

# FORTRESS

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SOMETHING THERE IS THAT  
DOESN'T LOVE A WALL.

*Robert Frost, "Mending Wall"*



Robert Frost's ambivalent declaration might well be the unacknowledged motto of the City of Houston's Neighborhood Traffic Project (NTP).<sup>1</sup> The most visible and controversial aspect of the project has been the installation of street gates — permanent barriers that would close off neighborhoods to incoming or cut-through traffic. As originally designed, the NTP included not only street gates but also diverters, one-way streets, and, more recently, speed humps (low-grade asphalt risers that force traffic to slow down). But since its inception, the program has been identified with the street gates, which, in their simplest application, were intended to allow city neighborhoods to ameliorate traffic problems. In more elaborate, multiple-gate versions, the barriers theoretically would create the sort of exclusive residential enclaves now commonplace in suburban developments across the country.

But like the antagonists of Frost's poem not everybody in Houston agrees that "good fences make good neighbors."

In 1994 and 1995, as NTP projects got under way, the gates began to generate controversy, much of it clearly unanticipated by city planners. Neighborhoods were split on whether the gates were necessary, whether they truly addressed the problems they were intended to solve, even whether they reflected accurate or sensible definitions of urban neighborhoods. Active opposition, complete with petitions and public demonstrations, began in several neighborhoods, and formal complaints of racial discrimination were filed with the city as well as the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD).

In late 1995, following lengthy investigations of the civil rights complaints, HUD entered into protracted negotiations with city officials over the continuation of the street gates program. Negotiations are still going on in 1997. The city halted some projects and delayed others. In response to some of the more strenuous objections, city council amended the NTP enabling



Street gates separating a neighborhood from the outside world.

ordinance.<sup>2</sup> HUD had been expected to issue the formal results of its investigations sometime early in 1997, but it now appears that any formal report has been again delayed, apparently by the continuing negotiations and the changeover in administration at HUD. If HUD eventually issues its findings, presumably the city will then determine which NTP projects can proceed as planned.

But whatever the outcome of the official reviews (which are likely to end in a formulation that saves face for city offi-

cials), in practical terms, it appears the street-closing element of the NTP program has been ended by citizen opposition. The most ambitious project, for the Shenandoah neighborhood in the Gulfton area on the city's southwest side, has been shelved and will almost certainly never be built. To a significant degree, gates have been effectively replaced by less intrusive speed humps, a program which the city recently expanded in response to growing demand.<sup>3</sup> Like gates, the speed humps reduce the amount and

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speed of traffic through residential neighborhoods — but without the effect or appearance of neighborhood segregation.

The brief history of the NTP provides a cautionary tale in the limitations of urban planning as currently practiced in Houston. Explicitly conceived as a method of bringing suburban-style living to the inner city, the NTP program quickly ran afoul of the architectural and cultural differences between suburban developments and urban neighborhoods.

The idea of street gates as a city planning option under NTP is a product of the first term (1992–94) administration of Mayor Bob Lanier, who proposed them as an offshoot of his Neighborhoods to Standard program, which targeted for improvement substandard streets, lighting, and other services. Previous city administrations had not been enthusiastic about civic association requests for street gates; the fire department strongly opposed gates as potentially life-threatening barriers to emergency vehicles. But

Mayor Lanier considers restrictive gates a tool that allows the city to compete with nearby suburban planned communities, which are often exclusively residential, single-access subdivisions built around cul-de-sacs. If suburban homebuyers have controlled access and private subdivisions, argued Lanier, why shouldn't city dwellers have them too?

