



Photo by Thomas Shear/UH Creative Service, courtesy University of Houston

## Framing the Issues

### The University of Houston's Framework plan envisions a campus bustling with life, not cars

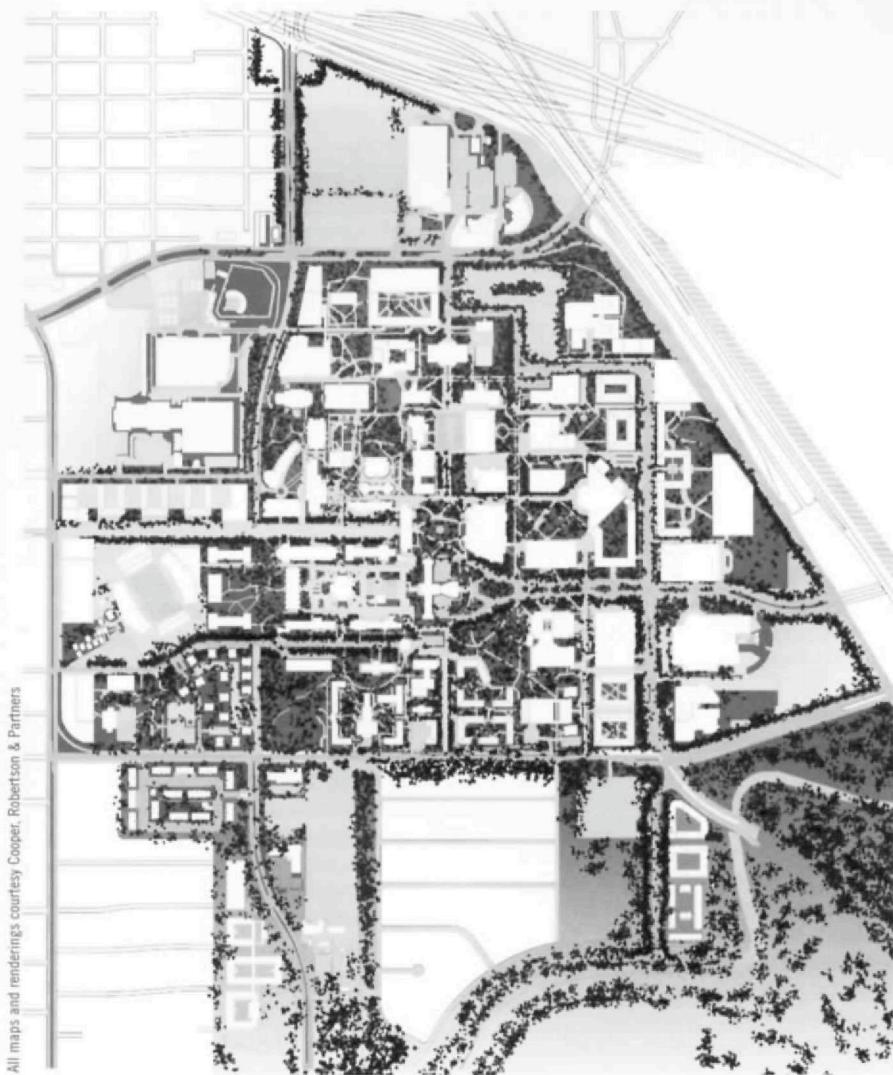
BY DAVID THEIS

**UNTIL RECENTLY**, if you wanted a God's-eye-view of the University of Houston's central campus, all you had to do was go up to the studios on the third floor of the Gerald D. Hines College of Architecture Building and look at the wall-sized photograph that was there. That photo captured the campus from overhead, showing the university as a reasonably green space surrounded by barrier islands of parking, which created a no-man's land between the school and its Third Ward neighbors.

