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Before diving into this critique, let us quickly rehearse some of the charms of Houston: its spaciousness; its trees; its fine old houses; its grand, inspiring skyline (from a distance at least); its mysterious no-man's lands of vacant lots, warehouses, and railroad ties with their "darkness at the edge of town" uncanniness. Indeed, this is a city three-fourths of which sometimes gives the impression of being at the edge of town. "Perhaps only through a kind of inattention, the most benevolent form of betrayal, is one faithful to a place," writes Aldo Rossi.¹ If so, Houston invites fidelity, because it is a strangely non-imposing environment. Part of what makes Houston so lovable is that here you can think without distraction, only marginally attending the not-too-stimulating streets.

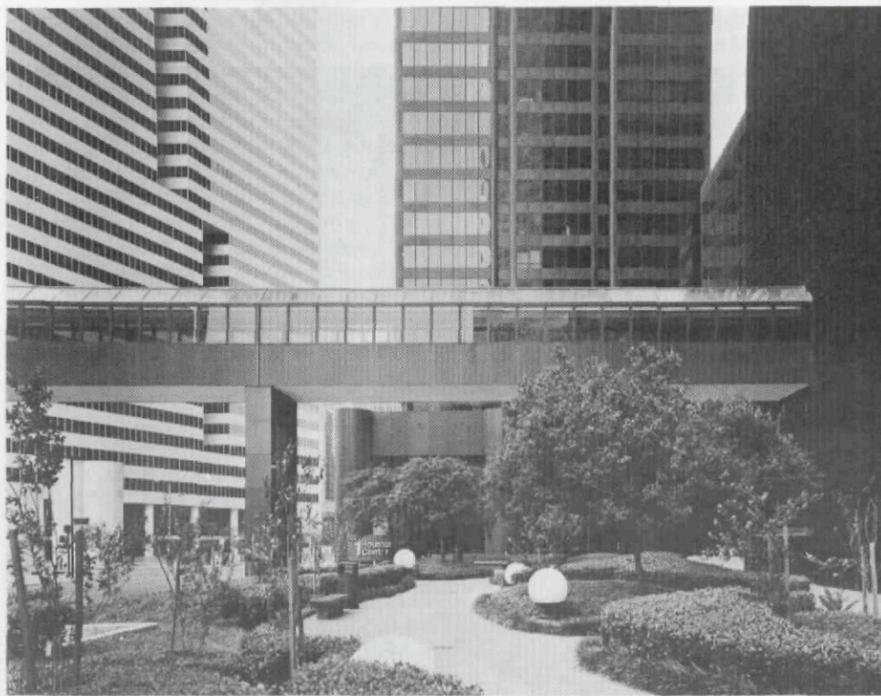
Nevertheless, Houston for a city its size has an almost sensational lack of convivial public space. I mean places where people congregate on their own for the sheer pleasure of being part of a mass, such as watching the parade of humanity, celebrating festivals, cruising for love, showing off new clothing, meeting appointments "under the old clock," bumping into acquaintances, discussing the latest political scandals, and experiencing pride as city-dwellers.

I am not speaking of Houston's public buildings - its courthouses, schools, welfare centers, prisons, and so on - which I am sure are quite delightful in their own way, but rather of those in-between spaces for the public's enjoyment, such as squares, fountains, monuments, parks, and promenades. These amenities tend to be viewed by residents of older cities as their natural birthright, like geographical features cut by glaciers. On the other hand, those who have only known the new culture cities understandably must be as impatient with these tiresome nostalgic rumors of fabulous public space as they are of tales of a unicorn. The successes of traditional public space increasingly are acquiring a mythological quality, like fairy tales about powerful grand dukes, titans of industry, or Olmstedian wizards who bear no resemblance to present humanity. But we must remember that these treasured places were neither the result of magic wands nor of glaciers, but of strenuous civic activity by people in the past not unlike ourselves.

We have all sorts of wonderful excuses for any deficiencies of urban design in Houston, which we trot out enthusiastically: the weather; the lack of zoning; the too-rapid boom in population; the scarcity of beautiful natural features; the low-density spread; the prohibitive cost of public space in the present economy; the free-enterprise, anti-tax ethos; the business community's "stranglehold" on municipal government. While these explanations contain part of the truth, taken singly each appears to be a rationalization. For instance, consider the following. Many South American cities abound in attractive outdoor plazas though their climates are at least as hot as Houston's. Chicago grew from 300,000 to nearly 2 million between 1871 and 1900, and still managed to provide increased public space. Low density in itself need not preclude the establishment of neighborhood foci - witness some Scandinavian cities. (Moreover, downtown Houston is hardly low-density.) A zoning law here would by no means ensure improved public space. Good urban design for the public can still be done economically, as demonstrated by the new Battery Park City promenade in Manhattan. Houston has got plenty of untapped natural beauty. Oligarchical control of city governments is the rule, not the exception.

