

block” at LaBranch and Dallas, owned by Centerpoint (once Reliant, once HL&P), the main transmission point for practically all the electricity used downtown, an unmovable chunk of visual disorder overlooked by the new convention center hotel, the arena, and the convention center, not to mention the buildings of Houston Center. The Sports Authority, the City of Houston, the Rockets, and Crescent have put in more than \$1.5 million to clean up the block, giving it new paving and painting the transformers, power poles, and other fixtures all a uniform beige. Higher exterior walls and fences have been added, along with new plantings and a series of “light-stick” sculptures.

Says Jane Page of Crescent Real Estate Equities Limited Partnership, which owns 13 blocks in the area, “The plan we came up with was to minimize the visual impact, clean it up with new paving and higher walls, and then actually celebrate it as a place that reflects Houston — the power and energy and light.”

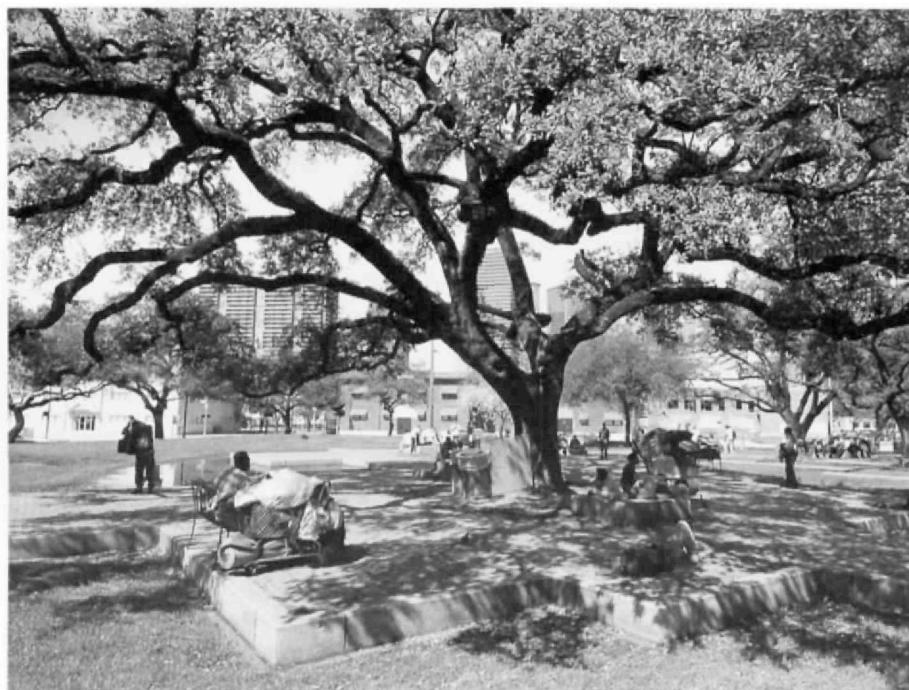
Page is one of the people who will rebuild the EED when market forces are right. And she says she sees signs that the public investment is paying off. Crescent last summer sold two partial blocks near the arena to a private developer who plans, she says, to build residential projects, the first in the area in nearly a century.

Adds Page, “This type of activity on the east side of downtown creates a vibrancy and excitement that draws people to events and functions during the day, evenings, and weekends. Houstonians want to live and work where there is excitement and activities. The east side is transforming to a true urban experience. We have had several Houston Center customers locate in our complex for the very reason of being in the middle of the ballpark and arena.”

Crescent has signed two restaurants, both aimed at an upscale evening crowd, for the Houston Center’s Park Shops, and will reconfigure the relationship of the two-block section to more strongly interact with the street. Entrances will be moved from corners to mid-block, and retail will be opened to the street.

Eventually, says Page, Crescent would like to see office towers in several of the blocks it owns near the convention center.

Whether this will be enough to begin the transformation of the EED from an ocean of surface parking to a living part of the city’s fabric remains to be seen. The area still faces the isolation that has kept it relatively empty for decades — the EED is so far from the new light rail line along Main, from the theater district, even from the new housing developments between downtown and the medical center, that it can’t draw from their energy. But if public money for convention facilities and sports facilities can do the trick, Houston has certainly paid the price. ■



Root Memorial Square, now a haven for the homeless, will soon sport basketball courts where NBA players can face off against amateurs.

BIG MONEY. BIG BUILDINGS.

CAN HUMAN LIFE EXIST IN THE SUPER-SIZED BUILDING DISTRICT?

BY TOM COLBERT

Houston’s newest sports arena, the Toyota Center, sits in the middle of what the newly installed street signs call the Toyota Center District. It lies on the eastern edge of downtown, adjoining the recently enlarged convention center and the new Hilton Americas Houston hotel. It is not far from the new Five Houston Center high-rise, and the recently expanded South Texas College of Law. One goes to the Toyota Center hoping to find some exciting architecture and maybe even a lively pedestrian-centered street scene. This is, after all, an entirely new district, paid for by taxpayer dollars. It is public architecture on an Hausmannian scale. Here especially, one does hope that a recent headline seen in the *AIA Journal of Architecture* would ring true: “Public Architecture Sets the Bar for Social Responsibility.”¹

