



Thousands gathered this summer for the opening celebration of the Sabine-to-Bagby Promenade.

## Night Lights

BY NONYA GRENADER

A few years back, German filmmaker Wim Wenders observed a phenomenon about development in Houston that exists somewhere between invention and magic: the notion of discovery in unlikely urban spaces. As Wenders had it in his 1993 poem *Once*: "I spent some time in Houston, a strange place. Its new downtown area had just been conjured up out of nothing."

Houston has a well-established tradition of creating somethings from apparent nothings, as attested to by beloved and improbable environments such as the Orange Show and the Beer Can House, to mention only two well-known examples. That this tradition isn't limited to the past can be seen in a pair of more recent examples, the Aurora Picture Show and, at a larger scale, the Sabine-to-Bagby Promenade along Buffalo Bayou. More mysterious than Jeff McKissak's exuberant homage to the orange or John Milkovich's collage-like appreciation of aluminum beer containers, both offer unique settings where art and architecture converge. The Aurora, a micro cinema housed in an old church, is an intimate environment of personal expression. The Promenade is a vast gathering space attached to a formerly neglected network of bayou and freeway. Created by the Buffalo Bayou Partnership, it expresses less a personal vision than a public one.

It has, nonetheless, a sense of surprise. Fabricated from the stretch of bayou between Sabine and Bagby streets, the Blue Bayou Promenade (as it is also known) seemed to materialize with theatrical effect and, in a city with too few public spaces, its summer opening was a welcome event. Ten thousand

Houstonians gathered to celebrate the mix of landscape and lighting and stream down to the bayou edge to walk, eat, and listen to music. Light fixtures along the trail that track the lunar cycle by changing from white to blue and back each month indicated the evening's full moon. The opening events, which included a floating cinema with a 20-foot screen, activated the bayou fully.

Though opening night was festive, the Promenade is meant to offer a year round experience. Its real success will be determined by whether people return regularly to stroll along it. There's good reason for them to do so. By day, the native plants take Houston's heat, and by night the tall grasses catch a breeze. Each evening, blue lights attached to the freeway overhead illuminate its ribbed structure. Though the light source is bold, the strategy of placement is subtle—it takes a few minutes to realize how site specific the lighting is, with the illumination mapping the bayou's path. Not only effective from bayou level, the light can also be understood at a larger city scale. As you approach the area at 35 miles per hour along Allen Parkway, a blue vapor glow wafts from the freeway's edge, foreshadowing the bayou promenade below.

It is this connection to context that distinguishes the Blue Bayou Promenade from Houston's other gathering spaces. The nearby Aquarium has its share of blue neon and is positioned to attract the public, but the two couldn't be more different. The Aquarium, with its frenetic activity, seems plopped into the downtown context, as if part of the former Astroworld had migrated north. In contrast, the Blue Bayou Promenade's lights,



Photo by Matt Sincala

The crowds at the Aurora Picture Show may be small, as is the venue, but the interest in the movies screened is large.

plantings, and pathways take their cue from urban infrastructure and topography. At bayou level, the city becomes surprisingly pastoral and quiet. Even the intermittent sound of cars passing above the walkway can be thought of as exhilarating or unsettling, depending on your point of view.

On any night, small groups of people wander the Promenade as an occasional bike glides by, activity refreshing in this formerly untapped stretch of bayou. Pausing at the Promenade path below the Hobby Center's massive garage, it is striking to note that these bayou and freeway edges were previously thought of as nothing more than back elevations, with views to be avoided.

Several miles away, and at a much smaller scale, another sort of urban invention occurred when the Aurora Picture Show transformed an aged wooden church into a 100-seat cinema. Founded in 1998 by Houston-based media artist Andrea Grover, the cinema was created as a venue to champion short films and videos, to host visiting film/video makers and curators, and to encourage active audiences. Much more modest than the Blue Bayou Promenade, Aurora was produced through volunteer labor and equipment donations.

Since its beginning, the Aurora Picture Show has invited curators to present screenings based on their area of specialization. Former Rice architecture professor Keith Krumweide and visiting critic Luke Bulman assembled a group of short films about interaction with the built environment that ranged from Charles and Ray Eames' *Blacktop: A Story of the Washing of a School Play Yard* to Gordon

Matta-Clark's *Splitting*. Such inventive pairings continue to thrive at the Aurora, where audiences sit in the original church pews and appreciate seeing subjects not available in more typical venues.

When Grover discovered the church on Aurora Street in Houston's Heights, she says, "It was an impulse buy—I fell madly and deeply in love with the place." Influenced by her interest in New York live/work spaces of the 1960s and 1970s, she envisioned the building as a place to combine her professional and personal interests. Currently Grover, her husband Carlos Lama, and their children Lola and Gigi live behind the movie screen in a three bedroom habitat that often accommodates visiting artists. The screen literally and figuratively divides, yet blends, Grover's creative pursuits.

It may have been more than a coincidence that the floating cinema that helped celebrate the opening of the Blue Bayou Promenade was co-curated by Grover. In this single degree of separation, these two inventive endeavors came together. These environments show good promise of joining the ranks of Houston's idiosyncratic, but treasured, places conjured from unexpected sites.

The Blue Bayou Promenade has a vision for celebrating neglected arteries of the public realm, connecting two undeniable urban forces, the bayou and the freeway, in a delightfully unexpected alliance. The Aurora Picture Show inserts innovative art in an historic setting. They each influence the way we view and take care of city spaces often thought residual and disposable rather than habitable. And like all good forms of magic, they are both best viewed at night. ■