

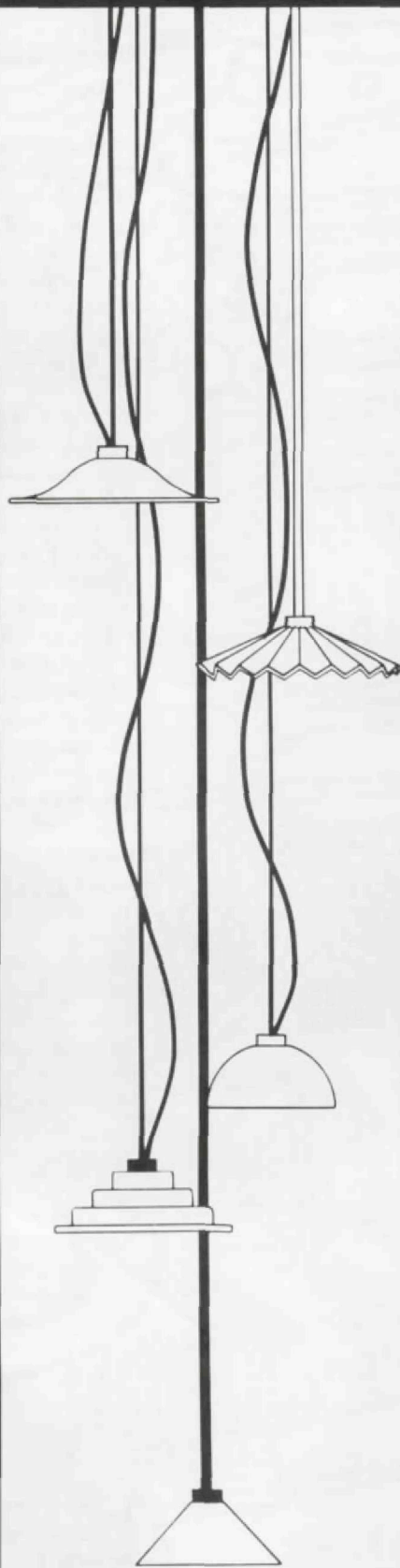
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THE ARCHITECTURE  
AND DESIGN REVIEW  
OF HOUSTON

A PUBLICATION  
OF THE RICE  
DESIGN ALLIANCE

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## EDITORIAL

# FUNNEL VISION

No one in Houston (or Washington or Sugar Land) has yet to propose that any part of the area's \$1 billion a year freeway construction program be subjected to a referendum or other far-reaching demonstration of community consensus. Yet plans for a 23.4-mile, \$1.09 billion first increment of a fixed guideway mass transit system are being held to such a test (or retest, since development of fixed-guideway transit improvements was approved by referendum in 1988, only to be contravened by the reflexive skepticism of then Metro chairman Bob Lanier). In an era when Sunbelt cities from Miami to Los Angeles have begun to build more balanced mobility systems involving rail mass transit, Houston has yet to break ground, even though its air quality, the nation's second worst, is now hampering efforts to accommodate new industry.

Moreover, since 1988, 25 percent of the funds collected by Metro from the local share of the sales tax has been routinely diverted to Harris County, the city of Houston, and other county municipalities for road and street improvements, concessions needed to placate dissident suburban constituencies and to relieve pressure on the city of Houston's recession-impacted budget. By the year 2000, this diversion will have amounted to at least \$650 million. And although the city's fiscal situation has now improved, no move has been forthcoming to restore this diverted source of funding to Metro for transit projects; in fact, Lanier proposed during his mayoral campaign to expand the fund grab to pay for police and other unrelated activities.

One measure the Urban Mass Transit Administration uses to evaluate prospective transit systems for federal funding is the unit cost of attracting new ridership. All such calculations are inherently speculative, and it goes without saying that fixed-guideway transit arrangements may be less than optimally cost-effective for cities such as Houston where development patterns have long been keyed exclusively to automobiles. But in view of the growth likely to be experienced by Houston and other such cities, sooner rather than later, a fixed-guideway system provides

the ability to order growth and its logistical consequences in a far more efficient manner. The alternative is to keep redoubling the size of our freeways every decade or so, an evolution already ensnaring 11 miles of the Southwest Freeway that will soon spread to the West Loop and the Katy Freeway.

Either of the two fixed-guideway systems considered by Metro last year has the potential to enhance the city's quality of life. But there is also reason to fear, given Metro's reduced resources and the current climate of adversity in high and outlying places, that it may feel obliged to cut corners in ways that might ultimately prove costly and impolitic to undo. From a community-building perspective, it is imperative that the system Metro builds not be subject to the same penny-wise, pound-foolish expediency that has already imposed noisy, unsightly elevated freeways on much of downtown, Main Street, and Montrose, but is instead developed unobtrusively and thoughtfully throughout. The system should go underground through congested and otherwise sensitive areas such as Hermann Park as a matter of course, rather than wait to be pressured or privately compensated to do so. Such a policy, if pursued from the outset, would also make it less problematic to route lines through present concentrations and corridors of development, allowing them to be of greatest benefit. The system should also recognize the value of providing for skip-stop and express service throughout, so it can sustain average speeds that would ensure its attractiveness to commuters and cross-town patrons. Finally, the initial program should be extensive enough to provide more than a single spoke, or spoke and a half, of the system.

An ample and first-class fixed-guideway system presumably could be realized by making use of the full funding authority originally granted Metro in 1978, augmented by modest levels of federal assistance. With luck, the system might even be finished before it becomes necessary to hold a referendum to double-deck the Southwest Freeway all the way to Sugar Land. ■



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