

TOP: San Felipe Street
and Post Oak Boulevard
photographed 2009.
BELOW: Rendering of
same intersection.

A RADICAL REMAKE *of*

Can what was Houston's SUBURBAN FRINGE turn into an urban neighborhood full of street life and character?

Uptown

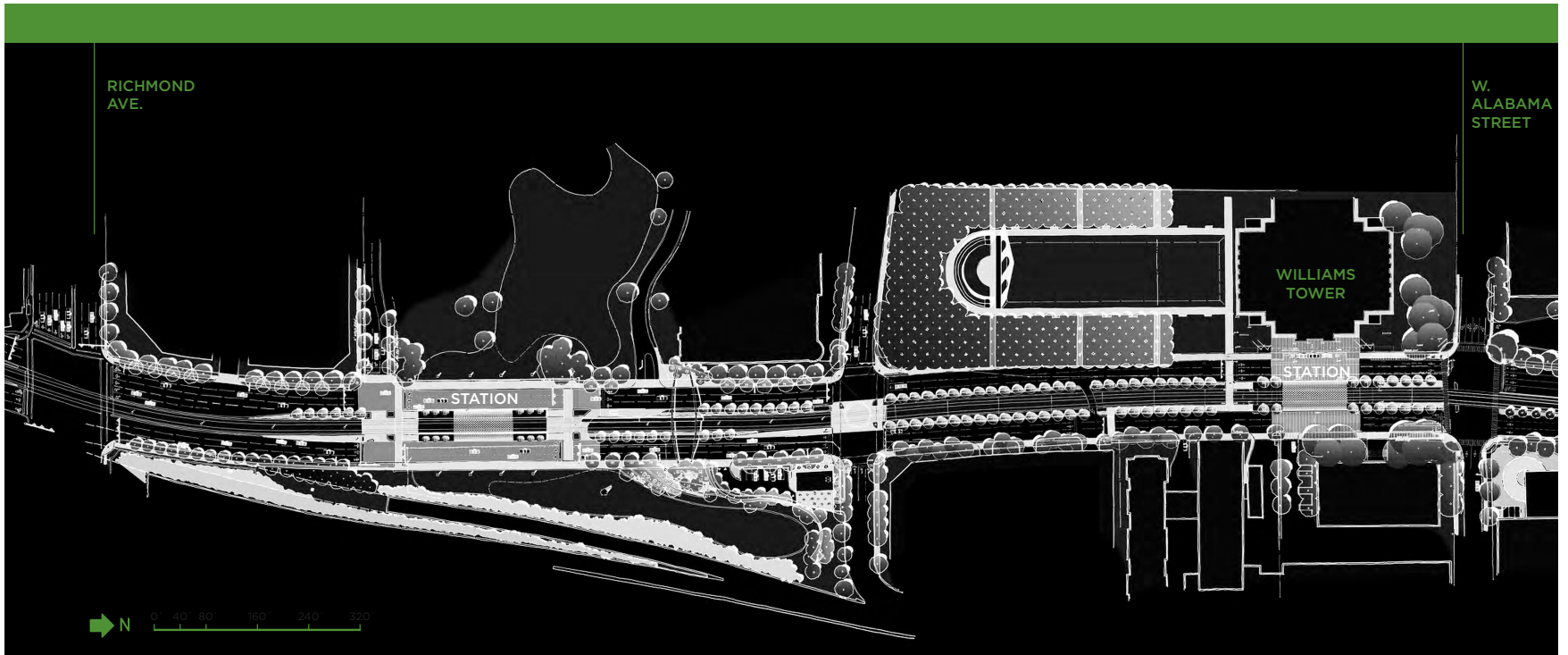
HIGH ABOVE POST OAK BOULEVARD, THE MAIN ARTERY OF HOUSTON'S POSH UPTOWN DISTRICT, A BANK OF TELEVISION SCREENS FED BY SEVEN CAMERAS DISPLAYS MANY-ANGLED VIEWS OF THE TRAFFIC COURSING BELOW. DURING AFTER-NOON RUSH HOUR, AN OFF-DUTY POLICE OFFICER SCANS THE SCREENS. >>>



BY POLLY MORRICE



PHOTOGRAPH SHAFÓN STEINMANN, RENDERING COURTESY UPTOWN HOUSTON DISTRICT



The watcher's job, explains John Breeding, the affable president of Uptown Houston District, the quasi-public entity whose fifteenth-floor conference room houses this monitoring system, is to observe "from sort of a birds-eye view" as cars disgorge from parking garages and inch toward Interstate 610 West Loop, the closest freeway. In case of a snarl, the upstairs sentry alerts the small squad of police directing traffic down on the ground.