We cannot blame greedy capitalism *per se* for the under-development of public space. On the one hand, socialist governments have not produced a noticeably better record in this area. On the other, profit-motivated developers elsewhere have been quick to seize on the strategy of creating attractive public space as a drawing card for their speculative property. Both London and New York have wonderful such squares that continue to benefit generations of city dwellers though long ago lining speculators' pockets. Nowhere does it say that the making of good public space must be motivated only by idealism. Indeed, Rockefeller Center, one of the most profitable real estate gambles in history, sold itself from the beginning as a

Pursuing the Unicorn: Public Space in Houston



View on McKinney Avenue looking west (Photo by Paul Hester)

contribution to the public weal, and included enough public space to back up the claim. Closer to home, the Water Gardens of Fort Worth - surely one of the happiest public magnets built recently, drawing a mix of social classes and putting them in a good mood (the one recent work by Philip Johnson that does not invite endless reservations) - also happens to be the hub of a newly developing area ringed by luxury condos, convention center, and Hilton Hotel.

The Need for Public Space

When it comes to good public space, Houston approaches the Miesian ideal of "almost nothing." Why should Fort Worth or San Antonio have more to show in this respect? "If the city fathers, the big shots of Houston, had been as civic-minded and as proud of their city as San Antonio's were," offers a local planner, "Houston would be as pretty as downtown San Antonio. Simple as that." Being a relative newcomer, I don't know if this is an oversimplification or the crux of the matter. Nor do I understand why the fortunes that were made in this particular boom town should have engendered so half-hearted a tradition of civic improvement among its elite. We are not lacking in millionaire-donated hospital pavilions and art museums, but in those gestures that would help to bring the city itself together as a work of art.

Perhaps the fact that so much of Houston's population is not only new but transient has a bearing here. Many people use Houston as a stepping-stone, to make money quickly and get out of this "ugly town." In such an exploitative atmosphere, little thought is given to putting anything back in. I have spoken to native Houstonians who take as a deep insult this rip-off, this sneering violation of their hometown, yet they continue to wear a friendly demeanor. Considering the provocations, Houstonians are a remarkably warm and hospitable people. However, the city itself, as a built environment, is rather inhospitable, impenetrable, and unfriendly to strangers, because there is so little public space here to mediate between the private homes and the impersonal corporate world. For all the local media's promotions of Houston as a brash, extroverted cookoff, the outsider is apt to find it a very hidden city where you need special access, good "letters of recommendation," as it were, to begin to uncover its secrets. Every metropolis is finally like that, but there are some which allow the stranger to have the sensation of at least holding the city's throbbing pulse and sharing the best of its personality, merely by inhabiting its public space. Not so Houston.

Public space also has political implications. To the degree that it promotes popular assembly, it raises the potential for, on the one hand, a more direct, participatory democracy, and on the other, anarchic riots. We know that the original seat of Greek democracy was a public square, the agora; medieval and Renaissance cities organized themselves around a marketplace with a communal meeting hall; the American town-hall tradition grew out of this same principle. The toleration of radical orators in Hyde Park and Union Square seems a functional outgrowth of public space.

The public-space tradition is opposed by a strong current of anti-urban thought in America that views crowds as "the mob" or "the herd;" in any case, the enemy of the rugged individualist. Anti-urban values color our Chamber of Commerce religion, Texana. Houston, as the biggest city in a state that is now predominately urban though it refuses to recognize itself as such, has suffered from this schizoid denial. Its resistance to city planning is partly a way of putting off acceptance of its urban nature, and partly a dread of the often messy negotiations between conflicting political interests which an open planning process necessitates. Houston does not seem to have had much of a town-hall tradition; nor do its democratic institutions at the local community level seem particularly developed. Indeed, the weakness of the neighborhoods politically goes a long way toward explaining the city's shortage of good public space. The creation of public space is the most self-conscious urban act a city can engage in; it signifies a city's maturation through the recognition of its responsibilities to the public's rights to be a collectivity.

The Streets

The most basic unit of public space is the street. Has the populace been made to feel it has a right to stroll the streets, and that the streets belong to it?

