

That quantity is the key factor in making and selling architectural space in Houston is a troubling fact of life. Few recent buildings rise above cost calculations based on square footage, timing, financing requirements, and market turnover to contribute to the quality of the social and civic landscape. Houston builders and buyers typically trade the opportunity to create a more beautiful, more livable city for short-term effects dictated by fashion, so-called market forces, and the structure of the building and development business.

The reasons for this misfortune are numerous. Most obvious are the negative impact on design of the economic forces driving builders and developers, and the uncritical acceptance of the patterns resulting from the real estate decisions we all participate in. Historically, these two factors have interacted to move Houston away from building, or even dreaming of, a better urban landscape and from the qualities of personal and civic life such a landscape might stimulate.

The term "economic forces" is a catchall for the financial risks and rewards that attend construction in a free-market system. Much the same for all builders, whether of houses or towers, they include every kind of negative pressure known to modern economic man, from indebtedness to all sorts of casualty and legal liabilities, the timing risk associated with interest rates, and the fluctuations of real estate markets. These forces express themselves directly as costs that the builder must bear.

The successful builder carefully watches land and labor costs, the structure of the budget, market activity, and especially market timing. Just as Houston had a long dry spell during which it sometimes seemed that nothing could be sold profitably, the city will soon see times when almost anything can be sold at an inflated price. The smart builder plans for such times.

For this entrepreneur, steep rises in the costs of such basic commodities as land, labor, materials, and money during good times are balanced by greater profits and the sometimes virtual elimination of "wild cards" (such as the buying public's independent preferences or the quality of the product itself). Developers are most secure when the public's ability to discriminate or refuse their product is weak. In a tight real estate market, design attributes – values derived from the qualitative experience the building offers – suffer the same devaluation as the product's other qualitative attributes. Good times reveal design as simply one among the builder's many costs that can and should be controlled, if not eliminated.

The recent history of Houston's apartment market is a useful example of the social and aesthetic impact of the buyer's market for design that exists here in good times and bad. The exodus of workers at the end of the city's last boom left a big hole in the demand for apartments, which in turn resulted in a high rate of vacancy and aban-

Taking Care The Design and Development Cycle of Business

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donment. Between 1987 and 1990, tens of thousands of units were demolished, just in time to help fuel the strong rebound in rents and values prompted by our economic revival. Apartment rents and occupancies are now at all-time highs, particularly in certain high-demand areas, and a number of builders have responded quickly with an unprecedented array of dismal, overly dense, tenement-style, walkup multistory apartment blocks. The projects' success speaks volumes about the lack of choice confronting the typical apartment dweller in 1991.

The future social costs of these new projects are not clear, but are likely to reflect the norms set by products of previous boom times. Southwest Houston, for example, is littered with examples of speedily built, quickly occupied apartment "communities" whose ill-considered (and unloved) designs have attracted little long-term loyalty from tenants. Fluctuating occupancy and high turnover rates mock hopes for social cohesion or economic stability. The quick answers of a decade ago to a strong apartment market have already often become the killing grounds of drug warriors or, at best, temporary lodgings for transient workers.

The significance of these points is not that certain builders or architects should be pilloried for insensitivity or brutality. Rather it is that this pressure to forgo good design is felt not only project by project but systematically, market wide. The ability to reduce the cost, and importance, of design is simply part of the developer's job description. That this effort has such a critical impact on daily life in Houston is due to the fact that builders and developers here are entrusted with the de facto stewardship of the community's interest in

the city's physical form. What developers put in or leave out of their projects, the rest of us must live with or without, often for the rest of our lives. It is tragic for Houston that these stewards have a vested interest in reducing and even at times eliminating design costs.

It can be argued that the role the public plays in dictating values through the thousands of leasing and buying decisions made every week regulates builders' economically determined approach to design. Ultimately, the argument runs, in setting continuous and at least partly predictable patterns for builders to aim at, the "market" makes its desires known and finds satisfaction. In a place that is built incrementally, it is indeed hypothetically true that each generation of buildings must compete with all surviving buildings and that therefore the place as a whole must gradually and inevitably improve. One might further contend that there are always choices for buyers and renters and that therefore the quality of design and construction depends absolutely on how insistent consumers are about issues of quality.

In fact, experience shows that the patterns set by buyers and renters, to the extent that they are not ruled by shortage, are dictated by fashion. The perception that long-term monetary value can be assured by adhering to a particular kind of plan or "style" ties the design tightly to ongoing balances between supply and demand, shortage and credit. For instance, if it is determined that to guarantee its sale or lease a house simply must be "Georgian" or a retail center "postmodern," much of the opportunity for thoughtful design work has already been lost. In a rising market, shortages of time and money makes things even worse.

Real estate cycles and builders' consequent perception of timing dictate when and where new building commences. In the absence of such factors as government intervention (e.g., housing subsidies or savings and loan deregulation), they dictate that building will start when shortage is imminent – precisely the time when design (and other elements that affect quality) is least likely to be considered important to the ultimate sales success of the project. Rising costs for land and other quantitative considerations further devalue design work at such times.

Therefore, improvement in the design and quality of Houston's buildings and the urban life they shape are unlikely to come from or through the present system of real estate development. Even when the builders themselves want it, such improvement runs counter to their best (short-term) interests. Their contingent position

in the operation of the real estate market makes developers poor candidates for the role of stewards of the public interest. It is no wonder that their track record as stewards is so far, if not without exceptions, miserable.

Approaches to guiding development in healthy directions abound in the United States, ranging from systems of professional peer design review to community oversight to tight legislation of quantitative standards governing such items as lot coverage, project size, density, and height. Houston's record with development guidelines, exemplified by the first post-World War II federal financing programs, has been excellent in some instances – for instance, the sensibly designed Kirby Court Apartments on Steel Street – proving that good, long-lasting rental housing can be built here by private industry. The city's tragedy, for renters and buyers alike, is not the disappearance of such programs but the failure to replace them.

Lacking a civically oriented planning process and both the larger view and public debate such a process would entail, Houston has made a tradition of changing its urban fabric on a piecemeal basis. Thus the active public life of downtown streets and squares from the 1920s through the 1950s was abandoned, the mix of houses, stores, and offices in neighborhoods throughout the city decided, and the disposition of economic development dictated, largely without public or civic involvement. These choices were taken at the behest of consumer demand by agents who had no larger interest than the health of their bottom line. For the city as a whole to come to grips with similar future choices will require creation of a broad-based decision process involving citizens, public servants, and professionals, along with builders.

The upcoming debates on zoning and other types of planning regulations may open the door to such a process. For designers, the definition and allocation of responsibility for protecting and enhancing the quality of individual buildings and the public realm as a whole – beyond responsibility to individual clients – is an urgent matter. A new system of stewardship by which development might be made to bring general improvement should be central to these discussions, and undertaken early. Making sure the question is included on the agenda is the responsibility of professional bodies and individuals alike. Although it is difficult to foresee the outlines of the prospective planning resolution, it will be a disaster for Houston if stewardship of the city's form is not specifically addressed. ■



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