest parallel is Ford's Theater in Washington, D.C., where John Wilkes Booth shot President Abraham Lincoln on April 14, 1865. Because of public objections, Ford's Theater did not reopen after the assassination. The federal government soon bought the building, converted its interior to office and storage space, then later used it as a museum of Lincoln's life and times. Literature of the nineteenth century refers to the building as "sacred"—there the Great Emancipator was slain.

Today, Ford's Theater is a designated national historic site, open to the public. Ironically, plans to restore the building's interior to a theater were underway during the Kennedy administration. The stage setting in the rebuilt theater (com-

pleted in 1968) is for Act II, Scene ii of "Our American Cousin," in progress when Lincoln was shot. Based on Matthew Brady photographs and other reliable information, this accurate restoration includes the presidential box, furnished and decorated as it was on the night of the assassination. Just as the sixth floor exhibit is not a memorial to Lee Harvey Oswald, Ford's Theater is not a memorial to John Wilkes Booth—rather, it recalls a president's martyrdom and preserves the historic setting.

In Memphis, Tennessee, the Lorraine Motel, where Martin Luther King, Jr., was assassinated in 1968, is preserved through a joint effort of state and local governments and the private sector. The motel complex will be converted into a museum on the civil rights movement. But in Los Angeles, the kitchen area of the Ambassador Hotel, where Robert Kennedy was shot that same year, is both inaccessible to the public and subject to the rush of daily use, making it unsuitable to become a memorial site.

These responses indicate that the stature and public personality of the individual assassinated—and the circumstances of the assassination, including its *setting*—influence whether the public will maintain interest in a site. When President Kennedy was killed, Dealey Plaza was already a memorial area, a low-keyed monumental gateway to downtown. The plaza's colonnades and park-like setting commemorate those who helped establish and build the city of Dallas. Further memorialization is compatible with the area's original purpose.

Since the assassination, people have wanted to visit the site—the place where it happened. They come individually



With President Kennedy's assassination on November 22, 1963, the Texas School Book Depository suddenly became an infamous landmark. This photograph of the building was taken the afternoon of the assassination. Dallas County Historical Foundation.

or by busloads to walk about the plaza's grassy knoll and white colonnades and read the historical markers. Invariably, they point toward the sixth floor window and the triple underpass.

A "Return" Visit

They visit this place for many reasons. Some are simply curious, attracted by the macabre and the sensational aspects of the assassination. But others come in an effort to understand, to comprehend what happened. Many come in an act of solemn remembrance—seeking a kind of reconciliation. Essentially they *return*, because they already know the site well from television and newspaper reports and historical accounts. It is almost too familiar. The site is a compelling yet terrible magnet. And for many, to go there

is to wish there were no reason to go there—in a sense, to wish it away.

To preserve sites of recent, disturbing history—events not yet drained of their emotional intensity—requires courage and foresight. The exhibit on the sixth floor of the School Book Depository is an appropriate use of this place, one that confronts this tragic event and acknowledges its lasting historical importance to this nation. The exhibit is not a celebration of history; rather, it is a recognition of history and an attempt to understand it.

Preserving sites of tragic history is essentially an elegiac process. The historic setting in Dallas will always abide with memory of the assassination—and the enduring regret that it ever happened. ♦

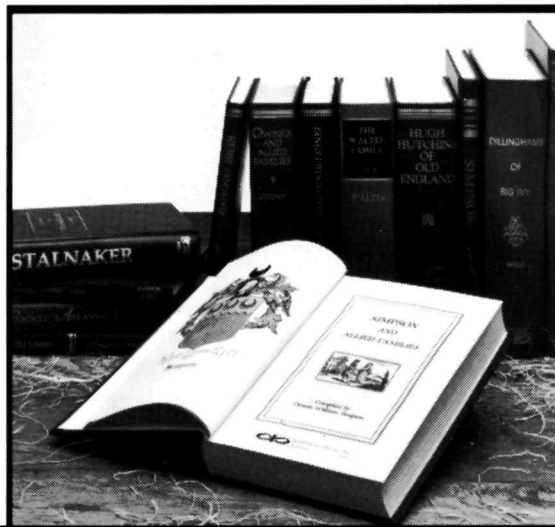
Richard West Sellars is a historian with the National Park Service in Santa Fe, New Mexico. He is also a specialist in historic preservation and teaches preservation for the Park Service and universities across the country.

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