Cite

THE ARCHITECTURE + DESIGN REVIEW OF HOUSTON

94

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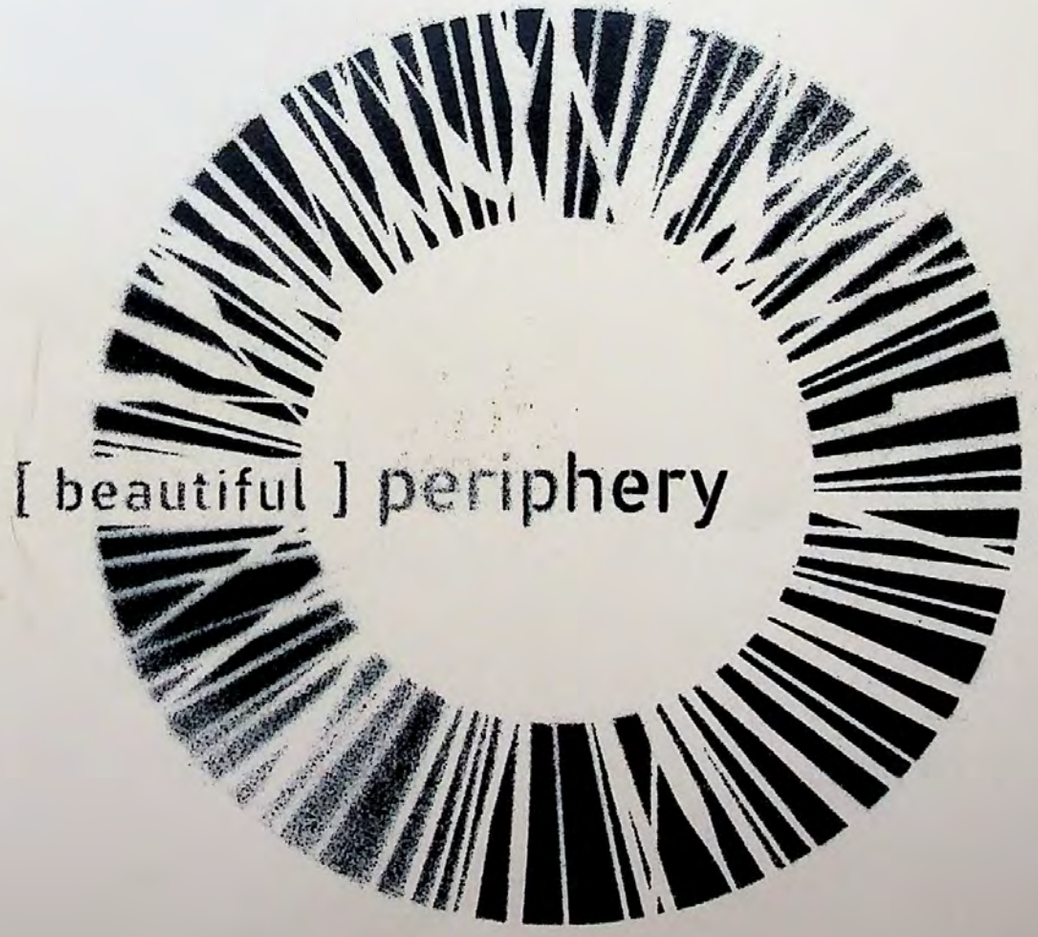

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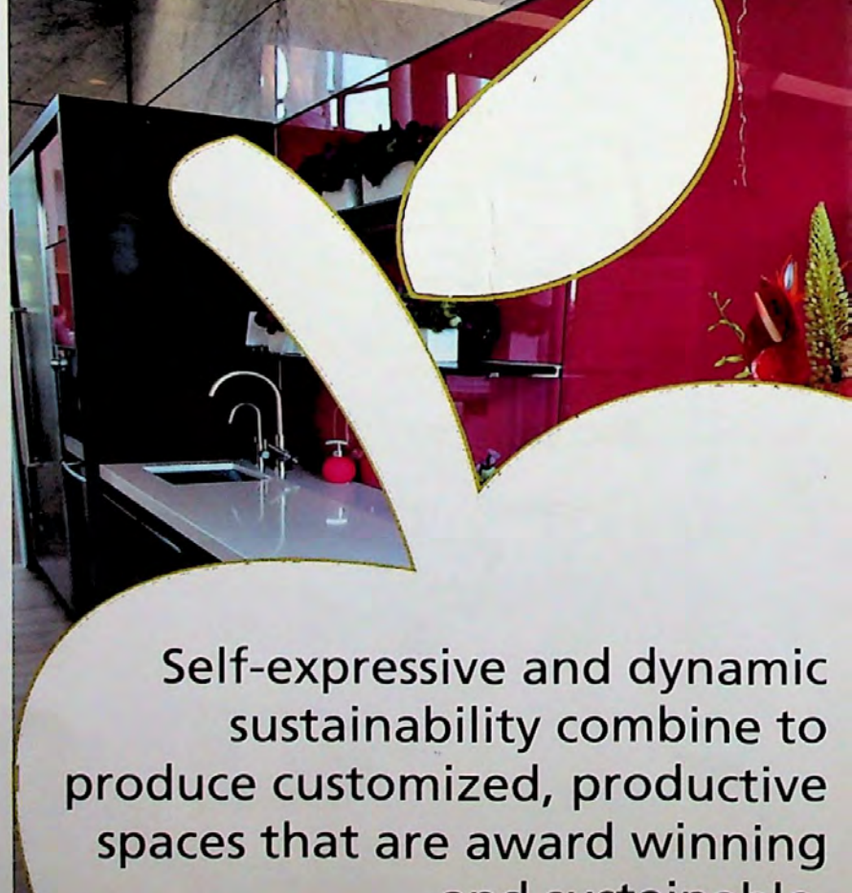

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THE ARCHITECTURE + DESIGN REVIEW OF HOUSTON

A PUBLICATION OF THE RICE DESIGN ALLIANCE

94 SPRING 2014

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THE RICE DESIGN ALLIANCE, ESTABLISHED WITHIN THE RICE SCHOOL OF ARCHITECTURE IN 1972, IS DEDICATED TO ADVANCING ARCHITECTURE, URBAN DESIGN, AND THE BUILT ENVIRONMENT IN THE HOUSTON REGION THROUGH EDUCATIONAL PROGRAMS, THE PUBLICATION OF *CITE*, AND PROGRAMS TO INITIATE PHYSICAL IMPROVEMENTS. WE SEEK TO ENHANCE THE QUALITY OF LIFE WITHIN OUR COMMUNITY.

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THE BEAUTY BETWEEN

THIS ISSUE FEATURES A SERIES OF PHOTOGRAPHS BY PAUL HESTER THAT CAPTURE THE UNEXPECTED BEAUTY OF THE PERIPHERY.

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LETTER FROM SUSAN ROGERS, *Guest Editor*


In this special issue of *Cite*—The Beautiful Periphery—we explore the contemporary megalopolis of Houston beyond Loop 610. Sometimes derided, though largely cast off and ignored by the powerful and elite the increasingly diverse periphery is home to most Houstonians. Economies of scale, islands, and spines define this landscape and our mundane, everyday places give it form. Subdivisions, apartment complexes, strip malls, big box stores, and shopping malls—these pieces or fragments aggregate without seemingly adding up to anything more than discontinuous parts. At the same time, slowly and nearly indiscernibly, these places are appropriated and transformed into something beautiful.

Houston's periphery is layered and imperfect—yet it is also organic and authentic. Our goal has been to explore this periphery and methods of its production, appropriation, and adaptation. Albert Pope, Gus Sessions Wortham Professor of Architecture at Rice University, shares his insights on the megalopolis and forces that shape our contemporary cities—concluding that "[i]t is not possible to project a viable tomorrow if we remain willfully blind to the urbanism that we produce today." Susan Rogers, Director of the Community Design Resource Center and Assistant Professor at the University of Houston, investigates 1970s era multifamily housing in Houston—the good, the bad, and the ugly—through the lens of change and adaptation. Natalia Beard of SWA Group shares a visually compelling and rich proposal for the flea markets along Airline Drive. Joseph Altshuler argues that the typical backyard fence is a potent instrument of organizational power and visible manifestation of the "cul-de-sac city," sharing a series of playful proposals to transform this element of division into a point of connection. Judith K. De Jong, architect, urbanist, and Assistant Professor at the University of Illinois at Chicago School of Architecture, explores the mutations among urban and suburban strip malls and big box store typologies, while Allyn West gets up close to criticize the new Walmart on Wayside. Capturing the unexpected beauty of the periphery, photographs by Paul Hester are intermingled throughout this issue.

Houston—created incrementally and informally without a master plan or a grand vision other than its highways—reflects the human needs, daily routines, and conventional desires of its people. We must come to terms with the complexities, challenges, and futures of this landscape as a means to build a better city. We propose that, in fact, amid such seemingly adverse conditions, resilience, innovation, and adaptation are already driving transformative change.

SUSAN ROGERS AND GREGORY MARINIC

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Left: A "heat" map showing the density of multifamily housing in Houston. Graphic by Rose Lee

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ANYTHING THAT FLOATS

The morning of April 12, twenty-six competitors arrived at the Sesquicentennial Promenade to hunker down with the pile of surprise building materials that they were charged with turning into something that might float. There were winners and some sinkers.

CALENDAR

AUGUST 2014

20 + 27
WED 6:30 PM

CIVIC FORUM ON WALKABILITY

BROWN AUDITORIUM / THE MUSEUM OF FINE ARTS, HOUSTON
1001 BISSONNET

In October 2013, Mayor Annise Parker unveiled Houston's Complete Streets and Transportation Program, a series of policy goals to steer roadway improvement projects to incorporate the needs of pedestrians and cyclists. This policy is the latest in a series of proposals to help set a course for the future of Houston in order to meet the needs of one of the fastest growing urban populations in the country. This two-part civic forum will address both the aspirations and challenges facing our city through the lens of walkability.

SAVE THE DATE!

SEPT 9 RDA SPOTLIGHT PRIZE AND LECTURE

ANNUAL LECTURE BY A DESIGNER IN THE FIRST FIFTEEN YEARS OF THEIR PRACTICE.

ATF PHOTO BY MARY BETH WOICCAK AND FIFTH WARD BY SUSAN ROGERS.

INITIATIVES FOR HOUSTON

Two $5,000 Rice Design Alliance Initiatives for Houston grants will be awarded for projects proposed by a faculty member, Gregory Marinic, and an undergraduate student, Giovanni Peña, at the Gerald D. Hines College of Architecture at the University of Houston. Guest jurors awarded the grants.

Marinic's "Fifth Ward Renaissance" focuses on the rehabilitation of a "poetically crumbling" shotgun house into a community "e-reading room" or education center. The $5,000 grant will help to fund structural improvements to the building as well as an interior overhaul. Marinic's students will collaborate with Pastor Robert Thomas, Jason Logan, and third-year interior architecture students, experimenting with digital fabrication technologies and engaging in interdisciplinary research, while working directly with the Fifth Ward CDC, Olivet Missionary Baptist Church, and the UH Community Design Resource Center led by Susan Rogers.

THE START OF A TRADITION
SUNDAY STREETS A BIG SUCCESS

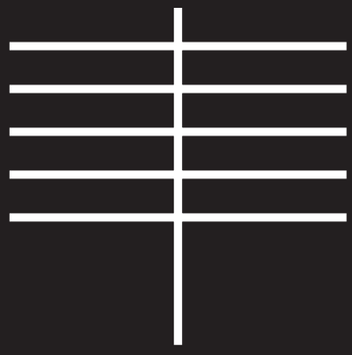
BY RAJ MANKAD

During the course of one and half years, and ten articles, OffCite writers proposed, petitioned, documented, analyzed, and publicized the temporary closure of streets to cars so they might be opened up for other uses and to other users. On March 5, 2014, Mayor Annise Parker announced a pilot program called Sunday Streets HTX that creates just such pedestrian and cycling promenades. OffCite's most recent articles have celebrated the success of that pilot program. The first Sunday Street, along White Oak and Quitman, drew more than 3,000 people, in the rain. The City of Houston estimates that 20,000 came out on Westheimer for the second one. Mayor Parker said, "We are seeing the start of a tradition." READ MORE AT OFFCITE.ORG/SUNDAY_STREETS.

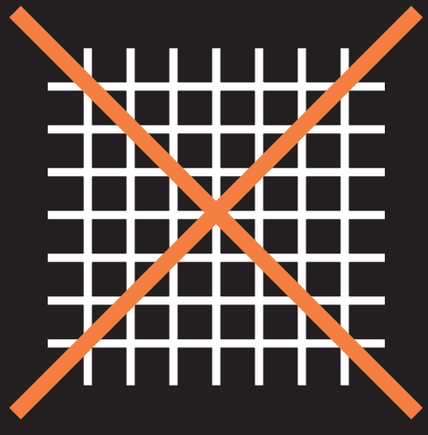
Poison Girl co-owners, Dawn Callaway and Scott Repass.

SUNDAY STREETS PHOTO BY RAJ MANKAD.

AN INTERVIEW WITH ALBERT POPE



MEGALOPOLIS



METROPOLIS

WHEN TALKING ABOUT HOUSTON, THE TRADITIONAL TERMS OF ARCHITECTURE QUICKLY FALL APART. HOW CAN WE START TO MAKE SENSE OF THE PROBLEMS AND POSSIBILITIES OF THIS … WHAT IS IT CALLED? ARE WE EVEN LIVING IN A CITY? IT TAKES A THEORIST TO ANSWER THAT QUESTION, OR AT LEAST TO HELP US FORM BETTER QUESTIONS, WHICH IS WHY *CITE* APPROACHED ALBERT POPE, A PROFESSOR AT THE RICE SCHOOL OF ARCHITECTURE. SUSAN ROGERS, THE GUEST EDITOR OF THIS ISSUE AND DIRECTOR OF THE COMMUNITY DESIGN RESOURCE CENTER AT THE UNIVERSITY OF HOUSTON, SPOKE WITH HIM AT BROCHSTEIN PAVILION AT RICE ON NOVEMBER 11, 2013.

