

>> NEWS FROM RICEDESIGNALLIANCE.ORG

The new Rice Design Alliance website features commentary and podcasts from RDA civic forums and lectures, a calendar of RDA events and events sponsored by other area organizations, travel journals from RDA city tours, and several resources, including a growing archive of past *Cite* issues and links to *OffCite.org*, the *Cite* blog.



FROM LEFT: Winka Dubbeldam with RDA member Luiza Maal; Marfa, Texas; and "The Rurban Horseshoe" from *Cite* 73.

> TEN YEARS OF INITIATIVES FOR HOUSTON

The Initiatives for Houston grants program supports projects that focus on Houston's built environment, its history, present condition, and future development. Jury members evaluate proposals in terms of their potential for making a significant contribution to our understanding of the city. An exhibition showcasing 10 years of winning proposals is planned for early 2010.

Past recipients have created an astonishing range of publications, plans, and built projects. For example, the green roof of the Burdette Keeland, Jr. Design Exploration Center at the University of Houston was funded in part by an Initiatives for Houston grant from the Rice Design Alliance.

The exhibition will run from January 7 to February 26, 2010 at the Architecture Center, Houston. The opening reception will be Thursday, January 7 from 6 to 10 pm.

> GETTING HIGH OR BAD TRIP

Winka Dubbeldam, with a wink, said she really liked the name of the Rice Design Alliance Fall lecture series, *Getting High: Towers in Architecture*. "Getting High, this is a really great title for a Dutch person," she said to laughter from the roughly 300-member audience. She was one of four speakers in the series, including Peter Buchanan, Ali Rahim, and Ross Wimer. Each brought stunning perspectives. Indeed, Buchanan began the series by slamming the majority of towers being built today as "rubbish" and endemic of the final throes of a dying way of thinking.

Visit ricedesignalliance.org if you missed the series for write-ups and video recordings.

> MARFA REFRIED: TRANS-PECOS X2

RDA will lead a second group to Marfa, Texas. Trip dates are February 11-14, 2010 and the cost is \$1,500 per person. It is an encore of a sold-out trip in February 2009. Travelers toured private homes by Houston's own Carlos Jiménez as well as Lake/Flato and Cameron Armstrong. Architectural historian Stephen Fox led a walking tour of downtown Marfa.

> FROM OFFCITE.ORG: CITE 73 NOW AVAILABLE FREE ONLINE

This issue, published in the winter of 2008, looked forward, looked back, and then forward again. It considered the reshaping of the University of St. Thomas and Texas Southern University. *The Rurban Horseshoe* examined historically black neighborhoods on the periphery of the city. Joel Warren Barna analyzed the debate over the Ashby Highrise.

> MEXICO CITY ARCHITECTURE LECTURE SERIES

The "City of Palaces" is what radio announcers used to call Mexico City in their daily broadcasts. As Richard Neutra pointed out in a 1952 essay, only Peru's cities can rival its Pre-Colombian and Colonial riches, but no other city in the Americas can boast of monuments from both eras, as well as an extraordinary body of modern architecture that keeps growing. During 2010, Mexico will celebrate the bicentennial of its independence, as well as the centennial of the Mexican Revolution. The Spring 2010 series will mark this celebration with a lecture series featuring a remarkable group of emerging architects who are making an impact on Mexico City.

See the calendar and visit ricedesignalliance.org for more details.



his deep gratitude to the eight \$10,000 Underwriters: D. E. Harvey Builders, Haynes Whaley Associates, Inc., Linbeck Group, SpawMaxwell Company, Satterfield & Pontikes Construction, Inc., TDIndustries, Tellepsen, and Phoebe and Bobby Tudor.

Gala Chairs Mikki and David Harvey, Jr. recognized their gala co-chairs, David Andrews, Underwriting; Shelby Holman and Kim Kasse, Auction; and Bob Inaba and Randall Walker, Environment. Harvey introduced the Tudors, recognizing their leadership on a number of Houston's educational and cultural boards as well as raising and donating money for the Ideson project and for buildings at Rice University, where Bobby is co-chair of its Centennial

Campaign. Mikki Hebl noted Phoebe's successful efforts to save the historic Wiess House, now home to Rice President David Leebron and his family.

The Tudors were presented the Rice Design Alliance Award for Design Excellence, a Lalique China Mood bowl donated by Neiman Marcus. Phoebe spoke of the Julia Ideson Preservation Partners' efforts to restore the building and provide state-of-the-art archival storage and work areas for the collection. Noting the high humidity inside that evening, Phoebe pointed out how much the building needed the renovation.



NEWS

UNDERWRITING PARTY

DESPITE THREATENING SKIES, TORNADO warnings, and competing events, Gala contributors and their guests turned out to honor philanthropists Phoebe and Bobby Tudor at the annual RDA Gala Underwriting Party held on October 29 at the Julia Ideson building. The historic 1926 building was designed by Boston architect Ralph Adams Cram, architect of Rice University's original campus, and it is undergoing a renovation and expansion. Gala honoree Phoebe Tudor, chair of the Julia Ideson Preservation Partners, is heading up the effort to raise \$32 million for the project. Gensler is the architect, SpawMaxwell is the contractor, and Haynes Whaley is the structural engineer for the project.

Guests gathered in the soon-to-be-renovated, second-story Tudor Gallery where they enjoyed hors d'oeuvres and wine provided by Jackson and Company. Library docents were on hand in the venerable Texas Room where historical documents were on view, and architectural historian Stephen Fox answered questions about the historic building that was home to Houston's first city library. Mark Crippin with SpawMaxwell arranged for views into the new wing, which is due to open in early 2010. The collection then will be moved from the old building into the new wing, and renovation of the historic building will begin.

Rice Design Alliance President David Spaw thanked contributors for their support of the gala, *Hue: Celebrating a Vibrant Community*, and expressed



ABOVE LEFT: David Harvey, Phoebe Tudor, Mikki Hebl, and Bobby Tudor; CENTER: Rice School of Architecture Dean John Casbarian and Charles Maynard; BELOW RIGHT: Kimberly Hickson, David and Joni Calkins, and David and Joan Spaw.

LETTER

IN RESPONSE TO CITE 73, WINTER 2009

In rereading the Hindsight on the Ashby Highrise, the author [Joel Warren Barna] made an assumption and revealed his slanted opinion in the matter while feigning neutrality throughout the entire article till the very end. First "neighborhood cohesion as a positive force" is a wildly subjective litmus test for any city's growth. I may ask, who decides the criteria for what that cohesion is and how is it positive? Or better what are the positive attributes for any neighborhood in the vast long term? All too subjective for a single property to be determined by people in the adjacency. The author also clearly ends with emotional hyperbole on "Bissonnet Canyon." Landowners could only dream to be so lucky. As a student of architecture, it is obvious that the local institutions are only interested in keeping our profession as the "house-pets for the rich." I am for progress, not perfection.

Sincerely,
Anonymous
Student of architecture



LET US HEAR FROM YOU

Cite welcomes and encourages readers to send letters, including critical ones, to citemail@rice.edu.



CALENDAR

RDA LECTURES

MEXICO CITY ARCHITECTURE
Brown Auditorium
The Museum of Fine Arts, Houston
1001 Bissonnet
(Enter via the Main Street door)
7p.m.
713.348.4876
ricedesignalliance.org

JOSE CASTILLO
CO-FOUNDER AND PRINCIPAL,
ARQUITECTURA 911SC
Wednesday, February 3

DEREK DELLEKAMP
FOUNDER, DELLEKAMP ARGITECTOS,
Tuesday, February 9

JAVIER SANCHEZ
PRINCIPAL, JS^A
Wednesday, February 17

FRIDA ESCOBEDO LOPEZ
PRINCIPAL, ESCOBEDO LOPEZ,
ARCHITECT
Wednesday, February 24

URBAN PLANNING

SO LONG
URBAN COWBOY

The Spring Branch Stables

JUST A FEW MILES NORTH OF I-10, NESTLED IN THE heart of Spring Branch, 48 acres of undeveloped land were, until recently, home to 70 horses and a close-knit community of horse lovers. Unlike typical equestrian facilities, the Spring Branch Stables (SBS) housed an eclectic collection of tenant-built structures. A long dusty path cut through the center of the stable area, like an image of old Texas, with mismatched wooden fences demarcating the individual stables. Each stable evidenced its hand-built origins and revealed the character of its tenant.

A molded iron sign hung from a wooden beam proudly declared one place “Jenny’s Barn,” while a young goat peeked through a lonely section of chain-link fence tied onto the wooden gate of the structure. Some of the units were wrapped with corrugated metal, others with weathered plywood. Gaping holes were patched over with materials at hand. One tenant set up an improvised ice house next to his stable. Another tenant proudly hung a “Cowgirl’s Place” sign on a clapboard shed. Above the sign someone had nailed a horseshoe to catch some luck.

At the end of the path was Steven Long’s stable. He and his wife found SBS eight years ago. Long edits *Horseback Magazine*. That day he wore a plaid shirt with worn leather suspenders holding up his work jeans. As he talked about his years at SBS and the community of “plain folks who love to ride horses,” he began to tear up.

The tenants believe the land was first used for stables in 1933 and land ownership is verified from 1952 when Ben Fry officially opened the Spring Branch Stables. The last stable manager, Fry’s son Henry, received notice from landowner Kemp Springs Investments earlier this year telling him to have his tenants out by April 15, 2009.

“A thought struck me that this stable is real old and it possibly qualifies for a national historic landmark,” Long said. “Up until the turn of the century, urban stables were as common as the kitchen chimney,” Long added. “It’s clearly a dying part of our architectural landscape and cultural history.”

As land values around the country increase, urban stables are being shut down in favor of more profit-

able land uses.

“Horse stabling is at the bottom of the list to make land valuable,” Long noted. “It’s not advantageous to maintain a stable in the city.”

Duany Plater-Zyberk Company (DPZ), an architectural firm known for its New Urbanist designs including Seaside, Florida and Beachtown, Galveston, posted two proposals on their website for incorporating retail development and housing. Their work is heralded for an emphasis on place-making, mixed-use, and walkable neighborhoods. “Both plans may reincorporate the equestrian facility, thereby connecting residents to its former use,” DPZ said in a statement about the project.

“It’s a place where you know your neighbor and your neighbor knows you and looks out for you. Where you know your neighbor’s horse and your neighbor’s horse knows you,” Long said of the stables. “In this small equine community you have all the things that happen in any community.”

“One year we all took horses and went through neighborhood streets caroling on horseback,” Long reminisced. To celebrate Easter tenants would hang eggs from the trees and the kids would ride on horseback gathering them.

“There are fancy, elegant stables on the edge of the city, but nothing like this,” Long said. “It’s being lost and it will never be replaced.”



Tenant-built structures on 48 acres of land at Spring Branch Stables.

Houston is often criticized for ignoring its cultural history in favor of new development. The Spring Branch Stables held that elusive architectural sense of place with its palimpsest of structures modified and adapted over 50 years of use. Russell Howard, president of Houston Mod, estimates that the city is losing about one post-war building a week.

“We’ve seen adaptive re-use of downtown buildings, but it’s the minor architecture which is being lost at a rapid rate,” Long said.

Long’s bid for the historic registry was not successful. Tenants moved their horses and tore down their stalls, and Spring Branch Stables followed the path of many other urban stables around the country. The collapse of the financial system and housing market appears to have put all plans on hold leaving the 48 acres to wildflowers and bees. Frank Liu, a developer associated with Lovett Homes and listed as a contact, communicated by email that no specific plans are ready to be discussed. Only memories of the community and the distinct culture that thrived at the site for decades remain.

Though the city hosts the largest livestock show and rodeo in the world, it is allowing remnants of its own cultural legacy to disappear. Steven Long lamented: “it’s abysmal, it’s tragic, it’s obscene, it’s outrageous, and most importantly, it’s stupid.”

—Allison Parrott

OUT OF THE WOODS AND ONTO THE SHELF

Returning to Texas, a Designer finds his Groove

**FURNITURE DESIGNER
MICHAEL GARMAN,**

FOUNDER of the Houston-based One3Creative and resident of The Woodlands, was honored with the Best Prototype award for his “Bnch” at this year’s Interior Design Show (IDS) held in Toronto. The annual juried contemporary design event is the largest of its kind in Canada, showcasing innovative international furniture design by 300 established and emerging artists. Garman, 30, was chosen by a jury composed of designer Gord Peteran; journalist Tim McKeough, a contributor to *Metropolis* and *The New York Times*; and Anne Vos, North American director of Moooi.

Constructed of Baltic birch plywood and hard maple, the bench’s characteristic feature is a set of juxtaposed cutaways into opposing corners. This disruption in an ordinary bench’s configuration refocuses the user’s attention while emphasizing the dynamics of the piece. Closer observation reveals that the insides of the legs and the underside of the seat all share the same geometry. The cutaways are therefore an extension of those components, resulting in a product of stunningly balanced proportions. The stacked pieces of production cutoffs ironically resemble the grains of exotic tropical woods, while also evoking the designer’s training as an architect and his experience in manipulating fine strips of wood when building models. This method requires few joints, allowing for a more homogeneous façade. Garman likens the exposure of the striations to a glimpse of a mountain cross-section, belying the piece’s inherently light profile and what the company’s website terms “contemporary warmth.”

When deciding on a winner among the 25 candidates for the Best Prototype award, the jury searched for products that featured a thoughtful design as well as the potential for easy production. All three of the jurors praised Garman for employing simple ideas and simple geometry—qualities often undervalued by young designers

and often the most difficult to realize. Elaborates McKeough, “I think that young designers are often tempted to overwork things because they feel

like they haven’t done enough.” Not Garman, who argues that as a designer, “you have to keep the composition dynamic, but it must also be understood as a whole.”

Garman’s interest in furniture design evolved while he was pursuing a degree in architecture at the Rhode Island School of Design in Providence, where he explored concrete furniture construction in independent study courses. His graduation coincided with the economic downturn of the early 2000s. After a period of working various jobs in Boston including collaborating on live-vegetation green roofs, outfitting bespoke rooms for a prominent physician, and an experimental stint discovering the corporate retail culture of a “big box” home decorating store, Garman decided to return to Houston. He began work on his current furniture line in a shed attached to his family’s home in The Woodlands. Two years later, he launched a website for One3Creative, and his Bnch made headlines at IDS.

Working as an innovative furniture designer and trying to reach a large audience while based in Houston presents a distinct set of challenges and rewards. Garman cites the difficulties of locating others in the city’s stratified design community, which limits the stimulus that comes with sharing ideas and collaborating in comparison to a place

“Bnch,” Best Prototype at Toronto Interior Design Show; Michael Garman.

like Brooklyn. Because Houston is not a design mecca on the level of Copenhagen or Milan, the manufacturing resources also can be difficult

to come by—a moot point for Garman, who remains committed to making each piece by hand in his studio. The designer, however, firmly believes in Houston’s growing population of design-conscious individuals who have a vested interest in pieces with clean lines—“without the studded Lone Stars”—and he views the city as an ideal base from which to expand to an international market.

Both the IDS jurors and Garman agree on the increasing irrelevance of which city a designer calls

home, due to the rapid distribution of techniques and new products online. However, notes McKeough, this access to the newest trends may also make it hard for designers to “block out that noise and find inspiration in their own environment.”

The forested neighborhood where Garman

grew up and his medium of choice may indeed be intertwined. Whether The Woodlands will emerge as the Weimar of the 21st century remains to be seen, but for the time being Houstonians may anticipate Garman’s further explorations in wood beyond the Bnch. And while he enters his work into competitions across the pond, he plans to keep his studio within the bounds of FM 1488. As the designer acknowledges, “I’m not 100 percent sure where I fit in yet. In general, I should have been born 40 years ago, maybe in some northern European city. But Texas is home.”

Michael Garman’s “Bnch” and other products from One3Creative are on view at Peel Gallery, Laura U Collection, and PerezCohen Gallery.