Then, for a sense of how the university could look in five, ten, or twenty years, all you had to do was turn away from the wall and ponder the enormous, computer-generated plywood model that was also then located in the College of Architecture's third floor studios. The model, computer-routed in a series of curving grooves, showed large new swatches of green space, including a corner where the campus reached to Brays Bayou. It also showed a Cullen Boulevard that was closed to traffic and lined with trees. Above all, it showed the University of Houston's vast expanse of perimeter parking lots transformed into a series of quasi-

villages, each one open to its surrounding neighborhood. In short, the model presented a place that someone viewing it might wish already existed, so it would be possible to take a walk down one of the shaded boulevards, get a bite to eat, pop into an art gallery, and maybe check out the bird life down on the bayou—not to mention take in a class on modern sculpture or state-of-the-art physics.

The model represents a radical change for the University of Houston, one that would alter both its sense of itself and its sense of connection to the city beyond its borders. Phillip Lopate, writing in the fall 1996 issue of *Cite*, accused the university of "refus[ing] ... contact with a surrounding urban world ... [which] explains the bodiless, abstract, unmemorable—or, should I say, willfully antimemorable—quality of the campus itself." In the *Houston Architectural Guide*, Stephen Fox described the university's isolation from its neighbors in even stronger language: "Through purchase and exercise of ... eminent domain, it has surrounded itself with a swath of territory that buffers the campus.... Displaced neighbor-



All maps and renderings courtesy Cooper, Robertson &amp; Partners

**Opposite Page:** The Ezekiel W. Cullen Building (Alfred C. Finn, 1950). Its quadrangle is a product of Hare and Hare's 1937 master plan for the university.

**Below Left:** Illustrative site plan of the proposed campus. White areas represent both new and existing structures.

**Below:** Illustrative site plan of the existing campus. Darker grey areas represent existing structures.



hoods and apartment complexes have been replaced with suburban, institutional landscaping, a noncommittal approach to urban design."

The rather enormous difference between the campus described by Lopate and Fox and the hoped-for campus reflected in the computer-generated model reflects a new vision, one embodied in the university's latest master plan, officially known as the Framework. Like all visions, the Framework will no doubt be tempered by reality, but its level of ambition is clear. In an effort to raise the University of Houston to Tier 1 status, and to imbue the campus with a much-desired sense of place, university regents turned to the New York urban planning team of Cooper Robertson & Partners, which has developed campus plans for Harvard, Yale, and Trinity College, among others. Working with University of Houston planners and a fifth-year design class at the College of Architecture, Cooper Robertson created a scheme for a reinvented campus.

At a number of points, the Framework opens the campus up to its neighbors

and welcomes them in. The "unpresent scrim" that Lopate described would be pierced, and "town and gown" would finally meet. As Joe Mashburn, dean of the College of Architecture, notes, the Framework "is uniquely UH. Cooper Robertson was aware of how [the university] was created in order to educate the children of the working class. Their plan invites the community in."

The Framework also plays a prominent part in the University of Houston's efforts to raise its profile, both locally and beyond. The UH Board of Regents' ultimate goal is to have the university recognized as a Tier 1 research institution, one funded by the state at the same levels as the University of Texas and Texas A&M. But in academia as in business you have to spend money to get money, so the regents are embarking on an ambitious capital campaign, one whose goal is expected to be in the \$600 million range, in order to drastically upgrade facilities and attract higher profile professors and students.

