

**in•fra•struc•ture** (in'frə-strük'chər) *n.* 1. the basic facilities, equipment, and installations needed for the functioning of a system or organization. *The American Heritage Dictionary, 1985*

**P**ublic investment in infrastructure is a huge force that shapes the way we perceive our community, and it should be an integral part of planning for the future. But we've always had a problem embracing this concept. In Houston, government has taken a back seat to business and the private sector has overshadowed the public, reflecting the political traditions of Texas and the West, where there is a persistent sense that even if we gave government a bigger role, it probably couldn't get it right.

To be great, a city must have a strong and diverse economy that produces substantial public wealth. Without such wealth there can be no great art, no superior universities, no sound public education system, no magnificent public spaces, not even sports teams. Great cities today and throughout history have in common at least two things: vigorous commerce with high job inventories and a prominent position in the economy of their national state. Therefore any public investment, especially in infrastructure, should first be a business decision based on potential for economic enhancement; however, it is

equally important to acknowledge that infrastructure is a powerful tool for defining the character and ethic of a community.

The City of Houston spends enormous sums every year on new infrastructure and maintenance of systems already in place. But it is not alone. Separate municipalities such as West University Place or Bellaire along with other governments such as Harris County and the Houston Independent School District also spend millions each year on building and maintaining everything from schools and roads to libraries, sewer systems, and parks. Within greater Houston still more overlapping public agencies have budgets that include infrastructure — Port of Houston; Flood Control District; Houston Community College District; Harris County Hospital District; new tax increment zones downtown and in the Galleria; and even quasi-private “districts” such as the medical center, where the Texas Medical Center, Inc., acts as a governmental body of sorts, regulating such things as parking, traffic patterns, signage, and new construction.

Each of these separate public and quasi-public agencies spends tremendous sums on infrastructure every year, for a total that often far exceeds what the private sector spends on all types of construction. It is obvious that, for better or worse, such combined, large-scale spending will affect the way our neighborhoods look and function.

#### *Infrastructure and Planning*

Houston has long been allergic to planning. The notion that government can bring any intelligence, foresight, thought, or wisdom to the planning process is foreign to the political thinking of many Houstonians. Indeed, government involvement in planning has been pretty much regarded here by many as socialism — of the most pernicious sort.

The problem with this political philosophy is that it does not square with history. Three of the biggest components of Houston's economic well-being — Texas Medical Center, Houston Ship Channel, and Johnson Space Center — were not the product of fortuitous



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immaculate conceptions or, to mix the metaphor further, of lightning hitting the same place thrice. They were the result of public intervention to create something where nothing had existed before.

The Texas Medical Center began when voters approved a proposal to take the southern part of Hermann Park and give portions of it to any medical research, medical education, or health care institution that would locate there. In its early years, the Medical Center owed much to the presence of a government-funded facility — the Veterans Administration Hospital. The Ship Channel got its start when Houston, aided by a well-timed gullywasher that transformed the trickle of Buffalo Bayou into a coursing river, persuaded a dubious federal government that the bayou could be converted into a commercial waterway. The Johnson Space Center is ours because, with the help of Albert Thomas and Lyndon Johnson, we stole it, fair and square. Not one of these acquisitions was derailed by protests against inappropriate government intervention or pointless public spending. Each became a major engine for the creation of jobs. Each affected Houston's built environment. Each developed Houston's economic base and helped define the community.

Since the belief that government ought not to be involved in planning runs counter to actual practice, political and business leaders must tack like sailors heading into the wind. Swearing fealty to the wonders of the market and the private sector, they undertake construction of a convention center hotel that the private sector shuns. Protesting their undying allegiance to free enterprise, they approve public-supported funding to ren-

ovate the Rice Hotel. Whether this is good or bad is not the point. The point is that because we have not had a defining debate about these issues, we lunge here and there to meet specific needs and deal with particular opportunities without the benefit of community consensus on just exactly what it is we want to accomplish.

Do such debates take place in real life? According to one school of thought, the effective politician eschews philosophy and focuses on results. Progress is measured not by consensus achieved but by buildings built, sidewalks laid, freeway miles constructed. Such quantitative assessment of accomplishment is clear and precise. The difficult consensus-building required to set priorities and chart a course in advance is avoided in a barrage of impressive-sounding numbers.

