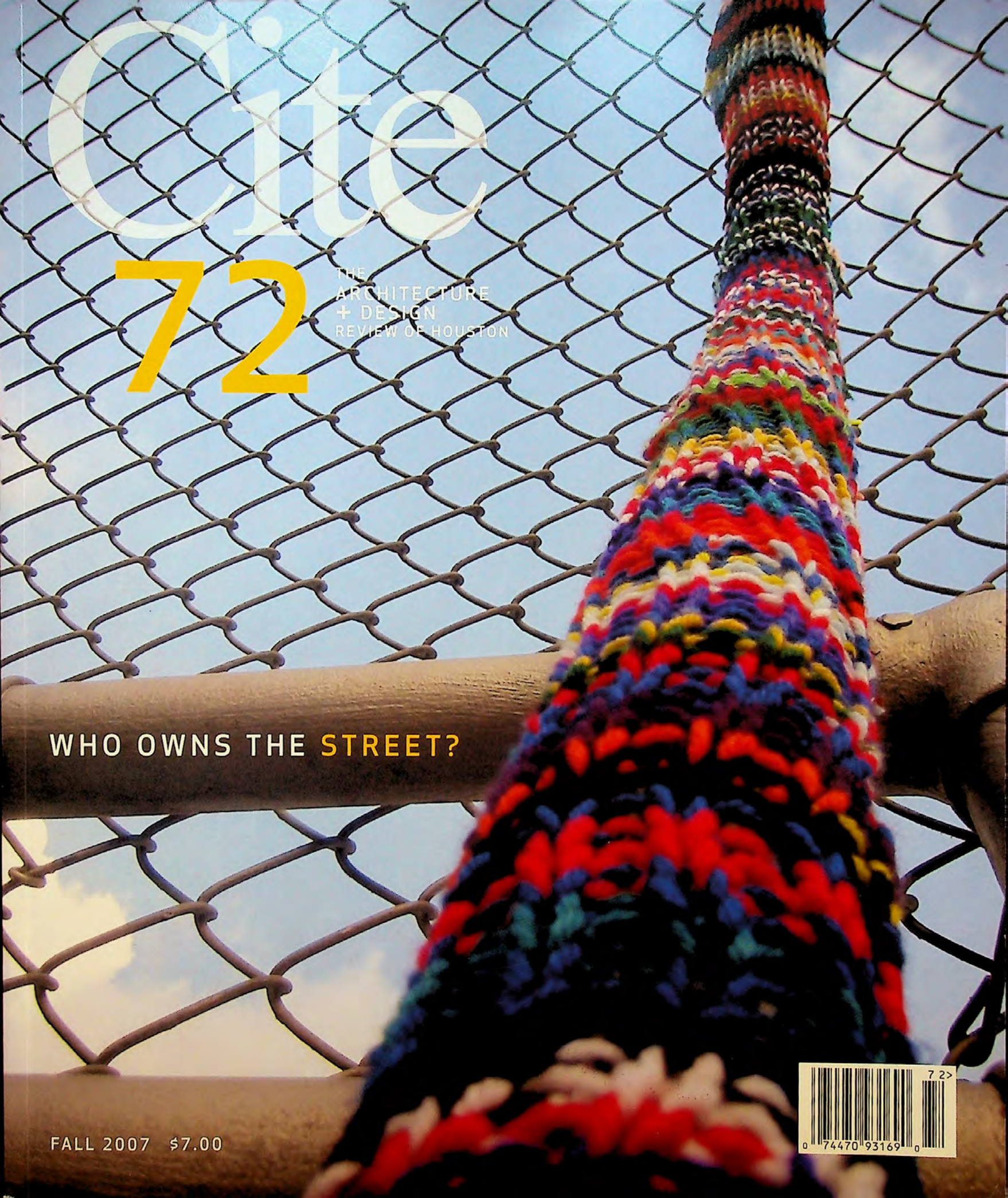
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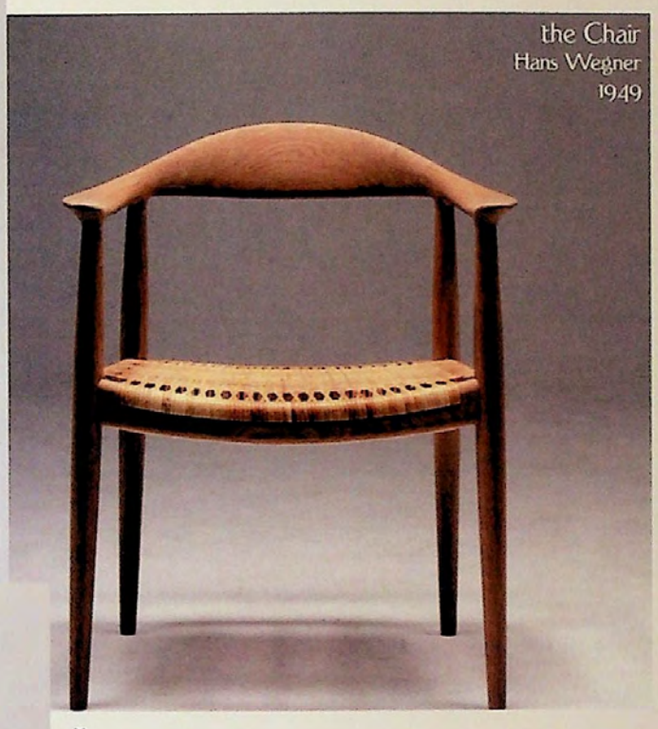

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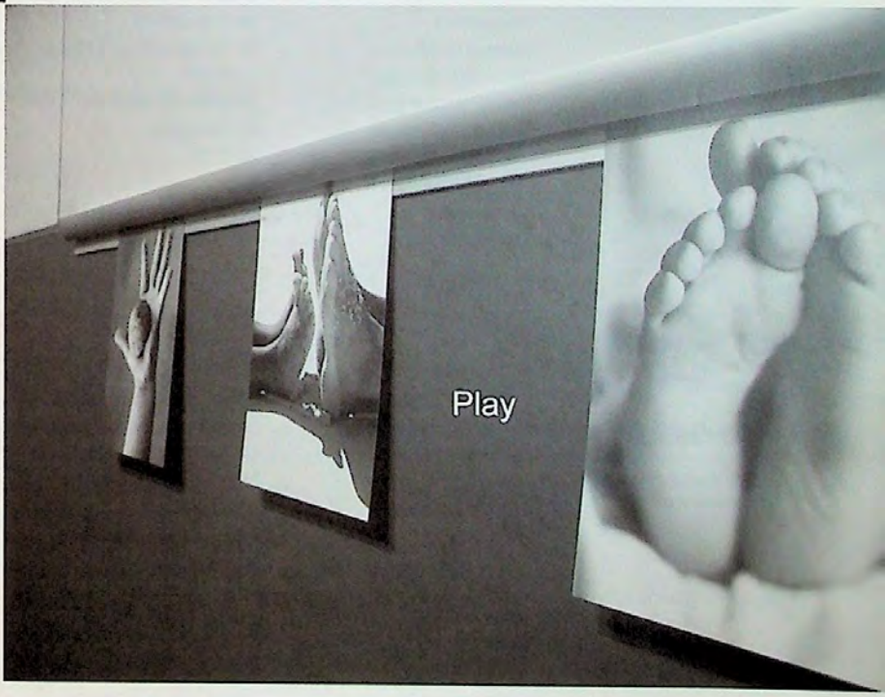

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THE ARCHITECTURE + DESIGN REVIEW OF HOUSTON

A PUBLICATION OF THE RICE DESIGN ALLIANCE

72 FALL 2007

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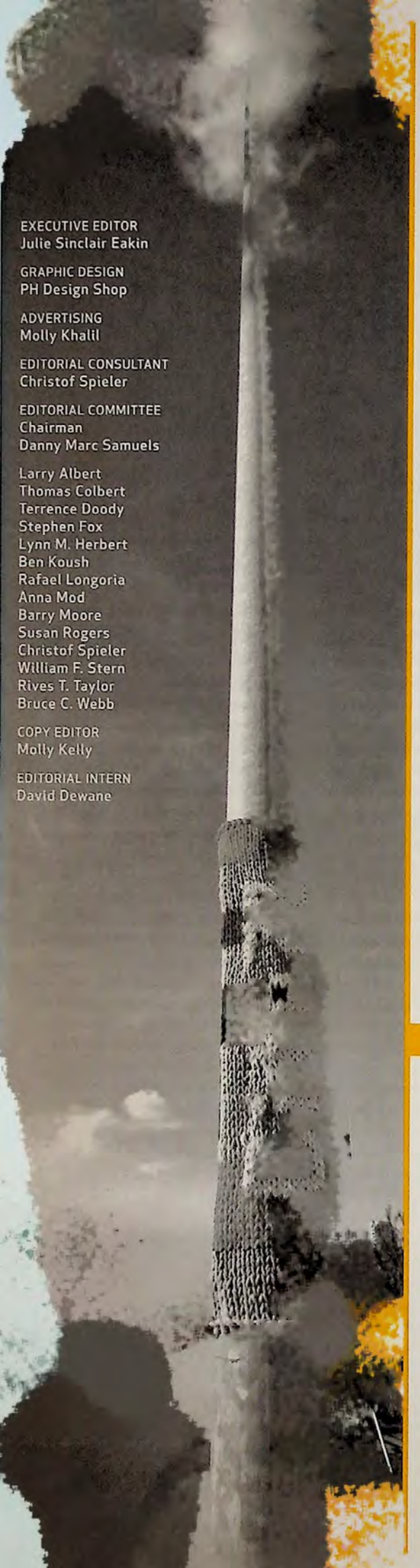
The Rice Design Alliance, established in 1972, is a nonprofit educational organization dedicated to the advancement of architecture and design. **Web site: rda.rice.edu**

COVER: Knitta takes on a freeway overpass bridge in Houston.



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CONTRIBUTORS

David Crossley is president of the Gulf Coast Institute, whose mission is to improve the quality of life in the Houston region. He has spoken and written extensively about transportation and urban growth.

Julie Sinclair Eakin is executive editor of *Cite*. Her freelance design writing appears in *Cabinet* and *I.D.* magazines.

Eric Hester is a recent Rice University graduate in visual art who works as a photographer and craftsman. Only the varied assignments, odd jobs, and pet projects can satisfy his creative wanderlust. Eric relishes the lack of a desk job but finds it ironic that he spends hours staring at computer screens.

Ben Koush works for DMJM Rottet and is a founding member of Houston Mod.

Anna Mod is a cultural resources specialist with SWCA Environmental Consultants and a visiting associate professor at Prairie View A&M University. She works with municipalities, community organizations, architects, and developers to support the rehabilitation of historic buildings.

Christopher Olivier is a self-taught artist and native Houstonian. He works in photography and sculpture, using electronics as source material and has participated in numerous exhibitions and juried shows.

PH Design Shop is a graphic design and marketing communications studio. It sells a unique selection of cards and stationery in its South Shepherd Drive retail store, which adjoins a cupcake emporium.

Marci Perry is president of the First Ward Civic Council and a member of the boards of Super Neighborhood 22, Avenue CDC, Citizen's Transportation Coalition, and Buildings to Standards Board 4.

Tom Rusteberg is an interior architect at DMJM Rottet. He has valued his role as an observer since he can remember.

Susan Rogers is the director of the Community Design Resource Center at the University of Houston's Gerald D. Hines College of Architecture, where she is also a visiting assistant professor.

Michelangelo Sabatino is an assistant professor at the University of Houston's Gerald D. Hines College of Architecture. His articles appear in journals such as *Casabella*, *Harvard Design Magazine*, *Places*, and *JSAH*.

Christof Spieler is an Associate Vice President with Matrix Structural Engineers and a board member of the Citizens' Transportation Coalition. He writes about transportation at ctchouston.org/blogs/christof.

The Harris County Civil Courts Building, circa 1910.

PRESERVATION

COURTING CHANGE

Resurrecting the Historic Harris County Courthouse

LIKE MANY OF THE OTHER 225 TEXAS COURTHOUSE buildings that are 50 years old or older, the Harris County Civil Courts Building, built on land set aside in the Allen Brother's 1836 town plat, has suffered from a malady afflicting historic structures statewide: deferred maintenance and unsympathetic alterations. Charles Erwin Barglebaugh, of Lang & Witchell in Dallas, designed the cruciform-plan, Beaux Arts-style building in 1910. A welcome latecomer to the Texas Historical Commission's Historic Courthouse Preservation Program, the building underwent selective demolition and hazardous material abatement this past spring and summer; restoration of the exterior and interior public spaces and the rehabilitation of additional interiors is imminent.

The acceptance of the courthouse into the Courthouse Preservation Program (established in 1999 by the Texas Legislature and Governor George W. Bush) three years ago occasioned the funding of $500,000 for a preservation master plan, a document that details the building's historical and architectural development, provides an evaluation of existing conditions and rehabilitation recommendations, and includes an outline for the continued use of the building.

When the building opened, it was the fifth Harris County courthouse at this location. Remodeled to house the Civil Courts in the 1950s, when the (recently renovated) Moderne-style Harris County Courthouse was constructed nearby, the five-story structure has a raised basement, four symmetrical pedimented façades with paired Corinthian columns, and grand staircases rising to an elevated first floor. Inappropriate changes made in response to technological shifts and office space needs over the years included filling in the central rotunda (in 1955), removing exterior and interior staircases, compromising load-bearing walls, and installing floor and ceiling coverings. The result was a severely altered historic structure.

The Houston architectural office of PGAL leads the current restoration team, with ArchiTexas as the historic preservation architect and Walter P Moore as structural engineer. In specific preservation zones of the building, a strict restoration philosophy will be implemented: If the missing feature existed in the building in 1910, it will be restored if extant, or reconstructed where missing; existing elements added after 1910 will be removed. Outside of the preservation zone, in secondary, tertiary, and non-public spaces, utilitarian office requirements will result in drop ceilings to facilitate HVAC and other cabling to all areas of the building.

Preparation for the selective demolition and hazardous material abatement necessitated study of the original architectural drawings combined with onsite inspection of visible elements and allowed for establishing preservation zones. As it became clear that not all elements shown on the original drawings had actually been constructed, the preservation architects looked to Cooke and Johnson counties, where Lang & Witchell had designed similar courthouses, to garner clues about the missing features and materials. While the 1915 hurricane destroyed the dome window on the Harris County courthouse, fortunately the skylight of Cooke County's courthouse is similar in scale, proportion, and appearance. Elements rediscovered when the drop ceilings and vinyl flooring were removed include significant portions of the original courtroom plasterwork on the fifth floor, door and window moldings, and the original mosaic floor tile.

Each pedimented façade originally had a grand staircase that took visitors from the street level to above the raised basement and into the rotunda. Over time, the staircases facing San Jacinto and Fannin streets were removed and the rotunda enclosed. These two important exterior staircases will be reconstructed and the rotunda restored using the original architectural drawings. Although the county jail original to the building will not be returned, window bars will remain as a physical memory.

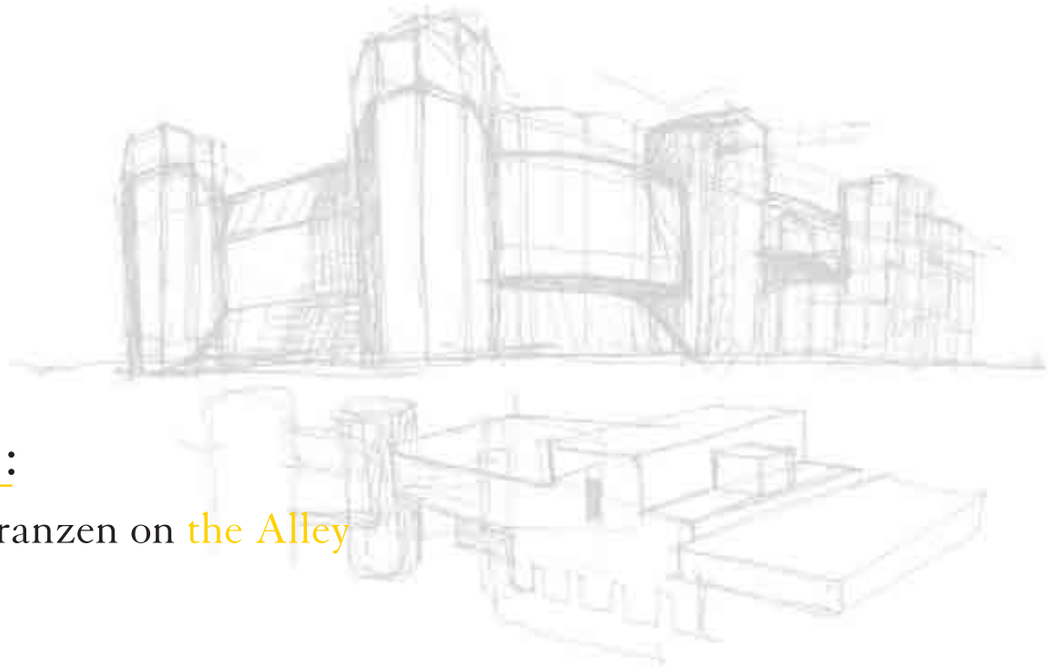
Of six original courtrooms in the building, two large examples with viewing and seating mezzanines will be closely restored to their historic configurations and furnishings, with an allowance for new systems to accommodate the court's modern functions. An original bench from a public area will be replicated throughout the building, and elevators will be returned to their original locations.

