

From Loop, To Loop, To Loop

Cameron Armstrong

The psychological and physical impact of Loop 610 on Houston cannot be exaggerated. Places are described as inside, outside, or beyond this 44.3-mile route around inner Houston. Buildings are in its "area" or "corridor." The loop's effect is not simply geographical: its circumference has become a fact in the city's social worlds too. People identify themselves and their neighborhoods according to a consensus about a cultural divide that occurs at the loop. No matter that human birds flock in diverse groups, this eight-lane great wall has given the city's stereotypes vigorous life. Concepts of "lifestyle" dominate the view on both sides of the road. The possibility of going aimlessly east or west, north or south, inside or outside Houston disappears among the implications of cultural and social proximity.

This divided ideological terrain contains differing versions of Houston's present and divergent expectations about its future. Chief among presumptions is that the loop itself is eternal, sustaining our prejudices of the form of the city far into the future. The completion of Houston in that future is supposed to echo distinctions already made. Indeed, given that self-fulfilling prophecies are the norm in our development system, such a view is in order. Nevertheless, whether the future will happen inside or outside the loop remains a contentious issue.

"Inside" versus "outside" is in truth a question of agenda. One side seems to require a center of gravity, a critical mass of population without which "true" urbanity cannot be achieved. Institutions, whether museums, opera houses, or universities, must be piled one atop the other; neighborhoods must reach the density of old-world (or at least Yankee) settlements. The whole must be driven by an economic core with the power to define and project the values of the social order. Opposed to this view is a vision of dispersion: of extended, low-density development punctuated by modest versions of traditional urbanism à la Houston - Galleria-type malls, areas of mixed, apartment and strip-retail development, and scattered concentrations of office towers. From this perspective, Houston is to be a world of glass towers amid treed suburbs - an endless freeway network connecting village to village.

At present, both views coexist in the city's mid-decade economic doldrums. In a town awash in borrowed money, there seems little urgency in the choice between alternative futures. But by the end of the decade, hundreds of millions of dollars will have been spent on engineering projects aimed at fixing the city's mobility problems. As they become part of Houston's landscape of ramps and overpasses - the man-made geography that dominates thinking about neighborhoods and their proximities - these public works will rewrite the meaning of the loop.



Windsor Plaza (Photo by Paul Hester)

First among the projects is Metro's Regional Transit Plan. Depending upon the option chosen, the plan will entail capital expenditures of up to \$6.3 billion concentrated on existing corridors into and out of the city. By the end of this decade, almost \$2 billion may have been spent on buses, transitways, and possibly rail vehicles and track. Second, there is Beltway 8, already under construction, planned as an 87.5-mile, six- to eight-lane ring around outer Houston. Its cost will be borne partly by tolls charged on the northwest section by the Harris County Toll Authority. The balance of funds and construction will be provided by the Texas State Department of Highways and Public Transportation.

In the abstract world of transit planning, these systems are seen to complement each other in delivering mobility to our jammed city. But consider the timetable. By 1991, with Metro only 15 to 20 percent into its capital budget, the authority's segment of the Beltway will be complete and charging tolls. Running from the intersection at Roark Road and US-59 north to I-10, US-290, and then east to I-45, this 28-mile arc will make the drive from Sugar Land to Westchase to the Energy Corridor, or even to Greenspoint and the North Belt developments, a quick commute. More than offering just an easier way to Houston Intercontinental Airport, the Beltway will bolster the ease of life and work outside Loop 610.

Partly by luck and partly by plan, the Beltway will give geographic form to the split personality of the west side. At present, driving west from the Galleria, the surroundings yield a mixed bag of wealth, poverty, crowding, and dispersion. Areas like Memorial and Spring Branch accompany each other westward along the Katy Freeway (I-10), while US-59 cuts through southwest Houston and Sharpstown. However, just beyond the line of the Beltway at West Belt an endless expanse of prosperous Ashfords, Lakesides, Villages, and Colonies stretches past State Highway 6 and north of I-10 to link up with the Champions area of FM-1960. Directly north of Loop 610, the close-in mix of industry and "older" (circa 1950) neighborhoods rapidly gives way to stretches of open land interspersed with subdivisions and apartments. To the north of the Beltway, as to its west, a more certain world of large subdivisions and corporate headquarters exists. The completion of the Beltway will exaggerate the west side's already schizophrenic condition.

