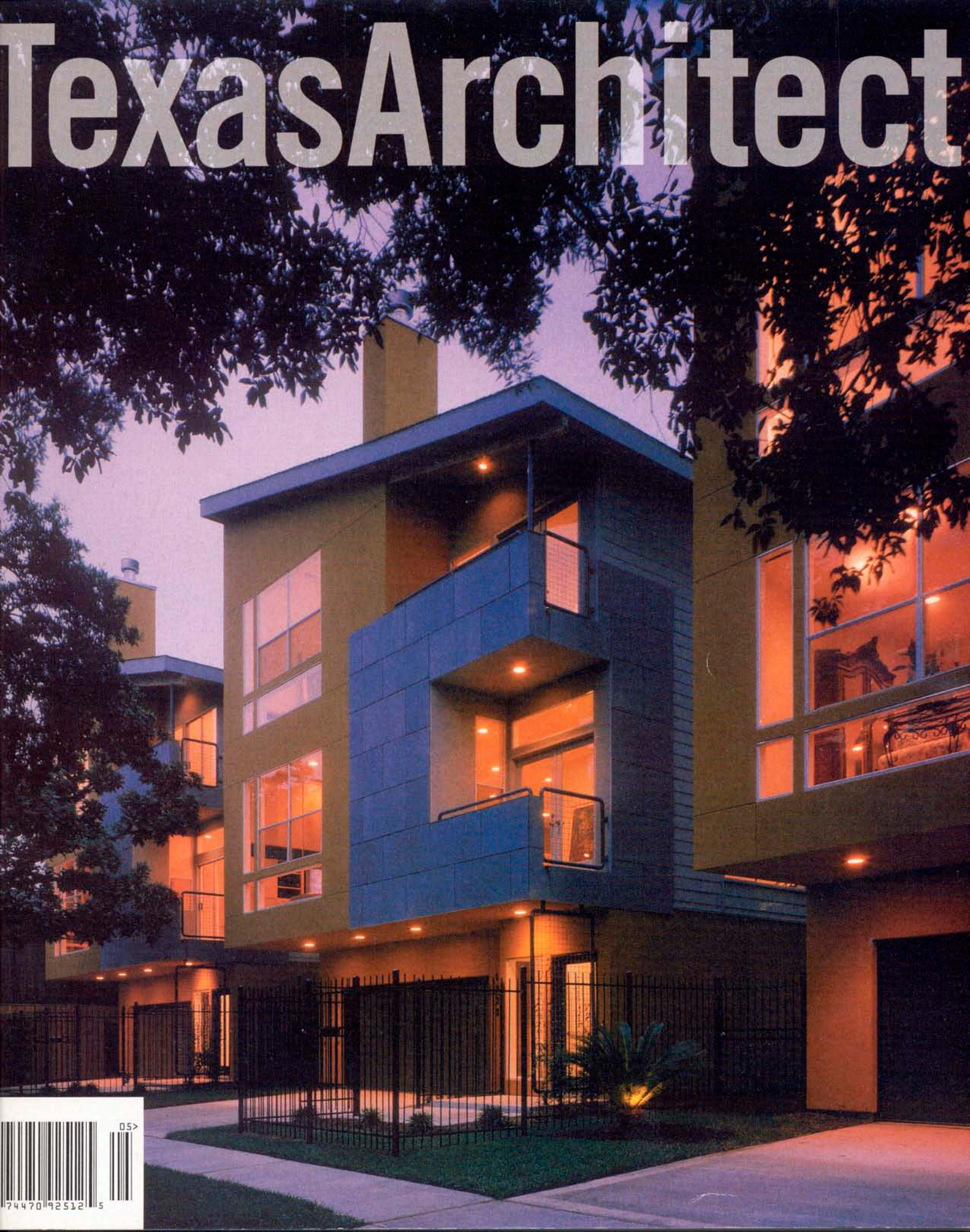


# Texas Architect



by BARBARA KOERBLE

## Historians Rescue 150-Year-Old Kiln

Denton County's Wilson Pottery, abandoned over a century ago, set for exhibit as cultural relic



Excavation of the original site of Wilson Pottery took place in 1998. A new structure will house the reconstructed kiln; photo courtesy James R. Kirkpatrick.

