

Suburbia Deserta

David Kaplan



These houses, once in an area of rich rice land, are now in the "foreclosure rainbow"

© 1986 Paul Hester, Houston

In only 12 years time, more than a thousand of them have appeared, places whose names evoke the country, aristocracy, and the past, places that sound like dreams come true — Kings Forest, Whispering Pines, Nottingham Country, Mandolin, Windsong, Vienna Woods, Woods of Wimbledon, Golf Villas of Atascocita, Pecan Grove Plantation, Sha-De-Ree.

For many, these places do represent lifelong dreams, even though the dream is way the hell out, even though the dreamer is moving to a block filled with strangers, even though his dream looks like every other house on the block. The suburb, for many of us, is the preferred setting for raising a family, staking out a community, making a life.

Robert A.M. Stern calls the home the "badge honoring individual success," and until recently, Houston has had plenty of that. But with the sudden economic downfall, some suburban neighborhoods have turned into what city planners call "war zones," a description formerly reserved for inner-city ghettos. Houston is often called the city of change, the city in process, but drive to certain middle- and upper-class neighborhoods and you'll see where things just stopped.

One section of Houston has seen so much suburban breakdown, so much abandonment it has been nicknamed the "foreclosure rainbow." It is an 18-mile arc of newer subdivisions in West Houston, stretching from US-59 south to US-59 north. Many of these subdivisions were built to be near the Energy Corridor, the series of energy-related offices along the Katy Freeway (I-10).

A real-estate salesman, who will be called Jim, takes me into the foreclosure rainbow. We drive along the I-10 feeder road, near Mason Road. "This area was supposed to be the center of Houston," Jim says, driving past great expanses of unmowed fields. The area was once rich rice land.

Driving through a healthy looking suburb, he explains why many of the two-story brick houses look alike: "One builder tried it and it worked." He gives a few quirks of the trade, including, "If there's no sidewalk, it's called an estate."

Jim drives to a different subdivision, where there are few signs of life, where things have stopped. The houses are in the \$100,000 to \$200,000 price range and only a few years old. Towards one horizon, there are enough adjacent empty lots to suggest a desert scene. Jim parks his car at a half-completed block where a few of the houses look lived in and the rest look vacant. We enter one of the vacant houses; carpeting has been ripped up and sinks are missing, reclaimed by their builder, Jim speculates. But most of the destruction has been done by teenage vandals. "There's nothing else for these kids to do out here," he says. A message has been painted in every room: "Rock 'N Roll" over the kitchen cabinets; a bedroom has been renamed the "Trashroom."

Scenes like this are common in Houston for a number of reasons. First, there is the economy; a prime contributor to foreclosure rainbows has been the absence of economic "lightning." Houston developers gambled that lightning would strike Houston a second time, but it did not, according to Barton Smith, director of the University of Houston Center for Public Policy. Our first boom, which began in 1975, was counter-cyclical in that the rest of the

nation suffered during that period, prompting many Americans to migrate here. In 1981, foreseeing another great counter-cyclical boom, builders went wild, especially in the outlying regions of town. But the second boom never took place. In 1982, the oil market started slipping. "It was all kept secret," says Smith, "but many people lost their jobs and moved out." In a 15-month period between 1982 and 1983, 160,000 people lost their jobs here.

With a tremendously overbuilt real-estate market, property values dropped. This sent shockwaves through a town that had come to believe that the value of anything in Houston was bound to go up. At the same time, interest rates were rising. To make home buying more appealing, mortgage banks introduced the graduated mortgage which allowed a buyer to initially assume low monthly payments, then pay more with time, creating a situation where the buyer eventually made steep monthly payments as he or she watched their home's value decrease. This, along with job losses, encouraged foreclosure. If Houston had been a state during the summer of 1985, it would have led the nation in foreclosures.

But the economy does not tell the whole story. It doesn't explain why one subdivision makes it, while another in the same area does not. Other factors come into play, most importantly, quality of life.