Diagram of Houston regional freeway network; shaded portion shows area between Loop 610 and Beltway 8



Retail Center, Dairy Ashford (Photo by Paul Hester)

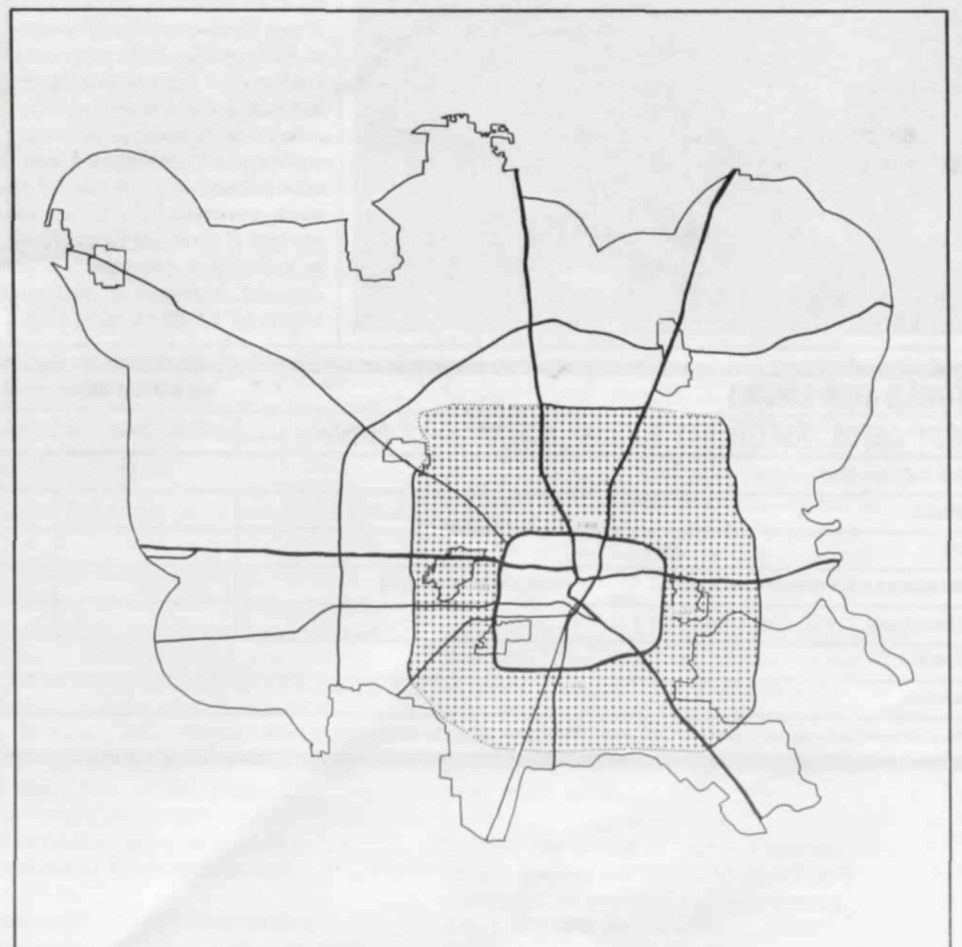
The west side saw explosive growth in the 1970s, especially in the far west. Here development has slackened little with the onset of Houston's mid-1980s blues. Meanwhile, the vitality of the North Belt and Champions areas have prompted yet more ambitious office- and land-development schemes. And with projects like The Woodlands and First Colony, both the north and the west have seen the creation of virtually autonomous new towns. These outer areas are in little doubt about their economic or social identities. Corporate expansion and relocation has brought both the expectations and the people to populate this linear-city environment. Not so the intermediate zone between the Beltway and Loop 610. Here is where "entertainment" malls and night clubs jostle apartment complexes and exclusive residences, where economic appreciation and runaway growth coexist with decay and bankruptcy.

Already the site of the city's highest population densities, this "loop-to-loop" area is seeing growth in both retail and restaurant capacity. Streets like Fondren are becoming home to districts of specialty retailing and discount stores. Others are the make-or-break testing ground of Houston's night life. Still others, like the North Post Oak-Hempstead Highway area, are witnessing a return of industry

in the form of service centers and industrial parks. From the strip centers of Westheimer and Richmond, to the restaurants and bars of Hillcroft and Windsor Plaza, to the spec office towers dotting the periphery, one senses a pent-up energy.

