



H O U S T O N — S T Y L E

THE LOSS OF FAITH IN BOTH OF THE
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The defeat of Houston's comprehensive zoning referendum in fall 1993 dealt a serious blow to the ambitions of the city's Planning and Development Department. By nullifying the extensive work that had gone into preparing the ordinance, voters deprived the planners of the public authority necessary to bring about comprehensive planning and instead left the city with a vast, inchoate collection of poorly coordinated development ordinances. It also left neighborhoods that lacked viable deed restrictions unprotected from intrusive and incompatible development. On the other hand, this setback has given the city another chance to devise an approach that better responds to the needs of a metropolis that is by now a complex matrix of interrelated sprawl rather than a conventionally planned city of large, homogeneous, and easily zoned blocks.

of this issue), sponsored by a nonprofit citizens' group, the Friends of Hermann Park, proposes ways to better organize and expand the park's usable land with suggestions for improved access and parking. Wisely, the master plan's author, landscape architect Laurie Olin, has provided directions for implementing the plan over a number of years as funds become available. But the plan would never have developed if the Friends of Hermann Park had not stepped in to propose an alternative to the Parks and Recreation Department's piecemeal measures, which had failed to maintain or build upon the qualities in the original plan for this historic public park. Now citizens and city departments are working together in a partnership that promises to yield long-overdue improvements.

But a look elsewhere in the city shows how unchecked private interests can create chaos. Although discussions of the downtown stadium proposal championed by Houston Oilers owner Bud Adams have been tabled for now, the fact that such a massive redevelopment project got as far as it did points out the shortcomings of the city's ad hoc approach to planning. Besides the dubious value of such a stadium,

the proposal raises other serious issues, foremost among them the impact of the increased volume of traffic pouring onto downtown streets during sports events and the acres of new parking space that would need to be provided.

The impetus for zoning Houston at such a late date came from a grassroots movement of homeowners and neighborhood associations trying to protect their turf through a less tenuous legal framework than that afforded by deed restrictions. The referendum probably failed because the Department of Planning and Development tried to take on too much in too little time, producing a proposal that fell short of expectations and lost the support of many of the people who had originally championed its cause. But this constituency has not gone away. In the wake of the ordinance's defeat, a surprising number of neighborhood associations, business alliances along with other private groups, and government agencies have begun to formulate initiatives for planning within the boundaries of their own districts or interests.

On the bright side, the recently announced master plan for Hermann Park (reviewed by Barrie Scardino on page 16

The long list of projects described by Rives Taylor and Joe Douglas Webb in this issue (page 22) shows how many planning initiatives are focusing on the inner city alone. Their very number suggests deep reservations about the ability of the city government to plan the city, or even whether city government can be a primary, proactive player in guiding Houston's development through the critical years ahead. The mandate to initiate comprehensive, top-down planning with the necessary political tools for its implementation was not given to the city's planning department. At the citywide scale, the planning agenda implicit in the zoning ordinance was too abstract and unwieldy for some and too insensitive to individual property rights for others. But reconfirming these traditional Houston suspicions may have cleared the air of false optimism about just how much zoning can do for a city. And the cool reception and subsequent withdrawal of the

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downtown stadium proposal – the kind of mega-project that might have captured the public's imagination only a few decades ago – is an indication that Houstonians are not so easily convinced of the civic value of this kind of high-profile project, especially if the cost benefits and potential impacts are not carefully laid out for them. The loss of faith in both of the agents of urban salvation, city government and the developer hero, has activated the creative energies of the citizens themselves, who believe that by joining together around specific interests and pooling their expertise and resources, they can overcome the lack of government initiative and the problem of limited venture capital.

Such a situation does not necessarily negate a role for the Department of Planning and Development, but it does

complex political conjunction of local, county, state, and federal jurisdictions. Rigorous planning is not only imperative but likely to be mandated by higher levels of government; the city's need to develop plans for conforming to new federal air-quality standards is an example. The challenge will be to make such mandates serve as the foundation for creative planning, rather than treating them as obligatory nuisances or bureaucratic problems. As Barry Moore's article on the Houston environmental movement points out (see page 20), consensus building may be easier to achieve in this area than in the messy territory of politically or economically derived land-use regulations.

Planning activity of a second type will result from the efforts of numerous private and quasi-public organizations, each pursuing its own projects in support of its

district could funnel back into the district any new tax revenues associated with rising property values resulting from planned improvements.

Both of these projects raise questions about the degree of control the city will be able to exercise over these privately sponsored initiatives. Particularly with regard to the Uptown developments, the city has set a troublesome precedent by allowing the design of the public environment to be largely privatized, without adequate public review or exploration of better alternatives. Stronger guidelines for planning and review need to be developed beyond the purely financial incentives associated with the special improvement or tax increment financing district if they are to become a primary vehicle for future city redevelopment.

Given proper guidance, aid, and encouragement (and some luck), many of these projects can make a difference, giving shape and substance to the Houston collage. But while each is focused on a specific target, be it a neighborhood, public park, or commercial district, the city is still a complex, interrelated system, and such activities can succeed or fail on the basis of how well they relate to things outside their own immediate cone of vision. Ultimately the city will inherit both the benefits and the problems of these projects. The Planning and Development Department can be a useful partner to these groups and at the same time protect citywide interests. It can help to develop a broader view, coordinating efforts with municipal agencies, and assisting citizen groups in making good use of available expertise. An untested model of how this might work is the plan authored by University of Houston law professor John Mixon and recently advanced by Mayor Lanier that allows neighborhoods to form their own mini zoning districts and work with the planning department to develop regulations and enforce them. This balkanization of planning, however, does not address the edge problems of planned neighborhoods, a concern raised during the zoning debate, nor does it provide ways for dealing with the vast, marginalized areas that would fall between these neighborhoods.

