

# THE ANA\_OMY OF EMPTYNE\_S

UNDERSTANDING THE OVERLOOKED SPACES

By Susan Rogers | Photography Sharón Steinmann

VACANCY in a city with “world class” aspirations is not supposed to happen. Yet Houston is a city structured more by its empty spaces than by its filled ones. This is a story, then, about the other side of urbanism. It is the “wrong story,” but a defining story—one that requires thinking “outside the Loop.” It is an attempt to understand the anatomy of emptiness—the spaces not occupied or inhabited and absent of activity or comfort—as a defining and endlessly shifting element in the landscape and experience of the city.

Houston is 25 percent vacant—amounting to more than 150 square miles of void—an area that could comfortably contain the city of Boston three times or half of New York City. When you add to the vacant land streets, right-of-ways, and open spaces, the amount skyrockets to nearly 60 percent of the city being free of buildings or vertical interruption—and if you continue by adding the amount of empty space present, but unused, inside of built-up parcels, it increases yet again. In other words emptiness is the predominant experience. It is no accident then that Houston has begotten many scholars who have expanded our understanding of what constitutes a city. In fact, the challenge for Houston is that urbanism in some sense is like life: it is the space and time that falls in between the memorable monuments (moments). A theory of the urbanism that exists in

between the architecture, instead of the urbanism defined by architecture, is needed if we are to read this story.

While there are certainly exceptions, most of Houston is sparse, holey, and discontinuous. Raw vacant land, bulldozed properties, underutilized land, particularly the ubiquitous parking lot, and abandoned buildings punctuate the city. So much space lies between buildings, subdivisions, and developments that these vast vacancies both characterize the city and dissolve it. These are waiting spaces, spaces ignored, spaces where nothing is happening, spaces where there is hope that something will happen, spaces ready and available for something to happen, and finally spaces where things are happening even while awaiting better things. These are spaces full of potential thus far unrealized.

But because there is so much space in Houston, potential alone is hard to hang your hat on (especially the ten-gallon variety). The complete city, the full city, that so many wish for seems a long way away, especially when you consider that only one of four new residential units are built inside the city limits, and that for every three building permits issued in Houston, one demolition permit is granted. A close look at the city over time reveals a tendency for emptiness to simply move around, to shift. While Washington Av-