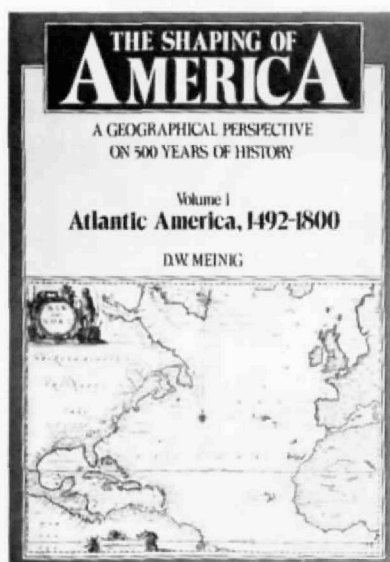
According to University of Houston sociologist John Gilderbloom, too many projects were built by inexperienced developers who were "unable to see the big picture," who were looking for a quick buck. Rather than rely on the wisdom of professional planners or borrow from the examples of successful neighborhoods, these developers, says Gilderbloom, "acted too much on a whim." Gilderbloom believes that the neighborhoods that worked are those that were founded by developers who not only believe in planning, but who also commit to staying with their project. A viable neighborhood also requires a sense of community, a sense of "we-ness," as Gilderbloom puts it. Often, he laments, homebuyers choose their home solely for the deal they can get, overlooking who their neighbors will be, and whether the neighbors are the kind that look after one another.

If a neighborhood possesses the above-mentioned characteristics, it can flourish, even in these rough times, even way out in the foreclosure rainbow. Cathy Lecky enjoys living there, in the suburb of Nottingham Village. She and her husband have been there since 1980. From her screened-in porch, we look out on her flower garden, the centerpiece of her spacious backyard. Her fence blocks the view of I-10, although we still hear the traffic. Lecky brags on her 2,875 square-foot home. "We got a super deal," she says. "It's sturdy, energy efficient, and it doesn't leak." She adds that in the house's early stages, their builder, Ray Braswell, was very cooperative. "A lot who built out here have left town, or have gone out of business," she says, "but he still builds out here."

Nottingham Village, built by Kickerillo Company, is nicely landscaped, offers recreational facilities, and good schools. But despite its well-laid foundation and active civic group, Nottingham now has its problems. When Kickerillo sold out, the new developer built a big apartment complex near the country club, which angered homeowners. Crime also has increased. Teenage crime is a minor nuisance: recently kids knocked over mail boxes and stole the yard-of-the

BRAZOS BOOKSTORE

The Shaping of America



A GEOGRAPHICAL PERSPECTIVE
ON 500 YEARS OF HISTORY
Volume I: Atlantic America, 1492-1800
by D. W. Meinig

First in a projected set of three volumes that will present an entirely fresh interpretation of the development of America from its beginnings.

512 pages; 81 B&W illustrations 7 X 10". \$35
Yale University Press



©1986 Paul Hester, Houston

month sign. A more serious concern is adult crime. A security man told Lecky that because of the economy, more and more people are stealing jewels, guns — anything they can sell quickly.

But things are good in Nottingham compared to other subdivisions nearby, where, says Lecky, a “world of people” have foreclosed. Some have lost their jobs, others are unhappy with their subdivisions. Many houses leak badly. A developer in one subdivision built \$300,000 to \$400,000 houses and never got around to planting trees. Homeowners in another expensive suburb were startled when they discovered that the road connecting I-10 to their homes would be lined with strip centers.

Lecky knows a couple who are considering walking away from their poorly constructed \$200,000 home. Their monthly payments have shot up to \$3,000. They’ve paid \$180,000 on the house — almost its original value — yet they still owe \$215,000!

Some Houston streets now have as many as a half-dozen or more foreclosed houses in a row. When faced with such extreme abandonment and eventual deterioration, the best response for remaining residents is to draw on the strength of their homeowners association (HOA). The North Houston subdivision of Forestwood offers a case in point. Built in the late 1970s, its inexperienced developer sold out to another one who went bankrupt in 1985. The developer had been acting as Forestwood’s homeowner’s association, so that when it went under, there was

no longer a HOA, and no deed restrictions could be enforced. Residents who couldn’t pay the private garbage collector let months of garbage pile up in the backyard. One man raised goats. There was no street lighting; the club pool was covered with slime.

One resident, a school teacher named LaSandra Sanders, decided to save the neighborhood. She knocked on doors and she tried to clean up things. “My husband and sons would mow nearby vacant lots and it kind of caught on,” Sanders says. They enlisted more neighbors by holding outdoor socials and literally stopping passing cars.

