

Projects in the Central City

Still Looking for the Sum of the Parts

Rives T. Taylor and Joe Douglas Webb

A surprising variety of groups have begun to recognize that Houston's central city, especially downtown, needs sustained and focused attention leading to a long-overdue comprehensive and strategic plan.

The idea of coordinating and exercising control over urban change runs against the local business community's belief that autonomous personal property rights supersede all else. But a growing perception that property rights are attended by community responsibility is creating interest in the concept of a central, perhaps quasi-governmental facilitator in private and public development projects. Increasing numbers of downtown stakeholders, who now see the necessity of coordinated efforts to reverse the central business district's slide from economic and cultural preeminence, find themselves trying to sell the importance of downtown itself to an apathetic metropolitan region.

Mayor Bob Lanier has taken the first step in community consensus building with Imagine Houston. It is uncertain whether Houston's leaders understand that this is only the first step, not an end in itself, of a process that should lead to a comprehensive plan for the city as a whole. While Mayor Lanier and just about everyone else at City Hall talk about revitalizing downtown, they have provided few incentives to make that rebirth happen. They have not realized that City Hall's resources can provide the very fabric that binds downtown efforts together. Nowhere is the current uncertainty more clearly manifested than in the continued and disastrous decline of the city's Planning and Development Department.

One need not look very far to find cities where public and private entities have joined to revitalize their downtowns:



Aerial view of downtown Houston, 1989, looking northeast.

Portland, Pittsburgh, Baltimore, St. Louis, Denver, even San Antonio and Dallas. Small or large, these efforts share the common denominator of a broad, public vision and a well-developed implementation plan.

Seeing both the local void and successes in other cities, many groups here are engaging in downtown planning, among them Houston Downtown Management Corporation, Harris County, the Metropolitan Transit Authority of Harris County, the city of Houston's agencies

responsible for public safety, the federal government, the state of Texas, the Texas Department of Transportation, the Greater Houston Convention and Visitors Bureau, Cullen Center, the Episcopal Diocese of Texas, the Houston Chinatown Council, the institutions of the Theater District, and private developers. These, along with many others, have made downtown the center of their activities, initiating planning efforts intended to contribute part of a complete solution to the problem of downtown revitalization.



Capital Planning

The number and complexity of private, quasi-public, and public entities at work in downtown underscore the need for a coordination of efforts. Founded in 1983 by downtown business leaders, Central Houston, Inc., was the first attempt at quasi-public planning coordination to help the center of the city remain competitive with the rapidly growing "edge cities." A voluntary membership organization, Central Houston was established

as a 501(c)(6) nonprofit membership association seeking to maintain downtown as a real and symbolic focus for the community, a mission summed up in the slogan the group introduced last year, "Downtown - Capital of Houston." Headed by president Robert M. Eury, educated as an architect and urban designer, this 60-member umbrella organization has become a recognized voice for downtown businesses, landowners, and office workers.

A number of focus organizations have formed under the umbrella of Central Houston, Inc., with charters based on specific problems and potentials in downtown. Central Houston Civic Improvement, Inc., founded in 1984, has been the vehicle or fiscal agent for such projects as the creation of mounted police patrols, the design competition and implementation for Sesquicentennial Park, the Theater District identity program, holiday decorations, the Main Street Proud campaign, and the Hermann Square beautification in front of City Hall. Similarly, the Houston Downtown Management Corporation (HDMC) was founded and authorized by city council in 1990 to operate the Houston Downtown Public Improvement District. Set up as a 501(c)(3) public nonprofit Section 115 corporation, the 30-member HDMC board represents property owners in seeking improvements in the downtown district. To support HDMC's five-year plan and daily operations, an assessment of 6 cents per \$100 land value was levied in 1991 on 705 acres of downtown property. The board quickly adopted policy goals for increasing the public's attraction to downtown. HDMC has been responsible for improved public safety, street and sidewalk beautification, cleanup, and maintenance, and general identity and signage campaigns. Contracting with numerous local design firms, director Guy Hagstette, an architect and urban planner, has combined his own team's knowledge with community vision in major development projects, the formulation of a series of neighborhood plans, and collaborations with Metro's massive street improvement projects. HDMC, which to a degree is independent of Central Houston and is staffed under contract with Central Houston, has no real sanctioned power beyond the force of its vision and its strength as the advocate of landowners' interests. It has been a catalyst for public discussion and partnerships but cannot force issues to a resolution. This role is usually performed by a city's planning department, but in Houston this has rarely been the case.

Another active participant in downtown's future is St. Joseph Hospital. This charitable institution, Houston's oldest hospital and with a staff of more than 2,500, is a major landowner; its 11 full blocks and 3 to 4 partial blocks lie not just in the vicinity of the primary complex but throughout the downtown area. The hospital has recently begun the process of reevaluating its physical facilities in relation to health care reform and changes in medical technology and service delivery. Emphasizing its commitment to stay in its present location, St. Joseph wants to encourage housing downtown for both staff and patients. It is exploring the possibility of creating a buffer along the Pierce Elevated (I-45) and developing a campus precinct that would be an integral part of a rejuvenated downtown district.

Preservation of the downtown environment, often initiated or assisted by the Greater Houston Preservation Alliance, drives a number of visible planning efforts. These often face public apathy or the kind of outright opposition provoked recently by the attempt to get the city to adopt a preservation ordinance independent of a zoning code (see page 49). The effectiveness of this effort remains to be seen. Currently, downtown preservation efforts are centered on rehabilitating existing commercial buildings into new residential enclaves, among them the Hogg Building, the W. L. Foley Dry Goods Co. Building, and the old Union National Bank Building, in or near the Main Street-Market Square Historic District. The Houston National Bank Building may become a mosque under Houston Rockets superstar Hakeem Olajuwon's stewardship. With mixed success, the Market Square Alliance has tried to preserve the fabric of this historic square while helping sympathetic commercial and residential initiatives on a shoestring budget. Harris County has started rehabilitation of the First National Bank Building for a new courts and administrative facility, and Houston City Council member Lloyd Kelley and Mayor Lanier have announced the funding of design work on the redevelopment and rehabilitation of Allen's Landing. Farther south, at 1200 Travis, the city is preparing to purchase the 1967 Houston Natural Gas Building, which will become the new headquarters for the Houston Police Department.

The Greater Houston Convention and Visitors Bureau is the quasi-public group with the greatest potential for effecting immediate major facilities development downtown. Its pending (if not overdue) decision on the development team and location for a new convention center hotel will have significant impact on the city's ability to attract future conventions and special events. The decision will also lay the groundwork for a proposed convention center expansion, with the possibility of an adjacent sports arena. The group's commitment to downtown was affirmed when it relocated its offices to the Market Square area in 1993.

Metro and Inner-City Mobility

The vital issue of urban mobility faces an even more diverse cast of competing players. Beyond the oversight and funding of the federal Department of Transportation, the regional and marginally independent Metro organization works with a shifting number of city departments, including Public Works and Engineering. Add to this coordination challenge any number of utility concerns, such as city sewers, Houston Lighting & Power lines, Bell/AT&T lines, or Entex mains, that can be encountered when roadways are reconstructed. The challenge is multiplied by Metro's dealings with private landowners, the myriad local jurisdictions beyond the

1 Federal Empowerment Zone

The city submitted its application to the Department of Housing and Urban Development in June to become the site of one of the first of six "empowerment zones" nationwide. The project area includes downtown, the Port of Houston, and portions of each of the original six wards and the East End. The award includes \$100 million in federal social service funds, along with other benefits, and up to \$3,000 in tax credits to businesses for every new job offered to a resident of the area.

