

LEVEL 1 - 30 OF 115 STORIES

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HEADLINE: Film Crew Transforms Texas 'Sniper's Perch' Into Stage for Painful Memories

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The modest, red-brick building at 411 Elm St., across the street from Dealey Plaza downtown, provides a respite from the towering skyscrapers and triple-tier expressways that define this city. It has become a favorite historical landmark among the younger denizens of Dallas.

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Such popularity is in contrast to feelings slightly more than a decade ago, when 411 Elm St. was known only as the Texas School Book Depository building. Lee Harvey Oswald is believed to have shot and killed President John F.

Kennedy from its sixth-floor window on Nov. 22, 1963.

For 15 years after the assassination, the building was ignored and often empty, a constant, painful reminder of a dark moment in Dallas history. It narrowly escaped the wrecking ball during the 1970s, but the notoriety eased when it was renovated as a county office building in 1977.

Now, with arrival of filmmaker Oliver Stone, many of whose movies depict the tumultuous 1960s, 411 Elm St. is slowly, eerily being made to look as it did in 1963.

Stone's newest effort is temporarily called "JFK" and is about New Orleans District Attorney Jim Garrison, who went to court to try to prove that the Kennedy assassination resulted from a conspiracy. Kevin Costner is cast as Garrison.

For Dallas residents, transformation of the School Book Depository has been a mixture of triumph over the past and reopening of painful wounds.

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"Some people are real uncomfortable with the whole idea," said Bob Hays, executive director of the Dallas County Historical Foundation which oversees The Sixth Floor, an exhibit that chronicles Kennedy's life and is located on that floor of the old building. "Sure, there will be some pain to it," he said. "It's

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like going through the cedar chest of a dead parent."

Most people here have become more open in discussing the assassination, Hays said, noting that more than three-fourths of the current population was not even here 28 years ago.

The movie crew's renovation of the building has been effective enough to cause double takes by some longtime Dallas residents as they pass it. Stone's researchers waded through film footage and thousands of still photographs to achieve the authenticity he sought for "JFK." Dallas County, which owns the building, signed a contract to allow elaborate changes.

Pierced Styrofoam bricks were plugged into the first-floor windows. Wood trim has been painted over, historical markers and parking signs removed and old parking meters installed. One parking lot has been covered with gravel, and old railroad tracks were laid to recreate the loading dock on the side of the building.

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"Some things we've had to sacrifice," said Victor Kempster, Stone's production designer, referring to surroundings that cannot be transformed to resemble their 1963 appearance.

The most notable sacrifice, he said, is the landmark Hertz Rent-a-Car sign that sat atop the building for decades. "That was the first thing we decided not to do, as much as we would have liked to," he said. "The roof is too delicate."

The old sign, badly damaged, was retrieved and declared unfit for use. Kempster said that he considered making a new sign but that working atop the unsound roof was too risky. So the roof "won't occur in most of our shots," he said.

The same goes for most of the surrounding area. For instance, the crew must avoid filming the gleaming, mirrored exterior of the Hyatt Regency hotel, just beyond the triple underpass toward which the Kennedy motorcade was moving at the time of the shooting. The skyline nearby has changed vastly. "We do our best, but there is nothing we can do but avoid it," said Kempster, whose film credits include "Driving Miss Daisy" and "Born on the Fourth of July."

Rearranging the Dealey Plaza area was almost easier than gaining access for the film crew to the sixth-floor "sniper's perch." After four requests to Press Alt-H for Help or Alt-Q to Quit.

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Dallas County Commissioner's Court, permission was given to film from the window but only on four mornings between 6:30 and 10 o'clock.

"They don't need to have the sixth floor," Commissioner Nancy Judy said. "This is fiction, not a documentary."

But the commissioners were criticized for simply trying to hide from events that shook the world nearly three decades ago. Commissioners responded that they were trying only to protect The Sixth Floor, which opened in 1989 as the final step in renovating the building after the county bought it 12 years ago. Thousands of people attend the exhibit every week and, Judy said, the county did

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not want them disrupted.

Filming began here this week with reenactment of the motorcade past the depository and is to continue for four to six weeks around and inside the building and at the Texas Theater in nearby Oak Cliff. There, Oswald was arrested after the assassination. The crew then plans to complete the movie in New Orleans. Among those sorry to see them go will be hundreds of extras hired to recreate the motorcade.

Those disturbed by the filming can take heart. According to the contract with the county, Stone's crew has until May 14 to turn the 1963 School Book Press Alt-H for Help or Alt-Q to Quit.

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Depository building back into the 1991 Dallas County Administration Building.

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