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A WALK DOWN MONTROSE REVEALS



The many views along Montrose, beginning with the museum district as seen from the Warwick Hotel (left). Above: MFAH Central Administration and Glassell Junior School building.

The Lillie and Hugh Roy Cullen Sculpture Garden.

BY BRUCE C. WEBB

THERE ARE PLACES THAT HOLD our interest because they seem to compress time and space into a picture of the city in miniature. Grady Clay, a longtime editor of *Landscape Architecture Quarterly* and a keen observer of cities, called them “epitome districts” — places that are crammed with clues that trigger our awareness of the larger scene — things around the corner, processes out of sight, history all but covered up.”

Montrose Boulevard is one of those places. In a city with few notable contenders, it, or at least that portion of it that begins at Mecom Fountain and ends at the intersection with Westheimer Road, is arguably Houston’s most urbane street. It serves as a bridge between the refined, right bank culture of the Museum District and the left bank counterculture strung out along Westheimer. Along the way it gathers up an eclectic collection of businesses, cultural institutions, apartments, and restaurants — a few of them squeezing alfresco dining into the narrow sidewalk right-of-way — and arrays them in a way that has the look and feel of that rarest of Houston happenings: a pedestrian zone. It is also the source of often curious discoveries, among them such entities as the Consulate General’s Office of the People’s Republic of China, a proletarian, concrete-block stronghold with a small signboard holding a brace of fading photographs of Chinese celebrations.

You can actually take a decent stroll along the Boulevard and feel reasonably well accommodated and diverted. North

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THE EVOLUTION OF AN URBAN STREET, HOUSTON STYLE



A hypostyle hall bridging the street: the U.S. 59 viaduct.

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Montrose developer J.W. Link's Montrose mansion, Sanguinet, Staats & Barnes, 1912, now part of the University of St. Thomas.

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View looking north toward the Alabama Street crossing and the high-rise Parc IV Condominiums.

of Westheimer, the boulevard sheds some of its dignity, unravels into an inner-city version of a strip and becomes more aware of the view from the automobile than the view seen from up close.

Epitome districts change, with only traces of a former life surviving from one generation to the next. Present day Montrose Boulevard is a product of such changes, and is a far cry from its original formulation as the spine of a 260-acre subdivision built on the then-outskirts of Houston. One of several residential developments in the city's street-car suburbs, Montrose Place was put together in 1911 by J.W. Link, a lawyer, lumberman and former mayor of Orange, Texas. Link assembled land between Richmond, Pacific, Taft, and Graustark streets from 25 separate owners and set out to create Houston's poshest neighborhood, naming it after the Royal Borough of Montrose in Scotland. In a precursor to what would happen in dozens of later themed subdivisions that sought metaphorical respite from the heat and relentless flatness of Houston's topography, he gave Scottish Highland names to most of the streets as well.

The Houston Land Corporation, which Link formed with several other leading Houston businessmen, provided a modern, comprehensive infrastructure for the new development, one that included complete water, sewer, gas, paving, curbs, sidewalks, and landscaping in the selling price of lots. A feature of the plan were four major boulevards — Yoakum,

Audubon, Lovett, and Montrose — with esplanades that were landscaped with seven train-car loads of palm trees and 4,000 large shade trees.

Montrose Boulevard was not planned just for the wealthy; Link provided a hierarchy of lot sizes and locations so that even persons of modest means could afford one. Houses were required to cost a minimum of \$3,000. But to encourage others to think in grand terms, Link built a mansion for himself on Montrose Boulevard at a cost of \$60,000. The neo-classical house was designed by architects Sanguinet, Staats & Barnes of Fort Worth, and constructed of limestone imported from Carthage, Missouri, and cream colored vitrified brick with enameled terra cotta glazed accent tiles. The lavish interior included a 40-foot by 20-foot living room with high wood wainscoting, wood-beam ceilings, and fireplaces of English Caen stone. There were five bedrooms on the second floor and a large ballroom on the third. Link sold the house to oilman T.P. Lee for \$90,000, and in 1946 Lee in turn sold it to the Basilian Fathers to form part of the nascent campus of the University of St. Thomas, where it presently serves as the administration building. Other fine houses followed, and by 1925 Montrose Place was essentially built out. It continued to be a distinguished address up until World War II, with many of Houston's elite families calling it home.

