



Houston Chronicle
eXtra

DOMECOMING

Houstonians flock to Astrodome for a last look before \$105M renovations begin . Page 3

Week in Review

LOCAL | STATE ROUNDUP

Dome gets last hurrah before repurposing



Michael Ciaglo / Houston Chronicle

Months before the Eighth Wonder of the World is repurposed for its next chapter of use, thousands of Houstonians flocked to get one last look at the Astrodome's historic, evocative interior. Long lines stretched late into the night Monday on the 53rd anniversary of the Dome's opening.

Items compiled from staff and wire reports

HPD to give training on transgender issues

With deadly violence against LGBTQ people at a 20-year high, Police Chief Art Acevedo pledged Wednesday that all Houston officers will get transgender competency training. Acevedo acknowledged that anti-gay hate crimes are among the most underreported, largely because people in the LGBTQ community feel uncertain they'll be protected by law enforcement. HPD hasn't previously offered competency training for transgender issues, and Acevedo said that gap in training has left the door open for some mistakes.



Jon Shapley / Houston Chronicle

Police Chief Art Acevedo, far right, says the training will ensure transgender citizens are "handled with respect and sensitivity."



Orion Span

Space hotel draws big interest

▶ Wealthy space enthusiasts are paying \$80,000 deposits to secure a spot in the solar system's first-ever space hotel, which could accept guests starting in 2022. Aurora Station, the brainchild of Orion Span based in Houston and Silicon Valley, sold four months of reservations within 72 hours of being announced last week.



Godofredo A. Vasquez / Houston Chronicle

Stockman convicted of fraud

▶ A federal jury in Houston on Thursday convicted former U.S. Rep. Steve Stockman of being the mastermind behind a wide-ranging fraud scheme, using hefty charitable donations to cover personal expenses and campaign debts. The jury found Stockman guilty of all but one of the 24 counts brought against him. He could face 20 years in prison on each count.

Report card gets sunnier outlook

▶ Relative to the rest of the country, Texas' average test scores on the National Assessment of Educational Progress do not appear overly favorable: near the bottom in reading achievement, roughly average in math. Those results, however, do not account for students' backgrounds and statistical likelihood to perform well on the test. In fact, an analysis by the Urban Institute estimates Texas students perform very well in math and above-average in reading when accounting for demographics.

ESSAY

How the Astrodome was saved

By Allyn West

In the 1970s and '80s, Courtney Tardy went to the Astrodome to watch baseball games. "I remember the original score-board and display," she wrote in an email, "and the excitement of being in that amazing space."

Maybe it's no accident that Tardy grew up to become an architectural historian.

When NRG Stadium was being built next door, Tardy was working with Ramona Davis at the nonprofit now called Preservation Houston and was getting questions about the future of the Astrodome. "We both considered it to be one of, if not the, most significant building in Houston," she writes. So she undertook what might be considered the first step in saving it. She wrote a letter.

Written with the Texas Historical Commission and submitted in 2001, that letter, she says, declared that the Harris County Dome Stadium was eligible for the National Register of Historic Places. The stadium was envisioned by Judge Roy Hofheinz, designed by Lloyd and Morgan and Wilson, Morris, Crain and Anderson, made structurally feasible by Walter P. Moore and opened to the public in 1965.

Now, as the city has come together for a "Domecoming" to celebrate a turning point from a past when demolition seemed imminent to a future of usefulness that no one can predict, Tardy deserves at least some of the credit for getting us here. (Disclosure: Tardy was a former colleague of mine at the Rice Design Alliance.) Though Harris County Judge Ed Emmett is the public official most closely tied to the salvation of the Astrodome, many private citizens have played important roles, too.

Without their many letters, petitions, documents and road trips — the tools of architectural preservation — Houston might have lost its most iconic building.

Fearing the end

In 2007, Emmett took office. At that time, Joe Stinebaker, a spokesman for Emmett, said Emmett's position was that "the thing was sitting there in the middle of terrific county property. It was going to waste."

"Do we tear it down? Do we redevelop it?" Stinebaker asked.

Madeleine Hamm, a former Chronicle writer, was in favor of the latter. She was then serving on the board of Preservation Houston.