Susan Rogers | In your writings, you make a distinction between a megalopolis and a metropolis. Could you talk about why that's important to understanding Houston?

Albert Pope | There are two ways to define metropolis. One is that it is a catch-all term for a big city. There is a second, more precise way to define a metropolis, which is the urbanism that was built in the late nineteenth century through the first half of the twentieth century. That historically specific version of metropolis is defined by a grid substructure of streets and blocks. When we stopped building street and block infrastructure 50 years ago we entered a new type of urban production which was based on discontinuous spines or the cul-de-sac. It was at this time that the French urban geographer Jean Gottmann coined the word "megalopolis" in order to define this new, spine-based type of urban production. Gottmann defined megalopolis as a conurbation, which means a polynuclear network that connects formerly discrete urban entities into a sprawling net that connects smaller closed developments together into a continuous urban tissue. So megalopolis is spine based, metropolis is grid based. My writing and design projects all attempt to describe the difference between those two worlds.

We tend to minimize their differences by seeing the spine as a subset of a grid, which it kind of is—you can extract the spine from a grid. But the organizational properties of spine-based development are completely different. I started using the term megalopolis to make that distinction clear because we don't build the metropolis anymore, in the strict sense of the term, because we don't build blocks and streets. In the 1950s just about the entire world abandoned continuous block and street urbanism and switched over to spine-based urbanism. We moved from a metropolitan to a megalopolitan type of urbanism and to really get that you have to know the distinction between the two terms. On some level, we all know that when we go outside the Loop that we have moved into a different world, a different reality. The way we navigate outside the Loop is totally different from the way we navigate inside the Loop. Our relationship to nature is different, and our relationship to built form completely changes. We need to be more precise with language in order to appreciate these differences.

SR | Could you talk about how a grid-based metropolis and spine-based megalopolis expand or grow differently?

AP | As I mentioned, the unit of expansion is much larger. We do not grow by the city block but by the multiblock spine. Also, as the megalopolis grows, it jumps out over the edge of existing construction. Land developers call it "leap-frogging." You jump over the existing line of development to get to cheaper property. And then smaller infill projects are constructed in the gap if the area is successful. But sometimes that gap just stays open. So, one, you get a larger scale and, two, these multiple nuclei have space between them. A grid, on the other hand, grows like a stain. It just pushes out, block by block with no gaps at all, creating a continuous urban field.

It is important to acknowledge that we no longer make continuous fields because a spine is a closed form. It is a hierarchical figure defined by boundaries. What you typically see inside the Loop are different gridding campaigns done by single developers, which is where we get all our T intersections and roads that misalign by 10 feet, the little dog legs that are everywhere, which are essentially developers refusing to cooperate with each other and the city having no mediating agency like you do in Chicago and New York, where you have a standard grid size. But it has the same effect of a continuous field. Despite the dog legs you can still move around the grid network in a number of different ways that you can't in a spine system, where you are constantly moving up and down a traffic hierarchy from the suburban neighborhood street to the collector to the feeder road to the freeway and then back down to the suburban street.

SR | One of the things we are trying to do with this issue, "The Beautiful Periphery," is to uncover and understand what is happening outside the Loop. It is here that we have some of the highest density neighborhoods, some of the most diverse neighborhoods, and the kind of social qualities that we used to assign to the urban condition. I wonder if you would talk about the loaded qualities of the terms "urban" and "suburban" and what they had meant historically, and how they are turning inside out.

AP | In Chicago, one quarter of the population lives on the urban grid, and three quarters lives on a spine-based megalopolis. It is more extreme in Houston. It is kind of ridiculous to call 75 percent of the built environment "sub" urban anymore. When we use the word "suburban" what we are really saying is that it is a subclass urbanism; it is not a legitimate or a fully fledged urbanism. If 75 percent of the world is living in it, how can we define it as subclass? Have we really been producing a subclass urbanism for 50 years? In terms of making any progress urbanistically we have to figure out a way to drop the "sub" and generate a fully fledged alternative form of urban organization, and not a "sub" urban condition because it is where we all live. What is the word "suburban" useful for, other than some perverse kind of self-loathing?

IN HIS MOST RECENT WORK, ALBERT POPE HAS IMAGINED POSSIBLE FUTURES FOR THE FIFTH WARD IN WHICH LARGE-SCALE AND HIGH-DENSITY DEVELOPMENTS RELATE TO ONE ANOTHER TO SHAPE SHARED SPACES. HIS FOCUS ON THE POST-1950S MEGALOPOLIS HAS TURNED TO THE RAPIDLY CHANGING FABRIC OF AN AREA FIRST BUILT IN THE EARLY TWENTIETH CENTURY. THE RESULTING DIAGRAMS ARE FAMILIAR IN THAT THEY RESEMBLE THE POLYNUCLEAR, SEEMINGLY UNPLANNED CITY WE HAVE NOW, BUT THEY TURN THE GAPS INTO COMMON SPACES.

PROJECTION DRAWING BY TSVETELINA ZDRAVEVA.

SR | Perhaps the word "periphery" in our title is adhering to an outmoded way of thinking?

AP | Maybe what is new about your periphery is that it is not a periphery. Everybody is rightly excited about Midtown with people moving back into the city. However, compared to what is going on in the Energy Corridor and in The Woodlands, what is going on in Midtown is a drop in the bucket. Perhaps 5 percent of new residential starts are in Midtown. At this point we are not going to reinstate the center/periphery paradigm. The center hasn't held in Houston for a long time. With the Medical Center, Post Oak, the Energy Corridor, and The Woodlands we have large multiple centers that all have their own peripheries that bleed into other peripheries and other centers. But more importantly we have smaller multiple centers in terms of subdivisions, office parks, shopping centers, shopping malls—all are part of this polynuclear conurbation. And they are closed. They are not continuous grids. They each have a boundary. In a megalopolis, peripheries are all over the place.

SR | Could we talk about why "suburbs" have been criticized?

AP | It's like living in a house with no windows. Living in a city with no public space is almost unnatural; it rubs against human nature in such a profound way that it is disturbing, yet we build and dwell this way without even thinking about it. Right? We automatically defer to the economic bottom line, but there's a human bottom line as well—philosophers call it an ontological condition. They ask what is it that we need as human beings to exist or dwell in a manner that is commensurate with our bodies and our minds? It is not difficult to argue that we need more than a grocery store and a TV screen and a stretch of asphalt connecting them. I don't care what the developer's spreadsheet says or how well something is selling or how we've done it in the past, there is this other bottom line that we need to pay attention to. I think it has a lot to do with having a window in each room, like an office or a kitchen, by the way. Rooms without windows in them are simply not fit environments, and we have no business building them. This sort of base level of human existence must be respected. This is what I mean by an ontological condition. We're not fulfilling that, even on this campus. I think this has a lot to do with your reader's prejudices against the suburbs, that it fails at an ontological level; it isolates us to the point that the only option we have for engaging the world is by purchasing relatively useless mass consumer objects and entertainment. But surely the answer is not simply to declare it all subclass and just walk away from it or to only address 25 percent of the city and forget about the rest. By labeling it an illegitimate urbanism all we do is ignore our problems, or to simply say that we have to build cities like we used to build them amounts to the same thing—it ignores the pressing problems that the megalopolis poses.

SR | How do architects address the challenges of the megalopolis?

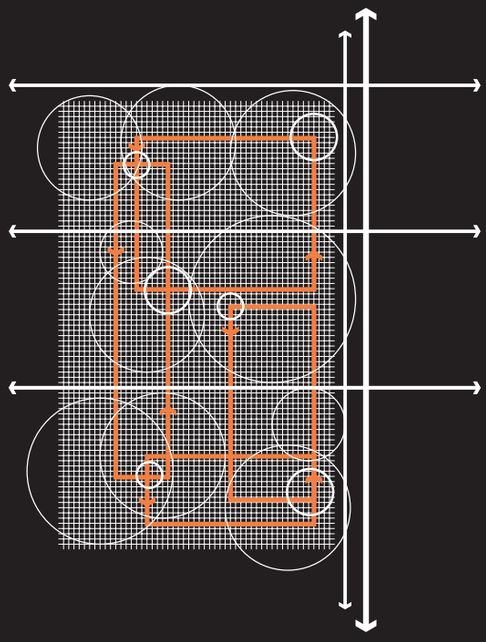
AP | The only way we can actually be effective and make the "suburbs" into legitimate urbanism is, first of all, to be professional, to take the chip off our shoulder, and stop treating the megalopolis as a subclass. We love traditional cities and rightfully so. We pay thousands of dollars to visit them—they are amazing. We also know that you can't simply reproduce them in a modern economy that requires scales of development far exceeding traditional scales. Also, we cannot reproduce the effects of traditional cities in a very short period of time. The cities we love were built over hundreds of years by the hands of many generations. Houston was not even half a million people in 1950. To expect to produce a sophisticated urbanism in 50 years is absurd, because we know a sophisticated urbanism is a palimpsest of things being built over time. We need to understand the parameters in which we make cities today.

Besides acknowledging its legitimacy, what is needed in order to operate in the megalopolis is an understanding of the primacy of space over form. Let me explain that. If we continue to think of form in the megalopolis in the same way we think of form in block and street urbanism we are not going to get very far. There are two ways to think about form: one is where you manipulate form and the final outcome is form; the other is where you manipulate form and the final outcome is space. The prevailing characteristic of the megalopolis is the spatial dominance. You sense this the second you drive from inside to outside the Loop—form literally recedes. What makes this observation important is that the spatial dominance is not only a characteristic of Megalopolis, it is also a characteristic of architectural and urban traditions. There are some obvious examples. One of them is a tradition that is called poche, where the form is not about itself but about the space that it creates. But most important to designers is the fact that the spatial dominant drove modern architecture and urbanism. Space is the dominant medium of modern architecture and urbanism; recalling Mies' IIT Campus, Le Corbusier's Ville Contemporaine, or Wright's Broadacre City illustrates this is so.

Modernism taught us that we have to shift the way that we think about architectural and urban form if we are to be effective in a world that is dominated by space. We have forgotten this lesson in the age of the Bilbao Effect; with postmodernism we became form based and are understandably reluctant to let that go. Yet we must let it go if we are to be effective designers in the context of the megalopolis.

SR | I'm thinking about the New Urbanism. Is not their intent to go back to the metropolitan form, the grid, and continuity?

AP | I admire that New Urbanists go out and make stuff as opposed to those of us who sit around and talk into recording devices. But, in the end, one has to say that they are short-sighted and myopic. New Urbanists say they are making walkable cities, but what they are really making are walkable subdivisions that are isolated like all subdivisions within massive megalopolitan conurbations. Because they do not acknowledge the legitimacy of the megalopolis, they are unable to address the larger picture. They call their movement town-based planning. To achieve the quality of a town means that maybe 30,000 of us can aggregate in one isolated place, but no more, because if you have another "town" or subdivision next door then you start having conurbations. In the end the "town" is superficial, because the structure on which New Urbanist subdivisions are built on is so radically different from the urbanism they are trying to reproduce. They have not really gotten past the problem of the New Town introduced 110 years ago by Ebenezer Howard in the English Garden City movement.



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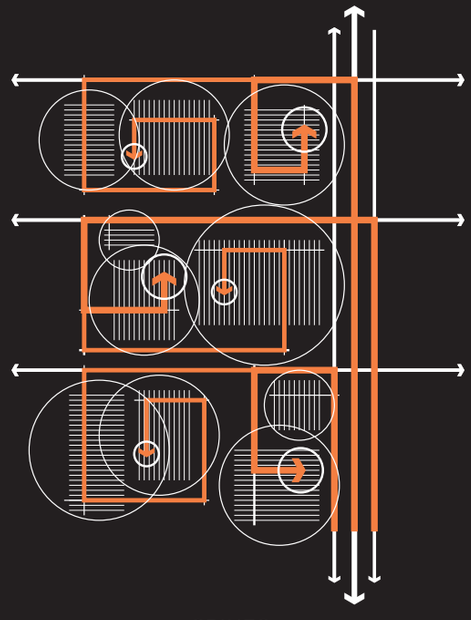


SPINES

IN THESE DIAGRAMS, ALBERT POPE TRACES INDIVIDUAL PATHS OF MOVEMENT SHOWING THE LIMITED CONNECTIONS IN A SPINE-BASED SYSTEM VERSES A GRID. SMALL CIRCLES REPRESENT DESTINATIONS, LARGE CIRCLES REPRESENT SOCIAL GROUPS, AND ORANGE LINES ARE POSSIBLE PATHS.

SR | The question of scale seems important. On the 100-acre site of Greenspoint Mall, for example, you could put 54 downtown Houston blocks. What could happen to a site like that?

AP | Infill in old cities is small scale, but we don't build in increments of mom and pop stores anymore. We build in increments of Walmart and shopping malls. It is called "economy of scale," and it is the most basic economic rule of a modern consumer economy. Economies of scale drive down the unit cost of everything. Houses, iPhones, computers: we wouldn't have any of this stuff without economies of scale. You can say we ought to go out to Greenspoint and make it into a "real" city, but that will not work. First, you don't have an extensive surrounding fabric that real cities require. Second, you are still looking at a single unit of aggregation. In other words, Greenspoint Mall is our block. Our contemporary unit of aggregation is not a 300-foot-square city block, it is a shopping mall, with parking. Until you grasp that scale, come to terms with it, all you are going to do is reproduce environments that are violently displaced from their original contexts, their original meaning, their original economy, where they become, by definition, superficial. How many developers do you know that could make money on a 5,000-square-foot parcel within a 300-foot city block? Yet that is the scale of development that makes "real" cities—the cities that we admire.

