

Houston from on High

Alex S. MacLean's photos show us the present. Can they also help us understand the future?

BY DAVID CROSSLEY

Everything in Alex S. MacLean's pictures appears still, even quiet. The water is frozen in place; the leaves on the trees don't move.

On the ground, our world is not like this. It's in constant motion: a hand brings a cell phone to an ear, a car veers away from another, fists wave in the air, particles fly off our tires. On the ground, our world is filled with noise.

We are busy creatures, and MacLean's pictures are windows on our busywork. As we explore them, we see that there is always evidence of people, always indications of our work. And as MacLean's images make clear, we have not had a light touch on the land.

Over the last several years, first as president of the Citizens' Environmental Coalition and now as president of the Gulf Coast Institute, I have had a particular interest in how we impact the land we live on, and how we arrange ourselves to do our work and have our fun. I've learned about the immensity of the watershed we live in, the confluence of forest, thicket, prairie, and marsh, the estuary system, the bays, the Gulf.

So it seems important to me to note that MacLean's photographs were taken in one of the most complex ecosystems in the nation, a place where the Great Northern Prairie comes to a tentative conclusion as it blurs into the Coastal Prairie, the Northern Forest, and the Coastal Marshes of the great Gulf Coast, all of which empty across an enormous watershed that pours largely into the Galveston Bay Estuary System, the second most productive such system in America. Within all of this an astonishing variety of life exists, providing the natural services that make our own lives possible.

Not many people know about the subsystems and interplay of diversity in our region, in part because it is not explained to children in schools. I don't see it in MacLean's work, but in other pictures, ones from space, the impact of our building on the region looks like a comet struck the ground just northwest of Galveston Bay. Intricate gray patterns spray out from its center. From space, all we see are roads and parking lots, the tops of the biggest buildings, malls, warehouses, industrial facilities, impervious surfaces that allow no water to penetrate the earth. At the center is the city of Houston proper, which stretches out to encompass 617 square miles in an extraterritorial jurisdiction of 1,888 square miles. The city commands a

region of development whose 13 counties cover 13,000 square miles.

In MacLean's pictures, we can see how freeway intersections have replaced trees and grass, divided communities and neighborhoods, brought heat and stress to our lives, provided places for collisions. In almost all the pictures the guiding principle of design seems to be how to accommodate cars and trucks. To architects and planners that may be old news, but I found it surprising.

One particularly striking MacLean photo, seen on the page opposite, looks toward the central business district from east of the city, down along Buffalo Bayou. In the middle of the picture heading left are a multitude of trees, implying neighborhoods protected by them. And in the distance is the core of it all, the often-glowing city center (although here it is disappointingly dull, on one of those

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ozone days). The central business district seems small from this perspective, and compared to the great cities of the world it is small. But there is space around that center, space for much more city than is presently there. Even if dense, skyward development could be confined to the section of Houston below Buffalo Bayou between U.S. 59 and I-45, the central district could be three or four times bigger than it now is. It's clear that Houston is a city that's not finished.

It's estimated that before long we're going to have 4.5 million more people in our region. The generation after next will live with double the population we have today. Where will those new people live? Do we have enough rooms? Enough cars?

There is so much work to be done. To help prepare for this growth we should be having intense and broad discussions

about the ecosystem and what infrastructure we will need within it to accommodate all those new neighbors. In the past, we haven't done that sort of planning in Houston. We haven't looked at the big picture. We've tended to build pieces, in isolation. Even the highways have been discussed, planned, designed, and engineered in pieces, as if they were not part of something larger. While it's clear that we have staked our claim to the spaces occupied by railways and roads, and said, okay, this is where transportation takes place, beyond that we have agreed on little.

Many other cities are furiously reinventing themselves with a single goal: to provide the quality of life that "knowledge workers" say they desire. Planners across the country are focused on reducing air pollution, preserving open space, reducing the impact of cars and people on the environment. We are not yet doing that.

The core of Houston's myth has been that we aren't interested in long-term visions, and that we don't do long-range planning. But that myth may have outlived its usefulness. The central question today is, do we continue the philosophy of serendipity that has brought us to where we are, or do we pause for a moment and talk about where we think we're going? Perhaps come to some agreement about at least a few basic principals?

There are a fair number of people in the area who are thinking about these broad issues. Recently, a presentation made to the Transportation Policy Council at the Houston-Galveston Area Council called for a new look at the process of regional planning. It examined current trends in development, which would produce a blanket of homes and stores spread diffusely but ubiquitously across the region, and compared them with the idea of focusing jobs and development around existing activity centers and infrastructure, among them the core city, business centers such as the Galleria and Greenspoint, and emerging municipalities such as Sugar Land and the Woodlands. This kind of growth could make more efficient use of land and existing infrastructure, and could make it easier and cheaper to provide transportation, sewer and water facilities, schools, services, and shops.

One problem in making such changes appears to be that our existing planning system, such as it is, has built into it the inability to easily shift direction. The prime example of this is highway planning. Even though there is a dwindling number of

experienced transportation strategists who believe it's a good idea to add ever more lanes of highway in big city regions, once the roadway money has started moving, it's almost impossible to stop it. Projects that are still two years away from being let to contractors are said to be a "done deal." The Katy Freeway expansion and the extension of the Grand Parkway are both typical of this, with significant concerns that they should not go forward, but a machine in motion that apparently can't be slowed and certainly not stopped.

The concept of a massive moratorium on new miles of roadway and new parking lots, much less the cutting down of trees to clear land for construction, is wishful thinking. But the idea is an appealing one, especially in the midst of a growing stormwater runoff problem, and an air quality problem that would be heavily impacted by the increased traffic new roads invite.

Still, we find our hope wherever we can, and I found it in a number of Alex MacLean's photographs. One shows a cluster of old buildings downtown; there's some rubble, and destruction is taking place, but two existing walls about four stories high are shored up by steel supports. Anyone who hates waste has to be thrilled to see this kind of care being taken, especially when you know very well that what's driving the work is the desire to make money, which means that somebody who's trying to make money sees value in those old walls.

And then there's another picture, one of a neighborhood inside Loop 610 where a sea of trees shade houses and other built structures. The cooling effect and the pollution mitigation of those trees is spectacular, wonderful. They help improve people's lives not just physically, but psychically. It's a kind of miracle that those trees are there, because if you could have an aerial photograph of that area 100 years ago, you would have seen miles of prairie, with hardly any trees. Nearly all of the vegetation in this very large area was put there by people.

On the ground, it can be hard to see very far. Perhaps one reason we may have had trouble seeing the big picture is that we haven't had enough big pictures to look at. That's one of the advantages of Alex MacLean's photos: they give us points of study while trying to decide where next to go. They are icons that could be lined up on a web page as buttons linking us to thousands of discussions about how we have grown, and how we should grow. ■