—Steven Thomson





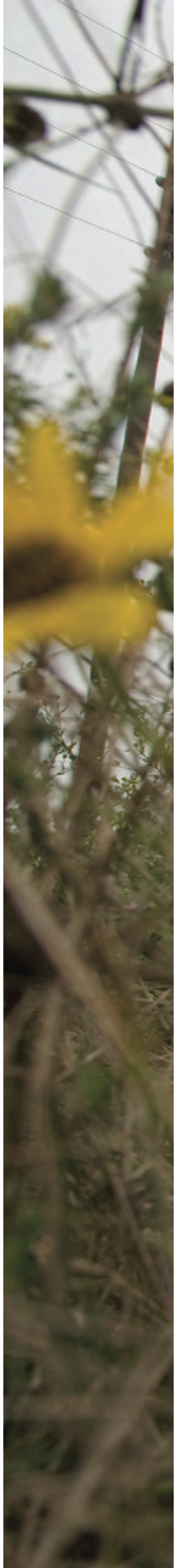
HOUSTOPIA 2035


**IS A NEW CONSENSUS EMERGING ON A DENSER,
MORE ECOLOGICAL AND WALKABLE FUTURE
FOR THE REGION?** *by Jeffrey Taebel*

THE MOST RECENT GROWTH FORECAST DEVELOPED BY THE HOUSTON-GALVESTON AREA COUNCIL (H-GAC) PREDICTS THAT THE HOUSTON REGION WILL ADD 3.5 MILLION PEOPLE AND 1.5 MILLION JOBS BY 2035. PRODUCED USING URBANSIM, A MODEL THAT FIRST “LEARNS” FROM THE RECENT PAST AND THEN USES THESE “RULES” TO SIMULATE FUTURE REAL ESTATE MARKETS, THE FORECAST SHOWS DENSIFICATION OF THE REGION’S URBAN CENTERS, BUT IT DOES NOT SHOW IN ANY SUBSTANTIAL WAY A SLOWDOWN OF SUBURBAN DEVELOPMENT.

CYPRESS CREEK WATERSHED PHOTOGRAPHY *Sharón Steinmann*

Jaime González of the Katy Prairie Conservancy (KPC) worked with volunteers to move rare and endangered species of plants and insects from the Saums Road Prairie before a road expansion paved over the near pristine landscape.





“WHILE I KNOW THE STANDARD CLAIM IS THAT YOSEMITE, NIAGARA FALLS, THE UPPER YELLOWSTONE AND THE LIKE AFFORD THE GREATEST NATURAL SHOWS, I AM NOT SO SURE BUT THE **PRAIRIES AND PLAINS**, WHILE LESS STUNNING AT FIRST SIGHT, LAST LONGER, FILL THE ESTHETIC SENSE FULLER, PRECEDE ALL THE REST, AND MAKE NORTH AMERICA’S CHARACTERISTIC LANDSCAPE.”

Walt Whitman, Specimen Days (1883)

I

The march into pastures and woodlands is a matter of increasing controversy. Climate change, peak oil production, environmental degradation, rising ecological awareness, demographic trends, and a new economic landscape are just a few of the burgeoning forces that have the potential to move the region away from this familiar trajectory.

The long-standing debate about the appropriate role of public sector planning in guiding development has intensified, and for those closely involved, there are signs that the ground beneath common assumptions about what the region should look like in the future may be shifting.

Public Visioning

Long used in military war games, “scenario analysis” was pioneered by Royal Dutch Shell to plan for the types of unforeseen events that led to oil shortages in the 1970s. Regional planning initiatives have increasingly employed scenario analysis as a tool for evaluating the likely benefits and pitfalls of potential growth patterns.

When H-GAC was developing its 2035 Regional Transportation Plan (RTP) in 2005, the agency involved the public in developing alternative growth scenarios. Envision Houston Region was co-sponsored by the American Institute of Architects, Blueprint Houston, Center for Houston’s Future, North Houston Association, and Urban Land Institute—Houston District Council. Community forums conducted with these and other partner organizations in eight locations throughout the region attracted over 800 participants. To get a broad representation of residents and businesses, meetings were held at various times in urban, suburban, and exurban locations region-

wide. This “public visioning” process was designed by Fregonese Calthorpe Associates, a firm that has managed many similar efforts across the nation.

Participants were divided into teams of eight to ten that could choose between three “chip sets” representing the 3.5 million people and 1.5 million jobs that H-GAC expects the region to add by 2035. The chip sets represented different growth scenarios—status quo, compact development, and a hybrid option in between. The teams were asked to place the chips from their chosen set on maps of the region to indicate where they thought development should happen. They were also asked to record the key values they were trying to achieve on their maps.

This exercise provided the basis for an evaluation of three different growth scenarios for the Houston region. Scenario A—the H-GAC forecast—reflected current trends in development patterns and served as a point of comparison for Scenario B, which was based on an average of the 71 maps produced by Envision Houston Region participants. For the most part, Scenario B concentrated growth in already developed areas and preserved more green space; it also gave the counties surrounding Harris County a smaller share of the region’s growth compared to Scenario A. Finally, Scenario C preserved the general patterns preferred by Envision participants, but maintained the forecast growth trends in population and jobs for each county. Interestingly, Scenario C produced a pattern of more defined town centers and concentrated employment than did Scenario B.

Using a Geographic Information System and Travel Demand Model, H-GAC then compared how the scenarios would perform according to various regional mobility and environmental metrics.

The analysis showed that both the citizen-derived Scenario B and H-GAC’s modified Scenario C would produce mobility and environmental benefits whose

REGIONAL PLANNING INITIATIVES HAVE INCREASINGLY EMPLOYED SCENARIO ANALYSIS AS A TOOL FOR EVALUATING THE LIKELY BENEFITS AND PITFALLS OF POTENTIAL GROWTH PATTERNS.

differences in degree were far from staggering. But before dismissing these outcomes as small beans, it should be noted that the modeling comparison only used the roadways and transit network already on the ground or in adopted transportation agency plans. The effects of METRO implementing its plan for light rail and new bus services were accounted for, as were those of a completed Grand Parkway, but not the effects of the new investments in commuter rail, bus service, sidewalks, and bikeways that would likely be central to a coordinated public strategy to achieve a “Houstopian” vision of future growth.

Also, it is interesting to consider how well Scenarios B and C perform when we take into account how each would distribute new growth. The studies presented here are comparisons of how Scenarios B and C would allocate new growth differently from Scenario A in the 100-year floodplain, in Hurricane Evacuation Zone A, within existing wastewater treatment service areas, and within existing dense street networks.

The main lessons from Envision Houston Region were (1) that changing growth patterns alone would produce a comparatively less car-dependent region, while potentially yielding more substantial environmental benefits, and (2) that those outcomes were desired by a consensus of the participants. It also appears that money could be saved by focusing growth in areas with existing infrastructure. Whether this represents enough evidence for public agencies to significantly shift the current mix of planned transportation investments or enact supportive land use and economic development policies remains to be seen. It does, however, seem to be worthy of continued study and public discussion.

Livable Centers

Public input from Envision Houston Region led to the establishment of new goals in H-GAC’s 2035 Regional Transportation Plan and also fueled the launch of a new H-GAC program, Livable Centers, designed to provide financial support for planning and infrastructure that will result in the creation of more mixed-use, walkable places. One empirical basis for pursuing Livable Centers as a regional transportation strategy was established by Australian researchers Peter Newman and Jeff Kentworthy, whose analysis of multiple urban regions revealed that achieving a critical mass of people and jobs, or activity density, produces a significant increase in the share of people’s trips made by walking and transit versus by car.

This principle is on display even in the Houston region’s hot and mostly un-pedes-

Participants in a public visioning place chips representing jobs and people to create a scenario for 2035.



trian-friendly landscape. For example, the percentage of Downtown and Texas Medical Center workers who commute by transit or carpool is much higher than the regional norm. And since those workers have left their cars at home, they make their daytime trips for lunch, errands, meetings, and appointments on foot, albeit often through a tunnel or a skywalk. Each of these walking trips is a potential car trip that the worker has not made, either during the workday or, as is also likely, during the commute home when congestion is at its peak.

More evocative of the new type of activity centers that could one day dot the region’s landscape are The Woodlands Town Center and Sugar Land Town Square. These places have a mixture of office, retail, and civic activities along with some housing, all organized around public spaces and connected by walkways and pedestrian-friendly streets. At a smaller scale, individual mixed-use developments like Post Properties in Midtown, West Ave in Upper Kirby, and CITYCENTRE in West Houston also create activity density. That developers have sensed a greater public demand for walkable mixed-use environments is evidenced by these developments and the many similar projects that were put on hold by the economic downturn and credit crunch. On the suburban fringe, Tomball and Waller are planning to revitalize their downtowns to take advantage of these trends as well as to eventually connect to the central city via commuter rail.

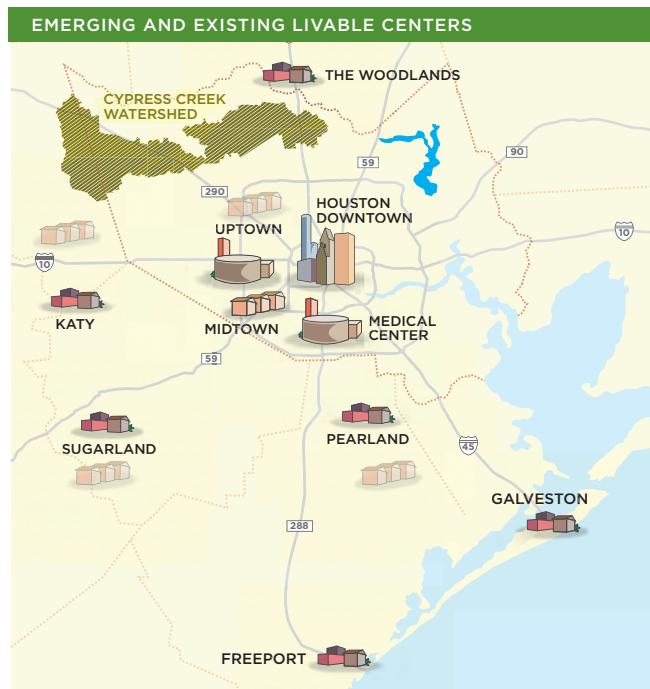
THE STUDIES

THESE TABLES AND MAPS COMPARE DATA FROM 2005 AND SCENARIOS FOR 2035. SCENARIO A REPRESENTS THE CONTINUATION OF TODAY'S TRENDS. SCENARIOS B AND C, DEVELOPED WITH PUBLIC INPUT, CLUSTER NEW HOMES AND JOBS THEREBY LOWERING CAR TRIPS AND EMISSIONS, AND RETAINING OPEN SPACES. EIGHTY-THREE HIGH-DENSITY "LIVABLE CENTERS" OF VARIOUS SCALES AND LOCATIONS WOULD ACCOMMODATE GROWTH WHILE REDUCING VEHICLE MILES TRAVELLED BY TEN PERCENT.

METRIC	2005	SCENARIO A	SCENARIO B	SCENARIO C
Daily Vehicle Miles Traveled	133.3 million	247.7 million	231.6 million	231.2 million
Daily Transit Boardings	394,000	758,000	845,000	944,000
Nitrogen Oxides Emitted*	170.6 tons/day	46.6 tons/day	46.4 tons/day	43.7 tons/day
Volatile Organic Compounds Emitted*	87.7 tons/day	50.7 tons/day	48.7 tons/day	47.7 tons/day
Impervious Surface	586 square miles	892 square miles	853 square miles	864 square miles

* Emissions reductions assume new automotive technology.

NEW DEVELOPMENT (2005-35) VS. SCENERIO A	SCENARIO B	SCENARIO C
In Floodplain	-3%	-32%
In Hurricane Evacuation Zone A	+8%	-29%
In Existing Wastewater Treatment Service Areas	+30%	+30%
In Dense Street Networks	+57%	+61%



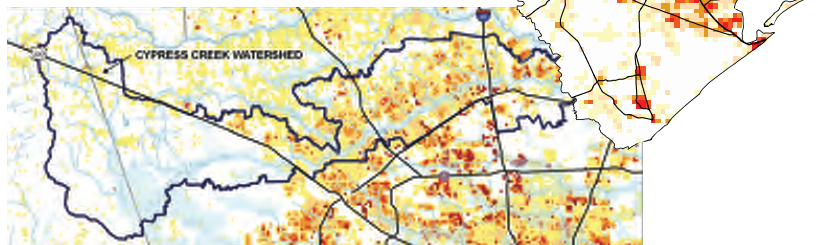
SCALE	EXAMPLE
50 neighborhood centers (3000 - 10,000 JOBS AND PEOPLE/SQ. MILE)	Midtown
25 town centers (10,000 - 25,000 JOBS AND PEOPLE/SQ. MILE)	Downtown Galveston
7 regional centers (25,000 - 50,000 JOBS AND PEOPLE/SQ. MILE)	Uptown Houston
1 urban core (50,000 JOBS + AND PEOPLE/SQ. MILE)	Downtown Houston

LEGEND

- Urban Core
- Regional Centers
- Town Centers
- Neighborhood Center
- Cypress Creek Watershed
- Roads
- Harris County

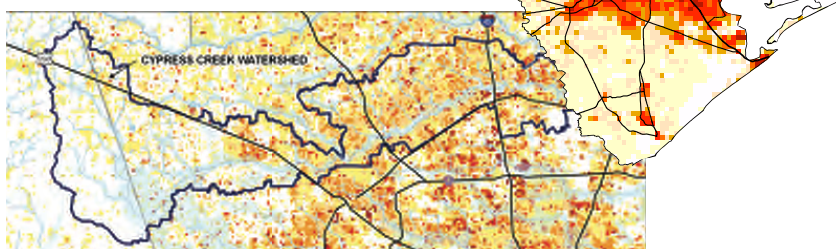
2005

The Houston-Galveston region is surrounded by an outer greenbelt of farms, prairies, wetlands, and woods. The largely undeveloped western portion of the Cypress Creek Watershed is the site of the planned but unfunded Segment E of the Grand Parkway connecting highways 290 and 10.



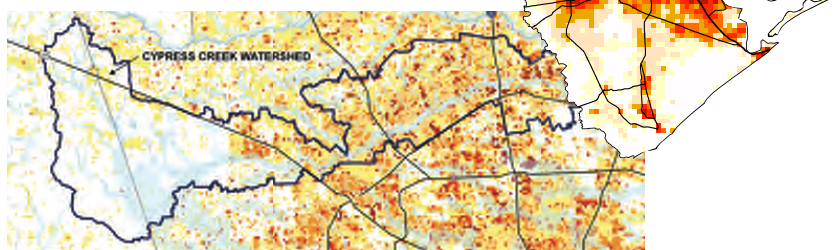
SCENARIO A

If current trends continue as projected, population density will increase in some areas. Farms, prairie, and other open space, including the western Cypress Creek Watershed, will give way to low-density suburbs.

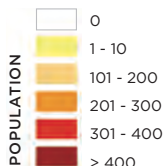
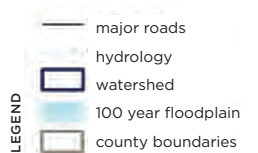


SCENARIO C

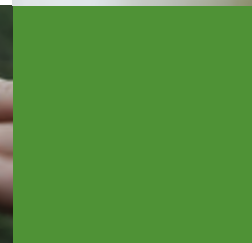
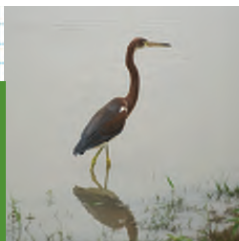
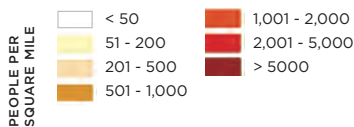
The alternative 2035 scenario, conceived with input from the public, would cluster new single-family homes and dense livable centers in areas already developed. The western Cypress Creek Watershed would remain open and better able to serve as a resource for recreation, flood control, hunting, and farming.



CYPRESS CREEK DETAIL KEY



REGION DETAIL KEY



THE KATY PRAIRIE CONSERVANCY OWNS AND MANAGES 14 PRESERVES IN THE CYPRESS CREEK WATERSHED. TOGETHER THESE PRESERVES COVER OVER 13,000 ACRES OF HABITAT, AN AREA LARGER THAN MANHATTAN.



FROM TOP:
Tri-colored Heron,
Buckeye Caterpillar,
Rough Coneflower,
cattle, and Pitcher Sage.



So, how can we best gauge the potential mobility improvements achievable through a Livable Centers strategy? Conventional travel-demand models are not well suited for estimating the pedestrian trips and transit ridership that active mixed-use centers would generate.

H-GAC staff has developed its own model, based on activity density. Using this tool, H-GAC projects various combinations of different-sized centers that could achieve a 10 percent reduction in future Single Occupant Vehicle (SOV) trips. The Livable Centers table in this piece shows the number of each center that would be needed to achieve a 10 percent reduction should all types of centers be built.

The mix of centers to be built in the blended scenario would absorb about 40 percent of the region's anticipated 2035 population and job growth. Based on past trends, realizing such a goal of concentrated development seems like a daunting proposition, especially when the mobility rewards appear small. But when we consider the environmental (less surface parking), economic (utilization of existing infrastructure), and quality of life (fun places to be) benefits, it is an attractive option.

While H-GAC had previously funded individual pedestrian projects in places like Midtown, Uptown Houston, and The Woodlands, the Livable Centers program was its first effort to specifically encourage, as well as gauge, local government support for the activity density concept. A total of \$1.5 million in federal funds were made available by H-GAC to support local planning studies and another \$17 million was allocated for planned projects that were ready for implementation.

