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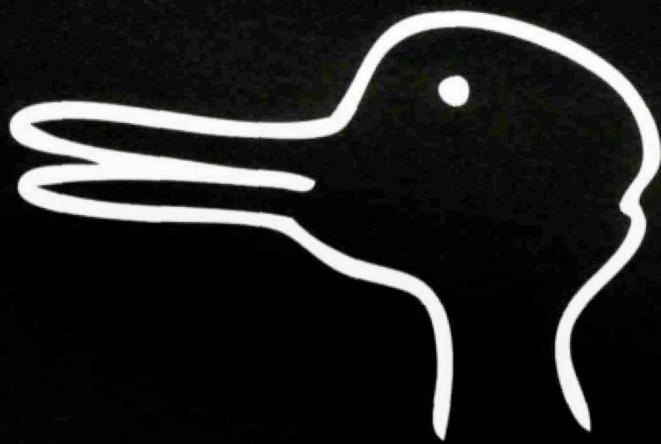
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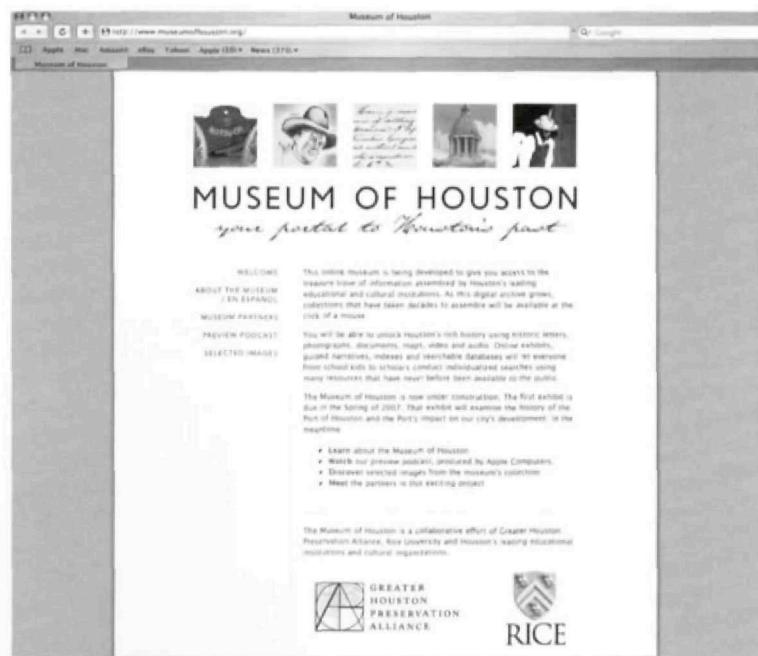


You know, this really isn't a duck, a rabbit, or a duck-rabbit; just lines on a piece of paper...or are they really lines?

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Houston's Virtual Past

The biggest museum in Houston is under construction, and no one knows how big it will be, when it will be finished, or how much it will ultimately cost. But everyone involved, including the major funders, could not be more pleased, and no one is looking back.

The Museum of Houston, or more officially, museumofhouston.org, is our first digitized, on-line museum. Its ultimate purpose is to contain everything related to the history of the city. Even though the museum is still in the drawing up of documents and signing of agreements stage, the organization is very much in place, including the major players—Rice University, University of Houston, Texas Southern University, Houston Metropolitan Research Center, Greater Houston Preservation Alliance, and The Museum of Fine Arts, Houston, among many others.

The idea is that anyone wanting to know anything about the history of Houston need only go to www.museumofhouston.org, and connect there to any number of collections—public, institutional, private, memoirs, scrapbooks, ledgers, church records, public documents, family photographs, you name it. This visionary project expects to be an endless and bottomless site. And it will be interactive; there is software planned that will allow anyone to record their own archival information and insert it into the museum "collection."

The organization is also buying equipment, such as portable scanners, to help institutions that do not have the necessary hardware and software to record their materials. Think of it as an on-going, open-ended collection without a stopping point. History, after all, is simply anything that happened before today. It is happening all the time.

So where did this brave new idea come from? David Bush, director of communications at the GHPA, is credited with the original local inspiration. The group putting together Houston's virtual collection also has outside models, chief among them a website being developed with great success by the state of Maryland. Thanks to the generous backing of the Houston Endowment and the Herzstein Foundation, the Houston site is already up, running, and building under the direction of its steering committee. "Money raising for this project is a top priority for GHPA," says GHPA Executive Director Ramona Davis. But she also acknowledges no one really knows what the final costs will be.

That's the way it should be. The Museum of Houston is a truly collaborative community project. Rice University is providing the server space to host the enterprise, with active participation by Chuck Henry, vice provost and director of Fondren Library. The museum fits exactly into Rice President David W. Leebron's vision for the 21st century, to get the university beyond the hedges and into the community. GHPA, meanwhile, has hired and given office space for a project manager/on-line tech person.

It can be frustratingly challenging to raise enough money to construct a big museum building and attempt to fit all pertinent archives inside it, only to then find yourself limited by the physical space you have. With the virtual museum there's now an alternative. So, are you interested in Houston history? Some of it, or all of it? Just by dropping by the website and checking out the progress you could be a sidewalk superintendent of this amazing construction. It is a chance to watch the city accumulate its collective history. Just stay connected. — Barry Moore