ROA GALA

HUE

Giving Back to a Vibrant Community

THE RICE DESIGN ALLIANCE'S 23RD ANNUAL GALA, held Saturday, November 14, 2009, brought 1,100 people to the second floor of the Hilton Americas-Houston. RDA President David Spaw welcomed the hushed crowd who later gave a standing ovation to the honorees, Bobby and Phoebe Tudor, when introduced by Gala Chairs David Harvey and Mikki Hebl. Phoebe is head of the campaign to expand and restore the 1926 Julia Ideson Building, Houston's first library. Bobby, the chairman and CEO of investment and banking firm Tudor, Pickering & Co., is currently co-chair of Rice University's $1 billion Centennial Campaign.

Randall Walker, Bob Inaba, and Juliè Gauthier of Kirksey Architects designed the environment. A row of centrally located tables glowed green or purple, lit from underneath. Guests' tables were topped with red, yellow, or orange tablecloths and bright modern flowers by Rebecca Johnson. The evening included dinner and dancing to the music of Fried Ice Cream. Guests pored over the fabulous auction assembled by Shelby Holman and Kim Kaase. Austin James and Liz Anders curated the collection of work donated by Houston artists and galleries. Andrea and Bob Crawmer and The OFIS assisted the auction team by warehousing and delivering auction items to the event.

David Andrews, fundraising chair, was in good spirits as his committee raised over $500,000 to fund RDA programs, despite the challenging economic times. Lisa Gray wrote in the *Houston Chronicle* that the mood was "buoyant" and even interpreted the energy as a good omen for the architecture, engineering, and construction industries. Her conjecture speaks to the enormous effort of all those who made the event possible.

Honorees Bobby and Phoebe Tudor

Peter Merwin and Margaret Lawler

Joan and David Spaw

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RDA Gala auction shoppers

Molly Khalil, Austin James, and Blakely Bering

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Troy Woods + McMurtrey Gallery
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Yapa Kitchen Fresh Take Away
Kate Zimmerman
Zoe's Kitchen

FARNSWORTH & CHAMBERS

City Parks Department Preserves the Wright Stuff

Alan Shephard and other astronauts officed at the Farnsworth and Chambers building from 1962-64.

THE FARNSWORTH & CHAMBERS BUILDING, LOCATED at 2999 S. Wayside, reopened in December 2009 following an extensive rehabilitation by City of Houston Parks and Recreation Department for use as its headquarters.

The building is presently known as the Gragg Building, after the second owners who sold it and the surrounding acreage to the city in the late 1970s. Houston architects MacKie & Kamrath, local proponents of Frank Lloyd Wright, designed the building in a modernist style reminiscent of Wright's Taliesin West in Scottsdale, Arizona and it includes steeply-slanted, rough-faced green quartzite walls and concrete vertical shapes that evoke the talud and tablero construction techniques of Mesoamerica.

Architects for the rehabilitation, Daniel Kornberg and Kris McGraw of HarrisonKornberg Architects, successfully adapted and improved the functionality of the building and introduced nine new hipped-roof clerestory skylights. Additional alterations include the introduction of egress doors, enlargement of the ribbon windows on the north and south (secondary facades), and replacement of floor-to-ceiling window systems where they were too corroded to be restored. Original elements including the interior mahogany paneling and light coves, wooden intake grills, steel-framed ribbon windows, and interior circulation were maintained and any damaged elements replicated in kind.

The building is significant nationally as the headquarters of the Manned Spacecraft Center (MSC) in Houston while the Clear Lake campus was being designed and constructed from 1962-1964. Mercury astronauts, including Scott Carpenter, Gordon Cooper, John Glenn, Gus Grissom, Wally Schirra, Alan Shepard, and Deke Slayton, as well as project director Robert Rowe Gilruth, maintained offices at the building.

-Anna Mod

Anna Mod served as the historic preservation consultant for the rehabilitation of the building. Read more about the building at OffCite.org.

PHOTOSCAPE

THESE IMAGES WERE NOT MANIPULATED

Photographs by David A. Brown, entitled "Trying to Find My Way," are on exhibition, as a part of FotoFest at Darke Gallery until May 1st. The series is a walk down Main Street. Brown turned his lens to storefront windows and photographed those strange spots where the outside views are reflected on top of interior ones. Are they more than optical curiosities? The images show a buzzing, jangling range of data — historic buildings in the periphery, a policeman on patrol, a passing car, an empty store, a clear sky — that bring together a surreal but encompassing experience of street, architecture, and place.

-Raj Mankad

>> NEWS FROM RICEDESIGNALLIANCE.ORG

WEB SITE THRIVES

The 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 links to OffCite.org, the *Cite* blog, and CiteMag.org, a new website featuring free access to the archives.

FROM LEFT: Marfa tourgoers return from petroglyph site; UH Dean Patricia Oliver and RSA Dean Sarah Whiting in the Frederick Kiesler-designed Cave of New Being; Interior of a home on the 2010 RDA architecture tour.

> PATRICIA OLIVER NAMED UH DEAN OF ARCHITECTURE

Patricia Oliver became dean of the Gerald D. Hines College of Architecture at the University of Houston on January 20. She succeeds Joseph Mashburn, who in 2009 announced plans to step down from the post he has held since 1998. He will remain connected to the college in a teaching capacity.

Oliver served from 2001 to 2008 as senior vice president of educational planning and architecture at the Art Center College of Design in Pasadena, California. While there, she created the environmental design department to bridge the area between architecture and product design.

> SALLY WALSH LECTURE

The Sally Walsh lecture will be held on April 7 at 7 p.m. at the MFAH. Speakers are Spanish architects Luis Mansilla and Emilio Tuñón.

> MARFA REFRIED

In February, RDA members enjoyed a four-day tour of Marfa and the Trans-Pecos region. On the way out of El Paso, architectural historian Stephen Fox led visits to historic mission sites. After mailing our valentine cards from the Valentine, Texas post office, and checking into the Paisano Hotel in Marfa, the group visited Tim Crowley's home, designed by Carlos Jiménez, where guests enjoyed a sunset reception. The next day began with a visit to the 10 x 10 house and the studio and home of architect Kristen Bonkemeyer, followed by the Chinati Foundation and its bright lights, aluminum boxes, and crushed cars. The morning ended with a Mediterranean feast in a renovated school bus, catered by Food Shark.

Dual residents of Houston and Marfa, Toni and Jeff Beauchamp, Casey and and JoAnn Williams, Barbara Hill, and Amy and Holden Shannon welcomed the tour into their homes. Interior designer Marlys Tokerud entertained the group with a reception at her compound.

On Saturday, Professor Bob Mallouf led a tour of Fort Leaton, the largest adobe structure in Texas; Cielo Bravo, the site of a pre-Columbian pueblo on a bluff overlooking the Rio Grande; and a narrated tour through Big Bend National Park, ending with a sunset hike and tour of Bee Cave, where petroglyphs are inscribed in a rock shelter. The day ended with a Valentine's dinner dance at the Gage Hotel in Marathon.

On the trip back to El Paso, architect Geoffrey Wright led visits to historic places, including the Tiffany Dome at the Camino Real Hotel.

> TOUR MADRID AND BARCELONA

Madrid, capital of the kingdom of Spain, and Barcelona, capital of the autonomous community of Catalunya and the second largest city in the Spanish kingdom, represent two poles of Iberian architecture. Led by Houston's most illustrious figure in the world of international architecture, Carlos Jiménez, the RDA will visit both Madrid and Barcelona to experience a new, architectural Edad de Oro and see how Spanish (and international) architects have reinvented these two extraordinary cities with architecture that is daring, often austere, yet also fits into the urban places and landscapes where it has been built.

The dates for the tour are June 12-19, 2010, and the cost per person, not including airfare, is $3,400.

> RDA HOME TOUR: SOUTHGATE

On Saturday and Sunday, March 20-21, from 1:00 p.m. until 6:00 p.m., RDA members and their guests will have the opportunity to visit eight houses in Houston's Southgate neighborhood on RDA's 34th annual architecture tour, Southgate: An Urban Oasis.

Southgate is adjacent to Rice University and the Texas Medical Center, two Houston institutions that are expanding substantially. Southgate is undergoing considerable change, yet it has retained its close-knit community feeling. Architects and designers working in the neighborhood have been successful integrating their designs into the older fabric and staying within the neighborhood's strict restrictions.

MARFA PHOTOGRAPH HELEN FOSDICK, DEANS PHOTOGRAPH THOMAS CAMPBELL, HOME INTERIOR ERIC HESTER

Q + A

Eminent Domain
An Interview with Antonya Nelson

FROM "EMINENT DOMAIN,"
New Yorker, January 26, 2004

This neighborhood was called "transitional." The church was being destroyed to accommodate a new freeway, and a ramp jutted raggedly into the sky above it, a road to nowhere: eminent domain. Paolo drove past it on his way to the theatre for rehearsals. Every day, the girl balanced on the church steps, surrounded by a shifting group of men. Always the only female, and, as a result, the center of a kind of stunned, stoned, possessive attention.

Antonya Nelson teaches in the Creative Writing Program at the University of Houston and is the author of four short story collections and three novels. Her work has appeared in The New Yorker, Harper's*, and anthologies such as the* O. Henry Awards *and* Best American Short Stories*. The following excerpt is from a conversation between Nelson and a writing class at the University of Houston's Gerald D. Hines College of Architecture taught by Raj Mankad and Thomas Colbert.*

RAJ MANKAD: Many of the faculty at the UH Creative Writing Program teach here, but they set their writing in Los Angeles or New York. You've written extraordinary Houston stories. How did that come about?

ANTONYA NELSON: I've lived in a few different places. And obviously setting means something to a story, but I don't use the term "setting" when I'm talking about fiction. You can say a story is set in Houston, but for me it is more useful to say "atmosphere." Any number of stories center on New York City and Los Angeles as a physical place but are atmospherically different for each writer in terms of investment in that city or space. For me, it was useful to be an outsider in Houston, to have arrived and see it as a completely alien landscape, to come into it and say, "Holy cow, this is such a weird place." Another useful position is as a deep insider where you have been in a place so long you have an authority that is unquestionable. You have to provide very little in the way of establishing shots because you know exactly what will nail it for you.

I like either of those positions very much. The less enviable position is the one I'm in now—someone who has not been here long enough to claim authority but so long that it's not looking novel. I have to create characters who reflect that sensibility.

RM: In your story "Eminent Domain," the homeless adolescent seems to be an insider and the narrator an outsider.

AN: That story was written the first year I was in Houston. I did have a teenage girl who was giving us a run for our money. I wanted to create a character, Paolo—you know in a lot of ways his position in the city reflected my own. He was there at the request of an organization that was interested in the arts. Though I'm not like him at all, his access to the city, his approach to the city, very much reflected my own at that time.

RM: When I read "Eminent Domain," I think of the 59 Spur construction near Main and Alabama. The ramp that went into nowhere.

AN: Yes. The 59 Spur construction was exactly what was going on when I was writing that story. That's one of the most frightening things to encounter in the landscape. You are driving along, driving along… oh wait a minute, the highway ended!

The first year we were here, some teenagers had moved construction cones, maybe on 59 or 610. A prank was played and somebody was killed. That really stuck with me. The stuff of nightmares.

THOMAS COLBERT: I understood the nightmare in "Eminent Domain" as being on the receiving end of the freeway. The city was about to crunch the church, the girl, and the neighborhood… it's just about to happen.

AN: At the time for me, being here and living in Montrose and having a teenager whose future looked a little uncertain some days, the landscape was not innocent. Anything that seemed half done and crumbling, whether it was a church crumbling or a road unfinished, was frightening in some fashion. Also just being in a place where we did not have a support system in any way—everybody was as kind as they could possibly be—but if you don't have longstanding friends or attachments, it's difficult to call on people. "Have you seen my daughter?" So everything looked terrible to me. You can wander through the city in any kind of mood. That's what I mean by atmosphere. I can wander through quite happily now, and it's just charming.

RM: In the ending of "Eminent Domain," the girl is back with her wealthy family and gets married. The narrator is relieved. But that highway crunching the church—and the name of the short story—suggest that we should not read the ending as happy.

TC: The girl is balanced on the church steps. She's in front of a church that's deteriorating and the city is leaning over… it's about to grab her, about to grab this sort of wild thing. The city is exerting this culture over her.

AN: Well I think a lot of my stories have characters in them whose problems or issues turn out to be phases. The kid has turned out to be ordinary rather than extraordinary. You want the kid to survive and be fine. Any parent wants a kid to be healthy, good, and fine, but something about the notion of being absorbed into all of the ordinary is paradoxically disappointing.

TC: So is that what the term "eminent domain" is about?

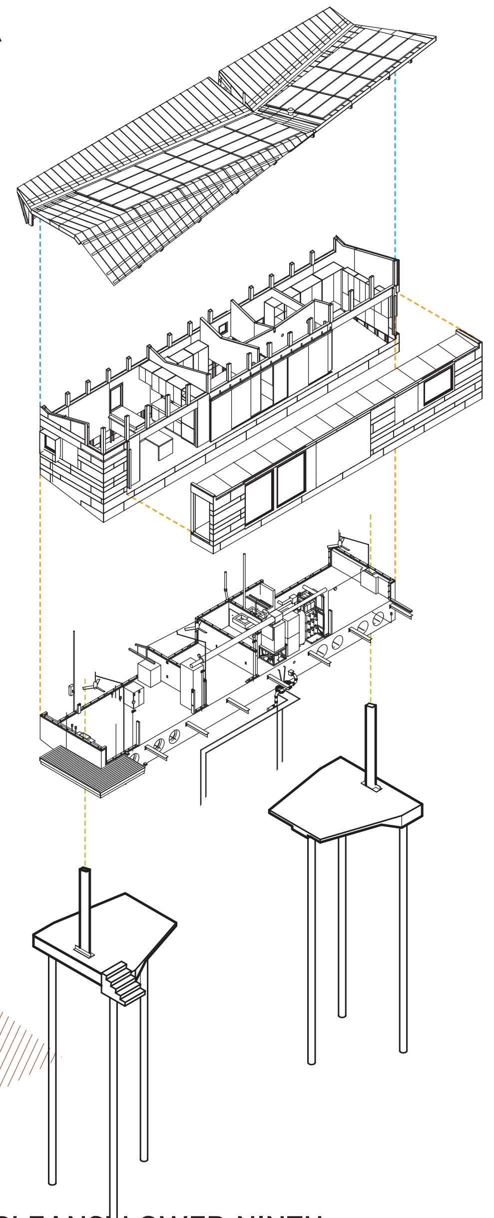
AN: For me it is. Yeah, I like that expression. It's not for me limited to what a city can do with property or about private property being taken. It's about private individuals overrun by public averageness.

MAKING IT RIGHT?

A CRITICAL LOOK AT BRAD PITT'S EFFORTS IN NEW ORLEANS' LOWER NINTH WARD.

