

# Defending an Intact Alamo Plaza

Janet Dietel, President

It is true the story of the Alamo has captured the imagination of the world, drawing tourists from across the county and around the globe, as Glenn Effler asserts in [his rebuttal](#) to my Express-News op-ed, "[Thirteen days don't tell the whole story.](#)" However, virtually every other aspect of the Alamo's history - from the events of the siege, to the manner of the site's preservation, and what it symbolizes - has been the source of passionate debate. As that debate continues, we may be headed for another battle, not over the church and long barracks associated with the massacred Texas garrison, but over preserving the integrity of the surrounding plaza.

Effler supports documentary maker Gary Foreman's resurrected proposal to reconstruct the Alamo's 1836 boundaries, advocating a tourist-centric approach that caters to visitors' pre-conceived expectations of what the Alamo site should look like. He does not so much refute the key points made in opposition to this plan, as dismiss the history, preservation principles, and planning goals that contradict its advisability.

Never did the Society assert that San Antonio's "authenticity, identity or international appeal is indelibly defined by the existence of [what Effler describes as] three largely unremarkable buildings." We did point out that the Crockett Block and the Woolworth Building contribute to the Alamo Plaza National Register Historic District. This district is significant not only for the story of the Alamo, but for the plaza's evolution into the commercial and civic heart of San Antonio between 1850 and 1924. While the latter story lacks tragic drama, it remains relevant to our city's history, and is critical to understanding why the Alamo we see today is not the Alamo of 1836.

Furthermore, the Crockett Block and Woolworth Building are not merely old, as Effler asserts, but are deemed historic by virtue of their association with either a significant person or event. Renowned San Antonio architect Alfred Giles designed the 1882 [Crockett Block](#) for two of Samuel Augustus Maverick's sons. Giles helped the early makers of San Antonio, including the Maverick family, shape the developing city in the late 19th century. The Crockett Block ranks among Giles' earlier commissions and represents the only intact building designed entirely by Giles on the plaza.

As for the 1921 [Woolworth Building](#), history contradicts Effler's claim that its significance is based on "a lunch counter protest," making up "one of hundreds of demonstrations" that have occurred on Alamo Plaza. Instead, peaceful integration took place inside this building on March 16, 1960, orchestrated by courageous church leaders, store managers, and members of the NAACP. The prominent location of Woolworth's, together with the store's status as a national chain, added to the distinction of this historic achievement that set San Antonio apart from other Southern cities at the time.

The selective assertion that these particular buildings represent an "intrusion onto hallowed ground" underscores the danger of discarding a nuanced approach to history. In fact, the crux of the problem facing the Alamo Plaza Restoration Project is that the 19th century citizenry

reintegrated the site of the battle into everyday life within twenty years of the Alamo's fall. The sanctification of the Alamo – the creation of “a site set apart from its surroundings and dedicated to the memory of an event, person or group,” as defined by geographer Kenneth E. Foote – did not take place until nearly half a century after the battle.

This hallowing process began in 1879 with the founding of the Alamo Monument Association. Little remained of the perimeter structures that Effler wants re-constructed in place of the Crockett and Woolworth Buildings. When the association finally saw the transfer of the Alamo church to the State of Texas in 1883, the U.S. Army had constructed a roof and parapet on the building, and the Crockett Block already stood across the plaza. The [Maverick Bank](#) would rise the following year, where Woolworth's now stands.



*By the 1910s, Alamo Plaza was a vibrant center of commerce, culture, and entertainment. Photo courtesy San Antonio Conservation Society Foundation.*

Basically, supporters of the reconstruction plan are asking San Antonians to reject the way locals shaped the cultural landscape of the plaza in the 19th century, as well as to surrender their input into the site's interpretation, in order to cater to tourists' expectations. This remodeling of the physical environment, like a stage set, not only distorts history, but creates a host of preservation and planning dilemmas that are discussed further in Part 2.

## Defending an Intact Alamo Plaza - Part 2

In this continuation of "Defending an Intact Alamo Plaza," Conservation Society President Janet Dietel further examines the preservation and planning dilemmas raised in Glenn Effler's rebuttal to her op-ed, "Thirteen days doesn't tell the whole story."

