



Speed zone

BY LARS LERUP



Aerial photo: © 2002 Landstar Aerial Background photo: 2003 © Hootie + Harlowe

Kirby Drive, from Upper Kirby (top) south to the Rice Village.



A JUMP CUT AWAY from the stillness of the subdivision, action and speed pick up. The passage from stillness to speed is made almost smooth by a zone somewhere obscurely between the two. Still housing, but denser housing, and with an occasional commercial building, this buffer zone anticipates the speedzone. The traffic is heavier, the speed increases, and the real estate market is softer, more fluid. The pace of change, imperceptible in the subdivision, is here visible if not yet striking. The canopy of trees thins out; streets stop their meandering; street humps are introduced to slow the increase of traffic and speed; building density increases, and therefore activity. We are at the edge of the speedzone.

Speedzone Kirby

The commercial swelling of an avenue like Kirby Drive is typical of tributaries of the feeder systems around the freeway network. Like a meal that causes a python to bulge, the speedzone gently impinges on the adjacent subdivisions, and in the case of Kirby, pushes deeper into the suburban fabric. Since there is no zoning, buffers seem to emerge naturally. Precisely how this occurs is buried in real estate history, yet the transition

zone appears natural (compared to planned areas that give the impression of being hard-lined, one against the other). But there are hidden constraints. In the transition zone, the speedzone's development freedom slowly morphs into the constraints of the deed restrictions or zoning of the adjacent subdivision.¹ The view changes — from the cinematic to the photographic, from movement to stasis. This range from flux to fixity reflects the pragmatics of this highly volatile corridor of activity. Fused yet separated, both firmness (deed-restricted or zoned subdivisions) and let-go (along the speedzone) live comfortably together. There is a great lesson to be learned from this elasticity of operation.

Ebb and Flow

It may only be after a catastrophic event that a city's internal connections become apparent; behind an apparently obscure cacophony of actions lie vital mechanisms that, when interfered with, can halt the entire enterprise. However, while the city chugs along in its everyday ways, there is virtually no evidence of the underlying mechanism. In fact, as we look closer at the speedzone, only tiny events appear — thousands of simultane-

ous but independent actions, the ebb and flow of bodies (humans and vehicles) and artifacts (from soap to hamburgers). All are apparently totally disconnected from each other; each action on its own errand; each event oblivious to any other. Much like a Beckett novel (such as his first, *Watt* of 1953) the speedzone's actors (and their paraphernalia) seem haplessly thrown to chance and irrationality. Yet because of common physical limitations and jurisdictional purview, manifested in the particulars of the street and lot system, and in habits and morés, our actors are all functionally similar. Complex nested networks of actors, connected by friendships, work habits and chance, build a rich mix of activity. As we look closer, the complexity increases. Next to the laundry, a small Thai restaurant produces astonishingly different behaviors, attitudes, smells, gestures and sounds. In unison, hundreds of tiny uses and associated events combine in an observer's mind to form a symphony of sights, sounds and smells that no plan could duplicate. These micro-activities are purposeful, determined and supported by a myriad of regimes, such as financial institutions, know-how, deliveries, service mechanisms, habits, and desires.

The speedzone hosts a multitude of highly diversified human events. A dense set of stimuli occurs simultaneously and without friction, aside from tiny hesitations in entryways and at intersections. This lack of serious friction can itself be seen as an expression of internal dispersion — of just enough space or leeway (and always parking) to go about your business. (This kind of natural proxemics, or spacing, was expressed by E.T Hall in an image of a flock of birds resting equidistant on a telephone line.) It is the density of stimuli that is of particular import. Nowhere in Houston but downtown, the Galleria, and the Texas Medical Center is that density roughly equal. However, here is also where the similarity ends. In all the before-mentioned settings, behaviors and actions are unified into families of activity: business, shopping, and health. Along Kirby, the divergence of events and behaviors, thoughts, and speech is the norm.