Based on positive response from many quarters to its initial rollout, H-GAC anticipates further expansion of the Livable Centers program in

CAN CAPITALISM SAVE THE WILDS?

Putting A Price Tag on the Cypress Creek Watershed

Using UrbanSim, H-GAC created a hypothetical scenario in the fast growing Cypress Creek watershed that drains the prairies and wetlands to the northwest of Houston to illustrate the impacts of low-density growth and what may be a more sustainable path forward. The scenario involved modeling what would happen if all new growth expected by 2035 was blocked from the watershed that lies west of US 290. This growth was reallocated to the section of the watershed east of US 290, using UrbanSim's trend-derived "rules." An exception was made for Bridgeland, west of US 290, which was allowed to continue its build-out since it was already under way.

The scenario focuses growth in the eastern watershed, where the biggest damage to water quality has already occurred, and would save 3.6 miles of impervious surface in the western portion. This equates to an area 14 times larger than the combined parking lots of Reliant Stadium and the surrounding exhibition complex.

But how could such a thing be achieved? Counties don't have the ability to limit growth in unincorporated areas. Regional tools used elsewhere, like urban growth boundaries, appear unlikely to take hold any time soon in a state which values strong property rights.

One idea that might fit here would be to establish under state law some type of Greenfield Impact Fee, based on the value of the ecological services that would have to be replaced when natural areas are developed. To play this idea out a little further, let's say that under this arrangement development in the eastern Cypress Creek watershed would not be subject to this fee, since it was already substantially urbanized, but development in the western section would be. Proceeds from the fee could be used to acquire private land in the western watershed for conservation or to provide additional tax incentives for property owners to keep their land in its natural state.

The advantage of a largely market-based approach is that no one would be prohibited from developing greenfield sites. But the value of their ecological services would be factored into the cost of development.

WHAT WOULD HAPPEN IF ALL NEW GROWTH EXPECTED BY 2035 WAS BLOCKED FROM THE WATERSHED WEST OF US 290?



ABOVE: Switchgrass towers over Mary Anne Piacentini, executive director of the KPC, in a seed nursery. LEFT: Bridgeland development expands nearby.

< TWO DEVELOPMENTS FORETELL DIFFERENT FUTURES >



ABOVE: Woodlands Town Center could serve as a model for dense livable centers. RIGHT: Low-density homes in the Bridgeland development spread across the western watershed.

future long-range plans and continues to track this type of development at the local level. That the Houston region might no longer be solely defined by its car culture and car-oriented development is much more plausible than would have seemed a decade ago.

Addressing the complex issues faced by dynamic, growing metropolitan areas like the Houston region will require better information than ever before. The good news is that it is possible at least hypothetically, with the tools and techniques now available, to test drive various policy choices (freeways vs. transit, land use controls vs. laissez faire). Planners, policy-makers, and even the general public can draw upon scenario analysis as a means to guide decisions affecting regional growth.

In addition to H-GAC, several local non-governmental organizations are now involved in scenario analysis activities. Houston Tomorrow, a non-profit whose mission is to promote sustainable development, has prepared alternative growth scenarios using H-GAC's forecast data. The Center for Houston's Future, another non-profit whose mission is to make Houston a leading place to live and work, is engaged in a major scenario development process. H-GAC itself is planning to again use scenario modeling, along with new online tools, to get public input on growth and transportation options as it prepares its 2040 Regional Transportation Plan.

It is possible to imagine a day in the not too distant future when public agencies, think tanks, and universities will pool their resources to develop robust scenario-testing tools that are easily accessible online to the public. With this capability, an exercise like Envision Houston Region could have hundreds of thousands, rather than hundreds, of participants. What kind of Houstopian vision would be the result? Tune in. www.h-gac.com/livablecenters.com



Dove hunter Jeremiah Carstensen of Waller tramps through a cornfield in the Katy Prairie Conservancy.

DURING A WARM MIDDAY DRIVE NORTH on Highway 288, I decided to take the Chenevert exit instead of the Pierce elevated (I-45) to go into Downtown. As I exited, my mind flashed back to the early 1990's when former City Councilwoman Ada Edwards had an afro-centric bookstore on Chenevert and Elgin, and my favorite black-owned embroidery shop was adjacent to the northeastern edge of Baldwin Park.

As I stopped at the light on Elgin, the condominiums, townhouses, and lofts brought my daydream to a crashing halt. The lyrics to "Them Changes" started going through my head: "Well my mind is going through them changes; I just feel like committing a crime. Every time you see me going somewhere, I feel like I am going out of my mind." This song, a man's lamentations about an unfaithful lover captures the feeling of dislocation in Houston, where the past is treated with disregard—particularly in what is now called Midtown.

Midtown is a late 20th century Houston urban phenomenon. One hundred years ago, Houstonians knew Midtown as the South End, an elite residential section with one of the city's first streetcar lines. Remnant Colonial Revival houses with grand columns, such as B. B. Rice's house at 1503 Hadley Avenue, survive to attest to the South End's former status. But without deed restrictions, the commercial development of auto dealerships, office buildings, and infill retail buildings from the 1920s through the 1950s occurred at the expense of the houses and their spacious yards. Houston's upper middle class migrated westward after World War II. By 1970, a landscape of parking lots, abandoned lots, and buildings that had seen better days was in place, left to minority communities and such determined survivors as the Sears at Main and Wheeler.

Midtown's present makeup, however, is really an agglomeration of whole and partial neighborhoods culled by highway corridors. This creature of freeway construction is configured by Interstate 45 to the north, Highway 59 to the south, Highway 288 to the east, and Spur 527 to the west.

The 15- to 20-year real estate boom beginning in the 1990s, which created Midtown, has left some pockets of residential and commercial excellence but they rarely meet to form lively seams. This time of recession

MIDTOWN

provides an opportunity to consider what interventions could make Midtown a more coherent and stable neighborhood.

Some see Midtown as the epitome of market-driven inner-city revitalization, removing blight and sparking a renaissance in the inner city. While investment and new construction on vacant lots does bring hope of a better neighborhood, poor and working class people are being pushed out in such areas as the northwest corner of Midtown, thereby exacerbating existing inequalities.

The Midtown TIRZ No. 2 is mandated to acquire land to build affordable housing, but skyrocketing land costs forced the TIRZ to purchase

FUTURE OF HOUSTON'S INNER LOOP NEIGHBORHOODS OR DEVELOPMENT PATTERNS FROM THE PAST?

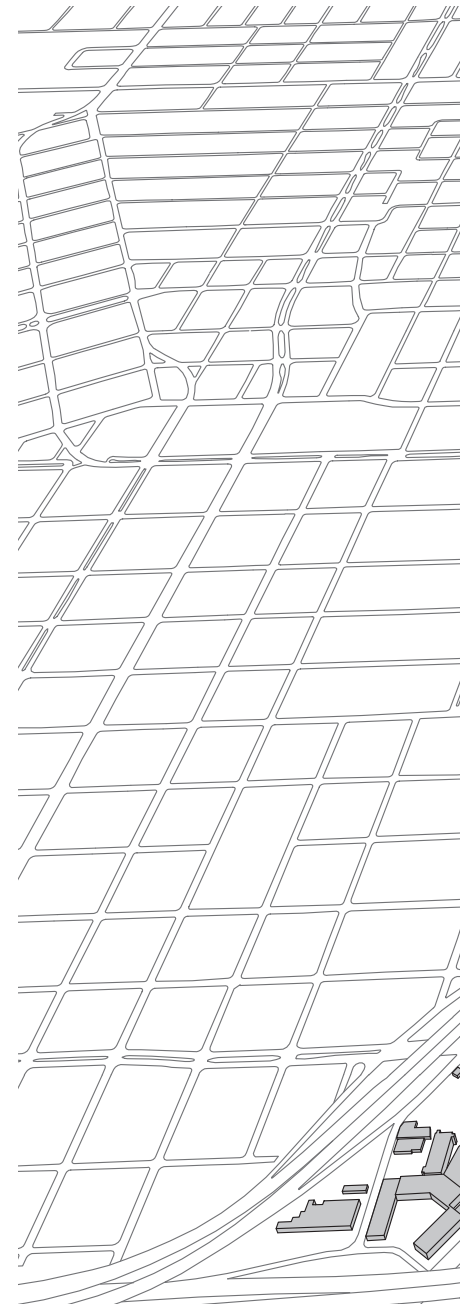
by **Robert S. Muhammad**
map by **Armandina Chapa**

parcels outside of Midtown in the Third Ward. As a result, Midtown itself—once within Third Ward boundaries—has already lost and will continue to lose lower-income communities.

Second, a public space could create a diverse and unified neighborhood identity. Midtown has no midtown. It has no discernible center, plaza, or coherent development pattern. Baldwin and Midtown parks are pleasant patches of green space but fail to capture the character of Midtown. Plans for plazas at Houston Community College have potential.

The presence of the light rail line affords the possibility of Midtown creating a coherent urban corridor that can transform the district into a cohesive whole, benefiting a diversity of people. Alas, this is an opportunity that could be missed. The recent Transit Corridor Ordinance may help create pedestrian environments but the standards are optional.

In order to do some excellent transit oriented development, Midtown has to overcome the urban legend of viable Main Street businesses being destroyed by the construction of the light rail line. Main Street in Houston, and in communities across the American landscape, was made a ghost corridor



by suburban greenfield development, access roads, freeways, toll roads, outer loops, and bypass highway construction.

Solutions abound, but it is not promising that about one third of the buildings in Midtown were developed in the last 15 years and this boom has resulted in an incoherent environment. The two suburban-style CVS stores, one on Main at Elgin and the other on West Gray at Bagby, are clear examples of the need to set standards. CVS has made an urban storefront location in the Baylor College of Medicine Faculty Center along the rail line.

For all the handwringing about viable businesses lost on Main Street during light rail construction, there is little public discussion about the steady residential growth one to two blocks west and east of the rail lines between Elgin and Webster and what



Buildings since 1990

- Commercial
- Multifamily
- Office
- Single Family
- Non-profit
- Governmental

ONE NEIGHBORHOOD? A close look at a map of Midtown reveals many pockets that sometimes meet but rarely relate to form a whole. —Christof Spieler

- 1** The Post Midtown complex has ground floor retail and wide sidewalks but across the street is a CVS in the middle of a parking lot.
- 2** Northeast and northwest Midtown filled up with townhouses in the 90s and early 2000s, displacing most of Freedman's Town.
- 3** Travis and Milam became a Vietnamese retail strip in the 70s and 80s, now partly replaced by restaurants and home goods stores.
- 4** One block of old buildings amidst empty lots at the Ensemble-HCC light rail station contains the Continental Club and four restaurants.
- 5** Ventana at Midtown contains 282 apartments, but is oriented towards an internal courtyard and its garage, not the sidewalk, and has not spawned surrounding retail.
- 6** Wheeler and Main has a Sears and Fiesta with huge parking lots but will likely see redevelopment when the University rail line is built.
- 7** Social services are scattered through Midtown, many along Fannin and San Jacinto.
- 8** Houston Community College is working to create public plazas on campus and improve sidewalks around it.
- 9** Churches have been islands of stability as Midtown has gone through its multiple lives.
- 10** Main has seen little development near Greyhound, but plans for apartments, retail, and a park at McGowen are afoot.

that boom portends. Commercial developers know rooftops equal retail. The viability of Main Street businesses will soon be a matter of fact rather than fodder for urban legends. The question is: Can Midtown make room for the small retailer and shop owners along a revitalized Main

Street? Can Midtown find a way to place workforce housing affordable to teachers, fire and policemen, returning war veterans, and recent college graduates in developments within a quarter mile of rail? Midtown needs a midtown, a central plaza or town square that

signifies its unique history, collective vision, and communal identity. Will it be left to chance to develop organically (whatever that means) or will the esoteric market forces of Houston's economic growth machine determine what the character and location of the heart and soul of Midtown will

be? Will it be determined by history, geography, or economics? For the most part, Midtown is a glimpse of the future of Houston's inner loop neighborhoods which appears to be following development patterns from the recent past. I guess my mind will keep going through them changes. **c**

THE BRIDGE EL PUENTE
FAMILY EDUCATION CENTER
CENTRO de EDUCACION FAMILIAR
6114 Renwick



A NEW Center ON THE

PERIPHERY



The work day is done

and a line of cars are snaking their way through the front gates of the Napoleon Square Apartment Complex. The lively, bouncing sound of accordions playing in corridors waft from several car stereos. In a corner of the crowded parking lot, two young boys kick a soccer ball, while a street vendor pushing a small white cart sells elote, roasted corn on the cob served on a stick, sprinkled with chili powder.

The vendor rolls his cart past the open front doors of several ground level apartments where inside other merchants have set up shop.

To the uninitiated, the complex is a labyrinth, with rows and rows of identical apartment buildings, worn and faded paint, and scraggly landscaping. But, with many residents returning home from work, there are also the unmistakable signs of community: a motorist taps his car horn and waves to a neighbor, friends linger by an open doorway catching up on each other's day, a woman hands off a couple bags of groceries to a teenager. These are the scenes likely playing across all of Houston, but here at Napoleon Square things are a little different. As noted by Oriana Garcia, a local community organizer, Gulfton

is often the first home in Houston for newly arriving immigrants from Latin America. The area's affordable housing, shops, language, food, and culture all help to provide a familiar environment that eases the residents' transition to life in America.

The last decade has ushered in one of the largest demographic restructurings in U.S. histo-

ry, turning inside-out the relationship between center and periphery and wealth and poverty. In most cities, including Houston, the most profound changes have occurred in the landscape of the "inner ring," the area sandwiched between the coveted urban space of the central city and the suburban sprawl of the periphery. The outwardly conventional landscapes of the inner ring are neither urban nor suburban, but a conglomeration of both, a hybrid condition mixed from one part global city, one part garden suburb, and one part disinvestment. Gulfton in southwest Houston is one of these landscapes.

First, a short history. Prior to the 1950s, the Gulfton area was a greenfield, entirely undeveloped. In the decades that followed, Houston's population would explode, and rapid development ensued to accommodate that growth. In Gulfton that meant the construction of 15,000 apartments in 90 separate complexes. The apartments, predominantly built in the 1970s, accommodated the lifestyles and desires of young, predominantly white, professional singles, equipped with amenities such as hot tubs, swimming pools, and club houses—and supported with neighboring discos and night clubs. When the bottom fell out of the oil market in the 1980s, young domestic migrants packed up, while at the same time war and poverty brought new migrants to the city from more distant places, such as Mexico, El Salvador, and Vietnam. Though it is no longer on Houston's margins, the area's population moved from the peripheries

The **Baker-Ripley** Neighborhood Center for Gulfton, Sharpstown

BY SUSAN ROGERS

of the global economy. This migration marked the beginning of Gulfton's transformation from a swinging suburb to a transnational hub.

Today Gulfton is the nexus of Houston's transnational communities. The neighborhood is Houston's Ellis Island, a point of entry for many new immigrants arriving in the city. As Beatrice Marquez was quoted in *Education Week*, "In parts of Central America, people don't say they are coming to Texas or Houston. They say they are coming to Gulfton." The local mall has lost all of its national franchises and instead is fueled by independent stores, while the 1970s apartment complexes have been repurposed as mixed-use with stores occupying the ground floor apartments. In one case apartment units have been combined to house a school. Tract homes now house beauty salons, tire repair shops, and small tiendas. The mixed-use transformation of buildings in Gulfton has occurred spontaneously from the bottom up, indicative of the entrepreneurial spirit of residents and their need to adapt existing space for new uses.

The demographic change in Gulfton mirrors changes in similar communities across the United States. Between 1980 and 2000, the population within Gulfton's three square miles nearly doubled (the area today is the densest neighborhood in Houston), rising from 26,000 to over 45,000, all without the construction of a single additional housing unit. In fact, over the same time period there has been a net loss of 444 units. Accordingly, when the swinging singles moved out and immigrant families moved in, occupancy more than doubled. In 1980 only 15 percent of the population comprised children age 18 or younger; by the 2000 census count, that number had risen to 30 percent. Over 60 percent of the neighborhood's current resi-

dents were born outside the United States, arriving from over 40 countries.

Global communication networks keep residents connected to their countries of origin, culture, language, families, and friends. Telephones, cable television, the press, and wire transfers keep conversations, politics, and money flowing. Multilateral globalization (versus unilateral Americanization) is highly in evidence in the community and offers a glimpse of a future world. For example, Empresas ADOC, with footwear shops in Guatemala, El Salvador, Nicaragua, and Costa Rica, has one store in the United States—located in the center of Gulfton. And Pollo Campero, a Guatemalan chicken franchise, opened its second store in the United States in Gulfton. The community also has U.S. branches of three Salvadoran banks and a Mexico-based FAMSA furniture store, the self-professed "store without borders" where you can purchase a stove in Houston to be delivered to a family member anywhere in Mexico.

