

For almost 100 years, Main Street was exactly what its name suggested: the place that Houstonians identified as the center of their everyday as well as ceremonial lives. From the wharf at Allen's landing, through the business core of downtown, past the grand residences of local burghers, and to the cluster of cultural, open space, and educational facilities around Rice University, Main Street served as gathering space, home, place of work, and recreational resource for the city. Even with the advent of the automobile, Main Street, at least in the beginning, was able to adapt. Historical photographs show a rich diversity of approaches to both parking and building typologies respectful of the older 19th-century urban fabric and accommodating of early 20th-century locomotion. For perhaps 30 years, from 1920 to 1950, the physical scale and

moved to action by Houston's brief flirtation with zoning, the Houston chapter of the American Institute of Architects organized a workshop that brought together the city's schools of architecture, politicians, and professionals to contemplate visions for Main Street's future.¹ The organizers saw an opportunity to codify order along the corridor, and their publications are infused with optimism about a planning tool that Houstonians had traditionally eschewed. But the defeat of zoning at the polls rendered the spirit, if not the ideas, of this exercise moot.

At about the same time a private group of property owners in Midtown formed a Tax Increment Revitalization Zone for their area of Main. The TIRZ is designed to freeze the tax base, then capture a percentage of the rise in tax payments beyond the base for revitaliza-

tion efforts. Thus far, though, the Midtown TIRZ has resulted in little visible public improvement along the corridor. Instead, there has been construction of mostly banal apartment complexes that have done little to improve Main Street's situation.

Meanwhile, a third group of private individuals arose with the idea of combining the visionary approach of the AIA workshop and the practical considerations of those who pushed for the Midtown TIRZ. Ultimately, they formed Making Main Street Happen, Inc., a not-for-profit volunteer organization dedicated to realizing a comprehensive vision, as opposed to a series of uncoordinated plans, for this key Houston street. As part of their efforts they sought the attention of Mayor Lee Brown, who encouraged Making Main Street Happen to not just continue with their planning, but to help form a public/private coalition that might be able to implement any ideas that were generated.

A request for qualifications was sent

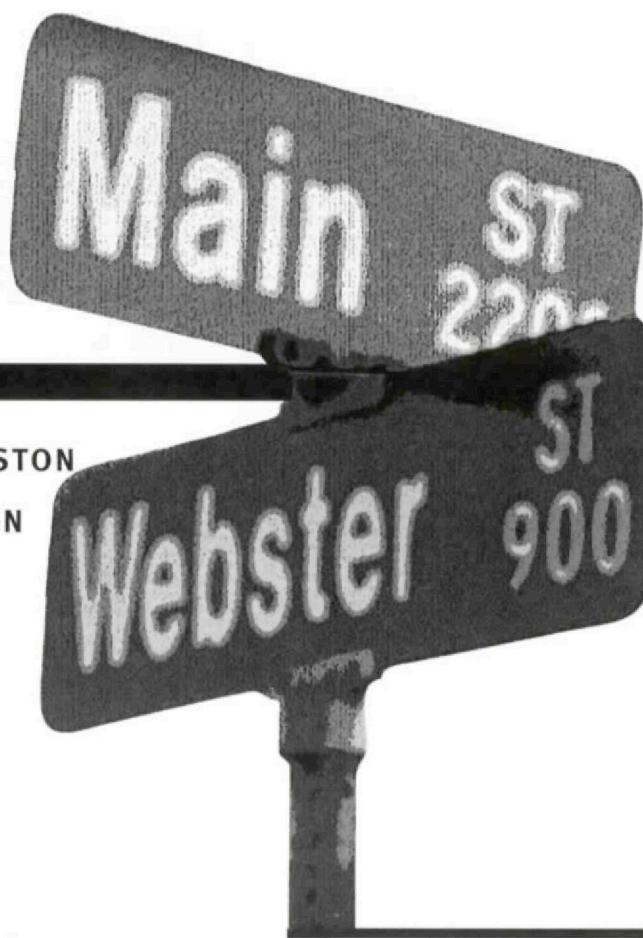
Happen's Peter Brown, to ponder age-old questions.³ What makes a great city? What makes a great street?

The Context

In the great cities and streets debate Houston is like other places. In its quest to be "world-class" it sometimes pretends to be something it is not. Houstonians too often apologize for the city's unique combination of humidity, heat, swamp-like flatness, protective blanket of oak trees, and automobile culture. But great urban places somehow manage to weave such local factors with location, history, and culture into unique expressions of urban form. The Making Main Street Happen Competition was an opportunity to examine city-making visions in Houston's quest for greatness. At the same time, an examination of the opportunities and constraints of city-making

the Main Street Idea

WHAT WOULD IT TAKE TO GIVE HOUSTON A SIGNATURE BOULEVARD? A DESIGN COMPETITION FOR MAIN STREET OFFERS SOME SUGGESTIONS.



form of Main Street matched well the dimensions of the pedestrians, workers, residents, shoppers, and motorists who used the street.