Sanders and her neighborhood posse then tried to get the owners of the abandoned homesites to maintain their own properties. Often it took months to figure out whether a house was actually vacant, suburban life being what it is. Once they did declare a house abandoned, it could take several more months to track down the owner. Making Forestwood their pilot project, the Center for Public Policy and Houston Proud stepped in to assist the Forestwood residents.

In October 1986, Forestwood residents achieved a milestone. By getting the approval from the necessary 50 percent of its property owners, Forestwood could recharter its HOA, giving it legal power to maintain restrictions and collect fees to pay bills. Forestwood’s destiny, to a far greater extent, was in the hands of its homeowners.

In Forestwood, or anywhere else, when people walk away from their homes they go in many directions. They leave town, they rent apartments, or buy trailer homes. Some obtain bigger houses at lower prices. It is not uncommon these days for a person making huge payments on a house to foreclose, and, in the same neighborhood, find an identical house which has been repossessed by the Department of Housing and Urban Development and is being offered for \$20,000 less than the value of the original home. To pull this trick, one must sign on to the new home before foreclosing on the old one.

Many people are desperate and one can find all kinds of “creative” negotiating. Says David Montgomery, a Forestwood resident, “All kinds of deals are taking place. You see a lot of ‘save my credit’ listings in the classifieds. It’s unbelievably chaotic. It’s a flood. Lenders are swamped with property now; they don’t really want to be in the property management business; it’s a great buyer’s market right now. You can get good prices and good financing, if you’ve got a job.”

Charles A. Fuller has made a business out of the current chaos. He goes door to door, buying homes about to foreclose, cleaning them up, and reselling them. Three years ago, he was himself a Houstonian in dire financial shape. Now he nets a six-digit income, and he trains teams of foreclosure buyers in seminars across the United States. Fuller sees himself as an entrepreneur who generates a previously stagnant market.

(Continued on page 20)

PAM WILSON GRAPHICS HAS A REPUTATION

It's no secret that we're cheap and easy, but by now you're finding out that we're also good... experienced... and professional.

Not a bad reputation to have at all.

Advertising • Brochures
Annual Reports • Logos

Pam Wilson Graphics

(713) 840-0002

MASONRY the most versatile building system there is



Masonry Institute of Texas
5100
Westheimer
Suite 200
Houston
Texas 77056
713-968-6550

Terra Surveying Company—
providing a full range of land surveying
services to Houston and Austin’s
architectural community:

- Development Plats
- Topographic Surveys
- Boundary Surveys
- Tree Surveys
- Completion Surveys

4900 Woodway
Tenth Floor
Houston, Texas
77056
(713) 993-0327

TERRA
SURVEYING
COMPANY, INC.

9020 Capital of Texas
Highway
Suite 348
Austin, Texas 78759
(512) 343-6205

Chicago

THE INDIAN STYLE

RAYMOND HEAD

A magnificent cultural tour documenting the continuous influence of Indian architectural and decorative style on the European sensibility from the seventeenth century to the present. Head demonstrates the impact of Indian motifs on a variety of works from theater designs and religious institutions to the bungalow house, offering examples from European and American cities.

Cloth \$29.95 224 pages 114 halftones

Now in paper

THE ARCHITECTURE OF THE ITALIAN RENAISSANCE

JACOB BURCKHARDT

Edited and with an Introduction by Peter Murray
Translated by James Palmes

“This is the first English translation of an extraordinary work of scholarship first published in Burckhardt’s native German in 1867. Peter Murray, a British authority on Renaissance building, has done an admirable job of editing and revising it.”—Paul Gapp, *Chicago Tribune*

\$24.95 (est.) 320 pages
68 halftones, 250 line drawings

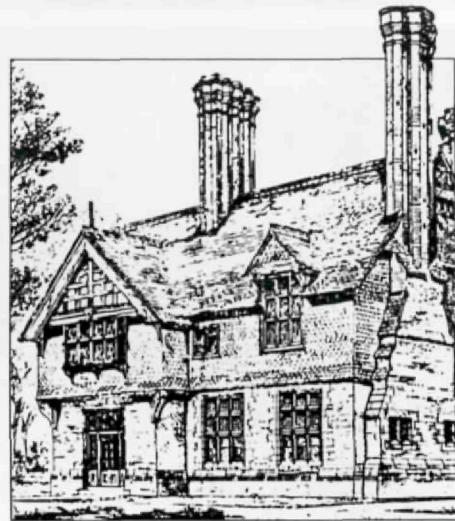
THE SENSE OF UNITY

The Sufi Tradition in Persian Architecture

NADER ARDALAN and LALEH BAKHTIAR

The authors examine Persian architecture in relation to both Islamic tradition and mystical Sufi doctrines. Numerous photographs and drawings suggest new ways of viewing man’s relationship to his environment.