In many ways the residents of Gulfton are more connected globally than locally.

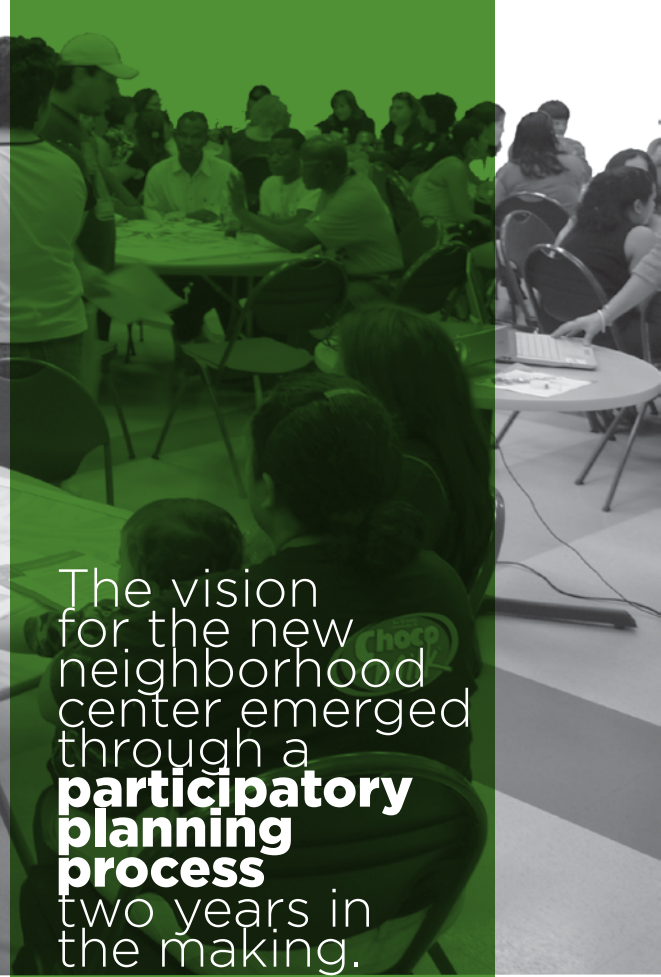
While global networks keep people connected, the physical landscape divides. Gulfton was built privately for profit and so lacks the civic infrastructure of community or recreation centers, libraries, public spaces, small blocks with their natural connectivity, or other amenities. There are more than 100 pools in Gulfton (many now filled in), but



Rosa Gomez, 33, left, teaches computer skills to Emmanuel Ndamdio, 70, during the computer class she teaches at El Punte Family Education Center in the Napoleon Square Apartments.

Apartments adapted to mixed-uses on Bellaire.





The vision for the new neighborhood center emerged through a **participatory planning process** two years in the making.

only one 30-acre park. Each apartment complex is an enclave unto itself. You could comfortably fit 16 standard downtown blocks in one super-block in Gulfton. Sidewalks are infrequent, and with the exception of the park, the only public space is the street.

The social bonds that have developed in the community operate in resistance to the physical division that characterizes the landscape. More impressively, these social bonds have developed in a community that is highly transitional—more than 90 percent of Gulfton’s residents rent. Residents push back against the limitations and constraints of the physical landscape by activating leftover spaces to meet their needs—spontaneous markets pop-up in underutilized parking lots, garage sales occur in the interstitial spaces between street and apartment, and enterprising shopkeepers find new homes in unusual places.

It is within this context that Neighborhood Centers Inc. (NCI) embarked on a groundbreaking, multiyear participatory planning and design process to develop the Baker-Ripley Neighborhood Center, a community center and marketplace serving the residents of Gulfton and the adjacent Sharpstown

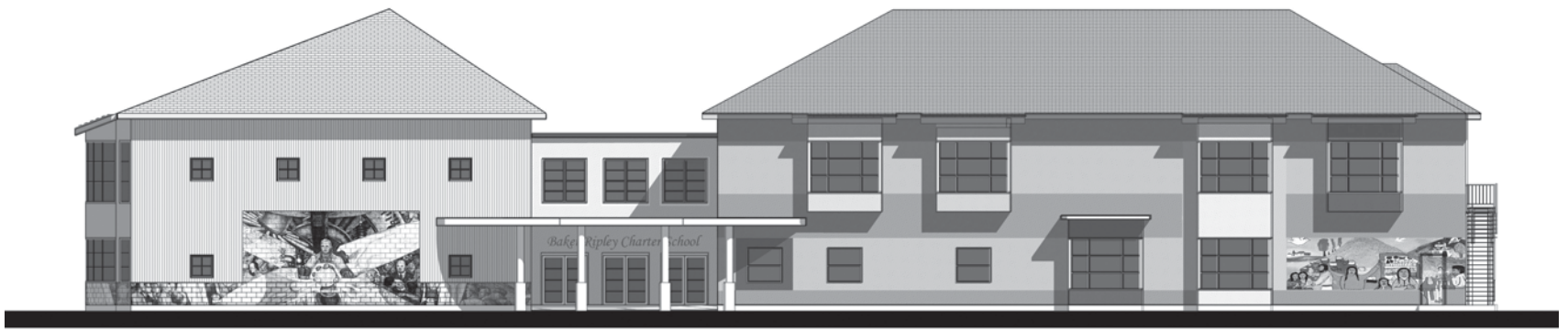
neighborhood. While networks of social and civic infrastructure exist in the center of the city, they have been slow to develop outside of the core to address the increasing needs in the inner ring.

NCI is a product of the American settlement house movement that began in the late 1800s, an era that was marked by large-scale immigration and change, very similar to conditions at the end of the 20th century. The most famous settlement house is Hull House in Chicago, established in 1889 by Jane Addams, which continues to serve the community today. Similarly, NCI began as the Houston Settlement Association, founded in 1907 in the city’s East End with the mission to “extend educational, industrial, social and friendly aid to all those within reach.” Today NCI has six neighborhood centers and 59 service sites that reach 300,000 people each year.

NCI has had a presence in Gulfton for over a quarter of a century. In 1998 the organization opened The Bridge/El Puente in the Napoleon Square Apartment complex. In 2007, after decades of planning, the city of Houston opened the Southwest Multi-Service Center, which consolidated a number

ABOVE AND BELOW: Baker-Ripley Neighborhood Center Public Workshop.





Elevation, illustrating the public art “canvas” walls.

of social services under one roof and which is where NCI has been housed since the building’s completion.

In the offices of The Bridge/El Puente, Rosa Gomez, originally from Tampico, Mexico, prepares to teach a computer class. Gomez is a success story of the center, a local resident who has taken advantage of the programs there to learn English and a trade and has returned to give back to an organization she says has given her so much.

Gomez, who has been living in Houston for six years, was part of a group of community residents that served on a panel to select the architecture firm for the project in 2005. What she was looking for in their designs, she said, was a building that was approachable to the population it was going to serve. “We didn’t want something too fancy or official looking,” she said. “We didn’t want the building to

Between and around the buildings are **public space zones**, each with an identified purpose and program.

be intimidating. Houston is such a big place and it’s hard for people to find a place they are comfortable in and can get information in Spanish.”

The selected design team for the Baker-Ripley Neighborhood Center was led by Concordia, an urban design, architecture, and community planning firm based in New Orleans that promotes the comprehensive planning and design of facilities in the context of the total community and in collaboration with stakeholders. The team also included the New York-based nonprofit Project for Public Spaces (which also worked on Discovery Green and is currently working on Emancipation Park in the Third Ward) and the Houston-based landscape firm Asakura Robinson Company, among others.

The vision for the new neighborhood center emerged through a participatory planning process that was more than two years in the making. The design of the Baker-Ripley Neighborhood Center, currently under construction at the corner of Rookin and High Star adjacent to the Southwest Multi-Service Center, began with an “Appreciative Inquiry” that asked over 100 residents and stakeholders to identify the strengths of the neighborhood. Building from this foundation, the design team developed a preliminary program for the building, and everything—from the public spaces to the program to the architecture—became the subject of six additional public workshops. As noted by the Project for Public Spaces team, what emerged from the process was the vision that “community centers can be more than just buildings with an adjacent park; the whole facility, inside and outside, can



The site is an oasis in a sea of concrete.



Site plan.

A PROGRAM WITH SOMETHING FOR EVERYONE

1. EDUCATION BUILDING

lobby
teacher's workroom
counselor
special education
first grade classroom
mechanical
kindergarten classroom
computer language lab
library
principal

2. DAY CARE & YOUTH BUILDING

multi-purpose room
infant room
toddler room
lobby
counseling area
outreach

3. BUSINESS BUILDING

lobby
business incubators
business center
conference
credit union
café
retail

4. RECREATION BUILDING

gym
dance studio
stage wing
outdoor stage
kitchen

5. ART BUILDING

art room
studio

be a community place.” Input from the community, solicited and welcomed throughout the two-year planning process, shaped the entire project. The building is scheduled to open in December 2009.

A unique quality of the project is its inventive program, developed in response to stakeholder input and distributed on the four-acre site in five buildings that shape the public spaces and create a “village” feel. Each of the five buildings has a different use: one focuses on education, another on art, another on business and entrepreneurial activities, another on recreation and related activities, and another on health care. The buildings house a mixture of the programmatic pieces, which include a library, credit union, commercial kitchen, retail spaces, business center, gym, science and computer labs, art studios, educational classrooms, business incubators, market spaces, and counseling and social service areas. There will be something for everyone here, and the synergy that is likely to be generated has the potential to build even stronger social networks in the community, creating a free and open space to build ties and establish roots.

Between and around the buildings are public space zones, each with an identified purpose and program.

The market zone is adjacent to the business center; the park zone fills the spaces between the educational, art, and recreation buildings; the plaza zone mediates the area between the Baker-Ripley Neighborhood Center and the Southwest Multi-Service Center. Areas for playing, walking, celebrating, socializing, selling, and performing are defined in the site plan, including a movie screen on the north side of the recreation building. The public spaces and buildings dance gingerly around the existing large oak trees scattered on the site, a goal set by stakeholders.

The public spaces will help to address the deficit of open space that characterizes the community. Specifically, compared to the city's overall average of 27 acres per 1,000 people, Gulfton has 30 acres for 45,000 people, or a meager two-thirds of an acre per 1,000 residents. It is easy to imagine how this weave of public spaces will spark spontaneous pickup soccer games, music performances on the plaza, and the infectious laughter of children playing on the playground. Forming a backdrop to the public spaces will be vibrantly-colored buildings designed to be canvases, surfaces for future public art projects that will celebrate the many cultures of the community.

While we can critique public processes in design,

particularly the inherent risk that they will reduce architecture to its lowest common denominator, as has been argued in regards to the World Trade Centers site, it is hard to be critical of a project for a community center that incorporates the community's voice at every turn. In the end the project might not meet the criteria for “high design,” but it seems certain that it will measure up to the criteria of the people who will use it and so become a center of community life in Gulfton.

Over the last 20 years, southwest Houston has completely changed: the memory of Michael Pollock's infamous commercials for Colonial House apartments—advertising free VCRs and leisure time spent playing bumper pool and languishing poolside—has faded (though still available via YouTube), and Gulfton has become more famous for its problems than for its assets. Yet the open, participatory process incorporated into the vision, programming, and design of the Baker-Ripley Neighborhood Center provides a glimpse of what is possible if we did things differently—if we looked to strengths instead of weaknesses, if we opened up design to dialogue, and if we used design more often as a strategy for change. **C**

-Zeke Minaya contributed to the writing of this article.

TOP: San Felipe Street
and Post Oak Boulevard
photographed 2009.
BELOW: Rendering of
same intersection.

A RADICAL REMAKE *of*

Can what was Houston's SUBURBAN FRINGE turn into an urban neighborhood full of street life and character?

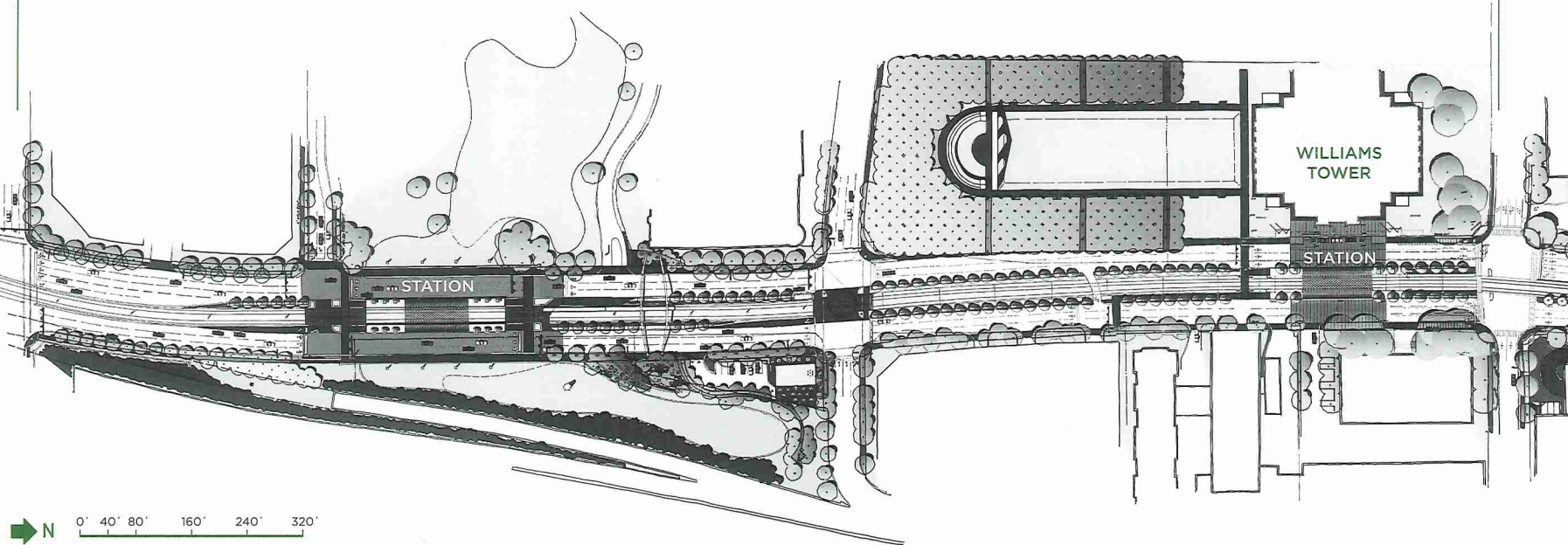
Uptown

HIGH ABOVE POST OAK BOULEVARD, THE MAIN ARTERY OF HOUSTON'S POSH UPTOWN DISTRICT, A BANK OF TELEVISION SCREENS FED BY SEVEN CAMERAS DISPLAYS MANY-ANGLED VIEWS OF THE TRAFFIC COURSING BELOW. DURING AFTER-NOON RUSH HOUR, AN OFF-DUTY POLICE OFFICER SCANS THE SCREENS. >>>



BY POLLY MORRICE





The watcher's job, explains John Breeding, the affable president of Uptown Houston District, the quasi-public entity whose fifteenth-floor conference room houses this monitoring system, is to observe "from sort of a birds-eye view" as cars disgorge from parking garages and inch toward Interstate 610 West Loop, the closest freeway. In case of a snarl, the upstairs sentry alerts the small squad of police directing traffic down on the ground.

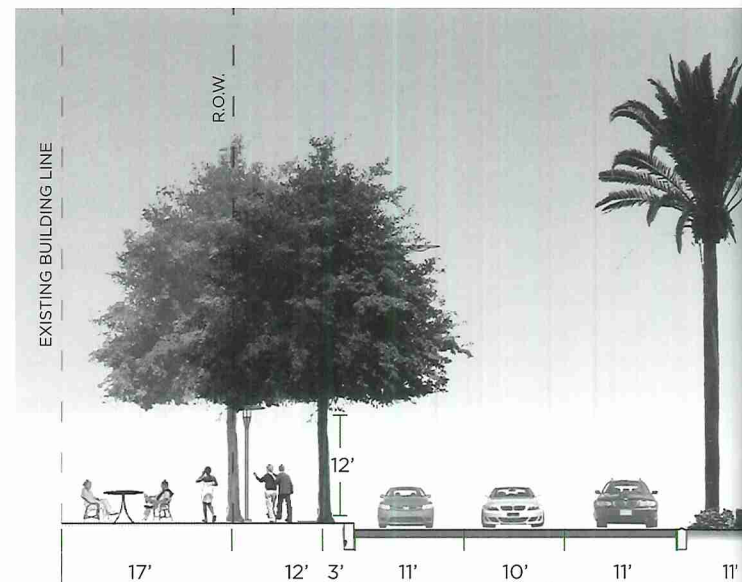
Breeding explains, "Sometimes he'll say, you have to leave the green light on longer to pull more cars through."