Missing elements on the exterior to be reconstructed include the terracotta balustrade and light posts and the terracotta tiled pediment roofs. The original windows, wood casement or sash with prismatic glass, will be replaced with an insulated wooden window of the proper historic proportion and appearance, but with metal cladding and insulated glass. The replacement windows will also be operable but will be fixed with a set screw, an easily reversible intervention needed to address current safety codes.

In the end, the building will be a credible and notable piece of early 20th-century civic architecture, well deserving of its place among Texas's historic courthouses and a source of pride for demolition-minded Houston.

– Anna Mod

COURTESY OF THE HOUSTON METROPOLITAN RESEARCH CENTER (ABOVE, LEFT); COURTESY OF THE FRANCES LOEB LIBRARY, HARVARD GRADUATE SCHOOL OF DESIGN (ABOVE, RIGHT); EZRA STOLLER (RIGHT).



Q + A:

Ulrich Franzen on the Alley

THE ALLEY THEATRE, BY ULRICH FRANZEN & ASSOCIATES, WILL SOON TURN 40.

In 1968 the doors of Houston's new downtown dramatic arts venue, the first large-scale cultural building designed by Franzen, opened under the charismatic leadership of founder and artistic director Nina Vance. The Alley's kinetic qualities—seen in the ascending external steps that respond to grade changes on the site, and the monumental internal stair that spirals up to the second-floor lobby and theater—lend drama to the theater-going experience while recalling the Guggenheim Museum. The use of exposed cast-in-place concrete instead of travertine as the Alley's finished surface gives the building a sense of irreverent permanence not unlike Boston's City Hall, by Kallman McKinnell & Wood, also from 1968. Its free-form overhangs and terraces recall the sculptural qualities of such other contemporary New Brutalist buildings as Paul Rudolph's Temple Street Parking Garage in New Haven. This bold yet humane building—a castle of sorts, replete with watchtowers—bears testimony to Franzen's interest in robust Romanesque architecture as well as to the Alley's reputation as an avant-garde repertory theater working against the grain to enrich Houston's cultural life through intelligence and wit.

After decades of practice in New York City and teaching at Yale University's School of Architecture, Ulrich Franzen retired to New Mexico, where he claims, like others before him, to have discovered the authentic America of the Southwest. I recently interviewed him there in the house he designed.

– Michelangelo Sabatino

TOP: **Franzen's sketches of the Alley Theatre.**
ABOVE: **The Alley upon completion in 1968.**

WHO WERE THE PROTAGONISTS IN THE ALLEY'S BUILDING CAMPAIGN?

The Ford Foundation was crucial; they selected the architects. Nina Vance became very friendly with Wilson McNeil Lowry, the man who really determined that the foundation would promote a repertory theatre movement in the United States. The Guthrie Theater in Minneapolis, designed by Ralph Rapson in 1963 and run from the late '60s by the actor/director Douglas Campbell, had set Lowry off to the importance of repertory theater in America.

WHAT ROLE DID NINA VANCE PLAY?

Nina Vance was the building's heroine. She wanted an interpretation of the next step in her art and wanted to go beyond the theater-in-the-round as it was then understood. Nina wanted a setting in which it was possible for the action to surround the audience. That is why we designed the smaller open stage and an auditorium with ramps.

WHAT WERE SOME OF YOUR BASIC CONCERNS DURING THE DESIGN PROCESS?

There is something special about Texas. I thought that Jones Hall being built before the Alley was importing a Lincoln Center attitude to a place with very special qualities, and it seemed like a terrible thing to do. My idea was to build something that represented not just Texas but the Southwest, with touches of Mexico. Jones Hall is exactly what I think you shouldn't do in Houston if you want to have a building that is preoccupied with culture and life.

WHY IS THERE A DRIVEWAY THROUGH THE BUILDING?

Houston is not very pedestrian friendly. I wanted the building to be inviting for people coming in. I didn't think the surrounding area was that welcoming. One of the requirements the theater group had was that they wanted people to be able to drive in and buy tickets. That is why we designed a driveway through the building.

WHAT PROMPTED YOU TO CHOOSE CAST-IN-PLACE CONCRETE?

I wanted something that was permanent and with a sense of history about it in terms of the material. I don't think I would have used stone. Concrete was employed in a fairly sophisticated way. For the Alley, the concrete is very structural—it's used for enormous spans and curves. It is a very complex building structurally.

WHAT WOULD YOU LIKE THE FUTURE TO HOLD FOR THE ALLEY THEATRE YOU DESIGNED?

I would be very unhappy if they tried to change the Alley. To me it's like making a church glitzy. Who would think of that? I'm not religious, but a theater like the Alley tries to capture the spirit of that part of the world and celebrate it. To jazz it up would be a terrible thing. Just clean the outside surfaces up with some vinegar and water!

CALENDAR FALL07.cite

LECTURES

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GERALD D. HINES COLLEGE OF ARCHITECTURE
FALL LECTURE SERIES
3 p.m.
arch.uh.edu; 713.743.2400

JAMES TIMBERLAKE, KIERAN TIMBERLAKE ASSOCIATES
Philadelphia
September 11

CHRIS REED, stoss LANDSCAPE URBANISM
Boston
September 25

ADA TOLLA + GUISEPPE LIGNANO, LOT-EK
New York City
October 2

JINHEE PARK, SINGLE SPEED DESIGN
Boston
October 23

EDWARD R. FORD, DETAILS OF MODERN ARCHITECTURE
Richmond
November 6

RDA FALL LECTURE SERIES:
DESIGN ACTIVISM
The Museum of Fine Arts, Houston,
Brown Auditorium
7 p.m.
rda.rice.edu; 713.348.4876

ROBERTA FELDMAN, CITY DESIGN CENTER
Chicago
September 10

BRYAN BELL, DESIGN CORPS
Raleigh
September 19

JOHN PETERSON, PETERSON ARCHITECTS; FOUNDER, PUBLIC ARCHITECTURE
San Francisco
September 26

RANDY HESTER, UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA
Berkeley
October 3

CAMERON SINCLAIR, DESIGN FOR HUMANITY
Sausalito
October 10

EXHIBITION

HOUSTON WILDERNESS: A COLLABORATION
More than 50 photographs offering unique interpretations of the diverse eco-regions encompassing and surrounding Houston.
The Museum of Fine Arts, Houston
September 22, 2007 to January 6, 2008
houstonwilderness.org; 713.524.7330

TOURS

16TH ANNUAL OLD SIXTH WARD VICTORIAN HOME TOUR
October 21. Tour Houston's oldest intact Victorian neighborhood, founded in 1877.
old6ward.org; 713.446.5085

2007 AIA HOUSTON HOME TOUR
October 27 and 28, noon – 6:00 p.m.
Tickets for the nine architect-designed houses are $25.00.
Featured architects include: Allen Bianchi, Framework Design, Glassman Shoemake Maldonado Architects Inc., HarrisonKornberg Architects, Intexure Architects, m + a architecture studio, MC2 Architects, Metropolitan Design Group, Robertson Design Studio
aiahouston.org; 713.520.0155

Single Speed's Sasaki Foundation exhibition design, Boston Architectural College. UH lecture October 23.

LETTERS

CITE 71

The [hurricane] issue gave *Cite* greater relevance and, I am sure, raised awareness, questions, and challenges for its diverse readership. This seems to be exactly what the mission of *Cite* and RDA should be in facing the future of the metropolis in general, and the Bayou City in particular. Moreover, the new format and design communicate this content coolly, clearly, and compellingly. Combined with the renewed editorial direction, the design brings *Cite* into the 21st century in style and raises the standard of the journal to the next level.

Christopher Hight
Assistant Professor, Rice School of Architecture

The Hurricane issue just arrived and it looks great. Amazing cover!

William Menking
Editor, *The Architect's Newspaper*

Last night was the first time since student days when I have read *Cite* cover to cover in a single sitting. #71 is wonderful, and alarming. Andrei Codrescu's reflections are a delight; "Data Central" is the sexiest centerfold I've seen in a long time; the student and churchgoer in me loves learning of the Katrina Furniture Project in NOLA; and the back-page Alexander Hamilton quote is almost as powerful as the embossed cover. *Cite* continues to deliver.

Lonnie Hoogeboom
Natalie Appel + Associates Architects

I am enjoying this new look, and content, of our beloved *Cite*. It is the most visually sophisticated, coherent, and meaningful issue in a long, long time. More power to the press!!

Paul Hester
Artist/Teacher, Department of Visual and Dramatic Arts, Rice University

Having grown up in Baytown, where my childhood home straddles the blue and gray zones of your map on page 31 of the latest *Cite*, I am very intrigued by this issue. This is the first time I feel compelled to read every article! Great job!!

Ed Shoemake
Vice President, The Staubach Company

LET US HEAR FROM YOU. Please send your comments about *Cite* to julie.eakin@rice.edu.

CORRECTIONS.
Cite 70: The photos on pages 38 and 39 were taken by Nash Baker.

Cite 71: In the table of contents, the *Texas City* article should have been credited to Bruce C. Webb.

American Embossing, of Houston, created the custom sculptural die for the cover of the Hurricane Issue.

NEWS

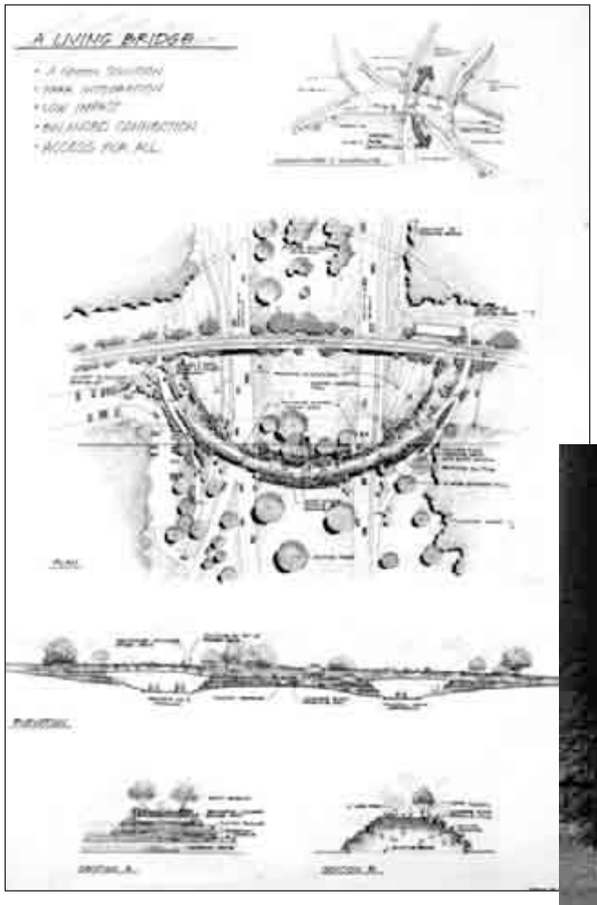
FALL 07 DESIGN CHARRETTE _ SUSTAINABLE, AFFORDABLE HOUSING COMPETITION _ RDA GOES TO BUENOS AIRES _ RDA 07 GALA

BRIDGING THE PARK

Last month, 25 teams took part in the 7th annual RDA Partners all-day design charrette, Bridging the Park, with support from the Memorial Park Conservancy and the Houston Parks and Recreation Department. Participants were challenged to propose a design to unite the north and south parts of Memorial Park, Houston's largest, via a pedestrian bridge. They were to design a link that will serve as a landmark for the city and also connect segments of an existing bike path along Memorial Drive.

The winning design, by a team from Clark Condon Associates (Rebecca Bailey, Chris Golden, Jamie Hendrixson, Brian D. Roth, Lindsay Landers, and Paul Weathers), thoughtfully considered the site both from a landscape perspective and in terms of usability and functionality within the larger park plan. Honorable mentions went to teams from architects DMJM Rottet and PGAL, and to a team of UH students (Fizza Hasan, Jasleen Sarai, Preetal Shah, and Laura Vargas).

Judges were Heidi Eagleton, architect with Royse/Eagleton; Rafael Longoria, board member of RDA and Memorial Park Conservancy, and architect with Longoria/Peters; Joe Turner, director of the City of Houston Parks and Recreation Department; and Larry Whaley, president of Haynes Whaley Associates, Inc., structural engineers.



Bridging the Park charrette's winning design.

RDA HOMETOWN TOUR

In June, RDA members gathered in front of the Casa Dr. Pedro Domingo Curutchet, designed by Le Corbusier, in Buenos Aires, Argentina. Upcoming tours include San Francisco in February and Berlin in May. For information on both, visit rda.rice.edu.

THE 99K HOUSE COMPETITION

The Rice Design Alliance and AIA Houston announce a two-stage national competition to design a sustainable, affordable house that addresses the needs of the low-income family in the Gulf Coast region. The competition objectives are to broaden awareness of green building strategies applicable to affordable housing, to generate and publicize practical examples of these houses, and to construct an exemplary house prototype.

The competition committee challenges designers and architects to design a sustainable, affordable house for a specific Houston residential lot. Special consideration should be given to affordability, longevity, energy savings, and appropriateness for Houston's hot, humid climate. A site has been donated in the Fifth Ward, a residential area east of downtown, where the winning design will be built.

The competition is a two-stage project to be completed in 2008. Stage I will be an international design competition for a 1,200-1,400 SF single-family house with no more than three bedrooms and two bathrooms. The construction budget is $99,000. Deadline for submissions is January 14, 2008. The Jury will select three finalists who will each receive a stipend of $5,000 and will be expected to produce construction drawings.

For more information and to register, go to the99khouse.com.

Green Matters, Green Works!

THE RICE DESIGN ALLIANCE'S 2007 GALA

Saturday, November 3, 7:00 p.m. until midnight
One and Two Allen Center, 1200 Smith at Dallas Streets, Houston

The Rice Design Alliance's 2007 Gala will honor longtime Houston environmental activist, Sadie Gwin Blackburn. A descendant of Harvey Allen (the younger brother of Houston's founders, for whom Allen Center was named), Mrs. Blackburn has a legacy of raising environmental awareness in Houston and leading efforts to preserve the city's parks, bayous, and gardens.

The evening will celebrate architecture that is environmentally friendly and sustainable. Guests will have the opportunity to learn about the importance of green building practices while dining, dancing, and viewing auction items.

Gala Chairs	Andrea and Bob Crawmer
Underwriting Chair	Kimberly Hickson
Auction Chair	Austin James
Environment Chairs	Eric Ragni and Scott Strasser

It is anticipated that 1,000 architects, design professionals, engineers, contractors, developers, and RDA members will attend this popular annual event. Funds raised will support the 2008 RDA programs and its journal, *Cite*.

For ticket information, please call Mary Swift at **713.348.5670**.

COURTESY CLARK CONDON ASSOCIATES (LEFT); LINDA SYLVAN (RIGHT)

Dealing with DENSITY

CONSTRUCTING THE CITY'S LEGACY TAKES CARE AND A LITTLE CLAIRVOYANCE

BY 2035, THE HOUSTON AREA WILL GROW BY 3.5 MILLION PEOPLE. THAT'S THE FORECAST FROM THE HOUSTON-GALVESTON AREA COUNCIL (HGAC), and while there may be argument about the numbers, there's no doubt the region continues to become more populous. The big question is how Houston will grow. There are fundamentally two choices: Extend outward or densify inward. The former has been the pattern for 150 years, but it comes with high costs. Low-density housing takes up vast tracts of land, requires significant new infrastructure, and forces residents to drive more and more just to meet everyday needs. The HGAC extrapolates current trends and predicts the loss of virtually all open space in Harris County, including wildlife habitats in the Katy Prairie, an increase in driving from 26 miles a day to 30 per person, doubled commute times, and 32,000 lane miles of new road and highways to accommodate that scenario.

The alternative to sprawl is more density in the existing urban fabric, and while that's been happening for over a decade now, in the form of townhouses in the Heights, Uptown condominium towers, downtown lofts, and Montrose apartment complexes, it is not a result of planning. Most of the region's infrastructure spending goes to the suburbs, and city ordinances make it more difficult to construct urban building types than suburban ones. Instead, urban growth is the result of market forces, and, with more appropriate regulations, we could easily have more. Some people will always want to live in the suburbs, but there are many who would rather live closer in given the opportunity.

Denser development means not as much loss of green space, requires less infrastructure, is easier to serve with high quality transit, and reduces commute times. HGAC examined an alternative to the future sketched above, concentrating growth in existing urban areas, and found 25 percent greater transit use, 10 percent fewer vehicle miles traveled, less impact on floodplains, and better air quality.

