

Bright Lights Strip City

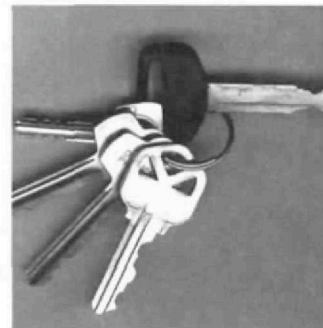
Larry
Albert



In 1982,
when this map
was drawn,
this part
of Northwest
Houston was
pretty
sparse



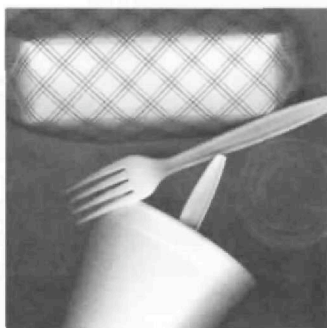
Now it's a lot
more
developed. I
drove around
the area to
see what I
could see.



I was hungry, so
I drove to
Fiesta. But I
did a stupid
thing. I
locked my
keys in my
car.



Inside the store, a
man with a guitar
was singing songs in
English
and Spanish from a
balcony overlooking
the shoppers. He
sang and played
loudly, but I could-
n't hear anyone
applaud him when he
finished.



I ate three
egg tacos and
some salad
from the
salad bar.
There
was a sushi
bar there
too, but I
didn't feel
like trying
it. Later, I
had a hot
chocolate.



While I waited in
front for the man
from AAA to come,
Tony, who was sell-
ing newspapers,
told me about his
experiences as a drug
dealer in Kansas
City. After he got
out of the business,
some men killed a
friend of his.

Tony was shot too,
in the upper thigh.
You can see Tony in
this picture, barely.

Later, while the lock-
smith tried to break
into my car, I noticed
that the parking lot was
pretty social. The lock-



smith took a long time
to figure out my lock.
He was from Iceland, but
had lived in Texas for a
while. He showed me a
picture of his low-rider
truck. He said he paid
\$600 a month to keep it.
He also told me some
things about the area.
He said people in the
north parts are better
off, and more white. He
said people from the
north and south parts of
this area both shop at
Fiesta, though. He said
there was no real need
to go south, inside the
loop, for anything.
"Pretty much anything
you might want is up
here," he said.

The next day I found some other places I thought were

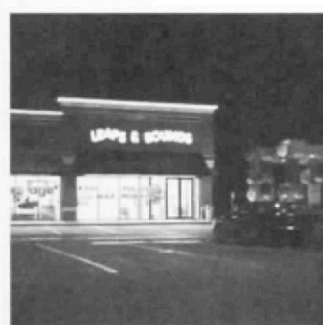


interesting, too. At the edge of the Willowbrook Mall was this place called MountAsia, where they had pinball and video games. I watched, but didn't play any. There was also a McDonald's inside, and bumper cars and miniature golf out back. The miniature golf was on a hill at the edge of the mall parking lot, and it had lights

Many of the video games focused on big cities and killing. "In a megalopolis, a



huge city mixed with new developments and old ruins," said the introduction of one, "violent fighting games were sponsored covertly by highly placed political figures. The merciless death matches would make the public go wild with excitement." Here's a picture of another game that had realistic scenes of a sprawling countryside:



I read some magazines in a bookstore in a shopping center across the street. Then I saw what looked like a day-care center nextdoor, with a big jungle-jim type thing outdoors next to it. It was closed at night, though, so I couldn't be sure.



This structure, sitting out in the mall parking lot, was closed too. It's a mobile play space for children that's run by Hallmark.

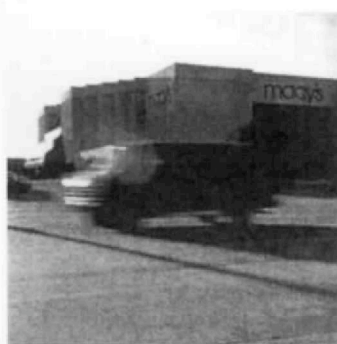


Several other freestanding buildings or complexes were arrayed at the perimeter of the mall parking lot. One was The Enclave, an apartment house. Another was a health club called Q.

An extremely low-key salesman named Troy showed me around the Q for a few hours.



