

DURING A WARM MIDDAY DRIVE NORTH on Highway 288, I decided to take the Chenevert exit instead of the Pierce elevated (I-45) to go into Downtown. As I exited, my mind flashed back to the early 1990's when former City Councilwoman Ada Edwards had an afro-centric bookstore on Chenevert and Elgin, and my favorite black-owned embroidery shop was adjacent to the northeastern edge of Baldwin Park.

As I stopped at the light on Elgin, the condominiums, townhouses, and lofts brought my daydream to a crashing halt. The lyrics to "Them Changes" started going through my head: "Well my mind is going through them changes; I just feel like committing a crime. Every time you see me going somewhere, I feel like I am going out of my mind." This song, a man's lamentations about an unfaithful lover captures the feeling of dislocation in Houston, where the past is treated with disregard—particularly in what is now called Midtown.

Midtown is a late 20th century Houston urban phenomenon. One hundred years ago, Houstonians knew Midtown as the South End, an elite residential section with one of the city's first streetcar lines. Remnant Colonial Revival houses with grand columns, such as B. B. Rice's house at 1503 Hadley Avenue, survive to attest to the South End's former status. But without deed restrictions, the commercial development of auto dealerships, office buildings, and infill retail buildings from the 1920s through the 1950s occurred at the expense of the houses and their spacious yards. Houston's upper middle class migrated westward after World War II. By 1970, a landscape of parking lots, abandoned lots, and buildings that had seen better days was in place, left to minority communities and such determined survivors as the Sears at Main and Wheeler.

Midtown's present makeup, however, is really an agglomeration of whole and partial neighborhoods culled by highway corridors. This creature of freeway construction is configured by Interstate 45 to the north, Highway 59 to the south, Highway 288 to the east, and Spur 527 to the west.

The 15- to 20-year real estate boom beginning in the 1990s, which created Midtown, has left some pockets of residential and commercial excellence but they rarely meet to form lively seams. This time of recession

MIDTOWN

provides an opportunity to consider what interventions could make Midtown a more coherent and stable neighborhood.

Some see Midtown as the epitome of market-driven inner-city revitalization, removing blight and sparking a renaissance in the inner city. While investment and new construction on vacant lots does bring hope of a better neighborhood, poor and working class people are being pushed out in such areas as the northwest corner of Midtown, thereby exacerbating existing inequalities.

The Midtown TIRZ No. 2 is mandated to acquire land to build affordable housing, but skyrocketing land costs forced the TIRZ to purchase

FUTURE OF HOUSTON'S INNER LOOP NEIGHBORHOODS OR DEVELOPMENT PATTERNS FROM THE PAST?

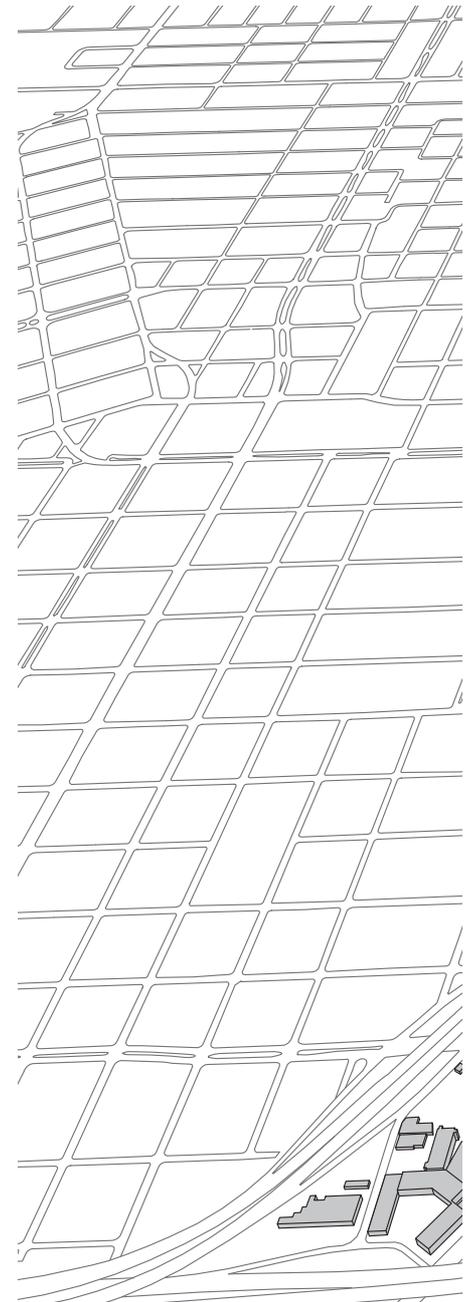
by **Robert S. Muhammad**
map by **Armandina Chapa**

parcels outside of Midtown in the Third Ward. As a result, Midtown itself—once within Third Ward boundaries—has already lost and will continue to lose lower-income communities.