By Rafael Longoria

PHOTOGRAPH IWAN BAAN, AXON COURTESY MORPHOSIS



01

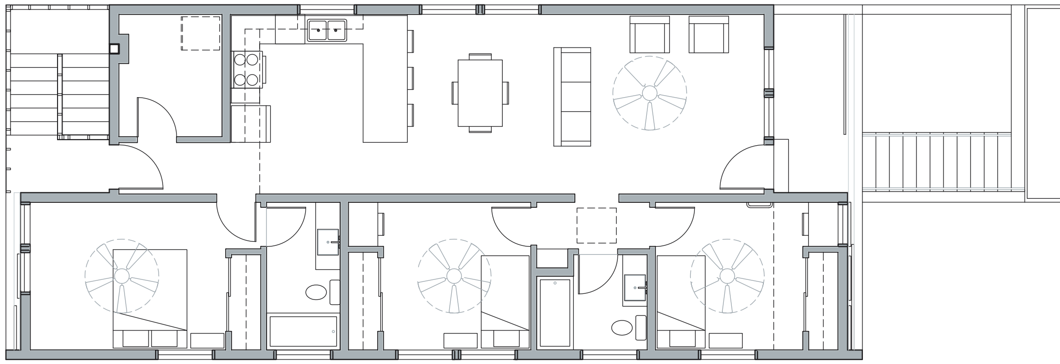
MORPHOSIS
SANTA MONICA, CALIFORNIA

LEFT: The FLOAT House by Morphosis with the Claiborne Avenue bridge in the background.
RIGHT: Diagram showing roof with solar panels and rain collector, space enclosures, floating chassis with buit-in cisterns, and anchoring piers of FLOAT House.

ARCHITECTS HAVE BECOME SUCH A COMMON SIGHT IN NEW ORLEANS' LOWER NINTH WARD THAT NEIGHBORHOOD CHILDREN CAN SPOT THEM RIGHT AWAY. ON ONE VISIT, I WAS GREETED BY A CUTE NINE-YEAR-OLD GIRL CARRYING A CAMERA AND A PHOTO ALBUM. "ARE YOU ARCHITECTS?" SHE ASKED. UNDER THE GAZE OF HER NEARBY MOTHER, SHE EAGERLY SHOWED US THE PHOTOGRAPHS MOUNTED IN HER ALBUM—AN IMPRESSIVE COLLECTION THAT INCLUDED PORTRAITS NEXT TO BILL CLINTON, BRAD PITT, ANGELINA JOLIE, AND OTHER NOTABLES FROM WASHINGTON AND HOLLYWOOD. HER COLLECTION ALSO FEATURED GROUP PORTRAITS OF VISITING ARCHITECTURE STUDIOS FROM ALL OVER THE COUNTRY, AND WE HAPPILY POSED WITH THE GIRL AND HER MOTHER, WHO WERE ABOUT TO TAKE POSSESSION OF A BRAND NEW HOUSE BUILT BY MAKE IT RIGHT (MIR)—BETTER KNOWN AS BRAD PITT'S FOUNDATION. MEANWHILE, A STEADY STREAM OF TOUR BUSES CIRCLED THE NEIGHBORHOOD.

The Lower Ninth Ward is downriver from the French Quarter, separated from the Upper Ninth Ward and the more prosperous parts of the city by the Industrial Canal—a man-made waterway completed in 1923. Two retractable bridges connect the Lower Ninth Ward with the rest of the city. Saint Claude and Claiborne Avenues, where the bridges are located, used to be thriving commercial arteries running parallel to the Mississippi River. Once a multiethnic enclave of working class immigrants, the Lower Ninth Ward is now solidly African-American and famous for its unique Mardi Gras traditions.

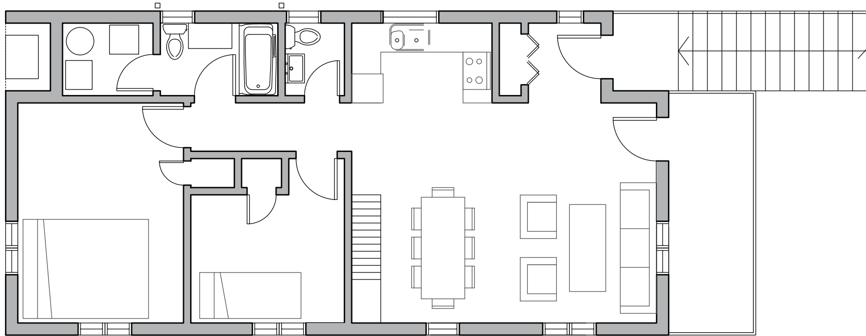
In New Orleans, as in Galveston and other coastal communities, topography can be a matter of life and death. Holy Cross, the portion of the Lower Ninth occupying the higher ground along the banks of the Mississippi River, was largely spared by Hurricane Katrina and still boasts a remarkable collection of 19th-century houses. But the area north of Claiborne Avenue (where the MIR projects are located) was almost completely destroyed on the night of August 29, 2005, when the levees that line the Industrial Canal failed, and a torrent of water inundated this neighborhood, which, like many other parts of New Orleans, is below the level of the

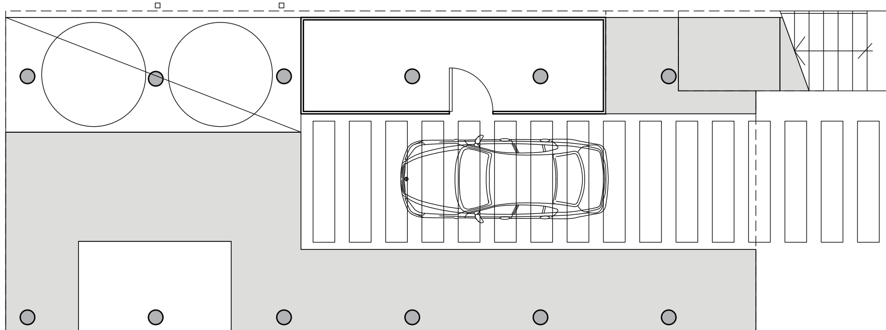


02

ESKEW + DUMEZ + RIPPLE
NEW ORLEANS, LOUISIANA

TOP: EDR floorplan.
FAR LEFT: Rendering showing perforated screens for front façade and entry stoop.
LEFT: One of the finished EDR houses.





03

KIERAN TIMBERLAKE
PHILADELPHIA, PENNSYLVANIA

LEFT: Main floorplan of Kieran Timberlake House.
BELOW LEFT: Ground floor plan showing cisterns, storage, and covered parking.
BELOW: The façades of the Kieran Timberlake House reflects the pattern of its structural insulated panel system.

TOP RENDERING AND PLAN COURTESY ESKEW + DUMEZ + RIPPLE, PHOTOGRAPHS RAFAEL LONGORIA, PLAN BELOW COURTESY KIERAN TIMBERLAKE

Mississippi. The "before and after" figure-ground maps of the Lower Ninth Ward clearly illustrate the devastation. Whatever was not destroyed by the impact of the rushing torrent was rendered unsalvageable by sitting underwater during the many days that it took for the concave ground to be drained.

It is easy to understand why Brad Pitt chose the Lower Ninth Ward as the focus of his philanthropic work in New Orleans. The human and material devastation in this neighborhood was overwhelming, as graphically illustrated in the media. And to make matters worse, the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) seemed unable to aid a population largely composed of uninsured residents who could not afford to rebuild without outside help. Pitt assembled a group of architectural advisors that included former University of Virginia Architecture Dean William McDonough, former Tulane University Architecture Dean Reed Kroloff, the Los Angeles/Berlin/Beijing–based architecture firm GRAFT, and New Orleans architect John C. Williams, who would become the "executive architect" for many of the built projects. As handsomely documented in the just-published book *Architecture in Times of Need*, McDonough and GRAFT laid out the conceptual guidelines for the MIR architectural efforts. The "cradle to cradle" concepts developed by McDonough and Michael Braungart in the book of the same name formed the basis for the sustainability agenda that now permeates the entire MIR enterprise. GRAFT conducted preliminary research, coordinated community involvement, and prepared the architectural program, in addition to designing several houses. GRAFT also contributed the temporary pink structures whose installation inaugurated the MIR program with a publicity barrage that caused many, myself included, to question the seriousness of these efforts.

An important debate is taking place in New Orleans about the wisdom of rebuilding in areas that are so vulnerable to natural disasters. The debate can be summarized as rational planning versus cultural and historical continuity. MIR chose to side with the residents who wish to stay in the community where they have always lived. MIR has raised more than $32 million and made a commitment to build 150 houses by the end of 2010. Financing for the individual projects for families who already own a lot in the neighborhood is a combination of public and private disaster recovery funds, owner contributions, and conventional mortgages, with MIR filling the "funding gap" to ensure that house payments (including property taxes and insurance) do not exceed one-third of the household's gross monthly income.

A carefully chosen initial group of local, national, and international architects agreed to design prototype houses "as a donation to the residents of the Lower Ninth Ward and society as a whole."[1] Selection criteria for the architects included knowledge of New Orleans or disaster-relief design, familiarity with sustainability, experience with residential work, and a record of innovation with low-budget projects.

A gallery exhibition of house prototypes by the MIR architects was installed for qualified homeowners to view before choosing their preferred design. The published "base construction costs were identified at $200 per square foot for the first prototype and $130 per square foot for all replicable models thereafter."[2] However, this targeted base cost figure does not include active sustainability features (such as cisterns, solar or geothermal equipment) or site preparation costs. The national/international groups and the local group are following two distinct paths to build the houses. Architects from the national/international groups turn their schematic designs in to John C. Williams Architects for value engineering, production of working drawings, and construction supervision. Local architects can follow their projects through construction, allowing them to make the painful, but crucial cost-cutting choices themselves.

THE ARCHITECTS

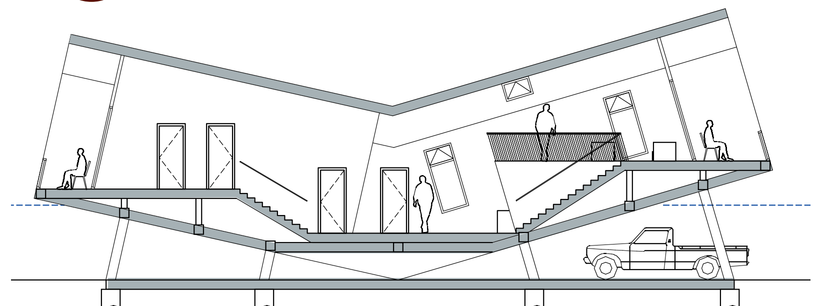
ROUND ONE FIRMS AND NUMBER OF HOUSES BUILT OR UNDER CONSTRUCTION

(AS OF JANUARY 2010)

INTERNATIONAL	
Adjaye Associates, London	2
Constructs, Accra, Ghana	3
GRAFT, Los Angeles/Berlin/Beijing	5
MVRDV, Rotterdam	0
Shigeru Ban Architects, Tokyo	1
NATIONAL	
BNIM, Houston/Kansas City	4
KieranTimberlake, Philadelphia	2
Morphosis, Santa Monica, California	1
Pugh + Scarpa, Santa Monica, California	2
LOCAL	
Billes Architecture, New Orleans	4
Concordia, New Orleans	1
Eskew + Dumez + Ripple, New Orleans	4
Trahan Architects, Baton Rouge, Louisiana	2
John C. Williams Architects, New Orleans	*
* EXECUTIVE ARCHITECT	total: 31

04 MVRDV ROTTERDAM THE NETHERLANDS

TOP AND BELOW: Rendering and longitudinal section illustrating the only one of the round one houses not selected by any residents.

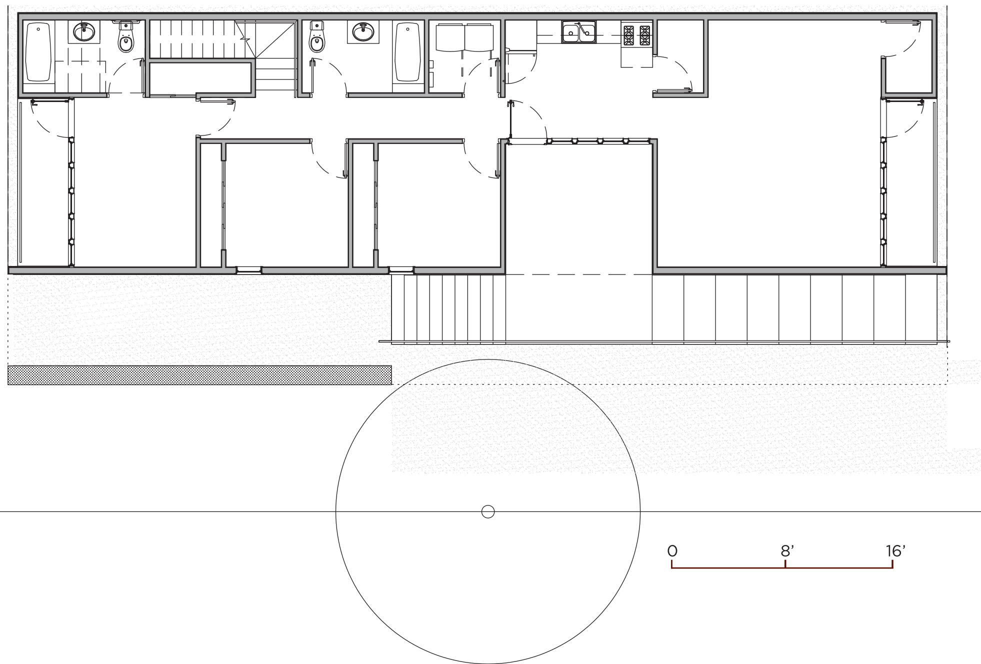


RENDERING AND SECTION COURTESY MVRDV

05

TRAHAN ARCHITECTS
PHILADELPHIA, PENNSYLVANIA

LEFT: View of Trahan Architects sensuous side porch.
BELOW LEFT: Trahan Architects floor plan with side entry.
BELOW: Clients and architects pose on the porch.
BOTTOM: Façade from street.



The 31 houses built or under construction as 2010 begins include at least one by each architect on the initial list with the notable exception of MVRDV. The famous Dutch firm chose a frivolous approach to its designs, a curious choice in the context of so much suffering. See figure 4. MVRDV's designs for New Orleans are less houses than metaphors of destruction: one house appears to have been bent in half, and another replicates the way that some buildings landed on top of one another after the flood. Although great effort and ingenuity went into making workable units out of these concepts, and the results are interesting at a certain level, they have not attracted any local customers. Like most home buyers, the MIR families are more concerned with the number of bedrooms and bathrooms and the amount of storage space than they are with aesthetic subtleties.