Try walking in most neighborhoods of Houston (excluding downtown, which we will get to later). If you are lucky, you will find a semblance of a sidewalk - one narrow square of concrete edged on both sides by grass. After a rain the grass looks like rice paddies, the concrete is probably cracked, buckled and in grisly condition. Moreover, it is often only big enough to walk single file, which tells us something about the city's attitude toward walking as a social activity. Even single file, you cannot advance very far without being stopped by a giant puddle, ditch, wall of weeds and vines, the concrete's sudden disappearance, or someone's compound fence pushing you onto the road. If you

swerve the other way, you find yourself marching across someone's lawn, where the line between pedestrianism and trespassing becomes paper thin. This is not only the back streets, mind you, but important thoroughfares like Bissonnet.

How long can this "City of the Future" get away without putting in decent sidewalks? Outside of downtown Houston, one is not even required to reconstruct a public sidewalk after tearing it up for new construction.

Houston's streets give off the blunt message: *Don't bother walking. It's not worth it. Take the car.* Such a suggestion must be particularly rejecting to citizens who don't have cars. Make no mistake, the shabby condition of our sidewalks is a matter not of neglect but of policy: the sidewalk system will neither be completed nor its present stock repaired so long as the rights of pedestrians are held in such contempt.

What of the rights of streets themselves? I ask not in a fanciful Louis Kahn manner, but in the sense in which "an emphasis on the spatial continuity of the street is an absolute prerequisite for the achievement of urbanity."²

In Houston, time and again streets are rerouted to dog leg around private homes or office buildings that stand in their way.³ The result is that oddity of Houston road-pattern so confusing to visitors and residents alike: the street that dies in a dead end, only to be reborn with the same name several blocks later, then to disappear, reappear again, etc. In a way, there is something charming about this hide-and-seek game with its slow, Southern rhythms. The maddening infrequency of street signs and the street lamps to read them, or the house numbers, all seem part of the hidden, esoteric, elusive face of Houston. (Or is it a subtle expression of hostility to newcomers?)

I would also invoke the principle of preserving the integrity of the street-wall if I were not afraid of being laughed at in the Houston context. Here, each owner defends his right to set his building as far off-line as he wants to. The recent setback regulations - which would compel new buildings to be placed a minimum of ten feet from the curb - are admirable as far as they go, but what is the point of setback laws when there are no functioning sidewalks to begin with? The next "Woodway Canyon" may be a little less cheek-to-jowl with its highway, but without the commitment to create more of a walking environment, it will still be a sterile office park, albeit set back to a more "orderly" starting line.

Whichever way you turn the question, walking and public space are deeply intertwined. The great plazas and squares do not bloom in a void; they are fed by the rich pedestrian life of the neighborhood streets around them. What makes Siena's Piazza del Campo work so magnificently, I discovered recently in Italy, was not just the often-reproduced monumental ensemble or the sloping funnel shape, but the circulation pattern of 11 streets leading into it, drawing walkers from the nearby, encircling commercial streets almost inexorably into its magnetic field.

In Houston, the lack of public space inhibits festivity. There is an impoverishment of ceremony, processions, and holiday rituals, because we have not even a modest "Piazza San Marco" for people to gather. The Galleria is our Fifth Avenue, but you cannot have an Easter parade in a shopping mall. We do have, however, the opening of the Livestock Show and Rodeo in which the city elders ride horseback down Main Street. Here horses and ponies are less out of place than pedestrians.

Monuments and Stadiums

Houston is a city without a symbol. You cannot conjure up its image with simply an arch, an Empire State Building, a landmark like the Alamo, an Eiffel Tower. Not that this is necessarily bad. It permits the imagination to roam; and better the honesty of no symbol than a trumped-up logo rushed in to fill the void.

Still, there is much talk now of monuments "anchoring" various neighborhoods. While I doubt very strongly that the weightlessness of Houston - its eerie, flat, floating quality - can be counteracted by a series of anchoring monuments strategically placed (a literal picture of Oldenburg's anchor comes to mind), I applaud

the effort and look forward to results. The tricky thing about contemporary monuments is that it seems a little too late in the game for the solemn, patriotic bronze celebrations of civic pride, while the anti-heroic, post-modernist approach still smacks of coyness and calculation.

