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From the Grassroots

The Greater Third Ward Community Plan

With a June 1993 request for proposals for comprehensive planning assistance, the Third Ward Redevelopment Council officially kicked off an ambitious, highly progressive, and long overdue effort to revitalize the greater Third Ward, an area of the inner city southeast of downtown that lies north of Old Spanish Trail, east of Main Street, south of Interstate 45, and west of (and including) the University of Houston. Predicated on community participation and privately funded by local benefactors, the project represents a unique and important grassroots planning effort in a city in which

seen as an infringement of the rights and privileges of the business elite.² The Greater Third Ward Community Plan may serve as a model for other local community activists and planners to emulate.

The main purpose of the nonprofit Third Ward Redevelopment Council is to coordinate the revitalization of the greater Third Ward. Officially established on 24 August 1992 and currently chaired by the

ning area was established to coordinate the effort.

The newly established Third Ward Redevelopment Council secured verbal commitments to the project and promises of financial support from Texas Southern University, the University of Houston, and the Texas Medical Center — the major institutions in the planning area.⁴ Resources and staff assistance have been

Third Ward, from which the Greater Third Ward Community Plan has emerged, is one of Houston's four original city council districts and oldest neighborhoods. Stephen Fox describes it in the *Houston Architectural Guide* as "a landscape that spatially depicts the development of Houston's Afro-American community from a culture formed under the impact of legal segregation to one that has won nominal equality."⁸ Despite persisting inequities and socioeconomic disparities, Third Ward remains a distinctive and culturally rich community, resonant with African American history, from which some of Houston's notable black leaders have emerged. The *Houston Press* characterized it as charming and historic, "one of the most fascinating areas in town," and designated it "Best Neighborhood" in the September 1994 Best of Houston issue.

Community planner Roberta Burroughs — a former Third Ward resident whose firm, Roberta F. Burroughs and Associates, was awarded the Greater Third Ward Community Plan contract in April 1994 — calls the neighborhood one of Houston's best-kept secrets. Burroughs, who has a background in sociology and urban planning, is well versed in community planning and committed to getting people involved in neighborhood redevelopment. Her firm's "asset-based planning" focuses on a community's strengths, seeking consensus on strategies for improving conditions in the neighborhoods as well as maintaining the healthy areas. Her planning team, which included program and policy evaluators Decision Information Resources, planner Sara Jane White, and the civil engineering firm Terra Associates, developed the plan in four phases. The planning process has been something of a laboratory for students and faculty from Texas Southern University and the University of Houston, who have participated in facilitating community meetings, surveying land use in the neighborhoods, and exploring urban design concepts for a linear greenway.

Phase one of the plan, completed in July 1994, involved setting goals and objectives and eliciting residents' opinions about existing conditions, the community's problems and potentials, and possible improvements. Housing, land use, economic development, transportation and circulation, community facilities, city services, human services, the arts, and community empowerment were identified as critical issues.⁹ Phase two reviewed and analyzed existing conditions. Strategies for addressing community problems and reinforcing community strengths were presented to the community for its feedback in draft form during phase three. Phase four consisted of refining the draft plan to reflect public response. The final plan was presented to the public on June 3 in a community celebration organized by the Third Ward Redevelopment Council and held at TSU.



These boarded-up shotgun houses will soon make way for single- and multifamily housing, to be built by a newly formed community development corporation in Third Ward.

development decisions typically descend from above. From the start the Third Ward Redevelopment Council made public involvement a key condition of the planning process, stating emphatically that "the plan must directly reflect the priorities of the residents and area civic organizations."¹

This from-the-bottom-up endeavor is especially significant for Houston, a city many sociologists and planners consider the antithesis of the planned city. The role of government in Houston has been to accommodate the needs of capital rather than community; conventional planning is

Rev. Manson Johnson, the council is a coalition of universities, hospitals, businesses, churches, civic organizations, and residents. It grew out of a series of breakfast forums held by Texas Southern University in 1990 to present a campus master plan to Third Ward stakeholders, during which concerns were voiced about issues affecting the quality of life in the community.³ It became apparent that a comprehensive plan was needed to develop effective strategies to address those issues and guide revitalization in Third Ward. A formal organization made up of representatives of community groups, businesses, and institutions from the plan-

provided by the city of Houston, Metro, and the University of Houston, and many local banks and foundations have contributed funds.⁵ Neighborhood churches and other civic groups and individuals are also collaborating with the council and its team of community planners.

The "greater" Third Ward addressed in the plan comprises 12 neighborhoods, several public parks, the medical center, and the campuses of TSU and UH⁶ and is adjacent to Midtown, downtown, and the East End.⁷ The planning area covers approximately eight square miles, roughly a third the size of Manhattan.

The council is planning an event in the late fall to kick off implementation of the plan.

