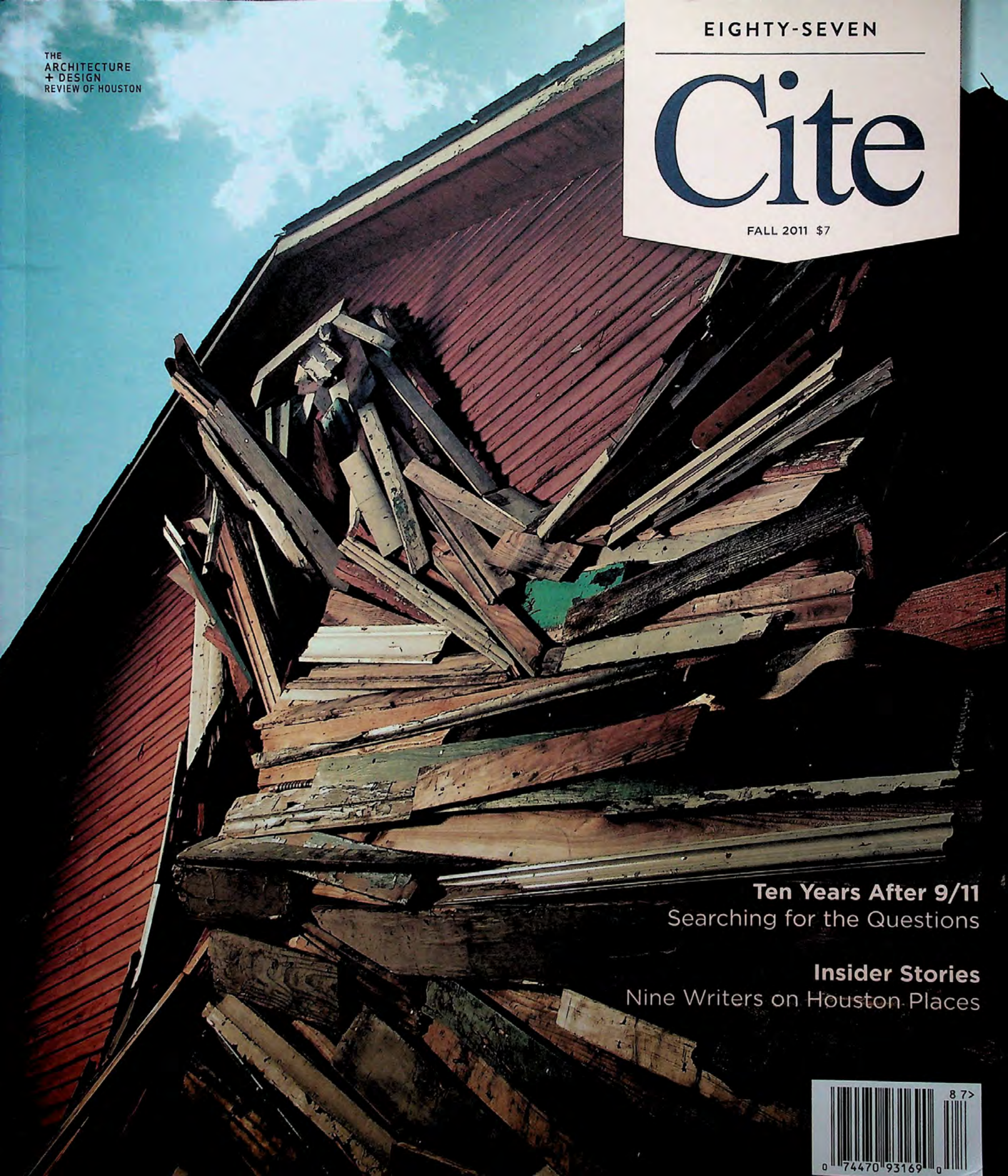

THE
ARCHITECTURE
+ DESIGN
REVIEW OF HOUSTON

EIGHTY-SEVEN

Cite

FALL 2011 $7

Ten Years After 9/11
Searching for the Questions

Insider Stories
Nine Writers on Houston Places

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RDA, established in 1972, is a nonprofit organization dedicated to the advancement of architecture, urban design, and the built environment. Through its lecture programs, civic forums, tours, and *Cite*, RDA creates a public forum to stimulate discussion, involvement, and cooperation among the many groups of citizens who are able to improve the quality of life within Houston and its environs. Membership is open to the public.

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Cite

THE ARCHITECTURE + DESIGN REVIEW OF HOUSTON

A PUBLICATION OF THE RICE DESIGN ALLIANCE

87 FALL 2011

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ABOUT THE COVER: Dan Havel and Dean Ruck's Fifth Ward Jam. The project was funded by the Houston Arts Alliance. Photographed by Jack Thompson.

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LETTER FROM THE EDITOR

The cover of this issue shows Dan Havel and Dean Ruck's latest work, Fifth Ward Jam. Fashioned out of an old house, it looks like Houston's culture—heterogeneous, exploded, twisted, improvised, and strangely beautiful. The editorial team was drawn to Fifth Ward Jam because of the way the splintered wood seems to focus a terrifying energy, like a plane crashed into the house and left a stage in the crater.

This issue of *Cite* features two ostensibly separate and unrelated sections. Guest editors Terrence Doody and Rich Levy challenged *Cite* and our readers to reflect on the tenth anniversary of the September 11, 2001 attacks well after the flurry of television coverage has passed. The second section emerged from an effort led by Jane Creighton, Pat Jasper, and Carl Lindahl to commission writers who have insider stories about Houston places. No connection, right?

Fifth Ward Jam gives form to a connection we hesitatingly voiced early on in the process. Trauma after trauma—September 11, the endless wars, flooding, hurricanes, drought, and economic collapse—have marked the last ten years. Our domestic politics seem more splintered than ever. And yet, this issue of *Cite* demonstrates that the traumas have been countered by a renewed search for community, history, and individual worth.

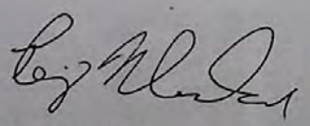
The afternoon of October 1, Fifth Ward Jam officially opened with a little music festival. Prince Jabo and Texas Johnny Brown played in the zydeco and blues styles that developed right there on Lyons Avenue. The crowd was a wondrous mix of ethnicities. I knew about two dozen of the artists and writers. As for the locals from the Fifth Ward, I did not know a soul. Class and race differences are persistent and real, but the structure of Fifth Ward Jam suggests that communication is still possible. There is a potential "we" to Houston.

During the artists' talk, Dean Ruck emphasized that Fifth Ward Jam now belongs to the Fifth Ward and that he hoped the community would take ownership of it. Rappers, zydeco bands, political debaters jam onward and forward. However, no Discovery Green-style public/private partnership will subsidize and schedule regular activity. Will Fifth Ward residents come to love and use an art work that resembles the abandoned houses next door?

In his contribution, Carl Lindahl, a scholar of Louisiana folk culture, considers the vernacular architecture of Frenchtown, a locale close by Fifth Ward Jam. The resilience of Frenchtown families and their commitment to their architecture is a powerful reminder that placemaking often emerges without big funders or institutions through bottom-up, creative engagement with tradition and history.

In their contributions, Terrence Doody and Rich Levy note a post-9/11 search not just for answers, but also for a way to frame the right questions. Levy takes solace in his son "tuning in to Al Jazeera" on his phone. Indeed, in less time than it took us to put together this issue, multiple Arab revolutions have inspired the leaderless Occupy Wall Street movement, arguably capturing the nation's attention more than the excrutiatingly masterplanned rebuilding of Ground Zero down the street.

As far-flung and ununified an issue as this one is, a theme of bottom-up resilience runs through it all. The writing was so strong throughout that we leave the reader to imagine the scenes with only a gentle and skillful nudge from illustrator John Earles. Enjoy and email me what you think at mankad@rice.edu.



RAJ MANKAD

CONTENTS.FALL11

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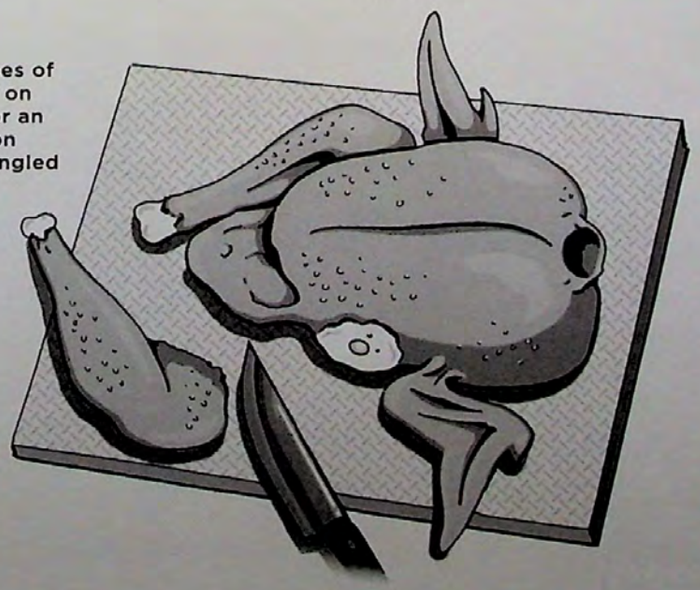


See "Shapes of Tradition" on page 18 for an explanation of this mangled turkey.

CITINGS

>> NEWS FROM RICEDESIGNALLIANCE.ORG

NEW WEB FEATURES

RDA is continuing to develop its web presence. Plans for next year include a new webpage for rdAGENTS to connect young professionals. OffCite will launch a page dedicated to the Unexpected City campaign featuring an interactive map of sites. Ricedesignalliance.org already features a deep archive of past programs and will host rdaTV, a rich and growing video collection, including lectures and talks from past series.

FROM LEFT: National Congress of Brazil in Brasilia designed by Oscar Niemeyer; McNay Art Museum in San Antonio; Fernando Brave, Pablo Ferro, and Craig Minor.

> 2012 SPRING LECTURE SERIES

The next series, NEW MODERN: 21st Century Furniture Design, will explore new ideas, technologies, and cultural forces affecting furniture design as interpreted by a variety of designers from around the world, including Mike & Maaike from San Francisco and Jurgen Bay from Holland. This exploration, beginning January 11, examines the impact on the overall creative design process by factors such as advancements in materials, overarching cultural shifts, and the manufacturing process itself.

> 2011 RDA GALA

The 2011 RDA gala honored and celebrated The Woodlands, a master-planned community 27 miles north of downtown Houston, and The Woodlands Development Company, the entity that has continued to honor the vision that founder George Mitchell had for the new town almost 50 years ago. The gala raised over $500,000. Look for a full report in *Cite* 88.

> SAN ANTONIO TOUR

San Antonio, founded in 1731 adjacent to the Mission of San Antonio de Valero, is the oldest city in Texas. The RDA visit will include a walking tour of downtown San Antonio and historical sites such as the River Walk; eighteenth-century Franciscan missions that preserve the Spanish frontier culture of San Antonio; the King William neighborhood, the most intact elite Victorian neighborhood in Texas; and works by San Antonio's greatest architects, both historic and contemporary.

Architectural historian Stephen Fox along with local architects and designers will serve as guides. The tour dates are March 8-11, 2012. The cost are $1,275 per person, $200 supplemental charge for single rooms, and $1,020 tour only without hotel.

> 2012 HOME TOUR

This year's Rice Design Alliance tour, Living with Art, will be held Saturday and Sunday, March 24 and 25, 2012, from 1:00 p.m. until 6:00 p.m. each day. "From 1950 to 1975, Houston underwent explosive change, growing from an incubator of yet-to-be-realized dreams into a renowned metropolis—a center not only of commerce and political power but also of the arts," begins Sarah Reynolds in her book *Houston Reflections: Art in the City, 1950s, 60s and 70s*. Houston is now recognized as one of the centers for the arts, and of renowned collections. The tour will look at significant houses in Houston that were designed or retrofitted around art collections.

SAVE THE DATE!
03.24-25.12
THE RICE DESIGN ALLIANCE 2012 TOUR
THE ART HOUSES TOUR A NOT-TO-BE-MISSED EVENT! MARK YOUR CALENDARS NOW.

> BRAZIL TOUR

Modern architecture in Brazil made a first timid appearance in the city of São Paulo, yet it was in the city of Rio de Janeiro that a particular, and internationally recognized, brand of architecture was forged. The brand consisted of a Brazilian twist on modern architecture, which had been theorized by such architects as Lucio Costa, and prolifically practiced by Oscar Niemeyer, Affonso Reidy, and the Roberto Brothers. Unlike its counterparts in Europe and North America, early twentieth-century architecture in Brazil sought no rupture with tradition even if it paradoxically resisted four centuries of colonial influence. Rice University Professor Farès el-Dahdah, who grew up in Brasilia, and architecture historian Stephen Fox will be our guides. The tour dates are June 12–19, 2012.

BRASILIA PHOTO FROM WIKICOMMONS; MCNAY PHOTO BY SERGE AMBROSE; FERRO PHOTO COURTESY CRAIG MINOR

IN FOCUS

The Concrete Whisperer

On Material and Memory

It was all wrong. At John Zemanek's new house, curing blankets had accidentally imprinted their stitching pattern into the concrete floor, transforming it into a spreadsheet with columns and rows.

Enter David Miller. He is the principal and owner of Dungan Miller Design, Ltd., a firm specializing in concrete finishing. Using a "whirlybird machine"—think of a vacuum cleaner atop a gargantuan applicator pad—Miller sanded and polished the imprint away, leaving a "quiet" and "creamy" surface that glows like gypsum throughout the house, much to Zemanek's pleasure.

Concrete is reactive, Miller says. It leaves a permanent record of what it's been through. "Its beauty is that it's honest."

Maybe that describes Miller's practice, too. He credits much of what he knows to experiments with the medium and collaborations with clients and architects. He credits Louis Kahn, Frank Lloyd Wright, Philip Johnson, and others who made exposed concrete part of the vernacular.

And he credits Suzanne Dungan, who took him on in an "old-fashioned apprenticeship." In 1994, with Terrell James, Dungan started this business, developing stains and slabs for artists interested in concrete. Miller joined them in 1999. Dungan became an ideal mentor. A "deeply curious" person, he says, she combines "a strict sense of the bottom line" with "an elevated sense of possibility" as a designer and artist. When Miller took over the business in 2005, he wanted to keep Dungan's name in the company's to recognize her. "She was my practicum."

That he came to the industry at all was reactive. He graduated from Rhode Island School of Design and worked as a "starving artist," he jokes. "That's only glamorous when you don't have to be one." Painting never seemed a viable career. He was so personally engaged in the subjects of his paintings he had trouble deciding whether they worked as art for others. But he credits painting for teaching him the "skill, taste, facility, and good judgment" that serve his practice now.

Now, working with concrete, of all things, he has found "that famous passion," he says. "There's something about concrete that's psychologically comforting," he says. "It's both fluid and rock-like. There's a tangible aspect of transformation—it's incredibly grounding. I'm more engaged in the medium now."

At Canopy, Claire Smith's restaurant in Montrose, the medium had been all but forgotten. Canopy occupies a much-remodeled suite in a 27,000-square-foot shopping center. "The floor was black. There was an inch of sealers, varnishes, and epoxies, dating back to the '80s," he says. He was brought in, as with Zemanek's house, to "right a wrong." He sanded and polished the floor into a dark, moody plane, that, below green accents and wallpapered photographs of live oaks, makes you feel as though you are indeed beneath a canopy, picnicking in the shade on the cool ground.

But now he's concerned. Entering the restaurant, he sees the dirty tracks of patio furniture dragged across the floor.

His floor.

"Oh, no," he says, wincing.

When Smith arrives, he says he'd like to come back. Soon. The floor, he says, needs some attention. It's almost imperceptible, as Miller is kind, patient, as far from pushy as you can be. But he's nodding in agreement with himself, insisting on it—a gesture that suggests the care, the refusal of mediocrity, that are all his own. *-Allyn West*

• FALL LECTURE •

PABLO FERRO
PACKS THE HOUSE

Apparently, a whole army of people in Houston know who Pablo Ferro is and love his work. The Museum of Fine Arts, Houston event (co-sponsored by the Rice Design Alliance and AIGA) was packed for the sold-out presentation of the title designer, movie director, animator, and all around Renaissance Man. The crowd was a heady mix befitting the presenter himself: a slew of hipsterfied young graphic designer nerds mixed with older film buffs, advertising professionals, architects, and typography geeks. The eclectic audience was an indication that Pablo Ferro has been fully rediscovered (if he was ever really forgotten). Read more at OffCite.org.

CALENDAR

SYMPOSIUM

HOUSTON ARTS ALLIANCE
Houston Inside Out
Rosellen Brown, Robb Walsh, Bao-Long Chu, Roger Wood, and Gwendolyn Zepeda
November 12, 1 p.m.
Houston Public Library, 500 McKinney Street

LECTURES

RICE SCHOOL OF ARCHITECTURE
Reinier de Graaf and Laura Baird
On Hold Architects, OMA/AMO
November 17, 5:30 p.m.
Farish Gallery, Anderson Hall
Rice University
arch.rice.edu

UNIVERSITY OF HOUSTON
Paul Goldberger
Pulitzer Prize Winner and Columnist for *The New Yorker*
The Atrium, Gerald D. Hines College of Architecture
November 8, 6 p.m.
arch.uh.edu

Ganit Mayslits Kassif
Mayslits Kassif Architects
November 29, 6 p.m.
Theater, Room 15, Gerald D. Hines College of Architecture
arch.uh.edu

TOUR

RDA ANNUAL ARCHITECTURE TOUR
Living with Art
Saturday and Sunday, March 24-25
1-6 p.m. each day
ricedesignalliance.org

ARCHITECTURE

HOW STUDENTS LANDED THE BEST GIG IN TOWN

The Menil Café

OVER THE PAST FIFTEEN YEARS, UNDER THE guidance of Danny Samuels and Nonya Grenader, the Rice Building Workshop has developed a set of core ideas about design and service commensurate with the values and experiences of its student participants, namely thrift, extreme efficiency, and ingenuity in making the most of small spaces. And while these principles were derived from the workshop's long partnership building affordable housing with Project Row Houses (PRH), they have successfully translated them into a set of designs that were recently selected for a coffee house for the Menil campus.

LEFT: Site plan. The café will be north of the bookstore adjacent to the parking lot.
RIGHT: Rendering of café looking south.

To join the distinguished architectural company at the Menil would alone be high honor, but to have done so as students in a pool of experienced professionals goes to show what the faculty leaders have known all along, that the workshop is capable of excellence.

University students tend to begin with an economical sensibility deriving from ordinary conditions of student life: Ramen noodle dinners, rehabilitated furniture, and vertiginous debt. At the Rice Building Workshop, successive cadres of students have evolved a distinct approach through several community-based projects in Houston's Third Ward.

In 1996, students began by investigating the community around PRH and the possibilities inherent to its architectural heritage. They found that row houses, however they may signal poverty and deprivation to an uninformed outsider, in fact offer unequaled opportunities for joining interior and exterior spaces, and for consolidating neighborhoods through front and back porches and shared backyards.

The workshop's "Six Square House" incorporated the best of the row-house vernacular: deep overhangs, cross-breezes, elevation above ground, and the porches. The two-story building, measuring all of 900 square feet, is open to its community, joining with the existing row houses to strengthen the community's hold on its space.

From Six Square House, the students adopted practices and strategies that prevailed in later projects, including modular design, which allows for off-site construction and then on-site assembly without even much of a toolbox. They also developed a "core system" that was refined and strengthened in later designs like the "Extra Small (XS) House," completed in 2003. This 500-square-foot building came much closer to the row house precedent and was built within budget for just $25,000. The core in XS, as with later designs, combined storage and mechanical systems—electrical and plumbing—enveloping a bathroom within and supporting a kitchenette without. As the only intrusion into the envelope of the building, it separated the single volume into two highly adaptable open rooms.

The Rice Building Workshop's most recent and celebrated project was "ZeRow House," which they submitted in 2009 to the Solar Decathlon, an international competition by the U.S. Department of Energy to build houses with "net-zero" energy consumption. The design also incorporated their signature core system.

A tour of the ZeRow House impressed Menil Director Josef Helfenstein to such an extent that he requested that the workshop submit proposals for a café planned for the north end of campus, behind the current location for the bookstore on Sul Ross, facing the parking off Alabama Street.

According to the Menil campus's new master plan, as devised by David Chipperfield, visitors enjoy opportunities for exploration and contemplation in an environment described as "art urbanism." The new Menil café will not sit on one of the major axes of the campus, but will vitalize the pedestrian way.

The Menil café has quite a different program than the previous projects by the Rice Building Workshop, but the students have made the case that their signature core system is highly adaptable, as suitable to a commercial venture as to a small home. The core bundles all the café's utilities together for efficient use of energy and space, and to limit any intrusion into the sightlines between the café and the rest of the campus. The café's customers will enjoy an open design allowing for free access and egress, with views in all directions.

Based on this impressive achievement, the students of the Rice Building Workshop have shown that their focus on community, efficiency, and adaptability is a viable model for builders in Houston and abroad.

-Hank Hancock

IMAGES COURTESY RICE BUILDING WORKSHOP

A NEW INVERSION

Re-thinking the Habitat for Humanity House

"INVERTING THE ROOF TRUSS WAS THE 'AHA' moment for us," says Yoni Pressman about a house design selected by Habitat for Humanity and to be built by Rice University volunteers.

Whereas Habitat's houses tend toward traditional gable and hip roofs, the design by Pressman and his fellow Rice School of Architecture graduate student, Courtney Benzon, turns the trusses upside-down. "It allowed us to give the house a distinct aesthetic presence and create dynamic spaces full of natural light," Pressman explains.

The Centennial House will be built by Rice volunteers to mark the 100th anniversary of the school.

The site for the house on Manton Street in Settegast appeared in *Cite* 81 (Spring 2010). Susan Rogers wrote in her article on vacant space, "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." The house will sit at the edge of that forest.

The house's orientation on the site creates a variety of outdoor living spaces such as an intimate side yard with a shaded patio and a sunny backyard with a vegetable garden and play area.

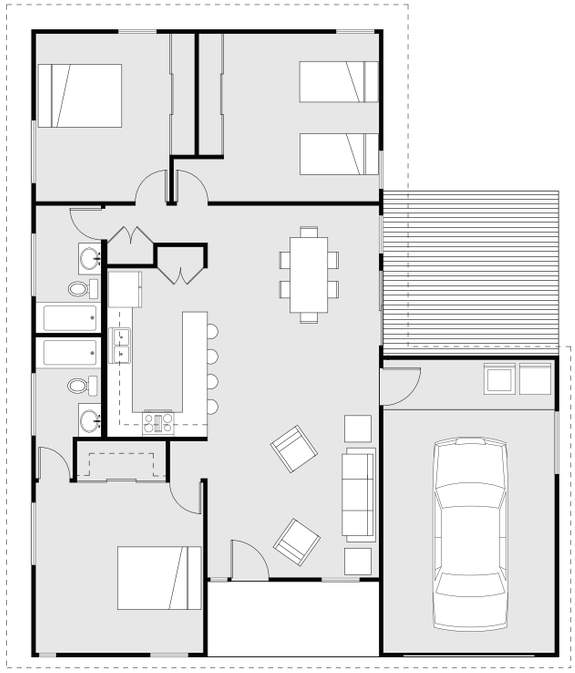
According to Jerry Kovaly, Director of Construction at Houston Habitat, "The legacy of the Rice Centennial House will go beyond the construction of this home. The design is very livable and emphasizes the importance of family life. We look forward to building more of these in the future."

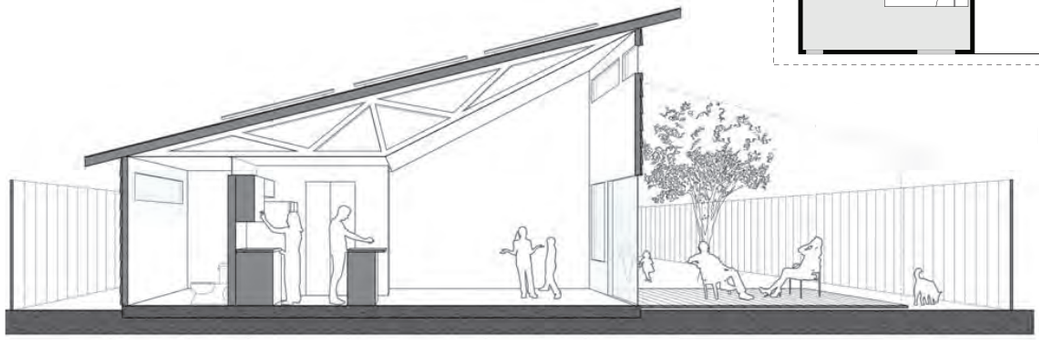
Imagine northern light descending through the clerestory windows onto a family enjoying their new 1,300-square-foot, 3-bedroom house.