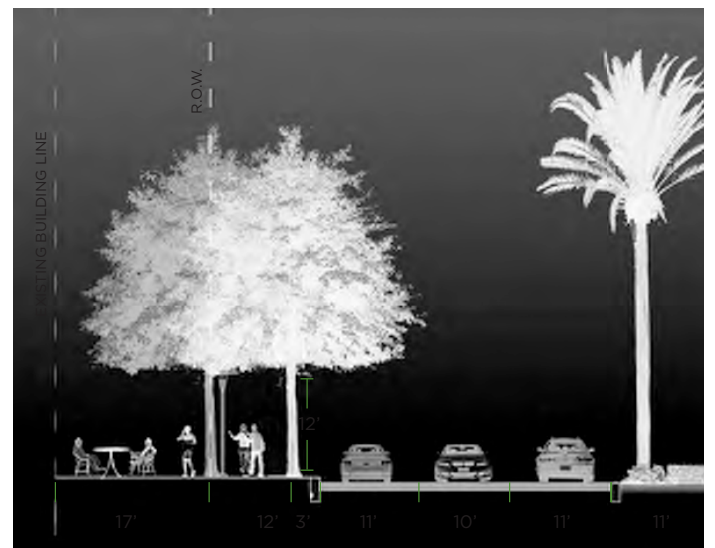
Breeding explains, "Sometimes he'll say, you have to leave the green light on longer to pull more cars through."

And how does this "traffic surveillance system" time the signals?

"It's a bit agrarian," Breeding admits. "We have someone standing down at the light."

That Uptown's traffic command center relies on the same technique—pushing the walk button—that harried pedestrians use to scurry across its congested streets is endearing but also prescient. This thousand-acre area of office towers, hotels, high-rise residences, and luxe retail, often referred to as the Galleria area, is trying to nudge its car-dependent culture toward one that also embraces people on foot.

To make itself walkable—to bring urbanism to a place the writer Phillip Lopate described in *Cite* as "having the most concentration of buildings possible to assemble without achieving anything like an urban texture"—Uptown is drawing on the intertwined efforts of not one, but three quasi-public entities: the management district; the area's tax-increment reinvestment zone, or TIRZ; and the TIRZ's construction arm, the Uptown Development Authority. All three are headed by Breeding. These agencies—and implicitly, the area businesses and developers they represent—have partnered to carry out



germinated as a mall on Houston's then-suburban fringe; others question the use of tax-increment financing, in general, as a development tool. Competing voices aside, it seems clear that Uptown,

perhaps alone among Houston neighborhoods, has the money and the resolve to tinker with its founding premise. Its dual impulse to offer mass transit while also staying friendly to drivers typifies what Susan Rogers, director of the University of Houston's Community Design Resource Center, calls Houston's desire "to have its urbanism both ways."

