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THE ARCHITECTURE and DESIGN REVIEW OF HOUSTON

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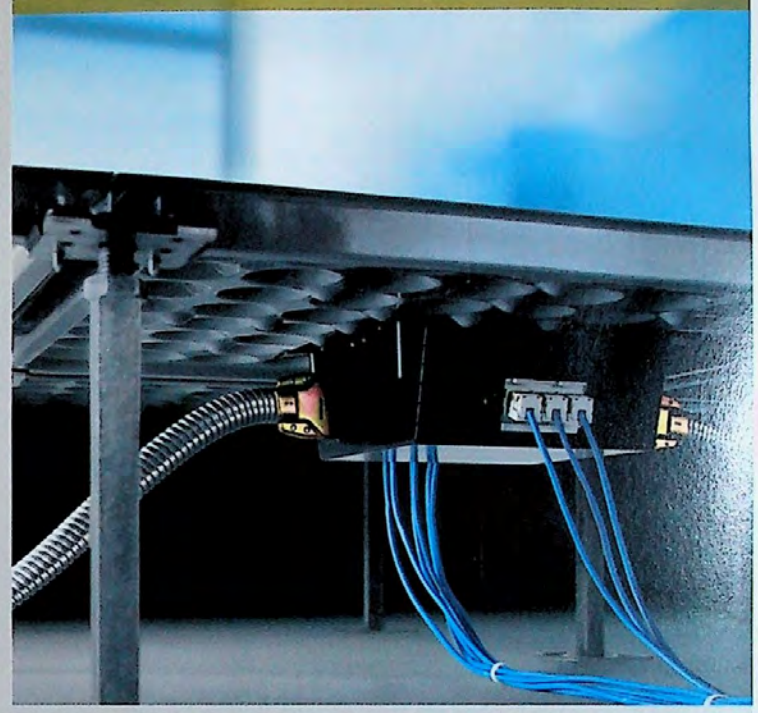

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OF HOUSTON

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64: SUMMER 2005

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and design.

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Michael Brichford is a co-founder and board member of Houston Mod. He has been actively involved in promoting the preservation of Memorial Bend via documentation and education.

David Jacobson has been a reporter and producer with the Associated Press, Japan Broadcasting Corporation, and CNN. He currently serves as weblog correspondent for *Japan Media Review*, published by the University of Southern California's Annenberg School for Communication.

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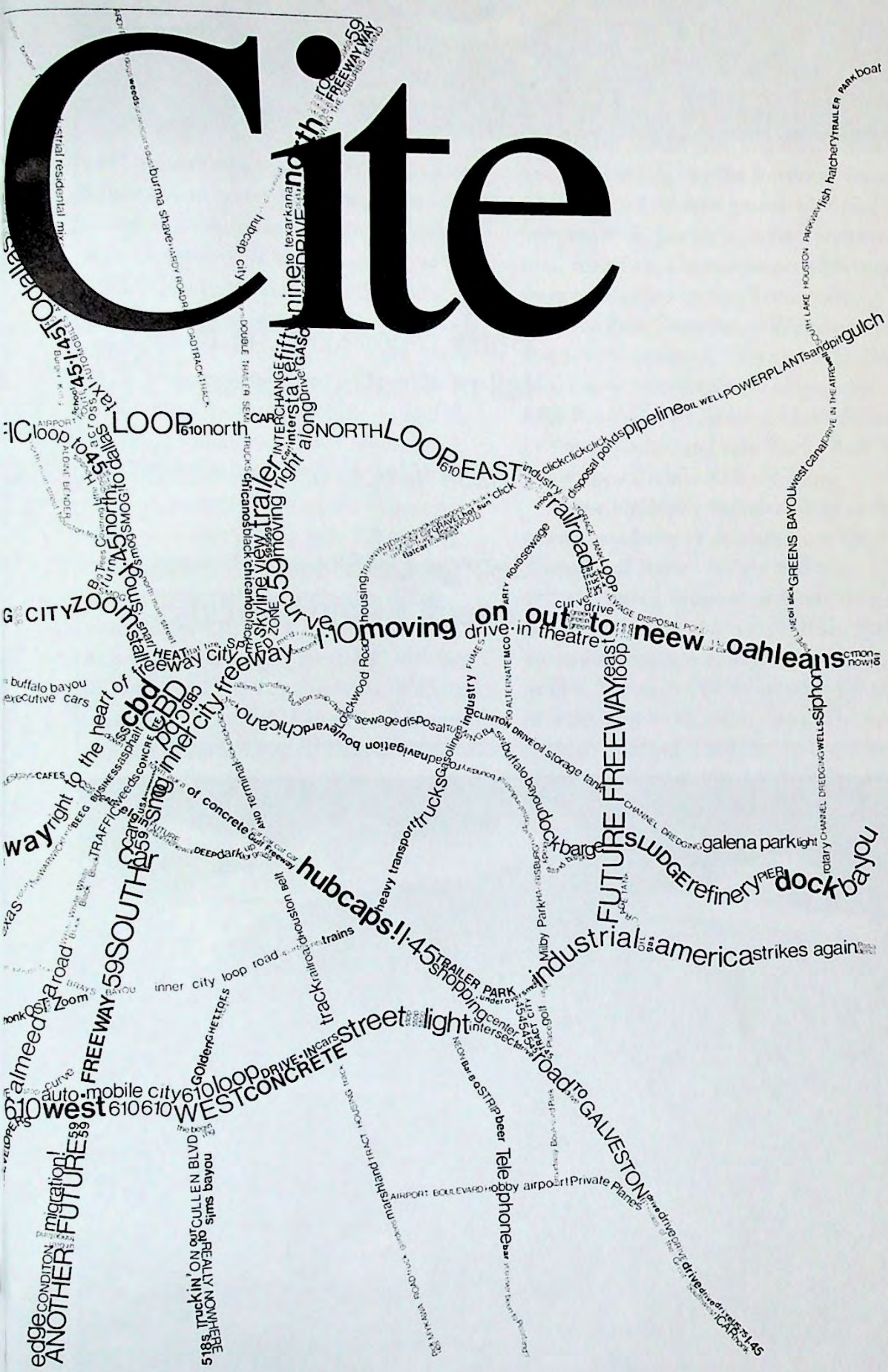


Above: "Word" map of Houston roadways courtesy Peter Papademetriou; from the front cover of *Houston: an architectural guide* (1972).

Cover: Image is a detail from a larger map created in 1997 as part of the Cultural Arts Council of Houston/Harris County's Houston Framework project. The detail emphasizes what has been termed Houston's Manhattan, an area about the size of the real Manhattan that contains most of Houston's cultural institutions. Map © Core Design Studio.

contents

Cite

COMING IN CITE 65

Barry Moore on the rise and fall of Westbury Square

Bruce Webb on the Galleria

George Dodds on the new Federal Reserve Building

and more

RDA Tour Members Visit Mexico City and Seattle

This spring, Rice Design Alliance members made trips to both Mexico City and Seattle/Victoria, where they completed RDA's ninth city study tour.

The Barragan House, Legorreta Studio, Mies' Barcardi office pavilion, and Diego Rivera's and Frida Kahlo's house/studios were just a few of the sites that 39 members of RDA visited on their March trip to Mexico City. Led by RDA board member Rafael Longoria, architectural historian Stephen Fox, and tour director Lynn Kelly, the trip offered an in-depth look at Mexico City's history, its architectural landmarks, and its modern architecture. The Camino Real, designed by Mexico's most internationally celebrated architect, Ricardo Legorreta, was home base during this, RDA's first international tour. Guests visited several private residences by architects Albin Vasconcelos Elizondo, Kalach+Alvarez, Augustín Hernández, Teodoro González de León, and TEN Arquitectos. Walking tours of the Ciudad Universitaria campus and the Central Historic District were led by local architects and historians.

Then in June, 35 RDA members headed northwest for five days in Seattle. Before settling into their home base at the Alexis Hotel, guests detoured via Tacoma to visit the Chihuly Bridge of Glass. Thursday began with a walking tour of downtown Seattle with commentary on historic buildings by the Reverend Dennis Andersen, a Lutheran pastor who also happens to be Seattle's premier architectural historian. Contemporary structures were highlighted by our hometown resource Paul Crowther, a Rice alumnus and Seattle architect. Sites visited included the new Seattle Central Library by Rem Koolhaas, Experience Music Project by Frank Gehry, and Gas Works Park by landscape architect Richard Haag.

Tour highlights included visits to the private residence of art collectors Virginia Bloedel and Bagley Wright and the award-winning home of architect George Suyama. There was so much to see that guests had to choose between a day trip to Bloedel Reserve on Bainbridge Island or a day trip to Victoria, Canada to stroll through Butchart Gardens. To try to see all that there is to offer could really keep one "sleepless" in Seattle!

David A. Crane, 1927-2005

RDA lost a good friend May 20 when David A. Crane, a former dean of the Rice School of Architecture, passed away in Charlottesville, Virginia. He was 78. Though dean of the architecture school for only five years, from 1972 to 1977, he initiated a number of programs that had a major effect on both Rice and the city of Houston. One of Crane's initiatives was the Rice Design Alliance, which he founded in 1973 with the help of architecture school faculty members O. Jack Mitchell and William T. Cannady.

"David came to Rice with a whole set of powerful objectives, and he stayed with them," Cannady remembers. "As a result, he accomplished most of what he came to do. He began with people at Rice, but then expanded to include all sorts of people with an interest in the city. He was able to get the support of the leadership of the Houston community at the highest levels in order to get things done"

Donald L. Williams was also on the Rice faculty when Crane arrived and ended up working with him on another of his initiatives, the Rice Center for Community Design and Research, which gained national renown for its work on urban design. Williams, who became president of the Center, recalls that Crane was "both visionary and practical. He could see patterns in a city that others couldn't."

The son of Presbyterian missionaries, Crane was born in the Belgian Congo. His family didn't return to the U.S. until Crane was a teenager. He went to high school in Alabama, then college in North Carolina before serving with the Navy in World War II. Following the war he attended the Georgia Tech College of Architecture, and after obtaining his degree there went on to the Harvard Graduate School of Design.

Crane became a nationally respected urban designer, in part as a result of redevelopment projects in cities such as Boston, before being hired by Rice. Following his time at Rice, Crane focused on his private practice, heading up planning for a new community in Egypt, among other projects. In 1986 he became professor of architecture and community design at the University of South Florida, from which he retired in 2002.

CALENDAR

LECTURES

::

THIRD ANNUAL HOUSTON MOD LECTURE
Alan Hess
■ Friday, August 19, 6 p.m.
HISD Central Administration Building, Auditorium
3830 Richmond Avenue
www.houstonmod.org

URBAN LANDSCAPES: THE MIES' IMPERATIVE
"A Total Design: The Villa Tugendhat in Brno, Czech Republic"
Peter Lynn, FAIA, Professor Emeritus, University of Tennessee School of Architecture
■ Tuesday, August 30, 6 p.m.
Gerald D. Hines College of Architecture Theater, Room 150
713.743.2400 or
www.arch.uh.edu/news

URBAN LANDSCAPES: RECENT WORK
Jose Castillo, Architect, Mexico City
■ Tuesday, September 13, 3:30 p.m.
Gerald D. Hines College of Architecture Theater, Room 150
713.743.2400 or
www.arch.uh.edu/news

URBAN LANDSCAPES: RECENT WORK
Nora Lees
■ Tuesday, September 20, 3:30 p.m.
Gerald D. Hines College of Architecture Theater, Room 150
713.743.2400 or
www.arch.uh.edu/news

URBAN LANDSCAPES: ZONETALK
Charles Tapley
■ Tuesday, September 27, 3:30 p.m.
Gerald D. Hines College of Architecture Theater, Room 150
713.743.2400 or
www.arch.uh.edu/news

RDA LECTURE: ARTHOUSES
"New Directions in Museum and Exhibition Design"
Victoria Newhouse, author of *Towards A New Museum*
■ Wednesday, September 28, 7 p.m.
The Museum of Fine Arts, Houston
Brown Auditorium
713.348.4876 or www.rda.rice.edu

URBAN LANDSCAPES: CLEAR
Julia Czerniak, Associate Professor, Syracuse University School of Architecture
■ Monday, October 3, 3:30 p.m.
Gerald D. Hines College of Architecture Theater, Room 150
713.743.2400 or
www.arch.uh.edu/news

URBAN LANDSCAPES: RECENT WORK
Brian Mackay-Lyons
■ Tuesday, October 4, 6 p.m.
The Museum of Fine Arts, Houston
Brown Auditorium
713.743.2400 or
www.arch.uh.edu/news

RDA LECTURE: ARTHOUSES
"New Directions in Museum and Exhibition Design"
Brad Cloepfil, Allied Works Architecture
■ Thursday, October 6, 7 p.m.
The Museum of Fine Arts, Houston
Brown Auditorium
713.348.4876 or www.rda.rice.edu

RDA LECTURE: ARTHOUSES
"New Directions in Museum and Exhibition Design"
Tony Fretton, Tony Fretton Architects
■ Wednesday, October 12, 7 p.m.
The Museum of Fine Arts, Houston
Brown Auditorium
713.348.4876 or www.rda.rice.edu

RDA LECTURE: ARTHOUSES
"New Directions in Museum and Exhibition Design"
Lyn Rice, Lyn Rice Architects
■ Wednesday, October 19, 7 p.m.
The Museum of Fine Arts, Houston
Brown Auditorium
713.348.4876 or www.rda.rice.edu

URBAN LANDSCAPES: LANDSCAPE AS URBAN INFRASTRUCTURE
Kevin Shanley, ASLA, SWA Group
■ Tuesday, October 18, 6 p.m.
Gerald D. Hines College of Architecture Theater, Room 150
713.743.2400 or
www.arch.uh.edu/news

RDA LECTURE: ARTHOUSES
"New Directions in Museum and Exhibition Design"
David Adjaye, Adjaye/Associates
■ Wednesday, October 26, 7 p.m.
The Museum of Fine Arts, Houston
Brown Auditorium
713.348.4876 or www.rda.rice.edu

SYMPOSIA

::

GREEN ROOF WORKSHOP
Part I: Designing a Green Roof for Houston's Climate
■ Monday, August 1, 4 p.m.-8 p.m.
Downtown Marriott
916 Dallas
713.520.0155 or
mandy@aiahouston.org

GREEN ROOF WORKSHOP
Part II: Details and Lessons Learned
■ Monday, August 8, 4 p.m.-8 p.m.
7777 Greenbriar
713.520.0155 or
mandy@aiahouston.org

EXHIBITIONS

::

FIFTH YEAR STUDENT WORK
■ August 15–September 15
Gerald D. Hines College of Architecture Gallery
713.743.2400 or
www.arch.uh.edu/news

VILLA TUGENDHAT
■ August 15–September 23
Gerald D. Hines College of Architecture Archives
713.743.2400 or
www.arch.uh.edu/news

URBAN LANDSCAPES: ITALIAN PLAZAS
■ September 12–September 30
Gerald D. Hines College of Architecture Archives
713.743.2400 or
www.arch.uh.edu/news

ROBERT LINDSEY DRAWINGS
■ October 1–October 30
Gerald D. Hines College of Architecture Archives
713.743.2400 or
www.arch.uh.edu/news

PAUL HESTER PHOTOGRAPHS
"Changing Houston"
■ October 20–November 23
Gerald D. Hines College of Architecture Gallery
713.743.2400 or
www.arch.uh.edu/news

EVENTS

::

RDA CIVIC FORUM I: PROSPECTS FOR SUSTAINABILITY IN HOUSTON
Part I, "People," will explore the health, safety, welfare, and happiness of human beings as we try to live our lives in a busy urban environment.
■ Wednesday, July 20, 7 p.m.
The Museum of Fine Arts, Houston
Brown Auditorium
713.348.4876 or www.rda.rice.edu

GULF COAST INSTITUTE LIVABLE HOUSTON MEETING
Speaker and roundtable discussion
■ Wednesday, July 27, Noon
Houston-Galveston Area Council
3555 Timmons
713.523.5757 or
crossley@gulfcoastideas.org

RDA PARTNERS 2005 CHARRETTE
Plan C.B.D.: Urban design near major new urban park
■ Saturday, August 6, 8 a.m.–6 p.m.
Gerald D. Hines College of Architecture
713.348.4876 or www.rda.rice.edu

EXPLORE THREE GREEN BUILDINGS IN HOUSTON
Visits to the Emerson Unitarian Church Education Center, the American Heart Association, and the UT School of Nursing Building
■ Saturday, August 6, 10 a.m.–2 p.m.
Please RSVP to Eco-interchange-RSVP@usgbc-houston.org

GULF COAST INSTITUTE LIVABLE HOUSTON MEETING
Speaker and roundtable discussion
■ Wednesday, August 24, Noon
Houston-Galveston Area Council
3555 Timmons
713.523.5757 or
crossley@gulfcoastideas.org

© 2005 Hayes + Howard

The UT School of Nursing Building will be part of an exploration of eco-friendly buildings in August.

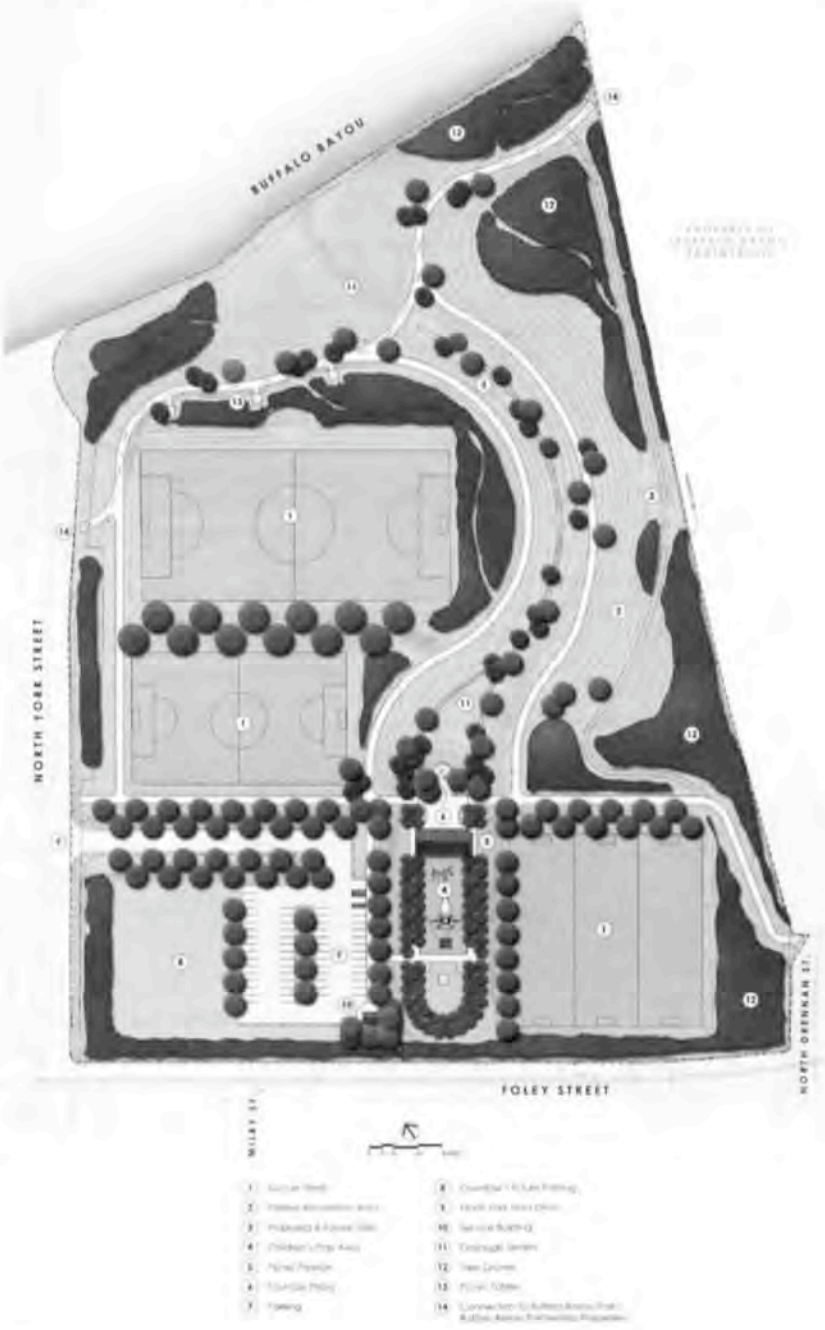
RDA CIVIC FORUM II: PROSPECTS FOR SUSTAINABILITY IN HOUSTON
Part II, "Planet," will discuss the Earth as the source and sustainer of our lives.
■ Wednesday, August 31, 7 p.m.
The Museum of Fine Arts, Houston
Brown Auditorium
713.348.4876 or www.rda.rice.edu

GULF COAST INSTITUTE LIVABLE HOUSTON MEETING
Speaker and roundtable discussion
■ Wednesday, September 28, Noon
Houston-Galveston Area Council
3555 Timmons
713.523.5757 or
crossley@gulfcoastideas.org

RDA CIVIC FORUM III: PROSPECTS FOR SUSTAINABILITY IN HOUSTON
Part III, "Prosperity," will discuss our economy and its effects on our people and planet.
■ Wednesday, September 21, 7 p.m.
The Museum of Fine Arts, Houston
Brown Auditorium
713.348.4876 or www.rda.rice.edu

2005 RDA GALA
The 19th annual RDA Gala, held to support the 2005-2006 RDA programs and publications, will honor designer Herbert C. Wells. The event will include dinner, dancing, and a silent auction.
■ Saturday, November 5
The Pavilion, 1800 Post Oak Boulevard
713.348.4876 or www.rda.rice.edu

OVERCITE
An article in *Cite* 63 about high-rise living mistakenly attributed the design of Uptown Park to Ziegler Cooper Architects. It was designed by Beard + Allen Architects, Inc.