2 Main Street-Market Square Historic District

In Houston's oldest entertainment area, Market Square property owners and retailers have shifted their emphasis from survival to redevelopment through formation of the Market Square Economic Development Corporation. Bright spots include new brewpubs and cafes and a New York-based restaurant looking at the Stegman Building (Main at Prairie).



The State National Bank Building has reopened, and the Kiam Building has undergone new rehabilitation. Proposed Metro service improvements and special events should make Market Square a major center of after-hours activity. Improving the identification of the historic district's physical boundaries has been one of the Houston Downtown Management Corporation's recent accomplishments.

Architects has begun to tackle the difficult problem of making the Theater District-Civic Center labyrinth of tunnels and underground parking garages comprehensible.

3 Theater District Wayfinding

A team from HDMC and Gensler & Associates Architects has begun to tackle the difficult problem of making the Theater District-Civic Center labyrinth of tunnels and underground parking garages comprehensible.



4 Wayfinding and Environmental Graphics Strategy

An HDMC initiative to provide a consistent graphic image and place markers along routes from welcoming gateways at freeway exits to primary and secondary destinations identified by downtown users themselves.



This design effort by Gensler will organize both the tunnel and street levels.

5 Albert Thomas Transformation

The Albert Thomas Convention Center, now being called Bayou Place, will be converted in two phases into what is touted as the largest entertainment facility under one roof in the country. The developer, David Cordish, recently applied for permits for interior and exterior remodeling. One rumored use for the second, western half of the facility: a casino. Construction was slated to begin by the end of 1994 and be complete in approximately 18 months. More than \$50 million will be spent beyond the cost of abatement and other preparatory work paid for by the city.

6 Sam Houston Coliseum and Music Hall Site Amphitheater and Casino

Maxxam, Inc., is continuing lease negotiations with the city for immediate construction of an amphitheater that could be followed by development of a grand casino and hotel - if casinos are legalized by the state. Maxxam would be responsible for demolishing the Coliseum and constructing both of the proposed facilities. With casino legalization, the project could reach \$300 million.

7 University of Houston Downtown

Two new buildings are in the immediate future: the eight-story Academic/Student Life Building, containing classrooms and physical plant and located along Buffalo Bayou, and a recreational building to the north.

Value of the first building is approximately \$22.5 million. Future development includes skywalks crossing the bayou to two additional new buildings on Main Street south of the bayou.

8 South Texas College of Law Library

Hoover Architects has completed the schematic design of a new library the size of a city block for the downtown law school, to complement its existing building east of Main Street.

Construction is anticipated for 1995-96, contingent on the success of fundraising, with a goal of \$25 million.

9 St. Joseph Hospital

Encompassing more than five city blocks (and owning at least three times that many downtown), the campus has led the way in using vacant space under the Pierce Elevated Freeway for parking.

10 Houston Industries Plaza at 1111 Louisiana (now 1100 Milam)

Houston Lighting & Power's parent company is relocating its headquarters to a 23-year-old, 47-story building with 1.4 million net rentable square feet that is receiving five new floors of communications facilities at its crown, new skin treatments on the main shaft, and a fully reconstructed interior. With removal of the building's sloped glass skirt and reconstruction at the ground floor, HL&P will give back to the city an expanded street-level plaza. Keating Mann Jernigan Rottet of Los Angeles is handling the reconstruction, with Ziegler Cooper, Inc., and Lehman Smith Wiseman directing interior architecture. HL&P will also set an energy conservation example with its cool-storage (ice or water) systems. An ambitious schedule calls for the company's Greenway Plaza divisions to move in during July and August 1995 and the remainder in spring 1996. Construction costs are approximately \$100 million.

11 City Hall Rehabilitation

Ray Bailey Architects with MAS & Associates and D. Y. Davis Associates have led the complex revisions to address safety issues as well as plaza reconstruction at the City Hall complex. The archi-



tectural rehabilitation of the main lobby, council chambers, and the mayor's office and chambers is awaiting

final approvals. The City Hall Annex has been completely overhauled and temporarily houses council chambers and the offices of council members, the mayor, the controller, and other officials from City Hall until the rehabilitation is completed. The cost is in the \$11 million range.

12 City of Houston Public Safety Facility Assessment

Approximately two million square feet of space is being reviewed for current, long-term, and alternative uses. Gensler & Associates Architects with John S. Chase, F.A.I.A., Architect aims to house city departments in city-owned buildings and consolidate the Houston Police Department in a central building.

13 New Houston Police Department Headquarters

City council recently discussed purchasing the 26-story Houston Natural Gas Building at 1200 Travis to consolidate HPD's operations.



14 The Rice Hotel

During July, the Rice Hotel was sold to Christian Wolfier of Euro Investors Property, Inc., an out-of-town developer who may rehabilitate or sell to another developer. While several developers, notably Morgan Hill, have put considerable effort into reviving the hotel, its future is very uncertain even after years of design studies. Among those looking into its rehabilitation are Jim McIngvale and an unnamed partner, whose \$1.7 or \$1.8 million offer was rebuffed. Estimates for redevelopment have ranged from \$50 million to \$85 million. The October rains caused the entertainment floor's roof to collapse.



15 The New Convention Center Hotel

The proposed hotel, pursued by two developer and design teams, has been under review by the city and its financial advisers since last spring. With a \$150 million total project cost, this 1,200-room building could provide a competitive advantage to the downtown convention center. The request for proposals stipulates that the hotel be within 1,500 feet of the convention center.

16 Convention Center Expansion

The original design concept and master plan provided for expansion of both the north and the south ends of the center, doubling its current size and with the potential for more.

17 The Biggest Game in Town?

Bud Adams and the Dome's supporters have proposed a flexible \$245 million project to house a 71,000-seat football stadium and a 24,000-seat basketball and hockey arena designed by HOK Sport of St. Louis. Supporters claim that the vast public-private expense would be offset by future downtown economic benefits. The proposal is currently on the shelf.

18 Sam Houston Park

With the recent addition of the Yates Homestead to the seven existing historic houses and one church, three sites remain for the Heritage Society's expanding collection of uprooted Houston history. Efforts continue to provide site improvements and enhanced museum facilities.

19 Sheraton-Lincoln Hotel

Slated for transformation into 350 luxury apartments by 711 Polk Street Associates Ltd., led by Neal Zaniboni of Los Angeles. The building will include commercial uses on the four bottom floors. Estimated renovation cost is between \$25 and \$30 million.



20 Dakota Lofts

Recently completed and fully occupied, developer Randall Davis's first adventure into the downtown housing market is a rousing success.

21 Houston Studios

Currently Houston's largest sound and film stage; used in several feature-length films. Developer Milton Howe's proposal calls for an expanded complex containing the existing film facilities attached to existing production company offices and loft apartments.

22 W. L. Foley Dry Goods Co. Building

Recently sold, the building will be converted to art galleries on the ground floor and residences above by a group that includes Jamie Mize, Dan Tidwell, Minette Boesel, Guy Hagstette, and Doug Lawing.



23 Hogg Building Lofts

Remodeling will create 85 new residential units. Will be developed by Randall Davis, January to March 1995.



24 Union National Bank Building

This 12-story building, capable of conversion into as many as 80 loft units, attracted the attention of Camden Property Trust last year; now another organization may be looking at the property.

25 Houston National Bank Building Rehabilitation

Hakeem Olajuwon has bought the Houston National Bank Building (also known as the Franklin Bank) and its parking lot, perhaps for a downtown mosque. The Rockets' star center has also taken a ground lease on the Sweeney, Coombs & Fredericks Building.



