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Cite

The Architecture and Design Review of Houston

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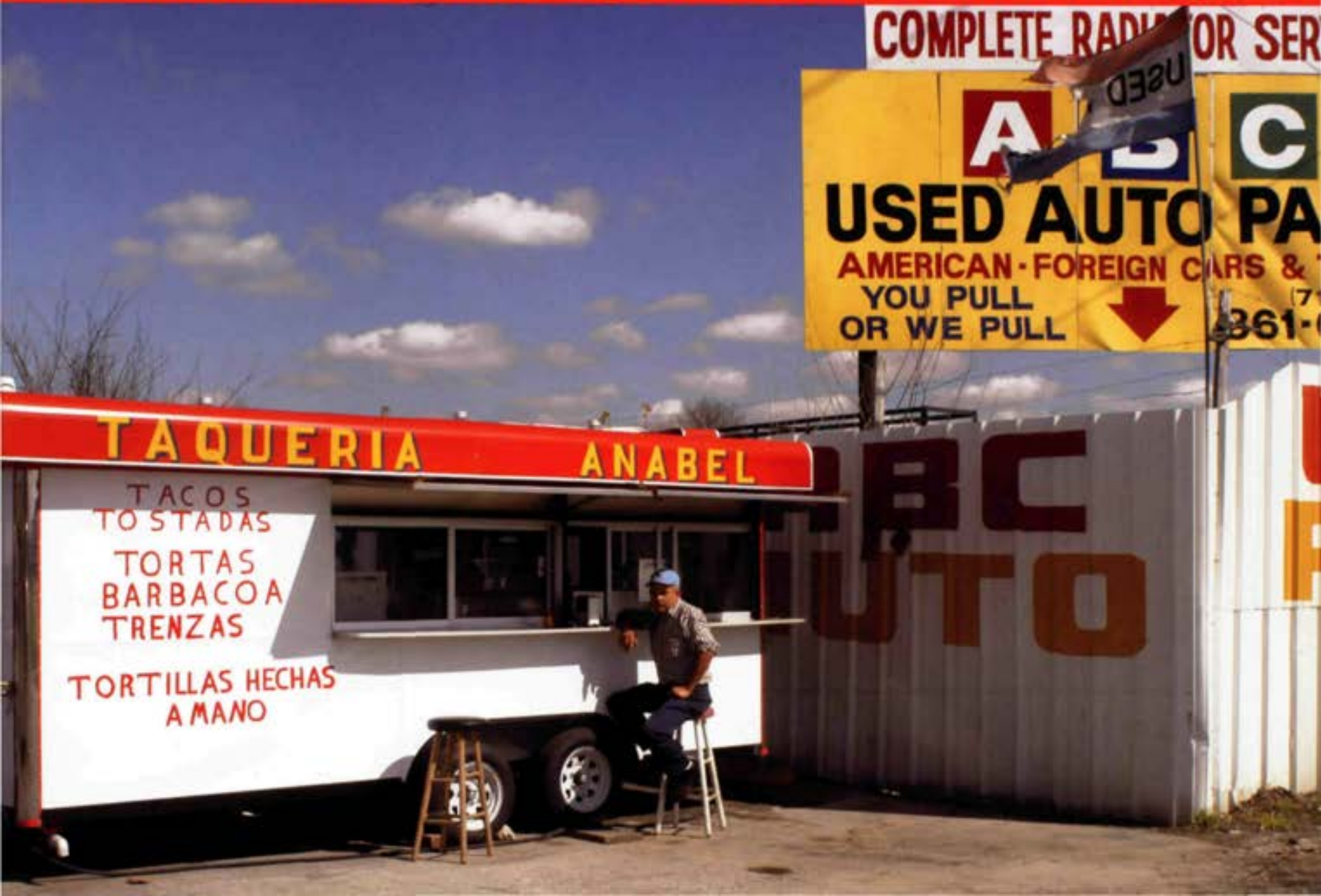

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WebCite: www.rda.rice.edu

Cover: Gabriel Ortiz at Taqueria Anabel, 2100 Shepherd.

Photo by Hester+Hardaway.

Cite

contents

RDA News

BIG IDEA, SMALL HOUSE

Using a $5,000 Initiatives for Houston grant from the Rice Design Alliance, architecture students in the Rice Building Workshop recently completed the "extra small house" — a freestanding 500-square-foot house intended for one or two people.

Nonya Grenader, co-director of the building workshop, said that the tiny, low-budget house was intended to serve markets that few builders currently address. The house, she says, could serve "one or two people who might need a starter home, or someone with limited financial resources and land area, or someone who wishes to live simply, using fewer resources."

Grenader and co-director Danny Samuels led a class of about 40 grad students and undergrads. The students submitted ten plans to their "client," Project Row Houses, a nonprofit public art group in Houston's Third Ward. The chosen design, executed at 2304 Stuart St., looks much like an update of the neighborhood's historic shotgun houses.

Deep eaves shade the house's windows and porch, and built-in storage on the west wall further insulates the house from Houston's brutal summer sun. The house's bathroom walls are clad with Polygal, a translucent polycarbonate material. During the day, the bathroom becomes a glowing "light box."

The house was built over 36 weekends with volunteer labor, plus approximately $15,000 in donated materials (including Hardiplank siding and the Polygal), and $15,000 in grants. (Besides the RDA, the Susan Vaughn Foundation and the Houston chapter of the American Institute of Architects also awarded grants to the project.)

Project Row Houses plans to use the new building to house artists-in-residence.

CITE'S BEST: COMING SOON TO A BOOKSTORE NEAR YOU

Ephemeral City editors Bruce Webb and William F. Stern. (Editor Barrie Scardino not pictured.)

Ephemeral City: Cite Looks at Houston will appear in bookstores this November. Co-editors Barrie Scardino, William F. Stern, and Bruce C. Webb selected 25 articles from *Cite*'s first 20 years, along with 224 black-and-white photographs, maps, and plans. The book, published in hardcover by University of Texas Press, will cost $35.

The authors include nationally known writers and architectural historians, many of whom have been frequent contributors to *Cite*, and whose work has given the publication its flavor.

The book is divided into three sections: "Idea of the City," edited by Webb; "Places of the City," edited by Scardino; and "Buildings of the City," edited by Stern. The sections are introduced with new essays by the editors, all of whom were founding editors of *Cite*. Most articles are followed by a brief update and bibliography of related articles published in the magazine.

In his foreword, Peter G. Rowe, dean of the Faculty of Design at Harvard University, describes the content of *Ephemeral City* as "common and not so common depictions of Houston, Texas." The editors chose this specific group of articles to explore the developmental history and architecture of a flat, sprawling, free-spirited city that is impossible to capture through any one episode or explain through any one place. By using different writers and focusing on both very broad and very narrow topics, the editors have provided a collage rather than a still life to reflect the essence of this remarkable place.

Look for future announcements about a book signing and reception featuring the editors and writers this fall.

Scenes from Chicago, clockwise from the top: Frank Lloyd Wright's Coonley House; the tour group in front of the Farnsworth House; Stephen Fox on the stairway to architectural heaven.

Chicago...our kind of town!

From June 5 through 8, 51 RDA members took a whirlwind tour of Chicago, visiting private homes designed by Ludwig Mies van der Rohe, Frank Lloyd Wright, David Adler, and Harrie T. Lindeberg.

The insiders' tour was made possible by RDA board members and friends of the RDA. Margaret and Louis Skidmore hosted the tour group for lunch at the Arts Club and facilitated visits to 860 and 880 North Lake Shore Drive. Jeff and Mary Clark (the sister of RDA board member Larry Lander) arranged visits to their neighbors' Frank Lloyd Wright homes in Oak Park. And past RDA president Liz Glassman, director of Chicago's Terra Museum of American Art, made possible the tour of Mies's Farnsworth House and Frank Lloyd Wright's Coonley House. Stephanie Sick, wife of Rice Board of Governors member Bill Sick, helped tremendously with the planning of the group's trip to Lake Forest and the North Shore, and made possible the visit to Crab Tree Farm to see the extraordinary Arts and Crafts collection of Mr. and Mrs. John Bryan.

Architectural historian Rolf Achilles provided not only architectural information but political and social commentary as well.

One of the highlights of the tour was a pilgrimage to Mies's Farnsworth House in Plano, which is for sale and hadn't had a visitor in two years. Architectural historian Stephen Fox, who accompanied the group and planned the extensive itinerary, described the trip to Farnsworth as "going to architectural heaven."

CALENDAR

RICE DESIGN ALLIANCE CIVIC FORUM
"The Greening of Houston: Part II"
Wednesday, August 20, 7 p.m.
Brown Auditorium
The Museum of Fine Arts, Houston
713.348.4876 or www.rda.rice.edu

Part II of this series will address Houston's green space — what is being done, and what can be done.

RDA FALL 2003 LECTURE SERIES
"Different by Design: Modern Architecture and Community"
Brown Auditorium
The Museum of Fine Arts, Houston
713.348.4876 or www.rda.rice.edu

What role does architecture play in community identity? This series examines four places where architecture, especially modern architecture, was intended to be a key component of communal identity.

Wednesday, September 17, 7:30 p.m.
Michael Sorkin will speak on "Growing Up Modern: Hollin Hills." Sorkin has been hailed as "the toughest and wittiest architecture critic in the business" and "a thorn in the flesh of America's more complacent architects." Principal of the Michael Sorkin Studio, he is also a professor of architecture and director of the graduate urban design program at City College of New York. His books include *Local Code, Wiggle*, and *Exquisite Corpse*, and his writing has appeared in the *Village Voice*, *Metropolis*, and the *New York Times Sunday Magazine*.

Wednesday, September 24, 7:30 p.m.
Keith L. Eggener will talk on renowned Mexican architect Luis Barragán's Gardens of El Pedregal, a modern subdivision begun in 1945 on lava fields south of Mexico City. Barragán considered the project, which is now mostly destroyed, to be his most important. Eggener, of the University of Missouri–Columbia, is author of *Luis Barragán's Gardens of El Pedregal*.

Wednesday, October 1, 7:30 p.m.
David Dillon, architecture critic for the *Dallas Morning News*, will speak on "Columbus: Different by Design?" Columbus, Indiana, population 39,000, is the home of extraordinary modern buildings by architects such as Eero Saarinen, Richard Meier, and I.M. Pei.

Wednesday, October 8, 7:30 p.m.
Ned Cramer, curator of the Chicago Architecture Foundation and former executive editor of *Architecture* magazine, will speak on "Selling Style: The Houses at Sagaponac." He'll describe the recent 36-house, 80-acre speculative development in Sagaponac, New York, designed by a who's-who of modernist architecture.

RDA/MENIL LECTURE
"Russian Avant Garde Architecture: Illusion and Repression"
Tuesday, October 7, 8 p.m.
The Menil Collection
713.348.4876 or www.rda.rice.edu

Jean-Louis Cohen, director of the French Institute of Architecture and Sheldon H. Solow Professor in the History of Architecture, Institute of Fine Arts, New York University, will speak on selected Russian and Soviet avant-garde architects who were contemporary with artist Kazimir Malevich, and the relationship between his work and their own. The exhibition *Kazimir Malevich: Suprematism* will be on view at the Menil Collection from October 3 through January 11, 2004.

RDA/RICE HISTORICAL SOCIETY LECTURE
Sunday, October 26, 4 p.m.
Location on the Rice University campus to be announced
713.348.4876 or www.rda.rice.edu

Barrie Bullen, author of *Byzantium Rediscovered*, will lecture on the architecture of Ralph Adams Cram and his work at Rice University.

RICE DESIGN ALLIANCE 2003 GALA
Saturday, November 8, 7 p.m.
1500 Louisiana
713.348.4876 or www.rda.rice.edu

The 17th annual RDA Gala, supporting the 2003-2004 RDA programs and publications, will celebrate the ongoing transformation of downtown Houston and will honor Central Houston, Inc.

RDA SPRING 2004 LECTURE SERIES
"Chicago Architecture Now"
January and February
Brown Auditorium
The Museum of Fine Arts, Houston
713.348.4876 or www.rda.rice.edu

This series will explore the contemporary state of architecture in Chicago and the upper Midwest. Chicago has consistently represented some of the most important developments in the architecture of the United States. From the masonry buildings of H.H. Richardson and Daniel Burnham to the expansive prairie homes of Frank Lloyd Wright to the expressed steel frames of Ludwig Mies van der Rohe, Chicago presents a virtual catalog of major movements in 19th- and 20th-century American architecture.

Wednesday, January 21, 7:30 p.m.
Blair Kamin, the Pulitzer Prize–winning architecture critic for the *Chicago Tribune*.

Wednesday, January 28, 7:30 p.m.
Doug Garofalo of Garofalo/Garofalo Architects.

Wednesday, February 4, 7:30 p.m.
Brad Lynch of Brininstool + Lynch.

Wednesday, February 11, 7:30 p.m.
Ralph Johnson of Perkins & Will.

Wednesday, February 18, 7:30 p.m.
Jeanne Gang of Studio Gang/O'Donnell.

UNIVERSITY OF HOUSTON, GERALD D. HINES COLLEGE OF ARCHITECTURE FALL 2003 LECTURE SERIES
"Home Grown"
College of Architecture Theater
713.743.2400 or www.arch.uh.edu/news

The series offers an exploration, exposition, and celebration of the talents within the UH College of Architecture.

Tuesday, September 9, 2:30 p.m.
Rob Civitello.

Tuesday, September 16, 2:30 p.m.
Joe Colaco.

Tuesday, September 23, 2:30 p.m.
Robert Burrows.

Tuesday, September 30, 2:30 p.m.
Ronnie Self.

Tuesday, October 7, 2:30
Joe Mashburn, Dean, Gerald D. Hines College of Architecture.

Tuesday, October 16, 2:30
Dietmar Froehlich.

UNIVERSITY OF HOUSTON, GERALD D. HINES COLLEGE OF ARCHITECTURE GALLERY EXHIBITS
713.743.2400 or www.arch.uh.edu/news

August 25–September 19
Work by fifth-year students.

November 3–November 28
Faculty show.

BRAZOS PROJECTS
"Glenn Murcutt: The Simpson-Lee House"
2425 Bissonnet St.
Monday–Saturday, 10 a.m.–6 p.m.
Sunday, 10 a.m.–5 p.m.
713.523.0701 or brazosprojects.org

Glenn Murcutt, winner of the 2002 Pritzker Prize, is best known for elegant, modern houses that rest delicately on the rugged Australian landscape. This show — Murcutt's first solo show in North America — focuses on a single project, the spare Simpson-Lee House, said to be the architect's favorite work.

September 15–November 16
Monday, October 6, 7 p.m.
Murcutt presents an illustrated talk at Brazos Bookstore.

HOUSTON MOD ORGANIZATIONAL MEETING AND LECTURE
E-mail: info@houstonmod.org

The new organization, dedicated to promoting and preserving modern architecture and design, hosts its first meeting and public lecture.

Thursday, August 21, 6:30 p.m.
The organizational meeting begins with a reception hosted by Ray + Hollington Architects in the firm's office at 4912 Main (which is itself an award-winning renovation of the MacKie and Kamrath–designed Weldon Cafeteria).

Thursday, August 21, 7:30 p.m.
William F. Stern, FAIA, will speak on "Conservation and Preservation: Houston's Modern Architectural Legacy" at the Lawndale Art Center, 4912 Main.

LETTERS

Defending the Fort Worth Modern

Over the past 20-plus years, I have been impressed by the efforts of the Rice Design Alliance to keep its members and the Houston community informed relative to advancements in the fields of architecture, urban planning, and design. As a Texas architect with frequent business in Houston, I have been afforded the opportunity to enjoy a number of events hosted by the Alliance with mutual friends who have been instrumental in the success of the organization.

For these reasons I feel compelled to inform you of my complete surprise and disappointment that an organization of the Rice Design Alliance's stature and academic standards could have allowed Richard Bretell's recent article on the Modern of Fort Worth ("Ando's Modern: Reflections on Architectural Translation," *Cite* 57) to have been published in *Cite*. Speaking out on behalf of the project team, as director of design and construction for the project, I can comfortably state that the article is fraught with misinformation, unfounded supposition, and professional naiveté. The most shocking aspect of the article is Mr. Bretell's callous and undeserved criticism of some of the very professional entitites that worked so hard to make the building's realization the success that it is. Based upon his observations and conjecture, Mr. Bretell must have limited experience with the aspects of a project that take it from initial concept, or vision, through design development and construction to a successful completion.

