

# ARTIST DISTRICT AS DIASPORA

BY CHRISTA FORSTER

## In

his essay “Strange New City,” the poet and essayist Mark Doty, a former professor in the University of Houston Creative Writing program, dramatizes the conflict between his initial experience and his final assessment of Houston:

After the initial shock [one] feels on entering the rawly energetic Sunbelt is the odd exuberance of it, an unexpected feeling of human energy, the room, even in the endless asphalt acres, for individual expression.... [T]his is what the future looks like: if America has a ready example of life in the twenty-first century, this is probably it: artificial, polluted, a little dangerous and completely confusing, yes—but also interestingly polyglot, open-ended, divergent, entirely unstuffy and appealingly uncertain of itself.

Undoubtedly, Doty’s paean to Houston would resonate with most creative people who make Houston their temporary or permanent home. For artists, the character of the landscape plays a central role

in the epic struggle inherent in the creative process. How Houston produces and sustains the necessary ache and yearning that prompts the artistic imagination lies precisely within its constant enactment of paradox, its unification of contraries, its ability to marry Heaven and Hell. An alpha and omega city, the beginning and the end of the American Dream—as a muse, Houston is unfailingly generous to her protégés.

This generosity may be the reason why the city has emerged in the avant-garde of the nation’s alternative arts scene. Pamela Clapp, executive director of the Andy Warhol Foundation for the Visual Arts in New York City, credits Houston’s strong and viable arts

infrastructure, including major museums, art schools, commercial galleries, and alternative art spaces, with shaping the city as an important hub in the national and international arts network. “It’s a testimony to the health of the arts environment when a city can spark new creative enterprises the way Houston has,” Clapp says, citing *DiverseWorks*, *Project Row Houses*, *Aurora Picture Show*, and *Voices Breaking Boundaries* as luminary examples of such creative enterprises.

Through the Houston Idea Fund, the Warhol Foundation continues to invest money in Houston’s arts scene, supporting unconventional artistic practices that fall outside the traditional frameworks of gallery, museum, or alternative arts space. The Joanna, an experimental exhibition space created as an open platform for emerging artists and curators, and *Sky-dive*, a collection of exhibition spaces located on the floor beneath Scott Gertner’s *Sky Bar*, have received Houston Idea Fund monies. And it’s not only the

- ★ PROTOTYPE 180
- ART GUYS WORLD HEADQUARTERS
- ITCHY ACRES
- ◆ SPACETAKER AT WINTER STREET STUDIOS
- ✕ SKYDIVE
- FRENETICORE/FRENETIC THEATER
- BOX 13
- ▼ VOICES BREAKING BOUNDARIES AT CAFE FLORES

Warhol Foundation that is interested in Houston’s alternative arts culture and its contributions to the national stage; the venerable *New York Times* itself has also taken notice. In its 2008 Travel Magazine, the editors highlighted Houston as a “true cultural hotbed” especially suited to “creative types with more ideas than cash,” identifying Spacemaker, an artist resource center located within Winter Street Studios, as an energetic arts space where “designers and artists of every stripe come together.” (Full disclosure: Christa Forster is married to David A. Brown, the founding director of Spacemaker.) Indy-small-town vibe.

Besides its supportive infrastructure and artistic camaraderie, there’s something even more primitive at work in Houston’s thriving arts scene: opportunism. As Bill Davenport, a visual artist featured in the Contemporary Arts Museum Houston’s 2009 exhibition “No Zoning,” says, “At first Houston seems awful, gross, but once you get used to this disorganized,

weird, post-apocalyptic mess of a city, you realize you can get away with murder. You can do anything.” Often this opportunistic, winner-take-all attitude, so prevalent in business, debases the needs and principles of the community, as Houstonians have witnessed with the Enron and Stanford Financial debacles or the lax environmental regulatory policies that have resulted in Houston’s abominable air quality. On the other hand, when artists seize upon the same opportunistic spirit underlying a practice such as the city’s lack of zoning, their work may—intentionally or not—benefit the community in uplifting, transformational ways.