26 New Hope Housing

A single-room-occupancy residential building located at Preston and Hamilton, this is an outgrowth of Christ Church Cathedral's street mission program. Designed by Jackson & Ryan Architects, the three-phased project will ultimately result in 150 rooms with private baths and minimal cooking facilities. Common kitchen facilities will be provided. First-phase groundbreaking took place in September 1994 for 43 rooms, slated to cost \$1 million. Rents are anticipated to be \$250 per month, and the residence will have both female and male occupants.



27 SRO Hotel at 1414 Congress Avenue

The Houston Area Community Development Corporation, affiliated with Advocates for Housing, has purchased an existing 1920s three-story hotel at 1414 Congress and plans to provide 57 SRO units in the three floors. HACDC is awaiting final approvals from HUD for the rent supplements program and from the Texas Historical Commission (to ensure that the proposed renovations do not destroy historically significant features of the hotel) for construction to commence. Total value: approximately \$1.9 million.



28 Homeless Gateway Pavilion

HDMC is proposing an open-air pavilion encompassing an entire city block in the northeast corner of downtown that will accommodate 300 homeless men and 100



women in separate areas. Designed by Rey de la Reza AIA Architects, the structure will consist of permanent umbrella-type structures with changeable canvas roofs on a grid system. A removable canvas partition system will subdivide spaces, on a slab with integral heating coils. There will be separate modular pavilions for sleeping, eating, laundry, and toilets. Controlled entrances are set within a perimeter of low fencing for security combined with berms and landscaping. Counseling and health care will be provided. Estimated cost: \$1.2 million.

29 East End Buffalo Bayou Segment

A consortium of the Buffalo Bayou Partnership and the East End Area Chamber of Commerce has called for a greenbelt linking existing parks along Buffalo, White Oak, and Brays bayous. Funds have been secured for phased implementation of hike-and-bike trails from Allen's Landing to the ship channel's turning basin, resulting in a green corridor that would link the Harrisburg and Navigation neighborhoods and provide a catalyst for neighborhood renewal.

30 Museums in the East End Segment of Buffalo Bayou

Development of sites along Buffalo Bayou will highlight the multiple lives of the waterway by rehabilitation of existing industrial and commercial buildings: a technology museum in the Willow Street pump station; an energy museum in the Gable Street power plant; a Hispanic arts center near El Mercado del Sol; a railroad museum in the Velasco Street incinerator complex; and a nautical museum in the Long Reach docks.



31 White Oak Bayou Improvements Into Allen's Landing

Already completed are waterway edges and hike-and-bike trails linking the existing White Oak Bayou trails (up to Houston Avenue) into downtown to the UH-Downtown campus (by Charles Tapley of Tapley Associates Architects and Pate Engineers), to Allen's Landing, and to the adjacent Willow Street pump station. The project was completed by the county and the Harris County Flood Control District in spring 1994.



32 Allen's Landing and Main Street Viaduct

In early September, at Councilman Lloyd Kelley's request, the mayor's office proposed spending \$400,000 for design and feasibility studies for the rehabilitation of this historic precinct, part of the Main Street-Market Square Historic District. Potential projects range from a minimal \$750,000 for restoration to over \$8 million for tourist destination attractions. Joint public and private funding is anticipated.



33 McKee Street Bridge and James Bute Park

The perseverance of private citizens and a motivated grass-roots alliance made possible the preservation of the McKee Street Bridge and the purchase and creation of the adjacent park site.



34 Sesquicentennial Park, Phase 2

This Harris County Flood Control District and Houston Parks and Recreation Department project tackles both



flood control (\$5.6 million) and park improvements (\$4 million) on 9.5 acres behind the Wortham Theater. Supported by private funding, the design, led by Team Hou and landscape designer Lauren Griffith, includes an amphitheater and continuation of the bayou's hike-and-bike trails. Completion is slated for next summer.

35 Linear Park for Midtown Area

A spinoff from work done for the HDMC by a team led by Kevin Shanley of the SWA Group, this design exercise calls for connecting Buffalo Bayou at the McKee Street Bridge and Bute Park in northeastern downtown to Hermann Park and Brays Bayou to the south by means of a winding linear park. The park would envelop a grand boulevard extending the Alameda axis through downtown, linking future residential and low-scale commercial neighborhoods.

36 The County's "Campus" and New Courts Building

Tentatively located on San Jacinto near the county courthouses, this vast new courts complex will be a mixed-use development with more than 40 courtrooms, jail cells, and support spaces in one block. Commissioners court has also acquired the First National Bank (Lomas & Nettleton) Building and plans a \$43 million rehabilitation to house the law library, county clerk's office, and support functions, with a new, multistory office tower and garage appended to its southern side.

37 Peden Community Correction Facility

Scheduled for completion in March 1995, this project extends the county's system across the bayou with a midrise 360-bed women's supervised probation facility inside the 1930s Peden Iron & Steel Co. Building at 600 North San Jacinto and Baker Street. At the end of Baker Street, Community Correction Facilities Nos. 4 and 5,



developed by North Village (Cedar Street Corporation) and opened last year, house more than 1,100 male inmates on supervised probation.

38 State Jail on Top Street

This 667-bed medium-security prison, also developed by North Village (Bayou City 2 Limited Partnership), is scheduled for completion in January 1995.

39 The Federal Detention Complex

Hoover Architects will design this midrise or highrise tower for more than 500 inmates. The Federal Bureau of Prisons has selected a site adjacent to Christ Church Cathedral. The drive to locate the jail downtown was motivated by the need for it to be close to the federal courts.

40 Midtown Redevelopment Association

An example of private initiative and vision that needs to seek public support on a huge scale, the volunteer Midtown Redevelopment Association approached city council for a tax increment finance district to rehabilitate the 600-acre Midtown area and received approval in early November. A 25-year plan projects an investment of several hundred million dollars in midrise commercial and residential blocks. The first phase will develop the northwest quadrant, which stretches east-west from Bagby and Main and north-south from I-45 to Westheimer-Elgin.

41 Allen Parkway Village

The village residents' council is attempting to secure \$300,000 for a study of the now largely abandoned complex. Future planning is based on the notion of a community campus—a combination of sustainable housing projects and an educational and vocational campus for the community. With the promised but pending funding and with support from Henry Cisneros at HUD, the residents' council hopes to hire consultants to plan this concept and tackle the contentious issue of how many units will be rehabilitated.

42 Fourth Ward/Freedmantown

The Freedmen's Town Association successfully petitioned city council for \$805,000 to begin the rehabilitation of the Freedmen Town Historic District, with an Intermodal Surface Transportation Efficiency Act grant

as source for \$644,000 of the funding. The plan calls for a people mover in the form of a rubber-wheeled trolley—to emulate the electric trolleys here at the turn of the century—that will link the historic district bounded by West Dallas, Wilson, and Andrews streets with downtown. Targeted improvements include repairing the brick roadway on Andrews and Wilson, rebuilding sidewalks, reopening small commercial ventures along the trolley route, and supporting other neighborhood businesses, all consistent with the association's overall effort to recharge the area's residential and commercial mix by luring tourist dollars.

43 Chinatown

Chinatown Architects (Peter Brown, Sye Tatar, and R&T Architects) and the Houston Chinatown Council are planning the community development of low-scale



residential blocks, senior citizen housing in existing warehouse space, and a two-story open-air farmers' market between Chartres and St. Emanuel. The group hopes to apply for a tax increment finance district designation.

