



Sally Gall, *Untitled (Vassar Palm)*, 1985

Sally Gall, courtesy of Texas Gallery, Houston

City Myth, City Reality, And City Voice in Houston

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Houston is a paradigm of those first-world cities whose most meaningful growth has occurred since World War II. Because this city grew economically and demographically faster – and then collapsed faster – than almost any other major city on record, it has been the focus of an inordinate amount of rhetoric that has helped to shape a popular mythic conception of the city.

A complete and critical understanding of the physical form of Houston, or any city, is as dependent upon the language of the city as it is upon the more traditional tools and techniques of urban design or architectural theory. The language by which a city examines itself betrays its preconceived hucksterism, its deepest wounds, and its highest hopes. The language which describes and articulates the city as experienced becomes a gauge of both the visible and invisible qualities which its people perceive in their physical setting.

When talking to people who live and work in Houston, one is struck immediately by the impression that the public persona of the city as represented by its famous skyline is remarkably at odds with the articulated private visions of its citizenry. Essayist and novelist Phillip Lopate confronts this reality in "The Mysterious City of Houston," (see *Houston Style*, December 1985). One late night, while driving down Kirby Drive towards his apartment, he carefully observes the ambiguous form of this street:

It sucks you in, like so much of Houston, inviting you further and further with no opposition, nothing to bounce off of, until you notice that the place it's sucked you into is your own interior self.

Lopate claims that the Houston which is most present for him is, beyond the flash and bravura of big city towers, a private world hidden from the outsider. It is not an extroverted confluence of people-filled street rooms like traditional 19th-century cities. Instead, he suggests that the real Houston is the one you discover within your individual self or with a small group of friends outside of a non-existent crowd. The city is viewed as an ever-present frame of reference just beyond.

Reinforcing this point is a passage from *Baby Houston*, by June Arnold. In this semi-autobiographical work, the City of Houston plays an important role which parallels the travails of Baby, the protagonist. The city grows as the protagonist grows; Houston fails as Baby fails. At one point in the story Baby strikes up a conversation with a stranger at a restaurant:

[This woman] . . . has just moved to Houston and wants to know how I would describe it as a personality. "Oh, in some ways, Houston is a mess," I begin happily.

This statement is wonderfully suggestive because it is obvious to anyone who lives or visits Houston that, indeed, the city is a mess. But this sense of obvious physical messiness does not in the least impinge upon Baby's happiness. If anything, the stranger's interest in Baby's city becomes the stepping-off point of one of those long-winded explanations on the meaning and complex beauty of the city in which only a Houstonian could revel. Like Lopate, Arnold's knowledge of the city is internalized and, by implication, secret; it is revealed happily to the chosen only when the Houstonian chooses to reveal it.

In contrast to these visions of a private and rich urban complexity is the popular public understanding of Houston. Among the constructions of language that describe this pervasive state of mind are "space city" (that strange mixture of barbecue and science most vividly depicted in Tom Wolfe's *The Right Stuff*), the "city of the future" (which conjures up images of the "Jetsons"), "boomtown" (which has been applied equally well to a host of cities), and the "Chicago of the '80s" (which no doubt people from Chicago now find amusing). Less flattering descriptions of Houston abound and are equally important in defining the popular mythic conception of the city. Among these are "hub-cap city," the "sinking city," and the infamous "billboard capital of the world."

For cities with similar entrepreneurial histories, these statements summarize reactions which, when positive, reflect small-town boosterism, and, when negative, tell of big-city rivalry. The citizenry of Houston and the world outside have a tendency to believe that these abstractions are specific to their time and place. Statements of this type can be combined to construct a catch-all statement which covers the gamut of Babbit-like optimism. For instance:

"In each case we made our future" with "the can-do spirit," since "there is really no reason for [Houston] to be here," except for the fact that "this city was built by hustlers."

While these phrases were written by Houstonians about Houston, they have a familiar ring and could have been spoken by New Yorkers or Dallasites. On the one hand, these statements say everything about the psychology of the city; on the other hand, they say little about the place.