Regardless of whether the university

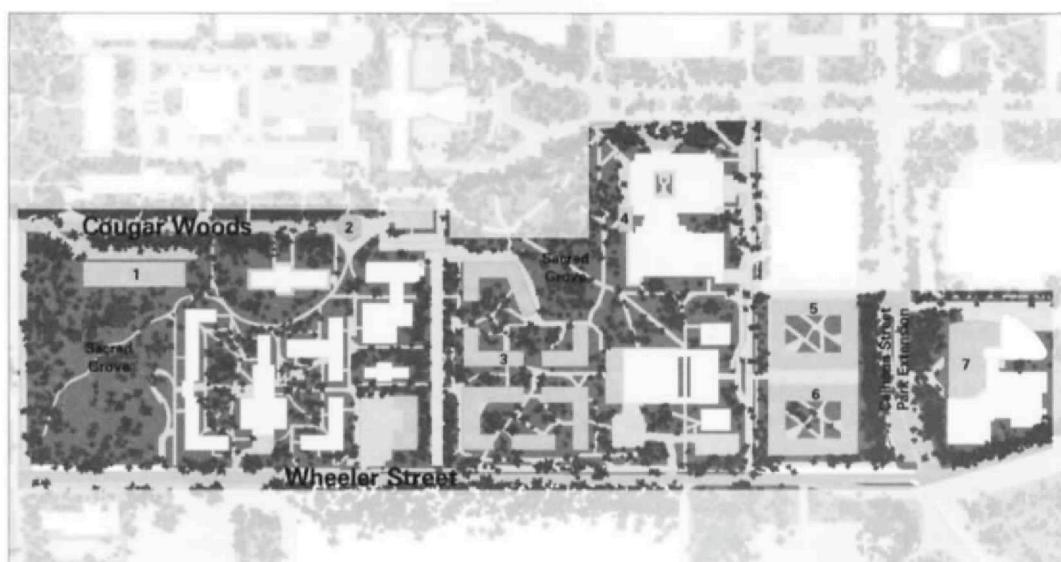
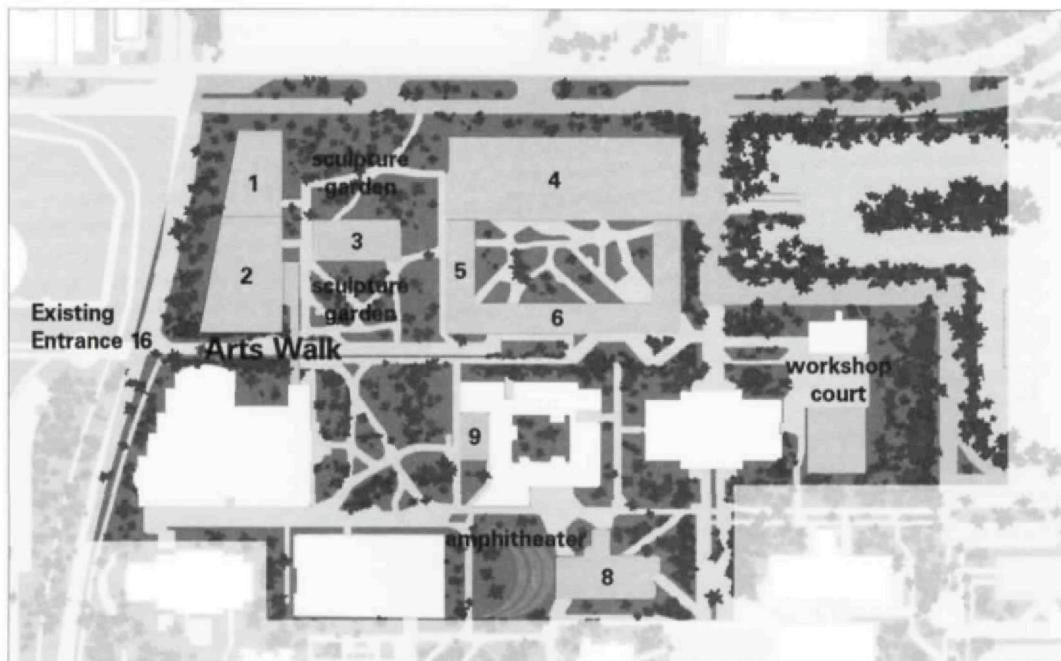
reaches Tier 1 status, in the next ten years the student population is expected to grow from the current 35,000 to around 42,000, which would put a massive strain on the university's resources. It already faces a shortage of 800,000-square-feet of classroom and office space. And since planners also expect the number of students living on campus to rise from the current 5,000 to 12,000 by 2016, a shortage of housing is another concern.