I visited one of the houses by Eskew + Dumez + Ripple, a distinguished New Orleans firm whose design has proven to be very popular with the neighborhood clients. See figure 2. A family of four had just moved in. The family was delighted with the sparkling new house and the fact that each child had her very own room. Like most of the other MIR projects, this house is elevated in the manner of a beach house to avoid future floods and to qualify for insurance. It has a simple plan divided longitudinally by a wall—reminiscent of a double shotgun cottage that has been converted to a single-family dwelling. One side contains an open, all-purpose family room, while the other side is divided into three bedrooms and two bathrooms that open to the common room. A practical utility room occupies a space behind the kitchen. The straightforward design is energized by a long sloping roof that provides the common room with a pleasant double-height space and a surreal third-floor balcony. The building is well proportioned and its windows are carefully placed for maximum effect. The renderings for this house proffered an array of laser-cut screens for the front facades (owners could choose anything from floral patterns to a pixilated portrait of Fats Domino), but it seems that to date none of the residents who chose this popular model has been willing to venture that far.

TOP TWO PHOTOGRAPHS AND PLAN COURTESY TRAHAN ARCHITECTS, BOTTOM PHOTOGRAPH RAFAEL LONGORIA

The eye-catching house designed by KieranTimberlake, a Philadelphia firm famous for its innovative research, uses filigreed railings and a trellis to envelop the building (on the south side and top) to provide shading and privacy. See figure 3. The screens are modern adaptations of the traditional decorated balconies and porches of New Orleans, something that the MIR organizers encouraged participating architects to evoke. Renderings show the trellises covered with vines, which would add a welcome dimension in this neighborhood where older vegetation has not yet returned to its former splendor. True to their Philadelphia heritage, KieranTimberlake designed a disciplined house organized along a service bay where utilities are bundled. Instead of simply offering a fixed floor plan, they provided a system of interchangeable programmatic elements and finishes from which the various owners can choose. At a recent lecture in New Orleans, firm principal James Timberlake expressed hope that MIR will move from "stick-built" homes to more reproducible prefabricated systems.

The house designed by Trahan Architects of Baton Rouge, Louisiana, was built next to a beautiful live oak, one of the few mature trees to survive in this part of the neighborhood. See figure 5. A sensuous curvilinear trellis on the south of the house bends to the shape of the live oak's canopy as it creates a side porch and marks the entrance. The louvers were intended to contain integrated photovoltaic and water heating features, but it does not appear that these ideas survived the MIR "value engineering" process. Worse yet, in their second house built by MIR, the trellis disappeared altogether.

The house by Tokyo-based Shigeru Ban is disappointing—particularly when you consider the magnificent houses and paper-tube emergency relief designs that have made him one of the world's foremost architects. See figure 6. The elevated courtyard is an intriguing idea, but the final product with its lonely patch of planted roof is highly compromised, and its unfortunate proportions ignore the elegant local traditions. Ban's design is based on the structural furniture idea that he brilliantly executed in two widely published houses in Japan, where storage cabinets become the building's columns and walls, but much was lost in the translation to local construction practices.

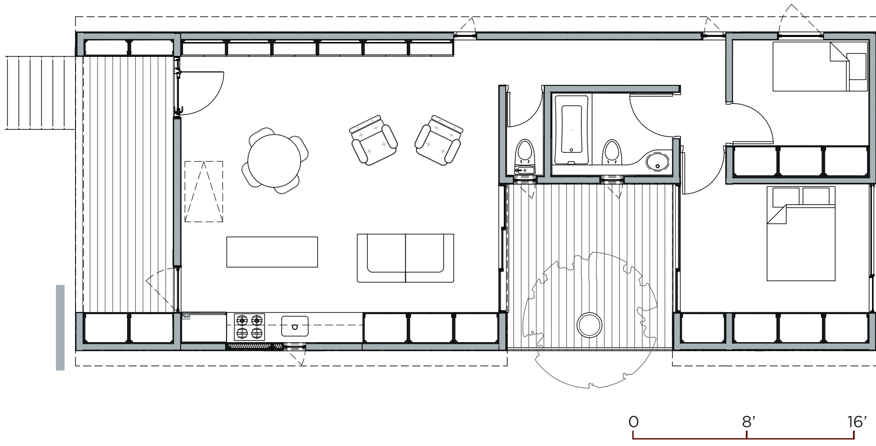
Morphosis's FLOAT House fulfills MIR's promise to provide examples of great innovative design for flood-prone areas everywhere. See figure 1. Morphosis—the Santa Monica, California, firm headed by Pritzker Prize–winner Thom Mayne—designed an amphibian house, grounded by concrete piers, that simply rises with the water in the event of a flood. In addition to displaying the firm's characteristic formal virtuosity, the house promises greater urban cohesion by having a more traditional relationship to the ground—as well as avoiding the accessibility problems with raised houses that have generated many complaints from disabled residents. Buildings like the FLOAT House exist in the Netherlands, but according to publicity material, this is the first amphibian house to get a building permit in the United States. Morphosis partnered with the UCLA architecture program to develop and prefabricate elements of FLOAT House, thus avoiding the handover of control required of the other out-of-town architects. The high-performance chassis—essentially a sliding barge—built out of polysterene foam coated in fiber-reinforced concrete, can accommodate a variety of house plans.

LIKE MOST HOME BUYERS, THE MIR FAMILIES ARE MORE CONCERNED WITH THE NUMBER OF BEDROOMS AND BATHROOMS, AND THE AMOUNT OF STORAGE SPACE THAN THEY ARE WITH AESTHETIC SUBTLETIES.

"Make It Right: From Concept to Community," an exhibition held at the Contemporary Arts Center in New Orleans in Fall

Aerial view drawing of Make It Right projects.

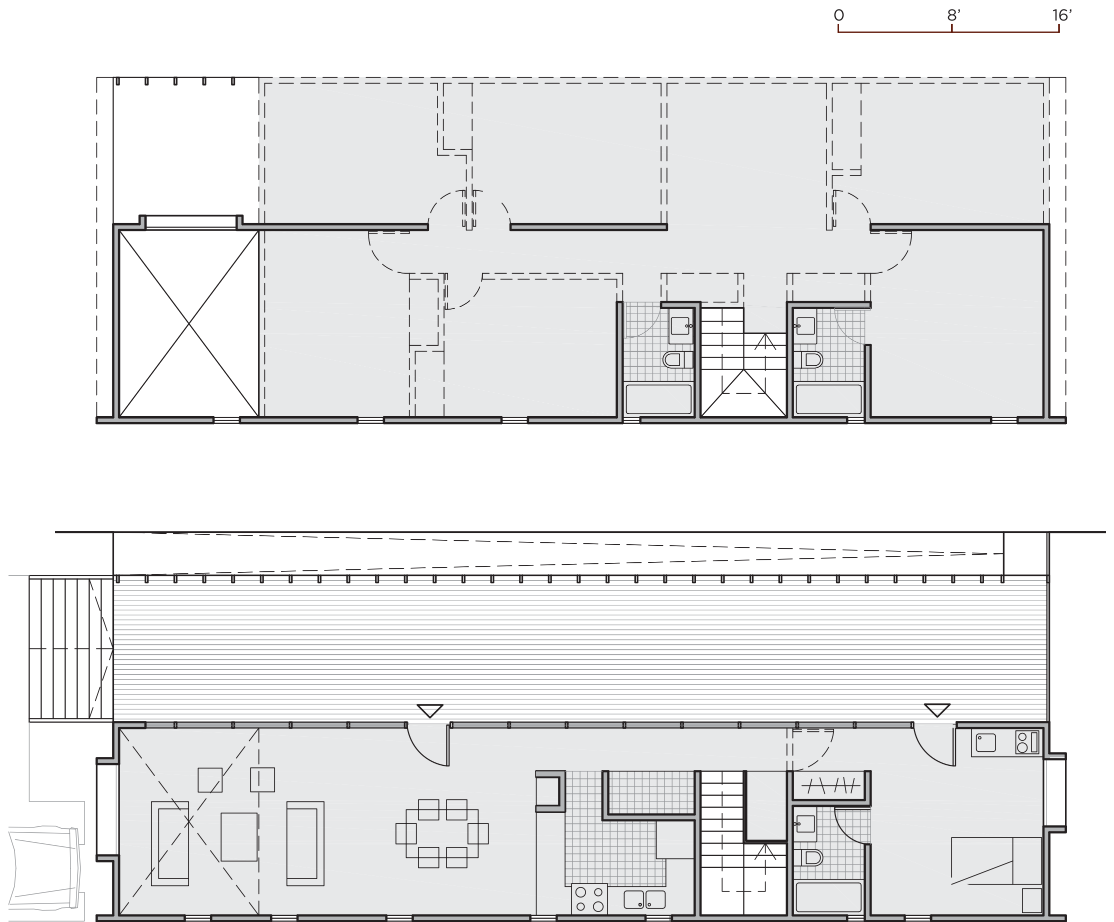
AERIAL MODEL COURTESY MAKE IT RIGHT FOUNDATION



06

SHIGERU BAN
TOKYO, JAPAN

TOP LEFT: Shigeru Ban's first floor plan.
ABOVE: Street façade of finished house.
LEFT: View of elevated courtyard.



07

ELEMENTAL
SANTIAGO, CHILE

RIGHT: Elemental's second floor plan and first floor plan. Note the kitchenette that allows the first floor bedroom to be rented out as a studio apartment.
ABOVE: Elemental rendering highlights its flexible double-height side porch.

TOP PLAN COURTESY SHIGERU BAN, PHOTOGRAPHS RAFAEL LONGORIA; BOTTOM RENDERING AND PLANS COURTESY ELEMENTAL

THE

HOUSES BUILT SO FAR BY MIR RANGE FROM EXTRAORDINARY TO INCONSEQUENTIAL, BUT ARE HARDLY REPRODUCIBLE MODELS OUTSIDE THE CONFINES OF A CHARISMATIC CHARITY.

2009, both presented the projects-in-progress and introduced a second round of designs focused on duplex houses. Additional architects invited for the second round of houses included Atelier Hitoshi Abe, Sendai/Los Angeles; Bild Design, New Orleans; buildingstudio, New Orleans; ELEMENTAL, Santiago, Chile; Gehry Partners, Los Angeles; Waggoner & Ball, New Orleans; and William McDonough+Partners, Charlottesville/San Francisco.

The houses built so far by MIR range from extraordinary to inconsequential, but are hardly reproducible models outside the confines of a charismatic charity. In order to be truly sustainable, affordable housing must work within the realities of the market without relying on donated design, materials, or labor. The project designed by the Chilean firm ELEMENTAL for MIR's second round provides an excellent example of how to do affordable housing in the Gulf Coast while recognizing that sustainability also has economic and social dimensions. See figure 7. Alejandro Aravena, ELEMENTAL's principal and a superbly talented architect, developed a highly successful model for low-income housing in Chile that is being reproduced in thousands of units around the world. The key to his approach is structuring buildings that can easily be modified to grow with the occupants's changing needs. In Latin America he builds mostly in brick and reinforced concrete. For the Lower Ninth Ward he designed a simple wood-frame house with a generous side porch that occupies half the length of the building. In its initial configuration, the side porch provides a versatile social space suitable for this climate; but it also invites owners to add as many as seven rooms under this roofed space and possibly even generate rental income within this compact structure.

RIGHT: Neighborhood site rebuilt without MIR help.
BELOW: Residents and guests inside EDR house.

MIR is not the only organization building sustainable houses in the region or in the Lower Ninth Ward neighborhood. Global Green USA, the American arm of an environmental organization created by Mikhail Gorbachev, has completed three well-crafted sustainable houses in nearby Holy Cross, where it is also planning a mixed-use complex near the river. Tulane's School of Architecture has a remarkable collection of design-build projects not far from their campus; they have received national attention on the Sundance Channel reality show "Architecture School." Cameron Sinclair's Architecture for Humanity also invited a group of distinguished architects to design houses, but it chose to focus its reconstruction efforts on the even more devastated Mississippi Gulf Coast.

It must be noted that not everyone in the neighborhood has sought help from private groups. I visited Valeria Schexnayder, a lifelong Lower Ninth resident whose recently rebuilt house is surrounded by MIR projects. This formidable lady declined to participate in the MIR program and instead used her disaster relief funds to purchase a double-wide prefabricated house. The immaculately kept neo-traditional house looks like what you would find in a new median-income neighborhood anywhere in the U.S. The house was delivered on-time and on-budget and she and her family could not be happier. The only thing she requested from MIR was a pair of bald cypresses to be planted in her front yard.

Numerous publications from around the world have followed Brad Pitt's architectural initiative with the attention they usually devote to his personal life. French fashion magazine *Marie Claire* labeled him *"le batisseur"* (the builder), while *Metropolis* called him "Saint Brad" and speculated he may become the most important architectural patron of our age. The first time I saw the MIR buildings under construction, they seemed awkwardly out of place—a sort of architectural petting zoo on a beach-like landscape. But on a later visit, after hundreds of bald cypresses had been planted along the new pervious-concrete sidewalks, I decided the neighborhood will survive this and much more. Trees have a way of rescuing architects at the same time that they remind us great architecture is not enough to make great neighborhoods. The Lower Ninth Ward still needs a balanced mix of commerce, recreation, education, and culture in order to become vibrant again. Nevertheless, I applaud Brad Pitt for using his power of convocation to channel resources and energy to help the remarkable people of this extraordinary place, while giving a very good group of architects a chance to make a difference. C

NOTES:
(1) Kristin Feireiss, ed., Architecture in Times of Need (Munich, London, New York: Prestel Verlag, 2009), 129.
(2) Ibid., 123.

RAFAEL LONGORIA

SOMETHING OLD, SOMETHING NEW, SOMETHING BORROWED

- THE CLAYTON LIBRARY REHABILITATION -

BY NICOLA SPRINGER

It seemed a modest house, small even, and as I slowed to a walk, I marveled that on my looping jaunts around the Museum District I had never fully noticed or stopped at the house before.

But there it stood in humble grandeur, a simple two-story Georgian Revival house with repointed red brick, dark green shutters, and bright white window sashes. Lit by the morning sun, the house proudly presided over its expanse of manicured lawns and variegated flora. Commissioned in 1917, the city residence of William L. Clayton and his wife, Susan Vaughan, was designed by Birdsall Briscoe, who at the time was the most prominent residential architect in Houston. The austerity of the Georgian Revival style is a reflection of the changing trends in residential architecture, as ornament and ostentation in building were being replaced with the luxury of expansive grounds. The Clayton House asserted its functionality and reflected the industrious nature of its owner. Will Clayton, who would become the second-wealthiest man in Houston (after Jesse H. Jones), was the veritable King of Cotton when cotton was king. In the 1940s, Clayton would enter the political arena and extend the international influence he had achieved in cotton. As undersecretary of state for economic affairs in the Truman administration, he played an instrumental role in drafting the Marshall Plan in the 1940s. Susan Vaughan was a patron of the arts and worked very closely with Briscoe on the design of the house as well as the grounds.

