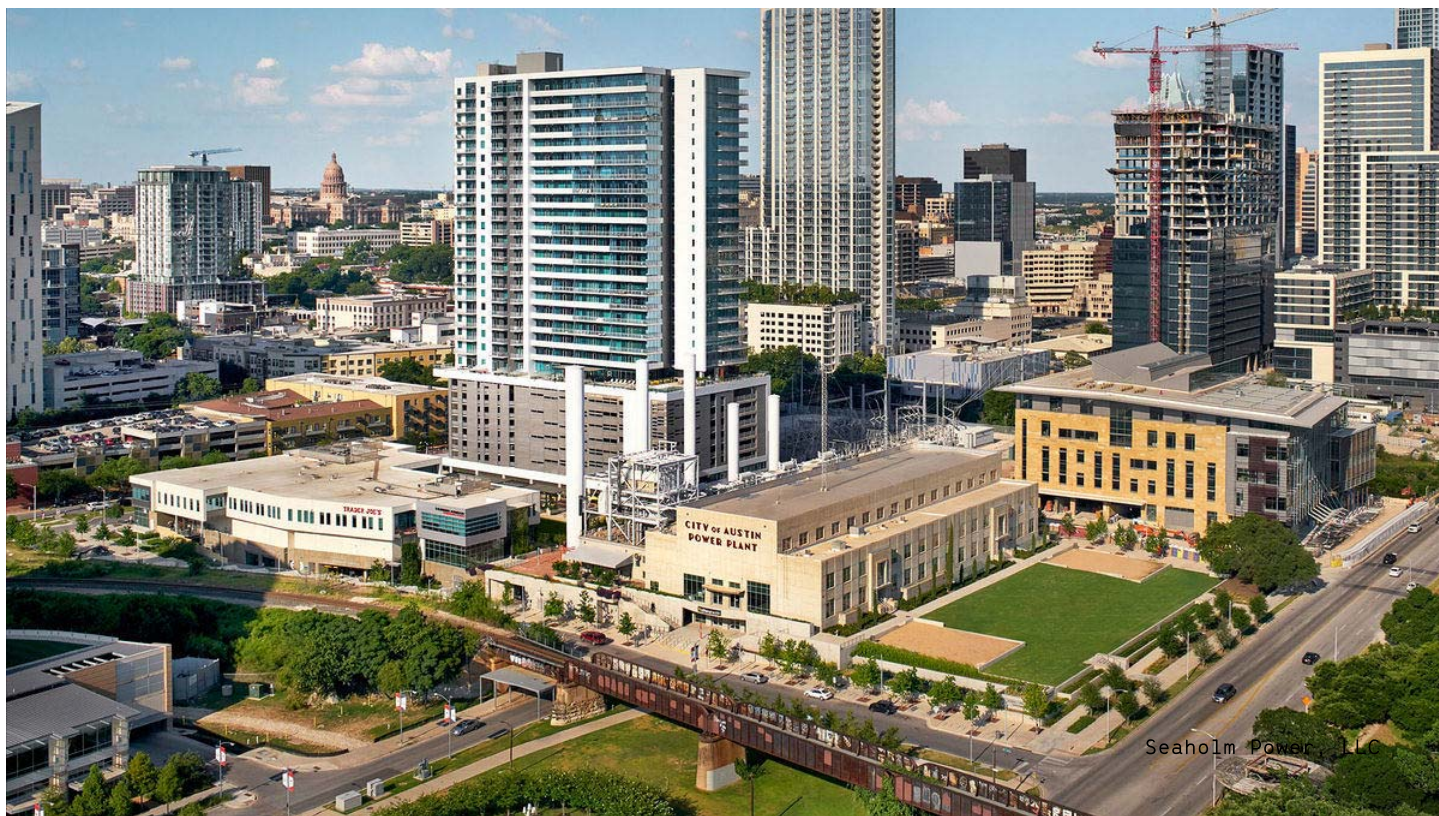




November 30, 2016

The History Behind One of Austin, Texas' Hottest Development Properties

By:
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The 1948 Seaholm Power Plant has been transformed into 130,000 square feet of commercial space.

At more than 65 years old, it's no surprise that Austin's Seaholm Power Plant is no longer producing electricity, but it is still helping to power the city as one of its hottest new development projects.

What is now more than 130,000 square feet of commercial space in downtown Austin was commissioned as the city's new power source in 1948. At the time, post-war Austin had a population of roughly 130,000, and it was growing fast. In addition, new appliances like dishwashers and air conditioners were putting an added strain on the municipality's already over-worked infrastructure.

The structure built to help remedy the electrical shortfall was a hulking, three-story Art Moderne building capable of producing 100 megawatts of electricity—more than enough to power the city on its own. Though portions of the project went online earlier, the full plant—named for Austin's fourth city manager—was finished in 1958, and though it was originally designed to burn coal, the utility company made the switch to burning heavy crude oil before its coal bins were ever used.

As the 20th century wore on, new gas, nuclear, and solar power sources were built around the city to supplement the aging Seaholm plant. By the 1980s, the Seaholm's systems had grown obsolete and in 1989, the plant ceased generating power—though it remained an active part of the region's power grid.

The plant's final boiler was finally shut down for good on July 28, 1992. The site itself sat nearly untouched for a decade, and its once-thriving landscape became overgrown, disheveled, and largely forgotten. By 1997, the city of Austin was looking to demolish the plant, though a local friends group sprang into action to save the structure.

As Austin's downtown began to see a resurgence in the early 21st century, ideas for Seaholm's reuse began to surface—a city aquarium space was one of the many proposals that was intriguing but failed to take root.

Then, in 2004, the city of Austin got serious and issued a request for proposals for redevelopment of the site, coupled with a commitment to remediate the toxic PCBs and heavy oil deposits that remained at the scene.

That's when [Seaholm Power, LLC](http://www.seaholm.info/) [Link: <http://www.seaholm.info/>] stepped in, led by managing partner John Rosato. In April 2005, the team was selected to redevelop the full 7.8-acre site, including the power plant itself. Their approach balanced the construction of a new high-rise residential tower, a shorter commercial building, and a parking garage on the site with the restoration and preservation of the iconic Seaholm Power Plant.

The team was careful to recognize and celebrate the existing structure's history. Its massive turbine hall was preserved and left open for public viewing as opposed to being leased as private office space. They also kept as much old infrastructure as they could, leaving some original boilers intact as well as a 75-foot crane.

In addition, they deconstructed various levels of the structure to open up a 65-foot-high atrium at the center of the plant. Outside, old water intake pipes that once brought helped cool the plant's radiators were repurposed to collect 320,000 gallons of water to irrigate the site's 1.5 acres of green space.

Construction of the project began in 2013 and was completed in early 2016. The site's 280 residential spaces have already been sold while local businesses and a Trader Joe's occupy many of the commercial spaces in the new buildings.

The historic Seaholm Power Plant itself, meanwhile, is occupied by healthcare tech giant Athenahealth and a local restaurant, which sits in the four-story space where the ninth boiler once helped churn out the city's power.

Today, thanks to some creative thinking, the Seaholm Power Plant remains a powerful symbol for the city of Austin and its history.



David Weible is the content specialist at the National Trust, previously with Preservation and Outside magazines. His interest in historic preservation was inspired by the '20s-era architecture, streetcar neighborhoods, and bars of his hometown of Cleveland.