Monuments are meant to outlive us, to be passed from one generation to the next. In *The Human Condition*, Hannah Arendt's crucial discussion of the public and private realms, she makes the point that love of glory drove powerful men in ancient times to leave behind triumphal arches and other beautifying monuments. This perfectly valid motivation - glory - has been undercut, at first by Christian anti-*vanitas* morality, and more recently and seriously, by anxiety about the earth's very capacity to endure, and with it, a shifting of the image of the future to outer space. "Only the existence of a public realm," wrote Arendt, "and the world's subsequent transformation into a community of things which gathers men together and relates them to each other depends entirely on permanence. If the world is to contain a public space, it cannot be erected for one generation and planned for the living only; it must transcend the life-span of mortal men."⁴

The architect Bruno Taut believed that every municipality should have a *stadtkrone* or city crown, a sort of shrine to inspire the rebuilding of society. Our *stadtkrone*, if you will, is the Astrodome. (It would indeed become a "cult building" if the Oilers ever put together a championship season.) The Astrodome is a moon rock on a lunar landscape. Built in the middle of Houston's love affair with the space program, its "forbidden planet" iconography has more to do with NASA than baseball. On a hot day, you are well advised upon leaving the stadium to make a beeline for your car. In any case, there is nothing to detain you: the Dome, which could have been the hub of an interesting neighborhood of cafes and bars where people could gather to discuss the game afterward, is like a giant vacuum cleaner sucking in tens of thousands and a few hours later spitting them out onto the heat-blasted parking lot.

Imagine a city park landscaped over that parking lot, where fathers could take their sons and daughters afterward, where friends could play catch and people lie under the shade trees. At our sports stadiums, though subsidized by tax money, the public is made to feel redundant and unwelcome the moment an event is over. Greenway Plaza is dead late at night. No matter how keyed-up you may be after a basketball game or rock concert at the Summit, you have no alternative but to sit in your car for half an hour, inhaling exhaust fumes and waiting for the opportunity to squeeze into the moving lane of exiting cars. Compare this situation to Madison Square Garden, Wrigley Field, or the Boston Garden, where fans can spill directly into the streets and walk off their exuberance or disappointment.

There are so few opportunities in Houston to linger *en masse* after an event, and savor oneself as part of the emotional crowd. Better public transportation would help. Then you would have an alternative to driving - you could walk friends to the next bus/train stop. Mass transit also holds a crowd together. Anyone who has ever taken the train to or from Yankee Stadium on the night of an important game, and seen the subway cars fill up with fans, can attest to the carnival atmosphere - liberating and sometimes a little frightening.

The Astrodome's and the Summit's exit plans prevent any possibility of rampaging teenagers taking over the streets; crowds are dispersed immediately into atomized, separate automobiles. But a city which takes the bigger chance with a crowd's freedom is also the livelier city.

It has been suggested that the true monuments of our age are the freeways. Certainly this is the one "public space" on which the most money and constructional attention has been lavished. The freeways do give us the vantage point for an urban experiencing of Houston which is no longer obtainable on foot; and, if ever increasing density and utilization are marks of successful public space, then our highways are a hit. However, they do not promote interactional conviviality: conversation between citizens may be undertaken only at risk, and generally is limited to a few words just preceding and follow-

ing catastrophe.

Downtown: Tunnels, Plazas, Fountains, Arcades

In a city with few distinguishing landmarks, few real "places," the downtown will inevitably be regarded as a quasi-public space. The tragedy of Houston as an urban place (and it only occurred in the last 25 years) was the gutting of its downtown as a multi-use, retail, walking area and its conversion to a single-use, corporate office function. This became inevitable when the old movie theaters were torn down, many of the small stores scrapped, and free-standing slab towers erected whose street levels were given over to garage entrances or bank lobbies. Now corporate headquarters alternate, for the most part, with surface parking lots, and it is no longer inviting to window shop or even dally downtown. Park, do your business, and get out.

It is regrettable that at the same historical moment Houston moved from being a racially segregated to an officially integrated city it also converted its old downtown into a more monolithically white-collar (if not white) universe, and redistributed its shopping and entertainment functions to outlying malls where pre-existing residential patterns would reinforce *de facto* segregation. I do not mean to take away anything from the nobility of that struggle for Houston's integration in the '60s, or to question the genuine gains made since by some minority members in the corporate work place, but simply to note that the "social mix" role which the older sort of downtown might have played was considerably diluted by these changes. At the same time, the city moved to place one particular type of entertainment downtown, whose ticket prices and aesthetics would likely attract only the middle and upper classes - namely, high culture.

There are still pockets of downtown, mostly along Main Street, where the down-and-out hang out, clinging to (and tacitly permitted to retain) certain storefronts and street corners by reasons of historic territoriality. However, the poor almost never venture into the underground tunnel system, which is strictly for the socially homogenized, office-staff population. The decision to put so many of downtown's retail functions below ground, in the tunnels built by office buildings, is a key example of the movement away from public space toward privatization. The tunnels have leached an entire economy from ground level, and taken much of the street life and energy of downtown with them. That would be a fair enough exchange if they were more open to the general public. But whereas any damn fool can happen upon interesting shops while walking daily through a city's streets, you need a guide to take you into the tunnels.⁵ Their random growth, in the absence of an overall coordinated construction, has made it very easy to get lost down there. In fact, the only real way you can master the maze and become one of the tunnel *cognoscenti* is to work downtown.