And how does this "traffic surveillance system" time the signals?

"It's a bit agrarian," Breeding admits. "We have someone standing down at the light."

That Uptown's traffic command center relies on the same technique—pushing the walk button—that harried pedestrians use to scurry across its congested streets is endearing but also prescient. This thousand-acre area of office towers, hotels, high-rise residences, and luxe retail, often referred to as the Galleria area, is trying to nudge its car-dependent culture toward one that also embraces people on foot.

To make itself walkable—to bring urbanism to a place the writer Phillip Lopate described in *Cite* as "having the most concentration of buildings possible to assemble without achieving anything like an urban texture"—Uptown is drawing on the intertwined efforts of not one, but three quasi-public entities: the management district; the area's tax-increment reinvestment zone, or TIRZ; and the TIRZ's construction arm, the Uptown Development Authority. All three are headed by Breeding. These agencies—and implicitly, the area businesses and developers they represent—have partnered to carry out



Its DUAL IMPULSE to offer mass transit while also staying friendly to drivers typifies what Susan Rogers, director of the University of Houston's Community Design Resource Center, calls Houston's desire "to have its urbanism both ways."

an ambitious mobility plan. And, though their agenda includes road building, they aim "to radically change the pedestrian environment" by collaborating with Metro, the transit agency, in constructing nearly two miles of light rail along Post Oak Boulevard, to be flanked by widened sidewalks, landscaping, and seven distinctive stations.

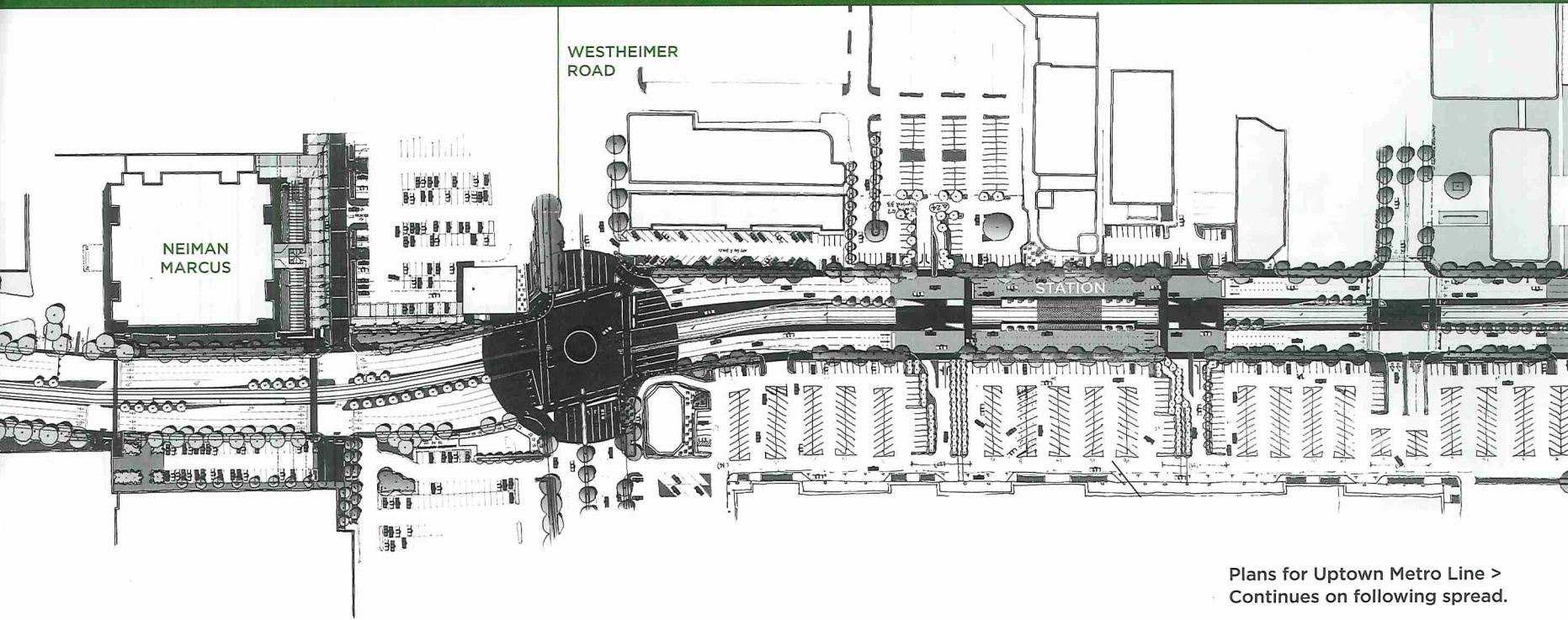
Uptown's plans, and the alphabet-soup of agencies seeing them through, spark differing opinions. Some experts are pleased with the notion of remaking a neighborhood that

germinated as a mall on Houston's then-suburban fringe; others question the use of tax-increment financing, in general, as a development tool. Competing voices aside, it seems clear that Uptown,

perhaps alone among Houston neighborhoods, has the money and the resolve to tinker with its founding premise. Its dual impulse to offer mass transit while also staying friendly to drivers typifies what Susan Rogers, director of the University of Houston's Community Design Resource Center, calls Houston's desire "to have its

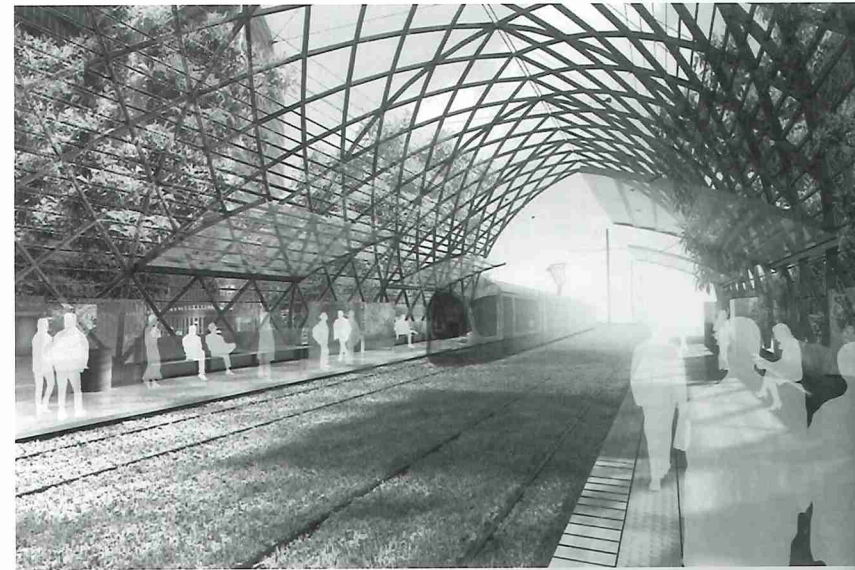
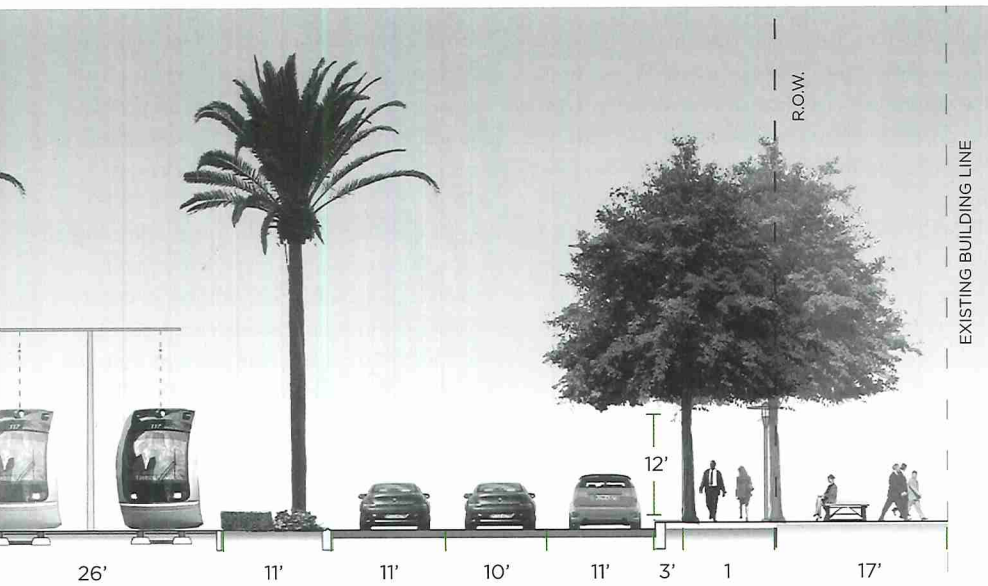
urbanism both ways." Rogers says, "It's never been attempted before, and I guess we'll see. Uptown will probably be the best example of trying to make that work."

Unlike the Houston version, uptowns elsewhere have geography or history behind their names.



Plans for Uptown Metro Line > Continues on following spread.

A Parisian experience comes to Houston.

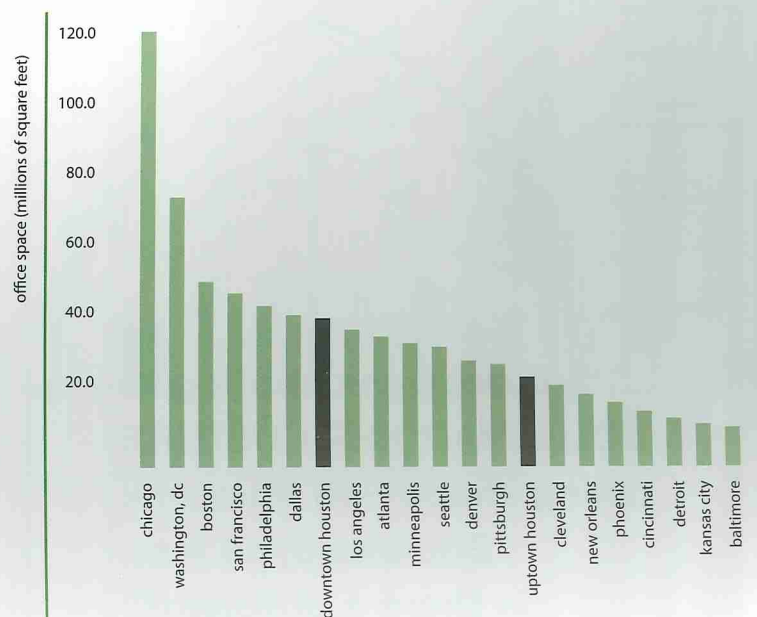


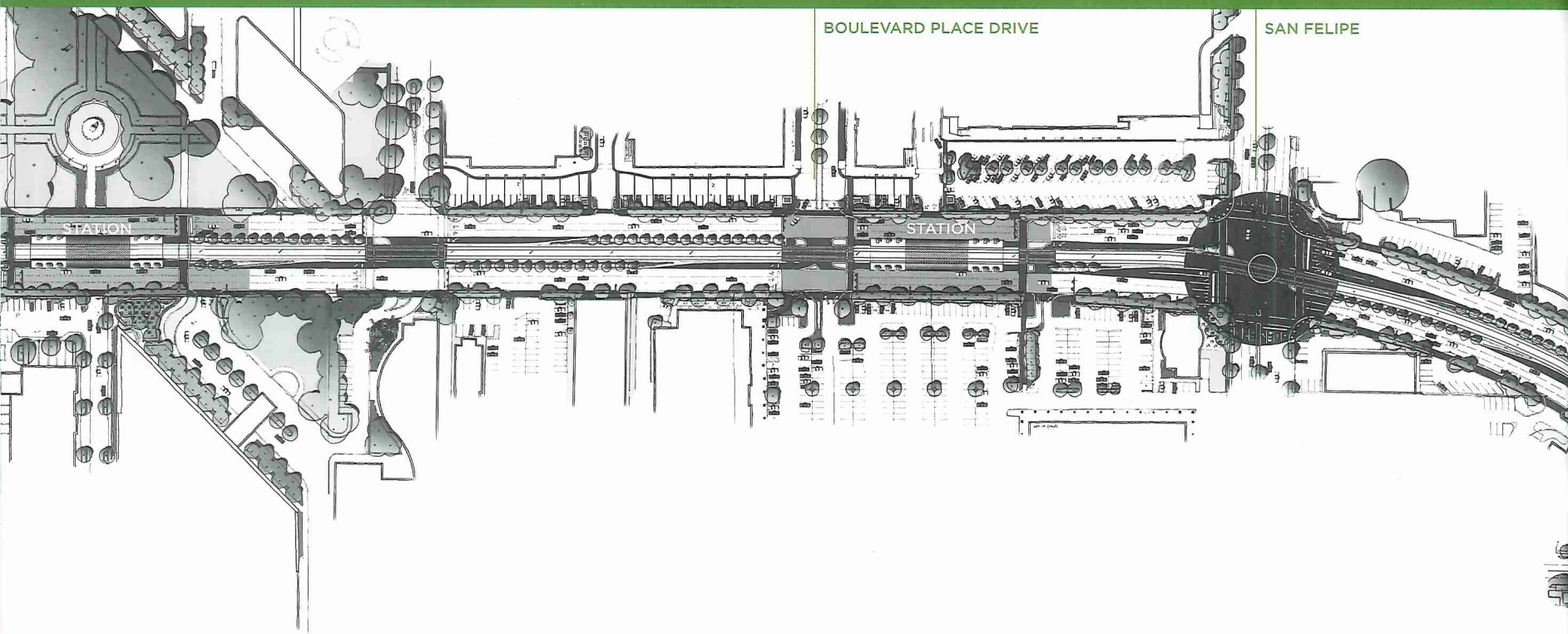
Uptown New Orleans, for instance, takes in a swath of neighborhoods situated upriver of the Garden District and the original Creole city. By contrast, the compact, irregularly shaped district lying just west of Houston’s inner freeway loop was likely christened “Uptown” to connote “upscale” and “upmarket.” The modifiers seem apt: Uptown’s 700-plus stores include Neiman Marcus, Saks Fifth Avenue, and Tiffany & Co., while the district’s office towers house one-fifth of Houston’s class A office space.

Yet back in 1970, when master developer Gerald Hines unveiled his three-story, enclosed mall (loosely modeled on the Galleria Vittorio Emanuele in Milan), it had few commercial neighbors on the Loop 610 feeder. Not for long. Centered on the novelty of an indoor skating rink, Houston’s Galleria soon became an urban gathering place: on the Houston Architecture Info website, posters blog nostalgic about the mall’s early years; one recounts “more or less” growing up there. During Houston’s oil-boom, the Galleria expanded, while the surrounding streets sprouted new retail, hotels, and office buildings, most notably Philip Johnson’s Transco Tower (now Williams Tower), which viewed at a distance still seems to bolt straight up from the horizon. Since the 64-story tower’s completion in 1984, most Uptown construction has been multi-unit residential; a high-rise housing boom took off in the 1990s, going strong until curbed by the recent downturn. Despite its lack of a blueprint, Uptown evolved—aggregated may be a better word—into a dense urban blend. As Rogers says, “It really is a mixed-use area. In some ways [it] represents kind of a real district in Houston that’s distinct and unique.”

NATION'S LARGEST DOWNTOWNS

* Excludes New York City 325.6 million square feet





As early as 1975, Uptown business leaders began tackling their problems without waiting for the city to act. In that year they formed a voluntary taxing entity, the Uptown Houston Association, to address such edge-city issues as open drainage ditches. This private organization still exists but has been largely supplanted by the more powerful Uptown Houston District (formally, Harris County Improvement District #1). Created by the State Legislature in 1987, the district levies a tax (about 14 cents per \$100 assessed value) on property inside its boundaries, using the money to “leverage public funds” for area improvements. Besides the traffic operation, the district’s projects include landscaping, marketing, a yearly holiday lighting ceremony, and, in a 1995 effort to lend the area a unified style, the installation of six pairs of steel arches over Post Oak Boulevard; futuristic steel rings, bearing street names, were strung above intersections. Critical reaction was mixed.

In 1999, Uptown’s stakeholders put in place the last of the public-private entities now shaping the area’s roadways, parks, and light-rail configuration. They lobbied City Council to create an Uptown TIRZ, arguing successfully that increment-funded projects were needed

to reduce congestion and keep shoppers from fleeing to outlying malls. Simply put, when an area becomes a TIRZ, the city agrees to freeze the amount of property taxes collected from it for a given period (in Uptown’s case, 30 years); any tax income above the predetermined level—the increment—is returned to the zone to promote economic development. This, in turn, is expected to push property values higher, increasing the increment and eventually creating higher tax revenues for the city. Uptown’s planners estimated that over 30 years their increment funds would total \$235 million. This amount was budgeted for street and infrastructure improvements, and the Uptown Development Authority (UDA) floated bonds to raise the sum and allow construction to begin.