Second, a public space could create a diverse and unified neighborhood identity. Midtown has no midtown. It has no discernible center, plaza, or coherent development pattern. Baldwin and Midtown parks are pleasant patches of green space but fail to capture the character of Midtown. Plans for plazas at Houston Community College have potential.

The presence of the light rail line affords the possibility of Midtown creating a coherent urban corridor that can transform the district into a cohesive whole, benefiting a diversity of people. Alas, this is an opportunity that could be missed. The recent Transit Corridor Ordinance may help create pedestrian environments but the standards are optional.

In order to do some excellent transit oriented development, Midtown has to overcome the urban legend of viable Main Street businesses being destroyed by the construction of the light rail line. Main Street in Houston, and in communities across the American landscape, was made a ghost corridor



by suburban greenfield development, access roads, freeways, toll roads, outer loops, and bypass highway construction.

Solutions abound, but it is not promising that about one third of the buildings in Midtown were developed in the last 15 years and this boom has resulted in an incoherent environment. The two suburban-style CVS stores, one on Main at Elgin and the other on West Gray at Bagby, are clear examples of the need to set standards. CVS has made an urban storefront location in the Baylor College of Medicine Faculty Center along the rail line.

For all the handwringing about viable businesses lost on Main Street during light rail construction, there is little public discussion about the steady residential growth one to two blocks west and east of the rail lines between Elgin and Webster and what



Buildings since 1990

- Commercial
- Multifamily
- Office
- Single Family
- Non-profit
- Governmental

ONE NEIGHBORHOOD? A close look at a map of Midtown reveals many pockets that sometimes meet but rarely relate to form a whole. —Christof Spieler

- 1** The Post Midtown complex has ground floor retail and wide sidewalks but across the street is a CVS in the middle of a parking lot.
- 2** Northeast and northwest Midtown filled up with townhouses in the 90s and early 2000s, displacing most of Freedman's Town.
- 3** Travis and Milam became a Vietnamese retail strip in the 70s and 80s, now partly replaced by restaurants and home goods stores.
- 4** One block of old buildings amidst empty lots at the Ensemble-HCC light rail station contains the Continental Club and four restaurants.
- 5** Ventana at Midtown contains 282 apartments, but is oriented towards an internal courtyard and its garage, not the sidewalk, and has not spawned surrounding retail.
- 6** Wheeler and Main has a Sears and Fiesta with huge parking lots but will likely see redevelopment when the University rail line is built.
- 7** Social services are scattered through Midtown, many along Fannin and San Jacinto.
- 8** Houston Community College is working to create public plazas on campus and improve sidewalks around it.
- 9** Churches have been islands of stability as Midtown has gone through its multiple lives.
- 10** Main has seen little development near Greyhound, but plans for apartments, retail, and a park at McGowen are afoot.

that boom portends. Commercial developers know rooftops equal retail. The viability of Main Street businesses will soon be a matter of fact rather than fodder for urban legends. The question is: Can Midtown make room for the small retailer and shop owners along a revitalized Main

Street? Can Midtown find a way to place workforce housing affordable to teachers, fire and policemen, returning war veterans, and recent college graduates in developments within a quarter mile of rail? Midtown needs a midtown, a central plaza or town square that

signifies its unique history, collective vision, and communal identity. Will it be left to chance to develop organically (whatever that means) or will the esoteric market forces of Houston's economic growth machine determine what the character and location of the heart and soul of Midtown will

be? Will it be determined by history, geography, or economics? For the most part, Midtown is a glimpse of the future of Houston's inner loop neighborhoods which appears to be following development patterns from the recent past. I guess my mind will keep going through them changes. **c**