To deal with this influx of students, the campus' built environment is expected to almost double in size, from eight million square feet to around 15 million square feet. According to Phillip Anketell, the university's director of campus planning and real estate, the regents have stated that they want to expand facilities without losing the university's "park-like feel." He adds, "They've said, 'We don't want to be another UT.'"

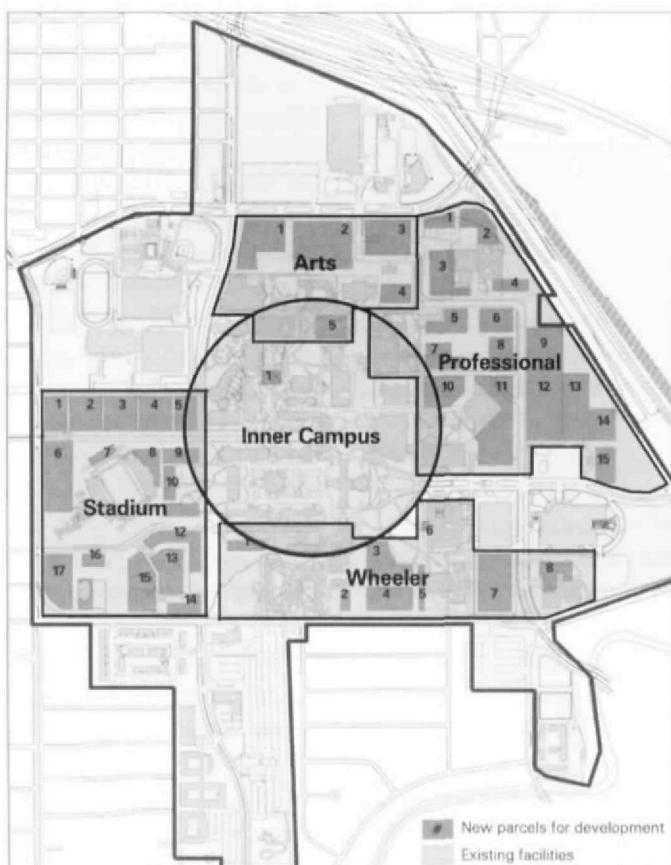
The need for these new buildings is what led to the decision to put the Framework together. One of the first initiatives of University President Jay Gogue, who took office in September 2003, was to commission a strategic plan. When that

was completed in the fall of 2004, the university administration realized that to implement their strategy a number of new facilities would be required. To help make sure the facilities were put in the right places, a new master plan was needed. That became the Framework. Work on the Framework began in December 2005.

Cooper Robertson told the regents that they could achieve the kind of growth they wanted, and maintain both green space and open space, without expanding the campus' geographic limits, which total about 550 acres. By taking one essential step—transforming parking on campus—they could have their cake and eat it too. In the vision of the Framework, nearly all of the campus' sprawling surface parking lots would be changed into something else. Cars would wind up in parking garages, most of which would have retail and other amenities on the ground floor, or satellite lots on the outer periphery of the campus. (For details on the first of the parking garages, see sidebar page 25.) The leftover space, which would be substantial, would be transformed into a series of "villages,"



**Below:** Map of the four proposed campus precincts as well as development parcels.  
**Top Right:** Map of proposed Arts Precinct.  
**Bottom Right:** Map of proposed Wheeler Street Precinct.  
**Opposite Page, Top Left:** Map of proposed Stadium Precinct.  
**Opposite Page, Top Right:** Map of proposed Professional Precinct.  
**Opposite Page, Bottom:** Artists' renderings of what the proposed new precincts might look like. Left to right: Arts Precinct, Wheeler Street Precinct, Professional Precinct, and Stadium Precinct.



each with its own identity.

In a somewhat oversimplified nutshell, the plan leaves the interior of the campus almost untouched, but radically transforms the school's edges by creating four precincts, each with a distinct character, but each combining academics with housing and retail, often in the same building.