This competitive logic was made explicit in the city's 1993 NTP manual: "An ever-increasing decline in the overall quality of life in [Houston's] residential neighborhoods over the past few decades [generates the] flight of families and businesses to smaller, outlying suburban communities — causing a reduction of [the city's] tax base." The manual further explains, "While there are a myriad of causes for this decline of quality of life, one of the most prominent is through-traffic in residential neighborhoods and its relationship to the disruption of a peaceful environment, and the potential for criminal activity."<sup>4</sup>

Although the manual is vague on the

precise relationship between traffic and crime — "It can be inferred that effective policies and programs to manage through-traffic may also act to mitigate the potential for criminal activity" — the NTP was explicitly conceived as both a traffic program and a crime-prevention program. This dual intention was largely responsible both for the initial popularity of the program and for its eventual dispute. Few Houstonians could argue with a plan that promised to alleviate traffic problems; but yoked to undemonstrated assumptions about criminal activity, the NTP generated political controversy.

Houston, of course, is not unique in this recent experiment with gated communities. Private developers, in or out of the cities, conventionally market exclusivity, security, and private entry as essential features of residential housing. From New York to Los Angeles, Miami to Seattle, city governments have considered various forms of street closure as a response to citizens' concerns about traffic and crime. Locked gates preventing



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outside access to a public street are theoretically a last resort for solving neighborhood problems — but in recent years restrictive gates or walls have become increasingly popular across the country. City officials have become enamored of the acronym CPTED (pronounced SEP-ted), for "Crime Prevention Through Environmental Design," a concept closely associated with the work of architect and urban planner Oscar Newman.<sup>5</sup> One of CPTED's principles is that diverting or restricting traffic around residential neighborhoods can decrease not only cut-through traffic but crimes of opportunity. Supporters cite successes in Chicago, Dayton, and other cities where, they say, large, decaying urban neighborhoods were stabilized, made safer, and even rejuvenated by judicious redesign.

Critics of CPTED, on the other hand, argue that building barriers between neighborhoods is an antidemocratic and polarizing approach to city problems, exacerbating the very racial, ethnic, and economic divisions that make urban problems so intractable and cities so difficult to govern. Michael Lind calls the now-common gates a symptom of "the new feudalism," citing an opinion from a California appeals court, which "recently

ruled that seven metal gates installed by the Los Angeles suburb of Whitley Heights represented an illegal 'return to feudal times.'" "Increasingly, those Americans who can afford to do so," writes Lind, "have been withdrawing into gated suburbs, many of them indistinguishable from private cities, whose community associations provide not only security but trash collection, street cleaning, and utilities as well."<sup>6</sup> University of Houston urban historian Robert Fisher describes the utilization of street closures as another sign of an international trend toward privatization of public resources and a rejection of the traditional concept of the city as a place "where people come together as a community." Increasingly, says Fisher, citizens feel unable to rely on an underfunded and diminished public sector to provide basic services and have rejected the notion of the city as a place of "learning to live with, and enjoy, the Other." Instead, they turn to private, commercial sources for protection (private police and security systems), and they see street gates as one more way of closing out the unexpected and potentially dangerous encroachments of city life.<sup>7</sup> In his book on the built environment of

Los Angeles, *City of Quartz*, architec-

## "BUILDING BARRIERS BETWEEN NEIGHBORHOODS IS AN ANTI-DEMOCRATIC AND POLARIZING APPROACH TO CITY PROBLEMS."

ture critic Mike Davis argues that this demand for "security" is often a self-justifying cover for something else: "As a prestige symbol — and sometimes as the decisive borderline between the merely well-off and the truly rich — security has less to do with personal safety than with the degree of personal insulation . . . from 'unsavory' groups and individuals."<sup>8</sup>

But Kelly Hawkins, president of the Shenandoah Civic Association, disputes this portrayal of the Houston residents who are requesting street gates. Writing in the *Houston Chronicle*, Hawkins defended his neighborhood, which he described as primarily working-class and minority: "Houston's rich and privileged already live in fortressed security. The poor and subsidized are increasingly living in fortressed security complexes, like the Gulfton area. Only the working classes and middle classes are being denied parity. When imagining Houston's future without fortressed neighborhoods, realize that this would be a future of fleeing working-class and middle-class taxpayers."<sup>9</sup> If the city hopes to retain its middle-class residents, concluded Hawkins, it will have to allow controlled-access residential areas across the board.