Enterprise Zone

As in a toppled Tower of Babel, thousands of tongues are wagged (not only in different languages but also with totally different intentions). Superficially, these scenes may be quaint and charming,



Photos © 2003 Hester + Hordt



much like a small European city, but behind them hover democracy and equal opportunity. Here in the nooks and crannies of this visually discombobulated microcosm, careers are made, enterprises started, bodies trimmed, stomachs satisfied, risks taken, affairs consummated, business transactions conducted, liens delivered, tax returns prepared, apartments cleaned, high fives exchanged, coffees bought and imbibed, children taught to read, hair cut, nails polished, cars washed, shoes mended, art sold, books signed, clothes fitted, TVs tuned, loud music played, beer drunk, wine tasted, barbecue smoked, cars valet-parked, wallets misplaced, petty crimes attempted, parking tickets given, umbrellas opened, winks exchanged, kisses thrown, cell phone messages delivered, cell phone calls taken, barbells hoisted. The speedzone is its own distinct ecology.

The density and complexity of the microphysics of activity are a communal good — something for any metropolis worth its name to aspire too. This is the complex machinery of emancipation that the open city yearns to deliver. This is the power filigree — the multitude of human interactions, short on capital but essential for the life of small entrepreneurs — that

makes democratic cities worth their salt. It is a shame to lose these zones where giant real estate interests have stayed away. As a naturally evolved enterprise zone, this corridor may be as important to cherish and preserve as national monuments, wilderness areas, and wetlands.

Challenges

A peculiar threat to the productive instability of the speedzone comes in a most unlikely form. In the '80s no expert

metropolis. Since the development ground is wide open, the search is on for areas of exploitable softness. Like truffle pigs, real-estate agents leave no stone unturned, and both soon and naturally the speedzones come to their attention. Since it is hard to agglomerate large parcels of land here — too many small and independent landowners — the footprint is adjusted. Consequently, upscale housing, in the form of townhouses at the softer edges and in the transition zone,

environment. The total lack of public open space in the speedzone makes housing the least natural addition. Yet this is the nature of a world in flux, and with the speedzone's habit of adaptability, the new residents may not find parks but plenty of stimuli to partake or kibitz in. Since there is no risk that the high-rise development will reproduce, the real disunity occurs in the vicinity of a flock of townhouses at the edge and spilling into the transition zone. Here David rather than Goliath is the agent, since with low-rise owner-occupied housing comes organization and deed restrictions (we want to protect our real estate values!), which in turn will lead to the calcification of the speedzone. As always there is no protection against invasions. One can only hope that the elasticity of the speedzone will prevail.

Feeder Zone

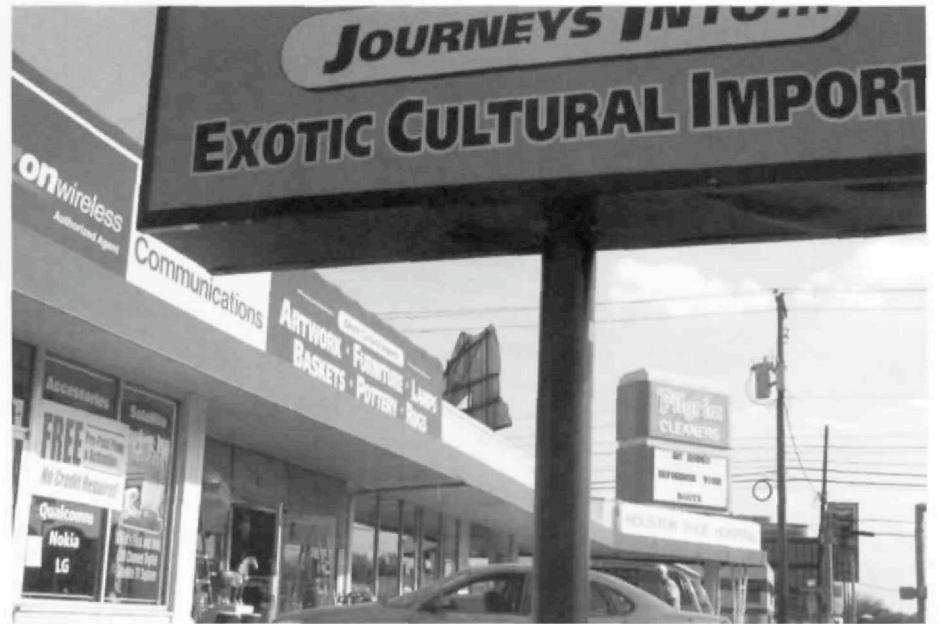
Downriver from the elastic tributary, things are changing. Turning from Kirby on to the feeder parallel to the freeway, we enter the franchise corridor. Here another calcification is taking place: the relentless repetition of the national and global players of commerce. Like Muzak, the same tune is repeated over and over