The TIRZ-financed work includes reconstructing or widening Uptown’s main thoroughfares and building secondary streets to connect these major roadways and provide frontage for new development. Much work has been completed, and some \$20 million in other projects is under contract. However, TIRZ funds will also be used to reconstruct Post Oak Boulevard to accommodate the new rail line. The Uptown Corridor is one piece in Metro’s planned light-rail network, six lines that when completed will travel more than 35 miles through most of the city’s central neighborhoods. Starting at the Northwest Transit Center at Loop 610 and I-10, where suburban park-and-ride buses stop on the way Downtown, the Uptown line will jog about four-and-half miles south to Westpark, where it will connect with the to-be-constructed University line. According to Breeding, a letter of intent, laying out the respective responsibilities of Metro and the Uptown TIRZ for the approximately 1.75 mile section running along Post Oak is still in progress. In general, though, “We [the TIRZ] will design, fund, and construct Post Oak Boulevard. Metro would come back in and design, fund, and construct the light rail system.”

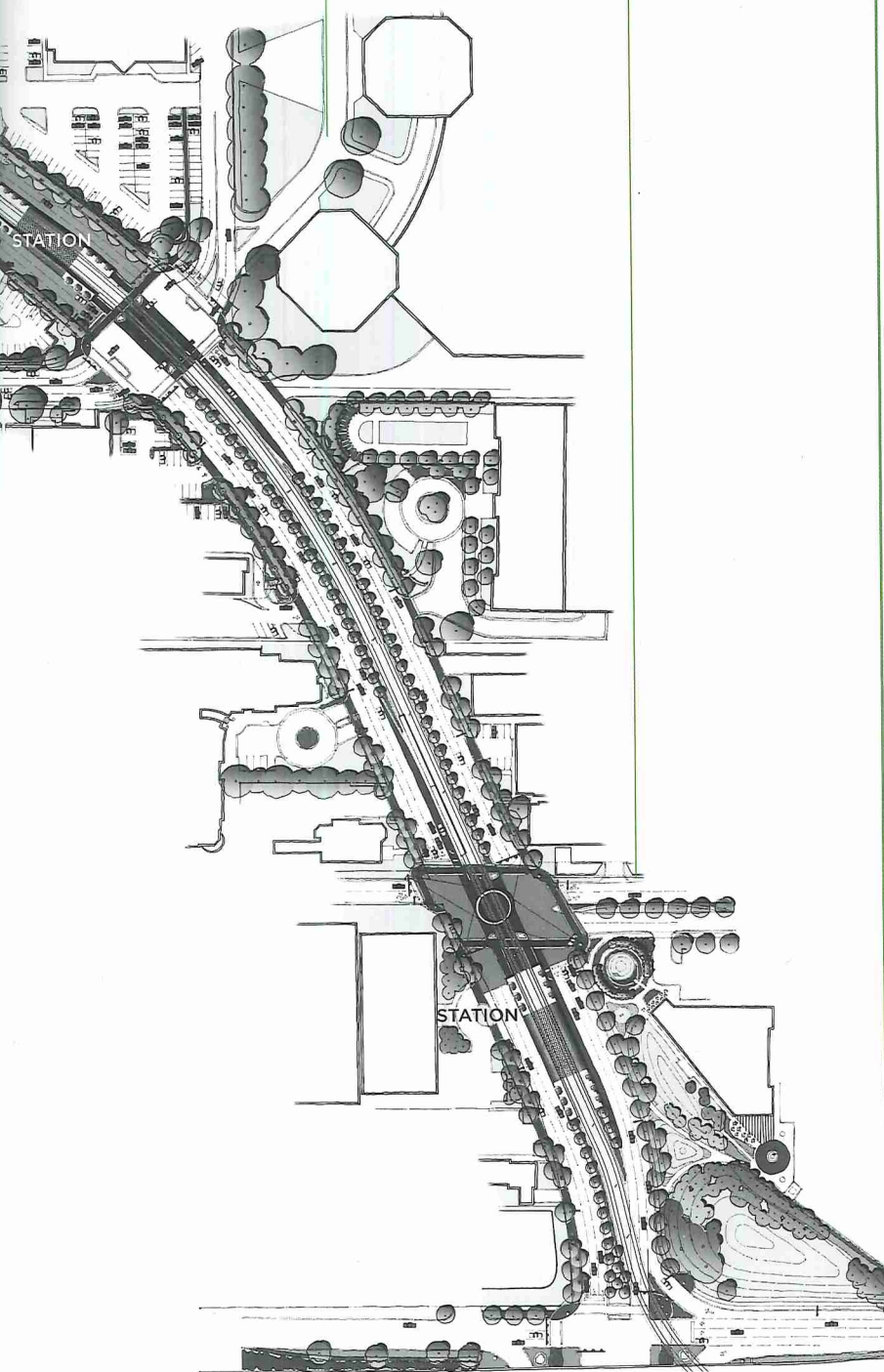
The plans for the new Post Oak Boulevard are seductive. The rail tracks will run not through concrete, but a lush greensward. Glass-and-wood stations with trellised sides will shield riders from both sun and rain, while broad, well-lit sidewalks will sway businesses to open outdoor cafés. The stations were designed by Agence d’architecture Brochet-Lajus-Pueyo, a Bordeaux firm, Paris-based Signes, and Houston’s SWA. John Breeding credits Olivier Brochet with being the creative force behind the design, although he also says it was “definitely a team approach.” When the trains start running—in 2012, according to Metro, although Breeding thinks 2014 is the more realistic date—the effect could well be, as David Crossley, president of the research institute Houston Tomorrow, believes, “transformative.”

Houstonians hoofing it! A boulevardier culture taking shape—on Post Oak Boulevard, no less. Is there a problem? As with any grand scheme, there are a few dissenters. A source who works for a large Uptown stakeholder says his anti-rail employer believes the trains will actually worsen traffic. For others, the process rather than the plan raises concerns. The boards of the Uptown TIRZ and its management district are appointed, not elected; this governing structure—used by TIRZs throughout the city—troubles critics who believe these entities should be directly answerable to the public. In 1999—after Houston authorized 12 new TIRZs in a two-year period—Brian Wallstin sputtered in the *Houston Press*, “tax-increment financing is not your parents’ public spending, which is rooted in the ideal that taxes

**“Houstonians hoofing it!
A BOULEVARDIER CULTURE
taking shape—on Post Oak
Boulevard, no less.
Is there a problem?”**

BRIAR OAKS PLACE

UPTOWN PARK BLVD.



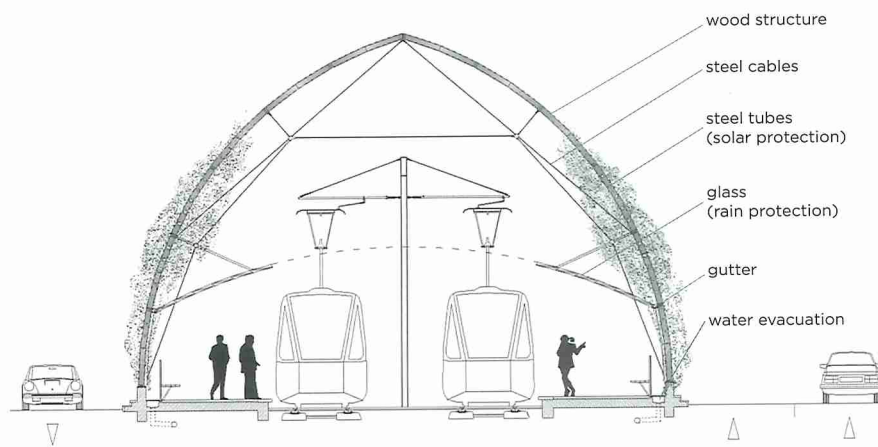
are collected for the benefit of everyone, not just those who pay them.” Ten years later, Steven Craig, an economist at the University of Houston, comments, “The governing process of [a] TIRZ is not democratic. It does not represent the entire area, and so the people that are in the TIRZ management are maybe doing the right thing, but it’s not systematic that they would be doing the right thing. And there are a lot of voices that aren’t heard.”

Others disagree, or more precisely, they see the TIRZ/management district approach to reviving or rebranding a neighborhood as a complex mixture of both good and self-interested motives. “There’s nothing particular unusual about either TIRZ’s or management districts—they’re used all over the country,” Crossley says. “What’s unusual is that they’re being used in Houston to promote urbanism.”

Scott Hochberg, the state representative for Houston’s Sharpstown neighborhood, worked to pass a 1999 law that closed a costly loophole in TIRZ financing. He favors TIRZs, especially in struggling neighborhoods (the sort they were devised to aid), but he wonders if some zones should be dissolved early: “If the area is wildly successful, you end up with more money in the TIRZ than ever anticipated. Should there be a cap on the amount of money the TIRZ should get?” He adds, “You can’t run a city if you give your major tax increments over in perpetuity. You’ve got nothing left to service those areas that aren’t growing.”

If, in fact, the dream for a walkable Uptown is realized, does it matter if it also reflects the desires of the area’s developers and businesses? Or if the Uptown TIRZ and its management district make decisions that some feel should be the product of many voices? For John Breeding, the answer is clear: “If we weren’t doing it, it wouldn’t get done.”

As Metro works to secure right-of-way needed to build the Uptown line, and to acquire federal funding for the University corridor, Uptown’s quasi-public organizations chug along—tending the flowers, building roads. Furthermore, a \$14 million contract was awarded for widening sidewalks and adding pedestrian lighting. In December 2008, the UDA pledged to spend \$8.5 million of TIRZ funds to help the city of Houston acquire the Water Wall—the landmark fountain beside Williams Tower, designed by Phillip Johnson and John Burgee—that some feared could meet a developer’s wrecking ball. The semicircular cascade and its surrounding three-acre park is now a public space. Saving a tourist attraction is surely good for Uptown, but then it also benefits people from across Houston who have made the Wall their Wall, a genuine hangout. Once again, it seems, a semipublic entity is using totally public funds—here, a tax increment—to pull off what the city couldn’t achieve by itself. This may not be the best way to get good things done, but it is Houston’s way. **c**



Cross-section of future light rail station.



[Where's the]

REVOLUTION

The CHANGING LANDSCAPE of
Free Speech in Houston.

CLOCKWISE FROM TOP: Menil Collection north lawn; strip center on Memorial Drive; “Camp Casey” outside Crawford, Texas; and the George R. Brown Convention Center.



IN 1984, *Cite* published an essay by Phillip Lopate entitled “Pursuing the Unicorn: Public Space in Houston.” Lopate lamented: “For a city its size, Houston has an almost sensational lack of convivial public space. I mean places where people congregate on their own for the sheer pleasure of being part of a mass, such as watching the parade of humanity, celebrating festivals, cruising for love, showing off new clothing, meeting appointments ‘under the old clock,’ bumping into acquaintances, discussing the latest political scandals, and experiencing pride as city dwellers.”

Twenty-seven years later, the lament can end. After the opening of Discovery Green, the Lee and Joe Jamail Skatepark, and the Lake Plaza at Hermann Park, the city seems an altogether different place. The skyline itself feels warmer and more humane when foregrounded by throngs of laughing children of all stripes. The strenuous civic activity of countless boosters and officials to make these fabulous public spaces is to be praised.

The *Houston Chronicle* published a celebratory editorial invoking Charles Moore’s essay “You Have to Pay for Public Life.” The paper’s editorial board, which now includes former *Cite* managing editor Lisa Gray, called on Houstonians to raise money for more of the public-private partnerships that made possible these recent parks, which today are so “buzzy, clean, [and] people-filled.”

But have we really achieved public life? The test of whether the city offers a truly healthy, fully functioning range of public spaces is political protest. Let’s talk megaphones and marches. No other use of public space is so complex, or as deeply embedded in the nation’s psyche and its founding documents.

On the morning of February 15, 2003, a torrential storm swept through Houston. A lusty, full-throttle Gulf Coast downpour drummed rooftops and filled bayous. Caravans of tanks, fuel trucks, and soldiers were passing through the waterlogged streets. It was

the dawn of a global day of opposition. In London between 75,000 and two million were already protesting. For Rome, the estimates ranged from 650,000 to three million. Between 300,000 and a million people were gathering in New York City, and 50,000 people would descend upon Los Angeles later in the day.

Just after noon, when the protest in Houston was scheduled to begin outside the federal building at Rusk and Smith, the storm cleared, and a stunning blue sky opened over a crowd of thousands, perhaps 10,000 in all. The people spilled over the sidewalk, wrapping around the federal building and filling a depressed plaza on its west side with a swirling jumble, fueled by a drum ensemble that seemed to take their cue from the frenetic rhythm of the earlier rain. There was a wondrous feeling, one that architectural historian Max Page described as finding “oneself in a space that is expressly out of scale with the individual, and to find that thousands together have filled it.”

Without a parade permit, the march was confined to the sidewalks along the route, which passed the Hobby Center, cut through Sam Houston Park with its statue honoring the Spirit of the Confederacy, and finally moved under I-45 along the bayou. The limitation of sticking to the sidewalk forced the crowd into a narrow, serpentine line. With the help of megaphones, organizers tried to maintain the energy with chants that sound absurd out of context:

BY RAJ MANKAD
PHOTOGRAPHY KEITH KOSKI AND THERESA KEEFE



LEFT: Chinese consulate.
RIGHT: Downtown sidewalk.

Where is there a place to seek redress for our grievances and expect that public outcry might help turn the levers of government?

“

“Tell me what democracy looks like!”
“THIS is what democracy looks like!”

The thunderous highway overhead ultimately drowned out the megaphones, forcing people into a meditative silence before they poured into the muddy bowl at Eleanor Tinsley Park.

Buffalo Bayou’s banks have long served as a place of collective action—the Battle of San Jacinto, the running of the cotton clads, and the Camp Logan “riots,” to name a few. But the bayou proved to be a dispiriting rallying point, its banks as serene and isolating as Glenwood Cemetery. The site is a favorite place to photograph the city, and a backdrop of high-rises seems to emerge directly out of the trees, as if there is no history to the city. By the time the end of the super-elongated march arrived, the rally had dissipated, and the speakers were left to look out from the stage at a few scattered individuals trying to kick the mud off their shoes.

”

Moore asked in his essay, where would one go in Los Angeles to have an effective revolution? “If one took over some public square, some urban open space in Los Angeles, who would know?” We might ask the same of Houston. Where is there a place to seek redress for our grievances and expect that public outcry might help turn the levers of government?

The Discovery Green crowds on weekdays and weekends are promising. The stages, event lawns, electrical supplies, public transportation, abundant parking, and symbolic proximities are enough to make any activist salivate. A public-private partnership made this \$122 million miracle possible, and it is managed by a non-profit conservancy.

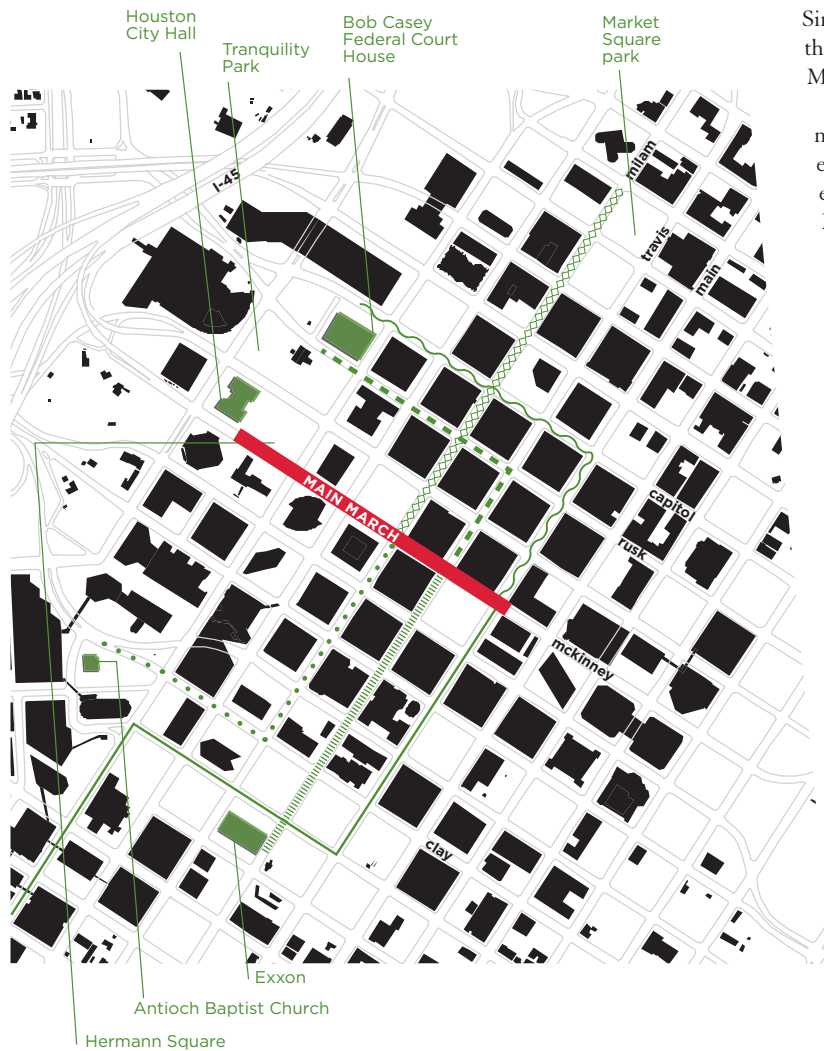
Among the first to test access to Discovery Green was a group of Republicans gathered outside the Texas Republican Convention at the George R. Brown Convention Center on June 11, 2008. Soon thereafter, the Service Employees International Union (SEIU) protested in the park to call attention to the practices of Aramark, which provides food and beverages at the convention center. The Harris County Democratic Party and Obama for America held a rally at the Discovery Green Anheuser-Busch Stage on October 19, 2008.