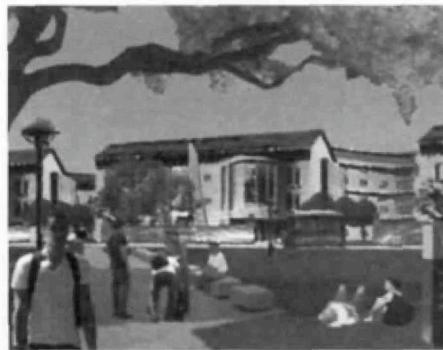
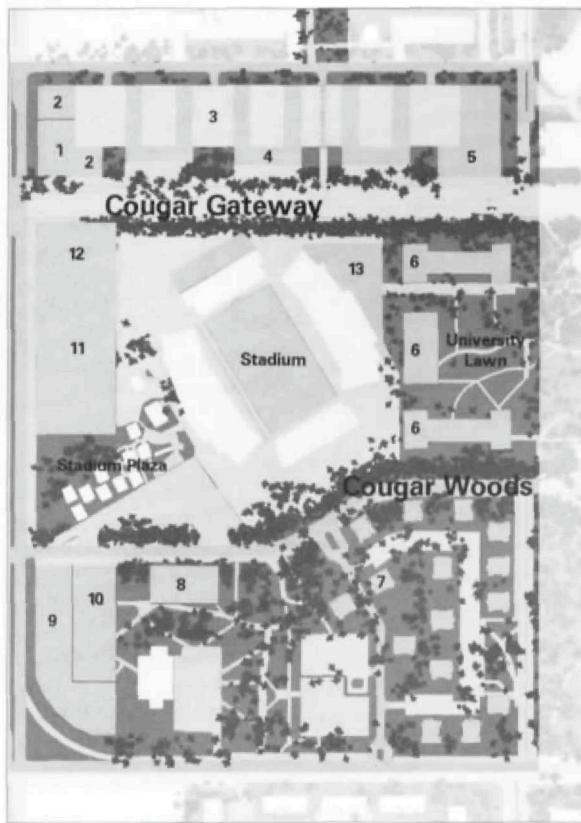
One precinct that could bring visitors from across town to the campus includes a 550,000-square-foot Art Village, proposed to be built in the parking lots between the College of Architecture Building and the Gulf Freeway. Along with the attractive green space already in place between the Moores School of Music and the Fine Arts Building, the Art Village is projected to include a sculpture courtyard, outdoor art studios, an outdoor amphitheater, and a student plaza. Loft apartment buildings with student housing and retail would be included, along with a parking garage with ground-floor retail.

Dave Irvin, the university's assistant vice president for facilities and plant operations, and perhaps the leading spokes-

man for the Framework, foresees a mix of private art galleries and cafes in the lofts and garage.

Graduate students and married students are expected to be attracted to Calhoun Village, at the north end of Calhoun in what is called the Professional Precinct. Calhoun Village, one of three suggested areas of commercial development, would contain some 100,000 square feet of first floor, continuous retail space on both sides of the street filled with tenants such as bookstores, outdoor cafes, and specialty shops. The Professional Precinct would add around 1,600,000 square feet to the campus itself—768,000 academic and 665,000 residential. Besides creating courtyards and quadrangles for the engineering, law, and business schools, the plan calls for mixed-use student housing, which would include academic and commercial space along with the residences.

In one example among many of campus greening, a re-routed Calhoun Street would enter an expanded park zone



along Brays Bayou, in effect absorbing the bayou's jogging trails and wooded spaces into the university. This parkland could be one place where Third Ward residents would feel welcome strolling in to explore the campus' new shops and walkways. Calhoun, says Irvin, would become "a destination."

The Wheeler Street Precinct would be built with undergraduates in mind. Its development would include student housing designed to look like low rise residential, in part to respect the nearby University Oaks neighborhood, which consists in large part of single family homes. There would also be academic space and retail designed to appeal to younger students. This area would extend into the Third Ward, and welcome the university's neighbors to shop and otherwise be a part of the community.