In some ways, the tunnels are rather congenial. They offer a more urban stream of foot traffic than is found in most parts of Houston; people bump into each other, stop and chat; the occasional glimpse of a boiler room is like coming upon a construction site. In these minimalist corridors, slight differentiations of material or lighting become giddy refinements, while the sudden entry into "plaza-like" openings seems a thrilling event. Ultimately, though, it is a mole's life, with vista constrictions that induce a monotonized torpor. Monotonous, too, is the duplication of store offerings - soup and salad bars, travel agencies, card novelty shops - lopsidedly designed for a lunch-hour trade. This lack of merchandizing variety ensues from the folly of each office tower trying to be its own self-sufficient "city in miniature." No surface downtown retail area could ever get away with so little mercantile specialization, or so clone-like and mediocre a level of food quality. But without access to the general public, there is no real spur to excel.

Above ground, most of the so-called "plazas" which our office towers extrude like pseudopodia are sad drawing-board abstractions, hard on the bottom and brutally unshaded - fine places for sculpture, not people. One is grateful for the good sculpture, like the Barbara Hepworth ensemble in front of the First City Tower. But this corner, which seems donated to the public by the angle of the building's

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setback, would be so much more satisfactory if there were also plenty of tables and chairs with umbrellas, or shade trees. As is, it seems ambiguous whether the space is meant to be private (still part of the building) or there for the public's enjoyment. The message I get is: pause a moment to admire the art, then keep moving.

In general, corporations do poorly at providing public space. Either their plazas are deserted or, if they become popular like the one at New York's Seagram Building, security guards are hired to keep off the "undesirables." Corporate plazas cannot be considered true public space, as the urban designer Stanton Eckstut has argued: the only way you are going to get true public space is if the city provides it and maintains it.⁶

A much more useful corporate architectural contribution to the public good in Houston would be the addition of porticos. We have an excellent prototype in the gracious arcade attached to the downtown Texaco Building, with its Guastavino tile vaulting, by Warren and Wetmore. There is also a rather nice arcaded sidewalk on the Rice Hotel. Think of a downtown Houston arcaded like Bologna (another city with problematic weather), where you could walk along for blocks sheltered from rain or excessive heat, under air-cooled stoas(!), looking into windows of shops, chancing the elements only at street corners - and even then, a pedestrian tunnel system might come in handy just for these crossings. A total fantasy? I can't help thinking that these covered promenades would have been no more costly to build than the underground tunnel system. Of course, the tunnels had the economic incentive of providing another layer of rental real estate. But in the long run, that decision may prove to be uneconomic, since it detracts from downtown's potential viability as an 18-hour-a-day center of commercial activity.

One of the most popular public spaces downtown is the reflecting pool (Hermann Square) in front of City Hall. Anything with water has a primitive attraction, as everyone knows. So where are all the fountains in Houston? Of the few I have seen, most double as directional barriers, placed in the middle of traffic circles, undercutting any calming and/or romantic effect they might exert. The nice thing about fountains is that they suggest nature without, like parks, obliging one to abandon one's "flaneur" love of the streets, one's whole urban mentality, for metaphors of country and wilderness.

That may be one reason why the workers at lunch are so fond of the reflecting pool: they can enjoy the shade, the water, and the jabbering city scene, which makes an easier transition from their jobs. By contrast, they tend to shy away from nearby Tranquillity Park and Market Square. The open greensward of Tranquillity Park seems more designed as a visual eye rest for people in offices looking down, than for actual enjoyment. Indeed, the underutilization of Tranquillity Park and Market Square has become such an embarrassment that the city council recently discussed allowing street vendors (perish the thought!) in these two places, if nowhere else. Perhaps the municipal government is beginning to learn what Jane Jacobs taught long ago: that a city park which becomes too solitously tranquil a retreat gets a bad reputation as a dangerous no-man's-land. Besides, Houston is not such a jangling, frantically tense place that it needs zones of quiet everywhere. Quite the contrary, downtown could do with some brash corners that intensify excitement. It is a scandal, in a downtown with such minimal public space, that two of its parks should be so underused. But what do you expect when the entire strategy of the new downtown has been to keep people off the streets and below ground, shuttling them from the tunnels to their cars? The whole habit of public space has dwindled here.