There are three types of public infrastructure: maintenance, developmental, and definitional. Maintenance infrastructure supports existing development. Examples are a new sewer line for an existing neighborhood, repairs to a pothole-ridden street, supplemental street lighting, replacement or addition of sidewalks — projects whose main benefit is to maintain, restore, or enhance an area. By and large, public investment in maintenance infrastructure yields no commensurate benefit to the public treasury other than to prevent losses triggered by physical decay. The amount of money spent is likely to be greater than the benefit received. But it keeps us even — rather than falling behind.

Investment in developmental infrastructure spurs new economic activity. Examples include new streets to inaccessible areas, improvements to existing roadways that enhance their capacity to trans-

port goods and people, extension of water or sewer lines to unserved areas, expansion of existing utilities to facilitate denser development, and new public buildings that generate development around them or encourage private-sector investment.

Definitional infrastructure, while not necessarily needed for maintenance or to enhance the likelihood of private investment, helps stamp the community with a unique character, a signature different from that of other urban areas. It can also have significant economic impact. The Gateway Arch in St. Louis

has come to symbolize that city, tying the community to its history as the door to the West, and it anchors major redevelopment projects. Paris's Eiffel Tower is definitional, as is its extensive park system. In Houston, the Astrodome has been both developmental and definitional; to the extent that we have developed bayous as greenbelt parks, they, too, are examples of definitional infrastructure.

In a more abstract way, infrastructure improvements can be physical or philosophical. Physical infrastructure is construction paid for with public-sector dollars. Philosophical infrastructure is a system of ideas, sanctioned by government through laws, that gives direction to private-sector investment. Issues of philosophical infrastructure have been hotly debated in Houston: zoning (since the 1920s) and land-use ordinances (since the 1980s). The question of zoning has engaged the community on a broad philosophical level; zoning opponents have consistently had the better of the argument because it was easier to conjure a parade of horrors than a train of benefits. With more success, the passage of land-use ordinances in response to particular problems has been made possible by an activist constituency bent on finding a solution and willing to support legislation to achieve that goal.

#### *Public Transportation*

Houston's greatest infrastructure failure has been its inability to develop a high-quality public transportation system. Houston still relies on buses, and buses only. This has been a failure on two counts. First, the lack of better public transportation creates mobility problems

and lays the groundwork for future congestion. Consider the near-nightmare conditions at the intersection of Kirby and the Southwest Freeway, along Shepherd Drive between Allen Parkway and the Southwest Freeway, or at the intersection of Westheimer and Post Oak. With nothing more than steady, unspectacular growth in traffic, these areas and others like them will become virtual parking lots.

Second, the lack of effective public transportation retards revitalization and new growth in the community. For years, the primary arguments against development of a more extensive system have been that Houston is not dense enough to support anything more than skeletal bus service, and that rail or other fixed-guideway transportation is not flexible enough to adjust to unanticipated growth patterns in the community. What fascinates about the first argument is that it is so completely out of sync with the current emphasis on reinvigorating neighborhoods inside the Loop. Considerable private money, not to mention a good deal of public investment, is being directed toward the goal of getting Houstonians to live in more densely populated neighborhoods (including downtown) at the same time that public transportation is being neglected on the basis of the "not-dense-enough" argument. A great deal of public money has been spent on the Grand Parkway. If density must precede transportation infrastructure, how did government commit more than a billion dollars to a project in the middle of nowhere? As for citing the immobility of fixed guideways to justify vetoing their use, what about the fixed guideways for autos that we call freeways?

The obvious point is that development follows infrastructure, not the other way around. It has ever been thus. The American interior — lands beyond the original 13 colonies — did not experience rapid growth until a system of roads, rails, and canals began to knit the new territories to the old. These transportation systems were built with a combination of public and private monies.

#### *Public Spaces and the Public Ethic*

Plato wrote, "That which is honored in a city is practiced there." A home is the expression of a family's personality and character, a measure of what is important in life, an indicator of prosperity; is it any different for a community? What we build — or choose not to build — gives

eloquent testimony to who we are, who we think ourselves to be, and what we aspire to be. Our public buildings and our public spaces provide the clearest statement of a community's values.

Since the 1950s, Houstonians have worked steadfastly to refute the notion that they live in a subtropical climate. It is possible to acknowledge and embrace our sweltering summer heat, and to enjoy our mild falls, winters, and springs.