But growth puts strains on the existing fabric. New development can mean less tree canopy, more cars on the streets, fewer places to park, more demand on parks, and new buildings looming over old ones. As more neighborhoods are feeling these effects, political pressure increases for additional constraints on growth. It is entirely within the power of the City of Houston to slow or stop new development within city boundaries. But nobody short of the state legislature can limit regional growth. The formula is simple: Every two units of housing that aren't built in the city mean an acre of open space lost on the outskirts. A better answer, it would seem, is to densify intelligently.

Urban density poses important questions: What building types are appropriate? What kind of infrastructure do we need? And how do we make decisions about growth? In this issue of *Cite*, we look at how these questions are being answered. Six new mixed-use projects will soon increase retail space inside the loop by 20 percent and add 3,600 residences—more than the number of houses built last year in the Woodlands, Cinco Ranch, and Sienna Plantation combined. METRO's transit plan is focused not on suburbs but on dense urban places, and the debate whether to put rail lines in city streets is only part of a broader question—how to use the public right of way. We see different answers in Downtown, Neartown, and the Rice Village.

The big issues are what kind of city we want to build, and who gets to decide. Who owns the street is being answered, in fact, street by street, project by project, by market forces, developers, neighborhoods, and multiple levels of government. Together, these entities are changing our city, sometimes slowly, sometimes abruptly, and figuring out the ground rules as they go. — *Christof Spieler*

Instant urbanism

Mixed-use lifestyle centers, coming soon to an intersection near you.

by Susan Rogers

In the coming decades Houston has essentially two choices: Grow out or grow up. We can continue to sprawl to the horizon in our predominant pattern of low-density development, or we can begin to generate activity in our cores, creating centers of concentration. One way to do this is to reassemble our city of spare parts by remixing office, retail, and residential uses into dense, walkable environments, a trend elsewhere in the U.S. While Houston has been slow to follow this lead, a string of mixed-use lifestyle centers is currently planned to spread across a swath running from downtown westward between Interstate 10 and the Southwest Freeway—and to provide centers and focus for an increasing number of our master- planned communities. Together these projects will add nearly three million square feet of retail, over a million square feet of office space, and over four thousand residential units, some in densities more than ten times the Houston average. In a city that has frequently been held up as a poster child for sprawl how will these new developments transform the way we live? And what kind of city can we hope to see in the future?

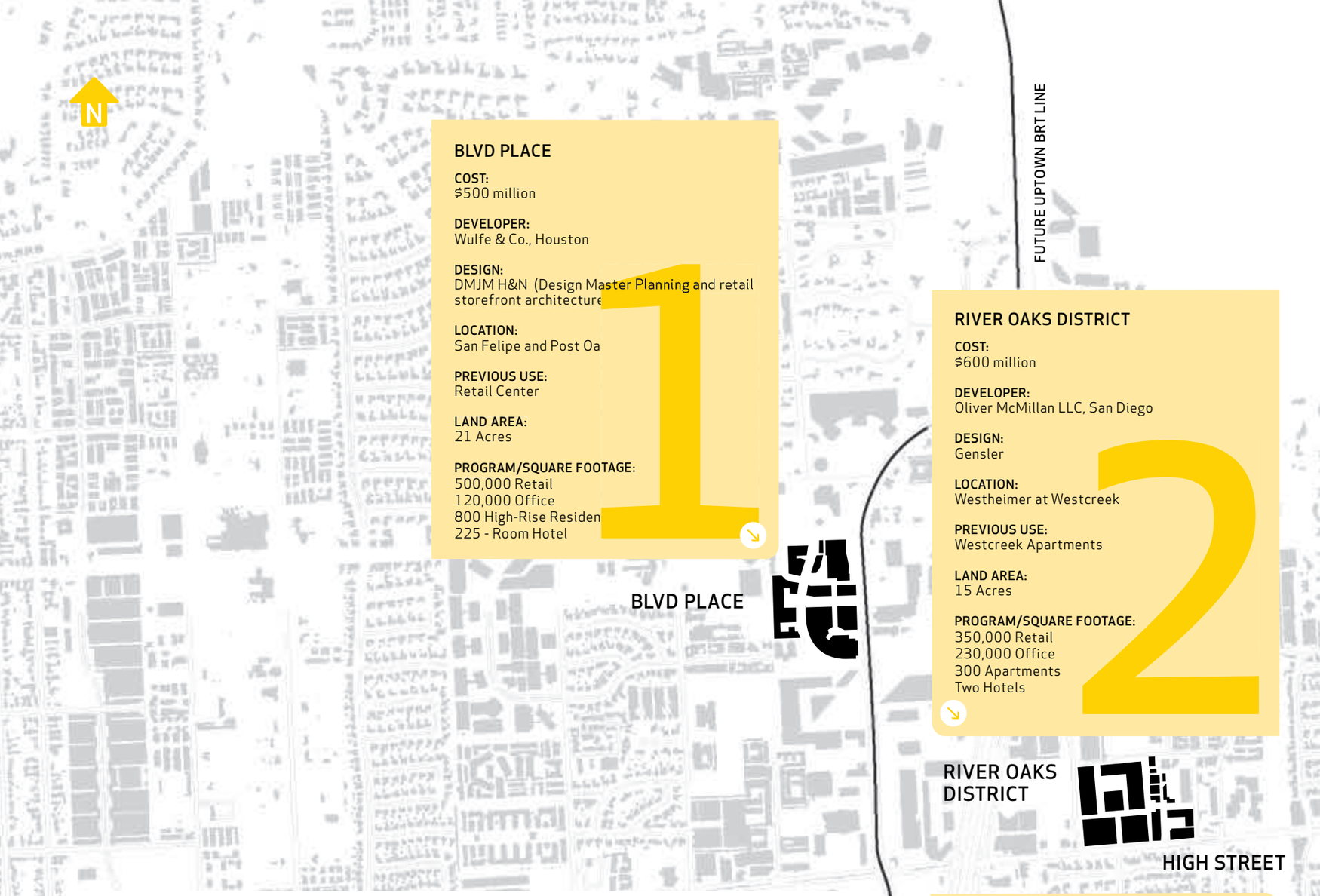
1 BLVD PLACE
2 RIVER OAKS DISTRICT
3 HIGH STREET
4 WEST AVE.
5 SONOMA
6 REGENT SQUARE

CHRISTOPHER OLIVIER

Throughout the U.S., large mixed-use projects are coming to market, boosting the density and renewing the diminishing luster of planned suburban developments, creating synergies in edge cities with a new infusion of living options, and redeveloping and filling in urban spaces. These projects take their cue from historic town centers, vibrant urban districts, "great cities," and the newly evolving marketplace of experience. Often defined as lifestyle centers, the new mixed-use developments recombine the spare parts of the city that have been left unassembled for decades. Looking backward as much as forward, the projects evoke both a mythical time—before the advent of automobile and information technology, when proximity, walkability, and density fostered community—and a mythical place, where leisure time eclipsed the daily grind.

Demographic shifts are supporting the trend toward high-density mixed-use living. Household sizes have dropped, and for the first time in U.S. history one-person residences outnumber family households; couples are having children later in life, the affluent are becoming even wealthier, and the demand for high-density "lock and leave" living is expanding. At the same time, suburban living is under attack as the main driver of sprawl, and urban living is held up as a sophisticated and intelligent choice. While the argument for density and against sprawl can support the case for mixed-use developments, the truth is that the largest motivator to these developments is green, the color of money. Boosted by the appeal of the urban lifestyle to young professionals and the deep pockets and discriminating tastes of empty nesters, the market for walkable, pedestrian-friendly "urban" environments is robust. This market demands luxury, location, and liveliness.

Clearly, the growing demand for urban living has had a large ripple effect on property values. The price of real estate in urban areas throughout the country, including inside Houston's Inner Loop, is steadily on the rise. As the wealthy pursue an urban way of life, and property values rise with the demand, suburban



poverty has for the first time in U.S. history eclipsed urban poverty. While dense, walkable mixed-use lifestyle centers, with their potential proximity to public transportation could provide an attractive living option for people of all incomes, because of market demand only the few can afford the steep price of admission. In the early 20th century, the suburbs and the federal largesse that funded them opened up homeownership to an expanded middle class and profoundly transformed our cities, many would say for the worse. Now, as urban areas become coveted, the populations that never benefited from this largesse are being pushed to the periphery, where living has become increasingly costly in terms of both time and energy. Increased demand for urban living, as evidenced by the mounting number of mixed-use centers, is driving dense, compact development and displacement.

Traditionally an urban typology, mixed-use development is no longer limited to cities; the market for these projects is as strong in suburban master-planned communities as in dense urban areas. There are two types of large mixed-use projects completed, under construction, or on the boards in Houston: those that seek to create and define a center where none currently exists and those that seek to capitalize on the synergies of existing centers. The former occurs in outlying areas and the latter in areas close to downtown in what has traditionally been defined as urban. Examples of the former include King's Harbor in Kingwood, The Woodlands Town Center, CityCentre, Sugar Land Town Center, Pearland Town Center, and LaCenterra at Cinco Ranch. "Center" and "Town" are recurring themes and illustrate the development goal of creating a focal point of activity for large master-planned communities. Examples of the latter include Sonoma, West Ave., Regent Square, River Oaks District, BLVD Place, and High Street, all located in existing areas of concentrated activity and use—the Galleria and Rice Village, for instance—though only one project, BLVD Place, is strategically located to take advantage of the light rail expansion.

In our super-sized era it is no surprise that many of these projects are very large. Upon completion, the five projects inside the Loop will comprise over 10 percent of all the rentable retail area within the Loop, adding 1 million square feet to the current 8 million available. Developers prefer big, contiguous sites to build big projects, with big risks but with the potential for big profits. This tendency generates two dilemmas: The first is related to two categories of development—small and incremental, or large

WEST AVE.

COST:
$100 million

DEVELOPER:
Urban Partners, D

DESIGN:
Looney Ricks Kiss

LOCATION:
Kirby and Westhei

PREVIOUS USE:
Retail and athletic

LAND AREA:
5 Acres

PROGRAM/SQUARE FOOTAGE:
180,000 Retail
380 Apartments

4

WEST AVE.

and cataclysmic. The former can create diversity, as Jane Jacobs so aptly pointed out, as buildings accrue over time: Aging buildings become affordable to small entrepreneurs, while new, better spaces draw in more established tenants, creating synergy, interest, and variety while also providing the opportunity for a continuous recycling of space, with the potential for both mixed uses and mixed incomes. Large developments occur all at the same time, and are most often targeted at a single market sector. For this reason success or failure of parts of the development can lead to success or failure for the entire project, as in any closed system. Furthermore, these large projects have a tendency to look the same and run the risk of attracting a homogenous population and reproducing the cookie-cutter monotony of suburban development. As Pallavi Gogoi recently wrote in *BusinessWeek*, "These [developments] give the impression of having less character, with an eerie sense of monotony, as the same pattern of storefronts, townhomes, and condos multiply across America. In a sense, their uniformity mirrors the very suburbs they escape."

Houston's upcoming projects range in size from 4 to nearly 150 acres. Some work to fit seamlessly into the existing fabric, and others are so large they create their own context. Sonoma is the smallest project planned inside the Loop; at just four acres, the seven-story project will sit amid the more intimately scaled buildings of the Rice Village. It will definitely be a landmark. Even before construction begins it has generated controversy and received its share of criticism from neighbors and critics alike. Regent Square, to be located on 24 acres at the intersection of Dunlavy and Allen Parkway, is the largest Inner Loop project. It will be completed in two phases, eventually including nearly 2,000 residential units and over 300,000 square feet of retail.

It might be suggested that the mixed-use lifestyle center is the logical conclusion to the rising eminence of shopping. From the arcades of Paris in the 19th century, to the department stores of the early 20th century, to the enclosed shopping malls of the mid-20th century, to today's open-air lifestyle centers, shopping has become the center of public life. The mixed-use lifestyle center turns the mall inside out and tacks on the convenience of living and working there. Major retailers are taking notice, and many of the same shops we once browsed in the air-conditioned comfort of the suburban mall are

"INSTEAD OF CREATING REAL PLACES, THESE URBAN COLLAGES—WITHOUT DEFERENCE TO HISTORIC OR GEOGRAPHIC AUTHENTICITY—SEEM MORE AND MORE TO BE CREATING IMAGES OF PLACES, IN WHICH ULTRA-MODERN STRUCTURES HIDE BEHIND PSEUDO-HISTORIC FACADES."

developing new "urban" store designs and lining up for tenancy. If these lifestyle centers owe more to the mall than to the rich, diverse, and lively urban districts that they seek to emulate, then public space might be at risk. It is already evident that many of the projects in Houston and elsewhere seek to privatize the spaces they borrow from great cities, spaces that were once public and open to debate and protest, non-conformity and social activity—streets, sidewalks, plazas. If public space is not truly public, we may have sacrificed freedom and autonomy for control.

The mixed-use lifestyle center is pre-packaged urbanity—instantly whole, "lively" and "luxurious." Spare parts are selectively borrowed from European urbanism—a piazza here, a plaza there, an Italianate archway, a cobblestone street, a sidewalk café—and recombined without deference to historic or geographic authenticity, resulting in collages of urban forms that, as Larry Millett writes in the *St. Paul Pioneer Press*, "Instead of creating real places, seems more and more to be creating images of places, in which ultra-modern structures hide behind pseudo-historic facades." But the packaging of mixed-use lifestyle centers is part of their success; the image, the prestige, the environment, the lifestyle are all for sale. "Timeless," "intimate," "luxurious," "upscale," "prestigious," and "trendsetting" crop up in the press releases for the major new centers in Houston. "Walkability," "quality of life," and "urban" are also recurring themes. "Those who choose to live, work, and stay here will have everything they could want right outside their door," states an advertisement for CityCentre. Residents can effortlessly fill their days relaxing at boutiques and spas and their evenings wine tasting and dining alfresco. While the centers create an atmosphere of luxury and leisure, it appears that life's more mundane needs—a gallon of milk, a screwdriver, dry cleaning—will often need to be met elsewhere.

The architecture of Houston's lifestyle centers is described as "traditional," "familiar," "sophisticated," "inspired," "historical," "Mediterranean," and "Tuscan." Architecture here is captive to the logic of the market, the demands of the client, and the tastes of the target audience. In fact, too many of the projects are typical modern structures wrapped in nostalgic, pseudo-historic façades constructed from synthetic stucco, evoking visions of someplace else in some other time: An advertisement for Sonoma boasts, "Inspired by the romance of Sonoma wine country, Sonoma evokes visions of historical Mediterranean and Tuscan architecture." In fact, at Sonoma floor plans are named after favorite wines—the Chardonnay is a one-bedroom unit, the Pinot Noir has two bedrooms, and the Beychevelle is a three-bedroom penthouse suite. Whether any of these projects will make the historic

SONOMA

DEVELOPER:
Randall Davis Company and Lamesa Properties

DESIGN:
Ziegler Cooper Architects

LOCATION:
Bolsover at Morningside

PREVIOUS USE:
Retail and Office

LAND AREA:
4 Acres

PROGRAM/SQUARE FOOTAGE:
125,000 Retail, Restaurant and Office Space
220 Residential Units

5

SONOMA

REGENT SQUARE

REGENT SQUARE

COST:
Over $100 million

DEVELOPER:
GID Urban Development Group, Boston

DESIGN:
David M. Schwarz/Architectural Services, Inc. Washington, D.C. (Master Planning/Urban Design) with select buildings designed by Robert A.M. Stern Architects, Morris Architects, Aponwao Design, B&D Studio, Hartman-Cox Architects, and Bowie Gridley Architects

LOCATION:
Bounded by Allen Parkway West Clay, Rosine and Tirrell

PREVIOUS USE:
Allen House Apartments

LAND AREA:
24 Acres

PROGRAM/SQUARE FOOTAGE:
Phase I –230,000 Retail and Restaurant
740 Residential Units
60,000 Office Space
200-Room Boutique Hotel

Later Phases –100,000 Commercial Space
1000 Residential Units

6

MAIN STREET LRT LINE

FUTURE UNIVERSITY LRT LINE (RICHMOND OPTION)

(WESTPARK OPTION)

registry in 50 years, as the River Oaks Shopping Center recently did, is yet to be determined.

The packaging is part and parcel of such projects, however, and while their wrappers differ, for the most part they look pretty much the same whether they are minutes from downtown or a short day trip to the suburbs. They have similar mixes of amenities—boutiques, fine dining, upscale grocery stores—though the suburban projects are more dependent on mid-scale franchises borrowed from the mall and are likely to include more convenience retail; the urban projects capture the more alluring high-end retailers and dining establishments. Though there is potential for these projects to foster density and synergies between work, leisure, shopping, and home, the greater, and as yet unmet, potential for these projects is to serve a broader range of lifestyles and incomes. I can envision a series of dense mixed-use centers, served by public transit, in neighborhoods such as Park Place and Pecan Park, Spring Branch and Pasadena. While the retailers might change, the impact on our way of living could be for the better, and perhaps we could even find a way to mix up incomes so the waiters can live down the street from the doctors and the retailers next to the lawyers, in a dense, vertically integrated neighborhood.

