

Houston's R/UDAT Redux

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Regional and Urban Design Assistance Team (R/UDAT) is a program sponsored by the American Institute of Architects to provide guidance to cities on issues of urban design and planning. Teams come from outside the city being visited and typically consist of ten or so individuals representing a broad range of expertise. They conduct their task in an intense workshop setting that lasts three or four days, concluding with a public report.

The R/UDAT team that visited Houston between 20 and 23 April 1990 included land use attorneys, transportation and environmental planners, and authorities on constitutional law and public policy from across the nation. Their charge, agreed to in discussions with community groups, city officials, and representatives of the mayor, was to consider the question, "How will Houston create a flexible, comprehensive planning system?"

The final report – available from the AIA – calls on the city to "implement a comprehensive planning process at the 'Sector' scale with land use regulation determined by the sector" and to "establish a process for city coordination of metropolitan systems (transport, utilities, open space/ environmentally sensitive areas) and capital improvement programs." It recommends that the mayor's Land Use Strategy Committee lead the strategic planning effort and establish a strategic planning workshop to prepare an "action agenda" for the city that would include such issues as forming a "metropolitan vision," stabilizing threatened neighborhoods, and implementing sector planning.

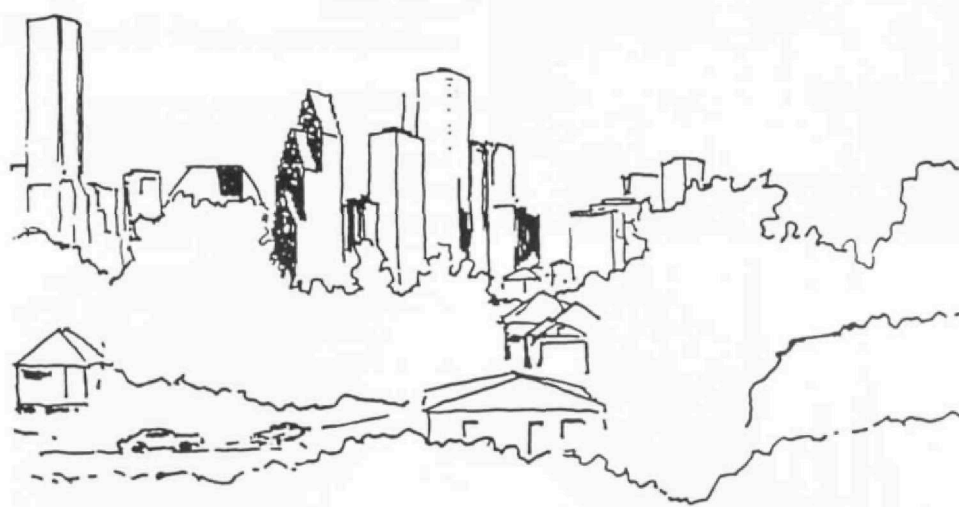
In response to Mayor Whitmire's statement – "I see the Houston of the 1990s as a place of prosperity, of new growth, of a solid and diverse economy. We'll assume our place of prominence, as one of the world's leading cities" – the team felt that such optimism suggested the need to create "a broad vision-setting process" that should engage Houstonians in thoughtful dialogue about the region's overarching growth goals and principles. The results of such a process could become the road map to guide debate on ways to fulfill economic development objectives to create economic vitality that will serve all sectors of its community.

The report is, perhaps by necessity, too general and does not reflect the many creative exchanges between team members and city and community leaders, yet the overall result of the R/UDAT visit has been to complement and inform the several ongoing debates on the control of land use.

Let me try to add some perspective and challenge to the "broad vision setting process" that the report calls for.

Consider the art of making the American city – the provision and division of what are still seen as limitless fields of enterprise to accommodate the aspirations of an infinity of free wills, and the development of these fields into states of highest and best use, a relative condition whose only effective measure is profitability, and whose necessary condition is freedom from constraint. The American city has evolved to become the most vital as well as the most perplexing instrument of the political and social project – yet I believe that the underlying character of cities such as Houston is potentially much closer to Jefferson's dream of freedom in order than the history-burdened cities of the East.

These old cities of the East share with Europe a sense of a present always in the shadow of the past; Houston and other new American cities are formed in the potential of a continually unfolding future. The European city uses architecture as an instrument to establish the rule of governments, gods, and kings. Once constructed, such structures maintain their influence long after their original significance has waned. The American city demands that architecture offer a continually changing experiment in the ennoblement and extension of the potential of the individual and the community. Where some regret the disorder and the fragmentation and the extremes of wealth and decay that mark so many American cities, they fail to realize that such qualities are inherent in the nature of the beast. The American city should never look like Paris or Rome. To be so constrained by the figures of history would be antithetical to the necessary dynamism of urban America.



However, much as one can enjoy the raw enterprise and vitality of the new American city, it does, at its worst, contain a serious flaw. This is when the sum fails to be more than the parts, when the public realm is diminished by overly selfish private enterprise. The idea of the public realm is more than the provision of parks and plazas; it is both the spatial and institutional infrastructures that support civic life. The dominance of private enterprise tends to form the city into isolated collections of corporate fiefdoms that produce an almost medieval sense of fragmentation. And citizens, unless they are threatened, are unaware that there are very few institutions or professions or public leaders who are at all concerned or imaginative about the evolution of the city's public realm. Some complain that the power brokers in Houston do not encourage broad participation in the shaping of the city. Whether participation is actively suppressed or simply not desired is unclear. Desire for public life must be provoked before the demands will be felt, and the major developers have little to gain by such stimulation. So where does the responsibility lie? It is an unhealthy situation when the majority of citizens in a population reaching two million is unaware of or uninterested in its power to demand the creation of inventive and responsive planning agencies, staffed by gifted individuals who are committed to improving and enhancing the quality of public life.

The great cities in America's future must represent a creative balance between private good and public good, between private enterprise and public enterprise. The same field of competition that exists within cities exists between cities, and those that fail to improve the quality of public life will suffer. The cultures of great cities are shaped publicly and actively, and to allow Houston to assume, as the mayor states, a "place of prominence as one of the world's leading cities" will require a much more intelligent and informed commitment within city government to the shaping of public culture.

The R/UDAT visit came to Houston during a time of unprecedented concern for the state of the city, surely the healthiest sign of recovery and new confidence. And R/UDAT and LUSC (the wonderfully breathy acronym for the Land Use Strategy Committee) and the Greenwood Committee have with wise professional advice considered all the legal and policing strategies that can be used to effect the formation of the city. Such a concern with means is appropriate, but it is the ends to which they are put that must concern us all. As a companion to these special-interest committees, wouldn't it be exciting for coalitions to be formed out of the diverse groups in the city? All the Little League organizations could come together with the runners and the Sunday basketball players to dream about the perfect sports and leisure environment that Houston could support; RDA members could join with the different players in the design community – from the architects to the florists – to nurture in all our imaginations landscapes of desire appropriate to the promise of this great sprawling city. They could be joined by a brigade of passionate retailers committed to bringing the same exuberance and invention to public life that they promote in their Fiestas and Le Peeps and on the terraces of Goodes.

However, these issues go much further than lifestyle. Houston is a mess of a city, more exciting than most, perhaps, but also uglier and more decayed than it need be. Unless there are arrangements that focus the energies of all the city's diverse and lively communities on strengthening the quality of public life – not for just better schools, better parks, better leisure facilities, but for stronger newspapers, stronger public institutions and agencies, and the means to provoke courageous and inspired visions of the possible – it will remain a city of unfulfilled promise. Just remember what Frank Lloyd Wright said about Houston. ■

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