As mentioned in the article, I met with Mr. Bretell, as I have done with many other architectural critics and academicians, to discuss the project's evolution. It is evident to me that Mr. Bretell had his own agenda, regardless of information he was provided to the contrary. His article does not represent much, if anything, that I shared with him. Yes, there were changes made to the building's design through the subsequent design phases following the competition. However, the museum's board of trustees informatively approved design modifications as recommended by the project team, including Tadao Ando, to improve the design's responsiveness to previously established programmatic, functional, and aesthetic guidelines. Tadao Ando initiated a number of the changes to the design that Mr. Bretell alleges were forced by others less visionary than the design architect. Apparently Mr. Bretell did not consult with Mr. Ando while preparing research for his article.

The most irritating aspect of the article is Mr. Bretell's denigration of Linbeck Construction Corporation's ability to render an Ando design in built form. Mr. Bretell stated that Linbeck "is not primarily known for its work with major architects" (whatever "major" is) and then went on to state that "many devotees of architecture in Dallas–Fort Worth had assumed that the revered local firm Thomas S. Byrne, which had built the Kimbell and important Dallas buildings by Stephen Holl, Richard Meier, and Antoine Predock" should have received the commission.

I have no ideas who these "devotees" could be to have assumed such a thing. The three important buildings he refers to are all houses that pale in scale to the Modern. The Thomas S. Byrne that completed the Kimbell some 30 years ago did so under different ownership and with a staff that is long since gone. Linbeck, on the other hand, since the '80s has successfully completed larger buildings designed by Norman Foster, Ricardo Legoretta, and the late Paul Rudolph. Linbeck successfully completed the recent large-scale renovation and expansion, designed by Phillip Johnson, of the Amon Carter Museum, and is currently working with Michael Graves on a Federal Reserve Bank building in Houston.

I had originally planned to challenge each misinformed accounting Mr. Bretell gave for the design modifications to Tadao Ando's original competition entry, but decided the article's lack of merit did not deserve any more time on my part. Suffice it to state that the building you see in Fort Worth today is the result of an extremely successful collaboration among a visionary architect, other talented design professionals, and a very capable, patient construction firm. For many logical, compelling reasons, too numerous to address in this letter, the Modern is not Tadao Ando's competition entry in built form. The evolution of the design is indeed a great story to tell, as long as you do it justice.

Peter Edward Arendt, AIA
Fort Worth

CORRECTION

TWO BRICKS SHY OF A LOAD

Rice University's Keck Hall.

"Good Bricks" (*Cite* 57) misstated the name of award winner Frank Garvey, the developer honored for the Corinthian, a downtown special-events venue. The article also omitted one of the recipients of the 2003 Good Brick Awards, given by the Greater Houston Preservation Alliance for heroic feats of preservation.

The missing paragraph should have read:

"Rice University and FKP Architects for Keck Hall. Chemistry labs are significantly different now than they were in 1925, when William Ward Watkin designed one for Rice in the campus's signature Lombard Romanesque style. The university hired FKP Architects to preserve the building's historic integrity while updating its classrooms and laboratories. FKP replaced the clay tile roof and steel casement windows with care to match the originals; repaired and restored tile mosaics and exterior columns; and used photographs from the Rice archives and complex petrography tests to plan for the aging limestone. In this award, the Greater Houston Preservation Alliance also recognized the efforts of laboratory planners GPR Planners Collaborative, Inc.; engineers Burns, Delatte & McCoy Inc.; structural and civil engineers Walter P. Moore and Associates; restoration architects David Hoffman & Co.; and project manager and builder Linbeck Construction Corp."

Cite regrets the errors.

Courtesy Houston Convention and Entertainment Facilities Department

Gateway to a basketball arena: The proposed Root Memorial Square (above); and the park as it is now.

Courtesy Houston Convention and Entertainment Facilities Department

AS THE ROCKETS GET A REWORKED FRONT YARD,

A MIDTOWN PROPOSAL LOOKS TO CARS TO PAY FOR GREEN SPACE

ARENAS, PARKS, AND PARKING

Courtesy Kirksey Architects

Courtesy Kirksey Architects

Can parking fees pay for a park?: A plan and rendering of the proposed McGowen Green.

AS TWO MAJOR CONSTRUCTION PROJECTS (the new basketball arena downtown and the light-rail line along Main Street) draw closer to completion, plans have emerged to add an extra touch of green to each of them. A pair of urban parks, one reworked and modest and the other new and grandiose, have been proposed by different groups, and as might be expected, the modest idea is the one most likely to be realized. At the core of the grandiose scheme, however, is a financial notion that, if it works, could help open the way for additional public green space in a city that sorely lacks it.

The modest idea is being pursued by the city's convention and entertainment facilities department, and involves reshaping Root Memorial Square, a lush but somewhat seedy expanse of trees, grass, and walkways bounded by Clay, LaBranch, Bell, and Austin streets. Once the homesite of early Houston banker Alexander Porter Root, the land has been owned by the city since 1922, and by the 1930s boasted ball fields, a playground, and a band shell. In 1987 the park was reworked under the direction of architect Burdette Keeland, becoming less a recreational area than an urban oasis marked by an overarching canopy of live oaks. Unfortunately, the change did little to keep the park from sliding into urban decay along with the area surrounding it. Over the last decade or so Root Memorial Square and its environs have suffered serious neglect, with the park's pathways allowed to buckle and its center becoming a haven for the homeless.

It took the placing of the downtown basketball arena next door to regenerate interest in the square. Two years ago, ownership of the land shifted from the parks department to the convention and entertainment facilities department, a less-than-auspicious sign that might have been taken to mean the square was about to be paved. Instead, however, Kirksey Architects was hired to rethink Root Memorial Square one more time, and a few months back unveiled a design that in a way combined the area's two previous incarnations by retaining much of the tree cover, but adding a basketball court on one side, a gazebo on another, and a kiosk that could be used to distribute basketballs. The center of the square would be opened up and landscaped, and a semicircular walk would lead people around the park's edges.

The basketball court is an obvious nod to neighboring Toyota Center (as the basketball arena was recently dubbed), and was included at the suggestion of the Houston Rockets, who have indicated they might use it for pre-game events. How it would be used at other times is uncertain. Though there is a small apartment complex across the street, and the larger Houston House complex is within shouting distance, city officials admit the court is unlikely to become a neighborhood amenity, and indeed that it was not added with that in mind. Plans call for the basketball goals to be removable, though that would still leave a hard-surfaced court taking up a considerable amount of the square's area. Such planned vacancy raises the specter that Root Memorial Square could become like too many other downtown squares, among them Market Square, Jones Plaza, and Tranquillity Park — places pretty to look at, perhaps, but all too often bereft of people.

Still, a revamped Root Memorial Square seems a certainty. The anticipated cost is relatively small at $2.6 million, and the idea has received a nod of approval from City Council. Work on the

square was expected to be finished by late November or early December, to coincide with the opening of not just the Toyota Center but also the expanded George R. Brown Convention Center and the new convention center hotel.

Much less certain is the grander scheme named McGowen Green, which proposes to turn four vacant and nearly empty blocks of Midtown between Anita, McGowen, Main, and Travis into a lushly landscaped area fed by a meandering stream that empties into a miniature lake. Anchored at one edge by a light-rail stop, and sited in a rapidly growing residential district, McGowen Green is unlikely to lack users. Given an estimated price tag in excess of $75 million, it's more likely to lack money.

That's why the notion floated by Ian Rosenberg has proven so interesting. Rosenberg, a board member of the Midtown Management District and an independent consultant in planning, design, and development, was at the meeting of the Midtown Management District's Urban Planning Committee in August 2002 when David Crossley of the Gulf Coast Institute presented the first nascent plans for McGowen Green. Crossley, a Smart Growth advocate, had been thinking about the acreage between McGowen and Anita for a while. The Main Street master plan described it as a potential plaza or a place for commercial construction. There had also been talk that Camden Property Trust, which owns part of the land, might erect an eight-story apartment project there.

None of those plans appealed to Crossley. Then one weekend, as he was floating in an inner tube on the Comal River near New Braunfels, inspiration struck. Why not, he thought, transplant this stretch of river to Houston's Midtown? When he returned home, he downloaded a satellite image of the Comal and found that the stretch he'd traversed fit very nicely into the area bounded by McGowen, Anita, Main, and Travis. A few days later he was at the regular meeting of the Midtown Urban Planning Committee with his doctored photo and a proposal for a 5.5-acre chunk of semi-wilderness in Houston's urban core. Rosenberg liked what he heard, and made a friendly suggestion: Why not build the entire thing on top of an underground parking garage?

That idea, Crossley recalls, suddenly gave his pie-in-the-sky notion a chance of success. A garage would go a long way toward making the setting aside of four blocks of prime real estate more palatable to area developers, who could lease some of the parking instead of building their own garages or lots; and the projected revenue from a 3,700-space parking garage could be used to back the sale of bonds for construction. Too, the garage could be used as a park-and-ride to attract more riders to METRO's new light-rail system. And the whole project would significantly raise the value of property on the surrounding blocks. In the rosiest of scenarios, McGowen Green's garage could use Houston's love affair with the car to make the area a more walkable community. Still, while the parking-garage idea has many admirers, Rosenberg cautions it has also been a magnet for criticism, in particular because the garage would add some $59 million to what otherwise would be an approximately $16 million park project.

In part because of the daunting cost, even the most ardent proponents of McGowen Green admit that it will take a lot of work to transform the park from a plan that many people are willing to admire to a project that they're willing to support. "The most immediate thing to overcome is the momentum toward something else," Crossley notes. "But I do think that this idea has given some people pause." Councilman Carroll Robinson has signed on as a supporter of the park plan, and Midtown Management District planning committee member Daniel Barnum, of Hall Barnum Lucchesi Architects, agrees that it's something that can actually be done — assuming, that is, that certain scenarios work out properly. Already a looming financial deadline by the Midtown Tax Increment Reinvestment Zone has been pushed back to next year, and none of the owners of the property that would become McGowen Green have rejected the idea outright.

It's clear that neither a McGowen Green nor a revamped Root Memorial Square will solve the green space problems of a city whose urban core is as bereft of public parks as Houston's. Still, given Houston's less-than-admirable record of creating useable and enticing small urban oases, it's nice to note that at least a few planners are thinking seriously about the issue. They may not have the answer yet, but at least they're asking the right questions. — *Mitchell J. Shields*

Art deco for airplanes: The Municipal Air Terminal.

Flying High

A rare 1940s air terminal finds new life

BY BARRY MOORE

One of the best art-deco buildings in Houston has been saved. The Municipal Air Terminal, designed by City Hall architect Joseph Finger in 1940, is located at 8401 Travelair, on the west side of Hobby Airport. On March 25, City Council approved a lease between the City of Houston and the Houston Aeronautical Heritage Society (HAHS) and its immediate site.

When first built, the terminal was a glorious example of Moderne architecture, appropriately expressing the romance and glamour of flight. It has equal north and south wings symmetrically arranged around a central lobby ziggurat, which is topped with a glass control room (the only exterior portion that has been changed from the original). Bas-relief cast stone panels on the two wings depict a Wright Brothers "pusher" biplane, an experimental Sikorsky helicopter, and a sleek DC-3. The east and west portals of the lobby are marked by a stylized Icarus reaching for the sky, with an airplane substituting for a fig leaf. The concrete, stucco, and clay-tile structure was originally painted the palest off-white variations; painted aluminum window sashes provided a bright contrast.

When it first opened, the terminal seemed huge, and was more than adequate to serve the four or five airplanes and 200-some passengers per day. But with the exponential growth of air traffic after World War II, it wasn't long before there was literally no place to put the planes; baggage handling was a nightmare. By 1954 the now too small terminal was replaced by Hobby Airport. Air travel and its accommodating architecture has always changed with stunning rapidity; Hobby itself was supplanted 14 years later by the then brand-new Houston Intercontinental Airport. It is fortunate but strange that this 63-year-old building was neither demolished nor much altered.

Working with master planner Howard Hill at Brand & Allen Architects, Inc., and general contractors Tribble & Stevens, HAHS projects a $10 million to $11 million multi-phased restoration effort. HAHS President Drew Coats, whose vision and determination has made the dream a reality, describes a civil-aviation museum with restaurant and gift shop that showcases the history of Gulf Coast flight from 1903 to the present.

The first phase, now under way, will open the north wing, with space for HAHS's growing collections and a few offices for the organization. As a first sign of progress, a security fence has been moved by the city, and for the first time in years, the terminal is again open to the street.

Hardly any major airports remain from the pre-World War II era. Most of them have been swept away for much larger facilities, or remodeled beyond recognition. An exception is New York City's LaGuardia Maritime Terminal, designed as a harbor for the Pan American Clipper fleet of flying boats and now serving small commuter aircraft. Houston's deco jewel is an architectural treasure and an aviation landmark, now lovingly tended and, soon again, open to the public.

Left: Mobile taco van, at construction site on Willowick.

Below, left to right: Charlie's Foods, at a construction site near the Marq'E Theater on I-10; Taqueria El Primo, 2100 Durham; Uncle Ruben's Bar-B-Q, Canal Street at Navigation.

Movable Feast

PHOTOS BY PAUL HESTER | TEXT BY RAFAEL LONGORIA

AUTOMOBILES DROVE URBANITY AWAY, but in Houston, urbanity is coming back on wheels. Taco trailers have become the rapid deployment forces providing a beachhead for street life.

Mobile food vendors are nothing new. Nickel-plated vehicles with clever drawers and hinged sheds have followed construction sites for many years. Ice-cream trucks can still be found ringing their bells in various neighborhoods. And menacing-looking barbecue trailers are out in full force around the Astrodome every year during rodeo season.

Of course, with the growing presence of Hispanic laborers at Houston's construction sites, it is natural that mobile food vendors should feature menus that reflect the work force. But the most intriguing development is Latino food vendors' transformation of the food vehicle itself.

In Mexican cities, it is common for food vehicles to occupy a site on a permanent basis. Every large town has a collection of popular street food vendors that have occupied a given street corner for decades, such as the legendary *torta* cart on the side of La Purisima Church, Monterrey's great modern landmark. Rather than using their wheels to follow their clientele (or even go home at night), these vehicles continually occupy parking spots by busy sidewalks with the acquiescence (either official or unofficial) of the local authorities.

In Houston, where officials are not as acquiescent, food vehicles stay away from the sidewalks, instead renting the vacant lots that abound in the city. The result is, in effect, urban infill-on-wheels. And in many neighborhoods it is the first step toward promoting that elusive holy grail of urbanism: street life.

University of Houston architecture professor Bruce C. Webb has observed that Houston is at its most urbane during the annual festivals that for brief intervals fill some of our streets with improvised commerce and strollers.[1] The spirit of these movable feasts can be seen on a daily basis in neighborhoods where newly-arrived entrepreneurs have set up for business. On Navigation, Harrisburg, and all over the North Side, formerly weed-infested lots are now thriving as al fresco *taquerias* and flea markets. Often, all that is needed is a tiny patch of asphalt in front of a strip shopping center or mechanic's shop.

Some of my favorites include the roasted chicken stand decorated with a mural of Monterrey's mountains that occupies a site next to a gigantic pile of used tires at the intersection of Broadway and Highway 255; the caravan of converted school buses that form a post-industrial village square along Harrisburg; and the *taqueria* that fronts an improvised parking lot across the street from the Mexican Consulate on Caroline.

Of course, Houston's mobile food movement is not limited to *taquerias*. West Houston offers Asian variations, and barbecue-on-wheels abounds in the Third Ward. Perhaps the purest expression of the latter genre can be found outside a strip center on East Alabama: a minimalist green pickup truck with a custom-built barbecue grill welded to the truck bed just behind the rear window.

Two recent books from Los Angeles authors have commented on this phenomenon. In *Magical Urbanism: Latinos Reinvent the U.S. Big City*, Mike Davis, one of America's keenest urban observers, marvels at the urbane instincts of Latino immigrants and their ability to energize decayed neighborhoods as they battle anti-vendor ordinances around the country.[2] *Everyday Urbanism*, a thought-provoking collection of essays edited by architectural educators Margaret Crawford and John Kaliski, features intriguing student designs for movable street-vendor stands — part of an urban design assignment that included observing what is already working in Los Angeles.[3]

We could learn a great deal by observing what is already working in Houston. ■

1. Bruce C. Webb, "The City of Short-Lived Phenomena," *Southwest Review*, Volume 77, Spring/Summer 1992, pp. 289-306.
2. Mike Davis, *Magical Urbanism: Latinos Reinvent the U.S. City*, Verso, London/New York, 2000.
3. John Chase, Margaret Crawford, and John Kaliski, *Everyday Urbanism*, Monacelli Press, New York, 1999.