The roof will angle solar panels to the Texas sun and offset the owners' electricity bills, if funds are available. And that's where you can help. Labor, in-kind, and monetary donations are needed to complete the project by spring 2012. For more information, see habitat.rice.edu/rch

-Raj Mankad

LEFT: Vert House's inverted truss roof brings volume and light to an otherwise small house.
RIGHT: Plan.
BELOW: Section showing inverted truss.





COURTESY COURTNEY BENZON AND YONI PRESSMAN

By TERRENCE DOODY

"WHAT AM I LOOKING AT, JACK? WHAT AM I LOOKING AT?"

This issue of *Cite* comes ten years after the terrorist attacks on September 11, 2001. In that attack, more than three thousand people lost their lives, and more have died since then from the effects of exposure to toxic materials in the rubble. Many, many more have lost their lives in the Iraq and Afghanistan wars that the United States launched in retaliation.

9/11 has had lasting effects on our national life, both big and small, from our foreign and defense policy to longer lines at airport security. Perhaps the most drastic change, however, has been to our collective imagination. Before 9/11, we had seemed to ourselves to be invulnerable. Wars happened elsewhere. But since 9/11, we have had to reimagine our role in the world, acknowledging the vulnerability of our physical place, the limits to our power, and the fallacy of our belief that because of our power, we do not have to understand the cultures of other peoples in order to conquer them. The unthinkable happened, and we have had to start thinking again.

In *Up from Zero: Politics, Architecture, and the Rebuilding of New York*, Paul Goldberger, architecture critic for *The New Yorker* magazine and dean of the Parsons School of Design, explains the lofty aspirations, complex politics, and conflicting agendas that contended for control of the rebuilding project and the style of the memorial at Ground Zero. He published *Up from Zero* in 2004, arguing that more than the buildings themselves was at stake: in all its dimensions, this was to be the "rebuilding of New York," a corrective awakening or moral revivification of the city's spirit. His book's last sentence reads: "Idealism met cynicism at Ground Zero, and so far they have battled to a draw." Still, more recently, he praised the buildings and designs that balance corporate office space with memorial, and reconnect streets where the old superblock cut them off. However, Ground Zero has a long way to go before it or the city's soul is restored.

And the United States still has over 100,000 troops on the ground in Afghanistan.

We thought it appropriate to mark this tenth anniversary of 9/11 because "the death and life of great American cities" that Goldberger says were at stake in the aftermath of the attack remain so, including ours.

1 SPECIAL SECTION 9/11 PAGE 8

The photographer Sally Gall, a Houstonian, now lives with her husband, the writer Jack Stephens, on Vestry Street in lower Manhattan. They were once able to see the World Trade Center from their window. As Sally recalls that day, she cried out, "What am I looking at, Jack? What am I looking at?" This from a woman who had spent her adult life looking at things and imagining them as images. The unthinkable, or the unimaginable, had occurred right before her eyes, and she didn't know how to see it. She hasn't been alone in trying to understand all of the attack's implications for ourselves and our cities.

Jack's and Sally's accounts begin this section of *Cite*.

Next is a summary review of three novels and their imaginative investigations of the catastrophe, noting the way each book makes us think about the city itself, its strangers, and the distances that connect them.

The section concludes with Rich Levy's account of September 10, 2001, which tells the story of Salman Rushdie's reading that night at the Alley Theatre, and of the days following as Rushdie waited for the airport to reopen. It's a surprising essay that concludes with a guarded optimism.

ALL ILLUSTRATIONS BY JOHN EARLES

THE PICTURES I COULD NOT TAKE

Or, We Have to be Able to Imagine What We Know

I LIVE IN DOWNTOWN MANHATTAN, AND ON THE MORNING OF SEPTEMBER 11, while I was making coffee, I happened to look out the kitchen window and saw a woman across Greenwich Street looking out of her window with an expression of terror on her face. I opened my own window, stuck my head out, and saw a tower of the World Trade Center with a hole at its top and flames leaping out. I said to my husband, "What am I looking at, Jack? What am I looking at?" because although I could see the building in flames, I couldn't fathom what I was seeing. I couldn't believe that the flames I saw leaping from the top of a skyscraper were real. Of course I knew they were real, but I couldn't take it in. How could this be? And with no idea of what was going on, I ran out into the street and down toward the World Trade Center to find out.

At first it never occurred to me to make photographs because this is not the kind of photographer I am—I don't usually document real life events—and I was so busy looking that to start shooting photographs would have taken me out of the moment and into something else. And several times afterwards in those first few hours of September 11, as I was watching everything that was happening before me, I thought again about taking pictures, but I couldn't figure out how to do it. It was too gigantic, too momentous, too hard to understand.

At one point, when I had gone inside, I answered a phone call from the photo department of *The New Yorker* asking me if I was photographing downtown. They called me, I suppose, because the photo department knew I lived in Tribeca, along with many other photographers, and because the police by that time were no longer letting anyone cross south of Canal Street. I did consider the "work" angle of it, and even thought this could be my opportunity to try my hand at photographing something happening quickly before my eyes, as opposed to my usual still and carefully composed photographs, but even then I did not take any photos.

I now wish I had, if only for one reason—it would have helped to make it real to me and perhaps initiated some kind of understanding. Even though there are a million photographs of that day, and even though I have pored over them all with great interest, and even though at the time I didn't understand why everyone was photographing it, I now realize that the act of photographing makes something real, stops it, records it, says it really happened. "Bears witness," as the expression goes. So this is an account of a photograph that I didn't take but wish I had, as it might have helped me personally understand the reality of a momentous event that I witnessed.

I've never understood why people on vacation take so many pictures of tourist sites, in a world that is filled with so many pictures. Or why someone needs to photograph a work of art hanging in a museum. I have often felt irritated at people who do that—taking pictures of pictures. Why more photos, and why more photos of things that have already been photographed a million times? But I now understand, in a deeper way, that the act of taking the picture is often more important than the image itself. The act says, "I have witnessed this." An especially important declaration when it is something outside one's own normal experience—not only the World Trade Tower's destruction, but also, for example, the Roman Coliseum's endurance—that one feels a desire to understand more completely.

Even now when I look at the pit where the towers used to be, and know that I watched the entire thing unfold—buildings standing, plane crashing, buildings falling—it is hard for me to believe it really happened. Of course, I know it happened, but because it was such a monstrous event, it is still hard for me to comprehend. I think it would help me now if I had photographed that day, an act I would have comprehended. c

This essay will appear in The Photographs Not Taken*, edited by Will Steacy.*

BY SALLY GALL

THE PICTURES I HAD TO TAKE

(Because I Knew Words Would Fail Me)

I AM NOT A PHOTOGRAPHER. I DON'T LIKE THE WAY STOPPING TO LOOK through a camera interrupts immediate experience and corrupts my recollection of events. September 11, 2001 was an exception. On that morning, and for the next two days of my involvement in search and rescue, I carried and used a small digital camera for one desperate reason: I knew I'd never be able to accurately retrieve from memory what I was seeing through the warped lens of emergency.

I'd just begun the workday at my desk in the second floor loft I share with my wife, photographer Sally Gall, on the corner of Greenwich and Vestry Streets in Tribeca, and had only subliminally registered the rumble of a jet passing low overhead, when my phone rang and a friend said: "If you look out your window, you'll see something amazing and terrible."

When I got there, Sally was already leaning out our open corner window to look the dozen blocks down Greenwich Street to the World Trade Center. "What am I seeing?" she whimpered, "What am I looking at?"

High above us, under the kind of piercing blue sky known to pilots as "severe clear," angry flames and black smoke belched from the gaping maw in the North Tower. My response came directly from the belly. "Fucking terrorists."

"No!" Sally resisted. But the wound was too large and deliberate to have been made by a private plane. And I could see where the wings had sliced through.

My impulse was to stay close to home, but Sally wanted to get closer, to better see and understand. I would have gone with her, but I was waiting to be sure my typing assistant was safely off the subway. Asking Sally not to get too close, I handed her my new point-and-shoot and asked her to document what she saw.

On the street corner under our window, I stood looking up at the North Tower as nearby buildings emptied and the streets filled with people of every stripe and nationality. A postman of Middle Eastern extraction came to stand beside me. He had an American flag patch on his uniform sleeve. His eyes brimmed and voice cracked as he told me he delivered to the North Tower. "Twenty-five thousand people are on their way to work in there."

I wrapped an arm around his shoulder. "Let's hope they all get out," I said, but I was preoccupied with the character of the fire.

Trained as a volunteer fireman, I knew that as the angry orange flames died down and the smoke went gray with steam, water from the upper floors was doing some good for the moment. But I worried that the blast had

HIS EYES BRIMMED AND VOICE CRACKED AS HE TOLD ME HE DELIVERED TO THE NORTH TOWER. **"TWENTY-FIVE THOUSAND PEOPLE ARE ON THEIR WAY TO WORK IN THERE."**

BY JACK STEPHENS

ruptured the emergency sprinkler system's water lines, which lead me to imagine something worse. By coincidence that morning, I was due to deliver an IMAX film script to a producer. Its subject was extreme skiing and for the last four days I'd been steeping myself in the science of avalanches. Burned into my brain was the rapidly escalating mechanism by which a single toppling snowflake can trigger a catastrophic sloughing of snow. I couldn't stop thinking that if the fire was hot enough to distemper steel, and part of an upper floor collapsed, the tower's famous exoskeleton structure could channel that energy in a vertical avalanche of pancaking concrete and steel.

That's when the second plane ripped through the South Tower and exploded in a fireball that made me duck. With millions of glinting sheets of paper drifting east like mica from a mountaintop, the sky was devastatingly beautiful as I ran down Greenwich Street, desperately searching the thickening throng of dispossessed businessmen and women from the nearby office buildings, hoping Sally hadn't gotten close enough to get hit by plane parts or glass.

I COULD SEE THE PEOPLE. THEIR LEGS, ARMS, AND HEADS WERE JUTTING FROM THE WINDOWS ABOVE AND BELOW THE DAMAGE.

Six blocks down I found her, rattled by the explosion and unable to work my camera. Taking it from her, I asked her to go back home where it was safer, then I began to document what words were already inadequate to describe.

I could see the people. Their legs, arms, and heads were jutting from the windows above and below the damage in the northwest corner of the North Tower. Some were waving jackets. Dangling out of one window, someone was trying to rappel a curtain or tablecloth to the floor below. He lost his grip and was gone. Two more people leapt out holding hands. Falling faster than you'd think bodies should, they parted and disappeared below the roofline.

By the time I averted my gaze, I saw eight human beings leave the smoldering tower, and even now I have a strong urge to disremember what I saw. In fact, I've only recently come to understand the only picture I took out of a hundred that day that cuts off the tops of the twin towers. It is a telephoto shot. At its center is the blurred X of a person in free fall.

Stunned beyond belief, I threaded the dazed crowd back to where Sally stood on our street corner. The smoke from both towers was black and thick, and that meant hot. Again I spoke from the gut. "If the fires don't stop, the buildings will come down."

Sally protested: "No they won't! How could you know that?"

I didn't want to know it, and I was hoping my gut was an idiot. But two or three minutes later, the South Tower slid to the ground, and I felt like the worst of Cassandras.

"Where'd it go?" Sally gasped. "Where'd it go!"

I was concentrating on the orphaned North Tower. The smoke was billowing furiously now, but thanks to the westerly breeze I could make out someone on the roof, just to the left of the big antenna. He was waving a jacket and if anyone had a chance to be snatched from disaster by a helicopter, he did. But the skies were amazingly empty.

I was focusing all my will into a prayer for his rescue when the guy on the roof confounded all reason and sensibility by tumbling into space. Or rather, the building fell away from beneath him.

Sleep researchers say there is only one constant distinguishing all nightmares from dreams: the sense of helplessness. The next 18 hours were just as pointless and helpless a nightmare as they could be. And the building collapses weren't over. After helping set up a first aid station, I waited among idle paramedics hoping victims would show, just to know there'd been some survivors. But when the only visitor to the station was an old woman who'd tripped in her apartment, I got tired of waiting.

From our basement, I retrieved a hardhat, a painter's respirator, my mountaineering boots, climber's harness, and a crowbar. Going as far down the street as I could, I signed in to a search-and-rescue volunteer line and stood with other well-meaning locals, some still in business suits and loafers, to wait for the fires in Tower 7 to cool so we could get closer to look for survivors. We'd just cheered a squad of firemen marching down to the pit of doom, when I heard the surreal plink-tinkle sound of a music box being played backwards. When I looked up the bronze glass wall of Tower 7 was rippling like gelatin. "Get out of here!" a policeman yelled as the 47-floor building collapsed, sending a firemen-swallowing wall of ash and debris up Greenwich Street.

I have never run so hard or so far in such heavy boots.

By midnight, I was sitting in the back of a welder's truck full of construction volunteers, listening to reports crackle over the police band radio in the cab. At 3:00 a.m. we were "next in queue" when all volunteer activity was suspended. There were finally enough emergency personnel on the scene.

Dragging myself home, I slept poorly. Then, late the next morning, I went to the window. Outside it was eerily quiet, another severe clear day. I wondered as I leaned out to look down Greenwich if the nightmare had happened. The open sky, the rubble, and the massive plume of smoke said it had. But the pictures in my camera confirmed it with a vividness my memory sometimes wants to deny.

TEN YEARS LATER, NOW THAT THE SO-CALLED "FREEDOM TOWER" IS GOING up in the neighborhood and the memorial park is in place, I miss the twin towers even more than I did when they were reduced to a gaping pit. This may sound negative, but I do not care for nationalistic symbolism usurping a neighborhood already ravaged by terrorists. Why 1776 feet high? Why not a more fitting number than one of revolution and war? Why not 1964, the year of the Civil Rights Act guaranteeing true, universal liberties? Why such numerologies at all?

I also don't care for a park that forces me to think of the dead every time I walk by it. Honor the victims, yes, but is the permanent removal of a viable part of Manhattan from productivity, and its replacement by a cemetery, really what the hard working victims would have wanted? And with all the tourist mourners, gawkers, and patriots who will come, can this corner of Manhattan ever "return to business as usual?" I only lost one friend in those buildings that terrible day, Neil Levin, Executive Director of the Port Authority. We'd only just met over a few meals, but I liked him a lot. I have trouble believing this is what he would have wanted. I imagine Neil would want the place to be a symbol of resilience, and of the hard work and determination that built not just the Twin Towers but our country. I imagine he'd rather see his office put back and his replacement hard at work there.

I'm as sentimental a guy as there is. It was fashionable among New Yorkers not to like the Twin Towers. As a newcomer in the nineties, I loved them. They were my weather gauge; just by looking out my window at them, I could tell what to wear. They were a kind of urban polestar, too; by triangulating with the Empire State Building, they told me where I was in the city. Their replacement will no doubt function that way, too. But I wonder how long it will be before what is still imprinted in my brain, by years of routine seeing and response, fades and makes room for its replacement. C

THREE NOVELS OF 9/11

In Search of the Right Questions

JONATHAN SAFER FOER'S *EXTREMELY LOUD AND INCREDIBLY CLOSE*

Mariner Books, 2005), Jay McInerney's *The Good Life* (Vintage Books, 2007), and Colum McCann's *Let the Great World Spin* (Random House, 2009) are responses to the attack on the World Trade Center on September 11, 2001. They are not political analyses, but examine, as novels always do, the lives of the characters who are affected by the great event. The differences among these novels are important, and each of them gives us a version of New York City to contemplate.

I

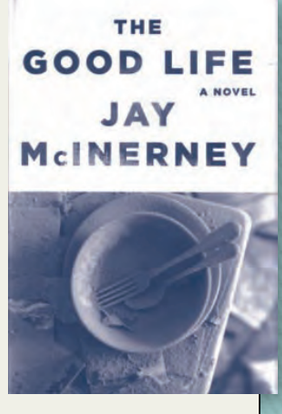
The narrator of *Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close* is Oskar Schell, a brilliant, hilarious, touching nine year old, whose interests are both eccentric and encyclopedic. On 9/11 he is sent home from school early and sees on the answering machine four messages from his father, who works in the World Trade Center. He is there when the fifth call comes in at 10:26:47—about two minutes before the North Tower collapsed—and he hears his father pleading for someone to answer as the building he's in is being evacuated. Oskar is paralyzed and can't pick up, so this is the last time he hears his father's living voice. Later, in his father's closet, he finds an envelope with the word "Black" on it and inside it a key. He decides to search for the meaning of this key, and therefore of his father's life, by looking up every "Black" in the New York City phone book and going on foot to see them, to see what they may know. The search of the son for the father has been an archetypal quest at least since Homer's *Odyssey*. The quest for a lock to fit a key, however, is a different story: the search is usually for the key itself, the key to the lock that opens the answer to the question. Oskar, however, can't frame his quest as a question; there are too many dimensions to the whole experience.

Oskar's journey through New York City brings him into contact with an assortment of mostly hospitable characters who aid or educate him in unpredictable ways. Some of them are eccentric as he is, and the book itself is something else. Some pages hold only a single short phrase. There are pages on which the type gets desperately smaller and smaller until it is indecipherable. One page is printed in colored inks—green for the word green, red for the word red—a page on which Oskar's father had once written his name. This is a seriously playful book, a kid's version of *Tristram Shandy*, and its whole method and end are suggested by the game Oskar and his father called Reconnaissance Expedition. Oskar goes into Central Park to look for clues, but his father doesn't tell him what they are clues to. They are not answers to a question, but a game that may be a search for a natural order to the city. Or maybe a gentle sign that the city has too many parts to be legible in any way at all. This is a book full of codes, secrets, and extraordinary accidents.

Oskar's narrative is interrupted, or complemented, by a series of letters begun in 1963 and written to their author's unborn son, who turns out to be Thomas Schell, Oskar's father. Their author is Oskar's grandfather who is now living as "the renter" in Oskar's grandmother's apartment, across the street. Eventually, we learn why Oskar has passed through the city unharmed—despite the terrorist attack, this New York City is remarkably safe—and he and his grandfather meet to examine the empty grave that marks the death of Thomas Schell, their father and son. Oskar's grandfather has been traumatized in another terror attack, the firebombing of Dresden, and cannot speak. He has to write everything. His suffering, isolation, and the arduousness of all human connection is a tragic balance to Oskar's story. Still, the differences between the two narrative lines often test the patience and may not work for everyone. On the other hand, what does work is the ending. The last 14 pages are a flip book of the photo sequence known as "The Falling Man," taken as a man leaped to his death rather than die in the tower's fire. Foer, however, arranges the images in reverse order, and the man rises into the realm of the happy ending that Oskar, at least, deserves. In a book of extraordinary devices, this is the most audacious: a happy ending to the unimaginable realities of 9/11.

II

The ending of Jay McInerney's *The Good Life* answers a question that has been on everyone's mind as soon as the plot's central question is formed. This is a novel of manners, the kind that traditionally ends in a marriage, but the couple at the center are each married to others when they meet at Ground Zero. Luke McGavock is a wealthy investment banker who lives on the Upper East Side; his wife, Sasha, is a beautiful, ambitious, expensive socialite; and their teenage daughter is more at risk than either of them realizes. On September 12, Luke walks out of the ruins covered with ash and sees Corrine Calloway. She thinks he must be in shock. He thinks she looks like Katharine Hepburn. As he heads home on foot, she gives him her cell phone number and asks that he call to tell her he is safe.



Corrine's husband, Russell, is in publishing; they live in a literary world downtown and have young twins. (Russell knows Salman Rushdie!) The romance has gone out of their marriage, Corrine thinks, and she wants to get back to writing her screenplay of Graham Greene's *The*

BY TERRENCE DOODY

Heart of the Matter. So she is already trying to make a change when she meets Luke, and she continues to work at the aid station at Ground Zero because it gives her a chance to stay away from home. For his part, Luke is burned out and has recently retired, to Sasha's chagrin, to write a book about samurai movies. And, of course, he keeps going back to the site to visit Corrine.

McInerney writes a regular wine column for *The Wall Street Journal* and knows New York City and the manners of its professional classes very well. *The Good Life* is filled with characters who spell out the uptown life, the different downtown life, and the very different life at Ground Zero, where a "natural man" named Jerry steals the show. The play of these geographies gives the novel its always unexpected details and texture. So if you like New York, like seeing it in movies, and read *The New Yorker* or *The New York Times*, you will find this novel filled with many collateral pleasures.

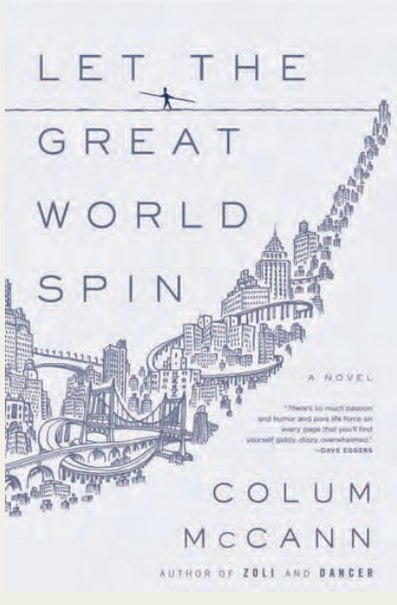
About halfway through the story, Corrine and Luke begin wondering whether or not they can separate from their marriages and end up together. In other words, they too want to know how the novel ends, and this gives McInerney another dimension to work in. *The Good Life* isn't a metafiction in the way *Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close* is. It is a meditation on the nature of change. Can we change ourselves? How do we do it? And, obviously, what effect do great events, terrible events, have on us? Do we change under their power? Or do we react to the terror by pulling back, digging in, and trying to hold onto order? McInerney's ending may not be the end the reader desires, but it is complex and satisfying. The unusually insightful copy on the back cover even calls *The Good Life* "redemptive."

III

Colum McCann's *Let the Great World Spin* is set on August 7, 1974, the day Phillipe Petit strung a wire between the World Trade Center's towers and performed for the crowd below in the morning rush hour. It is not explicitly a book about 9/11, but what else can it be? How can we read it after its publication in 2009 and not be mindful of the World Trade Center's subsequent history? How can we not ask questions? None of these books is a historical novel as we usually mean by the phrase, but each of them asks us to think about the ways we narrate our lives, the history they contain, the connections we discover.

Redemption is an issue in this book too. In the first episode, "All Respects to Heaven, I Like It Here," Corrigan is a Dubliner who lives in the housing projects next to the Major Deegan Expressway in the Bronx, and he has opened his apartment to the hookers who work the neighborhood streets. They come to him for a drink of water and the use of his bathroom, and that's about all he does. When his brother suggests he move to some place sunnier, Corrigan simply says, "I'm called here." It is clear that his calling is to seek God and his own sanctity, but his search seems as eccentric and disordered as Oskar's Reconnaissance Expedition. In a book that is clearly about the responsibilities that come to us by accident in a city filled with strangers, Corrigan's ascetic ministry is both the most compelling and the hardest to understand.

His hooker friends include Tillie and her daughter, Jazzlynn. Tillie once entertained a client by reading verses by the Persian poet Rumi to him, and Jazzlynn, who is still a teenager, has twin baby girls. One day as Corrigan is driving Jazzlynn back from a court hearing, they are killed in a car accident.



In the next episode, we meet Gloria, an African-American woman from the same projects that Corrigan lives in. She is in the Park Avenue apartment of Claire Soderberg. They have both lost sons in Vietnam and become unlikely close friends, forming a support group with three other women. They all see and discuss "the walking man," the French tightrope-walking funambulist, and Claire in particular is offended by Petit's flagrant display of sheer bodily life. Claire's husband is the city judge in whose courtroom Petit is arraigned and who, with great self-delight, fines Petite $1.10, a penny for every floor of the towers he has trespassed on. After Jazzlynn is killed, Gloria adopts and raises her baby daughters. In the final episode, many years later, one of the twins, Jaslyn, appears as a grown-up to comfort Claire on her deathbed, an end that is wholly unpredictable and beautifully tender.

