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The twin bridges at Montrose Boulevard and U.S. 59. Rather than design a bridge specifically for a four lane road, TXDOT decided to install a pair of two-lane-road bridges side by side.

The Sum of Its Parts: Mangling Montrose

BY BRUCE C. WEBB

In the city, change is inexorable. Some of the changes—to houses, the streets, the neighborhoods—percolate up from the people who live there. But often the changes are more remotely conceived, if no less visible when they leave their mark. This was the case recently on Montrose Boulevard, which has been impacted both by activities of the state highway department—no stranger to causing upheavals in the city—and a visit from corporate America, with its commodification of nearly everything it can lay hands to.

When TXDOT began to plan the widening of the Southwest Freeway a few years ago, a group called SWAP (Southwest Freeway Alternative Project) formed to counter the highway department's proposal to build an HOV lane above ground at Montrose. It was around Montrose Boulevard that the existing freeway, which sank below grade after passing Shepherd, rose again, and TXDOT intended to keep that arrangement, only on a wider scale. SWAP pushed an alternative scheme, which was to drop the elevated section of the freeway, which crossed the four lanes of Montrose, into a trench. I would never have believed this could come to pass in Houston, since the proposal's primary purpose had more to do with improving environmental quality than improving efficiency or saving money. But it did. The elevated deck that had for years impinged on Montrose Boulevard was removed, and with it the vast field of freeway-supporting columns that crossed the city grid on the bias, creating a shadowy underworld that provided a shelter for the homeless and a shaded shortcut for cyclists.

The widening project required replacing a number of the bridges that spanned the suppressed freeway, and most people were amazed to see the distinctive set of them TXDOT installed. They weren't particularly beautiful or daring, but they were a cut above the routine spans TXDOT usually provides. I thought they looked a bit cartoonish, overly simplified in appearance and unnaturally beefed up in places where they shouldn't be. But as it turns out, their design was for the most part more circumstantial than anything else. In order to span the 224 feet between the banks of the freeway channel without interfering with the roadway below, they were designed with thin, pre-cast concrete road decks supported by cables attached to bow-string trusses.

Five two-lane bridges were planned, all of the same design. Taking advantage of this rare Houston example of uniformity, the collection was together named the Houston Gateway. To further distinguish them, architect Rey de la Reza was brought on board; he added the fins and red balls located at the ends of the bridges, street lights, and fiber-optic lights that trace the supporting arches. The project won several awards, among them a National Steel Bridge Alliance National Award and a National Achievement Award from the U.S. Department of Transportation's Partnership for Highways Quality Program.

All this was for the good. But a critical point in the scheme was where the freeway slipped under Montrose. A group of visionary citizens saw an opportunity here to give the boulevard a special bridge, a span befitting its sta-

tus as one of Houston's best streets. But the idea never fully ripened. The group first contacted Renzo Piano, who on two separate occasions agreed to design the bridge. Unfortunately, in both cases TXDOT's schedule didn't match the architect's. Artist Robert Irwin was also invited in to take a look. Then Herzog and deMeuron got the call. They sent someone to meet with local officials, but soon sensed that TXDOT would be at best a reluctant client.

So the idea of having an extraordinary bridge went unfulfilled. Instead, to handle the four lanes of Montrose traffic TXDOT simply placed two Houston Gateway-style bridges side by side; it took less effort and assured that the set all matched. But the impact of the double bridges on the boulevard is less than satisfactory. Doubling up the bridges yielded an awkward, ad hoc looking ensemble. With its extra width the pairing is too low and bulky, and seems to block rather than connect the street segments. This feeling is heightened by the lengthy concrete median that had to be installed to protect the gap between the two spans. The bridges belong more to the freeway than to Montrose Boulevard, and bring to mind John Kaliski's comment in a review of Transco Tower a few years ago: "Great from afar; far from great."

If the paired bridges have had the biggest impact on Montrose, the CVS drugstore, which replaced a convenience store/gas station at the corner of Richmond and Montrose, has to be the most unwelcome. CVS is a relatively new player on the urban scene, but in a few short years the company has opened some 70 stores in

Houston, many of them replacing older, established Eckerd stores. Unlike Wal-Mart, which works its big-box aggression on the edges of the city, CVS nuzzles into the urban center, looking for prominent corners on which to plant its signature buildings.

Some time back, drugstores left the city for the suburbs, where they mutated into a new form of vending-machine architecture. Now they are returning to the city in this new form: CVS desires pylon signs, a drive through window, parking for 40 to 50 cars, and an object building. A standard-issue CVS store is a collection of malformed architectural elements rendered in vague ephus tectonics. It's a smarmy kind of architecture, designed to stand out in a crowd, though in such a way that it looks like it wants to blend in, but is failing. CVS has several different designs, and each is ugly in its own way.

The one on Montrose is a red brick and dusty yellow model assembled into a kind of cartoon-suburban style. Each new addition to a street tips the balance one way or another, and the CVS at Richmond moves Montrose one building closer to becoming a highway strip.

Franchise buildings that are destined to be repeated ad infinitum should be subjected to the closest scrutiny and to design standards. But this doesn't happen, and it remains for communities to protect themselves on a case-by-case basis. Like TXDOT, which was willing to respond to a citizen's group, CVS can be adaptable. For the Las Vegas strip it produced a pop-art decorated version of their building, decorated with giant Kodak film canisters and red lips and covered in lights. In Saratoga Springs, New York, James Kuntzler used his monthly *Civitas* newsletter to rail against a CVS planned for the historic Main Street. CVS knuckled under to public pressure and provided a more contextually suitable two-story brick model, custom-made for the town. So it is possible to force a deal with the company. But it takes work.

Voters are often asked to consider the question, "Are you better off today than you were four years ago?" It's the type of question that should be asked about parts of the city as well. Recognizing the importance of streets in establishing a city's character, Austin recently created a Great Streets Master Plan "ultimately to transform the public right of ways into great public spaces."

Something of this scope is probably not likely in Houston's near future, but it can be aspired to, and moved toward in small increments. One of those increments should be Montrose Boulevard, which is certainly one of Houston's great streets. Protecting its virtues, and enhancing its strengths, needs to be seen as a public project. It needs to be nurtured. ■