



# SAN ANTONIO CONSERVATION SOCIETY



**AIA**  
San Antonio

March 21, 2017

Letters to the Editor  
San Antonio Express-News  
P. O. Box 2878  
San Antonio, Texas 78278

Dear Editorial Board,

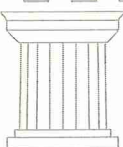
The San Antonio Conservation Society and The San Antonio Chapter of the American Institute of Architects (AIA San Antonio) have been monitoring the progress of the Alamo Plaza Master Plan with great interest. We were encouraged when the Alamo Master Plan team announced in December that the Crockett Block, Palace Theatre and Woolworth Building on Alamo Street would be repurposed as the site of the new Alamo Museum. We have advocated for this since the General Land Office purchased the buildings in 2015.

The Conservation Society and AIA San Antonio recently had the privilege of touring these historic buildings with Alamo Master Planner, George Skarmas. That tour re-ignited our enthusiasm for the Alamo Plaza vision, but also suggested that the opportunity to preserve more than the exterior shell of these important buildings had not yet been fully explored.

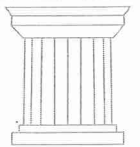
Samuel Maverick's sons erected the Crockett Building in 1882, one year before the State purchased the Alamo Chapel. Designed by Alfred Giles, the most prominent San Antonio architect of the Gilded Age, the Crockett Building retains its exterior and interior limestone walls and decorative façade elements. Restored in the 1980s, the Crockett Building would provide a logical entrance to the new Alamo Museum, with clear views of the chapel from its upper floor windows.

The 1923 Palace Theatre was designed by George Willis, one of the first architects trained by Frank Lloyd Wright. Willis also designed the 1928 Milam Building, the first fully air-conditioned office building in the country. The Palace Theatre was operated and later owned by Louis Santikos, a Greek immigrant who built the largest family-owned theater chain in Texas. A 1980s' restoration modernized the former theater.

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The Purpose of this Society is to preserve and to encourage the preservation of historic buildings, objects, places and customs, relating to the history of Texas, its natural beauty, and all that is admirably distinctive to our State; and by such physical and cultural preservation to keep the history of Texas legible and intact to educate the public, especially the youth of today and tomorrow, with knowledge of our inherited regional values.



The adjacent Woolworth Building opened in 1921. The building is remembered as the site of one of the first peacefully integrated lunch counters in the 1960s' South. Despite significant interior modifications, the building has retained the integrity of its upper-story façades and cornice, and the Woolworth name is still visibly inscribed above the canopy at the southernmost entrance.

Repurposing these historic buildings into a new, high-tech museum is an exciting challenge. We believe this can be accomplished without sacrificing the interiors of the buildings in their entirety. It is a well-known fact that the best approach to building conservation is one that takes advantage of existing features. Take, for example, the Crockett Building, which was originally designed to house four independent retail businesses. Instead of demolishing the interior stone walls, as currently proposed, could we not consider the opportunity to create new openings in the walls to allow visitors to pass from room to room, like at the McNay Art Museum and the U.S. Holocaust Memorial Museum, both of which offer a more intimate visitor experience?

The Conservation Society and AIA San Antonio believe that the Alamo Museum would function better as a series of spaces defined by the historic walls and context of the buildings. We recommend that the new museum's larger exhibition spaces be located in the Palace and Woolworth buildings, since their interiors have already been significantly altered. The Woolworth Building, in terms of size and flexibility alone, may rival the traveling exhibition spaces of the San Antonio Museum of Art and the McNay.

It is fortunate that this museum is being planned in 2017. Modern technology for interpretive devices, such as augmented reality, and the mechanical equipment required for climate control are becoming smaller, requiring less physical intervention to accommodate them into existing buildings. This further supports our belief that the Crockett Building, in particular, does not need to be gutted to function as museum space.

The Alamo is a one-of-a-kind site, and its proposed new museum deserves an innovative design solution that incorporates the historic character of the buildings that will house it. We look forward to seeing future plans for the development of this museum and urge that those plans reflect a thoughtful preservation solution.

Sincerely,



Janet Dietel  
President



Adam Reed, AIA  
President, AIA San Antonio Chapter