

## In Pursuit of an Elusive Future

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The past decade has brought changes to Houston that no one would have predicted as recently as 1970. The international crisis in the petroleum industry has had a dramatic impact on the city's economy, its urban form and patterns of settlement, and even its pulse and tempo. The creation and continued evolution of a public mass-transit authority is beginning to effect the urban landscape, contrary to the sentiments of even those who would die rather than give up their car keys. A progressive mayor has transformed the image of the city's chief official from an absentee-developer type into a pragmatic accountant, and a woman to boot. "Heronner," however, has projected a vision that is as realistic and no-nonsense as her predictable dress-for-success fashion image. A bit dull perhaps, but at least the potholes are on the decrease. Changes in national demography appear to be shifting also. The late '60s spurt of California license plates in Houston gave way to Michigan license plates in the '70s; one can't help but wonder which American cities are now host to spurts of Texas plates. The fact is that the city is in a slowdown. The "see-through" office or condominium building has become a distinctive Houston type; they come not singly but in groups. And now that insurance companies are starting to own hotel real estate, the boomtown edge has worn off.

On an upbeat note, the national Yuppification Movement is in full gear, with more Saabs than Trans Ams on the free-ways. Inner-city renewal is in evidence, although its reasons-for-being probably have as much to do with the cause-and-effect of overall retrenchment than with any commitment toward a way of life. Quality-of-life concerns are being manifested, although the see-and-be-seen street life of Perrier and cafes may be just another form of consumer fashion. However, culture is one of these consumer products, and the Houston public is simultaneously acquiring a lyric theater, a Noguchi-designed sculpture garden, and, of course, a new convention center. Diversity also appears to be on the upswing, with new constituencies: Hispanics, Asians, and gays are more and more an integral part of our urban population.

If one word has characterized Houston's notion of itself in this century, it is "growth." Boosterism has been the essential attitude, constructive criticism the extreme position, and the future the goal. Historic preservation, for example, has been a pathetic effort - an anomaly and a paradox. Mythology and fantasy, "image" if you will, were the elements which informed a present that never looked back.

Until the second world war, the presence of adequate capital made it possible for Houston to emerge from village to town to city, and to create the amenities that urbanization was supposed to offer as an alternative to rural life. In the 1920s, Houston saw itself as the "Little New York" of the South and by 1930 it had become the largest city in Texas. The Progressive Movement was in full swing, and while one ultimately might fault its capacity to address a sense of the whole city, it nonetheless did add one component to a future-directed outlook.

This element was *vision*, 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.

Yet the pressures of post-war urbanization, the loss of leadership, and the unanticipated period of expansion (reaching unexpected levels in the 1950s) overwhelmed these tentative efforts. The commodities of timber, cotton, and produce transported by a visible network of railroads gave way to the invisible commodities of oil, gas, and a system of distribution for goods and people that took the form of the individual motorized vehicle.

The City Beautiful gave way to the City Efficient, and the first official document to guide Houston's future was contained in the 1942 Major Street and Thoroughfare Plan, where traffic engineering became the basis for the organization of the future. As concept, however, this plan was an abstraction, a projection of the current state-of-the-art as a blueprint for development. Yet there was no real way to imagine the future, because its character could not be described in physical terms. Moreover, the strategy was limited by a conservative notion of the proper role of the government with regard to public intervention, one which prevented the development of a comprehensive view as had been presented in the 1929 *Report of the City Planning Commission*, Houston's classic document of the Progressive Movement. This instrument, nonetheless, has remained the persistent framework of the future.