In addition, the International Federation for Housing and Planning announced in October that a team of University of Houston architecture students (working under the direction of the author) earned first prize in the seventh annual International Student Design Competition for their project "A Greenway for the Greater Third Ward: Connecting Diverse Urban Communities," conceived as part of the Greater Third Ward Community Plan.

A comprehensive community plan serves as a guide for city officials, public agencies, and private interests planning for the growth, revitalization, and redevelopment of a community. Grassroots cooperative projects throughout the country have succeeded when undertaken in the spirit of cooperation and good faith. The Greater Third Ward Community Plan is an important example for shaping a vision of Houston for the next century that is responsive to the needs of all the city's citizens regardless of race, gender, or socioeconomic status. ■



Team leader Roberta Burroughs (third from right) and team member Mark Ingram (standing, left) discuss goals for circulation with Third Ward Redevelopment Council board members.



One of several modernist houses in Greater Third Ward.

NEIGHBORHOOD KEY

- 1 DEVONSHIRE/UNIVERSITY PLACE
- 2 ARDMORE
- 3 SOUTH END (BINZ)
- 4 RIVERSIDE TERRACE/WASHINGTON TERRACE
- 5 THIRD WARD
- 6 SOUTHWOOD/NORTH MacGREGOR
- 7 PARKWOOD DRIVE/SOUTH MacGREGOR
- 8 SOUTHLAND
- 9 OAK MANOR/UNIVERSITY WOODS
- 10 UNIVERSITY OAKS
- 11 WEST MacGREGOR
- 12 TIERWESTER/CANFIELD OAKS/COLLEGE OAKS



THE NEIGHBORHOODS OF GREATER THIRD WARD



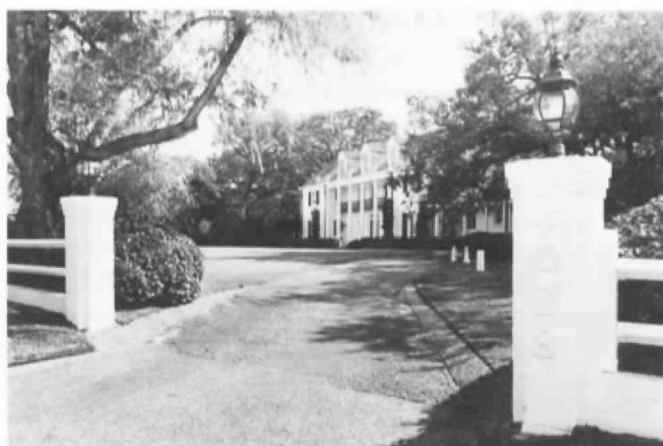
The intersection of Scott and Blodgett (near Texas Southern University and the University of Houston) is a terminus of one of several "economic revitalization corridors."



Calvary Baptist Church, 3019 Dennis, 1947, in the Third Ward neighborhood.



Second Pleasant Grove Baptist Church, 3317 Francis, is one of nearly 40 churches in Greater Third Ward.



House on South MacGregor Way in the Riverside Terrace neighborhood.

1 Third Ward Redevelopment Council, "Requests for Proposals for Comprehensive Planning Technical Assistance for the Greater Third Ward Community," June 1993, p. 6.

2 Stella M. Capek and John I. Gilderbloom, *Community Versus Commodity: Tenants and the American City* (Albany: State University of New York, 1992). In chapter 6, "Cities Without Urban Grass-Roots Movements: The Case of Houston," the authors compare Houston with Santa Monica to demonstrate the possible consequences of each city's approach to governing.

3 Third Ward Redevelopment Council, "Requests for Proposals," June 1993, p. 3.

4 *Ibid.*, p. 4.

5 Donors to the Greater Third Ward Community Plan include Bank of America, Bank of Houston, Bank One, Texas N.A., Bank United, the Brown Foundation, Compass Bank, Enterprise Bank, Guaranty Federal Bank, the Houston Endowment, Inc., NationsBank, the Shell Oil Foundation, Southwest Bank of Texas, Southwestern Bell Telephone Company, Tenneco, Inc., and Texas Commerce Bank.

6 The 12 neighborhoods are Third Ward, Binz, Riverside Terrace-Washington Terrace, Southwood-North MacGregor Oaks, Tierwester-Canfield Oaks-College Oaks, Oak Manor-University Woods, University Oaks, West MacGregor, Parkwood Drive-South MacGregor, Southland, Ardmore, and Devonshire-University Place. Hermann Park, the Brays Bayou hike and bike trail, and MacGregor Park are the major parks. See Roberta F. Burroughs and Associates with Decision Information Resources, Inc., and Sara Jane White, AICP, Inc., "Third Ward Community Plan Background Report: Population, Employment, Housing," October 1994, p. 19.

7 Burroughs and Associates, "Greater Third Ward News," April 1994.

8 Stephen Fox, *Houston Architectural Guide* (American Institute of Architects-Houston Chapter and Herring Press, 1990), p. 144.

9 Burroughs and Associates, "Greater Third Ward News," December 1994.