Although the Montrose tract that Link developed is still a neighborhood of

distinctive houses, very little evidence remains of the stately homes he promoted along Montrose Boulevard. Including the Link Mansion, only eight houses remain on the boulevard, and all of them have been converted to non-residential uses. Among them are two houses designed by Alfred C. Finn. One, the Fondren House at 3410 Montrose, 1923, is now La Colombe d'Or restaurant, and the second, the Westheimer House at 3700 Montrose, 1919, now contains offices. Another Finn house at 3504 Montrose was razed in 1998 to make room for the awkward backside view of an addition to Annunciation Orthodox Church.

The deed restrictions that had protected the exclusively residential character of the Montrose development expired in 1936, abetting a chain of dislocations. By then the automobile had become a primary determinant of the form of cities. New suburban developments were luring people away from the inner city, and the unprotected properties along Montrose Boulevard became more valuable as sites for gas stations, offices, and other commercial uses. Many houses were converted to rentals, subdivided into duplexes or apartments and then demolished to make room for a strip of purpose-built commercial buildings, apartment buildings, and cultural institutions. In the late 1940s in response to the growing volume of vehicular traffic, Montrose Boulevard south of Westheimer was enlarged by removing its esplanade.

During the 1960s and 1970s,

Montrose became more a state of mind than a location. It was Houston's version of Greenwich Village — albeit a "drive-in" version, according to a 1971 *Houston Chronicle* article. The relaxed attitude in the area, a reflection of the ethos of the Age of Aquarius, appealed to a wide range of people looking for or already experimenting with alternative lifestyles. The central axis for this action stretched out along Westheimer, which developed into a kind of free zone. Houses were converted into antique shops, topless joints, boutiques, bars, and restaurants, and were frequently treated to decorative makeovers that reflected the anything-goes aesthetic of the hippie culture. The intersection of Montrose and Westheimer became an epicenter for students, dropouts, and runaways looking for the zeitgeist. The action didn't spread very far along Montrose Boulevard, but the big old homes in the neighborhood were often subdivided into apartments or used to house communes. There was tension. Westheimer nightlife did not mix well with long-time residents or young families who were seeking stability.

Montrose Boulevard managed to weather the impacts of these changes reasonably well, in part because prestigious institutions gave it a solid anchor. It was a case in which the street's prevailing character was itself a primary asset, and tended to attract restaurants and other kindred businesses whose own personae were fashionably mixed and matched. Among the major north-south streets that

Below: Montrose Boulevard, seen in panorama a block before the intersection with Westheimer. Right: The Westheimer intersection, during regular business, and far right, during the Gay Pride Parade.



the crossings dissipate the singular focus of a street

Like a tangential conversation

connecting it with other places

slice through the residential fabric flanking U.S. 59, Montrose Boulevard stands apart as an internal street having no direct connection to the freeway system. Advertising signs on buildings tend to be small and understated, and parking is not obvious. In the section of Montrose Boulevard that runs from the museums to Richmond Avenue, only a few buildings break the dominant character — the Goodyear Tire Store, a converted service station whose orientation is more about cars than people, being the most conspicuous example.

As a rule, other buildings are pulled close to the sidewalk, sometimes with intervening landscaping, and parking is either tucked in back or to the side. Some approaches are ingenious — the Campanile, a renovated church that houses a branch of the Houston Public Library and, in what was once the educational wing, a tail of small shops and restaurants, is a model pattern, one that addresses both the pedestrian and the car. It provides a token parking court up front, while accommodating the greater part of the parking behind in a lot and a tiered garage. Other buildings take a more ad hoc approach, relying on curbside parking and, in the case of the Chelsea Market, using fringe space under the elevated section of U.S. 59. Even two chunky suburban-styled buildings north of Richmond, the Kroger Grocery and the Walgreen Drugstore, both with large, front-loaded parking lots, are more companionable than might be expected.

Other formulaic strip centers, a block-long, mustard-yellow one at 3939 Montrose and an L-shaped model at 3407 Montrose whose parking lot is spatially framed by a ten-story modern office building across the street, benefit from being lodged in the urban fabric rather than being spaced out, as they would be in the suburbs.

Cross streets offer major points of syncoption in the structure of a street. Each crossing brings another character into a conjunction that is highlighted at the corners. Like a tangential conversation, the crossings dissipate the singular focus of an avenue, connecting it with other places. A hierarchy develops: sometimes one street dominates, sometimes another. Still others, recognizing the potentials of a corner to unite rather than separate, treat their two faces more or less equally.