IF what Ada Louise Huxtable wrote ten years ago in *The Unreal America: Architecture and Illion* remains true, that "how and what we build encapsulates the life of an age; what we believe in and what matters to us," then how will we define our age? Will it be defined by enhanced urbanism and quality of life, by an end to sprawl and a more sustainable future, by opportunity and choice, by conflict between rich and poor, by the creative or the working class? The rising tide of mixed-use developments throughout the city and its suburbs is on the forefront of this debate, and the side that they are on is clear—more density, less sprawl, more luxury, less poverty, more urbanism, less suburbanism.

The instant urbanism of the lifestyle center is hot; it is one of the strongest products on the real estate market today. But what is the price? If we are not careful, what will emerge in this century is a divided city, with pockets of extraordinary wealth in our multiple centers and poverty in our sprawling peripheral landscapes, with little or no open space in between. Our urban and suburban neighborhoods that are home to these developments will become trite, predictable, and unaffordable to most, enclaves for a single class and a single lifestyle, a lifestyle of the rich and famous. And what we will have is not good urbanism but *luxurious urbanism*. c

STREET TALK

RETHINKING THE SPACE BETWEEN BUILDINGS CAN ACCOMMODATE GROWTH.

by **Christof Spieler**
drawings **Tom Rusteberg**

WHEN THE ALLEN BROTHERS LAID OUT DOWNTOWN Houston, they made half of it public property. That's not counting parks or stadiums or convention centers or theaters—those are recent developments. That 50 percent is what's in between all those places: the public street. And since 1835, we've been trying to figure out who owns it.

A street isn't just lanes for cars. It's a transit route, a bikeway, a pedestrian path, a parking lot, a park, a utility easement, and a venue for public expression. Fitting all of those uses into an 80- or 100-foot strip isn't easy.

In 1835, the streets were up for grabs. You walked wherever was least muddy, rode where you had room, parked anywhere there was space for your wagon. Since then, the trend has been toward more order: first wood plank sidewalks, then trolley tracks, utility franchises, traffic lights, and parking signs.

Outside of downtown, the quest for order has led to the modern suburban arterial: two lanes each way, a planted median, utilities underground, no parking, limited driveways, no sidewalk, no bus route, surely no homeless people, or protestors.

In the urban core, though, things are messier. Planners have been unable to legislate neatness—but that doesn't mean they haven't tried. For half a century after World War II, city policy on the streets in Houston, as elsewhere in the United States, gave priority to moving cars. In the quest for more efficient traffic flow, streetcar tracks were torn up, streets were made one way, no-parking signs appeared, street trees were cut down, and sidewalks narrowed. The policy, written and unwritten: Streets belonged to cars.

But the very things that traffic engineers hated—narrow streets, mixed uses, buildings without setbacks—turn out to appeal to the public. Places where planners didn't get their way—Montrose, the Heights, and the Rice Village—are booming. And downtown, where streets were made one way, lanes were widened, and parking was banned, lost its retail core and nightlife. The public doesn't really like streets that are designed only for cars.

With density increasing, rail transit returning to the streets, new pedestrian-oriented development, organized bicycle groups, and public demand for a more attractive, livable city, the streets are once again up for grabs.

Downtown has 15 fewer miles of traffic lanes than it did ten years ago, and nobody noticed—except for the pedestrians and the transit riders. That change is due to a massive reconstruction of downtown streets.

Giving public space back to pedestrians is a reversal of a 50-year trend. Consider this remarkable fact from William Whyte's 1990 book *City—Rediscovering the Center:* New York's Lexington Avenue between 57th and 61st carries 41,000 pedestrians a day and 25,000 people a day in cars, taxis, and buses. But the 38 percent of the people who use the avenue in vehicles are assigned 66 percent of the street right of way (5 lanes, or 50 of 75 feet between building fronts) while the 62 percent who walk are assigned only 16 percent of the right of way (the rest is taken up by poles, news stands, trash cans, subway entrances, and so forth). This is the city with the most pedestrians in the United States, with a business district where 75 percent of workers commute to jobs by transit, on an island where 78 percent of households do not own a car. Yet people who drive are assigned more than four times the real estate of people who walk.

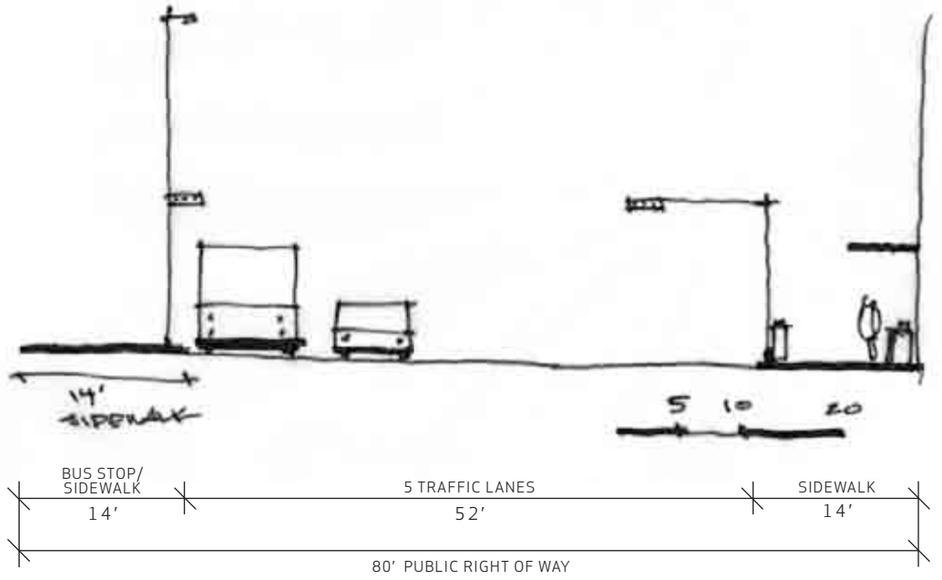
So how is it that in automobile-centric Houston, pedestrians got more space downtown?

Many of downtown's pedestrians are transit riders.

TRANSIT STREETS BEFORE

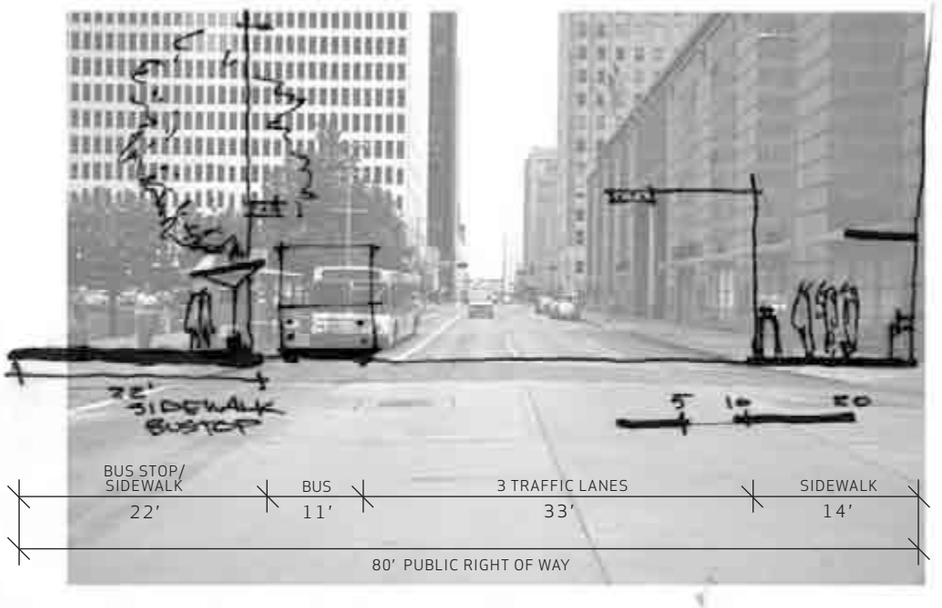
(MILAM LOOKING NORTH AT MCKINNEY)

WEST-EAST SECTION



TRANSIT STREETS AFTER

WEST-EAST SECTION



TRANSIT STREETS:

ARCHITECT:
Pierce Goodwin Alexander & Linville

CONSULTANTS/DESIGN FIRMS:
Clark Condon Associates, Inc.; Davis Associates, Inc.; Douglas/Gallagher, Ferro-Saylors; D.Y. Davis Associates, Inc.; Houston Downtown Management District; Llewelyn-Davies Sahni, Inc.; Rey de la Reza Architects; Slaney Santana Group; The SWA Group, Vitetta Group

COTSWOLD:

ARCHITECT:
Rey de la Reza, Architects, Inc.

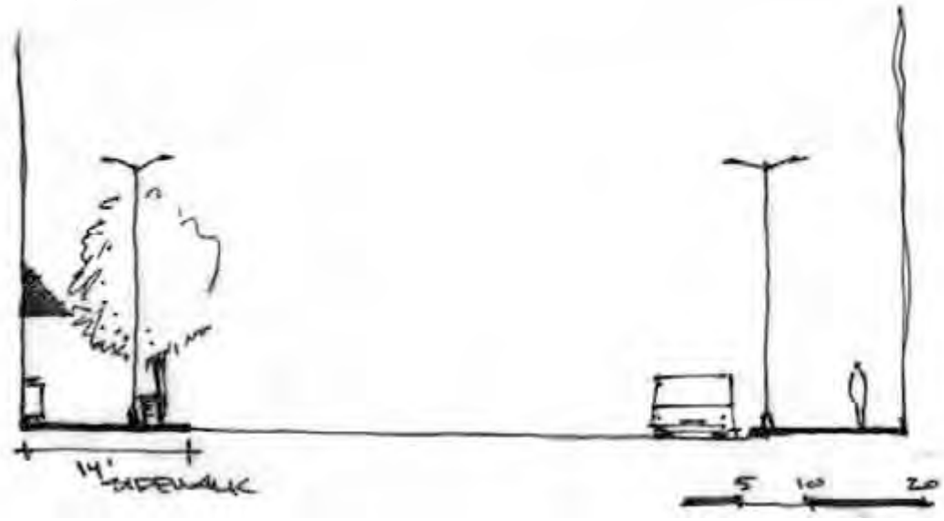
UNIVERSITY LINE:

TRANSIT PLANNING:
Carter & Burgess

COTSWOLD BEFORE

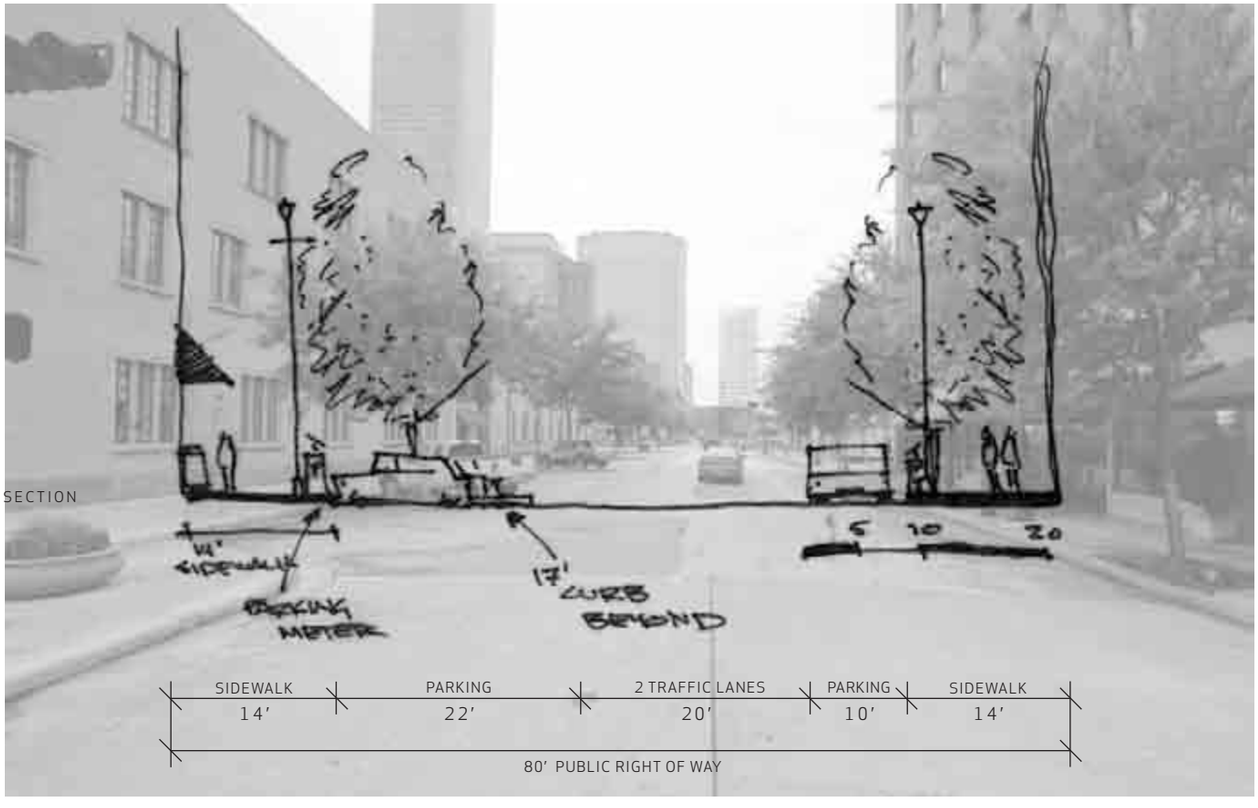
(PRAIRIE LOOKING WEST AT SAN JACINTO)

SOUTH-NORTH SECTION



COTSWOLD AFTER

SOUTH-NORTH SECTION



Over the last 20 years, METRO has built a successful suburban transit system using HOV lanes, park-and-ride lots, and plush coaches. That system carries 40,000 people a day, most of whom have the option of driving. Overall, 40 percent of the people who work downtown take transit. But they were waiting on narrow, crowded sidewalks. METRO's bus system needed better downtown stops.

Thus, unlike most street projects, the Downtown/Midtown Transit Streets Project was designed and funded as a transit effort, implemented by METRO and with 80 percent funding from the Federal Transit Administration. And—again, unlike most street projects—the entire street was reconstructed, from building line to building line.

Downtown got better infrastructure. Seven years of construction and $298 million bought new pavement, new storm drainage, new sidewalks, new street trees, new street furniture, and new bus stops over 314 blocks of 14 streets.

Downtown also got a reapportionment of the street. Two of the major streets rebuilt by the project—Travis and Milam—went from five traffic lanes to four. That freed up about 10 feet, which went into the sidewalks. The righthand sidewalk got a lot wider, enough to fit new bus stop shelters alongside a generous sidewalk. A similar reapportionment happened on Main Street. Here six lanes of traffic turned into two lanes of traffic, two lanes of transit, a lane of landscaping, and an extra lane of sidewalk. The displaced auto traffic shifted to Milam, Travis, Fannin, and San Jacinto streets, and, with the most successful new light rail line in the country (in terms of boardings per mile), Main Street is now carrying more people than ever. It's also a much better place to walk or sit at a sidewalk café.

For the first time in half a century—perhaps for the first time ever—downtown is now a pleasant place to walk. But the really remarkable part is that it isn't a more difficult place to drive than it was before. Traffic on Travis and Milam still flows, even at the peak of rush hour, a remarkable outcome for a 20 percent reduction in capacity. We've spent 50 years carving out more and more space for traffic lanes. In downtown Houston, it turns out, that traffic didn't really need the space.

Transportation planning usually focuses on movement. But cars spend most of their time parked. Where we put them does a lot to shape the city. In the Market Square area of downtown Houston, "modern" traffic planning created an area with lots of ways to get around but no place to go. Every street was five lanes, even though the traffic didn't warrant it. But there were significant parking problems: lots of short-term visitors to the courthouse complex who didn't want to walk a few blocks from a parking garage, and patrons of new restaurants and bars in old buildings without parking lots, who couldn't find a space.

The Cotswold Project didn't start as a parking solution. The goal was to revitalize the area, and the initial proposals were primarily pedestrian focused. In fact, the first plan, announced in 1997, was to get rid of cars altogether, and building a River-Walk-style canal down Congress Street.

But the parking demand was too strong to be ignored. In fact, it funded the $30 million project. The final plan: Five lanes of traffic became two, with diagonal head-in parking on one side and parallel parking on the other, nearly tripling the amount of parking. The resulting meter revenues were enough to float bonds to pay for the construction. They have funded not only the restriped parking but sidewalk extensions with decorative fountains at street corners, widened sidewalks elsewhere, new pavers in crosswalks, and pedestrian links to the bayou.

Urban street parking does triple duty. Obviously, it makes finding a space easier, which also makes operating a downtown business easier. Parked cars also help pedestrians to feel more secure by separating the sidewalk from traffic.

Rarely is the mechanism for allocating public space as direct as a parking meter. Street space is a limited resource. Charging for it encourages people to use it wisely, and raises money to improve the whole street. It's no accident that downtown Houston, where parking isn't free, has the highest public transit use in the city. It's also no accident that the Cotswold area, where parking is easiest to find, is among the most active parts of downtown.