The Clayton House, guest house, and garage together create a compound, with the main house at the center; they occupy an entire city block, with Oakdale and Prospect to the north and south, respectively, and San Jacinto to the west. The front entry, framed by palm trees, looks toward Caroline and the morning sun. The guest house and garage flank the main house toward the rear and west of the site. The boundaries of the property are delineated by a white iron picket fence and Houston's ubiquitous live oak trees. The gardens share the simple, formal geometry of the house: brick pathways and gravel drives gently divide lawns and shrubs, like sashing in a neatly stitched and comfortable quilt. The property was designated a Recorded Texas Historic Landmark.

In 1958 the Clayton family deeded their residence and grounds to the City of Houston. In 1968, after the death of Will Clayton and at the behest of his daughters, the buildings became a public library. In the last three decades, 5300 Caroline has become the home of one of the largest municipal centers for genealogy. In 1983 the Houston Genealogical Library for Research was built, expanding the complex to four buildings and two Houston city blocks. Sitting to the south of Prospect Avenue, the added library building made minimal gestures to the historic landmark across the street; it was a simple municipal response to the need for additional library space for an ever-growing collection.

In 2004 the architecture firm of Glassman Shoemake Maldonado Architects (GSM) was selected for the restoring, updating, and adding of much needed meeting space to the complex. Ernesto Moldanado, principal at GSM, notes that much of the preservation work is unseen. Over 140 piers were placed under the main house to level the foundation. The structural skeleton of the house, an atypical hybrid of masonry and steel, proved partially responsible for the house's longevity. Windows stripped of their lead paint were found to be in good condition due to the durability of the cypress wood from which they were constructed.

Most of the rooms in the house have been altered to support the functions of a library. Reading rooms and meeting rooms, which long ago had been living rooms, were rehabilitated in keeping with the restrained detail of the original house. Muted paint colors join walls and paneling together, bringing a cohesiveness and modernity to the whole space. Enhanced by the natural

Aerial rendering of Clayton House, guest house, and garage showing rehabilitation and additions.

IMAGES COURTESY CLAYTON LIBRARY AND GLASSMANN SHOEMAKE MALDONADO

LEFT: Garage, original design by Birdsall P. Briscoe, addition (white) by Glassmann Shoemake Maldonado. BELOW: Clayton House.

light that washes these rooms, the spaces provide a perfect canvas for the colorful life stories that genealogical researchers uncover here. One room, however, has been returned to its original aesthetic. On the first floor a room that had been originally a porch and later was remodeled into Mr. Clayton's study has been completely renewed. Wood paneling has been restored, the floor refinished, and some original furniture reinstalled. A striking element in this room is a large fireplace that uses a cotton plant motif (executed by the Austin woodcarver Peter Mansbendel) in its decoration, a subtle reminder of what brought the Claytons their great wealth. Here the story of the Clayton family and their contributions to the City of Houston will be preserved.

A simple color and material palette defines the Clayton estate. The original buildings are distinguished by their red brick. Green shutters at full-height windows complement the dusty gray-green of the slate tile roof. White accents in wood and cast iron define the porches and remodelings performed by Briscoe during the Clayton's occupation of the house. GSM used the rule of white elements when making their architectural additions. The interventions are functional and minimal, seeking in their simplicity to stand apart from the historic buildings. The decision to go "modern" with the additions was immediate and agreed upon by the client as the best way to showcase the original architecture. Where the additions departed in plan from the strict geometry of the box, efficiency and minimum space requirements became the organizing rule. The guest house addition, hardly visible at the rear of the building, provides an accessible entry and elevator. The original red brick wall slips past the white tower and remains visible on the interior, while a tall slot of glass demarks the junction between the old and the new. This building will be the home of the Clayton Library Friends Foundation, and the elevator makes the second floor viable, adding two meeting rooms to the inventory of spaces in the complex.

The more obvious addition is at the garage. The white box of the meeting room, which also separates itself from the historic façade with slim vertical windows, preserves the integrity of the original building by sitting just below the eave of the pitched slate roof. On the southern face, three blank recesses in the glazed white brick act as mute reminders of the carriage doors that are no longer there. Where the envelope of the meeting room box is windowless, the vestibule that fronts this space is fully glazed to mimic the porch of the guest house to the north. This addition, with its meeting space for one hundred, in many ways will become the heart of the complex, allowing the library to fulfill its role as a major genealogical research facility, able to support regional and even national events and conferences.

Where the original buildings and the additions share a restraint and formality, a certain whimsy in the design of the gardens belies the geometry that organizes them. Like living ornaments that accent the architecture, Texas roses and perennials, oleanders and ferns, orange trees and elms are a few of the many plantings that attract butterflies and humans alike to wander through the grounds. Without original landscape drawings to guide him, Keiji Asakura of the landscape architecture firm Asakura Robinson Company describes the design of the gardens as an interpretation rather than a restoration. With the help of horticultural guides from the 1920s, old photographs, and family memories, he recreated the gardens to reflect the popular plantings of the time. As a Heritage Garden, the grounds will serve an added function, educating visitors about the local flora.

While the Clayton House inside its walls holds the history of families, it is the hope of the Library Foundation that the gardens will celebrate families' futures. The Library Foundation intends to rent out the grounds for parties and weddings. One can easily imagine the formal west garden as a wonderful outdoor chapel where vows may be exchanged and the front lawns an elegant setting for receptions.

The Clayton House and grounds represent a breath of fresh air with their gentle marriage of the old and the new. As I turn west down Oakdale and mentally recap my morning run, I am grateful for the coming together of private and public entities to create such great new public spaces in Houston. Cautiously picking my way across the light rail tracks at San Jacinto, I chuckle to think that eighty years ago nearly a hundred miles of streetcar tracks crisscrossed our city. And as I look up, the residential blocks of Venue Museum District rise before me, overlooking the Clayton House below. I wonder... what will the trend in city living be in a hundred years, and will they stand the test of time as well as the Clayton House? **c**

ADOBE ABODE

Building a Nubian Vault in West Texas with Simone Swan

TEXT AND PHOTOS BY SHANNON STONEY

Two service buildings contain the storage tank of well water and batteries that store power from a solar collector and windmill.

LEFT: Simone Swan's house is composed of four nubian vaults connected by a flat-roofed hall.

ABOVE: A stack of adobes.

BELOW: Simone Swan talks to Thomas Colbert. The width of the rooms under the vaults is only ten feet, but the soaring ceilings make the rooms feel much bigger.

ABOVE LEFT : A Greek architect and an American architect collaborated in the setting of the first keystone adobe.

LEFT: Swan House detail.

FOR FOUR DAYS THE TWO SIDES OF THE NUBIAN VAULT had curved up slowly from the thick adobe walls. The critical time had come to cut the first keystone to fit the space between the two arcs. We hacked away at the adobes with our machetes, trying again and again to cut off the right amount at the corners, but our mangled bits of dried clay wouldn't fit. Finally, Efren, a master mason from Ojinaga, Mexico, came over to see how we were coming along.

He eyeballed the arch from 30 feet away, picked up an adobe, whacked it a couple of times with a trowel, and without a word handed it to Eugenia, a young architect from Boston. She held it up to the odd-shaped hole and it slid in with an almost audible click. In celebration Eugenia and Gina, her Greek colleague, crossed their machetes in front of the first completed course of the emerging vault for the Adobe Alliance's new office space.

The mission of the alliance is to teach people in the U.S. Southwest and Mexico to build their own homes with almost no cash, using just the soil, sand, straw, manure, and cactus juice that can be found literally in their own backyards. During the ten-day workshop, we learned the many skills needed to build vaulted roofs without using one piece of wood, tin, or bought material.

Swan has blended aspects of modernist architecture with the best of desert vernacular building. She favors a modernist austerity, an "exalting frugality" as she calls it, and there is little ornamentation on the building.

The story behind the workshop begins, as do those of many of this region's arts institutions, with a cadre of artists, scholars, and curators nurtured by Dominique and John de Menil. In 1964 Simone Swan began working with Dominique de Menil, who was then serving as Acting Director of the University of St. Thomas Art Department. Swan joined the de Menils in developing their Menil Foundation project, and she was soon editing the foundation's publications and hiring its staff. She worked closely with the de Menils until 1977. At this point Swan's career took a radically different direction: she began studying architecture with Hassan Fathy, the Egyptian architect who reintroduced the ancient Nubian vault to modern Egypt. She worked with him until his death in 1989.

After Fathy died, Swan decided to carry on his project of housing the rural poor, but she focused her efforts in North America on the border between Texas and Mexico, where she saw a need for low-cost, sustainable, and owner-built housing. She chose the desert Southwest of the United States because it still has a thriving adobe tradition, and she hoped to find people there with the skills and interest to build in adobe. She also sought to meet the area's growing need for new, affordable, energy-efficient housing.

Jesusita Jimenez teaches for the Adobe Alliance workshops.

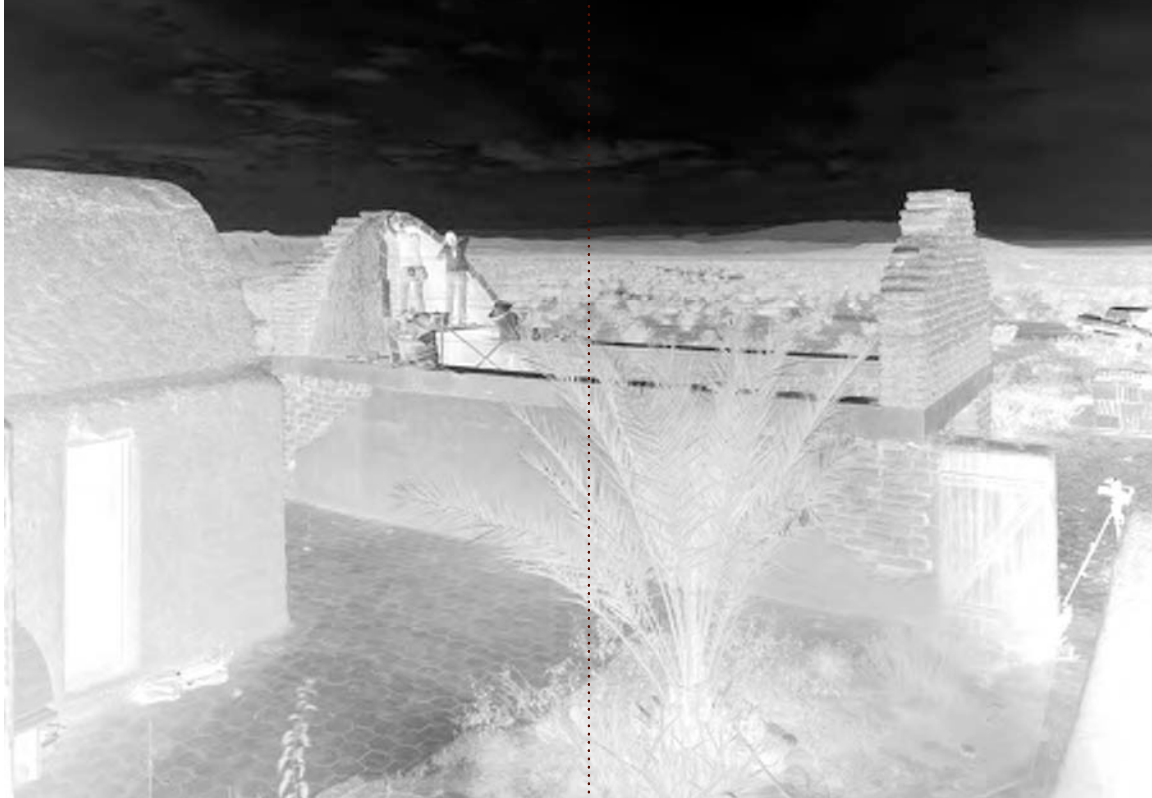
Swan bought her 500 acres in the Chihuahuan Desert in 1994, which was around the time she founded the Adobe Alliance, an international group of adobe enthusiasts. She built her own vaulted adobe house in 1998. As a prototype, the 1,600-square-foot house is irresistibly beautiful and serene. The H-shaped plan features four vaults forming the two long sides of the H and a central flat-roofed hall joining them. A small, perfect-domed outbuilding that was initially used as a tool shed is now a guesthouse. Two smaller vaulted outbuildings house the batteries that store power from the solar collectors and a cistern for well water.

The thick adobe walls create a deep silence, shade, and coolness inside the house, making it a welcome refuge from the hot desert days. Although enough light comes in the windows to keep the interior from seeming too dark, the windows are mostly small—some are tiny, only one foot square. A few large windows, however, open onto a shaded area on the south side under a ramada, and French doors open onto the two courtyards. All the rooms in the house and the domed outbuilding are ten feet across for harmony throughout.

The great hall that connects the two vaulted ends serves as an office for the Adobe Alliance. The ceiling is high but flat, as in traditional adobe houses, with *vigas* (wooden beams) running across to support the roof. The roof is not a traditional earthen adobe roof, however, but is built of Styrofoam panels under plywood with an Elastomeric sealant on them to keep out the rain. You can walk, stargaze, or sleep on this roof: a stairway in the west courtyard takes you up.

Swan has blended aspects of modernist architecture with the best of desert vernacular building. She favors a modernist austerity, an "exalting frugality" as she calls it, and there is little ornamentation on the building. A parapet of angled adobe blocks edges the roof deck, facilitating airflow to cool the deck at night, and in the master bedroom workers added some subtle ornamentation during the plastering. (Swan says, "I appreciate their creativity and initiative.") In addition to Fathy, Swan's architectural influences include Louis Kahn, who offered to design a beach house for her right before he died, and Rick Joy, an American architect known for building rammed earth houses in the desert. But there is something new about how all these influences come together in her home. As Dennis Dollens wrote in *Simone Swan: Adobe Building*, a short book about Swan's work, the buildings are "little architectural revolutions in adobe and mud plasters."

Her intent was not, however, primarily aesthetic: "Beauty is a bonus," Swan says. She didn't seek to copy Egyptian traditional forms, but wanted to design something that people with little money could copy and build by hand with locally available materials. She had originally dreamed of constructing



This room will serve as the new office for the Adobe Alliance. Strings stretched from one end wall to the other guide the builders as they raise the vault. The Nubian vault is laid at an oblique angle to the side and end walls.

The Swan house functions well in a difficult climate. There is no air-conditioning, but the house is surprisingly cool and comfortable on hot days.

a whole village of vaulted and domed adobe buildings somewhere in the Southwest, similar to Fathy's New Gourna in Egypt. But it proved difficult for many reasons. On this side of the border, the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development has many rules and regulations that are difficult to comply with using ancient construction methods. Also, people in Mexico and the U.S. Southwest who grew up in adobe houses sometimes want newer, more modern houses, even if they are not as elegant or energy-efficient as a vaulted adobe house. And it is hard to find local workers interested in learning new ways with ancient adobes.

Neither Fathy's work nor Swan's adobe project developed bottom-up dynamism. Nonetheless, she has persisted in teaching the building method to whoever is interested. During the recent Adobe Alliance workshop, we focused not on utopias, but on the demanding physical undertaking and the construction process. And we began by watching the process of adobe-making at a traditional adobe yard in Ojinaga, Mexico.

