

HISTORIC PRESERVATION

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A NEW RHYTHM

*Tampa's Ybor City
seeks revival
through preservation.*



Envision a

neighborhood in which skilled, well-paid workers walk daily to quiet, nonpolluting factories. Picture a community surrounding a main street lined with lively shops, affordable restaurants, and theaters that attract famous entertainers. Imagine a diversified, multiracial society offering equal opportunity of housing and employment. Such is the romantic picture of Ybor City during the early years of this century. If the reality wasn't *quite* as wonderful as all that, some people remember it that way and others hope to revive Tampa's cigar-making district with such a vision in mind.

The collective crucible of this spirited society were Ybor (pronounced E-bore) City's mutual-aid/social clubs through which several generations of immigrant factory workers reveled in their native cultures while assimilating into America's

A Sense Of Belonging

Mutual-aid/social clubs were the incubators of assimilation for immigrants in Tampa's fabled cigar district. Today the grandchildren of Ybor City are rallying to preserve that culture. BY ALEN FREEMAN PHOTOGRAPHY BY ALAN KARCHMER



During the 1920s a festive evening in the cantina of Centro Asturiano de Tampa, left, afforded damas the opportunity to don mantillas. Today in the cantina, above, older club members play dominoes daily. Cigar-box art, top, celebrates the home of handmade cigars.



The home of L'Unione Italiana, above and opposite, is a three-story, 1918 neoclassical building on Seventh Avenue. L'Unione Italiana is currently celebrating its centennial year. In a cigar factory in 1929, below, a lector reads while workers roll cigars. A 1914 Ybor City view, bottom, shows a well-established cigar company.



mainstream. The clubhouses endure today, long after the community's decline. Now a handful of second- and third-generation Americans, the children and grandchildren of those who organized the clubs and built the clubhouses, are renewing their determination to preserve these elaborate old buildings.

Ybor City is a former manufacturing community founded in 1886 near downtown Tampa. During weekdays Ybor City workers made cigars by the millions in scores of small factories. The evenings and weekends found them in one of their clubs. Each club typically contained a ballroom, a cantina, and a theater; some also housed a clinic. In these buildings members danced with their spouses or sweethearts and imbibed the drinks of their homelands, played card games and dominoes, performed in pageants and talent shows, and attended ethnic plays, concerts, lectures, movies, and variety shows. When they became ill they saw a doctor in a club clinic and had a prescription filled in a club pharmacy. The doctor might send them to a hospital built and operated by the club. And when they died, they could be buried in the club's cemetery.

Three of the clubhouses, Centro Asturiano de Tampa, El Circulo Cubano, and L'Unione Italiana, have been in continual use since they were built during the first twenty years of this century. Two built during the same period, El Centro Español de Tampa and the German-American Club, are currently vacant. The sixth building, Sociedad La Unión Martí-Maceo, is a former warehouse; unfortunately Martí-Maceo, as the club is called, had to relinquish its original clubhouse thirty years ago.

In fact, the buildings and the clubs long ago accomplished their function of easing the path of their members into America's mainstream. The manufacture of handmade cigars has dwindled in Ybor City, and so has its population. Now new uses and new roles in the community need to be found for the old clubhouses, and they require new sources of revenue for their upkeep and restoration.

Today Ybor City's most important people are, perhaps, those who are trying to preserve the club buildings, revive the club organizations, and rebuild the community. For the most part they are the children of those who chose to, or had to, move out of Ybor City and scatter to other parts of Tampa. Some seem to possess a collective guilt of complicity in the process of self-bet-