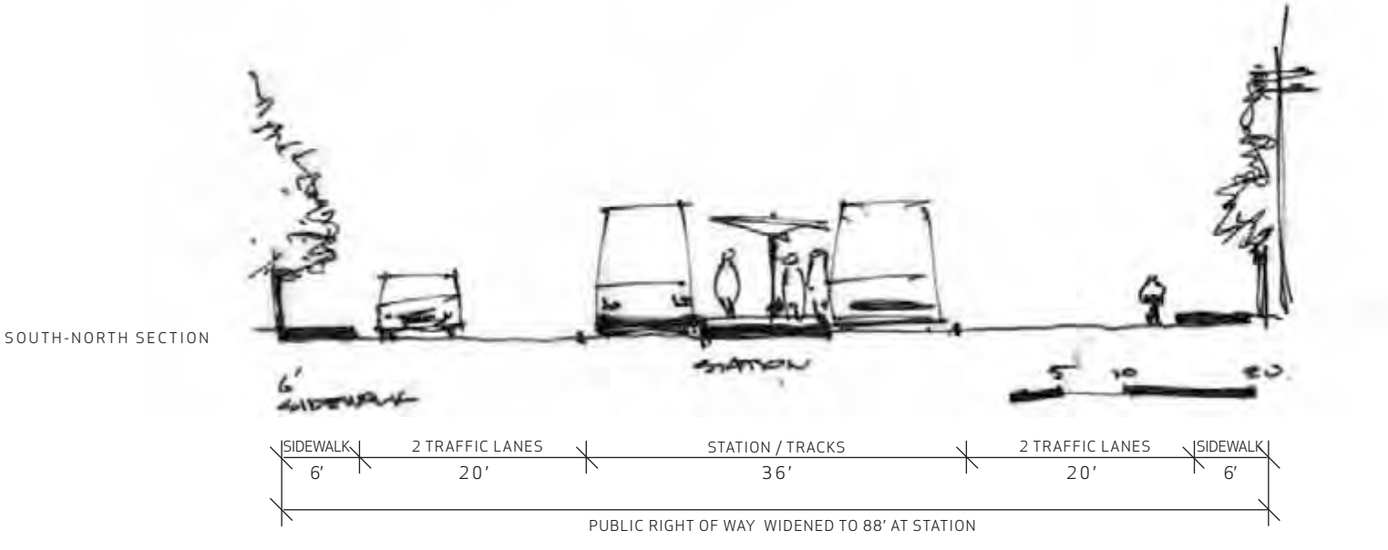
In August 2007, Houston City Council voted to sell one block of Bolsover Street in the Rice Village to the developers of Sonoma, a new mixed-use development, for $1.5 million. Thus, a street that once belonged to every citizen of Houston will soon be private property.

Street closing is not unprecedented; it's been done for owners as varied as Allen Center and St. Paul's United Methodist Church. But the track record of street closings isn't good. The worst problem is downtown, where the creation of the Toyota Center, the George R. Brown Convention Center, and

UNIVERSITY LINE EXISTING

(RICHMOND LOOKING WEST AT DUNLAVY)

UNIVERSITY LINE PROPOSED



Minute Maid Park has closed a third of the streets leading from downtown to the East End, constricting traffic and complicating transit plans.

Will closing Bolsover make the city a better place? Quite possibly. The proposed development will contribute stores, office space, residential units, and parking in the heart of one of the few walkable areas in Houston. The Village gets its vitality from density; more density should make it a more interesting place. Privatizing the street allows the developer to build parking underneath it and bring the surrounding buildings closer together. It is worth noting, though, that other, equally urban, mixed-use developments—Regent Square, BLVD Place, and West Ave—will actually build new streets, adding to the urban grid.

From a traffic standpoint, closing this one block will likely be no great loss. Most of the traffic in the area flows north-south, not east-west like Bolsover; most of the traffic on the street is local access. Bolsover is important for bicyclists and pedestrians as a quieter, safer alternative to Rice Boulevard, but that link will remain.

Still, every privatized street is a loss for the public realm. Private places like shopping malls and office developments can be regulated and restricted. A public street can't. You are allowed to be on a street whether you work there or not, whether you buy anything or not, whether you offend the adjacent businesses or not.

So the real danger is closing a block of Bolsover isn't traffic congestion; it's the loss of public access. But that loss is not inevitable when a street is closed. A sale can include conditions. In this case, one of those conditions might be a perpetual public access easement where the street is today, preserving the rights of people, if not the rights of cars.

A street can be remade without rebuilding it. A case in point: West Alabama Street. Before 2003, it was a neighborhood street. Then came a freeway construction project, and suddenly the street had a new purpose.

Widening and depressing U.S. 59 from Mandell to Main required three years of construction. City engineers concluded that the resulting backups would drive traffic onto local streets, and they made plans to accommodate it. Part of their solution: Make Alabama a dedicated commuter route. The bike lanes came out, replaced by a center lane that is inbound in the morning, outbound in the afternoon. To keep traffic flowing during rush hour, left turns are prohibited. Traffic lights are timed to maximize green lights for Alabama, leaving local cross traffic waiting as commuters pass. All the curbs remained in the same place; no pavement was added or changed, but Alabama became a different street.

It's possible that the repurposed street worked. Backups during spur construction were less than expected. But whether or not the new Alabama helped Sugar Land commuters, neighborhood residents—on foot, on a bike, or by car—had a harder time getting around. And, even with freeway construction finished, the street is still in its commuter configuration.

It's in the nature of a city that we all drive through other people's neighborhoods as we go about our lives. How much can we impose on them? Quite a bit, to judge from history. The pattern in Houston has been mobility at the expense of neighborhoods. Freedman's Town was demolished for Interstate 45, and Afton Oaks and Bellaire found themselves astride major thoroughfares as the city grew westward. But some neighborhoods have succeeded in stopping traffic: There is no Harrisburg freeway, and Kirby through River Oaks is still four lanes. Will the neighborhood around Alabama get its former street back?

THE FIRST MAPS OF HOUSTON SHOW STREETS SIMPLY AS THE EMPTY SPACE BETWEEN LOTS. IN SOME WAYS, WE STILL THINK LIKE THAT: WE SEE THE CITY FOR ITS BUILDINGS, NOT THE SPACES IN BETWEEN.

There's a fight under way on Richmond Avenue. But the real dispute isn't about light rail, it's about who owns the street.

Drivers on Richmond see red and blue signs demanding "No Rail on Richmond." Businesses are worried about construction driving away customers, about loss of access once the rail line is in, and about loss of their property to make space for tracks and stations. Some would have no objections to rail if their concerns are addressed; others are convinced that the project will inevitably doom their businesses. One of the latter has sued METRO in an attempt to stop all five new urban transit lines.

A block away, the signs in the front yards are green, and they read, "We want rail on Richmond." Every active civic club between Main Street and Shepherd along either Richmond or 59 has endorsed the Richmond option. Election results in these neighborhoods tell the same story: former state representative Martha Wong and Congressman John Culberson, both outspoken rail opponents, each got less than 20 percent of the vote, a significant drop from about 25 percent two years earlier, before the rail issue came up.

The question is, who gets a greater say, the businesses directly on the street, or the neighborhoods beyond? Rail opponents argue that it's the people directly on the street who should count. Culberson, in announcing his opposition to rail on Richmond, claimed that "97 percent of residents on or near Richmond" opposed the project. But he was only counting people who actually wrote his office, and only those directly on Richmond, not those one block away.

Of course the constituents with addresses on the street are only a small portion of the people who use it. Culberson counts 850 rail opponents on Richmond. Neartown, a civic organization that has endorsed rail on Richmond, represents 30,000 residents. Between 18,000 and 25,000 people a day drive on Richmond, and they come from all over the city. So will the 40,000 people who are expected to ride the rail line daily. Those who would benefit from rail on Richmond outnumber the opponents.

But unlike on West Alabama, the issue on Richmond isn't about accommodating suburbanites—the buses in the 59 HOV lane are the commuter service. Richmond rail will be there to get people in and out of the local neighborhoods, museums, and universities. With density increasing, it could be a valuable safety valve to accommodate more residents without more cars. And, once operating, rail will actually make access easier to the businesses that are now fighting it.

The issue is how to weigh the interests of different groups and find the best solution for the common good. Either extreme is dangerous: If we think only of the many we end up bulldozing neighborhoods; if we think only of the few, nothing gets built. The fight over rail on Richmond shows how hard finding this balance can be.

But, after over a year of debate, there are signs of hope: The contention has forced METRO into a planning process more public and more inclusive than anything that has ever happened over a Houston freeway, port, or airport expansion. The discussion has led to a better project. Of the six options still on the table for the University Line, three came from public input. METRO has also responded to the public by proposing ways to minimize the impact on businesses during construction. Had METRO pushed forward, the results would not have been as good.

The University Line debate may be a sign of things to come. As the city grows denser, competing interests get packed more closely together, and the demands on the public right-of-way increase. We can only hope that our collective political abilities grow accordingly.

The first maps of Houston show streets simply as the empty space between lots. In some ways, we still think like that: We see the city for its buildings, not the spaces in between.

But what happens in the public right-of-way shapes the city in powerful ways. The Cotswold and Transit Streets projects have changed what it's like to drive, park, walk, or take transit downtown. They have allocated the street more equitably, and in the process they have made the street a more pleasant place. There are signs that we are learning that lesson. The Uptown District's street improvements on Post Oak Boulevard have made walking easier in an area that was completely car-centered. The city of Houston's Urban Corridor Planning Process is based on the idea that the public right-of-way is central to remaking the city around transit corridors. Fifty years of assumptions about what streets are for and how they should look are being reconsidered.

The street is up for grabs again. But loosening the rules also makes life more complicated, creating a whole set of conflicts: cars versus people, locals versus commuters, businesses versus neighbors. It's clear on Richmond Avenue and Bolsover Street that these conflicts are not easy to deal with. But they are a necessary part of building a better city. Reshaping our streets also means reshaping the process by which these kinds of decisions are made. c

knit WIT

Homegrown talent takes its tactile message to the streets.

by **Julie Sinclair Eakin**

photography **Knitta**

IN MAY OF 2006, SATURDAY NIGHT LIVE'S "WEEKEND UPDATE" featured a news item about a local gang: Tina Fey announced that Houston-based guerrilla-knitting squad Knitta had been challenged by a Bronx counterpart, Los Crochets Locos.

Knitting came out of the closet and into mainstream circles at coffeehouses and bookstores in major cities a few years ago. This past summer, New York City's Museum of Arts & Design put on a popular exhibition, *Radical Lace and Subversive Knitting*, whose beautifully designed catalog makes a definitive case for elevating to art forms crafts that have long been considered hobbies. Featured artists hung tatted lace in dingy, vacated spaces to resemble spider's webs, knit banners with provocative political messages, a la Jenny Holzer, and produced large-scale, UFO-evoking sculptures of knitted steel fibers.

Knitta's output is more raw than those examples, a nod to the protest art of graffiti and its insistence on personalizing—and thereby claiming—public space. Its five members regularly take to the streets (usually at night) wherever they happen to be—Southwest Freeway overpasses, a bus in El Salvador, quayside along the Seine, New York City's Williamsburg Bridge—"tagging" objects or places they want noticed. When the group departs, the lowly car antennas, lamp posts, bridge railings, stop signs, and bike racks they've adorned demand to be reconsidered.

Knitta's mission is straightforward: to make things look better, albeit with an afghan-cum-Cat-in-the-Hat aesthetic. (Most of the yarn the group uses has a leftover, seventies-era vibe and comes donated from the stashes of fans.) If Knitta likes (or dislikes) something, leaving a handmade statement to that effect is "like giving a gift," as member PolyCotN says. Their preferred "crew" names intentionally promote the group's anonymity: GrannySQ, 24KpurlNekklas, Knotorious N.I.T., and MascuKnitity.

Mostly, Knitta's efforts are meant to mediate the hardness—literal and metaphorical—of the ubiquitous urban building materials city dwellers are inured to: glass, metal, and concrete. Knitta's contributions create intimacy in public spaces and serve as reminders that wherever its handmade artifacts are found, people exist nearby. The first project came about in the autumn of 2005, when PolyCotN was staring at the storefront of the Montrose clothing shop she owns and realized, "I wanted my door handle to be covered by knitted material." A stop sign down the street on Dunlavy followed, and the momentum hasn't slowed since. Press coverage posted on Knitta's Web site ranges from articles in *Time Out New York* to notices in magazines in Madrid and Berlin. Says 24KpurlNekklas, "I wish the other things we do got half as much attention." (Happily, no members have been arrested for their quick-witted makeovers—achieved speedily with the aid of plastic zip ties—although the police have occasionally "asked them to stop, nicely.")

In *The Death and Life of Great American Cities,* the late Jane Jacobs famously remarked, "Think of a city and what comes to mind? Its streets. If a city's streets look interesting, the city is interesting; if they look dull, the city looks dull." According to that logic, Knitta operates as a kind of urban ambassador, doing its part to make cities more interesting places, one stitch at a time. c

EL SALVADOR


LOS ANGELES


MONTREAL


SAN FRANCISCO

MONTREAL

SEATTLE

BADALING

SAN FRANCISCO

TRACKING

CHANGE

THE CURRENT WORD ON HOUSTON'S TRANSIT AGENDA

by **David Crossley**
photography **Eric Hester**

MANY HOUSTONIANS BELIEVE OUR NEXT-GENERATION TRANSIT STRATEGY IS NOT AS WISE OR USEFUL AS THAT CHOSEN BY DALLAS. THEY SAY THE MAIN STREET LINE IS A "TOY TRAIN" THAT GOES NOWHERE, THAT WE OUGHT TO BE DELIVERING SERVICE TO THE WOODLANDS AND SUGAR LAND INSTEAD OF INSIDE THE URBAN CORE.

It's true that Houston and Dallas are pursuing two very different strategies for high-capacity transit. Dallas's system is essentially suburban and Houston's is essentially urban. It's also true that Houston's approach is more cost-efficient, and that at the end of its first decade of service our high-capacity transit ridership will be greater than Dallas's.

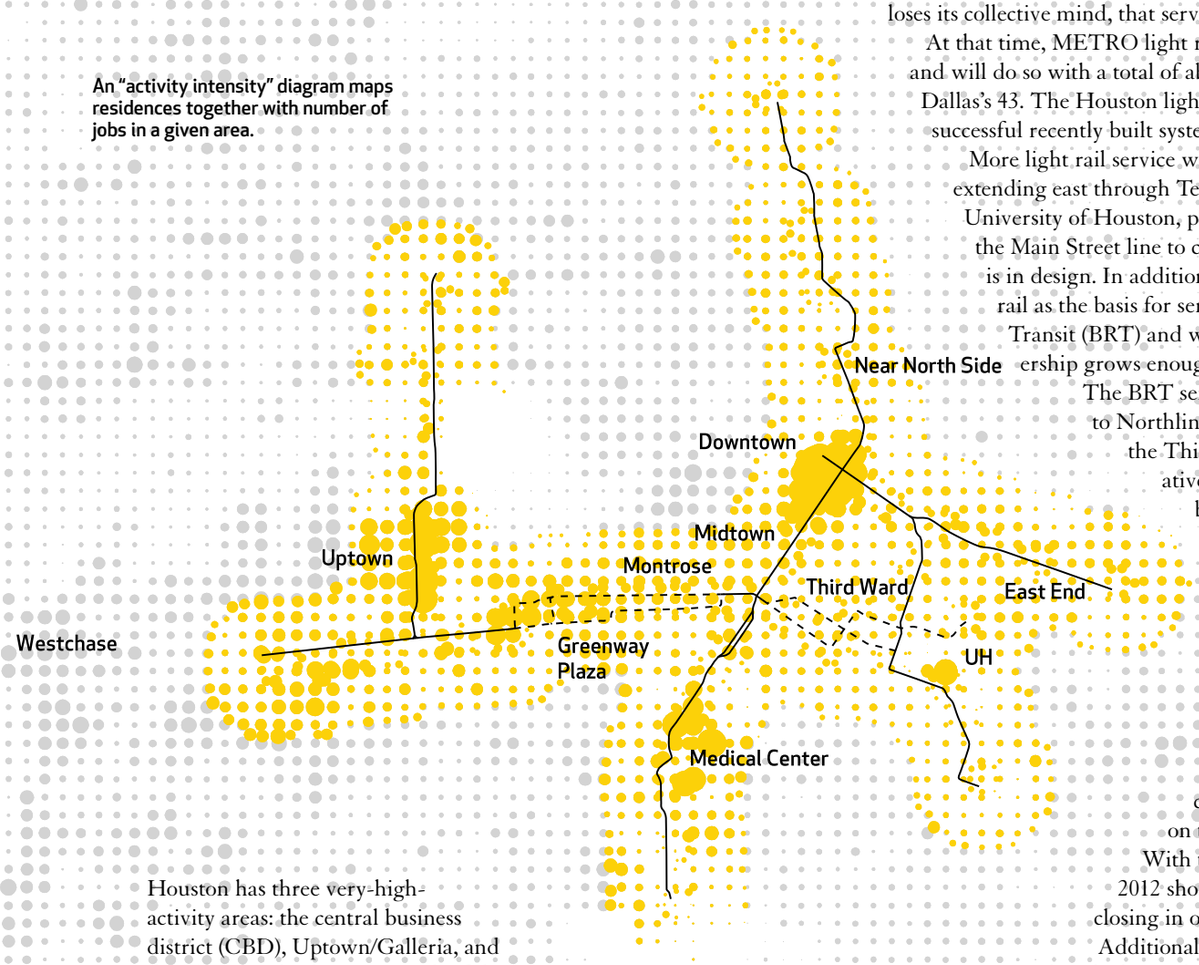
METRO operates in a defined service area that does not include The Woodlands, Sugar Land, and other big, busy places. This area is roughly two-thirds of Harris County with a few small extensions into places like Missouri City and Katy (both partly outside Harris County).

