



A NEW Center ON THE

PERIPHERY



## The work day is done

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

BY SUSAN ROGERS



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

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

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

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

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

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



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

Apartments adapted to mixed-uses on Bellaire.





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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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







Elevation, illustrating the public art “canvas” walls.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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



The site is an oasis in a sea of concrete.



Site plan.

## A PROGRAM WITH SOMETHING FOR EVERYONE

### 1. EDUCATION BUILDING

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

### 2. DAY CARE & YOUTH BUILDING

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

### 3. BUSINESS BUILDING

lobby  
business incubators  
business center  
conference  
credit union  
café  
retail

### 4. RECREATION BUILDING

gym  
dance studio  
stage wing  
outdoor stage  
kitchen

### 5. ART BUILDING

art room  
studio

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

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

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

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

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

While we can critique public processes in design,

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

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

—Zeke Minaya contributed to the writing of this article.