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# Invest in NRG? The Astrodome is ours.

Mike Vance, for the Houston Chronicle | February 15, 2017 | Updated: February 15, 2017 8:30am

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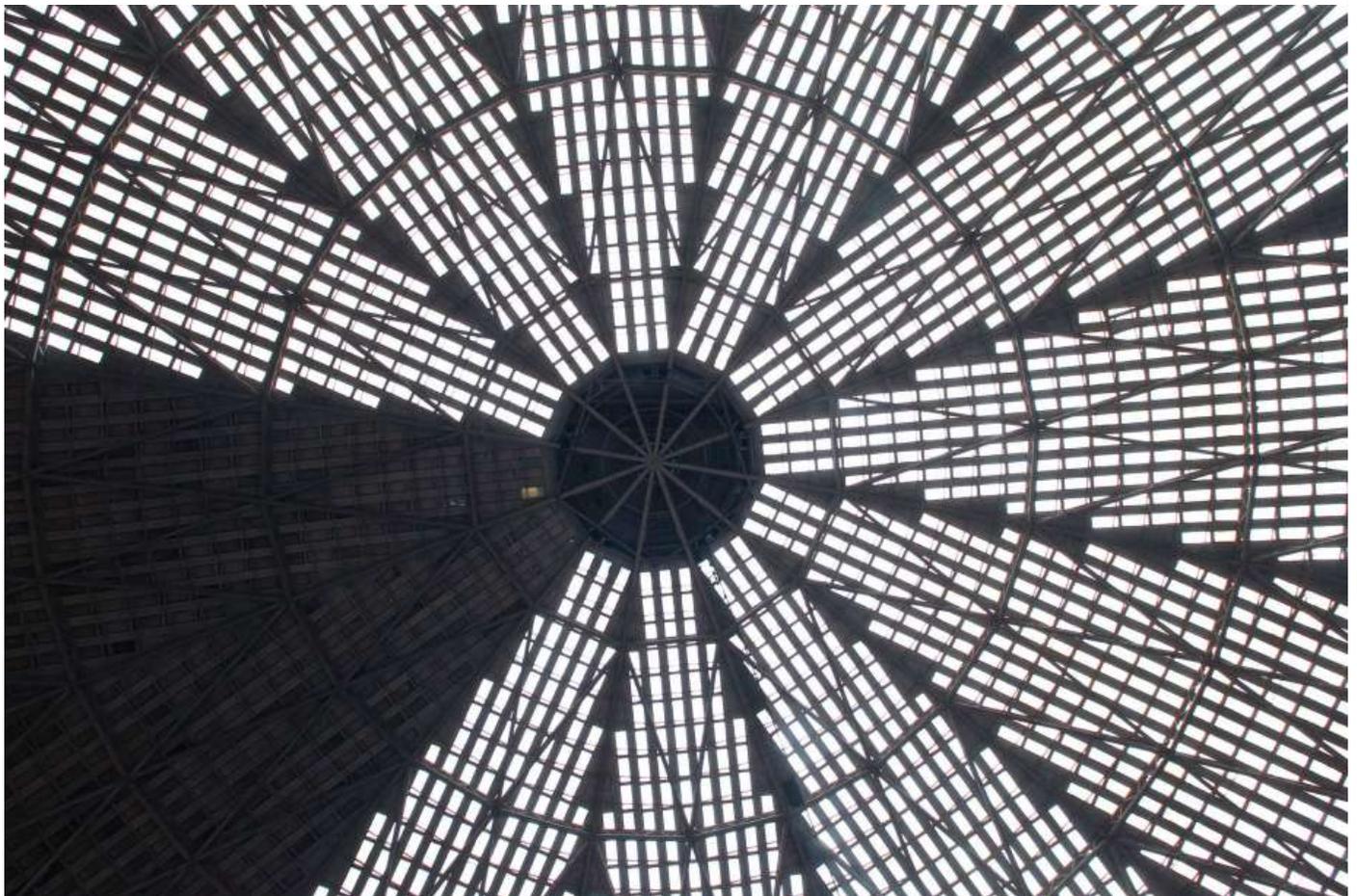


Photo: Steve Gonzales/Houston Chronicle

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The iconic ceiling of the Astrodome.

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There is no doubt that many thousands of Houstonians avoided downtown during Super Bowl week as if it were a plague-infested grizzly bear. Now that the congestion has waned, the east side of downtown should be a must-visit destination for everyone. The way the city remade the

area around Discovery Green and the George R. Brown Convention Center is amazing. A walk around the area at dusk, soaking in the lights, hearing the hum of conversations from both out-of-towners and residents of the high-rises that gleam nearby should make anyone proud to be a Houstonian.