Map courtesy SWA Group

A picnic pavilion, soccer fields, and bike/hike trails highlight the master plan for Tony Marron Park.

Tony Marron Park Gets a Public/Private Revival

Until recently, the 19-acre stretch of land in the East End known as Tony Marron Park was far from being a place for city residents to relax in and enjoy. Designated a city park in 1987, the space at 808 North York Street bordering Buffalo Bayou had never been developed. While some local residents played pickup soccer games there, the park had deteriorated over time.

"It was just a dirt field, and provided nothing but a space for vandals," says Paul Meza, president of the Second Ward Residents Organization and a neighborhood resident for all of his 67 years.

All that is about to change, with the land undergoing a massive face-lift sponsored by a unique partnership between area residents, the non-profit group the Park People, the city, and the county. The revitalized park, which was named after a longtime community activist, is set to open in the fall of 2005, complete with multiple soccer fields, a covered pavilion with picnic tables, a large playground, a trail system for pedestrians and bikers, restrooms and vending machines, an abundance of trees, and extensive landscaping and earthworks, including a drainage swale that will feature native wetland plants.

"It's certainly the biggest project we've done in our 26-year history," notes Glenda Barrett, executive director of the Park People. "But what's neat is that the city and the county are really joining in."

The idea for the project was born in 2002, when former president of the Park People Allyson Cook met Meza on a bus tour of the East End. Meza expressed interest in creating a place where local youth could stay out of trouble, area athletes could enjoy real playing fields, and neighborhood families could unwind and get some fresh air. Representatives of the Park People visited Tony Marron Park and saw it had untapped potential, with its view of the Houston skyline and close proximity to Buffalo Bayou. Following discussions with city and county officials, a decision was made to take on the project, which is now budgeted at close to $2 million.

While the East End has gained in popularity among new homeowners in recent years, those involved in improving Tony Marron Park wanted to make sure that longtime residents of the area had a say in how it would be developed. Two community meetings were held to gain input from the park's neighbors, says Barrett, with over 100 people participating. Groundbreaking occurred in early February 2004, with Mayor Bill White speaking at the ceremony.

Funding for the project is coming from several different sources. According to Roksan Okan-Vick, executive director of the Houston Parks Board, a mayoral-appointed board that functions as a non-profit, the City of Houston is supplying approximately $700,000, some of which is in the form of a grant from the Environmental Protection Agency. Harris County Precinct 2 is providing more than $250,000, and the Park People is raising the remaining amount.

Among those helping to cover that cost, says the Park People's Barrett, are the Wortham, Brown, and Fondren Foundations, the Houston Endowment, the Clayton Fund, the Jack H. and William M. Light Charitable Trust, ExxonMobil, the River Oaks Garden Club, the Barbara Dillingham Fund, Robyn and John Stevenson, and W.S. Bellows Construction Company. The Parks Board is overseeing the nuts and bolts of the project. The Greater East End Management District and the Buffalo Bayou Partnership have also been involved in the development of the park. It is all this cooperation that excites those involved.

"It's a real public/private partnership," says Okan-Vick. "I wish every project could be run like this."

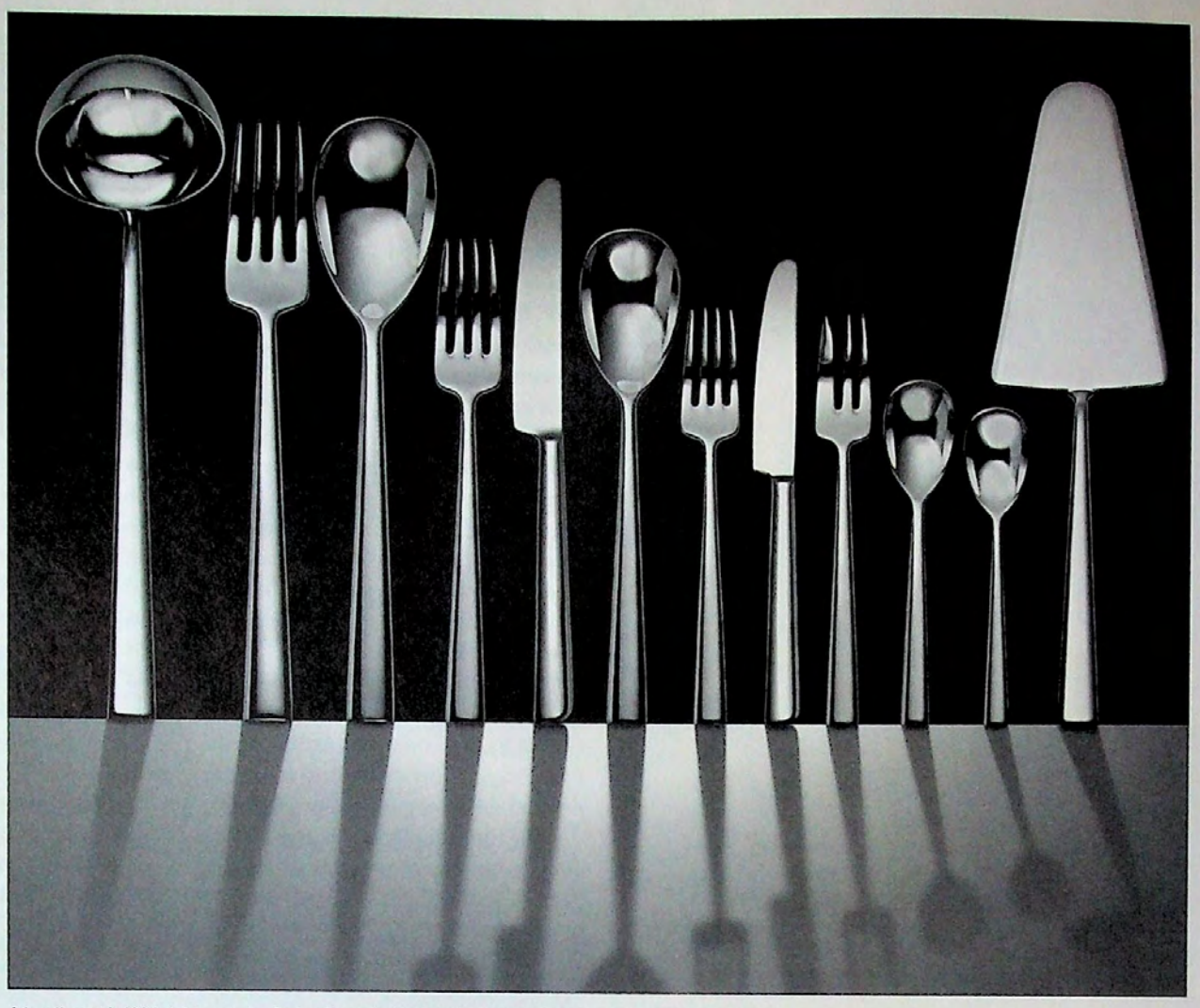
According to Okan-Vick, SWA Group is designing the park's picnic pavilion in a Spanish Colonial style. The earthworks will help to channel water into Buffalo Bayou, and a certified naturalist is working on the landscaping. The bike/hike trails will be part of the Buffalo Bayou Partnership's master plan for Buffalo Bayou from Shepherd Drive to the Ship Channel.

Another interesting feature of the park will be the availability of restrooms, something that the residents had placed at the top of their wish list. While the city rarely includes remote restrooms at parks because of vandalism, Okan-Vick says an exception was made when the residents promised to patrol the facilities regularly.

"That was a big, big plus," she says. "We know they will take ownership of them." Janitorial services will be provided by the county and the city, and Harris County Precinct 2 Commissioner Sylvia Garcia will provide construction of a service building to house the park's storage area, vending machines, and restrooms.

Heavy rains in January and February slowed the project down, but Barrett says that contractors are back on track for a fall completion. For residents, opening day can't come soon enough.

"It will enhance the community," says Second Ward Residents Organ–ization President Meza. "We will have something we didn't have before. I feel very, very happy about it." — *Jennifer Mathieu*



Asta, cutlery set in 18/10 stainless steel Design: Alessandro Mendini, with Annalisa Margarini, 2004 Manufacturer: Alessi

Photo by Edward A. Bourdon

The houses that William Floyd designed and built around Houston, such as this one in Memorial Bend, were modest in size, but large in the influence they had on others. Floyd helped set modern design as a standard for Houston's post-World War II neighborhoods.

Remembering William Floyd

Following a post-war housing shortage, Houston underwent a construction boom in the 1950s to the benefit of many local architects, one of the most prolific of whom was William Floyd. Floyd, an Oklahoma native who moved to Texas in the 1930s, passed away in 2004 at the age of 93. His lasting influence on the look of residential Houston is felt in neighborhoods around the city, from Glenbrook Valley in the south to Walnut Bend in the west and Spring Branch in the northwest.

William Norman Floyd was born in Norman, Oklahoma in 1911. His father taught history at the University of Oklahoma, where Floyd would eventually enroll to study mechanical engineering before becoming one of Oklahoma's first architecture students, graduating in 1934.

Upon graduation, Floyd served in the Army Air Corps in Texas, first at Ellington Field as a construction inspector and then as an engineer in Galveston. Toward the end of his stay in Galveston, Floyd came across a help-wanted ad in a local paper noting an opening for an architectural draftsman in Lindale Park, a new subdivision in north Houston. Floyd took the job and moved to Houston to go to work for developer W. R. Reid, who provided him with a field office and had him design a dozen houses in the Lindale Park neighborhood.

By 1941, when Floyd was recalled to service with the Army Air Corps, he had earned his license and opened his own architectural practice. During World War II, Floyd served as a staff architect at the Oklahoma City Aircraft Assembly Plant and as a construction officer in Guam and Okinawa. Upon returning to Houston, Floyd went back to work in Lindale Park as the subdivision architect. He reopened his practice, concentrating for the most part on small bungalows, but eventually branching out to other building types.

In 1950, a modern, two-story office building Floyd built on the corner of Sunset and Kirby was featured in a local newspaper. This recognition allowed Floyd to expand his practice in 1951. He hired two draftsmen, Harwood Taylor and William Jenkins, both fresh out of school. The firm became William N. Floyd and Associates and entered a productive period that would last until Floyd was called up by the Air Force to serve in the Korean War.

Not wanting to close the practice while he was serving in the military, Floyd left Taylor and Jenkins in charge. In the Air Force Floyd rose to the rank of captain, serving as the Chief of Master Planning for the Northeast Air Command, overseeing design and construction of air bases in Newfoundland, Baffin Island, Greenland, and Labrador.

After the war, as a reward to Jenkins for his loyalty, Floyd changed the name of the firm to Jenkins & Floyd. With Jenkins in charge of the business, Floyd worked as both an architect and a developer, building houses in neighborhoods such as Robindell, Briarcroft, Meyerland, Memorial Bend, Bellaire, Briargrove, and Walnut Bend.

In 1955, the house Floyd designed for his family at 226 Pine Hollow was honored with a place on the Contemporary Arts Association's Modern House Tour IV. This house typified a style that Floyd would draw upon for years: modestly-sized houses—his own was 2,700 square feet—that emphasized privacy. Floyd built variations on this design across the quickly-growing west side of Houston.

It was at this time, when his practice was the most active, that Floyd chose to leave the firm to Jenkins—Taylor had already moved on to open his own practice—and start fresh.

It's hard to pinpoint who was more influenced by their association: Floyd or Taylor and Jenkins. Modern influences were visible in Floyd's designs before the two promising architects joined the firm, but his designs took on a more modern look when the three of them worked together. However, it was after the three parted ways that Floyd's work began to attract national attention. Certainly Floyd had an eye for talent; the two draftsmen he chose out of school would go on to become two of Houston's more prominent architects.

The residences Floyd designed and built during this period took on a cleaner, low-slung look. In neighborhoods such as Woodland Hollow, Briargrove, and Memorial Bend he began to lean toward planar façades with flat roofs, low-pitched rancho deluxes, and the occasional butterfly-roofed house. His homes were affordable yet stylish. They appealed to aficionados of modern style, and attracted the attention of magazines such as *Better Homes & Gardens*, *Good Housekeeping*, *House & Home*, *Practical Builder*, and *American Builder*.

Floyd imbued his designs with personal touches. His houses had begun to include details such as hand-blown light fixtures from Venice and mosaic tile bathrooms for what he liked to call "a hand-worked look." One client had Floyd design a Piet Mondrian-inspired front door—a task he attempted 50 times before he felt he had the "right" door. Other clients were attracted by his shoji screens, terrazzo flooring, and porte cocheres. Advertisements for Floyd-designed houses enticed buyers with house names such as "The Contemporama" or "The Tropicana."

Floyd's designs struck a chord with local architects as well: Bill Caudill, Tom Bullock, Wallie Scott, and Charles Lawrence of Caudill Rowlett Scott all chose to live in Floyd-designed houses when they moved their firm to Houston from College Station. Earle Alexander, a founder of PGAL, and Gil Thweatt, a partner with Welton Beckett Associates and later principal with 3/DI, also chose houses designed by Floyd.

But just as he was garnering the greatest recognition of his career, Floyd began scaling back his practice and entering retirement. He shifted his focus to selling an eclectic mix of designs via home plan magazines such as *New Homes Guide* and *Better Homes & Gardens Home Building Ideas*.

Floyd's contributions to the city were largely forgotten over the next 30 years. His work did appear in the second edition of the *Houston Architectural Guide*, which listed two of his modern houses, one of them in Briargrove and the other in Memorial Bend, but otherwise he was little remembered.

But Floyd's work began to be noticed again with the advent of the internet. His name surfaced repeatedly in online design communities, exposing new generations of architecture enthusiasts to his work. In his early 90s by this time, Floyd appreciated the renewed interest.

While Wiliam Floyd's work may never receive the recognition given to many of his contemporaries, thousands of Houstonians have benefited from his designs. Perhaps his greatest achievement was setting modern design as the standard for the new neighborhoods of post-war Houston. — *Michael Brichford*

Photo by Mitchell J. Shields

By 2007, this parking lot in front of the George R. Brown Convention Center could be part of a 13-acre downtown oasis.

Greening the City Center

Late last year, City Hall and Downtown Houston Inc. announced one more step toward making downtown a vibrant center for recreation, residential life, and convention attraction. The announcement of a major park on the city's west side came in the context of a downtown renaissance that has included, among other things, the completion of Metro's first light rail line, the opening of the Hilton convention center hotel and Toyota Arena, and the expansion of the George R. Brown Convention Center. As with each of these, a great deal of quiet groundwork has supported the drive for a new downtown park.

Since the early 1990s a number of undeveloped parcels west of the George R. Brown have been targeted by Houston Endowment, Inc., one of Houston's major foundation benefactors, to become a public green space. The city purchased the two parking lots in front of the convention center in early 2002, and waited to see the fate of the remaining open space between the center and the Park Shops. In the meantime, Downtown Houston created a task force that invested in a Framework Plan, released in October 2004. "Aiming for high density residential development, a potential for 13,000 new units by 2025, the Framework saw the relatively undeveloped east side as prime ground for both residential development and also public amenities that go with such housing," notes Guy Hagstette, Central Houston's chief urban planner and a special advisor to the mayor for downtown urban development.

In late 2004, when Crescent Realty released for sale the parcels of land required for a park, Mayor Bill White stepped in and orchestrated their purchase. With $8 million from public sources and approximately $16 million from private philanthropic partnerships, three parcels were added to the city's existing parcels to create a park space of nearly 13 acres. Enhancing the deal was the city's contribution of the Crawford Street right of way running through the park parcels.

Though some have suggested there was a rush to purchase the Crescent Realty tracts, that downplays the bold public/private partnership that was required to complete the deal. Moving the park from idea to reality is now the responsibility of the non-profit Houston Downtown Park Conservancy. While the Conservancy will set the program strategy through design and construction, as well as eventually operate the park, it does not own the land; the newly organized Houston Downtown Park Corporation is the public owner of the land, using a similar legal contract as the land covenant that covers the Hilton convention center hotel. The city will contribute $750,000 a year to the Houston Downtown Park Corporation's operations.

Downtown's proposed privately run public park is taking its strategy from such successful public/private urban park partnerships as Bryant Park in New York City. In fact, a number of the organizers of such public/private partnerships are being called upon by the Downtown Park Conservancy to visit Houston and share their insights. While the Conservancy is still forming its vision for the park, clearly articulated are the goals to make it an active place, an urban destination that is green, inviting, and the center for projected residential growth. Though the actual form is far from decided, a mix of green spaces, fountains, and active venues is likely to result.

The Conservancy has embarked on intensive site analysis, preliminary functional programming, public visioning, and designer selection through a two-step public selection process. A design advisory group has convened, representing community design forces—among them the Rice Design Alliance—park advocates, and the downtown business community. When the agreement was made to purchase the land, a stipulation for the funding was that the park be completed and opened by December 2007. So the countdown has begun. — *Rives T. Taylor*

Map courtesy Kirk Farris and Keiji Asakura

The Ghost of Frost Town

It comes as a surprise to many that the settlement of Houston did not start in the summer of 1836, but rather 14 years earlier in 1822, one half-mile downstream from the bayou landing at the foot of Main Street. The original Houstonians were about 20 people, in four or five families, who settled under the supervision of Stephen F. Austin; little is known about them but their names, and we only have a few of those.

By the mid-1830s, this eight-block, 96-lot plat was called Frost Town, after the Frost family, who were among the original settlers. By the 1840s, Frost Town was a largely German town within a town; it boasted three churches and one synagogue, a school, a volunteer fire department, an armory, a brewery, an iceworks, a slaughterhouse/meat market, a blacksmith, mercantile establishments, and a cemetery.

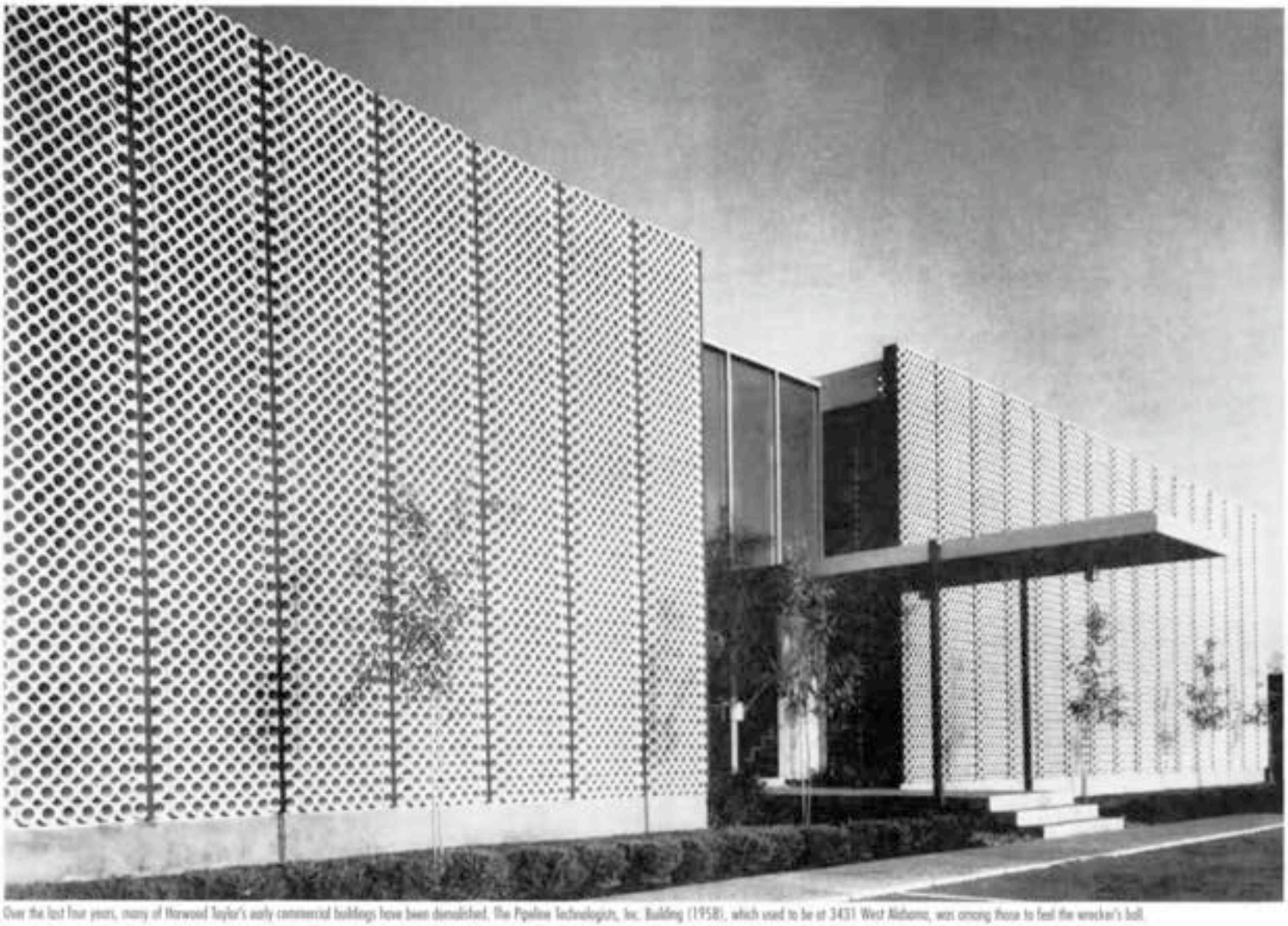
Some say Frost Town's decline began in 1853, when the Galveston, Houston, and Henderson Railroad sliced through the neighborhood, connecting the Texas & Pacific and International Great Northern lines. By the early 20th century, Frost Town was just a huddle of shabby houses known, in refection of its changed ethnic makeup, as Barrio de la Cran. A second mortal cut was made in the early 1950s for an industrial road connecting downtown with the Ship Channel. Then construction started on the elevated Elysian Viaduct, which linked the central business district with US 59 North.

