



## It Fakes a Village

BY DAISY KONE

*"The 20th century was about getting around. The 21st century will be about staying in a place worth staying in."*  
— James Kuntsler

**ASIDE FROM THE** splendid gift of Hermann Park, with its perpetual endowment of communal grace, the public realm of Houston is, for the most part, the street. Like many cities whose development occurred primarily after World War II, Houston lacks the urbanity that makes Charleston or San Francisco so beguiling. For the last 50 years, almost without fail, we have built Houston's urban places primarily for the convenience of cars and trucks. In doing so, we have unwittingly nurtured a quality that fosters a dull ambivalence to our own culture, a culture that evolved in part from our communal experiences within a human-scaled public domain.

City forms evolved from the pattern of shelters grouped around an open, communal area. The vital functions of food preparation, policy making, childcare, and weapons manufacturing were performed in the open area, making it more important than the surrounding shelters. Later,

this open space evolved into the agora, town plaza, or square.

While Houston lacks an abundance of plazas and squares, this doesn't mean we can't have a vibrant public realm defined by the street. Street patterns are the framework for some of the most desirable urban places ever built, such as those found in Savannah, New York City, Mt. Carmel, or Princeton. But Houston's urban places are formed by streets and public frontages designed to the standards of the suburb, a place whose very existence depends on the car. These standards make the street's primary purpose the delivery of a car to a parking lot, whose overpowering prominence makes many of our favorite Houston places simply conduits to destinations, not destinations on their own. The only important experiences occur inside the buildings.

### The Measure of Urbanism

Places in Houston do exist where experiences include not just the destination, but also what might happen along the way to it. One of these is the narrow street grid around Lanier Middle School. A mixture of homes and shopping is found within

a quarter mile radius of the school's location at Westheimer and Woodhead. Sidewalks are included within the public frontage of the streets, while the grounds of the school provide a type of park or open space. Westheimer Road to the north is lined with restaurants, bars, and shops. Westheimer's widening over time to four lanes has compromised the original pedestrian environment, but this is mitigated by parallel parking on the street, which provides both a traffic calming effect and a buffer that makes those who choose to walk rather than drive feel safer. The older buildings that were once grocery stores, gas stations, and shops remain commercial, and are open to the street with porches or storefronts. Many neighborhood residents choose to walk from their homes to shop or eat, a choice rarely made in the Galleria area, a place with no lack of shopping and dining destinations and one also replete with condominiums full of potential pedestrians.

The difference between the two neighborhoods is that in the one around Lanier Middle School, the one with walkers, the phenomenon of the Pedestrian Shed is still working. The Pedestrian Shed, codified



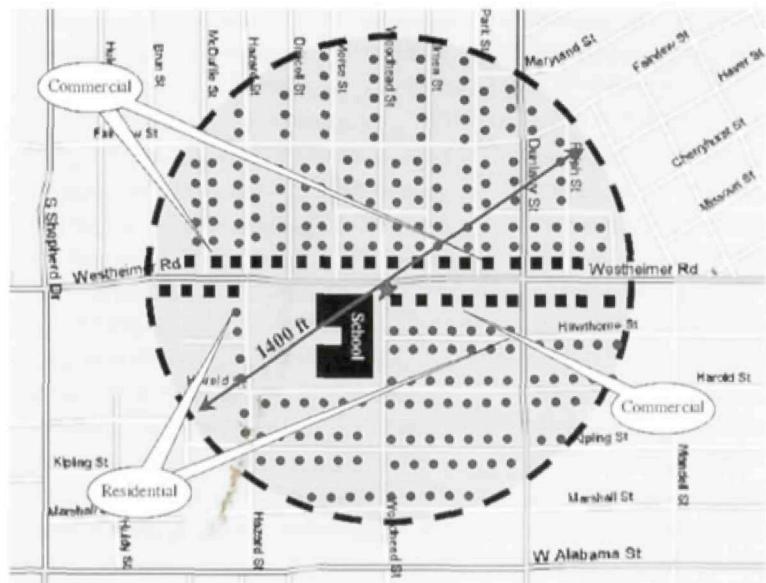
## Finding a place worth walking in Houston isn't impossible, but it isn't easy

as a design tool of the New Urbanism, is equivalent to a five-minute walk or a distance of 1,400 feet (a quarter mile). In general, this is the distance people are willing to walk to reach a destination. For anything exceeding this, we tend to go back to our cars. This phenomenon can be observed in many existing situations. Anchor stores in shopping malls are placed accordingly. In many European cities, pubs are situated at points separated by this distance. This is also the basic standard for the placement of Starbucks cafes along Madison Avenue. From historic American neighborhoods to European villages, this measure is a constant both rational and empirical.