The Stadium Precinct contains what might be the Framework's most intriguing features. Cullen Boulevard would be closed to vehicular traffic between Elgin and Wheeler, creating a pedestrian

zone that would one day include a tree-lined stretch dubbed the Cougar Woods. Elgin between Cullen and Scott would be named the Cougar Way, and would be the chief pedestrian entry point into campus. Elgin would be open to cars, but would be expected to see a great deal of foot traffic as well after the street is lined with mixed-use buildings, including outdoor cafes.

The university's holdings on Scott Street would also be transformed by mixed-use buildings, and by an intermodal transit station where the new Metro University light rail line is anticipated to reach the campus' outer edge. Shuttle buses would be used to ferry students from the light rail stop into the university's interior. On Scott Street the university hopes to work with private developers, who, according to Irvin, are attracted by the coming rail line.

The Stadium Precinct would add almost 1,900,000 square feet to the university, including 730,000 square feet of housing and retail, and 1,158,000

of academic. A large plaza would be constructed on the Scott Street side of Robertson Stadium.

While major changes would take place on the university's outer edges, the interior of the campus would remain recognizable to current students. Some building would take place, but mostly to create plaza-like "quads" around existing buildings. While such quads are not new to the university, the Framework plan would add to those already in place. One of the first examples of this Framework-inspired quad-building—the Cesar Pelli-designed Science Engineering Research and Classroom complex, which is built around a green square and a fountain—opened last fall. (For more on the complex, see story page 26.)

University representatives are uniformly excited by the Framework's promise of giving the "anti-memorable" campus an identity and sense of place. Irvin says the developments would "make the campus interesting and exciting, and will differentiate UH from

Lubbock and Stillwater."

Phillip Anketell sounds mildly amused when he thinks about how the University of Houston, "only three miles from downtown Houston, has tried to pass itself off as Penn State." Why, he asks, "should we create a suburban setting" that goes dead during long stretches of the day and night? By mixing uses, he notes, large parts of the campus would remain urban and lively even when classes are out.

Anketell also says that though the university is not a pioneer in developing a mixed-use campus—Atlanta's Georgia Institute of Technology and several West Coast universities have added such components—he doesn't know of any campus that has done so to the extent outlined by the Framework.

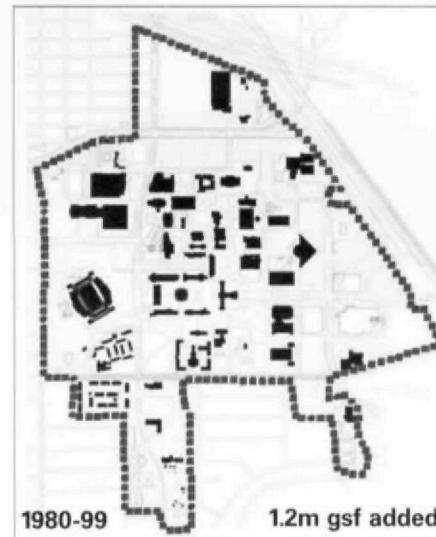
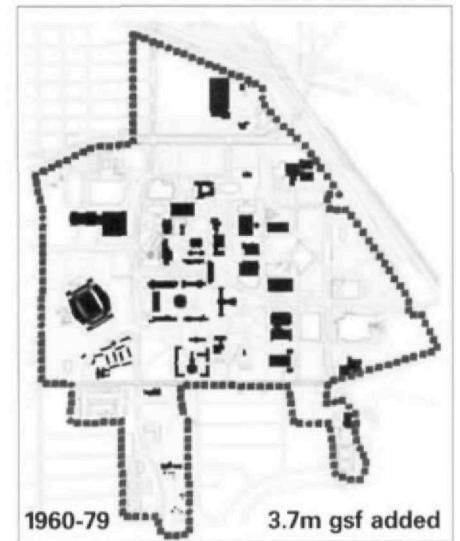
While the University of Houston's excitement over its Framework is understandable, so is the skepticism that a Houstonian might feel upon hearing about it. Anyone who has been waiting to see what kind of development the light



Photo by Frank White

**Above:** Students from the university's college of architecture work on the computer-generated model of the Framework master plan.