By the early 1990s only two or three shotgun houses remained in Frost Town. Then in 1992 the state paid $800 to the owner of the last remaining house, which was located at 1820 Bramble Street, and promptly tore it down. It vanished like the last passenger pigeon.

Today, Frost Town lives vividly in the mind of environmental artist and activist Kirk Farris. Pursuing a fascination with Buffalo Bayou bridges, in 1985 Farris persuaded the city to let his non-profit organization, Art and Environmental Architecture, paint the remarkable reinforced concrete girder that is the McKee Street Bridge. Once this was completed, his next step was to assemble land on the south end of the bridge for what became known as James Bute Park—and was, coincidentally, the heart of old Frost Town. Since that time, Farris has been pushing research, encouraging urban archeology, and writing and speaking wherever possible to promote his vision of a large Frost Town park.

A master plan, completed in 1999 with the help of Keiji Asakura of SLA Studio Land, Inc., envisions a public open space, partly shaded by the aging viaduct above, with paved pedestrian ways laid out in the old street pattern, and different ground cover vegetation indicating different historic land uses. With the anticipated acquisition of two or three remaining parcels the historic town site will be complete. And then, perhaps in the near future, visitors will be able to get an abstract sense of what kind of place Frost Town was 170 years ago.

There are some people in Houston who can drive by a modern building and clearly visualize what stood on the same site in their youth. But very few can do what Kirk Farris can—recycle throwaway land, dig into its human past, create a vision of the oldest part of Houston, and make you believe he really used to live there. — *Barry Moore*



Over the last four years, many of Harwood Taylor's early commercial buildings have been demolished. The Pipeline Technologists, Inc. Building (1958), which used to be at 3431 West Alabama, was among those to feel the wrecker's ball.

Light Touch : The Work of Harwood Taylor

BY BEN KOUSH

Harwood Taylor (1927-1988) was a prolific modernist architect who worked in Houston from the early 1950s until the late 1980s. While his career spanned four decades, his best work came early, culminating in 1969 with his design of the HISD Headquarters Building at 3830 Richmond Avenue. (This building, Taylor's late Brutalist masterpiece, is now scheduled for demolition.) Between 1955 and 1960, Taylor designed a series of wonderful flat-roofed brick veneer houses in a gentle Miesian mode. However, Taylor's true legacy is his commercial architecture, in which he deftly integrated progressive design with the unforgiving economics of serially-reproduced speculative buildings.

Harwood Taylor was born in Dallas on May 25, 1927. While serving in the Naval Reserves in northern California from 1945 to 1946 he also studied at Stanford University. He then transfered to the University of Texas, staying until 1949. He continued his education at the University of Houston through 1950, also working as a designer in the office of William N. Floyd (see "Remembering William Floyd," page 11).

Taylor's talent for design was apparent early on: In 1950 he won first prize in the Texas Society of Architects Featherlite Competition with his scheme for a medical clinic.[1] He returned to the University of Texas, graduating in 1951.[2] Taylor then settled in Houston, returning to work at what became William N. Floyd and Associates until 1953, when he started his own practice.

In 1955, Taylor joined forces with J. Victor Neuhaus III, a former high school classmate, to create the firm Neuhaus & Taylor. Their relationship was described as "a classic partnership: Taylor preferred design, Neuhaus management and marketing."[3] The firm was successful and grew rapidly, abetted by favorable building conditions in Houston, where development outpaced national levels from the mid 1950s until the oil crash in the mid 1980s.

Taylor was of the generation of Houston modernists, including Howard Barnstone, William R. Jenkins, Burdette Keeland, Hugo V. Neuhaus Jr., and Anderson Todd, whose 1950s designs revolutionized the way the architecture of the city was perceived at home and in the national press. Prior to World War II, the Houston architectural scene was dominated by the residential work of conservative eclectic architects such as John F. Staub and Birdsall Briscoe.

The single family detached house has always been the dominant building type in Houston, and it is within this type that the most progressive architectural design has usually been found. Taylor's generation of Houston architects was no exception. Their first published designs relied heavily on the austere and rigorous influence of Ludwig Mies van der Rohe. The lack of overt historical references separated their designs from the work of their eclectic predecessors. (Though the influence of Mies would wane by the end of the 1950s, many of his principles, such as the discreet indication of structure, ordered relationships between individual parts, and a tendency towards pure abstraction, would continue to characterize the work of the Houston modernist architects until the early 1970s.)

Taylor's early work was precocious and confident in its looseness. One reason for this was that Taylor, unlike his colleagues, had already designed a large number of houses for the unforgiving

Photo by Bart Bravoff

Photo by Jack Richberg, courtesy of Elva Kaim

Top: The H5D Headquarters Building (1969) at 3830 Richmond Avenue, a late Brutalist design of Taylor's, is scheduled for demolition.
Above: With the Kaim House (1955), 5203 Stamper Way, Taylor captured the classic image of California-style patio living.

Photo by F. Wilbur Selden

A surviving Taylor building is the Pacific Mutual Life Insurance Company Building (1960), at 2701 Fannin.

speculative market prior to the mid-1950s. His signature appeared on most of the renderings published during his tenure in Floyd's office. On his own he designed some 75 houses in Meyerland for builder B. F. Williams, including the Living for Young Homemakers Parade House (1955) at 5127 Jackwood Street, which was eventually inducted into the National Association of Homebuilders Hall of Fame. And he did all this before the tender age of 28.[4]

Taylor preferred working for commercial developers; thus his most progressive Miesian houses—all designed as favors for good friends—were somewhat anomalous in his oeuvre, though they were each happy exercises in modern architecture. The classic image of California-style patio-living (preferably with martinis in hand) was best exemplified by the Kaim House (1955) at 5203 Stamper Way. This striking house continues to be occupied by the original owner, who has maintained it in splendid condition for 50 years.

Taylor's crisp design of the Kaim House seemed to have been informed equally by Neutra's textural and loosely composed work of the 1940s and Mies' tight brick courtyard house projects of the 1930s. Low, spreading, pink brick walls face the street, concealing light, airy interiors that are oriented toward a large swimming pool and rear garden, which are separated from the living areas by a series of sliding glass doors. The house's owner leaves the glass doors open all the time and walks barefoot on the white terrazzo floors; the design makes this bearable even on the steamiest Houston days. The interior was described in a 1958 article as "warm without being sentimental and achiev[ing] an informal feeling without becoming disheveled … ornate frills and gimmicks went out the sliding doors when Contemporary arrived."[5]

Despite his skill at houses, the sheer number and prominent locations of Taylor's medium-sized speculative commercial work ensures that they will constitute his greatest contribution to Houston architecture. Taylor accepted these commissions enthusiastically, and noted, "Historically, architects have been commissioned by the church, state, or individual patron, but a new concept of clientele—investment building—has emerged."[6]

It is hard to drive along any business thoroughfare in Houston today and not see examples of Taylor's work. Sadly, this may not be true much longer. In the past four years many of his notable early buildings have been demolished, among them the Geophysical Supply Building (1956), formerly at Bell Avenue and Crawford Street; the Trotter Building (1957), formerly at 402 Pierce Avenue; the Pipeline Technologists, Inc. Building (1958), formerly at 3431 West Alabama Avenue; the Duncan Coffee Company Building (1961), formerly at 7105 Katy Road; the Beauty Pavilion (1962), formerly at 4747 Westheimer; and the Oil Base, Inc. Building (1962), formerly at 3625 Southwest Freeway. Another building, the Friden (1961) at 2903 Richmond Avenue, is presently abandoned and a good candidate for demolition.

Taylor's seemingly inexhaustible creativity imbued these modest buildings with individual personalities, satisfying not only the architect from a design perspective but also the developer client, who needed a way to entice companies to rent space in the buildings. Taylor found ways to increase interior flexibility so that the same building could accommodate many different tenants. Windows were positioned to allow a minimum of two-foot increments in locating interior partitions. Taylor used tilt-up pre-cast concrete walls to speed the construction process. His floor plans worked to remove interior structural columns within the tenant space by employing steel beam and concrete floor decking spanning from the building perimeter to its core.[7]

His most memorable commercial designs were for the single floor office buildings elevated above parking on pilotis. The first and most elegant of these, with its cantilevered travertine sun shades, was the Pacific Mutual Life Insurance Company Building (1960) at 2701 Fannin Street. It was followed by the Pontiac Motor Division Building (1961) at 3121 Richmond Avenue, the Erwin, Wasey, Ruthrauff & Ryan, Inc. Building (1961) at 3328 Richmond Avenue, and the Oil Base Inc., Building (1962). According to *Architectural Forum*, "People in suburban Houston … travel in cars; employees and customers come wrapped in a 6-by-16-foot steel package, so a large amount of parking space must be provided, and it is cheaper to lift a building off the ground and park under it than purchase additional land for a parking lot. Bay sizes in the Neuhaus & Taylor buildings are keyed to parking layout."[8] Effective as this may have been, it only worked for relatively small buildings. Taylor abandoned this scheme in favor of separate parking structures for the larger buildings the firm designed in the mid 1960s.

In the late 1950s the first nationally recognized firms were invited to design for local commissions. Since Neuhaus & Taylor lacked the reputation, large staff, and integrated engineering services needed to compete for the most prestigious Houston commissions, they started to specialize in production as architect of record, as well as construction management, engineering services, planning, and graphics. To reflect this, the name of the firm was changed in 1972 to Diversified Design Disciplines. In 1975, when they secured a good deal of overseas work, primarily in the Middle East, the name was changed again to 3D/I, the "I" standing for international.[9] Taylor eventually left the firm he co-founded in 1978 in order to get back to design, but never quite managed to replicate the success he achieved from the mid 1950s through the 1960s. ■

1. *Neuhaus & Taylor AIA Architects & Planning Consultants*. Company brochure. Houston, circa 1966.
2. Koyl, George S., editor. *American Architects Directory*. New York: R. R. Bowker Company, 1955, pg. 552.
3. Moorhead, Gerald. "Neuhaus + Taylor," *Texas Architect*. November-December 1989, pg. 65.
4. "B. F. Williams To Build 75 Homes," *Houston Chronicle*. January 23, 1955. Section F, pg. 2. "Parade Homes Go Into Builders Hall Of Fame," *Houston Chronicle*. October 2, 1955. Section D, pg. 5.
5. Trotter, Virginia. "Serenity Is Sought In New Modern," *Houston Chronicle*. November 23, 1958. Section 10, pg. 1.
6. "Architects Cite Need for Better Low Budget Design," *Houston Post*. March 16, 1965. Section 5, pg. 9.
7. Ibid.
8. "Offices Over Parking," *Architectural Forum*. January 1962, pg. 89.
9. Moorhead, Gerald. "Neuhaus + Taylor," *Texas Architect*. November-December 1989, pg. 65.

"The eye now sees in substance what the mind formerly could only conceive.

It is a new function added to our senses.

It is a new standard of measurement.

It is a new basis of sensation."

LE CORBUSIER, *Aircraft*

Mapping Houston : Flows, Frameworks, and Revelations

BY RAFAEL LONGORIA

When Le Corbusier proclaimed "the airplane indicts the city" in his 1935 book *Aircraft*, in which he predicted the bird's-eye view made available by airplanes would change the design profession, he could have hardly imagined the tools that would be at the disposal of every architect and planner just seven decades later. Satellite images, geographic information systems (GIS), digital photography, computer graphics, and the internet have transformed design practices. It is not only the amazing amount of information available that has made the difference, but how quickly and inexpensively that information can be accessed, reconfigured, and disseminated.

All this technology is impacting the way we understand Houston. Visit any architecture studio at Rice University or the University of Houston and you will see walls covered with maps of the city and aerial views downloaded from the internet. The ritual trip to the Houston City Hall Annex to pick up the required monumentation maps—remember diazo prints?—at the start of every project has become obsolete. Now it is all available online, in multiple versions and mostly free of charge.

The brave new world of instant information, intelligent materials, and incredible images is brilliantly documented in "Massive Change: The Future of Global Design," an exhibition that originated at the Vancouver Art Gallery last year. Curator Bruce Mau, a Toronto-based design guru, is particularly adept at introducing new ways of seeing our universe. The map section is spectacular. Included in it is a map in which the image of major airline routes outlines an elegant graph of the world; the density of lines indicates the most prominent areas (surely you can find Houston). Another map is a nighttime view of the Earth that differentiates electrical light from wood-burning fires and is one of the starkest depictions of have and have-nots I have ever seen. And the interactive satellite views are literally out of this world.

Generating specialty maps used to be a labor-intensive task involving ink pens, rub-off letters, and hand-applied color films. Producing maps was so expensive that choices had to be made very carefully as to what images to create. GIS and desktop computer graphics have dramatically speeded up the process. Not long ago, proficiency in GIS was listed as desirable for planners; today, it is essential. Several local colleges now offer courses in GIS, and Texas A&M University is offering a new Bachelor of Science degree in Spatial Sciences that concentrates on the study of GIS, global positioning systems, and remote sensing. According to their promotional brochure, "these cutting-edge technologies help environmental and

Top: Map showing the combined routes of major airlines. From the exhibition "Massive Change: The Future of Global Design." Courtesy the Vancouver Art Gallery.

Next page: Maps created by University of Houston fourth year architecture students show how different people experience the city in very different ways. To make the maps, students light all the places they have ever visited and blacken all the areas they have never been. By next outlining the part of Houston that encompasses their daily routines, and shading the rest, they get a "personal" map of the city. These maps were produced by students from fall 2003 and fall 2004.

natural resource managers map geographical features, patterns, changes, and conditions for environmental decision making, planning and problem solving."

Today, there are literally hundreds of Houston maps available on various governmental websites. The City of Houston Planning and Development Department, for example, has available on its website an extensive collection under the name of COHGIS (City of Houston Geographic Information Systems). The department has maps that cover almost any demographic aspect of the city: race, income, education, age, and more. Any particular land uses can be easily combined or isolated—did you know that 25 percent of the land within Houston's city limits is vacant? As an architect, I am understandably interested in the maps documenting building permits and demolition permits in the last decade. But the most surprising realization to me came from a 2000 population density map that highlights Gulfton, at the intersection of Bellaire and Hillcroft, as the densest spot in the city. It seems counterintuitive, but the many apartments in the area have gone from housing the swinging singles of the oil boom years to providing shelter for extended families of Central American immigrants. Demography is destiny, and these maps tell the story of an extremely vibrant and diverse southwest quarter.

A History In Maps

It must be pointed out that as maps have proliferated, graphic quality has plunged. Where maps were once the domain of specialized craftsmen, today anyone with the right software can produce dozens of maps with very little effort. As welcome as time-saving technologies are, a visit to the map collection in the Houston Public Library's Texas Room elicits a different kind of wonder. Sorting through their map flat files, painstakingly organized by decade, provides an unmatched understanding of the evolution of the city.

The Texas Room collection contains not only official documents, but also delightfully odd pieces such as Michael Galbreth's idiosyncratic "The Human Tour: An Anthroponorphic Route Through the City of Houston," a 1987 map in which a human figure emerges from the tour's outlines. The earliest maps of Houston show an elegant symmetrical scheme, with Main Street springing from the intersection of Buffalo Bayou and White Oak Bayou and flanked by Market Square and Courthouse Square. Old demographic maps have later-day hand-pasted labels covering the original ethnic group legends with more politically correct designations. And of course, pre-World War II Houston is clearly demarcated by its numbered wards—the original framework for understanding the city.

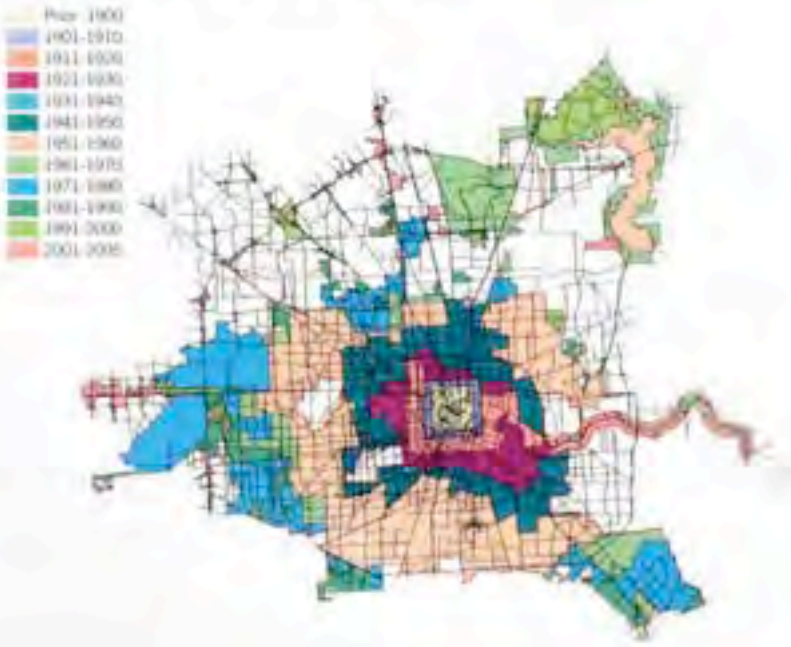
Looking at the 1942 "Major Street Plan for Houston and Vicinity" is like looking at an alien city. This map was made just before the freeways appeared, and Main Street is still the undisputed main artery. The website TexasFreeways.com displays a complete graphic history of the evolution of the Houston freeway system (as well as those of other Texas cities). It's a history that is augmented by the Texas Room's collection of Houston traffic studies, where one can follow in detail the steady increase of travel times along I-10 over the decades.

But no other image tells the story as concisely as the map of Houston's annexation history, which traces the official outline of the city from 1836 to 2005. Because of the generosity of its extra-territorial jurisdiction laws, Texas boasts three of the ten largest municipalities in the United States. And Houston has

