

as ideas. “The traditional black non-profits had no support, no technical assistance, no architects, no budget people, and no people to write grants,” says Gilderbloom. With the help of its students, the University of Louisville provided all those things. Students trained in architecture contributed renderings, and engineering students donated a Web site design. Ph.D. candidates in Urban and Public Affairs guide community members through the maze of zoning codes and processes.

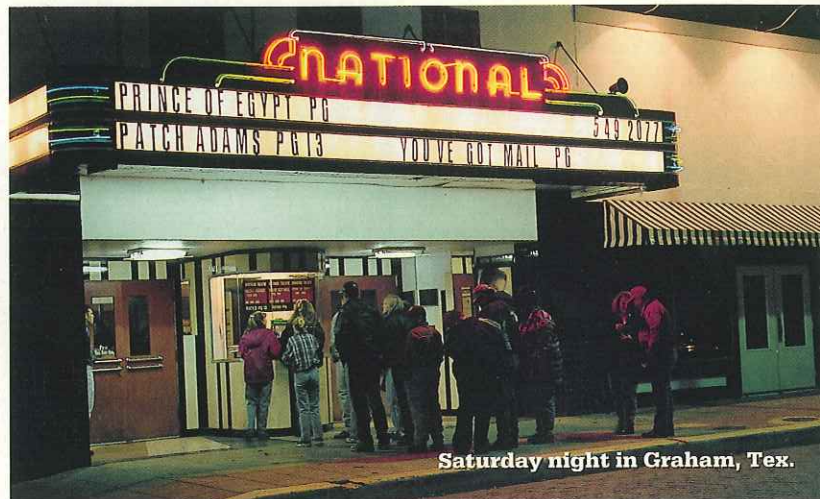
That’s the type of relationship the Office of University Partnerships at the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development looks for, says former Director David Cox, when making grants of as much as \$400,000 to encourage universities to get involved in community development. The schools “identify the kind of directions that communities want,” says Cox, “and then engage the technical expertise and resources of the institutions.” The five-year-old program has funded 78 schools so far.

Encouraged by its experience with Howard, Fannie Mae is incorporating university-community partnerships into a broader initiative. The corporation will provide technical assistance, planning, and more than \$100 million to six communities, three of them where Trinity College, the University of Pennsylvania, and Jackson State in Mississippi are partners. Fannie Mae also recently gave out \$5 million in grants to 14 universities nationwide.

Alvin J. Nichols, a Fannie Mae executive working on the LeDroit project, points out that universities are ideal community builders, not just because of their resources but because they can’t leave. “Institutions that can’t move,” says Nichols, “can’t wall themselves off.”

Like Lillie May Robinson, they have too much invested to move away.

Rachel Hartigan is a freelance writer and editor in Washington, D.C.



Saturday night in Graham, Tex.

The Next Picture Show

Texans rediscover the allure of local theaters.

BY ELAINE ROBBINS

GRAHAM, TEX.— At the end of the Larry McMurtry novel *The Last Picture Show*, a cold, late-November wind blows off the Great Plains. A downtown movie house stands vacant, its poster boards naked after the closing show, an Audie Murphy western called *The Kid From Texas*.

But the despair of a fictional failed theater symbolizing the demise of small-town Texas seems distant on a recent wintry night in this town just 50 miles south of Archer City, McMurtry’s hometown and the inspiration for his tale. At one side of the courthouse square 400 people queue up in the blue, orange, and green neon glow of the marquee on the restored 1941 National Theater. Waiting to watch *Meet Joe Black*, *The Waterboy*, or *A Bug’s Life*, neighbor greets neighbor, children scamper on the sidewalk, and others duck into the cozy pizza parlor next door named—that’s right—The Last Pizza Show.

