



Guadalupe Plaza, Houston. Clinton Drive entrance looking toward El Mercado parking lot and El Mercado.

but the architectural realization ignores this potentially provocative source of form in favor of a generic array of "Hispanic" postmodern elements, deployed like so many toys. Perhaps a thematically resonant work of public art would help the plaza transcend the conventional qualities of its built components as well as strengthen its civic identity. The recent controversy surrounding the proposed installation of Luís Jimenez, Jr.'s *Southwest Pietà* in Albuquerque's historic Old Town and its subsequent installation in that city's Martineztown/Longfellow Park illustrates the potential for such work to galvanize space and a community.²

Reyna Caragonne Architects' Plaza Guadalupe in San Antonio (*Cite*, Spring 1986, p. 16) provides an instructive basis for comparison with Houston's Guadalupe Plaza. The one-acre, \$1.7 million plaza was completed in two phases between 1984 and 1987 as part of an extended, community-based effort to revitalize San Antonio's Guadalupe Avenue and the surrounding low-income Hispanic neighborhood. Since the early 1980s, the Avenida Guadalupe Association along with the city of San Antonio has undertaken a master plan that in addition to the plaza includes a privately developed medical office building, completed last spring, and the Guadalupe Cultural Arts Center, an adjoining cinema successfully renovated as a performing arts and exhibition space, whose offices now spill over into a building across the street. Long-range plans include continued expansion of the arts center and renovation of low-income housing in the area. The neighborhood association has just completed a 20,000-square-foot row of street-front shop spaces across Avenida Guadalupe from the plaza that will be occupied by merchants in time for Christmas.

Both Plaza Guadalupe and Guadalupe Plaza offer outdoor performance areas as central elements, and both feature an assortment of incidental structures such as trellises, freestanding arcades, walls, and entryways. But Plaza Guadalupe is architecturally somewhat more sophisticated, if at times overwrought (evidenced particularly in the premature deterioration of fussy details) and still dependent on a generic postmodern vocabulary. Smaller in scale and more densely arranged, it successfully links Guadalupe Avenue with the nearby Our Lady of Guadalupe Church by a succession of outdoor spaces cut through a block. These are intended to be enclosed by buildings on either side. Guadalupe Plaza, on the other hand, is sited and sized more like a front lawn. Because it is isolated from its surroundings its ability to serve as an urban public place is compromised.

Both plazas raise questions about the ability of civic spaces to contribute to the revitalization of neighborhoods. Both depend almost entirely on programmed events for public activity because neither is particularly conducive to daily and spontaneous interaction – a deficiency that, in the case of Plaza Guadalupe, may be remedied once the row of shops across the street is occupied. The spirited, nurturing vision of the Avenida Guadalupe Association has motivated and sustained the project thus far, boding well for its future. Plaza Guadalupe shows the virtue of small-scale, incremental interventions that grow out of viable neighborhood contexts. But in the case of Guadalupe Plaza, El Mercado's ability to generate daily activity seems doubtful. Even the plaza's occasional use is problematic, given its tenuous link not only to the East End but to El Mercado itself.

Houston has experienced persistent difficulty in managing community development funds and thinking in neighborhood terms – monumentally so in the case of El Mercado, for which initial feasibility studies recommended only 70,000 square feet of retail space, roughly one-sixth of what was finally developed.³ Even as enthusiastic a supporter of El Mercado as Bodmer admits that "the renovation of a large complex such as El Mercado and the addition of Guadalupe Plaza will not be sufficient to stabilize the area in the long run."⁴ Nor does the creation of a tax abatement district in May 1988, embracing El Mercado along with other depressed Second Ward real estate, seem sufficient to overcome fundamental problems of location and community ties.⁵ One wonders if, all along, the more reasonable course would have been to take both plaza and market to the community, instead of attempting the reverse. ■

Notes

- 1 Luís Bodmer, "El Mercado del Sol: Pioneering Redevelopment Solutions in Houston," typed manuscript.
- 2 William Peterson, "Luís Jimenez, Jr.: *Southwest Pietà*," *Artspace* 12, no. 3 (Summer 1988), pp. 62-64.
- 3 Susan Allen, "The Rise and Fall of El Mercado," *Houston Business Journal*, 27 October 1986, p. 1.
- 4 Bodmer, "El Mercado."
- 5 City of Houston ordinance no. 88697, May 4, 1988.