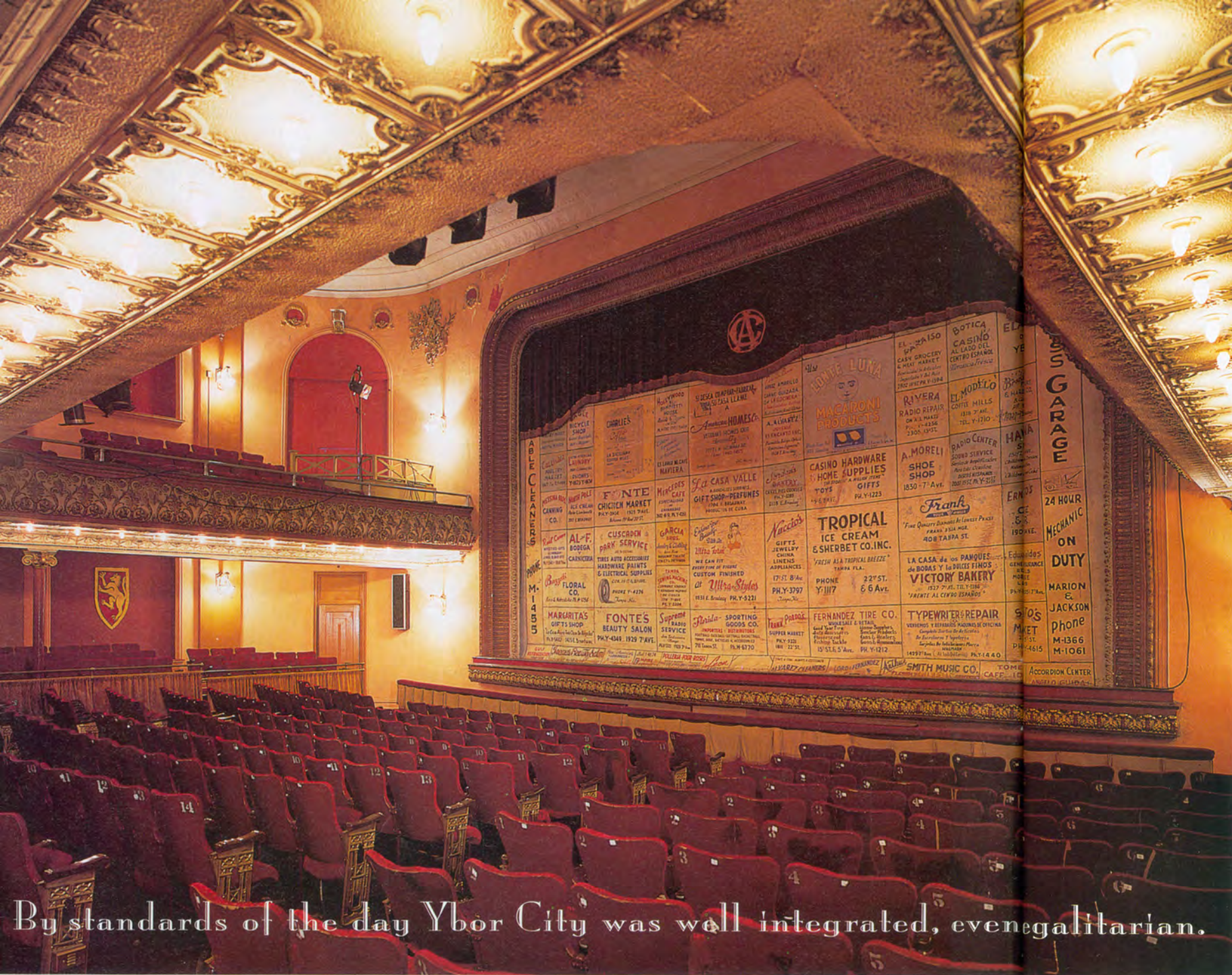
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terment, social mobility, and assimilation—the American dream, in short—that contributed to the exodus. One is drawn to these people because they are cordial, articulate, and resourceful, because their stories paint the portrait of a once vital community centered on the mutual-aid/social clubs, and because they are hanging on to their heritage by the slenderest of threads.

During the last twenty years or so each club has been kept alive by a group of members who have made sacrifices, says Fernando Noriega, Jr. He is the son of Ybor City cigar makers and, as the director of Tampa's Department of Housing and Development Coordination, happens to be the city's highest-ranking housing official. He represents a generation born prior to World War II whose members, now the middle-aged parents of young adults, were usually the first in their families to attend college. "We have

been so busy trying to keep the doors open and the bricks and mortar alive that we failed to encourage our children to carry on the work," he says. "Now we are beginning to find ourselves complaining that our kids don't think the way we do. . . . I think that we should really start to focus on reestablishing our roots with our younger generation." Anna Ramos is another member of that prewar-born generation. As the administrator/social director of Centro Asturiano, she brought disco to the clubhouse several years ago as a source of revenue to support the club and maintain the building. Referring to the organization's 15 trustees and 225 members in general, she allows matter-of-factly that "the Spaniards are very traditional. They are still thinking as if it were 1914 when this building was built. It took me a few months to get them to agree to [allow disco in the ballroom]."

