

Alex S. MacLean's overhead photographs of Houston, featured in the following pages, were taken last October at the invitation of *Cite* and the Rice Design Alliance. For two weeks, MacLean criss-crossed through mostly sunny skies above Houston, shooting more than 1,500 photographs from the vantage point of his 1967 single-engine airplane. These photographs present a remarkably beautiful portrait of the city and its environs, one that is both abstractly rich, like a modern painting, and at the same time filled with critical content.

MacLean took up flying in 1971 while studying architecture at Harvard's Graduate School of Design. Soon after earning his pilot's license he began taking pictures from the air. He completed his Master's degree in 1973 but never practiced architecture, choosing instead a career as a photographer. In 1975 he founded Landslides, a business specializing in aerial photography primarily for architects, engineers, planners, and environmental organizations. Over the last 25 years MacLean has photographed every state in the union except Alaska, and his pictures have been published in four books: *Look at the Land, Aerial Reflections on America*, with text by Bill McKibben (1993); *Cities of the Mississippi: Nineteenth-Century Images of Urban Development*, by John William Reps (1995); *Taking Measures Across the American Landscape*, co-authored by landscape architect James Corner (1996); and most recently Richard Sexton's *Vestiges of Grandeur: The Plantations of Louisiana's River Road* (1999).

Rice University, which appeared like a perfectly composed playing card. During the course of the flight MacLean was continually in touch with the air traffic controller, notifying him as we shifted course. I could only image the logistics he faced when photographing, the balancing of camera and plane, of changing lenses, of communicating with the tower, all while aligning the Cessna to get his shots. On our return we passed over the University of Houston campus before approaching Hobby for a graceful descent.

In January, the 1,500 slides arrived, and we began the task of selecting the images for this issue, a job made difficult by the high quality of all the photographs and our desire to be as inclusive as possible. We noted that some things made more compelling subjects than others when viewed from above. High-rise buildings, for example, which dominate the skyline when seen from the ground, made relatively uninteresting subjects when viewed in isolation from the air, appearing as extruded, urban non-entities. Much more powerful were angled views of the downtown street grid, with its composition of buildings, shadows, and empty blocks suggesting a map of Houston's urban system. Patterns of abandonment and renewal were sharply depicted in shots of inner city neighborhoods, where the shells of roofless buildings and general dishevelment contrasted with orderly segments of new construction. The remains of Allen Parkway Village appeared as a shrinking enclave trapped in the middle of an encroaching, cartoon-like housing development. The network of freeways that slice through the city's fabric seemed like indifferent lines when their kinetic reality

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The Houston Photographs of Alex S. MacLean

BY WILLIAM F. STERN

Flying solo, MacLean, a former college football player with the husky physique of an athlete, has taught himself the acrobatic skills of managing his plane's controls while taking photographs. Flying relatively low, between 1,000 and 4,000 feet, MacLean fastens his camera to a gyro-stabilizer that rests on his left shoulder. Guiding the camera with his right hand, he controls the plane with his left hand on the yoke and his feet on the rudder pedals, shifting altitude and angles as he photographs. He uses a 35-millimeter camera with lenses that range from 24 to 300 millimeters. Altitude, angle, and light are among the variables in determining any given shot. At lower altitudes more detail can be discerned, but at higher altitudes more area is encompassed, yielding wide, broad shots.

From his home outside of Boston, MacLean flew his plane, a single-engine Cessna 182, to Hobby Airport, which served as a base of operation during his Houston shoot. Shortly after he arrived, he suggested I come along with him on a flight over the city. Despite some trepidation, I couldn't resist the offer. At Hobby, we walked across the concrete apron to an isolated corner of the tarmac, where MacLean's airplane, a veritable miniature compared to the airport's other, more modern planes, was parked. The 32-year-old Cessna looked its age. There were plenty of dings, dents, and chipped paint on its body. The inside of the airplane was equally time-worn, with split upholstery and only a pair of seat belts, no body halters. Lined up on top of the airplane's dashboard were a series of camera lenses secured with Velcro. MacLean explained that he had not purchased a newer aircraft because the Cessna 182 was the best single-engine plane he had ever flown, and the company had stopped producing that model in the 1980s. He updates the plane by replacing its engine every 1,500 flying hours.