In an interview, Guy Hagstette, president of the Discovery Green Conservancy, explained, “The basics are that this is a public park—a dedicated public park under state law—but not a city park. It ultimately is controlled by the city, but a subsidiary public corporation, Houston Downtown Park Corporation, owns it. The Houston Parks Department has no official role here at all.” The model was Bryant Park in Midtown Manhattan. Hagstette emphasized that “first and foremost [Discovery Green] is a public park,” and that “we have to abide by any law

that governs how parks are managed,” including the First Amendment.

In practice, however, Discovery Green lacks a special permitting process for free speech public gatherings. Organizers of a July 3 “Tea Party” paid a substantial “venue license rental” in order to reserve the amphitheater. In contrast, city parks issue permits to free speech public gatherings for a processing fee in the \$20 range. A Gay Lesbian Bisexual Transgender (GLBT) kiss-in, however, was held August 15 at Discovery Green without any payment for a permit or venue rental. Presumably the organizers took that risk because kissing can be carried out in any number of places within the park and does not require a reserved stage with electrical hookups for microphones. According to Hagstette, no protest organizers to date have demanded a free speech permit to gather at Discovery Green at city park rates.

That protesters have only tentatively used Discovery Green, often as “event hosts,” indicates a larger failure of Houstonians to grasp the opportunities already available; they seem unable to identify the exercise of free speech as a constitutional right and priority. The history of protest in Houston is largely untold. The sole figure holding a sign over a highway, the modest marches, the absurdist street theater, the earnest seller of alternative newspapers—they seem to emerge and disappear. We are left in a city without a memory. Worse, we are a people afraid of open and democratic space. For instance, Hermann Square, with its shady lawn stretching out from the stage created by the City Hall steps, can easily host rallies in the 2,000 to 10,000 range, but few conceive of it as such a gathering place. Instead each new wave of dissent repeats the mistakes of its predecessors.



MARCH ROUTES

- ▬ ENVIRONMENTALISTS | EXXON BUILDING
- INTERFAITH PEACE | ANTIOCH PARK
- COMMUNITIES OF COLOR | MICKEY LELAND FEDERAL BUILDING
- ~ TAKE BACK AMERICA | BOB CASEY FEDERAL BUILDING
- - - - - WOMEN MOBILIZED FOR PEACE | TRANQUILITY PARK
- ◇◇◇◇◇ JUSTICE IN PALESTINE | MARKET SQUARE PARK

On March 20, 2004, anti-war organizers responded to previous fractured experiences by bringing together several political causes through “feeder marches” originating from symbolic points downtown and converging on a single march route to the steps of City Hall.

Similarly, no one has dared to treat Hermann Park and the reflection pool like the National Mall it resembles. That highly visible space near the zoo and the Miller Outdoor Theater could gather tens of thousands.

The creation of an activated space is not necessarily the result of a policy nor simply the product of bricks and mortar. For instance, Houstonians have excelled at the appropriation of spaces along the edges of Houston’s car-oriented infrastructure. “Freeway blogging” on the Hazard, Woodhead, Dunlavy, Mandell, Graustark, and Montrose bridges over the Southwest Freeway, when timed with rush hour, has been used to communicate various political messages to thousands of commuters. In the past, Mecom Fountain was frequently employed to similar effect for antiwar vigils.

Great cities shape regional, national, and international debates. Houston’s streets and parks have the potential to transform discourse in a way that is uniquely Houstonian, that draws from the experiences and knowledge of the people here. But the unicorn remains an ephemeral goal on the horizon. If Houston is to achieve public life, so much has to evolve simultaneously—the material landscape, the myths and tales that define the city’s identity, the cultures of dissent, and the institutions that govern open space.

Still, evidence of change is discernible. One of the most memorable moments in Houston’s recent history came on April 10, 2006. A huge crowd—somewhere from 20,000 to 50,000 people—marched against an immigration bill in Congress. They went from Guadalupe Plaza to Allen’s Landing, legally taking the street, but still forced into a mazelike path by highway overpasses and the light rail line. At its midpoint, the march curved around an I-59 ramp before it disappeared into one of those anti-pedestrian no-man’s-lands between neighborhoods. The mass of white-shirted, flag-waving bodies made a marked contrast to the monumental highway. The ramp itself was endowed with unexpected grace when the crowd became exuberant at the slightly elevated turn, which showed the march appearing to stretch infinitely in both directions. At that moment a landscape that is otherwise, as is so often the case in Houston, profoundly alienating and dangerous for pedestrians became a space of empowerment. **C**



RIGHT: Mecom Fountain.

by Ben Koush
photography by Paul Hester

WESTWARD HO

REMEMBERING THE ROBINSON HOUSE





WILLIAM F. CODY (1916-1978) was a Palm Springs architect well known in his lifetime whose reputation has been revived because of the increased interest in mid-century modern. In 1958 Cody designed what may have been his grandest house, a low-slung weekend villa for Patricia Welder and Hampton C. Robinson Jr. in what is now the center of the 800-acre Quail Valley subdivision in Missouri City.

The Robinsons frequented Palm Springs during the late 1940s and early 1950s. They belonged to a tennis club there and fell in love with Cody's sophisticated take on rustic resort lodgings for the well-to-do. In the mid 1950s, Patricia Robinson commissioned this villa, Cody's only Texas building, as the first in her husband's nascent suburban development. Hampton Robinson, a lifelong resident of Missouri City and a descendant of the DeWalt family, which had settled in the east corner of Fort Bend County in the 1840s, had begun repurchasing acreage formerly controlled by his family. His intent was to establish a luxurious residential community, somewhat like the golf course-centered Champions development then under way in northern Harris County.

Likely based on Rancho Mirage in Palm Springs, it was to be a place where River Oaks families could spend weekends in modern villas built around a golf course and imagine themselves on an ancestral Texas cattle ranch—all only 25 miles from their city houses. As the author of a September 18, 1960 article about the house in *The Houston Post* observed:

"The long, low-slung house hugs the earth. It has the same lines as early sod houses built by prairie settlers." Since Cody's house for the Robinsons was to be a model for future development, no expense was spared. The rough-hewn stone used for the load-bearing walls was quarried in Santa Maria, California, as were the decorative boulders of dark lava placed around the house. Such desert plants as Joshua trees, sago palms, sage, century plants, and

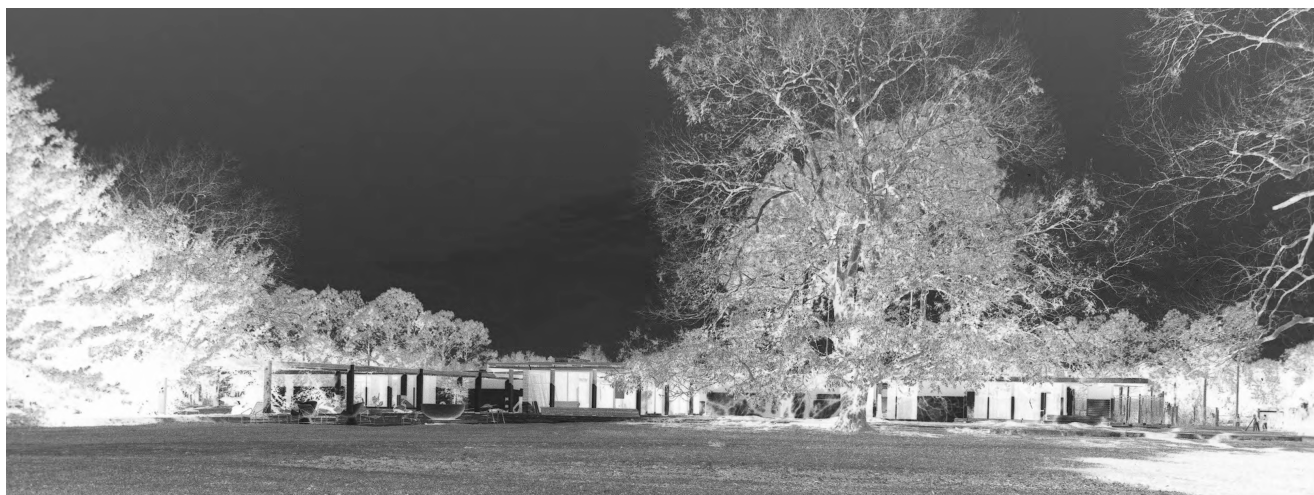
cactus were planted among the many large pecan trees already on the property. According to Diana "DeDe" Kaplan, shortly after the house was completed, Hampton Robinson arranged for 1,500 live oaks to be dug up by hand near Pleak, Texas, and transplanted along the winding, oyster shell-paved drive leading to the house from Murphy Road (now FM Highway 1092). Also reported in *The Houston Post* article, the interiors, using "tones of brown, beige, yellow, or chalk white," were by Palm Springs interior designer Robert Blanks.

The Houston architectural firm Hightower & Moreland was Cody's local associate architect, and the Fretz Construction Company built the house.

**CODY'S GEOMETRICALLY
PRECISE LAYOUT IS
REMARKABLE FOR THE
WAY THAT IT ORDERS
THE HOUSE WITHOUT
MAKING IT FEEL RIGID.**

Construction drawings for the house were completed in late August 1958, followed by drawings for the swimming pool in October. *The Houston Post* article reported that the house was built in 18 months and was in use by the Robinsons and their four children in early 1960.

The cruciform plan of the one-story house has four, one-room deep wings, which contain the living room, sleeping quarters, and service areas, projecting at right angles from the front entry. Although the elevations are articulated by rough stone walls and the flat roof's overhanging, canted fascia clad with pecky cypress trim, the plan is anything but irregular and is rigorously aligned to a three-foot grid. Cody's geometrically precise layout is remarkable for the



The Robinson House sits on an 8-acre lot surrounded by the fairways of a golf club.

way that it orders the house without making it feel rigid. The Robinson House's plan calls to mind the attenuated plan of Richard Neutra's 1946 Kaufmann House in Palm Springs, which Cody would have known. The weighty, "earth-hugging" appearance of the Robinson House, however, is worlds away from Neutra's thin, hovering elevations composed of pipe columns, smooth metallic sheathing, and stone walls detailed as if they were wallpaper.

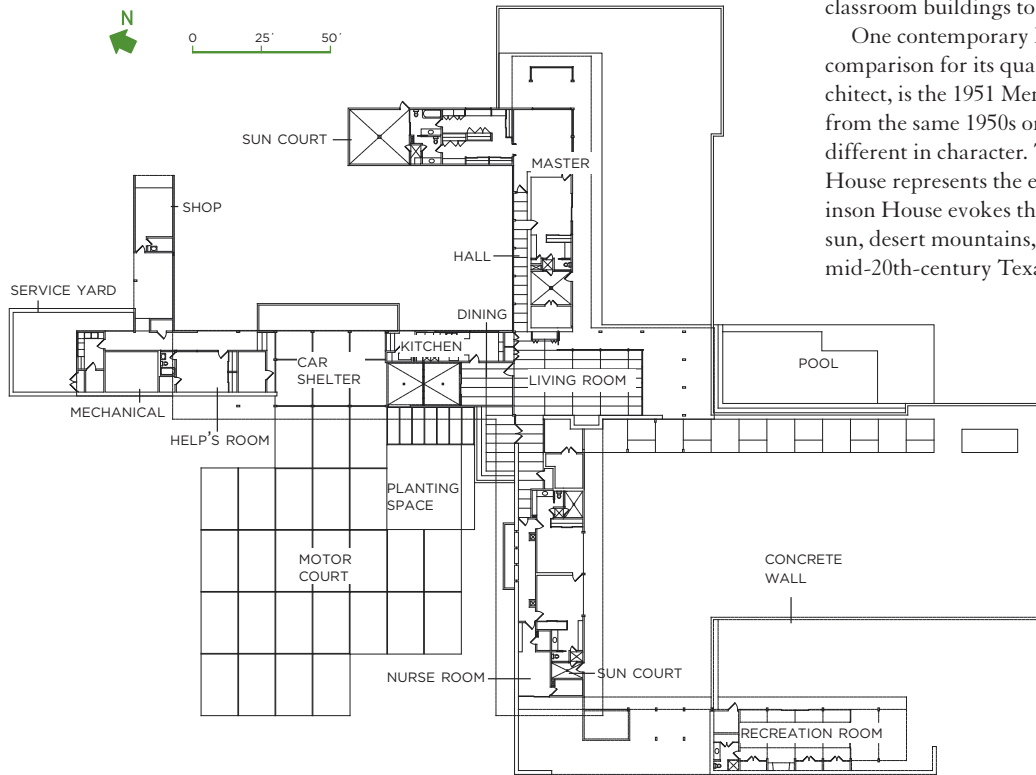
The Robinson House was intended as a weekend house and was never inhabited year-round. Patricia Robinson died in 1965, and Hampton Robinson's second wife, Louise Fenton, whom he married in 1967, did not spend time there. In 1969 Robinson sold 750 acres of his property to the investors James MacNaughton and R. W. Carey, who incorporated it into their planned community of Quail Valley. Quail Valley is a golf course-centered community developed for a mid-market clientele.

Like Sugar Creek and eventually First Colony, Quail Valley benefited from the incremental extension of the Southwest Freeway into Fort Bend County during the mid 1970s. After Robinson mothballed the house, it gradually fell into disrepair. By the 1980s it had taken on a new identity as Quail Valley's version of Miss Havisham's house in *Great Expectations*. The unoccupied house, hidden from sight behind a dense wall of vegetation on Hampton Drive, was the place where local teenagers would dare each other to spend the night. Hampton Robinson died in 1988. According to Barbara Fulenwider, who reported on the status of the house in a series of articles appearing in the *Fort Bend Star* from November 2002 through April 2008, upon the death of Louise Robinson in 2006, Adam DeWalt Adams inherited the property. The grandson of Patricia and Hampton Robinson, he had been making basic repairs on the house since at least 2003 and began a series of architectural interventions that can only be described as eccentric.¹ These included pasturing a small herd of miniature Mediterranean donkeys on the lawn and excavating a grotto under the concrete slab of the house,² all raising the ire of the city government of Missouri City, which objected to Adams's habit of starting construction without securing city permits. In November 2007 Missouri City took the unprecedented step of beginning condemnation proceedings for the first time in its history, based on the 122 code violations Adams had accrued.³ That same year Adams enlisted the assistance of the Houston firm of Ray & Hollington Architects to address these issues and eventually restore the house to its original state. Historic preservation consultant Anna Mod prepared the documenta-

tion necessary for the Texas Historical Commission to declare the house eligible for listing in the National Register of Historic Places. But in December 2007 these activities came to a sudden halt when the property was put under the temporary guardianship of Adams's mother, Patricia Robinson; by August 2008 this arrangement was made permanent by the family's lawyers.⁴ The grotto has been filled in and the animals removed, but major repairs necessary to seal the house from the elements have not been made and do not seem likely to happen anytime soon.⁵ Ray & Hollington and Mod say that neither has been in contact with the family since last spring.