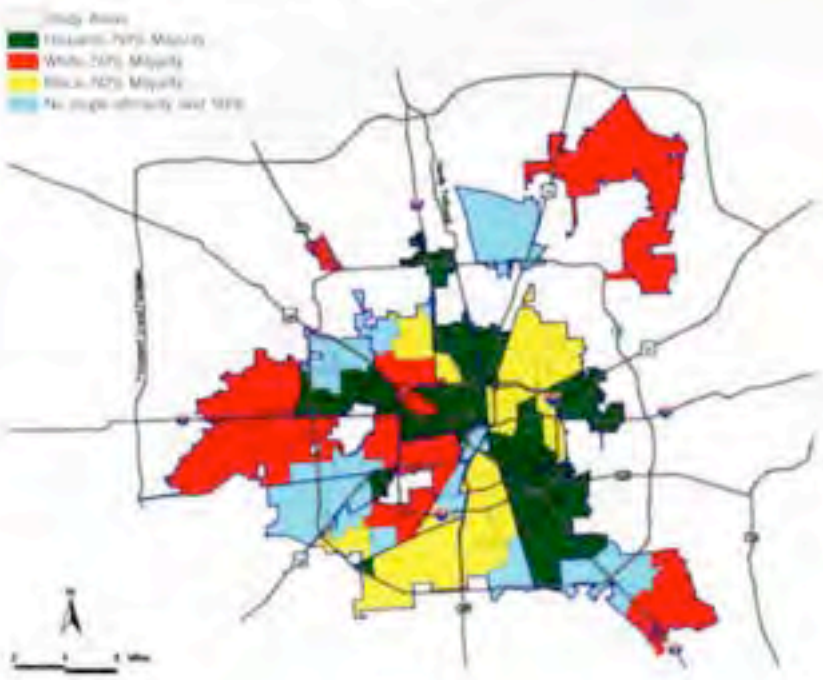
Continued on page 22

Six Major Cities Fit Inside Houston

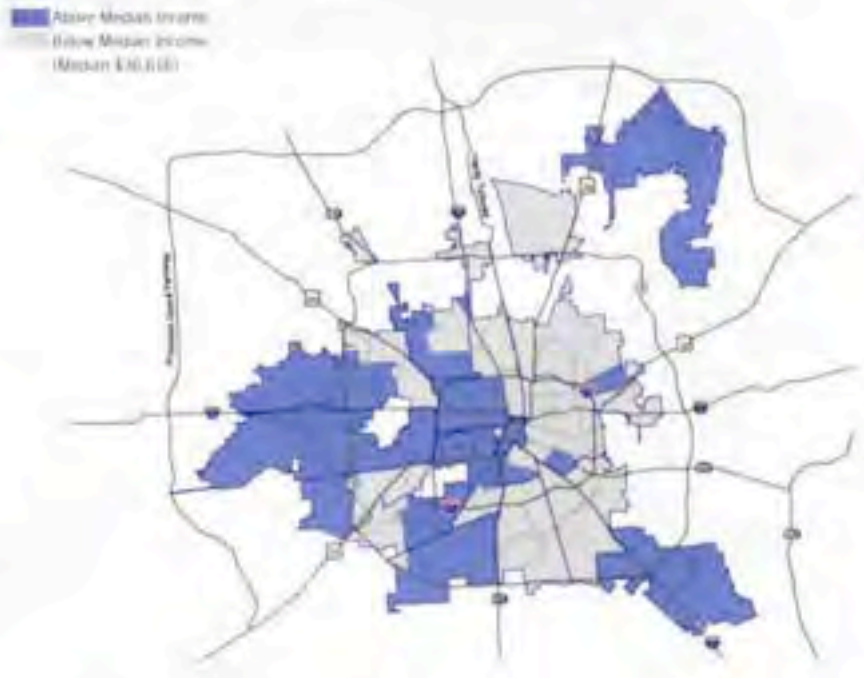
Houston Annexation History 1836-2005



Ethnicity by Super Neighborhoods 2000



Median Household Income 2000

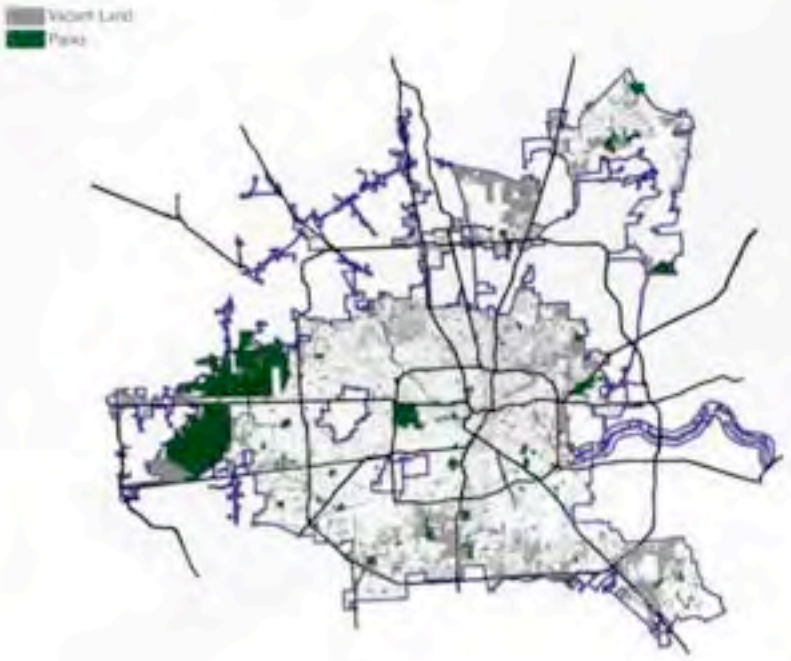


Houston Wards 1884

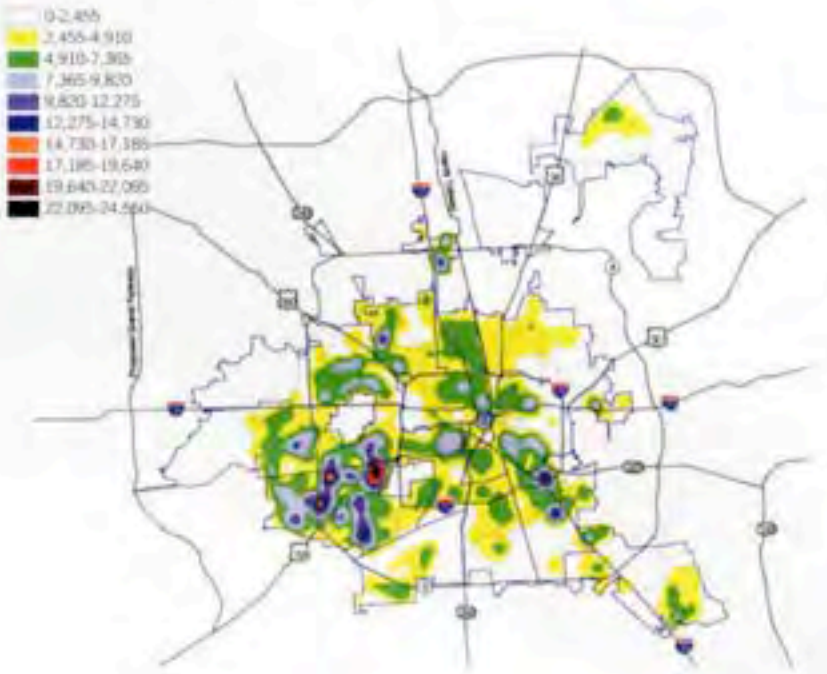
Houston Before Freeways 1942

The maps that make up the bottom row on this and the next page are from the collection of the Houston Public Library's Texas Room, and document the evolution of the city. From left: 1884 map of Houston's wards with downtown detail; "Major Street Plan, Houston and Vicinity" from 1942; map showing how long it took in 1979 to get from the central city to an outside point during rush hour, and the speed you would travel along the way; and a 1986 map detailing how much traffic passed along particular roadways in a 24-hour period. The thicker the line, the greater the number of cars that use the road.

Vacant Land and Parks 2005

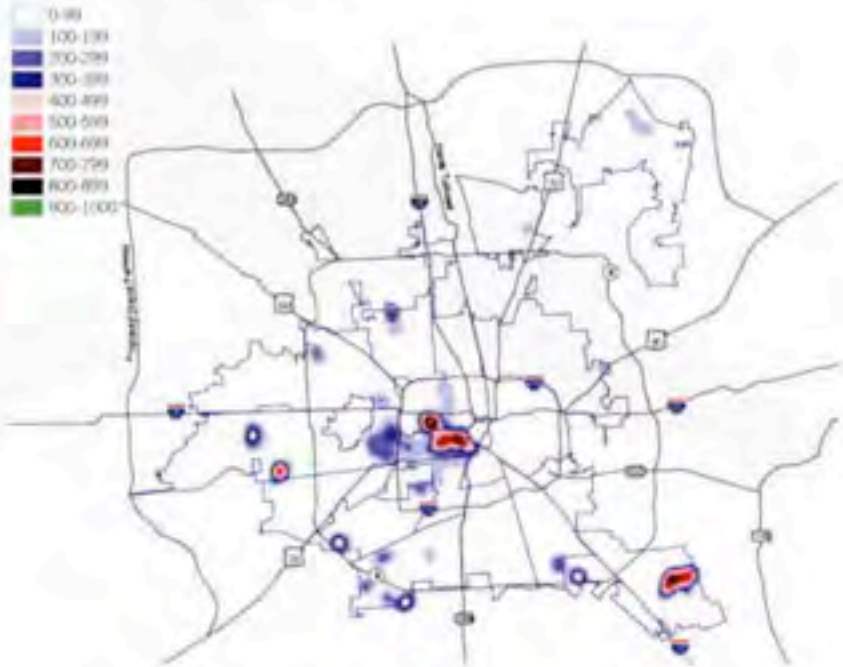


Population Density 2000



Residential Demolition Permits 1992-2000

Single Family Building Permits 1992-2000



Travel Time and Speed 1979

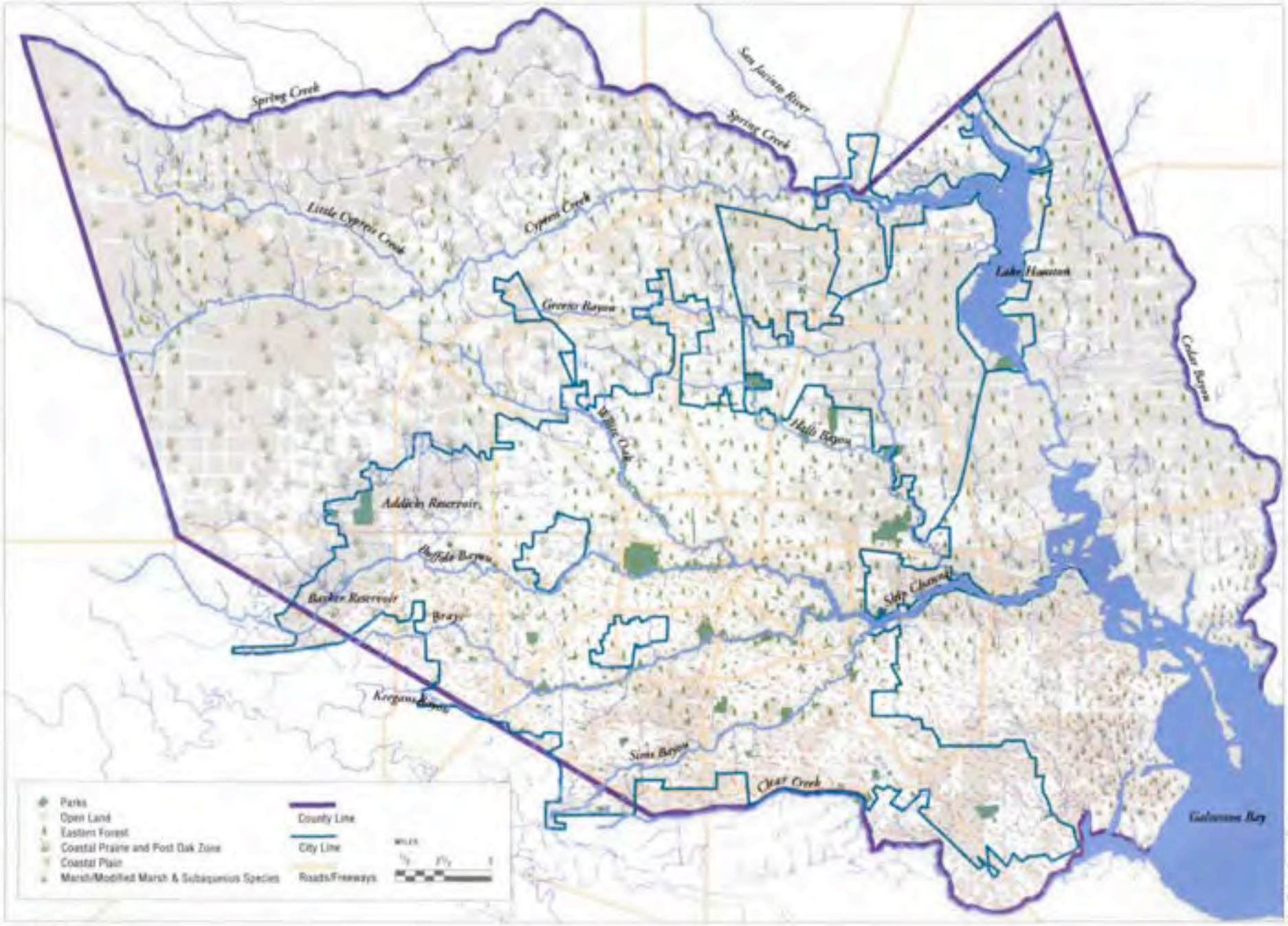
24 Hour Weekday Traffic 1986

Maps courtesy the Houston Metropolitan Research Center

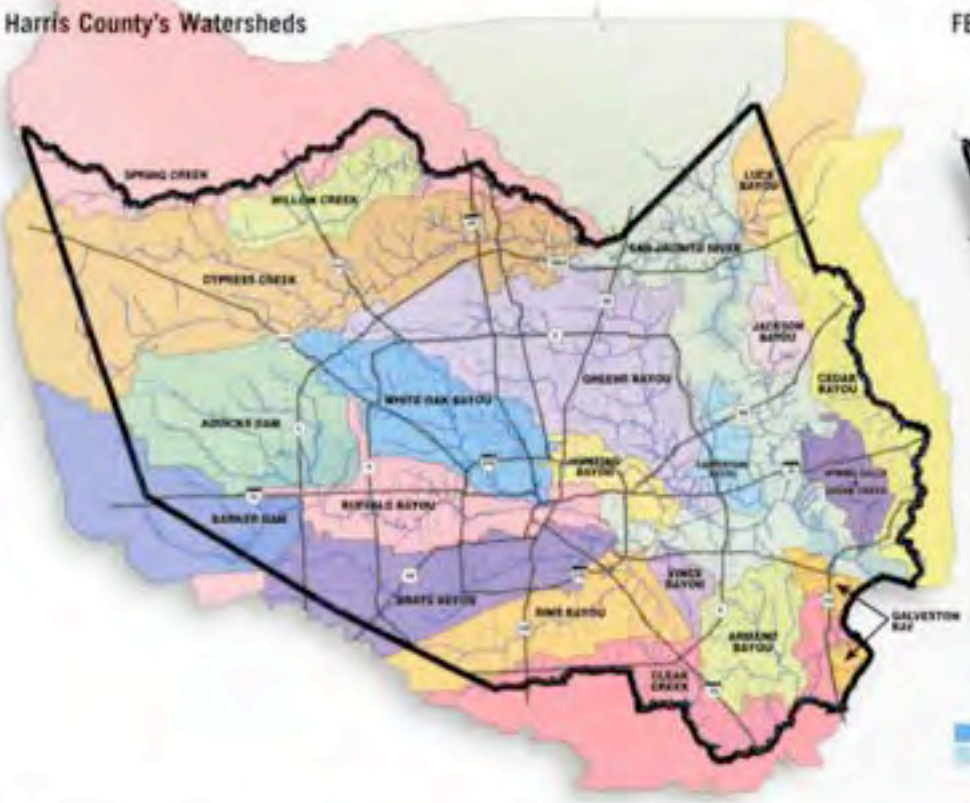
The maps on the top and center rows of this and the facing page are from the City of Houston's Planning and Development Department and cover a number of major demographic aspects of the city. They provide a graphic snapshot of Houston. Top row, from left: A map detailing how Houston's city limits could encompass six other major U.S. cities; a map showing Houston's annexation history from 1836 to 2005; a map showing the relationship between the city's parks and its vacant land; and a population density map, which reveals that the city's densest area is Gulfton. Center row, from left: A map of the ethnic makeup of the city's Super Neighborhoods; a map showing where those above and below the city's median household income live; a map showing where residential demolition has been most active; and a map showing the distribution of single family building permits.

Maps courtesy the City of Houston Planning and Development Department; Demographic data from the U.S. Census Bureau, GIS data from City of Houston Geographic Information System

The Houston Framework: Natural Systems



Harris County's Watersheds

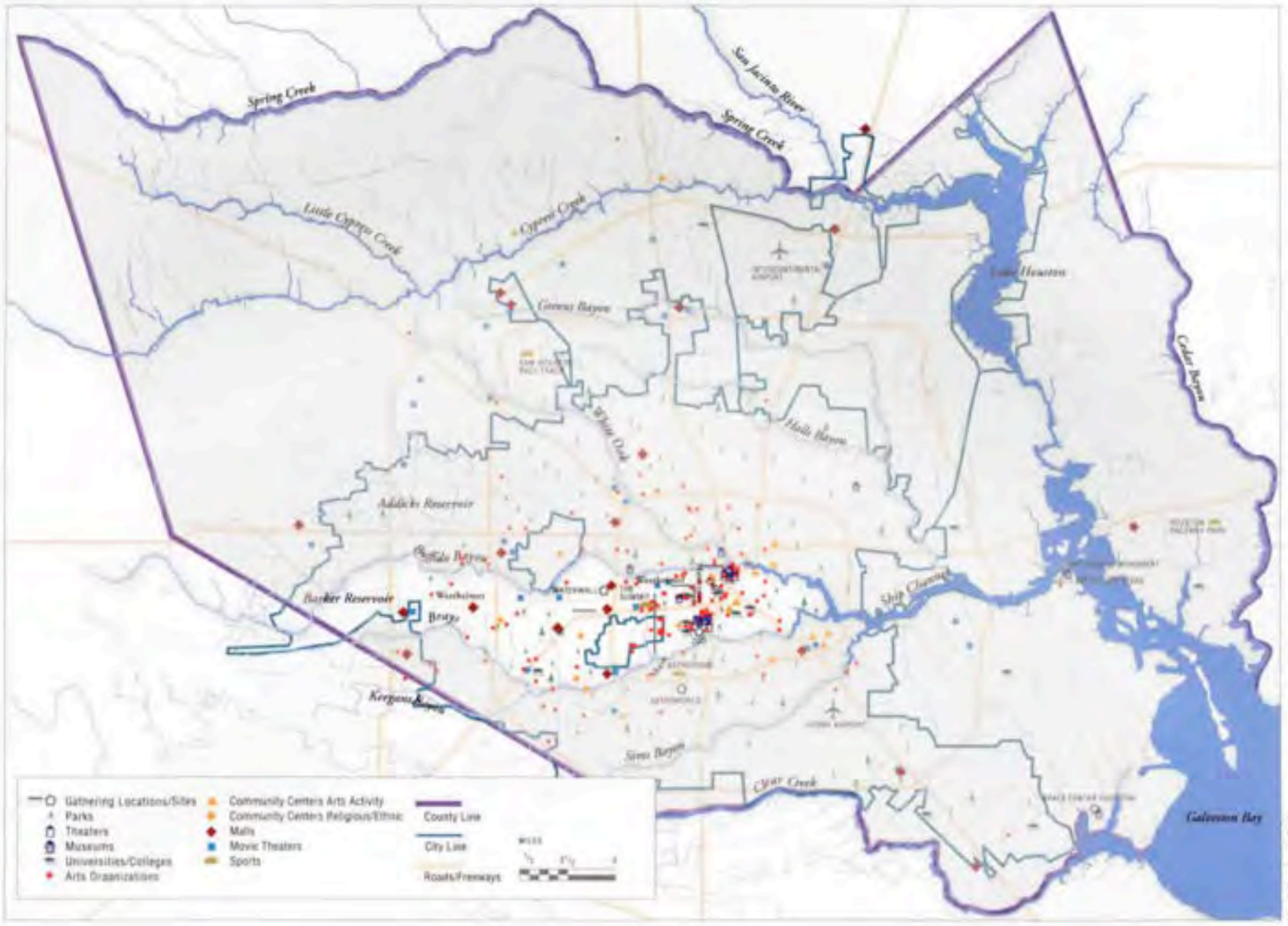


FEMA Preliminary Flood Plains 2004

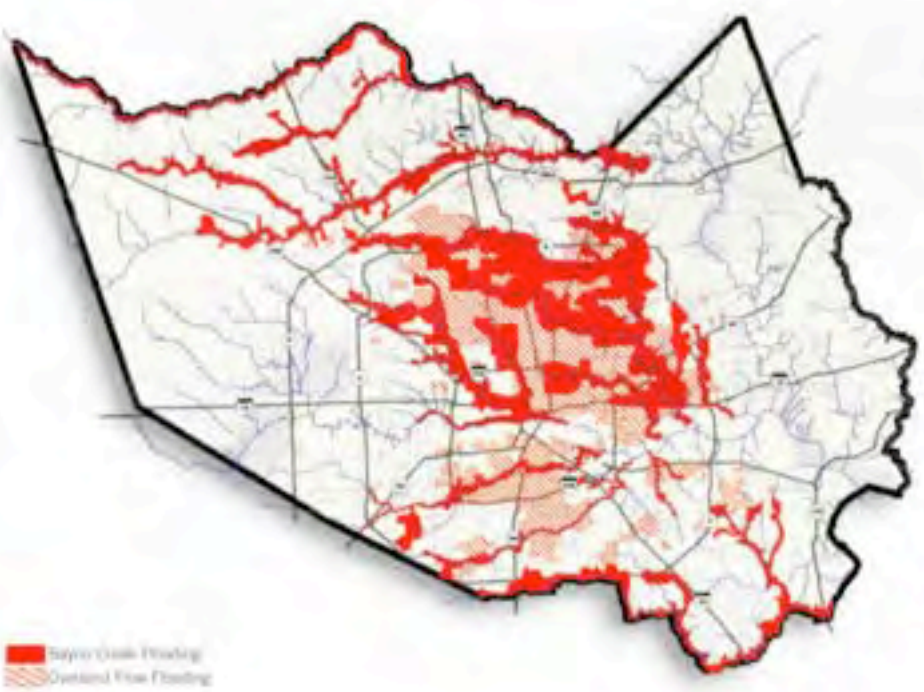
Map © Cain Design Studio

The large maps at the top of this and the next page are from CAOHW's 1997 Houston Framework study and document, from left, Houston's natural systems and the places in the city where people gather. The area highlighted in the gathering-places map is referred to as Houston's Manhattan, and contains most of the city's cultural and architectural treasures.

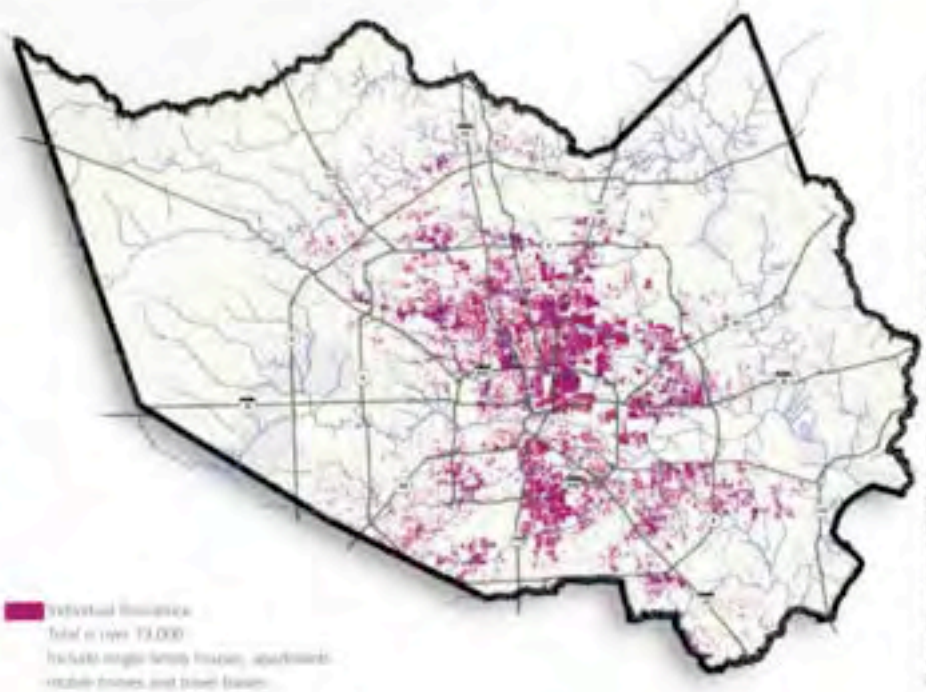
The Houston Framework: Gathering Places



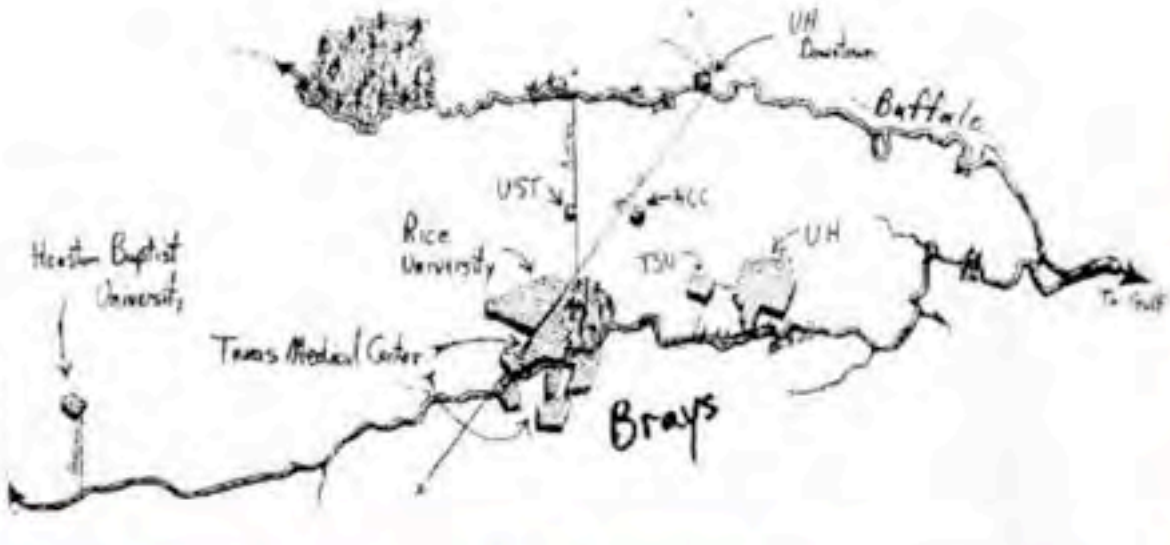
Estimated Allison Flood Damage Areas 2001



Allison Flood-Damaged Residences 2001



The four maps along the bottom of this and the previous page show Harris County's watersheds, the Federal Emergency Management Agency's preliminary revision of flood plains, and the devastating impact that Tropical Storm Allison had on the Houston region in June 2001.