The basic unit from which these "little architectural revolutions" are built is the adobe block, an amazingly simple combination of clay, manure, sand, and straw that is molded wet and dried in the sun. While it is soft enough to cut and shape with very simple tools, its compressive strength is impressive at 300 psi. This strength comes from the sand, while its tensile strength comes from the fiber in the manure and straw. Sand, manure, and clay are mixed together, and then straw is added. This wet mixture is punched into a wooden mold that makes four blocks at a time; each block is scored with a finger diagonally before the mold is lifted off. The adobes are turned regularly as they dry. The walls of the Swan house are made from adobes that are 18 x 12 x 3 inches, but the special smaller adobes made for the vault construction are 10 x 7 x 2 inches and considerably lighter.

Our first task as student builders was to trace a catenary curve onto a piece of cardboard and cut a template that would serve as our guide in building the vault over the new office walls. We draped a chain from the tops of the two long side walls of the new office until its curved midpoint almost touched the ground. Then we used a marker to trace this upside-down arch shape onto cardboard, cut out the U shape, and flipped it up onto the end walls of the room, which rose higher than the side walls. Finally, we traced the U-shaped curve into the adobe of the end walls with a carpenter's nail. This line marked the inner edge of the vault.

For a Nubian vault, the adobes are laid at an angle, with their short ends on the wall, and the long ends extending inward at about seventy degrees to the wall. They are laid leaning against the end wall at first. As the first course rises, mortar is called upon to hold each adobe tight against the end wall in defiance of gravity, while still wet, and it does. The mortar recipe is even simpler than the mix for the adobes: equal parts clay and sand, mixed with water. The builders scoop it up with their hands and place it onto the top of the wall or the previous course of adobes; then they fit each new adobe into the wet mortar. The bond created by the hydrophilic forces in the adobes is amazingly tight within minutes.

Our bare human hands did most of the work, with simple trowels and machetes to do the occasionally needed shaping. Sometimes we used a trowel handle to bang the adobe into the mortar, but our hands worked as well or better: too much banging can fracture the sun-dried bricks. As Swan says, "The great thing about adobe is that it's so forgiving." Mistakes were pretty easily fixed. Our crew of inexperienced women quickly became adept adobe vault builders, and Swan says that making the dome is even easier.

The Swan house functions well in a difficult climate. There is no air-conditioning, but the house is surprisingly cool and comfortable on hot days. Solar panels power batteries that have an inverter for producing regular alternating current, while some direct current flows to a small refrigerator and a swamp cooler. A small windmill adds to the energy-production mix. A pump powered by the batteries draws water from a historic well that has been deepened down the hill from the house. An on-demand water heater provides hot water for an outdoor shower and an indoor tub. The entire house is off the grid except for the phone and internet connection.

The Adobe Alliance, headed by Swan, has contributed to other projects in the region. It built its first vaulted and domed house in 1994 in Mexico for Daniel Camacho Rodriguez. Jesusita Jimenez, one of Swan's first and most talented students, taught the method to Rodriquez, and together they built the house, which sadly no longer exists. On the American side, a large house with three domes and five vaults was built close to Swan's house with Swan as the designer and consultant. Its distinguishing feature is a dramatic loggia with eight adobe arches at the west end of the house. A beautiful, little domed music room outside Lajitas, Texas, was the product of an Adobe Alliance workshop, part of a complex of cob buildings built by Patricia Kern. The alliance built a similar domed office in Alpine. Finally, it built two domes and three vaults over a new house in Ojinaga, Mexico, but Swan was not involved in this design.

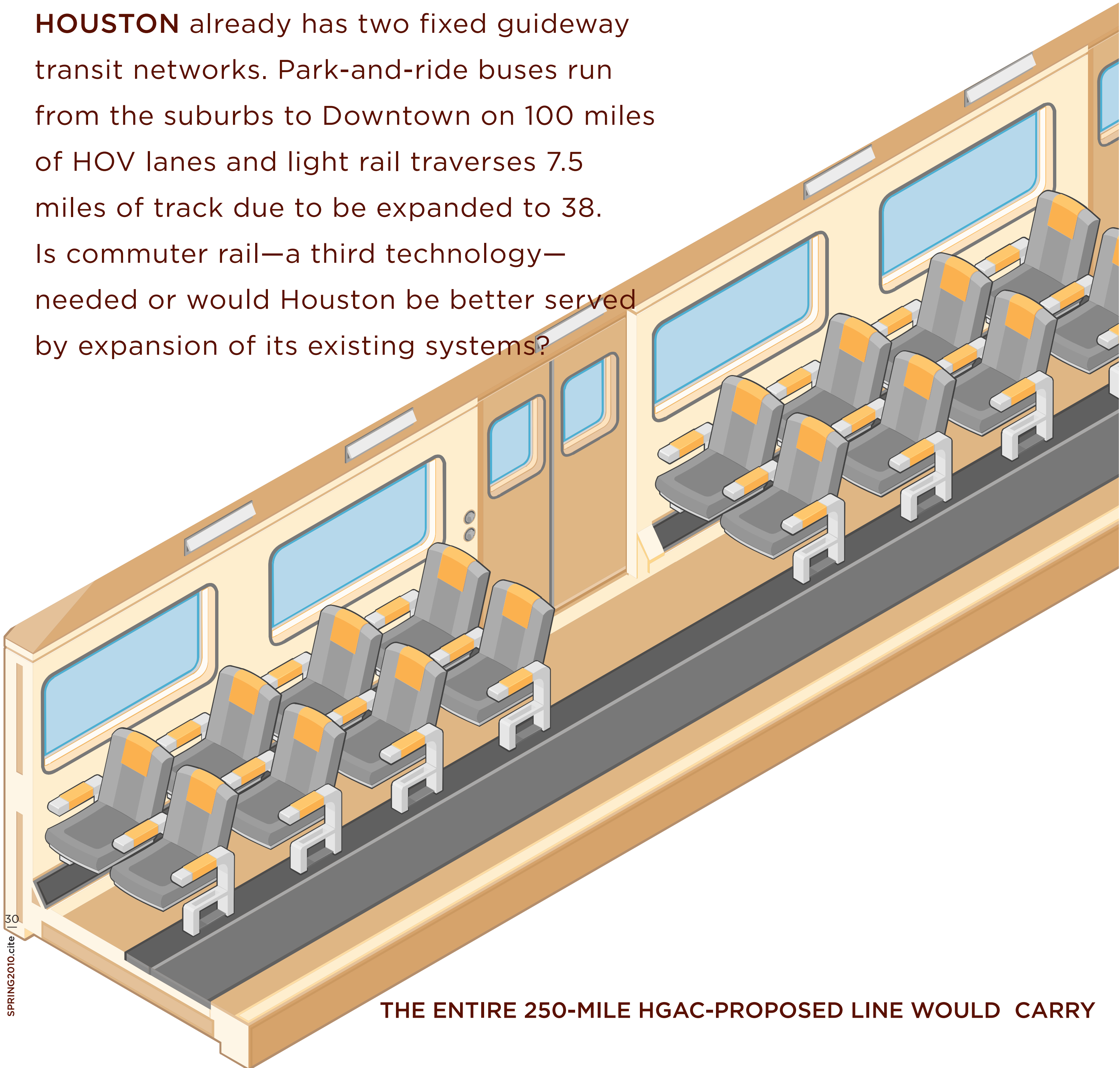
Though Swan's dream of building a whole village has not materialized, and the Adobe Alliance has not spurred a movement among low-income people in the Southwest, earth building is exploding internationally. Organizations such as La Voûte Nubienne teach adobe vault building in sub-Saharan Africa, and people have come to Presidio, Texas, from as far away as Nepal to learn the technique. Swan's goal is still, after the original title of Fathy's book, "construire avec le peuple." c

The Adobe Alliance built a domed music room for Patricia Kern near Lajitas, Texas.

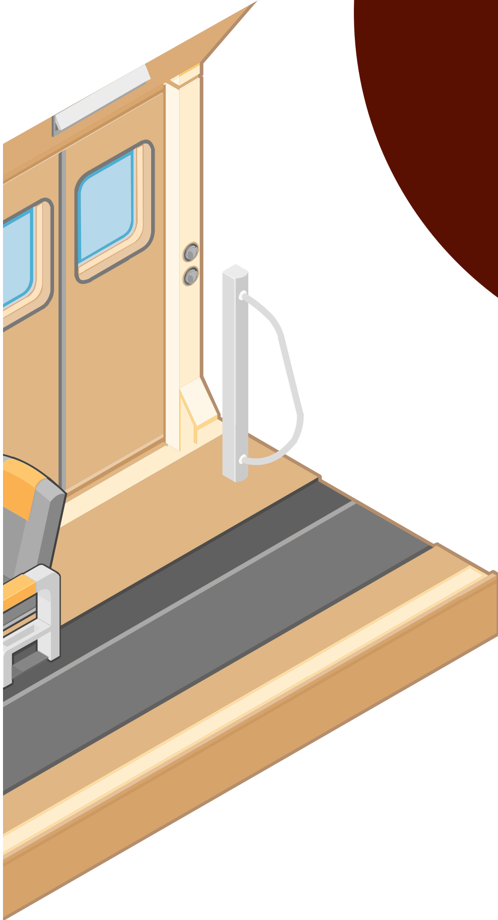
ARE WE SETTING UP COMMUTER RAIL TO FAIL?

by Christof Spieler

HOUSTON already has two fixed guideway transit networks. Park-and-ride buses run from the suburbs to Downtown on 100 miles of HOV lanes and light rail traverses 7.5 miles of track due to be expanded to 38. Is commuter rail—a third technology—needed or would Houston be better served by expansion of its existing systems?



THE ENTIRE 250-MILE HGAC-PROPOSED LINE WOULD CARRY



RAIL HAS TRADITIONALLY STIRRED controversy in Houston. But one thing is clear. There's a broad political consensus in favor of comuter rail. The clarity ends there. A dozen different corridors are under consideration; out of several possible central station locations, none connects easily to any of those corridors; at least three different agencies are vying to design and operate the system, but nobody knows how to fund it; and it's not clear how commuter rail will connect to the existing transit system.

Perhaps the most important question, though, is the simplest: what exactly do we mean by "commuter rail"? The answer to that question will play a large role in determining the shape of Houston's future.

The technical definition of commuter rail is "a mode of mass transit that operates on the national railroad network." It differs from Amtrak in that it serves trips within a metro area, not between cities. It differs from light rail (like Houston's Main Street line) and heavy rail (like the New York subway or Washington, D.C.'s Metro) because it can share tracks with freight trains.

The 21 U.S. systems that fit the definition of commuter rail offer dramatically different levels of service. Some offer over 100 trains a day; others, only six. Some stop directly in the middle of huge central business districts; others drop riders 30 minutes and two transfers away from downtown. Some suburban stations are in the middle of walkable neighborhoods; others are just parking lots off a highway. Those differences are reflected in ridership: the busiest system, the Long Island Railroad, accommodates 331,600 riders a day, while Nashville's Music City Star carries only 800.

So the question is not whether Houston needs commuter rail. The question is what places need to be connected, what level of service needs to be provided between those places, and how commuter rail will connect to other transit.

Unfortunately, a lot of the discussion of commuter rail shares a widespread misconception of Houston as a city where most people work Downtown and live in the suburbs, and where most traffic is commuter traffic. In reality Houston is a multicentric city. The Texas Medical Center, Greenway Plaza, Uptown, Westchase, Energy Corridor, and Greenspoint each has as many jobs as other cities' downtowns. (This is not a new thought—"Edge Cities" have been discussed since the 1980s—but it does not seem to have affected a lot of transit planning.) The densest concentration of Houston's resident population is within and just west of the 610 Loop; even with current low gas prices and sprawling development patterns, the area inside the Loop is projected to add nearly twice as many people by 2035 as any other comparably sized area in the region. Only about a quarter of the trips on Houston's freeways are work trips, and many work trips occur outside of rush hour.

Serving a multicentric city requires frequent two-way service that connects not just to Downtown but to other activity centers as well. Unfortunately, that's not what has been proposed. In 2008 the Houston-Galveston Area Council (HGAC) completed a study for a five-line regional system proposing rush hour service every 20 minutes and a handful of midday trains.

The initial set of alternatives, explored in a study currently being conducted by the City of Galveston, proposes a Galveston-to-Houston line with trains that would operate only three hours in the morning and three hours in the afternoon, with no midday or weekend service. Both proposals would rely on transfers to get riders Downtown from a station a mile away. Reaching other employment centers would be even less convenient: one proposed central station is three miles from Downtown, a 20-minute light rail trip to the Medical Center or Greenway Plaza, and essentially inaccessible to the University of Houston. Neither study considered alternate Downtown terminals or a better integration with the light rail system for connections to places like UH.

An infrequently available, rush-hour only, Downtown-focused system will not be very effective. The entire 250-mile HGAC-proposed line would carry only 36,000 people a day—fewer than the 7.5-mile Main Street light rail line. And it would cost a lot of money—$3 billion in construction costs (compared to a tenth of that spent on the Main Street line) and

ONLY 36,000 PEOPLE A DAY—FEWER THAN THE 7.5-MILE MAIN STREET LIGHT RAIL LINE.

$35 million a year, which comes to nearly $10 a trip in operating costs (compared to $1.30 on Main Street line), of which maybe 60 percent would be covered by fares.

Those kinds of numbers raise equity issues. According to HGAC's 2007 Transit Onboard Survey, Houston's local, non-commuter bus riders are 75 percent minority, and 54 percent have household incomes under $30,000. Their service is subsidized by about $1.95 a trip. Light rail riders are subsidized by less than $1 a trip. (Across the United States, transit serving denser urban areas carries more people and is more cost-effective than transit serving low-density suburban areas.) Given that current commuter bus riders are 35 percent minority and only 7 percent have incomes under $30,000, commuter rail riders would be whiter and wealthier than the average Houstonian. The $4 subsidy would unfairly distribute tax dollars.

How can Houston build a system that will be more useful to more people? The Main Street line provides a good example: it offers convenient connections to multiple employment centers, it stops in walkable places where riders do not need a car or shuttle bus to reach their destinations, and it runs every few minutes from early in the morning to late at night. The most successful commuter rail systems—those in New York, Boston, Chicago, Philadelphia, and San Francisco—share those traits.

Furthermore, some of the most successful suburban transit systems are not commuter rail at all. Dallas, St. Louis, Sacramento, and Denver built light rail lines that extend over 15 miles out, carrying people on the same sorts of trips that commuter rail systems do. A 2004 study on commuter rail to Fort Bend County concluded that a light rail line would carry people on 21,800 daily trips, compared to 12,100 for a commuter rail line on the same route. The light rail line, operating twice as often and requiring no transfer to get to the Medical Center or Downtown, would cost more to build, but the construction cost per rider would actually be lower. A shorter light rail line—extending only as far as Sugar Land, not Rosenberg—would cost the same as the longer commuter rail line while carrying more people. Other technologies—single-car diesel trains, express buses—could offer similar advantages: more frequent service, fewer transfers, faster acceleration, fewer emissions, and the ability to run outside existing railroad corridors to serve other destinations. But the HGAC and Galveston studies considered only locomotive-hauled commuter rail.

good political as well as financial case can be made for improving transit. Hundred of thousands of commuters must contend with freeway traffic while paying $3 a gallon for gas.

