

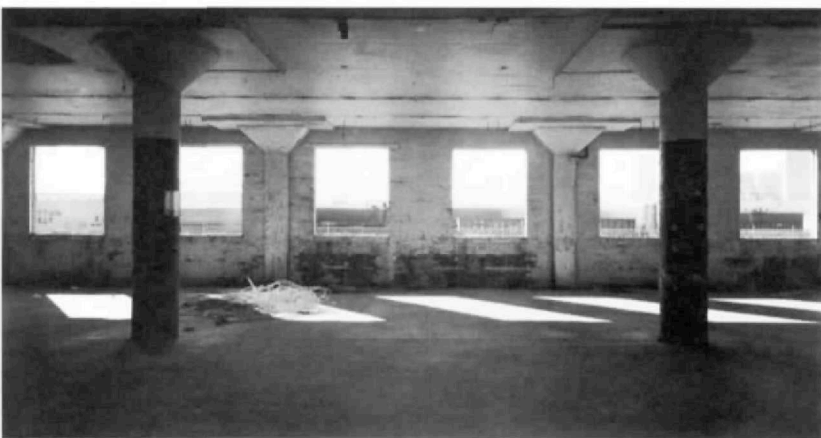


Both photos this page by Clay Harmon

Abandoned In Place

The former Southern Pacific rail yards are a ghost of Houston's industrial past

PHOTOS BY CLAY HARMON, MARTHA THOMAS, AND ARCHIE PIZZINI/TEXT BY BRUCE C. WEBB



JUST NORTH OF DOWNTOWN, close to Buffalo Bayou, is the nearest industrial site to Houston's city center. There, for more than 100 years, a busy railroad yard operated. It has been some time, however, since rail cars pulled into the former Southern Pacific yard to be examined, worked on, and returned to the nation's rail system. The site was retired from active use close to a decade ago, and with Houston's central business district now expanding on the strength of a new appe-

tite for inner city living, the property has begun to change its stripes.

Investors purchased the site in 2001, formed a TIRZ, and began showing around a proposal for a large "dense, mixed-use, pedestrian friendly, and transit-oriented development" called Hardy Place. With similar sites in Houston in recent years, the first act of possession has been to subject the land to the *tabula rasa* treatment, reducing it to a blank slate onto which a new urban reality can be written. This was the case with the former Astroworld, where the manufactured hills and mounds and planted trees and shrubbery that had created a setting for the amusement park were scraped away and leveled, despite being located in a topographically-starved coastal plain. The mantra is Darwinian: grow-evolve-adapt.

And this is apparently the planned future of the one-time rail yard. Other cities may try to rehabilitate industrial sites, taking advantage of the buildings that exist to create something new with a link to something old, but that's all

too uncommon in Houston. Before the earth scrapers moved in, though, a trio of photographers—Clay Harmon, Martha Thomas, and Archie Pizzini—roamed through the rail yard's empty buildings and grounds, documenting the environs in extremis. What they found was a place abandoned, but not necessarily dead, at least not yet. Theirs are pictures of an expedition into the belly of a singularly disquieting place after the machine stops, a place where the skin and bones and mechanical organs held in check by purpose and motion are not simply abandoned but heaped up, flooded, contaminated, and collapsing.

Just outside the thin allure and digital tidiness of the modern city, it's a dirge for the industrial style and the culture of a hundred years ago, for the railroad has changed very little in that time.

Houston is more new than old, and it is perhaps this more than anything else that makes it different from most of the world's big cities. Like most sunbelt



All photos this and facing page by Martha Thomas

boom towns, Houston owes much of its form and substance to late 20th century technology. Most of all, it learned how to grow away from its industrial sites. And it's for that reason that you have to go searching if you want to find signs of the city's industrial past.

By contrast, Pittsburgh, where I grew up, was one of the most industrially committed cities in the country. As was common among cities that came of age in the 19th and early 20th centuries, Pittsburgh depended on rivers and railroads to feed raw materials to the kindred factories that were the core of its economy. Those factories lined the banks of the rivers that flowed through the narrow valleys; the neighborhoods where the workers lived in densely packed houses flocked with soot were nearby. It was impossible not to be aware of the mills, their fiery machines, the mechanical muscle, the shrill, metallic noises. It was a setting H.L. Mencken described in an essay, "The Libido for the Ugly," as "hideous without a break."

Everything industrial from those days has now gone away, leaving Pittsburgh's industrial valleys so thoroughly pock-marked with abandoned industrial sites, empty downtowns, and run-down neighborhoods that in some places the scene looks like pictures of the devastation in the Ruhr Valley after Allied bombings in World War II. Pittsburgh, too, has learned to grow away from its industrial past, but doing so there is much harder than it is in Houston. So it capitalizes on its past with a vigorous nostalgia industry.

It is of course not the case that Houston has no heavy industry or notable industrial sites. This is, after all, the world's petrochemical center, and petrochemicals is an industry that takes a back seat to none in its spectacular architecture. The refinery corridor along Highway 225 between Pasadena and the dramatic Baytown bridge is perhaps the city's most compelling vista, especially at night, and I never fail to take visitors out there after they've seen all the usual city

attractions, usually after dark, when the dots of white lights outline the silhouetted forms of this spectral city.

Houston is also the busiest port city in the United States in terms of foreign tonnage, and its 25-mile-long ship channel is the other place in town with an exaggerated industrial landscape, this one with giant, Star Wars-like cargo cranes striding the railroad tracks, flexing mechanical muscles while lifting loads on and off docked container ships that have arrived from around the world. But this landscape is far off the beaten path for most; the city shrivels away from it.