As a naturally evolved enterprise zone, this corridor may be as important to cherish and preserve as national monuments, wilderness areas, and wetlands.

would have predicted that the Inner Loop would ever grow again, and grow, as is the case now, faster than the edge city. The thrust of this surge of development is housing, the staple of the suburban

and a very occasional high-rise building, has invaded the central corridor of the Kirby speedzone. The high-rise building appears truly idiosyncratic and otherworldly in the mostly low- and mid-rise





in an endless loop. The speed picks up; the search is easier because the signs are larger, brighter, and more conspicuous. The feeder is the transmogrification of the commercial strip, now attached like an elongated saddlebag between the freeway on- and off-ramps. Here is where the big fish school. Here changes are first manifest on the big board in the New York Stock Exchange, and on the ground as mere repercussions.

Speeding

Once back on the freeway behind the wheel of a ton of steel careening — pedal to the metal — at five miles over the speed limit, our experience of speed is complete. In fact, the advancement of car technology allows the driver to retain 50 cubic feet of buffered stillness inside his cockpit — shipped, as it were, from the subdivision — while outside top speed prevails.

The lore of speed in American literature, film, and video is immense, overtaking many times over the stillness of photography. The freeway car chase (shown on the first instance of reality television on a Los Angeles freeway) is ingrained on our minds, and repeated, hysterically, over and over again, in our children's

video games (rudely interrupting the stillness of the suburban house). The frustrations of the endless commuter traffic jams going into town are visibly juxtaposed with the heady line of flight going out of town. Such is the metabolism of freeway life — a type of artificial life best understood as a computer simulation that even the most sophisticated catastrophe theory cannot explain.

Inside the cocoon of freeway life, the dynamics are predictable yet hard to fathom. “Rarely,” I wrote in the conclusion of my book *After the City*, “cars align across the four lanes, and when three cars do, they stay together for a second only: A certain distance at work, independence and cooperation.² Six to seven cars slide back and forth inside my focus, held apart by mutual and mild aversion, while being held together by proxemics: the equation of car size, lane width, freeway geometry, speed, habit, rules and surveillance. A dance, a swarming, motorized prowess...”³

Sparta, I argued, “may have had its revenge on the city right here on the superhighway, but the drifters’ apparent directional resolve leading to a common destiny beyond my vision is deceiving. They will all disperse.” Sparta prefigured

suburbia, while Athens was the epitome of the city. Freeway life is of course emblematic of the modern version of the Spartan metropolis. Like the Spartans, the freeway drifters are athletes, some more than others, wielding SUVs instead of swords in their battles to be first. But the freeway is also the most blatant expression of the unforeseen consequences of the enormous agglomeration of subdivisions and their service components. Ameliorative, the freeway attempts to cope with, and by the ease and smoothness of drive, cover up the ordeal of a commute that, measured in man-hours for all of Houston, totals 34 years a day. Simultaneously, the freeway is productive as it spearheads further development at the edge of the network. The speedzone is a highly complex suburban artifact replete with its own technologies, its own life, its own hopes and desires. Financed and run by the cooperation of federal government, state government, and private contractors, it is an enterprise on its own independent errand — fueled by an astonishing hubris, amassed over the years by all the various actors of car culture, evenly spread, as it were, over thousands of miles of concrete and steel in Houston alone. ■

This text is an excerpt from “Speed: On the Photographic and the Cinematic in Suburban Striations,” a chapter from a book manuscript titled *Another Suburbia*.

¹ In the case of Kirby Avenue, the side inside the Houston city limits is deed-restricted, while the side inside West University is zoned.
² “Transportation is in a very cool spot between a social system and a physical system,” explains Christopher L. Barrett at Los Alamos National Laboratory. His colleague Steen Rasmussen adds, “The elements [or vehicles widely distributed over space] that interact with one another are like biological systems. They are dynamical hierarchies with controls at many different levels, like organelles, cells, tissues, humans.” (From “Unjamming Traffic with Computers,” by Kenneth R. Howard. *Scientific American*, October 1997, p. 87.)
³ *After the City*. MIT Press, 2000, p. 175.