MacLean handed me a headset so we could communicate easily during the flight, and so I could hear his conversations with Hobby's air traffic controller. He turned the key and the plane's engine came to life. Slowly, we taxied onto the runway, picking up speed until we lifted gently off the ground, rising to an altitude of only about 1,000 feet before leveling off. Riding the small plane I felt light, as if floating on a wafer with seemingly nothing between us and the ground. Fortunately, we were flying in clear, calm skies, but I still felt anxious. I asked MacLean to head southeast towards the San Jacinto Monument and then return along the Houston Ship Channel. The landscape below was concentrated with distinct patterns and shapes that appeared both familiar and strange. Later, I would view MacLean's photographs of this area and marvel at his ability to select, frame, and compose exquisitely detailed images of what I saw as a generalized landscape. We circled the obelisk of the San Jacinto Monument before heading back along the Ship Channel to the cluster of towers downtown, a trip that took approximately 15 minutes. Flying south, we traversed the tree-canopied neighborhoods of Montrose, finding the tidy main quadrangle of

was frozen by the camera's lens. Far more interesting were tighter views of the abstract patterns of freeway interchanges and the built-up corners at the intersections of ordinary roads. Photographs of the Ship Channel dominated by the industrial geometries of the adjacent port facilities and oil refineries were consistently fascinating, both for their abstract beauty and their shocking portrayal of a denatured landscape. By contrast, the built characteristics of Houston's older, stable neighborhoods were often hidden from view by soft canopies of mature trees.

Out on the periphery, the signs of habitation appeared more sharply etched than their urban counterparts, especially when viewed against the sweeping expanse of Houston's western prairie. The hull of the new Katy Mills Mall and its surrounding parking lot seemed like an ungainly ship marooned in a sea of nowhere. Ubiquitous cul-de-sacs, resembling biomorphic organs, anchored subdivisions; those subdivisions themselves document sequences that begin by erasing a site's natural greenery and replacing it with giant, earth-work-like sculptures scratched in a dusty emptiness, an emptiness soon refilled with tenuous fragments of model-railroad houses situated in too-perfect lawns. Viewed from the air, scenes that from the ground appear mundane often revealed an intelligence of form that transcends their content, making things as ordinary as a striped parking lot or a routine apartment complex appear as stunning essays of pure geometry. In their abstract distillations they can be as deceptively beautiful as an architect's model.