### **When is a restoration not a restoration?**

An Alamo battlefield historian, Effler supports documentary maker Gary Foreman's resurrected plan "to reclaim and restore as much of the Alamo as possible," including its 1836 boundaries. Yet, for the Alamo's principle surviving buildings - its church and convento/long barracks - there is no going back to 1836. To do so would require removing the curved parapet that the U.S. Army added to the church in 1849 to conceal the gable end of a new wood frame roof. Likewise, the modern concrete barrel-vaulted roof in place today would need to come off, exposing the interior masonry, remaining plaster, and painted motifs to the elements. The convento's/long barrack's missing second-story, lost in 1912 when Clara Driscoll won her lengthy court battle to decide the building's fate, would need to be reconstructed. Wisely, no proposal to carry out any of these alterations has been put forth in the name of restoration. These changes, made over the course of time, have become accepted parts of the buildings' history.



*The Alamo (at right) and ruins of the Convento (center), looking north, c. 1912. The old post office is visible in the background through the gaps in the walls. Courtesy of the San Antonio Conservation Society Foundation.*

In the context of Alamo Plaza, where Effler and Foreman want to see the Alamo's western perimeter structures rebuilt in place of the historic Crockett Block and Woolworth Building, restoration becomes a relative term. Foreman's plan omits reconstruction of the northern boundary wall where Col. William B. Travis died during the 1836 siege. This site has lain buried beneath the footprint of a substantial post office and federal building since 1890. The rededicated Hipolito F. Garcia Federal

Building, which replaced the old post office in 1937, covers an entire city block. Practicality rules out the removal of this massive building, which postdates the construction of the endangered Woolworth Building by sixteen years. However, the Federal Building's massive size, ornate style, and recent \$56 million renovation have apparently elevated it from "intrusion onto hallowed ground" - a charge Effler levels at the Crockett Block and Woolworth Building - to coveted potential museum space.

The Federal Building's exemption from reclamation illustrates the problem with attempting to selectively peel back a layer of the historic urban development that replaced the Alamo's perimeter structures. It is not that the less ornate Crockett Block and Woolworth Building (whose histories are discussed in [Part 1](#)) are less worthy to stand where they are, it is that they are more vulnerable



because of their smaller size and their association with the carnival-like businesses currently housed in them. The 1882 Crockett Block and 1921 Woolworth Building should be accepted and respected as valid products of the plaza's historical evolution. These historic buildings not only now serve as the western boundary for the plaza's open space, but effectively buffer the plaza from the 15-story Hyatt Regency Hotel and a six-story parking garage constructed immediately to the west in the 1980s.

*Above: Looking southeast at the Woolworth Building on the corner of E. Houston and S. Alamo Streets. The Losoya Street parking garage is visible behind it, to the right. Photo by Ron Bauml.*

*Below: The Paseo de Alamo cut-through to the Hyatt Regency (center) illustrates how historic buildings, like the Crockett Block (right), help to screen the plaza from more modern intrusions. Photo by Ron Bauml.*

### **With irreplaceable history comes great responsibility**

As rife with inconsistency as any proposal to restore the 1836 Alamo must be, the concept of reconstruction presents its own pitfalls. Over a century before men lost their lives in the battle of the Alamo, Spanish priests and Native Americans lived, worked, and buried their dead at Mission San Antonio de Valero. The inhabitants of this northernmost mission built



the structures that later made it possible for the Texas garrison to mount its doomed defense against Santa Anna's troops. The importance of Mission Valero as the first Franciscan mission founded in San Antonio, coupled with what authenticity is retained by its surviving structures, accounts for the Alamo's inclusion in the San Antonio Missions' 2015 World Heritage Site inscription, which carries with it responsibilities to protect and to preserve the existing site.