La Silla, Broadway at Highway 225.

American Bar-B-Que & Taqueria, Woodhead at Richmond.

Left: Taqueria la Flor, 1800 Houston Avenue.

Below: Uncle Ruben's Bar-B-Q, Canal Street at Navigation; Taco Mundo, Harrisburg; Taqueria El Primo, 2100 Durham; Charlie's Foods, at a construction site near the Marq*E Theater on I-10; La Silla, 8000 Harrisburg.

Taco Mundo, Harrisburg

La Silla, 8000 Harrisburg

Taqueria los Gallos, Harrisburg

TRAINS OF THOUGHT

SIX CITIES, SIX LIGHT-RAIL SYSTEMS, SIX VISIONS

BY CHRISTOF SPIELER, P.E.

This November, before METRO opens its first light-rail line, Houston voters will decide whether to lay 22.1 more miles of track. Is it prudent, a voter might wonder, to build more light rail before the Main Street line has proven itself?

But in fact, light rail is no experiment. The United States' first light-rail line has now operated for 22 years. Since it was built, 12 cities across the country have opened light-rail systems. All the systems are still in operation, and all but one system has expanded since its opening.

Urban rail transit is nothing new. At the turn of the 20th century, every large U.S. city had rail — subways, els, and streetcars — but in most places those systems were eventually abandoned in favor of automobiles. By the 1960s, though, the downfalls of car dependency became clear: congestion, pollution, sprawl, and oil dependency. A handful of cities built modern "heavy-rail" systems. These massive undertakings — five- or ten-car trains running on tracks completely separated from all other traffic — lured commuters from their cars, but were also very expensive.

Light rail presented an economical alternative. A light-rail vehicle is essentially an advanced streetcar, quieter and more comfortable, but more crucially, used in a different way. Streetcars ran like buses do today: in the same lanes as cars, stopping frequently, with the driver collecting fares. These "street-running" habits made service bus-like — slow and unpredictable. Light rail was born when European cities separated streetcars from automobiles.

That separation can take different forms. The important point is that a light-rail line does not require a consistent right of way. In laying out a light-rail line, planners string together different segments — a street, an abandoned railroad line, a highway median, maybe a bit of tunnel — to form a single line. The resulting system grows out of history and happenstance. Some cities were fortunate enough to have abandoned rail lines in the right places; St. Louis even had an unused subway under downtown. But sometimes neighborhood opposition or bad planning eliminates these possibilities, and sometimes they never existed in the first place. How a line is cobbled together determines how well a line works.

The perfect rail transit system goes where people want to go and gets them there quickly but does not interfere with traffic or disturb neighborhoods. Above all, it's inexpensive. Dozens of cities — those that have rail and want to expand, as well as those that want to build their first lines — compete for the $1.2 billion or so the Federal Transit Administration annually allocates to supplement local funds for "New Starts." The FTA grades proposals on cost-effectiveness: How many riders for how much money? The straightforward question requires a complex answer, one full of tradeoffs. Saving money by using an available corridor is good — but not if that corridor misses ridership sources. Serving a high-density employment area is good — but not if it requires too much expensive tunneling. Serving a neighborhood by running trains on the street, like buses, may add riders — but it could discourage other riders by increasing trip times.

Such tradeoffs can be decided only by addressing a much bigger question: Who is rail for, anyway? But that's not a technical question, it's a political one.

Debates about rail often accentuate divisions between suburbs and inner cities. With the coming of freeways, cities tended to segregate along economic lines, as the middle class moved outwards and left the inner cities to the poor. This migration left most cities with a relatively prosperous car-oriented suburban fringe, a belt of declining poor areas inside the fringe, and a vestigial downtown at the center — still a major employment center, but no longer a retail or entertainment destination. The rail systems of the 1970s were intended primarily to sustain those central business districts; business interests worried that congestion would drive white collar jobs out of the city and promoted rail as a way to make life easier for suburbanites coming to work. These goals are clear in the maps of these systems: San Francisco's BART has only a single line through the city, serving the financial district, but spreads out far into the suburbs. Washington D.C.'s MetroRail has more lines in the core, but they also concentrate on office areas. It's no accident that MetroRail's Green Line — which runs through minority inner-city neighborhoods — was completed long after its Red Line had been built miles into the suburbs.

Light rail came of age in a different era. Since the 1980s, cities have strived to revitalize their downtowns, sprucing them up with convention centers and boutique hotels, museums and ballparks, nightclubs and restaurants, lofts and condos. Meanwhile, inner-city neighborhoods around downtowns are gentrifying as the children of suburbia look for shorter commutes and homes with character. The donut city is growing a new inner ring.

In this new era, light rail's disadvantages turn into advantages. Tracks in the street, more visible than subway entrances, serve as beacons of renewal. Frequent stops encourage pedestrian activity. Even the novelty of rail — something that earlier planners worried might discourage riders — counts as a plus for people looking for something different.

The inner-city revival should not be overstated; the numbers of people involved are still small, and the suburbs have not stopped growing. But the inner city has become a major political focus. Richard Florida, author of *The Rise of the Creative Class*, and others argue that to succeed cities must retain the young, the educated, and the innovative, and that such people want a livable, vibrant city. Light rail fits that lifestyle and that image.

But the poor have not gone away; they have simply been driven further out, into older suburbs. The city is as segregated as ever. We have the suburbanites, car-dependent but frustrated by traffic jams; the new urbanites, who'd rather ride than drive to work or a coffeehouse; and the poor, who ride transit because they have no other choice. Rarely is one of these groups enough to justify a light-rail system, but their interests do not naturally converge. Who to serve — and how — is the central question in planning a rail line.

Outside New York City, rail will never again be transportation that serves everyone for every reason. But that does not mean rail does not have a place. A good transportation system offers options. Some people want to live in the suburbs and drive to work; others prefer an inner-city neighborhood where they can take the train to work and to a restaurant on Friday night. All of these people are part of what makes a city work, and we need to make a place for all of them. That doesn't mean putting rail everywhere or putting freeways everywhere; people will move, as they always have, to places that meet their needs. To say that rail is bad because it cannot move to adjust to the population is silly; the population moves to adjust to the transportation infrastructure.

Light rail has succeeded in a variety of different cities because it is flexible enough to fit in varied places and meet varied needs. No two light-rail systems are alike; each reflects local geography, demographics, and political priorities. In the next seven pages are descriptions of six systems: one old, four modern, and one proposed. They might be a preview of Houston's future — or a glimpse of what might have been.

San Francisco: Street-running light-rail lines mix with automobiles and trucks in traffic lanes, and obey the same traffic laws. When traffic backs up, so does the transit service. This is the slowest and least reliable way to run rail, and prone to accidents.

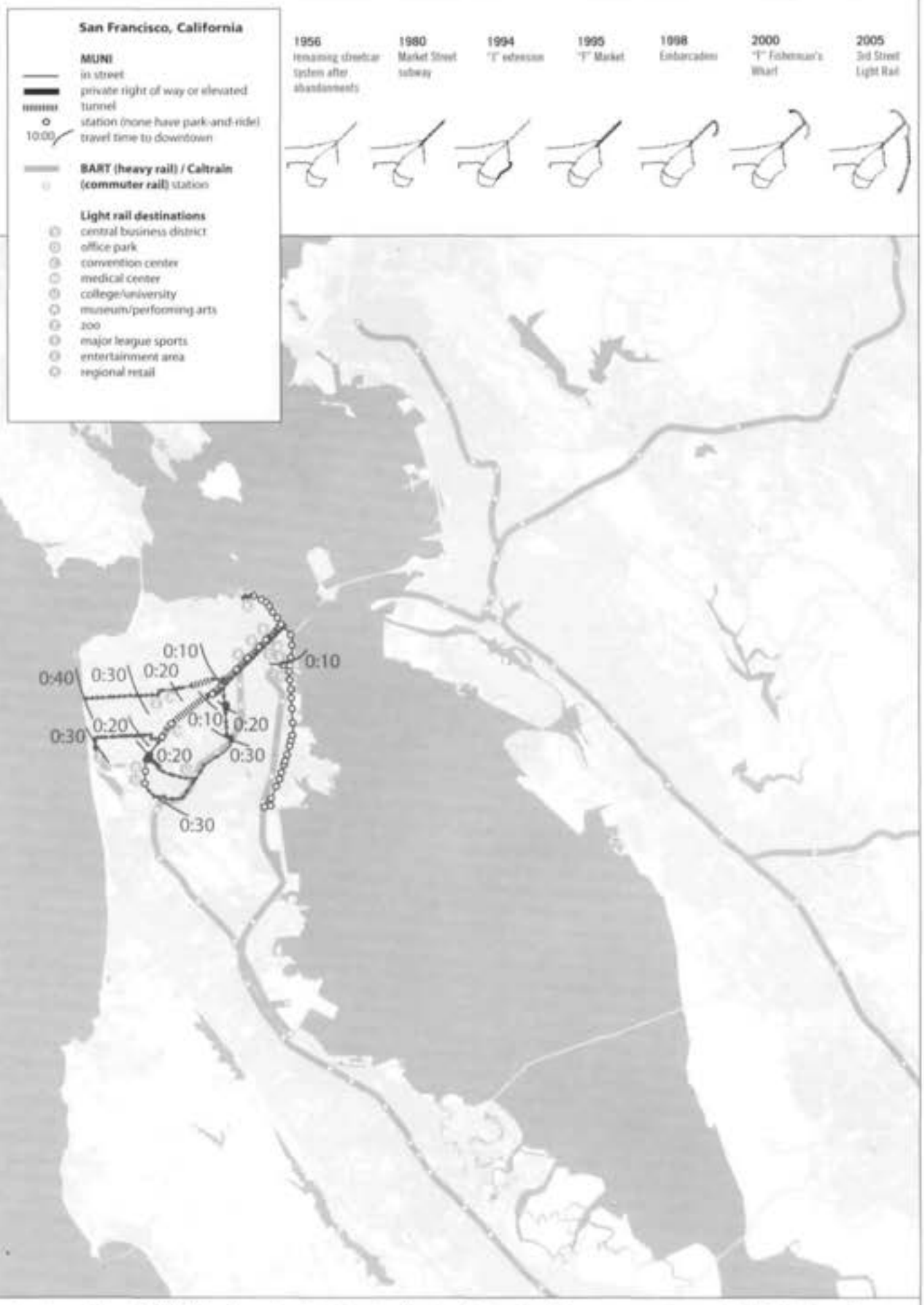
Houston: Light rail in reserved lanes fits into a street but interacts with other traffic only at intersections, where it obeys traffic signals. Since Houston's signals are designed to give trains automatic green lights, rail schedules are predictable and light rail will be faster than buses.

San Diego: In private right-of-way, the rail line occupies its own strip of land, outside of streets. Where a street crosses the tracks at grade, railroad-style crossing gates protect the trains. The trains can travel at top speed with high reliability and modest impact on traffic.

Denver: The inexpensive and unobtrusive use of a freeway provides an easy way to separate rail from traffic. But development alongside a freeway is not usually transit-oriented and station surroundings are often unfriendly to pedestrians.

Dallas: An elevated rail line avoids traffic altogether, but costs several times as much as a line at grade. Unlike the "els" of Chicago, new elevated lines are rarely built along streets (communities don't find that aesthetically acceptable); instead, they use a strip of private right-of-way.

Portland: Subways allow rail to avoid traffic completely, but are expensive to build. Tunnel stations also raise crime concerns, are more expensive to maintain, and don't have the visible presence of above-ground stations.



San Francisco, California, MUNI Metro **Operator:** San Francisco Municipal Railway **Funding source:** city general fund, 0.5% sales tax for transportation (capital costs), city general fund, federal and state funds (capital costs) **Service area population:** 0.8 million **Bus weekday trips:** 564,000 on 907 vehicles **Light rail weekday trips:** 164,000 on 163 vehicles

san francisco municipal railway

MUNI Metro

SAN FRANCISCO was one of the few U.S. cities that did not entirely eliminate its streetcar system. A combination of political pressure (from residents who preferred streetcars to buses) and expediency (three lines used tunnels that could not easily be converted to bus) saved four of the lines. Into the 1970s, 1940s-era streetcars still rolled down the streets of San Francisco.

Meanwhile, work was underway on the transit system of the future: sleek, comfortable, computer-controlled, completely separate from street traffic. The result was the Bay Area Rapid Transit system — intended not to replace the streetcars, but to bring suburban commuters into the city. It would run through downtown San Francisco in a subway under the streetcar tracks on Market Street. Plans for the subway included a second level that was above the BART tracks and below the station mezzanine. San Francisco decided to use that level for the streetcars, taking them out of street traffic in the city center. At the same time, the system was re-equipped with modern light-rail vehicles and renamed MUNI Metro.

The light-rail vehicles now run up to five and a half miles in a tunnel, averaging a speed of 20 miles per hour. Once they emerge on the surface, though, they revert to the ways of a traditional streetcar. They run in lanes shared with cars, down the center of residential streets and shopping areas. Most light-rail stops are nothing more than an orange band painted around a streetlight, and the stops are spaced closely. Nobody would design a light-rail system like this nowadays, but it works. This is the second busiest light-rail system in the country, and the N-Judah line alone carries 41,600 weekday passengers — more riders than half the light-rail systems in the country can claim. In the dense residential and commercial neighborhoods that grew up around the streetcar, light rail is indispensable. San Francisco has only half a car per capita.

In the past decade, MUNI has expanded the system with surface lines built to modern light-rail standards. First came a short extension from the formerly dead-end downtown subway to the surface and along the southern waterfront, a formerly industrial area redeveloped with apartments, offices, and a new baseball stadium. Construction is now underway on extending that southwards, through the Mission Bay redevelopment area (offices and a University of California medical research campus) and into Bayshore, San Francisco's poorest neighborhood. Some transit activists have questioned the need for these lines, pointing to more congested corridors elsewhere in the city (including the Geary Avenue bus, with 50,000 weekday riders). MUNI's supporters point out that the new line serves the areas where San Francisco can accommodate growth. Light rail will encourage that development to be the dense, transit-driven style, like the old streetcar neighborhoods — not the suburban sprawl created by freeways.

Meanwhile, MUNI has also revived the traditional streetcar. The tracks that carried streetcars down Market before the subway was built have been rebuilt, and restored streetcars from Philadelphia and Milan provide local service, stopping more frequently than the subway. Thus, Market street has three levels of rail transit: BART on the bottom, connecting the city to the suburbs, MUNI Metro above, connecting downtown to the outer neighborhoods, and the historic streetcars, serving the inner core. The historic streetcar line has also been extended along the northern waterfront to Fisherman's Wharf. The antique vehicles, an integral part of the transit system, carry more than 20,000 locals and tourists on an average day.

