

Dallas's Freeway Zamboni



Barrier transfer vehicle, developed by Barrier Systems, Inc., works the R. L. Thornton Freeway in Dallas.

The Dallas Area Rapid Transit Authority has come up with an expedient solution for creating designated HOV (high-occupancy-vehicle) lanes from the existing freeway rights-of-way to respond to the daily cycle of traffic demands. Called a Barrier Transfer Vehicle System, it depends upon an ingenious machine developed by Barrier Systems, Inc., of Carson City, Nevada, that looks like a cross between a berserk piece of farm machinery and an oversize Winnebago. It plies a heavily congested section of the R. L. Thornton Freeway (Interstate 30), adding an inbound lane in the morning and an outbound lane in the afternoon.

The first of its kind in the country, the system has been in operation in Dallas since September 1991. The \$14.6 million project (including an estimated \$600,000 annual operating cost) was jointly funded by DART and the Texas State Department of Highways and Public Transportation.

Before rush hour, the Barrier Transfer Vehicle sets out like a concrete-gobbling Zamboni from one of its storage sheds at either end of the HOV corridor, sidling along the inner lane and picking up one of a line of modified Jersey barriers (called "quickchange movable concrete barriers," or QMBs) from the median, then repositioning it gently to form a protected "contraflow" lane. The 31-ton machine has two operators on board (one fore and aft) but is actually guided by a buried cable and an on-board computer that directs the placement of the barriers to a toler-

ance of one inch. It scoops the barriers up in its front corner and directs them on rubber guides along a flattened-S-shaped track, then deposits them out the back opposite corner. Because of the oblique movement of the barriers, the vehicle sidles like a crab, at an angle to the direction of the freeway. The operation is reversed at the end of rush hour. Should a mechanical failure occur in the vehicle, it can complete its operations by being towed along by a special truck.

The contraflow lane exploits the significant directional split in traffic volume on the two sides of the freeway, estimated at 65 percent on the busy side to 35 percent on the slow side during rush hours. HOV users are estimated to save seven minutes on the 3.3-mile outbound trip in the afternoon and nine minutes on the 5-mile inbound morning commute. Reductions in travel time for DART buses using the contraflow lane are estimated to save approximately \$355,000 yearly.

DART has plans to extend the system to other area freeways. The present R. L. Thornton system is projected to have a four-year life cycle, because traffic volume will eventually increase in both directions. But this innovative and entertaining solution has bought time for Dallas traffic planners while they search for a more permanent solution to metropolitan commuting problems.

David Payne



House raising, Habitat for Humanity, Houston chapter.

Habitat for Humanity, a nonprofit developer of low-income housing whose volunteer help includes presidents of the United States among other weekend carpenters, is accelerating its building program in Houston. Since 1987, the Houston chapter of Habitat has built 48 affordable single-family houses, priced between \$36,500 for a three-bedroom unit and \$39,000 for four bedrooms. This year it plans to build 24 new units in clusters of five or more and is seeking donations of land as well as materials and labor.

If you have potential house sites you wish to donate that are already served by utilities and are convenient to schools, public transportation, grocery stores, and community services, please contact Karen Young, Executive Director, Houston Chapter, Habitat for Humanity, P.O. Box 8467, Houston, Texas 77288-8467; telephone (713) 521-2816.

Basket Case

HOUSTON ARTIST DAVID W. WARREN'S *WIDE SWING* (1989) IS MADE BY JOINING PARTS OF TWO OFF-THE-AISLE, CLASSIC CHROMED-WIRE SHOPPING CARTS (NEST KART, SYLVAN N. GOLDMAN, 1947), WHICH CAN THEN BE CHAIN-LINKED TO THE PORCH CEILING OF ONE'S CHOOSING (CUSHIONS OPTIONAL). WHEN WARREN MOVED FROM MONTROSE TO A PORCHLESS G.I. TRACT HOUSE IN OAK FOREST IN 1991, HE INSTALLED THE PROTOTYPE ON THE PORCH OF THE MENIL COLLECTION BOOKSTORE.



David W. Warren, *Wide Swing*, 1989.

Pole Sitters



Bruce Martin

Deep in the heart of the 1950s San Antonio subdivision of Cresthaven is one of the city's most arresting displays of yard art – a virtual forest of miniature pole-mounted buildings crafted by Sam Mirelez. A retired civil servant and a San Antonio resident for over 40 years, Mirelez works from postcards and library books to create as many as three buildings a week from discarded metal gutters, scrap aluminum siding, and even the remains of an above-ground swimming pool. The top of his fence and carport accommodate a portion of his work, with the balance perched atop poles throughout the front and back yards.

Mirelez's handiwork includes several White Houses and San Fernando Cathedrals, some Alamos and Golden Gate Bridges, and a few dozen interpretations of the Disneyland castle. There is a Taj Mahal with Christmas lights, a Jefferson Memorial, a Washington Monument, several Towers of the Americas (complete with lighted elevator shafts), a number of generic bungalows and churches, the five San Antonio missions installed in the correct north-south sequence, the Houses of Parliament with Big Ben, some Oriental pagodas, Dutch windmills, and a few Eiffel Towers. The U.S. Capitol serves as a home to purple martins.