But she succeeded. The dances are well attended, and the ball-



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room's rent has paid for clubhouse termite treatments. Now the priorities are a new ballroom floor, a new floor for the theater's stage, and rehabilitation of fragile windows all around the building. Las Damas del Centro Asturiano, the women's group of which Ramos is a member, has financed the recent construction of an elevator to the third-floor ballroom. Dances, of course, were mainstays of the clubs. There were special dances on such holidays as Halloween, Christmas, and New Year's Eve, but the ballrooms were also filled every weekend. "My family lived right in the center of Ybor City, on Eighth Avenue between Eighteenth and Nineteenth streets, in a big frame house," Ramos recalls. On Saturdays in the early 1950s she and her mother would walk the three blocks to El Centro Español, where big-band matinees drew fifteen- and sixteen-year-olds. "I would go upstairs to dance in the ballroom until eight or nine o'clock while my mother watched a movie in the theater," she says.

The theater in El Circulo Cubano was where a lively Cuban-style burlesque, called *Bufos*, played on the weekends. Jack Espinosa, another member of Ybor City's older generation whose father was a cigar maker, performed in *Bufos* when he was still attending junior high and high school. (Following a career as a nightclub comedian, Espinosa is now the spokesman for the Hillsborough Sheriff's Department, which is headquartered in Ybor City.) A locally written and produced version of *Bufos* played weekly; plots varied from week to week, but the characters remained constant. "There was a black guy, a colonial Cuban who danced the rumba, and a beautiful woman of mixed race, the one everyone was after," Espinosa recalls. "They both probably worked in the home of some Spanish people—an old man, who was always chasing the beautiful woman, and his wife, who was always chasing after him for trying to get smart with the others and play around. Then there was the beautiful daughter



The fire curtain in the theater of Centro Asturiano, left, bears a crowd of advertisements. A restored mural adorns the ceiling of the gated ballroom in El Circulo Cubano, above. The youngsters who posed in 1912, below, were members of El Circulo Cubano. Floor-show dancers swirl, bottom, in a club during the 1930s.

and her young suitor, who was supposed to be the handsome good guy with a mustache. Others were thrown in, like a Galician, stereotyped as the hardheaded Spaniard; maybe an American, played by someone who couldn't speak English very well; and once in a while an Italian because we had Sicilians who loved to attend these plays too, and that would help draw them in.

"It was funny, then maybe it got a little serious with some social commentary, but it always had a happy ending, with everybody dancing the rumba. *Bufos* was a satire of the intermingling of cultures and races in Cuba, a piece of old Cuba."

If a member of Martí-Maceo, the club founded in 1904 by Afro-Cubans, found himself or herself out of work for a week or so, he or she could expect to receive "a couple of dollars to make ends meet. That would go a long way in those days," says Juan Mallea, the outspoken vice president of Martí-Maceo. Mallea was born in Ybor City in 1918, and although he is a youthful seventy-five he is not too young to remember dances in Martí-Maceo's original 1909 building, a two-story brick structure rimmed with balconies on three sides. "The bottom part was a theater," he recalls. "After the club became well known we would give dances called 'Top and Bottom'—American dances on the top and Spanish dances on the bottom."

Sylvia Kimbell, on the other hand, knows about the club's early days only by hearing about the experiences of her paternal





The former German-American Club, above, survives in deteriorated condition. Completed in 1908, the clubhouse served the organization for only a decade. El Centro Español, opposite, located on Seventh Avenue, is also vacant. Scenes from Ybor City's heyday show Ninth Avenue, below, and Seventh Avenue, bottom, in 1926.



grandparents, who came to Ybor City from Cuba in the early 1900s, raised a family, and worked in the cigar factories. Her grandfather was a cigar maker, and her grandmother was a stripper, which meant that she stripped the stems from the tobacco leaves. Kimbell herself is the Hillsborough County commissioner for the district that includes Ybor City. She recalls hearing that Martí-Maceo members were entitled to medical care at a nearby hospital, and for those who couldn't pay for prescription drugs, the pharmacist at the drugstore on Seventh Avenue would bill the club.