The building of the interstates did not so much kill Main Street as slowly strangle it, making obsolete much, though not all, of the thoroughfare's uses. By the 1980s large blocks of land lay vacant in Midtown, while Main Street downtown was a fume-filled transfer point for buses. Even well-maintained destinations such as the Museum of Fine Arts and the Texas Medical Center increasingly turned their backs to Main. The street became unfriendly to pedestrians, more of a traffic conduit than a place, and its urban purpose in the framework of the city was ambiguous.

During the 1990s there have been a series of efforts to deal with the deteriorating situation along Main. In 1992,

out to 25 national and international architectural firms, and in February of this year five finalists were chosen to develop a master plan for the 7.5 miles of Main running from Buffalo Bayou to the Astrodome. The competition culminated in an early summer exhibition of the finalists' proposals at the Lawndale Art Center and, in June, a juried selection of a scheme and an architect by representatives from the Main Street Coalition and a group of outside professionals. The challenge presented the five finalists was a difficult one: Provide a vision "so powerful and compelling that a public-private partnership is mandated to provide a framework for making the vision a reality."² Choosing a winner surely prompted the jurors, who ranged from Metro CEO Shirley A. DeLibero to *Governing Magazine's* executive editor Alan Ehrenhalt to Making Main Street

suggests challenges that must be addressed if the organizers and the selected design team are to succeed in realizing their vision of Main Street greatness.

BY JOHN KALISKI

The Teams

With one exception, each of the competition teams was led by a well-established firm with strong urban design credentials. Among the entrants was the Chicago office of Skidmore, Owings, & Merrill (SOM), known since the 1950s for their high-rise office towers and business parks. At a more modest scale, they developed renown for their reconstruction of State Street in Chicago and the crafting of neighborhood guidelines in Orlando. Another entrant was the Portland office of Zimmer Gunsul Frasca (ZGF), which is known for the design of their city's successful light-rail system, the model for virtually every light-rail transit system in

the U.S. The selection of Atlanta-based Cooper Carry Associates, who partnered with Stull & Lee of Boston, must have been based on their work on successful neo-traditional communities such as Mizner Place in Florida and Harbor Town in Memphis. Ehrenkrantz, Eckstut & Kuhn Architects of New York and Los Angeles (Eckstut) is well known for the urban design of New York's Battery Park City. More recently, the firm has specialized in the design of super-scale urban retail/entertainment centers.

All four of these firms were clearly qualified to present urban design visions utilizing normative standards of professionalism. Given these firms' maturity, the choice of TEN/SLA Studio Land (TEN) as the fifth competition finalist was curious. Enrique Norton, lead designer of the Mexico City-based TEN, is known for his rigorous contemporary

move the hearts and actions of the decision-makers who will need to commit public dollars to Main Street improvements. In any case, the power of the urban landscape to poetically and pragmatically shape city-making in advance of development was not the primary interest of most of the architectural teams pursuing the competition's mandate for big picture architectural visioning.

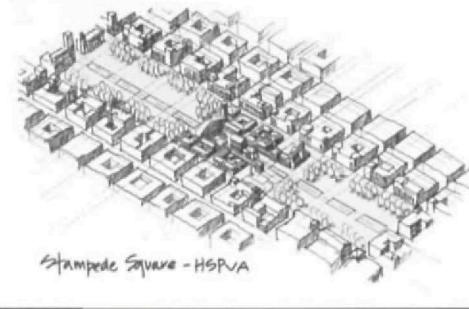
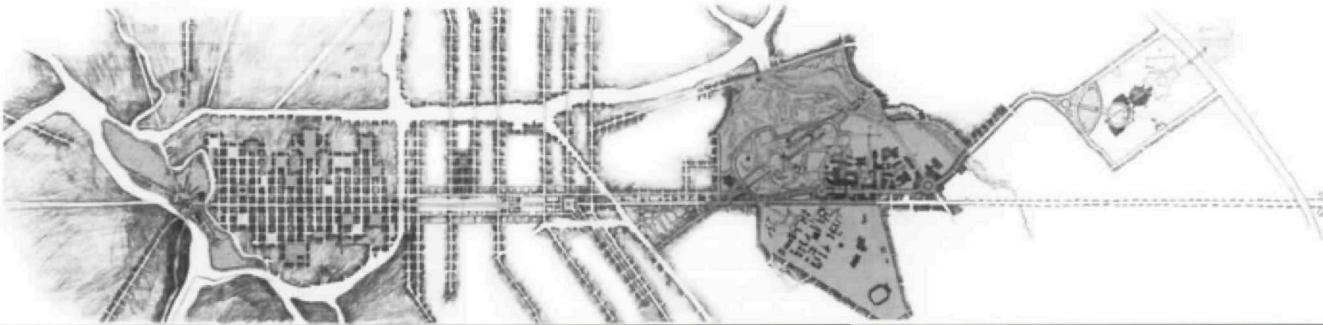
The Big Ideas