Many other connections and consequences keep building through the remaining episodes, but the slim links between them are not the book's only point, nor are the different glimpses of the walking man. Every episode is rich and independent, and their unpredictable relationships are hard to simplify to a single point. Only in "Etherwest," for instance, the slightest and funniest of the episodes, do we get a full version of Petit's walk from the viewpoint of one of the characters. And this comes when a group of programmers in a basement in California hack into the lines to call pay phones on the streets in New York when they become aware of Petite's walk. Sabel Senatore picks up and describes the walk in detail to an audience 2,500 miles away, and she has the advantage of the opera glasses she took the night before to see Marakova at the American Ballet Theatre. Afterward she and they disappear from the book.

McCann himself writes beautifully about the walking man in three short sections that describe his walk and his background. But he makes no effort at simple correlations between the walker and the characters below. Like Corrigan, Petit has a calling and great faith, but he also has a constrained perspective: he sees nothing else in the book. His walk is not even a metaphor for the other stories. The connections to be made we have to make for ourselves; the city's order is in no way plotted.

McInerney's novel encourages us to meditate on the nature of change, and Foer's to recognize that innocence can endure in the face of tragedy. McCann's book seems to be an inquiry into the nature of order itself. Where is it? How do we think about accidents? If boundaries usually draw a moral line, what does historical distance do to the moral field? How do distances connect us? And what, exactly, does this novel say about 9/11?

There is a passage in Salman Rushdie's *The Satanic Verses*, the novel that got him in trouble with the Iranian theocracy, that doesn't answer the question, but proposes another perspective:

Up there in air-space, in that soft, imperceptible field which had been made possible by the century and which, thereafter, made the century possible, becoming one of its defining locations, the place of movement and of war, the planet-shrinker and power-vacuum, most insecure and transitory of zones, illusory discontinuous, metamorphic—because when you throw everything up in the air anything becomes possible. . . . c

9/11, HOUSTON, AND SALMAN RUSHDIE

On the Other Side of Fury

He looked at the bloodstains drying on the darkened square, evidence here in New York City of the force of a gathering fury on the far side of the world: a group fury, born of long injustice, beside which his own unpredictable temper was a thing of pathetic insignificance, the indulgence, perhaps, of a privileged individual with too much self-interest.

***FURY*, SALMAN RUSHDIE (SEPTEMBER 4, 2001)**

THE FIRST INDICATION THAT THE RULES OF THE GAME HAVE CHANGED comes when we receive what seems like a threatening phone call in early August about the reading in September that will open our season. It's the hottest part of the day on one of those hazy, burnt-smelling summer afternoons in Houston, when the 100-degree heat makes a clear sky look milky, and the grackles squawk and hiss and click and chuckle, and the A/C in our office, one of the many gray-and-white 1920s bungalows surrounding the Menil Collection, can't keep up. My pants stick to the seat of my desk chair. The phone message left during the night is, I think, a sign of both menace and cowardice. I play it again: "You are presenting the apostate Salman Rushdie. We know who you are, Richard Levy." Click.

The message sounds unfinished. A male voice, deep, with a strong accent—a non-native speaker of English. Had he lost his nerve, his train of thought? Was that really all he had to say? Or was it a bad connection?

I call to my colleagues, "Hey, would you come listen to this?"

We are excited. Salman Rushdie has agreed to read from his new novel *Fury* in Houston on September 10, 2001, to open the 2001-2002 season of the Inprint Margarett Root Brown Reading Series. This reading will be part of his first official book tour since the fatwa was declared against him in early 1989 following the publication of *The Satanic Verses*. We have succeeded in convincing the Random House publicity department that our literary reading series merits a place on Rushdie's book tour, not an easy thing to do, given the typical East Coast view of the middle part of the country (especially south of the Mason-Dixon line) as several contiguous flyover states.

It soon becomes apparent, however, as that hot summer and our preparations for the season progress, that this is not going to be the usual opening reading. Rushdie has been living for years under police protection in England since Ayatollah Khomeini of Iran declared the fatwa in 1989 calling for his death in response to a book he wrote. And what a book to be cursed for. Published in 1988, *The Satanic Verses* is a tour de force, an undeniably brilliant novel, an extension of the burst of creative energy that had earlier produced two other great, bristling, and singular novels, the widely praised *Midnight's Children* (1981), a brocade of wild invention and twisted reality that follows a thousand children born at midnight on the eve of the brutal partition of India, and *Shame* (1983), set in a kind of manic, imaginary Pakistan.

The Satanic Verses, with the same kind of verbal and visceral intensity, has as its framework a fantastically inventive battle between Good and Evil, seen through the lens of the immigrant experience. It begins with a plane filled with South Asian travelers exploding in midair over London, after which the two main characters—both actors—wrestle as they fall to earth (a fall that seems to take forever and that they magically survive), one turning into a kind of evil angel, the other into a kindly devil.

For some, *The Satanic Verses* is filled with one blasphemy after another. Rushdie's smartest-kid-in-the-class antics, this time aimed at Islam, are too much for those Muslims who, to put it mildly, lack a postmodern sensibility. The title refers to certain verses supposedly spoken by Muhammad as part of

BY RICH LEVY

the divinely revealed messages of the Koran that were then withdrawn on the grounds that the devil had sent them, deceiving Muhammad into thinking they came from God. In the novel, Rushdie also uses the name Mahound, a derogatory term for Muhammad dating back to the Crusades. Perhaps most offensive to Muslims, he creates a brothel staffed by prostitutes who are given the names of Muhammad's wives, the esteemed "mothers of all believers."

As a result of this death sentence, Rushdie went into hiding. He also became a cause célèbre of the free speech movement and wrote several fine novels in the 1990s. But each time anyone approached a publisher about bringing Rushdie to Houston in connection with a new book, the response was that he might give a reading here, but it could not be announced in advance—a thorny problem for a presenter.

In 1998, the government of Iran, under more moderate leadership, spoke against the fatwa as a precondition to reestablishing diplomatic ties with Britain.

Rushdie has been living in New York largely without incident for a year or two, and the time is right for a public appearance in Houston.

As we prepare for the big night, one Alley staffer whose husband is a police officer suggests that we contact the Houston Police Department to make sure they are apprised of the situation. And, she adds, the local FBI office. Why not?

We call our contact at HPD, who works off-duty on occasion at Brazos Bookstore. He is now, it turns out, head of intelligence for the department. He knows all about the reading and even has the event on his calendar.

"Oh yeah, we know the protesters. They come out whenever the Israelis are in town. They always fax us in advance, a day or two before the event." He thinks they may bus in people, and says they'll have placards. And one or two of the young guys might get a bit feisty. "But usually," he says, "they're well behaved."

Later that day, I call the Houston FBI office. I'm passed from one person to another until someone introduces herself. Must be the low agent on the totem pole. I tell her we'll be hosting a reading, a public presentation, by Salman Rushdie on September 10 and pause for that to sink in.

"Salman who?" she asks, with no hint of irony.

I explain the situation: *The Satanic Verses* and the fatwa, with its accompanying death threat; the murder of the book's Japanese translator and the near-fatal wounding of its Norwegian publisher, among others; our reading series, the new book, and Rushdie's book tour; the protest emails and calls we've received (most of them similar, as if callers are reading from a script), including the few troubling ones. Despite the hubbub, I make clear, it's a great honor to have Rushdie in Houston.

She pauses for a moment, as if reviewing her notes, then says thank you and hangs up. Well, I think, that's that.

Several hours later, after lunch, a colleague buzzes me. "Rich, I think it's the woman from the FBI."

She reintroduces herself, Agent so-and-so, and then, without skipping a beat, asks, "Would you please tell me about the death threats you're receiving?" No, I explain, we aren't receiving death threats; Salman Rushdie has received them.

ABOUT THREE WEEKS BEFORE THE READING, THE PHONE RINGS, AND IT'S one of our board members, an executive at Continental Airlines, which customarily flies to Houston the writers for our reading series. He has someone from the FAA in his office, and the two of them are on speakerphone. The gist of the call: Rushdie cannot fly on a commercial airline—he is banned from commercial flights as a danger to himself and others. Our board member is quietly apologetic.

I email our contact at Random House. She replies that they are working on a solution and that the tour will proceed as planned. Next thing we know, the publisher has arranged for Rushdie to take a private plane.

First Rushdie will read in New York, Boston, Washington, D.C., Chicago, and then Houston. After Houston, he will go to Minneapolis for some sort of library fundraiser, then Denver and the West Coast. We are his single dip into the South. We have broken the ice. There are readers in the South! We feel the pressure to have a great crowd, publicity, event, and book sales. This is a kind of audition. Our adrenaline is pumping.

The evening of September 10 is broiling, bright, steamy. The reading is to begin at 7:30, and the crowd starts to assemble outside the theater at 4:30 p.m. (the series has no advance ticket sales). The nominal price of five dollars, free for students and seniors, ensures no one is kept away from the readings. Soon the ticket line runs down the steps and up the block. Our staff of three, with reinforcements from the Alley crew, takes charge, directing the line and keeping order.

Rushdie is dining at a restaurant across the street from the theater with the interviewer and a small group of board members. I walk up to Alley Theatre artistic director Gregory Boyd and managing director Paul Teatreault, who are amazed at the crowd. They point outside.

A very different kind of crowd is gathering in front of the theater, occupying the dozen or so steps leading down to the sidewalk—not to block the way, but to give audience members a kind of gauntlet to run. Women in hijabs and bearded men in black-and-white keffiyehs and long, loose-fitting shirts hold printed signs stapled to wooden sticks that read, "Death to Rushdie" (on the back: "Death to Israel"—dual use posters). Some chant and others call out slogans, while the women quietly hold their signs.

The bicycle officers keep the walks free, other officers on foot maintain a path up the steps, and the cops on horseback keep folks off the street. We can't believe it. There are probably 200 protesters in front of the theater.

I step outside into the brutal heat and ask several young men if they have read any of Rushdie's books. They look at me in disgust. "Of course not," one says. These folks clearly aren't interested in attending the reading.

Then we watch as the crowd on the steps shifts to the corner and rushes two cars parked at the entrance to the restaurant. It turns out the valet is Iranian, and he informs the crowd that Rushdie is at the restaurant and on his way out. A few people pound on the car, but in a flash police on horseback move them and everyone else back onto the curb. The scene is calmed, leaving just one or two loud young men. Rushdie and the dinner guests get into the cars, drive around the corner and into the theater's alleyway, scooting into the stage door undetected.

In the green room, Rushdie is fascinated and disgusted by the situation. He has not encountered a whisper of protest in New York, Boston, or Chicago—and now, here in Houston…. He's surprised to find such fundamentalism in Texas. (We are not.) It seems to energize him, to get him in a pugnacious mood for the reading.

Almost all the people get in unchallenged; the plainclothesmen at the door deny entrance to only two. The theater is packed. Several dozen

"SHE REINTRODUCES HERSELF, AGENT SO-AND-SO, AND THEN, WITHOUT SKIPPING A BEAT, ASKS, 'WOULD YOU PLEASE TELL ME ABOUT **THE DEATH THREATS YOU'RE RECEIVING.'"**

attendees who don't get seats watch the reading on a closed-circuit TV monitor in the lobby. I'm told later that as I was greeting the crowd in the theater and introducing Rushdie, the protesters turned to the east, knelt on the steps, said prayers, boarded their buses, and were gone.

It is the first and only time an Inprint reading makes the ten o'clock news. Hardly a word is said about the reading, the interview, or the endless book-signing line; the reports focus on the protest. After we're finished at the theater, we take Rushdie to a board member's house for a party. He has tremendous energy, speaks to everyone, and stays up late with students, smoking cigars and drinking on the patio. He's clearly glad to be on a book tour for the first time in more than 12 years. To hell with the protesters, he says. Sheep, he calls them. Idiots.

The next morning, September 11, as my nine-year-old son and I are getting into the car after an early doctor's appointment, we hear the first puzzled reports from the site of the World Trade Center on the radio. I drive Tom to school in a haze of disbelief. Who has done this and why?

I remember the morning as bright, sunny, and cooler than the day before; a front has come through. As I run into the office, my colleague Marilyn reports that Rushdie has called. He's at the Four Seasons. His plane is grounded—all flights are grounded—so he has returned to the hotel, but the Four Seasons will not let him check back in. They do not have any open rooms. He needs a place to stay. And he needs someone to come down to the Four Seasons and pick him up. Please.

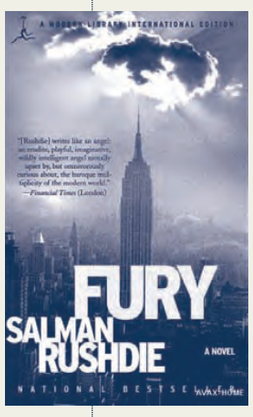
One more thing, he tells me: he's staying at the Four Seasons under an assumed name, an anagram of Salman Rushdie. When I arrive at the hotel and ask for Dr. Shane Maulis, the two desk clerks stop and look at me. A man emerges from an inner office, takes my driver's license, and vanishes for a few moments. Then, as if in a scene from a bad spy movie, he emerges, gives me an overly long look, and says, "Follow me," walking quickly to the second-floor ballroom. Someone who looks like an off-duty cop is standing outside one of the surrounding conference rooms. He unlocks the door and hands my license to someone inside the room, and that someone, sighing, gives his approval. I go inside. Click. The door locks behind me.

"Drama queens," Rushdie says and shakes my hand.

What happens over the next few days takes on an aura of the surreal. Up to this point, we've been doing our work; now we're making it up.

Rushdie and I sit locked in the breakout room at the Four Seasons for about two hours. The hotel staff has furnished him with two TVs, two telephones, a dozen cans of soft drinks, and a large tray of pastries. We watch as the towers are struck over and over again, and fall over and over again. After a while we turn the sound down and talk, or make phone calls. Neither of us has much to say. The hijackers, he opines, must be madmen.

Rushdie calls friends and family, including his girlfriend, to assure them that he's all right; I speak to Marilyn, who is searching for a place for him to stay. Briefly I consider my 12-year-old daughter's bedroom, but decide that after a decade in hiding, Rushdie has suffered enough. We discover that the poet Edward Hirsch and his wife Janet, who live in a two-story red brick house next to our office, are in Washington, D.C., and they consent to have Rushdie stay at their home. Since we are Rushdie's hosts, this is the perfect spot for him—convenient, quiet, and book-filled.



I ASK SEVERAL YOUNG MEN IF THEY HAVE READ ANY OF RUSHDIE'S BOOKS. THEY LOOK AT ME IN DISGUST. "OF COURSE NOT," ONE SAYS. **THESE FOLKS CLEARLY AREN'T INTERESTED IN ATTENDING THE READING.**

During the next few days, we bring Rushdie bagels and egg tacos for breakfast, and Vietnamese noodles and café sandwiches for lunch. We keep him company, if he so desires. We arrange for a private tour of the Menil Collection. He goes for walks in our bosky neighborhood. Karl Kilian, owner of Brazos Bookstore, hosts him for dinner one night; the director of the Menil Collection entertains him the next evening. He's treated with the secrecy and deference of stranded royalty. He seems slightly restless and a little bored.

But despite his phlegmatic demeanor—after all, his long-awaited book tour has been derailed, and he is stranded some place far from where he'd like to be with his girlfriend—he's quietly thankful for his circumstances. The Menil, which is across the street from us, is as amazing and wonderful a distraction as the art world can offer and, unfailingly polite, he is grateful that several of us are so solicitous of his happiness. I, in return, am grateful that he refuses to engage in false flattery, which relieves us of the need to respond with false modesty. It's a strangely calm, interim situation. I don't begrudge the man his reserve and his moods; I'd probably be quite a bit grumpier were the tables turned.

OVER A LUNCH OF SPRING ROLLS ON DAY TWO, HE asks me if I've ever done one of those cross-country drives across the U.S., a Jack Kerouac-style *On the Road* trip. Yes, I say, though these days I travel non-Kerouac style with my family. "Richard," Rushdie asks, "how would you like to rent a car, and we can drive to LA?" This is where his girlfriend awaits him. "Of course, we'd have to find a rental car first," he muses. I silently assume this would be impossible, but there is something sweet and almost boyish about the question, which causes me to pause for a moment. Then I tell him I can't do it, with three young children in school, my wife at a big law firm, too many things to do in the evening, getting the kids off in the morning—you know. (He doesn't, I think.) He nods, extols the boldness of a friend who has exhibited various kinds of fearlessness, hung out with football hooligans, traveled the world, et cetera, much of it with Rushdie. After a while, he seems to be talking to himself.

We know that as soon as the airports reopen, Rushdie is on the first plane out of here. We check with him Thursday morning over coffee and croissants. He tells us that the pilot Random House has hired will take him to L.A. at the earliest possible opportunity.

At noon that day, we hold our executive committee meeting as scheduled at the Inprint office. Twenty minutes into the meeting, shortly after we explain to our stunned board members what we've been doing for the past few days, as if on cue, Rushdie throws open the front door. "The pilot says it's time; air traffic control has given us clearance. Would you please call me a cab?" Everyone leaps up to shake his hand. Our meeting is on hold. We watch a few minutes later as he smiles and waves, and the cab drives away.

So what did we learn from the Great Man? Any nuggets of wisdom delivered over coffee or tea, which I can now share a decade later? What juicy bits of gossip or stunning insights have stewed in my noggin that finally need to be aired? Zero, zilch, nada, none.

BUT DESPITE HIS PHLEGMATIC DEMEANOR—AFTER ALL, HIS LONG-AWAITED BOOK TOUR HAS BEEN DERAILED, AND HE IS STRANDED SOME PLACE FAR FROM WHERE HE'D LIKE TO BE WITH HIS GIRLFRIEND—**HE'S QUIETLY THANKFUL FOR HIS CIRCUMSTANCES**.

First of all, hanging the mantle of Great Man on him puts the poor guy at a complete and stunning disadvantage. It hangs around his neck the burdensome expectation that he is perennially profound, and that everything he says is brilliant. Not even Salman Rushdie can measure up. Although he may be brilliant, even Rushdie needs some down time. He's also a writer, not a politician, and he's not seeking our votes (thank God). He wasn't chatting for posterity over spring rolls, although we did harvest an anecdote or two. He was simply being himself and a very pleasant guest.

Interestingly, even Rushdie seems to have a foggy notion of the events of that time. He was recently quoted in Emory University's *Emory Report*, in a piece titled "Rushdie on Truth and Memory," as saying the release date of *Fury* was September 11. It was in fact September 4, as he had launched the book in New York and given at least three readings before coming to Houston. But clearly a 9/11 release date makes for a better story. I wonder what he does remember of Houston and what was for us his memorable, impromptu visit.

He also said at Emory that on 9/11 *Fury* was instantly transformed from a contemporary satire into a historical novel, describing a city as it no longer was. He's right. *Fury* is an unusual book in Rushdie's oeuvre—a novel set in the current moment. His satire, of course, spins off into the realm of the absurd—a middle-aged college professor retiring to manage his burgeoning doll empire; but the gist of the novel grabs New York by the lapels and shoves it center stage. It's the gritty, grasping city of the nineties, still arrogant, endlessly growing and clamoring, and somewhat insane. New York was and is changed by 9/11—it's been humbled and done some soul searching. I think in some ways, despite the horrific loss of life and landmark, it's now a better place to live and visit. (Still outrageously expensive, but a better place.) I look at the High Line, a kind of magical park in the air, as an emblem of these greener, more pacific changes.

And beyond New York there are changes too. Peace Corps enrollment, for example, which peaked at 15,000 in 1966, is slowly growing from a low of about 4,000 in the 1990s; in the past year it has risen from 7,500 to more than 8,600 in 77 countries.

The National Endowment for the Arts in its 2008 Survey of Public Participation in the Arts found that, for the first time in 26 years, literary reading (which it defines as the reading of any novels, short stories, poems, or plays in print or online) is on the rise. An encouraging finding is that the rate of increase is fastest in the cohort of 18 to 24 year olds, which experienced growth of 21 percent between 2002 and 2008.

In Houston, the nonprofit organization Urban Harvest, which supports the development of community gardens throughout the city, started with a budget of $500 and a handful of gardens in 1994; there are now more than 100 community and school gardens and urban farms throughout the city, education programs, farmers markets, and a budget of more than $800,000.

Even the galvanizing of the youth vote to elect Obama in 2008 might be construed as a kind of positive change by some. It was exciting to see that high level of civic participation among college-age students and recent college graduates who had been quite apathetic for the preceding 20 years. I take it as a sign that our moral trajectory may be changing slowly for the better.

Of course, this is my view, from my particular socio-political vantage point. None of these changes can be construed as a direct consequence of 9/11. But 9/11 is a major part of the gestalt of the last ten years and certainly the general direction of the culture nationally has been strongly influenced by it. The wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, the financial meltdowns, the growth of the Tea Party and Occupy movements, the polarization of the Congress and the country—all of it stems in some way from 9/11 and from our various reactions to it. This is the position I'm staking out. Take it with whatever grain of salt you like.

FOR ME, THE *FURY* READING FUNCTIONS AS A kind of dividing line between a blithe pre-9/11 world and a wide-awake post-9/11 existence that compels us to take stock and consider change. It is as if, faced with loss, we have emerged from the long adolescence of the eighties and nineties.

Fury will never be considered one of Rushdie's great books. But it does have moments of wit and relevance that, for me, secure its place on this particular dividing line. The epigraph to this article is taken from a scene late in the book in which the main character, the semi-retired college professor Malik Solanka, loses his young girlfriend to a giant of a man, "hairless…stripped to the waist," who hails—like her, like him—from a distant and very different country.

Contemplating the bloody finish to a small riot in Washington Square, Solanka is aware that the animus he witnessed in the park—"the bloodstains drying on the darkened square"—is fueled by "a gathering fury on the far side of the world." He understands the connection between this "group fury, born of long injustice"—this distant, unconscious, destructive, but strangely moral third-world energy—and "his own unpredictable temper," which in a moment of clarity he calls "a thing of pathetic insignificance."

In other words, the blind rage of the Third World is following him to New York, leaving in its wake "bloodstains" on the concrete near his feet. Solanka's transformation, however slight, begins with his dawning awareness that he is (like Rushdie, like many of us) "a privileged individual" complicit in that injustice. It's a world-weary but hopeful moment and, in the context of 9/11, an insight that might serve as a harbinger of an acceptance, in some tiny way, of responsibility.

Two things happened recently from which I take solace. The first: Salman Rushdie returned to Houston and the Inprint Brown Reading Series on December 3, 2010, and was greeted without a hint of unpleasantness by almost two thousand people at Jones Hall. He read from his new book, a novel called *Luḳa and the Fire of Life*, which like *Haroun and the Sea of Stories* was written for one of his sons. He loved the open and warm reception he received here, and can't wait to return. What a difference a decade makes.

The other is closer to home—in my family, in fact. My son, who was with me on the morning of 9/11, is now 19, and not too long ago he came into possession of a cell phone with a great screen and an internet connection. He, like many 19-year-old boys, enjoys violent video games (with their politically incorrect scenarios), heavy metal music, action films, and so on. But what surprised me recently is that he also loves to watch the Al Jazeera English news broadcasts on his phone. He watches them every day. He encourages me to tune in so that we can talk about what he has seen and heard. He is developing a broader view of the world. I'm not sure this will make him a better person—I'm not that much of a Pollyanna—but I'm fairly certain that he would not be tuning in to Al Jazeera today if it weren't for 9/11 and our ensuing entanglements in the Middle East. One of the strange gifts of conflict is that you learn something about your opponent and yourself. My fingers are crossed. c

By JANE CREIGHTON + CARL LINDAHL

PLACEMAKING FROM THE BOTTOM UP

An Introduction to Writing & C/Siting Houston

Jane: From my office on the tenth floor of the old Merchant and Manufacturer's building, now the University of Houston–Downtown, I can look directly down at the ducks and turtles in Buffalo Bayou, then over at the Allen's Landing wharf on the south side of the White Oak / Buffalo Bayou confluence. Here is where this town first made its entrance, as two enterprising Anglos from New York took advantage of Santa Anna's burning of Harrisburg just to the east to set up a rival town. I can also take in the dilapidated beauty of the old International Coffee Building just up from the wharf, then gaze out through the gridded forest of downtown buildings, swinging from east to south to west, with the knowledge that everything I know about this city and its geography is fluid, a work in progress. Look one way, and there's a hungry Cabeza de Vaca, shipwrecked and thrashing through the brush nearly 500 years ago, working his way up among the Karankawas. Look another, and there I am 28 years ago, driving into the city for the first time from a Texas Commission on the Arts teaching gig in Edna down Highway 59, a New York transplant subdued by the heat and the strip-mall flatness, wondering how this city could possibly get into my bones. Those first visits brought me deep friendships, my first red beans and rice, the Continental Zydeco Ballroom, and extraordinary dishes at an Afghan restaurant, all for starters.