44 Metro Downtown Transit Streets Program

By far the most all-encompassing downtown effort, Metro's plans call for \$130 million in construction for downtown and less-involved Midtown transit street improvements to both carriageways and sidewalk environments, including new bus shelters and street trees. A number of north-south streets from Smith to San Jacinto and three east-west pairs (Congress-Preston, Lamar-McKinney, and Jefferson-Calhoun) will have modifications in their roadways in order to widen sidewalks, primarily on the transit side.

45 Metro Light Rail Link to the Texas Medical Center

Metro says thinking is too premature to define either the applicable transit technology or the service route. The medical center is working on the planning of its own internal transit circulator, potentially tied into the Metro line.

46 Downtown Circulator

This past summer, Galveston developer George Mitchell resurrected the 1970s call for a light-rail circulator system for downtown, ostensibly connecting the scattered downtown transit ridership with Union Station, in northeastern downtown, and its potential commuter rail connections to the south. Unfortunately, the notion quickly disappeared from discussion.

47 Metro North and South Transfer Stations

Schematic design is under way on a southern transit center in the vicinity of the Pierce Elevated (I-45). Rey de la Reza AIA Architects' one- or two-block schemes accommodate the technically complex bus operations and the need for secure waiting areas. All of the schemes feature enclosed waiting areas with some retail, are tied into the sidewalk pedestrian system, and can accommodate a future light-rail system. Work on the northern complex is pending.



48 Metro Buffalo Bayou Facility

On the northeast side of downtown (NoHo) between North San Jacinto and McKee is a staging area for buses, the former Southern Pacific freight-transfer yard, now surrounded by jails. Metro has promised to turn the second floor into a transportation museum that will plug into the Buffalo Bayou East Sector-Heritage Corridor redevelopment.

49 CBD Transfer Station (Block 139)

Unique in tying the street-level pedestrian and transit system with the ever-growing tunnel system, this project is for a block bounded by Lamar, McKinney, Main, and Travis. Designed not as a Metro project but rather as part of HDMC's master planning by Zimmer Gunsul



Frasca and Elbasani Logan, firms with worldwide experience in transportation and infrastructure planning, it uses a phased approach to develop not only the

connector between surface and subsurface life, but also the knuckle of the two major cross axes of downtown. In the first phase, the block becomes a green space with a transit plaza accommodating on-street bus dropoff connections to the underground. Some retail would play off the green space. In the later phases, as the transit system and the downtown real estate market pick up steam, the mixed-use facility would grow in density and height, using lease revenue to pay for increased civic amenities and possibly subsidizing certain retail activities. This creative and atypical Houston approach comes from designers who see the potential of coordinated physical and economic planning.

50 Freeway Ramps and Interchanges

The redesign of the Elysian Viaduct—Maury Expressway to extend the Hardy Toll Road from Loop 610 into downtown, as well as the ongoing design of new northbound and southbound ramps to U.S. 59 and the complete redesign of the I-10/U.S. 59 interchange, all Texas Department of Transportation undertakings, are proceeding at very different paces. Interchange and ramp designs are in the schematics and design-development phases. Construction for the Elysian Viaduct improvement was to begin this decade, but the effort is sliding for want of negotiation and coordination between the state, the city, and Metro.

51 U.S. 59 (South Shepherd to Spur 527) Redesign and HOV

The final leg of the southern "better bus" service approach to downtown on U.S. 59 will deal with the stretch from Greenbriar to Spur 527 that leads to downtown. The scheme calls for two central HOV lanes towering above a rejuvenated elevated 12-lane freeway. Metro consultants have been challenged by their client to package and sell this behemoth to skeptical residential neighborhoods.

52 Making Main Street Happen, Inc.

A group of planners and civic thinkers, organized by *Houston Life's* Mark Inabnit, leading proponent of the "livable city" effort, are focusing attention on the possibilities of a two-block corridor along Main Street between the Pierce Elevated (I-45) and the Mecom Fountain. A separate 501(c) (3) organization from the Midtown Redevelopment Association, its preliminary architectural symbol is a Texas version of the Eiffel Tower astride Main. This group's notions of an international commerce and consulate sector have made headway at City Hall and have gained some popular support.

city of Houston, and the needs and desires of the transit customers themselves.

As the most all-encompassing planning effort in the region, Metro's \$178 million transit streets improvement program (\$130 million in construction costs) in downtown and Midtown illustrates some of the problems of planning and implementation coordination. Having selected the "better bus" mobility paradigm for mass transit for the 1990s, Metro set about in the late 1980s to remake downtown as the hub from which spokes radiate to form a regional system. Metro's planners faced two operational challenges: first, to accommodate the successful park-and-ride, long-haul buses that cater primarily to affluent suburban riders going to work downtown via the ever-increasing HOV lanes and grade-separated viaducts; second, to accommodate crosstown bus transfers and interconnections to other radiating routes, which often means catering to a much less well heeled clientele. An initial concept called for the creation of a \$100 million Main Street mall, closing Main in most of downtown to all but bus traffic and using it as a major destination and crosstown transfer point. By eliminating the "obstruction" of other vehicular traffic and minimizing turns by creating a single straight-through operation downtown, Metro sought to improve operational efficiencies. Also, a densely populated pedestrian bus transit mall, with sidewalks widened to attract pedestrians, was seen as an impetus for commercial revitalization on the inactive parts of Main – an idea that has dubious precedent, since experience with mall concepts elsewhere has shown that commercial stretches completely separated from the private automobile and spontaneous drop-by and easy parking rarely survive. Further complicating the plan was the logistical issue of transporting the park-and-ride bus customers from the Main Street mall to their scattered final destinations. Metro proposed a separate system of people movers or shuttles, but this would require bus transfers, which often diminish ridership. Houston commuters want to leave their cars, get on the bus, and be delivered within two blocks of their offices, according to Metro. As soon as rumors of the Main Street mall hit the press, seemingly the entire Houston community, including the HDMC representing its landowner members, began to voice serious objections.

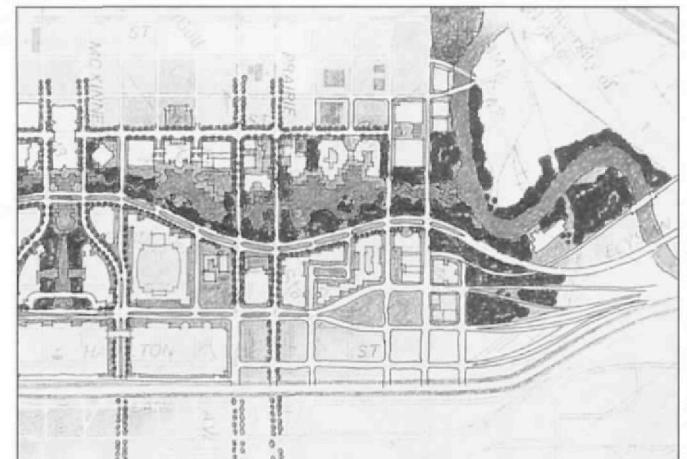
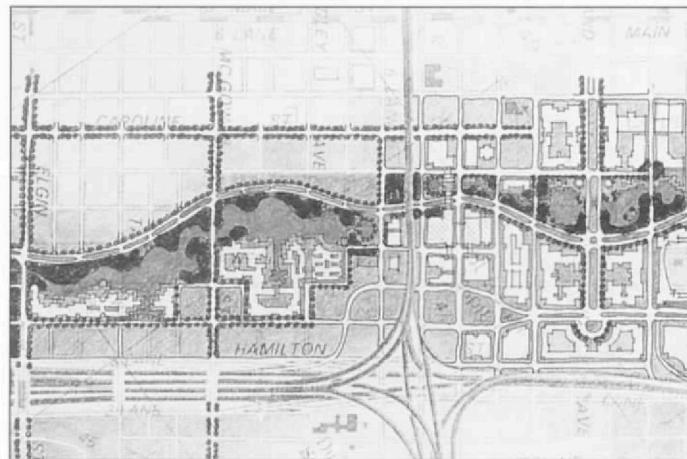
Another kink emerged quickly in Metro's early deliberations. Already facing a polarized user population downtown (office workers use the tunnels, and the population that is not part of the corporate world uses the streets), Metro planners concluded that suburban commuters could not be mixed with the crosstown transfers if ridership were to be maintained. Additionally, store owners around the bus stops used for transfers complained about the huge numbers of bus riders waiting to transfer to connecting buses, and their bothersome habits. These concerns led Metro to the conclusion that separate, secure, and remote transit centers would be the best solution downtown. This would also keep the slower and more numerous crosstown buses from interfering with the operations of the faster, sleeker park-and-ride buses. The Metro planners amended the Main Street mall concept to include a north and south transfer center at either