In other words, there is a completely different political economy that underlies the gridiron city than underlies the megalopolitan spine-based city. And the scale—it is not just the scale, scale is the easiest one to talk about, because it deals with economics, and you can actually put a number on it. The market has an increment of growth and it is no longer the individual building. Today, even the shopping mall is almost too small. But there is another side of the argument which earnestly asks why things are the way they are. When we add parking to traditional urban environments, we've already rewritten the ground rules for the city, and it will never again be the same. And how many people reading *Cite* magazine are willing to get rid of their cars? Not me. I mean it is part of who we are. How about our immediate access to the natural world, who would want to give that up? Or who wants to give up the ability to isolate ourselves—to take a privilege to step back from the world around us? Simply put: the urbanism that defines us is the urbanism that we make, and the urbanism that we make is the urbanism that defines us. This is Anthropology 101, and it must be respected.

SR | Can we talk about CityCentre, the urban-like lifestyle center way out west, which has become a very popular destination?

AP | So we have made some progress in defining the city as more than the asphalt which connects the TV room and the grocery store. It helps to have, for example, a decent bar, even if it is a franchise. And I think blowing the roof and the doors off the traditional shopping mall are a step in the right direction, but we must remember that these urban islands remain extremely limited, with or without roofs and doors. I think as designers we need to engage the bigger picture to make urbanism. Even though developers are trying to figure out ways to fill in all the gaps with the illusion of block-and-street urbanism, they remain tiny exceptions to the prevailing pattern. The spine is the prevailing pattern, and it has a completely different type of DNA than the street and block. You can't expect that CityCentre will function as an urban seed capable of expanding out to produce a new urban fabric.

SR | Do the new trails on the bayous address some of the challenges of the megalopolis by privileging space over form?

AP | Our bayous are great—very wet greenswards by necessity. We often think of them as linear parks. However, the bayou is a small segment of the spatial world outside the Loop and a small part of our routine experience. In general, I'm more interested in the presently malformed spatial network that the bayou is connected to. In other words, we have to tie the bayou into a larger spatial network, not imagine that we can pack its edges with blocks and streets. The potential of the megalopolis is built development up around a sequence of voids that are more or less continuous. It may be a good start, but we have to grasp the definition of contemporary urban space that is broader than that of a plaza or a (linear) park. These are exceptional spaces, and contemporary urban space is the rule not the exception.

SR | The Community Design Resource Center recently did a project in Alief, which is defined in many ways by islands of separated land uses. At the same time the neighborhood is criss-crossed with 11 miles of drainage ditches, and we proposed that the ditches were one way to connect places, creating a network of trails. The International District has received funding to complete the first trail.

AP | That is a good example. Ditches make for far better infrastructure than engineered culverts, especially if you can associate them with an amenity like a bike lane. The bike gets you into that space that you once ignored, and once it is no longer ignored its potential starts to become apparent. Because we call it a "drainage ditch" we get stuck on its utilitarian value alone, but it has far greater value than that—cultural value, environmental value, psychic value. A network of ditches may even be a better starting point for the revaluation of urban space than a traditional park. A civic park is also locked into a stubborn definition that is more difficult to revalue than a drainage ditch is.

As designers we sometimes approach the suburbs as a subclass urbanism; it is as if we have a prejudice against our own production. Given this prejudice it is impossible to mount a viable urban project, because if you spend so much of your emotional energy in antagonism, it eventually comes to define you. All ideologues suffer this fate. Consider New Urbanism; their charter members spend an enormous effort on a critique of megalopolis and the modern planning concepts that produced it. Their essential motivation turns out to be a critique. In this regard it is not surprising that when it comes time to provide an alternative—to project as opposed to reject—all they can summon up is nostalgic recovery of the urban past. This strategy defies common sense—as all ideologies do—inasmuch as solutions to our urban problems today cannot be found in the past, simply because these problems did not exist in the past. Being ideologically predisposed to reject the urbanism of the present is simply debilitating if not actually unprofessional. It is not possible to project a viable tomorrow if we remain willfully blind to the urbanism that we produce today. ○

model

COMMUNITY

offcite.org/thai_xuan

Contradiction and Complexity

the (beautiful) projects

BY SUSAN ROGERS

PHOTO OF ST. CLOUD APARTMENTS IN GULFTON BY HANA ABUELAISH.

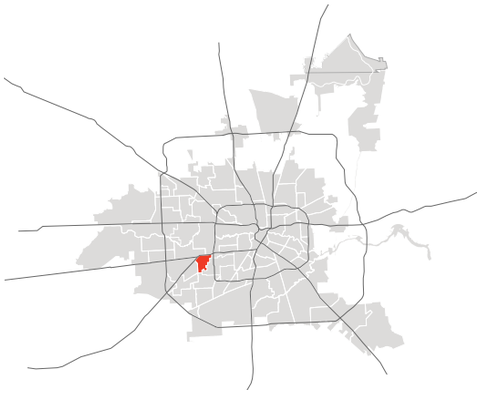
There is a stubborn and widening gap

like the one between the rich and the poor, in how we imagine our cities and the reality on the ground. The time-honored suburban stereotypes of homogeneity, conformity, and middle-class banality are as unmoving and obstinate as a giant rock, regardless of the actualities. It is as if we are blind, or perhaps just don't want to see. But big changes have occurred in this landscape of strip centers, shopping malls, subdivisions, and apartment complexes—change big enough to completely eradicate labels, yet somehow they hold. Some designers are paying attention, but their vision is too often to retrofit the suburban landscape into a semblance of the nineteenth-century city—a feat that is far too nostalgic and flawed. So while designers look to the past for inspiration, ground-up action transforms the present in hopes of a brighter future. What I define as the "New Projects," distressed and disinvested multifamily housing, is one story of transformation, among so many that could be told.

To begin, while the old public housing "projects" have been demolished in Chicago to make way for saccharine-sweet mixed-income neighborhoods—in cities like Houston (and suburbs throughout the U.S.) disinvestment, changing desires, and shifting socio-economic and spatial conditions are combining to create the "new projects" on the periphery. The new projects look nothing like the old, mixed from one part JG Ballard's Super Cannes and one part Herbert Gans' Urban Villagers; the large multi-family developments follow a suburban superblock model—privatized, gated, and disconnected from the surrounding city. The new projects were built quickly and cheaply in the 1970s and 1980s, most often for young professionals, and with little open space or amenities. Today, these projects are increasingly home to more families than singles and a vastly expanding number of people who live below the poverty line. Furthermore, in the absence of a national housing policy, where vouchers constitute the largest portion of low-income housing subsidies, this housing is, in many ways, the new *de facto* public housing and subject to many of the same challenges public housing communities faced 50 years ago.

In Houston the scale of the problem, and the potential salvaging effect of a solution, is immense. 315,357 is the number of multifamily apartments housed in buildings comprised of 10 or more units. Forty percent of this housing, or just over 140,000 units, were constructed between 1960 and 1979. Today, this housing is home to more than 20 percent of Houston's two million residents. The units are dispersed in roughly 600 separate complexes, with an average of 250 units, and typically constructed at densities of 30-40 units per acre. Not surprisingly, the new projects are located predominantly outside the Loop and many are in a downward spiral of disinvestment. At the scale of the neighborhood, the new projects are islands, privatized and disconnected from the surrounding context and resources. **At the scale of the complex, parking is the most prominent landscape feature and the open space that does exist is often undefined, lacking boundaries to contain it or shape it, and therefore belonging to no one. In most complexes, social organization, open space, public infrastructure, and a sense of control and ownership are all missing.**

Disinvestment and displacement have created the new projects, distant from the prosperity and opportunity of the center, and these projects have become affordable at the very moment that they have become less desirable. Two examples, St. Cloud and Thai Xuan Village, illustrate how grounded and organic change can transform decline into opportunity. The third case, Greenspoint, serves as an example on the opposite side of the spectrum.



315,357

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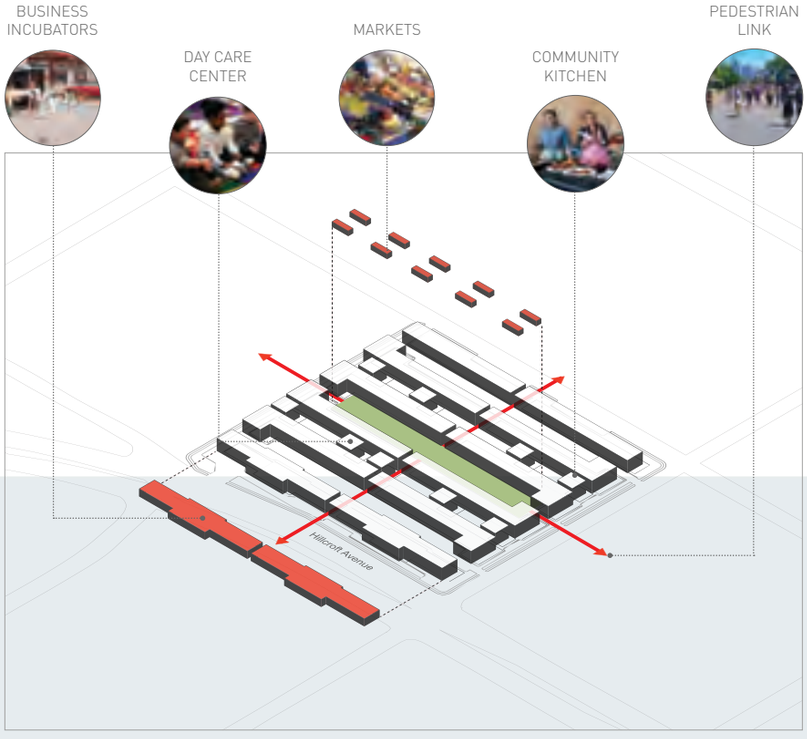
ST. CLOUD, GULFTON

It was a warm and muggy day in July when I first toured the St. Cloud apartment complex on Hillcroft. What I found was a quiet oasis in the center of one of Houston's densest, poorest, and most diverse neighborhoods—Gulfton. St. Cloud is a simple garden apartment complex—one of nearly 50 similar complexes in a three-square



18,000

PEOPLE PER SQUARE MILE

GULFTON HAS THE HIGHEST POPULATION DENSITY IN THE CITY OF HOUSTON, A DENSITY FIVE TIMES HIGHER THAN THE AVERAGE IN THE CITY

3,500

PEOPLE PER SQUARE MILE

HOUSTON

mile area that combined total 15,000 units. Once a prime destination for young professional singles moving to the city in the 1970s, Gulfton began transforming in the late 1980s when Houston's economy collapsed with the price of oil. As single professionals moved on to greener pastures, new immigrants began arriving in the city and filling vacated units. Today more than 60 percent of Gulfton residents were born outside the U.S. and poverty sits at a staggering 39 percent.

But St. Cloud stands in stark defiance of expectations. Home to primarily ethnic Nepalese refugees from Bhutan, it is indescribably beautiful—it works like an "urban village" of the kind that Herbert Gans defined in his 1950s study of the West End of Boston. In the West End Gans found that regardless of the plentiful studies defining the area as a "slum" (clearing any resistance to complete erasure) that the social networks and support systems in place created a neighborhood that worked, and worked well. Gans writes in *The Urban Villagers* that the "image of the area gives rise to feelings that something should be done, and subsequently the area is proposed for renewal. Consequently, the planning reports that are written to justify renewal dwell as much on social as on physical criteria, and are filled with data intended to show the prevalence of antisocial or pathological behavior." Facsimiles of this quote can be heard today, not in reference to historic city districts, but instead to the big multifamily complexes in struggling neighborhoods.

Sited on a superblock over 600 feet in length, St. Cloud is an island, gated and set apart from the surrounding neighborhood. The repeating pattern of courtyards and parking areas are framed by two-story buildings that open to the front and back. This pattern creates the condition where all the units face the open courtyards. As a result the well-defined courtyards are the central gathering and play areas. At one time there were four pools in these spaces; today all have been filled in. On the site of one former pool is an *ad hoc* and petite soccer field, with a 10-foot fence to prevent the adjacent apartment windows from being broken. On any day you can find men gathered in the courtyard playing the traditional board game carrom, children playing freely, mothers chatting on chairs moved outside to supervise, and pickling jars and container gardens dotting adjacent balconies and carports. In many ways the spatial definition of the courtyards has created a shared and safe space, that is both central and watched over by all the residents.

ILLUSTRATIONS BY SUSAN ROGERS.

St. Cloud stands in stark defiance of expectations. Home to primarily ethnic Nepalese refugees from Bhutan, it is indescribably beautiful—it works like an "urban village" of the kind that Herbert Gans defined in his 1950s study of the West End of Boston.

PHOTOS OF ST. CLOUD APARTMENTS BY HANA ABUELAISH.

The gradient from public to private space, a favorite mantra of designers and housing specialists alike, has been well defined, moving seamlessly from the shared public courtyards to the semi-public fenced gardens and patios to the individual units.

PHOTOS OF THAI XUAN VILLAGE BY PAUL HESTER.

A former apartment now serves community needs and there is talk of transforming the laundry areas into community kitchens or other social spaces. What is happening at St. Cloud is a micro-model of transformation that could be expanded by adopting the more ambitious strategies suggested by Jane Jacobs in *Death and Life of Great American Cities*. Jacobs recommended that the ground floor of project buildings be gutted and replaced with a mix of uses or more temporary vendors and markets, and that new streets be introduced to weave projects into the surrounding context. Imagining this model at St. Cloud, for example, would translate into creating new streets through the existing parking lots and introducing new entrepreneurial uses in buildings adjacent to major streets.

