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Downtown Austin frozen in the early 1980s by photographer Mark Goodman

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Intuitive photographer takes an anthropological approach to projects.

Updated: 11:53 a.m. Monday, May 11, 2015 | Posted: 12:00 a.m. Wednesday, May 13, 2015

By [Michael Barnes](#) - American-Statesman Staff

In 1982, almost an entire downtown block at Sixth Street and Congress Avenue was leveled to build One American Center, which became, in 1984, Austin's tallest building.

Still fairly new to town, photographer Mark Goodman was fascinated by the scene.



Congress Avenue, between East Fourth and Fifth streets, looking east in 1983.

"I was attracted to the light and the way it landed on the buildings and the cityscape," says Goodman, who taught at the University of Texas for 33 years. "It was still open. Not skyscraper tunnels like New York or Dallas. There was a beautiful sense of photographic light and change, and it was interesting to look at."

Goodman, whose subjects have ranged



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from the youth of an Upstate New York village to the punk scene in Austin, became more invested in a sense of place at Sixth and Congress during the two years of construction. His interests expanded to include the rest of Austin's original square-mile grid.

"Austin is a big city," he said in a 1983 interview while the project was ongoing. "I've limited myself to a manageable portion, one square mile, a lot easier to cover on foot, and I've limited myself to a pedestrian point of view. There are no special viewpoints that require privileged access, like high-rises or private property; instead, I chose viewpoints available to anyone who walked around."



Alley behind the 200 block of West Fourth Street, looking north toward the American Bank Tower in 1982.

The arresting results – 36 individual images of a downtown in transition – are collected in finely crafted art books titled "Capital Improvements." The five copies – that's right, only five – are packaged with essays and a detailed history of the central city, along with selections from Goodman's collection of vintage postcards that picture downtown Austin.

Goodman, 68, a very quiet and reserved person whose studio burned to the ground during the Labor Day 2011 wildfires and who now keeps a small, bright studio in Govalle's Canopy complex, is something of an accidental anthropologist.

"I'm a very intuitive photographer," he says. "I don't make lots of plans and stick to them. But I'm also very persistent. I doggedly keep pursuing what I'm working on, even though that can expand or change directions."



Austin photographer Mark Goodman with the seventh-grade version of himself.

A crooked path to Austin

The only son of a Boston couple who sold mutual funds together, shy Goodman was more interested in art than academics.

Theater helped him develop some social skills, but he has always been something of a loner. He attended high school in Lexington, Mass., while taking art classes at the Museum of Fine Arts in Boston.

"In some ways, I grew up there," he says. "It was relatively empty. I could just wander the galleries all the time. That place, more than Lexington, shaped me."

For him, the museum wasn't about school field trips or gallery talks.

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The Walter Tips Co. Warehouse, 215 W. Second St., looking north in 1982. The warehouse was razed in 1985 and Amli ... [Read More](#)

“It was a place where I could be taken in by the paintings, prints, sculptures and mummies,” he recalls. “I could stare and imagine and wonder. It’s wasn’t the everyday world, or the world on TV, or my life at home. It was like an ancient temple – still, beautiful, calm and quiet.”

He was surprised, then, to be rejected from art school. Instead, he took classes at Wesleyan University, then at Boston University.



The intersection at Congress Avenue and 10th Street, looking north in 1982. On the left is the Old Lundberg Bakery, and, ... [Read More](#)

Like a character from a Tennessee Williams play, he also spent a year and a half just going to movies.

He majored in anthropology rather than art – the sting of art school rejection might have had something to do with it – and that training came in handy later during his 20-year photographic project in an Upstate New York village.



Demolition of Charles B. Cook Funeral Home, 1100 Colorado St., looking northeast in 1983. The 26-story Westgate Tower is on the ... [Read More](#)

“What I did in Millerton was anthropological,” he says. “I thought of myself as a photographer, but being in one small place, intimately, and for a long time, it all came back to me.”

He took a class in the history of photography at Boston University and studied back issues of Aperture magazine in the MIT Architecture Library. His first photos were processed at a drugstore.

“It was always a cross between street and metaphoric photography,” he says. “I didn’t think of myself as a photojournalist, but rather as doing art, even though, at the time, it wasn’t considered art. It had its own traditions, its own specific world.”



Intersection of Congress Avenue and Sixth Street, looking northwest, toward the future site of One American Center. Previously located on this ... [Read More](#)

He took his small, drugstore-processed pictures to Minor White, editor of Aperture magazine, who told Goodman to jump ahead to intermediate photography classes. At a summer workshop in 1970, he learned to bring out an image’s inner moment. Then he saw a poster for the Apeiron Workshops, which attracted some of photography’s biggest names to a former dairy farm on a hill above

Millerton, N.Y.