**Above Right:** Maps showing the growth of the University of Houston campus by decades.



rail line would create along Main Street, or longing to see a backhoe gouging up asphalt around Minute Maid Park, might ho-hum the news from the University of Houston as mere drawings on paper, or, at best, carvings in plywood.

And the Framework is not, of course, the first master plan for the university. (Actually, in the publication that outlines the Framework it is not even described as a master plan, which is defined as "prescriptive and detailed," but rather as a plan that instead "provides a vision and the necessary ingredients to realize it." For most, though, the Framework is seen as a master plan, even if a general rather than a specific one.) The first campus master plan was conceived in 1937 by the St. Louis landscape architecture office of Hare and Hare. Like many campus designs of the period it was based on the concept of the academic quadrangle, with an overall organization essentially beaux-arts in character with open and closed spaces arranged along axes and cross-axes with formal focal points. The Cullen quadrangle is the best example of this era of campus building.

In the 1960s the university experienced

dramatic growth both in physical size and population. The 1966 campus master plan, influenced by the Victor Gruen plan for Fort Worth, provided for a ring of parking lots around the traditional, pedestrian-oriented campus. While the Hare and Hare plan of 1937 stressed defined architectural spaces, the pattern that followed was much more diagrammatic, with free-standing buildings sited along pedestrian and vehicular circuits in an ever-expanding field of parking lots, resulting in the University of Houston as it is today.

Subsequent campus plans have tried to synthesize aspects of the traditional Hare and Hare plan with the commuter plan of 1966. The Framework, though, is less interested in a synthesis than in something new. As to skepticism about whether the ambition will be achieved, Dave Irvin acknowledges that "after a campus master plan is introduced and unveiled, it's usually placed on a shelf." But where the Framework is concerned, he says, "we are already implementing some of its key parts." The first of the new parking garages has opened, and the transformation of Calhoun Street is underway, with landscaping, ornamental pavers, benches,

and other elements being added to the roadside, and two of Calhoun's six lanes being eliminated between University Drive and the Law Center. And the first stage of a new student plaza in front of M.D. Anderson Library is scheduled to be completed soon. (The library itself was recently renovated.)

Irvin describes a basic difference between the university's Framework and other, more chimerical plans. "Most plans fail because of a lack of funding and political will," he says. But according to Irvin, the University of Houston has both. "The plan has been developed by our regents and advancement people with an eye to what is economically and politically possible," he says. Irvin doesn't name names, but he says that the university has approached possible donors with the Framework in hand, and that the donors "made commitments that they'll want to announce in their own time."

The Framework has also been created with the surrounding neighborhood in mind. According to Anketell, State Representative Garnet Coleman—who by some accounts has been instrumental in slowing the pace of Midtown develop-

ment in an effort to prevent Third Ward gentrification—is on board with the University of Houston's plan, and other community leaders have been consulted as well. "They want to see the neighborhood develop," says Anketell.

Irvin says that in the next year to year and a half, more components of the Framework will be completed. Cullen will be closed. A 1,000-bed mixed-use development on Calhoun will be open. Half a dozen buildings, he says, are in design and should soon break ground. It appears that the Framework is well on its way from vision to reality, though the breadth of the Framework plan will clearly take more than a few buildings to implement. Nonetheless, the idea of the Framework has already resulted in some surprises. As College of Architecture Dean Mashburn points out, the regents are relying heavily on architecture to sell the new idea of the university to the city and donors.

"Architecture and planning will be emblems for the capital campaign," he says, sounding a little dazzled. And who can blame him? After all, how many massive Houston projects have been sold on the basis of architecture and planning? ■