\$29.95 172 pages
311 illustrations, 15 in color
Publications of the Center for
Middle Eastern Studies



THE ENGLISH HOUSE, 1860-1914

The Flowering of English Domestic Architecture

GAVIN STAMP and ANDRÉ GOULANCOURT

An illustrated survey of British domestic architecture in the Victorian era ranging from picturesque cottages to Romantic manor houses. Superb photographs of urban, suburban, and country homes are combined with descriptive commentary to unique effect. What emerges is not only a stunning visual record but also a lesson on the creative development of national and vernacular building traditions.

Cloth \$39.95 254 pages
18 color plates, 203 halftones, 8 line drawings

NATURAL ENERGY AND VERNACULAR ARCHITECTURE

Principles and Examples with
Reference to Hot Arid Climates

HASSAN FATHY

A master architect’s insights into the vernacular wisdom of indigenous architectural forms in hot arid climates. Fathy draws on his extensive research on climate control, particularly in the Middle East, to demonstrate the advantages of many locally available building materials and traditional building methods. Ultimately, he suggests improved uses of natural energy that can bridge the gap between traditional achievements and modern needs.

Cloth \$25.00 Paper \$10.95 196 pages
39 halftones, 45 line drawings
Published for the United Nations University

GRAUBART RUDY

Rosenthal Baccarat Alessi

GRAUBART RUDY

Kosta Boda Buccellati Orrefors

GRAUBART RUDY

Royal Copenhagen Dorothy Hafner

GRAUBART RUDY

Christofle Georg Jensen Oggetti

GRAUBART RUDY

Fine China, Crystal and Flatware

River Oaks Center • 1985 W. Gray • Houston, Texas 77019 • 521-1397

Coffee Then And Now

Coffee beans came West with the people who settled Texas. Settlers roasted, ground and brewed their coffee over campfires, and at open hearths. Hardy pioneers gave way to urban cowfolk, and fresh roasted coffee to grounds in a can.

Then in 1973, the House of Coffee Beans, Houston's original coffee store, was founded. Today you can come by Houston's coffee pioneer for a fresh-roasted, fresh-brewed sample, and discover something timeless.



HOUSE of COFFEE BEANS
Houston's original coffee store, since 1973.

2520 Rice Boulevard • in the Village • 524-0057 • 10-6 Monday — Saturday

STUCCO-PLASTER

RESTORATION

Donald Curtis

(713) 477-6118

UNIQUE ACCENT WALLS



GRAFFITO WINDOW SILLS KEY STONES DOOR MOULDINGS

WINDOW MOULDINGS CAST IN PLACE



ORNAMENTAL REPAIR
AND CASTING

L.D. Systems Professional Sound and Lighting

Systems design and installation to accommodate your architectural or interior design plans.

Our work complements the integrity of yours.

Please call Alison at (713) 695-9400 to request a brochure outlining our services.

467 W. 38th St., Houston, TX 77018
professional sound and lighting services, sales, rentals



On 13 September 1986, the University of Houston Center for Public Policy and Houston Proud hold a half-day conference: "Neighborhoods at Risk: Strategies for Community Action." It takes place in a ballroom of the Marriott Brookhollow. Water is served.

Tables surround the room, staffed by various private and government groups. At one table is Darryl Keller, owner of Lifestyle Management. For the right price, his company will manage a neighborhood, overseeing security, trash, landscaping, and mosquito control. "Houston's a little unique, no local controls," Keller says. "We take the place of the local government."

The purpose of the conference is to stress the importance of the homeowner's association as a vehicle for improving a community's quality of life, and as a voice for reaching developers, local government, banks, and residents. Conference organizers also hope to cultivate future neighborhood leaders. Barton Smith speaks frankly to the audience of concerned homeowners, saying that Houston is experiencing the greatest home market decline since the Great Depression.