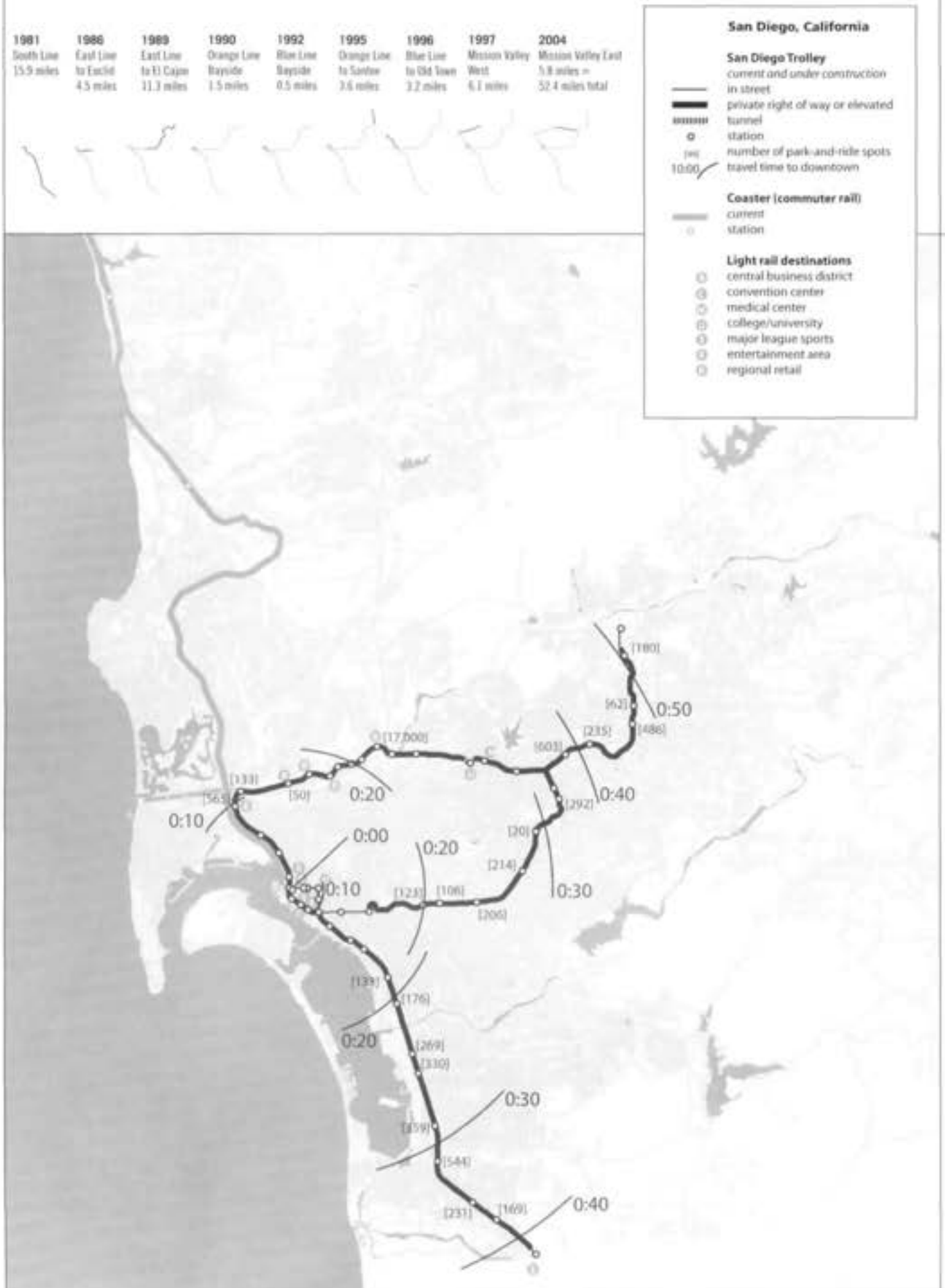
SAN DIEGO was the first U.S. city to build a new light-rail system. In 1979, local governments had the opportunity to purchase the San Diego and Arizona Eastern railroad, which ran south from downtown San Diego to the Mexican border at Tijuana, then east through the desert, with a branch line from the downtown area to the northeast. These lines provided the core of a new, low-cost light-rail system built without federal funding and with few frills. The trains were off-the-shelf light-rail vehicles already in use in Germany; the stations were simple; and the planners avoided expensive structures such as overpasses or tunnels. The South Line and East Line both followed the railroad tracks to the southern edge of downtown, then ran in the center of city streets through downtown to the railroad station, where Amtrak trains connect to Los Angeles.

The system succeeded immediately. The South Line ends only yards from the Mexican border; locals soon discovered they could take the trolley to Tijuana. Mexicans commuting to jobs in San Diego found it even more useful. Navy sailors from the Pacific Fleet can take light rail downtown. Park-and-ride lots serve suburban commuters. The line has attracted steady ridership throughout the day, with the first train running at 4:17 a.m. and the last at 1:52 a.m. Within three years of its opening, the South Line was carrying more than twice as many passengers as express buses had previously served in the same corridor. The East Line is more commuter-oriented, and thus has more pronounced rush hours. After three years, it carried almost four times as many passengers as the buses had.

The next extensions followed active railroad tracks along the revitalized waterfront, extending light rail south to loop around downtown and north to a major transit center. These lines serve the new convention center, hotels, and entertainment areas.

The plans then grew more ambitious. In Mission Valley, a series of shopping centers, a medical complex, Qualcomm Stadium, and San Diego State University line a narrow greenbelt floodplain — in other words, no obvious path for rail, but lots of potential ridership. Fitting in the tracks required building lengthy elevated structures, rerouting a creek, and even building a short tunnel to reach the center of the SDSU campus. The western half of the Mission Valley extension opened in time to carry crowds to the 1998 Super Bowl; the eastern half is now under construction. In addition to bus and park-and-ride commuters (the stadium parking lot, just off of Interstates 8 and 15, becomes a 17,000-space park-and-ride lot when no event is in progress), the Mission Valley line serves stadium spectators and shoppers. The Trolley is marketed as a way to park at one shopping center and shop at all of them.

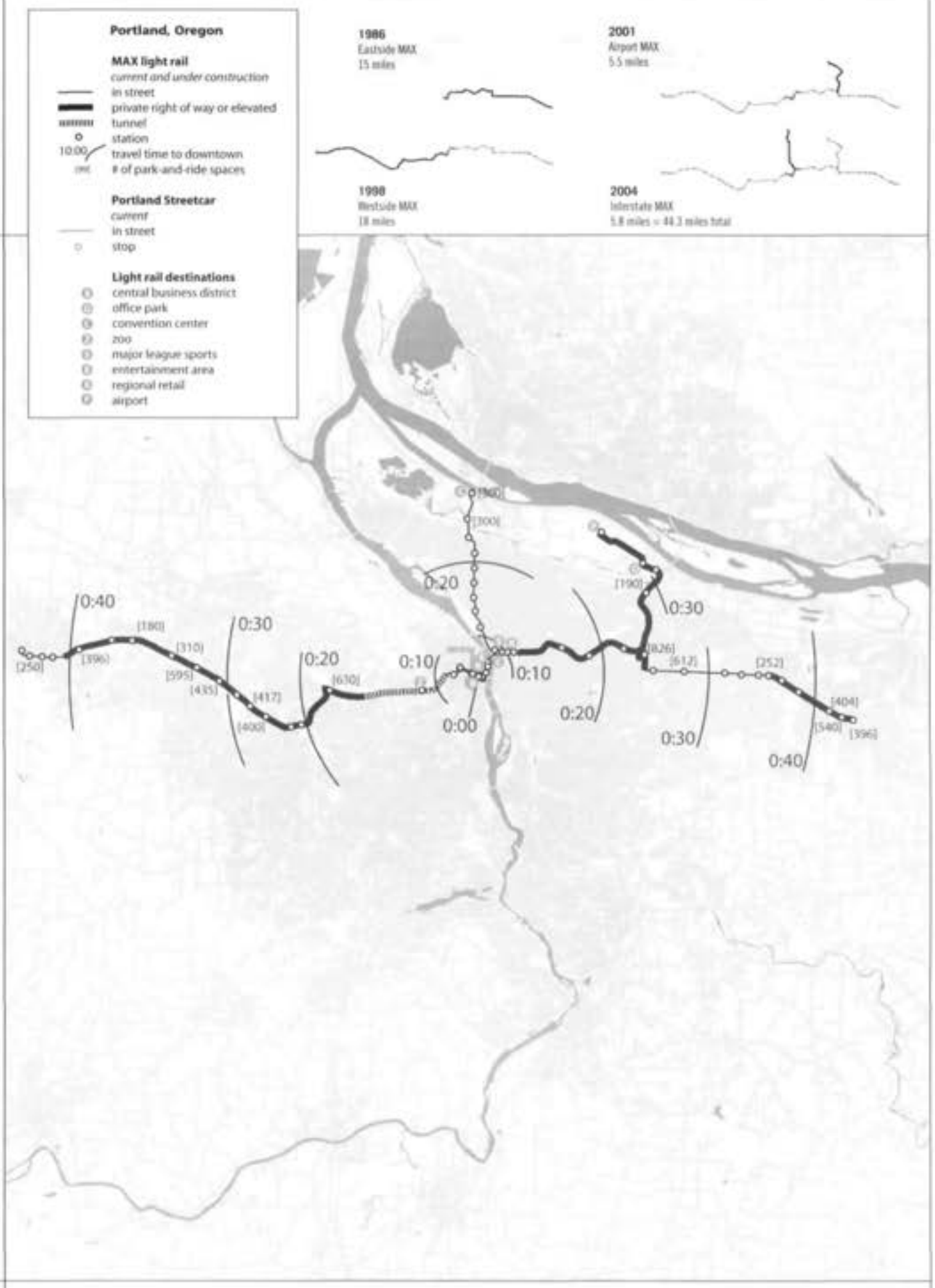
Reaching the many areas still not served, particularly to the north, will be expensive. But the Trolley's track record has generated the political support needed to extend the system into more difficult corridors.



San Diego, California, San Diego Trolley **Operator:** San Diego Metropolitan Transit Development Board **Funding source:** 0.5% local sales tax; state and federal funds (capital costs only) **Service area population:** 2.1 million **Bus weekday trips:** 167,000 on 408 vehicles **Light rail weekday trips:** 84,000 on 86 vehicles

san diego metropolitan transit development board

TROLLEY



Portland, Oregon, MAX **Operator:** Tri-County Metropolitan Transportation District **Service area population:** 1.2 million **Funding source:** 0.6218% payroll tax in service area, federal funds (capital costs) **Bus weekday trips:** 214,000 on 695 vehicles **Light rail weekday trips:** 77,000 on 72 vehicles

portland tri-county metropolitan transportation district

MAX

PORTLAND'S light-rail system was born in a freeway revolt. The Mount Hood freeway, proposed in the 1940s, would have headed west from downtown Portland, cutting through inner-city neighborhoods on its way to suburban Gresham. In 1969, the beginning of demolition for the new freeway prompted the election of anti-freeway activist Neil Goldschmidt to city council. As mayor, he presided over a city council vote to cancel the freeway. He also persuaded the federal government to allow Portland to reallocate $500 million in freeway funds to other projects, including a $214 million, 15-mile light-rail line from downtown to Gresham. Construction began in 1981, and service started in 1986.

The Gresham line, named MAX (Metropolitan Area Express), runs through the center of downtown on a pair of one-way streets. It crosses the downtown transit mall, which provides bus service to other parts of downtown. A streetcar line, opened in 2001, also connects with MAX in downtown, with service to Portland State University, northwest Portland, and the Pearl District. The light-rail line uses a street bridge across the Willamette River to leave downtown. After a few more blocks of running in the street past the Oregon Convention Center and the state's largest mall, the tracks squeeze between a freeway and a freight railroad line to pass through residential neighborhoods.

In the first decade, light rail's daily ridership grew from just under 20,000 to 30,000, and Tri-County Metropolitan Transportation (Tri-Met) cites $3 billion in development along the line. A 1997 Portland State University study found that houses adjacent to light rail stations were worth 10 percent more than those farther away.

Geography created difficulties for the second phase, a western line. Hills lie between downtown and the suburbs of Beaverton and Hillsboro, and the only way through was a tunnel, three miles long, dug through solid rock. Beyond the tunnel, the line follows a highway, old rail lines, and runs briefly on suburban streets. The Westside line also proved a success. Before it opened, about 14,300 people a day rode Tri-Met buses into downtown from the Westside; by 2002 there were 13,600 bus riders and 29,000 rail riders — more than had been projected for 2005. Overall MAX ridership more than doubled, to more than 75,000 passengers a day in 2002. A Tri-Met survey found that 77 percent of bus and light-rail riders have cars and ride by choice.

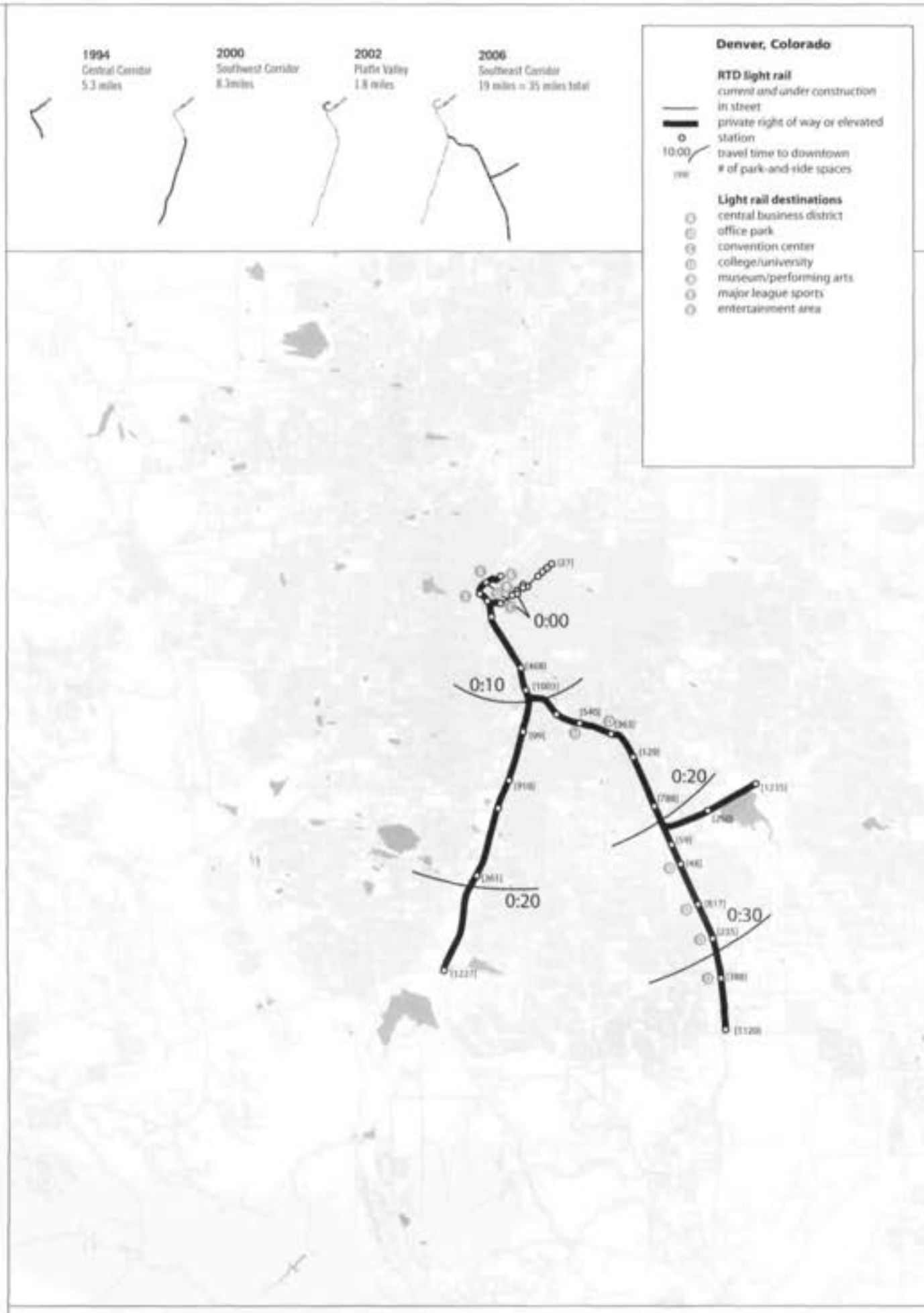
In taking the next step, a north-south line, Tri-Met suffered setbacks. In 1994 and 1998, voters in Portland and across the Columbia River in Clark County, Washington, rejected north-south line proposals. In Washington, most saw no benefit in a line that would serve only a small part of the county. In Oregon, several neighborhoods had concerns about the line's alignment. Without voter approval, Tri-Met couldn't issue bonds, but the agency found other ways to finance. A land swap enabled construction of a line to the Portland Airport, on the shore of the Columbia River. The city traded a large plot next to the airport to the Bechtel Corporation in exchange for Bechtel's constructing the Airport MAX line, which also serves Bechtel's property. Tri-Met used that private funding — which enabled the Airport MAX line to be built without federal money — as a financial match to obtain federal funding for a line along Interstate Avenue north from downtown and to the Columbia. When it opens in 2004, there will be two light-rail lines directly across the river from Washington — in case Clark County changes its mind.

In Portland, light rail is part of a broader vision that aims to combat traffic with planning, not freeway lanes. Zoning codes encourage higher-density development; a growth boundary around the city limits sprawl; and local governments provide tax breaks and financial assistance to developers building transit-oriented projects. Anti-rail and anti-planning think tanks point out that most Portlanders still drive their cars to work and that highway congestion is still increasing. But locals, particularly in Portland itself, support both the planning and light rail. For MAX, Tri-Met cites an astonishing 90 percent approval rating.

