

op ED

ON HOUSTON:
SPACE, PLACE, AND CHARACTER

Lars Lerup
Dean, School of Architecture
Rice University

"To walk is to lack a place," wrote the French multi-theorist Michel de Certeau in *The Practice of Everyday Life*. To Houstonians who move mostly by car, the sense of "lack of place" is greatly heightened. After all, pedestrians don't feel that the buildings they walk along move, especially since most cities made for pedestrians have continuous buildings lining the sidewalks. But Houston drivers, in the face of all reason, see the world fly by, thus revving up the sense of placelessness. If, in addition, the driver leaves a generic office space and arrives at a house almost identical to the houses of his neighbors, only the other members of his family, their heirlooms, and their personal effects help slow down the sense of "always going West."

Place, argues Certeau, is a "configuration of stable positions," while space "is like the word when it is spoken." Thus freeway drivers are involved in making space, while simultaneously leaving place behind in the dust. These long attenuated spaces form invisible cocoons that come alive every time the driver gets on the road. Yet the connection between place and space is intimate, since Certeau also argues that "space is a practiced place." In other words, place doesn't exist until it is practiced or turned into space. This finally suggests that, while lacking place, we are simultaneously performing place, making placelessness in Houston a somewhat less urgent problem — provided of course that we think having a sense of place is important.

Place in Houston is quite different from place in Paris simply because place is practiced while walking in Paris but while driving in Houston. The place that is being activated in Houston while driving relies on a set of stable and "proper" positions that are quite distinct and specific: the canopy of trees, the system of bayous, the network of freeways, the weather (especially when it gets into its position of 90/90). These specifics are juxtaposed with generalities, such as franchise stores, gas stations, shopping centers, single-family houses, and standard cars. (Although we may argue that since there are so many Chevrolet Suburbans in Houston, they could be seen as specific.) The specifics are part of a menu of

metropolitan characteristics essential for making Houston a place, while the generalities are part of global characteristics that we will find in Juneau as well as in Miami.

For Houston to fictionalize its characteristics, the way Paris or London has done, we need to create more metropolitan specificity. However, we have no reason to despair; Houston has distinguished itself quite well in its short lifetime. The Museum District, for example, like the dramatic separation of downtown and the Galleria, helps to give the city its specificity, but as citizens we can do our part too. The suburban house, which threatens to be diminished to only two or three types because that suits the mortgage industry, needs to embrace specifics. Where are the houses with a giant kitchen and no living room? Where are the houses with eight garages and no dining room? Where are the houses with one great Caracalla bath(room)? Where are the tree houses and the bayou houses? And where are the houses for those who love to dance? We are not all of the same tribe; we have different passions, quirks, and peculiarities. Let's play them out, give them form in our daily lives. Here is where architects can help. They know how to lift programs out of humdrum stereotypicality and how to give specificity and character to individual buildings. Tudors belong in England (and a past England at that)! Let's develop a set of Houston houses that will distinguish us from all other faceless megalopolises. All architects need are great clients. Are you out there?

ROADSIDEKICKS

Karen Weintraub
Norfolk, Virginia

It is a sad commentary on northwest Houston that the most attractive things to be seen off Interstate 45 are billboards. Without them the drive would be unbearably dull. Stretching out in both directions from this segment of freeway is a visual wasteland: trees are cut back several hundred feet on both sides, grass is rare, and the frontage road is pock-marked with hourly-rate motels, car dealerships, and discount furniture showrooms — not exactly the stuff of great architecture. Billboards interrupt the numbing horizontality of the exurban terrain the way mammoth towers of glass and steel punctuate the flatness of down-

THE BAYOU CITY

The pleasure-grounds of Houston include back yards, public parks, privately developed subdivisions, rivers we call bayous, and all the outdoor spaces in between that anyone has noticed or perhaps tried to improve.

Houston within Harris County has more than 2,000 miles of waterways, and we treat them like sewers. In this climate and on our overbuilt land, we need to protect every source of water we have. The city, in both the public and private sectors, has recently begun to take notice of how rich a resource our geography really is. We have abundant water and a climate that allows for beautiful trees and gardens.

By looking at Houston's landscape, this issue of *Cite* focuses on a variety of outdoor places in order to applaud the preservation of old places such as Bayou Bend and the construction of new ones such as the fountain at the Contemporary Arts Museum. We also hope to encourage projects on the drawing boards, such as the restoration of Hermann Park's grand basin and reflection pool and the Cotswold Project in Houston's historic district downtown. On every scale, from back yards to bayous, we can work harder to improve the landscape and the quality of our community life.

Barrie Scardino

town Houston. Billboards don't make freeways beautiful, but they do add texture, even an urban fabric that is missing in other parts of the city.

There was a lot of talk in the 1970s and 1980s about the disappearance of Main Street, which, critics argued, had moved inside suburban shopping malls. Main Street also moved onto the American freeway. Driving down I-45 is like window-shopping on a nine-lane Main Street. Some of the stores are big and wide like Best Buy, others are short and modest — mom-and-pop operations. Some are set back or inflected a bit more toward the roadway, providing an unexpected density to these two-dimensional streetscapes. Unlike the old Main Street, best viewed during a casual stroll, the freeway Main Street must be appreciated from a car, preferably in the fast lane. At 60 mph, gaps between the billboards and other road signs — between storefronts on Main Street, to extend the metaphor — tend to disappear and the wall becomes continuous. Going too slowly or driving on feeder roads won't leave the same impression.