When NTP opponents from civil rights organizations, including the League of Latin American Citizens (LULAC) and the NAACP, complained that several proposals seemed designed to place barriers between predominantly white subdivisions and their predominantly black or Hispanic neighbors, city officials responded by insisting — despite the explicit language of the NTP manual — that the NTP was solely an anti-traffic program.<sup>10</sup> Susan McMillian, who originally supervised the program, asserted that the NTP ordinance, especially in its revised form, recognizes only excessive traffic counts as reasons to close a street. "We must be able to demonstrate that the cut-through traffic is a real problem. . . . Crime is not an issue. I'm telling you it's not a justification — truly it never has been."<sup>11</sup>

City councilwoman Helen Huey, who strongly supports the NTP and headed the committee that revised the law, echoed McMillian's comments and added, "In limiting the ordinance to what is absolutely measurable — and that is traffic impact — we are making it as objective as possible."

McMillian noted that "the logic of CPTED" would suggest that diminishing traffic volume might also have an effect on crime, but says she tells civic associa-

tions that "gates won't keep out burglars any more than locks do."<sup>12</sup>

While opponents describe NTP as a form of racial and class segregation, proponents, who consider it first and foremost a crime-fighting measure, also argue that gates will protect property values. But a serious weakness in the property-values argument is the fact that gates often initiate a direct transfer of property values from one part of the neighborhood to another. While the investment of installing the gates, the accompanying landscape improvements, and theoretical improvement of security will logically increase property values in one part of the neighborhood, property values in the accessible, unclosed surrounding area could just as logically depreciate. According to previously published summaries, of 16 NTP projects proposed and planned under the original ordinance, 11 were to include at least one street closing with so-called "911 gates," accessible only to emergency vehicles.<sup>13</sup>

According to Washington HUD spokesman Alex Sachs, at least 6 of the 16 projects generated significant neighborhood opposition and formal racial discrimination complaints to HUD; 5 of those 6 projects included street gates.<sup>14</sup> The city says 10 projects involving gates have been installed, and another 5 are "currently in design," although, significantly, this list no longer includes 3 of the contested projects.<sup>15</sup> It should be noted that, since economic or class discrimination is without legal standing as an actionable offense, opponents and proponents of the gates have been inevitably polarized into racial and ethnic camps. Once the protests began in fall 1994, it appears that only two of the proposed gates were installed (in Timbergrove Manor and Idylwood) before the program was suspended in the summer of 1995.

A short summary of four NTP projects provides a general idea of how this program has worked.

**Pleasantville.** An early NTP project installed one-way streets on the edge of Pleasantville, a predominantly black, east-side neighborhood. After black residents picketed the project (protesting that they were now required to drive miles out of their way to return to their own homes), the one-ways were replaced by less restrictive, narrowed entrances designed to slow or divert cut-through traffic elsewhere. Complaints of discrimination are still pending with HUD.



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**Braeburn Valley.** On the west side, a gates plan was announced by the Braeburn Valley Civic Association after little public discussion. When an attorney who lived in the neighborhood objected, the city administration sealed the NTP files, citing possible litigation; the attorney appealed to the Texas attorney general, who overruled the city. Opponents charged that the gates would aggravate traffic problems and flood problems and were racially motivated; the project was suspended. The Braeburn Valley project is not currently included on the list provided by the Department of Public Works.

**Timbergrove Manor/Heights Annex.** Despite much neighborhood opposition, in October 1994 a single gate was installed on the edge of Timbergrove Manor, a subdivision just below 14th Street northwest of downtown. Opponents of the gate charged segregation and loss of emergency service (an ambulance was delayed en route to a heart attack victim, who was permanently disabled), and requested a HUD investigation. Complaints of discrimination are still pending with HUD; the gate remains, and the protests continue.