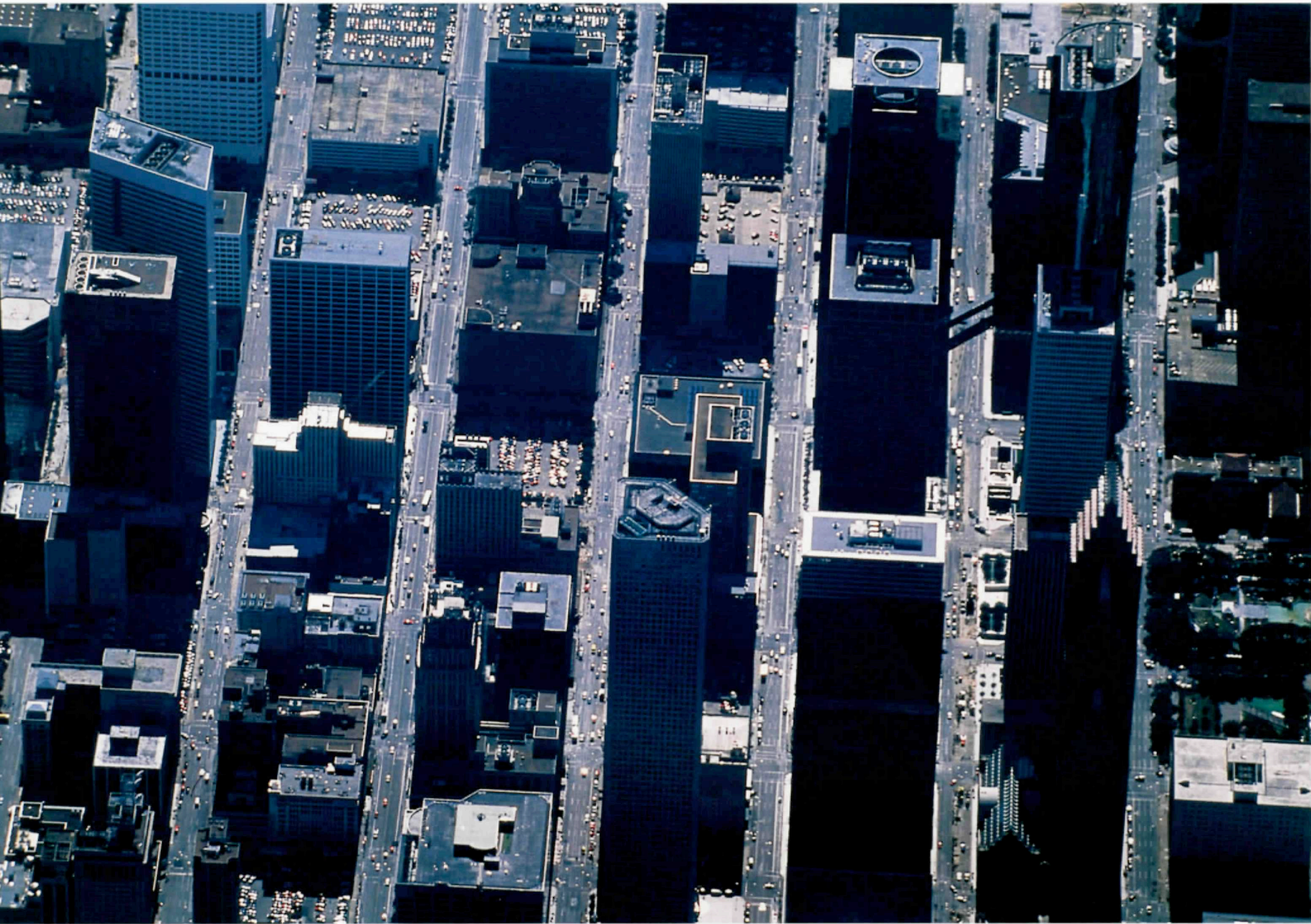
Our instructions to MacLean were general. We suggested areas for him to look at, but we wanted him to discover the city with his own eyes. The intention of this photographic essay was never to see Houston in its totality, nor to present a record of its prominent landmarks, but rather to reveal something about the place that could only be captured from the air. MacLean flew at all times of the day, from early morning into the last evening light, selecting one area of concentration after another, often returning to a location to re-photograph it as the light changed. The resulting images create a portrait of Houston from a vulnerable angle, telling us much about the city as a premeditated construction. They are not manifestly critical views, though they do prompt critical thinking about how the city grows and settles into a relationship with its natural site. Like the bird's-eye views of Paris that Roland Barthes extols in his essay on the Eiffel Tower, MacLean's photographs transcend sensation and allow us to see Houston as structure, "a corpus of intelligent forms" that can only be vaguely imagined from the ground.