THAI XUAN VILLAGE

The story of Thai Xuan Village has been told, but its lessons remain buried. The complex, built in 1976, was originally the Cavalier Apartments. It is one of 20 complexes that line the one-mile corridor of Broadway near Hobby Airport, flanking the repositioned Glenbrook Valley subdivision. The southeast side of Houston was once "swank," and young professionals and families flocked to the area in the 1950s and '60s. As it seems all good things must come to an end, the flight to more distant suburbs (particularly western ones) and the economic crisis of the 1980s ushered in a period of decline. When flight attendants fled and other young professionals moved on; disinvestment followed. In 1993, a Vietnamese Catholic priest, Father John Chinh Tran, bought the complex, renamed it Thai Xuan Village, and invited new refugees from South Vietnam to live there. In 1996, the complex was sold unit by unit as condominiums, and are today appraised at values between $5,000 and $10,000. This would be the start of a new, but rocky, future.

Over the next 15 years the complex deteriorated, balconies sagged, railings collapsed, and broken windows hinted at an escalating crisis. In 2007, elected officials, responding to pressure from neighboring community leaders, began threatening the owners with demolition. The residents fought back, organized a tenant organization, and in 2009 secured $250,000 in affordable housing funds to upgrade the complex. The sagging balconies are once again plumb, roofs have been repaired, and the exterior has been painted and cleaned.

Today, Thai Xuan Village remains imperfect, but worth understanding. In the center of the complex is a small outdoor chapel, placed prominently in the courtyard that once housed a pool, now filled in. Tenants grow vegetables and fruits in their small fenced yards or on the balconies, a small store occupying a former apartment serves residents' basic needs, and children play basketball on the slab of a demolished building. As Josh Harkinson writes in the *Houston Press*:

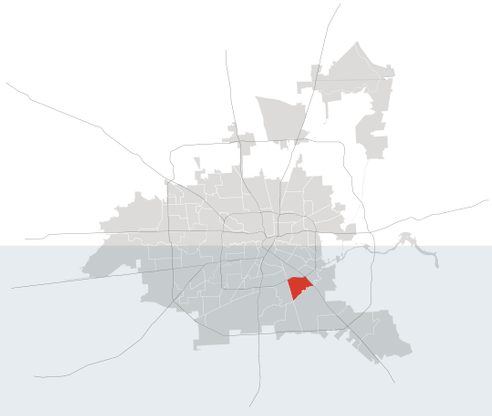
"Any sidewalk between any two buildings leads into a valley of microfarms crammed with herbs and vegetables that would confound most American botanists. Entire front yards are given over to choy greens. Mature papaya trees dangle green fruit overhead, and vines sagging with wrinkled or spiky melons climb trellises up second-story balconies. Perfumed night jasmine stretches for light alongside trees heavy with satsumas, limes, and calamondins. Where the soil ends, Vietnamese mints and peppers sprout out of anything that will contain roots . . ."

The changes at Thai Xuan Village are entirely organic. The gradient from public to private space, a favorite mantra of designers and housing specialists alike, has been well defined, moving from the shared public courtyards to the semi-public fenced gardens and patios to the individual units. As a result the maze-like quality of the open spaces has become more defined and more useful. Continuing to support the infusion of adaptive entrepreneurial uses, like the existing small store, could create additional economic opportunity and more lasting change, not just in the complex, but in the surrounding neighborhood.

St. Cloud and Thai Xuan Village illustrate the potentials of ground-up change in Houston's large multifamily complexes, but more needs to be done to ensure that affordable housing in dense and well-served neighborhoods is preserved. Which takes us to Greenspoint.

GREENSPOINT

The profound demographic shifts that have occurred in the last 20 years come sharply into focus in the Greenspoint neighborhood. The seven-square-mile neighborhood, appallingly nicknamed "Gunspoint," has one of the highest concentrations of multifamily housing within the city limits, at 11,000 units. Over the last 20 years, working-class families have replaced single-person professional households, and as a result, population density in the neighborhood has increased by a factor of 1.5. For example, according to the U.S. Census, only 2,500 people below the



1976

BUILT IN 1976, THAI XUAN VILLAGE WAS ORIGINALLY THE CAVALIER APARTMENTS. IT IS ONE OF 20 COMPLEXES THAT LINE THE ONE-MILE CORRIDOR OF BROADWAY NEAR HOBBY AIRPORT, FLANKING THE REPOSITIONED GLENBROOK VALLEY SUBDIVISION.

Over 34 percent of households currently live below the federal poverty level. Compounding a challenging situation, there are few basic amenities such as grocers, pharmacies, community services, libraries, or youth programs available to Greenspoint residents.

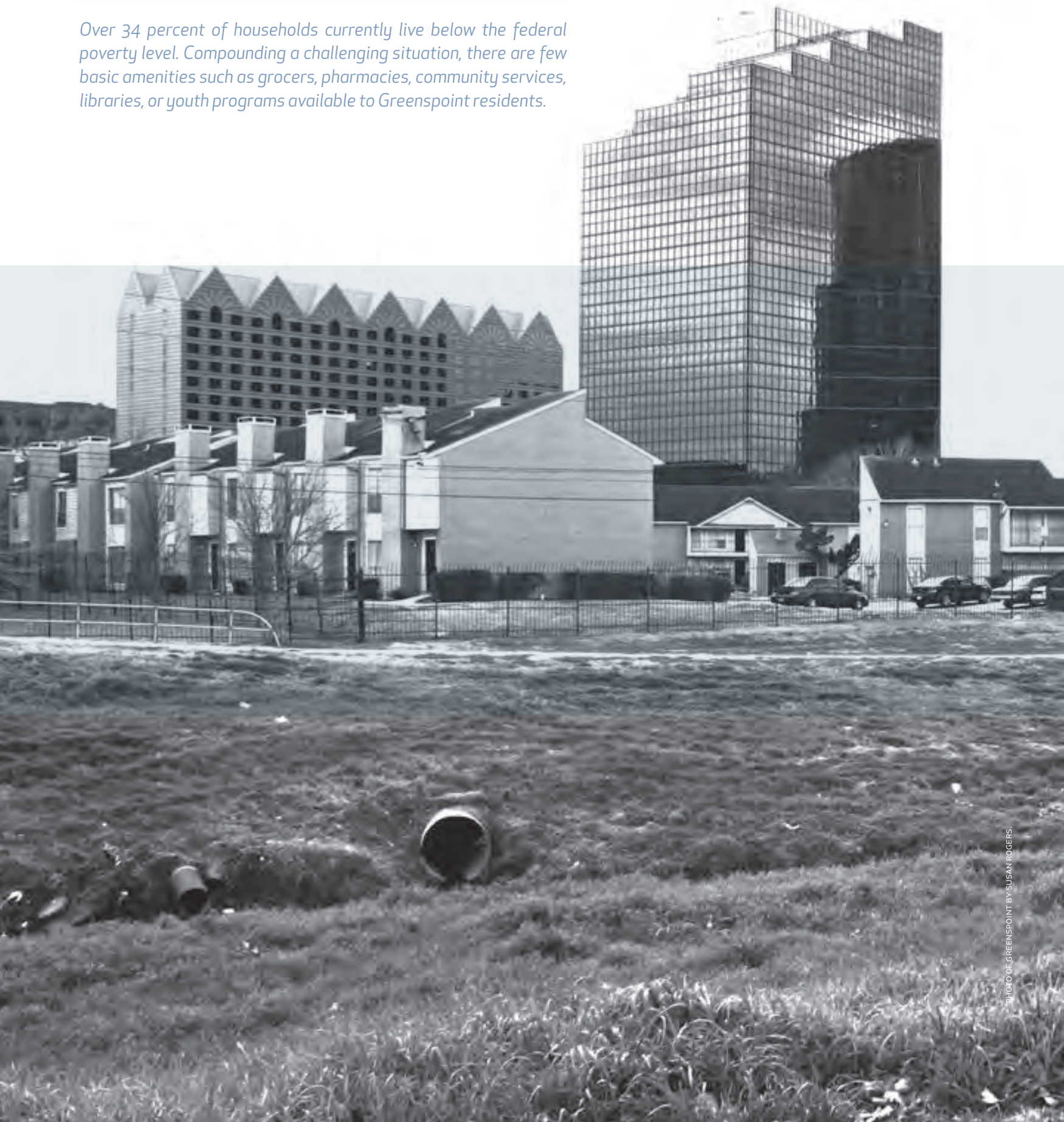


PHOTO OF GREENSPOINT BY SUSAN ROGERS.

age of 18 lived in Greenspoint in 1990. By 2000, this number had skyrocketed to over 12,400, and by 2010, it climbed yet again to 14,000 representing 36 percent of the total population. Over 34 percent of households currently live below the federal poverty level. Compounding a challenging situation, there are few basic amenities such as grocers, pharmacies, community services, libraries, or youth programs available to Greenspoint residents. Over 24 percent of households do not own a car and depend solely on relatively limited public transportation.

Greenspoint is a community divided—islands comprising a large and dying mall, office towers, multi-family housing, and strip retail development are disconnected and isolated from each other both physically and demographically. An immense scale compounds the division. For example, on the site of Greenspoint Mall you could put 54 downtown Houston blocks. Fundamentally there are two communities—one that caters to area office workers and one for those who call the neighborhood home. The division is exemplified by the fact that stores and restaurants serving the area's office workers are closed in the evening and on weekends. Greenspoint will soon be dealt another hefty blow when Exxon moves 5,000 employees from the neighborhood to their new campus in Spring.

While I can't claim to be an expert, Greenspoint, like South Park and other Houston neighborhoods, has produced a lucrative hip-hop and underground rap scene. For those of us old enough to remember rap's early days, it is perplexing to see a mall (where you can get all your Greenspoint wear), apartment complexes, and suburban-style single-family homes featured in street-style, badass rap videos. On the other hand, it makes it clear that local hip-hop culture is one place where demographic change is not studied, it is lived.

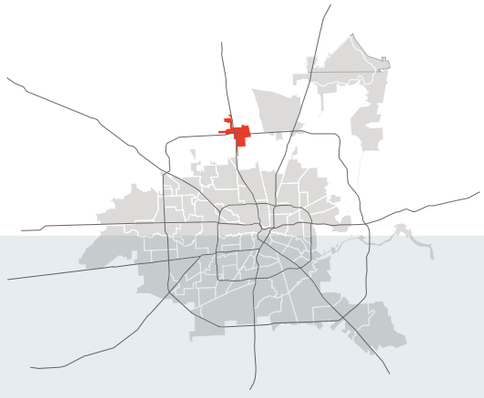
What does the future hold for Greenspoint? I would like to say a music production incubator, a space for Kaos TV, a program like Workshop Houston in Third Ward, or simple programs for youth and families—all this and much more could just occupy the vacant spaces in the mall—but it seems this is not quite the trajectory. One real estate investment company now owns 11 complexes totaling 2,712 apartments, or 25 percent of all of the multifamily units in the neighborhood. Steve Moore, one of the owners, has established a reputation as the "fixer" for distressed apartment complexes in Houston and has moved into the neighborhood. In his recent interview on KTRK, he notes that he is getting rid of drug dealers and criminals, investing in lighting and security, and has established a new set of ground rules for residents, which include a 10 p.m. curfew and no "baggy" or "skimpy" clothing. Greenspoint Mall also has a no-"baggy"-pants policy. Whether these changes are intended to create greater opportunity for the families that live in Greenspoint today or entice the young professional crowd back to the area is, as of yet, unclear. But the organic change happening at St. Cloud and Thai Xuan Village is yet to emerge.

CONCLUSION

The mayor keeps a list, dubbed the "dirty half dozen," which identifies blighted and distressed properties ripe for demolition. Troubled apartments are one of the biggest targets. The last published list of six, now demolished, included five apartment or condominium complexes and one motel. Over a three-year period ending in January 2013, the city demolished a total of 1,120 multifamily units. The question is what will we do with the remaining 310,000 units or so of which 150,000 are more than 40 years old? Demolition would create a twenty-first century re-development opportunity at a scale not witnessed since the era of urban renewal and would remove hundreds of thousands of affordable units from the market. Instead, we could learn from the innovative models that are emerging organically as complexes and apartments are retrofitted for charter schools, places of worship, community centers, small businesses, and youth programs, and formerly ornamental green spaces are transformed into vegetable gardens, sports fields, and gathering places. Meanwhile, the suburban model of large-scale gated and privatized developments is being transplanted into the core of our cities, and the lessons that should seem evident in their failures remain buried.

NOTES

1 Harkinson, Josh, "Tale of Two Cities," *Houston Press*, December 15, 2005. Available at http://www.houstonpress.com/2005-12-15/news/tale-of-two-cities/.



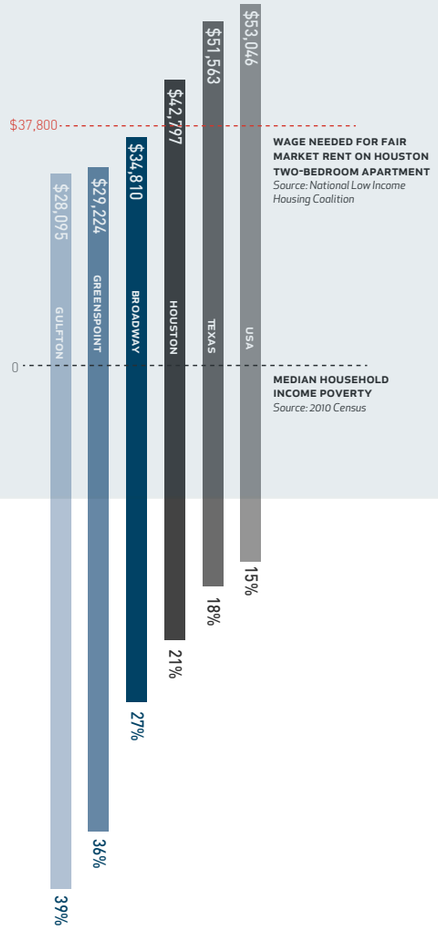


ILLUSTRATION BY SUSAN ROGERS.