Houston’s low cost of living, coupled with its minimal property restrictions, provides artists with incentives to dream large. As New York-based artist Mary Ellen Carroll suggests, where land art is concerned Houston’s lack of zoning is the equivalent of acreage elsewhere. This is exactly why she chose Houston for her latest conceptual art work, *Prototype 180*. Located in Southwest Houston’s Sharpstown subdivision, *Prototype 180* will involve literally rotating the 1950s house situated on a large lot abutting Bayland Park—that is, picking the house up and turning it around, the first result being that the entrance now faces the backyard and the public park. Her intention with this project, already ten years in the making, follows the trajectory of land art: she wants the conceptual presence of the work to reflect an artistic gesture that trumps its design. Carroll’s artistic goal is to “consider every object, every process that takes place in the building process,” including historical precedents in land use, best practices in new construction, innovative heating and cooling techniques, food production, public policy, private/public corridors, and redevelopment’s impact upon

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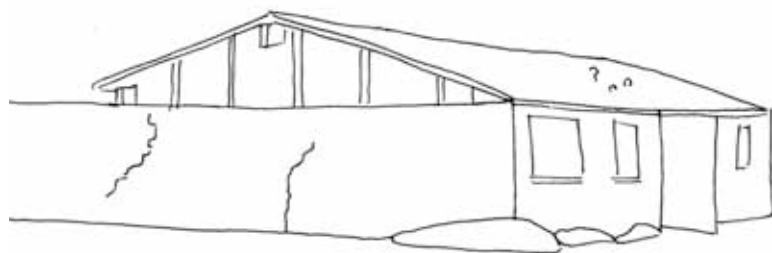


"Some day it will be our day," graffiti near Box 13 and the corner of Harrisburg and Cesar Chavez Boulevards.

the community. Ideally, *Prototype 180* can serve as a model for these investigations.

She chose Sharpstown because while doing her initial research, she noted it as an “innovation territory,” a place where history, public policy, community, and land use converge to form a crucible for revolutionary new thinking about how and where we decide to live. In this way, she wants the project to go beyond mere urban renewal. Regardless of how *Prototype 180* shapes up, however, Carroll shrinks from any intimation that its intention is to transcend its function as a work of art and instigate a social movement. “I can set up the conditions [where rethinking] is probably going to happen, but I can’t make that emotional experience occur. Artists are not social workers. It’s someone else’s job to keep [what they get from *Prototype 180*] in motion. Ultimately, I am always returning to the conceptual apparatus as a work of art.”

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Nestor Topchy is another artist considering land use as a central trope in his artistic practice. In contrast to Carroll, however, Topchy aims specifically for his latest project, *Oprojecto*, to transcend his individual artistic vision. “I was getting to it with *Templo/Zocalo*,” he says, referring to the erstwhile multidisciplinary artist complex in Houston’s West End that he, along with fellow artists Rick Lowe, sculptor Dean Ruck, and conceptual artist Jim Pirtle, co-founded in 1989. “But I didn’t own the land.” The website for the project, [organhouston.org](http://organhouston.org), describes *Oprojecto* as a “living work of art, a self-sustaining village and an environmental action.” Once Topchy and the non-profit he created to help realize the project—*Organ*—secures the acreage needed for its development, his plans include the following:

*Oprojecto will be constructed primarily from 486 steel shipping containers, and will consist of two main elements: an outer bazaar, which serves as the walled*



Proposals from a “Sunday Soup” held at Skydive. Participants contributed to a common fund, shared soup, mounted proposals, and voted on which project would receive the money. The winning proposal by Mindy Kober and students at the Houston Outdoor Learning Academy was to produce an interactive garden of native plants. The American Wandering Club proposed commissioning public sculpture on abandoned empty sites throughout Houston. Performance Art Lab sought funding to curate a guerrilla art show at a Taco Bell.

