

work as a tool for development. The architects, planners, and engineers for the light rail project have been hired. City Hall, the planning department, Metro, and all the coalitions and private interests are queued up. Now implementation is at hand and things are getting interesting. The way in which this small portion of light rail, with its 16 transit stops running through commercial, residential, and entertainment districts, is inserted into the city is critical. The rail line and its stations can either be a key unifying element that inspires as well as functions, or it can be an afterthought.

For a short time it seemed possible that the latter would be the case. Some in Metro were talking about the possibility of using off-the-shelf designs for the rail stops, in part for economy, and in part to help create a uniform identity. But the goal of individuality got a boost late last fall when City Council passed the Civic Arts Program, an ordinance requiring all eligible public projects to set aside 1.75 percent of their construction budget for the integration of art into the design. This opens the door for each light rail station to become a collaboration between artist, architects, and engineers; to become, in effect, a work of art in itself.

To find an example of where this has worked, and worked well, one need only look west to Los Angeles. That city's Metropolitan Transit Authority began construction of a subway and light rail system ten years ago. From the beginning, Los Angeles adopted a set-aside program similar to the one recently approved by Houston, and that program has led to an admirable integration of art into public projects.

Over the last decade in Los Angeles, some 175 artists have been commissioned to create works along the 59.4-mile system. Though some of the more elaborate Los Angeles installations are found in below-grade stations, and so aren't comparable to what might be done in Houston, the city has a number of notable at-grade stations that could serve as beacons of what's possible here. At the Baldwin Park Metrolink Station the pedestrian canopy and platform recall Native American rhythmic dance and iconography as part of artist Judith F. Baca's *Danza Indígena* (Native Dance). The Blue Line Anaheim Station is punctuated by 12 light totems, entitled *Local Odysseys*, that depict California regional history. Los Angeles' art initiative, the nation's largest, has helped the city's subway and light rail system become what one *Los Angeles Times* writer termed a "giant art show." The city's efforts are a model of the heights to which the integra-

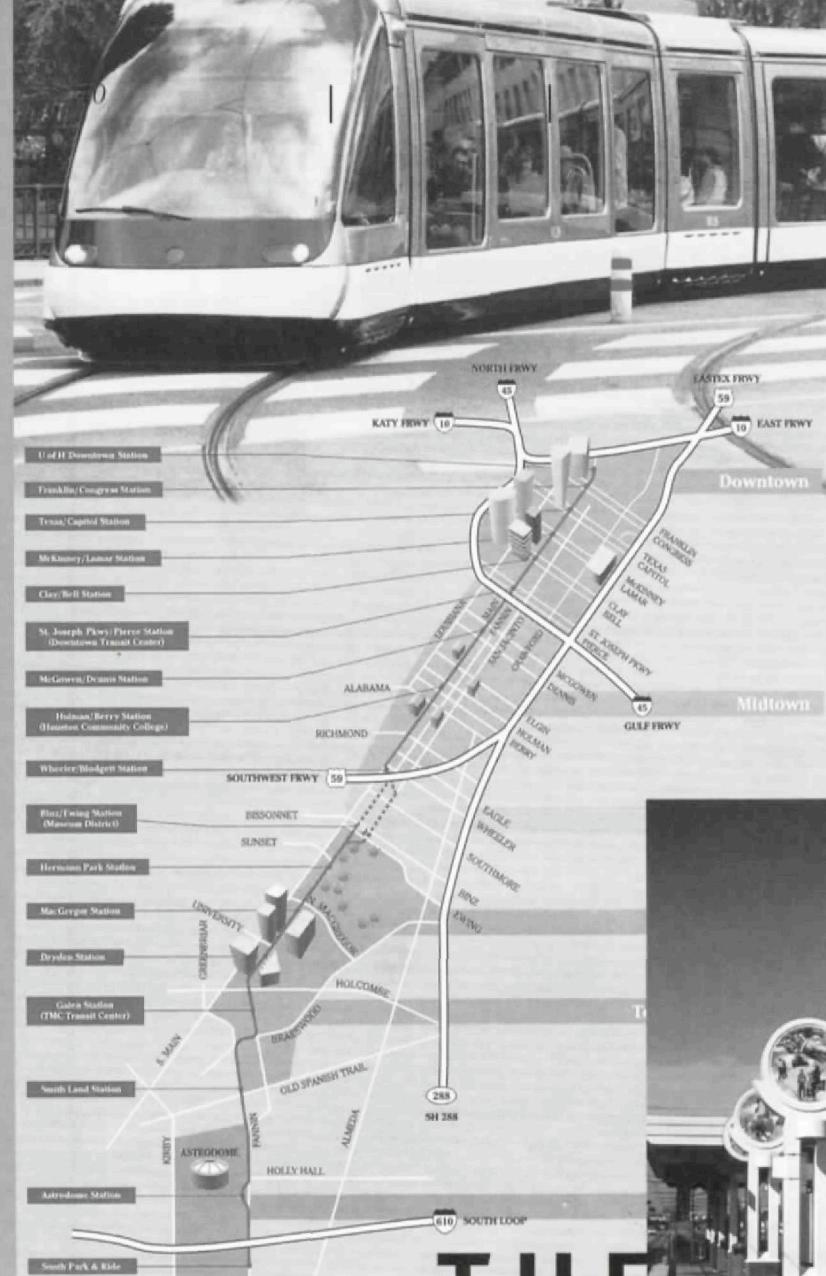
tion of art and transit can be taken.