And so the social history of the clubs is tightly intertwined with the physical development of Ybor City. Today, within approximately 110 blocks that in 1990 were designated a national historic landmark district, stands the nation's largest collection of buildings related to the cigar industry. A little more than a century earlier the land was no more than a swampy tract near Hillsborough Bay. Vicente Martinez Ybor, a native of Spain who had built a cigar factory in Cuba, had moved the operations to Key West to escape Cuba's harsh Spanish rule. When the workers in Key West grew militant, Ybor purchased forty acres two miles northeast of Tampa; formed a partnership with Ignacio Haya, a Spanish cigar maker from New York City; and in 1885 set out to build a company town. Because Ybor and Haya ran out of capital with which to finish their factories they sold some of their holdings to other cigar makers, and the cigar industry quickly took root and flourished.

Tampa's rapid population growth paralleled that of Florida. During the last twenty years of the nineteenth century Tampa annexed Ybor City and grew from (Continued on Page 118)

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SENSE OF BELONGING

(Continued from Page 34) an isolated village with a population of only 720 to a railroad-served factory town of nearly 16,000. Tampa was already Florida's leading manufacturing center at the turn of the century and was well on its way to becoming the world's leading supplier of Coronas, Royals, Panatellas, Perfectos, and other styles of Havana cigars. It was an accomplishment achieved primarily by immigrants who worked in simple factory buildings in Ybor City. (Another community grew up around cigar factories in West Tampa.) Surrounding the factories were the modest houses of the workers, many of them "shotguns"—one-story houses in which three or four rooms are lined up from front to back. Ybor City

residents bought what they needed in the stores on Seventh Avenue, which bisects the community, and they went to the clubs, which were located on Seventh Avenue or nearby, for entertainment and medical care. Ybor City was self-sufficient. It was a compact melting-pot community that, because of its single industry, developed a strong identity.

By American standards of the day Ybor City was well integrated—even egalitarian. Cubans, Spaniards, Afro-Cubans, and Italians lived side by side and their men and women worked side by side for equal pay. "The people who did the hiring and firing were, for the most part, European-Cubans of Spanish ancestry or Spaniards. Race was not an issue where they came from," says Delphin Acosta, a city planner who is the

grandson of Ybor City cigar makers and a trustee of the Historic Tampa/Hillsborough County Preservation Board. "And because Ybor City was removed from the economic and social structure of the South, the mores that were in place in just about every other southern city did not come into play."

But because the raw young city of Tampa lacked the charity hospitals and other philanthropies that met the needs of immigrants in more established northern urban centers, workers created their own mutual-aid societies.

The earliest of these groups to survive into the twentieth century was El Centro Español. Founded in 1891 as a Spanish patriotic society, the club altered its purpose a decade later to become a mutual-aid society and in 1906 constructed a hos-

pital on Bay Shore Boulevard. In 1912 members erected a clubhouse that expressed their material success—a palatial, dark-red-brick Mediterranean Revival building on Ybor City's main street, Seventh Avenue. Following years as a hub of community life, the club went into decline and sold the building in 1983. Today the vacant structure is owned by the state of Florida, which is seeking proposals for its redevelopment.

In 1902 a group of El Centro Español members from Asturias, a region of northern Spain, splintered off to form an affiliate of Centro Asturiano de Havana. The clubhouse of Centro Asturiano de Tampa, completed in 1914 on Nebraska Avenue near the western edge of Ybor City, is a three-story, yellow-brick Beaux-Arts building that from the street might be mistaken for a Carnegie library. It contains a well-preserved, 1,100-seat, still-functioning theater—Ybor City's grandest, where Caruso is said to have sung. On the third floor is a large ballroom that the club rents out on Saturday nights as a discotheque. Among the big bands that performed there during the 1940s and 1950s were those led by Harry James, Count Basie, Stan Kenton, Woody Herman, and Sammy Kaye. In the first-floor casino, meanwhile, older club members play cards and dominoes daily.

On Seventh Avenue, two blocks east of El Centro Español, Italian immigrants—primarily Sicilians—completed an impressive clubhouse in 1912 for L'Unione Italiana, which they had founded in 1894. A comprehensive history of Italians in the community is provided in *The Immigrant World of Ybor City* by Gary R. Mormino and George E. Pozzetta (University of Illinois Press, 1987). The building's three-day inauguration was marked by speakers, a ball, and the performance of a three-act play, *La Fuera (The Hurricane)*. Following a fire that destroyed the building two years later, L'Unione Italiana built a replacement in 1918 directly across Seventh Avenue. Now the oldest functioning club, L'Unione is restoring its handsome neoclassical building and upgrading it to meet city building codes. Membership, at \$40 a year, is open to anyone interested in learning about and preserving Italian culture. Members are entitled to voting rights at meetings and receive a bi-monthly newsletter. As a source of income, L'Unione Italiana leases the former cantina on the ground floor as a restaurant.