The Q has a dress code, and caters to people who are not especially fit but just want to work out and then leave. Troy had lived in this area for a long time, and was sick of it. This is a view of the inside of the Q, from a brochure he gave me. Actually, it's the interior of the Austin Q, but this one is exactly the same, down to the tiles, Troy told me.

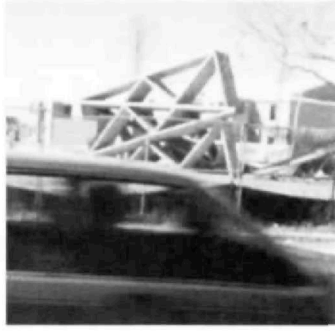


There was no curb at the edge of the lot which made the lot and the road that ran around it seem like one big concrete landscape, planted with stores and a few trees.

I spent a few hours talking with a woman named Pat, who was working at a makeshift cafe inside the mall, near the entrance. Only a few people stopped by. First, some men from the mall management company stood in front and seemed bothered by the sign. (The "A" from "Cafe" had fallen down, and was sitting on the counter inside.) And one of the few customers ordered a "steamer". Pat didn't know what that was, so the woman settled on a cappuccino with amaretto syrup, then swore about it after her first sip. Pat gave me a free decaf cappuccino, and told me that what she liked most about her job was the daytime hours, which gave her more time with her kids. She would have preferred to be making and selling gift baskets, but the store's owners knew she could make cappuccino, so they had her work here. The cafe's location was only temporary, Pat said. She has to go to the store across the way to get hot water.



Pat let me take this photograph from behind her counter.



I forgot to mention that sometime before this I passed a lot in back of Fiesta where people were building apartment houses. They had these big prefabricated trusses stacked up in front.



A few days went by. I used my camera to take some pictures of my roommate Al and his dog, Barney, a shar-pei. Al was moving to Phoenix. Many people know Al.



Compaq Computer's headquarters is a huge office park off the Tomball Parkway. I drove around the buildings and took pictures, but I felt a little nervous, like I was trespassing. I wasn't watching the road as carefully as I should have, and several cars honked.



Later, I found this picture of Compaq from the company's promotional material on the Internet.



In a residential development called Tallow Wood, I walked into a model home and met Staci, a salesperson for Espree Homes. Staci said she belonged to the Q health club, but she didn't like the dress code.



The model we were in was called the Arlington



Staci's friend, Emily, worked for a real-estate company that owned Espree Homes. Emily said she was sure she had met me, or at least seen me somewhere before. With her was a young couple, who had decided that they wanted the house they had just seen.



Staci said that Tallow Wood had been started by US Homes before the oil bust, and that her company had picked up the property cheap, from the FDIC. That made the prices low. She said that's a typical pattern all over Houston.

On my way out, I noticed something funny about the garage doors and the garden.



In the parking lot of a Jones Road shopping center, a group of people was having a car wash. By the time I got up the courage to talk to them, they were almost finished.

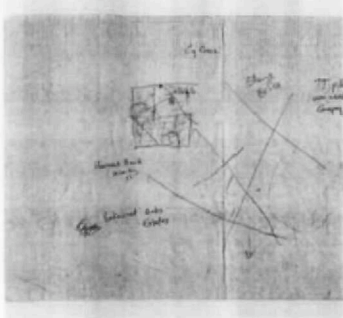


It was a girl's volleyball team, and they were raising money to travel to Las Vegas for a tournament. This is Karen. She told me her daughter was on the team. After we talked for a while, she told me something about one of her sons, too: he plays guitar at Fiesta. I thought that was a funny coincidence.



The volleyball team had taken over a whole section of the parking lot. But as I talked with Karen they packed up and left, and soon all that remained was some soapy water on the ground.

I bought a roast beef sandwich at the Texas Roast Beef Company, which used to be an Arby's and which was on the parking lot next to the soapy water. Inside I met Erica, who was on the volleyball team, and her mother Sheryl. Erica said that there had been an accident earlier at the entrance to the parking lot, and that she and her teammates had joked that they had caused it.



Her mom told me about the area I was exploring, and tried to describe what the various neighborhoods were like. She talked a lot about schools. I drew a map on a napkin to help explain by questions. She drew on the napkin to explain her answers. I also took notes on it.

Sheryl had lived in the area for 18 years. She said she liked how things had been growing so much.

She also said she had had to fight a freeway that was planned to go right through her house.



On the way home I passed a gas station that also sold TCBY