Houston, in fact, already has very successful suburban commuter transit. METRO, Trek, and Woodlands Express buses leave suburban park-and-ride lots every morning, running as often as every three minutes, and provide nonstop trips on free-flowing high-occupancy vehicle (HOV) lanes right onto downtown streets, a short walk away from 140,000 jobs. A 2009 Central Houston study found that over half of Downtown employees who live 20 to 70 miles from Downtown use the HOV lane buses. These 33,000 daily transit trips are in addition to 179,000 trips in local buses, vanpools, and carpools that also use the HOV lanes. If those vehicles ran on tracks rather than rubber tires, this would rank among the top ten U.S. commuter rail systems. The current service is more frequent, more convenient, and faster than most commuter rail systems and equally reliable. Therefore, adding commuter rail will only make sense if it serves other sorts of trips. Those could be trips to employment centers other than Downtown—now poorly served by the HOV buses, which have to use congested general traffic lanes to get there—or trips to outlying centers like Galveston or College Station.

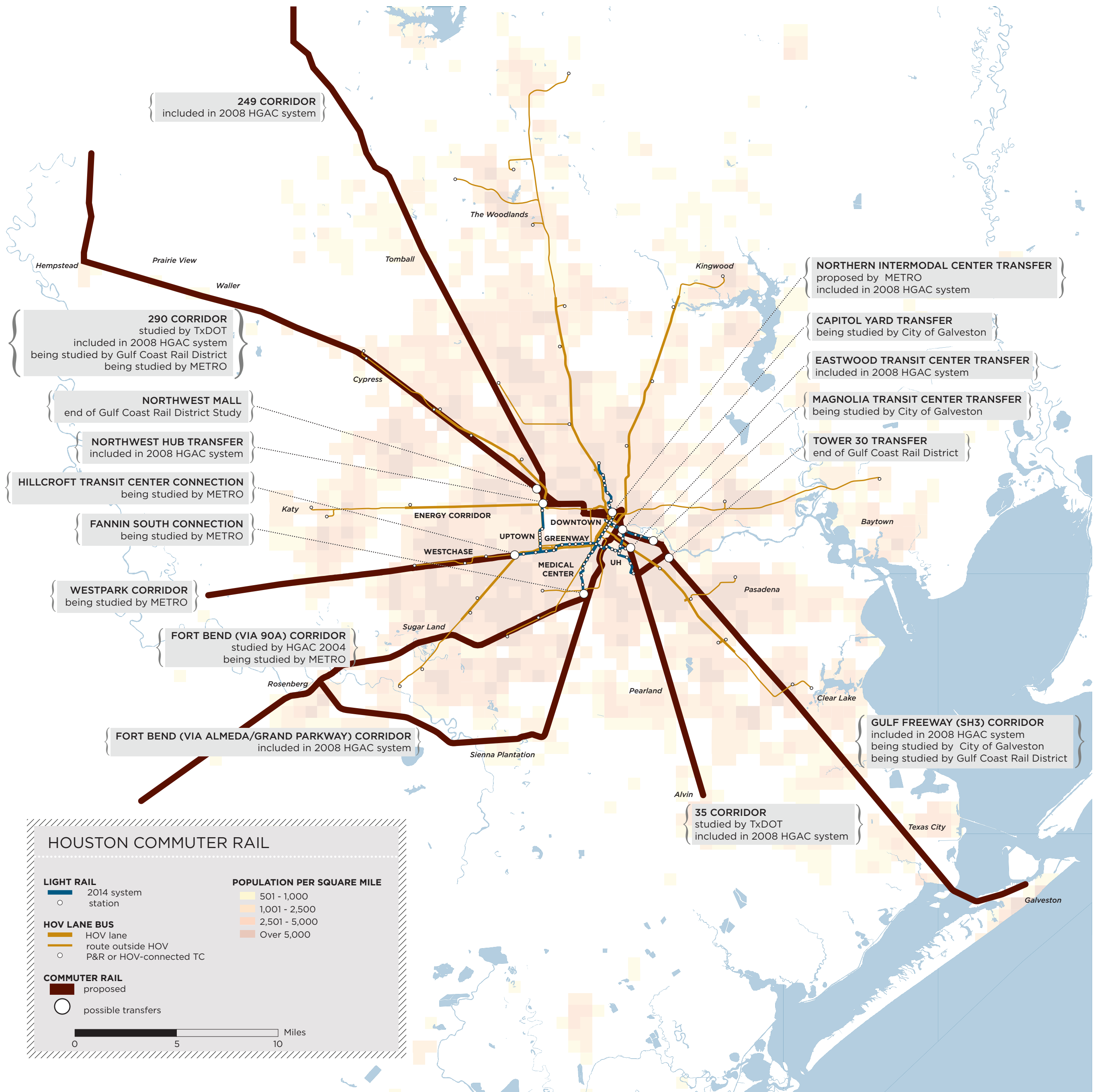
A good political as well as financial case can be made for improving transit. Hundreds of thousands of commuters must contend with freeway traffic while paying $3 a gallon for gas. Rice University's Houston Area Survey finds that 79 percent of Houstonians think better transit is important to Houston's further success, and the majority thinks rail is part of the solution. Meanwhile, as the state's highway fund runs out of money, freeway expansion is getting more expensive and more politically difficult. The expansion of the Katy Freeway cost $2.8 billion, more than $1.8 billion over the original estimate, and displaced hundreds of businesses as well as entire neighborhood streets. (It also destroyed one of Houston's best potential suburban transit corridors.) Highways do not come close to paying for themselves. According to a 2009 study by the Pew Charitable Trust, only 50 percent of the federal highway trust fund and almost no local road spending comes from gas taxes; the rest comes from the taxpayers as a whole. The Texas Department of Transportation says that gas taxes cover considerably less than half the cost of Texas highways, and that analysis does not consider external costs like pollution and lost property tax revenues.

But not all transit is good transit. An ineffective, expensive commuter rail system will not improve the region. Rather than rush ahead with a system based on preconceived, often faulty assumptions and driven by political urgency, we need to engage in a discussion about what we want to accomplish and how best to do that. Unfortunately, that discussion is harder to fit into a soundbite than "We need commuter rail." And while good transit with a high level of service and efficient connectivity will carry more riders, it is often more expensive and takes longer to implement than a more basic service. A few trains a day running from Hempstead to the parking lot of Northwest Mall from which shuttle buses (frequently stuck in freeway traffic) carry a handful of riders on to Downtown and Uptown is not good transit. But the politicians who backed it would still be able to take credit for "improving transit."

Commuter rail can be good transit. A well-connected system with simple transfers between suburban rail, urban rail, and local bus lines will be many times more useful than a series of unconnected systems. A system that comes within walking distance of homes and workplaces will cost its riders less than one that requires them to drive to a park and ride lot. A system that operates all day will serve more people than one that is based on nine-to-five jobs. Good transit could be commuter rail, light rail, an expanded and improved version of the existing commuter bus system, or a combination of all of these. What technology is used is not the important issue; what level of service is provided to what places is.

Decisions about transit are also decisions about urban form. People and corporations alike make decisions on where to locate based on available transportation. Job centers that are easier to get to will attract more jobs than those that are difficult to access. Transit that connects suburbs will encourage people to move to the suburbs; transit that connects walkable neighborhoods will encourage people to move there. Commuter rail can cultivate dense employment centers (as the HOV bus system has done for Downtown Houston), but it can also support low-density sprawl. If a rail system is frequent enough and runs in both directions, it can support mixed-use activity centers in the suburbs, too. Those centers already exist and are growing in places like The Woodlands and Sugar Land, though they are not necessarily convenient to existing railroad tracks.

Transportation decisions last a long time. The walkable leafy suburbs of New York, Philadelphia, and Chicago were created by commuter rail a century ago, as were the downtowns of those cities. Houston never had much commuter rail (and thus there aren't many small-town downtowns across the region), but Houston's most beloved urban neighborhoods—the Heights, Montrose, the East End—managed to get their human scale from growing around streetcar lines in the first decades of the 20th century. The decisions that will be made in the coming months and years about commuter rail will determine our vision for the future, a vision of what the Houston region will look like 10, 20, 50, even 100 years from now. That is the most important question of all: what kind of city do we want to be, and what sort of transit will support that? **c**



HOW TO EVALUATE PROPOSED COMMUTER RAIL ROUTES »

FIVE DIFFERENT AGENCIES ARE DEVELOPING PLANS FOR COMMUTER RAIL

Will the route duplicate services?

Park-and-ride buses extend to near the outer limits of suburban growth in most directions with the exception of Pearland and a few other areas.

Will the line go where people live?

Commuter rail studies have focused on existing freight rail lines radiating out from Houston. Where the proposed commuter rail corridors extend beyond the HOV lanes, it is often into largely unpopulated areas. There are exceptions: the Gulf Freeway corridor is populated all the way to Galveston, but the HOV lane goes less than half way. Commuter rail could also connect Prairie View or College Station (the latter has not been proposed).

Will the line go where people work?

Downtown is the biggest employment center in Houston, but it's not the only one. Uptown, Greenway, and the Texas Medical Center are all downtowns in their own right. Concentrations of jobs are also in Galveston, The Woodlands, and the Energy Corridor. The more jobs a line serves, the more useful it will be.

Will the line connect well to light rail?

Light rail connects major activity centers inside Loop 610; it would bring most commuter rail riders to their final destinations. Most existing railroad lines inside the Loop are already congested with freight trains, so transfers between commuter rail and light rail as far out as Northwest Mall have been proposed. The further the transfer is from a rider's final destination, the less convenient it is.

THE ANA_OMY OF EMPTINE_S

UNDERSTANDING THE OVERLOOKED SPACES

By Susan Rogers | Photography Sharón Steinmann

VACANCY in a city with "world class" aspirations is not supposed to happen. Yet Houston is a city structured more by its empty spaces than by its filled ones. This is a story, then, about the other side of urbanism. It is the "wrong story," but a defining story—one that requires thinking "outside the Loop." It is an attempt to understand the anatomy of emptiness—the spaces not occupied or inhabited and absent of activity or comfort—as a defining and endlessly shifting element in the landscape and experience of the city.

Houston is 25 percent vacant—amounting to more than 150 square miles of void—an area that could comfortably contain the city of Boston three times or half of New York City. When you add to the vacant land streets, right-of-ways, and open spaces, the amount skyrockets to nearly 60 percent of the city being free of buildings or vertical interruption—and if you continue by adding the amount of empty space present, but unused, inside of built-up parcels, it increases yet again. In other words emptiness is the predominant experience. It is no accident then that Houston has begotten many scholars who have expanded our understanding of what constitutes a city. In fact, the challenge for Houston is that urbanism in some sense is like life: it is the space and time that falls in between the memorable monuments (moments). A theory of the urbanism that exists in between the architecture, instead of the urbanism defined by architecture, is needed if we are to read this story.

While there are certainly exceptions, most of Houston is sparse, holey, and discontinuous. Raw vacant land, bulldozed properties, underutilized land, particularly the ubiquitous parking lot, and abandoned buildings punctuate the city. So much space lies between buildings, subdivisions, and developments that these vast vacancies both characterize the city and dissolve it. These are waiting spaces, spaces ignored, spaces where nothing is happening, spaces where there is hope that something will happen, spaces ready and available for something to happen, and finally spaces where things are happening even while awaiting better things. These are spaces full of potential thus far unrealized.

But because there is so much space in Houston, potential alone is hard to hang your hat on (especially the ten-gallon variety). The complete city, the full city, that so many wish for seems a long way away, especially when you consider that only one of four new residential units are built inside the city limits, and that for every three building permits issued in Houston, one demolition permit is granted. A close look at the city over time reveals a tendency for emptiness to simply move around, to shift. While Washington Avenue's vacant lots, used car dealerships, pawn shops, and bail bond offices are all but gone in the wake of new development, the Fifth Ward seems to lose more housing each year. While Midtown buildings are razed and redeveloped for higher and better uses, the Third Ward is slowly disappearing, one demolition at a time: in 2009 demolition permits outnumbered building permits two to one in the northern Third Ward. Though cities have always been rebuilt in an unsettling cycle of demolition and reconstruction, the cycle seems accelerated in Houston. This may be because there is so much space that it is unnecessary to use it efficiently: space can be wasted, used for a single purpose, or remain completely empty and unused. Combine that with speculation—particularly rampant in the Inner Loop—cheap land, and a perceived limitlessness to expansion, and the result is careless and injudicious use of land.