The southern portion of Montrose Boulevard is marked by four major street crossings and one freeway overpass. The first crossing, at Bissonnet Avenue, is Houston's best example of the City Beautiful movement. Here, three museums are brought together: the Museum of Fine Arts, Houston, with its modern neo-classical Brown Pavilion by Mies van der Rohe, 1974; the shiny-skinned, parallelogram-shaped Contemporary Arts Museum, Gunnar Birkerts & Associates, 1972; and the Lillie and Hugh Roy Cul- len Sculpture Garden, Isamu Noguchi,

1986, a labyrinth of free-standing planes, hillocks, and free-formed landscaping. Also part of the crossing is the anomalous villa that Houston architect William T. Cannady built for himself in 1991, a house that is imposing enough to fit in with the neighboring museums.

The buildings are wildly divergent stylistically, though with the exception of the Cannady House, which is decorated down to a domestic scale, they all demonstrate variations on a minimalist aesthetic. The interaction among the museums is complex. The Brown Pavilion, opening up its interior as an extension of a narrow fringe of sidewalk, reinforces the gentle curve of Bissonnet, a move deflected by the razor-edged corners and blank sides of the Contemporary Arts Museum, whose shape, set into the orthogonal street grid, creates a background for a triangular patch of space facing the intersection. This small but prominently positioned scrap of real estate, once embellished with temporary sculptures, art installations, and banners, has been quieted down considerably by a landscaping plan with a pool and benches that creates a street-level plaza. Both buildings push their points of view almost to the paradigmatic — the MFAH's glass box registering clarity and openness and the CAM's metal box, whose entrance is a narrow slot at one of the vertices, an air of indifference and mystery. The sculpture garden does a good job of acknowledging each by giving the MFAH a large garden space and

responding to the angularity of the CAM in its interior spatial divisioning.

The controlled character of this auspicious beginning to Montrose Boulevard is extended another block north by the Glassell School of Art, S.I. Morris Associates, 1978, on the east side of Montrose and the MFAH's Central Administration and Glassell Junior School Building, Carlos Jiménez and Kendall/Heaton Associates, 1994, on the west. The latter turns an appealing and elegant entrance façade to the boulevard, with well-composed windows that express the various functional volumes within. The Glassell School, by contrast, is a mall-like structure, with its main entrance opening onto the sculpture garden and its primary axis running parallel to Montrose. This configuration leaves a long, reflective, glass-block wall facing the street that is only interesting at night, when the interior is revealed. One block north, the picturesque, regency-style Fourth Church of Christ Scientist, Wilbur Foster, 1940, and the brooding Holland House Masonic Lodge Number 1, William McGinty, 1954, address each other in a cross-axial metaphysical dialogue.

Montrose Boulevard's other major intersections are far less distinguished. At Montrose and Richmond, a gas station, opening onto Richmond, and a convenience store and branch bank, both sited diagonally, are gathered and settled by the quiet of the five-story International Bank of Commerce building. The Alabama crossing is populated by three gas



stations, two facing onto Alabama and the other onto Montrose, and the stately Link Mansion, which gives the secluded campus of the University of St. Thomas a Montrose Boulevard address. The Link Mansion, with its grand front porch and porte cochere and blocky massing, is itself reminiscent of an old-style gas station, but with much more opulent scale, detailing, and material richness. The generous landscaped lawn, which formerly opened onto Montrose, was in 1988 privatized by wrapping it behind a perfunctory brick wall with metal bars, a wall that disfigures the character of the house and diminishes its street appeal.

Where the Richmond and Alabama crossings offer hints of the changing character of Montrose as it moves northward, the Westheimer intersection, where Montrose Boulevard once ended, is a resounding finale to the street's graciousness. Here the ragtag commercialism of Westheimer prevails, producing an intersection that includes a Taco Cabana drive-in restaurant with an apron parking lot, a convenience store and gas station, a pharmacy at the tail end of an inchoate strip of long, low buildings, and a newer strip center dominated by Blockbuster — the name is Dickensian — and an Eckerd Drugstore that faces onto Westheimer.

