



Urban Loft Townhomes (Robert Casares, 2004) at US 59 and Montrose.

Freeway as Landscape : Living on the edge

BY NONYA GRENADER

IT TAKES A CITY LIKE HOUSTON, with its love of all things new, to turn the freeway into landscape. In the absence of natural topography, the rise and fall of overpasses has begun to fill a picture-window view, however improbably. How did a transportation system long shunned by neighborhoods for its traffic noise and attendant air pollution move to front and center?

When the Gulf Freeway opened its initial section in 1948, it was admired as a convenient way to “get us there,” but only if you were located at one of its ends. Being “near there” or “on the way to there” meant accepting the freeway’s aesthetics and consequences. Whether path to or edge of, the freeway had the power to obliterate homes, divide communities, alter property values, mobilize neighborhoods, and activate environmental groups.

The Eastex Freeway (US 59 North) opened in 1953, cutting a swath through the eastern edge of downtown, obliterat-

ing landmarks such as the West End Ballpark and slicing through the residential Fourth Ward. In his comprehensive study *Houston Freeways*, Erik Slotboom documents the development of this complex transportation network. While generally praising Houston’s system, he makes small but significant note of the anti-freeway movement in the ’70s: “Opposition to the Gulf Freeway expansion focused on the displacement of homes in the predominantly black, low-income neighborhood adjacent to the freeway.” But the fervent opposition did not halt the momentum.

Later freeways continued to indiscriminately cut through the city’s established neighborhoods. The West Loop divided parts of Bellaire, looming over backyards and causing such an outcry that massive “sound walls” were devised to soften the blow. Never mind that sound, regardless of a barrier



wall, finds its path. Though these neighborhoods continued to prosper, the lots closest to the freeway suffered a loss in property values.

Even a historic pedigree did not ensure protection. The former Ross Sterling house at 4515 Yoakum Boulevard (originally built in 1916 by the Russell Brown Company as a speculative venture) was situated at the end of a once secluded and picturesque street. When Sterling moved in several years later, he commissioned Alfred C. Finn (and Finn's designer, Jordan Mackenzie) to design a grand porch. In *The Houston Architectural Guide*, Stephen Fox describes the distinctive addition as "a wide-span, reinforced concrete structure bracketed by a cantilevered canopy on the north end and an inglenook on the south, framed by a bulbous concrete column." Currently preserved and occupied by a law firm, the once privileged outlook of that porch is

now a view into the underbelly of US 59 South. Separated by approximately 50 feet and 50 years, the column supports of both porch and freeway are rendered in the same material and address ideas about mass, but they couldn't be more different.

The Sterling house is literally faced with the visual noise that accompanies freeways. A hundred-foot-tall light tower rises across the street, and an intimidating "Houston Gets Dumped" billboard dominates the backyard. Gatsby's valley of ashes with Doctor Eckleburg's "persistent stare" comes to mind. Recently (and thankfully for this distinguished but beleaguered house), the aesthetic and environmental arguments for rebuilding the freeway below grade have won out, and a new view is beginning to be realized along this stretch of 59.

The presence of a freeway may compromise quality of life on residential edges, but it also provides the muscle to

generate development along its periphery. For a retail strip, fronting the freeway is a plus—each store is its own advertisement, at eye level with passing cars. And the closer to an entrance or exit it is, the more desirable the location. Residential development coming in after the freeway has tended to turn its back, but in recent years a significant shift in attitude has occurred between the sacred and the profane. A view of the freeway has become not only acceptable but also profitable for developers.

Directly behind the Sterling house, Urban Lofts Townhomes has embraced this trend with industrial-strength façades bravely facing US 59. The units, with horizontal metal cladding and sawtooth roof profiles, mimic the traffic flow. Urban Lofts has multiple locations at Houston's freeway edges and has expanded to other cities such as Dallas and Atlanta. Developer Larry Davis

welcomes the design challenge of working on these sites. (As a measure of his success, Davis notes that he has recently sold to his 60th architect.) He confronts the freeway noise with details such as a double-pane window system (laminated with tempered glass) and additional strip soundproofing in the walls. In his own office on the freeway, he says he enjoys the visual activity of a constantly changing scene, "remarkably, without the accompanying noise."

At its largest scale, the freeway has sociological implications: "Inside the Loop" or "outside the Loop" has become a measure of one's affinity for city living versus suburban living. Now there is "on the Loop."

At the intersection of US 59 and the 610 Loop, the upscale Broadstone Uptown Lofts dominate most of a block. At the Broadstone, roughly half of the units face an interior courtyard/swim-



MacGregor Apartments (Feinberg Design Collaborative, 2004) on State Highway 288.



Broadstone Uptown Lofts (Steinberg Design Collaborative, 2003) at US 59 and the 610 Loop.