Top, left to right: A diagram showing how Bruce Bergen ticks inset of Houston's major educational institutions and a map created in 1987 by artist Michael Galbreth titled "The Human Tour." Galbreth's humans have outlines a trail through Houston's historic inner-city neighborhoods. Above, left to right: A preliminary version of a 1990 Houston Planning Commission long-term plan for a ring of green spaces around Houston and the final version of that same long-term plan, with the number of green spaces drastically reduced.

Continued from page 17

expanded steadily. The 2005 annexations stick to a narrow corridor along the edge of the city's northwest quarter following the pattern observed in other Texas towns by Keith Krumwiede in *Cite* 53 (Spring 2002).

Houston covers more than 600 square miles with less than half the population density of Los Angeles (3,161 persons per square mile versus 7,415 persons per square mile), but it edges Dallas as the densest city in Texas. As the Planning and Development Department's website proudly illustrates, Boston, Philadelphia, Las Vegas, Orlando, Denver and San Francisco could all fit together inside Houston's city limits.

The Wagon Wheel and the Branches

I often assign my architecture students at the University of Houston to create a map of their "own personal Houston." To begin, they're asked to pick up a Houston metropolitan map at a local gas station. Next, they're told to outline all the parts of the city that they have ever visited. Then they blacken out those areas of the map that they have never been in. On the area they have visited, they outline their daily routine, and slightly shade the rest. Of course, the map has to be big enough to include the incredibly large area from which UH students usually commute (recently I had a student who drove to school every day from West Columbia).

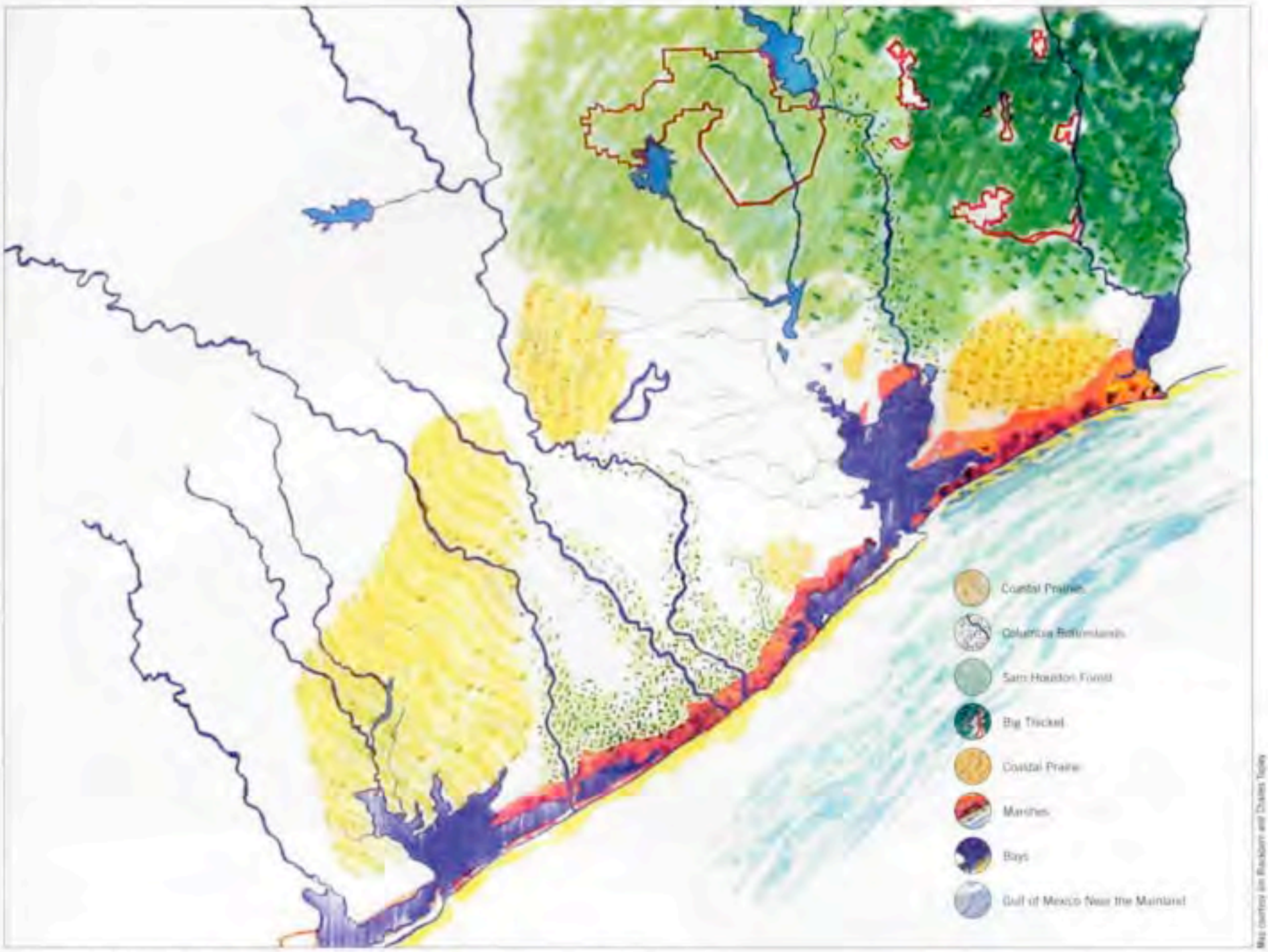
The resulting "personal maps" invariably feature three or four "village blobs" of various sizes connected by spidery segments of the freeway system. Most maps show some of the highways running off the edge, signifying various trips out of town, but some of the most intriguing maps are self-contained islands, indicating a surprising number of students who have only left the city through the airports. This exercise documents graphically two things we know intuitively: we each inhabit small villages within the larger city, and the freeways rule.

Peter Papademetriou's text map featured on the cover of the watershed 1972 *Houston: an architectural guide* left no doubts as to what Houston was all about. The then-new freeway system is outlined with a running narrative that wonderfully encapsulates our elusive city. That map, like the rest of the guide, presented an image of Houston that probably was not the one local architects wanted to put forth to their colleagues from around the country on the occasion of the AIA National Convention coming to the city. But like it or not, the freeways have shaped the city and its lifestyle.

Houston is defined by its flows—traffic and drainage. The city can be diagramed as the intersection of a wagon wheel and fanning tree branches. With no significant hills or untraversable bodies of water on the way, the freeway system is as clear a concentric/radial pattern as they come. And the bayous, equally unhindered by major obstacles, constitute a fairly regular bronchial system flowing in a southeasterly direction towards Galveston Bay. Of course, the elevated roads are considerably more visible than the region's millennial bayous. As much as a transportation system, the freeways have become the framework by which we understand the contemporary city.

Primordial Houston

And yet, as important as the freeways are, nature can always assert itself, as it did in June 2001 when the freeways became bayous. The Harris County Flood Control District maps documenting the effects of Tropical Storm Allison are scary. On the maps the bayous thicken till they meet and form a huge lake in the middle of the city. The ongoing reconfiguration of flood plains will have enormous economic implications. And the flood control authorities are actively acquiring flood-prone sites that have the potential of being assembled into



Map courtesy Jim Blackburn and Charles Tapley

This hand-drawn map of the ecosystem of the upper Texas coast by Charles Tapley and Jim Blackburn shows the plethora of natural resources that surround Houston.

a system of parks and green trails along the bayous that could transform the city.

I first became absorbed with Houston maps when I chaired the Houston Framework effort for the Cultural Arts Council of Houston/Harris County in 1997. This project sought to provide a strategic plan for CACHH's public art program. Through an extensive mapping process it identified a series of catalytic spots where CACHH's civic art and design efforts should be concentrated, such as bayous, parks, freeways, airports, and shopping malls.

Two of the Houston Framework findings related to the bayous stand out. First is what I call Houston's Manhattan, an "island" between Buffalo Bayou and Brays Bayou that extends all the way to the Katy Prairie, is of similar size to the real Manhattan, and contains most of the cultural and architectural treasures of the city. Second is the fact that Brays Bayou is Houston's "education corridor," already connecting the University of Houston, Texas Southern University, the various Texas Medical Center universities, Rice University, and Houston Baptist University with a bike and hike trail. While subtle and often invisible, the bayous continue to be the preeminent natural armature that ties the whole city together.

One of the most interesting documents I encountered in the Texas Room is a 1990 preliminary version of a Houston Planning Commission long-term plan that proposed a generous green ring encircling Houston where the Grand Parkway now stands. This vision cleverly took advantage of the considerable amount of existing wetlands and undeveloped land around the city. Unfortunately, by the time it went from draft to final report, the most compelling aspects of the green ring disappeared—even though a light-rail network, with the potential of introducing pedestrian-oriented corridors throughout the city, did appear in the final version.

I am still trying to figure out what happened to that plan as it went from draft to final form. But propelled by the need to face our flooding problem, a vision of linked linear parks could do for Houston what Frederick Law Olmsted's Emerald Necklace did for Boston more than a century ago—particularly when you factor in the potential relocation of railroad traffic to the perimeter of the city and the "rail to trail" conversions this would make possible.

Charles Tapley's and Jim Blackburn's hand-drawn map of the ecosystem of the upper Texas coast dramatizes more than any of the high-tech images the considerable natural wealth surrounding Houston. Ecologically invaluable estuaries, prairies, marshes, and pine forests adjoin the city.

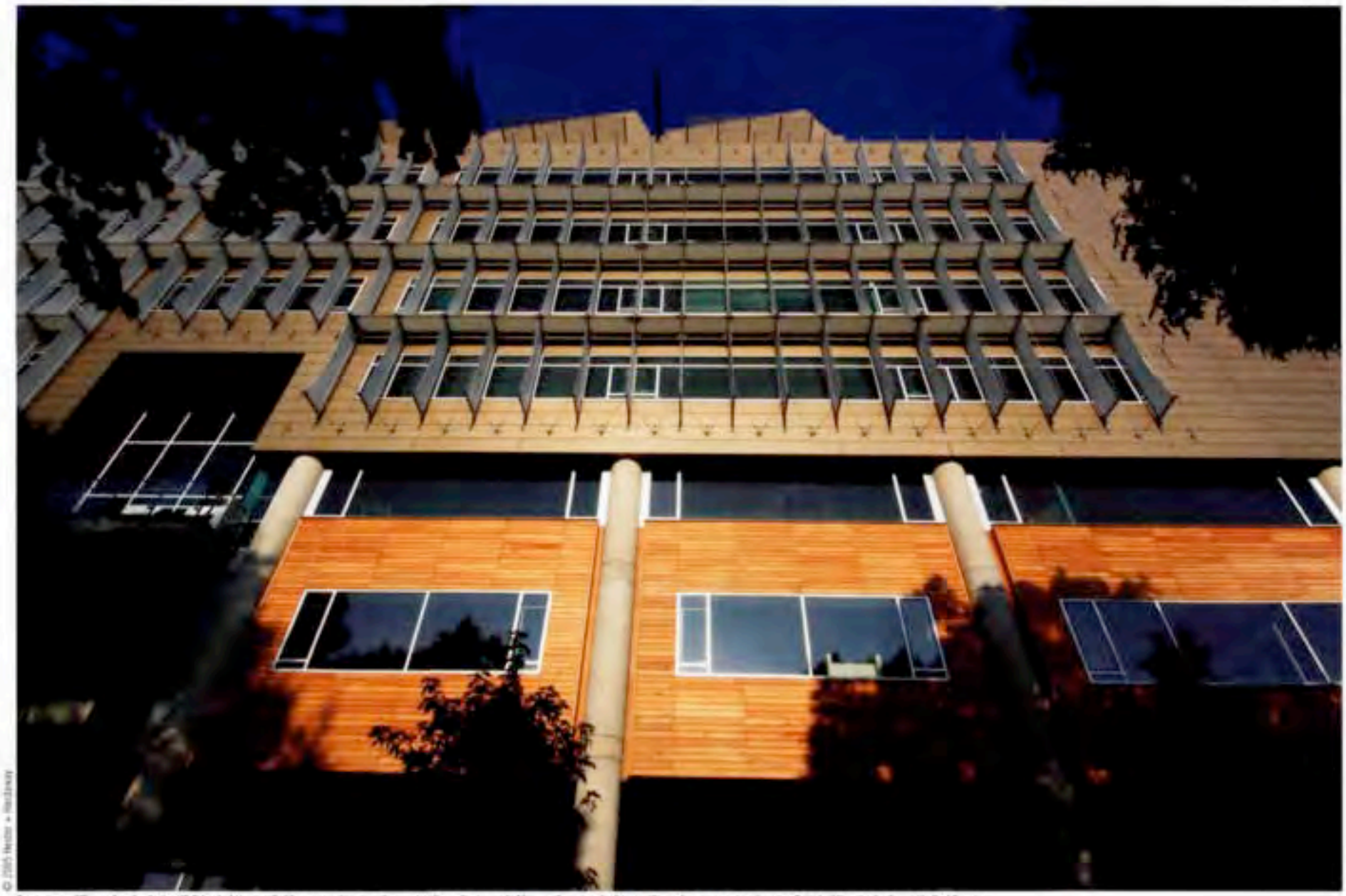
Perhaps what is most important about the proliferation of satellite photography websites, such as keyhole.com, that allow us to zoom in and out of the Earth from our computers is that it reminds us constantly about the interconnectivity of our environment, and the huge consequences of our individual and collective actions. ■

Related Websites

The following websites offer views from space:
Earth.google.com
Eol.jsc.nasa.gov/
Terraserver.microsoft.com
VirtualEarth.msn.com

On these websites you can find maps of Houston:
Pwegis.pwe.ci.houston.tx.us/
Hcfcd.org (At site, click on Maps & Exhibits tab.)
Gdc.h-gac.com/
www.houstontx.gov/planning/planning_studies/ludem.html (A number of the maps in this article were found here. Go to Chapter Three, Parts 1 and 2, and Chapter Four to download PDFs with the maps.)

And this website offer maps of the freeways:
Texasfreeways.com

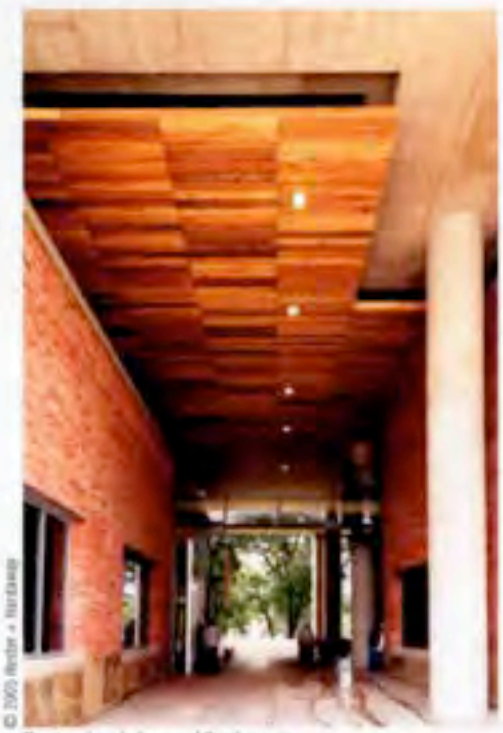


Presenting a different façade: At the UT School of Nursing Building, a combination of cypress siding, aluminum cladding, and canvas shades provides a sharp contrast to the rest of the buildings in the Texas Medical Center.

A Natural Pleasure

Seeking Ecological Balance at the University of Texas School of Nursing Building

BY MARK OBERHOLZER

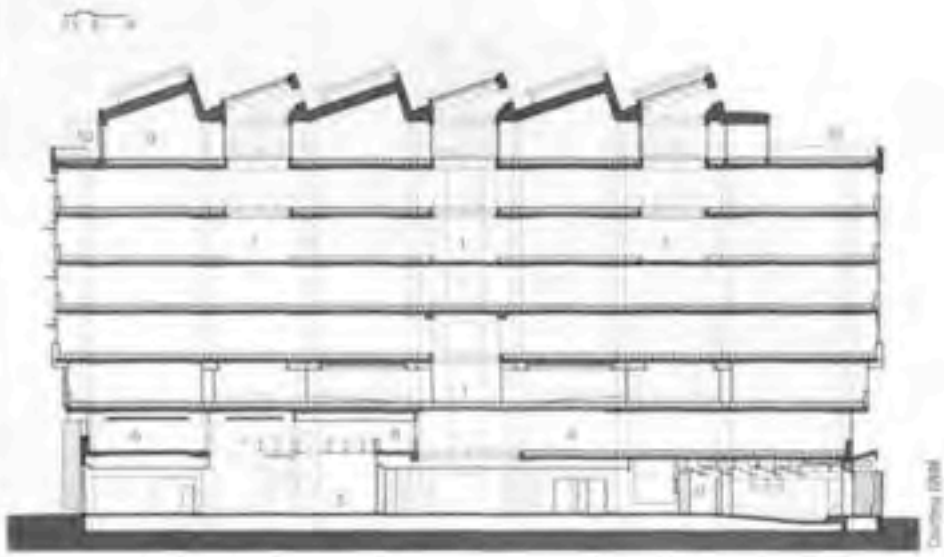


The view through the ground floor breezeway

© 2009 Hester + Hardaway

One of the School of Nursing Building's most striking features is its interior atria, which allow daylight to filter deep inside.

1 Atrium
2 Offices
3 Lounge / Kitchen
4 Study lounge
5 Breezeway
6 Bookstore
7 Classroom
8 Terrace
9 Deans Office
10 Roof Garden
11 Auditorium



Courtesy ZGF

Longitudinal section through the UT School of Nursing Building, showing location of roof garden and three interior atria.

The University of Texas School of Nursing and Student Community Center is a building unlike any of its contemporaries in the Texas Medical Center. It's relatively small in size and scale, its exterior materials are obviously natural rather than synthetic, and it makes little if any accommodation to the automobile. Sandwiched between M. D. Anderson's new Ambulatory Clinical Building and Grant Fay Park, a small park alongside traffic-choked Holcombe Boulevard, the School of Nursing Building manages to be at once both modest and startlingly assertive.

In addition to housing the School of Nursing and the student center, the structure was charged with being a model of ecologically balanced institutional building. The idea that a school that teaches health should reside inside something that itself encourages health is a premise that led the School of Nursing Building's designers (BNIM with Lake/Flato) to engage technologies that are not often found in institutional settings, especially medical buildings.

The only way to enter the School of Nursing Building is to walk up to it—there is no sweeping drive or towering lobby, common characteristics of new clinical buildings (which require areas for patient drop-off and pick-up) in the Medical Center. Although academic institutions abound in the Texas Medical Center, the complex has only a few places that actually have the feel of a college campus. The School of Nursing Building, with its pedestrian-friendly aesthetic, connects with and continues the academic atmosphere of some of the older parts of the Texas Medical Center, even though it is physically isolated from those areas.

Materials

While many modern buildings are conceived of in terms of formal operations—extruding, folding, warping, and so on—the School of Nursing Building strongly asserts its materials. The variety and nature of the building's materials give it an appealing tactile quality.

The first three floors of the building, which house most of the communal spaces, are clad in materials that have an explicitly "natural" character. At ground level, handmade brick from a 125-year-old San Antonio warehouse wraps around the articulated circular volume of the auditorium and through the entry breezeway, where it is accented with rough-hewn Texas granite.

Above the brick are cypress logs recovered from riverbeds and milled into horizontal siding, which is punctuated by the circular concrete columns of the building's structural frame. While each of these materials meets sustainability criteria, Lake/Flato's trademark Texas-industrial-agricultural aesthetic lends the School of Nursing Building a strong sense of identity very different from most buildings in the Texas Medical Center. The addition of a hitching post and a horse or two would not seem out of place.

Above the third floor, the materials take a turn towards a more industrial aesthetic. The upper five floors are clad in an aluminum wall system that skims just outside of the concrete frame, completely enclosing it and rendering the upper floors as a bronze-colored box sitting atop volumes of brick and cypress. Each of the façades reveals a careful study of the position of the sun during the day, evidenced in the amount of glazing and how it is shaded.

The east side of the building offers views into the dark shadows of the trees in an adjacent park. Operable windows fitted with screens occur at regular intervals along the length of the building. Outside the windows, a system of projecting vertical canvas shades tensioned with stainless steel cables helps reduce early morning glare and acts as a textural counterpoint to the metal siding.