During a break, a member of the conference steering committee tells me that Houston could lose out as a whole because of its distressed neighborhoods. He hears that New York banks are getting nervous about insuring loans here. He also tells of neighborhood civic groups going to mortgage banks, trying to renegotiate, make trade-offs. "We'll mow lawns of foreclosed properties if you'll lower mortgage rates." This has never been done before, but banks are open to the idea," he says.

Time sure flies. It seems only yesterday that Houston stood for power, but now we approach mortgage banks in the role of yardmen. Difficult years lie ahead for suburban dreams. Some literally may be plowed under, according to Smith. Others may revert to what he calls "mixed land use."

But when all is said and done, Houston may grow wiser. Perhaps in the future, we'll build suburbs with more care, and perhaps in this current struggle, we can add greater meaning to our existing neighborhoods. Says David Montgomery of Forestwood, "These are tough times, but the world's not coming to an end. At least in Forestwood, we're now talking to one another." ■

Citations

Star Wars In the Labyrinth

"Buildings and Reality: A Symposium on Architecture in the Age of Information"

Sponsored by the Center for the Study of American Architecture
The University of Texas at Austin
23-24 October 1986

Reviewed by Malcolm Quantrill

The line-up for this, the third symposium to be organized by the Center for the Study of American Architecture, promised more than the conventional swings and roundabouts between regionalists and fashion-artists purveying the very latest *thing*. Having spearheaded the first two events, the center's director, Lawrence W. Speck, gave the ball to Michael Benedikt, whose game plan also gave Charles Moore a more modest part in the action. All this seemed most appropriate as the longhorns settled to battle out of the labyrinth of linguistics, seeking a cosmic spiral that would deliver us from the beastly myth of the machine, upwards into the cool, fresh air of *reality*, no less.

Benedikt set the battle lines by saying that if architecture responds to cultural change, it is only doing what it has always done; but that now the "information explosion of video, VCR, Walkman, T-shirts, et cetera are imperceptibly changing our perceptions." He then played the already mythical Bo Gehring, arch-priest of video's new compact simulations of alternative configurations in space. Gehring spoke of this new *essence* in terms of an exclusive perfume: "Five seconds of film took 125 people five months to make, but half the world's population saw its initial relay." His most convincing tape, however, was an unedited shooting by Claude Lelouche of a high-spewed motorcycle run from Versailles, down the Champs Elysées, through Paris, to Montmartre. He told us: "When we read the 'viewer' controls the speed of information flow, while in TV everything is in real time, with no variant." According to Baudrillard, he said, "Architecture has two options:

either to become more ephemeral (like the media) or more traditional: it is vestigial — it does not go away."

Horace Newcomb, professor of film and television at The University of Texas, saw "the environment as the medium. Through orientation and siting, the form of villages and towns express the environment. A cathedral expresses cultural values; a shopping mall does not. Postmodernism, its constant interrogation of forms, becomes *not only* the 'dissolver' of values *but also* a 'tutor.' TV, its endless being, becomes what Robert Eco has termed celebration of the victory of life over art; dissolving the High Victorian illusion that stories have an ending into a mythic, religious, serialized, narrative of experience. But buildings are not serial," he said, "they do not embody narrative meaning — except in the *spiral* and the *labyrinth*. And it is difficult to get people to invest in metaphors!"

Douglas Davis, architecture critic of *Newsweek* and a video artist in his own right, reminded us that the labyrinth passes through the Augean stables, out of which he made a determined effort to clear the bullshit. His tapes portray his own vivid efforts to break out of the labyrinth of television — one resulted in middle-aged women smashing their tubes in order to *touch* the beast within — supporting his contention that "there is no mass," because "the medium is *only* transmission, but there is also reception." He recalled the interview with a Texas woman in 1958, who, when asked what she thought of television, said: "It's great! If you close your eyes, it sounds just like the radio." "The medium is not the message," Davis concluded: "the message is the medium."

Peter Eisenman proved that, while architecture may no longer have a narrative role — "Modernism failed," he told us, "because it is impossible to deal with the fictive in abstraction" — he is a great raconteur. On this occasion his theme was "The Art of Dislocation." "Whereas the caveman did not have in