The city's need to repair, augment, and expand its infrastructure is an unglamorous technical necessity, akin to working on the plumbing in a house, yet the infrastructure constitutes the most pervasive (if often hidden) part of the public environment. Most American cities have pushed the infrastructure problem into the background, relying on buildings to create the city's postcard image. But inattention to the quality of our streets, parks, transit systems, drainage systems, and utilities is the ultimate form of urban denial. Houston's failures in this regard are notorious, and efforts to improve the situation will not be helped by short-term solutions or by considering infrastructure to be a

compartmented series of technical problems to be solved. Rather, improvements and expansions of the city's infrastructure should be thought of as opportunities for collaborations between engineers, designers, and planners sensitive to the needs and desires of the city's districts.

Finally, the city needs to respect the advice and opinions of its charter review groups, panels, commissions, and advisory boards. These groups are both broad-based and close to the citizens of the city; frequently they have been impeded to marshal citizen expertise and use it to direct decisions that will have a direct impact on the quality of the public environment. A case in point is the Municipal Art Commission, a citizen group appointed by the mayor to advise the city on art in public places. But because its recommendations are subject to approval by city council, too often its advice is challenged or disregarded. The city must give the Municipal Art Commission a clearer mandate. In a city lacking zoning, advisory groups can be primary agents for promoting urban order, continuity, and citywide environmental quality.

The buzz word during the zoning debate was something called "Houston-style zoning," which purported to build on Houston's unique identity while avoiding the bureaucratic problems, ineffectiveness, and forced homogeneity that have accompanied zoning in other cities. Unfortunately, the document that was offered to the public last year looked more like old-fashioned, American-style zoning of a couple of generations ago. As numerous commentators have pointed out, Houston is not so different, in outward appearance at least, from other Sun Belt cities; so how much does zoning really affect the physical form of cities? Economic determinism and the typological sameness of modern urban buildings may be far more significant factors than zoning. The difference is the Houston way of doing business, which is to leave city development largely in the hands of the private sector, with few impediments to individual initiative and little normative intervention by government. Having failed to invent a planning instrument custom made for this style of thinking, Houston may have found its own style of planning by default in the spate of projects and initiatives that are filling the vacuum. Whether this is a case of Houston just acting like Houston, or a genuinely fruitful approach to planning, will depend on how effectively the city government can collaborate with its citizen entrepreneurs and citizen planners, and how successfully government and citizens working together can raise planning decisions from the level of special-interest initiatives to real civic-mindedness. ■

PLANNING

pose challenging questions for planners who would like to treat every city problem within a comprehensive framework and exercise top-down control in making broad projections about land use and development based on the abstract formulations of a highly centralized system. Instead, as Richard Sennett argued in the 1960s in his provocative little book *The Uses of Disorder*, the planning community will need to learn that

it must take responsibility for its acts in a historical, unpredictable society rather than in a dream world of harmony and predetermined order. Instead of planning for some abstract, urban whole, planners are going to have to work for the concrete parts of the city, the different classes, ethnic groups and races it contains.

Sennett's admonition is remarkably appropriate to Houston's current situation. But his thesis is also dangerously casual in its understanding of the technology of cities, the problems of infrastructure, and the importance of improving and maintaining the natural environment. His defense of "creative anarchy" as a planning style, while on the one hand potentially more genuinely democratic, may also doom a city to live in a perpetual state of "ad-hocism."

Just how Houston will forge its own planning alliances remains a pressing challenge. Whatever the outcome, several distinct levels of activity will need to be considered.

To begin, a broad set of environmental-quality issues must be addressed on a regional scale, for the protection and preservation of sensitive natural sites and resources are tasks not easily circumscribed by political boundaries. These issues can only be approached within a

own limited objectives. Often these groups are an outgrowth of confrontational politics and seek to redress grievances arising from governmental indifference or the excesses and presumptions of the powerful. But too often they also represent private interests that are hoping to turn a profit while selling their projects as having significant benefits to the city. Still others are put together by or in behalf of identifiable social groups, neighborhoods, or commercial districts using strategies that mimic the advocacy planning of the sixties and seventies.

Seeking to use the leverage of enabling legislation that supports the creation of publically sanctioned improvement districts, various groups have adopted large segments of property within the city and embarked on ambitious plans for their transformation. One of these, the streetscape redevelopment presently under way in the Galleria area (see page 31), will spend \$11 million on an elaborate package of landscaping and improvements (tree planting and burying utility lines) and glitzy decorative hardware designed by Communications Arts of Boulder, Colorado. Intended to affirm the existence of Uptown Houston as an identifiable district rivaling (according to its promoters) Rodeo Drive in Los Angeles or Miami's Miracle Mile, this project, which has proceeded outside the public review process, is being funded by bonds supported by a tax levied on property owners in the district under the aegis of Harris County Improvement District No. 1, created by the Texas Legislature in 1987. Similarly, the Midtown Redevelopment Association, a private development group, has received approval from city council to form a tax increment finance (TIF) district to support its ambitious plans to redevelop 600 acres of property south of downtown. The TIF