

A Paradox

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The primary focus of this issue of *Cite* is planning. Planning has become a topic of frequent discussion among architects, real estate investors, planners, developers, government officials, political candidates, and the general public in Houston and Harris County.

In this issue we first trace the general history of planning in Houston and then focus in detail on two major areas of current planning interest: the city's proposed Compendium of Plans process, and the planning of METRO's regional transit system. The approaches in these two plans are very different - the first incremental, seeking to create a city plan by compiling a series of area plans; the second seeking first a broad regional consensus, then focusing in detail on specific areas.

It is important to recognize that these are only two of the many on-going planning processes which deserve attention. Other areas of significant plan development now underway in Harris County include infrastructure (water supply, including subsidence; sewage, including regionalization of treatment; and flooding and storm drainage, focusing on detention ponds), streets and thoroughfares (thoroughfare plans and mobility plans for Houston, Harris County, and several surrounding counties), and major highway planning (both improving the existing freeway network and adding new freeways). The City of Houston and the METRO planning processes have received the most attention, but plans for infrastructure, for streets and thoroughfares, and for highways may ultimately have the greatest impact on the shape of the future urban form of the region.

But beyond these areas of planning, and perhaps beyond the scope of this issue of *Cite*, many in our city are asking: Has the time come to reconsider the role of land-use controls? For more than 20 years, the city has grown without controls and to this day, as a result of the bitter 1962 referendum, the word "zoning" remains unacceptable in Houston. But clearly a consensus is emerging that some land-use controls are necessary. Initially these controls have taken the form of a scenic-district ordinance, a development ordinance, a billboard ordinance, and similar ordinances, but concern already has arisen over the inability of such blanket ordinances to differentiate among the new and old neighborhoods making up the city.



(Photo by Paul Hester)

Land-use controls may be conceived in two ways - conservative and visionary. Conservative controls are implemented to protect (to conserve) existing assets. Controls which provide for buffer zones between incompatible uses (such as parking garages and cooling towers backing up to residential neighborhoods) or which reinforce existing deed restrictions (thereby protecting existing residential neighborhoods), or similar types of controls are essentially conservative. Visionary controls go further and actually attempt to shape the city or region by directing or limiting uses or other features such as height, floor area, or density of structures or developments. Such controls must begin from a consensus about a desirable future shape of the city and then regulate future development to guide it in that direction.

While traditional forms of zoning may be inappropriate for Houston, a broad consensus of public opinion (even including a range of development and real estate interests) appears to agree on the need for some types of controls, if only the conservative, protective type. The consensus necessary for visionary, city-shaping controls does not yet exist - perhaps it must wait for a visionary, but as yet undefined, "Goals for Houston" process which will bring citizens together to address the kind of future we want for our city.

Still, even now, real estate and development interests, government officials, and others are coming to recognize the paradox of planning and controls - that the preservation of land values and of existing buildings and areas, as well as the full development of the city, may actually depend on the implementation of some restrictions. Indeed, what urban theorist Nathan Lewis wrote over 70 years ago in *The Planning of the Modern City* may be paradoxical, but it is nonetheless true:

... that a policy of restrictions tends to fuller utilization of land than a policy of no restriction. The reasons lie in the greater safety and security of investment secured by definite restrictions. The restrictions tend to fix the character of the neighborhood. The owner therefore feels that if he is to secure the maximum returns from his land, he must promptly improve it in conformity with the established restrictions.

While this issue of *Cite* is only about planning, and not about controls, perhaps we need to ask ourselves, is planning enough? ■

Planning in Houston:

Stephen Fox

Like so many characteristics imputed to Houston, its reputation as an unplanned city is the result of selective and uncritical historical reflection. It is more accurate to say that Houston is a partially planned city in which successive episodes of rapid expansion have outstripped whatever planning progress might theretofore have been achieved. The notion of planning Houston's urban growth and development is not new. But support for constructing a public policy of planned development has been sporadic and inconsistent, dependent upon the personal commitment of individual citizens or public officials rather than institutionalized city policy.

Houston's engagement with city planning began as a result of local interest in developing a park and boulevard system tied to the regional network of bayous. Between 1910 and 1917, during the reform administrations of Mayor H. Baldwin Rice and his successor, Ben Campbell, a city plan document, *Houston: Tentative Plans for Its Development* (1913), was prepared and published by the Cambridge, Massachusetts landscape architect, Arthur Coleman Comey, and the first increments of a city-wide park and parkway system were completed. This latter task was carried out under the direction of the St. Louis landscape architect and planner, George E. Kessler; its centerpiece was the development of Hermann Park and Main Boulevard. Comey's recommendations, although received with interest, must have seemed too ambitious, both politically and administratively, to be implemented. Comey addressed not only the development of a city-wide park system (his report was commissioned by the Board of Park Commissioners), but also the compilation and use of data, traffic and transportation planning, control and regulation of housing and building construction, and legal measures that might be taken to establish a "Metropolitan Improvement Commission" to plan, regulate, and coordinate the city's and county's public-works projects.

The enthusiasm that sustained Houston's forays into public and private planned development in the 1910s ran its course by the end of the first world war. The subsequent revitalization of the cause of planning during the 1920s at first may appear as a logical - and even more successful - sequel to the achievements of the previous decade. Yet this revitalization masked the radical weaknesses that eventually retarded efforts to establish public planning as a normative procedure in Houston: an exclusive dependence on individual citizens committed to planning; the apathy, if not hostility, of the general public to the purpose and mechanisms of public planning; and the ambivalence of public officials, who supported the "progressive" appearance of planning while only reluctantly according statutory authority and financial support to public planning agencies.

Achievement and Failure

From the 1920s, three individuals stand out prominently in the history of Houston planning: Will C. Hogg, the rich, mercurial, impulsive lawyer who made public planning his personal cause; Oscar F. Holcombe, who, between 1921 and 1957, would serve 11 non-consecutive terms as mayor; and S. Herbert Hare, who, from the time of Kessler's death in 1923 until his own death in 1960, was the city's professional planning consultant.

In terms of achievements, the record of the 1920s was impressive: the creation of a City Planning Commission, the acquisition of Memorial Park and smaller parks, creation of the Buffalo Bayou and Brays Bayou parkways and of a downtown Civic Center, the preparation of a major street and thoroughfare plan, and the publication of a second city-plan document, *The Report of the City Planning Commission* (1929), issued as a record of the commission's recommendations and achievements. Moreover, the effects of public planning were adumbrated by those of private planning, especially in the development of planned garden subdivisions. The largest and most comprehensively developed of these was Will Hogg's River Oaks, begun in 1923 and carried out by Hogg, his brother and sister, Mike and Ima Hogg, and his associate Hugh Potter as a model of the benefits of planned community development.