The Ride

denver regional transportation district

Denver, Colorado, The Ride **Operator:** Regional Transportation District **Funding source:** 0.6% sales tax, federal funds (capital costs) **Service area population:** 2.4 million **Bus weekday trips:** 238,000 on 1,163 vehicles **Light rail weekday trips:** 31,000 on 31 vehicles



When DENVER'S first light-rail line opened, it ran from nowhere (a run-down residential neighborhood a mile and a half north of downtown) to nowhere (a transit center next to a freeway three miles southwest of downtown). This was the best the Regional Transportation District could do; previous attempts to raise taxes for regional rail proposals had failed. The Central Line did all right, though, mainly because buses from the south were rerouted to feed into rail. A 1,000-space park-and-ride lot at the south end of the line also brought some riders. In 1995, there were 13,100 riders on an average weekday. By 1999, that number was 16,100, 30 percent of whom were new to transit.

Colorado has strong anti-tax politics; state government must refund any increase in revenue that is above that attributed to inflation and the increase in population. Thus, RTD had to ask voters to increase spending even when its tax base grew. In 1995, RTD requested that its tax ceiling be increased for a light-rail extension south to Littleton. This time, the measure passed.

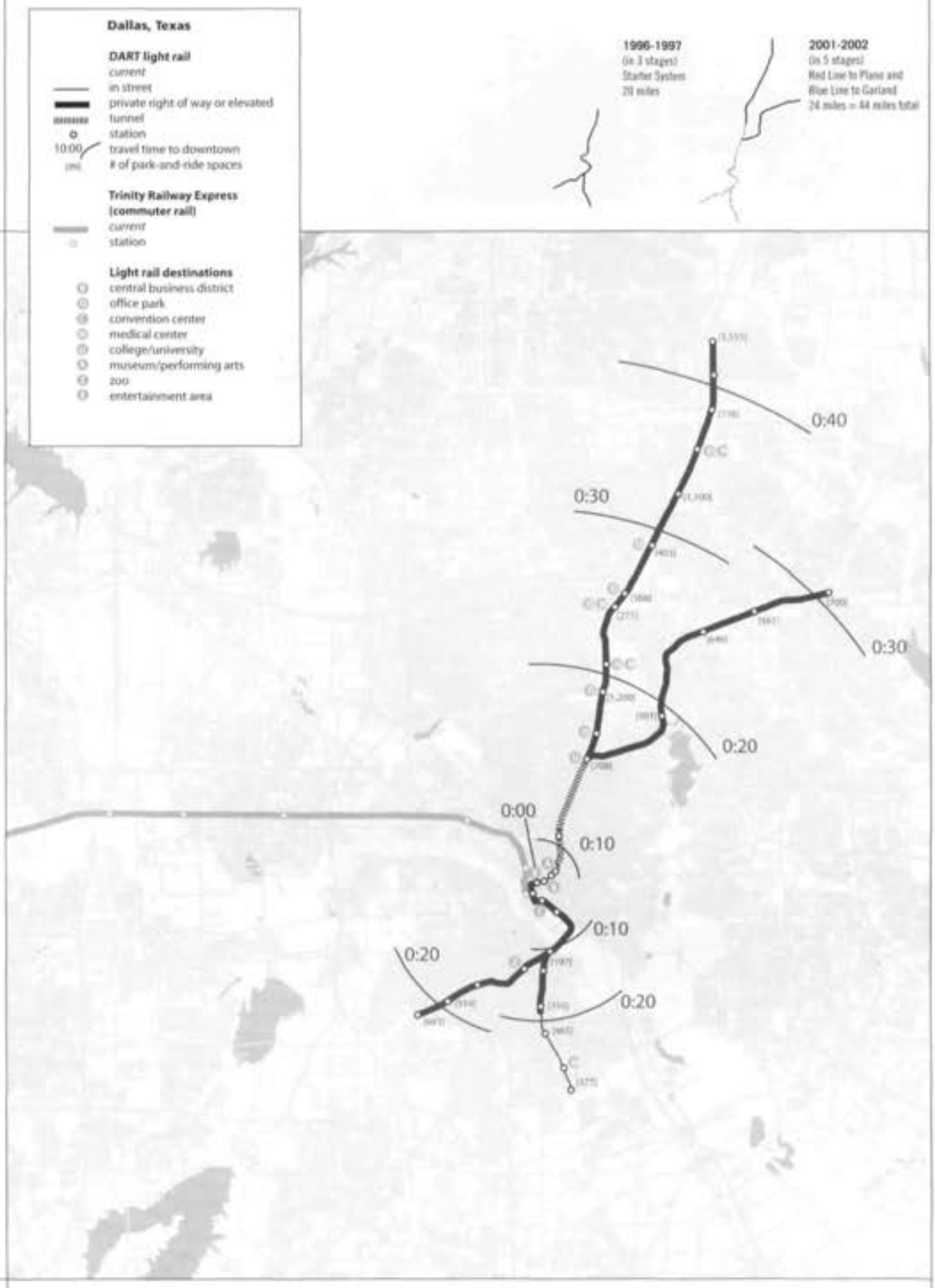
The Southwest Corridor extension followed active railroad lines through suburbs along Santa Fe Boulevard in a corridor with lots of commuters and no freeway. Once again, bus lines were rerouted, but the extension relied heavily on park-and-ride lots, with 2,600 spaces at four stations. As soon as the line opened in 2000, the lots filled, and RTD scrambled to provide more spaces. Riders complained about crowded trains. On an average weekday 13,300 people rode the new line (compared to 8,400 projected); 34 percent were new to transit. Light rail was no longer a train to nowhere.

With the Southwest Line a success, RTD considered further extensions. Planners concluded, though, that the original line, which followed streets through downtown, lacked the required capacity. So work began on a second downtown line, which follows the Platte Valley past Mile High Stadium to Union Station at the edge of the trendy LoDo area. Like the original line, it connects to the downtown transit mall, where free, frequent buses provide service to offices, shops, and the civic center.

Voters did not immediately embrace the system's expansion. A proposal to raise taxes for a regional system failed in 1997, but two years later a measure to fund the Southeast Corridor extensions passed.

The Southeast Corridor far exceeds the Southwest line in scope and potential. Denver stretches almost 20 miles across the plains to the southeast, and so far a commuter's only choice has been Interstate 25, the most congested highway in Denver. In the 1990s, the Colorado Department of Transportation studied expanding I-25 and found that any growth would be a tight squeeze. With little additional right-of-way available, any lanes added now might be the last ever. The highway department proposed to include light rail.

Pairing rail transit and freeways is nothing new. Chicago replaced an "el" with a rapid transit line in the center of the Eisenhower Expressway in 1953; San Francisco and Washington followed suit in the 1970s. But for those cities, the goal was simply to combine two modes of transportation in one corridor. The Colorado Department of Transportation saw light rail as a way to expand the freeway's capacity. When the freeway was expanded, the department reasoned, congestion would decrease at first, but then rise again as the population rose and no additional lanes could be built. But a rail line the width of a freeway lane has tremendous spare capacity. If three-car trains running every ten minutes fill up, you can run them every five minutes, or even run four-car trains every three minutes. In other words, a six-fold increase in capacity requires only the purchase of more rail vehicles. In the Southeast Corridor, rail's primary purpose is not to serve today's needs; it's to provide relief for future demand.



Dallas, Texas, DART Light Rail **Operator:** Dallas Area Rapid Transit Authority **Funding source:** 1% sales tax in service area, federal funds (capital costs) **Service area population:** 2.1 million **Bus weekday trips:** 214,000 on 858 vehicles **Light rail weekday trips:** 39,000 on 95 vehicles (includes spare vehicles for unopened extensions)

dallas area rapid transit authority

DART light rail

DALLAS Area Rapid Transit opened a 20-mile light-rail "starter system" in 1996 and 1997. The modest name concealed great ambitions.

In 1988, 58 percent of voters had rejected DART's plan to issue bonds for a 93-mile light-rail system. Despite that huge margin, the plan never went away. The "starter" line, built without bonds, was designed to be the core of that system, and it was built accordingly. On both ends of the downtown section are massive structures: a 3.5-mile tunnel under the North Central Expressway on the north and a 0.9-mile bridge over the Trinity River on the south. These were expensive projects, but they provide critical links, connecting downtown to ready-made rail corridors in the form of abandoned railroad lines, of which DART owns 125 miles. Two such corridors provided the path for extensions north to Plano and Garland, which opened last year.

These extensions have resulted in an oddly lopsided system. But the shape is telling: DART is two systems, one north and one south, with different purposes and characters.

The south end serves mostly lower-income, more transit-dependent neighborhoods. Trains run past back yards and down the center of a commercial street. The stations are designed for pedestrians and as bus hubs; park-and-ride lots are small. Besides the Trinity bridge, there are few major structures. The trains generally cross streets at grade. It's a typical light-rail system: efficient and not overly elaborate.

There's nothing modest about the north end. After a fast passage through the tunnel, trains emerge near SMU at Mockingbird Station, which is built in a huge trench with escalators up to street level. The two northern lines split even before leaving the trench. Neither stays on the ground for long; the lines cross major streets with overpasses. As a result, several stations are elevated. The goal here is to get suburbanites out of their cars and onto trains. Fast service — the trains speeding above cars stopped at red lights, past suburban shopping strips and the mid-rise office buildings of the Telecom Corridor — encourages them. So do vast parking lots at stations.

DART's light-rail system is different things to different people: a more comfortable alternative to the bus for some, a less stressful ride than the freeway for others. Socioeconomic segregation has allowed DART to serve two very different populations in very different ways: commuters get parking lots and fast trips; the transit-dependent get neighborhood stations. The bifurcated plan works: the first segment of the system to be opened started with 18,000 daily riders as opposed to the projected 15,000; the entire starter system carried 7 percent more riders than projected.

DART also pulled off another balancing act: It pleased the voters. The 1988 rail referendum was no fluke, and DART's unpopularity lasted through the early 1990s. Member cities regularly contemplated leaving the authority; Flower Mound and Coppell did. Now, light rail remains a hot political issue, but in a very different way. The question is not whether, but where and when. (The current debate is whether to spend more to serve the Love Field terminal directly with an underground station. Dallas likes the idea, but suburban mayors don't want the project to take priority over extensions to their cities.) In 2000, when DART asked voters to approve $2.9 million in bonds to speed up expansion, 77 percent voted in favor.

Dallas is now touted as a light-rail success story. The obvious conclusion is that once voters see trains running, they think differently about rail. But Dallas' approach was not really incremental. It was ambitious from the start. The difference between the rail system that the voters rejected and the one they now support is not substance but perception. What Dallas is now building is essentially the same as what it would have built had DART gotten its way the first time around.

HOUSTON is infamous in transit circles for its repeated rejection of rail. The track record is striking. Twice, METRO got as far as selecting contractors for rail systems before political winds shifted. When rail construction finally began, it was despite lawsuits and a citizen initiative that proposed literally to rip completed tracks out of the streets. Rail is controversial everywhere, but Houston is extreme. With the 2001 passage of Proposition 1, Houston is the only major city in the United States where voters must approve any new rail transit line regardless of funding.

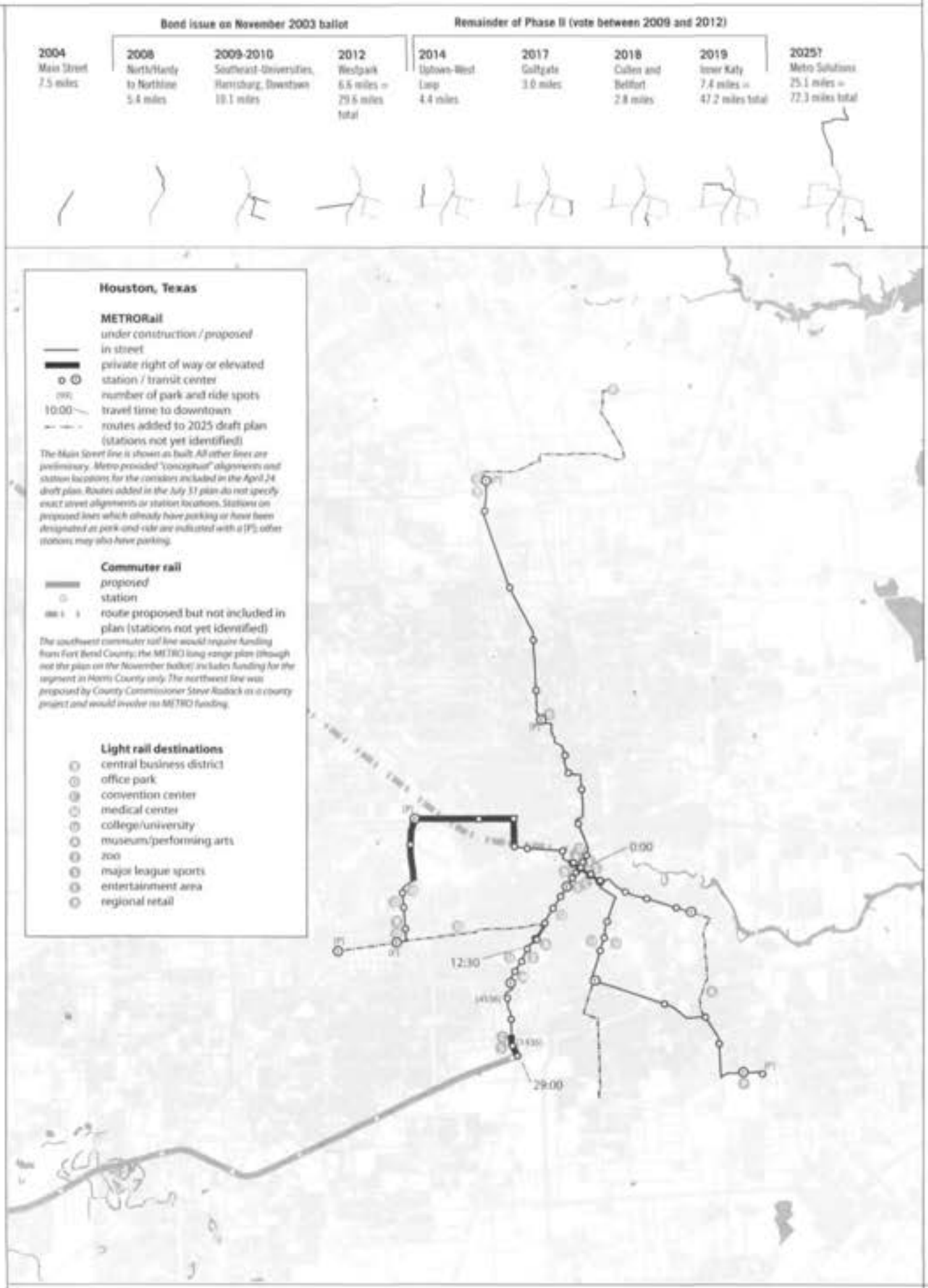
Less obvious than the contentious history is the legacy of the rail battles. Money that would have gone into a subway or monorail went instead to a network of High Occupancy Vehicle lanes. HOV lanes are the unloved stepchild of transit; they have never gotten much political support or public awareness. Conservatives sing their praises to defeat rail plans, then talk of converting them to tollways when the rail threat is gone. Transit supporters dislike something that looks so much like a freeway. But the 91-mile Houston system has become a quiet success. During a weekday rush hour, the six HOV lanes carry as many people as 24 freeway lanes. Up to a third of those people ride in buses. The comfortable, speedy service that HOV-lane buses provide to downtown from park-and-ride lots would be hard for any other mode of transit to beat. But if you aren't going to downtown, are going against the commute direction, or live inside the 610 Loop, the HOV lanes don't help. This is where rail might fit in.

Houston's first venture into light rail, the Main Street line, is a good example of a niche rail can fill. It ties together a corridor that has high current transit ridership, major sources of potential ridership, and potential for new, transit-friendly development. The Main Street Line is in large part a collector-distributor system. By collecting bus riders at transit centers at Fannin South, the Medical Center, and Wheeler, light rail will eliminate 1,200 bus trips a day. The rail line will also link destinations such as the Medical Center, Museum District, and Midtown to downtown, which is the hub of the bus system; riders from other parts of the city will be able to ride downtown on a bus (including the HOV-lane buses), then take the train to their final destination. South of the Medical Center, park-and-ride lots at Fannin South (owned by METRO) and Smithlands (owned by the Texas Medical Center) will provided satellite parking for the Medical Center. As downtown and Midtown residential development continues, light rail may find a new market: people who live along the corridor and work downtown or in the Medical Center.