Citespecific

Gulf Gate

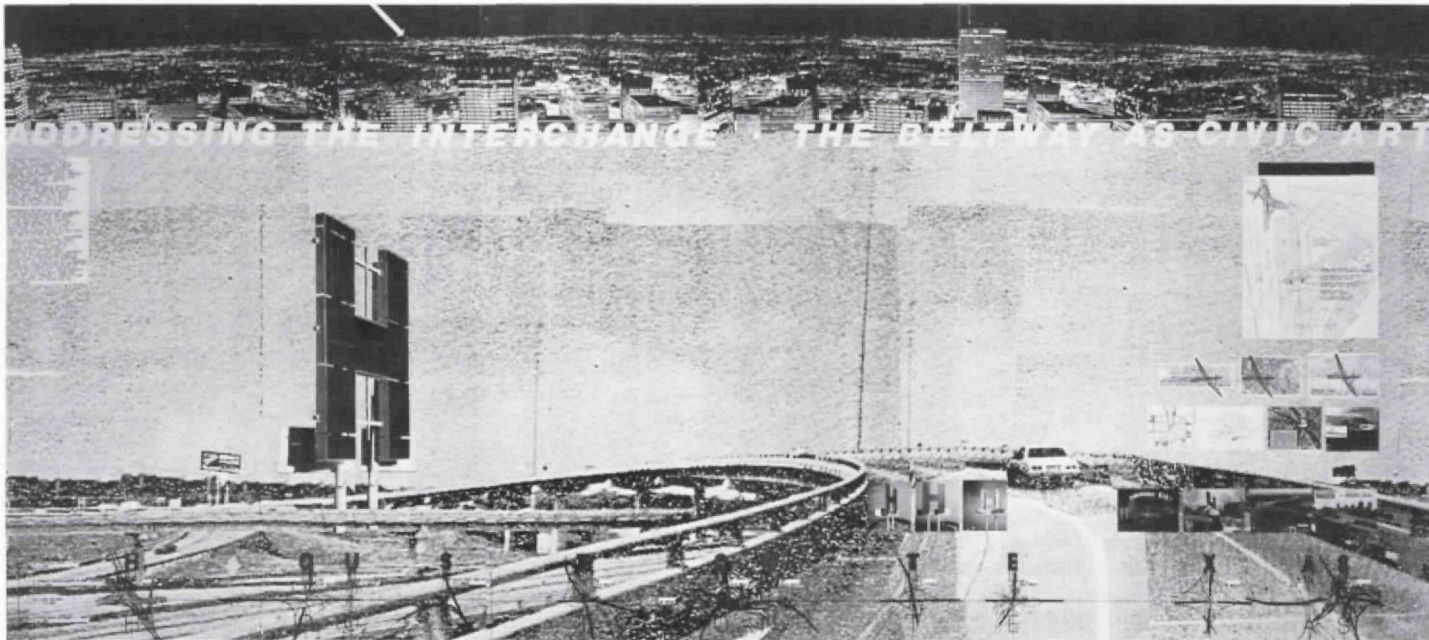
Missed Metaphors at the Gulf Freeway – Loop 610 Interchange Design Competition

Drexel Turner

City gates are a comparatively recent feature of the American landscape, a byproduct of the creativity of Dwight Eisenhower, whose genius as architect of the interstate highway system managed to surround virtually every locality possessed of at least one shopping mall and a chamber of commerce with a loop road that enabled motorists to transit the city without ever passing through it. The new highways also ran to and through the centers of cities, usually propped up on stilts like low-riding Augustinian aqueducts, penetrating the loops to form rudimentary if inadvertent gates. The loop roads constituted perhaps the most spectacular transformation of the national topography since Jefferson's Cartesian partition of trans-Appalachia. Coiled around city after generic city like multi-laned cousins of the long-discarded ramparts of European capitals, they rounded out whole pages of the urban atlas with a template efficiency that Rand McNally could only envy.

