

Old Spanish Trail Centennial Article on Houston Street Development

By Suzan O'Connor

How exciting to find out that our project on Houston Street is part of a much larger context! We had no idea that this stretch of Houston Street was part of the Old Spanish Trail until Charlotte contacted our office. Here is our contribution to this much-bigger picture.

The project began for us in 1998, when a real estate trust saw the potential for revitalizing a number of buildings on East Houston Street; historically San Antonio's premier commerce and entertainment district. The Trust first hired 3D/I to assess 12 buildings and to estimate the cost of related infrastructure improvements. We worked with them to form a public/private partnership with the City of San Antonio and pointed out additional financial incentives to assist with the development. Over the course of two years, the Trust began to purchase or strategically lease the buildings they desired.

A project of this magnitude also called for comprehensive architectural services. In addition to those listed above, 3D/I coordinated with public utilities, public works departments and funding agencies to make this project happen. We integrated our work with civil, structural, MEP, environmental, specialty design and landscape architect firms.

Since most of the buildings involved in the project were designated "historic", we completed extensive photographic and written research on the buildings and on Houston Street itself. Early in the process, we presented the research and preliminary plans to the City and State Offices of Historic Preservation, Historic Design and Review Commission, the San Antonio Conservation Society, and interested business and community groups. This initial involvement of stakeholders proved to be a key to moving the project off the drawing boards and on to reality. To assist with marketing, we prepared hand and computer-generated renderings, made presentations to groups and designed and outfitted a leasing center so that our client could attract tenants.

For the City of San Antonio Public Works Department, 3D/I also managed improvements to the streetscape on Houston Street between Alamo Plaza and the San Antonio River. The design included cedar elm trees in a continuous line on both sides of the street and new pedestrian amenities. We also designed a "pocket park" that was given back to the City for public use. This part of the process accomplished its two objectives: to attract pedestrian traffic and to re-establish Houston Street as a distinct locality, with edges, a central spine, and a "heart" at its midpoint. It became, once again, an identifiable district that had the potential for new life, rather than a dying street with a collection of structures.

For our private client, we designed the selective demolition and new construction that brought the buildings up to current code. We have continued to assist with designing and finishing-out the spaces as new tenants move in. In the process, we decided to step up to the plate and become a part of the emerging renaissance. In May, 2002, 3D/I moved our offices from a corporate high-rise to a circa 1917 steel and concrete building that fronts on Houston Street.

Several of the components of the Houston Street Development have won awards for design and community contribution. Five years from inception, it now totals 359K square feet of revitalized office, retail, restaurant and entertainment space in the heart of downtown San Antonio.