As Emmett settled into his role, Hamm remembers her husband telling her that all the talk on local sports radio was about tearing down the Astrodome. "We thought we'd like to do something," she said. "We came up with the 'Save Our Astrodome' campaign," an online petition that attracted



Houston Chronicle file

The Eighth Wonder of the World isn't going anywhere.

almost 3,000 signatures.

The following year, though, the Astrodome was declared unfit for occupancy, and its future was as uncertain as ever. Emmett, Stinebaker said, never had "any great emotional attachment to the Astrodome). But (he believed) it would be the height of irresponsibility to leave a major county building sitting out there rotting when it could be relatively easily converted to a revenue-generator."

What could be done? A few years later, in 2013, another advocacy campaign, led by Preservation Houston with the National Trust for Historic Preservation, went viral, rallying the city to #SaveTheDome — there were limited-edition cupcakes, cocktails and bright-orange billboards all over the city — in advance of the \$27 million bond referendum that voters have paid to convert the Astrodome into convention space.

But when voters rejected that referendum, some feared it was the end. Commissioner Jack Morman said "that should be the death knell for the Dome."

Cynthia Neely and Ted Powell said it differently, though. They were working as private citizens around the same time, mired in the bureaucratic process required to protect the Astrodome once and for all.

"I'm a big fan of the building," Neely said. "It was the first thing I wanted to see when I moved to Houston in 1980."

But the debate about its future, she says, "sounded like a bunch of babies fighting from the playpen. Why doesn't somebody just get (the Astrodome) registered and recognized for its historical significance?"

That was something Powell

knew how to do. An engineer at ExxonMobil for 28 years, Powell was heavily involved in the communities where he lived, serving on the parks board in El Lago before moving to La Porte. It was there he first noticed that the Sylvan Beach Pavilion, a Harris County building designed by Greacen & Brogniez and completed in 1953, was at risk of demolition.

Mostly on his own, Powell navigated the process of writing and filing the paperwork with the Texas Historical Commission to get the building designated a National Historic Landmark and State Antiquities Landmark. Neely says Powell "went through hell" to protect that pavilion.

One day, she called him and wondered whether the same could be done for the Astrodome. And over the next year, they did, filing what Neely calls "extremely complicated and technical documents" with the THC.

It all came to a head in Octo-

ber 2013, when they drove from Houston to Weatherford to attend a THC board meeting. Powell said, "We were the only two who showed up to advocate for the support of (the Astrodome) being listed."

'None of it is sexy'

And so it was. In 2014, the Astrodome became a National Historic Landmark on the National Register of Historic Places. Three years later, it became a State Antiquities Landmark. "These are the historical designations the building deserves," Powell said.

With these protections, nothing can be done to the Astrodome without a permit from the THC, and nothing can be done that can't be reversed.

"None of it is sexy," David Bush wrote in an email. He's the executive director of Preservation Houston, and no one knows better than he does what it takes. "It's a lot of preservation law and bureaucracy, but it shows what can be re-

quired to save a building."

So where does this saved building go from here? This year, the county commissioners have approved a \$105 million plan to install two levels of underground parking and restore the Astrodome's certificate of occupancy, improve restrooms, lighting and more. Stinebaker said. (Though some have questioned whether that money should be spent on flood control, Stinebaker stressed that the county is prohibited by law from spending it on anything but "tourism and economic development.") This plan will create nine acres of "column-free space," Stinebaker said, that can be used for all kinds of events. And that is a lot of space — Discovery Green, for comparison, is 12 acres.

Now, he said, "we pass the baton to the conservancy."

That's the Astrodome Conservancy, led by executive preservationists Phoebe Tudor, Minnette Boesel and Judy Nyquist, one part of the public-private partnership formed with Harris County to "steward" the Astrodome into the future. They're busy raising money and thinking up events such as the "Domecoming."

The pragmatic Powell says that he thinks the Astrodome is in good hands — even if it might take 10 or 20 years to come back "in some very optimal use."

Neely is a touch more philosophical. "We're all going to die. We're all going to be gone," she said, her bright laugh ringing out. "But now I guaran-damn-tee you that the Astrodome is going to be here awhile."