The Pedestrian Shed is a simple measure, like the two finger width between eyebrow and brim that determines the correct placement of a cowboy hat. Think of it as the urban equivalent of Vitruvian Man. This famous drawing by Leonardo da Vinci, depicting a male figure in two superimposed positions with his arms apart, circumscribed in a circle within a square, is also referred to as the Canon of Proportions. Da Vinci made the drawing to study the male body measurements as

determined by Vitruvius. The measure of each part is a function of its relationship to the whole. From this we know a palm is the width of four fingers, the length of a man's outspread arms equals his height, the length of the hand is one-tenth the height, and so on. The symmetry and harmonic relationships so clearly illuminated in the drawing were incorporated over and over again into Renaissance architectural proportions.

The Pedestrian Shed, like the Golden Mean or Golden Section (proportioning ratio of 1:1.618), is universally found. It is as observable in the traditional urban environment as the Fibonacci Series is in nature. The square mile containing Lanier Middle School as its center is a good example, and is abutted by several other such square mile areas that more or less adhere to this principle. Thus, when employed as a canon for planning, the 1,400 foot maximum distance that should be between destinations sets the "neighborhood" boundaries. As in the Lanier example, each "neighborhood" is planned with an accessible center (a park, shops, a school). Walking from home to the post office, the library, the school, or the shops



**Opposite page, top:** Four-way stops, single-depth parking, and short blocks slow down traffic in Rice Village, allowing pedestrians a sense of safety.

**Top:** The single crosswalk that connects the two sides of Highland Village can be daunting to pedestrians, who have to confront cars moving quickly along an arterial street.

**Above:** A diagram of the Pedestrian Shed surrounding Lanier Middle School, indicating the distance people are willing to walk to reach a destination, and the different destinations available within that distance.



In Rice Village, a closely connected mix of retail and service businesses, along with a good supply of restaurants, gives shoppers a reason to stay out of their cars and on their feet.

provides social contact. Such social contact within the Shed is further supported by the human scale of buildings, whose frontages accommodate not just sidewalks wide enough for two people to walk abreast in both directions, but also conveniently located benches, lighting, and landscaping, all of which help to make walking desirable and secure. Buildings should be permeable, with large windows allowing views into their interior, where food, goods, and activity entice people to come inside. Most important, the assembly of the street, public frontage, and buildings is conceived as a unified whole, with the geometry of the cross section (building height to street/public-frontage width) having ideal proportions that address human scale and prevent the street from becoming a quasi-freeway.

#### A Good Tool is Hard to Find

The Montrose District, Midtown, and West University Place contain remnants of this intuitive discipline. The remnants peek through layers of subsequent development, only to disappear again under the crushing footprint of a shopping center or arterial roadway.

Some might wonder why all neighborhoods can't have the positive aspects delivered by the Pedestrian Shed, but it's not that easy. When it comes to cities, Houston in particular, the complexity of competing goals can be overwhelming. Historically, when cities began to be planned instead of growing naturally like yeast colonies, heroic attempts emerged to codify their nature. Professions developed to focus solely on particular issues. As a result, urban place making today is embedded in a tangle of public policy, codes, regulations, and requirements of financial institutions. It all forms overwhelming barriers to innovative design. In many instances, city planning has succeeded in nothing more than the laying

over of a calligraphic shroud that encodes uses and limitations. The codes are hieroglyphs, powerful as symbols but dispossessed when translated into real actions. I tend to agree with Andres Duany's comment on the failure of planning as process: When the job seems too difficult, the tool is probably wrong.

Buckminster Fuller once said that when he was working on a problem he never thought about beauty, he only thought about solving the problem. He also said that when he arrived at a solution, if it was not beautiful he knew it was wrong. Charles Bohl, director of the Knight Center for Urban Studies at the University of Miami, says that one of the most destructive forces working against the construction of urban places is the grafting of suburban types—building-lot configurations, street types, landscaping, public works, open spaces—onto urban settings. This is the unsettling reality of the Galleria-Post Oak area, which expresses a high urban density using a suburban strip-mall form. The problem of the suburban model is that it results in places that are too dense to be country, too sparse to be urban, and too auto-dependent to be a viable public realm. This condition relegates Galleria power-shoppers to commingling within the confines of the mall, the modern substitute for the public square. It's not that this is a false experience, just that it is the *only* experience. And the story is the same for many other favorite destinations, such as Highland Village—it's a one-liner.