Since then, it has been a delicious, slow build. A return to Houston for good brought contact with intricate communities: writers and artists, schoolchildren who wrote about their families and neighborhoods—Eastwood, the near north side, west Houston—and labor organizers who introduced me to the rich difficulties of organizing state workers in offices, prisons, and the Richmond State School. It also brought friendships that have taught me how a chaotically organized city—evolving as it has from the opportunism surrounding the sometimes bloody culture wars that marked it from its very beginnings in the 1830s—can also hold the deep and resonant voices of people who persist against great odds. Those who have been here for generations, alongside those who have found political and economic refuge in the city, recreate themselves even as they create meaningful senses of place. Communities in flux, they borrow, reshape, mix it up, and sustain themselves, making music and food, making place. They're spread out across that grid all the way to the horizon.

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Carl: When I moved to Houston in 1980, everything about the city was broadly advertised as either brand new or about to happen. This image was accurate enough to pass for general truth. Sixty percent of the city's population had arrived within the past 12 years. The Astrodome, soon to be a relic, was still the Eighth Wonder of the World, and older landmarks were being dismantled daily in the shadows of Philip Johnson's postmodern towers. People were remaking themselves and the shapes of the city to fit the contours of their dreams.

The first Houstonian who talked to me was a gas station attendant. Glancing at my Illinois license plates and the U-Haul trailer hitched to my car, he offered in welcome, "You'll do just fine here. I'm working three jobs and I'll be doing something bigger next month." I was the first tenant in my apartment; the whole complex had been slapped together just before I arrived, and the lot was filled with cars bearing license plates from Pennsylvania, Ohio, and Michigan, as well as several bumper stickers that pleaded in unison, "Will the last one leaving Detroit please turn out the lights?" In the course of my first year, walking to and from my car, I watched nine tracts of flat grassland transform into apartment complexes that looked just like

ALL ILLUSTRATIONS BY JOHN EARLES

mine. I kept asking myself, "Here are the immigrants, but where is the city?" I had spent more of my life in Chicago, my father's birthplace, than anywhere else, and there was nothing on my new horizon that even vaguely evoked my sense of a city. In this mass of shifting forms and faces, I could find no anchor in time. The scene seemed choreographed by Austin Dobson, who wrote (I paraphrase), "You say time passes? No, we pass. Time stays." I kept searching for that one focal place where I could see time stay.

My neighbors were all mutual strangers to Houston, but in time I began randomly meeting locals who shared their anchors with me. I picked up a hitchhiker who told me to check out the Continental Zydeco Ballroom. "Best music in the world, been going since my folks took me there as a baby." I took him up on it. Next Friday night I drove to Frenchtown in the Fifth Ward and parked beside a rickety wooden structure, part ranch house, part barn, shaking with the sounds of accordion, frottoir, bass guitars, and stomping feet that seemed to drive the rhythms of speech—English mixed with Creole French—of the overflow crowd in the parking lot. The Continental's world was peopled mostly by friends who had walked there from nearby homes in a neighborhood created in the 1920s by migrants from rural Louisiana and Texas. They had turned this corner of Houston into a suburb of the countryside. Frenchtown was, and is, in constant transformation, but it also possessed and honored its roots in time. In the 30 years since I followed that hitchhiker's advice, many other rooted strangers have introduced me to their essential places, places that became theirs through birthright or adoption.

Doris McClendon ran the Continental Zydeco Ballroom for many years.

I PICKED UP A HITCHHIKER WHO TOLD ME TO CHECK OUT THE CONTINENTAL ZYDECO BALLROOM. "**BEST MUSIC IN THE WORLD**, BEENGOING SINCE MY FOLKS TOOK ME THERE AS A BABY."

The Houston that has grown to be so important to us is the sum of those places, illumined by the insiders who live there, where time stays.

Writing & C/Siting Houston is a project aiming to give voice to that persistence in time. Each of the writers whose words follow focuses on a corner of the city where neighbors have fashioned meaning through their interactions with place over time. Only Gwendolyn Zepeda, raised in the Sixth Ward, is a Houstonian by birth. The others, like us, are migrants who have discovered in the city special sites of refuge and exploration. They came here from places as distant as Iran and Vietnam or along shorter roads from Alabama, Louisiana, and rural Texas, driven by necessity or drawn by the arbitrary geography of employment. None of them sought Houston as a place in itself, but each of them helped fashion something here that is richer, more complex, and far more human than the flat and polished public face of the city would have led any of us to dream we would find.

This special section is dedicated to the memory of Susan Ahern (1949-2011), whose vision made our work possible. Writing & C/Siting Houston is a collaboration of the University of Houston-Downtown Cultural Enrichment Center, the Houston Arts Alliance Folklife & Traditional Arts Program, and The Houston Folklore Archive of the University of Houston. www.uhd.edu/cec.

JAMES FRAHER

SHAPES OF TRADITION

Accessing Insider Vision to Understand Architecture

FOR 175 YEARS, MIGRANTS HAVE POURED INTO HOUSTON CARRYING within them the unseen shapes of what a building should look like and what a neighborhood should be. When they first arrived, nothing—and everything—stood in the way of their creating homes and surroundings as similar as they desired to the ones they'd left behind.

Houston's early identity, like its population, was in constant flux. A letter written in 1838 by a displaced (and apparently seriously homesick) Hungarian describes a small population of enormous fluidity, in more than one sense: of some seven hundred citizens, the Hungarian writes, only "one-half were engaged in any regular business … unless drinking and gambling may be considered such." Drinking "was reduced to a system, and … the Texians … not only fought but drank in platoons." He adds, "Most of those who might be considered citizens were mere adventurers, who had pitched their tents for a time upon the prairy, to see what advantages might be seized upon in the combinations which were forming from the new elements that were about to create a new nation; with a view to depart should fortune prove unkind."

Yet they stayed long enough to house themselves. "Houses could not be built as fast as required," the Hungarian wrote on. It is not claiming too much to say that this new village existed only for and in the imagination of its first inhabitants, who were free to make anything they wanted of it. Local government did little to prevent the future from taking the shape of the newcomers' dreams; one of Houston's best known traits—the most enduring aspect of its Wild West heritage—was its lack of zoning regulations. The stranger down the street could not tell you what, or what not, to put on your lot.

The dream builders' imaginations were unhindered by the law, yet severely challenged by their means and their environment: what they could afford in their new town and what they could find there. Lack of money was one thing, but for many, scarcity of funds seemed less problematic than the absence of any signpost that might even remotely suggest "home" or "neighborhood," or hint at how to make one. The early immigrants were largely of Irish and German background. The climate, ecosystem, and natural building materials in the Houston area rendered most of the traditional building styles that they had brought with them, in their minds, incompatible with what they now saw.

How do you make what's at hand respond to the notion of a distant home? The first settlers' inner pictures of how a house should look were part of their folkloric make-up, their organic understandings of themselves and their communities. But in folk culture or vernacular culture, what is most familiar is commonly what is least often spoken.

BY CARL LINDAHL

OPPOSITE: Barn with long eave to protect pulley to lift bales.

As a teacher I came to learn early on that I don't know exactly what I do know until I try to speak it; then I suddenly realize that my understanding is much greater, or less or different, than I had earlier thought. I have learned as a student and teacher of folklore that most people tend to express their aesthetics much less often with their voices than with their hands. The artifacts that they create are infused with thoughts that we never see. A vernacular building can't tell us from the road how to experience it. If we do not dwell in a space, we will not know how to feel it, and can only guess what it does for those who do.

When you live inside a building, the building will eventually become the shell and mirror of your thoughts — gradually and paradoxically reshaped from the inside out by your memories of where you lived before. Your tradition remembers where you came from and ensures that your past is more than a memory. Structured material space is negative spiritual space: we see another's space before—sometimes long before—we know how to experience it. Yet we do know from experience how hard it is for us to change spaces without changing our minds, and how easy it is for our minds to work upon our surroundings to shape them to the power of our traditions. Tradition will spring out as we build or live within a building, no matter what we do.

My great folklore teacher, Warren Roberts, once told me about running into a farmer in the Indiana countryside as the man was putting the final touches on his newly-built barn. Roberts complimented the farmer on his work, and the farmer smiled with visible pride as he pointed to the face of the structure. Sticking out from the front was an extended eave, the kind typically built to protect the tongs, pulleys, ropes, and chains that hung from the ridge beam protruding far past the barn wall: a contraption to lift hay bales from a wagon below into the loft and in the process greatly ease a farmer's work. But this new barn was also built with a large window-like opening on the side of the roof, and below that opening was a piece of farm equipment: a bale conveyor, a newer means of lifting the bales into the loft.

As soon as it was polite to do so, Roberts asked the farmer the obvious question: "You've got a bale conveyor to get your hay into the barn, then why did you build that long eave on the front end?"

The farmer shot back without having to consider, and seemingly surprised by the words that came so quickly: "Because that's what a barn's supposed to look like."

Why is this the way a barn is supposed to look, and why is it pride-inducingly beautiful to its maker? Apparently, many other Midwesterners think that this is the way a barn should look, because in great numbers they now buy metal storage sheds with dummy loft doors and eaves that seem to serve no other earthly purpose than to show us what a barn is supposed to look like.

We could easily take the farmer's words to mean that vernacular beauty or folk beauty is nothing more than familiarity. There are some who say that folklore is only habit — a mixture of necessity and failed imagination. In architectural writing, such familiar, old-fashioned, seemingly functionless details are often dismissed as "post-modern pastiche." But to the farmer, this barn was, in the words of another great folklorist, Henry Glassie, "unnecessarily beautiful."

> FOLKLORE IS ABOUT ... HOW OUR ACTS ARE FORCED TO TAKE THE SHAPE OF OUR ENVIRONMENT AND HOW WE CAN CREATIVELY RESHAPE OUR ACTIONS IN RESPONSE.

We know about tradition from experience, but we seldom articulate our knowledge. In the first week of my folklore classes, while my students are grasping for an intellectual sense of folklore and vernacular culture, one or more of them is likely to share a story, often set in Houston, that according to some proves that the folk mind is like an empty barn, simply retaining the old shapes without real content or purpose simply because that's the way a barn is supposed to look.

This is the story: Every Thanksgiving, as a young mother, the grandmother would cook the family turkey. Every year, before slipping the turkey in the oven, she would cut off the tail and the legs. When grandmother's daughter became a mother, she did the same thing. When her children asked her why, she would answer, "That's the way my mother always did it." Grandmother had lived overseas for decades and had never been present when mother made Thanksgiving dinner. But finally, after long years, she had a chance for a holiday visit. She stared in awe at mother's modern kitchen and giant range, but then gasped loudly when mother lopped off the turkey's tail and legs. Mother blurted in defense: "But I'm just doing what you always did, every Thanksgiving when I was a girl." Grandmother answered, "But I had to mangle those turkeys. Remember how poor we were and how small the oven was? I could never find a turkey small enough to fit in that damn oven."

From this anecdote, students most often infer the message that folk tradition is passed on mindlessly, without reflection, by those who now practice it to those who will. The tale of the tailless turkey is, in one way, about the mindless repetition of custom. But it is also at least as much about communication, discovery, and the dynamic interdependence of environment and tradition. As a girl, mother did not watch grandmother closely enough to see why grandmother hacked off the turkey's extremities. Folklore is not about frozen ideas, it's rather about context and adaptation, and about sizing up one's circumstances and environment in ways that had not been perceived before. It's about how we must think about where we live now and what we bring here from our past, how our acts are forced to take the shape of our environment and how we can creatively reshape our actions in response.

Folklore, like the turkey, has to change with the size and shape of the practitioner's surroundings. You can't have a folklore without a creative folk. If folklore were simply the mindless repetition of some past habit, all the world's folk would be long dead, victims of their failure to adapt. It is important to note that the man who added the "unnecessarily beautiful" eave to the front of his barn also made the rest of the barn and adapted it to contemporary technology: that is folklore too. And the mother who mangled the shape of the Thanksgiving turkey, still, presumably, got the recipe right: that is folklore too.

When we look closely at vernacular structures, which indeed do not always speak to us in terms that we feelingly understand, we tend to find that folklore in general, and vernacular architecture in particular, are both public and private. Folklore embraces both shared images and interior imaginings, as in the barn made by a man who has never told us but rather shows us with his hands what a barn is supposed to look like. The public and the private mix together in patterning a building or a neighborhood. In order to access the visions of those who inhabit vernacular structures we need

to watch how their actions articulate their inner understandings and, most of all, to listen for the stories that help us tease out the unseen knowledge and make its complexity easier for outsiders to understand.

On one level, folkloric pattern may seem to be, like the unreflective mother at Thanksgiving, both repetitious and dull. But folkloric pattern is like a picture frame: it seldom exists simply to replicate, but often also to surround and call attention to what's new and different. Folkloric beauty is more than familiarity. Its patterning provides both comfort and tension—like yoga or blues, it constrains you with simple, repeating formulae precisely for the purpose of setting you free. The familiarity of the pattern helps make every slight change stand out in high relief, rendering every restatement a blend of the old and the new.

Consider the case of Frenchtown, Houston, a community that takes its name from the Creoles who first settled there, a largely French-African-American population that migrated to Houston from south Louisiana.

Frank Broussard keeps an altar in his home; it shows us what a Creole soul is supposed to look like. The map of Frenchtown hangs next to a wooden cross clustered with photos of his forebears who settled there and images of angels, black and white, that hover above a nativity scene displayed all year round.

There had been Creoles in Houston in the nineteenth century; sometime around 1900, they began settling in Houston's Fifth Ward. They had come from towns like Opelousas and Natchitoches, but mainly from outlying, deep-country farms. Many of the first migrants were railroad workers who settled conveniently close to the Southern Pacific Railroad tracks that run through Fifth Ward. The earliest migrants came more or less voluntarily, but they found ways of maintaining much of their former rural world even in the midst of the biggest city that many of them had ever seen.

In 1927 the voluntary population was joined by former neighbors from the farmlands fleeing the Great Mississippi Flood, the natural disaster that forced the sudden displacement of more people than any American storm before Hurricane Katrina. Frank Broussard's father rescued neighbors from their Louisiana rooftops and helped bring them to Houston. Nearly 80 years later, Frank, at age 68, participated in a second rescue mission when a storm even more murderous than the Mississippi flood once again drove country Creoles into Frenchtown. At one point about a dozen of his displaced relatives—including Angela Trahan of Bay St. Louis, Mississippi, and her husband and children—were living in Frank's Frenchtown house. Some of them, the newest wave of Creole settlers, remain today.

The evacuees of 1927 did not exactly choose to be urbanites. To survive, to make the shapes of their traditions work for, and not against, them they transformed their corner of the city into a suburb of the country. There is still a rural air to Frenchtown: even at the turn of the millennium Frenchtowners wake up to crowing roosters, plant giant country-sized plots of corn and okra on their lots, ride horses through their neighborhood, and—at least as late as 1997, when I was invited to one—use their garages to stage that most rural of all Creole rituals, the home boucherie, in which several families get together to slaughter a hog and transform, as the proverb goes, "everything but the squeal" into something good to eat.

And the migrants also brought with them their inner vision of what a house should look like. Louisiana's Creole prairie-scape is architecturally diverse, but one house shape tends to dominate. Any Creole carpenter can make it, and most have. It looks like Frank Broussard's home: a long, simple shotgun shape, with the roof extending past the front walls to form a galerie, or porch, facing the road. It's a pervasive shape for Creole homes, in the countryside as well as the town. The same shape dominates in the Creole neighborhoods in and near Bay St. Louis, Mississippi, where relatives of Frank Broussard and Angela Trahan built houses in the 1930s.

In Opelousas, Louisiana, the capital of prairie Creole culture, you can still order a house, designed by contemporary architects, to be built in this same seemingly ageless shape. The same shape molds public buildings, even Opelousas's Jewish temple, though the temple's front bay is no longer a galerie and the walls are made of unfamiliar brick. It was perhaps the most common shape to go underwater near the Gulf Coast when the Great Mississippi Flood drove Creoles from their homes and down the train tracks toward Houston. It was a shape that the evacuees carried in their heads—a traditional understanding of what a house should look like, but it had to be adapted in a corner of the city where many lots were square and where many of the homes had already been built for earlier city dwellers with different ideas of what a house should look like.

For the Frenchtown newcomers, some of whom arrived with no possessions and no material wealth, how to shape any home, no matter what it looked like, proved a monumental problem. One solution was to appropriate the broken-down abandoned boxcars from the Southern Pacific Railroad yards and convert them into houses. Some of these boxcar houses are still around — their origins well disguised. They sometimes take the shotgun shape. But whatever the builders' hopes, their material resources were often so limited that they could build only one room at a time, in an adding style that seldom allowed them to

Our Mother of Mercy, based on photograph taken after construction in 1929.

> THE CHURCH IS BUILT NOT ONLY IN THE WAY A CREOLE HOUSE SHOULD LOOK, BUT ALSO IN THE WAY A CREOLE LIFE DOES LOOK.

follow a master plan. The size and shape of each room depended on the lumber you could afford, or find.

When Creoles built public structures they tended to look like barns. The Continental Zydeco ballroom, when first built, was a general store attached to a house. Some Creole public buildings, like the shallow-eaved Silver Slipper zydeco dancehall, shared the favored shape of the prairies. In choosing to shave the galerie off the front end of the Silver Slipper, the Cormier family — the same family that has run the Silver Slipper since its establishment — may well have had in mind the same thing expressed to me by a country store owner in Louisiana: "I don't want people hanging around in front of my store. I want them inside, doing business."

The new arrivals brought their Catholic faith with them, but, it seems, felt at least a little lost inside the broad brick walls of St. Nicholas, officially the oldest black Catholic church in Houston, unfamiliarly soaring and monumental. In 1929, when they undertook to build their own Frenchtown Catholic church, the Creole carpenters, including Herbert Trahan, uncle of Frank Broussard and grandfather of Angela Trahan, settled on a shape that they all knew; a supremely humble shape for the new urban landscape, but created in the Creole way, by neighbors working together. As you look at one of the later photos from before it was torn down, you see a structure that, except for its size, could easily be a Creole house—if the front porch weren't enclosed to serve as a church foyer, and if that cross weren't standing on top of the roof.

I discovered an older photo of Our Mother of Mercy—and I was both astonished and, on further thought, unsurprised to see that it had indeed first been built to simulate a country home, with the galerie out front: a house of God assuringly like the house just down the road from where its builders once had lived. This shape, which unites worship, commerce, privacy, and partying, is simply a solid realization of the shape of Creole culture.

The church is built not only in the way a Creole house should look, but also in the way a Creole life does look. In the Creole countryside in the 1920s, a family dwelling served nearly all institutional purposes. The neighborhood would crush itself into a single home—a different home—every Saturday night and every Sunday after church and every Mardi Gras evening: on Saturday, so the young people could dance and court; on Sundays to share the day of rest with people too long separated by their diverse work; on Mardi Gras, to feast like there was no tomorrow.

TOP: Front of Frank Broussard's house.
MIDDLE: Frank Broussard.
ABOVE: Frank's altar.

When the Creole carpenters gave Our Mother of Mercy a galerie, they were saying with their hands that the old neighborhood ties still bound, that all their lives would still be shared, here as before, neighbor to neighbor. This gesture is not failed imagination; rather, it invigorates an old design with a creative and necessary flourish. It was a radical act to give a church a house-style galerie when churches were among the very few structures without one, and a second radical act to forego the rooftop cross for the sake of homey familiarity. The Creole carpenters made of one church a common home to serve in the place of the separate homes that many in the community still lacked the material resources to fashion for themselves.

Angela Trahan, a Mississippi Creole who had once lived in Houston, was forced to return to Frenchtown after Hurricane Katrina literally blew away the roof over her head. She had been minding children huddled in the dormitory of a Catholic boys' school when the storm surge crashed through the walls and threatened to drown them. As they struggled toward the safety of a sounder building the dormitory's elevator flew by them.

But a few blocks away was Sycamore Street, where Angela's grandfather had built four Creole-style houses, and they were the only four structures on that street that were still fully intact when the waters receded. Now back in Mississippi, Angela enjoys their galeries, and her relatives have given them new paint. The galerie is focal and festive. The Creole carpentry has proved its ability to survive. The survival of these houses is not just the habit or the job of survival. It is clearly the art of survival that the Trahans celebrate and practice with the flourishes of the double columns and pointed rafters, the mullioned entryway, and the festive acts and reflective moments that they live on that front porch, which serves as the perfect stage for how a Creole life should look. c

PHOTOS THIS PAGE: CARL LINDAHL

EXILE AND LIVE OAKS

Stories Whispered from the Trees

IT WAS ONLY YEARS LATER THAT I LOOKED BACK AT MY LIFE AS AN EXILED writer in Houston and realized that I had been fortunate to have landed in the peaceful, shady, Rice Village neighborhood and not somewhere else. As disoriented and fatigued as I'd been in the summer of 1987—bent under the responsibility of tending my six year old, who had already changed three countries—two, war-infested—I could still appreciate the geographic location I'd been thrown into by forces beyond my will. Houston was not the desert of the Western movies with a few cacti and plenty of dust, but one of the greenest places I'd ever seen, only comparable to lush tropical India, where I'd lived for a year.

My first residence—a tiny garage apartment—was at the end of a cul-de-sac off Kirby Avenue, not far from the Village. It was a wooden box that seemed to hang from a strong branch of an oak, suspended in mid-air. When the wind blew, the house shook, as if in an earthquake; the walls creaked, and my son laughed with joy and anxiety. At night, after singing a lullaby for him and tucking him in bed, I lay down, my body here, my soul somewhere else. I closed my eyes and tried to open the many locked doors behind which I'd left my dear ones. I envisioned my beloved hometown at the foot of Mount Alborz—a home I could never return to. As I lay brooding in the silence of the summer night, I heard the tender branches of a live oak caressing the roof. They were whispering to each other—the tree and the roof—and I heard them all through the night, speaking in a hushed dialogue. It might have been the fatigue or the homesickness that made me feel the need for consolation. I thought that the dialogue of the oak and the roof was meant for me and that the tree tried to bring me back here to tell me that my life had to root in this land, and that I had to stop pounding on locked doors. It would bring nothing but despair.

My first job was in the heart of the Village, near the campus of Rice University. This was temporary work until I'd found something in my field. Again, looking back, I realize that I had been so disoriented that I couldn't find a teaching job. I'd been a college professor back home and even as a refugee in Afghanistan, I'd taught at the University of Kabul. But now the financial need was urgent; the food stamps were not enough and I needed to work somewhere—anywhere. So the job developer, who could not find a teaching position for me, sent me to a bagel shop to begin working. This didn't last more than three days. As a playwright I hadn't learned how to make bagels. The second job was disastrous too. I'd thought that the owner of the flower shop would let me arrange the baskets or wrap colorful bouquets at the counter. But he wanted me to carry the heavy clay pots to the customers' cars and sweep the shop and hose down the sidewalk with a heavy boa of a hose. At last, when I developed a back injury the owner let me go. So the third one seemed like bliss. At a small company, by the name of Melissa's Paw Print, I stood at a craft table all day, painting T-shirts for two dollars a piece. The more shirts I painted, the more my wage was. I remember my agony now—how with a shaking hand I rushed to fill the blanks with green paint to create Christmas trees. I had to work as fast as I could to be able to take a decent wage home. If a drop of paint fell out of the lines, I had to pay the price of the ruined shirt.