potential for "another Richmond Avenue," where Metro's intervention actually killed businesses.

What came next was a multiplicity of duplicated and often tenuously coordinated planning efforts on the part of the city of Houston (through its individual departments), Metro, and the Houston Downtown Management Corporation. While the Metro board agreed to wait through fall 1992 and spring 1993 for further studies of the downtown transit concept, HDMC advertised for its own designers and selected a team led by the SWA Group, Rey de la Reza AIA Architects, nationally known transit planners Elbasani Logan Architects and Zimmer Gunsul Frasca, the urban marketing collaborative Lestin Dwyer Williams, and the economic development strategies panels of the International Downtown Association. The team was augmented by economists, retail experts,

the first place. Federal funding for the project fluctuated because of political and technological preconceptions, adding to the uncertainty of the planning direction. HDMC's team was and remains interested in the broader revitalization of downtown, with the transit street improvement efforts as the major catalyst; they hope to increase street parking (rather than eliminate it), improve neighborhood signage and wayfinding in the district, and improve the quality and safety of the pedestrian environment, including widening sidewalks. Both efforts rapidly came to the same conclusion: the Main Street mall concept was dead.

Over a period of months stretching into years, the two groups met informally and formally. They struggled to bring together the diverse constituency and urban service information necessary to make the plan work. Metro, with stipulated approval by HDMC, has come to



Thinking big, Kevin Shanley, landscape architect and urban designer with the SWA Group in Houston, produced this extensive plan for a linear park linking downtown to Hermann Park. Described in *Houston Life* (August 21–September 17, 1994) as "still a fantasy in the minds of urban planners," the scheme would unify many separate redevelopment target areas by providing a natural edge for projects in the Binz, Midtown, and downtown. Since its appearance a short time ago as a monthly magazine insert to *The Houston Post*, *Houston Life* has given space to several similar proposals by local architects and designers, seeking to establish a place for itself as purveyor of a City Pretty movement.

end of the downtown segment of Main Street. (This concept remains viable today; the southern transfer center is more likely to be built.)

The Main Street mall concept had reached the environmental impact statement stage before representatives of Central Houston, Inc., and Houston Downtown Management Corporation, the local design community, and the city got involved in what to this point had been exclusively a Metro show. HDMC moved to open the proceedings to public discussion, and, following widespread debate at the official release of the Main Street mall concept, the downtown stakeholders condemned the project, seeing the

and other downtown planning specialists who could provide a basis for understanding issues in other than transit terms. Meanwhile, Metro selected its own team, led locally by Pierce Goodwin Alexander & Linville. The two groups and their clients came at the problem from opposite directions, representing their different service concepts. Metro saw the design as a means of ensuring ridership through speed and ease of service as well as optimal economics of operation – a problem of adequate but effective pickup and drop-off spots and bus motion. Metro was also constantly challenged by the federal government's transit authorities, who questioned the efficacy of a bus mass transit system in

embrace the idea of dedicated transit streets that crisscross downtown, both north-south and east-west, providing service more effectively while not overloading any one street or removing private vehicles. The Metro planning process has established design standards for both civil engineering and urban design, while the design of transit shelters, signage, and other street furniture has come about through an often tenuous collaboration between the HDMC and Metro planners, who must work within the downtown standards already established. The number of details – shelter maintenance and security, graphic consistency, sidewalk and curb design, street lighting and traffic light design, compli-

ROAD KILL

ance with the plethora of codes, street tree selection and maintenance – is staggering. The entire gamut of public and private agencies is involved, not only in setting standards but also in providing some portion of the funding.

At the end of the summer of 1994, design teams were awarded contracts to complete the implementation of the design guidelines. The debate continues about such issues as increasing on-street parking. Backed by national commercial expertise, HDMC is convinced that on-street parking will do more to help street-level retail activities than any other design recommendation. The extent of innovative streetscape improvements, in the face of shifting signals from the federal funding authorities, is uncertain.

In other cities, such an undertaking would have been handled through elaborate coordination and management efforts together with regular public communication. The diversity of the interested and affected parties and the project's long time-frame would necessitate this. Under Metro's and HDMC's dedicated but novice stewardship, coordination of all the public authorities, as well as affected private landowners, is indeed ongoing, but no one has yet begun to talk about down time for landowners and their commercial tenants during construction, when streets will be closed for months by both utility and transit reconstruction.

Schematic design is concurrently proceeding on the other downtown transfer installation, the southern transit center in the vicinity of the I-45 Pierce Elevated. Having executed a number of successful and architecturally significant suburban transit centers, Rey de la Reza AIA Architects has developed schemes for one- or two-block configurations to accommodate the technically complex bus operations and provide secure waiting areas. From the outset on this project, Metro and its architects have worked with and responded to HDMC and surrounding property owners. All of the schemes are being designed with sensitivity to the requirements of an urban rather than suburban location; enclosed waiting areas, with some retail activities, are tied into the pedestrian system, although none of the schemes is close to the tunnel system. The architects have provided for possible accommodation of a light-rail system in the transit centers, should Houston elect that option in the future.

Meanwhile, on the other side of town, Harris County Improvement District No. 1, a quasi-public appendage of the Uptown Houston Association, is spending approximately \$11 million in bond money on a flimsy and mostly ineffectual scheme to permanently alter the streetscape of the Post Oak–Galleria area. The most conspicuous part of the package of street decorations is a gantlet of six pairs of three-story-high stainless-steel arches spanning Post Oak Boulevard from Richmond to Hollyhurst. Looking like floorless, dysfunctional pedestrian bridges, the arches meet the ground on either side of the boulevard in what are called “pocket parks.” Eschewing mention of accommodation, the *Houston Chronicle's* reviewer described these minuscule pedestrian contrivances as “part conversation piece and part art – all built with a Texas size sense of humor” and “fully decorated with four-foot-high cowboy boots inscribed with Texas legends, a gigantic stainless-steel sofa, and a 200-foot Texas tarpon complete with sound effects,” among other ersatz objets d'art. Other parts of the hardware package are giant stainless-steel “gateway” rings strung over major intersections as street markers, and custom-designed traffic signals and stainless-steel streetlights – all embellished in effusive press descriptions by the wanton use of adjectives such as “modernistic” and “futuristic.”

The authors of this “unique and distinctive family of elements,” as the street decoration scheme is described in their promotional materials, are Communication Arts of Boulder, Colorado, who cut their teeth on projects for Disney and the Rivercenter mall in San Antonio before accepting the challenge to give “Uptown Houston a strong identity to rival the Magnificent Mile in Chicago, Rodeo Drive in Los Angeles, or the Miracle Mile in Miami.”