It looks like a hundred other Houston intersections, most of them in older suburban areas, except for the little ironies that spill out along Montrose, where stores such as Atomic Music and Extreme Skin Art and Condoms Galore sidle up to

the Interfaith Ministries for Greater Houston. The intersection holds a symbolic cachet as the location of the silver disco ball that's raised above the street during the annual bacchanal of the Gay Pride parade. Just north of the intersection, a jazzy pylon marks the location of the flashy Montrose Townhouse Lofts, I. Phillips/Wild Design, 1997. In places, Westheimer can be fascinatingly tawdry, especially at night, when it turns into a kind of streetwise costume party. But when it reaches Montrose, most of that character has been neutered by corporate symbols of the non-place urban realm. This is too bad, since properly configured as a people place and perhaps populated by institutions such as the Art Car Museum and a few kindred bars and restaurants, the intersection could become a lively meeting place for the cultures of the two streets.

As notable as the intersections is a cross axis that appears in the form of the U.S. 59 viaduct, a formidable intrusion whose gritty underside has been likened to a vast hypostyle hall. The viaduct segments Montrose, creating a shadowy underworld where, to the consternation of neighboring residents and business owners, vagrants often take up residence. All this will come to an end in the next few years, when this section of U.S. 59 is depressed below ground level. Like the successful effort by J.W. Link to get an existing railroad line relocated outside the boundaries of his development, lowering the freeway is an act of purification. The

remarkable project was spearheaded by a coalition of neighborhood groups and civic associations who convinced the Texas Department of Transportation that this was a more reasonable solution than widening or double-decking the overburdened roadway. The scale and expense of the project is daunting, but when completed it will open new continuous vistas along Montrose Boulevard. The cross-axial gap that Montrose will soon cross, however, will remain, unless the bridge built to span U.S. 59 can itself mend the rift, perhaps by becoming a contemporary version of the Ponte Vecchio.

Many of the buildings that line Montrose Boulevard are nondescript, of the kind that establish an urban background. Others stand out as a part of a repertoire of little urban experiments that have popped up over the years. Chelsea Market, which opened in 1985 on a burned-out block in the shadow of U.S. 59, was an attempt by architect John Kirksey and partners Lance Goodwin and Norbert Choucroun to create a commercial development that both opened out onto the public street and contained a secluded pedestrian promenade within. As a typological prospect, it suggests an alternative to the auto-dominated strip centers that fill the city's commercial hinterlands. But it was never more than a segment of the length it would have needed to be to prove itself. People found

it a perplexing anomaly; stores located behind the exterior frontage, or, even worse, on the second floor, went unnoticed. Despite winning several design awards it was troubled almost from the beginning. By 1987 the center was 35 percent empty and fell into foreclosure. Not long after, it lost two of its bigger clients, Banana Republic and the upscale Anthony's restaurant. It was also troubled by mismanagement in the hands of Resolution Trust Corporation, which never seemed to understand what to do with the property. It's a good thing they didn't throw the baby out with the bathwater, though. Today, anchored by longtime tenant Butera's, a delicatessen that moved from a location closer to the museums, and the upscale Redwood Grill, the center seems to have found its metier. Main Street Theater occupies a back corner of the complex, and most of the in-between and upstairs spaces have become offices.

A little farther north at 4100 Montrose is the Campanile, Ray Bailey architects' noteworthy conversion of the Central Church of Christ, William Ward Watkin, 1941, 1947. The first non-residential building to be constructed on the boulevard following the lapse of deed restrictions, the church in 1986 had its educational wing made over into shops, restaurants, and offices, while the main sanctuary was made available to the Houston Public Library. The L-shaped plan of the complex neatly embraces a small front-court parking lot that is



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sometimes used for outdoor activities.

Several large apartment projects also attract notice, among them the twin towers of the Parc IV and V Condominiums at 3614 and 3600 Montrose, Jenkins Hoff Oberg Saxe, 1963, 1965. The 12-story buildings dwarf their neighbors and could have inflicted considerable damage to the street had they followed the present-day practice of garnishing upscale apartment buildings with garish, thematic decoration. Instead, they exude the studied simplicity and precision of the modern movement in clearly expressed modular construction of a white concrete frame and brick infill. The two buildings are well sited, with one holding the street edge and the other stepping back to create a front open space.

The Court at Museum's Gate, a somewhat overbearing postmodern, period piece of 1980s vintage at 4004 Montrose, Compendium, 1985, is low-rise in fact but bulky and over-coded in effect. The intricate plan densely fits 47 units and necessary parking onto a relatively small lot, but smothers its exterior space within a formidable brick wrapper, giving it the look of a fortified enclave, a look partially relieved by exuberant landscaping of the narrow strip of ground between the building and the sidewalk.