Shopping malls were far less plentiful then than now, a deficiency Eisenhower's highways also corrected. For wherever the loop roads and main highways came together, spaghetti-like interchanges resulted, soon attended by shopping malls in one or several of the corners of the newly dissected and excited real estate. Daunting as Eisenhower's vision was, the highways and loop-sided city gates were marked by a certain sameness and predictability that merged not unsmoothly with the memory of the sponsor-general himself. But to a





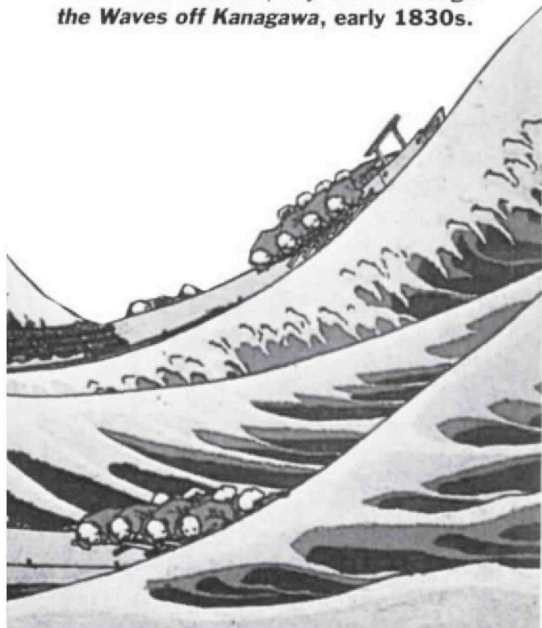
John Forney, John Bastian, and Richard Torchia, Gulf Freeway – Loop 610 Competition entry, 1989.

populace that no longer glides through these 50-mile-an-hour mazes in Buicks and Edsels but in Japanese imitations of Porsches dealer-prepped for MTV they appear oppressively “retro,” much as a longstanding breach in the Aurelian wall must have struck Pius IV when he summoned Michelangelo to fashion the Porta Pia as a more seemly conduit for a new, improved papal avenue.¹

A kindred urge to fast-forward at least one small stretch of Houston’s piece of the universal Eisenhower memorial evidently seized the Department of Landscape Architecture at Texas A&M University last fall. With the sponsorship of the Texas Department of Highways and Public Transportation and the National Endowment for the Arts, it organized a competition for the embellishment of the intersection of the Gulf Freeway (Interstate 45) and Loop 610 in Houston, expectantly titled “Urban Freeway Interchange as Art.” Not long before, the city of Los Angeles had staged a competition to elicit a West Coast equivalent of the Statue of Liberty astride the Hollywood Freeway where it passes between Little Tokyo and the Hispanic Pueblo. The winning entry (“Steel Clouds” by Studio Asymptote) was an overhead deconstructivist colossus, the heavy-metal apparatus of which, if ever built, would add yet another element of seismic suspense to everyday freeway roulette.²

The first-prize entry in the Houston competition (“Blue Shadows” by Studio Zero, a collaboration affecting the name of a more elementary mathematical

Katsushika Hokusai, *Fuji Seen Through the Waves off Kanagawa*, early 1830s.