I still like to believe that the mistakes of downtown Houston are not irreversible. With 40 percent of the work force situated in this one area, it remains too important a focus of capital and civic identity to be left so uninviting. Perhaps when there is more of a residential mix, and when mass transit is added to the equation, the CBD will become a livelier place, night and day.

The Galleria, and a Digression on Weather

I have been living in Houston for nearly

five years. Had I written this essay any earlier, it would have been even more riddled with half-informations than it must appear now to native Houstonians. Five years from today, I will only shrug at what now causes me chagrin.

One area I consistently try to avoid is the Galleria. As soon as I come within sight of its concrete panels I feel a migraine approaching. Managing to combine the twin nightmares of claustrophobic congestion and anomic vacuity, the Galleria is my idea of hell.

The whole Post Oak area around the Galleria is noteworthy for having the most concentration of buildings which is possible to assemble without, at the same time, achieving anything like an urban texture. Architects today are trained to build free-standing objects, but quite apart from whether the object is good or bad, what you get if you keep placing one free-standing object next to another is a proliferation of objects. What are needed now are not objects so much as places.⁷ Houston suffers from this malaise of placelessness, and nowhere more so than in the Galleria area.

Memories of a recent trip to Italy will not leave me alone. Forgive me; I cannot help comparing Houston's Galleria to the famous one in Milan. You enter the *Galleria Vittorio Emanuele* on foot, crossing over to it as a continuation of a busy square. It has a spatial clarity which one

indoor corridors compared to outdoor streets is that one cannot see the reassuring building tops of distant avenues; one goes forward wearing blinders in this miniature city that is insulated all too successfully from the real city. Contact with the weather outside is minimized both by climate control and the introspective mall design.

By contrast, if you are sitting or strolling in the Milan *Galleria*, it is an event to see the heavens open up and the rainstorm gusting just beyond the vaulted entrance. Weather has always stood for nature in cities - the saving reality of that which is out of our control, and provokes our amused resignation. It makes for solidarity among the urban mass, a good conversation starter for strangers thrown under an awning. In Houston, however, efforts to immunize the place against its own atmospheric conditions threaten to reach a phobic level.

Everyone knows about the interrelationships between air-conditioning technologies and Houston's building boom. We ought to ask ourselves, though, whether we may have overdone this moving of life indoors for comfort - especially since Houston's weather is not so terrible. Actually, it has one of the most pleasant climates of any North American city for seven-and-a-half months, and if the remaining four-and-a-half come close to insufferable, that average is no worse than New York, San Francisco, New Orleans, or

time a new activity center is built, this seems to be forgotten. The new is all covered with concrete, which is why those who have never been here picture us a city of concrete. The Astrodome, downtown, the Galleria, and the whole South Post Oak area would be so much more appealing and cosmopolitan if they were somehow pulled together by majestic rows of live oaks.⁸

Parks, Big and Small

The most important public space at present in Houston is probably Hermann Park. It is certainly "the people's choice." The zoo is one of the very few places in town where families of all social strata show off their children on a weekend, and where the energy of urban life is both concentrated and mellowed by its surroundings. The Juneteenth concerts at Miller Outdoor Theater provide some of our city's finest hours in the making of community. Still, there is no disputing that "Hermann Park remains a conspicuously underdeveloped scenic and recreational resource,"⁹ especially compared to what it was meant to be - our own Golden Gate or Central Park. The city ought to concentrate first on upgrading Hermann Park instead of acquiring more park land.¹⁰

One does have the impression that there are not many parks in Houston. This is largely the result of geographical maldistribution: most of the acreage is located in outlying, low-density areas. Memorial Park is larger than Hermann but not as centrally located; nor, for all its size, does much of it seem usable by the public. When you subtract the golf course, the arboretum and the semi-impassable thickets and swamps, you are left with barely more than a strip on the outer perimeter for convenient recreational use. Memorial Park remains basically a hunk of donated land: it is not yet truly a "park" in the cultivated, municipal sense of the term, although it does have splendid untapped potential.

Even more promising is the long, "hilly" (for Houston) grassland along Allen Parkway, which slopes down to Buffalo Bayou. It could make a terrific *Grande Jatte* picnic grounds and swimming hole, if the bayou water were ever cleaned up, and if the park were not so isolated by the road. How much more pleasant and usable it would be if the neighboring streets were designed to meet the bayou, instead of being cut off by a six-lane highway. As it is, more and more people seem to discover it each year, especially around the time of the Houston Festival's commendable Bayou Show, an exhibition of site-specific sculpture.