No other city has built a first rail line that packs so much into so short a corridor. The Main Street line serves not one major employment center, but two; the Medical Center has as many employees as downtown San Diego. With about 30,000 weekday boardings, the 7.5-mile Main Street line is expected to carry about as many passengers as Sacramento's 18.3-mile system, Salt Lake City's 15-mile system, or Baltimore's 22.5-mile system.

The Main Street line was intended from the beginning to be suitable as the core of a bigger system. Even as construction was underway, METRO conducted three corridor studies: North/Hardy, Southeast-Universities, and Uptown-West Loop. When METRO released its draft METRO Solutions plan in April, all were included, in addition to an Inner Katy segment connecting the Galleria line to downtown, and a spur along Harrisburg Road — 41 more miles of light rail by 2025.

Unlike most light-rail systems, the proposed routes, like the Main Street line, were mainly in streets. That means slower speeds: an average of 15 miles per hour, including stops, for the Main Street line (speeds would be higher on the proposed extensions, which



Houston, Texas, METRORail **Operator:** Metropolitan Transit Authority of Harris County **Funding source:** 1% sales tax in service area, federal funds (capital only; no federal funds used in Main Street light rail) **Service area population:** 2.6 million **Bus weekday trips:** 336,000 on 1,417 vehicles

houston metropolitan transit authority

METRORail


Reliant Park station on the Main Street line.


Ensemble/HCC station.


Downtown Transit Center.


Passing the Rice Hotel.

would have fewer stops). But because the petrochemical industry continues to rely on freight rail, Houston does not have the convenient abandoned rail lines other cities have been able to use. All the studies considered using active or inactive railroad lines; only the Galleria line ended up with private right-of-way (along an abandoned rail line in the western parts of the Heights and along 610 north of Post Oak).

In many cases, private-right-of-way options were eliminated because they did not serve neighborhoods and thus attracted fewer riders. Street alignments are often more pedestrian-friendly and promotes redevelopment by making rail a visible element in the cityscape. This is the same trade-off other cities have faced. Most cities have opted to sacrifice service for inner-city neighborhoods in favor of faster trips for suburban commuters; Houston's HOV system made that option less attractive, because many of those commuters are already using transit.

Most light-rail systems have been designed to attract riders not currently using transit. Stereotypically, that means affluent white suburbanites. Inner-city, lower-income, and minority areas — the areas where bus ridership is usually concentrated — have been served incidentally. METRO's plan instead focused on these areas: the inner north side along Fulton, Cavalcade, and Airline; the near east side along Harrisburg; and the Third Ward and neighborhoods north of Hobby Airport. Of all the proposed lines, only the Galleria line would serve gentrified or well-to-do neighborhoods (the Heights and Post Oak), and it would also put a transit center on the edge of the dense, lower-income Gulfton apartment area. The proposed lines could dramatically improve transit service to lower-income areas, connecting residents to jobs and educational opportunities.

Public reaction to the draft plan supported METRO's strategy. Most commenters asked for more rail, not less. The Post Oak business community wanted a more direct connection to the Main Street line. Continental Airlines asked for a station at Intercontinental Airport, and even offered to put up money if express service were provided to downtown. Residents of the primarily Hispanic east side said that the Harrisburg line was not enough, and presented to METRO a proposal to extend the line further east, then south to Gulfgate Mall. The African-American community pointed out that Sunnyside, a populous, poor area west of Hobby, wasn't served. METRO listened. When the "final" plan was approved at the end of July, it had four additions: a line along Highway 59 connecting Main Street to the Galleria; an extension of the Greenspoint line to Intercontinental; the Gulfgate line; and a branch to Sunnyside. The total: 24 more miles of rail and the support of key communities.

But there was a catch. In 1992, after killing a monorail system, Houston Mayor Bob Lanier had the METRO board send 25 percent of its revenue to local cities and the county for road improvements. The intent was to prevent METRO from building up a cash reserve that could be used for future rail, but the effect was to make small cities in the METRO service area dependent on the funds. The draft plan proposed ending this funding after 2009, which might mean tax increases in those cities. The METRO board members who represent them voted against the July 31 plan.

Negotiations behind the scenes created a new plan. The payments would continue through 2014, and bonds would be issued to start rail construction as soon as design can be finished. The tradeoff: less rail. The new "Phase II" plan included only 39.7 miles of rail lines by 2019, some of which were in the draft plan and some of which weren't. Both lines to the Galleria, the line to Gulfgate, and part of the Sunnyside line remained, but Greenspoint and both airports weren't included. The rest of the rail remains in the plan with funding and timing to be determined later. The board voted again on August 12; this time the small cities were largely on board.

Behind the scenes, though, not everyone was happy. When the board met August 18 to define ballot language, a 4-to-5 vote defeated the 39.7-mile plan. The sticking point was still the road funds; the solution was to delay the decision. A seriously scaled-down version of the original proposal — 22.1 miles of rail — could be built before 2012 without cutting off road funds; the board called for another election between 2009 and 2012 to approve funding for the rest. This plan received the cautious endorsement of ex-mayor Lanier, still a respected voice, and squeaked by the board 5-to-4.

The 22.1 miles to be put before voters (unless the board changes its mind again) are the northwards extension to Northline Mall, the Harrisburg line as far as the Magnolia Transit Center, the Southeast Line to the 610 Loop, and the Highway 59 line as far as Hillcroft. These would have been the first segments built under the previous plan, and their projected completion dates have not changed. Houston could still get the full 65 miles of rail by 2025 — but that would require at least one more election and hard decisions later. That possibility isn't much consolation for the areas left out. The Post Oak business community clearly hoped for a boost from rail, but the new plan only gets near the area. The Heights — a progressive, pedestrian-friendly area that might welcome rail — gets nothing.

The board's strategy seems to be to avoid opposition. Historically, opponents have succeeded in convincing voters who supported rail in general to defeat specific plans. By getting Lanier out of the way and preserving road funds, METRO might defuse critics. Those moves, combined with high voter turnout on the East and near North sides, could be the key to passing a rail plan.

But the modest plan may also turn off voters. The Main Street line is widely perceived as too little rail in the wrong place, and the new plan could seem like more of the same. The neighborhoods that would be served are relatively unknown to many Houstonians, and many higher-profile destinations — the airports, the Galleria, I-10 — aren't included. Anti-rail forces will no doubt point out that voters along I-10, 290, I-59 north, and I-45 South won't find much direct benefit in a plan that barely extends beyond the 610 Loop.

The Post Oak line would have made a wonderful counter-argument. It would have served the Northwest Transit Center, at the corner of 610 and I-10 West. The I-10 HOV lane (which will become a toll lane, but will retain its express bus service) and the Highway 290 HOV lane converge here. Buses pass through the transit center before continuing on to downtown. Rail would let HOV bus riders transfer to the train for a quick ride to the center of the Post Oak office area, avoiding chronically backed-up traffic on the West Loop.

The plan does include service to a park-and-ride lot at Highway 59 and Hillcroft — which connects to the Westpark Toll Road and the 59 HOV lane. It also links the University of Houston, with 30,000 commuter students, to the downtown hub of the regional bus system.

Ultimately, though, other solutions may bring rail to the outer suburbs. In late May, County Commissioner Steve Radack proposed a diesel-powered commuter-rail operation on a little-used freight rail line along US 290, then on to downtown. Radack pointedly said that METRO wasn't required to operate the line, though he did not say where the money would come from. This plan is not a substitute for light rail: Commuter rail is well suited to suburban commutes but impractical elsewhere. It can't offer the frequency or close station spacing of light rail, nor can it run in city streets. But commuter rail and light rail do work well together. The 290 commuter line could meet light rail at the University of Houston–Downtown (and near the Northwest Transit Center if the Inner Katy line is built), allowing riders to transfer for the last leg of their trips to work. METRO is also participating in a study of a commuter rail line to Stafford, Sugar Land, Richmond, and Rosenberg; such a line would connect to the Main Street light-rail line at Fannin South.

Another way to reduce congestion on suburban freeways is to encourage inner-city development. North of downtown, the proposed lines pass abandoned rail yards that could become high-density, transit-oriented developments. Those lines also serve the declining industrial area east of downtown, where new lofts are already sprouting. The system offers the possibility of living near a rail station and riding rail to work, shopping, entertainment, higher education, and even medical services.

Obviously, many questions remain about a plan that is necessarily sketchy. It makes no sense for METRO to spend money on detailed design before going to the voters, but a rail line's success depends not just on broad questions of alignment but on details such as station locations, coordination with buses, and streetscape design. So far METRO has demonstrated competence on these issues. The Main Street line is among the best-designed of the nation's street-running light-rail lines, with attractive landscaping, unintrusive but rider-friendly stations, and a reasonably efficient alignment that keeps trains from dodging through traffic or slowing down for curves, while still reserving lanes for cars. The biggest problem with the new rail line has been the disturbance caused by its construction; METRO claims it has learned lessons on that count.

The biggest question, though, is political: Will Houston voters support METRO's light-rail vision? To quiet critics, the board has cut an ambitious plan to a modest one. Dallas took only 14 years to design and build 44 miles of light rail; the ballot proposal would give Houston a 29.6-mile system 13 years after the Main Street line was approved. Los Angeles, which now boasts the biggest light-rail system in the United States, has 55 miles of light-rail track, with 38 more in planning or design (in addition to 17 miles of subway and 512 miles of commuter rail, all opened since 1990).

The cost to Houston-area taxpayers would be relatively modest. METRO's 39.7-mile plan would cost $958 million, half of which would be paid by the federal government; rail construction would account for less than 5 percent of the total METRO budget from 2003 to 2025. Buses would receive four times as much capital funding as rail.

It's instructive, too, to compare the light-rail plan to other transit options. The monorail plan canceled by Lanier would have cost $1.6 billion in 1991 dollars for only 14 miles. Widening the Katy Freeway is now estimated to cost $1.7 billion; the Grand Parkway — 77 miles of highway through open country around Houston — may cost $4 billion.

But voters won't approve the plan simply because it is economical; the question is whether it is part of the solution to Houston's traffic problems. METRO can make the case that it is. Lines to dense inner-city neighborhoods will attract riders the day they open. Cities such as San Diego have shown that an incremental approach — building short segments that eventually compose a true system — can work. METRO's planners have the maps to show that they are thinking regionally and that their proposed lines can connect and extend to serve more areas. They believe that Houston voters want rail, and that those voters will conclude a small start is better than nothing ■


Courtesy METRO

When it opens in January, the TMC Transit Center will connect light rail to buses with a skybridge across Fannin. Many of the riders on the Main Street line will make part of their trip by bus; the same would be true of an expanded light rail system in which light rail would be the high-capacity, higher-speed core of the bus system. The METRO plan includes improved commuter bus service, new express bus routes, additional transit centers, and expanded local service. METRO does not need voter approval to carry out these measures. But their inclusion in the plan is intended to send a message: Though rail will get the attention, METRO does not plan to neglect its bus riders.

Front elevation, seen from the Bagby Street bridge.

Plaza with dancing fountain.

Midway of the Downtown Aquarium. (Architect of record: Kirksey Architects. Landscape architects: Kudela & Weinheimer. Restaurant design: KSA. 2003.)

Sea Minus

AN AQUARIUM BY THE GULF (FREEWAY)

BY BRUCE C. WEBB

It would be difficult not to notice the new addition on the northwest edge of downtown near the theater district. From many vantage points the goofy fairground buildings and amusement park rides might be mistaken for an itinerant carnival that became lost on its way to a parking lot in a suburban strip center. But after many years of wishing and more than a few proposals, this is Houston's aquarium. No matter that it came in the form of a Landry's seafood restaurant nestled in the precincts of its own entertainment district. Squeezed between freeway, bayou, and the downtown street grid, it brightens an inchoate site formerly buried in downtown's subconscious with a dose of overwrought urban bonhomie.

Landry's Restaurants, Inc., displays an uncanny penchant for succeeding where others have failed. Once just a small chain of local seafood restaurants, the Galveston-based company has grown into a massive conglomeration of several formerly ailing restaurants (among them C.A. Muer, Chart House, Saltgrass Steak Houses, Joe's Crab Shack, and recently the Rainforest Café), along with The Crab House, Charley's Crab, and Willie G's Seafood and Steak House. Landry's bought the losers at bargain prices, then reinvigorated them with a formula of no-nonsense (meaning non-intimidating) menus and side-show themes. Having proven an ability to make silk purses out of fish tails (and to fill those purses with gold), Landry's has advanced to seeking new profits in underperforming parts of our cities. Such places are ripe for the

Plaza view from The Dive Lounge.

Shark train passing under I-45.

Aerial view of Aquarium complex from the southwest.

Landry's treatment: turnkey slices of simulated urbanity suited to the tastes of the new millennium.

Testing the waters in 1998 with Kemah Boardwalk, Landry's pioneered a formula of entertainment bricolage to create a mini-theme park, honky-tonk atmosphere that supplanted whatever working-class charm there was in Kemah's unassuming gumbo-and-shrimp-boat character. Leaving nothing to chance, Landry's created its own 14-acre district loosely attached to the waterfront site and featuring retail shops, a hotel, and seven themed restaurants (including one featuring a 50,000-gallon aquarium). Except for the 425-slip Kemah marina, the relationship to the Gulf coast is almost incidental; the development keeps the oil-slicked Gulf backwater and disheveled tide line as background for the boardwalk theme. There is no beach; instead there are dancing fountains where kids frolic in a central plaza surrounded by a carousel, a Ferris wheel, and a few other carnival amusements. The development has succeeded wildly.

Landry's became a player in Houston's downtown revitalization by topping four other proposals for a long-term lease to develop the city's Fire Station Number 1 and the Central Waterworks at 440 Bagby across the bayou from the Wortham Theater Center. Their proposal for a $21 million aquatic-themed entertainment center in the moribund northern edge of downtown was irresistible to city officials seeking bait with which to attract bigger crowds of entertainment seekers and tourists. Kirksey, Landry's architects, fitted the full-service aquarium restaurant, a cafe, a bar, a gift shop, a ballroom, and the 500,000-gallon aquarium into the converted fire station. They then wrapped the building with an undulating oatmeal-gray façade and gave it blue and white accents — the colors of a Greek taverna — and set it in the middle of a 14-acre midway similar to the one in Kemah. The complex is nominally located along Buffalo Bayou, but its more prominent edges are the Memorial Drive feeder and the dramatically elevated portion of Interstate 45, under which the tail of the park passes. At night the entire complex turns a lurid, neon blue; a Ferris wheel, too small to elicit any real sense of wonder, acts as a kinetic sign, waving to the freeway traffic streaming by only a few feet away. A train circumnavigates the site, passing through a shark exhibit in tanks lodged in the old waterworks building. Why a 19th-century C.P. Huntington steam engine was chosen to power this trip through the acrylic shark tank tunnel remains an inexplicable mixed metaphor to me.

Undulating lines of stylized liquidity are the guiding design metaphor of the place, architecturally formulated into what might be called surrealistic-baroque-modernism. Inside and out, there seems an aversion to anything meeting at a right angle. The Aquarium Restaurant on the second floor is supposed to resemble an undersea cave, with window views into a giant, 200,000-gallon fish tank. But rendered in vaguely shaped concrete flocking and hung with lighted plastic fish, it looks more like a hippie nightclub from the Age of Aquarius. The sea-cave theme is merely annoying; the real wonder in the room is the fish tank itself. If more of it were visible, it would be spectacular. The Nautilus ballroom on the top floor is surprisingly staid. Except for the huge, Dali-esque ceiling light fixtures, it could be a meeting room in a Holiday Inn.

Cultural Engineering

Landry's belongs to a breed of entrepreneurs who may be the true engineers of our urban life and culture. Landry's shares a belief in the importance of the theme with the less urbanistically ambitious, but no less successful, Brinker International, the largest impresario of restaurant chains. Some of the Brinker restaurants began not with a building program or a menu, but with a story. In the case of the Macaroni Grill the story is about the Romano family: "As a first-generation Italian, there are many things I remember about growing up. The thing I remember most is spending a lot of time with my grandfather while my father was off fighting in the war. What we did most was eat — because my grandfather 'lived to eat.' "

The story is, of course, fictional, but it is enough to serve as a libretto for what Brinker calls the "eating experience at Romano's Macaroni Grill." The company's concept paper describes the place in five scenes: Scene 1: The Gathering ("The sounds of music, laughing, and talking draw you from the parking lot to the entrance and inside to join a celebration."); Scene 2: The Entrance; Scene 3: The Stage ("Classic artists of Italy are spotlighted for the month or the week..."); Scene 4: The Garden Party ("A festive environment where the emphasis is on the celebration of great food and love of life."); Scene 5: Arrive'Derci ("As your guests leave their dining experience, passing through the paradigm shift ... they will take the experience home with them.").