At lunch break, I went downstairs to the sidewalk and sat on a bench under the umbrella of an oak tree and immediately drifted back to those locked doors, pounding and pounding. But they were sealed and bolted. How could I survive here? How long could I paint childish designs for a meager income? Hadn't I been a writer? Why had they kept my stories behind those doors and flung me, empty-handed, over the oceans? This deprivation, not of means, but of the soul, was so immense that every bite of the sandwich I took turned into stone when I swallowed my lunch. Now the oak leaves above my head hissed and whispered, as if calling my attention: You're thrown here—but soon you'll be free. Don't let exile destroy you. Don't pound on locked

BY FARNOOSH MOSHIRI

doors. It brings nothing but despair.

At the end of that summer, I enrolled my son in Poe Elementary School at the edge of North Boulevard, an exquisitely beautiful street surrounded and roofed by ancient live oaks. Soon, I realized that this was the city of oaks. I fell in love with the trees and often thought about their origins, their past. Had this place been a forest once? Long ago—even before Texas belonged to Mexico? Or had the saplings been brought from somewhere else and planted here, like myself? Had these trees rooted deep into the earth and claimed the land? Now I walked among them, thinking of them and gazing at their strong roots, bursting the earth open, showing gigantic talons—like those of legendry birds—mythical Firebirds. The Phoenix. The Simorgh.

Julio Cortazar, the exile of the Argentinean Junta, wrote that exile is an abrupt ending of a love affair… the exile and unhappiness walk hand in hand. In those days, I was in the grip of sadness. The beloved was beyond the oceans. I was here with no wings to fly. These lines of Rumi often reverberated in my head: "Since I was cut from the reedbed/ I have made this crying sound." Like Rumi, away from his beloved, I had turned into a "nay"—a flute, who made lamenting songs.

And the struggle had to go on. The absurdity of the shirts—the Halloween pumpkins on children's shirts, the fat turkeys on Thanksgiving shirts, candy canes hanging on Christmas trees. I'd become faster now, a painting machine, but I couldn't produce more than ten shirts a day. And the news from behind the locked doors was not good. My father had been arrested and tortured. As a result, he had gone through a succession of strokes and had lost the sight of one eye.

But the ultimate shock arrived a year after I'd settled in Houston. In September 1988 Khomeini ordered the mass execution of four thousand political prisoners—my comrades were among them. Had I stayed, I would have been buried in a mass grave in "Heaven of Zahara," Tehran's infamous cemetery.

This was when my recurring nightmares began.

At night, after my customary lullaby—folksongs of my remote land—I lay in my narrow bed, opposite my son's bed and watched him weeping in his dreams. He had developed the habit of beating his pillow to near death before he fell asleep, exhausted. He cried in that small dark universe of his nightmares. I'm not sure what he saw—his lost father, or the three countries he had left behind? I had to save him, but how? The house rocked and creaked with the slightest autumn breeze and my oak spoke to the roof. But her story was meant for me. Don't pound on locked doors. It brings nothing but despair.

It was during my long morning walks on North Boulevard, after dropping my son at school, when at last the seeds of a story sprouted in my head. Soon, I began planning my first novel—a novel whose images had appeared to me in recurring nightmares. I walked in the hallways of Evin, the central prison of the "Holy Republic," a guard pulling me by a leash. Now, I strolled on the boulevard to the rhythm of my heart and listened to the cry of bluejays and tapping of woodpeckers. At times, I stopped to observe the interwoven branches that had created a roof above the street. They were long, muscled arms embracing their siblings. I gazed at the play of light and shadow between the gleaming leaves and travelled to my dark alternate universe—the maze of corridors, the torture chambers, the wall of execution. They were all there—my dead ones. So, I wove a story that unveiled itself to me every night when I closed my eyes and took shape the next morning when I watched the oaks and listened to them.

Years passed and wounds almost, if not entirely, healed. The Paw Print days were behind me. I had entered graduate school for the second time and taught some courses, but mainly I supported myself and my son as a waitress—ironically, in the sidewalk café of the Alley Theatre, where I had hoped once, in vain, to work as a dramaturge. When I went up to the lobby of the theater to bring more wine and beer for the café, through the crack of the double door I watched rehearsals of my favorite plays. I couldn't help but remember my full-length play that was banned just before I went in exile. I thought about the promising career that had been abruptly canceled as it had just begun. The flute sang in my throat as I served wine to the Houston elite. What a harsh instructor exile had become—it taught me humility.

NOW GRIPPING THE WAIST OF THE TREE IN ONE HAND—AS IF SHE WERE A LOVER—AND LISTENING TO THE CAREFREE LAUGHTER OF YOUTH, I SUDDENLY AND UNEXPECTEDLY FELT AT HOME.

But a short while later I finished my novel. I had changed my creative language from Persian to English and had overcome the linguistic block. But more than anything, this achievement was a proof that my imagination and craft had not been mortally damaged by uprooting. I had won the battle with exile.

In the years that passed fast and slow at the same time, my son moved from elementary school to middle school and then high school. We relocated from our tiny cage to a slightly larger apartment surrounded by tall oaks. But I was still an alien, uprooted from my land, someone who had been "flung away," but not "set free," as Victor Hugo (himself an exile) describes. I admired and embraced the environment that I'd been thrown into, but I did not belong.

Until one day (and I even remember the day, because I took a mental note—I said to myself, "Mark this!") strolling in the Village, I reached Morningside Drive and looked up at the former Melissa's Paw Print. It was strange, but I felt nostalgic for the hard years of poverty and alienation. I crossed the street and approached the umbrella-shaped oak under which I had swallowed painful bites of sandwiches. I caressed the rough skin of the tree, as if she were the representative of all—the one bending over my former garage apartment, and the many along North Boulevard. Joyful people entered and exited an Irish bar that had opened on the first floor of the building. Now gripping the waist of the tree in one hand—as if she were a lover—and listening to the carefree laughter of the youth, I suddenly and unexpectedly felt at home. This was home, and I did not belong anywhere else. I belonged to this place, and all those closed doors had vanished.

This revelation happened twelve years after I'd arrived from the refugee camps of Afghanistan and India. But now another twelve years have passed. I have written a few more books—more as gestures of defiance. I have taught in American universities. I have overcome the exile's disease, the linguistic schizophrenia. But I have not forgotten the locked doors. True, I don't pound on them anymore, but they're there, somewhere in the horizon, suspended in midair, above oceans. I'm happy now, if happiness for a writer means remaining productive. I live in a different apartment, located under the gigantic umbrella of an oak. I have a loving companion and a dog who won't sleep at night if I don't sing him a lullaby—the old folk songs. My son has long gone—married. He is an accomplished man.

So, this all means that I've grown thick roots here, and as I'm aging, these roots may burst the metaphorical earth open and show gigantic talons. Like the Persian mythical bird, the Simorgh, the Phoenix that burns and rises from its own ashes. c

THE OLD SIXTH WARD HISTORIC DISTRICT

(Or as We Used to Call It, Del Sesto)

ALL OF US KNEW ABOUT THE ALLEN BROTHERS, WHO WE BELIEVED CREATED the wards, Houston's first six districts. My father, my aunt, and my grandmother talked about them as if the Allen Brothers were people we'd known, or people in the Bible maybe.

My teacher, however, didn't know about them. Isn't that strange? When I asked her, she said that as far as she knew, it was Sam Houston who'd made our city. There was no mention of any Allen Brothers in the teacher's edition of our textbook. "What were their first names?" she asked me. I didn't know. They were the Allen Brothers. They didn't need first names.

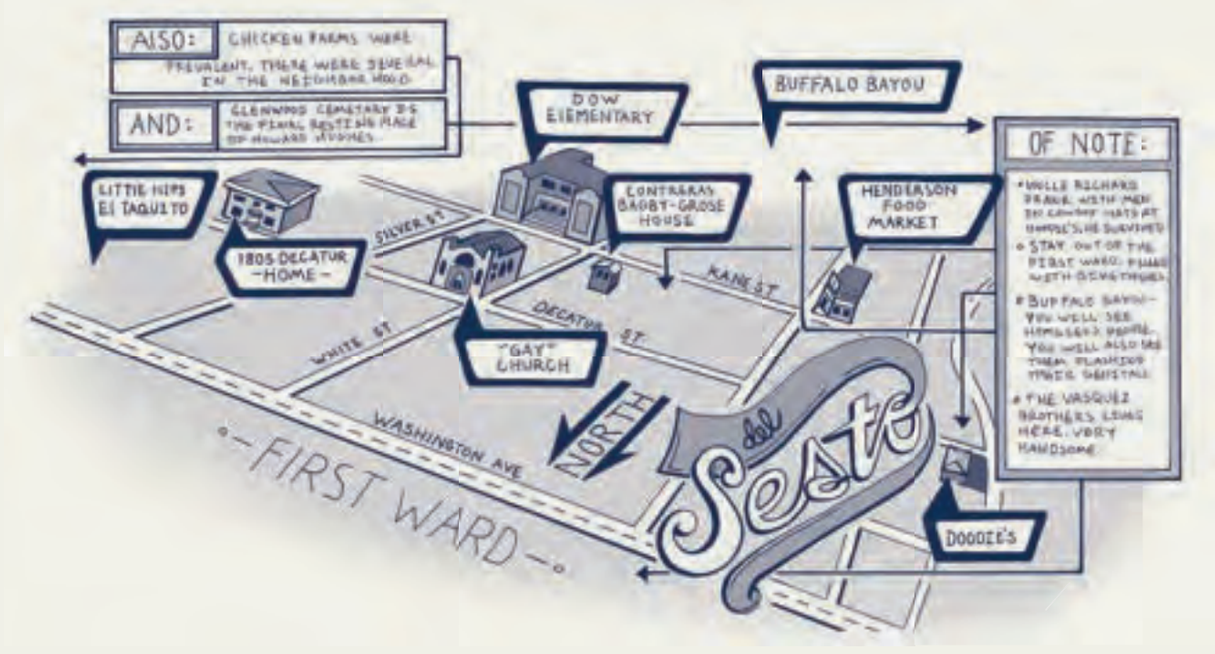
My family wasn't from the same kind of people as my teacher. Therefore, the Allen Brothers were added to the list of subjects we assumed were known only to those like us. For instance, we knew that the proper name for flip-flops was chanclas, no matter what my teacher called them. Our grocery store sold cow heads, and my teacher's did not. We knew people who lived in jail, and no one in school ever talked about jail.

And we knew the Allen Brothers had existed. There was proof: when we walked downtown, we came to that place called Allen's Landing. That was where they'd landed, my grandmother said, and I guess she meant on their boats.

Then there was the street called Allen Parkway, where I guess they used to park their boats or horses. After landing and parking, they must've built One Allen Center and Two Allen Center, the giant skyscrapers made of blue glass that hid underground sandwich shops. It made sense that my teacher didn't know any of this. Whenever I went to the Underground, the only people there were businessmen and businessladies, and the other kids like us who walked downtown.

The Allen Brothers, in their wisdom, had created six separate but equal wards—six worlds, actually, that were very close in distance, but light years away as far as I was concerned.

Across our northern border was the First Ward, a maze of rice factories and train tracks and children who liked to steal our bikes. On the other side of Downtown was the Second Ward, where ghosts and prostitutes gathered



BY GWENDOLYN ZEPEDA

on Polk Street, according to my cousin, who'd been forced to move there after marriage. Sometimes we visited her and roller-skated among the pit bulls at Eastwood Park, but we always came home before nightfall.

The Third Ward, Fourth Ward, and Fifth Ward were places we could never go. They had their own people, the Black People, who would be well within their rights to kick our asses if we ever crossed into their neighborhoods. And we were expected to patrol our own borders in the same way. It was understood, like the treaties we heard about at school that were drawn up between the White People and everybody else.

Lastly, the Allen Brothers made the Sixth Ward, which was my ward and which those in the know referred to as Del Sesto. The day after that, I suppose, the Allen Brothers rested.

Let's get our bearings now. Establish our boundaries. Own up to the truth.

The Old Sixth Ward is west of Downtown. It is defined, clockwise from the north, by Washington Avenue, Houston Avenue, Memorial Drive, and Glenwood Cemetery. It wasn't actually built by the brothers Augustus Chapman and John Kirby Allen. They were the founders of Houston, yes, but according to the Texas State Historical Association, the Sixth Ward wasn't named until 1876, 37 years after Wards First through Fourth. About 1858, it was platted by Mr. W. R. Baker as cheap homesteads for his railroad employees and for German farmers who needed places to live in town.

Did any of that matter, though? Not to me. Not then. Why would I research the Germans who built the Victorians on my street if they weren't in my teachers' textbooks and their houses were now peeling and sagging after a century of use? I didn't wonder who'd built the brick building I lived in; I only knew that our house was built in 1930 because the newspapers they'd used for insulation were printed with that date and peeking through parts of the ceiling.

I was living in modern times—the practically Space Age 1980s—and struggling through lower-classdom. The Allen Brothers were a good enough local mythology for me back then—someone in the sky to thank when the view of Downtown was particularly fine.

I used to sit in my room on the second story of our red brick house at 1805 Decatur, looking at the sliver of Washington Avenue visible between my green flowered curtains. Every evening, the nightclub called El Foco Rojo flashed its namesake red light and played loud music, alternating between ranchera favorites and Rick James' "Superfreak." Next to El Foco Rojo was the old fire station where I waited for the bus to take me to Reagan High School. Across from the fire station was the free clinic where I'd waited three hours to have my broken nose fixed before giving up and settling for permanent crookedness.

Throughout those air conditioning-less nights of 1989, I fantasized about a new Washington Avenue. I imagined the long stretch of car dealerships and taquerias replaced with coffee shops, fancy boutiques, and nightclubs with more than one English song on their jukeboxes. I wished it would be transformed into a place just as exciting and exotic as Houston's other long "W" street: Westheimer Road. I literally used to dream about it, so often I was sure my dreams were prophetic.

The year is 2011. El Foco Rojo is now a Pilates studio. The old fire station is an office where you go to inquire about the townhomes on that block. The free clinic is an art gallery. And I can still see it all from the upper northeast window of my father's house when I drive in from the suburbs to visit him. Afterwards, I might meet friends at the nearby wine bars that used to be nothing at all.

As Mimi Swartz put it in *Texas Monthly*, "The once forgotten corridor emerges as an eclectic enclave." But I always remembered the corridor, so must excuse myself from her collective.

My wish for Washington Avenue came true. I didn't understand what I was wishing for.

There's a Belgian restaurant on Washington Avenue called The Broken Spoke. Local folklore says it's owned by half of the former husband-wife team who owned Café Montrose until Hurricane Ike. They divorced and sold that café. Then the wife opened Jeannine's Bistro and the husband opened The Broken Spoke, and the two restaurants now compete for the discretionary income of Houston's crepe connoisseurs. Interesting. Both of them are on the "restaurants to try" list I keep on my iPhone.

I IMAGINED THE LONG STRETCH OF CAR DEALERSHIPS AND TAQUERIAS REPLACED WITH COFFEE SHOPS, FANCY BOUTIQUES, AND NIGHTCLUBS WITH MORE THAN ONE ENGLISH SONG ON THEIR JUKEBOXES.

But that's not why I'm Googling The Broken Spoke today. No, I'm trying to figure out what it used to be when I was a kid. I remember it so clearly: the deer heads on the wall and the waitresses serving tostadas under neon Tecate signs. The family who owned it was really into jigsaw puzzles. They'd work on big one-thousand-piece puzzles at the table by the register, putting in pieces here and there when business was slow. Their completed puzzles—Big Ben, the Eiffel Tower, a cottage garden—were rubber-cemented to poster boards and hung above the glass case that held Chiclets gum and leche quemada.

I remember every single thing about that place except its name. Did it start with a T? We used to eat there every week. I went there with my first serious boyfriend on our first serious date, only 22 years ago. Luckily, I have a computer and a connection to the Internet. I do an online search for "Broken Spoke," then search for the physical address.

I find a few dispatches from disappointed strangers posted two years ago. They're sad that Little Hip's Diner no longer exists. Little Hip's Diner was what existed after my restaurant closed, but before The Broken Spoke opened. I used to drive by it eight or ten years ago, on the way to visit my dad's house. But I never went in. I wonder, when the people who ate at Little Hip's get older and forget its name, will they feel as faithless as I do now?

Closer to the Sixth Ward's core, on the corner of Henderson and Kane, there's a neighborhood grocery-slash-convenience store. When I was in kindergarten, it was called Garcia's and featured a butcher shop in back. Mr. Garcia himself cut the meat. I used to walk there—three blocks—and purchase sliced ham and cheddar cheese, sometimes a quarter pound of headcheese, on behalf of my aunt. I'd buy her a pack of "Benson & Hedges Menthol Lights 100s," too, chanting the syllables every step of the way in order to get it right. If I came home with the right cigarettes, I'd earn the reward of being allowed to keep the change. I'd use that change to purchase a Snickers or a Moon Pie on my subsequent trip to Garcia's.

When I was 10 or 12, Garcia's was purchased by Uncle Buddy, the first black man I'd ever seen in the confines of our neighborhood. He was nice—generous with the candy. He rechristened the store in his own name, just like

the used car dealership he owned on Washington Avenue. The butcher shop became more of a grill with burgers and sandwiches. But Uncle Buddy didn't keep the store for more than a few years.

He sold it to a Vietnamese family whose name I never learned because they called the store, generically, Henderson Market. The grill became known for its "fried rice with pork," which seemed like such a delicacy to us at the time. We ordered it for breakfast, lunch, and dinner. We were addicted to the marinated pork, which I now know is thit nuong because I can now order it anywhere in Houston.

But back then, that first year of fried rice with pork, I knew nothing. That was the year that we learned not all Asian people were the same, even though we called them all "Chinese" or "Oriental." Henderson's was owned by the Vietnamese family, and Payless Market, the new grocery on Union Street, was owned by Koreans. And neither family would tolerate being confused with the other. So I learned the difference, just as I'd learned from my classmates at Dow Elementary the difference between Mexicans born in Mexico and Mexicans born here. I understood what it meant to be proud of one's country of origin right there in our neighborhood of houses built by Germans.

I believe that Henderson's Market passed through a few more hands between 1990 and 2000, the decade when I lived in not-Houston. For the moment it's still called Henderson's, and a Vietnamese family uses the back of the shop to make banh mi.

I know for certain that right at this very moment, just as when I was a kindergartener buying cigarettes in 1976, a Mister Carmen Frias is standing outside that store, having a beer and a chat with his friends. Some forces resist changes such as the cycling of gentrification. I imagine these men will be there drinking after the sun goes nova.

If you know the cycle of gentrification, you won't be surprised to hear that the gays had almost as much claim to the Sixth Ward as the Hispanics back in the 70s, 80s, and 90s. They even had their own church, which I used to call "the fag church," just like the rest of the Hispanic kids and just like an ignorant brat.

The gay church was shaped the normal way, but had strange windows. Instead of mosaic-like stained-glass saints or doves, its windows were a greenish blur. I wondered if that was meant to signify the congregation's homosexuality, but my grandmother said it was because they weren't Catholic.

Two or three Sunday mornings in a row, I walked very slowly down Decatur at Mass time, watching from the corner of my second grader's eye. What did I see? Two white men exiting a car and walking into the gay church together, almost close enough to hold hands. Then two white women doing the same. Then more: male couples, female couples, but also men and women walking alone.

After three Sundays of seeing this, I became bored by these gay people and their churchgoing. So I stopped worrying about them, along with all my friends.

I googled that church in 2011. It used to be the First Baptist Tabernacle, built in what one website tells me is the Gothic Revival Style. The building I remember is still there at 1919 Decatur. It's now an architect's office, but it remains church-shaped, greenish windows and all.

There's absolutely nothing online that describes it as a church for gays. Maybe I was wrong about that. Maybe we imagined it, all my friends and I. But the memory of exotic mystery and then blasé acceptance remains.

What else doesn't change? Dow School doesn't change, really, even though it has done quite a bit of shape-shifting and isn't technically a school anymore.

Dow Elementary was built in 1912 for the railroad workers' kids. Between its inception and 1991, Dow was attended by the children of German, Italian, Polish, Swedish, Irish, French, Swiss, Mexican, and Vietnamese immigrants. My parents were born here, so I wasn't technically an immigrants' kid, but Dow let me hang around for kindergarten and first grade in 1976 and 1977.

While I was learning from my *We Go Together* reader in Ms. Williams' class, a woman named Alice Valdez was starting an organization called MECA—Multicultural Education and Counseling through the Arts—four blocks away on the grounds of St. Joseph Church. In a small peach-colored building called Guadalupe House, she oversaw music and art lessons, tutoring sessions, summer musicals, and a sliding-fee-scale summer program for the neighborhood children. I went to MECA, too, after school and

THANKS TO THESE **HEROIC EFFORTS**, HOUSES FROM MY CHILDHOOD NOW STAND PROUD. MY CHEST SWELLS WITH SATISFACTION WHEN I SEE THEM TODAY, EVEN THOUGH THE PROCESS HAD NOTHING TO DO WITH ME.

on weekends, from 1986 to 1990, when Ms. Valdez personally drove me to the University of Texas for my freshman year.

In 1993, a much more expansive MECA moved to the historic Dow School building. With the help of the Sixth Ward Tax Increment Reinvestment Zone board (TIRZ #13), the organization began the process of restoring it.

If you go to MECA today in 2011, and climb its 40-odd cement steps past the soda-can sculpture of the Virgin de Guadalupe, you can see what they've been working on in their programs at the new building and throughout HISD schools. Sign up to volunteer. Take in a performance or register your child for violin lessons.

The inside of the Dow School now looks like a fabulous watercolor that's been laid to dry over Christmas lights and Aztec sundials. It smells like turpentine and tamales, and it echoes with children's voices and musical scales, countdowns to ONE-two-three, ONE-two-plié. I barely recognize my old alma mater.

But it feels as if a buzzing or humming underlies everything. I guess that comes from art and its creation. There's also a slight vibration that comes from the beating of parents' hearts as they watch their children on the stage. A small variance in air pressure from the sighs of parents and grandparents who mop MECA's floors to pay for lessons. All of these parents and grandparents want better lives for their offspring. You can feel it.

That's the same way it felt in that building in 1976. And I bet that's the same way it felt in 1912, too.

What's changed for the unequivocal better? The houses. I look at old photographs of my barrio and see my neighbors' homes, squatting there on Decatur, Kane, Lubbock, State, Union, Sabine, Silver, White, Henderson, Hemphill, and that strange little piece of Memorial Drive's feeder road where Gus's grandma lived.

The houses crouch next to bail bond companies, located close to the municipal court. The houses crowd against each other, front to back, over where the permanent renters used to live. The buildings stand wearily in these photos, achy and gray, but distinguishable by their shapes. I'd recognize those houses anywhere.

Someone else recognized those houses and knew the names for their shapes: Folk Victorian, Classical Revival, Queen Anne, Bungalow, Shotgun. Several people then took a handful of those houses and developed them like photographs, making them emerge more colorful and sharper around the edges. Those people formed the Old Sixth Ward Neighborhood Association, a coalition sworn to protect the houses from the plague known as developers, who'd already ravaged the land from Glenwood to Sawyer Street and were sneaking townhomes onto vacant lots on a weekly basis.

Thanks to these heroic efforts, houses from my childhood now stand proud. My chest swells with satisfaction when I see them today, even though the process had nothing to do with me.

The most successful restorations have their own names. The William A. Diehl House. The Harry A. Thomson House. The Mary Kay Wagner Ash House (she of cosmetic and pink sedan fame). I wonder if, back when the Diehls and Thomsons and Wagner Ashes lived in the Sixth Ward, they ever envisioned the decay and then the public adulation that would eventually overtake their homes.

Maybe some day there'll be houses named after people who lived in my time. I imagine the Martha Diaz House, painted a tasteful pale violet, complete with wrought iron plaque celebrating the longtime activist and Precinct 2 chairwoman. The Vasquez House would be done over in bright coral and would commemorate the handsomest set of brothers that the 1980s Sixth Ward had to offer.

The Margaret Suarez Zepeda House is what I'd modestly call the two-story brick apartment building my father bought for my grandmother. She served her community and her tenants there for years before making it into our family home. My brother is painstakingly remodeling it as we speak.

Maybe the naming will come about if I become more successful. I'll write a few more books and keep hoping. Surely someone will christen our house before I die.