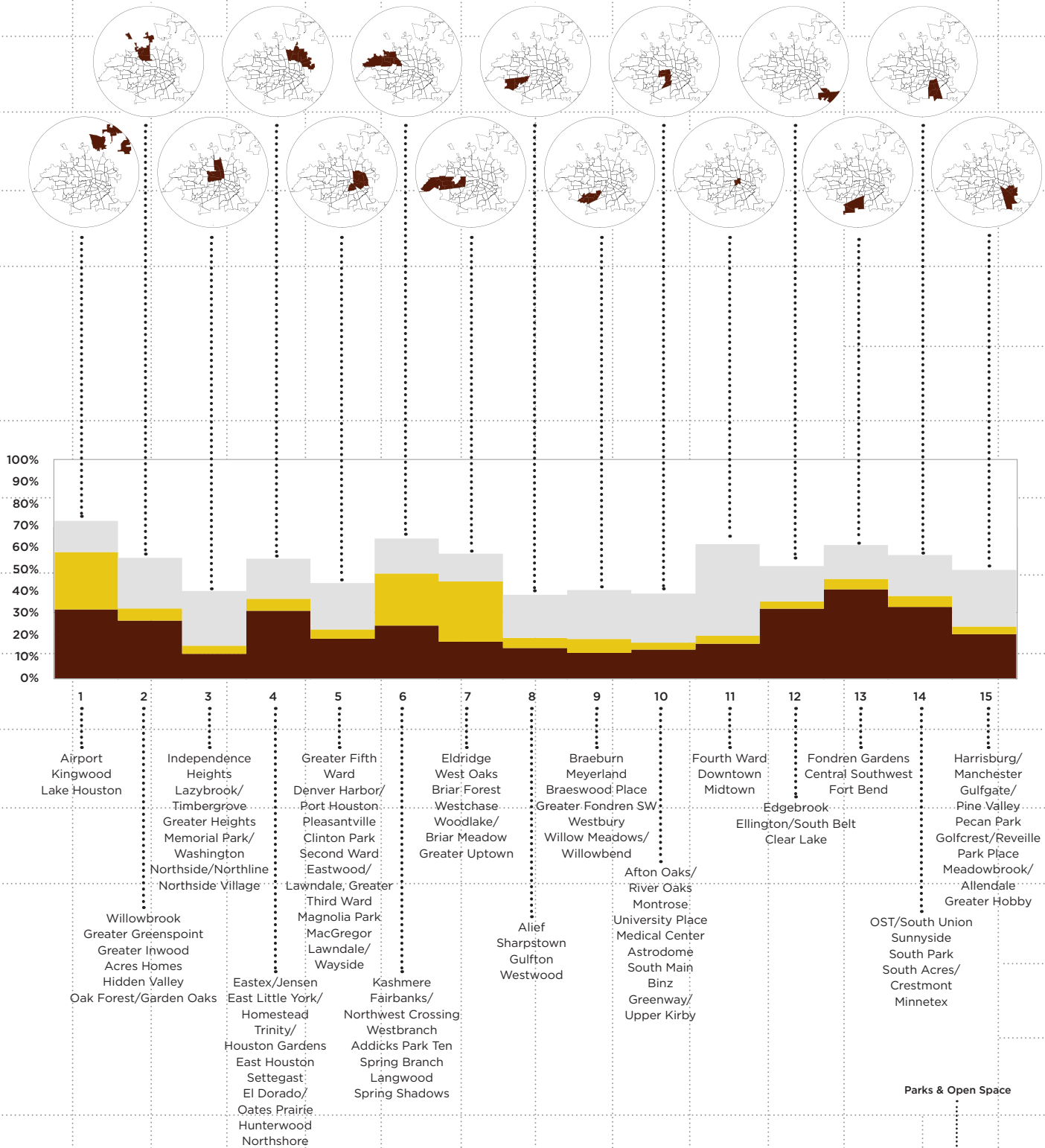
enue’s vacant lots, used car dealerships, pawn shops, and bail bond offices are all but gone in the wake of new development, the Fifth Ward seems to lose more housing each year. While Midtown buildings are razed and redeveloped for higher and better uses, the Third Ward is slowly disappearing, one demolition at a time: in 2009 demolition permits outnumbered building permits two to one in the northern Third Ward. Though cities have always been rebuilt in an unsettling cycle of demolition and reconstruction, the cycle seems accelerated in Houston. This may be because there is so much space that it is unnecessary to use it efficiently: space can be wasted, used for a single purpose, or remain completely empty and unused. Combine that with speculation—particularly rampant in the Inner Loop—cheap land, and a perceived limitlessness to expansion, and the result is careless and injudicious use of land.

The anatomy of Houston’s vacancy is varied and complex, ranging from the wild, to the wanting, to the withered, to the wasted. Within the city limits of Houston, raw or undeveloped land is found in overlooked, or leapfrogged, areas. Much of this land remains in a natural state—prairie, piney woods, scrub, or swampland. The largest patches of leapfrogged properties are in areas that have thus far remained unattractive to mainstream developers. These are

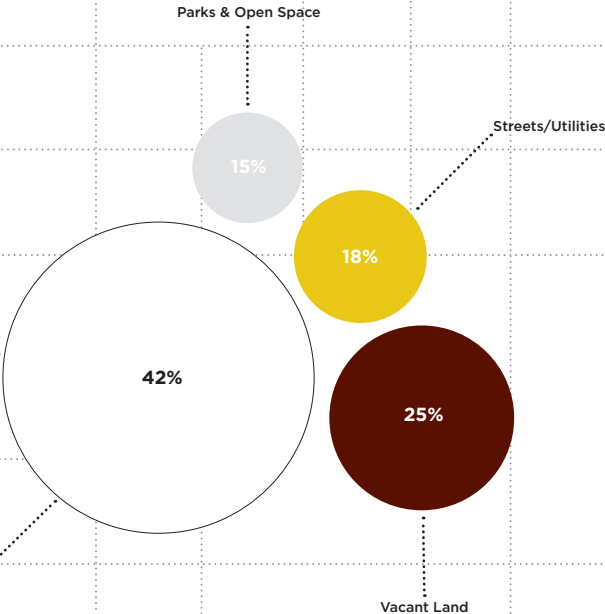
“INDEED, MOST OF WHAT HAPPENS IN THE WORLD MIGHT BE CONSIDERED TO BE PART OF THE WRONG STORY—THE THINGS THAT ARE NOT SUPPOSED TO HAPPEN.”

KELLER EASTERLING

LAND USE BY NEIGHBORHOOD: *Houston Chases its Tail and Comes Up Empty*



TOTAL LAND USE: *One Quarter of Houston is Vacant*







Flowers and topiary monkeys enliven a vacant lot along Fannin street.