The vitality of the northwestern area between Loop 610 and Beltway 8 (and of all other parts of Houston) has always relied on a not-so-subtle relationship to the promotion of the city as a whole. While dedicated to growth, Houston's myth bestows success only on areas which can sustain investment in the "future." Translated into marketing, this visionary boosterism results in competition to project the most exemplary image of the Sunbelt life (whether fulfilled or not). Houstonians are thus attuned to a complicated cross-referencing of taste, concept, and proximity. Is southwest Houston beautiful? Is First Colony "close-in"? Is the parity in office rents between downtown and the Energy Corridor permanent (does it exist)? The answers to these questions depend on how one juggles the terms of fact and fiction between the loops 610 and Beltway 8.

Generally, such juggling also depends on what direction one wants the city to take. For most Houstonians, a position on either side of the dispersion/concentra-



The Insider's View of Outside the Loop

Jerry Wood

The terms "inside the loop" and "outside the loop" are not commonly used at City Hall when political geography is discussed. Above the neighborhood level, distinctions are drawn based on council district, ethnicity and race, income level, or neighborhood age. Location relative to Loop 610 is a poor indicator of status with regard to almost all of these. The exception is age, yet even so there are subdivisions of single-family houses inside the loop developed as late as the 1970s. Being inside the loop doesn't even establish location within the City of Houston, since West University Place, Southside Place, and Bellaire are located wholly or partially inside the loop.

The inside versus outside distinction has been raised with regard to economic revitalization efforts. Council member Dale Gorzynski recently complained that a depressed area in his district, District H, has been neglected because it is located outside the loop. The nature of the complaint illustrates why the loop is not a commonly used reference point in city government. First, Gorzynski's district is a corridor running from Memorial Park and the Heights north to Greenspoint Mall. Its large black population is concentrated in Acres Homes and Studewood, both located outside the loop, yet it also contains significant black neighborhoods located inside the loop, too. Hispanic population is growing, especially in the north side, outside the loop. Young Anglos are buying homes and starting families in large numbers at both ends of the district, on the suburban edge and in the redeveloping areas of the Heights and Westcott area east of Memorial Park. Gorzynski's concern was that he has a neighborhood with "inner city" problems on the edge of the city. The variety of neighborhoods in District H, and the unpredictability of their location with regard to the loop, explains the irrelevance of the terms in municipal government.

In discussing the city government's role outside the loop, the only clear distinction to draw is between the already incorporated area of Houston, and its huge potential area covered by extra-territorial jurisdiction. This extra-territorial area (and Houston's ability to annex it) makes Houston different from most other cities and strongly shapes attitudes and events at City Hall.

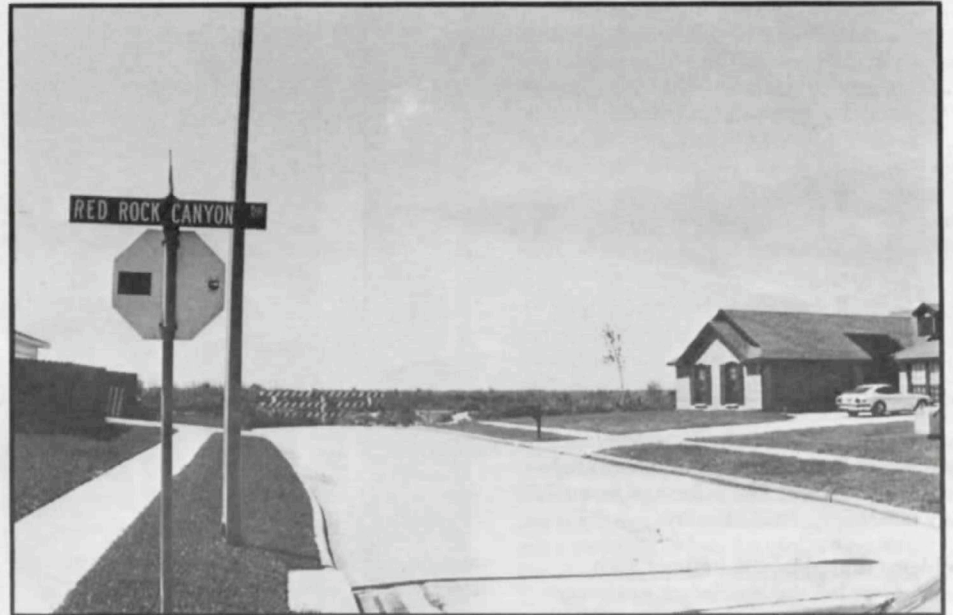


Dairy Ashford Village, Dairy Ashford (Photo by Paul Hester)