The least problematic, if scarcely unique, aspects of the improvement district's program are the planting of street trees along most stretches of the area's principal streets and the relocation of telephone and power lines underground. The first accords with Colin Rowe's reasoning that Houston can never have too many trees; in fact, planting trees is probably the only means of imparting any substantial sense of unity to the diffuse and random assortment of office and apartment towers,



The arches recently installed on Post Oak Boulevard, by Communication Arts of Boulder, Colorado, 1994.

department stores, arcades, strip centers, parking lots, garages, and vacant land that makes up the Post Oak/Galleria area, which the Uptown Houston Association describes as the “nation's largest suburban activity center [and] thirteenth largest business district – comparable in size to downtown Denver.”

What confounds the planners is the haphazard, spaced-out, and congenitally pedestrianless reality of the place. No family of stainless-steel Band-Aids, no matter how well intended, will make it seem otherwise. What might make a reasonable difference is several more attractions comparable in appeal and magnitude to the Transco

Fountain and park, an oasis that Houstonians actually drive to in the evenings or on weekends. Laser displays could also be managed, since we now have the technology to realize the kinetic “virtual volumes” Lazlo Moholy-Nagy photographed at night in Blackpool, or

the “standing” waves Naum Gabo devised at a small scale with rods and motors in the 1920s. Or, taking a cue from the popularity of the district's twinkly-light Christmas decorations, the designers might have thought in terms of a yearly calendar of seasonal displays –

which would at least have the advantage of coming down at some point – by a changing cast of artists and designers, allowing the district to experiment until it hit on something that worked.

Good intentions and the ability to float bonds are not by themselves enough to make good, or in this case even passable, public art. Those who have the welfare of the Post Oak

Boulevard–Galleria area most at heart should look again and explore other options for improvement, taking as a mantra Pugin's injunction that it is permissible to decorate construction but never to construct decoration.

The Editors



Back to the future: Guy Sabron's “Traffic Patterns for the Future” used Post Oak-like arches as a symbol of things to come in this 1934 magazine illustration.

Com and Isha, History of the Future (Hammann, 1993)

Midtown Efforts

Long the subject of scrutiny and theoretical design effort, Houston's Midtown has recently been getting closer attention because of a focused group effort. An example of private initiative, expertise, and vision that needs to seek public support on a huge scale, the Midtown Redevelopment Association recently received approval from city council for a tax increment finance (TIF) district for a portion of the 600-acre Midtown area. During two years of concerted efforts, a small core group of local businesses and landowners, allied with the driving force of the Reverend Stephen Bancroft of Trinity Episcopal Church, has worked to assemble a larger community consensus, define the community target area, entice yet-to-be-identified developers to the area, and secure other funding for redevelopment projects. The core group's efforts were augmented early on by the pro bono (to this point) talents of the private sector in tackling complex issues of land law, real estate transactions, and urban infrastructure. A complete planning team had to be assembled in order to produce the area's master plan as well as the economic pro forma required by the TIF submission. The wide array of dedicated consultants includes Hall Barnum Hughes Architects, Vernon G. Henry and Associates, Carter & Burgess, and Arthur Andersen Real Estate Advisory Services.

The midtown area is bounded to the north by the Pierce Elevated (I-45), to the east and south by U.S. 59 (taking in the northern South End neighborhoods) and the Texas 288 culvert, and to the west by Bagby Street. The area is almost desolate in spots, but a few beautiful trees and historic houses, standing alone amid open lots, herald its vibrant past. A number of civic institutions, commercial patches, and pockets of determined residents continue to exist in the area and have become part of the effort; others, as is the case in the South End neighborhoods, have chosen to be excluded.

The proposed 25-year plan projects an investment of several hundred million dollars. The planning process and current urban design scheme gained public exposure this past summer with their publication in *Houston Life* magazine for 17 July–20 August 1994. The planning team assigned a patchwork of land uses around the armature of a more

developed, two-block-wide Main Street commercial corridor. Having surveyed similar redevelopment projects elsewhere for the best mix of land use and density of development, the team believes that the central spine should have buildings 8 to 12 stories in height, with the lower floors dedicated to retail and commercial uses. Radiating from Main Street, a string of green east-west pedestrian boulevards would stretch back into the neighborhoods along narrowed street rights-of-ways. Closing some of the east-west streets would produce more economically developable tracts for lower-scale, four-story residential blocks serviced by back alleys. The thorough design vision aims to produce a district that has not only a pedestrian vibrancy at least 12 hours a day, but also a mixed socioeconomic residential base. A further challenge for the design and planning team is to redefine Houston's residential unit with reference to speculative models of 21st-century urban living and to increase the lifespan and quality of urban residential construction.

The first phase will take in the northwest quadrant of the Midtown area, stretching from Bagby to Main and from I-45 to Westheimer. This development would satisfy the commercial and residential needs of the Vietnamese community, with a larger block configuration (and thus a better scale for development) that links it to Montrose. Security is a major obstacle for the whole area in attracting residential investment, and this subdistrict is also perceived as being safer. A concurrent, privately supported design vision, amicably co-opted by the Midtown Redevelopment Association, has been developed for the Houston Downtown Management Corporation by its design consultants. It calls for connecting Buffalo Bayou at the McKee Street Bridge and Bute Park in northeastern downtown to Hermann Park and the Brays Bayou area with a winding linear park (archly scrambled to "Lanier Park" by some). The park would envelop a grand boulevard extending the Alameda axis through downtown, linking the future residential and low-scale commercial neighborhoods. It also would add another leg to the hike-and-bike trail system. Perhaps most challenging to endow and maintain would be the proposed string of water features, lakes, and water gardens that would dot the sinuous, four-block-wide green swath. The interplay between the orthogonal street grid and the gentle curves of the new linear park could

provide picturesque, unique block configurations and green parks around which residential enclaves would develop. As Kevin Shanley of the SWA Group, one of the design consultants, logically states, "To compete with The Woodlands, this suburban curve is the residential client's preference, as so many suburban developers have discovered." The tax revenue and investment for infrastructure improvements in this proposal seem to be no greater than those required for any other comprehensive renewal plan for the area.

In the same geographical area, and with some coordination with the Midtown Redevelopment Association, is another group developing a vision and a plan of action, Making Main Street Happen, Inc. Led by Mark Inabnit, publisher and editor of *Houston Life*, this group of planners and civic thinkers is focusing attention on the possibilities of Main Street between the Pierce Elevated and the Mecom Fountain. Following the February 1994 publication in *Houston Life's* first issue of a series of conceptual ideas – a number paralleling those of an American Institute of Architects design charrette for the whole stretch of Main several years ago (see *Cite*, Fall 1991) – the 501(c)(3) organization has gotten financial backing from the Anchorage Foundation of Texas and has formed a board representing citywide participation. This past fall the group published a sketch in *Houston Life* of its preliminary architectural symbol – an Eiffel-like "friendship tower" astride Main Street – in conjunction with a call for Main to become the avenue of consulates in this NAFTA gateway city. The idea of emphasizing Houston's status as an international commerce center has real merit. However, the group's proposal to raise \$20 million and garner the support of the mayor, while civic minded, points up the inefficacy of multiple competing efforts. And it raises a larger question: Is this another instance of Houston's propensity for confusing private speculative vision with civic mandate in making grand plans?