The Dallas Area Rapid Transit (DART) light rail system provides service from the central business

area to some of its suburbs. The system has spurred a lot of economic activity, while making it easier for many citizens of that region to opt out of congestion.

METRO has chosen a different strategy, which is to deliver service to as many people as possible as quickly as possible at the lowest cost. This means finding dense clusters of potential riders and connecting them together.

Modern demographic transit studies add the number of residents to the number of jobs in an area to reveal the "activity intensity" of places.



An "activity intensity" diagram maps residences together with number of jobs in a given area.

Houston has three very-high-activity areas: the central business district (CBD), Uptown/Galleria, and the Texas Medical Center. Each of those spreads out into secondary areas of activity, and those devolve into less intense areas and then into suburban "sprawl." In sprawl, areas of residential and other uses are separated and sparsely populated and thus inefficient for transit service—at least at the initiation of a high-capacity system.

METRO began its new, more sophisticated generation of transit service by connecting together the busiest, closest places in the service area. The central business district was the most intense, and the closest big one to it was the medical center. The first leg of the new system connected these two and extended southwest past Reliant Center to pick up more riders, enable a future connection to suburban areas, and get to relatively cheap land for a maintenance facility and a parking lot for suburban access.

In only two years, the 7.5-mile Main Street line has met its 2020 ridership goal. Because service was aimed at the lowest-hanging fruit in an intensely urban area, the Main Street light rail line is the most successful one in the United States in terms of ridership per mile.

Dallas light rail serves one major activity center and a series of suburban areas, and has six times more miles of rail than Houston. The Dallas lines get about 60,000 boarders a day; ours, 45,000 a day. Houston is three-quarters of the way to DART's numbers, with only 17 percent of the miles. We spent $350 million; Dallas spent $2 billion.

So what happens next? The last of the very large activity intensity centers is Uptown/Galleria. Along the way is another of the top six centers, Greenway Plaza. Bringing those two into the system is the intent of the controversial west side of the University line.

There were better alignments for the University Line than the best one still on the table, but early on those fell to other wielders of money and power. Even so, this one, on Richmond and Westpark, will provide good service. Unless the community loses its collective mind, that service will be available in 2012.

At that time, METRO light rail ridership will surpass Dallas's and will do so with a total of about 18 miles of track, again versus Dallas's 43. The Houston light rail system will continue to be the most successful recently built system in terms of ridership per mile.

More light rail service will begin by 2012, with the University line extending east through Texas Southern University and on to the University of Houston, plus a short extension on the north end of the Main Street line to connect to a new intermodal terminal that is in design. In addition, METRO will install about 20 miles of rail as the basis for service that will begin in 2011 as Bus Rapid Transit (BRT) and will make the transition to light rail if ridership grows enough to make that cost-effective.

The BRT service will extend Main Street service north to Northline Mall, east to the East End, and south to the Third Ward. With this service, two large, relatively low income inner-city areas will be brought into the high-capacity urban transit network. The East End is a mostly Latino community with tremendous drive and a creative master plan. The Third Ward is the source of about 25 percent of all transit trips in the region. Wealth and an educated population are concentrated on the west side of Houston; this new service offers a chance to create more wealth, and equity, on the east side.

With this core urban system in place, the end of 2012 should find METRO with an urban system closing in on 150,000 boardings a day.

Additionally, it can be argued that Houston already has the best suburban commuter transit system in the United States, which we got for an investment of $1 billion. The 115-mile park-and-ride bus service, based on a high occupancy vehicle (HOV) lane system, carries about 41,000 boardings a day, almost four times as much as the entire Dallas bus system.

No other region has such an extensive HOV-lane system. It is fast, comfortable, popular service, and that explains in large part why 30 percent of commuters going to the central business district do so by transit. But it only works well to go to that one place. Right now it is difficult or impossible to use the service to get to the Texas Medical Center, Uptown/Galleria, Greenway Plaza, Greenspoint, and Westchase.

JAY CROSSLEY

In 2012, that will improve radically when the park-and-ride system and the light rail/BRT systems connect. Transit service from places outside the core will become much more useful. In a sense, the park-and-ride system will then begin to do essentially what the Dallas light rail system does (but faster), and it wouldn't be surprising to see Houston's park-and-ride boardings rise to match those of the Dallas rail system.

However, it must be noted that Harris County has taken over Metro's HOV lane on Interstate 10. The county plans to do this on U.S. 290 as well. Besides reducing the number of ramps to HOV park-and-ride lots, there is a limit on how many buses a day can then use the new "managed lanes." One should probably assume this intent for every freeway as the two agencies add managed lanes everywhere. Over time, it appears that METRO could lose all of its investment in HOV lanes and, more importantly, lose all reserved right of way in the freeways, unless the public speaks out. Suburban transit service is a threat to land developers, and Harris County seems determined to diminish that threat.

The METRO Solutions plan approved by voters in 2003 included another phase of service to begin in 2025. By that year, if the plan is realized, METRO will add service to both airports, several new "Signature" bus routes, more light rail, perhaps more BRT, and some sort of commuter rail service.

METRO LEADS ESSENTIALLY NO PUBLIC DISCUSSION OF LONG-TERM GROWTH OR TRANSIT STRATEGIES TO SERVE IT. THE AGENCY IS POLITICALLY HAMSTRUNG ON MANY LEVELS.

Looking further ahead, the 2035 Regional Transportation Plan contains a 2035 METRO map that has a number of interesting features and may be considered the state-of-the-art METRO thinking in Houston at the moment.

Perhaps the most interesting thing on the map is an indication that high-speed rail would head out northwest along U.S. 290 and east along I-10. The purpose of high-speed rail is to connect big cities with very fast transit service as a replacement for short-hop air service. Considering the long series of strongly supportive speeches from elected and civic leaders at a recent workshop on such service, it's reasonable to say that high-speed rail from Houston to other Texas cities is on the way, maybe sooner than most people imagine.

Once that inter city infrastructure is in place, it's not inconceivable that we would consider some extensions within the region. These would provide fast connections among major centers, without any stops in between, which would then make clear what the light rail/BRT service is all about: local urban service.

Where high-speed rail and commuter rail stations will be located needs to be determined in order to think holistically about all the rest of the transit nodes. Several other large-scale issues need to be resolved soon, because billions of dollars are ready to be spent on other mobility infrastructure, possibly erroneously in some instances.

The commuter rail plan being born is based on existing freight lines that go into the Central Business District. Some of those can be useful for other centers, but generally the plan is to provide more commuter service to the CBD, even though only seven percent of commuters go there. It is essentially a plan of convenience that does not consider the existing commuter bus transit system, the high-speed rail possibility, or the realities of a region that is simply no longer monocentric, and is perhaps more polycentric than any other in the U.S.

In addition to the four big centers that will be connected by light rail in 2012, there are two more in the METRO service area: Westchase and Greenspoint. Each of those six places is emerging as city in its own right; each has more activity than downtown San Diego or Miami. Five of the six are already connected by the highway system, so some future generation of direct transit connections among these centers might well go around the city in the existing highway right of way. As freeways are reconstructed over time, there could be opportunities to connect all the big centers with car-speed—or better—transit service. Indeed, faster elevated service could be introduced using as little as eight feet of right of way.

Much more collaborative discussion needs to take place. But it is difficult to calm down and look at the big picture when the short-term difficulties are so large, and when the road-building, land-developing, transit-slowing energy is so high in county government.

Regardless, a huge paradigm change will come about because of the new transit service beginning in 2011 and 2012. With about 57 station areas in this new system, the density will increase in many urban places, which means that it is possible to imagine as much as a third of all regional growth taking place in walkable areas around each of those stations.

Those numbers do not depend on Manhattan-style density but on a pattern more like Paris or Washington D.C., where there are many townhouses and three-to-five-story buildings similar in size to New York City's brownstones, or buildings now accumulating in The Woodlands. The idea of walkable neighborhoods of different size and character connected to each other with safe, convenient transit service is coming to Houston very fast.

Having said all that, there is plenty to be critical about in METRO's operations and planning process. METRO leads essentially no public discussion of long-term growth or transit strategies to serve it. The agency is politically hamstrung on many levels, particularly regarding development and its inability to capture some benefit from the tremendous land value that METRO creates with its transit stations.

In terms of choosing alignments, the purely rational routes that would deliver the greatest ridership ought to be on the table at the beginning of public discussion. (METRO took Westheimer, one of the most productive sections, off the table without explanation; rumor had it that two real estate interests had simply said no. This is outrageous, if true, and makes a mockery of the public process.) Often the details that make transit service useful seem bollixed up by METRO (a transit ride from the Energy Corridor to downtown will apparently require using three different technologies and three transfers, and the Southeast and Harrisburg lines apparently will not connect to the Main Street line.)

By 2036, the city's bicentennial, Houston will in all likelihood be larger than Chicago, behind only Los Angeles and New York City in population. The region will have more people than New York City. If we can grasp this notion of our region as a vast geographic place with hundreds of centers organized into collaborative economic clusters that form sustainable networks of access, mobility, and green infrastructure, we will begin to move toward a high quality of life and prosperity for all. C

MERCURY Rising

Kirksey's new skyscraper **heats up** the Medical Center.

by **Julie Sinclair Eakin**

VIEWED FROM MY OFFICE IN THE architecture school at Rice University, the new Memorial Hermann Medical Plaza building at the corner of Fannin and MacGregor streets is a dramatic (some say looming) presence, juxtaposed as it is with the Academic Quadrangle's traditional, low buildings foregrounding my perspective. While I appreciate the placid mood conveyed by the traditional campus structures, all congenially faced in rose-colored brick, our slick new neighbor is for me a welcome irritant in an otherwise constant environment, a reminder of another world's pulse just beyond the hedges.

The 30-story skyscraper engages the natural world via its reflective glass surface, which acts as a kind of visual barometer, registering changes in cloud and light patterns throughout the day. Whenever a Life Flight helicopter prepares to land with an emergency trauma case, that story is broadcast across the building's façade in a crimson streak, the visual equivalent of an ambulance siren.

The 500,000-square-foot, mixed-use building cost $150 million and houses medical offices, some of which offer outpatient surgery and imaging facilities; retail tenants leasing 25,000 square feet on the first two levels; and an ambulatory care unit, which

ERIC HESTER

Client:
Mischer Healthcare Services

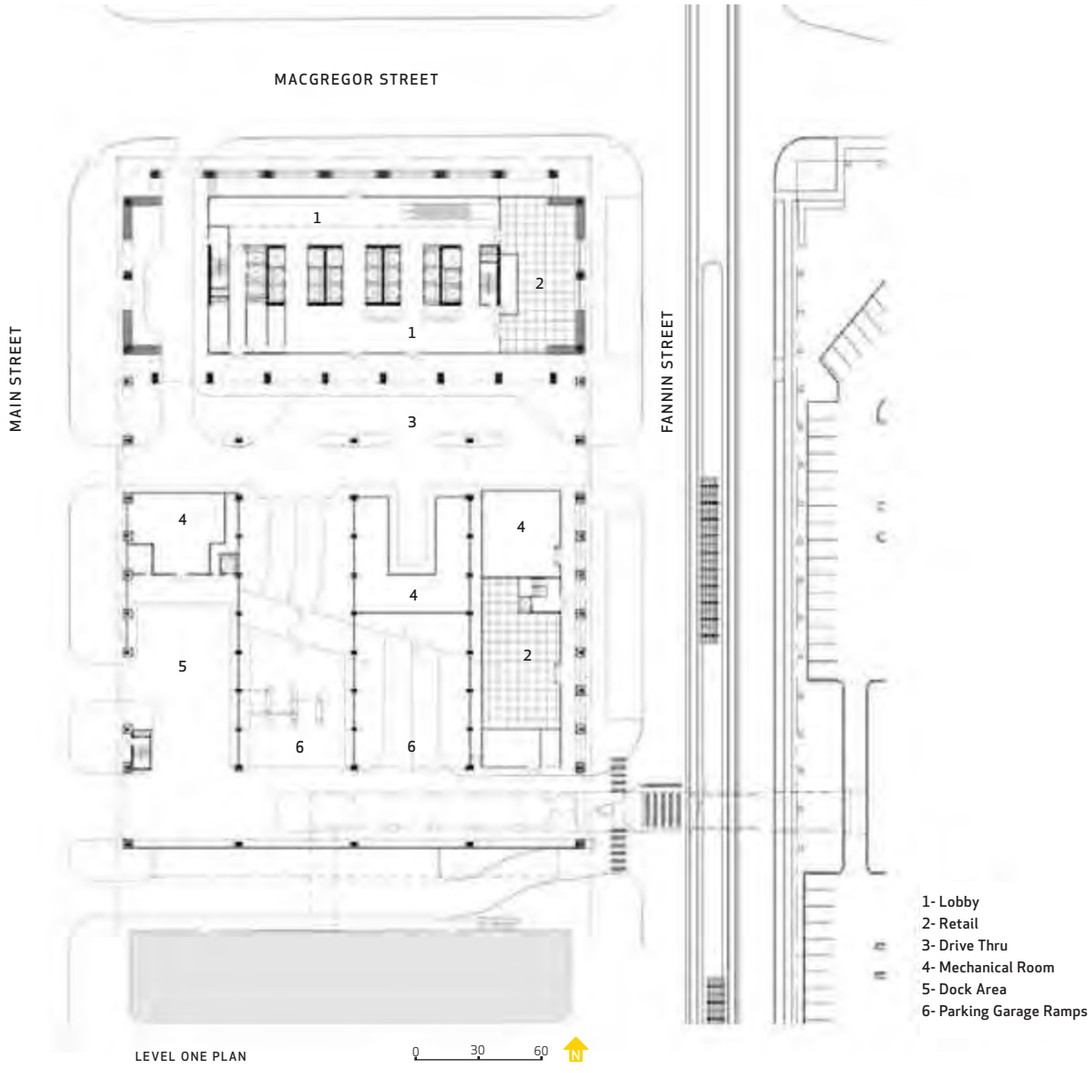
Architect:
Kirksey Architecture—Jim Dietzmann (project manager); Bob Inaba (project designer); Scott Wilkinson (principle in charge); Tomas Barrera (project architect)

Engineers:
Haynes Whaley and Associates (structural)
Wylie Consulting Engineers (MEP);
Walter P Moore (Civil)

Contractor:
D.E. Harvey Builders

Landscape:
Kudela Weinheimer Landscape Architects

Interiors:
Kirksey Architecture—Dan Hassebroek, Michael Parker



The building's alignment with the street grid beyond the university campus enhances its profile in relation to Rice.

occupies floors 14 through 16. The office template is reportedly an ideal size for examination rooms too, allowing doctors an especially efficient circulation between administrative and patient care areas. Having replaced a parking lot, the building now includes public space for cars on floors 3 through 11, as well as two underground parking levels accommodating physicians and valet service.

According to Bob Inaba of Kirksey Architects, the project's designer, the primary challenges during 26 months of construction were maintaining the connection to an adjacent building via an existing steel bridge that remained open; providing stouter structure to absorb the vibration of the weighty magnets in the imaging equipment; and saving as many live oaks as possible. (To that end, the building's foundations are oriented straight downward.) All equipment is located above the basement level in a nod to Tropical Storm Allison's torrents, and the façade was tested to 150 percent capacity for hurricane winds. An 18,000-gallon diesel supply allows for autonomous operation on the site over three days.

The building is perhaps most widely known, however, for its nighttime light show, projected from a sub-roof 50 feet below its tip. The client requested a recognizable lantern feature as a branding mechanism it could borrow for future buildings. So, together with lighting consultant John Michael Smith, Kirksey created the series of enormous white aluminum panels that rise at 45-degree angles, catching and reflecting computer-generated LED displays mounted just below. Experiencing this spectacularly abstract outdoor space, with expansive city views, made me imagine sidling up to a whale's belly, or, more realistically, to one of Richard Serra's *Torqued Elipses*. Unfortunately, it's off limits (although private functions may be held inside on the 27th floor).