The Houston described in these latter phrases is quickly accessible to the inhabitant and the visitor alike, and it is precisely this type of easy thought that has shaped the writings of much mass architectural media. For example, in 1976 Ada Louise Huxtable wrote an article that appeared in the *New York Times* entitled "Deep in the Heart of Nowhere." While she is quite thorough in her analysis of a city of freeways and new commercial structures, it is clear from her conclusion that either she did not see or could not recognize those aspects of the city which did not fulfill her expectations of the moment. Using language that should by now sound familiar, Huxtable wrote:

What Houston possesses to an extraordinary degree is an extraordinary, unlimited vitality. One wishes that it had a larger conceptual reach, that social and cultural and human patterns were as well understood as dollar dynamism. But this kind of vitality is the distinguishing mark of a great city in any age. And Houston today is the American present and future. It is an exciting and disturbing place.

Those mysterious aspects of the city which Lopate and Arnold happily speak of in their writings and which for them define the essence of the city totally elude Huxtable. As a result, her conclusion that the city is disturbing is not surprising.

Also disturbed, albeit eight years later, is critic Peter Blake, who after visiting Houston wrote a pointed critique of its downtown skyscrapers in the April 1984 issue of *Interior Design*. Blake complained:

Why do critics (like myself) think Houston is the pits? Answer: Because it isn't a city at all - it's a stack of megabucks, piled up to the sky and shrink-wrapped in some kind of reflective curtain wall. It has no people (they're scurrying around like moles in all those tunnels), so it looks as if the place has been neutron-nuked. Its streets are dead, and designed to be. The only visible, moving objects are air-conditioned limousines that circle those stacks of megabucks on elevated highways.

To deny that there is truth to this statement would be foolhardy; downtown, at least in 1984, was pretty much what Blake claimed. Still, Blake, like Huxtable before him, only confirms the obvious. His vision of the city is myopically limited by his fixation on downtown towers whose meanings are ultimately as ephemeral as the images of the Texas sky which they reflect. Writers like Blake and Huxtable, in seeking the mythic dimension of Houston, unwittingly fall back on the type of broad and sweeping language which applies equally well to most North American cities. What they find unique about Houston, from a development or socio-economic perspective, is, finally, its lack of uniqueness.

There can be no doubt that the same suspect ideology that sweeps away an older urban order based on a centripetal gathering of people and work and replaces it with freeways and wasteful sprawl is equally at work in Houston as it is in Los Angeles, Atlanta, or New York City. By celebrating the generic as discovered in the facile observation of Houston, most popular writing too easily ignores the specific attributes of the topography which do indeed make it specific. While I accept that the physical order of the inner city can be related to larger economic and demographic forces, these do not in and of themselves explain the unique qualities of Houston. Concepts that begin to articulate attributes of the city which are phenomenal can, however, be found within narrative descriptions of the rituals and relationships of the people who live in and visit Houston. Within the constants of these descriptions are buried truths which begin to describe a special urban order.

In *Mirage*, Wolde Ayele, an Ethiopian architect who grew up in Mexico City, observes Houston in relation to Mexico City while meandering through the Mexican countryside during a late night train trip. He describes Houston as a floating surrealistic world of lights, unusual rituals (including the daily wash and buff of downtown sidewalks), and strange personal encounters. In the following paragraph he defines for himself the city he inhabits:

Returning to Houston, I drove by silent buildings in the middle of the night. The spectral city stood in the moon-glow. Try taking a canoe trip one day down the bayou up until Allen's Landing. When you drift beneath the countless overpasses whose supporting shafts bear obscure obscenities in unknown languages, and look straight up at the city, you could swear that you inhabit a chimera. Down here, where derelicts have excavated homes for themselves from the raw earth, and where gutters spew contamination amid monolithic columns, Pirenesi would revel.

What is remarkable about Ayele's view of Houston is his observation from the bayou of the contrasts and strangeness of the varied inhabitation beneath the towers in the supposedly abandoned streets. Where others only see emptiness, Ayele's city is full of characters and encounters. His eye chooses to engage the city precisely where others consistently see nothing. For Ayele the downtown towers become silent but ever-present witnesses of the life of the city which parallel his own narration. The towers, though spectral, acquire memory.