Nearby at 4801 Montrose was, until recently, a vividly painted, suburban ranch house that had been moved from a lot across the street to make space for Bell Park, a neighborhood-scaled garden respite with a pool and fountain. The house had marked the entrance to

Gramercy Gables, E. Stanley Piper, 1928, a revivalist British, Tudor-style residential village located in a landscaped 1.37 acre setting. Apartments are still there at the rear of the site, but where the house was is now empty land on which a 19-story high-rise apartment building will soon be erected. The Montrose-fronting section of Gramercy Gables was the subject of a battle between preservationists who wanted to save the buildings and the Finger Companies, which sees the land supporting some 280 loft-style units. In the context of Houston's weak preservation regulations, attempts to save the Montrose section of Gramercy Gables were too little too late. The new building will not be very companionable to the surrounding residential neighborhood, and may portend more of the same to come.

A similar case of disfiguring the sectional properties of the street occurred some ten years ago, when the vertical

story Plaza Hotel as an offset to the damage they were planning to do to Gramercy Gables, but have abandoned the project as too costly.

Within its urban frame, Montrose Boulevard is more artifactual than contrived. It represents a street that has evolved out of real events occurring in real time. There is an uncanny spatial composition there that is hard to explain. Against the prevailing building line, pockets of space and open lawns take on a distinct figural character that does not exist on streets where building lines and other homogenizing principles are scrupulously followed. Robert Maxwell, the former dean of Princeton's School of Architecture, sets out an argument for such places as having the quality of "sweet disorder and the carefully careless." "It is possi-



Courtesy Houston Public Library, Houston Metropolitan Research Center

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scale of the museum district was changed by the construction of 5000 Montrose, Golemon and Rolfe, 1982, a hefty 22-story concrete apartment building that squeezed and dwarfed its neighbor, the once fashionable Park Plaza hotel. Prior to the towering condominium, the Plaza Hotel, Joseph Finger, 1926, the Warwick Hotel, and two nearby church towers gave the area a more or less uniform vertical scale. The Finger Companies toyed with the idea of redeveloping the nine-

ble," Maxwell writes, "to see all cultural manifestation as a mechanism whose aim is to ensure a balance between control and inspiration, between order and disorder, in a dynamic system of change. Difficult as the attributes may seem to be, and in spite of the fact that at any one time they may be in opposition, they are both concerned positively with the same issue — the degree of control needed to assure and to structure an ever surprising future."

For architects working in terms of such an idea, the challenge is not to create everywhere the patterns of order for which their education prepares them too well. This has been tried by the planners and the architects of suburbs and model cities, and has produced little beyond social and cultural entropy and boredom. The real challenge is to mediate between a stifling pre-determined order and the disorder of individual narcissism — and through that to shepherd change. This is not a simple task, particularly in places such as Montrose, where incursions of seediness threaten stability. And when such incursions are successfully resisted, they make the area targets for profit-driven, large-scale development.

But Montrose, both boulevard and surrounding community, has a deserved reputation for self-serving activism. Here, battles have been joined over many issues, some of them quite remarkable. In 1990, a group of Montrose residents became frustrated that police were not doing enough to stem a rash of vandalism and car theft. They organized a march on the home of one of the suspected vandals, chanting "leave us alone" and carrying signs in English and Spanish. The demonstration was followed by a re-instituted citizens' patrol. In another case, a neighborhood civic association carried on a three-year campaign to get large mounds of sand removed from under the U.S. 59 overpass. The sand had been stored there for use on the highways in case of freezing weather. But it had become an eyesore, and an attraction to vagrants who took up residence under the viaduct.

Montrose Boulevard's prime location makes it ripe for plucking. Already, misguided visions of a much denser street of apartments, which in one version would create blocks of Park Avenue-like apartment mid-rises with shops beneath, dazzle some developers and architects. But urbanization doesn't necessarily mean bigger, or require the higher densities of the 19th-century East-coast urban model. Neither does it mean the wholesale recasting of areas of the city into simulations of the New Urbanism, especially when the uprooting of a genuine urban past is a part of the bargain. For Houston, the best urbanization may be the sort that has evolved along Montrose. From Bissonnet to Westheimer, Montrose Boulevard could well be an example of what an unzoned city might be expected to look like when it is on its best behavior. ■