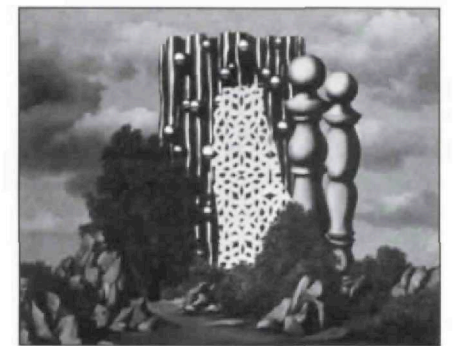
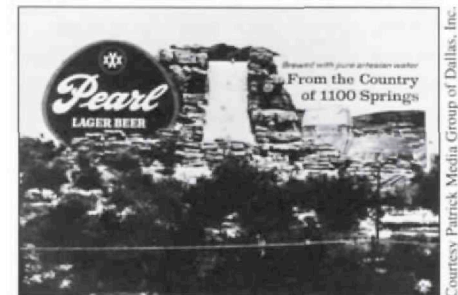
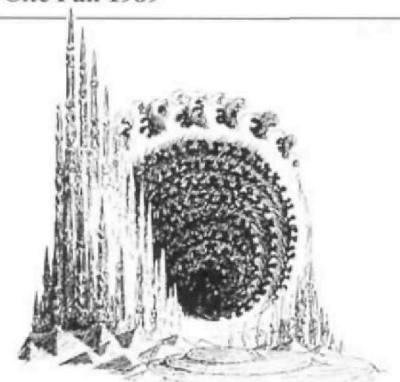
construct) was less fashionable and threatening, though similarly enigmatic.³ Chief among its assortment of built and landscape elements (scored, according to its creators, like a string quartet) was a celestial whirligig composed of an 80-foot-long rotating “conductor” arm held aloft on a 150-foot-high pole to alert passersby to solstices and equinoxes. The rest of the entries included a fairly predictable range of laser plumes, lightning fields, mastabas of crushed automobiles and tires, and special-frequency radio tune-ins, as well as a proposal to mark all 12 interchanges ringing the city on Loop 610 with giant letters, one to a site, spelling H-O-U-S-T-O-N T-E-X-A-S – a Venturi-effect, perhaps too BASCO for local consumption, which its proponents advanced with a motto from James M. Cain, “A place is only as good as its sign.”⁴

Behind every good sign is a good name, however remote the connection. None of the more than 40 Houston competition entries took notice of the nominal genius of the site as a way station on the road to Galveston and the Gulf of Mexico. This connection, though 50 miles distant, had not been lost on the developers of the property at the southwest corner of the interchange, who chose to call their enterprise, the city’s first freeway-side shopping mall, Gulfgate. The problem, therefore, would seem to be to put the right sign in the right place, something capable of making a bigger splash, perhaps in the form of miniature Gulf. The first city with a sign that points toward the sign for the job is Dallas, several hundred miles farther up Interstate 45, where an aquatic billboard has occupied the bluffs above the Stemmons Expressway since 1962 featuring a man-made waterfall of real water that initially promoted Pearl Beer (“Brewed with pure artesian water/ From the Country of 1100 Springs”). The sign’s affiliation with the down-home brewery has since fallen by the wayside and is now transferred, waterfall intact, to a clear-flowing imported vodka, in keeping with the yup-scale progression of marketing demographics in Dallas.⁵

Even Sixtus V, the Robert Moses of Baroque Rome, was not averse to mixing water effects with traffic, and so caused the approach to the Porta Pia to be elaborated by the Aqua Felice. But the Via Pia was a fairly narrow passage compared to the ten lanes and multiple ramps of the Gulf Freeway and Loop 610, just as the gentle lapping of the

Aqua Felice would scarcely project above the incessant traffic at the Gulf Gate interchange today, whether stalled or free-flowing. The Pearl billboard waterfall in Dallas is perched well above its expressway audience, but the Gulf Gate interchange, spread over flat coastal prairie, offers no topographical leg up, so whatever seeks to command the spot must do so at more or less the implied scale of the Magic Mountain at Disneyland, Hans Luckhardt’s melted Alpine fantasy, or Hokusai’s giant wave off Kanagawa. But since, as Oscar Wilde observed, “to be natural is such a difficult pose to keep up,” to say nothing of the effort required to make water run uphill, one might forsake the hydraulic short-fall naturalism of the Pearl billboard for the more spectacular faux-form falls of Magritte’s imagining or the luminescent, electronic sublime of the Pepsi-Cola waterfall that lately graced Times Square. Perhaps a pair of waves would promote a sufficient aspect of procession, parted so that one could pass through, like Claes Oldenburg’s *Colossal Knees* proposed for the Victoria Embankment. The surface of the waves could come alive at night with a crawling pattern of fish and sea creatures unimagined by Hokusai but folded easily enough into (or onto) Grand Marnier’s “Ocean of Grandeur.” Another option is to consider the interchange as a sort of drive-through Cornell box, a sea-farm cross section with fish suspended from an ocean-top datum bar on which boats could be perched.