The whole bayou system represents a new juicy opportunity for Houston, which could dramatically increase public space with a series of bayou "river walks," while being a boon for the tourist trade and commercial development. I realize that a developed bayou would also pose serious engineering challenges, given the area's flood-control problems, but surely we can figure out something better to do with this network of streams passing through the city than to line them with concrete and make them scenery for passing cars.

Houston has a paucity of small neighborhood parks. In a city of private lawns perhaps there is a diminished incentive to build them, the thinking being that there is enough green already. There is also no shortage of vacant lots in the inner city, often the sites of old fires, now held in limbo for speculation, growing waist-high weeds, wildflowers, and beer bottles. If only the city would cajole a few owners to donate their land, or else buy it and convert some of these corner lots into neighborhood parks. As it is, some are probably used now as impromptu playgrounds, though they are rather dangerous for small children; and whoever uses them has the guilt of trespassing, even if no one is around to enforce the law.

Bell Park is one of Houston's rare exceptions: an exquisitely landscaped, snug, well-kept garden which has all the civility of a London block park tucked into the urban grid. Its small space seems enlarged by the division into florally distinguished areas with a suggestion of topography, augmented by the Japanese wooden foot bridge which passes over a semblance of a brook. And yet, one never really loses site of the park's modest scale. Albeit a little precious, it is like being in a bonsai garden. We could do with a dozen Bell Parks.



View on Jefferson Avenue looking west (Photo by Paul Hester)

perceives, even from the outside, as a perpendicular intersection of two elegant avenues placed under a ferro-vitreous dome. The curious fact that the indoor buildings facing each other under the dome have been equipped with exterior facades adds to the sensation that you are still walking in a street - albeit an enclosed one - with sidewalk cafes and people in the above apartments looking down at you.

The Houston Galleria, by contrast, is a suburban mall, so turned away from the street that one is advised to enter it from the rear or the basement garage. The sidewalk in front of the Galleria is nothing - a taxi dumping stop, a ramp at best, cautioning that any other mode of entry but the preferred vehicular one would be perverse. You take your life in your hands if you hoof it across from the Sakowitz side of Westheimer. A raised pedestrian bridge might help, of course.

Once inside, the whole complex presents a disorienting multiplicity of undifferentiated corridors - especially since the addition of Galleria 2 - so that it is necessary to consult a lobby map with names and arrows to get one's bearings. Again, as with the tunnels, we see a disturbing Houston pattern: the interiorization of city life has led to a confusing, insufficiently inflected space, bland as an airport terminal, and negotiable with ease only by those "in the know." A disadvantage of

London, all excellent walking cities. It seems paranoid to plan only for the difficult few months. Besides, even in August the evenings usually cool down enough to be walkable. The reason people don't walk in Houston is not because of the weather, but because the streets are too boring and spread-out. I do not want to overstate the case. I bow to no one in my hatred of a 95°, muggy Houston afternoon, with air pollution at the danger level, torturing the sinuses. There are times when crossing a large street like Kirby at noon is like *Duel in the Sun*. For this reason, the sine qua non of good public space in Houston will always be shade.

One of the shadiest and most agreeable sections to walk in the city are the parallel blocks of North and South boulevards, with their double lanes of live oaks touching over a pretty brick walkway and forming a "nave" to filter the sunlight into sun spots. Even on the hottest days, one feels invited to stroll down the esplanade and peek at the mansions on either side (certainly more invited than in other wealthy divisions, like secretive Shadyside, or Courtlandt Place, which has recently put up an excluding fence.) North and South boulevards spoil us for the rest of Houston, because they make us realize how beautiful a city this *could* be. Houston's climate is ideal for any number of oak-lined avenues. If only a tenth of the streets looked this way, what ravishment! The glory of Houston is its trees. Yet every



The Underground, Greenway Plaza (Photo by Paul Hester)

Of course, Bell Park has the luck to be situated in a gentrified section of Montrose, surrounded by museums and townhouses. By comparison, the little neighborhood parks over in the black and Chicano sections of the East Side look untouched by gardener's hand. Of playgrounds like Emancipation Park in the Fifth Ward, all one can say is that they are absolutely necessary, and essentially unfinished.

In the barrios and the black wards, there is more street life, perhaps reflecting cultural tendencies to utilize whatever is at hand as improvised public space. Men and women hang on porches and at corners, bantering, arguing, singing, listening to the radio, practicing jabs - a spectacle for which the rising minority unemployment rate does wonders. While the poor may indeed be better at appropriating their streets as communal recreation space, that is no excuse for assuming their vitality should somehow be made to compensate for the lack of proper parks and facilities. On the other hand, what they do not need is a strategy which would embrace their whole neighborhood in a greenbelt, such as the University of Houston seems to be proposing for the area around its central campus, now ominously renamed University Park.