FREE
market economy
offcite.org/marketmile
PHOTO BY PAUL HESTER.

MM

AIRLINE MARKET MILE

INCLUSIVE DESIGN FOR GROWTH

BY NATALIA BEARD*

*THE CORE TEAM AT SWA GROUP THAT CREATED THIS PROPOSAL INCLUDES JAMES VICK, KINDER BAUMGARDNER, JENNY JANIS, JASON PIERCE, AND NATALIA BEARD

Every weekend, tens of thousands of people converge on Airline Drive's flea markets to shop and enjoy live entertainment. It's rare to see pedestrians in droves in other Houston suburbs, but here families and teenage couples, dressed in their best, flock to simple outdoor eateries as they make their way through the pulgas. The selection of merchandise ranges from cowboy boots and household appliances to religious paraphernalia, records, dresses for quinceañeras, oversized colorful piñatas, puppies, and live birds. But shopping is only part of the carnival atmosphere of carousel rides, live music, and soccer matches replayed on television. Food counters overflow with roasted corn, tacos de trompo (typically pork marinated in pineapple juice that's hard to come by elsewhere in Houston), and freshly prepared churros. Unlimited combinations of fruit dressed with chile powder, lime, salt, cream, and soda make for refreshing snacks on hot summer days. There are sculptures of elephants and giant ducks; especially popular with children are the life-sized fiberglass dinos in the "Dinosaur World" exhibition that was carefully rebuilt after it burned down a few years back.

Outside the markets, hand-drawn signs mark endless stretches of auto salvage yards, pawn shops, tire dealers, secondhand furniture stores, and laundromats. Mobile vendors seem to make use of every leftover space, whether in driveways and strip-mall parking lots or next to gas stations and warehouses. Fences of every color and configuration line the car lots and freestanding retail enterprises, speaking to the security-conscious sensibilities of property owners in the neighborhood. Nothing here looks tidy or planned, but everything in the neighborhood is purposefully designed in a kind of "Folk Urbanism" style to achieve a livable, self-organized matrix. Ordinary commercial activities have shaped this part of our city in a remarkable way.

The Airline Improvement District (AID) is not even in Houston: it is an island within Harris County, surrounded by the City of Houston but not within its corporate limits. Located on Airline Drive one and a half miles north of Loop 610 and minutes south of the George Bush Intercontinental Airport, it is roughly twice the size of Houston's Downtown. The majority of the local population is young and Hispanic. The area suffers from a number of serious infrastructure problems: it lacks a centralized water service, experiences repeated bayou flooding, affords only limited police patrol, endures soil and water pollution, and is poorly connected by roads initially conceived for rural traffic only. The flooding is so severe that 50 percent of the district's land area is within the floodplain, which impacts investment in new housing and water/sewer services. Fifty-six percent of AID homes were built prior to 1970. Residents modify aging structures to accommodate growing families.

IMAGE BY SWA GROUP.

In 2011, the district was awarded a grant under the Livable Centers Program through the Houston-Galveston Area Council (H-GAC). The program is designed to address urban planning issues associated with population increases in the Houston-Galveston region. The definition of improved "livability" normally includes new transportation options, improved environmental quality, and opportunities for economic growth. SWA Group, leading a team of consulting specialists in marketing, demographics, public engagement, and transportation, conducted the Harris County Area Livable Center Study that centers on the area served by the Airline Improvement District. The goal was to propose a set of long- and short-term projects that could be feasibly implemented and that would address the long-neglected infrastructure systems. Envisioned was a sustainable district that can evolve using its existing strengths by giving residents and local businesses the ability to mold their community while preserving the existing organic flow of grassroots goods and services. Instead of a conventional long-range master plan, the study engaged in a process of inclusive design.

In addition to the infrastructure improvements recommended to the Livable Centers Program, the imperative for economic development called for an unconventional approach that is the focus of this article. Though a mixture of income levels is present in the district, a large number of people live in poverty. Given its need for major infrastructure improvements, the area is not ideal for market-rate development. Instead, to realistically improve AID's economic future, SWA Group had to look elsewhere for solutions and soon identified an opportunity in the proposed strengthening of its dynamic grassroots foundation.

Land use patterns here differ from the conventional dynamics typically associated with suburbs. Although the district supports a mix of "brick and mortar" businesses, flexible enterprises in the form of mobile vendors and flea market stands are disproportionately represented. In the district, business owners can operate within joint living-working arrangements without the burden of meeting City of Houston health, building, and land-use regulations.

Though the salvage yards present hazardous environmental conditions and, in the view of some residents, detract from neighborhood appeal, the flea markets create an intensely and sensually rich cultural experience found nowhere else in Houston. These markets are concentrated along the area's major economic corridor, Airline Drive, and readily invite people into open-air gathering places. Out of the 400,000 square feet of retail space within AID, 46 percent is occupied by flea market vendors. Considering that 30 percent of residents make less than $25,000 annually, these flea markets serve as incubators for entrepreneurial growth. Small businesses pop up around the flea markets each weekend to take advantage of the dense crowds. A lot of permanent businesses in the area started with a simple rented counter and a market stall. Still, though signing up for a table might be very simple, the process of building a successful business and becoming a permanent part of the district economy is more difficult. The question of whether this situation can be measurably improved was one issue facing the designers.

Though flea market activity is the district's strongest socioeconomic asset, the AID management is more heavily focuses on local infrastructure as an economic and investment driver than on direct business development. Taking this cue to provide complimentary outcomes, SWA proposed a unique branding and networking strategy that brings together local business and district representatives. Because of the need for basic community services and economic growth, as well as AID management's desire to con-

MARKET MILE

A REBRANDED STRETCH OF AIRLINE DRIVE BETWEEN WEST AND CANINO ROADS WOULD TURN THIS LOCAL PHENOMENON INTO A WELL-KNOWN AND POPULAR HOUSTON DESTINATION.

IMAGE BY SWA GROUP.

PHOTO BY PAUL HESTER.

nect their work to the community, a programmatic structure was designed to bring new services to the area. This structure, called the Market Mile (MM) and Mobile Community Infrastructure (MCI), leverages the concentrated entrepreneurial and social activity surrounding the flea markets to create a dynamic partnership between business and home owners, and AID management.

MARKET MILE

The first step, which is to rebrand the stretch of Airline Drive between West and Canino Roads as the "Market Mile," would turn this local phenomenon into a well-known and popular Houston destination. In addition to that, partnerships between AID management and flea market vendors would lay the foundation for a new kind of dialogue between business and home owners and planning agencies. This dialogue would give managing government entities an entrepreneurial role in improving the district, provide business owners with a forum and a resource network, and actively market the area's goods to the greater Houston region. The incentive for business owners to join the network would be its ability to advertise, include them as a local resource, and aid in the process of their entrepreneurial growth. To grow support for the Market Mile at a local level, the district would organize family-oriented events and activities and provide free advertising to participating establishments. Eventually, streetscape modifications and signage along Airline Drive would solidify the campaign's branding component.

As a district initiative, the Market Mile would seek to stabilize local businesses and initiate tax-base expansion. New tax revenue could then be spent on building water, sewer, street, and flood mitigation infrastructure. In addition, the resulting network of Market Mile business owners could lobby for important measures like flood mitigation from the Harris County Flood Control District.

MOBILE COMMUNITY INFRASTRUCTURE

Where the Market Mile would begin the dialogue between business and home owners and AID management, the MCI program would extend that conversation to locations not always associated with the commercial spine of Airline Drive. Learning from how people in the district currently use their space, MCI would take shape in the form of a mobile fleet of trucks. Mobile food and retail currently operate very successfully within the existing vacuum of public services and regulation. At a fundamental level, expanding this network would provide people with basic things that could improve,

WEST MOUNT HOUSTON
AND AIRLINE DRIVE

IMAGES BY SWA GROUP.

PHOTO BY PAUL HESTER.

even transform, their lives: help in borrowing a book or renting a computer, language lessons, or assistance with paying tickets and applying for permits and loans. Part of the fleet could be set up to provide additional commercial services, like bicycle repair or programs that involve kids in music, art, and design. Many of these amenities are not available now and are not likely to become part of the district's hard infrastructure in the near future. The mobile fleet would leap over this deficiency and formalize the burgeoning community network by seeding it with the basics, cultivating culture, and offering easily accessible educational opportunities to residents of all ages. The vision is flexible and scalable to what is needed most. With a minimum design intervention (paint on pavement and some movable planters), parking plazas could be strategically set up throughout the district to host the fleet on a rotating schedule.

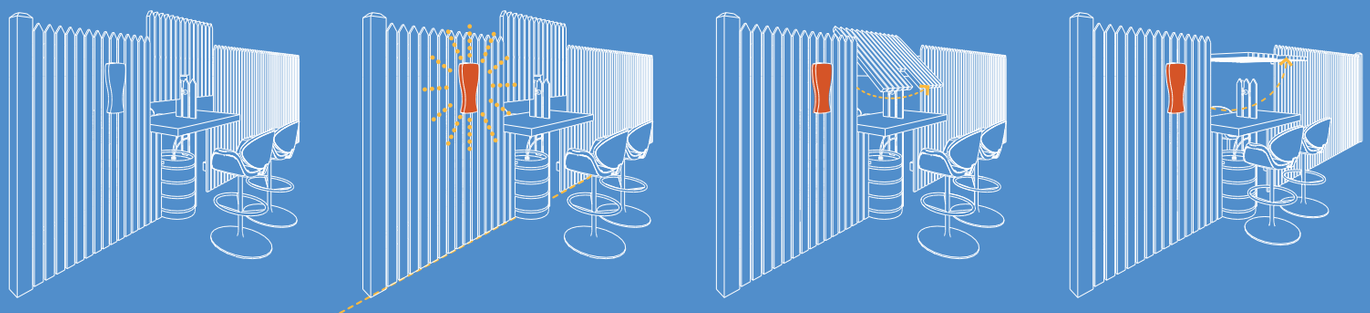
The proposed coupling of physical and social infrastructure allows for the construction of an organized foundation to leverage existing district activities as well as provide services that enhance and redefine the district. As the physical infrastructure is developed and the area undergoes change that is both desired and inevitable, the community will be able to take ownership of the area and become an integral part of the planning conversation.

Through the branding campaign and the mobile fleet, the district can redefine its future and invite others to participate in this unique Houston destination. The Market Mile and Mobile Community Infrastructure not only aid in the district's growth, but also act as catalysts for the projects necessary to improve the residents' health and create a truly livable community and unique Houston destination. ○

cultivate

LAND USE

offcite.org/plant_it_forward

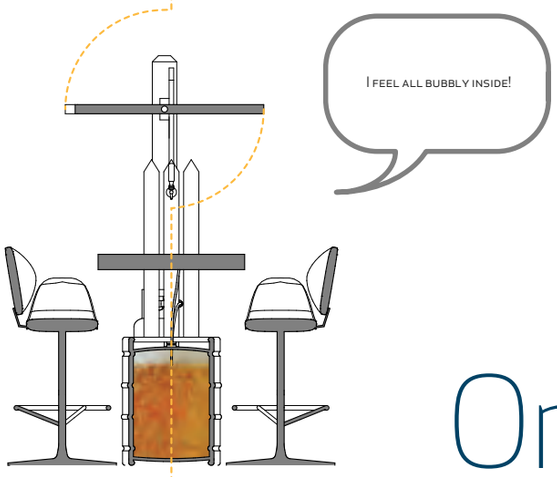


01
In the closed position, Alfred Hitchcock's Beer Window is unobtrusive and anticipatory. The relative privacy of the status quo remains un-challenged.

02
When the mood strikes, a neighbor on either side of the fence can switch on the iconic 'beer light.' The friendly, illuminated vessel announces the desire of a ritualistic drink, and calls the neighbor on the opposite side of the fence to participate.

03
When the moment is right, neighbors on both sides of the fence can swing the hinged Beer Window open!

04
The privacy screen becomes a shading device, sheltering social imbibers from Happy Hour's intense afternoon rays. The tap literally straddles the property line, offering draught beer to be shared. If ice is used to chill the keg, melting water will irrigate the backyard garden.



On the Fence

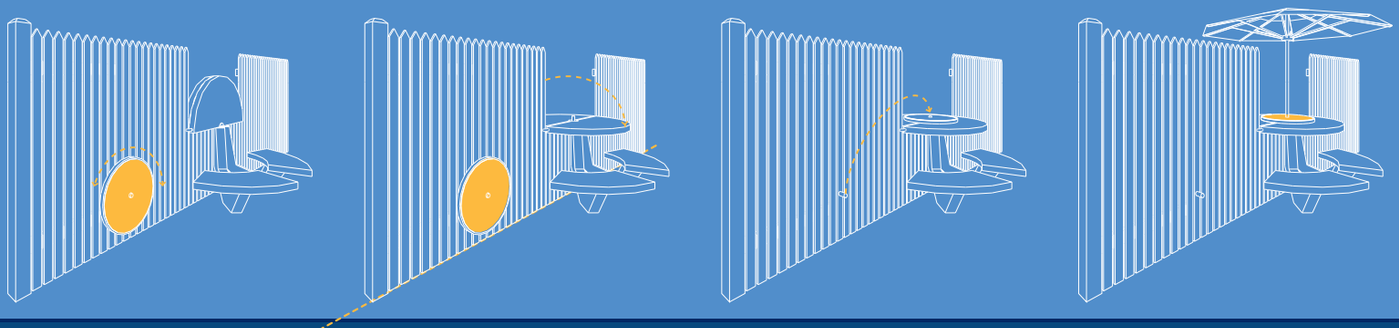
BY JOSEPH ALTSHULER

HOUSTON'S URBAN FABRIC is frequently characterized by the prevalence of hierarchical road systems—expressways that lead to feeder roads that lead to boulevards that eventually terminate in cul-de-sac destinations. This street infrastructure implies a pattern of territorial isolation where properties accessed by cul-de-sacs are insular, introverted, and closed off from serendipitous connections with the city. Albert Pope argues that such infrastructural form produces "individuated subjects at the expense of any massification or incorporation."[1] However, roadway organization is not the only infrastructural form that regulates how subjects are produced and how people interact in a city. Perhaps the fence is an even more potent instrument of organizational power and an even more visible manifestation of the "cul-de-sac city." In Houston, high fences, gated housing complexes, and limited access properties abound.