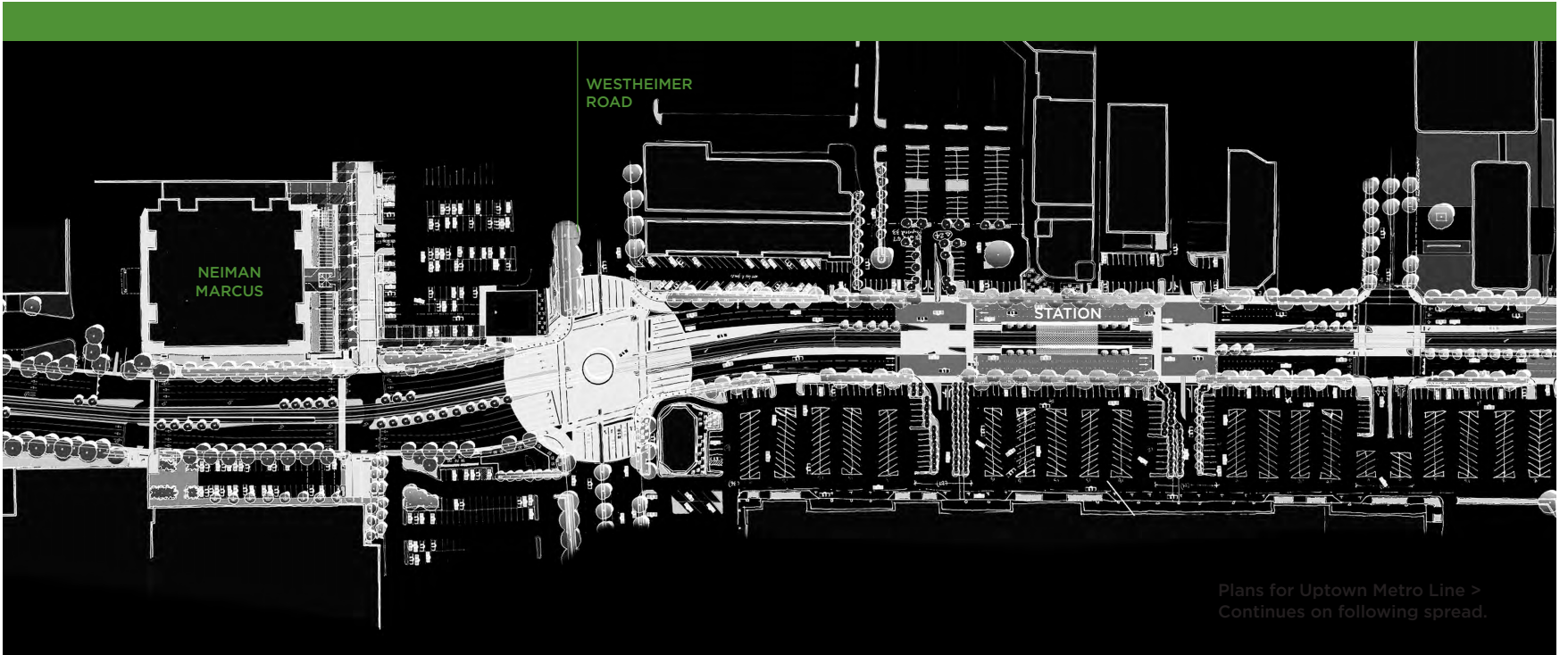
Rogers says, "It's never been attempted before, and I guess we'll see. Uptown will probably be the best example of trying to make that work."

Unlike the Houston version, uptowns elsewhere have geography or history behind their names.

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an ambitious mobility plan. And, though their agenda includes road building, they aim "to radically change the pedestrian environment" by collaborating with Metro, the transit agency, in constructing nearly two miles of light rail along Post Oak Boulevard, to be flanked by widened sidewalks, landscaping, and seven distinctive stations.

Uptown's plans, and the alphabet-soup of agencies seeing them through, spark differing opinions. Some experts are pleased with the notion of remaking a neighborhood that



A Parisian experience comes to Houston.

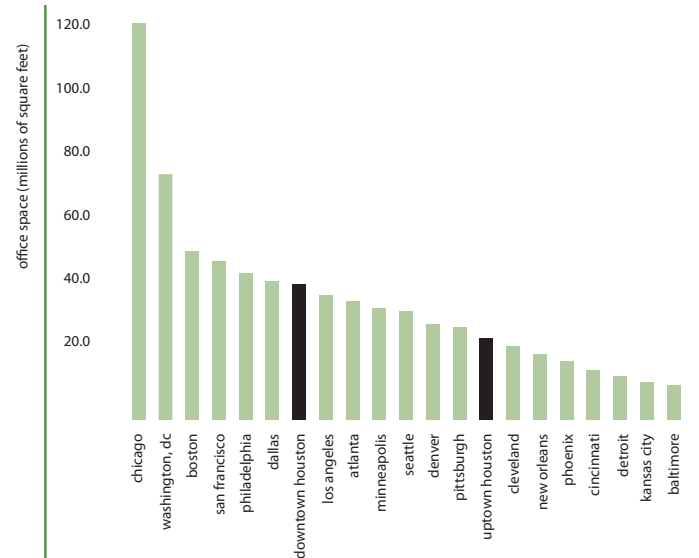


Uptown New Orleans, for instance, takes in a swath of neighborhoods situated upriver of the Garden District and the original Creole city. By contrast, the compact, irregularly shaped district lying just west of Houston’s inner freeway loop was likely christened “Uptown” to connote “upscale” and “upmarket.” The modifiers seem apt: Uptown’s 700-plus stores include Neiman Marcus, Saks Fifth Avenue, and Tiffany & Co., while the district’s office towers house one-fifth of Houston’s class A office space.

