HISTORIC PRESERVATION STUDY
OF THE
OTHO PLUMMER ADMINISTRATION BUILDING,
LAMAR UNIVERSITY,
BEAUMONT, TEXAS

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History, Theories, and Contemporary Issues in Historic Preservation
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Abstract

In 1901, the discovery of oil at Spindletop forever changed Southeast Texas. In the crosshairs of change was a small community just north of the Spindletop field known as South Park. Here, among a community long-dedicated to education, South Park Junior College was formed in 1923. Almost thirty years later, that junior college would come into its own as Lamar University as enrollments and campus construction increased. In the 1940s and 1950s, Lamar University had built a modern campus that visually looked toward the future of education and the prospects of the petrochemical industry in the area. The pinnacle of that forward-looking philosophy came with the construction of the Otho Plummer Administration Building – some say, one of the first round academic buildings in America that was, at the time, a practical solution to a geographic problem as well as a symbol of a university rooted in technical education. Now, after 50 years, the Plummer Building faces uncertain future as current users deem it unfit for current needs. Now is the time to solidify the Plummer Building’s significance and envision how it might continue to serve the university as well as its neighbors in South Park and Beaumont.
Spindletop

As with much of the history of Beaumont, Texas, real economic growth and industrialization came after the discovery of oil at Spindletop in 1901. Intertwined with the history and growth of Spindletop is the history of Lamar University. However, before Spindletop, at the beginning of the twentieth century, the Southeast Texas economy, like that of most of the South, relied on subsistence agriculture, but cattle ranching and the lumber business were also important. Large ranches sent cattle to New Orleans, and mills in Beaumont and Orange produced lumber for shipment to the rest of America and overseas. For centuries, Native Americans, Spanish explorers, and, ultimately, early Texans had seen signs of oil at Spindletop. It wasn’t until a small oil company – the Gladys City Oil, Gas & Manufacturing Company – was incorporated in 1892, that any serious attempts to drill for oil began. The Gladys City Company drilled three dry holes before an Austrian-born mining engineer named Capt. Anthony F. Lucas came to Beaumont. Lucas leased land from the Gladys City Company, but, again, came up dry. After urging from his wife, Caroline, Lucas was able to secure additional funding from Andrew Mellon. On the eve of America’s first, great oil discovery, annual production in Texas totaled about 800,000 barrels, a small fraction of the 63 million barrels produced annually across the nation. After three months of drilling, Lucas, along with drillers Al, Curt and Jim Hamill, brought in the first well at Spindletop, which has been estimated to have been blowing 800,000 to 1 million barrels of oil per day.

A new age was born, and Beaumont, Texas, America and the world would never be the same. Quickly, thousands of people poured into Beaumont to start oil companies (over 600 at the height of the boom), work on the rigs or just to witness the great event. Wild speculation drove land prices around Spindletop to incredible heights. The little town of Gladys City, on the edge
of the Spindletop field, grew up quickly with clapboard buildings housing businesses, saloons, boarding houses, and brothels. With over 250 wells operating at once, the Spindletop field declined rapidly in production. After yielding 17,500,000 barrels of oil in 1902, the Spindletop wells were down to 10,000 barrels a day in February 1904. By 1910, Spindletop was pretty much a ghost town as oilmen and speculators moved on to find the next great field. But, in 1925, a second boom occurred, called the Yount-Lee boom, as newer technology allowed drillers to extract additional oil from Spindletop’s perimeter. Although this second wave was more controlled than the first, within five years this boom, too, was over. In the 1950s, companies came in to mine sulphur at Spindletop and the field continues to produce small amounts of oil to this day. Most recently, companies are drilling caverns into the large salt formation that is Spindletop in order to store hydrogen and natural gas underground.

The discovery of the Spindletop oilfield had an almost incalculable effect on world history, as well as Texas history. Eager to find similar deposits, investors spent billions of dollars throughout the Lone Star state in search of oil and natural gas. The cheap fuel they found helped to revolutionize American transportation and industry. Many of the major oil companies, including Texaco, Gulf, Sun and ExxonMobil, were born at Spindletop or grew to major corporate size as a result of their involvement at Spindletop. The most lasting legacy, however, of Spindletop has been the petrochemical industry in Southeast Texas. Storage facilities, pipelines, and major refining units were built in the Beaumont, Port Arthur, Sabine Pass, and Orange, and brought thousands of workers to Southeast Texas.
South Park Neighborhood

During the first Spindletop oil boom, thousands of people came to Beaumont. Many were hard pressed to find housing. As the oilfield prospered, a small community just north of Spindletop grew to accommodate workers and their families. Later, the area would come to be called “South Park” and would be inextricably linked to the history of Lamar University.