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often on the perceived “wrong side of town.” You can map these properties in a crescent from the south side just outside the Loop to the north. For example, Settegast, Acres Homes, Pierce Junction, and Sunnyside all have a fair amount of wild land. In Settegast a large swath of the community was once platted into parcels and roads, and even cleared, but today the land has returned to a natural state—vacant except for a healthy growth of trees and scrub.

“Wanting space” refers to land that has been bulldozed and cleared of its prior uses in the anticipation that it will become something else. Demolitions like these have occurred throughout transitioning neighborhoods in Houston and have included large parcels, such as the former site of Astroworld or the

waiting, like sentries at the gate; and the site for the ambitious Regent Square which was simply cleared and fenced—though the word is this last project is back on track.

While Houston properties lie fallow, prompting little anguish in citizens who are used to emptiness, in cities as diverse as New York, Miami, Seattle, and San Francisco, vacant lots left in the wake of stalled developments are the subject of a great deal of concern. These cities are working to develop policies and incentives that would introduce temporary uses for the sites. As John King wrote in the *San Francisco Chronicle* on July 6, 2009, “large empty lots—whether filled with cars or covered with weeds—detract from what can be. . . . [W]ith ingenuity and a modest investment San Francisco could breathe life into these voids until the demand for development returns.” Proposed temporary uses include tree farms, food vendors, dog parks, temporary parks, gardens, and public art and exhibitions. San Francisco has not stopped there. To encourage innovative uses of empty commercial buildings during hard economic times, it has launched the “Art in Storefronts” program to support temporary art installations in vacant storefronts. New York artists and curators are working to embark on a similar program, theirs modeled more after the “pop-up” galleries of England. Efforts by smaller cities are also getting into the mix. In Escondido, California, the new city program “Adopt-a-Lot” allows citizens and organizations to “adopt” public or private vacant land for temporary use (two to three years) that provides a community benefit. In Cleveland, a city that has lost more than half its population in the last 50 years, a comprehensive plan called “Re-Imaging Cleveland” has been officially adopted to turn vacant lots into farms, green spaces, and parks.

Hardy rail yards. In some cases there is an interim use for these spaces, such as a surface parking lot. In other cases the land is simply fenced and forgotten—cultivating weeds—until the time is ripe for redevelopment. A number of wanting spaces in Houston and elsewhere are now in a holding pattern—victims of the recession—marking where major projects were planned, buildings were demolished, and then nothing happened. Three major mixed-use projects in this city that have been put on hold are the site bulldozed in Rice Village for Sonoma, which is now a staging area for city public works; High Street off of Westheimer, which progressed beyond a clean slate before all activity stopped, leaving the concrete columns with rebar coming from their tops to stand





Although in Houston there is a city-sponsored program to distribute vacant tax delinquent properties for affordable housing and community gardens, the program has been slow to show any significant results or make major changes in six target neighborhoods. However, there are plenty of unofficial examples of homegrown, Texas-style uses of withering and wasted spaces throughout the city. Redevelopment can be official, sanctioned, and concrete, or it can be transitory, temporary, and agile. In Houston official adaptive uses are outnumbered by the transitory appropriative uses, the activities that occur in places where no one is looking, undertaken by the street vendor, rug dealer, car detailer, taco truck. In some ways these appropriations are more interesting, in many ways more useful, and definitely more entrepreneurial than sanctioned projects.

The hundreds of acres of underutilized or “wasted” space in Houston come in all shapes and sizes, but one thing most of this space has in common is that it has only a single purpose and, as a result, is unused the majority of the time. These wasted spaces are most often parking lots. Examples include the giant church parking lots that are used for only a couple of hours two days a week, the vast stadium parking lots that are only active during a game or event, the park-and-ride lots that are 50 percent occupied less than 50 percent of the time, and the acres of parking that sprawl in front of the giant category killers, or big box stores, at any time of the day or night. In Gulfton, for example, parking takes up nine times as much land as park space. Given that most underutilized space serves the automobile, the infrastructure of the car stands in for an urbanism

that might be seen as yet to materialize.

Obsolete and underutilized spaces can be salvaged. On the southeast side, for example, tucked under the flyover of the HOV lane at Monroe and the Gulf Freeway is the plant menagerie of Three Sisters Nursery. Game rooms, biker bars, and ice houses fill up the abandoned mid-century auto dealerships, bowling alleys, and storefronts that remain

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as reminders of those halcyon days when the Gulf Freeway was the only freeway. The game rooms are elusive—popping up here and there, moving from place to place, appearing, disappearing, and reappearing elsewhere. The same might be said about the used car lot and the auto detail shop, which really can occur anywhere: no infrastructure is required besides a sign and maybe some of those colorful streamers so popular right now along North Shepherd, Harrisburg, and South Richey. Are these uses “ground cover,” a term coined by Dolores Hayden to describe “easily bulldozed buildings constructed to generate income while a developer holds land, waiting to build a more profitable project”? If they are, a transition may occur along these corridors sometime in the future.