# NO ZONING

by christa Forster

Houston's no zoning policy has birthed a barrage of surreal juxtapositions—that church around the corner from the icehouse across the street from the adult bookstore facing Headboard Heaven next door to that single-family home. In any other metropolis, one with rational zoning practices, magnificent mashups like these might never see the light of day. In Houston, however, such absurdities weave through our collective

consciousness, fashioning a genius loci that is at once defiant and pliant.

The show running through July 12, 2009 at the Contemporary Arts Museum Houston, "No Zoning: Houston Artists Engaging the City," celebrates makers whose imaginations have enmeshed them in the city's ordinary woof and extraordinary warp. What ties most of the exhibition's works and projects together is how they recall audacious acts direct from dreamland: viewing movies while Jacuzzi-hopping, marrying a plant, constructing a walled city with shipping containers, knitting cozies around stop signs, flipping a house literally, removing the heart of a home and feeling the void that results after the heart is cut out.

No Zoning features seventeen individual artists and collaborative teams, including The Art Guys (Jack Massing and Michael Galbreth), Mary Ellen Carroll, Rick Lowe, Mel Chin, Bill Davenport, Ben DeSoto, Sharon Engelstein, Andrea Grover, The Flower Man (Cleveland Turner), collaborators Dan Havel and Dean Ruck, George Hixson, Lauren Kelly, KnittaPlease (Magda Sayeg, et al.), Eric Leshinsky, Nestor Topchy, Jim Pirtle, and Workshop Houston (Zach Moser and Benjy Mason). In addition to their work, the show provides examples and documentation of significant projects from the 1980s to the present, and presents a program of performance, lectures, and video screenings during the museum's extended Thursday evening hours. Special artistic programs and educational tours located throughout the city are scheduled as well.

Call the CAMH, 713.284.8250, for more information.



Site of *Prototype 180*, not-yet-rotated rear of house abutting Bayland Park, Sharpstown.



Box 13 ArtSpace, corner lot, Harrisburg and Cesar Chavez boulevards.

# ECONOMY OF EVERYWHERE

by christa Forster

Houston's oil bust in the 1980s, and the ensuing recession in the early 90s, resulted in a surplus of derelict and affordable spaces in the city's center, a boon for artists and small arts groups, because they could occupy space in the same neighborhoods where their audiences, patrons, and fellow artists dwelled. With Houston's urban renewal, artists and small arts groups have embraced sprawl and ventured farther out. Some went north; many went east; some shifted into the very air.

"Itchy Acres" in Independence Heights has been an artistic locus on Houston's north side for 20 years. Recently, more artists—mostly visual—have ventured there, including the Art Guys who moved their world headquarters from 22<sup>nd</sup> street in Shady Acres to Knox Street in Acres Homes. Nestor Topchy's shipping container village, "Organ," is also envisioned as being on the north side.

When Rebekah French and Robert Thoth

first started looking for a space for their multi-media dance theater, Freneticore, "there were ten warehouses available along Navigation," says French. "By the time we had our financing together, there was only one left." French and Thoth bought that remaining 17,000-square-foot warehouse on the corner of Navigation and North Adams, and for the past three years, have been retrofitting it as a theater/exhibition/studio space.

While working as a fine-dining waiter in mid-2000, Thoth consistently overheard developers talking about gentrifying the Second Ward. "We figured that buying out here was a good compromise between the old Commerce Street arts district and affordability," says Thoth. French and Thoth describe their predominantly Hispanic

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neighborhood as "vibrant." "And we're five minutes away in every direction from a lot of weirdness, a lot of magic," says French.

In 2009, everyone is concerned about affordability. "It's going to be a time of great change," says Michael Peranteau, a respected leader in Houston's art

community since helping to found Diverse Works in the early 1980s. "In this economy," Peranteau suggests, "the smaller, more agile groups without spaces might fare better. They don't have the albatross of (having to maintain the cost of their) space around their necks." For example, Nameless Sound, a non-profit for international contemporary music, has a dispersed approach, using spaces all over town.