The notion of embellishing highway interchanges extends back at least to the first century A.D., when at the outskirts of Rome the Emperor Claudius devised the Porta Maggiore to carry the Aqua Claudia and the Aqua Anio Novus across the Via Labicana and the Via Praenestina, a feat Palladio and Piranesi both found awesome enough to record in drawings. In our own time, the perpetrators of Archigram offered to settle a circuslike variant of “Instant City” at the intersection of the Santa Monica and San Diego freeways in Los Angeles (1969), but found no takers. Ettore Sottsass and Marco Zanini have proposed to absorb a rotary for Milan into a building scheme at the Piazzale Loreto (1985), a project distantly related to John Barrington Bayley’s coliseumlike arrangement of Columbus Circle (1958). Similarly, Léon Krier has proposed to camouflage an interchange in Piraeus, the harbor of Athens, with all manner of herbage (1977). But the most promising route for interchanges, if they are amenable to

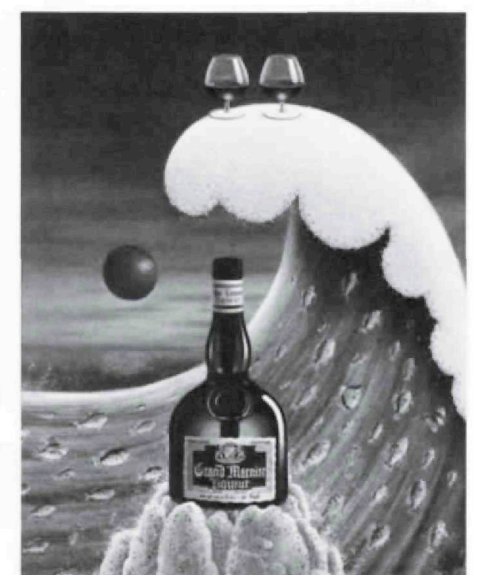


Top: Hans Luckhardt, “Fantasy in Form,” c. 1920. Middle: Pearl billboard, Stemmons Expressway, Dallas, 1962. Bottom: René Magritte, *Annunciation*, 1930. Tate Gallery.

intervention at all, perhaps lies outside the bounds of public taste. Which is why it might be better to lease the Gulf Gate sight byte to Sea World or Disney, and wave goodbye to the highwaymen. ■

Notes

- 1 Elisabeth B. MacDougall, “Michelangelo and the Porta Pia,” *Journal of the Society of Architectural Historians* 19, no. 3 (October 1960), pp. 97-108.
- 2 Mark Alden Branch, ““Steel Clouds” Stirs L.A. Debate,” *Progressive Architecture*, February 1989, pp. 22-23. “Steel Clouds” was the work of Hani Rashid and Lisa Ann Couture of New York; its construction cost was estimated at \$33 million.
- 3 “Blue Shadows” was the work of architect John Brown and artist Michael Knudsen of Calgary and architect Mark Hults of Dallas; its construction is projected to cost \$500,000. Accounts of the competition include Ray Don Tilley, “Bringing Art to the Freeway Vernacular,” *Texas Architect*, May-June 1989, p. 6; Ann Holmes, “Interchange With Art,” *Houston Chronicle*, 25 March 1989; and Jerry Laws, “Racing Imaginations Collide, Erupt Into Freeway Art Work,” *Houston Post*, 13 March 1989.
- 4 From *The Postman Always Rings Twice*. This entry, called “Beltway as Civic Art,” was the work of architects John Forney and John Bastian and artist Richard Torchia, of Philadelphia. The proposal’s giant letters all faced in toward the center of the city to be read from skyscrapers downtown, as if learning from the Porta Pia, which also faced inward in opposition to established practice for city gates.
- 5 Jennifer Tucker, “Purely Dallas: The Hay-Tech Waterfall – Down by the City’s Old Billboard Stream, Advertisements Spring Eternal,” *Dallas Times Herald, Dallas City Magazine*, 14 July 1985, pp. 14-15. Constructed at a cost of \$125,000, the rocks are made of hay; the “fall” requires 1.5 million gallons of recycled water.



Magazine advertisement, 1989.