On a weekday morning, however, it is not the architecture or the vitality of the district that arrests one’s attention, but rather the emptiness of the streets and parks surrounding the Toyota Center. Root Memorial Square does have people in it, but they are street people who have been driven from their homes under the bridges on the north side of downtown by loudspeakers that the city placed there. These speakers blare industrial noise throughout the day, in order to drive the homeless away, and they succeeded brilliantly. Homeless people are not tolerated in the parks closer to the center of downtown or in front of the convention center, so they congregate here, near the Toyota Center, where the only other human presence is that of the custodial workers, private guards, and police whose job it is to service and protect the enormous public investment that has been made in new construction in this part of downtown. The homeless will probably soon be driven even from their haven in Root Memorial Square, though. New projects are being planned for the park. Well-lighted basketball courts, where NBA stars will face off against selected high school athletes, are promised, a stage for pre-game musical performances is soon to be installed, and large beds of seasonal flowers are to be planted.

The designers of the Toyota Center District don’t

seem to have been very interested in actual people, homeless or not, and where they might walk or hang out between performances. But they are very interested in cars and where they will be parked. There are quite a few parking garages, the blank walls of which crash abruptly into the sidewalks, presenting a forbidding façade to pedestrian passersby. None of the garages appears to have been designed to allow future use of the ground floor for retail or commercial purposes, or to give the eye or the hand a place to rest. There are plenty of surface parking lots, too. Most of these are surrounded by iron fences, and some even have elevated guard towers. The Toyota Center web site clearly describes the building’s interest in its context. It says nothing about the neighborhood, but instead lists abundant parking as a prime reason for attending events there. It boasts of “ten thousand parking spaces within just a few blocks,” with “a private sky bridge entrance for premium guests.”²

Parking garages are not the only pedestrian-unfriendly structures in the Toyota Center District. An entire block at the entrance to the Toyota Center and in front of the Hilton hotel is filled with electrical transformers feeding power to downtown. The transformers are screened from the street by 15-foot high walls that abut the sidewalk. Nearby, another city block is filled by the huge cooling plant for all these buildings, the District Energy Center. If you asked a city planner to draw up a list of land uses that would keep people away from the Toyota Center District, you could not have come up with a more perfect anti-pedestrian program. The irony is that so many of these un-civic structures are owned or financed by the City of Houston.

One would expect that the Toyota Center building itself would fit into its context about as well as its flying-saucer-shaped roof suggests. In fact, it is more accommodating to the street than the other new buildings in the area. It, too, presents bland walls to the sidewalk, but they are less opaque, and they seem less impenetrable than most of the neighboring buildings.

The Toyota Center also creates a credible public space at its entrance. Waiting in line for your tickets or to go into a Rockets game is an exciting and sociable experience, especially at night. Crowds line up along lights set in the pavement, and strangers feel free to talk to one another under the spectacle of glittering skyscrapers. For the crowd’s entertainment, a monumental television screen hovers in the air overhead. The building opens up enough at its entrance to create an inviting sense of anticipation. Its brightly lit foyer is completely revealed behind a multi-floor wall of glass. Office spaces, shops, and exercise rooms are all visible inside. Standing in the plaza, waiting to go inside, one feels engaged with the city and its inhabitants.

From a distance, the Hilton hotel also seems like a place where one might find some urban conviviality. But sadly, at the street level it is like a fortified bunker. Its back and sides create a canyon-like streetscape of barren concrete walls. Its heavily recessed, north-facing entry is concealed behind a broad moat of bus and taxi drop-off lanes. Seen from the freeway, the nearby Five Houston Center and the South Texas College of Law buildings also suggest a greater level of vitality and responsiveness to human scale than is actually the case. They, too, have blank walls on all sides, albeit not as blank as those that grace the Hilton hotel and its attendant parking garages.

One might console oneself with the thought that these sorts of forbidding streetscape conditions — conditions that are also found around Houston’s new convention hotel, around the Toyota Center, and in fact around the entire super-sized building district on the eastern edge of downtown — are the inevitable result of the peculiar nature of these facilities and the crowds they generate.

Sadly, this is not the case. The Enron buildings on the other side of downtown have no particular need to accommodate huge crowds, and yet despite their more sophisticated skin and their stronger claim to the space of the street, they too are semi-fortified buildings that wall in unoccupied, heavily patrolled streets. In fact, much of the commercial core of downtown is built this way. What a pity that the City of Houston is following the same path that our corporate titans have blazed for so many years.

As we come to the end of downtown Houston’s greatest period of publicly-financed building construction, it is worth taking stock of what we’ve got. We have two major new sports facilities, a large convention hotel, tens of thousands of structured parking spaces, a doubling in size of the convention center, miles of newly defined streets, dozens of acres of newly landscaped parkland, and significant new commercial construction. But it is unclear what the civic agenda of all this monumental building really is, beyond attracting capital to the downtown area.

In a January *New York Times* article, Edward Rothstein summed up the problems we face as we attempt to grow our downtown: “The city’s greatest achievement, it often seems, is the protection of the private realm and competing private interests; about the public realm there is no understanding.”³ ■

1. *AIA Journal of Architecture*, December 2003, pg. 12.

2. This can be found at www.houstontoyotacenter.com/parking.aspx.

3. Edward Rothstein, “What Should a City Be? Redesigning an Ideal,” *New York Times*, January 24, 2004, pg. B7.