Pamela Clapp, executive director of the Warhol Foundation for the Visual Arts, reinforces Peranteau's speculation when she commends groups who are able to solve their space needs creatively, referring specifically to the Houston arts group Voices Breaking Boundaries, whose "Living Room Series" moves that organization's arts programming for the public into the private homes of willing individuals.



Living Room Series: Brown in the 3rd Ward, September, 2008.

*perimeter of the city, and an inner sanctum/park. OProjecto will include low-cost artist and architecture studios, micro-enterprises, shops and restaurants, an outdoor theater, meditation-contemplation center, garden and pond.*

Whereas most developers are inspired by visions of new avenues for financial profit, the type of profit Topchy seeks, playing the role here of artist and urban developer, is a spiritual one. He envisions Oprojecto as a social sculpture embodying a meritocratic communal effort that will evolve toward a balance of excellence and happiness—reflecting, he hopes, the "presence that's evolving in everything, a

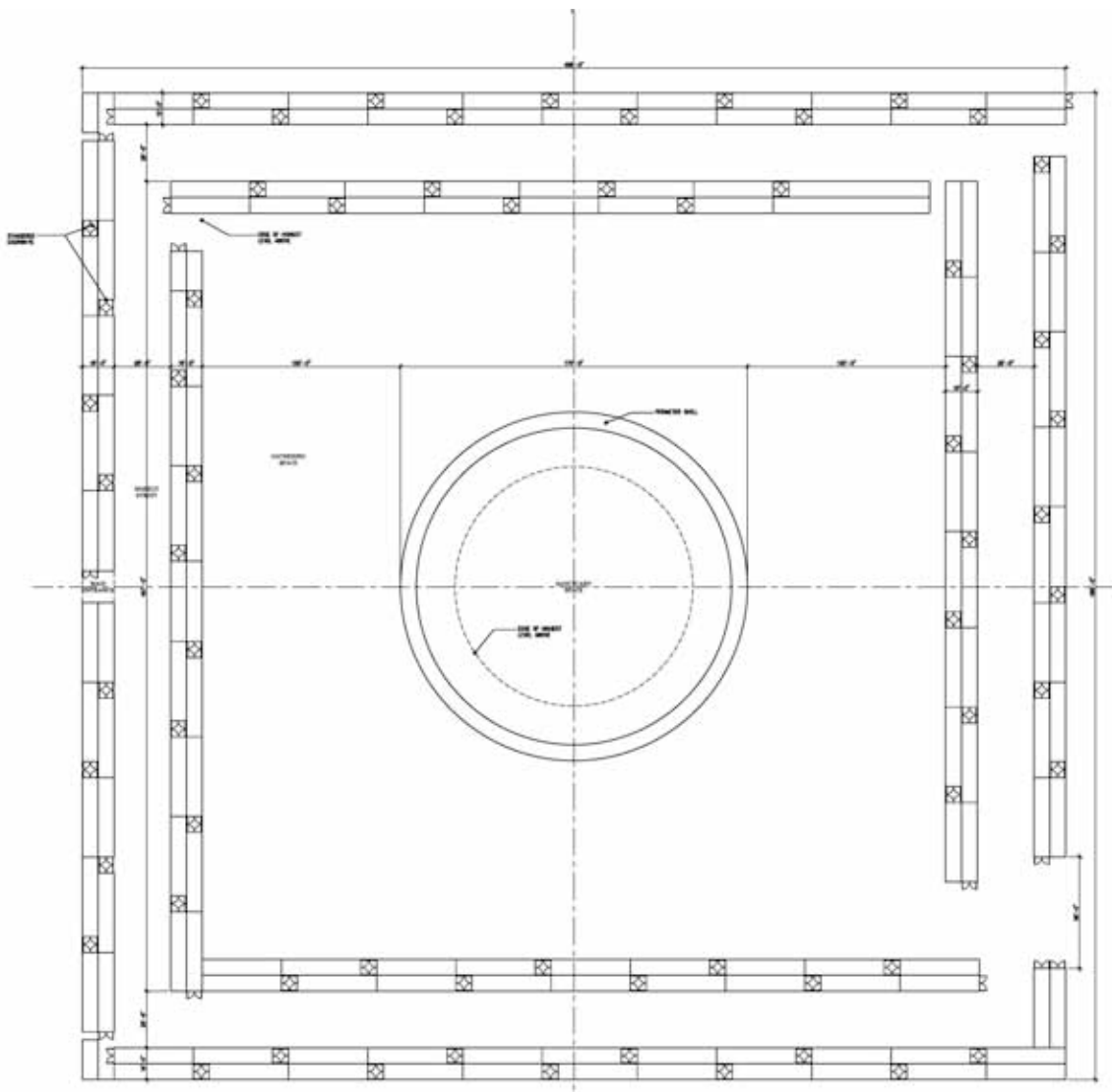
divine presence." In order for this type of evolution to happen, "people have to be comfortable, feel secure, be inspired," Topchy says. "All these things can come from one space. The space can lead people to an easier way to transcendence."