Today, midcentury movie houses in Texas are reopening to compete with high school football and Dairy Queens for their communities’ hearts. In the tiny Panhandle town of Olton (population 2,200), 28 entrants recently competed in a male beauty contest to raise money to rehabilitate the 1949 Roxy on Main Street, closed since 1954. At Kilgore’s Crim Theatre, where Art Deco mirrors and handwoven carpets used to recall the oil boom days of the ’30s, workers have closed the gaping hole in the roof and drained the small lake that had surrounded the stage. Denton’s 1949 Campus Theater, which Warren Beatty visited for the premiere of *Bonnie and Clyde* in 1967 (it closed in 1985), reopened a few years ago after a \$1.7 million renovation and today presents performances by 10 arts organizations.

“Between 30 and 50 theaters in Texas have been redone in the last 15 years,” says Killis Almond, an architect from San Antonio who renovates historic theaters.

From the 1910s through the early ’50s, nearly every dusty town with at least a few hundred residents had its Grand or its Texas or its Majestic. They took shape as demipalaces, Spanish missions with western murals, or storefront buildings

with giant marquees or vertical neon signs.

"Parents gave their children a quarter, and they saw the old cowboy movies of Gene Autry and Roy Rogers all day long," says Sue Brown, a member of the Kilgore Historical Preservation Foundation. "The owner of the Texan used to bring the cowboys and their horses on the stage. The cowboys sang songs for the kids." The picture show was often the only place for teenagers to go on a Saturday night date. "I courted my wife in there," says lifetime Graham resident R.C. Chambers, 75, as he waited in line at the National. "We didn't care what the movie was."

But after the war, the cattle and oil industries, the economic mainstays of rural Texas, began a long retreat in employment, except during occasional oil booms in the '70s and '80s. Texas towns lost their young people to prospering Texas cities. Many downtown theaters couldn't survive shrinking populations and competition from drive-in theaters, big-city multiplexes, television, and VCRs.

Why are the theaters coming back to life now? It's tempting to credit an economic revival in the hinterlands, but "you've got to pick your spots for that to be true," McMurtry tells me. The towns



Larry McMurtry on the site of the old Royal in Archer City

that are rebounding "are within easy driving distance of a Dallas/Fort Worth, Houston, San Antonio, or Austin." But Archer City and other little prairie towns close to nowhere "aren't developing at all," says the novelist, whose new book, *Duane's Depressed*, concludes his trilogy set in a Texas town called Thalia. "Oil is

at nine dollars a barrel—the lowest it's been in my lifetime that I can remember. Oil was at \$44 a barrel in the boom years. The cattle business is struggling. Nothing's booming up here."

But even in towns still struggling economically, the restored theaters revive downtown life, giving people a place to meet while reminding them of the picture show's heyday. "I think there is still that need for people to socialize," says Pam Scott, who with her husband, David, reopened the National in Graham. "People want to go out; they want something to do. And in little towns, that's still a real important part of their social structure."

As for economics, "you can redo these theaters into performing arts centers for a quarter to a half of what it would cost to build a new one," Almond says.

In Archer City (population 1,700), Abby Abernathy, a local actor and fifth-generation rancher, plans to rebuild the Royal, which burned down in 1967. Although the reconstruction may not bear much resemblance to the original, the model for Thalia's movie house in *The Last Picture Show*, Abernathy hopes it will attract tourists and revitalize a downtown that received one boost when McMurtry moved back a few years ago and converted four old buildings scattered around the courthouse square into a very large rare-book store. Like many of the Texas theaters coming back to life, it will be used for community theater and music rather than just first-run movies, which are expensive to play in single-screen theaters in towns with small populations.

To Sue Brown, a new movie theater in Kilgore is "like everything else—it moved out near Wal-Mart. It's a four-screen cubbyhole." But the Crim has the room and grandeur for dreaming. "When you go to sit down," she says, "you look to eternity to see the ceiling."

Elaine Robbins is an editor and writer based in Austin.



Road kill Thomas Jefferson often used this forest passage, overnighing nearby en route between Monticello and Alexandria (and later, Washington). But the scene has shifted. In October, Virginia bulldozed the 17th-century lane for a new four-laner south of Manassas.