To me, the building's nocturnal trip into the light fantastic is gimmicky: the colors change rapidly from magenta to violet to turquoise, like a stoned iguana. It ought, instead, to slow down and invite contemplation: James Turrell's installation inside the tunnel at the Museum of Fine Arts, Houston provides a model that never ceases to enrapture. The MFA,H is in fact intentionally referenced here as the second building complex book-ending Hermann Park. The medical plaza's interior lobby walls are from the same Indiana limestone used on the Beck Building's façade; metal beams in the lobby, as well as exterior awnings in the parking zone, were painted bronze to recall the new museum structure's genuine patina.

Memorial Hermann's considerable spell evaporates for me at the street level, where an unimaginative switch to another exterior material references a programmatic shift: Poured-in-place concrete provides a clunky punctuation for the sleek glass container above. Inaba understandably says he wanted to alert passersby to the retail presence by calling it out, and to provide light and views through that double-height area on a scale larger than that offered by the glass grid. But I would have argued for a continuation of the stealthy, silver-blue surface in some form. The designers worked sensitively within that language when managing other accommodations, such as countering the sun's intensity. The building's north and south walls feature daylight-mediating fritting on the glass (which also cleverly denotes the locations of the 30-foot-on-center columns).

Conveniently, from my campus idyll I can't see the structure's bottom portion and so, will persist in entertaining my own fiction of a more uniform façade that makes the most of the skyscraper's occasionally miraculous, transparent character. C

THE MODERN MR. JONES

A LEGENDARY HOUSTON ARCHITECT SHARES HIS TALL BUILDING PORTFOLIO

by **Ben Koush**

Greenway Plaza in the mid-1970s.

This article celebrates the occasion of the donation by Houston architect Arthur Jones of his firm's photographs and project presentation material to the Woodson Research Library at Rice University. This publicly accessible archive will, it is hoped, spur greater interest in some of the city's overlooked examples of important modern architecture.

Patrons of architecture in Houston have historically imported talent to design their largest and most prestigious buildings. Although this trend was already apparent in the selection of architects for the city's first generation of skyscrapers, built in the years before the Depression—Sanguinet & Staats of Fort Worth, Mauran, Russell & Crowell of St. Louis, Chicago's D. H. Burnham and Company, and Warren & Wetmore of New York City were all represented locally—it seemed to accelerate in the late 1950s beginning with First City National Bank's modern downtown office tower, designed by Gordon Bunshaft of Skidmore Owings & Merrill's New York City office and completed in 1961. In the next decade, a major commercial developer, Gerald Hines, commissioned Philip Johnson to design Pennzoil Place (1976). A building boom led by out-of-town architects ensued, and by April 1982, Nicholas Lemann, writing for *Texas Monthly*, observed: "These buildings elevated Houston to its current exalted status as (maybe) the architectural capital of the United States, the place where styles are set."

Houstonian Hermon F. Lloyd was unusual in that he circumvented this pattern of exclusion and maintained for his firm the role of lead designer when other locals were relegated to production (Wilson, Morris, Crain & Anderson), given only lesser buildings, compelled to seek work overseas (Neuhaus & Taylor and Caudill Rowlett Scott), or cut out of the picture completely (Cowell & Neuhaus). Lloyd, a man of great personal charm (he was a stage actor and radio personality), became developer Kenneth Schnitzer's personal architect for nearly all of his projects built after 1960. His innate design talent (and the ability to attract gifted colleagues, including Arthur Jones) steered his firm through the turbulent 1970s and 1980s.

Lloyd graduated from Rice Institute in 1931 and worked first with Harvin C. Moore in a partnership that dissolved at the outbreak of World War II. In 1945 he teamed up with William B. Morgan. Arthur E. Jones joined this firm, Lloyd & Morgan, as a designer upon his graduation from Rice in 1947 and became a partner, in 1962, at Lloyd, Morgan & Jones. (Its most noteworthy building, the Astrodome was completed three years later.) Benjamin E. Brewer, Jr., came to the firm in 1976 from Neuhaus & Taylor and became a partner in Lloyd, Jones & Brewer. Bob G. Fillpot, a 1967 graduate of Texas Tech, later joined the firm, and in 1984 it was renamed Lloyd Jones Fillpot Associates.

When Lloyd died in 1989, the Houston economy was in a tailspin from the oil bust. Schnitzer was being convicted in federal court for bank fraud related to the failure of his savings and loan, Banc Plus.

The large blocks of Banc Plus stocks the firm had accepted in lieu of fees were worthless. Rudderless without its dynamic founder and in a dire financial situation, Lloyd Jones Fillpot Associates slowly disappeared from the architectural scene.

Some 23 years after the completion of its last great office tower, Four Allen Center (aka the Enron Building), of 1984, Jones pulled these images of some of his favorite projects and discussed his thoughts on the work of this era. According to him, unlike many of his New York and even Houston colleagues, Lloyd insisted on sharing design responsibilities with each member of the firm. No one person stood out as a spokesperson. When asked if he was the lead designer on any of these buildings, Jones demurs, "We shared a lot." Another of the firm's distinguishing features, he explained—a pertinent one in light of the revived interest in environmentally responsive architecture—was the frequent use of exterior sunshades. Not only did these provide for passive cooling to reduce energy use, their design both acknowledged Houston's subtropical Gulf Coast climate and provided opportunities to use light and shade to animate the sheer elevations. During the 32 years that separate the firm's first highrise, the Melrose Building, from Four Allen Center, these partners designed formally restrained modern buildings with a reassuringly rational appearance—buildings that Lloyd likened to "a lady's little black dress" in a 1978 *Houston Chronicle* article Jones plucked from one of his innumerable manila folders.

Melrose Building

The name for the 21-story Melrose Building, Lloyd & Morgan's first office tower, was derived from those of the developer, Melvin A. Silverman, and his business partner, Bennett Rose. Silverman had previously commissioned the firm to design the 488-unit Town & Country Apartments (demolished in 1949) and was not deterred by the fact that the 12-person firm had not tackled anything taller than three floors. "Hermon got the job on a Friday and ran into the office with the news," recalls Jones. "We stayed until late Saturday night sketching designs until I finally finished the drawing that was printed in the Sunday papers!" The building's south and east elevations featured bands of steel-framed casement windows with turquoise glazed-brick spandrels surrounded on four sides by four-foot-wide, cast-in-place concrete sunshades. The walls surrounding the shaded windows were solid slabs of buff-colored brick. According to Jones, Lloyd adapted the design of the sunshades from books and magazine articles he had seen about modern Latin American architecture.

When it was completed, the little Melrose Building, taking up a quarter of the downtown block bounded by Walker, Rusk, Fannin and San Jacinto streets, was the first modern office tower in Houston. Its design epitomized the underlying tension between aesthetics and rationality that permeated postwar modern architecture in the United States. On one hand, the carefully calculated sunshades reduced cooling needs, but as the architects noted in an article from the *Houston Post* from 1951: "One of our main theories is that a multistory building is just a series of levels or planes…We think that the logical design of loft-type buildings should stress horizontal lines rather than vertical lines." Jones's simple explanation for why the east elevation was given a section of solid brick wall at the outside corner where one would expect more windows: "It was part of the composition." Two years later the Melrose Building was featured in *Architectural Forum*, where the article's authors intriguingly posited it as the antithesis of what was then the hegemonic building type, Lever House, designed by Gordon Bunshaft of Skidmore Owings & Merrill in Manhattan in 1952: "Where the Lever House uses glass for dramatic transparency, the Melrose Building uses brick for dramatic opacity." And, "Blue-green tile was used as a facing material on pre-cast concrete spandrel covers. Rather than use obscure glass, which is regarded by some architects as a misuse of the material, these architects got color on the building face, plus a somewhat reflective surface—and at the same time maintained the opacity they sought." In 1970 the windows were changed to the current dark-tinted glass, and the glazed-brick spandrels were covered by bronze-colored anodized aluminum panels. Jones laments the Melrose Building is now an abandoned "empty wreck."

"THE AMERICAN GENERAL BUILDING WAS A COMMISSION ON A HANDSHAKE BY THE LATE GUS WORTHAM," STATES A LLOYD, JONES & BREWER BROCHURE FROM 1982.

Americana Building

The Americana Building was another speculative venture with Silverman and Rose. It consisted of a five-level parking garage that connected the existing Foley's department store garage with a ten-story office building above. The garage and ground-floor retail space occupied by Foley's were completed in 1957, while the tower was not completed until 1961.

The Americana Building, like the Melrose, occupied less than a full block. By setting the tower at the edge of a parking garage plinth clad in pierced terracotta tiles, it appeared as a freestanding slab. The design suggested a close reading of Brazilian modern architecture, specifically the 1942 Ministry of Education and Health in Rio de Janeiro, by Lucio Costa and Oscar Niemeyer; that structure was clad with blue and white glazed tiles, with its long northern side protected by concrete shades and the southern side made of glass. According to a 1959 article in the *Houston Post*: "The east and west walls of the building will be covered with glazed blue brick, the south wall will have horizontal and vertical projecting fins in much the same style as was used in Silverman and Rose's Melrose Building. The fins serve to protect the offices from sun throughout the year. There will be non-glare glass from ceiling to floor. The north wall will be mostly glass." Lloyd & Morgan's Latin-tinged interpretation, however, was filtered through and customized by the extremely precise construction detailing the firm was developing for its highrises. In 2000 the garage portion of the building was refaced with polished metal panels, which, Jones says "don't look half bad, if you squint."

American General Building

The well-maintained 25-story American General Building is one of the high points of modern architecture in Houston. When looking at the 42-year-old photographs of the structure, Jones sighs. "Oh, it was perfect," he says. "They just don't make them like that anymore." American General sits on a parklike 25-acre site on Allen Parkway, purchased by American General Life Insurance Company in 1948 in anticipation of building its new headquarters. A Lloyd, Jones & Brewer brochure published in 1982 stated, "The American General building was a commission on a handshake by the late Gus Wortham." Jones remembers Wortham as one of those rare clients who "wanted a good building and was willing to write the big checks to get it...It was a beautiful relationship," he adds. "We all understood each other and never had to change the initial design, only refine it."

The American General Building rises on slender two-story piers above a marble-paved plaza, which in turn is suspended over executive parking spaces (surface lots provided staff parking). Its floor plates extend four feet past the exterior glass walls and support a gridded sunshade made of thin precast concrete members. Panels of tinted solar glass that stop six feet short of the floor are inserted into the grid for increased shading. The glass at the penthouse executive suites and lounge was recessed behind a flat, projecting roof of pierced concrete. Offset planes of shimmering dark glass, held in place by an attenuated, closely spaced concrete grid, dematerialized the building's bulk and caused it to look like a mirage hovering above its site. A photograph by Alexandre Georges of staff members striding across the spare, black-tinted concrete plaza inset with white marble strips that echo the building columns epitomizes the classic, Fordist business model to which American General aspired in the 1960s.

As a 1965 article in *Houston* magazine (the official publication of the Chamber of Commerce) observed, the American General Building was only the city's eighth tallest, but its spacious, rolling Buffalo Bayou site two miles west of downtown made it one of Houston's most prominent modern buildings. Both Lloyd and Jones claimed it as their favorite in a 1978 *Chronicle* article, with the former calling it "nice and ladylike in appearance, as well as strong." For Jones, it was "by far the best protected building from the

AMERICANA BUILDING
YEAR COMPLETED: 1957 AND 1961
LOCATION: 811 DALLAS AVENUE
SQUARE FOOTAGE: 212,000
ARCHITECT: LLOYD & MORGAN

MELROSE BUILDING
YEAR COMPLETED: 1952
LOCATION: 1121 WALKER STREET
SQUARE FOOTAGE: 221,000
ARCHITECT: LLOYD & MORGAN

AMERICAN GENERAL BUILDING
YEAR COMPLETED: 1965 | LOCATION: 2727 ALLEN PARKWAY | SQUARE FOOTAGE: 300,000 | ARCHITECT: LLOYD, MORGAN & JONES

PREVIOUS SPREAD: BALTHAZAR KORAB; CLOCKWISE, FROM UPPER LEFT: F. WILBER SIEDERS; VERNON B. HENDRIKSEN; BALTHAZAR KORAB; ALEXANDRE GEORGES

sun in town….I think it's very classical,…a solution to a situation of sun, the region, the site, and the function of the building."

Houston Natural Gas Building

The 28-story Houston Natural Gas Building and attached 10-level garage occupying the entire block bounded by Travis, Polk, Milam and Dallas streets was the then 36-year-old Kenneth Schnitzer's first major downtown project. The speculative building was named for its principal tenant, which leased one-fifth of the space. Schnitzer had begun working with Lloyd & Morgan in 1958, when he commissioned the firm to design a series of additions to the Century Building, of 1956, originally designed by Lucian T. Hood, Jr., and Lars Bang.

NATURAL GAS BUILDING
YEAR COMPLETED: 1967
LOCATION: 1200 TRAVIS STREET
SQUARE FOOTAGE: 500,000
ARCHITECT: LLOYD, MORGAN & JONES

In the spare, abstract design of the Houston Natural Gas Building, the individually articulated window frames of the earlier buildings were replaced by an alternating pattern of vertical piers and strips of windows. In place of American General's thin columns, the ground floor of this building was ringed by thick, sandstone-clad piers capped by a continuous beam projecting slightly from the walls of the offices above. The two-and-a-half-foot-wide floor-to-ceiling glass walls of the office floors were recessed two feet from the faces of the two-foot-wide piers. According to Jones, "You can say we did it for sun protection, but it was as much for looks as anything else." The rounded corners of the parking garage were determined by a car's turning radius; its façade was covered with dark-colored, vertical anodized aluminum ribs.

Greenway Plaza Phase II

According to a 1963 article in *Houston* magazine, Greenway Plaza began as a 41-acre "commercial subdivision" bounded by Richmond Avenue, Buffalo Speedway, Edloe Street, and the Southwest Freeway that was to contain "luxury townhouses, high-rise apartments, three-story office buildings, medium-rise office buildings, a 30-story high-rise office tower, retail shops, and a restaurant." The Lumberman's Company of Austin, Texas, was the principal backer and Charles M. Goodman Associates of Washington, D. C., was the planning architect. Goodman had been replaced by Neuhaus & Taylor in 1964, and by 1968, Schnitzer's Century Properties had bought out Lumberman's and added an additional 40 acres to the original development. Century Properties famously bought the entire adjoining Lamar-Weslayan subdivision to add the final 23 acres.

With Century's control over Greenway Plaza came Lloyd, Morgan & Jones's involvement. The buildings of Phase I—the Eastern Airlines Building and the Union Carbide Building—both had 11 floors and were completed in 1969. Like the Houston Natural Gas Building, their elevations consisted of solid vertical piers alternating with glass. In a 1974 article about Houston's architectural scene, the *New York Times* architecture critic, Paul Goldberger, wrote dismissively that they looked "like Edward Durell Stone buildings clad in the ribbed concrete of Paul Rudolph, an unhappy marriage."

The next three buildings, comprising Phase II, were more architecturally resolved. The first was the 21-story Kellogg Building, completed in 1971; the second the 11-story Sunset Building, completed in 1972; and the third, the 31-story Conoco Building, finished in 1973. This collection was built over a massive underground parking garage that also housed a collection of shops, restaurants, and a movie theater used by Greenway Plaza tenants. The central area between the buildings was a paved plaza punctuated by rectangular reflecting pools, planted areas, and groups of pyramidal monitors bringing daylight to the service concourse underground. The elevations were made of nearly square, white precast concrete window frames with recessed tinted-glass windows. Radical German architect Ludwig Hilberseimer's forbidding *Hochhausstadt* (high-rise city) project of 1925 is eerily evoked by Balthazar Korab's photographs depicting this pristine environment devoid of inhabitants. Goldberger wrote, "Not only are there not streets in the traditional sense at Greenway Plaza, there are not really any plazas. The visitor is expected to drive his car off the freeway right into an underground garage, and from there step into a tower. The traditional urban experiences of changing visual images and unexpected encounters do not exist in this austere place." Perhaps in response, Lloyd told Susan Bischoff of the *Houston Chronicle* in 1978, "Some

people see only three people in there and say it's a failure." Jones added, "That doesn't mean anything. Even if there are only three people, all the others have experienced it and know that it's there."

Four Allen Center

According to architectural historian Stephen Fox, the 21-acre Allen Center is "the only downtown office complex where streets have been closed to create a superblock." Like Greenway Plaza, it was started by an out-of-town developer, in this instance Trammell Crow of Dallas, and was later taken over by Century Properties, which hired Lloyd, Jones & Brewer Associates to design the remaining buildings. Of the four buildings the firm designed in the complex, the last one, Four Allen Center, was the most distinguished. Cesar Pelli paid homage to Four Allen Center when he designed the not-quite-matching 40-story 1500 Louisiana Building, across the street, in 2002.