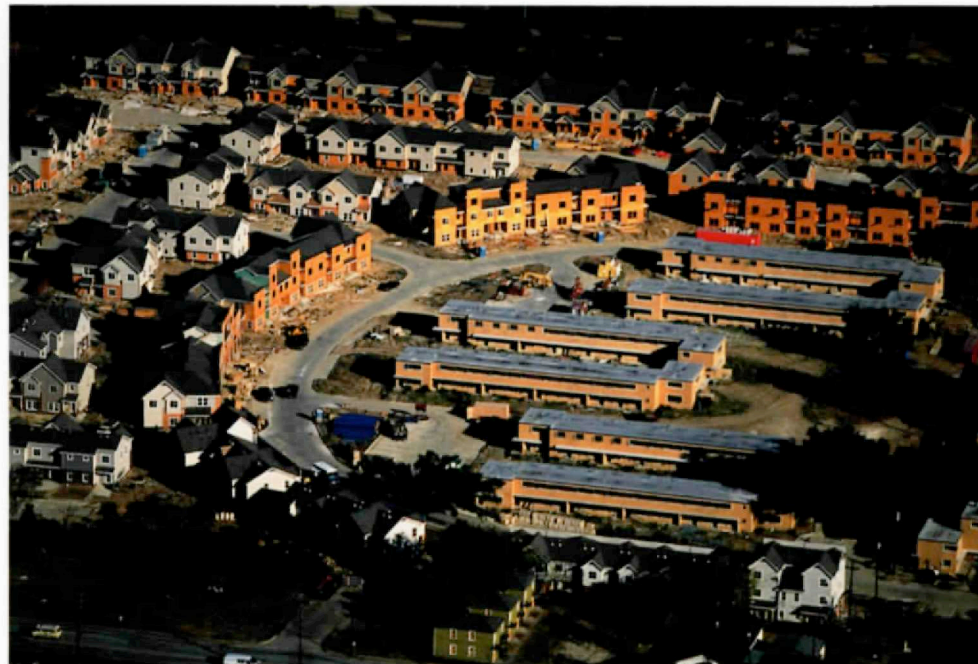
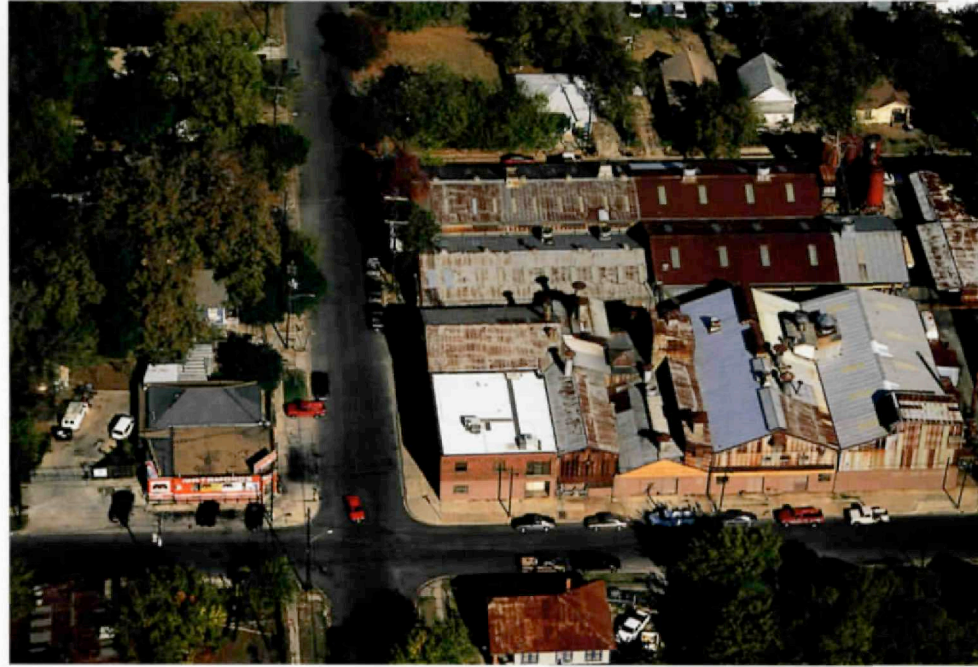
In conjunction with this issue of Cite, Alex S. MacLean's Houston photographs will be on display at The Menil Collection from September 8, 2000 through January 7, 2001. The exhibition is co-sponsored by The Menil Collection and the Rice Design Alliance.