The neighborhood I'm describing—Del Sesto, aka the Old Sixth Ward Historic District—only spans 25 or 30 blocks between Houston Avenue and Sawyer Street. (I can't vouch for anything between Sawyer and Glenwood.) And yet it would take me months to tell you everything that tiny slice of Houston encompasses.

Like everyone else who grows old, I look at my neighborhood and see stories. At that building behind the gas station, I see my Uncle Richard shocking us by walking his brown-skinned self into Doodie's, the neighborhood's first honky-tonk icehouse, and living to tell the tale. Simultaneously, I can see my (second) fiancé and myself, sipping Monica Pope's rosemary-scented cocktails on the patio, discussing which Asian traditions his parents will expect at the wedding.

I look at an empty spot behind St. Joseph Church and see the boardinghouse where my sons' paternal grandfather lived, back when he was a tall, blond 18 year old working for Clark Motors on Washington. I see him walking down Houston Avenue for lunch and meeting the beautiful Chicana who would become my sons' paternal grandmother.

I look at the architects' office that's sprung up next to my dad's house, and I see the field of chickens that our neighbors weren't supposed to have, and the day the boy we called Pelon taught us how to hold them.

I see all the buildings that have burned down and sprung up again. A phoenix on every block, almost.

What will you see if you go to the Sixth Ward? Parking for the nightclubs on Washington? The fireworks from Downtown on the Fourth of July? Location, location, location?

Will you see gingerbread trim and leaded-glass windows? Oak trees? A relative lack of flooding? Or the art car in that yard? Or the cow on that roof?

Will you see the decay? Remnants of the Germans, the Polish, the Mexicans, the crackheads, and "those people"? If so, can you see the melancholy that decay causes, which sometimes leads to determination? The kind of determination that builds railroads, writes novels, changes society for the better?

Or will you see all the various kinds of people living there relatively peacefully together? I invite you to go there and find out. Administer the Rorschach test that is the Sixth Ward.

Then ask yourself if the Sixth Ward is a permanent landmark, with its hard-won government-sanctioned designation. Did its newest neighbors succeed in creating a haven for so many time capsules? Or am I only fooling myself, pretending not to understand that everything in Houston eventually is temporary? C

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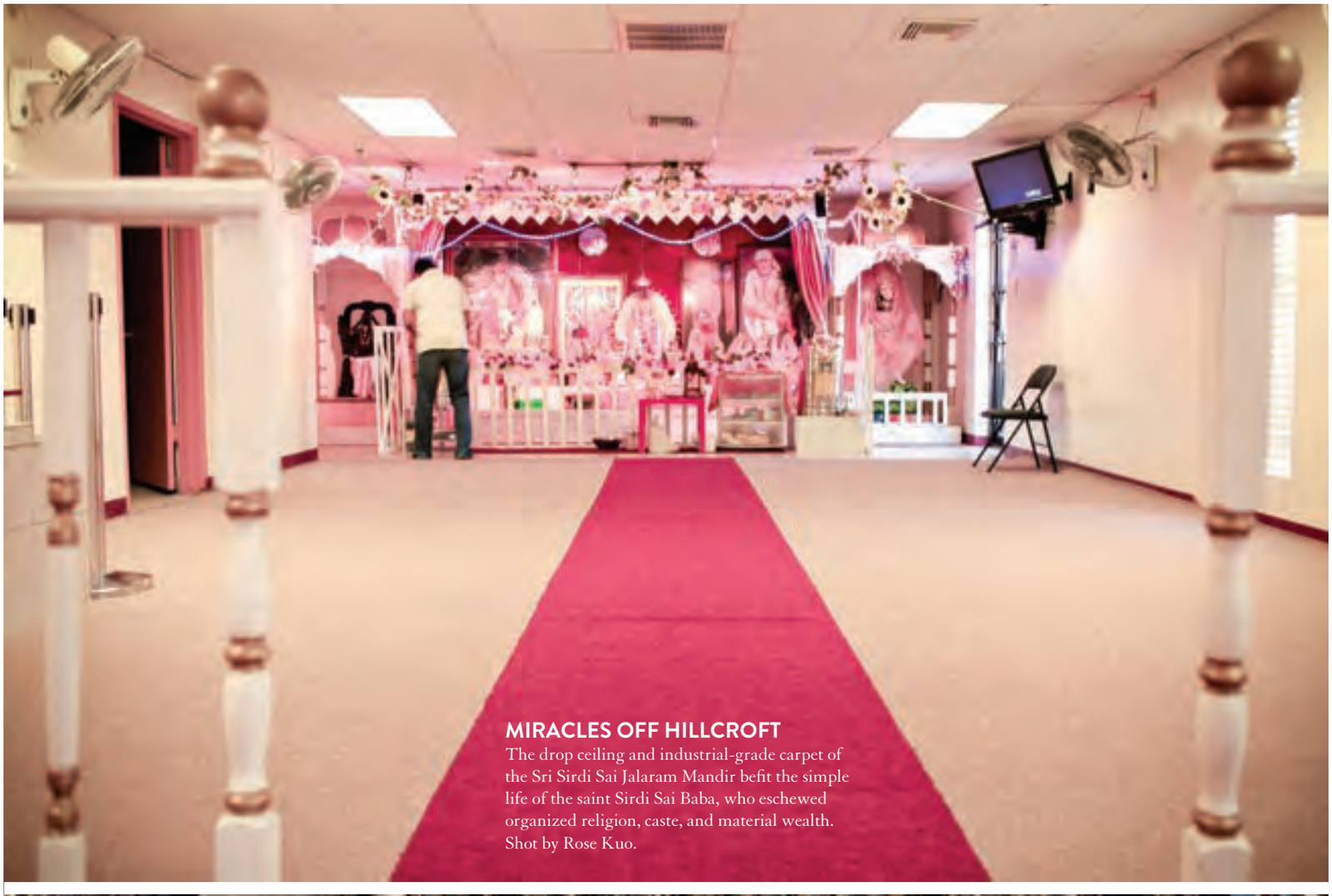
EAST SIDE SILOS
A sapling struggles to grow in the groove made by two of four silos on the lower banks of Buffalo Bayou. Shot by Jack Thompson.



MIRACLES OFF HILLCROFT
The drop ceiling and industrial-grade carpet of the Sri Sirdi Sai Jalaram Mandir befit the simple life of the saint Sirdi Sai Baba, who eschewed organized religion, caste, and material wealth. Shot by Rose Kuo.

A BAYOU TABLEAU
The unscripted spaces along the banks of the lower Buffalo Bayou provide a mysterious but humanizing escape from the city. Shot by Jack Thompson.


AMPEX
456
audiotape

AN UNZONED SOUNDTRACK
The magnetic tapes in the archives at SugarHill Studios stretch across an enormous back room. Shot by Jack Thompson.

FACE THE MUSIC
Learn your Houston music history, the wall-mounted speaker seems to shout. In contrast to the angry face, the interior of SugarHill Studio is warm and textured with various sound baffling materials. Shot by Jack Thompson.

THE SIMORGH
Many of Farnoosh Moshiri's compatriots were tortured and killed by the Iranian government. In her essay about exile, she draws strength from Houston's oaks, comparing their roots to the talons of the Simorgh, a giant mythical bird. Shot by Rose Kuo.

FIFTH WARD JAM
Dan Havel and Dean Ruck exploded what was the front of a house and transformed the side (not shown) into a stage. Shot by Jack Thompson.

SIXTH WARD, OR DEL SESTO
Writer Gwendolyn Zepeda stands on Decatur Street. She recalls the neighborhood before it received protection as a historic district. Shot by Lawrence Landers.

KEEPING THE GHOSTS HAPPY

William B. Travis Elementary School

I MOVED TO HOUSTON SIGHT UNSEEN IN 1989. MY FIRST HOUSE IN Houston was a 1926 bungalow in Woodland Heights. The name "Heights" always struck me as misleading—the area is hill-free as far as your eye can see—until Tropical Storm Allison hit in 2001. Then I learned that height is relative and that Woodland Heights was high enough.

The neighborhood reminded me of the part of New Orleans I had lived in before. All the porches faced the street, and every evening unleashed a promenade of people and pets, bikes and strollers. The neighborhood school, Travis Elementary, originally built in 1908, was three blocks away. Its most eye-catching feature was the playground. Instead of the standard boxy swing sets and monkey bars, the outdoor play structures were all replicas of dinosaur fossils. I liked the whimsy of it.

My work with Writers in the Schools (WITS) brought me inside the school once or twice a year, and I always had a good feeling about the place. The teachers were smart, loving, and creative, and the children seemed happy. Unlike most public schools, there were no uniforms, so you got a sense of each individual child. And although there was no one type of student, I tend to think of Travis as a place where tie-dyed shirts and Converse sneakers never go out of style.

In 2005 Travis closed for expansion and remodeling, reopening its doors in 2006. Danny Samuels and John Casbarian of Taft Architects led the redesign project. The new Travis Elementary incorporated the original building and built out from it. The added sections had high ceilings and natural light, giving the space a sense of freedom. The architects consciously created spaces that encourage conversation and community.

The WITS writer who was teaching at Travis that year, Kiki Przewlocki, partnered with classroom teacher Nancy Brown. They wanted to do a meaningful project with the third grade students that would both celebrate the new school and help the students see 3311 Beauchamp in a new way. First, they gave each student a camera and sent them on a quest. The students were to photograph interesting details in the building, both inside and out. The kids zoomed in on door knobs, banisters, light fixtures, and windows. Each student then chose one object to use for the project. First they painted pictures of the object using watercolors, studying the photo and bringing it to life in a new light. Next they wrote about the object using Pablo Neruda's poetry collection *Odes to Common Things* as a model. Next they labeled the object. And finally, as a kind of signature, they added photos of themselves. The children assembled their work onto poster board, and the project was exhibited at the opening ceremony of the school. According to Travis Principal Susan Walker, when she showed the project to the architects, they spent a long while studying the children's work, and it literally made them cry. The kids "got it."

The most compelling aspect of the new Travis Elementary building is how it highlights the old. Inside you see exposed brick walls mottled by a hundred years of use. You see high arched windows with their original glass panes. The classrooms of the original building are now used for the kindergarten. From the science lab, in the upstairs southeast corner of the original building, you can see the Houston skyline. Studying the exterior, you realize the façade of the old building is still intact. Houston is a city with no zoning. Often the old buildings, however historic and preserved, are destroyed and replaced without remorse. But at Travis the contemporary design actually serves to honor its past.

My daughter Pearl is in her second year at Travis, where her favorite subjects are writing and science. After school, she and her friends often play a game on the playground, among the sculpted bones, in which they are detectives tracking a ghost. They gather clues, analyze them, and follow their leads, but the ghost is elusive. They never capture it because it escapes back into the school through openings that are not accessible to them.

Schools are buildings, and they take on the character of the people who inhabit them. Over the course of a hundred years, a building absorbs many ghosts. What does one do to keep them happy? c

BY ROBIN REAGLER

AMERICA VARSHE AMERICA KANDE

Hinduism, Ornament, and the Suburban Box

IN 1983, WHEN I WAS FIVE YEARS OLD, MY FAMILY WENT ON A ROAD TRIP from our home in Mobile, Alabama, to Houston, Texas. My parents took me to two landmarks. One was the Astrodome, where I saw the Astros lose to the Cubs. The second was the Sri Meenakshi Mandir, one of the first Hindu temples in the United States and among the first in the South. The Meenakshi Mandir is located on what was, in the early eighties, the outskirts of Pearland. We must have taken the freshly laid Highway 288. I remember a huge Texas sun over farmland, and then—right after a stretch of trailer homes—the main temple tower rose up to greet us some 30 feet high and covered with icons of celestial beings.

Just imagine my perspective growing up Hindu in Alabama. The people around us, White or Black, Baptist or Pentecostal, didn't know what to make of little brown Hindu me. The monkey-brain-eating bad guys in *Indiana Jones and the Temple of Doom* were the only representations of Hindus many of them had seen. For that matter, the monkey-brain-eaters were among the only representation of Hindus I had seen. There was the *Guinness Book of World Records*, which features an embarrassingly high number of freakish Indians with titles like "Longest Fingernails," but no Wikipedia to answer my questions about Ganesh's elephant head, no Bollywood movies on Netflix Instant Watch, no Dr. Gupta flashing a toothy grin on CNN.

My parents and the other Indians in Mobile, all of whom were in the first substantial wave of Indian immigrants to the United States, did their best to raise us with strong identities by reproducing holidays like Republic Day of India, Navratri, and Divali, as well as Easter, July 4th, and Christmas. We met in family rooms with the couches pushed against the wall. We met in school gymnasiums. We met at the Jewish Community Center on Sundays. However, I had never beheld a monument to our culture in the United States, never experienced a place with our iconography, a place with bonafide Hindu priests, a place that served our food—in short, a place of our own.

Though I was tired after the long drive from Alabama to Texas—the outskirts of Pearland no less—I knew the temple visit had great significance. It demonstrated that we too had a stake in America, that we could assimilate, retain our core beliefs, and make an impact through our culture.

Fastforward. I now live in Houston and am the editor of *Cite: The Architecture and Design Review of Houston*. The publication is almost as old as I am. In fact, it was launched the year I visited Houston as a five-year-old. When we digitized the archives, lo and behold, I found a brief review of the Meenakshi Mandir from 1988 (available at citemag.org).

The reviewer, an architecture critic based at Texas A&M named Malcolm Quantrill, ridiculed the temple for its "confusion of scale" because it is "a suburban miniature version" of a temple compound in Madhurai, India. He calls it a "brick-and-concrete reproduction of history [that] is neither true to size nor material." Quantrill saves his most cutting wit for the interior: "We find ourselves inside a flat-ceilinged surburban box, an impression unchanged by the profusion of gods. The holy water and incense might remind me that these Catholic practices have a Hindu root, but the overall effect is of a Tupperware party in Tomball."

I am tempted to be offended, to condemn the review for insensitivity. The only problem is that Quintrell was right. I can, in fact, heap on more details. For example, in India, you would be hard put to find a temple that crams in as many different gods and goddesses as the Pearland Meenakshi Mandir. Though Hindus believe the divine takes thousands upon thousands of forms, typically any given temple is devoted to only one form. A Ganesh temple. A Kali temple. A Krishna temple. Pearland packs in deities popular in North India and South India, deities popular among divergent sects, both Saivite and Vaishnav, and even deities from Jainism, a religion in India arguably distinct from Hinduism.

Another problem with the Pearland temple is that it has no story about why it is where it is. All of India is, for Hindus, what Palestine and Israel are for the Abrahamic religions. Scriptures and folklore provide reasons for

BY RAJ MANKAD

the specific locations of many temples. For example, the Somnath temple is located on a site with a breathtaking view of the Arabian sea and is where the Moon god built a golden temple to Siva. The full story is a juicy one involving jealousy between lovers, a curse, and an explanation for why the moon waxes and wanes. Destroyed over and over again by Mahmud Ghazni and a host of other invaders, sultans, and emperors over its thousand-plus year history, it is the persistance of icon worship and the lore of the location that matter most. What's the story behind the location of the Meenakshi temple in Pearland—cheap property?

These problems with the Meenakshi temple all point to the tremendous challenge Hindus face in the United States. How are we really to reproduce a four thousand-year-old tradition, so deeply rooted in the land of its origin, so tied to specific building materials and practices, and so embedded in a social matrix of such complexity that it inevitably bewilders Americans? Christianity and Islam grew through evangelism and conquest, but Hinduism is a messy stubborn agglomeration that evolved where it always was.

Houston's Indian community in the late seventies and early eighties did the best they could with the money and expertise they had. In Pearland, they included so many gods and goddesses in order to draw in supporters from different communities, and thus to gather enough money to build, even if it was a surburban-box-miniature-doll-house version of the original with tile floors instead of marble and tupperware vessels instead of copper ones.

Now, in 2011, Houston has more Hindu temples than I can keep track of. The BAPS Swaminarayan Mandir, located in Stafford/Sugar Land and completed in 2004, stands out among all of them. It was designed according to Hindu architectural manuscripts known as the Shilpa-Shastras and constructed from Turkish limestone and Italian marble shipped to India where it was hand-carved in 33,000 pieces. When I visited the Sugar Land BAPS mandir, the wind blew through the columns. The open walls, the long passages leading to murthis, were indeed in perfect proportion. I was transfixed by a visceral memory of a visit I made to a lonely six-hundred-year-old Jain temple in Ranekpur, Rajasthan.

And yet, I prefer the "postmodern classic" Meenakshi mandir in Pearland over the reproduction of the ancient at the BAPS mandir in Sugar Land. I like ornamentation slathered on a suburban box more than Vedic proportions rendered in marble. Here's why. The make-do spirit of the 1980s Indian-American community was profoundly inclusive. The mash-up of divinities under a drop ceiling is a fuller expression of the humanist traditions in Hinduism than most temples in India.

The BAPS mandir in Sugar Land is a traditional mask for a sect that goes back only to the mid-nineteenth century, something like a Mormon Temple. The icons at the center of the temple are not of Ganesh, Shiva, and Krishna. Rather, marble carvings of the BAPS sect leaders sit in the most privileged spots. Adjacent to the temple of Turkish limestone and Italian marble, you will see the same steel beam construction in a moat of asphalt that the rest of Houston is made of. When the view of the temple includes those air-conditioned boxes that house lessons, dances, and receptions, you are faced with the same contradictions you see in Pearland. The India of the Shilpa-Shastras no longer exists, but we want to brace ourselves against a relentlessly fragmented world by invoking religious authority and teaching our children moral values. The marble temple reproduction and the big box community hall, together, manifest the contradictions that, say, an Indian molecular biologist faces in raising her daughter with a strong connection to her heritage.

The huge parking lots at both the Pearland and Sugar Land sites are the defining departures from traditional Hindu temples in India. Traditionally, the visit to a temple was about the total experience—fasting and bathing ahead of time, collecting offerings, the journey to the site, the company of your fellow travelers, the sounds, the smells, and the lore. It is not the architecture that matters most but the unifying rhythm of life, all of it culminating in the witnessing, or "darshan," of divine icons. In Houston, where we move from one air-conditioned bubble to the next, where the state does not support the construction of religious monuments, where bourgeois professionals drive the culture, it is no wonder that our temples are thin and insubstantial, closer cousins to Home Depot than Tirupati.

In his 1988 *Cite* article, Quantrill suggests Edwin Lutyens, the British architect of colonial Delhi, could have resolved the problems of the Pearland temple. The patrons of the Houston temples—doctors, lawyers, engineers, and business leaders raised in India—would likely balk at such a suggestion. Does the post-Indian Independence work of Le Corbusier, Louis Kahn, Charles Correa, and Balakrishnan Doshi offer any direction for spiritual spaces? No celestial nymphs adorn the High Court in Chandigarh.

Houston does have some alternative models. The Chinmaya Mission on Synott Road uses good proportions, a courtyard connecting the temple and classrooms, and a dome that doubles as the abstract form of the Siva Linga to good effect. However, if you want to see a place that exudes the raw spirituality of India, a place that doesn't bother at all with reproducing Indian architecture and doesn't need to, don't go to Pearland or to Sugar Land. Let me give you directions. Ride a bus to the Hillcroft Transit Center. I recommend the 132 Harwin line, which hurtles down the Southwest Freeway HOV lane. Or, if you must, drive a car to the Hillcroft exit. You are in what I consider to be the most vibrant part of the city, the omphalos, the "it" of Houston's wildly international mish-mash. Head north on Hillcroft. Pass the Chevron. Watch out for buses departing for Monterrey, Mexico. Pass Udipi Cafe. Pass Roop Sari Palace. Don't notice Babe's Cabaret strip club. Turn right when you see Raja Quality Restaurant-Sweets but don't stop there. Behind the Raja Sweets strip mall is an old office park, though "office park" conjures the wrong image. What you will see looks more like a series of storage units adapted into little shops—a tailor, an eye-brow threader, a travel agent—and four places of worship. In the second row of units, across from a masjid, look for dozens of shoes that mark the door to the Sri Sirdi Sai Baba Jalaram Mandir.

> IN HOUSTON, WHERE WE MOVE FROM ONE AIR-CONDITIONED BUBBLE TO THE NEXT, WHERE THE STATE DOES NOT SUPPORT THE CONSTRUCTION OF RELIGIOUS MONUMENTS...IT IS NO WONDER THAT OUR TEMPLES ARE THIN AND INSUBSTANTIAL, CLOSER COUSINS TO HOME DEPOT THAN TIRUPATI.

Sai Baba was a man of unknown origins, widely believed to have been born Muslim, who lived in the early twentieth century in a tiny town outside of Bombay. Muslims and Hindus alike consider him to have been a saint. He lived in a shack, didn't own anything, and eschewed disciples and categorization. The lore of his miracles is extensive and the humble temple off Hillcroft has been the site of many reported miracles. I myself, as you might have determined, am not one for miracles, prayers, and straightforward spiritual faith, but I love to visit. The worshippers will welcome you, they may feed you, and they will tell you first thing that your being there is, in itself, a miracle. Or, they may express embarrassment and implore you to visit their new suburban location in Sugar Land. c

EAST SIDE RUINS

Delighting in Unscripted Spaces Along Buffalo Bayou

WHEN I FIRST MOVED TO THE EAST END (EASTWOOD, SPECIFICALLY) FROM the Heights in 1999, it almost felt like I was becoming the citizen of a new city. That is, the East End felt new, or at least different, because, unlike most of Houston, it's obviously old. At first I did double takes at the signs denoting businesses that had been up and running since the 1910s and 20s. Suhm Spring Works, at 2710 McKinney, was founded in 1885.

Eastwood Park, two blocks from my house, was established in 1914, when the area was very diverse. The few times I've felt like an Anglo interloper in the barrio, I've reminded myself that today's Canal Street used to be named German Street. And strictly speaking, I'm German.

I found a still older layer of Houston when my young son Gabriel and I began exploring Buffalo Bayou, walking or biking the paved paths that line sections of its banks. That "antique Houston" is marked by what I like to call the Ruins of Houston—the mostly abandoned sites of the manufacturers who built along the bayou to have pre-Ship Channel access to water-borne shipping.

My favorite way to visit these intriguing remains is to park at Tony Marron Park, on North York between Navigation and Clinton, and then walk under the freeway overpass and down to a stretch of pavement on the south side of one of the bayou's bends. In the Buffalo Bayou Partnership's visionary master plan of 2002, this is the spot designated as the Boat Landing, with the dreamed of Symphony Island just steps away. Will there ever be a man-made island here, as the master plan envisions, serving as an outdoor summer home to the Houston Symphony and other musicians? Probably not.

In any case, if you start walking or biking toward downtown from this spot, you can follow the path all the way to Guadalupe Plaza and Talento Bilingüe, on the edge of downtown. There's one easily navigable break in the pavement. I've never timed it, but a power walker could probably make it in 30 or 40 minutes.

Gabriel and I made the short hike last Thanksgiving. But first we found an unusually elaborate soccer match going on at the Tony Marron pitch. The teams wore almost professional looking uniforms; an African-American man was apparently playing on one of the teams (I heard him speak, and he wasn't Latino), as he sported the same regalia and shin guards.

Near one goal a full drum kit was set up, and a boy of fourteen or so, seated on a drummer's stool, periodically thumped the bass drum with his foot pedal. A substantial crowd had gathered, and in general it was a festive scene.

But not where we lingered. We were in somebody else's cultural world, whose citizens happily ignored us as we walked past them and under the overpass to what feels, in a congenial way, like a no-man's-land. That is, the bayou below North York feels foreign, exotic, generally forgotten and therefore open to all. Though it's not quite as forgotten as it was a few years ago, because now the pavement bears a gang tag. And the old Tiphook shipping container, which has been resting on the bank during the ten or so years I've been making this walk, is now covered in gang hieroglyphics.

You can see why the Buffalo Bayou Partnership envisioned this bend as a boat launching area (and perhaps even a small marina), because that's what the section of bank used to be. There's a small, abandoned dock here, evidenced mostly by a line of rusting cleats. What kind of small vessel would've tied up in this unprepossessing spot? What cargo would they have carried?

The day was warm for late November, but a cool breeze made rippling patterns across the bayou's surface. So we set off.

Past the old dock the pavement ends and the still clearly marked dirt path starts to rise; the bayou bank towers a good one hundred feet above the water; the rise is mostly filled with leafless, scrubby looking trees of one invasive species or other. Trash trees, I've heard them called. A long, featureless concrete wall looms above the bank, its base obscured by the brown tangle of

BY DAVID THEIS

branches. What will archeologists of the future think about a civilization that threw up such utterly featureless walls? I like to think we'll seem inscrutable.