During the 1890s Ybor City became a

home for Cuban exiles seeking independence from Spain, and Vicente Ybor donated to them one of his two original wooden factory buildings to use as a meeting hall. Following the Spanish-American War and Cuban independence the Cubans in Ybor City founded El Circulo Cubano, taking its name from the circle that its founders formed at their first meeting in 1902. The club's current home, a four-story Beaux-Arts building on Avenida Republica de Cuba three blocks north of Seventh Avenue, was completed in 1917 when El Circulo Cubano's membership numbered 8,000. Today only 165 members remain, and they are restoring the building as state grants, matching funds, and other contributions are received. The cantina and a small medical clinic continue to operate for members.

In 1904 the Afro-Cubans, who composed Ybor City's smallest ethnic community, formed Sociedad La Union Martí-Maceo, named for José Martí, a white Cuban humanitarian who publicly espoused racial equality and unity, and for General Antonio Maceo, a black Cuban leader of revolutionary forces against Spain. In 1909 Martí-Maceo built its two-story brick clubhouse on Seventh Avenue. But when that building became a burden to the struggling club, the leaders accepted what they considered the inevitable and allowed the structure to be torn down in a 1960s urban renewal project. Since 1965 the club has occupied a building that originally was a dry-goods warehouse and that also has served as a storefront church and a union hall.

Ybor City's German immigrants did not work in the cigar factories, but some of them did create the elaborate designs that decorated cigar boxes. Many were merchants with stores along Seventh Avenue. They chartered the German-American Club in 1904 and four years later completed their three-story, neoclassical clubhouse, which contained a restaurant and rathskeller open to the public. But the organization was short-lived; it fell victim to anti-German sentiment during World War I, which forced the club to close its doors and sell its building. The Young Men's Hebrew Association occupied the former clubhouse from 1929 until 1944, and it has had several owners since. The building currently stands vacant and in need of repair.

Ybor City declined for the same reasons other urban areas have deteriorated: It lost its principal industry and then its population. Contributing to the district's

decline was the immigrants' success in becoming Americans at a time when America was building and populating suburbs. "My grandparents came to America to be Americans, and all the things that the Anglo population wanted, they wanted too," says Acosta. "Why should they want to live in tiny houses and not achieve the American dream? They achieved it, and they moved on."

These days the community derives its identity and vitality from the four surviving clubs and from such other community institutions as a trilingual tabloid weekly newspaper named *La Gaceta*, the Hillsborough Community College, a long-standing, family-owned Spanish restaurant called the Columbia, and Ybor Square, a collection of shops and restaurants within three interconnected red-brick buildings—two factories and a warehouse. Vicente Ybor built the older factory structure in 1886. Other former cigar factories are scattered throughout Ybor City. There is a small, state-operated Ybor City museum located within a 1923 Cuban bakery building, and next to it are several relocated and restored factory workers' houses. The Seventh Avenue commercial spine survives as a dozen blocks of early-twentieth-century storefront buildings, some housing disco bars and shops, others standing vacant. But the unfortunate legacy of unfulfilled urban renewal plans is street upon street lined with vacant lots.

Thirty years have passed since the cigar makers' cottages were cleared away. Now perhaps a vision that has been advocated by Noriega and others—one of new housing in old Ybor City—is realistic. It certainly seems appropriate. After all, a neotraditional neighborhood would complement Ybor City's century-old grid of streets, and because the lots are vacant, redevelopment would require no gentrification. Most certainly, no other locale could offer such spirited historic vessels of culture as the mutual-aid/social club buildings of Ybor City. What better than these tried-and-true buildings around which to wrap a community? ▼

The National Trust's Main Street Center, in conjunction with the Florida Redevelopment Association and the Florida Bureau of Historic Preservation's Main Street Program, will hold the annual National Town Meeting on Main Street from May 1 through May 4, 1994, in Tampa and Ybor City. For more information, contact the National Main Street Center, (202) 673-4219.