The Robinson House is a remarkable work of architecture in a highly unlikely setting. Like Cody's best California work, it embraces the landscape. The house is low and spreads gently across its flat site, which seems even larger than its actual eight acres because it is bounded on the south, east, and west by fairways of the Quail Valley Golf Club. Entry to the house culminates in a view across the South Texas coastal plain framed by a trabeated pergola outlining the swimming pool, which elicits an almost primal reaction in visitors. Subtle changes in the ceiling heights of the glass-walled living room further direct one's attention to this vista. Even though Cody did not spend much time in Texas, he seems to have grasped the tremendous power of the sky as it weighs upon the flat land and made this the central visual feature of his design, much as the Boston architect Ralph Adams Cram did in his plan for the Rice Institute some 40 years earlier that used an arched, double-height opening, the Sallyport, in the central administrative building, flanked by parallel rows of

The Robinson House is a remarkable work of architecture in a highly unlikely setting... it embraces the landscape.



classroom buildings to foreground the South Texas sky.

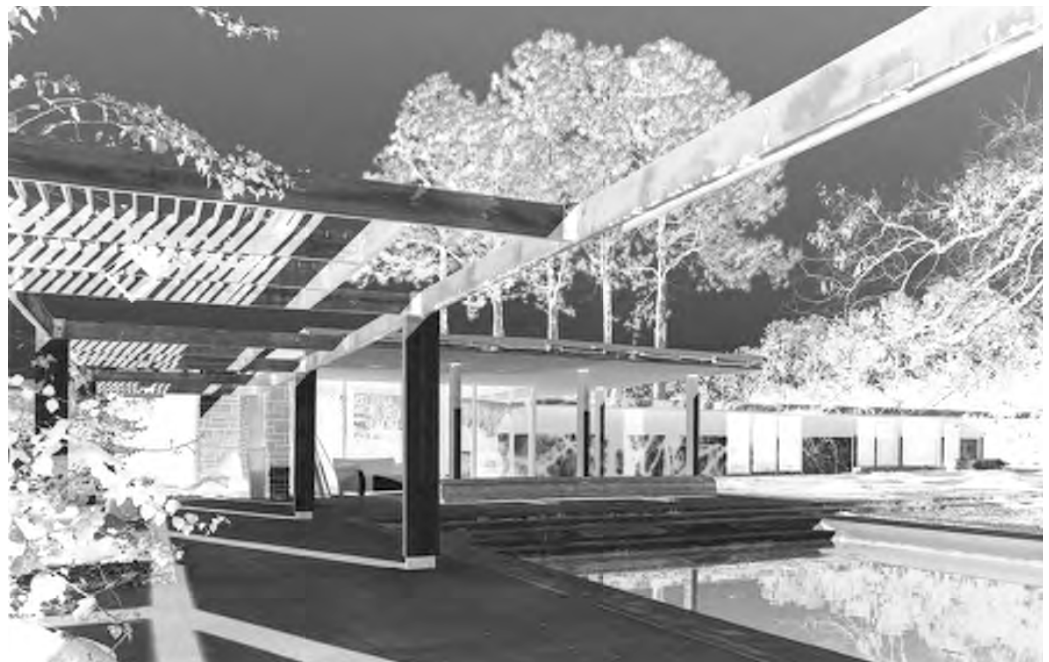
One contemporary Houston house with which the Robinson House begs comparison for its quality of design, as well as the cachet of its out-of-town architect, is the 1951 Menil House by Philip Johnson. Although both houses draw from the same 1950s one-story, quasi-ranch house vernacular, they are vastly different in character. The crisply detailed and somehow lofty Miesian Menil House represents the epitome of New York polish, while the expansive Robinson House evokes the sybaritic lives of Southern Californians surrounded by sun, desert mountains, and dry air. The Robinson House belongs to a subset of mid-20th-century Texan buildings, mostly houses, commissioned from California architects by clients who wanted to bring home the magical life identified with Southern California. These include the houses that the Beverly Hills architects Denman Scott and Burton Schutt (architects of the Hotel Bel-Air in Los Angeles) designed in Dallas, Midland, and Fort Worth (including Fort Worth's Ridglea Country Club) from the late 1930s through the mid-1950s; the sprawling modern houses of another Beverly Hills architect, Paul László, especially the sensational McGaha House in Wichita Falls of 1951; E. Stewart Williams's stunning house for Sam Maceo in Galveston of 1950; and Cliff May's ranch house for Leonard F. McCollum outside Industry, all of which show just how beguiled wealthy Texans were by the glamorous, movie star, and oasis modernism associated with Beverly Hills, Bel-Air, and Palm Springs.

The Menil House, whose owners formed a center for vanguard culture in Houston, has been meticulously restored, yet the Robinson House is forgotten, languishing on the city's outskirts.

One can only hope that the family deadlock over control of the house can be resolved and that the house will be restored to its original condition so that the citizens of Missouri City can finally recognize the unequaled architectural treasure in their midst. **c**



From top: Plans drawn to assist in restoration, contractor at end of hallway, and pool.



- [1] Fulenwider, Barbara. "Homeowner Told to Improve It or Lose It." *Fort Bend Star*. 7 November 2007.
- [2] Fulenwider, Barbara. "Rehab of Property Appears to Have Stopped." *Fort Bend Star*. 30 April 2008.
- [3] Fulenwider, Barbara. "Homeowner Told to Improve It or Lose It." *Fort Bend Star*. 7 November 2007.
- [4] Fulenwider, Barbara. "Repair Work to Begin Again on Quail Valley Robinson Estate." *Fort Bend Star*. 26 November 2008.
- [5] Fulenwider, Barbara. "Robinson Estate Future Still the Same: Fix or Demolish." *Fort Bend Star*. 4 March 2009.

CONTESTED CONTINUITIES

Architectural Principles in the Age of Cybernetics
(Christopher Hight*, New York: Routledge, 2008, 248 pp., illus., \$170.)

by Michael Leighton Beaman

DEPARTING FROM RESEARCH ON THE BAROQUE, Rudolf Wittkower in 1949 published what became for architects his most defining work: *Architectural Principles in the Age of Humanism*. What established this particular book as influential for architectural production was less the analysis of proportioning in Renaissance villas, but more his use of the diagram as a method of analysis. Ultimately, Wittkower rendered architecture's intellectual content a product of an analytical system that utilized the diagram. It was not long before this concept of analysis in architecture evolved into a method for producing architecture. The diagram as a generative model for architectural production was codified by Wittkower's protégé Colin Rowe in his essay, "Mathematics of the Ideal Villa," that pre-dated the publication of *Architectural Principles*, but nevertheless, was a derivative of Wittkower's methodology.

Rowe used the diagram—now separated from the analysis—to conjecture a conceptual link in the proportional order between Renaissance and Modern architecture. He accomplished this through a diagrammatic comparison between Le Corbusier's Villa Stein and Andrea Palladio's Villa Malcontenta. Although separated by 368 years of cultural definitions and technological progression, "Mathematics" posited that both villas embody the same system of spatial and proportional ordering, in effect producing a transcendent reading of architecture's techniques and effects. More important than the validity of the diagrammatic comparison of these two works was the formation of a mechanism for constructing architecture as a "body of knowledge" through time and across epitomes.

Implied in Rowe's mechanism is a delineation of what "belongs" to architecture and is one of what Christopher Hight in his book *Architecture in the Age of Cybernetics* terms "histories of continuity." Though only one of many ideas recounted in the book, the Wittkower / Rowe continuity is emblematic of a larger examination that Hight pursues through the vehicle of the human body's relationships to architecture—as subject, as metaphor, and as model. Unencumbered by the need to project a methodology of architectural production of his own, Hight addresses the correlations between present day architecture and its own constructed history,

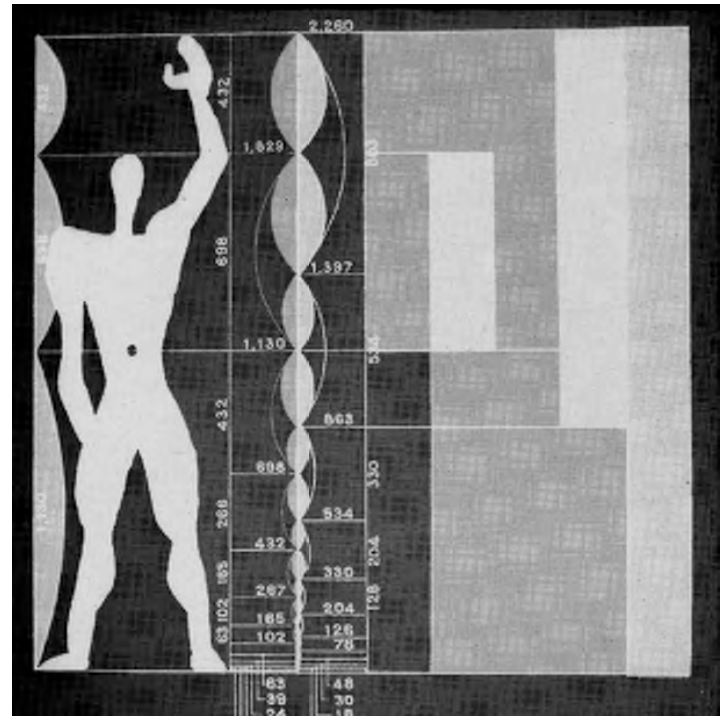
its quest for autonomy, and its continuing relevance to society.

Despite the play on Wittkower's title, Hight concentrates much of his effort into re-working the recent past, rather than examining the present or constructing the possible future. This reworked past is necessary in order to articulate both deliberate and unwitting contributions to the creation and embedding of Vitruvius' proportioned body as a classical model for architectural production. The book begins by dissecting claims of a departure from the classical model by the Modernist and the architectural philosophies this claim generated throughout the twentieth century.

He writes, "My primary site of examination is the sudden, heretofore unexplained, re-appearance of the human figure in mid-twentieth-century architecture and its relationship to recent interest in the body reference to issues of post-humanism, digital technology, globalization and science."

In unwinding the history of the classical model in modern architectural production, Hight produces clearly written accounts of this incredibly dense terrain, valuable for its rarity alone. This begins with a careful navigation of the arguments of phenomenologist Joseph Rykwert and Alberto Perez-Gomez who champion architecture's formation as an experiential art with those of the post-structuralist—Diana Agrest, Peter Eisenman, and Greg Lynn—who seek to find underlying social and technical systems at play in architecture production. This navigation establishes a focus on the formation of a classical architectural assemblage and sets an investigative tone for the book. Chapters on Le Corbusier's *Le Modulor* and Siegfried Gideon's *Mechanization Takes Command* further expand on the human figure's breadth of entrenchment in modern architectural knowledge.

Through a number of studies into these histories the book's central thesis of tenuous solidity of any consistent humanist architectural foundation emerges. Hight notes that assemblages arise from differences in the organization of "discourses, institutions, practices, patronage, objects and



Le Corbusier developed the Modulor in the tradition of Vitruvian Man to discover mathematical proportions in the human body in order to improve architecture.

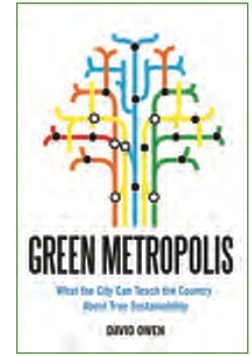
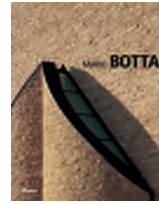
representations" and that these assemblages constitute a "historical contingency" which should not be so easily overlooked nor claims of continuity taken at a face value.

Among the humanist tentacles examined none are more satisfying to read than the chapters: "Measured Response" and "Reflections on the Modulor." Here the emergence of the mediated body in the form of statistically driven definitions, and extensions of the body's natural borders through technology integration, take shape as precursors to the cybernetic body. Hight builds this characterization of cybernetics as not a new, or even a yet-to-be-created human form, but as a "techno-social hybrid" that emerged mid-twentieth-century. Alluding to the possibility of this decidedly non-Vitruvian human as a site for further exploration, Hight contends that architecture has yet to fully address this redefinition. Though the book forwards a more transformative agenda for the future architect, one that eludes being a "super-specialized designer of form" or a "manager of extra architectural forces," it leaves one eager to find their own paths to achieve this transformation.

While much of the text requires a working knowledge of the actors in the texts and debates discussed, Hight provides a concise context for each, avoiding hyperbolic characterizations and presenting a thoughtfully, well-researched argument. With the prevailing trend to downplay critical discourse in favor of formal, technological, and theoretical expeditions, it is refreshing to see engagement in the philosophical underpinnings and future trajectories of these endeavors—all without merely dismissing them as products of a contested continuity.

* Christopher Hight is a board member of the Rice Design Alliance.

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CAN HOUSTON *feed* ITSELF?

IF WE CAN WALK TO THE FARM.

By John S. Jacob

IT WAS SOIL, NOT OIL, THAT DETERMINED THE location of the largest Texas cities. It was good dirt that drew people here—good dark, rich soil that is found in two prominent strips: the Texas Blacklands that extend from Dallas to Austin and San Antonio, and the coastal Blacklands that run from Houston to Corpus Christi. Seventy percent of the population of Texas now reside on these relatively narrow Blackland strips, most of them oblivious to the role of soil in their history.

In Houston, we call blackland soils gumbo clay, and we think of them as more of a nuisance than an attraction: they have some of the highest shrink-swell potential of any soils in the world. We support a world-class foundation repair industry here. When the first settlers came, the gumbo clay didn't seem so tough. The clays had so much organic matter they could run their hands through the prairie soils like a knife through butter. It took thousands of years for nature to form these soils, a legacy that can be lost for generations when paved over.

The technical term for this good dirt is Prime

Farmland—soils with the best combination of biophysical characteristics for producing food and fiber. It is currently cheaper to produce many of our foodstuffs far away from here, and the highest and best use of these soils under current market conditions is often residential subdivisions and other kinds of development. But what if rising fuel costs suddenly made food shipped 1,300 miles prohibitively expensive? Could we feed ourselves with what is left of our rich endowment of good dirt?

According to USDA maps, we still have about 3.2 million acres of prime farmland within 100 miles of Houston. We can't produce everything we like and want to eat. No cacao trees for chocolate here, for example. A more relevant question is whether we could supply most if not all of our basic needs from soils within a hundred miles or so. I think the answer is yes. The amount of land to support one person varies in the scientific literature from less than an acre to 20 or so acres. With 4 million people, we would likely need at least 2-4 million acres of farmland.

But we are expecting 3.5 million more people by 2035. So not only will there be more people to feed, there will be less land to feed them from, locally. If current density and development practices continue, we can expect to lose at least 1,000 square miles of prime farmland, prairie, and forest habitat to development.

Even if we could save remaining quality farmland, wouldn't a re-localized and re-intensified agriculture destroy what little we also have left in terms of natural diversity? Surely, every square inch of land would be needed to supply local food to the Houston area. The answer to this question requires us to consider the nature of small-scale intensive agricultural operations and the kinds of landscapes they might support.

In Amish country, for example, the land is inten-

sively cultivated—much more actively than in large-scale extensive systems associated with industrial agriculture. There is substantial natural habitat in that landscape, in some ways similar to the pattern of the Houston region 100 years ago. In *Larding the Earth*, Steven Stoll recounts the experience of the Amish in Ohio, and ties them to a long forgotten tradition of "soil improvers" active in America in the 19th Century. One of his informants says: "By working and farming the way the Amish traditionally have done, we make our place more attractive to wildlife. Should we be removed from the land and our farm turned into a 'wildlife area,' I am almost positive that the numbers and species of wildlife would dwindle."

We need more people on the land. It is only in labor-intensive mixed agricultural systems that enough manure and other organic matter is generated to renew and build up the soil food web, to put more in than is taken out. In addition, stewards on the land who know the lay of the land and who love the land can ensure that riparian buffers are in place and that enough natural refuges remain to protect our biodiverse heritage. Organic matter in the soil sustaining a healthy soil food web, and a diverse food web above ground, are what constitute a healthy working ecosystem.

We need more people on the land. Though a hyper-dense urban core might preserve farmland, the best pattern might also include a nucleated pattern of dense towns and villages. We may have enough good farmland to take care of our most basic needs in a post peak-oil era. But we will need people on the land to feed ourselves sustainably. And we will therefore need an urban pattern that facilitates connections between the city and the country.

Our long-term sustainability might just hinge on how close we are to the farm, and that proximity will hinge on how dense and walkable our urban areas are. It is ironic that the wide-open spaces that attract homebuyers to outer suburbs ultimately creates a leap-frog effect, further isolating everyone from farmland. Even preserving suburban life requires a change to development patterns.

I dream of a city—set on a plain, since we have no hills in Houston—where I can get to a pocket park within a five-minute walk. Where most everything I need in terms of services is also within walking distance—groceries, movies, cleaners, etc. Where I might have a small space in my house (perhaps on a flat roof) for a garden, or where a community garden is just around the corner. Where I am connected to my fellow citizens because we are all frequently out walking. But I dream also of a city where some deeper more primal needs can also easily be satisfied—the need to experience nature on its own terms (not just in some 5 or 10 acre park) and the need to have a connection with local soil through the food I eat. **c**