First settled in the 1890s, the South Park neighborhood is bounded by Washington Avenue to the north, Martin Luther King, Jr. Boulevard to the east, Highway 69 to the south, and, roughly, Avenue A to the east. The first settlers in the area built homes near modern-day Lavaca Street, near the campus of what is now Lamar University. In the 1890s, most of Beaumont’s population was concentrated along the Neches River and to the west of downtown. Being around three miles from the nearest school in Beaumont, the early settlers of South Park decided to establish their own school. Using lumber from the Beaumont sawmills, the settlers set to work on a one-room schoolhouse. Soon, the school – and the surrounding area – would come to be called ‘South Park.’ It is not known, precisely, how the area got its name, but one story goes that near Spindletop, there was a small grove of trees and spring where people would often have picnics. It is believed that because this area was like a park and south of Beaumont, the name ‘South Park’ just became an accepted description for the area. In any case, the new South Park school was sufficient for the needs of the farmers and ranchers in the area until Capt. Lucas (who lived in South Park in a house that remains standing today) brought in the great oil well at Spindletop. With so many new residents, new construction and new tax revenue, the small community – and its school – began to grow, rapidly. The one-room schoolhouse, soon, became two rooms. Then, with so many children attending the school, some classes had to be held in local businesses. A school opened at Spindletop but additional space in vacant South Park
storefronts were still needed for classrooms. Some people even opened their homes to teachers and students to hold classes. Realizing something had to be done, the local school board voted its first school bond in the amount of $23,000 in February, 1907. Looking toward the future, the school board purchased seven acres of land along Highland Avenue – the major north-south artery through South Park and to Spindletop. In 1908, all of the far-flung classes were consolidated into a new brick schoolhouse, which would, soon, become the focal point for the South Park community. In 1911, South Park schools added an agriculture building, and in 1913, through a special act of the Texas Legislature, the South Park Independent School District was formed. And, even though the oil boom days were waning, there was still much work at newly built refineries, storage facilities and Beaumont’s port along the Neches River. The South Park neighborhood continued to be a desirable location for new families to live and by 1922, the school board called for another bond election to build a new high school, which was completed in 1923. It would be in this new high school that the origins of Lamar University would begin as South Park College.

Lamar University

As was common for many junior colleges in Texas, South Park Junior College was operated by the South Park Independent School District and housed in the district’s high school building. The name changed to Lamar College in 1932 in honor of Mirabeau B. Lamar, second president of the Republic of Texas and the “Father of Education” in Texas. In the early 1940s, Lamar separated from the South Park School District and moved to a location a few blocks east of the high school, but still within the South Park community. During World War II, Beaumont and Southeast Texas became integral to the war effort. Thousands of workers were employed in
shipbuilding and, of course, maintaining the ready supply of fuels from the area refineries. After the war, many families remained in the area. In turn, the South Park neighborhood and Lamar College began to experience tremendous growth. In 1951, the college became Lamar State College of Technology, a state-supported four-year institution, the first junior college in Texas to make such a transition. The G.I. Bill helped returning soldiers go to college – for some, the first in their family to do so – and, as a result, Lamar’s enrollment increased rapidly and, along with greater numbers of students, there was a need for additional buildings.

In 1957, the college employed local architectural firm Pitts, Mebane and Phelps to develop a campus master plan. In their plan, the firm proposed building several new classroom buildings, dormitories and additions to the student union building. Also part of the plan was a new administration building to be built on a triangular plot of land at the intersection of the Beaumont-Port Arthur Highway (now, MLK, Jr. Blvd.) and East Virginia Avenue. The original plan called for a T-shaped building with the longest section pointing southeast toward where the highway and street intersected, and the front of the building facing in toward campus. Also, on this site, there were plans to build a non-denominational chapel, which never got built. At that time, prior to the interstate being built, the Beaumont-Port Arthur Highway was the main north-south road in and out of Beaumont. Then president F.L. McDonald understood that most people’s first view of campus would be at the East Virginia Avenue intersection, and he did not like the idea that passersby would have to look at the back of the new administration building. He asked the architects to go back and reconsider a building that would better present itself to those passing by. In turn, the architects came up with a round building that would fit the space and, essentially, have four “fronts.”
The Otho Plummer Administration Building

Named for then-Board of Regents director Otho Plummer, the Plummer Building was a representation of a young college moving forward in a modern age. From the first buildings built on its new campus, the college had adopted a more modern style, eschewing more traditional styles like Colonialism or Gothic Revival that would have made it look older and more “Ivy League”-like. Here was a college with a growing reputation for graduating quality engineers and looking to the future of what the petrochemical industry would produce in the 1950s and 1960s. And with the Plummer Building, that vision was firmly established.