The west side of the building attempts to avoid late afternoon glare and heat gain by limiting the use of windows. Small, deeply recessed windows provide occasional views from both sitting and standing heights, but most of the west-facing rooms have little glazing. The plan of the building reflects the idea that the west side is the least preferred side of the build-

Perforated metal siding adds depth and shading to the School of Nursing Building's west side.

ing—most of the building's main spaces and offices face north, south, and east. With few windows, the west wall is comprised primarily of exuberantly perforated aluminum cladding with a strong horizontal corrugation that runs across the central interior stair and wraps around twin exterior fire escape stairs, creating zones of intriguing transparency at night.

With its diversity of engaging and contrasting materials, the School of Nursing Building has the effect of making material qualities—rather than forms—the primary way in which the building is experienced.

Technologies

In essence, the typical contemporary multistory building is an architectural wrapper over a standardized system of structure and services that provides an adaptable but neutral interior. The School of Nursing Building attempts to subvert this convention with the employment of a number of ecological technologies that strongly characterize the interior of the structure.

The most striking features of the interior are the three large atria that bring natural light deep into the building. Translucent glass admits a soft, muted light into the three interior spaces. In addition to providing natural light, these atria allow building occupants to have a sense of where they are within the entire building—an antidote to the confusion experienced by visitors to the many mazelike, windowless corridors found throughout the Texas Medical Center. Similarly, the main stair above the building's entry is glazed on both outside and inside walls, creating a light-filled alternative to the elevators.

Most typical non-residential buildings utilize a suspended ceiling on each floor to provide a convenient space to run mechanical and electrical systems. In contrast, the School of Nursing Building uses a raised floor system above each structural floor—cabling, electrical, and air conditioning run underneath the floor. Because all of the building services except lighting are beneath the floors, a suspended ceiling isn't necessary in some areas, and the concrete structure remains exposed. These occasional glimpses of the concrete structure give the building a strong material presence, avoiding the neutral, immaterial interiors of typical office buildings. In some places, however, poor execution gives the building an oddly unfinished feel—exposed insulation and miscellaneous wiring is visible, but not to any designed effect. Rather than an aesthetic choice, this seems to be a misstep.

The Ecological Question

The School of Nursing Building attempts an interesting experiment—how well can a demanding institutional program on a small urban site aspire to be a model of ecological design?

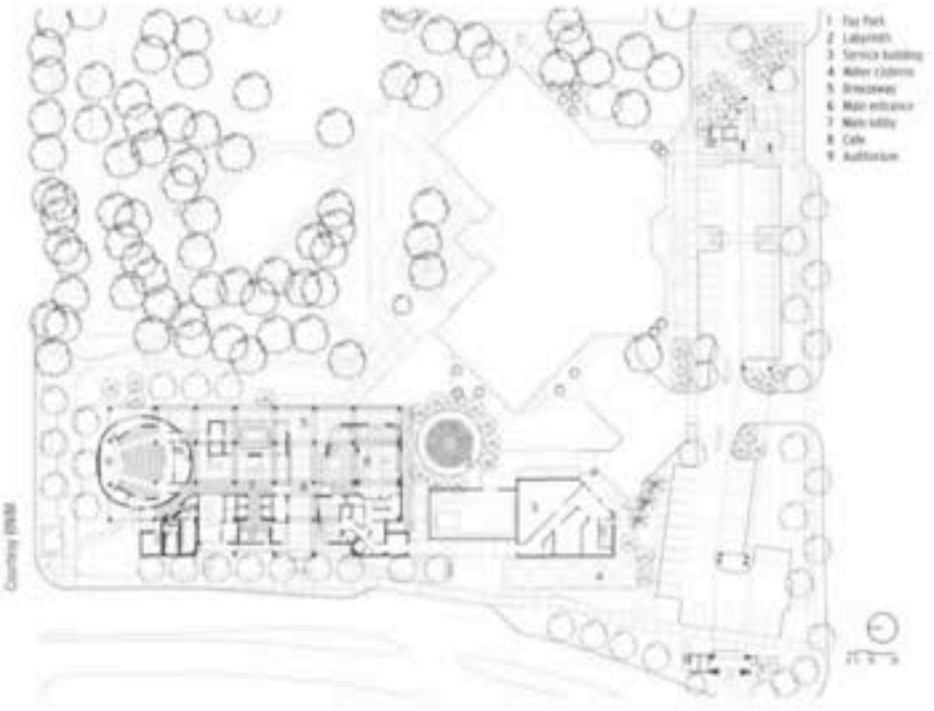
The idea of building for future flexibility is an interesting case in point. One of the risks of designing a building that can adapt to many possible futures is that it may mean the building is not perfectly attuned to its current users. Despite the constantly changing needs of most institutions and businesses, contemporary architectural design almost always begins with an analysis of program leading to a specific building.

Virtually all steel or concrete frame buildings are inherently flexible and adaptable because interior partitions are not load bearing. However, with the use of modular demountable partitions rather than steel stud walls encased in gypsum board, the School of Nursing Building anticipates future adaptability without the mountains of accompanying waste that result from typical office renovations.

This focus on how the building will perform from an ecological standpoint over the long term is an important intellectual idea. No longer can buildings be thought of with respect only to their physical form without considering the attendant use of long-term resources. The question isn't what an ecological building should look like, but what it should look toward. ■

A small outdoor walkway connects the two sides of the School of Nursing Building through a breezeway, and provides a view of Grant Foy Park.

Portions of the School of Nursing Building's roof are planted to reduce rainwater runoff and to keep adjacent areas and the roof itself cooler.



Courtesy EHRM

Site plan of UT School of Nursing Building.

Meeting the LEED™ Standard

The University of Texas School of Nursing and Student Community Center was designed to conform to a standard known as LEED (Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design). This system of credits was developed by the United States Green Building Council as a way of rating sustainable aspects of buildings in a standardized way, addressing concerns in the 1990s that the term "green building" had effectively lost any useful meaning due to lack of benchmarks.

The LEED NC (new construction) system attempts to evaluate a building's design and performance in a way that includes site and urban issues as well as environmental and technological means that reduce a building's ecological footprint. In addition, the LEED system takes into account how the health and sustainability of the building's occupants is encouraged.

The School of Nursing Building is attempting to achieve a "gold" rating in the LEED NC system. At the scale of the city, the building gains credits for providing bike racks and shower facilities for building users as well as being located near public transportation. Inside the building, LEED credits are earned through aspects such as rainwater harvesting (for non-potable water uses), materials with recycled content, waterless urinals, and lighting controls.

One of the most interesting aspects of the LEED certification process is the "commissioning" of the building, which entails verification that ensures the building's systems (such as air conditioning) are working as efficiently as predicted. This requirement has the effect of encouraging long-term sustainable practices in the operation of buildings. Over the life of a building, the maintenance and energy costs can far outstrip the initial construction costs. — *Mark Oberholzer*

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The Power of the County

Who has the most influence when it comes to shaping the Houston region? It's not necessarily the city at its center.

UNBEKNOWNST TO MANY of its residents, Harris County is "a more significant agent of physical change than the city of Houston is," says Guy Hagstette, special advisor to the mayor for downtown urban development. Those who live in the central city may not see it, Hagstette adds, "But you go outside the city and there ... the county has a very strong influence."

Road construction lies at the core of Harris County government. Of its total expenditures of $1.73 billion in fiscal year 2004, about 40 percent less than the city of Houston's $2.96 billion,[1] Harris County spent some 30 percent, or a half billion dollars, on road construction and maintenance. Only the administration of justice took up a larger chunk of county expenditures.

Included in that half billion was $213 million spent by the Harris County Toll Road Authority—the county's favored vehicle for new road construction, because it can generate revenue. Last year the Toll Road Authority opened the $391 million Westpark Tollway. Now it is moving on ambitious plans to build 40 more miles of the Grand Parkway, complete the last segment of the Sam Houston Tollway, extend the Hardy Toll Road to downtown, and add "managed" lanes[2] along State Highway 290. It can accomplish all this without either citizen input or alternatives analysis (which federal regulations describe as the "heart" of environmental impact assessment).

The Toll Road Authority's relatively small budget belies its outsized impact on county road construction. The Authority was instrumental, for instance, in launching the $2.2 billion Katy Freeway expansion project. One of the largest in state history, the project will transform 23 miles of I-10 into a 14-to-18 lane megahighway, including a 12-mile stretch with four toll lanes designed, built, and operated by the county. The county's offer to contribute as much as $500 million jumpstarted the project by reducing expected completion time from 12 years to six.

The county does more than simply construct roads. It also maintains 21,630 acres of parkland, about half the total that exists within county borders.[3] The Harris County Flood Control District uses a dedicated portion of property taxes to administer the Houston area's biggest regional flood prevention program. Last year, the District released preliminary copies of its 100-year flood maps,[4] the first county-wide revision of such maps since the early 1980s. These maps directly affect development because they can result in building restrictions and affect both flood insurance rates and property values.

The county has also played a role in revitalizing downtown and the Main Street Corridor. It has earmarked $388 million to build or renovate many of the county courthouse and jail facilities in an area spreading out over a dozen downtown blocks. And it has pumped more than $230 million into developing Reliant Park. As County Judge Robert Eckels says, redevelopment "wouldn't have happened without the county's participation." Citing the success of the Main Street light rail line, he notes the importance of the county's "work on developing the north end ... [and] likewise, the south end of the Main Street line.... We're the anchor on both ends of the system."

A Lack of Attention

Ask the average Houstonian what Harris County does, however, and you'll probably get a blank stare. "We don't get the type of attention that a city does," laments Judge Eckels. "It's actually very frustrating." One reason, he says, is the structure of county government. "People tend to understand the mayor [of Houston] and they understand the [city] council ... [but] the mayor of the county is called a judge, so nobody understands what it is that I do."

Texas' 254 counties operate under an antiquated structure set up by the State Constitution of 1876. Reacting to perceived excesses of Reconstruction, the document's framers sought to weaken central authority by dispersing it among multiple elected officials. That is why there are elections for county judge and local commissioners, as well as for county attorney, tax assessor-collector, and county auditor—not to mention judges and constables.

Ironically, this structure had the unintended effect of concentrating power among the county commissioners, particularly in urban counties such as Harris, Texas' largest and the third largest in the U.S. Since the State Constitution fixes the number of commissioners per county at four, commissioners in rapidly growing counties have become increasingly powerful. Each of Harris County's four commissioners represents a district of nearly 900,000 people. Precinct 4, the largest at 555 square miles, is larger in area than New York City and Chicago combined.

Moreover, each commissioner has control of the budget for his or her precinct. In the 2004 budget, Harris County commissioners were allocated a combined $272 million. By year's end, however, they had left $160 million—almost 60 percent of it—unspent. Observers suggest that these funds, often rolled over from year to year, provide a convenient source of discretionary spending.

The county judge occupies a much weaker position. Though he is the public face of the county and the only member of Commissioners Court to be elected countywide, he is neither a judge[5] nor a true chief executive. With a budget of only about $4 million, he commands no ready source of patronage, and his only real power is his one vote on Commissioners Court.

In contrast to the judge, the mayor of Houston is the most powerful politician in the city, with broad appointment powers and control over the budget. "In the city, so much depends upon the personality and power of the mayor," says Richard Murray, head of the University of Houston Center for Public Policy. "You get a mayor that's very efficient and effective, and he or she's got the tools to really make city government work. You get mayors with less power, ability, or interest, and things can deteriorate quickly."

Since 1991, city officials have been limited to six years of service, which has resulted in dramatic shifts in policy

Harris County has added more than a half billion dollars worth of new and renovated buildings to Houston in recent years. Among the additions have been (from left to right) the downtown courthouse complex, Reliant Center at Reliant Park, the Harris County Juvenile Justice Center, and the county jail.

BY BEN JACOBSON

with each new mayor. But continuity has reigned at the county, where officials have been able to serve extraordinarily long terms. E.A. "Squatty" Lyons, for instance, served 48 years as a county commissioner before retiring in 1990. The average tenure on today's Court is 12.4 years. "One person coming in isn't going to change [county government]," observes Judge Eckels. "It takes working together to build a consensus to get something done."

Former City Councilman Vince Ryan says such longevity has led to an insular political culture in which decision-making takes place beyond public view. "At Commissioners Court, all it takes is walking down the hallway for two meetings until you've got three votes, and the fourth is usually pretty easy to get," Ryan notes. "And then nobody says anything, because they have no need to debate publicly." Such was the case with the building of Reliant Center.

Pleasing the Rodeo

By the mid 1990s, the Astrohall, the principal exhibition facility in what was then Astrodomain and is now Reliant Park, was showing its age. Built in 1966 by the Houston Livestock Show & Rodeo on land owned by Harris County, "the Astrohall was definitely beginning to get into bad shape," recalls Leroy Shafer, the Rodeo's chief presentation and operations officer. "The roofs leaked.... Plumbing was bad. A/C was bad." The Astrohall's other big user, the Offshore Technology Conference, reportedly threatened to move elsewhere if no improvements were made.

At the same time, the Astros were threatening to leave Houston unless they got a new ballpark. Faced with the prospect of losing another sports team—the NFL Oilers had split for Tennessee a few years earlier—city and county officials in 1996 decided to go to the voters with a referendum asking for approval to build two new stadiums, one downtown for baseball and one next to the Astrodome for football. The vote was expected to be close, and support from the Rodeo, with its thousands of influential community volunteers, was considered critical.

Says the Rodeo's Shafer, "We were told by a research firm ... this was going to be a 50/50 issue. If the Rodeo supported it, it would probably pass by a percentage point or two.... If the Rodeo was against it, it had no chance of passing." So in exchange for supporting the referendum, the Rodeo extracted a promise from the county, in a letter signed by Judge Eckels and Commissioner El Franco Lee, that the county would at its own expense build a new exhibition facility to replace the Astrohall.

That new facility was Reliant Center, and the decision to build it had its origin in a backroom deal. Unlike with the baseball and football stadiums, there was no voter referendum. Partly, this reflected the fact that Reliant Center was presented as a low profile capital improvement project. But it also reflected a general consensus among decision makers that supporting the Rodeo, a longstanding pillar of the community, was the right thing to do.

"You didn't see a lot of the infighting that you see in some public projects," says Shea Guinn, president of Reliant Park-SMG, the firm that now operates Reliant Park, and the former head of the county-controlled entity that manages Reliant Center. "The county got this project done because the Astrohall needed to be replaced. That was the [principal] motivating factor."

Special Service Organizations

The county's power is limited by its lack of home rule, or the ability to write laws. To get around its limited statutory authority, Harris County has resorted to setting up special purpose governmental and quasi-governmental organizations. That explains the proliferation of local government units such as the Flood Control District, the Hospital District, and the Toll Road Authority, all of which are under the county's budgetary control

In the case of Reliant Center, Harris County established the Harris County Sports and Convention Corporation to develop and maintain its facilities in Reliant Park. Though state law already allowed Harris County to improve convention center facilities, the county established the corporation to avoid the impracticality of considering every purchase individually at Commissioners Court. "While it is cumbersome at times in that there are over 700 or so different political subdivisions [in Harris County], it also can be more efficient than in a single large entity [that] gets bogged down in its own bureaucracy and politics," explains Judge Eckels.

The Sports Corporation worked quickly. Construction of Reliant Center began in June of 2000 and was completed less than two years later. This was an impressive achievement, since the Sports Corporation was simultaneously overseeing contracts for Reliant Stadium, which needed to be finished for the August 2002 start of the football season. During the middle of all this, Tropical Storm Allison struck, and 9/11 followed.

Though nominally a private corporation, the Sports Corporation leases Reliant Park from the county for $1 per year. Commissioners Court appoints a majority of its board and approves its budget. If it incurs a deficit, the county makes up the shortfall. But it also benefits from semi-private status. In early 2000, it obtained the state attorney general's permission to bypass county procurement practices, such as those requiring competitive bidding, in order to maintain maximum operating flexibility.[6]

The Sports Corporation also carries considerable influence for an organization that employs only seven people. It has managed more than $573 million in construction contracts for the building of Reliant Center and Reliant Stadium, and will one day decide, with approval from Commissioners Court, how to dispose of the Astrodome, Houston's best-known architectural symbol (see "Making a Dome Deal," page 31).

Though the corporation sees itself as the landlord for Reliant Park, a publicly-owned property, it has made little attempt to explain its mission or function to the public. It has no website, although it promises one soon, and is not listed in the phone book. A call to the county's

Had it not been for Harris County agreeing to cover the cost of replacing the Astrohall with Reliant Center, it's possible the referendum that made Reliant Stadium—left, beside Astrodome—and Minute Maid Park possible would never have passed.

main switchboard in search of the corporation often results in the caller being connected to the Harris County/Houston Sports Authority,[7] an entirely separate and unrelated entity.

"Part of the reason we have a low profile is we don't deal directly with the public," says Executive Director Willie Loston. "It's not that we're not trying to, but we have very little interaction with the public. When folks have problems on the complex, amazingly, they figure out how to find us."

The Question of Citizen Participation

Addressing claims that it limits citizen participation, the county responds that public input is intended to go through Commissioners Court. However, citizens who have tried to use that avenue complain of being ignored. Robin Holzer, who has appeared before both Commissioners Court and the Houston City Council on transportation issues, sees the city of Houston working hard to be accessible, but at Commissioners Court, "It almost seems like most people don't get listened to."

By taking the public out of public policy, the county avoided grappling with the question of what, beyond just satisfying existing users, the wider public purpose was in building Reliant Center. Most convention center projects promise increased jobs, tourism, and economic development, but these were seldom used to justify building Reliant Center.[8] In the 1999 master plan for Reliant Center, the Sports Corporation forecast attracting just two new conventions a year, which would bring in a total of $760,000 annually in new revenues and hotel occupancy tax receipts. That's not very much when one considers the $20 million the county has to pay every year on the loans that financed the Center.

Houston has a long history of using public money to advance private objectives, with varying results. In the case of Reliant Center, one can argue that even if it does not perform well as an exhibition facility, it does serve the public's interest by preserving a home for the Rodeo. After all, the Rodeo estimates that in 2003 it brought $344 million of economic impact to Houston—enough to have paid off Reliant Center in one year.

With Reliant Center and the expanded George R. Brown Convention Center, Houston holds the distinction of being one of only two cities among the nation's 20 largest to have more than one convention facility. The other city on that short list is Las Vegas. Yet next to the number of convention visitors Las Vegas draws, Houston's numbers pale. And Houston's reputation as a convention site barely ranks it in the third tier of cities among meeting planners.

Hospitality industry experts say it is not the presence or lack of convention facilities or hotels that makes a location desirable as a convention or trade show site, but the nature of the city itself. That's why Orlando, Las Vegas, New Orleans, and San Francisco are perennial favorites for group meetings. "The problem that Houston has right now is that it's not perceived as an environment where there are a lot of fun things to do," says Hagstette of the mayor's office. "We have a beautiful convention center now, we finally have a convention hotel, but convention clients are saying now we need to work on our amenity package."

It may be time to consider the creation of the Harris County Amenity Corporation. ■

1. Harris County and Houston use different fiscal years, so this data is not directly comparable. The county's year ends February 28, the city's June 30.
2. "Managed" lanes employ variable pricing to raise tolls during times of peak congestion and lower them in off-peak hours to maintain a steady traffic flow.
3. The rest is maintained by the state, the city of Houston, or other municipalities.
4. A term leading to much confusion, the 100 year floodplain refers to land that has a 1 percent chance of being flooded in a given year.
5. There are some counties in which the county judge has judicial responsibilities.
6. The Corporation says it used a public procurement process for Reliant Center, but sought such permission to comply with fast-track construction of Reliant Stadium.
7. The Sports Authority is the joint city-county special venue district that financed and built Minute Maid Park and Toyota Arena.
8. At the opening of Reliant Center, Judge Eckels did claim that the new exhibition hall could host 300 to 400 events a year and pursue 156 of the nation's 200 largest trade shows.

Admiring the Eighth Wonder of the World, circa 1972.

Making A Dome Deal

BY BRUCE C. WEBB

Harris County's problem of what to do with its mothballed Astrodome continues to simmer after six years without a permanent sports team tenant and two years after the Houston Rodeo decamped for Reliant Stadium, the higher-tech neighbor that looms up next door. A failed pitch to secure the 2012 Olympics games—a bid bolstered by the number of stadiums, three of them indoors and air conditioned, already in place in Houston—probably gave the Dome its penultimate chance for survival.

What to do with the Dome was the subject of a lively 2001 Rice Design Alliance charrette, a spirited AIA "Call to Voice" website (www.aiahoutx.org/dm_call voice.cfm), and more than a few speculative articles and commentaries in the local press. The Dome can still inspire the imagination. Suggestions for its reincarnation include turning it into a housing development, a shopping mall, an entertainment center, a nature center, a historic museum, a science museum and planetarium, a theme park, an extreme sports venue, and, ignominiously, a multi-deck covered parking garage. But no proposal has had much staying power, and skeptics worry that the real plan might be to keep making (and shooting down) proposals until the public gets tired of hearing them, then quietly demolishing what was once the pride of the city.

The county delegated authority over Reliant Park to the Sports and Convention Corporation, a private entity, thus entrusting decisions about the public domain to an organization that has little public accountability. This didn't matter much in building Reliant Center, as the decisions were relatively non-controversial, but it will likely have more impact when the Sports Corporation decides how to deal with the Astrodome.

The Sports Corporation went fishing for ideas for the Dome by issuing a request for proposals, but with disappointing results: only seven applications came in, some say because of the short, six-week period from the announcement to the deadline for receiving proposals. In addition to having a compelling idea, bidders were required to have a record of successfully handling multi-million dollar projects and a business plan and financial backing to insure the viability of their proposal. Two proposals met those criteria and were given closer scrutiny. One was from the Texas Medical Center for a research and development center for human performance; the other, the winning proposal, came from an entity called the Astrodome Redevelopment Corporation, an eclectic collection of entertainment entrepreneurs and designers led by Bryan-based Trajen Aerospace. Their proposal envisioned a space theme park, a standard formula for selling an idea to Houston's public by wrapping it in promises of high tech space age wonders. (The high tech scoreboard promised to Astrodome fans when adding more seating resulted in the removal of the much loved original—a "wonder" that turned out to be as tame as the ubiquitous Diamondvision—and proposals by a consortium that included George Lucas to recreate the Albert Thomas as a space age, high tech entertainment center are cases in point.) Those promises always seem to end up being neutralized by reality. What the city actually gets is usually cheap, dumbed-down, and delivered as the best deal that can be made under the circumstances.