Instead of throwing more airconditioning at the problem, perhaps we could improve things with a definitional infrastructure that included more shade and water. Publically accessible fountains are an obvious amenity that should dwell on public and private open space. Water is a cool, kinetic invitation to relax. It quenches not only a thirsty throat, but a parched disposition.

The idea of shade-giving arcades has all but been abandoned in Houston. We need to relearn the lesson of Boston architect Ralph Adams Cram, who, when faced with the planning of the Rice University campus, devised an architectural style uniquely suited to our climate — a style that included colonnaded arcades. There are echoes of that lesson elsewhere in the city — the arcade of the old Texas Company Building at San Jacinto and Rusk, for example, or the walkways that join the buildings of Philip Johnson's academic court at the University of St. Thomas. By and large, in Houston we move straight from our car to the front door of a building. Between buildings, the walk — if we walk — is under open sky or, if we are downtown, underground.

The downtown tunnel system is both developmental and definitional infrastructure. Unfortunately, the definition it provides does not enhance a sense of community. The idea of underground passages giving shelter from the sun and rain is not a bad one. But why should we construct them in such a — pardon the expression — pedestrian fashion? Why have we missed the opportunity to make the tunnel system more than a place suitable for moles scurrying about their appointed rounds? Why can't we open the tunnel system up to the sky?

Trees are Houston's natural arcades. There is no single natural feature over which we have control that can have a greater impact. We cannot build hills like San Francisco's, or add lakes like Wisconsin's, but we can plant trees. And here, trees grow fast. Despite the good example set by Trees for Houston and the

Park People, we have not mustered the single-minded, fanatical (in a positive sense) commitment to urban forestation that a city of this scale requires. With about four million people spread out over more than 1,000 square miles, it will take a lot of trees to redefine the character of the place.

#### Politics and Policy

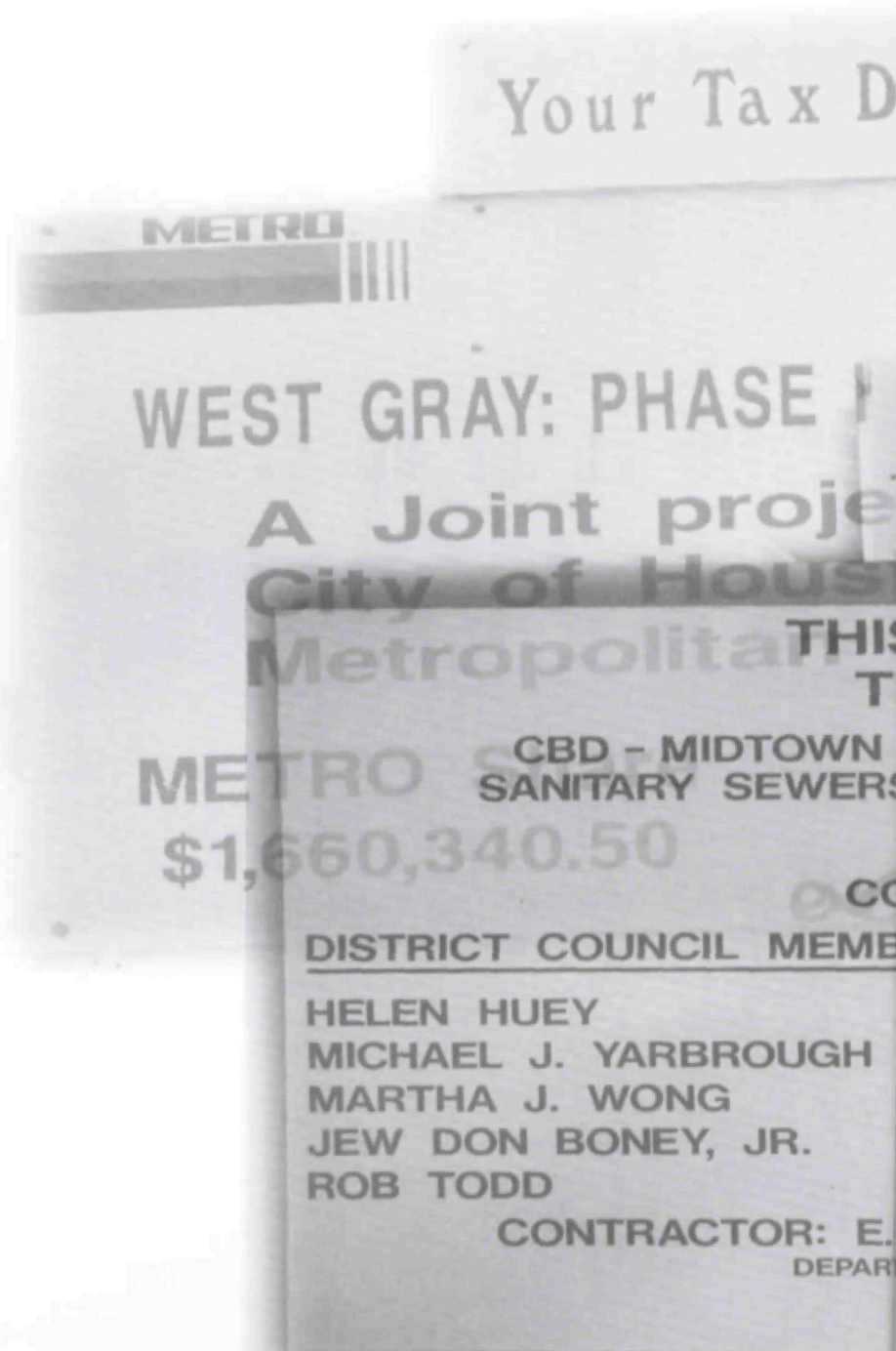
What are the important public spaces in our community? Where do we take visitors? My own list includes, among others, the Rice University campus, the environs of the University of St. Thomas, Hermann Park, Memorial Drive, Post Oak Boulevard as it works its way through the Galleria area, Kirby Drive through River Oaks, North and South MacGregor along Brays Bayou, the medical center, the space center, and the port. These places are the result of a building up, a layering of horizontal space, to make an identifiable place. It is this collective action that makes a significant impact, which is otherwise difficult to achieve one building, one site, one project at a time, where the scale is too small, the likelihood of consistency among projects too slim, and the prospects for sustained investment too unlikely.