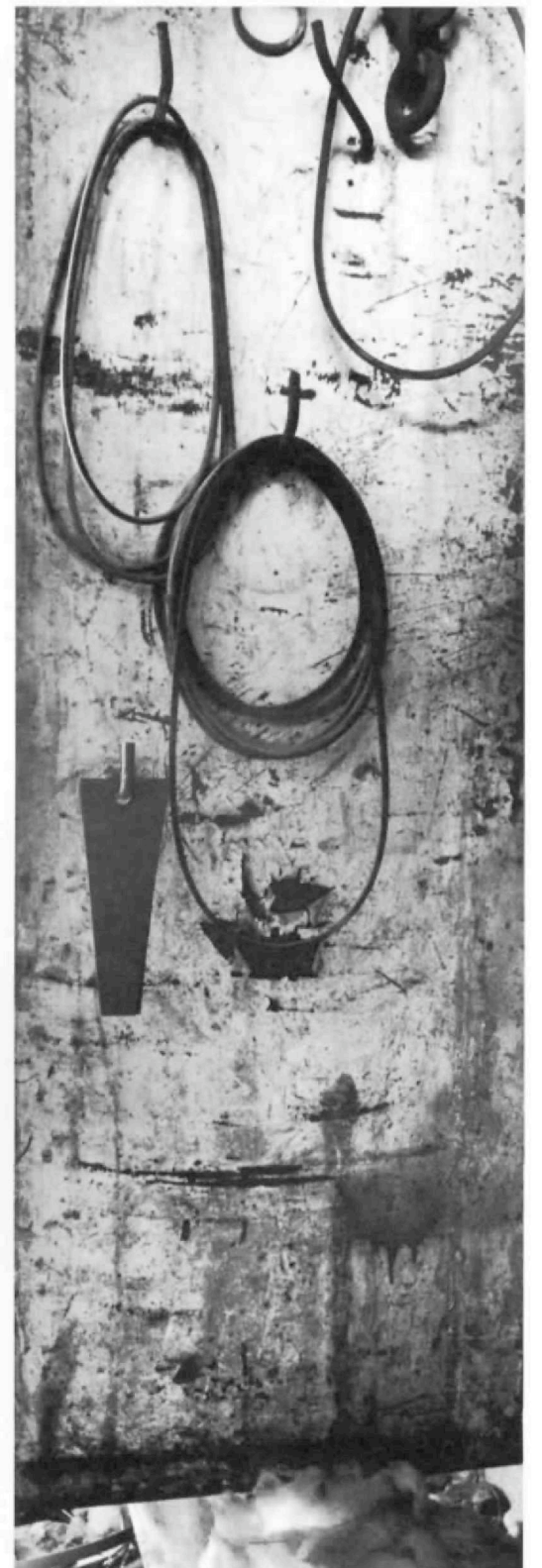
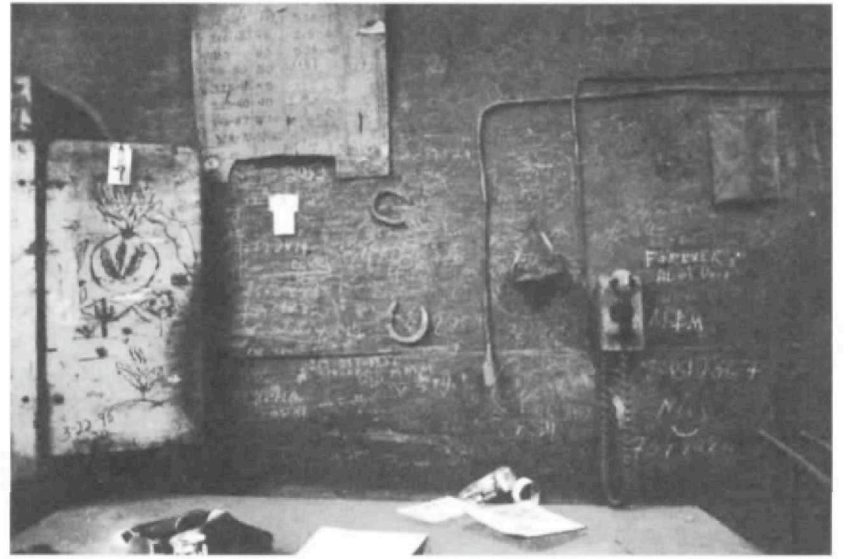
And so for many Houstonians the industrial present is as invisible as the industrial past, creating a disconnect from the muscle that once kept, and still keeps, much of the city moving. As older sites get bulldozed flat rather than reinvented, that disconnect grows.

As they empty, all ruins become receptacles for the imagination, perhaps none more so than industrial sites that, when

they were in use, were off limits to the general public. Now that they are coming apart, their noisy bustle and purpose silenced, they are vulnerable, open, revealing, suspended in time. As architecture critic Robert Harbison wrote, "Perhaps one's residual incomprehension of such places fuels one's present interest."

Maybe we only need museums because we don't trust the real. But each relic and artifact can be a portal into the city's memory. Julie Bargmann of D.I.R.T. Studio, who gave an RDA-sponsored lecture in Houston last fall, showed an approach that allowed these old sites to be active parts of determining their own future. Instead of erasing every trace of a site's history, D.I.R.T.'s solutions incorporate the legacy of an industrial past into new regenerative spaces, often by recycling much of the detritus rather than carting it away. In this way, the city, with time, builds upon itself. But it builds in such a way that there are clues enough for one to be able to say, "I remember." ■





All photos this and facing page by Archie Pizzini