Eastern Buffalo Bayou and Chinatown

Another partnership forged outside the agencies of city government has concerned itself with the development of the Houston Heritage Corridor, or East Sector, along Buffalo Bayou from Allen's Landing to the turning basin of the

Houston Ship Channel. Two years of collaboration between the Buffalo Bayou Partnership (an HDMC ally) and the East End Area Chamber of Commerce, through a public forum that addressed art and culture, historical preservation, housing and economic development, parks and open space, and mobility, resulted in a publication called *Houston's Heritage Corridor: East Sector Buffalo Bayou Redevelopment Plan*.

The vision and implementation plan were supported by local corporate funding and leadership, together with dedicated community participation. These core volunteer organizations realized that only through community initiative would the East End's natural and historic resources and its neighborhoods be properly managed. The Buffalo Bayou Partnership, created in 1984, is a volunteer community body of public and private interests charged with developing and overseeing improvements to the Buffalo Bayou corridor. The group's efforts began with a 1985 comprehensive master plan of the entire watercourse. Some projects, mainly in the western sector, have already been completed. The East End Progress Association has been active for more than 30 years in affecting change in the East End through community development and civic improvement efforts. Its 1990 community planning initiative (published as *Progress Through Planning*) identified strategies to improve access into the area, to develop Buffalo Bayou's eastern sector as a community resource, and to promote the area's industrial and cultural heritage. The East End Area Chamber of Commerce was established in 1991, concurrent with the inception of the Houston Heritage Corridor Project, to represent the area's business interests by revitalizing commerce, to improve business networking opportunities, and to implement the eastern sector plan.

Orchestrated by project consultants John Rogers Architects and Janet K. Wagner of J. K. Wagner and Company, Inc., the ambitious plan calls for "a coordinated greenbelt system" linking existing parks along Buffalo, White Oak, and Brays bayous that "clearly realizes the interdependency of the Bayou's commercial, recreational, and cultural resources." A system of hike-and-bike trails would be developed along the bayous, Harrisburg and Navigation boulevards, and abandoned rail right-of-ways, such as the Sunset and Harrisburg rails-to-trails

projects. The approach is similar to those in dozens of other cities that have successfully linked underused transportation corridors, natural watercourses, industrial archaeology sites, cultural resources, and renewing neighborhoods. Selected development of sites along Buffalo Bayou will highlight the many lives of the waterway while creatively rehabilitating existing Houston industrial and commercial buildings. A technology museum will be located in the Willow Street pump station, and also on the boards are an energy museum (at HL&P's Gable Street power plant), a Hispanic arts center (next to the defunct Mercado del Sol), a railroad museum (at the city's Velasco Street incinerator), and a nautical museum (at the Long Reach docks). The green corridor would link neighborhoods, serving as a backdrop for ethnic events and providing a catalyst for neighborhood renewal.

Since the preliminary publication of its plan almost two years ago, the ad hoc organization has been searching for implementation funding. In summer 1994 Anne Olson, the executive director of the East End Area Chamber of Commerce, led a team in securing federal Intermodal Surface Transportation Efficiency Act (ISTEA) funds for the Harrisburg and Sunset trails projects – the beginning of the long process of piecing together funding for the entire project. The ISTEA funds will be used to purchase and improve old railroad right-of-ways for trails that conform to the city's Parks to Standards Program. Procurement of property along the bayou, as well as funding for the stabilization of Allen's Landing, is still distant.

The community activists working for neighborhood improvement within the Heritage Corridor initiative are struggling, not only to fund the various projects but to bridge the vast differences of vision between the city and county, and to a lesser extent Metro. They have faced a frustrating lack of planning coordination and lack of official policy: the county has one agenda, the city another, and private parties will not step in until they get some assurances from public officials. Other ongoing projects along the bayou attest to the difficulties of communication and coordination. For example, the placement of the planned 1,100-bed Community Correction Facilities for Harris County on the bayou virtually blocked any future hike-and-bike trail linkage. Only last-minute negotiations with the

county by the Buffalo Bayou Coalition and the East End Chamber of Commerce persuaded the county to have its architects rethink the corner that would impact the trail system. Without a public agency to steer the consensus-building and coordinating process, it is difficult to assemble such a large-scale project.

Smaller projects such as the redecorated McKee Street Bridge and the adjacent James Bute Park illustrate what can be accomplished through the perseverance of individual citizens and the power of a motivated grass-roots effort. From a shifting cast of public and private officials, a loose but effective alliance was formed to tackle the preservation of the area: the East End Area Chamber of Commerce's Anne Olson, who provided strategic oversight and marshaled forces; local artists, including Kirk Farris, who first gave the McKee Street Bridge its colorful renovation; a private philanthropist, who bought the park site from a bank and made it available to Harris County Commissioners' Precinct 2, which will provide maintenance; and representatives of the American Society of Landscape Architects and Clean Houston, who held a cleanup day early this summer, aided by assistant county attorney Terry O'Rourke's dispatch of a probationer workforce. Successful volunteer efforts like this have historically not been initiated by local government agencies, and more often than not they face almost complete public apathy.

A smaller community effort whose urban renewal efficacy is yet to be tested centers on Houston's Chinatown. A consortium of design professionals called Chinatown Architects has joined forces with the Houston Chinatown Council and its commercial development corporation in attempting to use a common plan of action to link diverse private, commercial, and residential investment with public lands, infrastructure, and services. With the north-south axis of St. Emanuel Street as a pedestrian spine, the community team is working with the Houston Belt & Terminal Railway Co. to use its property for a northern civic park. Developers hope to build low-scale residential blocks to the east and west of the spine, while the council is investigating local private grants to develop senior citizen housing in existing warehouse space. The planners hope to locate a farmers' market between Chartres and St. Emanuel on a vacant lot owned by the

Houston Chronicle. This two-story, open-air structure would sit within a landscaped parking lot that would serve as the center of the community's civic life and could be closed for festival use. Linkage to the enlarged convention center precinct to the west through improved pedestrian streets lined with ceremonial gateways would also stimulate growth. Still eyeing the possibility of a TIF district, the group hopes that the limited utility capacity that has slowed development will be remedied within two years.

Imagine Houston

In the wake of last year's defeat of the zoning proposal, City Hall and the mayor have articulated the need to "create a forum to maximize communication and dialogue, to forge new partnerships, and to foster new civic initiatives" to address urban issues. The result, Imagine Houston, has been advertised as "a non-political, public interest, community-wide and strategic planning process that seeks to reach out and engage all neighborhoods and livelihoods in a planning process centering on the issues of critical importance to the community." Downtown appears to be a relatively small but not neglected portion of this ongoing brainstorming process. The effort is, rather, citywide and primarily volunteer (with some city funding), orchestrated by a community-based steering committee to "bring people together to share information, learn about each other's viewpoints, and develop consensus on the issues, goals and opportunities that will form the Vision for Houston." Engaging in the envisioning process and theoretical discussion are the mayor, the city council, members of the Planning and Zoning Commission and the Department of Planning and Development, other public officials, and representatives of a number of citizen groups.

Thus far, focus groups have been charged to meet regularly to discuss their assigned topics: Where We Work, Natural Resources, In Service of the Public, Where We Meet, Where We Live, Taking Care of Ourselves, Learning for Life, Fostering Our Cultural Resources, and Community Safety. In spring 1995, the steering committee will consolidate all the focus group reports into "The Houston Plan," which will be forwarded to the Planning and Zoning Commission and city council for review.

If the planning groups can overcome the handicaps of a complex bureaucracy, the difficulties of coordinating a widely dispersed effort, the urge to micromanage, and the suppression of spontaneity that results from a long, drawn-out process, the fruits of their deliberation will become the first steps in developing a comprehensive long-range plan for Houston.