One could argue that the Rome imagined by Sixtus the Fifth and the Chicago of Daniel Burnham are the bookends of a shelf of big design concepts that continue to spark the imaginations of urban designers. The sponsors of Making Main Street Happen requested big picture thinking, and the designers responded in kind. On the whole the projects suggest transformations of Main Street and its

variation platform and "dining experience." Eckstut also proposed clearing approximately ten blocks of land on either side of Main between Webster and Elgin streets. Eckstut suggested that this plaza's length was in part predicated on the distance it takes to stop a herd of running cows; they aptly named this space Stampede Square. They also suggested combining Hermann Park, the Texas Medical Center, and Rice University into one vast campus by closing Main from Mecom Fountain to North MacGregor and rerouting traffic to Fannin, which in this area would be renamed Main. Eckstut explained that this would expand Rice University's campus to include a great promenade along the old Main Street and create a better Main Street front door to the Texas Medical Center. At the south end of Main would be another open space named Astro Square, which would establish a

downtown to the rodeo culture of the Astrodome, Cooper Carry relied upon a carnivalesque scenario that would inspire people and organizations to gather together under the big tent of redevelopment. The specifics of what their project entailed seemed at times less important than the feel-good narrative that would convince everyone that the big something was okay.

The scheme that focused the least on establishing a script of big ideas was ZGF's proposal. Taking to heart the competition organizers' desire to understand how light-rail could be implemented, ZGF proposed a disciplined fixed-rail transit system running the length of the Main Street corridor. Unlike the other schemes, which reached out to embrace either regional scales beyond the control of the organizers or hyper-experiences that would need to become destinations



Ehrenkrantz, Eckstut & Kuhn's winning proposal, which calls for creating large units of open space along Main Street. The largest of these would be a ten block long, two block wide landscaped square between Webster and Elgin streets just north of a new home for the High School for the Performing and Visual Arts. The name of the space would be Stampede Square since, according to Ehrenkrantz, Eckstut & Kuhn, its 3,000 foot length is approximately the distance it takes to bring a herd of stampeding cows to a halt.

and experimental architecture. He is of a newer generation of designers that is critical, if not dismissive, of normative standards of practice. His presence in the competition was a wild card.

Also surprising was the exclusion of landscape architects as competition team leaders. The vastness of the assignment, the relative emptiness of the territory, and the desire to rapidly implement ideas that change the identity of an entire sector of the city suggest the importance of starting with the landscape in the immediately available public right-of-way. The inclusion of a lead landscape architect or two would have presented the competition's judges with a wider range of possible approaches. Perhaps landscape architecture as a profession has dropped off the urban design radar screen; perhaps the organizers did not feel there were any landscape architects glamorous enough to

environs that would fundamentally alter familiar scenes.

SOM proposed the establishment of two huge parks acting as anchors at either end of Main Street. The first would encompass Allen's Landing. To reestablish the visibility of this location, SOM suggested removal of the Main Street Bridge (a National Register of Historic Places Monument), completely rerouting traffic and vastly expanding the existing parklands to encompass the downtown campus of the University of Houston and environs. At the south end of Main, a new regional park twice the size of Memorial Park was proposed to mark the intersection with Loop 610.

Ehrenkrantz, Eckstut & Kuhn likewise suggested expanded open space at Allen's Landing. Their scheme proposed a technology theme for Houston's birthplace and set within it the world's tallest obser-

major gateway to the Astrodome.

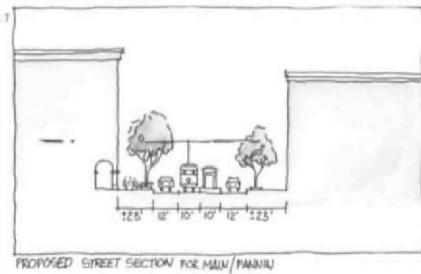
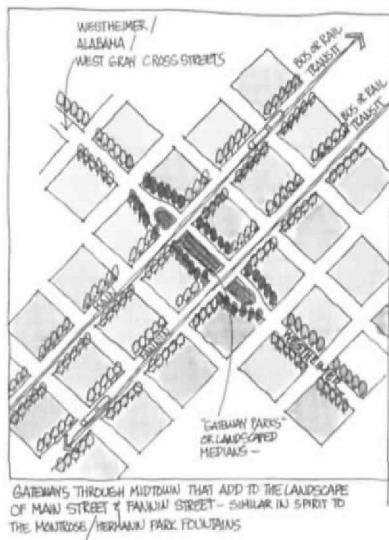
The Astrodome was also the concept focus of TEN. They proposed turning the Astrodomain into a vast multi-level pleasure park with direct access to Loop 610. Multi-story buildings full of entertainment, exhibit, hotel, and parking uses topped off by an undulating, park-like roofscape would cover the existing parking lots. The Astrodome would, in essence, be surrounded by a pleasure-filled girde of structure and become a surreal hybrid beer garden, shopping mall, convention center, and fairground.

Exaggerated spectacle similarly informed the Cooper Carry scheme. Carrying the moniker "From Symphony to Texas Two-Step," these architects idea for Main concentrated on establishing the big feeling or big narrative that would organize the redevelopment of the street. From the "classic" culture of

of national interest to succeed, ZGF's scheme confined itself to the blocks immediately adjacent to Main — all seven-plus miles of the street. Only in the context of the other finalists' ideas could the ZGF proposal be construed as modest.