It is precisely the sort of place that can renew one's belief that the collective attitude of our city is innovative, imaginative and can-do. And if there is one place and time in the history of our great city where that spirit shone the brightest, it was in the conception and construction of the Astrodome.

That's what makes it even more disappointing that Senator John Whitmire is carrying the water on yet more obstructionism designed to ensure that we stick to cynical business as usual. The party line on Whitmire's bill -- and it is certainly not too tough to figure out who's throwing the party -- is don't spend on the Astrodome. NRG Stadium needs the money. Well, "need" is not really the word. It's clearly "want."

***Mihir Zaveri and Bobby Cervantes: Lawmaker's bill reopens debate over \$105M Astrodome parking plan***

The senator has made a statement that he is concerned not only about NRG, but about Minute Maid, Toyota Center and BBVA Compass. But the simple fact is that Harris County is prohibited by law from spending money on those other facilities, and none would be covered under his bill.

Sometimes motives are hard to discern. This is not one of those times. There is better misdirection to be found at a second-grader's magic show. The repurposed, reimagined Astrodome would not be a stadium. This is not apples-to-apples, it's more like apples-to-possums.

The Astrodome is for all of us, all the time. There are many uses for this repurposed building, and almost all offer themselves to a complete cross-section of our citizens, making public use of a grand public space.

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Imagine some of the hundreds of local festivals, big and small, held under the beautiful Dome. Think of the educationally charged museums that could fit into 500,000 square feet of concourse space. There will be great convention displays, a magnificent rodeo carnival and food court, a special, second-to-none event venue and plenty of quiet days for families to stroll across the eight-acre lawn and be thankful for what we saved.

Common sense should indeed be our guide. Houston has hosted the Final Four twice. We have had the Super Bowl three times in the last 40-plus years. Sinking hundreds of millions of dollars yet again to upgrade NRG Stadium will not increase that frequency one bit. Now, how many times has any one of us taken his kids to the park or attended a festival during those years? It is absurd to debate for an instant which facility would mean the most to the citizens of Houston and Harris County.

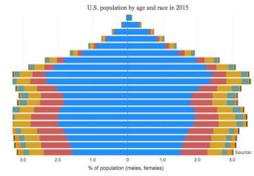
**Stephanie Stradley:** *Enough with Dome dreams. Let's put the money into NRG.*

Let's get some facts straight. The Astrodome has not been expensive to maintain. The county pays roughly \$170,000 a year with the vast majority used to cover the electric bill. So, that is not a potential source of funding for NRG. The plan the Commissioners Court has in place uses existing money. One third comes from the hotel occupancy tax, one third from a fund created from parking lots owned by the county and one third from the general fund that could be offset, meaning repaid, by future leases and festival rents. The plan that has been put in place, and is now threatened by self-interest, is a plan for a vital, revenue-producing Astrodome.

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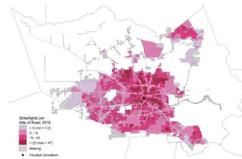
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The Texas Historical Commission has named the Astrodome a State Antiquities Landmark. That means the building cannot be demolished or even altered unless THC signs off on the plan. So Senator Whitmire and those who are behind the ill-advised bill would tie the county's hands and have the Dome remain there, empty, for another decade and a half.

The Astrodome is an asset, owned by the taxpayers of Harris County, that is completely debt-free. It is paid for. Demolishing it would cost at least \$35 million, possibly much more, and at the end of that process, we would own nothing. Remove the hand-wringing and emotion, and then answer who in their right mind would simply throw away an asset worth more than \$1 billion, the going rate to construct something similar from scratch.

Now add the undeniable fact that the Astrodome is not just "something," but rather a unique engineering marvel that is recognized around the globe as Houston's icon, our best advertisement for this can-do city.

The *Chronicle's* John McClain **dismissed** the idea of repurposing the Astrodome using the word "preposterous." Many of us might better apply that word to a concept that, instead of spending \$100 million to improve the quality of life for all of us, hands that same amount of money to private businesses that are already making a gigantic profit in order to let them make even more. Surely, those elected officials at the state level have plenty of neglected problems on their plates without throwing a wrench into well-thought-out local plans.

*Mike Vance is the author of multiple books on Houston history and producer-director of almost 100 feature-length documentaries, short films and television programs on the history of Houston and Texas.*

*Common sense should indeed be our guide. **Bookmark Gray Matters.***