

Houston in the Rear-View Mirror

John Kaliski

In the Fall 1985 issue of *Cite*, Peter C. Papademetriou suggested in this column that Houstonians need to look in the "rear-view mirror" (i.e., examine the "record" of the past) in order to continue the city's "drive" to the future. I sensed he implied that a certain *Weltanschauung*, or all-encompassing conception of politics and architecture, had begun to emerge in Houston in the period before the Second World War. This concept could be defined as the good city. Papademetriou described this vision as follows:

...an image of order and a sense of integrated organization in which public and private were clearly placed, supported in physical terms by a cohesive architectural language which began to relate piece to piece. Guiding this vision was a sense of the public good. A social contract, even in a laissez-faire context, began to emerge.

This "image of order" dissolved with the vicissitudes of the 1950s, '60s, and '70s. While it may be dangerous to paraphrase a friend, I think that Papademetriou is saying that the good city became the bad city. The piece-by-piece construction of a humanly scaled *polis* was destroyed by geometric growth and concomitant speculation.

Indeed, by outward appearance, this view is true enough. As one drives through the older sections of Houston, especially in the near eastern and central business districts, one can find material evidence of an entire ghost city - old warehouses, abandoned apartment buildings, and worse, the endless vacant lots and blocks of parking held for long-term speculation. These unsightly epitaphs to the past suggest memories neglected if not completely forgotten. My hypothesis is that the citizens of Houston merely have not forgotten this supposed golden moment (if indeed it even existed), but more decisively, abandoned it for a quest after a different vision, which like its forebear, the City Beautiful, has both its good and dark sides.

My conclusion is based on personal experience only; I literally watched Houston and Texas recede in my rear-view mirror, having recently moved to Los Angeles. This change of locale has given me the opportunity to think and rethink my opinions of a city that I dearly love in the context of a place that is often assumed to be similar. However, Los Angeles is nothing like Houston. On the other hand, it is precisely the city that Papademetriou imagined in his piece on Houston: the optimistic, 20th-century town that burst with growth out of a provincial stupor in the '20s and '30s to encounter and contribute directly to the sophistication, diversity, and even seaminess of international culture. The vital material evidence is all around Los Angeles, from Sunset Boulevard with its bevy of still-bustling movie theaters and office towers, to downtown's Broadway, where such institutions as the Grand Central Market continue to attract hordes of pedestrians after 60 years of use. The streets, buildings, institutions, and ideals which guided growth in the '20s and '30s in Los Angeles continue to validate their being today - if a little worse for wear.

Houston, by comparison, offers less to experience from that bygone era. True, examples of Houston's rich past do exist - the Heights, the Fourth Ward, Montrose, the area around Rice University, and the Gulf Building. They all should be treasured and encouraged to thrive. But given Houston's almost tenfold growth over the last 40 years, one should not expect a tremendous amount of historical or political continuity. The new, both buildings and people, overwhelm the old.

Instead, I believe in retrospect that Houston's future lies not in the redefinition of its mythic past but in a publically spirited analysis and debate of its mythic visions of the future. Lest one think I am buying into the dream of "Space City," reader beware, I am not. Rather, while I do not discount the lessons of Houston's past, I prefer to base my comments about its future on precisely that period of growth that was so destructive of past buildings, institutions, and the values they both represented.

During the '50s, '60s, and '70s people came to Houston for the economic opportunities, life in the suburbs, cheap housing, and, more recently, the city's nurturing posture towards a variety of minorities and lifestyles. The reification of these dreams, which is the American dream, with the inclusion into it of those who were purposely ignored in the first half of this century is Houston's hope and future; not a nostalgic elegy to a past which never existed.

To this end, at least three questions can be asked about revivifying the opportunistic ideals of Houston. The first question necessarily looks backwards but only with the intent of describing the present. What is Houston's current form? The answer to this query must take into consideration the formless suburbs, commercial strips, billboards, freeways, parking lots, and porn shops, as well as Post Oak Boulevard, Louisiana Street, and the San Jacinto Monument. An impartial analysis of what exists does not confirm a place in history. Rather, an impartial analysis makes possible the understanding and eventual critique of the patterns of life and form which ebb and flow with time. To define the future one must recognize not only the record of the past but the tenor of the present.

The second question is the most critical one. What is unique about these forms and patterns which combine to form that locale which is called Houston? This question is critical because agreement is almost impossible. However, the discovery over time of shared local values does imply that the essence of Houston is different from Los Angeles or any other place.

If the second question causes disagreement, the last question causes confusion that is political in its implications. How can uniqueness be promoted? Or, how can Houston best be Houston? The promotion of those unique aspects of Houston in such a way that they are available to an increasing majority provides the key to answering this last question. If Houstonians want to live in a garden city punctuated by nodes of intense activity, fine; just make the nodes and the gardens accessible and good. If Houstonians want to live in dense configurations which provide the more traditional amenities of urban life, that is fine too. Once again though, the crucial question is accessibility and quality. The point is not to infiltrate the River Oaks Country Club with saboteurs from the inner or outer cities. Rather the point is to encourage those economic entities which continue to provide opportunity even as they encourage growth.



Photo by Paul Hester

Architecture is a reactive force in these arguments, following the lead and cues of others, whether they be developers, politicians, or social historians. If Houstonians as a whole are given the opportunity to participate in this exploration of the future, one hopes that the resultant architecture will reflect the values and desires of a broad cross section of the city. My suspicion is that people still come to Houston to profit and in the original sense of the Latin root of profit, *proficere*: to go forward or make progress. For me, the idea of Houston is both economic opportunity and progress. Houston architecture should reflect both of these ideals, even as the individual designers delve into more personal explorations of form and craft.

Finally, I have arrived at the troublesome notion that there can be appropriate architecture for Houston. Is this architec-

ture seen in the rear-view mirror? Never! But in remembering Houston I do realize that there are many buildings and places which will always affect me. The Museum of Fine Arts, Houston, the Rice campus, the area adjacent to the Rothko Chapel, and the chapel itself to name just a few. I miss all of these buildings even as I miss the power of the gleaming skyline (though not the streets below). However, what I miss most of all is that quality of Houston which most Houstonians shrug off. I miss the heat: that steamy heat so delightful to escape from yet so satisfying to share with other Houstonians. In the rear-view mirror, as I left the city, the heat shrouded the downtown skyline. It shimmered over the outlying plains of housing and it flattened the light that is particular to this city alone. I had the thought: to make a city of heat - that is Houston. To make an architecture of heat - that is Houston too. ■

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