In his 1996 book *Between Fences*, Gregory K. Dreicer, writes, "We live between fences. They bound our properties and stand at the center of the American landscape. Fences define, protect, confine, and liberate. They tell us where we belong and who we are in relation to others. Fences join the public and private. Remove a fence; invite chaos. Erect a fence; you are home."[2] Public is communal, exposed, and inclusive; public is you—for all to see. Private is isolated, concealed, and intimate; private is me—for no one to see. Can we view the fence, the object that joins public to private, as not simply a solid wall, but instead as a wall that has been carefully punctuated with doors and windows? Can there be elements of "massification" and "incorporation" in a world that still supports an "individuated subject?"

The old adage says, "good fences make good neighbors." Robert Frost mused on this proverb in his 1914 poem, "Mending Wall," in which he describes two neighbors on either side of a fence, mending the fallen stones during an annual springtime routine. The narrator of the poem is skeptical of this act of border reinforcement, and he questions his neighbor accusingly, "Why do they make good neighbors? Isn't it / Where there are cows? But here there are no cows." Their fence

ALL DRAWINGS BY JOSEPH ALTSHULER.

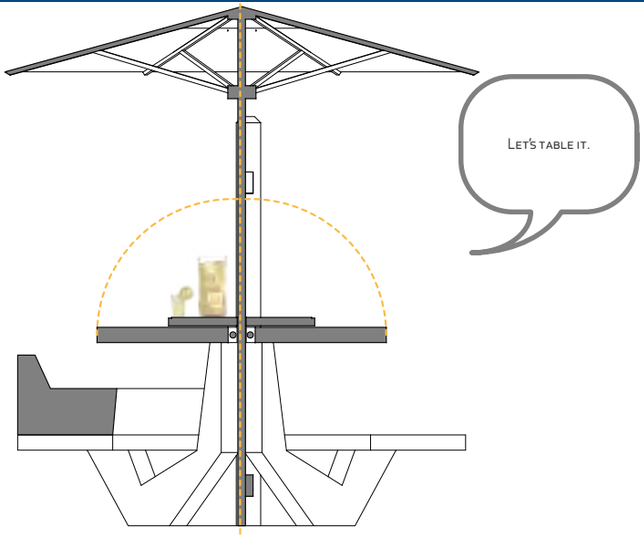


01
In the closed position, the Lazy Susan Picnic Table remains a functional bench. The surface of the Lazy Susan tray itself doubles as a chalk board, and acts as a playful, rotating art surface while being stored on a peg at kid-level.

02
When the moment is right, neighbors on both sides of the fence can swing the hinged table surface open!

03
The Lazy Susan tray is mobilized into position by simply placing it on its central axle. Neighbors can inscribe menu notes and food labels on its chalkboard surface ("100% Vegan cookies!"). By rotating the Lazy Susan, food-sharing can literally straddle property lines and neighborhood boundaries.

04
An optional umbrella can be installed to temper summer's hottest afternoons and springtime's evening drizzles.



*Booster Seat not included.

Great fences make great neighbors.

merely separates apple trees from pine trees. What would happen if a fallen apple were intentionally exchanged for a pinecone?

The fundamental act of architecture is to delineate borders—to mark territory by locating thresholds. "On The Fence" is a proposal for strategic property line interventions between prototypical backyard borders. The project inserts public apertures into the demarcations of private property. Literally implanting playful opportunities into the surface of the fence itself creates radical adjacencies and social opportunities. The border is re-delineated.

A lexicon of backyard leisure activities programs this new middle ground. By leveraging the familiar vocabulary of backyard recreation, new participants are invited to join in existing activities.

The architecture of "On The Fence" exploits the latent potential of two-sided adjacency to create and combine new collectives of neighbors and citizens. The project respects the discrete domestic differences that fences protect, but it challenges people on either side to interact in new ways. It posits that even in the private haven of a fenced-in yard, there can be a place for encountering the Other—people different from ourselves. Moreover, by privileging humorous possibilities, the project looks to ease the inherent tension and awkwardness that comes along with interacting with new people.

Great fences make great neighbors. ○

NOTES

1 See Albert Pope's analysis of the "cul-de-sac city" in "Terminal Distribution," *Architectural Design*, vol. 78, no. 1 (January-February 2008), 16-21.

2 Gregory K. Dreicer, *Between Fences* (New York: Princeton Architectural Press, 1996), 8.

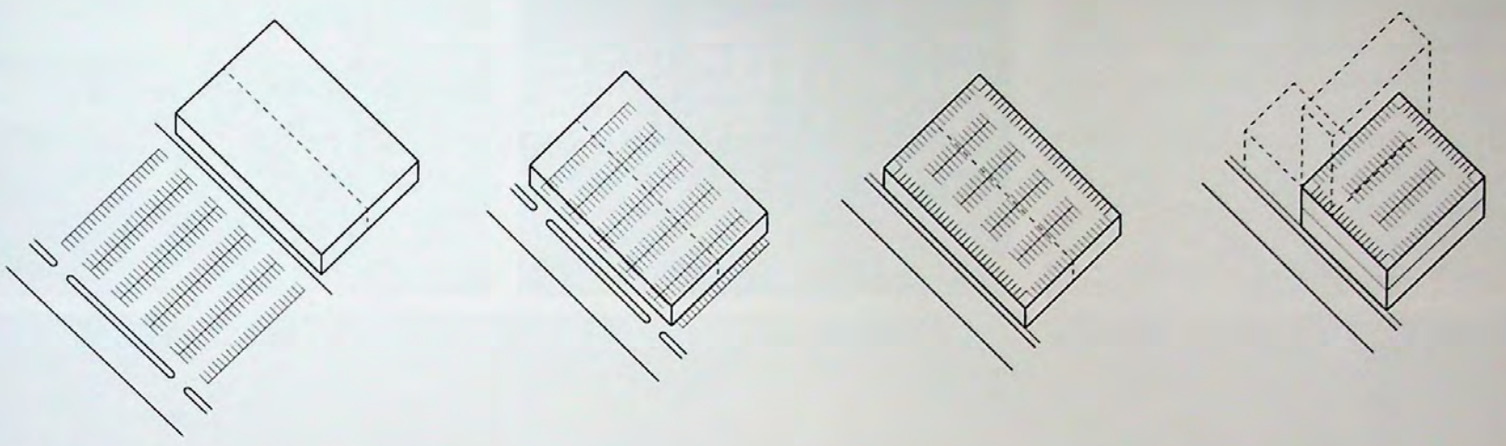
offcite.org/suburban_mutations

UNEXPECTED *urban life*

SUB / URBAN MUTATIONS

DEVELOPERS INSIDE THE LOOP COULD LEARN A THING

BY JUDITH K. DE JONG



BOX or STRIP
typical big box
or strip mall

STACK
parking at ground +
box or strip above

STACK
box or strip at ground
+ parking above

MIX
box or strip + parking
+ other programs

OR TWO FROM WHAT'S HAPPENING OUTSIDE THE LOOP

One of the most dominant narratives in urban design and planning holds that suburbia—and by extension, the suburbanized metropolis—is a "middle landscape" that mediates between civilization (the city/urban) and wilderness (nature/rural), producing a condition in which architecture recedes and landscape becomes the primary condition of the metropolis.[1] This trajectory of suburbanization is a literal form of "flattening." As advances in transportation technologies allowed people to live further away from their work, the form of the metropolis was quite literally becoming physically flat as the periphery expanded, particularly in those locales with the seemingly limitless geographies of much of the United States. This trajectory was most pronounced in the explosion of post-World War II American residential suburbia, largely comprising single-family houses on individual lots, producing a middle landscape with an ever-increasing perception of space. It was also evident in the parallel evacuation of the traditional inner city, as buildings were razed for parking and empty lots proliferated, also producing a reading of void. The Houston of the early- to mid-1990s seemed exemplary of this way of thinking.

Yet by the late 1990s it was clear that many American metropolises were in actuality becoming very different places—not ever more suburban, as was often forecast, but more urban, albeit with a decidedly suburban influence. They were not "flattening" in the *literal* sense. Rather, they were "flattening" in the *conceptual* sense; there was an increasing similarity between urban and suburban forms and ways of life. This ongoing trajectory of flattening is both effect and cause. Driven by substantial demographic and cultural change and evidenced by new spatial and formal practices, flattening also makes architectural and urban innovation possible. These novel practices, seen most vividly in urbanizing suburbs and suburbanizing urban cores, are exemplified in the emergence of hybrid suburban/urban—***sub/urban***, for short—conditions, including the residential densification of suburbia, and new forms of big-box and strip-mall retail, among others. Each of these new sub/urbanisms reflects, to varying degrees, the reciprocating influences of the urban and the suburban. At the same time, these hybrid practices combine and reconfigure conventional understandings of these familiar terms, and in so doing, challenge us to recognize and project the design opportunities of an American metropolis like Houston that is decidedly both/and.[2]

One such new sub/urban condition results from the urbanization of the strip mall and the big box, two of post-war suburbia's most prevalent and recognizable conditions. Though the birth year of the first strip mall is unclear, that of the big box is definitive: retailers Walmart, Target, and K-Mart all opened their first large discount stores in 1962 in response to the

BIG BOX MUTATIONS

BIG BOXES, IT TURNS OUT, COME IN MANY VARIETIES. MULTINATIONAL CORPORATIONS, BIG BOX RETAILERS, AND DEVELOPERS WILL DO ANYTHING TO MAKE A BUCK FROM ADAPTIVE REUSE TO CHIC MIXED-USE CENTERS. THE GLOBAL SUPPLY CHAIN MAY RELY ON STANDARDIZED SHIPPING CONTAINERS, TRUCKS, AND LOADING DOCKS, BUT CONSUMERS LIVE IN VERY DIFFERENT NEIGHBORHOODS. HERE ARE A FEW OF THE WAYS THAT RETAILERS HAVE CONSIDERED CONTEXT.

STACKED (CHIC) & MIXED

MOVE OVER WHOLE FOODS. TARGET, WALMART, AND OTHERS ARE ANCHORING EXPENSIVE DEVELOPMENTS WITH PARKING GARAGES BELOW, HOUSING ABOVE, AND SMALL RETAILERS ALONG THE STREET.

STACKED (NOT SO CHIC) & MIXED

DUN HUANG PLAZA AT BELLAIRE AND BELTWAY 8, AND THE HILLCROFT SHOPPING PLAZA AT THE SOUTHWEST FREEWAY, HAVE STRUCTURED PARKING AND A WILD MIX OF STORES.

rapidly growing suburban market, which was itself framed by the exploding commodity culture often associated with mid-twentieth century American settlement.[3] In this post-war, automobile-focused landscape, peripheral land was inexpensive, and tax codes privileged greenfield development, thus both the strip mall and the big box quickly developed the classic suburban characteristics of big, convenient parking lots at the front of the site, with big, low stores and/or strips at the rear.[4] This approach of practicality, economy, and efficiency was replicated in the stores themselves, and as a whole exhibited zero interest in urban and architectural possibilities. Architects and urbanists, save a few, were likewise uninterested.[5]

In 1972, Robert Venturi, Denise Scott Brown, and Steven Izenour (VSBI) published *Learning from Las Vegas*, a study of the "radically different" urban form of the commercial strip, of which Las Vegas was the archetype—"an exaggerated example from which to derive lessons for the typical."[6] For VSBI, the strip was evidence that architecture was no longer about traditional notions of "enclosed" space, exemplified by the historic Italian piazza that was scaled to the pedestrian. Rather, architecture was now about communication, epitomized by the graphic roadside sign that "ha[d] become the architecture of this landscape,"[7] and was informed by a "new scale" that related to, and was organized by, the speed and space of the highway. In an architecture of communication, the building in the traditional sense was no longer important. Instead, it was a big, low box fronted by an enormous, highly visible parking lot, with a big sign at the road that "connect[ed] the driver to the store."[8] For VSBI, this "anti-spatial" architecture of "signs and styles" manifested itself in two key ways: the "duck" and the "decorated shed." The duck was a building "distorted by an overall symbolic form;" in other words, the building "*is* a symbol."[9] The decorated shed, in contrast, was a building where "ornament is applied independently of [space, structure, and program];" in other words, symbols are applied *to* the building.[10] While VSBI thought both approaches were important and viable, the communicative potential of the decorated shed in the suburban landscape was explored to particular effect in a series of Best Product projects designed by SITE (Sculpture In the Environment) between 1972 and 1984.[11]

Developed by Sydney and Francis Lewis, art collectors and the owners of the Best Products Company, the Best stores were early big boxes, located in suburban shopping strips. SITE considered these commercial centers to be people magnets—the new locus of public interaction—and therefore an ideal place for the integration of public art and communicative architecture.[12] However, per VSBI, the most significant issue was how to communicate to an audience on the highway at the speed of the car, which SITE thought required new rather than historic imagery.[13] Accordingly, SITE explored the store as a "graphic sign" through approximately 20 projects for Best, one of the earliest and most of iconic of which was "Indeterminate Façade," built in Houston in 1975. Here, extra-tall, white-brick front and side walls of the big box were built with an eroded top edge, a portion of which was quite literally crumbling away onto the entrance canopy below. Whether at a distance from the highway or proximate in the parking lot, it was purposefully unclear whether the store was in the process of construction or demolition. Regardless, it was an arresting image that not only signaled across space, but also was an imaginative demonstration of what could be achieved in a communicative architecture of the commercial strip.