tion issue is enough to color predictions of the future. The area between the two loops, seen as a vassal of a dense center city, becomes slated for the ambiguities of a partly urban economy. But portrayed as a collection of villages, it is promoted as an extension of endless suburbia. Neither view takes into account the simultaneously concentrated and dispersed form of present-day Houston.

Up to now, the language with which to talk about this kind of urban form has not existed. But the growth of a new descriptive vocabulary is as inevitable as the obsolescence of Houston's polarized concept of itself. The year 2000 may find the area between the loops spurned by a city growing in opposite directions. Or it may be the sought-after center of an array of inward-looking satellites. Either way, this locale will form the middle ground in a subtler and certainly more mature city, a place less willing to make strict distinctions and better able to decide its fate consciously.

Rather than evoke false expectations by reference to a single loop, residents will point out relationships in, around, through, and beyond a whole region. From loop to loop and through the loop, the Houston of tomorrow will invent a new way of talking about, and valuing, itself. ■



Stub street, far west Houston (Photo by Paul Hester)

Houston is big, and will get bigger. Annexation has brought the "central city" of Houston to 576 square miles, with another 2,000 square miles in our extra-territorial area. Houston will continue to grow for a number of reasons, not the least of which is that, on most of our boundaries, no intervening incorporated municipalities constrain us. Further, annexation can be advantageous to residents and landowners in water districts on our periphery, in some cases replacing a high water-district tax rate with a lower city rate, and providing greater resources to cope with urban problems. Also, because the development of raw land is predicated on the assumption that Houston will someday annex the area, ending annexation would mean significant disruption in the development industry. Finally, the Houston City Council (in a rare display of unanimity on an issue of this importance) favors it. Annexation is beneficial for residents and property owners within the city, and it will continue to be beneficial. The real question is, will Houston incorporate the Delaware-size portion of Texas that is our extra-territorial area? If the answer is yes, then when and how?

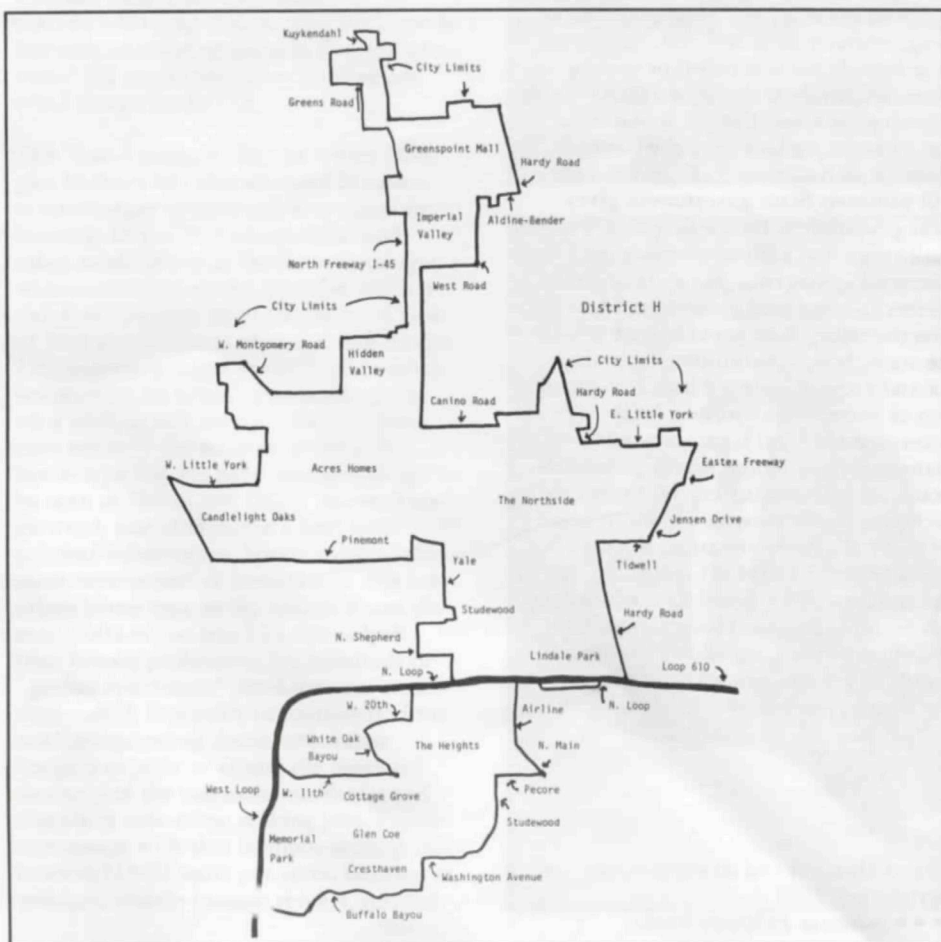
It might be useful to point out how Houston currently regulates development in its extra-territorial area. The city must approve plats of subdivisions which affect the planning of major thoroughfares, and must consent to the creation of water districts within the extra-territorial area. As part of that consent process, the city reviews and approves utility plans for these districts, and recently these plans are being directed toward regional sewage treatment. Overseeing these aspects of development is not extraordinarily difficult for the Planning and Development Department to do. What would be difficult for the city would be the extension of comprehensive city services over the currently developed portion of Houston's extra-territorial area.

