

A Houston Childhood in 1991

Bruce Webb

For a child a city can be an incomparable place for learning. A. E. Parr, a zoologist and senior scientist at the American Museum of Natural History in New York, described his memories of growing up in Norway during the early part of this century:

Until I reached the age of five we lived a short commuter distance outside of a town of about 75,000 on the west coast of Norway. Not as a chore, but as an eagerly desired pleasure, I was fairly regularly entrusted with the task of buying fish and bringing it home alone. This involved the following: walking to the station in five to ten minutes; buying a ticket; watching train with coal burning steam locomotive pull in; boarding train; riding across long bridge over shallows separating small boat harbor from ship's harbor including small naval base with torpedo boats; continuing through a tunnel; leaving train at terminal, sometimes dawdling to look at railroad equipment; walking by and sometimes entering fisheries museum; passing central town park where military band played during mid-day breaks; strolling by central shopping and business district, or alternatively, passing fire station with horses at ease under suspended harnesses, ready to go, and continuing past centuries-old town hall and other ancient buildings; exploration of fish market and fishing fleet; selection of fish; haggling over price; purchase and return home.

When I was five we moved into the town itself, and I started to go to kindergarten and elementary school soon after. The days would go as follows: off to school with other children joining the morning stream of white-collar pedestrian males ranging from clerks to shipowners, usually not walking with our elders but unavoidably exposed to overhearing adult conversation and observing adult behavior; soon passing a small botanical garden and greenhouse, a large building housing a substantial museum of natural history and a fair museum of

history and ethnography; passing, also, a great architectural variety of residences; then the railroad terminal and the building opposite which housed the fisheries museum previously mentioned, and also, on higher floors, a museum of decorative arts, a small city art gallery and the exhibition halls of the art association. Past the central park with the music stand, and on to the school, which shared a block with the fire station, city prison, and an historic but still functioning city government building.¹

A child growing up in Houston today might recall experiences more like these:

Until I reached the age of five we lived a short commuter distance outside a city of 2.5 million near the Gulf Coast of Texas. As a regular routine I was often taken on family outings to the shopping mall to buy things in the shops and big department stores. This involved the following: setting the VCR so we wouldn't miss any shows while we were away; walking from house to station wagon, where I was buckled into my safety seat next to my sister; backing out of our driveway and proceeding down the block of middle-size suburban houses, all reassuringly like our own house and all set far back on neat lawns with azalea bushes snubbling up close to the foundations; driving a few blocks and merging with the heavy traffic speeding smoothly along the freeway, where I remember catching fleeting glances of numerous medium to tall buildings, all of them looking as if they had been pressed from different cookie cutters out of the same reflective-glass material, and most of them as empty as the little cities I built with my Legos; passing a very large Baptist church that was at least 15 years old, and large, colorful signs that seemed to shout at us of things to buy, eat, or drink; leaving the freeway at a slower speed, and stopping at last at an intersection where many other cars had stopped, so we could all momentarily look at one another and at a gas station and at a restaurant with a huge plastic statue of a clown out front; then



entering the grounds of the shopping center, where I was regularly entrusted with the job of helping to spot an opening among the endless aisles of parked cars.

Then dashing across the superheated blacktop to enter the super-chilled atmosphere of the mall itself, where throngs of people moved purposefully in two parallel routes along the perimeter display windows, the center section having been given over to a collection of displays and fountains lazily spilling Bowline-scented waters, where children older than I smoked cigarettes and shouted to one another. Then dipping into dozens of shops to explore the merchandise that was set out in great piles for us to rummage through, and searching for a clerk to check out our selections; sitting down for a quickly consumed dinner of geometrically shaped bits of chicken and a huge pink "milkshake"; then returning home late at night to watch the programs we had taped while we were gone.

When I was a little older we moved a little farther from the city into a neighborhood that resembled a theme park, and I went off to school, catching a big yellow school bus at the corner of my street for a three-quarter-hour trip to a school in my old neighborhood. While we waited for the bus, standing just inside the curb on a little brown spot of ground in a neighbor's lawn, I could watch streams of cars carrying people to work, their faces hidden behind heavily tinted windows. I could imagine that inside some of them rode the mayor, our priest, maybe even a professional baseball player.

Once I was taken downtown to see a performance of *The Nutcracker*. We left the freeway to enter a labyrinth of narrow streets that crisscrossed between the tall

buildings I had formerly seen only from a distance, then slipped suddenly underground to park the car and walk swiftly across the vast, low-ceilinged interior of this dimly lit subterranean chamber, coming at last to a nondescript orange door that led into a green corridor, emerging after a very long walk into the grand hall of the theater, where we were pushed along an escalator by people scurrying to find their seats. After the performance we followed the large crowd along the same green corridor, trying several orange doors until we found the one leading to where our car was parked. Joining the line of cars slowing inching through the rapidly dwindling supply of breathable air, we emerged back onto the street, where I remember seeing a group of roller skaters dressed in leather road warrior outfits outside a building where my father said he worked. We then proceeded along one dark and gloomy street after another in the gathering darkness, my mother saying she hoped we had enough gas to get to the freeway, which we reached with great relief. Feeling more secure with the cars and trucks zipping by us at 60 or 70 miles per hour, I could look back to downtown, where the buildings at that safe distance formed a satisfying sculptural cluster. We stopped somewhere to eat a sit-down meal of geometrically shaped fish morsels served in Styrofoam boxes, which my father said were made in New Jersey, and then went home. ■

From a talk given on 15 January 1990 at a Rice Design Alliance Fireside Chat, The Future of the Street.

Notes

1 A. E. Parr, "The Child in the City: Urbanity and the Urban Scene," *Landscape*, Spring 1967, pp. 3-5.

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