

Live Oak Friends Meeting began in the mid-'50s as a handful of seekers who met for evening worship at a private home. Later, as we grew in number, "home" was located in the old Jewish Community Center on Hermann Drive. We planted a live oak tree there on Arbor Day--now large and flourishing.

During the early '60s, Friends met in what once was a Presbyterian manse, known to us as the Houston Council of Churches building on Chelsea Place. At that time, some of our members became active volunteers at Jefferson Davis Hospital, then Houston's charity hospital. Friends worked as nurses' aides and orderlies to relieve the overworked staff and provide much needed care for the patients. As a result of this experience, writer Jan de Hartog, a member of our meeting, wrote his book, *The Hospital*. Concern of Friends and others for Jeff Davis and the ensuing publicity helped end the stalemate between county and city over the fate of the hospital, initiated much needed reform, and hastened the physical move to Ben Taub Hospital in 1964.

Later we moved to the YWCA on South Willow Drive, near South Post Oak. Our stay there was interrupted for about a year when we met at the Religion Center on the University of Houston campus. We then met for some time at Peden Y.

During the mid-'70's our search for a permanent location took us to the Heights, but Friends were not of one mind on the question of ownership of property. We let the opportunity pass, and accepted the offer to rent one of the de Menil "gray" houses in the area of the Rothko Chapel. For five years or so, the Live Oak Friends Meeting was located on the corner of Sul Ross and Mandel. Next, we rented space from the Chocolate Bayou Theater, located near where the Brown Convention Center now stands. During this time, attendance of plays by our members increased dramatically!

The Mennonite Church on Wirt Road, in Spring Branch, was our next gracious host. The building and grounds were attractive, enhanced by the "Peace" rose we planted on the property. The Mennonites, with whom we share a peace testimony, generously allowed us use of the building on Sunday evenings, but we found evening meetings were sometimes inconvenient, especially for parents with small children.

We began in earnest our search for a permanent meeting house. Now looking for a place in 1982, we found that prices for property were sometimes triple those of the mid-'70s! A modest, blue-painted frame house with its own small garage apartment in the Heights was found. Finally, we had our own meetinghouse--a place to worship in silence, to have discussions, to conduct business meetings, to build community. Our 12-year stay at the house on Alexander and 10th gave us a wonderful sense of stability. Many who came to "look in" on Quakers decided to stay. But as our numbers grew, the meeting house became more crowded, and classroom space--which by now included a storage room, a temporary structure, and the hall outside the bathroom--could no longer accommodate the children's activities.

Faced with our need for more space and better accommodations, our community decided to look for property or land suitable for a bigger meetinghouse. In early 1995, we sold the house on Alexander Street and purchased land in Shady Acres, a neighborhood on the edge of the Heights, west of Durham. With an additional gift of the adjacent land, our site was extended to span the distance between 25<sup>th</sup> and 26<sup>th</sup> Streets.

After selling the Alexander Street house, we took shelter on Sunday mornings at SSQQ, a dance studio owned by Rick Archer, who had grown up in our meeting. Despite the unusual worship environment of mirrored walls and a glittering disco ball overhead--which often gave rise to interesting analogies about the ways we reflect the Inner Light, we settled in and began making plans for the new "Quaker Center" we hoped to build in the Heights.

Early in December of 1995, Hiram Butler, a newcomer to our meeting, introduced us to James Turrell, a Quaker artist whose medium was light. Turrell spoke of his Quaker background and shared his dream of creating a "skyspace" for a Friends meetinghouse. Turrell had created a "skyspace" for P.S.1, a contemporary art museum in Long Island City, N. Y., and had named it *Meeting*, and one in Los Angeles named *Meeting 2*. Would Live Oak Friends Meeting be willing to

incorporate Turrell's gift of a "skyspace" into the new meetinghouse we hoped to build? It was a project beyond our conception at the time, but with the enthusiastic offers of assistance from many corners of the Houston community, The Live Oak Meeting House Project was born.

And so began our process of research and learning, both about Turrell and his work, and also about our new neighbors--among them many retirees and young Hispanic families--in the modest neighborhood where we had bought our land. We accepted Turrell's installation with the hope that, like the Rothko Chapel, the project would serve as both link and ministry to the wider, non-Quaker community.

James Turrell's fine reputation as an artist attracted generous support for the project from many in the art world. Sally Reynolds, along with Hiram Butler, worked tirelessly to connect with art patrons in Houston and elsewhere. Architect Leslie Elkins offered her services and her experience with light features in spaces designed for worship. A campus of three buildings was planned: the meetinghouse with "skyspace" for our worship, a community center for service projects and education programs, and a smaller office/library with an upstairs apartment.

The hard work of grounding those dreams in reality and converting them into wood and concrete and steel continued, until at last, we saw our way to begin construction on the first phase of the project--the meeting house. The decision to begin with the worship space was a difficult one for our community. It required us to walk forward in faith that a way would open to accommodate our children's education program and our service activities. Happily, just as construction on the meeting house began, a little notice appeared on the fence of the property across from ours: "House for sale--to be moved."

Friends decided to purchase the small frame house from our neighbor, who had lived there with her family for over forty years. The addition of a neighborhood house to the project seems representative of our desire to become an integral part of the neighborhood. Until we are able to build our community center, this little house will provide a place for outreach and community participation, and will help us feel immediately at home in our new neighborhood.