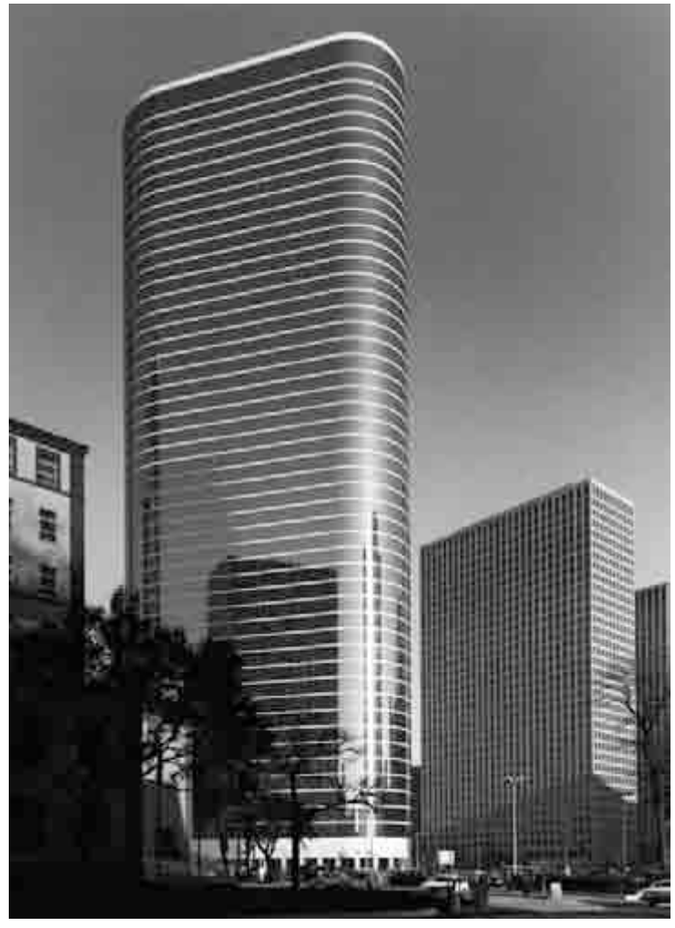
Although the 50-story Four Allen Center Building was tall in comparison to the firm's previous projects, it was about average for Houston's crop of 1980s downtown towers. The building's distinction on the skyline is owed to its orientation to the Fourth Ward street grid instead of downtown, so that it always appears in perspective. The sheer tower is clad entirely in flush, silvery-blue mirrored glass and white aluminum panels that demarcate each floor with curved edges at the ground floor and a cornice echoing the building's rounded plan. Four Allen Center was originally crowned by a band of cold cathode lights that are unfortunately not regularly illuminated anymore. The building is a perfect example of what Charles Jencks termed the "slick-tech" variant of late-modern architecture in his 1980 book *Late-Modern Architecture*: "buildings that emphasize the slippery wet-look and the distortions caused by a reflective surface that is not entirely flat."

Arthur Drexler, then director of MOMA's department of Architecture and Design, was quoted in a 1984 firm brochure: "I saw a building in Houston recently called Four Allen Center. Nothing had been written about in any magazine, and I wasn't even familiar with the work of the architects...It is the most beautiful mirrored glass building I have ever seen—absolutely staggering...They are alone in Houston, bravely doing modern buildings." It was perhaps due to the efforts of Drexler that in 1985, when the Japanese review *GA Document* devoted a special 42-page section to office work in Houston, it included several pages on Four Allen Center, the only building designed by a local firm. "It's just a damn good building!" says Jones, perhaps summing it up best.

In 1985 Four Allen Center won an honor award from the Houston AIA chapter and a design award from the Texas Society of Architects. In a 1985 issue of *Texas Architect* the jurors referred to it as "…a new contribution to the high-rise fashion show. Very elegantly detailed, consistently restrained, never over using materials, it has taken technology to another level…and any building that has a halo has to be pretty good." **c**

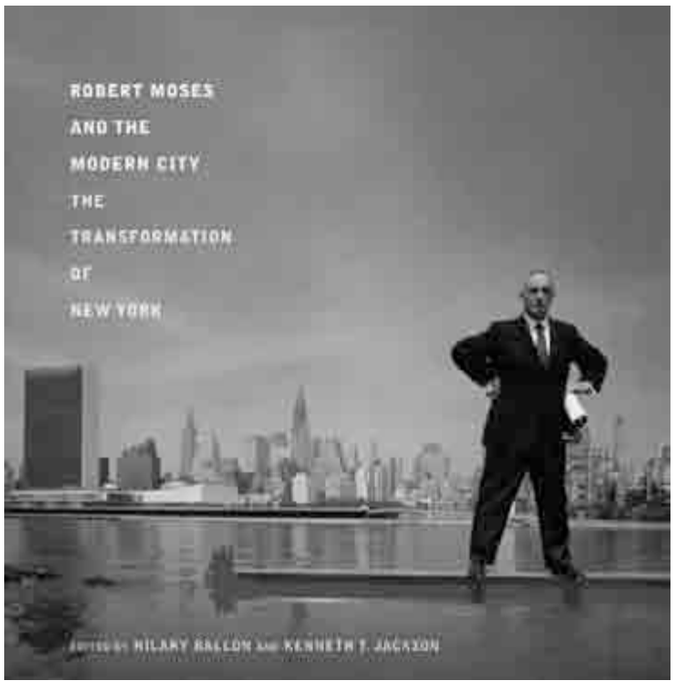
A preliminary interview for this article was conducted by Stephen Fox and William F. Stern.

GREENWAY PLAZA PHASE II
YEAR COMPLETED: 1973
LOCATION: 3,4, & 5 GREENWAY PLAZA
SQUARE FOOTAGE: 519,000, 241,000, 912,000
ARCHITECT: LLOYD, MORGAN & JONES



FOUR ALLEN CENTER
YEAR COMPLETED: 1984
LOCATION: 1400 SMITH STREET
SQUARE FOOTAGE: 1,300,000
ARCHITECT: LLOYD JONES FILLPOT ASSOCIATES

LEFT: ALEXANDRE GEORGES; UPPER RIGHT: BALTHAZAR KORAB; LOWER RIGHT: RICHARD PAYNE



ROBERT MOSES RECONSIDERED

Hilary Ballon and Kenneth T. Jackson eds.,
Robert Moses and the Modern City: The Transformation of New York
(W. W. Norton & Company, 2007; 335 pages; $ 50.00)

by Michelangelo Sabatino

WITH SOME EXCEPTIONS—BOSTON'S "BIG DIG," CHICAGO'S Centennial Park, and ground zero—municipal governments of most major American population centers have gradually reduced their involvement with large-scale urban renewal projects. Reluctance to invest in new infrastructure that doesn't involve gas-guzzling cars or even the basic maintenance of extant public transportation systems reflects the anti-environmental, *laissez faire* attitude of recent presidential administrations. The preponderance of developments undermining urbanism in the public's interest in favor of the profit-driven initiatives of developers prompted two recent concurrent exhibitions and an accompanying book on New York's preeminent 20th-century civil servant, Robert Moses. Reviewing the major public works projects Moses spearheaded—a boon to some and a travesty to others—offers an occasion to reflect on his contributions and the changing conditions of American cities over the last decades.

Between the early thirties, when he was appointed Commissioner of Parks for New York City, and 1968, when he was terminated as chairman of New York State's Triborough Bridge and Tunnel Authority, Moses initiated an astonishing number of significant public infrastructure projects: the construction of public swimming pools, bathhouses, and beaches (McCarren Pool, 1934; Jones Beach, 1930); suburban automobile parkways (Henry Hudson Parkway, 1937); urban bridges (Verrazano-Narrows Bridge, 1964); public housing (Washington Square Village, 1956-59), and cultural centers (Lincoln Center for the Performing Arts, 1958-69). Moses systematically modernized New York City's five boroughs and their connections to the surrounding three-state region. The catalog documenting the museums' exhibitions, edited by Columbia architectural historian Hilary Ballon and Kenneth T. Jackson, professor of history and social sciences at Columbia, reconsiders Moses' legacy. The book, *Robert Moses and the Modern City,* includes a series of succinct critical essays by scholars with differing viewpoints who address Moses' multifaceted activities in various roles of public leadership.

Jackson's introductory essay identifies four major themes: Robert Moses in the national context; his vision; questions pertaining to his integrity; and his reputation as a racist. Marta Gutman traces Moses' history as commissioner of parks and his role as a builder of pools, bathhouses, and beaches. Owen D. Gutfreund addresses "his" highways, parkways, and bridges. Ballon looks at urban renewal and housing, specifically the challenges Moses faced in "directing market forces to serve public goals." Martha Biondi tackles the accusations that Moses was a racist civil servant. Robert Fishman offers a compelling account of Moses and his critics. Joel Schwartz ably discusses Moses' planning strategies. A substantial part of the book is dedicated to a catalog of projects (those realized and not) shepherded by Moses. A portfolio of contemporary color photographs by Andrew Moore illustrates the built public works, demonstrating how gracefully these sites have aged.

An aim of these studies is to temper Robert Caro's passionate condemnation in his Pulitzer Prize-winning *The Power Broker: Robert Moses and the Fall of New York*, published in 1974. Caro's biography followed the controversy over the Cross-Bronx Expressway (1948-63) , which painted Moses as an elitist power broker more concerned with accommodating the automobile rather than people. Although Caro's narrative was based on archival research and extensive interviews, his sensational writing style and axe-grinding attitude failed to adequately credit Moses for what he did achieve: a dialogue between public and private interests. This new scholarship demonstrates that the autocratic civil servant was, despite undeniable shortcomings, not entirely self-serving and morally reprehensible. While it is easier for us to sympathize with Jane Jacobs, whose *Death and Life of Great American Cities* (1961) advocated a grassroots spontaneous urbanism favoring neighborhoods over heavy-handed planning, it is unfair to demonize Moses, as did Caro and Marshall Berman, author, most famously, of *All that is Solid Melts into Air* (1982).

The project of critically reassessing Moses is not without an agenda of its own. For example, Ballon's 2002 book on transportation infrastructure, *New York's Pennsylvania Stations*, was published during a time in which "signature" buildings drew the lion's share of media attention. By vindicating the contribution of Robert Moses to the "rise" and not "fall" of New York, Ballon and Jackson have also drawn attention to the role of the civil servant at a time when private entrepreneurial action is valued above all. It is hard to say how many graduates today with Moses' pedigree (a graduate of Yale, Oxford, and Columbia) and a family background of wealth would choose a career in the public sector instead of a lucrative job in private enterprise.

In the public as in the private realm, a building is only as good as its client. If our cities are to be more livable, we need municipal governments to become more discerning on behalf of the public good. By revisiting Moses' record, marked by both accomplishments and failures—visionary stances and serious errors of judgment—we are reminded that any collaborative process also requires compromise and that, as Moses often claimed, "you cannot make an omelet without breaking eggs." c

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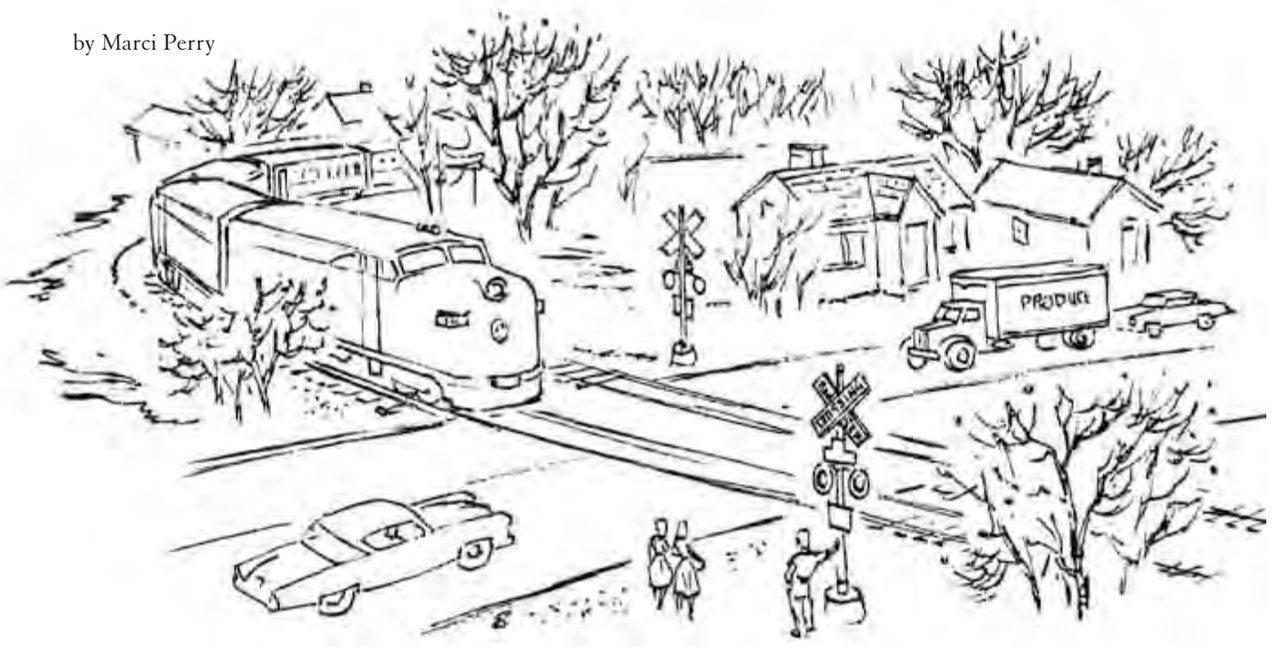
by Marci Perry



A TRAIN IS PART OF THE HOUSTON CITY SEAL, IN RECOGNITION of its economic impact here. In 1997, when I moved to the First Ward—the area between Interstates 45 and 10, Sawyer Street and Washington Avenue—there were three railroad lines in the neighborhood, all running east-west within eight blocks of each other. Two are still active, Union Pacific's Freight and Passenger Mains, and now there are plans to add commuter rail trains and direct them out U.S. 290.

The railroads were built starting in the 1850s, so the tracks were really always part of the neighborhood. People used the trains and they worked for companies that used them. The building that is now the Winter Street Studios, for instance, was a furniture factory that relied on the local transport. Today people can no longer see that connection between the trains and our neighborhood. We watch all kinds of freight pass through—automobile carriers, grain cars, boxcars, tank cars, container cars, everything you can think of—but we have no earthly idea what's in most of those cars.

Winter Street has a railroad running down its center, the Freight Main. The street is paved with gravel, like streets in Houston used to be. There are little houses, basically cottages, on both sides facing the tracks, built by people who worked for the railroads. The Missouri-Kansas-Texas line ran along the wider Spring Street, and its tracks were set off to the side. Many of the buildings immediately around it were industrial, and as the industries moved out the tracks weren't needed as much and were removed. The First Ward has been agitating for more than nine years for a bike path down the MKT line.

Union Pacific's Passenger Main is actually within a more fallow area, with warehouses around it, and at the edge of the neighborhood, so those trains do not have the same impact on our lives as the ones on Winter Street. Houston Avenue skirts the trains via an underpass. That line alone had 14 passenger trains a day in the 1950s. Amtrak still uses it, but now it's mainly freight.

This morning, delivering the civic club newsletter, I saw three trains move through in an hour and a half. I hear them, but I can tune out the noise. The people with the biggest problems are those with false expectations, the ones who moved into townhouses thinking the tracks would be torn up. Their houses shake, and they get bent out of shape.

When the locomotives stop it can be a very serious issue. The tracks cross all of our north-south streets, and if it's a long train, it effectively closes those streets for 15 minutes or more. Those minutes absolutely count if somebody's having a heart attack or other emergency. The situation is really bad in the East End, where trains just sit there and people can't get past. That's when children are most likely to get hurt because they try to climb under the trains.

We've had many accidents and even deaths at the crossings. (Houston ranks #2 in the nation's "trespassing fatalities," which includes deaths caused by trains suddenly moving while people are passing under them.) We also have a safety problem when a train is coming and people race down our narrow streets in their cars looking for an open street to get across the tracks.

There are nine or ten crossings on Winter Street, so the train has to sound its horn before it gets to Sawyer and all the way through the community. The horn is heard up in Woodland Heights and in the Sixth Ward.

For about a decade, First Ward residents have been working to get what we call a safety zone, one that could become a quiet zone. What we want is to get certain streets closed where they cross the track and leave two or three open that have crossing arms. We already succeeded in getting crossings east of Houston Avenue closed; now we're trying to block off more streets on the west side. Ideally, I'd like to see an underpass for Houston Avenue at the Winter Street tracks, but only if we can find a way to preserve the properties on either side.

First Ward is a small community and doesn't have much clout. But council member Adrian Garcia has always been involved in trying to help his constituents lead a more peaceful coexistence with the trains. In other areas, such as Manchester, grade separations have been built to put trains and other traffic on different levels. Steve Gibson, a developer and president of Western General, has put a lot of work into these issues.

We're trying a make a win-win situation—something that's good for the community and also good for the railroad. After all, you don't kill Goliath with a slingshot; you work with Goliath and try to make him benefit, too. C

COURTESY OF *A RAILROAD STUDY FOR HOUSTON*, DE LEUN, CATHER & COMPANY, 1953.

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