Houston's downtown skyline also figures prominently in Susan Wood's poem *Aubade (Houston 1985)* (see *Cite*, Summer 1985). In this poem, a biblical sense of guilt is related to the physical development of the city. The supposed giddy achievements of Houston, such as man's walking on the moon, are contrasted with a knowledge of built death as exemplified in the Rothko Chapel. The city is imbued with an eschatological sense when she represents the skyline as not only a beginning but also an end. In the fifth verse of the poem she writes:

*Driving east on I-10 at dawn, I see
Houston loom,
backlit by sun, red, a hundred copper
obelisks
cut off by a cloud. They might be floating
in a water blue sky. They might be on
fire.
I try to imagine this as the last morning:
To look up, suddenly, and find
a sky gone white and absolute.
No time to say what disappears.
I try to imagine it.
We must imagine it to live.
How far will the flash be seen?
No father to forgive us, not knowing what
we do.*

Once again a floating world is observed. Unlike Ayele who imagined his skyline from below the horizon and naturally enough inhabited his world with the forgotten, Wood looks straight on at the city and projects a middle-class nightmare which is familiar and uncomfortable to the majority of people.

In an earlier line of the poem she states that the downtown towers:

*... are beautifully
anonymous, each face a face
at the window as though the body
is a box which holds the heart
and is crowded with absence.
In this climate, how shall we know
we have been saved?*

Wood, in this poem, animates the skyline as accountable and judged.

If the skyline can represent our worst fears it also can serve as a mirror which reflects a distant but continuing past. Rising above the horizon, standing within a tower and looking out, Houston-born author William Goyen sees past the city towers to focus on the small community in the Heights where he grew up. Once again the image of a floating city of towers effortlessly reflects the image of the sky (or, perhaps as Phillip Lopate mentioned, the image of the viewer himself). However, unlike Wood or Ayele who use the image of the skyline as a backdrop to ponder the surreal contrasts and metaphysics of modern life, Goyen, looking away from the skyline, becomes capable of remembering the mysterious continuity of an older, hidden, and secret Houston. He writes in "While You Were Away" (*The Houston Review*, Fall 1979):

*The last time I came home I stayed high
up in a new glass hotel overlooking a
freeway. From a window looking
northwest over packed acres of houses,
streets, shining buildings holding sunlight
and cloud in their mirror walls, I saw
way out what ought to be our old
neighborhood on Merrill Street. A white
cloud wrapped around it and was so low
that it swaddled down into the thick green
that must have been, as clearly as I could
see from that distance, those ancient live
oaks on Bayland Avenue that have not
been uprooted.*

The subtitle of Goyen's essay is "Houston Seen and Unseen, 1923-1979." Unseen emotion combined with the visible struggle of the daily ritual of Houston through time become for Goyen the

essence of the life of this city, a life which is held still and recalled for a moment through the physical and monumental presence of the ever-present oaks.

The contrast of the invisible versus the visible appears in much of the narrative language of Houston. The floating city not quite real, yet certainly not unreal; the city of infinite reflections leading to individual reflection; the skyline from below, right at, or above a limitless horizon; the claustrophobic stillness then sudden violence of weather; the psychology of flatness always present but never seen; the total engulfment by forces of nature; the mystery contained from a within only to be revealed ever so slowly to the initiate - these are some of the devices and reality which have permeated not only the literature but the physical presence of Houston. The inaccessibility of that part of Houston which is obscured by the white cloud Goyen describes is that aspect of Houston which most of us ignore in our rush to define the obvious.

At the beginning I suggested that narrative language could serve as one medium for first an understanding and then a making of the city. In *The Image of the City in Modern Literature* Burton Pike states:

*... literature, by imposing the
imaginative order of its conventions on
the disorder of life, might be the only
realm in which the paradoxes (of the
modern city) can be encompassed.*

By exploring the literature of Houston one can begin to structure the specific rituals of urban life by the voices as well as the physical landmarks of the city. To ignore the narrative voices of a city is to make the particular generic, putting oneself in the position of attempting to quantify experience through an analysis of form alone.

There are many physical and formal reasons that the downtown skyline of Houston is famous. One is the relatively small size of the blocks which permits the realization of only one tower per block, creating a pure chessboard of speculation. Another is the approach to downtown along elevated freeways rushing through bayou parks. This causes one's view of downtown to gradually lose its sense of gravity as one gets ever closer. There are many other attributes of this type that could be described. However, the reason critics and others spend so much energy defining and redefining the downtown skyline of Houston is that its extreme verticality is set against an even more extreme horizontality. Most important, yet too often ignored by outsiders and Houstonians alike, are the presences within that horizontality. Some choose to see and hear for themselves that which lies beneath the towers and that which marks the presence of urban life. Here there are always whispers and voices which describe and invent and then reinvent this place. ■