The Role of Transit

Main Street is blessed with vital destinations of regional importance such as the Astrodome, the Museum District, and, of course, downtown. People naturally imagine public transit connecting these places. While transit includes bicycles, buses, and boots (pedestrians), Making Main Street Happen is clearly more than a little curious about the potential of light rail. Three of the competition entries — those by Cooper Carry, Eckstut, and TEN — more or less accepted Main Street light rail as a mandate and then



PROPOSED STREET SECTION FOR MAIN/PANHOU

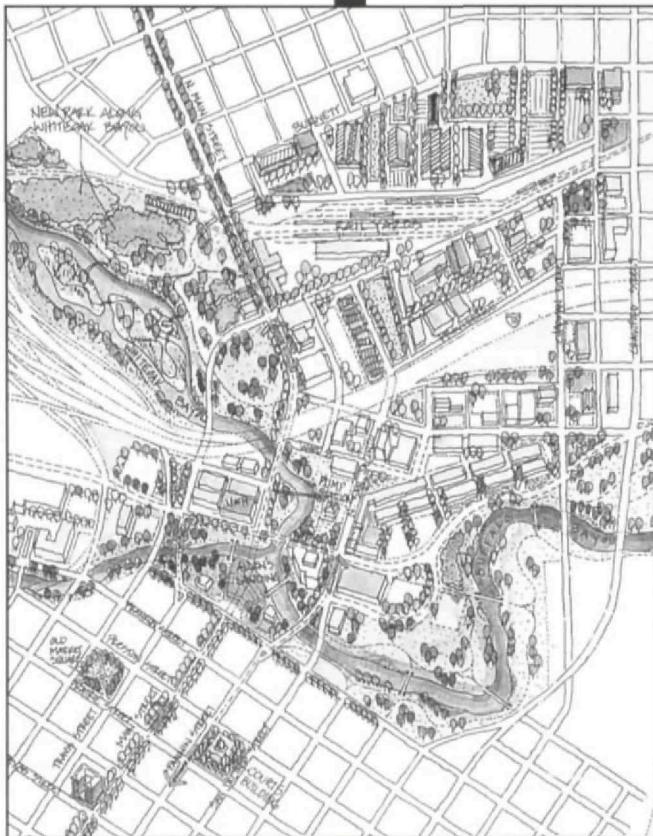
In their plan, Skidmore, Owings & Merrill suggested that the character of Main Street would depend on the vitality of the surrounding communities. While proposing a number of block-size parks, SOM also paid close attention to neighborhood level detail, concentrating on the physical design approaches needed to nurture existing places.



LIGHT RAIL & ENHANCED BUS SYSTEMS SHOULD BOTH BE INTRODUCED TO MAJOR BOULEVARDS. BIKE SHOULD ALSO BE INTRODUCED WHERE POSSIBLE.



TWELVE NEW RESIDENTIAL NEIGHBORHOODS IN MIDTOWN - EACH IDENTIFIED WITH ITS OWN PARK & COMMUNITY BUILDINGS. FAMILIES ARE WELCOME.



moved quickly on to architectural visions. Of these three, only TEN devoted detailed, as opposed to big picture, attention to the design of a future Main Street transitway.

TEN proposed a complete street-furnishing program that could flexibly accommodate the demands of a transitway. The team challenged the standard use of historically inspired, off-the-shelf streetlights, benches, and trash cans. Instead, they proposed a futuristic panoply of computer-generated designs for these often prosaic elements. They proposed pedestrian-scale poles for residential areas, tall poles for commercially oriented locales, poles that morphed into trash cans, poles that transformed into benches then trash cans, and endless other variations. The resulting richness of Main Street's "furnishing zone" stretched the paucity of functions that these programs typically address. TEN's proposal challenges city designers to recognize that just as there are many overlapping uses along the length of a street, so there should be many ways to light a street, sit on benches, or throw away garbage. Unfortunately, this same team's neglect of actual organic elements such as shade-providing street trees undermined the subtlety of their everyday approach to making a useable sidewalk.

ZGF's take on the transit challenge included a series of dimensioned cross sections that showed how Main would change from district to district as the train passed by. These sections were based on an analysis of changing curbside conditions, width of available right-of-way, and a review of adjacent land use. In combination with their proposal to place block-square parks at each train stop, ZGF demonstrated that rail could be technically accommodated throughout the proposed transit corridor in a commodious manner.

Of all the schemes, SOM's was the only one that flirted with the possibility that rail would not be implemented on Main Street. Like ZGF, but without as much detail, they proposed that rail could ply Main, but they also pointed out that, for the same money, buses could equally and elegantly serve not just the Main Street corridor, but additional corridors as well. Extensive landscaping of these corridors, SOM pointed out, would not only make them connectors to the city's bayou system and parks, but also make them green alleys that could be designed to accommodate an entire system of rapid buses. SOM specifically pointed out the potential of running an enhanced bus system along Almeda Street as well as Main. By touching both streets with this type of investment, a more extensive wedge of the city would be served by transit, particularly those neighborhoods along the Almeda corridor that have been ignored for decades by Houston's power players. In the Making Main Street Happen competition, SOM seemed to be suggesting a smart alternative to Houston's decades-

old rail debate: Use the same amount of money to improve the physical appearance and function of many boulevards and communities rather than only one.