Yet back in 1970, when master developer Gerald Hines unveiled his three-story, enclosed mall (loosely modeled on the Galleria Vittorio Emanuele in Milan), it had few commercial neighbors on the Loop 610 feeder. Not for long. Centered on the novelty of an indoor skating rink, Houston’s Galleria soon became an urban gathering place: on the Houston Architecture Info website, posters blog nostalgic about the mall’s early years; one recounts “more or less” growing up there. During Houston’s oil-boom, the Galleria expanded, while the surrounding streets sprouted new retail, hotels, and office buildings, most notably Philip Johnson’s Transco Tower (now Williams Tower), which viewed at a distance still seems to bolt straight up from the horizon. Since the 64-story tower’s completion in 1984, most Uptown construction has been multi-unit residential; a high-rise housing boom took off in the 1990s, going strong until curbed by the recent downturn. Despite its lack of a blueprint, Uptown evolved—aggregated may be a better word—into a dense urban blend. As Rogers says, “It really is a mixed-use area. In some ways [it] represents kind of a real district in Houston that’s distinct and unique.”

NATION'S LARGEST DOWNTOWNS

* Excludes New York City 325.6 million square feet



COURTESY UPTOWN HOUSTON DISTRICT



As early as 1975, Uptown business leaders began tackling their problems without waiting for the city to act. In that year they formed a voluntary taxing entity, the Uptown Houston Association, to address such edge-city issues as open drainage ditches. This private organization still exists but has been largely supplanted by the more powerful Uptown Houston District (formally, Harris County Improvement District #1). Created by the State Legislature in 1987, the district levies a tax (about 14 cents per \$100 assessed value) on property inside its boundaries, using the money to “leverage public funds” for area improvements. Besides the traffic operation, the district’s projects include landscaping, marketing, a yearly holiday lighting ceremony, and, in a 1995 effort to lend the area a unified style, the installation of six pairs of steel arches over Post Oak Boulevard; futuristic steel rings, bearing street names, were strung above intersections. Critical reaction was mixed.

In 1999, Uptown’s stakeholders put in place the last of the public-private entities now shaping the area’s roadways, parks, and light-rail configuration. They lobbied City Council to create an Uptown TIRZ, arguing successfully that increment-funded projects were needed