Large-scale private development controlled by the developer, such as the Hogg brothers in River Oaks, Gerald Hines in the Galleria, or George Mitchell at The Woodlands, does, of course, have an enormous effect in the community. During years of rapid expansion, the major engines for development of Houston's built environment have been in the private sector. Glenwood Cemetery, a private development, not a public park, was the first large landscaped space in Houston (and Houstonians used it as a park for family outings and picnics). The Houston Heights, now treasured as a unique community worthy of preservation, was developed by private investors who not only sold lots and houses but also installed the infrastructure, including a streetcar line. River Oaks was born not on the desks of city planners but in the mind of Will Hogg. Over and over again, Houston's municipal boundaries have been expanded because of private-sector activity. Even today, with the anticipated annexation of Kingwood and other northwesterly areas, that pattern persists, proving again that infrastructure must precede development, whether privately or publically provided.

For the first time in Houston's history, the focus of the city's growth and devel-

opment is shifting away from outward expansion toward a balance between expansion and redevelopment of existing neighborhoods. With this change, the public sector will be forced to become more concerned with infrastructure in all its manifestations. While expansion and new private-sector development at the outer edges will continue, the future of the city inside the city limits and especially inside the Loop will depend on public investment. Change has already begun without much public discussion of the implications of such redevelopment. The justification of necessity has been used to

avoid difficult questions on what the proper role of government ought to be in rebuilding older infrastructure in the city. When it comes to changing the face of the inner city today, one would be hard pressed to accomplish anything without government participation; few if any private-sector interests could acquire control over enough property to have a transforming impact. Likewise, while several individual private interests might take steps to collectively alter an area, they could not coordinate infrastructure improvements without public participation.



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# City of Houston



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We may cling, if we wish, to the notion that the private sector is wiser, more efficient, and more effective than government. But private resources alone cannot tackle municipal redevelopment on the scale needed to transform our community's built environment. Nor can the limited and overburdened public coffers be expected to underwrite this kind of change without financial backing and know-how from private investors.

Houstonians need to support a broader role for the public sector but at the same time demand that the best practices of the private sector be included in what-

ever arrangements are made, including fiscal responsibility and planning. Infrastructure, new or improved, must be a reflection of the civic will to build an economically vital community that reflects our character and ethic. ■