Unfortunately, buses do not have a good image for the vast majority of middle class commuters considering public transit. For recalcitrant automobile drivers, rail is sexier than buses. Nevertheless, if one considers the relationship of dollars spent to the number of riders served, buses almost always prove to be more efficient than rail in North America's spread-out metropolises. To achieve an efficient result for enhanced buses in Houston, someone would have to step up and design a smart system that is technologically sophisticated and transcends existing perceptions. SOM hinted that such a possibility exists if one seeks to design it. An enhanced bus system for Main (as well as for inside the Loop) may yet prove to be an intelligent, feasible, and transformative direction for Houston to pursue should the current plans for light rail on Main suffer the same fate as earlier rail plans, and be discarded.

Main Street Topos

Several of the competitors' schemes attempted to directly address the uniqueness of Houston's "topos" — the character of the city's topography, climate, light, altitude, longitude, latitude, and fauna. TEN, taking advantage of the large number of vacant parcels of property that exist in Midtown, proposed the creation of a myriad of helter-skelter open spaces. The opportunistic set-aside of these minispaces for parks and other public uses would allow existing businesses and new projects to orient around attractive green space where there is currently nothing but empty land. In contrast to existing plans for Midtown that proposes a minimum scattering of parks,⁴ TEN realizes in their design a "deconstructed" and virtually continuous open-space network that reveals a past order of abandonment yet projects a cooler future under a canopy of oak trees. If implemented, the TEN proposal would result in an intimate pedestrian-scale layering of the old and the new. Imagine North Boulevard mutating from a quiet residential street into an urbanized district seamlessly connected by surprising courtyards, alleys and mews, and you get a sense of what TEN envisions for the area around Main in Midtown. The end product could form the framework for one of the most desirable and walkable neighborhoods in Houston.

SOM also proposed the establishment of a large number of block-size parks. However, instead of relying on the circumstance of vacant parcels, SOM suggested the establishment of an open-space order based upon the mechanics and typological patterns of traditional neighborhoods. These patterns include utilization of one-quarter-mile walking radii as the basic building block of pedestrian neighborhoods and the use of traditional

architectural typologies such as front porches and sidewalk entrances to low-rise residential buildings — something the current crop of multi-unit apartments sprouting up along Main Street eschews. SOM also utilized the Houston precedent of great alleys of oak trees, linked the bayou system to neighborhoods, and acknowledged the scale of existing block-size parks in their proposals for new open spaces. SOM seemed to be asking Houstonians to recognize the wisdom of responding to, rather than fighting, Houston's climate.

Not all of the schemes handled Houston conditions with as much aplomb. For instance, the large size of the Eckstut open-space proposals, particularly the 600-foot by 3,000-foot Stampede Square, would not result in a space one would want to casually hang out in during a Houston summer. Its large expanses of paving and great length would challenge all but the hearty. Equally difficult to imagine is Eckstut's proposal for back and forth pedestrian activity between the Museum District, Rice, and the Texas Medical Center, even with the creation of a shaded green promenade where Main Street now courses. Once again, given the heat and Houstonians' lack of tolerance for traditional urban walking, this type of formal City Beautiful expression seems ill-suited for anything but visual pleasure.

ZGF also proposed a transformational greening of Main Street. However, their response to the climate was more inventive. Rejecting live oaks as the pre-eminent street tree, ZGF suggested instead inviting the East Texas piney forest into the city and sheltering Main with great stands of fast-growing loblolly pines. The pines would follow the linear path of the light rail, and punctuating their linearity would be fountains placed along the length of the tracks. Oncoming trains would trigger fountains of water, the spray of a cooling mist through the humid air, and the sound of bubbling jets from between the trestles as the trains approached. ZGF's scheme would not only be a unique solution for the design of station stops, but one that grew out of specific climatic conditions found in Houston. On an intimate level, the tactileness of ZGF's fountains in relationship to the light rail would almost invite one to explore Houston's long, hot summer.

In the ZGF scheme, Main Street, especially in the Midtown area, would be turned into an intricate weaving of trees, open space, and water that is primal in its recollection of an older urban forest, yet new in its unexpected use of water. It carries one's imagination beyond the more standard and literal contextual place-making tactics of the other schemes by proposing a user experience that depends upon a complex response to and interpretation of Houston landscape, air, water, and light. This type of response is subtle, poetic, and, in the best sense of the word, critical. It allows the user to understand and judge the specific quality

of a place by gradually revealing and contrasting the elements of its topos. This is the type of creatively poetic response to the land that the other entrants' schemes were missing.