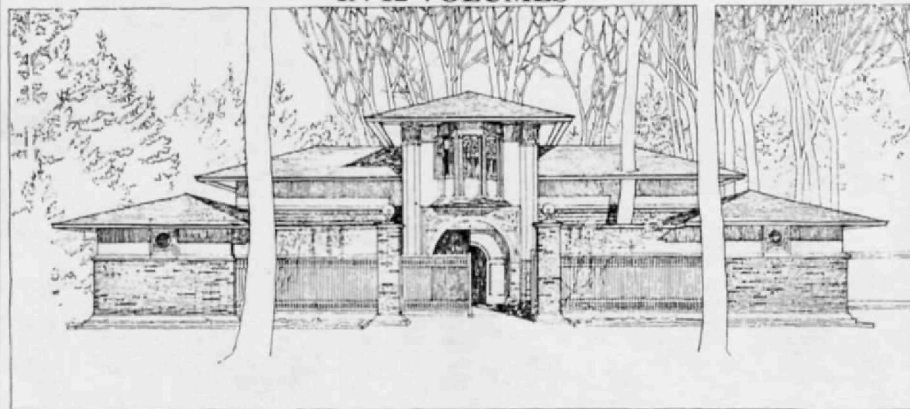
The natural scientist, A.E. Parr, once observed what he perceived to be a limitation of sociology: it attempted to evaluate the very age of which it was a product. The obvious conclusion was that there was no way to evaluate loss, a lack of reference, and no standards against which to measure. For Houston, the future has been a goal which recedes indefinitely, and as the technology of change (including real technology, but also economics, politics, and social geography) becomes more rapid it remains ever elusive, and any sense of eventually achieving reality becomes more diffuse.

The ancient Greeks recognized that the *polis* was, by definition, the public place. Consequently, the private domain was equalized, routine, and anonymous. In contrast, the public domain was highly figured; the *agora* and *stoa* were the places that became institutions, where collective public ritual was acted out. Politics as the process of social intercourse was rooted in the existence of the city itself. Consensus was essential, and respect for the past was embodied in the permanence of these public institutions.

There can be no future without a past, no accomplishment without a record. Perhaps this quiet interlude in Houston's existence can be tapped to yield a panorama of possible new directions, to *plan* a future, and to decide how to guide its evolution. One should use the rear-view mirror when driving to the future. ■

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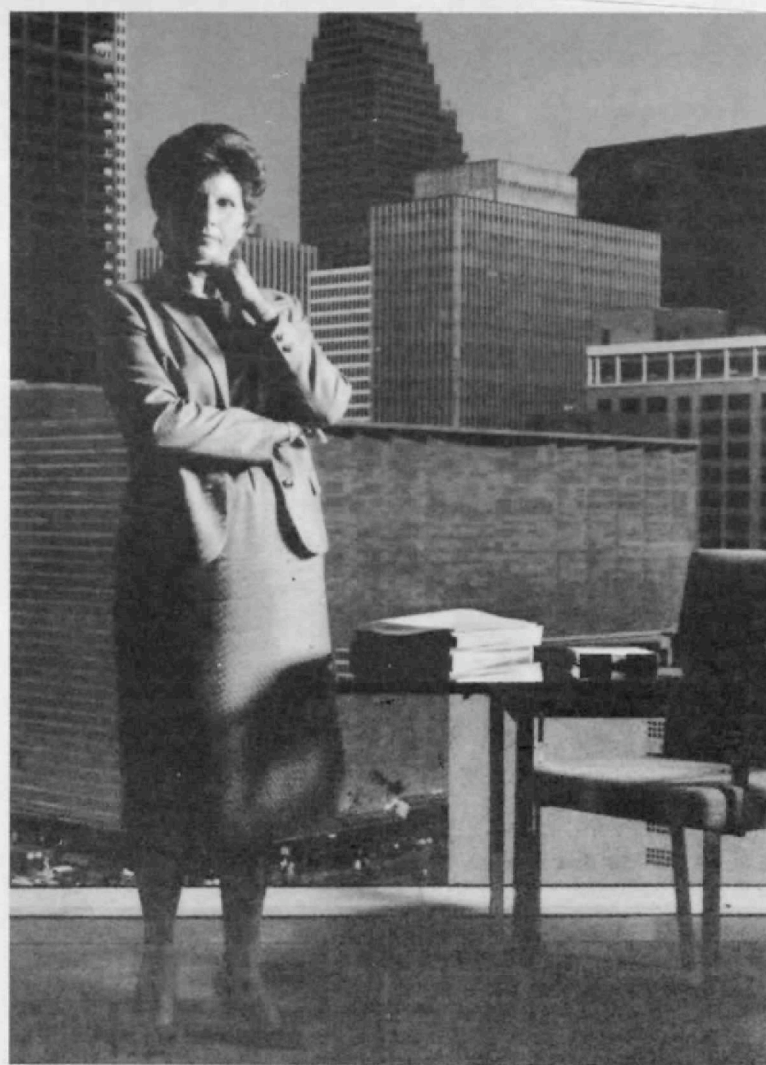
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