It may well be the case that the real Gulf Coast or Houston's real historic downtown are insufficiently vivid and accommodating mise-en-scenes for contemporary sensibilities. The simulated experience substitutes reliability and exaggeration of effects for genuine adventuring. Or as Umberto Eco explains, contemporary Americans prefer the fake even when the real equivalent is possible because "the public is meant to admire the perfection of the fake and its obedience to the program."

Thick City — Thin City

Cities aspire to thickness and a concentration of form, to literal and figural density, and to permanence. They favor typological patterns that provide economy of form and conservation of space. Over time they acquire a consciousness and a memory.

But thin urbanism has none of these characteristics. Its effects, instead, are sceneographic and conceived in terms of the view from the road, aesthetic distances more common to suburbs than downtowns. The buildings of thin urbanism are speculative and thinly constructed. They do not go through a process of aging by which they would accrue added cultural value; instead they are either new or old. Aldo Rossi writes that the architecture of the city finds its individuality absorbed into the collective. As contrasted with the suburban anarchy of form, architecture in the city becomes a part of a more complex, historic richness of place. It is difficult to think of the downtown aquarium being absorbed in this way; its sense of place was spawned in the formless drift of Kemah. It is no longer clear where the boundaries between city and suburb lie, but one thing is clear: With the coming of the downtown aquarium, that boundary moved that much closer to the center of the city.

But creating a compelling and distinctive sense of place is a formidable problem for a new-millennium city that systematically dismantled much of its downtown history in the belief that it no longer needed it. Without a dramatic site or much remaining of the historic city and its architecture, how can Houston redevelop its downtown into a compelling destination for large recreational crowds and tourists? The building blocks of this endeavor are the products of media architecture that seek to join the real world of the city to the world of the theme park. But the stories about these cities become repetitious and dull as every city acquires not just one of everything but the same one of everything.

Already Landry's is planning a similar treatment — with an aquarium restaurant, a Rain Forest Café, and the signature amusement-park midway — to bolster Corpus Christi's municipal marina. Galveston's Seawall Boulevard, between 53rd and 57th Streets, is in the finishing stages of a development that includes a 130,000-square-foot convention center to complement the San Luis resort spa and conference center and an expanded Hilton hotel, both properties owned by Landry's CEO Tilman Fertitta. The new convention district will enhance Galveston's desirability as a convention destination while at the same time inverting things by making the historic Strand a satellite city for the convention crowds the way Paris becomes a satellite theme park for day trippers who center their visit to France at Euro Disney in Marne-le-Valle. A new Rain Forest Café with a performing volcano (every half hour after 7 p.m.) is the roadside attraction, though not a good addition to the surrounding neighborhood.

Finally, Landry's recently purchased the heavily indebted, nonprofit Ocean Journey Aquarium in Denver, the Rocky Mountain region's only aquarium. The $93 million aquarium opened in 1999 and filed for Chapter 11 last year with $62.5 million in debt. Landry's picked up the 17-acre complex for an astoundingly low $13.5 million and is presently diluting its educational focus and turning it into an entertainment venue with many of the standard Landry's features.

Remarkably, it is through projects like these that we convince ourselves of the rejuvenation of the city. ■

Around the World on Beltway 8

BY LARRY ALBERT

You can fly almost anywhere from the airport.

But why bother? So much of the world revolves around Houston already.

I went shopping for shoes at DSW Shoe Warehouse. DSW stands for Designer Shoe Warehouse.

It's in an Italian shopping center past Beltway 8, on the side of the I-45 freeway.

I asked the store manager where the Italian shoes were. They weren't organized by country, she told me. "You'd have to look at each pair to see where they came from."

She said there wasn't any connection between the design of the buildings and the shoes inside. "It's just a strip," she said.

This pair was especially comfortable. I thought they were from Italy, but when I got to the checkout I noticed a tag that said MADE IN BRAZIL.

Afterwards I walked down to the end of the shopping center, to a bar called Buffalo Wild Wings. I ordered some Caribbean Jerk Buffalitos, which turned out to be chicken tacos.

The basketball finals were on TV, along with a NASCAR race called the "Food City 500." There was a war on, too. It was in Iraq.

I played a game on NTN, the National Trivia Network. The questions were posted on some of the TV screens, and I punched my answers into a gameset.

Between rounds, brief news headlines flashed at the bottom of the screen. "Iraq Campaign Dents On-Air Advertising," one of them said. I did pretty well for a while, but I messed up on a question about Henry VIII's wives and ended up in fifth place.

There were more TVs on in Conn's when I wandered in, but most of them were tuned to the Food Channel. A salesman named Gary told me they weren't allowed to show the news while the war was on, because customers might get upset.

Already that day, Gary said, a mother had complained when her child wandered over to a TV that showed some women dancing in bikinis. Outside, at the front of the shopping center overlooking the freeway, I found a statue of a woman with no arms, stuck on top of a pole.

Sculptures were planted all over. This one on top of Oshman's Supersports USA looked kind of familiar. It was a man wearing a big fig leaf.

In the middle of the shopping center, in front of a store called Country Clutter, was a big fountain. Two hairy men were trying hard to hold up the Earth, which was wet and dripping all over them. The horses around them looked upset about the flooding.

Sometime later, while the war was still going on, I passed this scene of destruction outside Memorial City Mall.

It was a new Target.

In Greenspoint, I stopped to take a picture of a big metal building that had a lot of flags out front. A sign said it was the Harvest Time Church, and that Shelton Bady was the bishop.

A man in a Range Rover stopped and asked me what I was doing. He turned out to be Shelton Bady. He said the flags represented all the different nationalities of his congregation. He said they were still missing a few. He had just come back from a trip to Honduras.

Bishop Bady said he thought it was important to try to understand different cultures, and that he wanted to use that understanding to expand others' concept of God. "You can't know God and be distant," he said.

After a while, we said goodbye and I went across the street, where there was a traveling amusement park set up in a supermarket parking lot. I watched two kids get off a ride called Paratrooper.

But just as they landed, one of the kids tripped over a cable, hurt his leg, and started crying. His mom tried to comfort him by saying she'd take him to get some chips and salsa, but he wanted to ride again.

Later, I ate dinner at IHOP.

Have you been to Forbidden Gardens? A man named Tom greeted me at the front gate. Tom said he lives in Scotland and Norway. He was getting ready for a trip to Alaska.

Tom ushered me into a room to watch a movie about the Forbidden City and the tomb of Emperor Qin in China. The movie plays continuously, he said, so it didn't matter when I walked in. After the movie began to repeat itself, I went outside for the tour.

Our tour guide, Elizabeth, told us that Ira Poon, the man who built Forbidden Gardens, chose to build it out here in Katy because the land reminded him of his hometown, Hong Kong, and also because the land was much cheaper than in Houston.

Elizabeth showed us the tombs of Emperor Qin, who ruled China in the third century B.C. He built an army of 6,000 terracotta soldiers to protect his body after he died.

They were set up just as if they were real soldiers in battle, but underground. Forbidden Gardens had a recreation of his gravesite, and authentic replicas of the soldiers, at one-third scale.

Elizabeth said that some of the soldiers had lost their heads because vandals had broken them. The soldiers originally had wooden spears, too, but many of them had been broken or stolen, so the rest were removed.

After a short tour of the Weapons Room, we got to see the Forbidden City. It was under a big shed roof.

Elizabeth said there were very few trees in the Forbidden City, because the emperors were afraid of assassins, and assassins could hide in trees.

In the Architecture Room, she told us the emperor's dream about a watchtower. He called seven architects, but killed six because he didn't like their designs. The seventh got the watchtower right, because he got help from a friend who built cages for crickets.

After the tour, I found some more buildings sitting in crates, out on the grass. Another tour guide told me they were for exhibits that hadn't been set up yet. They looked like they had been sitting out for some time.

Behind the crates and over a wall was a new subdivision.

On my way out, I discovered why it was called Forbidden Gardens.

A month or so later, I went to the Alamo.

This Alamo was part of Northwest Forest, a conference center in Cypress run by the company that sells Kwik Kopy franchises. They hold sales meetings there, but also rent it out to people.

Inside, guests were arriving for a wedding the next day.

Along the balconies on each side were guest suites, where people could stay overnight. Each one was named after someone who had been killed at the real Alamo.

Outside, a barbershop quartet was rehearsing. I met Jim, who said he would be officiating at the wedding. He said he was a minister in Ukraine, but he flew in for the weekend because he's known the bride since she was little.

Behind the Alamo was a string of small, cartoony storefronts. There was a general store, a town hall, a saloon, a barber shop, and even a print shoppe. Something about them looked strange.

As I was looking at the stores, a woman named Rose drove up in a golf cart. She opened up a sliding door on the side of the storefront building and started to drive in. I asked her if I could go inside, too.

It was a laundry room.

On my way out, I took more pictures of some of the signs they had.

I thought the signs were funny, but I knew they meant business, because I had already seen this center off Highway 290, closer to town.

There were a lot more Alamoes here.

And a lot more garage doors, too.

It was a huge amount of space for lease, but most of it was empty. A brochure in a box by a sales trailer listed only two tenants so far: Ford and Kikkoman.

Behind Alamo Crossing I found three buildings of townhomes under construction. The one on the left was just wood. The one in the middle was covered with Styrofoam. The one on the right was covered with brick. It was like the Three Little Pigs.

I wandered inside the Styrofoam house. Behind, the sun was setting, and it made the wall glow a brilliant blue.

In Sugarland, along the Southwest Freeway, there's a bank that was built to look just like Thomas Jefferson's home, Monticello.

There's a copy shop right next door to it, too.

This is the front porch, but you can't go in that way. It's paved with grass.

Later, I went back to the bank and used the ATM in the drive-thru. It was nice, but nothing like the ATM in this gas station off 290. You've got to get out of your car to use it, but it speaks to you in a British accent.

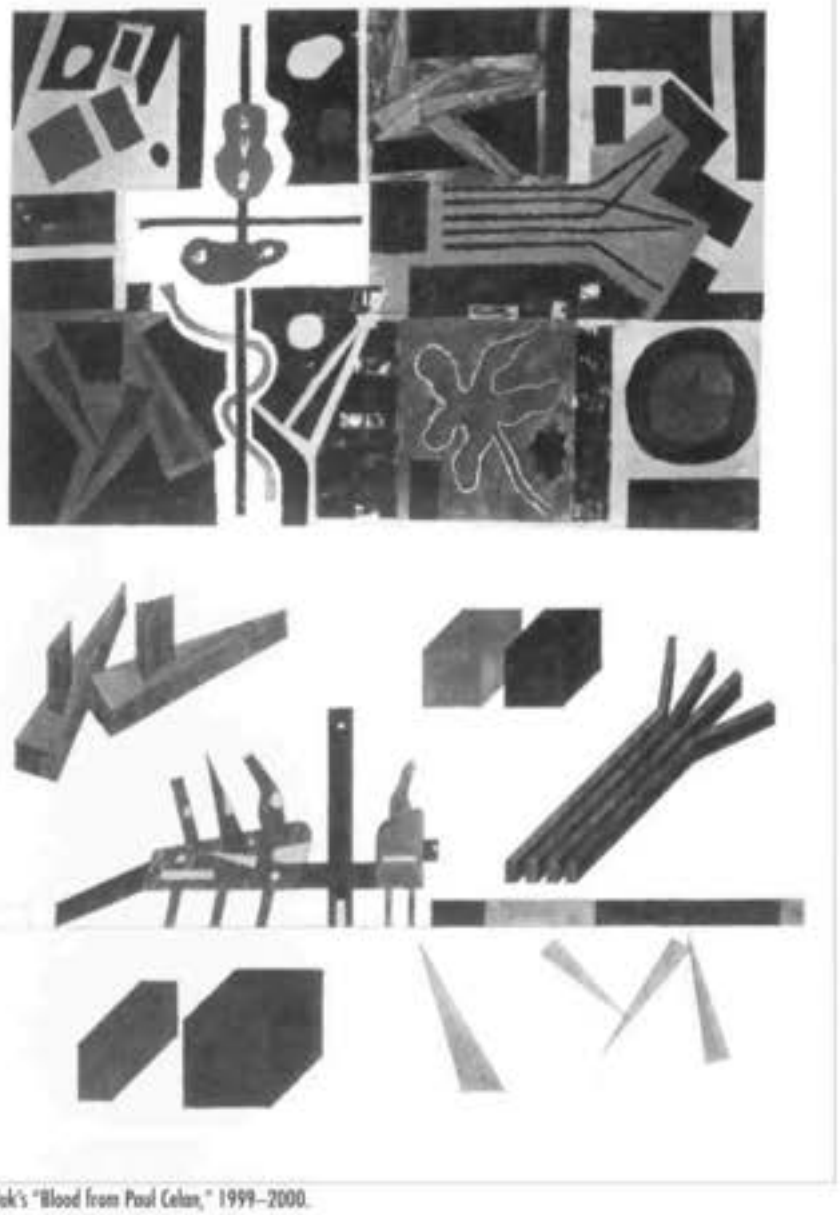
In a Wal-Mart parking lot nearby, I found some statues for sale.

They seemed to have some problems keeping their heads too.

More statues were wrapped up in crates, waiting to be sold.

It reminded me a lot of Forbidden Gardens, except there wasn't any garden, just a parking lot.

The parking lot looked like it had some history to it. Lines had been painted and covered over and then moved and painted again. But people could still figure out where to put their cars. ■



John Hejduk's "Blood from Paul Celan," 1999–2000.

Builder of Dreams

By Bruce C. Webb

Sanctuaries: The Last Works of John Hejduk, The Menil Collection, May 7–August 31

Rediscovering the work of the late architect-poet John Hejduk in this small exhibit of some 100 ink and gouache drawings and architectural models from the Canadian Centre for Architecture, on view at the Menil Collection, recalls a defining moment in late modernism during the 1970s and the publication of *Five Architects*. The book featured early work by Hejduk and then comparative youngsters Peter Eisenman, Michael Graves, Charles Gwathmey, and Richard Meier — a group that became known as the New York Five. They were a radical (chic) bunch; in the wake of the turbulent sixties they had abandoned functionalism and the apologetics of social concerns for the cool, modern, neo-Corbusian aesthetics of the 1920s and '30s. The work of the five looked similar enough in the book, especially those soon-to-be ubiquitous inked line drawings and stand-up axonometrics. But each went on to develop a personal style of his own. And to build. Everyone, that is, but Hejduk, who became the odd man out. Praise for Hejduk usually included the qualifier "built almost nothing."

So while most architects leave behind a legacy of built work, Hejduk is remembered for a collection of speculative drawings, models, and poems. It's work ideally suited to the gallery. Hejduk was an architectural magus; in the elusive language of the subconscious he created pictures of architectural ideas that were as profound and affecting as poems. There was never anything impossible about his ideas; they were clearly architectural possibilities. They could be built. Even the daring Wall House with cantilevered pods affixed to a shear wall, for a time the near-iconic, pedagogical example of architecture-as-idea, was constructed after Hejduk's death by a group in the Netherlands. But for the most part what Hejduk designed belonged to the category of allegories, the "what ifs."

The Wall House is the earliest of the exhibited work, presented here in several variations both in drawings and exquisitely crafted little models. This seminal design became deeply embedded in the image bank of most students of architecture in the 1970s and '80s (and the teachers of students in the '90s). It showed how a rational *parti* could morph into stylized surrealism through Hejduk's creative figurations.

There is also a small-scaled white model and several drawings of the Berlin Masque project, a festival of fantastic architectural typologies, the dramatis personae for an allegorical performance. The two most recent architectural designs, a small "Christ Chapel" and a large cathedral, are more deeply personal, almost to the point of solipsism. Like a cabinet of curiosities, the cathedral rounds up many of Hejduk's architectural themes and unselfconsciously affixes them to the inside space and outside walls of a rectangular box. Entering the artistic world of the two religious buildings requires the same suspension of disbelief asked for by a novel. But the effort is worthwhile.