The anatomy of Houston's vacancy is varied and complex, ranging from the wild, to the wanting, to the withered, to the wasted. Within the city limits of Houston, raw or undeveloped land is found in overlooked, or leapfrogged, areas. Much of this land remains in a natural state—prairie, piney woods, scrub, or swampland. The largest patches of leapfrogged properties are in areas that have thus far remained unattractive to mainstream developers. These are

> "INDEED, MOST OF WHAT HAPPENS IN THE WORLD MIGHT BE CONSIDERED TO BE PART OF THE WRONG STORY—THE THINGS THAT ARE NOT SUPPOSED TO HAPPEN."
>
> KELLER EASTERLING

LAND USE BY NEIGHBORHOOD: *Houston Chases its Tail and Comes Up Empty*

100%
90%
80%
70%
60%
50%
40%
30%
20%
10%
0%

1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10 11 12 13 14 15

1. Airport
Kingwood
Lake Houston

2. Willowbrook
Greater Greenspoint
Greater Inwood
Acres Homes
Hidden Valley
Oak Forest/Garden Oaks

3. Independence Heights
Lazybrook/Timbergrove
Greater Heights
Memorial Park/Washington
Northside/Northline
Northside Village

4. Eastex/Jensen
East Little York/Homestead
Trinity/Houston Gardens
East Houston
Settegast
El Dorado/Oates Prairie
Hunterwood
Northshore

5. Greater Fifth Ward
Denver Harbor/Port Houston
Pleasantville
Clinton Park
Second Ward
Eastwood/Lawndale, Greater Third Ward
Magnolia Park
MacGregor
Lawndale/Wayside

6. Kashmere
Fairbanks/Northwest Crossing
Westbranch
Addicks Park Ten
Spring Branch
Langwood
Spring Shadows

7. Eldridge
West Oaks
Briar Forest
Westchase
Woodlake/Briar Meadow
Greater Uptown

8. Alief
Sharpstown
Gulfton
Westwood

9. Braeburn
Meyerland
Braeswood Place
Greater Fondren SW
Westbury
Willow Meadows/Willowbend

10. Afton Oaks/River Oaks
Montrose
University Place
Medical Center
Astrodome
South Main
Binz
Greenway/Upper Kirby

11. Fourth Ward
Downtown
Midtown

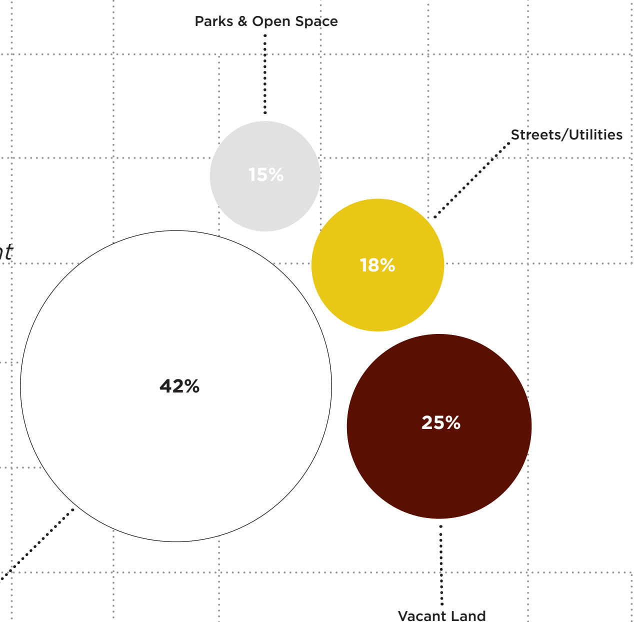
12. Edgebrook
Ellington/South Belt
Clear Lake

13. Fondren Gardens
Central Southwest
Fort Bend

14. OST/South Union
Sunnyside
South Park
South Acres/Crestmont
Minnetex

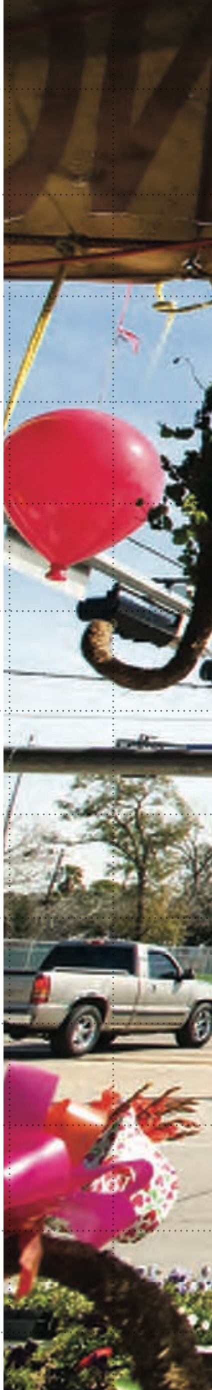
15. Harrisburg/Manchester
Gulfgate/Pine Valley
Pecan Park
Golfcrest/Reveille
Park Place
Meadowbrook/Allendale
Greater Hobby

TOTAL LAND USE: *One Quarter of Houston is Vacant*



Parks & Open Space
Streets/Utilities
Vacant Land

Source: "Houston Land Use and Demographic Profile 2000," City of Houston Planning Dept.



Flowers and topiary monkeys enliven a vacant lot along Fannin street.

often on the perceived "wrong side of town." You can map these properties in a crescent from the south side just outside the Loop to the north. For example, Settegast, Acres Homes, Pierce Junction, and Sunnyside all have a fair amount of wild land. In Settegast a large swath of the community was once platted into parcels and roads, and even cleared, but today the land has returned to a natural state—vacant except for a healthy growth of trees and scrub.

"Wanting space" refers to land that has been bulldozed and cleared of its prior uses in the anticipation that it will become something else. Demolitions like these have occurred throughout transitioning neighborhoods in Houston and have included large parcels, such as the former site of Astroworld or the

THE ANATOMY OF HOUSTON'S VACANCY IS VARIED AND COMPLEX, RANGING FROM THE WILD, TO THE WANTING, TO THE WITHERED, TO THE WASTED.

Hardy rail yards. In some cases there is an interim use for these spaces, such as a surface parking lot. In other cases the land is simply fenced and forgotten—cultivating weeds—until the time is ripe for redevelopment. A number of wanting spaces in Houston and elsewhere are now in a holding pattern—victims of the recession—marking where major projects were planned, buildings were demolished, and then nothing happened. Three major mixed-use projects in this city that have been put on hold are the site bulldozed in Rice Village for Sonoma, which is now a staging area for city public works; High Street off of Westheimer, which progressed beyond a clean slate before all activity stopped, leaving the concrete columns with rebar coming from their tops to stand waiting, like sentries at the gate; and the site for the ambitious Regent Square which was simply cleared and fenced—though the word is this last project is back on track.

While Houston properties lie fallow, prompting little anguish in citizens who are used to emptiness, in cities as diverse as New York, Miami, Seattle, and San Francisco, vacant lots left in the wake of stalled developments are the subject of a great deal of concern. These cities are working to develop policies and incentives that would introduce temporary uses for the sites. As John King wrote in the *San Francisco Chronicle* on July 6, 2009, "large empty lots—whether filled with cars or covered with weeds—detract from what can be. . . . [W]ith ingenuity and a modest investment San Francisco could breathe life into these voids until the demand for development returns." Proposed temporary uses include tree farms, food vendors, dog parks, temporary parks, gardens, and public art and exhibitions. San Francisco has not stopped there. To encourage innovative uses of empty commercial buildings during hard economic times, it has launched the "Art in Storefronts" program to support temporary art installations in vacant storefronts. New York artists and curators are working to embark on a similar program, theirs modeled more after the "pop-up" galleries of England. Efforts by smaller cities are also getting into the mix. In Escondido, California, the new city program "Adopt-a-Lot" allows citizens and organizations to "adopt" public or private vacant land for temporary use (two to three years) that provides a community benefit. In Cleveland, a city that has lost more than half its population in the last 50 years, a comprehensive plan called "Re-Imaging Cleveland" has been officially adopted to turn vacant lots into farms, green spaces, and parks.

The Fuqua park-and-ride lot—and the 28 other lots—could also serve as a community drive-in theater.

Although in Houston there is a city-sponsored program to distribute vacant tax delinquent properties for affordable housing and community gardens, the program has been slow to show any significant results or make major changes in six target neighborhoods. However, there are plenty of unofficial examples of homegrown, Texas-style uses of withering and wasted spaces throughout the city. Redevelopment can be official, sanctioned, and concrete, or it can be transitory, temporary, and agile. In Houston official adaptive uses are outnumbered by the transitory appropriative uses, the activities that occur in places where no one is looking, undertaken by the street vendor, rug dealer, car detailer, taco truck. In some ways these appropriations are more interesting, in many ways more useful, and definitely more entrepreneurial than sanctioned projects.

The hundreds of acres of underutilized or "wasted" space in Houston come in all shapes and sizes, but one thing most of this space has in common is that it has only a single purpose and, as a result, is unused the majority of the time. These wasted spaces are most often parking lots. Examples include the giant church parking lots that are used for only a couple of hours two days a week, the vast stadium parking lots that are only active during a game or event, the park-and-ride lots that are 50 percent occupied less than 50 percent of the time, and the acres of parking that sprawl in front of the giant category killers, or big box stores, at any time of the day or night. In Gulfton, for example, parking takes up nine times as much land as park space. Given that most underutilized space serves the automobile, the infrastructure of the car stands in for an urbanism that might be seen as yet to materialize.

Obsolete and underutilized spaces can be salvaged. On the southeast side, for example, tucked under the flyover of the HOV lane at Monroe and the Gulf Freeway is the plant menagerie of Three Sisters Nursery. Game rooms, biker bars, and ice houses fill up the abandoned mid-century auto dealerships, bowling alleys, and storefronts that remain as reminders of those halcyon days when the Gulf Freeway was the only freeway. The game rooms are elusive—popping up here and there, moving from place to place, appearing, disappearing, and reappearing elsewhere. The same might be said about the used car lot and the auto detail shop, which really can occur anywhere: no infrastructure is required besides a sign and maybe some of those colorful streamers so popular right now along North Shepherd, Harrisburg, and South Richey. Are these uses "ground cover," a term coined by Dolores Hayden to describe "easily bulldozed buildings constructed to generate income while a developer holds land, waiting to build a more profitable project"? If they are, a transition may occur along these corridors sometime in the future.

THE CREATIVE USE OF EMPTY AND NEGLECTED LOTS HAS PROVIDED ENERGY TO THIS CITY IN THE PAST.

The creative use of empty and neglected lots has provided energy to this city in the past. The once thriving flower markets along Fannin added vibrant

THE ANATOMY OF HOUSTON'S VACANCY: *The Four Ws*

WILD SPACE

Acres Homes

Greenspoint

Settegast

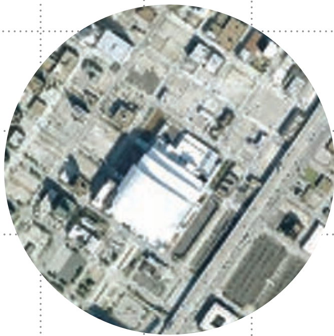
WANTING SPACE

Astroworld

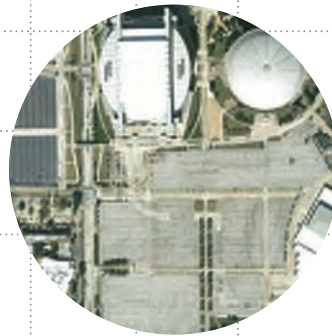
Hardy Yards

Pierce Junction

WASTED SPACE


East Downtown

Greenspoint Mall


Reliant Stadium

WITHERED SPACE

Third Ward

North Shepherd

Fifth Ward

AERIALS COURTESY GOOGLE EARTH

color and fun, though they have now all but disappeared as land is targeted for "higher and better" uses. The used car lots along Washington Avenue once stood in for an urbanism that has now emerged there. As energy bursts forth in one place, it vanishes from another. Thus, Washington Avenue has sucked some of the nightlife out of the Midtown district, as Midtown did to Downtown, and Downtown did to the Richmond Strip, and so on and so on. Apparently Houston is a city so dispersed in energy that its young digerati can only support one "hip" area at a time. In the Montrose the tattoo parlors and second-hand stores on Westheimer that support the cool, edgy character of the neighborhood are fewer and fewer, like the bohemians they served, moving on to cheaper digs in less trendy and more affordable areas. In the wake of this exodus, Montrose institutions like Mary's, Chances, and La Strada have all closed their doors. On the east side, enterprises focused on auto repair, tires, tacos, and transport continue to fill the empty spaces, even while art studios, galleries, and tattoo parlors become more and more frequent, displaced from other parts of the city.

Emptiness, as a problem, is the topic of many prescriptions and cures. Most solutions fit within the accepted paradigms of "good" urbanism—filling the holes with pedestrian friendly, dense, mixed-use environments. But, Houston's great swathes of the in-between, the overlooked, the under-valued, and the abandoned need a new way of thinking, beyond typical solutions to more agile, temporary, and engaging interventions. It might be that urbanists and thinkers in Houston can find a way to simultaneously accept the opportunity of so much emptiness with a new more radical (and less elite) approach to the problem of too much space—maybe a "lite" urbanism. For example, we could start thinking of parking lots as opportunity sites for intervention. We could have policies that make it impossible to develop greenfields until we have filled existing holes. Other policies could outlaw the abandonment of a big-box store intact and instead require that the building be demolished, adapted for a new use, or turned into a park. We could definitely use more vacant lots for community gardening; in many places we could engage in outright farming. Park and ride lots could become community drive-in theaters, recycling centers, farmers markets, auto repair service and training centers, or neighborhood sports courts—giving us places to come together as citizens, not as consumers. We could take these same ideas to the parking lots of Home Depot, Lowe's, Wal-Mart, and Target. Many of these potential uses for vacant properties could build community, provide a valuable use or service, and make our city better. **c**

(1) Keller Easterling, "A Repertoire for Dissensus, Episodes from the Wrong Story," *Hunch*, No. 12 (2009).

LINKING SYSTEMS OF THOUGHT

The Green Braid: Towards an Architecture of Ecology, Economy, and Equity: An ACSA Reader (Edited by Kim Tanzer and Rafael Longoria, New York: Routledge, 2007, 400 pp., $49.95)

by Kayte Young

ARCHITECTURAL SUSTAINABILITY IS OFTEN REDUCED to calculations of energy gains and losses, thermal envelopes, renewable material choices, and rainwater harvesting. The editors of *The Green Braid* complicate the study of green building by placing the concept of sustainability within networks of relationships having three strands: ecology, economy, and equity (the "green braid").

In their selection of peer-reviewed essays and competition designs from over 15 years of publications issued by the Association of Collegiate Schools of Architecture (ACSA), editors Kim Tanzer and Rafael Longoria have included economics and social equity in their vision of sustainable architecture alongside more conventional environmental and ecological concerns.

The book is divided into six sections, each with a general introduction by Longoria and Tanzer. The first section comprises essays by four invited authors, David Orr, Ellen Dunham Jones, Thomas Fischer, and Steven Moore. These contemporary essays lay out what is at stake, specifically the role of architecture in addressing global climate change and the looming environmental crisis. But, as these essays convey, the challenges are not confined to the environment: the editors of this collection compel architects to embrace economics, politics, and social justice as aspects of sustainability as well.

The subsequent five sections are the selected essays, an eclectic, often surprising, collection across theoretical, pedagogical, historical, and practical territory. Highly academic reflections on Donna Haraway's cyborg theories or on the role of critical theory in architectural practice sit alongside a brief and straightforward description of a modified trailer design. From traditional, sustainable urban development practices in Sarajevo or Chanderi, India, to SmartWrap, Scupper Houses, and brownfields in Chicago's rustbelt, this volume pushes at the boundaries of typical green architecture studies.

In an exemplary essay, Mahesh Senagala suggests that sustainability be addressed at institutional and existential, as well as ecological, levels—another braid. "Solar Sails and the Triad of Sustainability" presents an entry in a design competition for the U.S. Department of Energy (DOE). Charged with creating a wall dedicated to educating the public about solar energy at the site of the DOE headquarters in Washington, D.C., Senagala has designed a visually striking, pedestrian-interactive solar temple. This project, capable of producing 142 kilowatts of electricity, would reach beyond the didactic to a dramatic, poetic celebration of the sun.

Suburban development is the focus of several essays. William F. Conway and Marcy Schulte look at possibilities for transforming first ring suburbs into neighborhoods that are culturally rich and environmentally sound. Anthony Denzer examines a postwar planned community in Los Angeles known as Community Homes. Designed by communist Gregory Ain in 1945, the housing development was to include open floor plans based on feminist ideals and progressive theories of parenting. Racial integration was the most radical aspect of the cooperative and is the most likely reason it was never built (it was denied backing by the Federal Housing Administration). Denzer argues that Community Homes served as a critique of developments projects such as Levittown before they were even built.