Downtown Strategic Initiatives Planning Effort

The American Institute of Architects-Houston Chapter has embarked on a year-long examination of the Houston Downtown Management Corporation's current plan for downtown by more than 20 teams drawn from individual design firms, committees of the AIA chapter, and individual members. By building upon or modifying the HDMC plan, the AIA-HDMC collaboration aims to point out the potential for revitalization and diversification of downtown, both long and short term.

The plan's geographical areas of concentration span the downtown area. Individual studies cover Leeland Place (the St. Joseph Hospital area), the George R. Brown Convention Center, the Theater District-Sesquicentennial Park-Post Office area, Union Station and the district northeast of it, Main Street (divided into three parts), NoHo (the district of warehouses, many now artists' lofts, northeast of the bayou), Courthouse Square, Market Square, the Houston Civic Center, Sam Houston Park, the CBD core, Cullen Center, Upper Main, Midtown, Chinatown, and Fourth Ward. The process will culminate in a fall 1995 community symposium and exhibition, the collaborative updating of HDMC's development plan with the AIA, and publication of the results in a community action workbook. *Houston Life*, a new vehicle for community awareness, has offered to publish monthly reports on each team's results, beginning in December 1994.

Loose Cannons

Development of independent mega-projects can shape an entire urban precinct. Even when these projects are subject to public coordination and control, whether in the form of City Hall development approval processes, city ordinances including zoning-type restrictions, or citizen review processes, they have their own impetus and

momentum. In Houston, the pace of a project's announcement, planning, and development is completely independent of public review and even public support. Any one multimillion-dollar speculative effort can effectively become a loose canon, with the potential for wreaking havoc upon or strengthening downtown's fledgling and fragmented planning efforts. Houston's central business district presently faces at least half a dozen such large-scale projects.

One such scheme calls for replacing the Sam Houston Coliseum and Music Hall with a land-based casino in a deal put together by the Maxxam Corporation. Currently negotiating with the city, the speculators plan to demolish the Coliseum as soon as possible to make way for an outdoor amphitheater that would back up to the Music Hall, the home of Theater Under the Stars. If casino gambling is legalized in Texas, Maxxam will demolish the amphitheater and construct a new casino on the banks of the bayou. Little discussion has focused on whether downtown really wants a casino, or on the appropriateness of the proposed location in terms of parking, infrastructure, or impact on the Civic Center, the Theater District, the bayou, and Sesquicentennial Park. All of the ongoing urban and transportation planning efforts in downtown could be literally be undone overnight.

Similar speculations center around the surplused Albert Thomas Convention Center, a facility in a difficult location. A series of speculators has called for the phased development of theater space (to be run by Pace Entertainment Corporation) in the western end of the two-block 1960s structure, following the eastern end's renovation into a multi-attraction entertainment club. Recently, developer David Cordish has proposed converting the second-phase development of the western end into a casino. The existing contract with the city did not address such a use, and downtown could face two casinos in short order, with no investigation of their financial advantages or disadvantages to the city.

In a third major proposal, Bud Adams and the Houston Oilers organization spent summer 1994 advocating a flexible stadium downtown that could accommodate football, hockey, and basketball. Originally dubbed the Dome and designed by HOK Sport, a firm with extensive experience in designing sports arenas, the

\$245 million complex would have covered approximately six downtown blocks and intervening street right-of-ways, encumbering the equivalent of eight blocks. The public discussion, press coverage, and proponents' feasibility studies all focused solely on financial issues and not the physical impact on downtown and the inhabitants of its eastern neighborhoods. Adding to the uncertainty of the proposal, the Houston Rockets basketball franchise refused to join the stadium consortium but left open the option of building its own arena in conjunction with the convention center complex. Downtown could still end up with a sports complex containing both an arena and a stadium. Although Adams seems to have abandoned his proposal, it is significant that the current downtown planning concepts do not fully address either possibility, leaving unanswered many important infrastructure, parking, transportation, and physical impact questions that would certainly be relevant if other stadium proposals are made in the future.

Recently proposed state and federal highway projects would also affect downtown. Given their shifting parameters, neither the city nor downtown developers know how traffic will flow, or how it will affect real estate values. For example, on the northeast side of downtown in the Union Station district, the design of a relocated U.S. 59 access ramp by the Texas Department of Transportation could drastically alter traffic patterns throughout the area. New ramps will feed incoming traffic into downtown on Jackson and Hamilton and departing traffic on Chenevert and Chartres, with Metro HOV lanes added for good measure. Houston Belt & Terminal's Union Station blocks the flow of all these streets to the south at Preston. Add to the ten-year developmental time frame the possibility of new facilities and their traffic in the district – sports arena(s), a convention center expansion, new convention center hotel(s) – and the lack of a planning strategy for interlocking multiple agencies becomes even more serious. Who, for example, is looking into the possibility of mass transit service for these high-population destination points?

Slightly to the west is the complex Elysian Viaduct (Elysian-Maury Expressway) and Loop 610 interchange. A proposed redesigning will extend the Hardy Toll Road into downtown and further increase

the accessibility and economic viability of the area. However, in another example of the problems associated with the split authority and lack of foresight of the responsible governmental agencies, the Toll Road Authority wants the project, the state has designed the interchange, the city of Houston owns the right-of-way, and everyone wants Metro to pay for it. Construction was to begin during this decade, but the timetable is sliding because of lack of negotiation and coordination. The potential impact on the slowly awakening commercial and convention district, Buffalo Bayou, and the McKee Street Bridge and Bute Park is, as usual, uncertain. The process is not far enough along for anyone to discuss the plans publicly, much less review the environmental impact.

Finally, northern downtown has also become, almost without notice, the correctional facility capital of Harris County, soon to house a projected population of more than 12,000 inmates. County and state prisons have proliferated, primarily around Buffalo Bayou in the NoHo warehouse area. Two large judicial and correctional facilities loom on the downtown planning horizon, located even closer to the central business district. The new Harris County Criminal Justice Center, tentatively located on San Jacinto near the existing county courthouse, will be a mixed-use development packing courtrooms, jail cells, and support spaces in one oversize building of over 500,000 square feet. The Federal Bureau of Prisons Detention Center, recently awarded to Hoover Architects, will feature a mid-to highrise tower housing more than 500 inmates; a site adjacent to Christ Church Cathedral has been announced. Two other sites on the east side of downtown were considered, in the area where the convention center expansion and hotel, as well as any sports facilities, would be located. Another site was adjacent to the Main Street–Market Square Historic District. Such a large downtown jail, with its security-conscious design, may not be a complementary neighbor for other downtown developments (although Christ Church has raised no objections). The combined costs of land and facility are likely to make this project more expensive than most luxury apartment complexes.

"Downtown – Capital of Houston"

When Central Houston, Inc., introduced its new moniker for downtown last year,

more than one witness to the debut wondered if anyone understood the ramifications of the new title and the questions it brings to mind. If downtown really is the capital of Houston, why doesn't the community, much less City Hall, treat it as such? In the recent past, Houston seemed to have forgotten downtown, leaving it adrift in a swamp of parking lots while speculators bulldozed what little history remained. Now some stakeholders are starting to take responsibility for the impact of their projects on the whole of downtown; yet the community has no one to coordinate, catalogue, orchestrate, and direct these efforts. City Hall should be a leader in the process. It could provide the leadership necessary to integrate each of the community's disparate projects into a thriving, organic whole, making downtown a capital example of urban planning and redevelopment. ■