Conclusion

Houston has very little good public space. Yet fragments and models exist, scattered across the cityscape, that might reasonably be multiplied: the City Hall reflecting pool, Bell Park, the Texaco Building's arcade, North and South boulevards, the Bayou Show, Hermann Park's zoo and the Miller Outdoor Theater, among others.

We could benefit from more lively gathering places that promote a sense of play, collectivity, ritual, and urbanity. Everywhere two major streets come together could be celebrated with an urban design that concentrated vitality. Instead, these crossroads are usually occupied by gas stations.

Maybe I feel this lack of public space more because I come from New York, and consequently could be applying an inappropriate standard. Certainly, native Houstonians do not experience their city as suffering from "placelessness." A long-time Houstonian has suggested to me the following intriguing thesis: that older cities had more of a need for articulated public space because their homes were less comfortable. Houston offers a much higher standard of domestic comfort for the individual, much less public space, and this reflects the pattern for cities of the future.

Finally, I would be remiss if I did not address an unspoken fear: that providing public space is "asking for trouble," because such places would become havens for junkies, rapists, muggers, vagrants, and so on. It would be beyond the scope of this article to disentangle in this attitude undercurrents of racism and classism from legitimate safety concerns; or to examine the legal and civil rights of junkies, vagrants, etc. to free assembly; or, more problematically, to understand the tricky dynamics by which one public space maintains a healthy diversity and territorial balance among competing users, while another is abandoned by the middle class to what has been somewhat pejoratively

called "the underclass." All I can do is reiterate that, in my view, the inhabitants of a city have a *right* to public space, and that the rewards of good public space are so lavish, in terms of fostering a democratic sense of community and a reality - fostering well-being - that it seems more than worth the struggle to solve whatever problems might arise from such an effort.

If, as both Hannah Arendt and Richard Sennett (in *The Fall Of Public Man*) have argued, mankind has undergone a radical shift toward privatization,¹¹ and his resistance to public life is now embedded at the level of "the human condition," then why bother? We have seen the last of good public space in our time. If, on the other hand, the problem is not so profound, then with some goodwill, raised urban-design consciousness, and a lot of money, Houston can catch up with other cities in this respect. Money: there's the catch. How will we do it in the present economy? I don't know, but I doubt that Houston is in a worse economic hole than all the cities of the past and present which somehow have found a way. Moreover, Houston is dreaming if it thinks it can reach the status of a world city by cash transactions alone, without lifting a finger to create inspiring public space. ■

Notes

Many ideas in this piece came from conversations with (i.e. were stolen from) Edouardo Robles, Stephen Fox, Drexel Turner, John Kaliski, and Terrell James.

- 1 Aldo Rossi, *A Scientific Autobiography*, Cambridge, The MIT Press, 1981, 72.
- 2 Kenneth Frampton, *Modern Architecture 1920-1945*, New York, Rizzoli, 1983, 213.
- 3 "This is a condition of post-World War II subdivisions and results from two conflicting principles of then-current city-planning wisdom: subdivisions should have non-continuous streets to discourage through traffic; street names should be continuous to avoid confusion." Stephen Fox, letter to the author.
- 4 Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition*, Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 1958, 55.
- 5 I thank Ceil Price for being that able guide.
- 6 Eckstut, in conversation with author, November 1983.
- 7 This interpretation was suggested to me by Kenneth Frampton, in conversation, December 1983.
- 8 I specify live oaks because they flourish in this climate. Palm trees, unfortunately, have become the preferred status symbol in Houston, and not only do they provide little shade but they go grey and limp after one good freeze, as we saw last winter.
- 9 "Reclaiming Hermann Park," *Cite*, Spring 1983, 2.
- 10 The articles by Stephen Fox ("Big Park, Little Plans: A History of Hermann Park," *Cite*, Spring 1983, 18-21) and Drexel Turner ("From Less to Moore: New Proposals For Hermann Park," *Cite*, Spring 1983, 24-27) provide excellent analyses of how its original Olmstedian vision was blurred, how its acreage was nibbled away by hospital grabs, roadways, and surface parking lots, and how it might be improved now.
- 11 Much as I am drawn to Arendt's and Sennett's "rise of privatization" thesis, I wonder how much hard historical evidence there is for this line of thinking, or if "public man" is, in his own way, just another lost Golden Age myth, a Noble Savage in reverse with which we torment ourselves. After all, the agora tradition was never so robust that we can base a whole "decline" scenario on it.

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