A few industrial plants, some abandoned, some in service, still line both banks of the bayou. On the north side, an old plant or warehouse has recently been demolished, clearing the view toward downtown. Through this new opening I saw the ruins I most wanted to inspect today, the twin brick chimneys of what I believe used to be a glass factory. The factory itself is long gone, and the chimneys are choked by trees and brush.

To reach them Gabriel and I had to cross a small bridge that runs across one of the bayou's tiny tributaries. For a bicyclist, this would be an insanely dangerous spot, because the bridge was never finished. The pavement ends at the west end of the bridge, and on its east end the bridge was never properly connected to the unpaved section of the path that runs on to the old dock—there's an unannounced drop-off of a good foot and a half. A speeding bicyclist would go down face first.

The path continues to climb as it follows a bend in the stream, and soon the brick chimneys poke up out of the vegetation. People come and go here; no doubt there are homeless encampments, and the city has business back here as well. A break in the scrubby trees that leads near the chimneys. A large tractor had been through at some point, leaving clearly etched tracks in the hard clay.

You have to push through the branches to get from this path down to the chimneys. I hadn't been to their base in several years, and getting there was more of an effort than I remembered. And when we made it I was a little disappointed. I'd expected to find more old glass than we did. I remembered seeing some fairly antique medicine bottles (I've read somewhere that old bottles marked "cocaine" have been found there, from when the drug was legal), which now I wished that I'd collected, but today the historic pickings are slim.

Still it's satisfying to stand at the connected chimneys' base and look up; they're maybe 50 feet tall, and their weathered red brick looks aged and significant, even though one chimney is now marked with a rather oversized hand-drawn yellow phallus. Given the dimensions and shape of the chimneys, the illustration seems redundant.

There was an odd sight at the base: a large pile of what I took to be gray feathers. I imagined this to be some sort of Santeria site, and told Gabriel not to stand on it. Then I looked closer and saw that the gray pile was made of hair. Less evocative perhaps than feathers, but quite a bit more mysterious. It looked like a gathering of old homeless men had hacked off their beards right there.

Gabriel saw some piles of gravel he wanted to climb, so we pushed through the growth into an open space crossed by a train track. He ran off to play and I followed. I saw signs of floods, going back who knew how far in time. That is, tree trunks were crammed here and there into the overgrowth; some trunks rested on top of other trees. Seashells peeked out of the dirt.

Following the train track I soon came to an open space with a clear view of downtown. In the view's foreground stood a thoroughly tagged wall, and beyond it a Second Ward neighborhood. To the right I saw the real highlight of the ruins tour (one that is much easier to get to than the chimneys), a line of four mysterious looking silos. And in the background stood the skyline. It was perhaps the most textured view I'd ever had of downtown. To finish the scene off, the bass drum from the soccer pitch began thumping away.

Then some contraption in a nearby factory began giving off the same piercing sound that the giant ants made in the 1950s sci-fi classic *Them*, so I pulled Gabriel off a pile of abandoned railroad ties and we pushed our way back down to the silence of the paved path.

By now Gabriel was ready to head home, but I assured him that we were close to his favorite spot on the bayou, and perhaps in Houston: the silos.

The Houston landscape and cityscape are not particularly differentiated; vast stretches of Houston look pretty much like other vast stretches. But the silos and adjoining spaces are truly unique. The silos themselves are unmarked, and look much more mysterious than they probably are. (Ships must have taken on rice here.) But, in their very blankness (except for the vine that is growing on one of them, almost from top to bottom, that looks like a trompe l'oiel painting), they look like Houston's pyramids, as did the now-demolished silos that once towered over Buffalo Bayou at Waugh. (I want to call those silos lamented but in truth I can't remember their name. I do lament the apartments that were built in their place.)

And the silos are only part of a "ruin complex." A few steps away lies the slab of some old building. The slab is maybe 80 by 40 yards, and is still partially walled on two sides, so it's not just a blank slate.

And between the slab and the silos stands a big rock—a boulder, really—that doesn't seem to belong in Houston. Maybe it's a meteor. Whatever it is, Gabriel loves to climb it. He and a friend came down here last summer with Gabriel's seldom-used video camera. This is one of the few spots in Houston that moves him to break it out. He and the friend filmed a chase scene, one of them in hot pursuit of the other, across the slab, then up over the rock, and toward the silo.

The Buffalo Bayou Partnership has made some effort to reclaim the silos and the adjoining grounds. A video artist projected images on their blank walls last summer. St. Arnold's Brewery "adopted" the site. But now the St. Arnold's marker is tagged beyond recognition. Homeless people sleep in some of the silos' hiding places.

Still, there aren't many spaces in Houston where you say, somebody should shoot a movie here; this is one of them.

If you walk just another five minutes or so, you find yourself on the northeastern bend of downtown. At the Teatro Bilingüe complex, that is, and the hulking Alexan Lofts. That brick pile nearly became a ruin itself, after the city-sponsored Mercado del Sol that it once housed flopped so catastrophically in the late eighties.

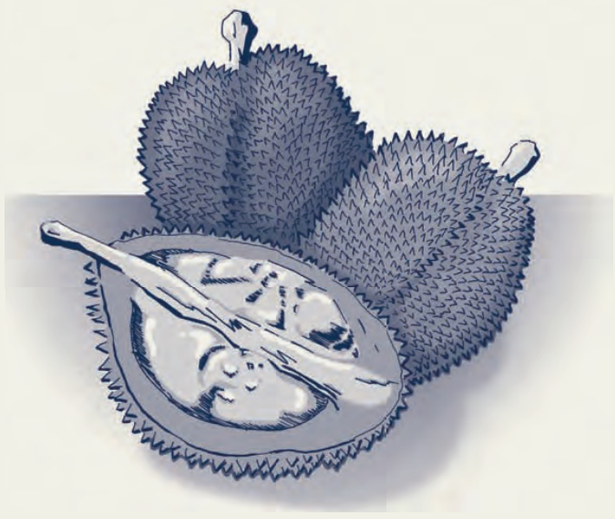
Now the massive building has been reclaimed and made into apartments. Will the rest of the bayou be successfully reclaimed as well, and brought back into daily use? I'd be a hypocrite to say that it shouldn't be. I was thrilled by the Bayou Plan's vision, and used to daydream about living in the simultaneously green and urban space that the plan lays out. I believed that the city should make implementing the plan its number one priority, and build the new waterside neighborhoods, and carve out the downtown island that it calls for; then we'd have a real city on our hands, one that would make New York and Chicago take notice.

But I have to admit I would miss the vaguely haunted walks that today's mostly forgotten landscape provides. I'm not sure the planned developments will inspire my son to take out his camera. c

THE SILOS ARE ONLY PART OF A "RUIN COMPLEX." A FEW STEPS AWAY LIES THE SLAB OF SOME OLD BUILDING... MAYBE 80 BY 40 YARDS, AND IS STILL PARTIALLY WALLED UP ON TWO SIDES.

QUE HUONG SUPERMARKET

Rewinding 2600 Travis



IF A TIME-LAPSE CAMERA HAD BEEN PLACED ON THE CORNER OF 2600 Travis from 1986 to today, it would have captured a dilapidated building refurbished by contractors and painters, bricks coated in creamy white paint, neon blue and green words with accent marks scattered in Mylar across windows and walls. Then people carry out newly purchased baskets of purple mangosteens and boxes of yellow-green durians; men and women hoist whole roasted pigs in cardboard boxes wrapped in red cellophane for weddings; a mass of people, some in ao dai—silk colors floating before your eyes—celebrate with dancing Chinese lions and Fu dogs; and the residue of firecrackers pile up in the corners of walls and doors.

Suddenly, we would see the taking down of signs and the shuttering of doors. Just as quickly, the contractors and painters appear again: glass windows everywhere and bricks coated in dark gray. A limo pulls up to the front entrance facing McGowen Street. The back parking lot is filling up with cars, and the valet boys are running so fast you can hardly see them.

I knew 2600 Travis before Bryan Caswell's restaurant Reef, back when it was Que Huong Supermarket, a small, Vietnamese-owned "mall" with several businesses within its tacky, green linoleum hallways: the market itself, Hong Kong Restaurant, Thien An Sandwich Shop, Pho Cong Ly, and Le Nam Hair Salon. In the late 1970s, Midtown Houston was home to Little Saigon, a neighborhood (a village) of Vietnamese and Vietnamese Americans, who pioneered the redevelopment of Midtown. Travis and Milam Streets were viewed as a mirror image of 1970s-era Saigon. The Vietnamese areas were established around Milam Street, Webster Street, Fannin Street, and San Jacinto Street. My father, with his prescient knowledge of Houston, had decided on this city as our home after reading an article about the Space City when we landed in Miami in 1975. We moved to Houston in 1979. A general practitioner, he soon opened his medical clinic in the St. Joseph Medical Plaza on Webster and Crawford Street. He invested in the brand new construction and became co-owner of the building with a group of doctors. He wooed other friends to set up shop there. Others came to Houston at my father's behest and built freestanding clinics on Milam (some of which still run today).

His clinic was on the first floor with easy access to the street. Through high school and college, and even graduate school, the clinic was a summer home for my siblings and me—we would work there, assisting my parents and the nursing staff by weighing patients and retrieving files. I learned a lot of medical terms and learned to recognize some individual symptoms just by watching my father in action.

It was a family business. And because it was my family, my mother was really in charge. She had encouraged my father to invest in the building and had determined that the first floor clinic was the best: since the front

BY LONG CHU

> WHAT MY FATHER DIDN'T KNOW WAS THAT MY MOTHER WAS INDEED PRACTICING HEALING, BUT OF A DIFFERENT KIND: SHE WAS REDEFINING SOOTHSAYING AS SOOTHE-SAYING.

door was facing south, it would be the most prosperous location for his practice. She set the hours. She designed the waiting room and chose which magazines to place there. She made sure the clinic had a family room with a well-upholstered sofa where she could nap after lunch. This family room, much to my father's chagrin, was also my mother's "clinic," where she practiced a less reputable healing art: palmistry and card reading. On some days, my mother had more clients than he did.

My father railed unsuccessfully against the mysticism. He rebuked my mother for practicing the less scientific art. What my father didn't know was that my mother was indeed practicing healing, but of a different kind: she was redefining soothsaying as soothe-saying. She would hold a client's hand, reassuring her that a dallying husband would come back, or lament with another client that it was time to move on. She would reveal an "answer" that a woman already had in her heart but only needed the room to speak it out loud in the soothing presence of a friend. Most of her clients were women who struggled mightily against the chafing roles of women in a Vietnamese society, and my mother provided and encouraged the redefinition of those roles as revealed in cards and the lines of a palm.

My mother was keenly excited when Que Huong Supermarket opened in 1985. The owners, Tran Van Thanh and his wife, Tong Thi Phuong, were patients of my father's. They were also clients of my mother's. The Thanhs had owned a small Vietnamese market on Leeland Street. They wanted to expand and open a dream market, they told my mom. "Imagine, we can import fresh durians, fresh mangosteens, unimaginable jackfruits," Mrs. Phuong said when she came in one day for a reading. "We have a site in mind." My mom was in agreement. She was delighted by the prospect of fresh fruits from home. The intricate lines on Mrs. Phuong's weary hands promised prosperity.

Indeed Que Huong Supermarket had everything. My mother no longer had to make her own tofu, which she did for years, boiling and pressing soybeans into curds in a process that would take several days, plus several days more for the tofu cake to firm up. What greedy delight in my mother's eyes when she saw baskets and baskets of mangosteens! The surprisingly hard purple rind gives way when the fruit is pressed between one's palms, revealing nestled inside a white flesh reminiscent of peach, grape, and strawberry. At that time, this market was the only place in all of Houston where you could place an order for a whole roasted suckling pig for weddings and Tet celebrations.

Mrs. Phuong's lines did not lie, but they did not foretell when the prosperity would end. And if my mom knew, she did not reveal to Mrs. Phuong that her prosperity was tied to my mother's "prediction" that the wind was shifting from Midtown to the rapidly expanding Asian Town on Bellaire Boulevard between Highway 59 and the newly built Beltway 8, which made travel to that area from other parts of the city incredibly fast. My mother predicted the shift because she knew a lot of people, and they would talk, and the talk was of change. She also knew by her own altered habits: by 2002 and 2003, we were spending more time in shops off of Bellaire Boulevard and often drove all the way out there for lunch and dinner in the newly built restaurants. My mother encouraged my father to close his clinic and sell his shares of the building at St. Joseph Medical Plaza. She also encouraged my brother, who was already practicing dentistry, to open a medical/dental office and let my father work there part-time to anchor the medical portion of the practice. And so in 2005 my father closed his office in Midtown, where he had been practicing for 26 years.

Que Huong Supermarket shuttered its doors in 2006. Mr. Thanh and Mrs. Phuong now run a smaller grocery store, with nowhere near the influence of Que Huong Supermarket, on Bellaire Boulevard across the street from the behemoth Hong Kong Supermarket (whose family ironically had their start in a small eatery within the Que Huong Supermarket mall). My father's leaving encouraged other colleagues to leave, and as certain as if the future were written in the lines of their hands, the Vietnamese community left Midtown and moved southwest. A few restaurants remain along Milam and Travis Streets now, but it is nothing like it was in the heyday of the 1980s and 90s.

Reef Restaurant opened its gleaming glass door at 2600 Travis in July 2007 to rave reviews. If you check out their website, you will learn that Bryan Caswell is a handsome, young chef and a powerful force on the national culinary scene. Caswell and Reef are collecting awards left and right: James Beard Award Nominee; Best Chef/Southwest 2010; Top 10 Best New Chefs (*Food & Wine* magazine); Number One Seafood Restaurant in the U.S. (*Bon Appétit* magazine); one of the 50 Best New U.S. Restaurants (*Travel & Leisure* magazine). There is a link on the website to magazine articles and photos of beautiful people celebrating the worthy success of Reef.

But what I remember is Que Huong Supermarket with the scent of dried shrimp and fish sauce, and stocks of bamboo shoots and roasted ducks, and I wonder if the people at Reef know they are partying where I used to shop for tofu, look out for fresh durians for my mother, and pick out red envelopes for li xi for my nephews and nieces. I wonder if they know they are probably standing where carcasses of suckling pigs were sprayed down and roasted so the skin puffed and crunched, then coated in obligatory red for worship ceremonies. I imagine the spicy note of star anise, so heavily present in a bowl of pho, still floating in the refined air of the new space.

Perhaps Bryan Caswell knows the history of the building. I imagine that he does. In doing my research for this essay, I ordered from his dessert menu the Vietnamese coffee tart. It was delightful and deep. I could taste the chicory note and the condensed milk—all ingredients of a good strong Vietnamese coffee like the ones I ordered often from a food stand at Que Huong Supermarket so many years ago. The walls in Reef are decked out in a bleached-green glass that was carried to shore from the ocean, which we crossed in 1975 to make our home in America: both in Houston, and in many ways, in the market that was once at 2600 Travis. c

SUGARHILL RECORDING STUDIOS

The Story of a House

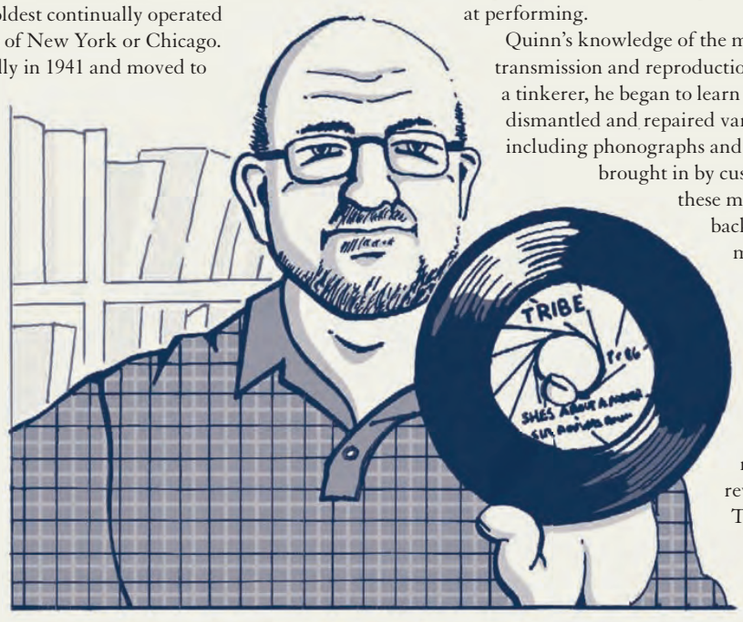
JUST SOUTH OF OLD SPANISH TRAIL AND WEST OF WAYSIDE, IN A WORKING-class enclave that backs up to the railroad yard and cargo terminal at Produce Row, stands a two-story box of a building at 5626 Brock Street. Situated on a large lot with tall trees, it has a monotone sheet-metal façade. From the street it appears to have no windows, just a blank face. On the main west side is a fenced and gated parking area. Along the wall within that spacious enclosure, a dark awning over a solid door signifies the main entrance. The building looks nothing like the neighboring houses (mostly small, sagging, wood-frame residences over a half-century old). If you stand far enough back in the parking area and survey the upper part of the structure, you can glimpse the apex of an off-center roofline. That's the only clue that this sprawling, postmodern-industrial edifice was actually constructed around an older architectural core that was once a family home.

That home, like the family who lived there, is unknown to most Houstonians, despite its housing the oldest continually operated recording studio in the nation outside of New York or Chicago. An independent facility founded locally in 1941 and moved to this location around 1950, it first gained fame under the Gold Star name, but has been known since the early 1970s as SugarHill Studios. In 70 years of operation, an astonishing range of musicians—Lightnin' Hopkins, Willie Nelson, the Big Bopper, Clifton Chenier, Lucinda Williams, Maxie Granados, and Beyoncé Knowles, to name a few—has recorded there.

MEET THE PATRIARCH

William Russell ("Bill") Quinn (1904-1976), a Massachusetts native and self-trained public address system soundman for a traveling carnival company, became a Houstonian by accident. In 1939 a broken car axle stranded him and his wife here as they drove toward the carnival troupe's winter home in Florida. In need of funds, the crafty Quinn took advantage of Houston's no-zoning municipal policy on land use and posted a "Radio Repair" sign in the front window of the place where they were staying until the car was drivable again, a house belonging to one of his wife's relatives. Soon he began to draw customers and make money, one fix-it job at a time. Within a few weeks, he had earned so much cash that he chose to abandon the carny life and settle permanently in southeast Houston.

A few months later, Quinn rented space in an old storefront at 3104 Telephone Road and opened his one-man venture, Quinn Radio Service. Business was good, for in Houston (and elsewhere) in 1940, radios were hugely popular, both the technological focal point of most homes and a primary source of entertainment and news. And those old-style tube radios often required adjustments or repairs, services that Quinn was adept at performing.



Quinn's knowledge of the mechanics of electronic sound transmission and reproduction soon expanded. Essentially a tinkerer, he began to learn more about recording as he dismantled and repaired various newfangled devices, including phonographs and early home disk recorders, brought in by customers. The mystery of how these machines could capture and play back sound must have fascinated the man. Likely driven more by simple curiosity than by any visionary entrepreneurship, he continued to experiment and observe the results.

After much trial and error, Quinn eventually figured out how to make primitive recordings entirely on his own—a revolutionary breakthrough in Texas at the time. To do so, he had to utilize recycled materials and makeshift devices. For example, he located and

BY ROGER WOOD

OPPOSITE: Andy Bradley, SugarHill's Chief Engineer for the past 27 years.

purchased scrapped pressing equipment from up north, then renovated it. He also amassed scratched or damaged records from various sources, broke them into little pieces, pulverized them in a coffee-grinder, and melted the remnants to form the raw "biscuit dough" material necessary for producing copy disks from an acetate master.

In 1941, having decoded the fundamental secrets of recording and reproducing sound, Quinn refocused his business plan, changing the company name to Quinn Recording. It was a daring venture, given that deep knowledge of recording technology was then still a closely held secret in an industry controlled by five major companies based in Chicago and New York. Moreover, shellac—one of the essential raw materials for making records at that time—was largely unavailable for civilian use during World War II, a shortage that alone almost shut down the recording industry nationwide. Yet the studio company that Quinn founded not only survived, but remains in business in Houston today, despite an eventual relocation and various changes in ownership.

HE ALSO AMASSED SCRATCHED OR DAMAGED RECORDS FROM VARIOUS SOURCES, BROKE THEM INTO LITTLE PIECES, PULVERIZED THEM IN A COFFEE-GRINDER, AND MELTED THE REMNANTS TO FORM THE RAW "BISCUIT DOUGH" MATERIAL NECESSARY FOR PRODUCING COPY DISKS FROM AN ACETATE MASTER.

Though at first it mainly produced radio advertisements or jingles, Quinn's solo enterprise by 1944 had expanded to encompass not only recording, but also the mastering, pressing, and distributing of 78 RPM disks. His first few productions were for his own short-lived Gulf Records label, which issued only four records (three by white country singers and another by an African-American blues ensemble).

In 1946 Quinn closed the experimental Gulf Records enterprise and launched his Gold Star Records label. Its soon-abandoned slogan, "King of the Hillbillies," indicated that he initially expected to focus squarely on traditional country music. Yet over the next four years, Gold Star recorded a wide range of artists performing in a dazzling variety of ethnic styles. There was plenty of country music, to be sure, but also Cajun music, western swing, gospel, German polkas, Tejano conjunto, and lots of blues, both the primal solo guitar style and the fully orchestrated version that would soon give way to R&B.

From today's perspective, the Gold Star imprint represents some of the most significant documentation of regional musical styles in Texas at the time. But Quinn's motivation was not archival in nature: he was simply looking to record material for which there might be demand on regional jukeboxes. Perhaps, as a Massachusetts-born outsider, Quinn also lacked some of the ingrained prejudices that were then common among white men in the South, making it easier for him to cross certain cultural boundaries. Whatever the case, Quinn's self-built studio, like the one that would replace it at the turn of the decade, embraced a no-zoning ethos in direct reflection of his adopted city, a burgeoning metropolis of people from myriad communities. To local musicians, Quinn in effect offered an open mic.

Gold Star Records produced four national hits in the late 1940s, all by performers from minority groups. The first featured the fiddler and singer Harry Choates, a native of Vermilion Parish in southwest Louisiana. Growing up on the Texas side of the Sabine River in Port Arthur, Choates had absorbed the Cajun music traditions that inspired his spirited 1946 Gold Star recording of the classic waltz "Jole Blon," sung entirely in French patois. It became an unlikely nationwide phenomenon, cresting twice at the number four position on Billboard's Most Played Juke Box Folk Records list in early 1947. The following year Gold Star scored two more top-ten Billboard rankings, first with "T-Model Blues" by the iconic African-American guitarist and singer Lightnin' Hopkins, a native of the southeast Texas cotton country who had settled in Houston's Third Ward. Then Lil' Son Jackson, who had briefly migrated to Houston from Dallas, followed with "Freedom Train Blues." Like Hopkins, Jackson performed solo, his lone voice accompanied only by his plaintive licks on guitar. His lyrics lamented the loss of a woman who "rode that freedom train" north, escaping the South in search of a better life—a situation that spoke to the collective experience or aspirations of many African-Americans. One year later Hopkins again charted for Gold Star, this time at number 13, with the sharecropper's blues "Tim Moore's Farm," which bitterly references an actual person and place in rural Grimes County, northwest of Houston. Despite the odds against his independent venture, Quinn's company had climbed high on the Billboard charts, then generally the domain of a few major labels, by highlighting music from the social underclass of the region.

Although Quinn was making some money on his investment, his lack of experience with the tax codes governing the national distribution of his product led to problems. In 1950, besieged by IRS troubles, Quinn chose to terminate his Gold Star Records label and close the Telephone Road business site. Disillusioned by the confusing responsibilities of owning a record company, Quinn elected to concentrate on contracting his self-taught engineering services to other producers. To do so, he first needed to establish affordable studio space in which he could install his recording equipment.