When the strip mall and the big box first began to migrate into the American city, they did so primarily through a literal transposition of suburban conditions, with the same requirements for large lots, plentiful parking, and deeply set, big, low buildings. But as they push forcefully into denser conditions, more challenging constraints—such as smaller, more expensive sites and more robust regulatory requirements—have produced new, potentially innovative versions, including the *stack* and the *mix*, the most successful and interesting of which hybridize not only urban constraints with suburban formats, but also formal conditions with graphic communication. In a city such as Chicago, where the traditional city

PARK-LIKE PARKING

AFTER INTENSE DISCUSSIONS WITH NEIGHBORHOOD ORGANIZATIONS, H-E-B PRESERVED OLD OAK TREES AND INCLUDED A GATE AT BRANARD STREET FOR PEDESTRIANS AT THE MONTROSE MARKET.

BIG BOX ART

BEST PRODUCTS COMPANY BUILT BIG BOXES THAT DOUBLED AS PUBLIC ART FOR AUDIENCES MOVING AT FAST SPEEDS IN CARS. HOUSTON'S VERSION (1975) EXISTS, BUT THE ICONIC FAÇADE WAS REMOVED.

MASTERPIECE DISCOUNT

TARGET HAS BROUGHT THEIR DISCOUNT GOODS TO LOUIS SULLIVAN'S FORMER CARSON PIRIE SCOTT & CO. BUILDING IN CHICAGO'S LOOP (1899).

PHOTOS FROM LEFT: COURTESY WALMART, PAUL HESTER, RAJ MANKAD, UNKNOWN, TARGET

center maintains a certain physical density and some degree of psychological dominance, these versions often first sprout in or near "downtown." But in a city such as Houston, where the urban structure is polynuclear and thus the historic "downtown" is simply one of many downtowns, these new versions are just as likely to be found in the urbanizing periphery.

The *stack* version is new construction that adapts to denser sites and conditions by employing one or more of the following techniques: becoming more vertical and using multiple levels; incorporating structured parking; delineating the street edge in some way; and providing access to those who walk and/or arrive by other forms of transportation. Importantly, however, the stack maintains large square footages and continues to accommodate easy car access with plentiful, usually free parking. Examples—most commonly big boxes—are found in inner cities such as Chicago's Lincoln Park neighborhood, where Home Depot has a store, as well as in densifying suburbanized areas such as the Northgate area of Seattle, where Target anchors a power center. In Houston, the stack is most evident in strip malls. Early, highly simplified versions have existed inside the Loop since at least the 1990 opening of Shepherd Square, located at the southeast corner of Westheimer Road and South Shepherd Drive, the west edge of which is two levels. However, more recent and developed versions are found in densifying west side areas between 610 and 8, specifically in Little India (Hillcroft and Highway 59) and Chinatown (Bellaire Boulevard at Beltway 8), on opposite sides of Sharpstown.

One such project is Dun Huang Plaza in Chinatown, best known for its numerous restaurants, which sits on a large, rectangular lot that is deeper than it is wide. Built in phases between 2005 and 2008, the project comprises of five two-story buildings and two parking garages that line the site's edges and in concert create a loose, asymmetrical U-shape. Two of the retail buildings delineate the somewhat limited street frontage along Bellaire Boulevard, creating a slender opening through which cars access both the long strip of surface parking at the center of the site, and the two structured garages where the vast majority of the parking is housed. Though primarily oriented towards the car—the plentiful parking is free, of course—wide sidewalks and some surprising grassy spaces make pedestrian movement to and through the site easier than expected. As designed by Global Architecture Design Group, the architecture of the buildings varies somewhat across the phases, but as a whole is safe and traditional, reinforced by a primary material palette of red brick and beige cast stone. Given the large number of retailers in the complex, the size and location of signage is tightly controlled, resulting in a horizontal zone at the top of each level in which all signage is found. The zone for the ground level retail is particularly full, probably because that retail is almost fully occupied (the second floors are less so), and because many stores have signage in two languages. As a result, the signage of individual stores is difficult to read from the road, particularly at higher speeds, leaving the center to rely on a horizontal pylon at the street. Thus while the project exhibits an interesting degree of suburban/urban hybridization of form and space, it is also a lost opportunity for additional graphic exploration.

Yet the horizontal zone of signage intimates a way forward through the graphic device of the stripe. Rather than detail the buildings with fussy corbels and decorative railings and inlaid stars, the surface could be clean and taut, with a wide, flush stripe of a contrasting color that continues across all the buildings in a big graphic move. Repeated on the second floor, the eye-catching stack-of-stripes could not only organize the façade and the individual store signs, but also broadcast a clear and memorable image to the road. There is also the question of the strange grass rectangle in the parking lot. Renderings of the project show it as a big fountain, though it is unknown if it was value-engineered out or never really meant to be. But both the proposed fountain and the resultant empty grass lot convey another lost opportunity: that of using design to stage new ways of sub/urban collective life. Rather than default to indeterminacy—just because anything *can* happen there doesn't mean it *will*—this could have been

designed for, among others, the new sub/urban foodie audience that frequents this place.

The *mix* integrates additional programs such as housing with retail, and is the least common of these new versions. Examples are located primarily in urban areas, but are increasingly seen in urbanizing suburbs as well, and thus also incorporate many of the characteristics of the *stack*. For example, the Wilson Yard development (2010), which backs up to the Red Line elevated rail ("L") in Uptown, a dense lakeside neighborhood on the north side of Chicago, comprises a two-story, 180,000-square-foot Target store as well as two adjacent buildings containing 179 housing units and 25,000 square feet of additional retail space.

BLVD Place, found in rapidly densifying Uptown Houston directly west of Loop 610, is a strip mall anchored by a big box. Phase One of the project contained 70,000 square feet of retail and office and was completed in 2009. Phase Two of the project, which contains 211,000 square feet of retail and office, is currently under construction and projected to open in 2014. This phase is anchored by an almost 50,000-square-foot Whole Foods, which sits just south of the corner of San Felipe and Post Oak Boulevard and is framed on both sides by skinny strips containing two levels of retail plus two to three additional levels of office space. Rather than sit at the absolute rear of the site, as is typical in suburbia, the strip mall and big box move towards Post Oak Boulevard, where they define a new kind of sub/urban street edge with a sidewalk wide enough for small seating areas, an access road, and one row of teaser parking in front. Parking is housed almost entirely in a very large five-level centralized garage that is currently lined on its north and (most of its) south sides by the retail/office strip buildings; according to plans, the buildings will eventually fully line the south and west sides as well. However, the east side of the garage, which faces Post Oak Boulevard, is purposely open and visible—albeit screened with closely spaced wood slats—presumably to reassure drivers that there is still plenty of convenient parking on site. In addition, Whole Foods has one separate level of 260 dedicated parking spaces under the ground level store, from which access is provided directly into the store via prominently placed escalators at the front glass wall, as well as more typical stairs and elevators. Given the prohibitive cost of underground parking in Houston's clay-based soil, this is an extraordinary move.

The architecture of BLVD Place, by the Los Angeles office of AECom, is refreshingly contemporary, especially in comparison to the many horrendous, mostly traditional residential projects of the recent past in the area. And unlike Dun Huang Plaza, BLVD Place relies on architecture rather than literal signage to communicate to the road.[14] Here, the graphic device is that of the line, materialized as a thick, white, largely horizontal edge that limns the top of both the retail and office levels, then returns to form a C-shape that frames and distinguishes each major office volume of the project; the scale and clarity of these frames read quickly and well at a distance. At the scale and proximity of the pedestrian, the line becomes the basis for the frit of the glass in the office volumes, producing a pattern of alternating narrow and wide horizontal stripes that reinforces the horizontality of the thick white frames. The line is also the patterning agent on the concrete panels of the currently exposed west face of the parking garage.

As the strip mall and big box encounter denser conditions, such as Houston's urbanizing periphery, they are mutating into new versions that always synthesize urban constraints and suburban formats, but seldom hybridize formal conditions and graphic communication, thus limiting their potential innovation. Dun Huang Plaza is representative of this (self-imposed) limitation; invention is found in the way it engages site constraints, not in its uninspired architecture. In contrast, even in its currently incomplete state, BLVD Place shows the promise of both; in particular, the graphic device of the line is exemplary of a recuperation of the communicative capacity of the commercial strip as a primary means of exploring the architectural and urban possibilities of new hybrid retail practices. But while Blvd Place clearly *reflects* changing ways of sub/urban life, only time will tell if it might also *shape* them. For example, like Dun Huang Plaza, it does not seem to suggest new possibilities for collective sub/urban life.

In his essay "Atlanta," architect Rem Koolhaas asserts that "sometimes it is important to find out what the city *is*."[15] Perhaps counter-intuitively, to determine what the city—or suburbia—*is* often requires looking at it in a new way, since conventional thinking usually does not provide ways to move forward productively. This conceit is a crucial basis for today's sub/urban project because suburbia is undergoing significant cultural and demographic urbanization but is rooted in forms that resist conventional urban understanding and evolution. It is therefore critical to continue to not only rethink what suburbia *is*, but also project what it *could be*, in order to develop innovative new forms and spaces that both reflect and shape changing ways of sub/urban life. ○

NOTES

1 This narrative is based on historian Leo Marx's chapter "The Garden," *The Machine in the Garden* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1964), 73-115.

2 For a comprehensive discussion of "flattening," see the "Framework" chapter of De Jong, *New SubUrbanisms* (New York: Routledge, 2013).

3 There does not seem to be a definitive definition of "big box." However, one of the better definitions is as follows: "Big-box retail facilities are large, industrial-style buildings or stores with footprints that generally range from 20,000 square feet to 200,000 square feet. While most big-boxes operate as a single-story structure, they typically have a three-story mass that stands more than 30 feet tall. The definition, or perhaps the description, of a big box store can be better understood through its product category. For example, book retailers like Barnes & Noble generally range from 25,000 square feet to 50,000 square feet, whereas in the general merchandise category, big-boxes like Walmart range from 80,000 square feet to 130,000 square feet." Theodis L. Perry Jr., *Managing Maryland's Growth: Models and Guidelines (for) Big Box Retail Development* (Baltimore, MD: Maryland Department of Planning, 2001), 3, accessed December 7, 2011, http://www.mdp.state.md.us/OurProducts/publications.shtml.

4 Thomas W. Hanchett, "US Tax Policy and the Shopping Center Boom of the 1950s and 1960s," *The American Historical Review* 101, no. 4 (October 1996): 1082-1110.

5 Portions of this essay were adapted from De Jong, *New SubUrbanisms* (Routledge, 2013).

6 Robert Venturi, Denise Scott Brown, and Steven Izenour, *Learning From Las Vegas*, revised ed. (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1977), 18.

7 Venturi, Scott Brown, and Izenour, *Learning From Las Vegas*, 13.

8 Venturi, Scott Brown, and Izenour, *Learning From Las Vegas*, 13.

9 Venturi, Scott Brown, and Izenour, *Learning From Las Vegas*, 87.

10 Venturi, Scott Brown, and Izenour, *Learning From Las Vegas*, 87.

11 While VSBI emphasized the communication of image, and SITE emphasized the communication of meaning, James Wines acknowledges that SITE was "conceptually attracted to Venturi." James Wines, *SITE* (New York: Rizzoli International Publications, 1989), 19.

12 Wines, *SITE*, 12.

13 *SITE* had a particular interest in Italian ideas of the 12th–16th centuries, where "the 'function' of architecture was the integration of the arts in the service of communication." However, they also felt quite strongly that contemporary practices should not use historic imagery; rather, new imagery was needed for a new cultural and intellectual time. Wines, *SITE*, 9.

14 Which is not to say there will be no signage. As evidenced in Phase One results, individual store signage will most likely be small, bundled in a dedicated horizontal zone, and primarily visible at slower speeds and closer distances.

15 Rem Koolhaas. "Atlanta," *S,M,L,XL* (New York: Monacelli Press, 1995), 835.

WALLMART

BY ALLYN WEST

The second Walmart Supercenter inside Loop 610 is going to make a lot of money, AND THAT'S TOO BAD: The receipts will undercut the argument that the store could have added something of value to the neighborhood and Houston's retail vocabulary other than a few jobs and ONE MORE BIG DUMB BOX.

The one-story, 185,000-square-foot Supercenter, which opened in January, sits on a 28-acre site in the East End where Oshman's Sporting Goods warehouses once sat. It can be accessed from South Wayside Drive and the I-45 feeder. East of the site are the Sanchez Charter School (of the Association for the Advancement of Mexican Americans) and a low-slung apartment complex. Beyond are older neighborhoods of single-family houses — Idylwood, Country Club Place, Simms Woods, Eastwood, Forest Hill, Magnolia Park, and Pecan Park. The site, in other words, is complex and interesting and urban, only a few miles from Downtown, the University of Houston, a Houston Community College branch, and light rail lines on Scott Street and Harrisburg Boulevard. It's also near Brays Bayou, where stretches of the Bayou Greenways hike and bike trail are now under construction.

The Supercenter, though, is neither complex nor interesting nor urban. Of course, Walmart typically conceives of its stores not as works of architecture but as links in supply chains: Goods are trucked in from regional distribution centers, and they're moved out in the backs of SUVs. As economically successful as this model has been, it might explain why protests, not permits, are often the first things Walmart receives when it plans to develop in urban areas. It's a one-size-fits-all model, and the size Walmart does best is XXL.

Elsewhere, though, Walmart is attempting to add value to the neighborhoods it wants to sell to. Six mixed-use projects anchored by Walmarts are planned in Washington, D.C. One, Fort Totten Square, was designed by Hickok Cole Architects. North of Downtown, it will be just a five-minute walk from a Metro hub. Renderings show four stories of apartments atop a 120,000-square-foot Walmart, with 10,000 square feet reserved for other retail and restaurants. Walmart even sprung for the substantial cost to put parking and truck bays underground, which allows the store to cozy up to the street. Still, it wasn't as though Walmart brass suddenly became urbanists, explains principal Michael Hickok. "The value of the land was high enough and market demand strong enough that it made economic sense [to do this]. The way to maximize value was to increase density."