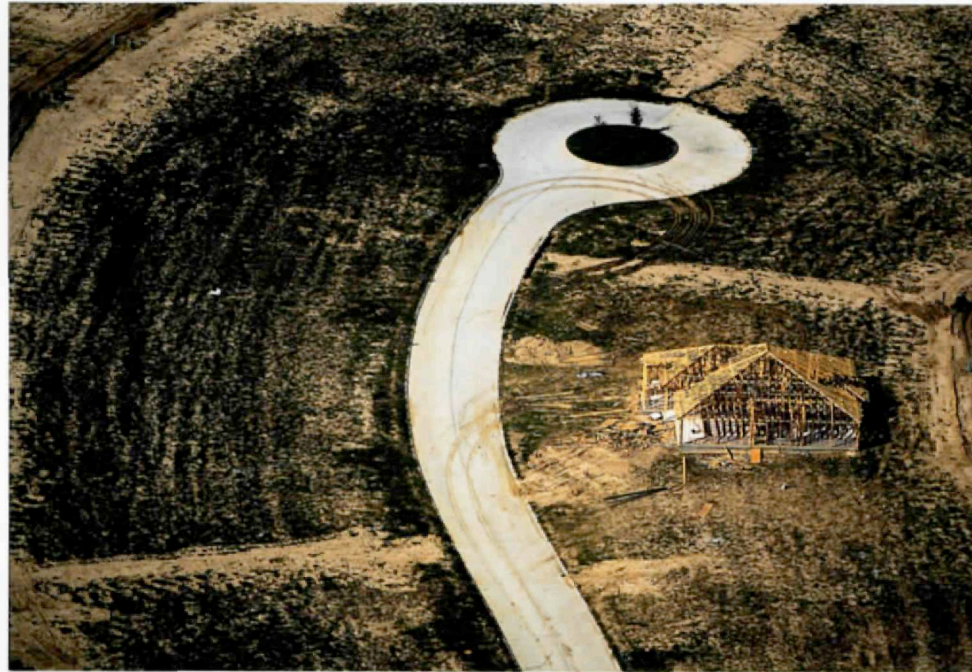
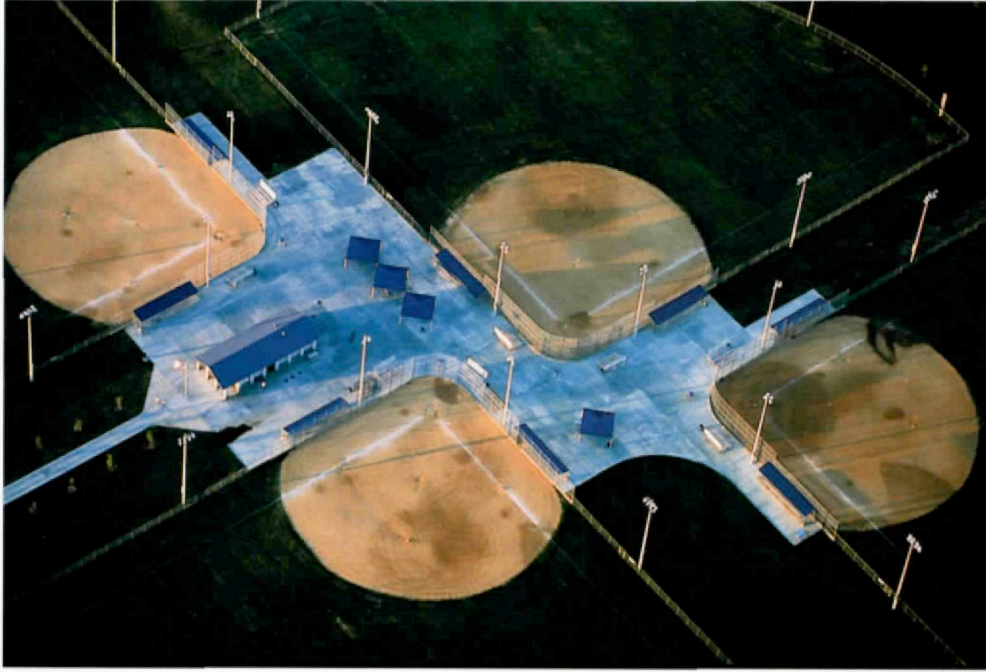