The creative use of empty and neglected lots has provided energy to this city in the past. The once thriving flower markets along Fannin added vibrant

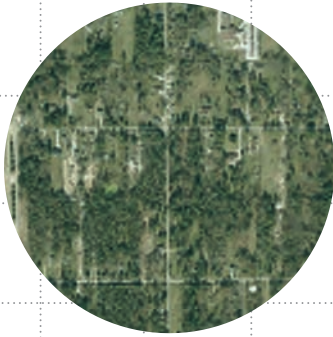
The Fuqua park-and-ride lot—and the 28 other lots—could also serve as a community drive-in theater.





## THE ANATOMY OF HOUSTON'S VACANCY: *The Four Ws*

### WILD SPACE



Acres Homes



Greenspoint



Settegast

### WANTING SPACE



Astroworld

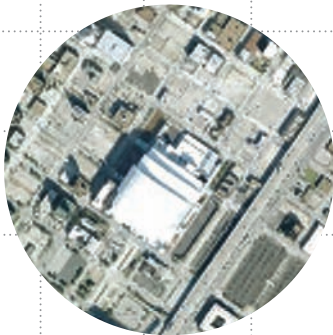


Hardy Yards



Pierce Junction

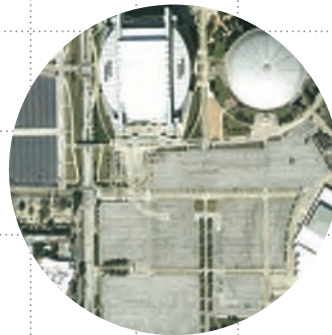
### WASTED SPACE



East Downtown



Greenspoint Mall



Reliant Stadium

### WITHERED SPACE



Third Ward



North Shepherd



Fifth Ward

color and fun, though they have now all but disappeared as land is targeted for “higher and better” uses. The used car lots along Washington Avenue once stood in for an urbanism that has now emerged there. As energy bursts forth in one place, it vanishes from another. Thus, Washington Avenue has sucked some of the nightlife out of the Midtown district, as Midtown did to Downtown, and Downtown did to the Richmond Strip, and so on and so on. Apparently Houston is a city so dispersed in energy that its young digerati can only support one “hip” area at a time. In the Montrose the tattoo parlors and second-hand stores on Westheimer that support the cool, edgy character of the neighborhood are fewer and fewer, like the bohemians they served, moving on to cheaper digs in less trendy and more affordable areas. In the wake of this exodus, Montrose institutions like Mary’s, Chances, and La Strada have all closed their doors. On the east side, enterprises focused on auto repair, tires, tacos, and transport continue to fill the empty spaces, even while art studios, galleries, and tattoo parlors become more and more frequent, displaced from other parts of the city.

Emptiness, as a problem, is the topic of many prescriptions and cures. Most solutions fit within the accepted paradigms of “good” urbanism—filling the holes with pedestrian friendly, dense, mixed-use environments. But, Houston’s great swathes of the in-between, the overlooked, the under-valued, and the abandoned need a new way of thinking, beyond typical solutions to more agile, temporary, and engaging interventions. It might be that urbanists and thinkers in Houston can find a way to simultaneously accept the opportunity of so much emptiness with a new more radical (and less elite) approach to the problem of too much space—maybe a “lite” urbanism. For example, we could start thinking of parking lots as opportunity sites for intervention. We could have policies that make it impossible to develop greenfields until we have filled existing holes. Other policies could outlaw the abandonment of a big-box store intact and instead require that the building be demolished, adapted for a new use, or turned into a park. We could definitely use more vacant lots for community gardening; in many places we could engage in outright farming. Park and ride lots could become community drive-in theaters, recycling centers, farmers markets, auto repair service and training centers, or neighborhood sports courts—giving us places to come together as citizens, not as consumers. We could take these same ideas to the parking lots of Home Depot, Lowe’s, Wal-Mart, and Target. Many of these potential uses for vacant properties could build community, provide a valuable use or service, and make our city better. **c**

(1) Keller Easterling, “A Repertoire for Dissensus, Episodes from the Wrong Story,” *Hunch*, No. 12 (2009).