There were other proposals, home-grown ones, submitted to the Sports Corporation, among them a multiuse entertainment complex suggested by a music major from Lee College, and an intriguing idea to create an enclosed site for public events such as the Houston Festival, a proposal that had the advantage of requiring little or no work on the Dome, but had little prospect of generating much revenue either. Big players such as Disney, Cordish Company, Six Flags, and tyro local entertainment promoter Tillman Fertita passed on the opportunity to make a bid.

Details of the winning scheme remain sketchy. What is certain is that the proposal has a lot of wiggle room to it. What began as an entertainment complex has metamorphosed into a 1,000 room hotel, with perhaps a space-themed park or some other attraction in the center.

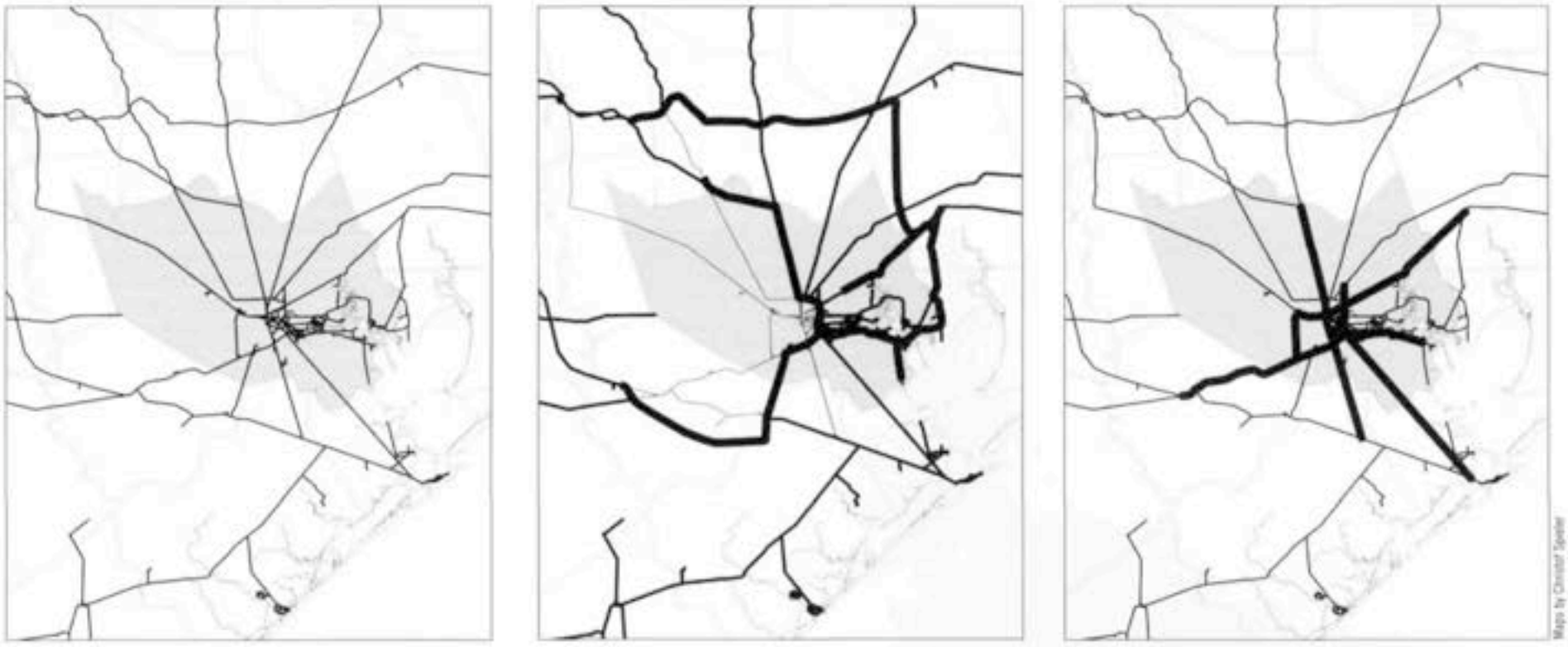
It's difficult to do anything with an old sports stadium other than turn it into another sports stadium, so the Astrodome is not a developer's dream project. Almost any revenue earning conversion could be had for less money and less effort in brand new, purpose-built form. Parking problems are a thorny issue, as is an abject context that is not a very felicitous setting for a luxury hotel. Hotels surrounding the Astrodome have had a dismal performance record; only two years ago, three hotels on Reliant Park's periphery, among them the Hotel Astrodome, which housed Judge Roy Hofheinz's legendary Celestial Suite, were foreclosed.

The Sports Corporation's main interests are pragmatic, befitting the "bidness" fixations of Houston politics. The primary goal comes down to engineering a conversion of the Astrodome *into "a more productively used asset" while* using as much private funding as possible. And doing this without much regard for the public's concerns other than the desire to avoid any tax increase. As policy questions are pushed away from politicians, the public's concerns and involvement get muted.

Rather than seeking ideas for the development of the Dome and then finding the financial means to support the best one, the Sports Corporation sought to award a firm that had a good idea and had already assembled the financing to realize it. (Astrodome Redevelopment Corporation is backed by, and even located in the offices of, the Gulfstar Group, a unit of former gubernatorial candidate Tony Sanchez's International Bank of Commerce).

In the end, saving the Dome comes down to a matter of public desire more than need. It's really a question of what is fundamentally worth saving about the Dome. Just as Roland Barthes was able to reduce the Eiffel tower to a single abstraction, the Astrodome, arguably an inelegant object of comparison, can be summed up in terms of the ineluctable, irreducible, platonic space inside of it. The challenge is to conserve rather than erase the Dome's phenomenal properties. The few renderings and descriptions of the proposed hotel-theme park scheme are not encouraging in this regard. To restore some of the former magic to the place one might find a vision in Barthes' paean to the qualities of the Paris landmark, about which he wrote: "One can dream there, eat there, observe there, understand there, marvel there, shop there, as on an ocean liner (another mythic object that sets children dreaming) one can feel oneself cut off from the world and yet the owner of the world."

To get a developer, a businessman, or a group of county politicians hell bent on trying to turn a moribund architectural artifact into a profit center to appreciate this is difficult indeed. Until then, it might be a better alternative for the city to pay the estimated $500,000 a year to keep Houston's biggest room available for occasional uses and better ideas. ■



Maps by Christof Spieler

Freight Trains: Disappearing Soon from a Neighborhood Near You?

BY CHRISTOF SPIELER

Top: These three maps show where Houston is in terms of its freight rail traffic, and where it might go. The map top left is of Houston's existing railroad system, which is centered on downtown. Downtown is where the rail yards are, and where tracks lead to Ship Channel industries. As a result, freight trains converge on inner-city neighborhoods.

The map top center shows Harris County's Regional Freight Rail Improvement Plan. It proposes a series of new grade-separated rail corridors (heavy lines) that would remove many or all freight trains from some existing rail lines (light lines).

The map top right shows a plan offered by the railroad companies. In this proposal existing rail lines (heavy lines) and rail yards would be upgraded, and overpasses and underpasses would be added to some roads to reduce train congestion and impact on Houston neighborhoods.

TRANSPORTATION PLANNERS have long believed in making no little plans. Even by those standards, the idea of rerouting all the freight trains that come into and go out of Houston onto new corridors is big. But so are the implications: no more tying up traffic at railroad crossings in the Heights or River Oaks or Sugar Land; no slow-moving freight trains splitting neighborhoods in the East End; more capacity for the Port of Houston; and miles of rail corridors vacated for reuse as bike paths, toll roads, or routes for passenger rail.

The most amazing thing is, it just might happen.

Houston has been dealing with the effects of freight trains for a long time. The line that today causes traffic jams on Westheimer and Richmond near 610 was built in 1914 to get trains away from Montrose neighborhoods. A 1953 study commissioned by the City of Houston recommended moving Union Station in order to reroute trains that might block the flow of traffic to the emerging downtown freeways. But changing the layout of the rail lines didn't happen. Houston's freight railroad system has remained static while the city exploded around it. Almost all the lines that existed in 1953 are still in use, and no new lines have been added.

The state of the rail network is a reflection of economic realities. Ever since the government began subsidizing transport by truck, the railroad business has been defined by the need to cut costs to meet the competition. Even with deregulation, growing rail traffic, and mega-mergers, the freight railroads have slim profit margins. They simply do not have the money to build new rail routes or dramatically upgrade existing ones.

If the rail system is to be transformed, one of two things must happen: the railroads must go out of business, or the government must get involved. And after waiting 50 years for the former, state and local governments are now considering the latter.

In Houston, the impetus for a new look at freight rail comes from several unrelated developments. The 1996 merger of the Union Pacific and Southern Pacific railroads went badly, causing severe rail congestion in Houston and alarming people in the petrochemical industries and at the port. A 2001 proposal to build a new rail line near Clear Lake gave residents of Houston's east side a chance to remind politicians of the effects of railroads on their communities. The 2003 METRO Solutions planning process led the county to study commuter rail, and those studies concluded that heavy freight traffic left no room for new passenger trains. And the Harris County Toll Road Authority, looking for the space to add more traffic lanes, eyed the rail corridors that radiate out of downtown Houston.

None of this would have resulted in anything, however, were it not for a dramatic shift in thinking on the state and national level. Unlike every other means of freight transport in the U.S., rail freight has remained completely in the hands of the private sector. Governments may build roads, airports, ports, and waterways, but it is the railroad companies that build, maintain, and operate the nation's train tracks. Having experienced intense government regulation from the Progressive Era into the 1980s, the railroads prefer it that way. And while state highway departments were rechristened "transportation" departments in the 1970s, their focus—and their funding—has remained centered on pavement, not tracks.

But in recent years, governments across the country have begun to realize that freight trains are an important part of the transportation picture. In Massachusetts, the state government spent money upgrading a cross-state freight line to make the port of Boston more competitive with the port of New York. In Lafayette, Indiana, the tracks of two railroads were relocated to get freight trains away from downtown streets. The nation's best known public rail infrastructure project, the Alameda Corridor in Los Angeles, is intended to let the busiest port on the West Coast handle an anticipated surge in container traffic. Most ambitiously, the City of Chicago brought together six national and two local freight railroads, the local commuter train authority, Amtrak, the federal Surface Transportation Board, and the Illinois Department of Transportation to hammer out a $1.5 billion plan to increase freight rail capacity, improve commuter rail service, separate trains and roads, and remove an obtrusive elevated rail line near the Loop.

Freight rail relocation first made it onto the Texas Department of Transportation's radar in the Georgetown-Austin-San Antonio corridor, where heavy freight rail traffic cuts through a series of downtowns and complicates plans to start commuter rail service. TxDOT

is now asking the state legislature for $100 million annually to help relocate freight rail routes in urban centers. That money won't go far; it's estimated that the Georgetown-Austin-San Antonio project will cost $700 million just to maintain the current level of rail capacity. Still, TxDOT's funding request is a sign that rail has made it onto the state's agenda. TxDOT is also preparing to launch a statewide freight rail improvement study.

In August 2004, Harris County completed a grade crossing study aimed at separating rail tracks from the roads they cross. That study led the county to conclude that trying to rebuild all the existing rail lines to eliminate road crossings might not be the most desirable option. As a result, the county followed up with the the Regional Freight Rail Improvement Plan—a study funded jointly by Harris County, Union Pacific and BSNF (the two primary railroad companies in Houston), Fort Bend County, the Port of Houston, and the City of Houston. That study looked at concentrating rail traffic in fewer, higher capacity rail corridors. Besides the funding partners, the study involves TxDOT, the Houston-Galveston Area Council, and METRO. Perhaps most critically, it also has backing from the business community in the form of the Gulf Coast Mobility Partners, a Greater Houston Partnership committee.

Houston still has a huge amount of freight rail traffic in the city, due in large part to the petrochemical plants along the Ship Channel, and it moves in many corridors radiating in every direction. The seven proposed projects included in the Regional Freight Rail Improvement Plan reflect that. These projects vary greatly in scope, impact, and cost. The least expensive, priced at $147 million, would improve existing freight lines in the East End, adding tracks and building new overpasses and underpasses to separate auto traffic from rail traffic. This would benefit Union Pacific and BNSF as well as the neighborhoods by keeping trains moving without blocking streets. Another scheme would relocate the facilities at which truck trailers and containers are loaded onto trains from current constrained sites, one near 610 northeast of downtown and another near Hobby Airport, to open land near Crosby, 30 miles from Houston. This would remove both trains and trucks from inner-city neighborhoods.

The most ambitious projects would create new rail corridors that would completely bypass Houston. One corridor would follow the alignment of the proposed Grand Parkway through Fort Bend County, removing 50 trains a day from Sugar Land, Missouri City, and Sienna Plantation. Another would follow an existing rail line through Montgomery County, letting trains from the north and northwest bypass the city and suburbs such as Tomball and Spring. A third corridor would tunnel under the Ship Channel, connecting industries in Pasadena and Bayport directly to rail lines to the east and northeast. These corridors would be major undertakings, involving the construction of more than 150 miles of new double-track rail lines, some on entirely new alignments, at a cost of $3 billion.

While they are related, each of the seven projects in the Regional Freight Rail Improvement Plan could be undertaken independently; some are in fact redundant. The plan contains no comprehensive analysis of how the different projects would fit together and how the revised freight rail system would function. Presumably, some existing rail lines could be abandoned. However, many of the lines serve industries located along their rights of way, and these industries would still require local trains to serve them, albeit a much reduced number.

The projects would be welcomed by many neighborhoods. But it's important to remember that neither the county nor the state is the final decision-maker here; the railroads are. The rail lines are, after all, private property, and the railroads are protected from local government control by the interstate commerce clause of the U.S. Constitution. If the railroads cannot be persuaded to go along with a relocation scheme, it will not happen.

For the railroads, two things matter: funding and impact on their operations. That's where some of the proposed projects could run into problems. Many of the trains headed into or out of Houston serve the port area; even trains passing through Houston often stop at the city's rail yards to pick up or drop off train cars. The Regional Freight Rail Improvement Plan admits that the Union Pacific is unwilling to relocate its major yards farther out, where they would be less convenient to the port. This means it's unlikely that trains will be able to bypass the city entirely. Even if the government picked up the cost of relocating the rail yards, the railroads could pay a penalty in time and money by shifting their operations. For example, the proposed rail bypass that would go through Fort Bend County might help Sugar Land and Missouri City, but it would also add 21 miles to the trips of most of the trains using it.

Union Pacific and BNSF themselves have come up with a more measured approach to change, one summed up in a proposal that would concentrate on improving existing freight lines and freight yards in the inner city. Under the railroads' plan, trains would move through the same neighborhoods they do now on many of the same routes, but additional tracks would be added to allow for more rail traffic and help prevent trains from having to stop in central Houston due to congestion. The railroads' proposal also includes grade separations—overpasses and underpasses—and quiet zones to reduce the impact of rail traffic on the city's residents. Four existing rail yards and 36 miles of track could be abandoned and made available for new uses. The railroads' plan does not offer the radical relief that the Regional Freight Rail Improvement Plan does, but it would bring significant benefits at a much lower price tag, and would have the support of the railroad companies.

Either plan, though, faces considerable hurdles. Financing may be the biggest. Los Angeles' Almeda Corridor was paid for in large part by tolls collected from the railroads using it. That succeeded because the Ameda Corridor reduces travel times, saving the railroads money, and allows for the running of more trains.

Depending on the railroads to cover the cost of an updated system is less likely to work in Houston. Instead, local leaders are working with Congressman Tom Delay to secure federal funding. In any case, major transportation projects always benefit some areas while harming others, so any rail relocation project will undoubtedly face local opposition. A final hurdle could be the considerable cooperation between different levels of government, each with its own interests and motivations, that would be required to allow any plan to succeed.

The key to any workable scheme may be the re-use of existing rail corridors, which represent very valuable real estate, especially for transportation projects such as highways, rail transit, or bike paths. Who gets the land, and what use that land is put to, could be a contentious issue. Harris County, the City of Houston, and METRO might all want to stake a claim, and historically they have had difficulty working together due to lack of coordination and political rivalry.

One obvious use of rail corridors is commuter rail service. Public transit is generally METRO's responsibility, but the county became interested in commuter rail in June 2003, when County Commisioner Steve Radack, a critic of METRO's light rail plans, presented diesel-powered suburban commuter rail in the 290 corridor as an alternative. That evolved into a county-funded study of commuter rail in three corridors, which was released in December 2003. The county seemed poised to begin a broader study, but in June 2004 the commissioners voted to hold off.

That 2003 Harris County study indicated that the biggest hurdle to commuter rail was existing freight rail traffic. On most area rail lines, particularly those leading into downtown, there is too much freight train traffic to allow for the addition of passenger trains. With freight trains relocated, commuter rail would be relatively easy to implement. But financial and political challenges would remain. Opening a commuter rail line on existing tracks costs upwards of $3 million a mile for track improvements, stations, and trains. Then there are the operating costs to consider. No commuter train system in the United States operates without some form of public subsidy. Los Angeles' commuter rail system costs $11 per passenger trip to operate, and fares cover slightly less than half of that.

METRO's service area doesn't even cover all of Harris County, and extends only barely into Fort Bend County. Any commuter lines outside that area would require an expansion of METRO and its sales tax, agreements with counties or cities to fund rail, or new transit agencies. When METRO released a revised rail expansion plan in June, it included two commuter rail lines to be opened by 2012: the US 290 line as far as Cypress and a line along US 90A from the southern end of the Main Street light rail line as far as Missouri City. An extension to Sugar Land and Rosenberg would have to be funded by those cities or by Fort Bend County. Currently, the US 90A line carries heavy freight traffic, and freight rail improvements could make adding passengers trains more feasible.

But the county may have another plan in mind for some of the rail corridors that might be used for commuter rail. At one time or another, the Harris County Toll Road Authority has expressed interest in toll roads in railroad right-of-ways paralleling US 290, SH 249, and I-10 inside 610. The Westpark Toll Road, the I-10 toll lanes, and the Hardy Toll Road downtown extension all use the right-of-ways of abandoned railroad lines. The Toll Road Authority has money, and because it uses no federal funding, it's free to build without public hearings or environmental impact studies.

Confronted with the idea of a toll road or commuter rail, neighbrohoods may prefer a less intrusive alternative: bike paths. The city's bikeway plan already includes bike paths in three abandoned rail corridors, and County Judge Robert Eckels has also mentioned the prospect of more bike paths. But bike paths do not have the political constituency that highways or public transit do. The battle lines are drawn: the approval of any plan that would free up rail corridors would likely be followed by agencies and politicians fighting for their control.

Some grand schemes, like the Interstate Highways, succeed and change the world. Others, like high-speed passenger rail, seem perennially stuck in the future. Oftentimes, a grand scheme devolves into a series of less revolutionary but more practical smaller projects. It's impossible to tell which course the Houston freight rail study will take. But one of the most important steps has already happened: freight rail is on the agenda. ■

Hip Architecture?

Hip: The History
by John Leland, published by Ecco, 2004.
384 pp., $26.95

Reviewed by Aaron Betsky

In the world of architecture, it is not hip to be hip. Or cool, or anything else that smacks of surfing on the trends and tastes of the day, pandering to mass audiences, or otherwise doing something other than building the rock of ages in as intellectually rigorous a manner as possible. As an alternative, the architect can just do her or his job, making functional structures in a cost-effective manner. Giving 'em what they want might be acceptable in certain circles, but in architecture that would only mean making conservative structures that are instantly recognizable.

The dirty, dirty secret behind all of this is the reality that, in fact, architecture *is* as subject to the whims and fancies of fashion as any other cultural endeavor, and that most of us would sorely like to be hip—and some of us even are, as architects become fashion models and culture stars.

Now there is a bible for those who secretly aspire to be hip. John Leland's *Hip: The History* gives us the genesis of the term, its evolution in American culture, and its meaning. In so doing, Leland offers an alternative to those attitudes in architecture that tend to make the discipline elitist, isolated, and rigid. Though he does not address architecture at all, preferring to focus on music and literature, Leland does provide definitions and pathways that might be useful for design disciplines. Along the way, they might actually help architecture turn from a lily white profession into something a little more open to the realities of our society's racial makeup.

For hip, as Leland is careful to point out, is a black thing. The word itself probably derives from the West African language Wolof, and means, according to Leland, "to see or have your eyes wide open." In the U.S., it became the word for slave knowledge and language, which hid behind phrases the masters could not understand. From these origins in resistance, hip evolved into something that also sheltered a set of values the reverse of those produced by the physical conditions in which slaves found themselves. It proposed the open against the closed, the mutable against the fixed, and the multivalent against the clear and the concise. These values found their expression in what Leland calls "some constants: a dance between black and white; a love of the outsider; a straddle of high and low culture; a grimy sense of nobility; language that means more than it says."

As African-Americans moved into large cities, hip became the way they defined themselves. It was also profoundly urban. In the faceless city, it became a way of establishing identity, but it also infected that scene to the point that "hip is what causes creatives to move to a city, and if you're hip, you'd be there already." Hip allied itself with (or was co-opted by) advertising, which preserved what to Leland is one of hip's most profound attributes, namely "that it allowed Americans to reinvent themselves." Hip came to be about setting a scene of your liking and playing a role you invent. That scene is always shifting and mutating as the story of your invented life, led in the cracks and seams of a more and more regulated economy and city, develops in cooperation with a changing cast of characters.