Effler suggests that altering the plaza to focus on the 1836 battle should take precedence over, what he terms, the need "to appease UNESCO or seek its approval before implementing desired upgrades to Alamo Plaza." In disdaining the Alamo's World Heritage designation, Effler casually dismisses nine years' worth of collaborative work among historians, heritage organizations, and government entities to secure this international honor, a first for our state. As he points out, the Alamo does not need the designation to be a popular tourist destination. But, neither does Texas need the embarrassment should the "upgrades" that Effler endorses compromise the Alamo site, which forms an essential element in the missions' group designation.

The assessment of the Alamo's integrity as a site, vetted by a panel of international conservation experts and approved by the World Heritage Committee, takes into account the dramatic and permanent changes brought about by mission secularization and the flourishing urban development that gradually followed. Experts agree that the Alamo has retained enough of the elements needed to express its significance as the founding site in San Antonio's chain of missions, despite the evolutionary changes to its historic setting. The reconstruction plan that Effler supports takes the opposite view. It calls for re-creating missing structures that emphasize the Alamo's role in 1836 without regard for how the site evolved and risks creating a more abrupt and confusing visual disconnect between the different historical eras represented on the plaza.



*Augustus Koch's Bird's Eye View of San Antonio Bexar Co. Texas 1886 Looking East, 1886. Courtesy of the San Antonio Conservation Society Foundation.*

Carefully weighing the advisability of reconstructing missing Alamo structures goes beyond “appeasing” UNESCO to embrace acting in the best interest of our city. Nor can we be accused of parochialism if we are guided by conservation principles and practices established at other sites of international importance and value. Several case studies of [reconstruction in the World Heritage context](#), including those summarized in the Krakow Charter (2000), Riga Charter (2000), and at the International Symposium on the Concepts and Practices of Conservation and Restoration of Historic Buildings in East Asia (2007), have established precedents that should give responsible planners pause when considering Foreman’s proposal for Alamo Plaza.

The East Asian symposium recognizes that “[partial reconstruction] should not be undertaken if the site in its present form has acquired significance in its own right.” Riga allows for reconstruction in certain circumstances, “providing always that reconstruction can be carried out without conjecture or compromising existing in situ remains, and that any reconstruction is legible, reversible, and the least necessary for the conservation and preservation of the site.” From Krakow, comes the idea that “reconstruction of an entire building, destroyed by armed conflict . . . is only acceptable if there are exceptional social or cultural motives that are related to the identity of the entire community.”

If we apply these principles to Foreman's Alamo Plaza proposal, we find key points of conflict. The Crockett Block and Woolworth Building, currently standing on the plaza’s western boundary, are historic in their own right. Any reconstruction undertaken will be irreversible in the sense that, once these large, multi-story buildings are removed, it will not be feasible to restore them to their original locations. Furthermore, we have no assurance that sufficient documentation exists to guide reconstruction, or that moving existing buildings and reconstructing new ones will not damage the remnants of the original perimeter walls known to exist a mere four to twelve inches below the ground. Finally, we question whether the reconstruction of a long vanished structure to highlight the story of the battle truly relates to the identity of the entire community. Effler, himself, repeatedly champions the desires of visitors who “hunger for knowledge of the 13-day siege” over other audiences, including many San Antonians who feel that they have a justifiable self-interest in the way they experience their own plaza.

This active civic engagement is reflected in the SA2020 project, initiated in 2010, which brought thousands of citizens together with urban planners to establish a shared vision for the city's future. Major areas of focus relevant to Alamo Plaza include Downtown Development, Economic Competiveness, which also encompasses Heritage Tourism, and Environmental Sustainability. In all of these areas, historic buildings directly contribute to making downtown symbolic of “economic health, public-private partnerships, quality of life, community pride, and community history” ([Historic Preservation: Essential to the Economy and Quality of Life in San Antonio](#)). These historic buildings, including the Crockett Block and Woolworth Building, are worth preserving as stepping stones to the future, as well as windows into the past.

Alamo Plaza's importance as a cultural hub that once embodied all of these desirable civic attributes is what we should strive to reclaim and restore, not with re-created structures that function as props, but with compatible adaptive use of existing historic buildings, innovative interpretation, and strategic revitalization that enhances the overall experience for locals and tourists, alike.