Because Houston annexed ten-foot strips down various roads in the early 1960s, Houston's extra-territorial area extends over most of Harris County and large portions of Fort Bend, Waller, Montgomery, and Liberty counties. Within this considerable area Houston may annex contiguous areas unilaterally, and can prevent incorporation of new municipalities or annexation by other cities. Houston's extra-territorial area surrounds a number of other towns, and limits their capacity to expand beyond an already established

point. This means, for instance, that Houston will review plats and utilities for development west of Katy, northwest of Waller, northeast of Humble, or even southwest of Sugar Land. The prospects of providing services to such far-flung areas is daunting, but the magnitude of the efforts required to extend services to already developed areas is even more so. Consider, for example, that Houston's extra-territorial area covers Kingwood, The Woodlands, Mission Bend, the entire Mason Road area, FM-1960, Channelview, and points in between.

In the face of such an enormous area (some population estimates for our extra-territorial area go as high as a million people), Houston's most recent annexations seem rather small. In 1982 the city concluded some half-completed annexations in Alief and Fort Bend County, and made some small extensions of its boundaries elsewhere. The total population added was about 22,000, approximately the size of Deer Park. The 1983 annexation consisted of an uninhabited park site. The 1984 annexation added another 19,000 people to Houston. The 1977-1978 annexations of Clear Lake City, Greenspoint, most of Alief, and several thousand residents of Fort Bend County were more ambitious, and much more controversial.

Clear Lake City's story is well known by now. A bill in the Texas Legislature gave the residents of the unincorporated development of Clear Lake City the right to incorporate if Houston did not act before the end of 1977. Predictably, Houston acted, annexing the portion of the Clear Lake City Water Authority within its extra-territorial area in two actions before the end of that year. The result has been a continuing round of disputes and lawsuits. The annexation of Alief was less controversial only because residents there did not have any ambition to incorporate independently. The 1977 annexation in Alief added about half of the developed portion of the Alief Independent School District, lying east of Highway 6. Unfortunately, this half of the developed area was not a compact, discrete area. It protruded like a trailer hitch off Houston's rear bumper, skipping over some water districts, taking others, and rarely including the full length of any thoroughfare. The follow-up, in 1978, added most of the developed area east of Highway 6, but still created much confusion. The original townsites of Old Alief, for instance, was excluded, as was most of the right-of-way for Beltway 8. Large islands of unincorporated territory lay along Kirkwood, Wilcrest, and the Southwest Freeway (US-59). Emergency services were hampered by citizens' understandable confusion as to where the city left off and the Alief Volunteer Fire Department and Harris County Sheriff's Department began.



Boundaries of Houston City Council District H