#### Village Life

In spite of how far away we move from the original village idea of community, we still feel it necessary to evoke it, if only by name. Having had our pedestrian rights and public gathering places slowly eroded by the supremacy of the car, we substi-

tute facsimiles. Hence we append certain nomenclature—village, plaza, courtyard, square, meadow, woods, plantation, colony—to contemporary built forms. Meyerland Plaza, Highland Village, and First Colony are actually nothing of the sort. Yet bizarrely, we accept these appellations despite the discrepancy. Does this reveal some crack in the psychology of individual and collective identity? Or is it merely nostalgia?

To extend the question, consider the purpose of a shopping center name: that of improving customer capture ratio and brand recognition. Nostalgia is frequently called upon for the job. Using words such as village, plaza, or square handles this function while tapping into the desire to belong. The names bring to mind images of people strolling, picnicking, sitting on benches, smiling as they greet one another, and discussing the news of the day. In a simpler time, these activities were a by-product of obtaining necessary provisions. Now we take care of business as efficiently as possible, obliterating the most basic opportunities for communal experience.

In Highland Village, a "lifestyle center," there's not much to do except get inside the shops as fast as possible, in spite of a prodigious effort towards decorative fuss. The Village boasts an allee of resolute palm trees lining the street, a Houston signifier for up-market shopping first utilized at the River Oaks Shopping Center. In Highland Village the trees are festooned with playful oversized flowers, which are changed periodically to reflect the seasons. A curved glass-block wall provides a backdrop to a bronze sculpture composed of five abstracted female shapes, presumably representing various incarnations of happy Village shoppers—young, old, single, in groups. These abstracted forms turn their back on the shops and gaze across Westheimer to the Pottery Barn, perhaps wondering how

they might possibly get over there.

A small plaza sits in front of the grouping, completing an assembly whose entirety is, for the most part, viewed by people in cars speeding along Westheimer. As if this were not enough visual stimulation for the cars, an enormous berm is currently being constructed on either side of the sculpture plaza with the words "Highland" on one side and "Village" on the other. The letters are set at an angle, once again for the viewpoint of passing motorists, although a better vantage point might be from the air. Thus the Village's only example of public art and public plaza, albeit a small one, is directed at the car. Located where it is, very few people walk in front of it. Fittingly, not one of the symbolic female shoppers has any feet.

The stylization of Village life into a series of parking lots creates a condition in which walking is not forbidden, just made empty of promise. All the necessary ingredients for a pleasant pedestrian experience are present: sidewalks, public art, permeable buildings with windows showing goods, interesting shopping, street trees, parking in front of stores, etc. But they are all in the wrong proportions or wrong places. They are devoted to making Highland Village a single gigantic billboard.

Navigating the convoluted leftover spaces by foot is tricky. Leaving Crate and Barrel by the east doorway, the pedestrian is confused. The tendency is to turn north towards the other shops. But once this decision is made, accessing the Westheimer sidewalk to get to the other side of Drexel is inconvenient and awkward. Therefore the pedestrian's preferred method for getting to the shops on Drexel's west side is the mid-block run. Even mothers pushing baby strollers run this gauntlet, dashing between cars, some of which, thank goodness, might actually be slowing down for a red light.



Pedestrians who turn south or exit Crate and Barrel's Westheimer doors are greeted by a blank space containing a line of white bollards that guard the Crate and Barrel storefront. The configuration of this ambiguous space makes it unsuitable as a sidewalk, parking lot, or plaza, although it does contain four parallel parking spaces that only the cognoscenti have discovered. This is a wasted opportunity to pull pedestrians in front of the invitingly open Crate and Barrel building, which boasts ample fenestration, as well as beautiful lines and massing. Merchandise is attractively displayed, but once again, more cars move by this façade than people. Just beyond the blank space, the peek-a-boo sidewalk along Westheimer doesn't look very friendly, given that only four inches of curb separate walkers from heavy traffic.

Thus walking around Highland Village is surprisingly discomfiting. An engorged Westheimer Road reams out the Village, breaking it into two pieces. Here, the street comes into its full glory as a six-lane arterial feeding cars to Loop 610 or the Galleria and back. To confound the problem for pedestrians, anxious shoppers, keen to initiate the hunt, frequently jump the lights at the Village's only pedestrian crossing, located at Drexel and Westheimer. Two fading white stripes painted on the street are merely lip service to minimum code standards; the crossing is almost imperceptible. No other signage, change of paving materials, or geometry alert drivers to the importance of this intersection to pedestrians. Contrast this with the beribboned archways soaring over the north and south parking lot entrances. Pedestrians may have been left on their own, but a great deal of effort is invested in showing cars where to turn.