**Shenandoah/Gulfton.** The ambitious Shenandoah gates project was apparently designed as the Lanier administration's showplace NTP project. The original plans called for as many as 20 barriers, which would have separated almost completely the Shenandoah single-family residential subdivision on the far southwest side from the much larger Gulfton area. One temporary barrier was installed but was removed after repeated public protests and formal complaints to HUD from Hispanic residents of Gulfton. The project was indefinitely suspended, pending the outcome of the ongoing HUD investigation and city review. At this writing, although permanent barriers remain officially under consideration, none has been installed in Shenandoah; the project is not currently included on the list provided by the Department of Public Works.

The two most controversial projects have been Timbergrove Manor/Heights Annex and Shenandoah/Gulfton. The double names in themselves reflect divisions within the neighborhoods. In each of these instances, a neighborhood association representing a small, single-family residential subdivision (200–250 homes) sought to separate itself, to one degree or

another, from its surrounding neighborhood. Although the only explicitly allowable reason for a street gate under the city's NTP program was excessive traffic, proponents of the gates in both neighborhoods freely acknowledged that their motivation in applying for the gates was their belief that such barriers would reduce crime.<sup>16</sup>

Although HUD officials have released no official report in connection with the agency's investigation of the gates-related civil rights complaints, they say they are engaged in a "good-faith effort" at reconciliation between the City of Houston and the complainants. HUD spokesman Alex Sachs said that representatives are engaged in "productive discussions" with the city and the affected neighborhoods, but that these matters take time, and there is currently "no timetable for resolution." The formal report from HUD — originally promised at the beginning of 1996 — has been delayed yet again, this time by the transition to the new Clinton administration. Late in 1996, Sachs anticipated an announcement on the Houston investigation "in the next few weeks," but now he has revised that prediction, calling it "overly optimistic." Andrew Cuomo has replaced Henry Cisneros as HUD Secretary, and it will be after a transition period that the agency again turns its attention to specific local investigations.

One indirect outcome of the street gates controversy has been an apparent extension of the ongoing tension between HUD and the Lanier administration, most evident in the lengthy controversy over Allen Parkway Village, the historic public housing complex. Mayor Lanier has been adamant in his criticism of HUD for what he describes as its mismanagement of the Allen Parkway matter, and he reacted angrily to the decision by HUD to investigate the street gates program. Lanier has lobbied HUD (Secretary Henry Cisneros) and Congress (Representative Tom DeLay) directly on behalf of the gates program, and has openly advocated funding cuts for HUD's Texas regional offices should the agency continue to "interfere," as he called it, with the city's program. HUD has refused to respond publicly to the mayor's charges, and its spokesman dismissed speculation that the continuing controversy might increasingly strain relations between the city and the federal agency on other matters. "We have seen no evidence," said HUD's Sachs, "that there is a strained relationship [with the city of

Houston] because of this investigation. Secretary Cisneros is particularly proud of moving forward on Allen Parkway Village." Sachs saw no reason why the agency and the city administration could not continue to work together on other coordinated projects.

Meanwhile, local opponents of the gates are not so optimistic. Dismayed at the continuing lack of official HUD action, they have begun to recruit their own allies in Washington. Congressional representatives Gene Green and Sheila Jackson Lee have each written to HUD and to the city of their concern about the gates program. Speaking of the Timbergrove Manor gate, Lee described the residents' problems with emergency vehicles and school traffic, adding: "Lastly, and possibly most disturbing, is the fact that the barrier has now created two separate neighborhoods with *vastly* different ethnic makeups" [emphasis in original].<sup>17</sup>

Whatever the outcome of the legal battles, the citywide opposition generated by the street gates program has effectively eliminated the gates as a serious instrument of public policy in Houston. That will not mean the disappearance of gates, of course; private developers of suburban subdivisions or of urban apartment complexes will continue to market gate enclosures as emblems of "exclusivity" and "security," thereby generating pressure on the public sector to compete with the private market by providing those same intangible commodities. But if the city continues to respond as if individual subdivisions or civic associations should dictate public policy for entire neighborhoods — and by extension for the whole city — neighborhood polarization, and the political crises that accompany it, will be the inevitable result. ■

1 Original enabling legislation for the NTP consists of a group of related city ordinances adopted or amended by the city council in 1992–93: City of Houston, Texas, Ordinance No. 92-1009 (July 28, 1992), No. 93-177 (February 23, 1993), No. 93-218 (March 3, 1993). The ordinances are included in the "City of Houston, Neighborhood Traffic Projects Manual," n.d. [1993].