The other part of the show, titled "Enclosures," is a collection of some 32 drawings depicting dramatic encounters between animals, men, and angels. The colorful drawings that are in the permanent collection of the Menil have a primitive quality reminiscent of the stained glass windows by artist Marc Chagall or early Spanish illuminated manuscripts. Hejduk was a prolific writer; his design work frequently explored linkages between poetic narratives and architectural space. For example, in "The 13 Watchtowers of Cannaregio," the elaborate sectional drawings are animated by a story of "the inhabitant who refused to participate." This combination of architectural suggestion and verbal specification presented architecture as a kind of dramatic fiction. In the "Enclosures" drawings the sense of architecture becomes less tangible, as though a section had been drawn through a vision. But the drawings portray the same internal restlessness and forceful penetrations that fill the cathedral with mystery.

Hejduk is best known for his role as the protector and animator of the architectural school at Cooper Union, where for a remarkable period of 25 years he served as dean. His artistic work is a pedagogical extension of a great educator. It was as a teacher that he visited the University of Houston College of Architecture as a critic in Professor John Perry's famous Honors Studio in the fall of 1979. Before arriving he issued, by mail, an unusual preliminary set of instructions to the students that included bringing to the first class meeting a cigar box, a full-sized ink drawing of a musical instrument, and a painting depicting the playing of a musical instrument.

At that first meeting Hejduk handed out the second part of his brief: "Imagine and invent a structure and place at which to play the instrument incorporating both painting and instrument. Represent (having imagined and invented) the structure and place in cigar box. When finished it should reflect those things in a sensitive and beautiful way. Eloquent. Elegant."

When the end of the week arrived the students filed in and sat in a circle holding their cigar boxes. One by one, Hejduk asked them to open them. He didn't say much, but he let them know he was deeply moved by their efforts. The students loved it. Some of them wrote poems about Hejduk. One such read, "Learning by osmosis/Seeing with the sudden clarity/ Of his transcendent vision."

But this was back in 1979, and not everyone was convinced that this had much to do with being an architect. Maybe even less so when Hejduk sent his former student Daniel Libeskind (head of architecture at Cranbrook Academy and at that time the quintessential "paper architect") and artist Raymond Slutsky to follow him in the UH Honors Studio. And Libeskind in turn sent his own brilliant students Ben Nicholson, Bahram Shirdel, and Willie Taylor to teach at UH. Outsiders called it a cabal. But for a period of ten or so years, the ideas broached by Hejduk and fueled by others were a big part of the creative dynamics of the college. It was a time when there was not much professional work, and jobs in an architecture office were difficult to find. The computer was just entering the scene and the old, defining skills of hand drawing, model making, and drafting were on the verge of being displaced in architectural practice. The school was everything. Sometimes it seemed like a sanctuary — almost a monastic place — for protecting and practicing a deserted art against a time when it would again, maybe, be needed and desired.

In an age of cynicism, Hejduk's visions may seem hopelessly innocent. But they helped to make it possible for students and architects to dream. And to the extent that dreaming is still sanctioned as a part of knowing, they continue to do so. ■

Cullinan Hall, *James Rosenquist: A Retrospective*, 2003.

Raising Rosenquist

By William F. Stern

James Rosenquist: A Retrospective, The Museum of Fine Arts, Houston (and the Menil Collection), May 17–August 17

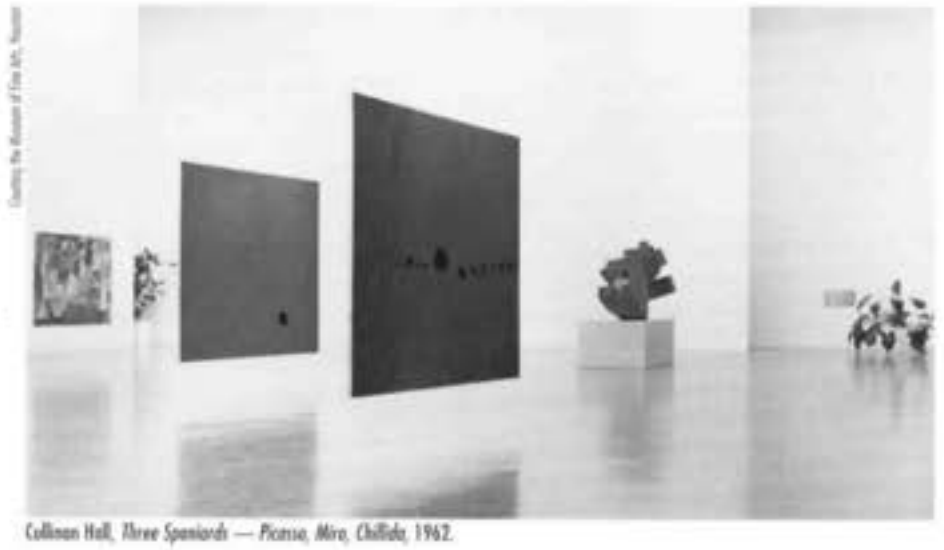
How startling Cullinan Hall at the Museum of Fine Arts, Houston, must have appeared when it opened in 1958. This vast room, with 30-foot ceilings, was like no other museum space in America. In designing the flexible exhibition space, architect Ludwig Mies van der Rohe clearly anticipated the display of huge pieces of modern art. Forty-five years later Cullinan Hall has grandly fulfilled its potential with the hanging of three giant paintings by James Rosenquist as the culmination of his retrospective exhibition. Few museum spaces in this country could so gracefully accommodate these outsized paintings, each measuring 17 feet high by 46 feet wide. The effect is a combined triumph of both painting and architecture.

Each painting comprises 39 panels stacked in a running-bond brick pattern, six rows high. The assemblage for the panels is made up of wood stretchers and canvas on quarter-inch plywood backing, bolted together so tightly that the divisions between panels are barely visible from a distance. Rosenquist executed these paintings at his studio in Aripeka, Florida, north of Tampa. Before painting started, the panels were fabricated, bolted together, and suspended from the exposed structure of his warehouse-like studio. Having prepared the content for each painting as a collage drawing, Rosenquist, working from a mechanical lift, translated the drawing to full-scale painting. Not surprisingly, Rosenquist began his artistic career as a sign painter for billboard advertising.

At the Museum of Fine Arts, the paintings are displayed chronologically from left wall to center wall to right wall, starting with *Through the Eye of the Needle to the Anvil*, 1988, followed by *The Stowaway Peers Out at the Speed of Light*, 2000, and concluding with *Joystick*, 2002.

The three paintings, each projecting 18 inches from the wall, appear effortlessly suspended by cable, attached to U-hooks embedded in the white plaster ceiling. But what appears graceful and effortless was not easily accomplished, and is reminiscent of exhibitions during the early years after Cullinan Hall's completion. Indeed, Mies van der Rohe fully intended for paintings to be hung from the ceiling, and even provided a means to do so. Occupying the central portion of Cullinan Hall, a dropped acoustical-ceiling layer devised to hide air-conditioning ducts while deadening sound reverberation, incorporates a grid of light sockets that combine with structural connection points for suspending art. According to architect Anderson Todd (as noted in Stephen Fox's history of the the Museum of Fine Arts, Houston), Mies van der Rohe told the trustees, "You can hang one of your Texas Cadillacs."[1] In 1962, then recently appointed director James Johnson Sweeny took advantage of Mies' display system with his exhibition "Three Spaniards — Picasso, Miro, Chillida," in which paintings were suspended from wires connected to the structural ceiling sockets. Many later exhibits during the Sweeny years utilized this system of display.

But the structural sockets exist only in the central portion of Cullinan Hall; there are no means to hang paintings from the ceiling along the three peripheral walls. For Jack Eby, the museum's current design director, and his associate Bill Cochrane, the challenge was to determine a way to hang the Rosenquist paintings, each of which weighs 1,000 pounds. Luckily the steel roof structure could accommodate the additional load. The roof of Cullinan Hall rests on internal steel beams, which are carried by five-foot-deep steel-plate girders exposed to the outside. To provide a connection to the steel beams, it was necessary to cut a narrow incision into the plaster, then weld steel struts between the beams, and finally bolt U-hooks to the struts, three for each painting. The plaster was patched, and a rope-and-pulley hoisting mechanism was strung through the hooks. That left the assembly and raising of the paintings.



Cullinan Hall, *Three Spaniards — Picasso, Miro, Chillida*, 1962.

The process began by bolting together the top row of panels, adding a continuous aluminum strip along the top edge and securing the rope to the edge strip. That row was then raised, leaving enough space between the panels' bottom edges and the floor to assemble and secure the next row of panels, and the next, until all six rows were lifted together in place. The bolted assemblage was raised to its final height, and the rope and pulleys replaced by cable. When the paintings are lowered, the process will be reversed.

The three paintings are most dramatically viewed by looking across the space of Cullinan Hall from the upper level gallery of Brown Pavilion, the 1974 addition to the Museum of Fine Arts designed again by Mies Van der Rohe. These monumental tableaux give the same sense of permanence and fit as the Rothko paintings at the nearby Rothko Chapel, a building designed specifically to house those commissioned works. Although the three Rosenquist paintings will move on when the exhibition closes, one can hope that the curators at the Museum of Fine Arts will not shy away from exhibiting art at Cullinan Hall in a way that Mies van der Rohe surely envisioned. ■

1 "The Museum of Fine Arts, Houston, An Architectural History, 1924-1986," *Bulletin*, April 1992.

Final Exam

THERE IS ONLY ONE QUESTION.
WHERE DOES "WHAT'S IN A NAME" COME FROM?

DIRECTIONS: READ ALL THE REVIEW QUESTIONS AND ANSWERS FIRST.

REVIEW QUESTIONS

1. When was the last time you gave an out-of-towner directions to Houston's iconic landmark, the Williams Tower?

2. When was the last time you referred to New York City's iconic landmark, the Daimler-Chrysler Building? Or do you prefer its interim designation, the Chrysler-Plymouth-Dodge-Jeep Building?

3. Who will be the first to call Houston's own boys of summer, when they succumb to ignominious defeat, the Minute Maidens?

4. You are a Houston Rocket and playing for the championship of the NBA. Would you prefer to win this world title in a place called
   a. The Summit
   b. Compaq Center
   c. Lakewood Church
   d. Madison Square Garden

5. Name the building that has been called "a classic, the standard against which all succeeding tall buildings in . . . Houston have been measured. It has yet to be surpassed."

   a. Allied Bank Plaza
   (now First Interstate Bank Plaza)
   b. Humble Building
   (now Exxon Building)
   c. Transco Tower
   (now Williams Tower)

6. What is the name of the world's tallest building, at the moment?

7. Who said, "All that is solid melts into air"?

8. What's a metonymy?

9. Who is Helen McSweeney?

REVIEW ANSWERS

9. Helen McSweeney is a woman my mother has known since high school. She has been married to Jack Goggin for about 150 years, but to my mother she is always Helen McSweeney. Except for a year or so early in her marriage, my mother has always lived within 15 miles of where she was born, and lately she has been moving back in closer. Her long-term memory is still intact, and she is suffused with a sense of her place. This sense and the endurance of names are a great comfort to her.

8. Metonymy is the rhetorical figure that indicates "the use of the name of one thing for that of another associated with or suggested by it." Metonymy often denotes relationships of contiguity or proximity. My dictionary's example is "the White House" for the "President." Wall Street, Hollywood, and the Alamo are also often metonyms. So are "the Crown" and the images of skirts that sign women's restrooms. In *Pride and Prejudice*, when Elizabeth sees Darcy's estate for the first time, she realizes she has never really seen him: His place puts her in hers. Metonymy is one of the ways our habits of language establish and express our sense of belonging to our surroundings and is as important as memory for giving us a feeling of rootedness and identity.

In "A Sketch of the Past," Virginia Woolf writes of her earliest memories at the family's summer home: "At times I can go back to St. Ives more completely than I can this morning. I can reach a state where I seem to be watching things happen as if I were there. That is, I suppose, my memory supplies what I had forgotten, so that it seems as if it were happening independently, though I am really making it happen. In certain favourable moods, memories — what one has forgotten — come to the top. Now if this is so, is it not possible — I often wonder — that things we have felt with great intensity have an existence independent of our minds; are in fact still in existence?"

Thomas Pynchon believes in this independent, extra-mental existence of personal experiences. Proust believes they come to reside in places and things that hold them in reserve for us until some sensation evokes their memory, the place itself, the moment no longer lost. As they do for my mother, for Proust names endure and hold off mortality.

7. Marx said it in *The Communist Manifesto*, as he explained in fury the insatiable restlessness of capital: "The bourgeoisie cannot exist without constantly revolutionising the instruments of production, and thereby the relations of production, and with them the whole relations of society. . . . All fixed, fast- frozen relations, with their train of ancient and venerable prejudices and opinions, are swept away, all new-formed ones become antiquated before they can ossify. All that is solid melts into air, all that is holy is profaned, and man is at last compelled to face with sober senses, his real conditions of life, and his relations with his kind."

6. And where is Malaysia again?

5. None of the above. It's the Tennessee Building (formerly the Tenneco Building, now El Paso Energy). But there's trend here.

4. There has been no announcement yet that Lakewood Church will change its newest venue's name to Madison Square Garden.

3. I hope I am. It's a lousy name for a ballpark. Enron, as a name, has much more robust consonants and makes you feel even better about stealing home.

2. You must have been sick that week.

1. Huh!

ANSWERS

1. It is from Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet* : What's in a name? That which we call a rose by any other name would smell as sweet. (Act II, scene 2, lines 43 - 44)

MORAL OF THE STORY?

The Williams Tower is, therefore, tall, graceful, even inspiring. But in the restless world that this is, it is the great spike of the Transco that nails us into place!

EXTRA CREDIT

1. What Houston buildings should be renamed?
   a. Renoir
   b. Gotham
2. What would some good alternatives be?
   a. The Ashurbanipal
   b. The Armageddon Lofts
   c. Mussolini's

ANSWERS

Sorry, time's up.

BY TERRENCE DOODY

RICHARD PAYNE, FAIA Earth and Sky: New Photographs Opening late September, 2003

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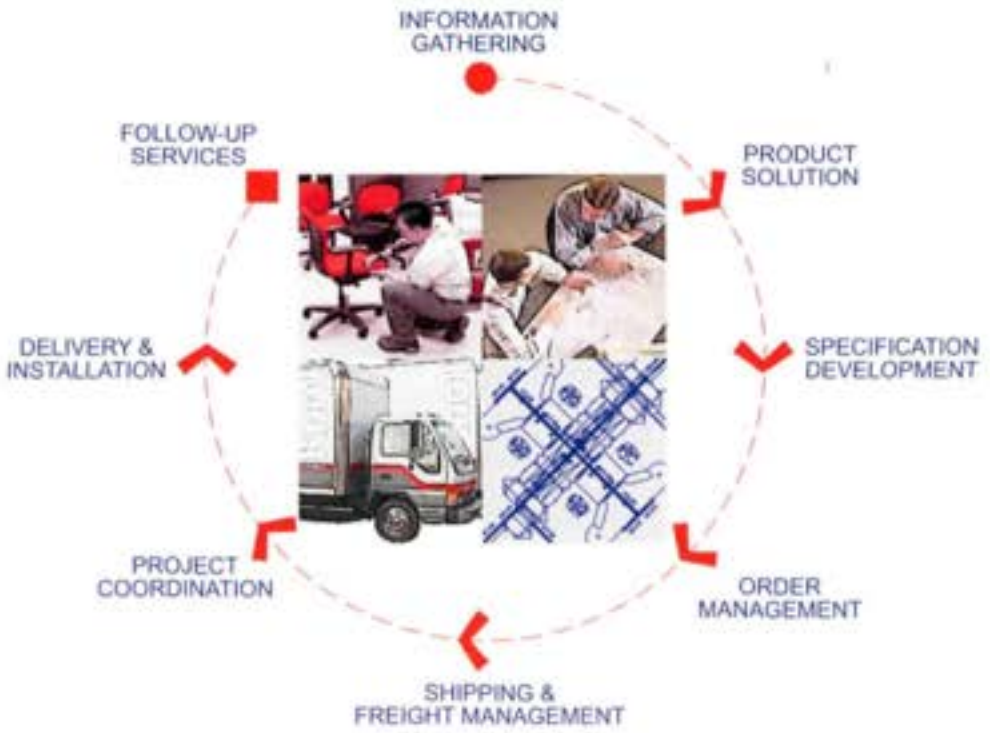

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