The self-reliant Quinn quickly devised a solution. Again taking advantage of Houston's no-zoning policy, he moved his collection of gear into the ground floor of the nearby two-story home he owned on Brock Street. He then remodeled the family living room and dining room area into a performance space and engineering control room, tacking empty egg cartons onto the walls to baffle the sound. To christen his self-designed workplace, he returned to the Gold Star name, but in a different context. Thus, the business previously known as Quinn Recording Company, home of the now defunct Gold Star Records label, reemerged as an unaffiliated studio-for-hire under the moniker of Gold Star Studio, conveniently located just downstairs from where its founder resided with his wife and son.

The new home-based business represented a second chance for Quinn in the still nascent independent recording industry, and the new strategy better suited his particular skills. Free of the burdens of recruiting, managing, and promoting the artistic talent, as well as financing and accounting for the recording, manufacturing, and distribution of the end products, Quinn could now concentrate solely on his craft—the technology of recording and reproducing sound. This revised business plan flourished, and the Quinn family got used to having a professional recording studio right downstairs next to their kitchen.

TOUR THE STUDIO

In the foyer and the reception room at SugarHill Studios, glass-cased walls

display Gold Record Awards, album and CD covers, publicity photos, posters, clippings from periodicals, and other memorabilia of a few of the musicians who have recorded there. Some of them did so just a few steps away, down the hall and to the left, in Studio B, a 12-by-28-foot room, walls covered with wood paneling and sound baffles, three sound-isolation booths on one end and the engineer's control room on the other. A gold-colored star in the floor tiles, about six feet across, marks the center point where musicians have gathered to perform for almost fifty years. Studio B was designed by the famous Nashville-based producer, engineer, and songwriter Cowboy Jack Clement as part of a major 1964 expansion, which included a new entrance area and hallway, and numerous offices and storage space at the southern end of the building.

To get to the older part of this convoluted studio complex, just return to the hall and proceed to its northern terminus in the coffee lounge. Pass through the lounge and take the next short hall, then veer to the left into the big control room, a high-tech chamber full of large soundboard desks and other furniture crowded with computer screens, speakers, and gear. This was once Quinn's front lawn.

To your right, the wide window visually connects this engineering room to Studio A, a twenty-nine-by-twenty-eight-foot space with a grand piano to one side. The ceiling in there is tall enough for a two-story house; that's because this structure was once precisely that, the home that faced the front yard. In fact, those log-like beams traversing the open area about twelve feet overhead formerly supported the flooring of the upstairs Quinn family living quarters. When later owners gutted the building and eliminated all the second-floor rooms, they had to retain those wall-to-wall beams for reasons of structural integrity. But today those old timbers also seem to function as decor, setting a rustic tone. The rest of the room harmonizes. Protruding from the back wall are three isolation booths in a row, all capped by a single decorative roofline that slopes into the spacious studio; it is covered with earthen-red Mexican tiles and supported by thick buttresses of white adobe. This place feels as comfortable as a neighborhood cantina.

Chances are that you already are familiar with certain hit songs or seminal recordings that were produced here, if not in this very room then in one of the adjoining spaces, past or present. Yet chances are that you, like most people, might not even realize that those classic tracks were made in Houston. And it is even less likely that you can trace their origins back to this rather unglamorous setting: an odd-looking building near the University of Houston campus on a dead-end street in a mixed-use neighborhood that exemplifies the gritty juxtapositions permitted by the Bayou City's no-zoning approach to land management.

Given its obscurity, the property at 5626 Brock Street is a fitting analogue to Houston's important yet generally underappreciated role in the evolution of popular music and recording history. And the legacy of this site begins with a man named Quinn. c

SugarHill control booth.

JACK THOMPSON

CHANCES ARE THAT YOU ALREADY ARE FAMILIAR WITH CERTAIN HIT SONGS OR SEMINAL RECORDINGS THAT WERE PRODUCED HERE, IF NOT IN THIS VERY ROOM THEN IN ONE OF THE ADJOINING SPACES.

HOUSTON'S UNZONED SOUNDTRACK: A SAMPLER OF GREAT MUSICIANS WHO RECORDED AT 5626 BROCK STREET

The thousands of recordings Bill Quinn and others engineered reflect the breadth and depth of Houston music.

Lightnin' Hopkin and other blues traditionalists made many records there, but so did younger players who cultivated a more progressive, urban blues sound. For instance, influential artists such as Albert Collins, Joe Hughes, and Clarence Green all made their recording debuts at Gold Star.

Gold Star Studio also produced traditional Texas country music by white artists, working often with the prolific producer Pappy Daily. The now venerable George Jones, who hailed from the Texas Piney Woods, recorded his first seven hit singles there. Other artists included Benny Barnes from nearby Beaumont, with his 1956 number two song "Poor Man's Riches," and Frankie Miller from near Victoria, with the top-ten tracks "Blackland Farmer" and "Family Man." Some future stars, such as Willie Nelson and Roger Miller, were raw talents in their Gold Star sessions.

Two Daily-produced songs that registered high on both national pop and R&B charts, early manifestations of the "cross-over" phenomenon, were the humorous 1958 rockabilly shuffle "Chantilly Lace" by the Big Bopper—a jive-talking former DJ from Beaumont—and the 1959 number-one pop song "Running Bear" (a star-crossed tragedy about lovers from rival tribes) by Johnny Preston from Port Arthur. Mega-successes such as these brought more session activity to Quinn's studio.

In the mid-1960s, Quinn and his staff worked with numerous other producers, including the African-American music mogul Don Robey, whose labels were hugely influential in the evolution of blues, R&B, gospel, and pop. The hundreds of sessions with Robey's artists birthed hits such as "Funny (How Time Slips Away)" by Joe Hinton; "You're Gonna Make Me Cry" by O.V. Wright; "Treat Her Right," the 1965 number-one R&B hit by Roy Head (one of Robey's few white artists); "You're All I Need" by Bobby Bland; "Cryin' for My Baby" by Junior Parker; and "A Friend in Jesus" by the Mighty Clouds of Joy.

Other styles of music proliferated at Gold Star, including zydeco—the syncretized blend of black Creole folk music and urban blues personified by the accordion player and singer Clifton Chenier. Though born in Louisiana, Chenier was living in Fifth Ward's Frenchtown when he was "discovered" in 1964 by Chris Strachwitz of California-based Arhoolie Records, who took Chenier to Gold Star to record the first of numerous sessions. The following year Gold Star recorded the immortal "She's About a Mover" by the Sir Douglas Quintet—a San Antonio-based, multiethnic rock group led by the now legendary Doug Sahm. And the year after that, the folk-rock trio from Corpus Christi called the Pozo Seco Singers (featuring a young Don Williams, later a country music star) made its folk-pop single "Time," a hit released on New York-based Columbia Records.

After Quinn sold the studio in 1968, it went through several owners. A brief stint (1968–1970) under International Artists, a Houston record label best known for producing Austin's seminal psychedelic rock band, the 13th Floor Elevators, led to the 1969 hit "Hot Smoke and Sassafras" by the progressive rock group Bubble Puppy. The label also recorded singles or long-play albums by various rock bands (including the especially avant-garde Red Krayola) as well as bluesman Lightnin' Hopkins. After International Artists collapsed, the veteran music producer Huey Meaux bought the studio facility and renamed it SugarHill.

Over the next 14 years, Meaux's engineers recorded artists from all over the region. Notable examples are the neo-western swing band Asleep at the Wheel, which in 1976 produced one of its signature songs, "Miles and Miles of Texas," at SugarHill, and acclaimed signer-songwriter Lucinda Williams, a veteran of the local folk-rock scene who in 1980 cut her first album of original material, Happy Woman Blues. But one singer, born Baldemar Garza Huerta in the small South Texas town of San Benito, would redefine the standards for commercially successful recordings made on this site. Performing as the 1970s crossover superstar Freddy Fender and starting with the bilingual "Before the Last Teardrop Falls" (the first recording ever to register simultaneously as number one on both pop and country Billboard charts), Fender created 20 hit singles that included "Wasted Days and Wasted Nights" and six long-play albums (two that ranked number one), all at SugarHill Studios.

After Meaux sold the facility to Modern Music Ventures in 1986, SugarHill focused more on contemporary Houston jazz, producing successful albums by Kellye Gray, Sebastian Whitaker, Harry Sheppard, David Catney, Tony Campise, Erich Avinger, Herb Ellis, Joe Lacascio, and several others. But a renewed emphasis on recording Spanish-language and Tejano artists, a legacy that began with Quinn's late-1940s production of Conjunto de Maxie Granados, led in the late 1980s and early 1990s to regular sessions for top-selling Latino groups or singers such as Xelencia, La Fiebre, Emilio Navaria, the Hometown Boys, Jerry Rodriguez and Mercedes, Rick Gonzalez and the Choice, Los Dos Gilbertos, Johnny Rodriguez, Adalberto Gallegos, Elsa Garcia, and others.

In 1997 the ownership of SugarHill Studios changed once again, yet the business plan of cultivating diversity remains. In recent years the studio's most commercially successful productions include five hit singles (two of which crested at number one) and tracks from two hugely popular albums by the stylish all-female R&B group from Houston called Destiny's Child, as well as several solo releases by group members, including a 2003 number one hit by the most famous of them all, Beyoncé Knowles. Nationally known rappers such as Lil' Wayne and Mack 10 have utilized the studio, as have established country singers such as Clay Walker and Johnny Bush.

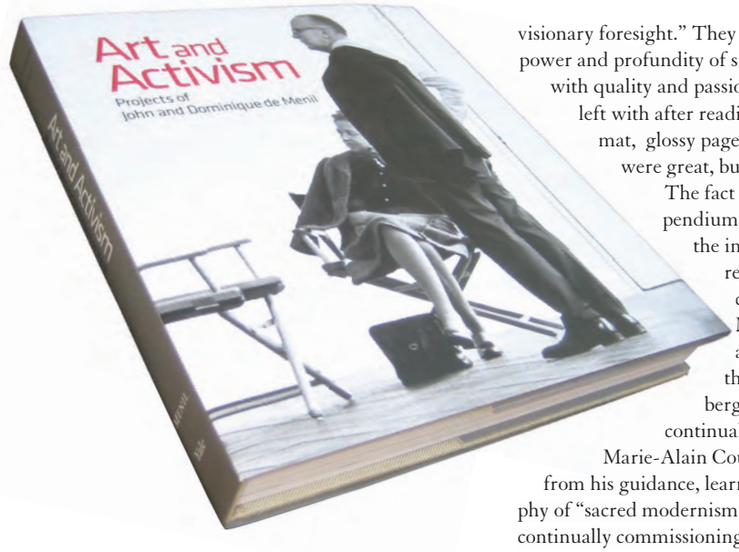
In the late 1990s and early 2000s, the Fifth Ward-born trumpeter Calvin Owens, former bandleader for B. B. King, produced at least six albums there.

Gold Star/SugarHill Studios also has recorded countless less-famous stalwarts of the Houston music scene. Different producers create their recordings for different reasons, but the best of them likely grasp a simple truth: obscurity and significant achievement are not necessarily mutually exclusive. Such is surely the case at 5626 Brock Street, for this historic studio site remains largely hidden and unknown, even to the thousands of people who enjoy the music that originated here. And yet for all the memorable hits that came into being in what was once Bill Quinn's house, there are thousands of significant tracks, equally worthy of an audience, which remain largely obscure. Collectively these recordings comprise the rich and unzoned soundtrack of life in Houston.

CAN WE BE CRITICAL OF THE DE MENILS NOW?

Art and Activism: Projects of John and Dominique de Menil
(edited by Josef Helfenstein and Laureen Schipsi, Yale University Press and the Menil Collection, 2010, 344 pages, $65, hardback)

by John Pluecker



A SMALL WAVE OF BOOKS IS COMING, ALL attempting to document the historical contributions of John and Dominique de Menil. *Art and Activism: The Projects of John and Dominique de Menil* was first and subsequently followed by *Sacred Modern: Faith, Activism, and Aesthetics in the Menil Collection* by anthropologist and art historian Pamela Smart. In the coming year, Knopf/Random House is planning to publish a biography of the de Menils by journalist William Middleton and funded with almost $400,000 from the Houston Artists Fund.

Without a doubt, these publications are a sign of a deepening interest in the histories of artistic communities of Houston. These books posit a history for Houston's strange mix of progressive arts activism and oil-fueled capitalism. *Art and Activism* also ends up being a veritable canonization of the de Menils through a series of essays by various scholars, artists and arts workers, most of them previously associated with the de Menils on some level as students, employees, or fellow travelers.

I say canonization because *Art and Activism* is an unencumbered celebration of the de Menils. In the foreword, the de Menils are said to have shown "independence and confidence, as well as visionary foresight." They "demonstrate the power and profundity of simple ideas executed with quality and passion." The question I am left with after reading all 343 large-format, glossy pages is: yes, the de Menils were great, but perfect?

The fact that the book is a compendium of essays means that the information tends to repeat, spiraling around certain facts. The de Menils are continually arriving to Houston in the 40s with Schlumberger. The de Menils are continually meeting Father Marie-Alain Couturier and profiting from his guidance, learning from his philosophy of "sacred modernism." The Menils are continually commissioning Philip Johnson to build their home on San Felipe. This repetitiveness means that certain facts, certain judgments accrue and gain added weight, building an entire mythology out of the de Menils.

As Houston moves into the end of its second century as a city, producing a new mythology is an urgent task. The book lauds the de Menils for their experimentalism, their daring, and their playfulness. This is not the old myth of the wild frontiersmen of Allen Brothers' lore. This is a myth to defeat another myth, the one most non-Texans are familiar with: the Republican politicians of Bush and Perry fame. This is a story a certain segment of Houstonians want to tell ourselves now to prove to ourselves (and the world) who we really can be. This need for a counter-narrative is understandable.

Still, is all we can do merely celebrate them and their actions? Can we criticize the de Menils while still recognizing their contributions?

I find myself drawn to texts in the book that make room for more poetry and less didacticism. Specifically, the text by Mel Chin seems to be playful in a way that other essays do not make room for. Only he, in the final essay in the book, pokes fun at Dominique de Menil, calling her "the empress of the Empire of Light and high priestess of a collection holding things divine and surreal." He talks about her scolding him for smoking in her museum and then tells the story of nearly crashing into her car during an alcohol-fueled daydream. By the time I reach the end of the book, I am thrilled someone had taken the risk of having fun with the grande dame herself.

What would happen if we thought critically not only about their accomplishments, but also their contradictions?

The principal antagonism shared by the de Menils and Houston itself is the co-existence of extreme wealth and economic success alongside liberal politics and a sophisticated aesthetic sense. Even so, though the de Menil money flowed from oil and gas exploitation, their politics were hardly the same as those of Schlumberger, the corporation. In fact, Gerald O'Grady's essay in the book details the Menils' friendships with numerous socialist and Communist thinkers from Roberto Rossellini to Jean Malaquais and Leon Trotsky's widow to grassroots groups in Latin America. Deloyd Parker, founder of Houston's SHAPE Center, has a short article about how John de Menil funded the SHAPE Center when it was first emerging. Remarkably, this funding continued for almost 20 years and included the rent payment, the purchase of a building, a van and even Parker's first trip to Africa. Amazing work, indeed: brought to us by the oil and gas industry. The world of arts and culture in Houston is inextricably bound up in this fundamental contradiction.

It's important to remember that this move to turn the de Menils into a myth is irreducibly connected to institution-building. It's been the central dilemma of the Menil Collection (and modern projects generally): how to institutionalize a spirit and an energy of experimentation?

And yet, the result of the modern project is not only a series of institutions (MFAH, CAMH, the Menil Collection, Rothko Chapel, Rice Media Center, SHAPE, etc.) but also a wholly changed cultural space. A space within which we move. The de Menils were intent on opening up the traditions of Texas, making room for different kinds of people and different kinds of cultural expression outside of the old confines. Their success was unequivocal.

In actual fact, the community that formed around the de Menils has already been subdivided in millions of ways since the fifties and sixties. Houston is full of large institutions of art and established non-profits and autonomous projects. This contestation and contradiction is the real legacy of the de Menils. They created a space within which we could transgress. And part of that transgression should be looking back on them with an urge and a willingness to critique and question.

Further reading in the Citemag.org archives: In Cite *82 an article on page 32 by Miah Arnold carefully chronicles the Menils' contributions to the countercultural movement of the mid-twentieth century and to the artistic and political infrastructure of the city.*

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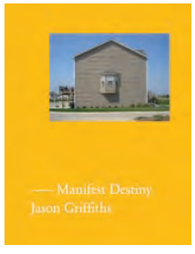

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BY JASON GRIFFITHS

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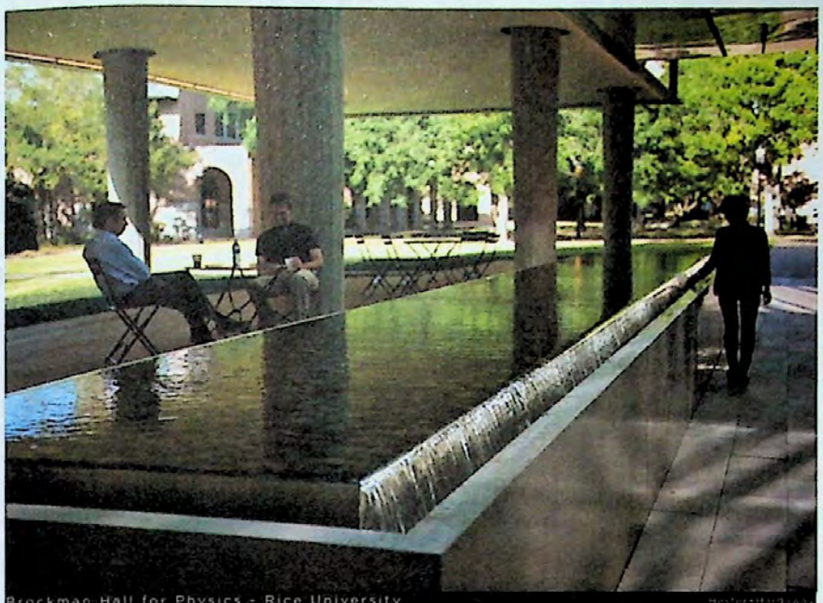

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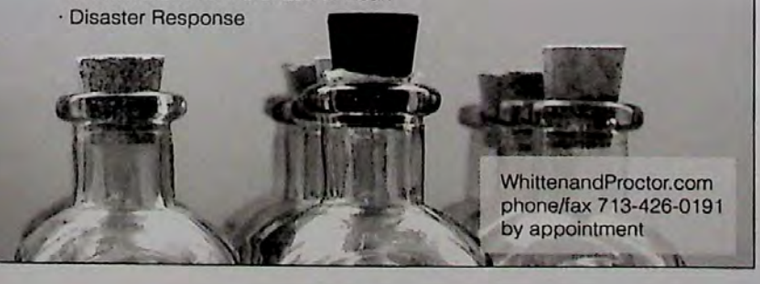

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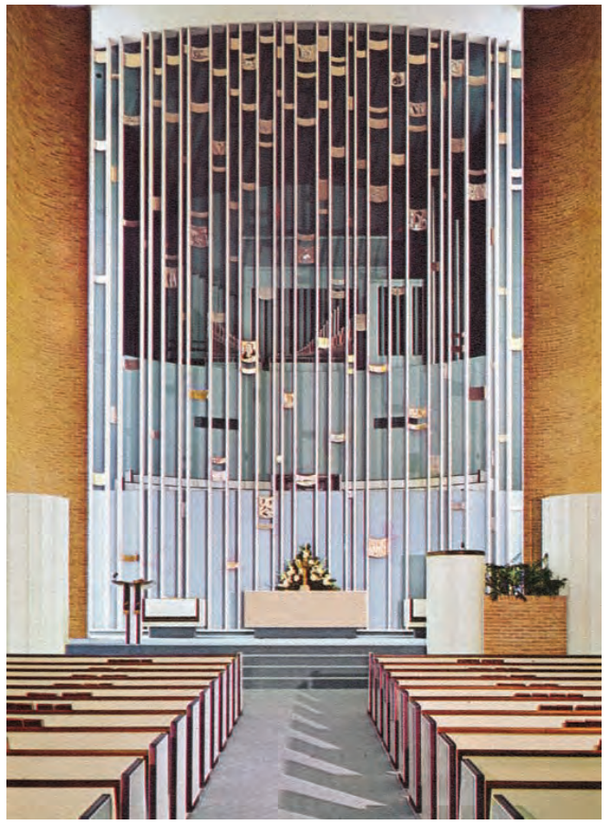

Space Age choir screen of the demolished sanctuary depicting Psalm 148:13 "Let them praise the name of the Lord: For his name alone is excellent; his glory is above the earth and heaven."

ANO DEMO-NI

The Death of Central Presbyterian Church

By Ben Koush

New York is notoriously the largest and least loved of any of our great cities. Why should it be loved as a city? It is never the same city for a dozen years altogether. A man born in New York 40 years ago finds nothing, absolutely nothing, of the New York he knew. If he chance to stumble upon a few old houses not yet leveled, he is fortunate. But the landmarks, the objects which marked the city to him, are gone.

— *Harper's Monthly*, June 1856.

DURING THE WEEK OF SEPTEMBER 20 ANOTHER Houston landmark bit the dust. The midcentury modern Central Presbyterian Church (1962) formerly located at 3788 Richmond Avenue was quickly dispatched by some deft backhoe action. According to Russell Howard, the president of Houston Mod, inside the church "it was such a space-age scene up on the altar, very cosmic." Its death spiral lasted a little more than a year. On May 30, 2010, Central Presbyterian Church, whose congregation seems to have been shrinking, entered into a union with the nearby St. Philip Presbyterian Church "to serve Christ's Kingdom together" as their website notes. The forty-nine-year-old church was then vacated, awaiting its fate. Along came Morgan Properties who wanted the land for apartments but not the church building. (A few years earlier they also demolished the even more architecturally significant Dow Center formerly at 3636 Richmond Avenue, designed by Caudill Rowlett Scott in 1961 to house the architecture firm's own offices, to make way for an apartment complex.)

Reaction was typically muted. Houston Mod hosted an open house at the church and enthusiasts snapped pics of the naked carcass. Howard quipped of the new apartments, "They do blend nicely with the Costco design" (a new development that replaced Neuhaus & Taylor's HISD Headquarters Building of 1969 at 3830 Richmond Avenue, a glistening white precast concrete fantasy that used to be Houston's best example of Brutalist architecture). One of the commentators on a Swamplot.com post about the demolition wrote that "we should do what we can to save worthwhile buildings," but that in addition "we should be willing to let buildings die," presumably like when mother had Fluffy put down because her vet bills were getting out of hand. Even F. Talbott Wilson (1912-1987), the architect who designed the Central Presbyterian Church in 1960, seemed ambivalent about his efforts. When interviewed by the *Houston Post* in June 1962, he said, "I don't know of any church in Houston which would be a form giver. We have not done anything yet."

This attitude is at once incredibly disheartening but also liberating. Rem Koolhaas, an architect and one of our most daring critics of contemporary urbanism, wrote in his 1994 critical essay, "The Generic City," that "A city is a plane inhabited in the most efficient way by people and processes, and in most cases the presence of history only drags down its performance." Oh gosh, was he writing about Houston? This sentiment accords perfectly with the ethos governing our city and its development. In a city where the physical evidence of its past has been systematically erased since its inception, it always has the potential to be ever newer, probably bigger, and most importantly, more profitable. Hope springs eternal that something better is always just around the corner.

However, one must ask, in the conspicuous absence of anything qualitatively better after all these years (at least to this writer), how much longer must we wait? Are our expectations too lofty? Is Houston supposed to be ugly? Maybe what we have (or had) is as good at it gets. Perhaps the city is not ready for such self-reflexive questioning quite yet. See the controversy over the recent declaration of "Historic Districts" where demolition permits will no longer be issued. These buildings account for less than 1 percent of the building stock in the city, much less than the 12 percent on average that Koolhaas recently determined to be under protection across the globe. And what's more, even New York, that hungry gobbler of buildings in the middle of the century before last now seems to have an architectural character of nearly geological permanence despite the best intentions of its entrepreneurial elite. Is patience the best counsel for the patrimonially minded? Do we preservationists just need to wait it out with gritted teeth? Will our city eventually start to coalesce as the hot passions of development begin to cool, or the mass of buildings gets too big to continually digest? c

PHOTO COURTESY HOUSTON MOD

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