2 The revision attempted to define neighborhood boundaries more precisely and to allow for more inclusive neighborhood representation. Although the substance of the regulations was largely unchanged, the deterrence of criminal activity was deleted as an explicit justification for the installation of gates, (City of Houston, Texas, Ordinance No. 95-1070, October 4, 1995). The revised version of the ordinance did not satisfy most opponents of the street gates, who continued their protests.

3 Tom Kennedy, public information officer for the Department of Public Works and Engineering, says that as of December 1996, the city had installed approximately 500 street humps, and he expects it will triple that number by the end of 1997. One "street segment" generally requires three such humps.

4 "City of Houston, Neighborhood Traffic Projects Manual," p.1.

5 Oscar Newman, *Defensible Space: Crime Prevention through Urban Design* (New York: Macmillan, 1972), *Community of Interest* (Garden City, New Jersey:Anchor Press/Doubleday, 1980). Newman has consulted on several CPTED projects across the country.

6 Michael Lind, "To Have and Have Not: Notes on the Progress of the American Class War," *Harper's Magazine*, June 1995, 35–47, *passim*.

7 Interview with the author, August 1995.

8 Mike Davis, "Fortress L.A.," in *City of Quartz: Excavating the Future in Los Angeles* (New York: Verso, 1990), p. 224.

9 Kelly Hawkins, "Working-Class Houstonians Want Secure Homes, Too," *Houston Chronicle*, October 29, 1995, p. 4C.

10 Complaints of discrimination were made to HUD under both Title VIII (fair housing) and Title VI (federal funding). Officially, these complaints are still pending; a HUD spokesman said that the laws require the agency to attempt "conciliation" of complaints before attempting to impose a resolution.

11 Interview with the author, December, 1996.

12 Interview with the author, December, 1996.

13 The summary here is based on previously published information concerning the original NTP proposals. *Houston Chronicle*, August 17, 1995.

14 HUD public information officer Alex Sachs was interviewed by the author in December 1996 and January 1997.

15 Letter from Tom Kennedy, Department of Public Works and Engineering, to author, January 18, 1997, including a list of street gates projects "constructed" or "approved, currently in design."

16 In a 1995 interview with the author, Paul Vogel, a former Timbergrove Manor resident who had been the foremost proponent of the gates, based virtually all of his arguments on crime statistics, saying the gate was needed because it would separate "a relatively well-off neighborhood from a relatively poor one." Similarly, the Shenandoah residents pointed to fear of crime as the primary motivation in proposing the gates. Ross Lence, a professor of political science at the University of Houston and a Shenandoah resident, told the author that on certain corners drug deals are taking place "any hour of the day or night, and the police know about it." Lence believes that the gates would make it more difficult for criminals coming from outside the subdivision to frequent the area. Lence's comments were echoed by other residents, including Tip Allen, chairman of the Shenandoah crime watch committee. Allen's neighbor, Carlo Penagos, told the author that gates were necessary because the presence of crime in the neighborhood — particularly drug-related crime perpetrated by "outsiders" from Gulfton — prevented his children from playing outside. A few months after the interview, Penagos was charged by Houston police with practicing medicine without a license and distributing drugs without a license; according to the Houston Police Department, his criminal case is pending.

17 Sheila Jackson Lee to Robert C. Lanier, Mayor of Houston, October 28, 1996 and to Jamie Jameson, Director, Program Operations Compliance Center, U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development, October 28, 1996.