STARTING AT 42

Houston's new development ordinance is a good place to begin planning for the city. But it's only a beginning.

© 1998 The Positive Image, Houston

BY RIVES T. TAYLOR

In the past few months, Houston has experienced a relatively unusual, future-focused debate about the nature of our neighborhoods in the next century. The well-covered discussions in City Council concerning the revisions to the Chapter 42 development ordinance only brought to a head a lengthy period of talk in which a large, if homogenous, group of citizens came to realize that the time to plan for the preservation of quality inner-city neighborhoods amidst Houston's growth is now. The multi-year process that actually produced the revised Chapter 42 ordinance, a process orchestrated by the City's Planning Department, has resulted in a good piece of urban planning. It is, however, only the first step. And if we're to take further steps, we can't allow the thread of the debate most assiduously covered in the press, the issues of density and, to a lesser extent, street parking, distract us from the complexity of the ordinance's full revision.

Bigger issues lie in the path of adopting and enforcing the Chapter 42 revisions for the urban redevelopment primarily within Loop 610. While there is a consensus that we are a city that has no use for zoning, I see in the furor raised over Chapter 42 the beginnings of a realization that we do need planning, composed of community- or neighborhood-based processes that support and enhance the quality and diversity inherent to our city.

It's heartening to have Houston admit the need to be concerned over the future of its urban environment. (Even if it can be unsettling at times, which I discovered when I found out that my 1983 Architectonica townhouse had been held up as an example of "recent" evils of increased density and over-building.) But we as a city need to understand that ordinances in general, and Chapter 42 in particular, can encourage and/or discourage not only development but also diversity. Our current debates ignore that fact that a large part of the inner Loop area is very diverse in cultural, economic, and urban realities. One size does not fit all. The City Planning Department's revision effort has done a credible job of trying to recognize this.

Houston is unique. Several planners I know who have visited the city from elsewhere marvel at the area's ability to adapt to new economics and a diversity of cultures. We have thrived without controls. We have historical properties and districts that survive by local determination; our city preservation "laws," most would admit, have no teeth. In many places we see industrial land uses cheek by jowl with residential uses. Houston is composed of a network of developer precincts tied together by boulevards and highways — some would say that a boulevard-type planning arrangement, with "zoning" applying only to these urban arteries, may in fact be our future.

But the Chapter 42 revision recognizes that inside the Loop a future development approach employing a fine mesh of alleys and residential blocks makes sense. Underlying this whole urban ethos is Houston's need to be responsive to market forces. We are a city founded on, preoccupied with, and projecting change. We may even be the unacknowledged model of the city of the 21st century. I do believe that everyone involved in the Chapter 42 revision effort recognizes Houston's uniqueness, so much so that no one believes that we could lift another city's planning mechanisms and drop them down here. But *could* we learn from other cities?

Other cities, for example Boston of the early 20th century, have had the same avenues of urban evolution and flash points of citizenry conflict now facing Houston. I saw that in the late 1980s, when I had the opportunity to practice city planning and urban design in New England. In Boston, the practitioners of planning were divided into two clear and often competing camps. I worked for a firm that emphasized collaborative planning and the process of consensus building. Other firms, often those that planned suburban residential communities or worked in historic, already established areas, used a more streamlined process to determine the best actions to take.

Although Boston, in contrast to Houston, was and is honeycombed with zoning districts and special planning groups and redevelopment zones, there are still numerous analogies to be drawn between the cities that help in understanding the nature of planning for a diverse community. Many of these analogies boil down to understanding the different impacts of process planning versus product planning. Broadly speaking, Boston, New York, and San Francisco are shaped by the former, while Washington, D.C. and other historic cities such as Savannah, Georgia, reflect the latter. Neither style of planning is better than the other, but it is clear that process planning supports a number of the initiatives espoused by Houston's current political leadership. If we were to focus on the process of consensus building, as I believe the Planning Department is doing, we could establish an ongoing, flexible process that's capable of dealing with the change we face. Product planning, with its inflexible and hard to change codes and formal provisions (such as, say, design standards that dictate final form) cannot work in this city. Improved quality of life may be the goal of both these planning approaches, but in Houston the very meaning of "quality of life" is as diverse and evolving as the city's population.

Some city planners might find the dependence on ongoing public discourse unsettling. To them, such public debate is a Pandora's box of threats to the city's orderly development. But such a concern fails to accept the simple fact that any workable city-wide urban control device has to originate in public needs and mandates. The customers of government services, the citizens, have to be part of the process, as messy as that might get. Another lesson I learned in Boston is that it takes an ongoing partnership of city leaders — holding, one hopes, the big picture in mind — and locally focused neighborhoods with their micro-worries to find the right planning balance. I still remember that nothing would make Mayor Flynn or his staff respond faster, even to the point of breaking off a meeting with a developer and his planning consultants, than a call from some neighborhood representative with an idea about some on-going community consensus process.

Will this happen in Houston? Perhaps the deepest lesson for us to learn from other cities is that it should. The process of planning needs to be flexible, adaptive, and public-consensus based. In that light, the "boiler-plate" parts of Chapter 42, the ones that introduce the ordinance and are rarely considered glamorous, are in fact essential to tying together the city's diverse elements. The legalese of these sections belie their intent to delineate clearly responsibilities and processes for action and response; this "boiler-plate" answers the fundamental questions of how the planning and enforcement process will work, and how it will evolve.

These first sections also lay out just how all of Houston's citizens can avail themselves of the tools of planning. While the developer lobby and the vocal neighborhood groups both tend to represent a demographically similar constituency, one that's primarily well-established, more affluent, and white, it's crucial that everyone is afforded access to the process. Boston, at its planning inception, was very much stratified by "the haves and have-nots" — and the planning of the city reflected that, with the greatest planning attention focused on the affluent neighborhoods. But planning in Boston grew from that monoculture viewpoint to embrace a diversity of visions for the future form of the city, although the Boston of today is not nearly as diverse as Houston is at a young 160-plus years.

In the end, the best product of a revised Chapter 42 could well be a revised approach to planning, one in which Houston's diverse business and residential communities join with the political leadership to shape the city in an ongoing, collaborative process, one that remains open to new ideas, and stays accessible to the full citizenry. ■

Construction workers at labor on the retractable roof of the Ballpark at Union Station.