John Sedlack, vice-president for planning of the Houston Metropolitan Transit Authority, has said that it is Metro's intention to "have some form of individuality for each of the stops" along Main, adding that it's "very important that this first line be put in a place and help shape redevelopment of the corridor in a pedestrian friendly, sustainable way." Houston's individuality may not meet that of Los Angeles, which spent an average of \$320,000 for the art component of each of its five new Red Line stations. But Los Angeles' simplest at-grade stops show that you can take design and engineering plans and guidelines and, through manipulating such fundamental items as paving, a canopy, or construction materials, create something unique. The point is that good design does not have to be grandiose or expensive. It just has to be thoughtful and well executed.

According to City Planning Director Robert Litke, Main Street can't be viewed in isolation; one has to remember that it is "the spine, a 100-foot right of way," with which surrounding streets and neighborhoods will be aligned. Not much press has been given to the connections or linkages that will be made to Main, but the consideration of how the light rail project inserts itself into to the various communities along its route is critical to the project's success. According to Jennifer Ostlind, principal planner for the city's Long Range Planning Department, "Enhancing the area around the stops will encourage infill [economic] development, especially in blighted areas."

Ultimately, mass transit is just not about mobility, it is about the creation of pedestrian friendly neighborhoods. From a design standpoint, it is a fantastic opportunity. From an economic perspective, it can be an armature for intensive redevelopment. The development community has finally bought into the fact that pedestrian friendly design, or the "livable community" concept in which people live, work, and play without slavish dependence on the automobile, is good business.

And now the task is to make it good design as well, and help set a precedent for what might follow. Even before the first shovel of dirt has been turned for the Main Street line, expansion of the rail system is being considered. This year Metro will undertake a major investment study that could test the waters for public support of extending rail to the airports. Next would come a line to the Galleria and along Westpark to Beltway 8. Subsequent lines could extend northwest to Tomball. All of them would have their own stops, their own identities to create, their own art to encourage. But first comes the stations along Main. These 16 transit stops along this 7.5-mile route could become ground zero for a new way of looking at the city, and a new way of connecting to where we live. ■



Route map courtesy Houston Metropolitan Transit Authority



THE TRAIN STOPS HERE

AND WHEN IT DOES,
WHAT WILL RIDERS
ON THE MAIN
STREET LINE SEE?

BY DAN SEARIGHT

The year is 2004, and a Metro train pulls into a transit stop in the Museum District. Light reflects through a steel and colored-glass canopy; nearby, classical music accompanies video clips of the latest cultural and entertainment events around town. The paving underfoot is inset with bronze figures of varying design. The stop blends seamlessly into the surrounding community. In Houston, riding mass transit is not just a means of getting from one place to another, it is a journey of delight.

That, at least, is the promise being offered by some supporters of the light rail system that Metro has proposed to

run along the 7.5 miles of Main Street from the Astrodome to Buffalo Bayou. And it's a promise that should not be allowed to fade away once the public has been sold on the project and construction gets underway. What has to be remembered is that transit is about more than just transportation. If transportation were the only issue, then buses would be enough. But transit is also about how you get where you're going — the comfort of the trip — and what you see when you get there — the ambiance at the end of the ride.

That ambiance will matter particularly if, as Metro has claimed, transit is to