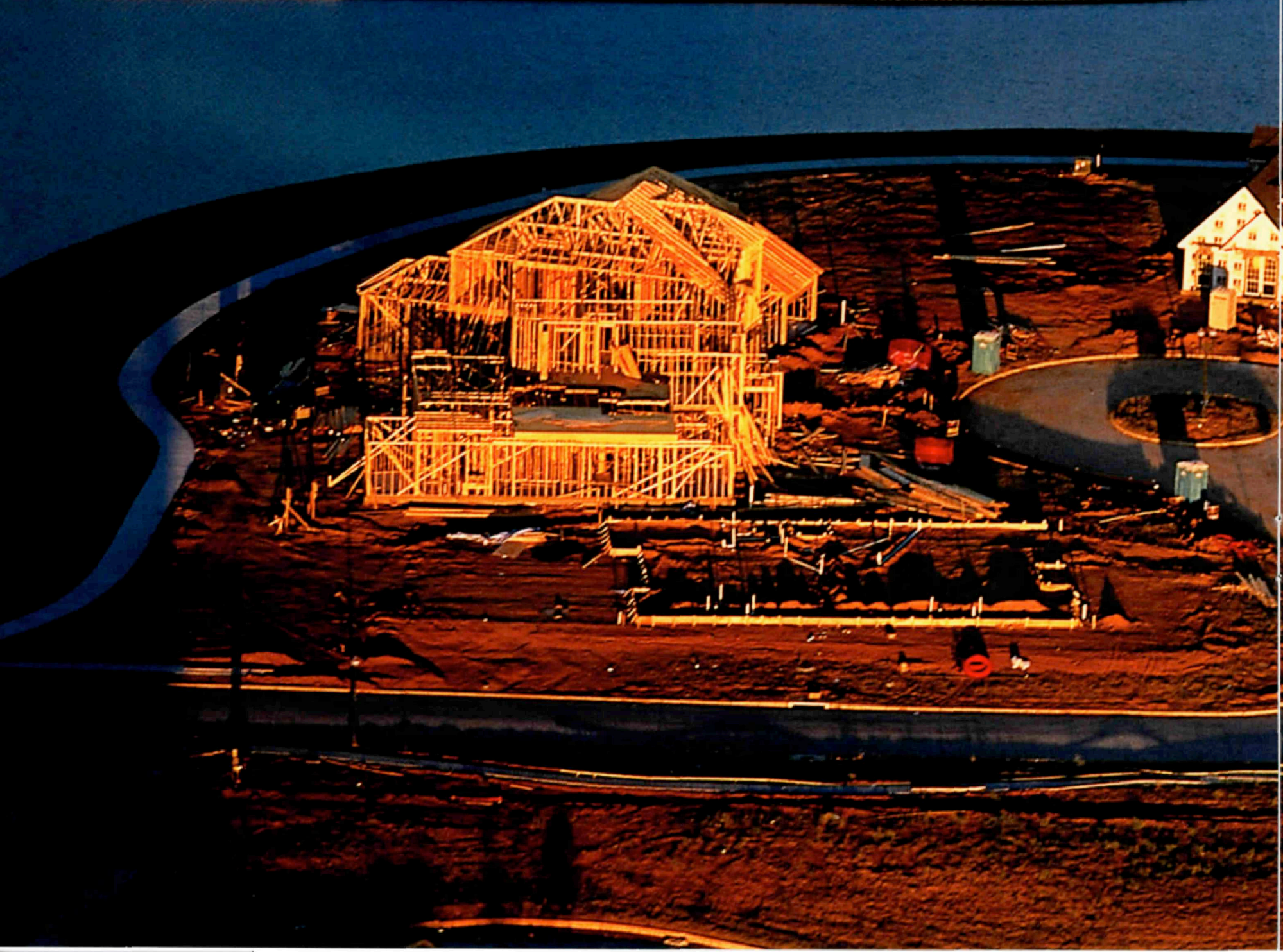


Clockwise from top left: Travis and Commerce, Downtown; Fifth Ward; Allen Parkway Village; Warehouses near Hardy Street Railyard





Clockwise from top left: Baseball Diamonds; West Houston Cul-de-Sac; Entrance Gate, Clear Lake Subdivision; Railroad Crossing