The miniatures have been purchased by drivers-by – one woman insisted on a blue-roofed Disneyland castle as a Mother's Day gift – as well as neighbors. What Mirelez enjoys most is watching people slow down or stop just for a moment to admire his special form of brake-able art.

Bruce Martin

Wilshire Village

The magnolia-shaded Wilshire Village Apartments are Houston's next-of-kin to Sunnyside Gardens, Queens, and Baldwin Hills Village, Los Angeles. Inside Wilshire Village's brick gates are a series of well kept lawns in courtyards defined by the fronts of long, rectangular two-storied apartment blocks straight out of Clarence Stein. Most social life, however, takes place on the back sides of the apartments, where small "individual" stacks of rear entrance stoops and stairs face onto service courts. There one can observe elderly residents discreetly breakfasting on these postage-stamp terrace/landings behind potted plants and hanging baskets.

Wilshire Village's concrete pathways, cracked and buckled in places by the roots of immense live oaks that share pride of place with the magnolias, have become an integral part of my morning path. Small pinwheels and flags sprout among plants in flower beds edged with brick; wind chimes ring from tree branches. Bright pink, blue, and violet flowers bloom under the bosky canopy, playing against the creamy buff brick of the apartment blocks as do such unexpected combinations of architectural details as English Regency canopies hung over glass-block side lights, sharp-pointed triangular bay windows, and wrap-around corner casement windows, vaguely nautical railings, and close-meshed steel screen panels.



Bruce Martin



Daniel Armstrong (Eugene Werlein, architect of record), Wilshire Village Apartments, 1940. View along Dunlavy Street.

Los Gerd Hartmann and Paul Hester, Photographers, © 1974

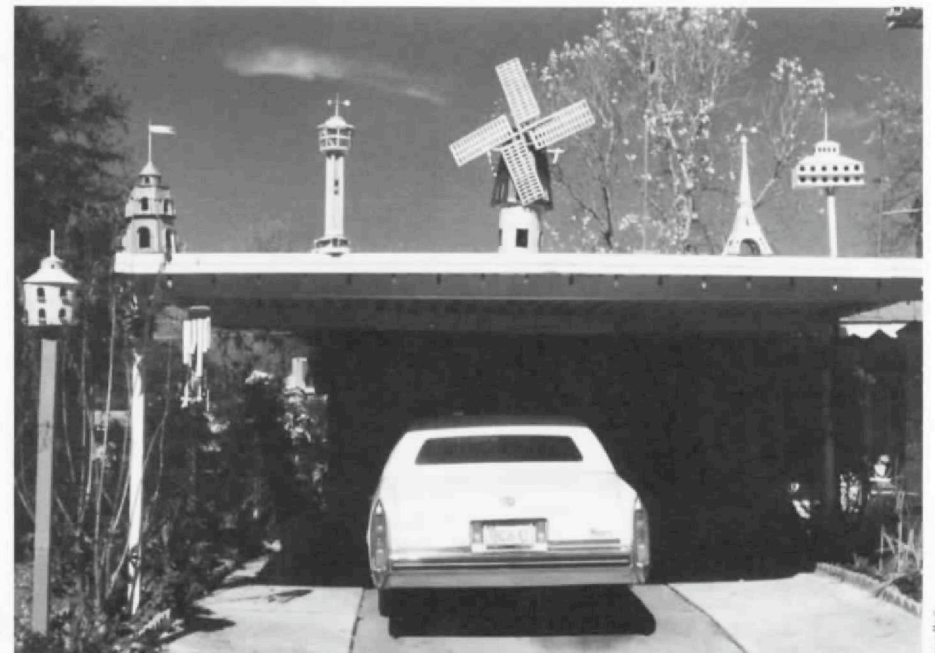
The interiors admit generous amounts of air, light, and view. The apartments are raised up off the ground, and in the days before air conditioning, in a neatly integrated inversion of the attic fan principle, large fans drew air through screened grilles just above grade into the plenum below the ground floor and from there into the units; the second floors were cooled by attic fans drawing air in through louvers in the roof. At one time, Wilshire Village was also served by its own artesian well and electric generator, making it almost energy self-sufficient.

Wilshire Village consists of 144 units in 17 buildings located on seven and a half acres at the southwest corner of the intersection of Alabama and Dunlavy streets, half a mile west of Montrose Boulevard. It was designed by Daniel Armstrong (with Eugene Werlein as architect of record) and developed with FHA-insured financing in 1940 as one of only three such projects authorized for Houston.¹ (The others, the River Oaks Garden

Apartments, located behind the River Oaks shopping center [Fooshee & Cheek, 1937], and the Park Lane across from Hermann Park [F. Talbott Wilson and S. I. Morris, Jr., 1940], have both been demolished and replaced by much denser condominiums.) The layout and general typology of the units were predetermined to an appreciable extent by FHA guidelines, which in turn had been influenced by the work of Stein and his collaborators. Wilshire Village was built during a time when modernism was becoming an accepted style, but the architects working under the FHA guidelines made a distinction between modern forms and a modern home – the latter "constructed to afford comfort, convenience, and livability." The distinction put the emphasis on livability rather than image. At fewer than 20 units per acre, with its mature, well-tended landscape, decorous and inherently pleasant units, and affordable rents, Wilshire Village remains a housing type that Houston could use more of.

Sheryl Tucker

¹ *Houston Chronicle*, 7 April 1940.



Bruce Martin