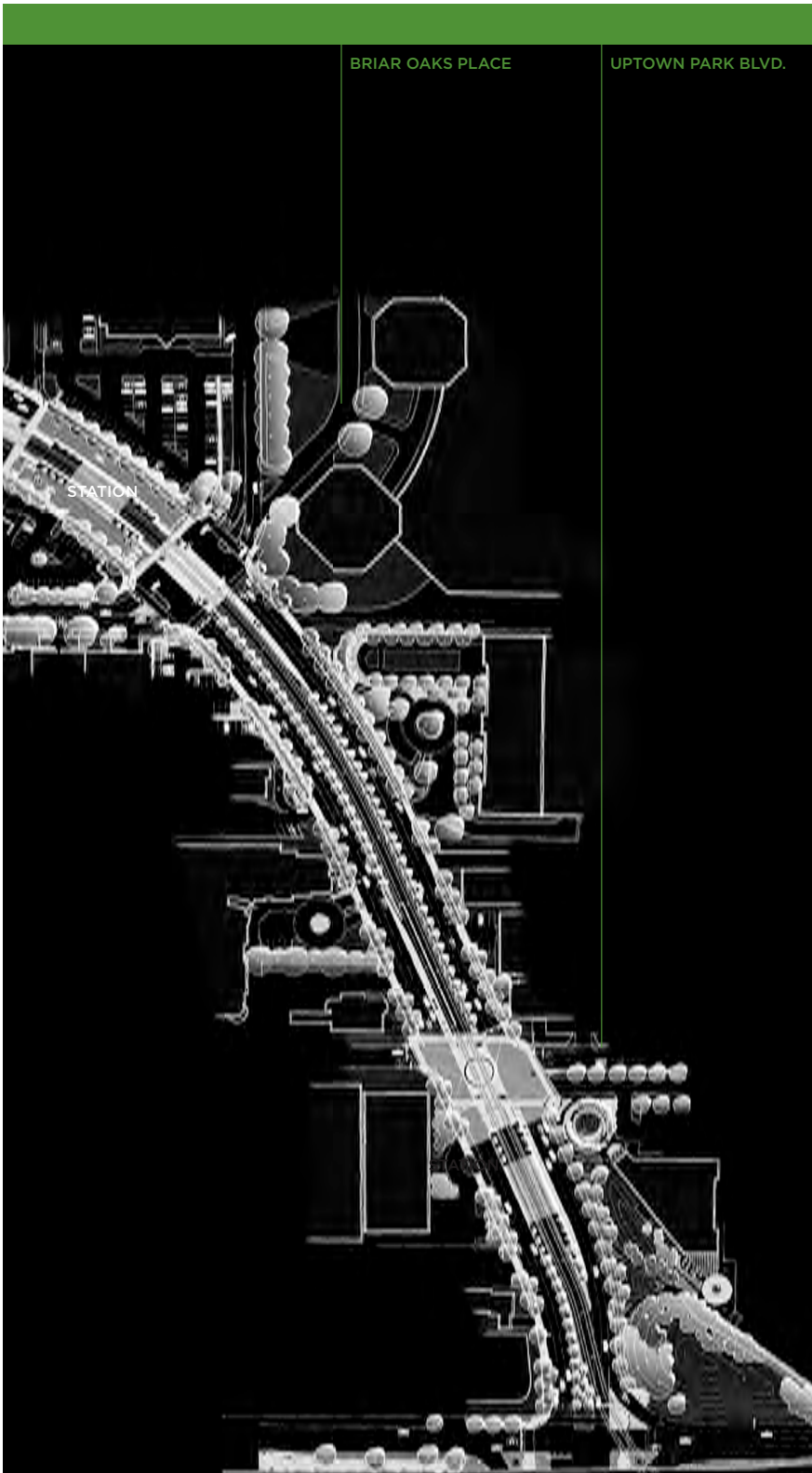
to reduce congestion and keep shoppers from fleeing to outlying malls. Simply put, when an area becomes a TIRZ, the city agrees to freeze the amount of property taxes collected from it for a given period (in Uptown’s case, 30 years); any tax income above the predetermined level—the increment—is returned to the zone to promote economic development. This, in turn, is expected to push property values higher, increasing the increment and eventually creating higher tax revenues for the city. Uptown’s planners estimated that over 30 years their increment funds would total \$235 million. This amount was budgeted for street and infrastructure improvements, and the Uptown Development Authority (UDA) floated bonds to raise the sum and allow construction to begin.

The TIRZ-financed work includes reconstructing or widening Uptown’s main thoroughfares and building secondary streets to connect these major roadways and provide frontage for new development. Much work has been completed, and some \$20 million in other projects is under contract. However, TIRZ funds will also be used to reconstruct Post Oak Boulevard to accommodate the new rail line. The Uptown Corridor is one piece in Metro’s planned light-rail network, six lines that when completed will travel more than 35 miles through most of the city’s central neighborhoods. Starting at the Northwest Transit Center at Loop 610 and I-10, where suburban park-and-ride buses stop on the way Downtown, the Uptown line will jog about four-and-half miles south to Westpark, where it will connect with the to-be-constructed University line. According to Breeding, a letter of intent, laying out the respective responsibilities of Metro and the Uptown TIRZ for the approximately 1.75 mile section running along Post Oak is still in progress. In general, though, “We [the TIRZ] will design, fund, and construct Post Oak Boulevard. Metro would come back in and design, fund, and construct the light rail system.”

The plans for the new Post Oak Boulevard are seductive. The rail tracks will run not through concrete, but a lush greensward. Glass-and-wood stations with trellised sides will shield riders from both sun and rain, while broad, well-lit sidewalks will sway businesses to open outdoor cafés. The stations were designed by Agence d’architecture Brochet-Lajus-Pueyo, a Bourdeaux firm, Paris-based Signes, and Houston’s SWA. John Breeding credits Olivier Brochet with being the creative force behind the design, although he also says it was “definitely a team approach.” When the trains start running—in 2012, according to Metro, although Breeding thinks 2014 is the more realistic date—the effect could well be, as David Crossley, president of the research institute Houston Tomorrow, believes, “transformative.”