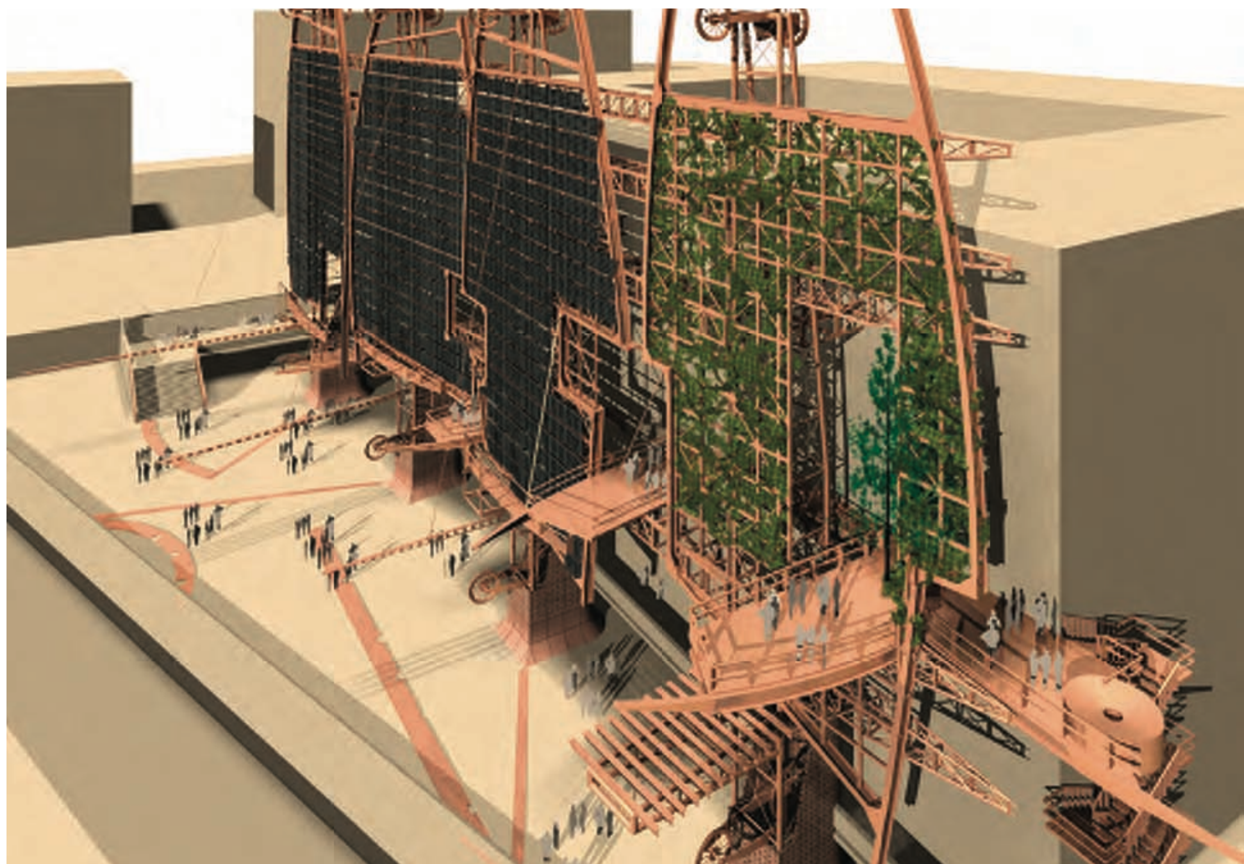
The Green Braid is not a book to be read from cover to cover as a coherent thesis or manual, but rather the kind of collection to be kept on hand for inspiration. Just when I thought I had a handle on what the book was all about, I would turn the page, discover another gem, and feel my expectations challenged and my mind stretched to encompass other perspectives. I found myself surprisingly moved by a critique of Renzo Piano's Tjibaou Center for the Kanak people of the French South Pacific territory of New Caledonia. Lisa R. Findley's thoughtful treatment of the complexities involved in the postcolonial project of designing a cultural center for a marginalized indigenous community after centuries of French colonial rule complicated my own initial response to the soaring beauty of Piano's formal choices. Piano's use of double-skin wall systems, thermal chimneys, and louvered panels in this project made me think of the Menil campus in Houston. It reminded me that a few world-class architects have been developing technological and aesthetically stunning innovations in green architecture for decades, and Findley's hard-hitting essay reinstilled my faith in architecture criticism.

This collection looks at the way we think about, teach, design, and build architecture, and asks us to fundamentally change our practice. Tanzer and Longoria hope to see a shift in architectural thinking and building that might begin to create a network of relations linking systems of building and systems of thought: a collective movement toward truly sustainable architectural practice. It is refreshing to find in a collection of essays on the greening of architecture attention paid to the issues of indigenous rights, feminist concerns, and situated knowledges. This bodes well for the future of the sustainability movement—if architects pay heed to Tanzer and Longoria's compelling call to action.

Senagala writes, "Architecture that does not move us is not architecture. Architecture becomes sustainable when it is part of our journey to understand ourselves." The work collected in *The Green Braid* takes us a long way on that journey. c

Rafael Longoria is a member of the *Cite* editorial committee.

Rendering of Mahesh Senagala's "Solar Sails and the Triad of Sustainability" entry in a U.S. Department of Energy design competition.



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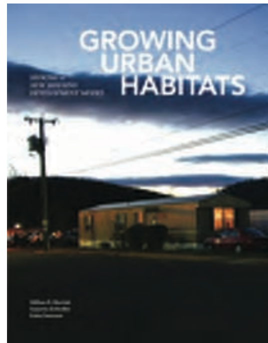

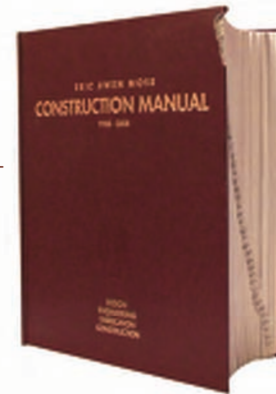

GROWING URBAN HABITATS:
SEEKING A NEW HOUSING DEVELOPMENT MODEL

BY WILLIAM R. MORRISH, SUSANNE SCHINDLER, KATIE SWENSON

Based on the goals of "Urban Habitats," a design competition held in 2005 by Habitat for Humanity of Greater Charlottesville and the Charlottesville Community Design Center for the redevelopment of a local trailer park, this book frames 16 design opportunities for affordable, dense, compact, and sustainable housing. Case studies were selected from the Urban Habitats proposals and contemporary work by innovative designers such as Anderson Anderson, Koning Eizenberg, Onion Flats, or Zoka Zola.

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THE ARCHITECTURE OF GERRIT REITVELD

BY KAYA OKU

Up until this edition there have been surprisingly few substantial surveys of Gerrit Rietveld's architectural output—a situation which this masterful publication has corrected. Produced with all the hallmark Toto publishing traits, this publication presents breathtaking new high-quality interior and exterior photographs of all buildings, accompanied by plans, sketches, models, and explanatory essays. Also included is a comprehensive list of all architectural and furniture works realised.

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URBANBUILD: LOCAL_GLOBAL

BY ILA BERMAN, MONA EL KHAFIF

This publication documents a two-year program at Tulane University School of Architecture called URBANbuild. This program was initiated to actively support the rehabilitation of New Orleans in the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina. This double-sided book covers both a "local" view of urban development, by looking inward toward New Orleans and its redevelopment, as well as a "global" view, through extensive international research and statistical data meant to inform and contextualize the "local" practice. *URBANbuild: local_global* is a great resource for anyone interested in the complex discipline of urban development.

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THE GLASS ROOM

BY SIMON MAWER

In 1930, Jewish newlyweds Viktor and Liesel Landauer meet with architect Rainier von Abt, not just an architect but "a poet...of light and space and form," who builds their dream home, a "modern house...adapted to the future rather than the past, to the openness of modern living." This novel by famous British author Simon Mawer, finalist of the 2009 Man Booker Prize, takes place in fact in the Villa Tugendhat designed by Mies van der Rohe in Brno, Czech Republic. Mawer moves through six decades of European history, much of it unspeakably tragic, using the glass house as a window on the hopes and fears of its various inhabitants and the conflicts that rip Europe apart.

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METROBASEL:
A MODEL OF A EUROPEAN METROPOLITAN REGION

BY JACQUES HERZOG, PIERRE DE MEURON, AND MANUEL HERZ

Published in the form of a full-color comic and driven principally by the characters Michel and Patricia from Godard's movie *À Bout de Souffle (Breathless)*, *MetroBasel* is a comprehensive urban study and portrait of Basel and its surroundings. Realised by the urban research unit ETH Studio Basel, the comic was conceived by **Jacques Herzog, Pierre de Meuron, and Manuel Herz** and narrates the city's architectural and urban history while analysing the region according to urban themes and activities such as living, working, moving, or recreation.

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ERIC OWEN MOSS: CONSTRUCTION MANUAL 1988-2008
DESIGN, ENGINEERING, FABRICATION, CONSTRUCTION

BY ERIC OWEN MOSS

Packaged in a binding reminiscent of an old engineering or medical guide, with finger tabs to pinpoint each project easily, this massive testimony to the works and projects of Eric Owen Moss provides a comprehensive survey of this Los Angeles-based architect's output.

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RECITE:

Ancient curse OF FREEWAY FRONTAGE EXCAVATED FROM ARCHIVES

by Harbeer Sandhu

EARLY LAST DECEMBER *CITE* HELD A RELEASE PARTY AT Green Bank. The building incorporates recycled and locally-sourced materials, and many other admirable sustainable design choices, but the first thing I noticed when I got out of my car was that I was standing in the shadow of Magic Island.

It was a crisp fall evening. I stood beside the U.S. 59 Greenbriar/Shepherd overpass as hundreds of cars sped past both ways, their drivers happy to be headed home after work. The intermittent wind gusted cold, and somewhere beyond Greenway Plaza, out past the Galleria, the sun was setting, and as it set it united everything—the sky, the white concrete freeway barriers, me, all the cars in the parking lot, the parking lot itself, the bank, and this big, iconic Egyptian temple—everything—in a rich, pink, lambent singularity.

Gong.

I grew up in Houston, by which I mean the suburbs. Growing up in Houston has its advantages. For instance, you'll never break your clavicle flying headfirst over your handlebars while mountain biking down a gnarly trail. Never. The closest thing we have to "inspiration point" is the flyover interchange from the West Belt South to I-10 East—not a good place to entwine fingers and kiss. Around these parts, "scenic vistas" are the stuff of bank calendars and Windows desktops.

And ghosts? Pshaw. A kid growing up in suburban Houston can swagger down any street confident that the undead don't inhabit such new haunts. In the absence of old buildings, we are untethered in time so that history reads like mythology—George Washington may as well have been Gilgamesh.

Still, I made do. I dove into books. I feasted my imagination. I pinched my nose, stuck a funnel onto the end of a pole, and scooped tennis balls out of the bayou that ran behind the neighborhood tennis courts, then hung a long piece of swamp grass from my mouth and pretended my buddy and I were Huck Finn and Tom Sawyer fishing on the banks of the Mississippi. Dozing, there, on the banks of our neighborhood drainage ditch, I dreamt of escaping to a magnificent place with majestic castles and magic mountains, a place where the streets didn't all meet at right angles. I dreamt of Walt Disney World.

My parents had a brown Ford Fairmont station wagon with mustard pinstripes. We lived on the southwest side, but most of my parents' community was way up on the northwest side, so we often made two round-trips clear across town on weekends. I loved to sit in the "back back," the way back, because I had three big windows to look out of and I didn't have to sit between my sisters. Innumerable hours of my childhood were spent cruising along Houston's freeways staring out of those windows at all the billboards and businesses that define our landscape.

Magic Island was one of my favorite sites to drive past. Lit up from below with blue and white floodlights, its stately columns echoed the lush palm trees silhouetted against the blank facade with its too-big doors, and the generic pharaoh's head looked serenely unperturbed by the commuter hubbub passing beneath his perch. An inverse mirage, it transformed the concrete swamp around it into desert. Driving past Magic Island transported me to ancient Egypt and commuted the Southwest Freeway into the River Nile.

Another such site was the Castle Golf putt-putt golf course on the West Loop. Reclining in the way back, I was transfixed by the sight of a grand castle protected by a moat with a fountain and, splayed out before it, all manner of fairy-tale windmills, space palaces, Alpine cottages, and pirate shipwrecks. As it shrank and disappeared amid neon signs, billboards, and freeway lights, I would close my eyes and explore the Black Forest or the moon or the Bermuda Triangle—whatever one would call the place that could give rise to such whimsical architectural juxtapositions.

Bruce Webb, writing in the Spring-Summer 1989 issue of *Cite*, described driving past that same location: "From the superscale of the freeway, Castle Golf appears as a distant, ideal village, like a page out of a children's pop-up book…If everything has an ideal distance and point of vantage from which it should be seen—especially stage sets, shams, and follies, which depend on the principle of aesthetic distance to preserve their illusion of verisimilitude—for Castle Golf that point of view is from the freeway at 50 miles per hour." (Bruce Webb. "Castle Golf." *Cite* 8, now available at citemag.org.)

I never set foot in either of these places. Had I gotten any closer, it's likely that I would have seen them for the cheesy "stage sets, shams, and follies" that they were. Bad carpet and Astroturf. Fluorescent lighting. Stale tobacco odor. Rubbery pizza. Webb called it a "thin example of architectural trompe l'oeil" and wrote that "despite the presence of real live ducks,…the extensive waterways have the artificial look and smell of blue toilet bowl water."

Though losing one's illusions is the definition of growing up, in this case my journey to adulthood was hastened along prematurely by Houston's freeway gods. In the 1980s Houston began its second major wave of freeway construction. The new eastbound U.S. 290 carpool lane—elevated and free-floating as it wended toward the NW Transit Center—sliced and murdered the open view of Castle Golf. New construction on U.S. 59 mocked the pharaoh by stretching an on-ramp right across the Magic Island façade. Redacted! My two favorite sites in Houston had been upstaged by the very feeder roads their builders had sought for the visibility they provided.

My parents traded in the Ford Fairmont station wagon for a VW station wagon, and then made the switch to a minivan. Abandoned for a decade, Castle Golf was eventually taken over by a cast-stone outfit—the fake castle with its Astroturf putting green has become a supplier of fake rocks—and much of the property has returned to its natural swamp prairie state. Magic Island caught fire after Hurricane Ike, has since become a glorified pigeon coop, and will allegedly reopen some day.

> I never set foot in either of these places. Had I gotten any closer, it's likely that I would have seen them for the cheesy "stage sets, shams, and follies" that they were.

Perhaps the strangest twist to the story, which I learned recently, is that beneath the Pharoah is a simple Miesian glass and steel box, designed by Wilson, Morris, Crain, and Anderson as a furniture store room, completed in 1971. The site is a freeway palimpsest. **c**

OOPEY MASON

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