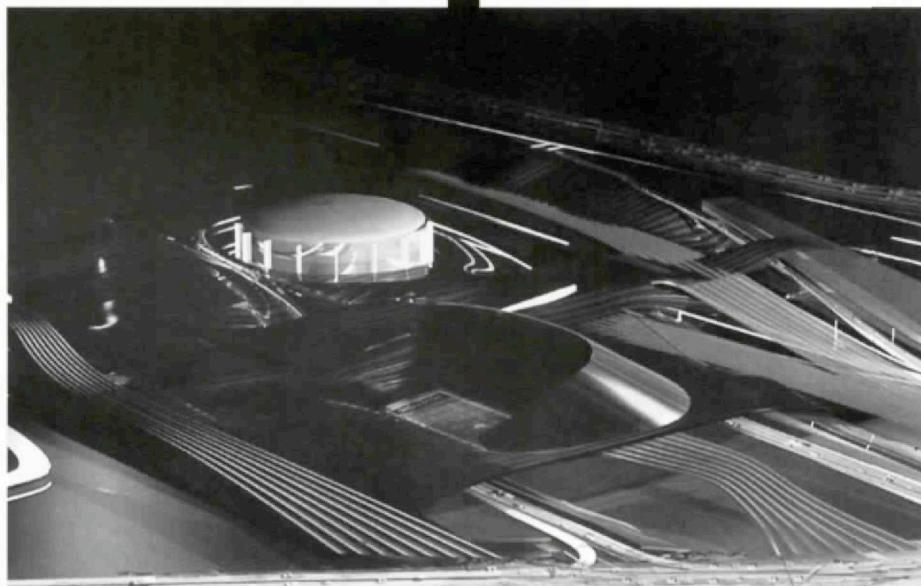
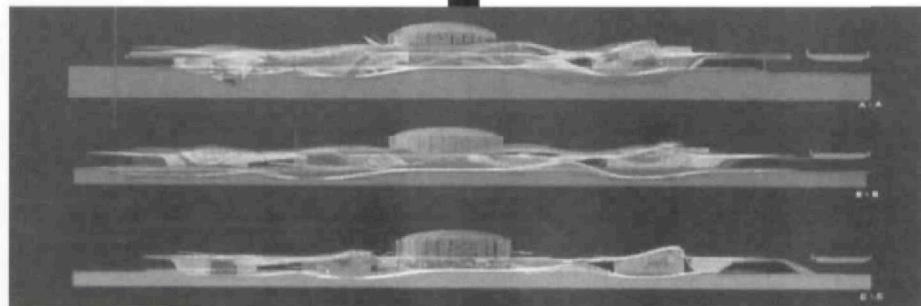
Houston Identity

If the Main Street schemes were as a whole underdeveloped with regard to poetic visions of landscape specific to the conditions of Houston, they certainly did not have the same difficulty projecting sensibilities with regard to establishing a sense of architectural identity. For example, TEN rendered a hardscape world of three-dimensional folds and complex curves that clearly symbolized the current fascination with both digital methodology and chaos theory. Particularly intriguing, if economically improbable, was their creation of a manmade topography of hills and dales that act as retention ponds at the Astrodome. In contrast, all of the other entries relied on historic architectural precedent to either create or reinforce a sense of place.

Cooper Carry and Eckstut both suggested that Main Street's identity should be formed by the themed architecture that is associated with festival marketplaces and cineplexes. Both of these firms provided an architectural framework for commodified experience as the core component of Main Street identity. For these types of experiences to work they need to be highly scripted and art directed, like operas or movies. People need to be transported in their imaginations to a real place even as they know they are in a simulated environment. To help achieve this flight of the imagination, Cooper Carry suggested that the signs and symbols of Houston's multiculturalism inflect the standard formulas that lead themed projects to look and feel at once like every place and no place.