Houstonians hoofing it! A boulevardier culture taking shape—on Post Oak Boulevard, no less. Is there a problem? As with any grand scheme, there are a few dissenters. A source who works for a large Uptown stakeholder says his anti-rail employer believes the trains will actually worsen traffic. For others, the process rather than the plan raises concerns. The boards of the Uptown TIRZ and its management district are appointed, not elected; this governing structure—used by TIRZs throughout the city—troubles critics who believe these entities should be directly answerable to the public. In 1999—after Houston authorized 12 new TIRZs in a two-year period—Brian Wallstin sputtered in the *Houston Press*, “tax-increment financing is not your parents’ public spending, which is rooted in the ideal that taxes

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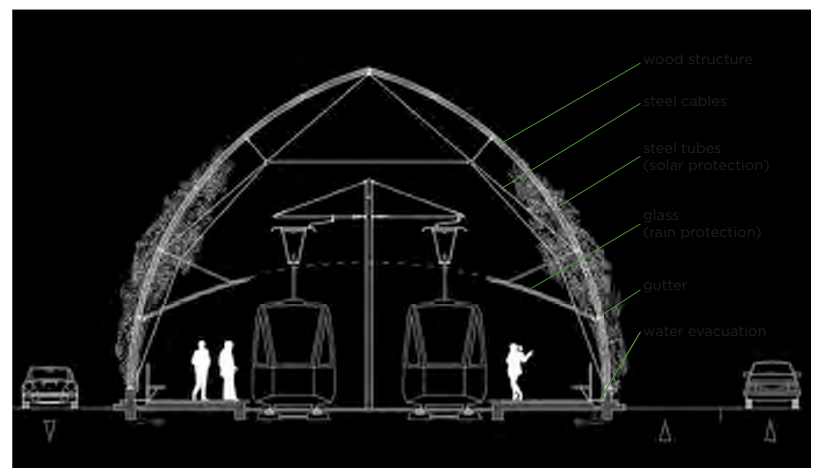
are collected for the benefit of everyone, not just those who pay them.” Ten years later, Steven Craig, an economist at the University of Houston, comments, “The governing process of [a] TIRZ is not democratic. It does not represent the entire area, and so the people that are in the TIRZ management are maybe doing the right thing, but it’s not systematic that they would be doing the right thing. And there are a lot of voices that aren’t heard.”

Others disagree, or more precisely, they see the TIRZ/management district approach to reviving or rebranding a neighborhood as a complex mixture of both good and self-interested motives. “There’s nothing particular unusual about either TIRZ’s or management districts—they’re used all over the country,” Crossley says. “What’s unusual is that they’re being used in Houston to promote urbanism.”

Scott Hochberg, the state representative for Houston’s Sharpstown neighborhood, worked to pass a 1999 law that closed a costly loophole in TIRZ financing. He favors TIRZs, especially in struggling neighborhoods (the sort they were devised to aid), but he wonders if some zones should be dissolved early: “If the area is wildly successful, you end up with more money in the TIRZ than ever anticipated. Should there be a cap on the amount of money the TIRZ should get?” He adds, “You can’t run a city if you give your major tax increments over in perpetuity. You’ve got nothing left to service those areas that aren’t growing.”

If, in fact, the dream for a walkable Uptown is realized, does it matter if it also reflects the desires of the area’s developers and businesses? Or if the Uptown TIRZ and its management district make decisions that some feel should be the product of many voices? For John Breeding, the answer is clear: “If we weren’t doing it, it wouldn’t get done.”

As Metro works to secure right-of-way needed to build the Uptown line, and to acquire federal funding for the University corridor, Uptown’s quasi-public organizations chug along—tending the flowers, building roads. Furthermore, a \$14 million contract was awarded for widening sidewalks and adding pedestrian lighting. In December 2008, the UDA pledged to spend \$8.5 million of TIRZ funds to help the city of Houston acquire the Water Wall—the landmark fountain beside Williams Tower, designed by Phillip Johnson and John Burgee—that some feared could meet a developer’s wrecking ball. The semicircular cascade and its surrounding three-acre park is now a public space. Saving a tourist attraction is surely good for Uptown, but then it also benefits people from across Houston who have made the Wall their Wall, a genuine hangout. Once again, it seems, a semipublic entity is using totally public funds—here, a tax increment—to pull off what the city couldn’t achieve by itself. This may not be the best way to get good things done, but it is Houston’s way. **c**



Cross-section of future light rail station.