It speaks to Houston's power upon the artistic imagination that Oprojecto has become an emergent reality. Topchy and his team of key players, architect Si Dang of ANDRIA Design and civil engineer Hirsham El Chaar, have been checking out the neighborhood of Acres Homes as the site for Organ's Oprojecto. Acres Homes, historically an African American neighborhood and currently one of the

city's poorest and most blighted, has been targeted by Mayor Bill White's Houston HOPE program, which proposes to "invest in a collaborative coalition of community stakeholders and city leaders that develop and implement comprehensive plans to improve the quality of life in low-income neighborhoods." Inviting Topchy and company into this collaborative coalition would be an interesting move on the part of Houston HOPE; it's a truism that artists are the mavericks who often blaze the trail for other pioneering folk seeking to improve their lives through land ownership and entrepreneurship. Acres Homes is an ideal location for Oprojecto: land there



Rendering and plan of Oprejecto, a village to be made of shipping containers.



is still relatively affordable and, just as important, highly accessible to Houston’s commercial, medical, cultural, and residential center—the Inner Loop. Already creative Houstonians seeking more room to realize their visions, including The Art Guys, the late Virgil Grotfeldt, and the painter Terrell James, have relocated to Acres Homes, sowing the seeds for the urban renewal so coveted by city planners and urban developers alike.

The story of how artists revitalize defunct metropolitan areas can be read all across America and viewed in places like Brooklyn’s Williamsburg, Los Angeles’s Chinatown and Silver Lake, and San Francisco’s Mission District. Abandoned or empty properties, viewed as blight by many citizens, are seen by artists as raw canvases upon which to mount their works. Here in Houston, alternative arts groups are embracing the East End as one of the last frontiers for securing an Inner Loop address. BOX 13 (formerly Commerce Street Artists’ Warehouse) dominates the corner of Harrisburg and Cesar Chavez; FrenetiCore Multimedia Dance Theatre has set up shop on the corner of Navigation and North Adams; and the fledgling Independent Arts Collaborative has had its eye on a large parcel of land along Canal. Affordability and accessibility are prime reasons why these groups are drawn to the East End. Metro’s rail expansion, now in full swing along Harrisburg, provides them with the hope that if they build it, their audiences will come.

While it’s uncertain whether long-term residents of these transitional neighborhoods—Sharpstown, Acres Homes, the East End—will embrace the influx of artistic innovation, it’s probable that the artists’ tendency toward collaboration will serve them well as they undertake their projects in these “innovation territories.” And surely Houston’s “unstuffy” character, this polyglot of problem-solvers, will ultimately convince its citizens to navigate the journey’s obstacles together. ✨