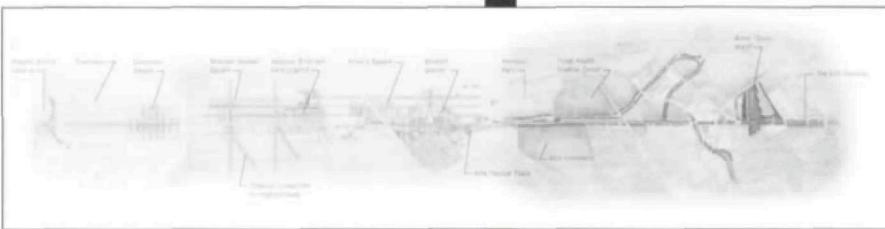
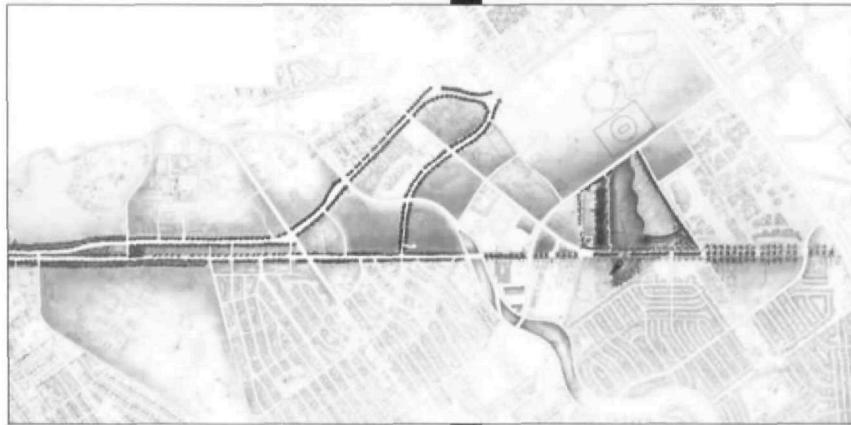
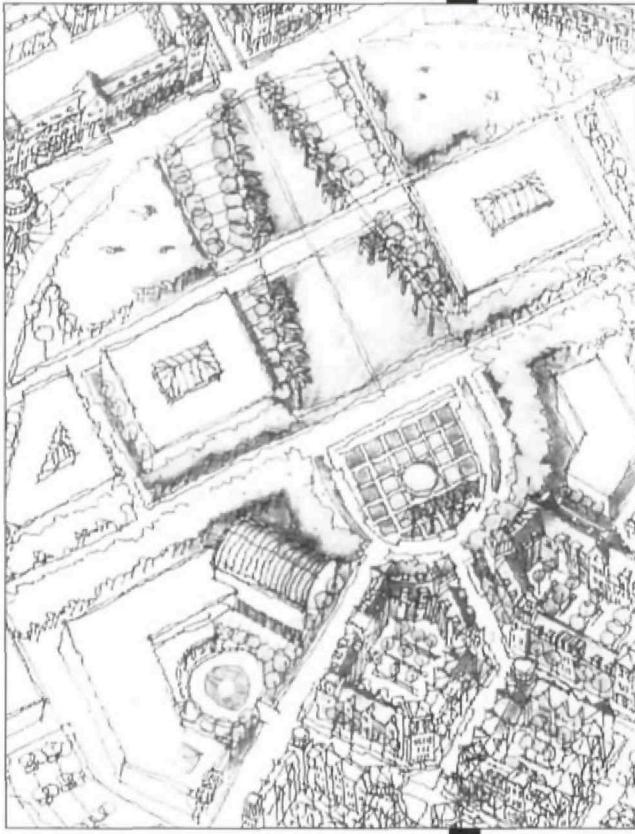
Eckstut went even further and clothed their entry in a rich panoply of vernacular imagery. They carefully documented old signs, favorite outdoor cafes and barbecues, scenes of oak tree-lined streets, and other Houston ephemera and collaged them into their drawings and plans. There was an attractive and clever specificity to the Eckstut proposal that spoke directly of Houston, even if that remained a veneer masking an otherwise normative 1990s development strategy.

SOM suggested that Main Street's character would depend not upon spectacular attractions arrayed like rides in a theme park, but rather on the vitality of the corridor's surrounding communities. At the neighborhood level they concentrated on the physical design tactics needed to nurture existing places and make them work for the variety of groups that already live in the area. Rather than propose a large-scale gesture such as a formal square or entertainment center as the first Making Main Street Happen project, they, with the assistance of Houston landscape architect James Burnett, suggested the improvement of



TEN/SLA Studio Land produced the competition's boldest scheme. In its computer generated images, TEN rendered a world of three-dimensional folds and complex curves, one in which Main Street would be lined with futuristic benches and streetlights. TEN also suggested turning the Astrodome into a multi-level pleasure park filled with entertainment, exhibit, hotel, and parking uses, on top of which would sit an undulating roofscape.





Cooper Carry's proposal, above, concentrated less on specifics than on the "big feeling" or "big narrative" that would organize the redevelopment of Main. Their scheme suggested themed architecture of the sort associated with festival marketplaces, but tied in this case to signs and symbols of Houston's multiculturalism.

Elizabeth Brown Rice Park.

This neglected, though still lovely, block-square open space isn't even on Main Street, but it is surrounded by a viable neighborhood that, with care and infrastructure investment, could be the starting point for a piece-by-piece revitalization. At the core of SOM's community identity concept was the notion that improvement through neighborhood-based revitalization is just as important, if not more important, than the strategic top-down strategies suggested by all of the other entrants. SOM pointed out that it does indeed take a village, in fact many villages working together, if you want to make a character-filled, everyday city that the residents identify as their own.

A Main Street of urban spectacle surrounded by dormitory neighborhoods will fail to reach the potential envisioned by its champions. Everyday identity cannot be bought or themed or dictated. It has to grow as a culture from within. Everyday culture and identity is what draws people to all of the most enduring destinations. SOM was the only team to begin to express this essential city-making viewpoint.

And The Winner Is...

While the jury was closed to outsiders, and only the jurors know what happened behind closed doors, the selection of Eckstut's proposal as the winning one was not surprising. Of all the teams, Eckstut best met the Making Main Street Happen's mandate to provide a powerful and compelling scheme that could be implemented by a public/private partnership. The reality is that the mechanisms are not in place in Houston to tackle parcel-by-parcel, block-by-block, and street-by-street neighborhood revitalization on a large-scale basis. In any case, this was not a competition about establishing a vision suitable for ground-up revitalization. This was a competition about inventing a big idea that, if necessary, can sustain a transit component. Eckstut deeply understood this reality and addressed it.