Bruce Davidson, who had made large-format photographs of East Harlem street life, encouraged one workshop class to go into town and take pictures.

“From the very first day, it was, like, this is it,” Goodman says. “It was a fabulous experience. I kept going back every day. I used a 120 mm camera on a tripod that took square negatives. All unplanned, but perfect.”



Republic Square One, now the Hobby Building, 333 Guadalupe St., under construction, looking northeast from West Second Street in 1984.

From 1971 to the end of the decade – then on annual return visits through 1991 – he photographed the young people of Millerton. In 1977, he was supported by a Guggenheim Fellowship.

Along the way, he learned about the social and cultural history of the town, which was once mainly agricultural and a railroad connection. Its working-class citizens fell on hard times once the railroad traffic ceased, but by the 1970s, Millerton was also attracting “summer

people” up from the city, causing social tension.

The uncanny series of images that came out of the experience, “A Kind of History,” made his national reputation.

From punk to downtown streets

Hired to teach at UT, Goodman moved into an apartment without air conditioning during the summer of 1980, a year with 105-degree temperatures.

On the Drag and West Campus, he took to asking passersby whether he could take their picture. He carried a large camera with a huge flash operating off a 510-volt battery. He had stumbled on a punk hotbed, centered around Raul’s nightclub and Inner Sanctum Records.

“One of my students, her boyfriend was in one of the punk rock bands,” Goodman recalls. “They were performing at Raul’s, opening for the Big Boys. I decided that this was my focus. I was just taking pictures of people.”

He kept the negatives, and in the mid-2000s his images of the Big Boys and another band, the Dicks, were turned into a book.

“As I started to play with the pictures – that’s what editing is, playing with pictures – I saw that the sequence needed to be expanded,” he says. “The rhythm of the pictures was too short. They also needed to be bigger. So 11 inches by 11 inches became the size of the book.”

“Big Boys Dicks” came out in 2008.

His book about downtown, based on photos taken around the same time, took its title from a sign at a demolition site that read: "Another Capital Improvement Project."

"There was so much construction," he says. "Nothing in comparison to today, but at that time, it was: What's happening to his town?"

Because of the many hours he spent on the project, Goodman has become something of an expert on downtown's history, especially as it was frozen in time by his photos in the early 1980s.

Goodman often juxtaposes old and new. In one shot, the Capitol pokes out from an apocalyptic pile of rubble as the still-new Westgate tower soberly stands witness. In another, a postmodern tower complex – now the Hobby Building – emerges from behind a decaying warehouse near the railroad tracks.

In one alley, graffiti reading "Anarchy" and "Anywhere But Austin" contrast with the glass-covered American Bank Building (now the Chase Bank Tower, blessedly no longer gold). One can see reflections of a modernist bank building in the art deco decor of the Scarbrough Building. A fence seems to imprison the old commercial block that contains the surviving Mexic-Arte Museum, plus the long-gone Oscar Snowden appliance showroom, where the Frost Bank tower now rises.

Goodman records the spindly little trees and wild patches breaking out of the asphalt in the industrial district that straddled lower downtown on both sides of Congress Avenue. In one unsettling picture, sidewalk construction makes the approach to the Capitol alongside the historic Lundberg Bakery looks not unlike a muddy 19th-century scene.

Besides his 36 precise images – it took months to get the light right while taking the photographs from silver prints to pigment prints in the books – Goodman includes rare historical images, mostly on old postcards, beginning with a 1839 watercolor view of Austin as seen from President's Hill.

Among his many sources was W.C. Walsh's "Austin in the Making," published in 1924, when Walsh was in his 80s. The man had been brought here in 1839 as a 4-year-old.

Although nostalgia doesn't taint this work, one can't help but wonder why so many old structures like the Victorian Travis County Courthouse and the two Third Street train stations, placed on either side of Congress Avenue, were allowed to deteriorate to the point of demolition.

Goodman shares one image of the ornate Houston and Texas Central station as it was being demolished in 1965. A sign in front reads: "Keep the Ball of Progress Rolling."

Goodman: "In less than 90 minutes, 100 years of history were made into dust."

While the images can be purchased individually, the release price on the five art books, put together by AgavePrint and Cloverleaf Studios, is \$7,500 each. None have sold. Goodman has also approached a local publisher about a longer, less expensive run.

“It cost a small fortune to make,” he says. “The end papers alone were \$85 a book. It was not done to make money. It was done to put this together as beautifully and wonderfully as possible. It would be nice if someone bought them and took care of them, because I won’t be able to take care of them forever.”

More Austin history

For 25 years, Michael Barnes has written about Austin’s culture and history. Among his recent stories have been reports on ancestral Austin families, local desegregation and life on East Avenue. To sample more than 100 of his history stories, go to mystatesman.com/austin-history.

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