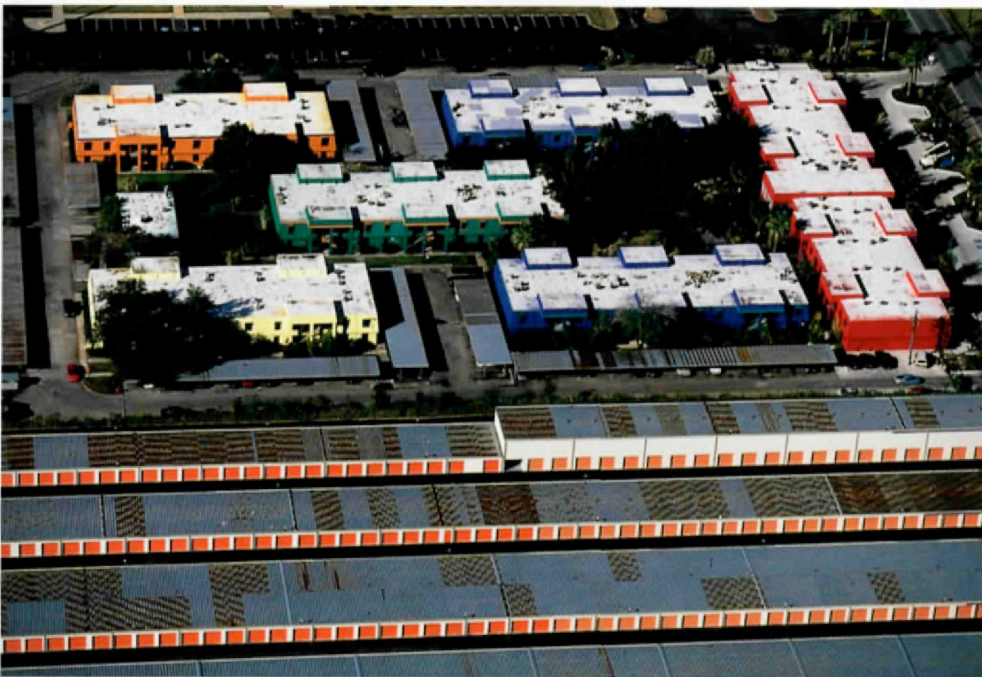
Tree Canopied Neighborhood, Montrose



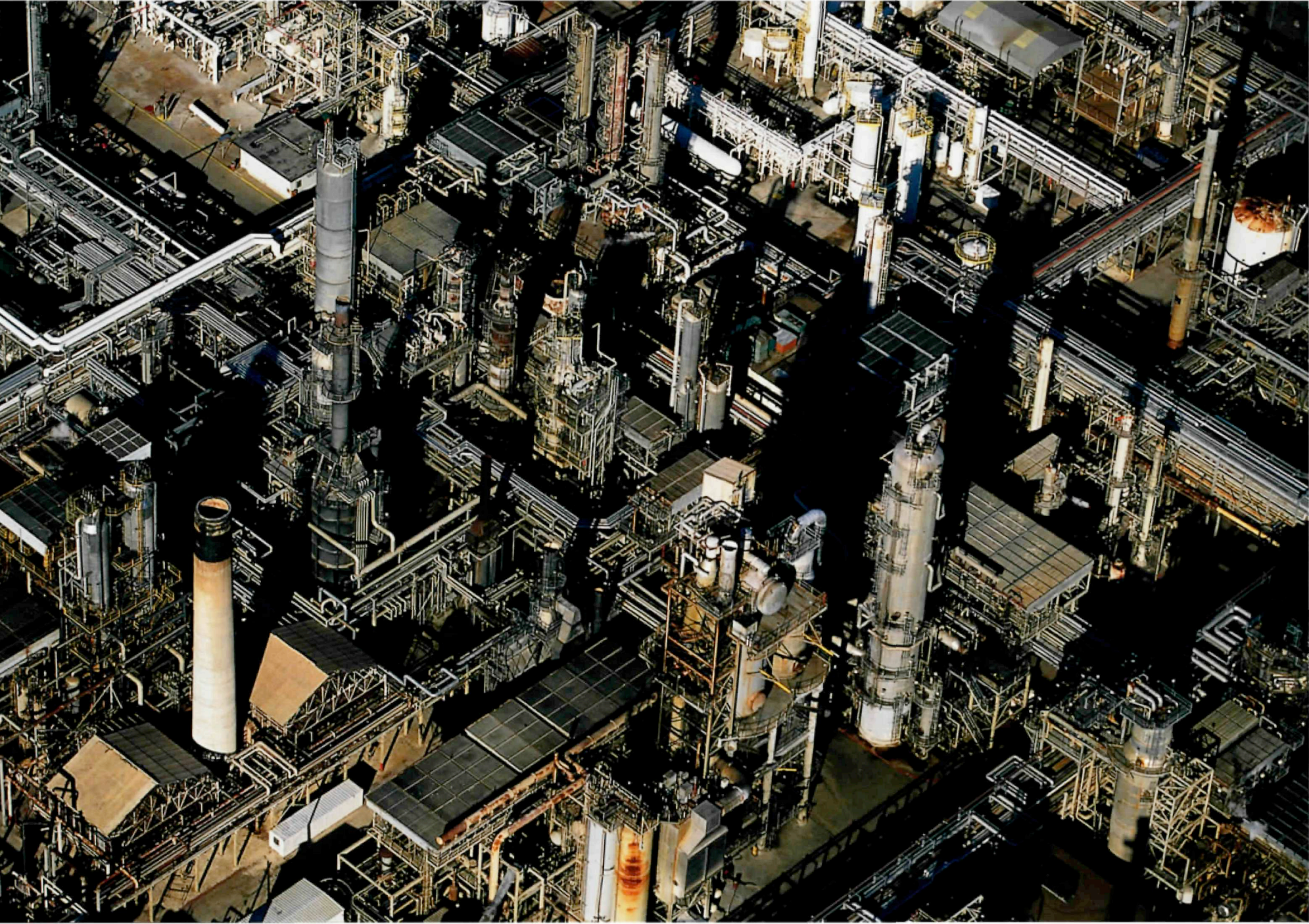








Clockwise from top left: School Buses; Foundation Slab, Waller; Wal-Mart, Copperfield Crossing; Apartments and Mini-Storage near Beltway 8





Highway 288 Apartment Complex



Houston Ship Channel at Loop 610 Bridge