AS DEVELOPMENT SWEEPS ACROSS DENTON County, preservationists have rescued one vestige of local history—a rare kiln dating back to the 1840s. The office of James R. Kirkpatrick Architect in Denton recently completed a study for an exhibition building to house the reconstruction and restoration of the historic Wilson Pottery kiln. The firm is collaborating with the Denton County Historical Commission and the Denton County Archaeological Society on the project. The kiln, abandoned over a century ago, was threatened by ongoing development before it was disassembled and removed from a site in the town of Corinth in south central Denton County. One of the first non-agricultural industries in the area, the Wilson Pottery site was listed on the National Register of Historic Places.

Barry Vermillion, chairman of the Archaeology Committee of the Denton County Historical Commission, undertook the rescue operation to document and salvage the historic kiln. The kiln had to be disassembled and moved to preserve it from destruction. Fortunately, for the future of this proposed educational exhibit, Lake Sharon Limited Partners, Inc., and Zena Development Corporation of Southlake, Texas, permitted the salvage operation to take place. Vermillion contends, "The kiln is unlike any other nineteenth-century pottery kiln in not only Denton County, but in North America." Its uniqueness results from its combination of two traditional kiln types, the beehive and the groundhog kilns. The groundhog is an underground, tunnel-like kiln, while the beehive is a circular kiln built above ground. Vermillion describes Wilson's kiln as a modified groundhog/beehive kiln, because it is circular, but partially buried in the ground. For unknown reasons, the kiln was double-sided and had a double fireplace. The kiln originally was used to produce salt and slip-glazed pottery until operations ceased around 1865.

Kirkpatrick observed that two goals for the project design were to emphasize the original location and atmosphere of the kiln, and to ensure that the building would not be intrusive in its new surroundings, particularly if the new site is a historic park. Kirkpatrick took his cue for the form of the kiln exhibition building from the appearance of the kiln in its original location, partially buried in the ground and overgrown with vegetation. Kirkpatrick's proposal for an elliptical domed structure constructed of thin shell concrete is similarly conceived as a partially sunken, earth-sheltered design. To evoke the origi-

nal appearance of the kiln, its surface will be covered with earth and planted with native plants. The interior of the facility will contain the reconstructed kiln positioned next to an amphitheater to seat visitors during program presentations. A walkway around the perimeter of the room will be elevated to permit views from above the kiln. A projecting side window, mimicking the positioning of the kiln firebox, will reinforce the feeling of an underground space. The building will also house artifacts retrieved from the site during salvage operations.

Part of Kirkpatrick Architects' charge was to plan the developmental phases of the Wilson Pottery Kiln Reconstruction project. In the project's first phase, a site for the reconstructed kiln will be determined; the criteria as stated by the proposal is that the new site "must be respectful and cognizant of the original location." So far, four sites have been proposed. According to Kirkpatrick, the two most likely sites are the Historic Park of Denton County, located near Denton's historic downtown square, and the Cross Timbers Park, located in the southeast corner of the city. While the Cross Timbers Park site is close to an elementary school—convenient educational programming—the Historic Park site has the advantage of already containing a relocated 100-year-old Victorian home—the Bayless/Selby House. This house, currently being restored by Kirkpatrick Architects, is proposed as the support/staff facility. If another site is chosen, the study proposes either to move an historic structure to the site and restore it, or to build a vernacular style building indigenous to Denton County as the support space. The construction or relocation of a support facility would occur during phase two of the project, and the kiln display facility would be constructed during phase three. During phase four, site improvements will be completed, with support staff hired during a fifth, and final, phase. Preliminary cost for the entire project, excluding possible site acquisition, is estimated at \$1.4 million. Ultimately, the Denton County Historical Commission will select the site for the facility and will raise funds for the project.

Of Kirkpatrick's design, Vermillion states, "he achieved the look we wanted—it's amazing for them not having seen the original site." As development rapidly escalates south of Denton and north of Fort Worth in the Alliance Airport corridor, the last remaining vestiges of Native American villages and indigenous structures may disappear without a trace. The rescue operation that saved the historic pottery kiln may serve to draw Denton County residents' attention to the loss of their history, and provide a precedent for saving what's left for posterity.