Music, an elusive medium that can appear anywhere, became the carrier of hip, and from there it moved into fashion and products. Hip was about openness and change, and hence about the new. This means, according to Leland, that hip was both the agent of transformation and a slave to consumer culture, as in America these became synonymous: "Hip was aligned with modernism, and advertising was modernism's mass medium." Hip was about abstraction, about slickness, about the aura of the new and the open. That meant it could be used to sell, but also that it stood for an essentially free culture. It is about an attitude and a possibility, not about a fixed thing: "Hip captures this moment of anticipation, a present tense that never becomes the done deal of the past. Hip is to crime what gangsta rap is to real gangbanging: the attitude and the lingo are the same, but the music is all implied potential, the real thing all grisly result. Hip is the frisson of the bullet or blue note still in the air, dangerous but remote. Its alternative is the romance of work, and that's no romance at all." Its hero is the trickster who "points toward what is actually happening: the muddiness, the ambiguity, the noise. They are part of the real, not something to be filtered out."

Leland's definitions are not new. He acknowledges the work of Robert Ferris Thompson, whose *African Art in Motion* (Berkeley, 1974) and *Flash of the Spirit: African and Afro-American Art and Philosophy* (New York, 1983) established the solid art-historical basis for this story, and Ishmael Reed, the fiction writer whose seminal *Mumbo Jumbo* (Garden City, NY, 1972) is its most vivid evocation. In a wider sense, Leland's argument is one of the class of "flip and reverse it" theories (to cite a fairly hip guru, Missy Elliott) that seek to make what is ugly beautiful, what is bad good, and what is old-fashioned hip.

Whether that just makes it another trick is less important than whether we can learn something from it beyond ourselves being open to interpretations and ways of looking at our world that are the reverse of what we believe. In this case, Leland has some helpful hints. As noted, he believes that hip captures the essence of the city as a place of open, changeable scenes that inhabitants themselves can use to invent a world in which they want to live. The first question then might be: Could urban planners encourage this? Leland also points out that the final expression of hip is online: "Long after commodity fetishism divided society from the objects around it, the logic of the internet or DJ culture carries this dualism to its natural conclusion: the physical objects that hold samples or computer codes are practically irrelevant. The information doesn't exist to give the objects meaning; it is whole in itself." A second question then might be: Is this an argument for a virtual architecture?

For both questions, the answer is probably no. The whole point of hip is that it is an act of resistance and reuse. Making it easy does not help. Similarly, it is exactly the continual presence of the real in Leland's definition that makes the power of the virtual, even if meaning comes from some sort of transcendence. Rests the question: Can architecture itself be hip? Can it be open and tricky? Can it be always poised, but never gangbanging?

Robert Venturi, quoting Arthur Heckser, said it almost half a century ago: "It is the nearness to chaos, but its avoidance, that vitiates." Somehow, being right there on the verge of nothingness, at the edge of consumer culture, violence, trendiness, and total disorder, makes for strong architecture—but only if it holds something open, poised, and ineffable. That something might be space, the old standby spiritual self-justification for architecture. Perhaps Louis Kahn was hip after all.

That concentration on pure, empty space also makes architecture a luxury, as space is just about the most expensive commodity in our culture. That however, is hip too. As Leland points out: "Though it grabs its ideas from the bottom of the economic ladder, hip lives in luxury. Poor societies worry about growing enough corn; rich societies can worry about being corny. Hip shapes how we drive, whom we admire, whose warmth we yearn for in the night. Its scent transforms neighborhoods from forbidding to unaffordable." Or, as Nelly put it more succinctly: "Forty acres and a mule, f**k that s**t, forty acres and a pool."

Architecture turns nature into shaped space, chaos into a scene for collective action, the city into a place of open structures. Architecture can be a way of sheltering space with structures that are not rigid, but reflect the reuse and reinvention of a culture (in every sense of that world) that already exists so that it gains new clarity and life. As long as it does not close down, try to hold onto rules that are no longer of use, or disappear into dreams of utopia, architecture could be pretty hip. How is the architect to achieve hipness? Leland leaves us with a way: "To be hip is to believe in the possibility of reinvention—to understand oneself as between states, neither one nor the other, without original sin, forever on the road. Or as they say in Wolof: to see, to open one's eyes."

It might be a good idea for architects to start by opening their eyes to the possibility of the hip, and to those who invented the phrase. ■

Courtesy the Blaffer Gallery

Still from video Plug-In City (Houston), 2005.

Archigram Lite

Alain Bublex: Plug-In City (Houston)
Blaffer Gallery, University of Houston
April 23–June 12, 2005

Reviewed by Bruce C. Webb

Nobody did more to titillate the architectural imagination in the latter third of the 20th century than the Archigram group from England. With a Monty Python aesthetic and a distinctly English penchant for the play on words, Archigram tossed together Constructivist visions and a fascination with technology to formulate a keenly perceptive architectural interpretation of the Sixties' zeitgeist. They also provided one of the most entertaining cases of analogical thinking ever to brighten architectural discourse.

Alain Bublex, a French artist from Lyon whose show "Plug-In City (Houston)" was recently on view in the upstairs space at the University of Houston's Blaffer Gallery, colonizes one of Archigram's best known ideas. Architect Peter Cook conceived the Archigram version of Plug-In City in 1963 as a concept for a city of continual change in which enormous technical frames served as an infrastructure that hosted interchangeable cells of habitable space.

On a large, composite drawing in the front room of the Blaffer's loft-gallery Bublex acknowledges his precursors: half of the panel shows a reproduction of one of Cook's Plug-In City drawings, while the other half, a wire-frame, computer drawing, describes where Bublex is taking the idea. On an adjacent wall a stunning pair of large photomontages depict the Eiffel Tower transformed into an armature supporting new scaffolding that holds a growing village of small modular units or "plugs."

Resembling a cross between a shipping container and a house trailer, the plugs are the primary components of Bublex's urban vision. In both Eiffel Tower photographs the Pompidou Center, another Paris icon, appears; it too becomes a framework for more of the ubiquitous plugs. The Pompidou is one of the more detectable descendents of Archigram-think, and a building that Bublex, not surprisingly, finds interesting.

In the Blaffer's back room Bublex turns his transformational strategies on Houston. In three large panels, two of them animated, he lets the plugs loose on familiar city scenes that he photographed during a earlier trip to the city. The Houston pictures are not pretty. They are unaesthetic and unselfconscious snapshots and videos of inchoate landscapes littered with trash containers, road signs, and things coming apart. Houston with plugs is not much different from Houston without plugs. The plugs show up like a game of "Where's Waldo," sometimes in the foreground, sometimes hidden in the background, sometimes taking over the downtown. In one sequence Bublex has video-montaged a collection of plugs onto the cars of a freight train passing by a railroad crossing in the First Ward.

The favored method of delivering the plugs is by helicopter, and most of the pictures show them hovering above the city carrying parts for assembling the city. Other scenes show the helicopters more menacingly, flying in military formation like an army of predatory locusts—scenes reminiscent of pictures from a modern battlefield.

This is an entertaining show, more so because the spectator is witnessing his own city treated to this kind of special attention. It's a little like seeing your daughter come home from school in punk gear. Archigram's drawings were made by hand and had only an abstract context. By contrast, "Plug-In City (Houston)" shows how ideas are ripened by advanced imaging technology. The question is, at what point do the ideas become overripe and perhaps spoiled by technique?

For Bublex, Houston is undistinguished, except, perhaps, for the fact that it is so undistinguished. He calls it a "generic city" in a catalog interview conducted by Blaffer director Terri Sultan. What appeals to him is the city's restlessness and incompleteness, a quality that makes it kin to Italo Calvino's half-built city of Thekla, a city perpetually in construction as a way of avoiding the beginning of its own destruction. Bublex makes this insight about Houston into a visual metaphor that says the city is little more than a series of incidents and conjunctions. I'm not sure that definition works for Paris, but it often seems entirely adequate for defining Houston's genius loci. ■

Kimbembele Ihunga (1994)

An African Vision

Perspectives 145: Bodys Isek Kingelez
Contemporary Arts Museum
January 29–May 1, 2005
African Art Now
The Museum of Fine Arts, Houston
January 29–June 5, 2005

Reviewed by Kelly Klaasmeyer

U.N. (1995)

If Dr. Seuss had designed Brasilia, the Brazilian capital might look something like the work of Bodys Isek Kingelez. Kingelez makes architectural models of amazing, over-the-top cities. Kingelez lives in Kinshasa, the Democratic Republic of Congo's sprawling capital city of 4.5 million, a city deeply affected by the 30-year kleptocracy of President Mobutu Sése Seko. Having lived in Kinshasa since 1970, Kingelez produces works infused with his desire to create solutions for the entire spectrum of urban problems.

Like Brasila's actual creators, urbanist Lucio Costa and architect Oscar Niemeyer, with their visions of Gesamtkunst*stadt*, Kingelez is on a mission to create an urban utopia.

Kingelez's work was a part of a Houston-wide African art extravaganza inspired by the Museum of Fine Arts, Houston's epic exhibition "African Art Now: Masterpieces from the Jean Pigozzi Collection." In addition to the MFAH pieces, Kingelez works from the Pigozzi collection were featured in the solo show "Perspectives 145: Bodys Isek Kingelez" at the Contemporary Arts Museum.

Kingelez uses found materials—paper, cardboard, plastic, polystyrene—to craft fantastic new worlds. Yellow boxes from UHU brand glue and empty toothpaste cartons become building blocks, while swatches of corrugated cardboard become tiled roofs. But for the most part, the origins of the materials Kingelez employs are hard to place; he breaks them down into neutral building components. Every once in a while you might notice something and think, hey, isn't that part of an oil filter?

Kimbembele Ihunga (1994), part of the MFAH exhibit, covers approximately 60 square feet. It was named after the small village where Kingelez grew up and contains a statue of the artist's father. Within Kingelez's cityscape a yellow high-rise spreads out in a "V" like a lady's fan, while another building looks something like the Sydney Opera House, but is made from concentric stars—a reference to the Congolese flag. Still another structure, a skyscraper, sports giant flying buttresses with rococo edges.

Kingelez's models are crisply constructed and his buildings use bright, light, clear colors and dynamic lines. In Kingelez's cities, roofs levitate and arc and the walls of buildings zig and zag, curve and undulate.

Kingelez's plan for the United Nations building, *U.N.* (1995), which was also at the MFAH, is a skyscraper combined with a Ferris wheel-like circular form with inverted scalloped edges dotted with purple stars. A "UN" in giant letters sits atop the building, and looks like it might be intended to rotate.

Ville Fantôme (1996), an urban vision of Kingelez's that was part of the CAM show, has shiny silver and gold skyscrapers that make New York's Chrysler Building look bland and unornamented. Gaily colored apartment blocks snake back and forth, each one unique. Kingelez has said that "a building without color is like a naked person without clothes." And even the terrain of his *Ville Fantôme* has been painted in vivid hues, breaking up and decorating the landscape.

Kingelez's models are amazing, something the artist wouldn't hesitate to tell you. He has an ego to match the grandiosity of his designs, many of which he has named after himself. In a video shown at the CAM, Kingelez states that an "artist is a small god." It's an opinion of themselves that some artists and architects with extravagant aspirations might well have, but which few would be frank enough to share.

Kingelez's ego exists in conjunction with noble goals, however. In the video Kingelez talks of plans for a "medicinal city" that would bring the world's pharmaceutical companies together to work in one place and concentrate research on curing diseases such as AIDS. In one of his models he has named a building after his favorite vitamin; another is named for ampicillen, another for Vermox, a worm medication, "because we eat things that are not medically safe."

In the CAM video Kingelez discusses his home city of Kinshasa. Speaking in front of a decaying building he laments the state of the capital, its roads, its trash, and his fellow inhabitants. Kingelez has said about his work, "I created these cities so there would be lasting peace, justice, and universal freedom. They will function like small secular states with their own political structure, and will not need policemen or an army."

The artist obviously has ambitious agendas, but they aren't that far removed from the creators of Brasilia's idealistic goals. And when you look at Kingelez's unrestrained designs for utopia, it doesn't seem so far fetched. In his cheerful, fanciful buildings gathered along eccentric avenues, poverty, strife, and decay are nonentities.

To the extent that a physical environment can affect people by shaping their attitudes, behavior, and moods, Kingelez's plans would surely yield better results than Brasilia, with its cold rationality and social egalitarianism applied so stridently that it tastes of fascism. In Brasilia, Costa planned things down to what sort of cars would be chosen for taxis, the wardrobes of bus drivers—dark grey uniforms with chevrons in company colors and a mandatory cap—and what cemeteries would look like—shallow graves with plain tombstones "without any signs of ostentation."

Kingelez's approach is far more open and far less rigid. No one would end up living in anything like the monotonous rectangular apartment blocks that became the bane of Brasilia. In Kingelez's world, everything from public structures to private housing is equally, extravagantly creative.

Educated by Catholic missionaries, Kingelez is self-taught as an artist. But perhaps self-taught isn't the right word; maybe it should be community-taught. He learned about art by growing up in a traditional village. Every day he would "watch the men making masks or working at the forge." He took those lessons and decided to make things that would envision a better way for the city in which he lived.

His designs are quirky and idiosyncratic, but then so are people. His models are collected and exhibited as artworks, but Kingelez is serious about having them realized. In his artist's statement in the CAM catalog he said, "I dream of a better, more peaceful world. When Africa's political climate cools down and acting becomes possible, I'll present my concept of modernity to the African people."

As megalomaniac plans for utopia go, Kingelez's is definitely one of the most appealing. ■

FAST FORWARD : Impressions in the 21st Century

BY PETER PAPADEMETRIOU

A full generation has passed since the 1972 publication of *Houston: an architectural guide* (Houston Chapter, AIA); this is almost the identical amount of time that had passed since the only urban guide that preceded it, the 1942 *Houston: A History and Guide* (WPA American Guide Series), which was published the year before I was born.

In 1972, as I and the others involved with the architectural guide looked at the emerging city which we had represented with a graphic map on our book's cover—a map where words were overlaid on the contours of the interstates and highways that defined Houston (and a section of which can be seen on the contents page of this issue of *Cite*)—it seemed so far away from the city that had existed before World War II. The 610 Loop had just been completed and the Southwest Freeway was the femoral artery of a newly pulsing urban landscape. The Houston that had been described by the WPA guide seemed really *old*, distant, and, well, *quaint* by comparison with this new city of the 1970s.

So when *Cite* invited me to visit this spring and asked, "How has Houston changed?," I had to fast-forward from the intense discovery process our team experienced in 1971-72: Drexel Turner, Stephen Fox, and me in the archives of the Texas Room of the Houston Public Library; Bill Lukes, Paul Hester, and me driving all over and photographing.

What would I see in 2005?

The diagram that was our 1972 book cover, the "loaded" words forming a map, has now replicated itself geometrically: there are loops within loops. The abstraction that we used to capture Houston's form was the structural armature of "mobility" at the macro scale of expressways and major arterials. The original "wagon wheel" implied universal distribution and access, and I was struck by the current scale of this new mobility, remembering that the equation that drives the reality for every mile along the radius tells us that the area expands logarithmically, that is, becomes more decentralized. On my ride to Bush Intercontinental at the end of my visit, my driver commented, "Houston's freeways are so lyrical." One *did* feel detached, "floating" above the expansiveness of it all. But mobility brings with it alienation, and you have to get down to the micro scale to see the fine grain of particularity and difference.

It is *amazing*. The scale, architectural and planning ironies, and cultural juxtapositions have exploded, and my guides—Rafael Longoria, Patrick Peters, Drexel Turner, Rives Taylor, Stephen Fox—really knew how to shock me. Let me recall a few vignettes from my visit...

Longoria took me west along Long Point on a cultural tour of taco stands in "clusters" reflecting specialization of regional tastes. I knew I was in for cross-cultural juxtapositions as we passed Bibas Greek Pizza, and as the Latin theme was mixed with Asian. Yet work/live doesn't necessarily generate "neighborhoods," as we saw on Blalock Road, where a 1970s mall has become an Asian enclave, one in which Koreans own commercial property yet commute from other places.

Longoria also showed me a rodeo arena somewhere in the vicinity of Little York that probably has never seen a gringo, and a flea market that was like being in Laredo, off Airline Drive just outside the county line.

West Bellaire Boulevard was a real culture shift, with bilingual English/Chinese street signs, not to mention garden apartment complexes with what were obviously "For Rent" signs with 713 telephone numbers, but otherwise completely in Chinese (exclamation marks included!). Near Wilcrest and Bellaire Boulevard we happened upon the Tao Chew Temple, smack in the midst of a subdivision, and another Buddhist compound off Beechnut and Dairy Ashford that looked like a movie set from *55 Days at Peking*. But nothing was more eerie than the huge, white, Richard-Meier-meets-Bucky-Fuller terraced structure with cascading staircases, about seven stories high including a gold geodesic dome set on a cubic base with gigantic doors, located between Westpark and the 12800 block of Ashford Point at 3611 Overture. Although there was no identification, and it didn't appear as though anyone had been there in a while, one of my guides, Stephen Fox, reports that it is the home of "Cheng Hua Sheng Mu Gong." Go figure! Of course, Fox had arranged to end our tour with dim sum at the Hong Kong City Mall's Ocean Palace Seafood restaurant, intimate family dining for 1,000, at least.

But perhaps the biggest anachronism (if it's possible for Houston to have any) was the Hindu community in Stafford, and its carved-from-nine-ton-blocks-of-marble-and-shipped-from-India-ready-to-snap-in-place temple complex, Baps Shri Swaminarayan Mandir. The artisans carving away informed me that they only spoke Hindi.

The now-designated "Museum District," a fortuitous aggregation of loosely-related institutions I wrote about in *Cite* some ten years ago, also contains the new diversity of Asia House (whose future home is being designed by architect Yoshio Taniguchi), the Czech Cultural Center, and the Buffalo Soldiers Museum.

In a location without memory and a landscape with no physical geographical features, "grounding," cultural orientation, has always been a problem of "place-making." I'm still struck by those unpredictable, non-physical factors that make "place": the Hispanic "day-labor corridor" along Westpark, for example. Everyone apparently knew when to be there, but there really isn't a "there" there.

Katy Mills (I remembered when the road to San Antonio was just a lazy S-curve on I-10 and a grain elevator next to the railroad) suggested an urban metaphor, as a multiple entry mall of seven "neighborhoods" featuring an AMC theater with 20 screens. Tracker Country, with what seemed an acre of boats sitting on the blacktop, also ironically reminded me what the impact of development (such as the cluster of tall buildings at Park Ten) would be on the fragile landscape that the Katy Prairie represents, and how the Addicks Dam might not mitigate future Tropical Storm Allisons. Maybe that's why I saw street signs off Texas 99/Grand Parkway to the intersection with FM 1093/Westheimer Road reading Canal Road and Highwater, and a subdivision named Crestwater: Get those boats ready!

In Sugar Land, Venetian Estates used to be an "identity-image" hoot in the 1970s, but clearly "authenticity" is still sought by all: First Colony does have *that* ring to it, and the Sugar Land City Hall brings New Urbanism and The Past to the future. In terms of instant pedigree, Southern National Bank has appropriated Monticello, with a planned expansion replicating in some form Thomas Jefferson's University of Virginia, while the Museum of Southern History is a quotation of his Poplar Forest.

In the mid-1960s, Charles Moore wrote of Disneyland as place-making in his essay "You Have to Pay for the Public Life." The same appears to be becoming true of mobility, as the *New York Times* reported in its April 28 article "Paying on the Highway to Get Out of First Gear." The equation is a dichotomy of Concentration + Dispersal = Congestion. I used to use Hardy Road (now the Hardy Toll Road) as a shortcut north, and in the 1970s Westpark was this "little secret" to skirt the Southwest Freeway near Greenway Plaza, a "secret" obviously so successful that the closing of the old service railroad tracks resulted in its expansion into a multi-lane arterial. And there's Highway 8/Sam Houston Tollway, the new "New Loop": can Highway 6 and the Grand Parkway be far behind? And I understand that Chimney Rock may be the origin of another tollway, south of the Sam Houston. When I asked a native Houston friend, one of those "inner-city folks" who lives near the Rice Village, whether he had a toll road pass, he sneered, "No. That's for *county people*!"

I still love that fact that even when you think you're headed "somewhere" in Houston physical infrastructure can just plain *die*: Bellaire Boulevard, a major civic artery inside the 610 Loop, as it heads west after Addicks-Clodine Road, becomes an esplanaded suburban street, but just dead-ends into San Pablo Drive and peters out after three blocks as it enters Fort Bend County. Or those crazy but apparently jarring juxtapositions that have always been part of the Houston landscape, such as the exclusive golf club west of Sugar Land, surrounded by the Jester Unit of the Texas Department of Criminal Justice: *Don't* hit one into the rough!

Well, the newest novelty in town ("show it to the New York boy") is Houston's METRORail. I was somewhat fascinated by history repeating itself, since trolleys were the first phase of Houston's urban expansion in the 1910s. And in the inner-radius the existence of a historic core with important precincts such as the Texas Medical Center, Downtown, and the University of Houston and Rice University provides a concentrated proximity that begins to suggest predictability of travel and pedestrian precincts. The light-rail cars have the allure of newness, service was at quick intervals when I tried it, and after all, the long-term Transit System Plan follows the macro-scale of major road systems. Imagination will demand an exploration of the symbiotic relationship, and partnerships, between transit and urban development potential. There were some raw edges at Old Spanish Trail and Greenbriar there are light-rail parking lots and buildings of no redeeming value, and when the train line switches from Greenbriar to Fannin at South Braeswood, it becomes an area that is "urbanistically *not*."

Yes, Houston *has* "changed," but it has remained true to the reinvention that seems to have driven its growth in the last century. It remains a bit like the story of the blind men and the elephant: depending on the part they touched, each had a different story of what it looked like. In 1972, in trying to tell the story then, we shared the idea that "it all fits together when you can see all the pieces." I think that still remains true: *Houston is What You Make It*. ■

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