That wouldn't have worked in Houston's East End. A five-story, mixed-use project there would have been awkward and out of scale; the tallest structure in the area is the bell tower of the Villa de Matel chapel. Plus, Wayside might not have been able to absorb the cars that hundreds of new residents would have introduced. And Hickok acknowledges that JBG, the developers of Fort Totten Square, had to mitigate the stigma of living above a Walmart. "Throwing one up and throwing units on top doesn't make a community," he says.

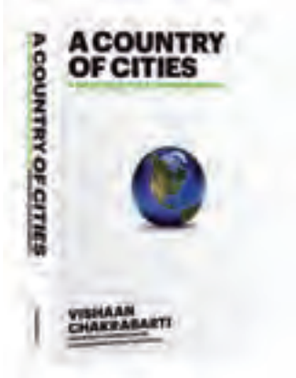
The suburban model that was thrown up, though, doesn't work, either. Take, for example, the lack of access it creates for two nearby communities (i.e., potential customer bases): the Brookdale Village Apartments on Maxwell Lane and, farther south on the feeder, the New Hope Housing at Brays Crossing, designed by Glassman Shoemake Maldonado Architects in 2011. The infamous low prices Walmart manages to wring out of suppliers would be a boon, no doubt, to these Houstonians. But the store's cars-only orientation is hostile to them. Brookdale Village residents now face Dumpsters, truck bays, detention ponds, and a chain-link fence topped with three stands of barbed wire. What would have been a two-minute walk, door to door, has been mangled into a circuitous mile.

You can imagine other possibilities that might be not only more interesting but also more efficient, if "efficient" means getting as many customers as possible to the store to buy things. Here's one: What if there were a tree-lined pedestrian path along the perimeter of the property that lollygagged around the detention ponds and led to a rear entrance? Here's another: What if the store's McDonald's weren't secreted away in a corner but opened to a patio facing the charter school?

Despite the plan behind Fort Totten Square and the precedent of commercial success in other urban areas in Houston of retail typologies like the mix and the stack, this Supercenter borrows solely, and slavishly, from suburban architecture, with its "big, convenient parking lots at the front," as Judith De Jong writes, and "big, low stores ... at the rear." Were this a watermelon stand thrown up at the intersection of farm-to-market roads, you might get why it works the way it does. Were it 1962, you might be satisfied. It's not.

PHOTO BY PAUL HESTER.

MFA BOOKSTORE SELECTS



PETER ZUMTHOR:
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TASTE IS TIMELESS

by Adolf Loos

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METRO VERLAG, 2013, 128 PAGES HARDCOVER, $22.50, $18 FOR RDA MEMBERS

OSCAR NIEMEYER AND NORMAN FOSTER
IN CONVERSATION WITH HANS
ULRICH OBRIST

The occasion of this conversation was the first and only encounter that took place between these two great architects, shortly before Niemeyer's death. Many common interests between the two are revealed, some of which were expected, while others are quite surprising. They shared, for instance, a passion for the practice of drawing and a conviction of its centrality for architectural work. A rare insight and opportunity to witness the interaction between two unmatched architectural personalities of our times.

ARCHITECTURE IVORYPRESS, 2013, 49 PAGES, SOFTCOVER, $16.50, $13.20 FOR RDA MEMBERS

A+U # 515:
HOUSES BY EMERGING ARCHITECTS

This issue introduces 10 of today's practitioners. In pursuing the enhancement of the individual quality of life, these architects seek to portray the innovative forms of the house typology through readings of context and culture, not to mention a manipulation or translation of its framework. With an essay by OFFICE Kersten Geers David Van Severen, plus works by architecten de vylder vinck taillieu, Adamo-Faiden, Andrés Jaque, Tatiana Bilbao, John Lin, MASS Design Group, and others.

A+U 2013, 135 PAGES,
$40.00, $32 FOR RDA MEMBERS

A COUNTRY OF CITIES:
A MANIFESTO FOR AN URBAN AMERICA

By Vishaan Chakrabarti, foreword by Norman Foster, ill. by SHoP Architects

Vishaan Chakrabarti argues that well-designed cities are the key to solving America's great national challenges: environmental degradation, unsustainable consumption, economic stagnation, rising public health costs, and decreased social mobility. If we develop them wisely in the future, our cities can be the force leading us into a new era of progressive and prosperous stewardship of our nation.

METROPOLIS BOOKS, 2014, HARDCOVER, 252 PAGES, $29.95, $23.96 FOR RDA MEMBERS

THE CORONER'S REPORT

by David Heymann

The Architecture of Art Museums: A Decade of Design: 2000 – 2010 (written by Ronnie Self, Routledge, 2014, 208 pages, softcover)

Ronnie Self's eminently readable new book of case studies, *The Architecture of Art Museums: A Decade of Design 2000-2010*, provides in-depth descriptions of 18 prominent museums opened in America (mostly) and Europe during the booming first decade of the twenty-first century. Laid out chronologically by date of opening—from Tadao Ando's Fort Worth Museum of Modern Art to Zaha Hadid's MAXXI in Rome—the works are authored by SANAA, Herzog & de Meuron, Renzo Piano, Diller Scofidio + Renfro, Steven Holl, Shigeru Ban, etc.; i.e., the apex predators of the architectural world, working on what was then, and still may be, the sociocultural equivalent of the Greek temple, Renaissance palazzo, Baroque church, or early-Modern housing.

Self, an architect and Associate Professor of Architecture at the University of Houston, worked for Renzo Piano for 12 years, and he brings that office's heightened common sense to his task. He lucidly dissects how each of these often complicated buildings works in its context, how it is perceived and moved through by visitors, how exhibitions can be hung given the architectural strategies (he is less clear about curation), how the buildings are structured and constructed, how mechanical and environmental systems operate, and how each is serviced. (His attention to loading docks is much appreciated.) Each entry is 2,000 to 3,000 words in length, with excellent architectural drawings, regularly including details of how natural illumination is controlled, and just enough photographs to judiciously describe the points made.

The need to publish more on the recent avalanche of well-known museum buildings would seem to be marginal, but the initial purpose of the book becomes rapidly clear. It's useful to have all that information in one place, a great resource for architects, curators, and educators. There will now never again be the need to ask studio students to do this sort of data gathering, at least for these buildings. Though one could describe the relationship between boulders in an avalanche, Self keeps the descriptions largely discrete, allowing the reader to make necessary connections while providing clear means to do so (in setting out, for example, the four primary means of conceiving exhibition space: room, gallery, loft, and hall).

Data aside, the great pleasure of reading the book is Self's particular voice. Like a very intelligent coroner calmly reading post-mortem reports at an inquest, Self builds his cases by the slow and logical accumulation of facts. You are led in innocently: the facts amass without overt speculation on motives. Self thinks carefully, and his writing is both earnest and without cant. Occasional abrupt shifts between paragraphs and slightly stilted grammar heighten this sense of earnestness, and the book can actually be read aloud to satisfying end. There is, of course, no innocent data. The particular skill with which Self pieces together the various skeins of site, program, experience, structure, and architectural intent invariably allows him, somewhere near the end of each entry, to quietly slip in an often profoundly critical observation without it seeming to be the sort of qualitative commentary it actually is.

So, for example, late in describing Hadid's building in Rome, Self points out: "the MAXXI has reverted back to the very long gallery type (exemplified by the Grande Galerie at the Louvre for example) defined here by continuous parallel or curved walls. The ceiling fins also follow the same geometry. Visitors are pulled through the space and past the works. At the MAXXI the experience should be more akin to navigating the internet or the changing scenes of cinematography. Movement and discovery are, however, at the expense of repose, focus, and meditation." Or, in describing Piano's use of imported materials at the Nasher—despite the architect's rhetoric of location—Self notes that rather "than 'place,' the approach in this instance might speak more of the seductive pedigree of European luxury." The text is filigreed with similar scalpel cuts.

Read the full review at offcite.org/art-museums

"Mixed Use Development," collage, 2014, Carrie Schneider.

THE MIXED USE FUTURE OF NOW

ON THE WAY TO A FRIEND'S HOUSE in the suburbs, a friend and I skipped the tolls and drove past the second loop on a surface road, playing a guess-what's-next car game:

Best Buy, Marshalls, AT&T, Subway .....

But in spurts, the retail syntax gave way to those euphorically Houston stretches where scrappy, audacious imagination cracks through the concrete and reads like a romp told by too many voices at once.

The friends we were going to see are recent transplants from Montrose, now occupying their colonial two-story with an independent press and compromising their lawn with art too unnerving to describe here. When we arrived, they apologized, "We're so far!"

But I was thinking the reverse: the young professionals who move inside the Loop claim heightened cultural capital for living "the urban experience" but are more consumers than contributors to creative life.

I'm prickly because "the urban experience" has become a real estate spell convincing consumers that they can just arrive at "artsy" or rent "culture" while simultaneously manicuring away its sources. I'm sad to see the soul centers of my city being flipped into fortressed "mixed-use developments" and market-calibrated "town centers" in which diversity of experience is reduced to increments of purchasable quirk.

Blocks like the one pictured here as substrate once seemed uncanny in Houston for their enforced coherence. Now they're difficult not to encounter. The tin tower, the stucco something, brick/beige boxes, are becoming as legible to us as the syntax of retail outlets. I'm not surprised that the language of most-profit-per-footprint is loud in Houston's current boom, but I am struck by how silver-tongued it is. Let's play the guess-what's-next car game inside the Loop:

Form: Three stories, zero setback, gated in slabs ..... Foreshadowing: Curated thrift store, upscale salon, pet service establishment ..... Or context clues: Apple store, sushi, upscale organic .....

Eventually consumption consumes itself. In the suburbs, the structural shells are left and creativity moves in, telling another joke. Shopping plaza and office complex subversions turn into outposts of any imaginable sort—using their own password, "profit," to get away with everything but. This is not creativity self-consciously branded as such, or variety within the limits of consumable culture. This is some real free enterprise. Not corporate copy-and-paste, but people taking up space, making exchanges, and claiming their right to a multivocal, incoherent, human city. These post-capitalist occupations are some of the most inspiring and creative cases for hope in Houston.

Despite a beaten-down feeling about the current rapidity and massive investor-powered real estate turnover in the core of my city, I suggest by way of collage that eventually we'll take it back over. It's just a matter of time (assuming the construction lasts). There is a way to imagine past our current experience—because people already are.

In leftovers, basically. We can be creative in the leftovers, and while at some point in the future it will seem strange that our greatest originality and variety of voice was tucked under drop tile ceilings and until extracted as "underground!" by marketing strategies, at another point in the future it will seem absurd that human expression and the spaces that we make were something scarce to be scavenged for profit at all. – *Carrie Schneider*


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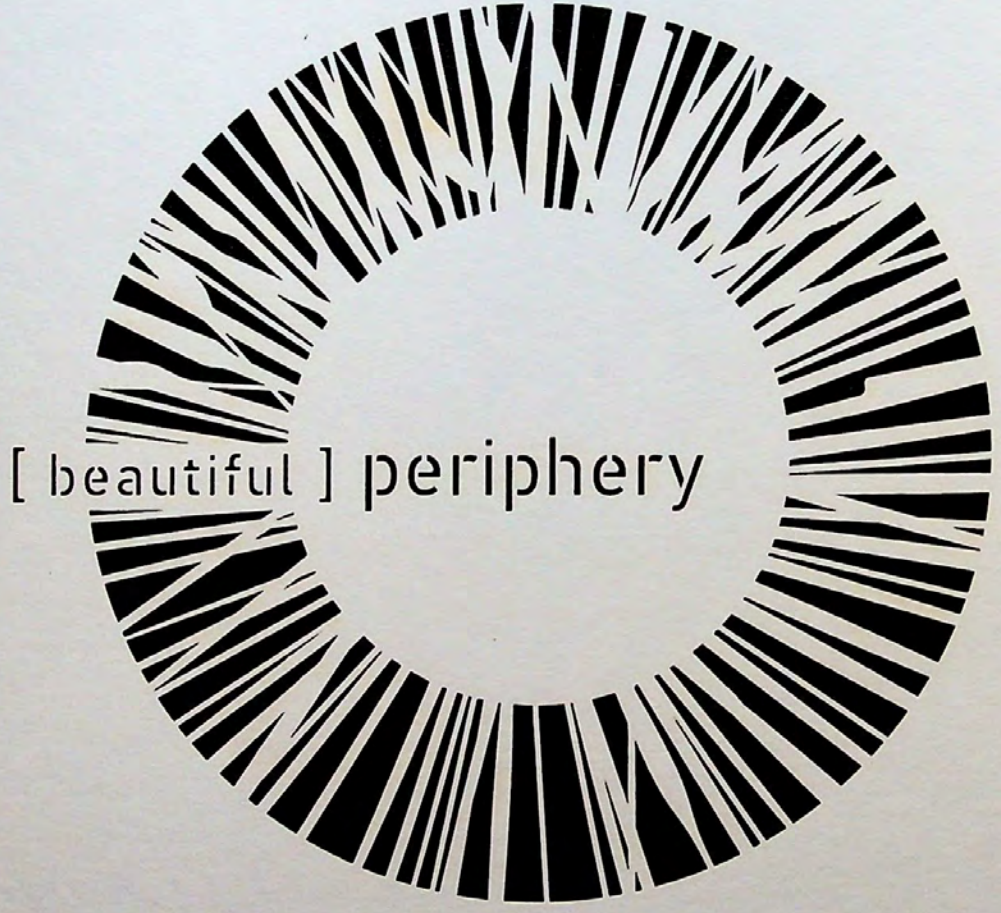
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