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Michael Ciaglio / Houston Chronicle

"Domecoming" celebrated the 53rd anniversary of the Astrodome.

THEATER REVIEW

'Revisionists' defined by actors' stage presence

By Wei-Huan Chen

"The Revisionists" is a smart and tight play featuring two people who represent opposite ends of the world and who indulge in conflict, understanding, humor, eating, drinking and secret-sharing over 90 minutes.

The main characters are David, an American likeable in his mid-20s, and Maria, a Polish woman who lived through the Holocaust. David is a vegetarian, a New Yorker, an intellectual and a writer. But, more important, he's the most irritating version of all those things. The dialogue that playwright Jesse Eisenberg gives him is cuttingly self-aware. He explains to Maria, for example, that his young-adult novel about talking bulls was actually an anti-fascist allegory, but she probably wouldn't understand all that.

David's flaws are hilarious because they reflect what makes left-leaning, Ivy League-educated urbanites so hard to put up with — their snarky, privileged self-cen-

redness, their holier-than-thou, vegan-lite attitude barely masking the fact that they're selfish and inconsiderate. Maria is unpretentious, welcoming and self-aware, is the classic foil to David.

In the co-production by Stages Repertory Theatre and the Evelyn Rubenstein Jewish Community Center, which runs at the JCC through April 22, Maria's played by Christine McMurdo-Wallis. McMurdo-Wallis and co-star Nik Crawford, who plays David, have a unique acting style here. They speak and gesture like screen actors. Directed by Leslie Swackhamer, the two don't gesticulate or yell or enunciate in ways you might be used to in theater.

This makes Maria a nuclear force on stage. Intensely likeable yet distant all at once, Maria's actions are worthy of scrutiny. Look at how she lights the candles in her apartment, how she arranges the photos on her wall, how she sits in front of her television, watching CNN, like a well-disciplined elementary school

student. This is a difficult performance. Theater actors often act to the back of the room (a logistical necessity), whereas screen actors limit their performance to a tight physical space around them. This approach works for McMurdo-Wallis because Maria, while openly lathering her second-cousin with food and hospital-ity, has a well-hidden side that's lonely, nervous and shy.

Crawford's choices similarly lean on the "small" rather than the "big," but he doesn't always get with his co-star when they interact. Their voices are a bit too low for the theater they're in. And Crawford often ducks his head, so that the spotlight casts long shadows that obscure his face. It would work if felt even more deliberate, but Crawford's physical presence feels elusive and disconnected (while the satirical-yet-relatable text speaks volumes).

I've seen anti-social characters — the kind that lurch and sink and make themselves invisible — portrayed authentically yet still retaining a

'The Revisionist'

When: 2:30 p.m. Sunday, 7:30 p.m. Tuesday-Wednesday, 7:30 p.m. Thursday, 2:30 and 8 p.m. Saturday, through April 22

Where: Evelyn Rubenstein Jewish Community Center, 5601 S. Braeswood

Information: \$25-\$59; stages theatre.com

sense of stage presence. Think of the lead roles in "Dear Evan Hansen" or "The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-Time," or most roles performed by Woody Allen or Michael Cera. A band teacher once told me that playing softly on a horn doesn't mean using less energy, it means using more — just think about how hard it is to tip-toe to the fridge in the middle of the night. Crawford makes you consider this fascinating conundrum. He's still searching for the two or three outbursts or gestures that make the smallness of the rest of the performance pay off.

Speaking of payoff: I loved

the ending. I think it actually said something original about loss, in a way that wasn't obvious yet was also profoundly relatable. The tone is just serious and sad enough without making the play an emotional drain. In other words, for all the people who are weary of Holocaust narratives, rest easy: This is not really that kind of play.

The final moments do give the seemingly banal conversations that occurred earlier a new resonance. David didn't give much thought to his arguments with Maria about family. She did. She knew and saw everything all along. Her quick movements, her furrowed eyes, her deliberate, conscientious words are not to be ignored because if you do, you might find yourself in the company of white-hot tears and failing eyes without knowing why. Maria teaches us that, if you want to know, you must put down the books and ego and assumptions, and simply ask.

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