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ming pool and are named for impressionist painters. The brochure describes these inward-facing units as “a more traditional picture of urban living to enhance your personal privacy.” Though the freeway is downplayed in the marketing material, the units facing US 59 and the West Loop are described as “modern, large scale lofts [that] paint a more abstract approach to apartment living” and are named for contemporary artists. A prominent corner loft, “the Rauschenberg,” has a freeway vista. Though it is doubtful that Rauschenberg would approve of his name on the unit, he might appreciate the view.

The edge of the vast MacGregor apartment complex runs parallel to State Highway 288. The sales packet describes the development as “Sophisticated. Smart. Upwardly mobile. A welcome, tranquil escape for busy inner loop professionals.” Unit types are dispersed throughout the project, and apartments on Highway 288 range from a one-bedroom at \$900

to a two-bedroom, two-bath at \$1,575 per month. These apartments do not shy away from the view with their large windows, operable French doors, and abbreviated balconies.

What has caused this change in attitude? Has the desire to live close in created a housing market so lively that the search for sites has extended to more marginal areas? Though it seems that freeway frontage might offer a more economical tract of land, developer Davis has not found that to be one of the advantages. With a 25-foot setback, the available building envelope on the freeway is more restricted than other possible sites and, in Davis’ experience, the price per square foot at the freeway’s edge is equal to many comparable interior lots.

Could there be a more progressive rationale in which developers and dwellers have come to appreciate the aesthetics of a concrete-filled scene? Reyner Banham, in his 1986 book *A Concrete Atlantis*, reflected on the influence of fac-

tories and grain elevators and celebrated the pioneering engineers who envisioned these modern and elegant concrete structures. Could the freeway, as an extension of that industrial landscape, offer compelling vistas? In the absence of a front yard or a more pastoral view, the freeway could become the inner city’s panorama.

After all, given an appropriate proximity (in spite of screening walls, window coverings, and double-pane glass), the presence of the freeway will relentlessly penetrate interior space. Fifteen years ago, the architectural firm Wittenberg Partnership designed a house that innovatively allowed and even welcomed the freeway to saturate the view. The house site was on Vassar Street, at the edge of a neighborhood that had suffered from the noise and visual imposition of US 59 South.

Wittenberg Partnership took a feisty “if you can’t beat it, join it” approach and wisely realized that the freeway, full of energy and brawn, was a force too

formidable to ignore. The design features large windows with views to US 59, celebrating the landscape much like Ed Ruscha’s photographs honor the Sunset Strip. Unlike some recent apartments and lofts that treat the implausible placement as a sort of default position driven by economic potential, the Wittenberg design perceptively framed the continuous horizon of lanes as urban scenery.

It remains to be seen if this recent development along the freeway’s edge (with an exit ramp at your doorstep) will continue at its current pace. In his book *A Sense of PLACE, A Sense of TIME*, J. B. Jackson, the astute observer of places ranging from the garage to the wilderness, acknowledged that roads belong in the landscape. But it continues to be a conflicted role. When Jackson noted, “In time, we will find our way and rediscover the role of architecture and man-made forms in creating a new civilized landscape,” it is doubtful he was anticipating densely packed condominiums perched above foothills of concrete. ■



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Sterling house (Alfred C. Finn, 1916) adjacent to US 59.



Sam Grenader

US 59 facing Sterling house.

Now there is "on the Loop."



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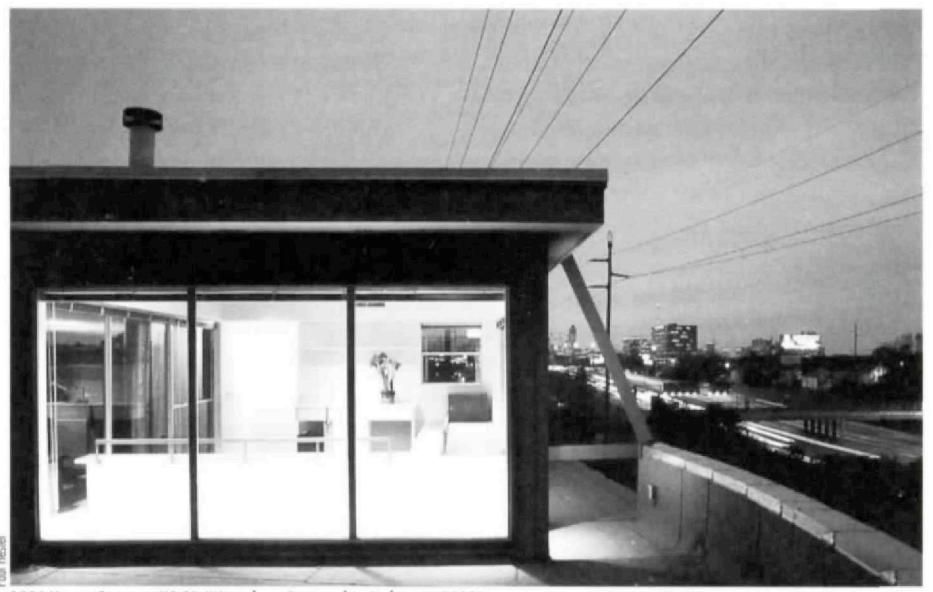
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