The new Main Street is not created by billboards alone but by the combination of billboards and signs. No roadscape is complete without a few golden arches or giant seashells. A pickup truck on a pole adds interest to the streetwall as it sends an unmistakable invitation: "Buy your truck here!" Signs also help make the area more visually interesting at night. Billboards are evenly lit from the bottom, but signs often flash, pulse, or spin, adding depth and action to the streetscape.

Boards and signs also give drivers a sense of orientation and location. The buildings along the road are undistinguished, and, in Houston at least, there are no real curves or hills to provide visual markers. Robert Venturi, Denise Scott Brown, and Steven Izenour recognized the importance of billboards when they wrote in *Learning From Las Vegas* in

1975: "If you take the signs away, there is not place. . . . The graphic sign in space has become the architecture of this landscape." Another thing that makes billboards interesting is that they change. Unlike conventional architecture, the beginning of a month can bring a new image: spring brings the Astros, winter brings the Rockets. Billboard changes help mark the passage of time.

The presence of billboards along area highways also affirms something essential about Houston. Houston's personality has a lot to do with the city's libertarian business ethos — anyone can do what he wants with his own property. From its origins as the Allen brothers' real estate venture, Houston has been one big sales pitch. Billboards help reinforce that character. However, billboards are only spatially and iconographically important when they appear near other billboards. The single beer-promoting board in a residential patch doesn't belong. But to prohibit billboards along a highway such as I-45 would deprive Houston of a much-needed urban corridor and make thousands of commutes much less visually interesting.

At the University of Houston in 1992, Venturi said his "name would be mud" for admitting it, but he believes billboards are important to Houston's cityscape because they form a middle ground between the shotgun shacks of Fifth Ward and the skyscrapers of downtown. He concluded, "I love your billboards. The only trouble is they're not big enough."

Editor's note: With this issue, Cite begins an op-ed page, which will become a regular feature. We invite submissions of approximately 500 words. Opinion pieces and letters to the editor will be published as space allows, and Cite reserves editorial rights. Please send correspondence to Editor, Cite Magazine, 1973 West Gray, Suite 1, Houston, Texas 77019 or fax us at 713.523.6108. Our e-mail address is barriems@aol.com

Letters

and the American public. We are scheduling a live test of the project this summer on Flag Day (June 14).

Meanwhile, best success with *Cite*.

Future on,
Doug Michels, Architect of Ideas
Washington, D.C.
February 10, 1997

TUNNEL VISION

Here's a way to force all those downtown moles out of the tunnels [*Cite* 36] and onto the streets of downtown Houston to mingle with the thugs, winos, and pan-handlers: why not flood the tunnels with Freon and convert them into giant air-conditioning coils? Ordinary people aren't as smart as architects (who don't seem to own cars) and have to be forced to enjoy strolling in the 85- to 95-degree heat (for six months out of the year), 95 per cent humidity, rain, auto exhaust, noise, and pollution. Maybe if we can air condition the streets of downtown Houston, we'll see more pedestrians.

G. Clifford Edwards
Houston
January 22, 1997

CADILLAC RANCH, ABSOLUTLY!

Thanks for publishing photos of Cadillac Ranch and its sad alcoholic imitator, "Absolut Ranch," in *Cite* 36. For your information, we have taken legal action against Absolut Vodka for copyright violation. Ranch dressing indeed . . .

As you may know, Ant Farm's House of the Century is 25 years old this year (1972-97), and a celebration at the site is being planned. Hope to see you all there. After the flood . . . HOC Biotecture! By the way, the "Ant Farm in Houston" article in *Cite* 31 was excellent. Tom Diehl did a great job on the text, and the graphics were very cool.

Back here in Power City, it's NATIONAL SOFA time. My studio is now designing an interactive monument at the White House for live two-way communication between the President

RICE VILLAGE

The last issue (*Cite* 36) was packed with some interesting stuff; hope you can keep it up. The article on the Rice Village left me wondering about a whole series of issues that were not addressed. Perhaps some future issues could. SUCH AS What is the trend in ownership? Did a registered architect really design the parking garage so visible from the west approach, which looks for all the world like a freeway overpass? What are the divergent opinions of the landlords/tenants as to what threatens the stability of the Village? I would love to see a map showing the real estate values, land uses, and revenue per square foot.

This issue of *Cite* concerned itself very directly with several important local topics. Something I would like to see in a future issue: a plan of the proposed Allen Parkway Village. I have never seen a plan of what designers have in mind, only a few verbal descriptions.

Tim Hansen, ASLA
Houston
February 3, 1997

News Flash

Hines College of Architecture

The Gerald Hines family will make a \$7 million contribution over 20 years to the University of Houston College of Architecture. In honor of this donation, the college will be renamed the Gerald D. Hines College of Architecture. "This gift will help us become one of the preeminent architectural schools in the nation," said Bruce Webb, dean of the College of Architecture. The donation will provide a permanent endowment and fund programs that enhance study opportunities for architecture students at the University of Houston.



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