The original Highland Village was built before people began to miss historic public spaces such as the court-

house square or the farmers' market, places we long took for granted. Even as Westheimer grew from two lanes to six, it wasn't seen to matter that it gutted Highland Village; movement between the shopping center's two halves was expected to be by car. Central Market did not exist then, but now that it does, how disappointing it is to be unable to eat breakfast or lunch there and then walk directly over to the Village shops on a Saturday. Now nothing short of a pedestrian bridge could improve the ugly, circuitous route to the pedestrian crossing at Drexel. If half as much attention was given to the pedestrian as is given to the car, Highland Village could be a great place to be, not just a great place to shop.

#### **Connectivity**

Conversely, in Rice Village, pedestrians share the street with drivers. Cars from the Texas Medical Center to Rice University to West University Place and beyond are filtered through Rice Village's strong street grid. Instead of slicing right through the middle of Rice Village, the traffic-laden arterial of Kirby Drive is an edge, and nobody walks it, just as no one does any arterial. Rice and University Boulevards carry a lot of traffic, but the benefit of the grid—connectivity—provides many different ways of moving cars through. The people who live in the Montrose area experienced the connectivity phenomenon first-hand when, after efforts to block the destruction of Spur 527 failed, their worst fears did not materialize. The existing street grid was actually able to deliver the cars that once spewed off U.S. 59 in a single stream to their various downtown destinations without severely compromising their neighborhood.

Sidewalks in Rice Village, whose minimum width—2.5 to 3 feet—is usually considered inadequate for pedestrian-

friendly environments, are completely walkable. The short blocks, abundant four-way stops, and single-depth parking on every street slow auto speed and put barriers between cars and people, making walking completely non-threatening.

The additional parking load is deposited in a centrally located, free parking garage that sits in the middle of a block, not directly on the street. Other, smaller parking structures are placed on the north side, also off the street. Throughout the Village, the two-story building height and narrow travel-lane widths of the streets keep the scale appropriate to humans. Two mid-block passages through the buildings cut journeys in half for destinations on University, Rice, or Times Boulevards. This destination-driven urban plan has a rich mix of retail and service businesses, ample supply of restaurants, and shared streets, all parts of a robust formula encouraging people to spend time there and celebrating the extravagant variety of the commonplace.

The number of new apartment and other residential buildings around Rice Village is an acknowledgement of the growing awareness of a walkable neighborhood's value. The ability to live near work or shop without a car serves more than a social leveling or functional purpose. It invites immersion into the human drama, whether we are spectators or primary players. The public stage that is the street or square is also the clearinghouse of the community, giving inhabitants the chance to compare and contrast themselves with others, all types of others. This body-to-body type of social exchange—speaking, walking, mannerisms, dress—is not possible via cell phone car-to-car.

#### **Recovery of Standards**

Just as the full spectrum of developers,

planners, design and transportation engineers, and all the associated professions have contributed to the decline of public space, they are capable of aiding its recovery. The mission of the planning and landscape professions, as well as the engineering professions, is the recovery of the historical standards that exist and function in such places as Charleston, Princeton, Savannah, and Miami's South Beach. As proven by market value, increased health benefits, and public approval, these standards work in many situations and should be available for use again.

This need not and should not be a comprehensive application. Many urban building forms that are necessary for modern convenience (the parking lot, the drive-thru) inherently create undesirable street frontage. And conventional suburban development has a right to exist in the built environment. We just need to let go of the idiosyncratic idea that it must be the only form. Every city contains areas of existing or potential mixed use, and we should think twice before we dispose of them. The tendency to blanket our communities with the suburban forms responsible for traffic congestion and sprawl is strong in terms of the planning establishment's resistance to change. Nevertheless, Houston's pockets of potentially walkable urbanity are poised to become bright spots among the blanks of strip-mall parking lots. Reinforcing design elements of good public space would have the forceful effect of bringing more pedestrians, commerce, and safety to the neighborhoods, making the habitat of the urban environment more viable for its predominate species: humans.

*"Tradition is the tending of the fire, not the worship of the ashes." — Johan Wolfgang von Goethe ■*