Essentially built as an outer and inner ring, the building is mainly of brick entrances with brick half-walls and half windows. An outer sidewalk allows entry into several offices while other offices are entered through the inner, open-air atrium in the center of the building. The building featured many modern amenities, including air conditioning, and houses, today, the office of the university’s president, upper administration and financial offices. The most striking feature of the building is the outer concrete buttresses. Cast on-site, the white buttresses support the roof and form a type of zig-zag pattern around the building representing the key symbol of the Tau Beta Pi Engineering Honor Society (see ‘Graphics’ section). On campus, the Plummer Building remains a focal point. While not many students use the building, from its northwest entrance one covered walkway leads to the Wimberley Building, which houses all of student services, and a second covered walkway leads to the Lucas Engineering Building. Leading directly out from the entrance is a landscaped sidewalk that leads to the “the head” – a large bust of Mirabeau B. Lamar – and the entrance to the Setzer Student Center.
Completed in 1958, the Plummer Administration Building has stood for over 50 years as a unique symbol of Lamar University’s identity as a forward-thinking educational institution. For some today, though, the building has outlived its usefulness and should go. In fact, just this year, as the university undergoes a new round of master planning, one iteration of the 30-year plan show the Plummer Building gone and replaced with a park-like area and carillon tower. And these feelings are understandable. Many mid-century buildings do not hold the same nostalgic affection that some have for the more ornate buildings of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. However, because of this, it is all the more important that buildings, like the Plummer, are championed for preservation.

While any university is a community within itself, in a small city, like Beaumont, the university plays a major role in the city’s identity. In addition to academics, the university offers public sporting events, quality performing arts, and two museums. The visual identity as represented in the campus’ buildings is crucial to the role of the university. As mentioned, most of the buildings on campus (save for the new dorms built in the last ten years) are all modern and represent a college that was growing rapidly and looking toward the future. Using the Plummer Building as an example of the type of modern, forward-thinking architecture that could continue to be built on campus might help draw the attention of technology firms both within and outside the petrochemical industry. Further, the Plummer Building continues to sit on a wonderful piece of land that is underutilized to bring residents on campus. And while the Beaumont-Port Arthur Highway has been transformed into parkway where cars pass the campus below street level, the Plummer Building continues to be a unique building as President McDonald envisioned.

Most of the criticism of the building, though, is not in how it looks but how it functions. As a round building, it can be difficult to determine where, exactly, the entrance is. What does
not help is if one enters through one of the passages into the inner atrium, it can be very difficult to find one’s way around. Plus, as mentioned, some offices are entered through doors on the outside ring of the building. Over the years, too, many of the interior offices have been divided and subdivided haphazardly to accommodate new functions. One area that is truly beautiful are the executive offices where the president and other administrators have offices. This area has beautiful wood paneling and tall windows. Looking at the exterior of the building, some work needs to be done to clean or repaint the concrete buttresses and some work could be done to provide better wayfinding signage around the outside of the building.

If, in fact, the building no longer serves its original purpose well, the answer does not need to be demolition. Recently, the university opened a Visitor Welcome Center that caters to potential new students and their families. The only available space for such a center was on the south side of campus in a former conference center, which is so far removed from the types of things new students want to see on campus that the Welcome Center staff have to drive students and their parents around campus in a golf cart. So, perhaps the university should build a new (modern) administration building and allow the Plummer Building to serve as a easily-recognizable visitor center. In fact, adjacent to the Plummer is a parking lot with a large ‘Visitors’ sign at its entrance. Another possibility would be to move the administrative offices to another building and then, gutting the Plummer of its offices (except the executive offices), removing the windows and creating a semi-outdoor communal space for student gatherings or performances. The once executive offices could function as office space for student organizations. Finally, in some ways, Lamar University has lost touch with its roots in the South Park community. Over time, the neighborhood has changed demographically and there are those who see such changes as insurmountable challenges. However, given only minor renovations to
the Plummer Building, it could become a type of community anchor, providing a space for neighborhood association meetings, special community events and, perhaps, a small museum dedicated to history of South Park.
Estimated Budget

While any one of these ideas for the future of the Plummer Building will require much discussion within the university as well as with the Beaumont community, there are some initial steps that could be taken to make the building more efficient and aesthetically pleasing.

Exterior Cleaning/Power Washing $ 20,000

Painting

  Concrete Buttresses 11,000
  Exterior Doors 1,500

Atrium Landscaping 5,000

Wayfinding Signage 5,000

Office Renovations 150,000

Renovations would be undertaken, primarily, in the offices of Financial Services, which includes Purchasing and Accounts Payables.

Total Estimated Budget $192,500

As a state-supported university, much of this initial budget could be met through legislative action or through the state’s Higher Education Auxiliary Funds (HEAF). When, and if, the university decides to petition for the Plummer Building to gain historic status, then, additional funding may be available through the Texas Historical Commission. Additional funding could be soliciting from one or several of the petrochemical companies in Southeast Texas. Currently, ExxonMobil, which operates a refinery nearly adjacent to campus, is a major supporter of the university. Depending on the future use of the Plummer Building, ExxonMobil may be worthwhile partner.
Sources


Bell, Milton, architect, interview by author, Beaumont, TX, April 12, 2013.


Mary and John Gray Library Archives and Special Collections. File of not cataloged newspaper clippings and notes on previous preservation attempts. Lamar University, Beaumont, TX.


1. 1957 Master Plan, showing plans for T-shaped administration building
2. 1960 Master Plan, showing the change to a round administration building
3. View from Beaumont-Port Arthur Highway, ca. early 1960s
4. Architectural rendering of proposed administration building, ca. 1957
4. Photograph of completed building, 1958