Eckstut's scheme utilizes familiar project types that developers want to build in 1999. That is just what the competition's organizers need — a team that can jumpstart a development process with a vision that local and national financiers will clearly understand and seek as an investment opportunity. The Eckstut scheme was the best at mitigating this economic forthrightness. Eckstut's architectural imagery was both the most specific to Houston and the most reassuring. Their proposal, better than any of the other entries, demonstrated that if massive change is going to occur to Main's building environment, the end result could still be familiar to Houstonians.

In addition, Eckstut showed a subtle understanding of the means by which public dollars can be leveraged to fulfill private purposes. For example, their suggestion to place the High School for the Performing and Visual Arts between the

proposed Stampede and Grackle Squares cleverly utilizes school funds to facilitate private investment. Public monies can be used to assemble and clear land in a Main Street location for a needed school facility. In addition, clearing the site of "blight" just happens to be of interest to any developer that might be induced to build a retail/entertainment venue in this area.

This type of manipulation of public monies to serve private redevelopment purposes can be castigated. There is a long history of redevelopment benefits flowing to private entities that are far in excess of the long-term benefits the public gets in return. Nevertheless, Eckstut's pragmatism is smart. It knowingly combines an understanding of space making principles with development purposes. It recognizes that combining public and private resources as opposed to government sponsored guidelines, standards, and zoning is the key to implementing partnerships that allow projects in risky locations to move forward. And Main Street, particularly Midtown, remains a risky location.

Being part of a development deal is, in fact, a powerful means for cities to actively control the shape and benefits associated with development. A strong local government can negotiate a hard bargain that results in a better designed project. Without zoning or many of the other land use controls that other cities utilize, this is probably the best means Houston has to actively shape large-scale projects. The city can always ask, how much do you want it, and how much are you willing to give me for it? Eckstut, better than most architecture and urban design firms, knows how to play this game on behalf of their clients. Their proposal inherently offered the clearest path to strategies that link capital sources to quality development deals. Perhaps the Main Street competition's organizers saw in the Eckstut scheme a vision that was at once physically big picture, diagrammatically clear, visually reassuring, and economically pragmatic. This is what the original request for qualifications called for, and the jury delivered the goods requested. Are they the right goods? Time will tell.

An Additional Opinion

What makes a great city? What makes a great street? These are the two questions that began this essay, and further reflection on them in light of the five Main Street proposals, and especially the winning scheme, suggests that the forces of a great competition project are not always the same forces that create a great street or a great city. Great cities and great streets typically happen over a long period of time. They are the result of a host of individual decisions made in the context of a strong framework of commonly shared values.

The strongest aspect of the Eckstut scheme is its vision of large open spaces

generated by association with development spectacles. Perhaps this is appropriate for Houston. However, the very economic drives that create these spectacles shift and change with each season. This year luxury movie theaters are the rage; last year it was in-town big-box retail; next year who knows? One has to fairly question those who would allow this type of economic whirlwind to be the prime motivating force for crafting a great city. One also has to remain suspicious that the overwhelming scale of Eckstut's proposed spaces will be defeated by the reality of Houston's climate. For the Eckstut design to successfully evolve, it must find a way to address the actual institutional and physical history of places along the Main Street corridor. Most important, given the large-scale condemnation and clearance required to implement the scheme, community enthusiasm may be difficult to obtain. Assuming that all of these factors are intelligently confronted, as they surely will be, what will be left of the original scheme?

Some of the other Main Street proposals seemed more accepting of Houston's climate, more adaptable to the types of economic whirlwinds that occur over time, and more fine grained in relationship to the surrounding neighborhoods. TEN literally used chance as a design device. If their results were obscurely academic, their point was well taken. Great cities and great streets are not so much willed into existence as they accrue. They result from many unpredictable social, political, and design decisions made over time. SOM implicitly accepted this point when they proposed the nurturing of existing neighborhoods as a key starting point. ZGF, by concentrating their resources on improvement along the Main Street corridor, created a framework that real estate decisions both large and small could react to in a host of ways over a long period of time. They established a flexible context where most of the blanks are filled in over time rather than by design.

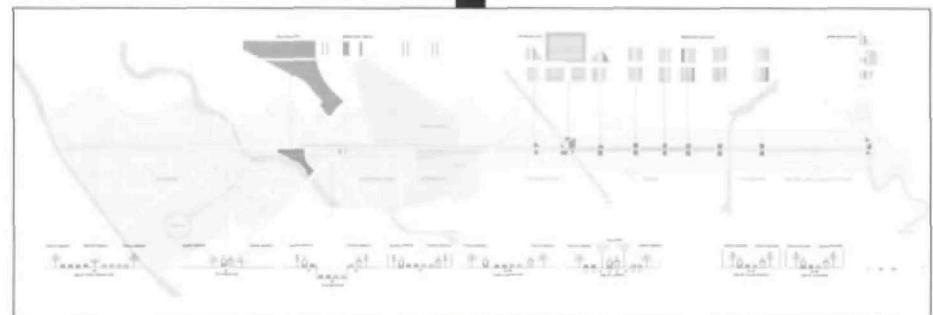
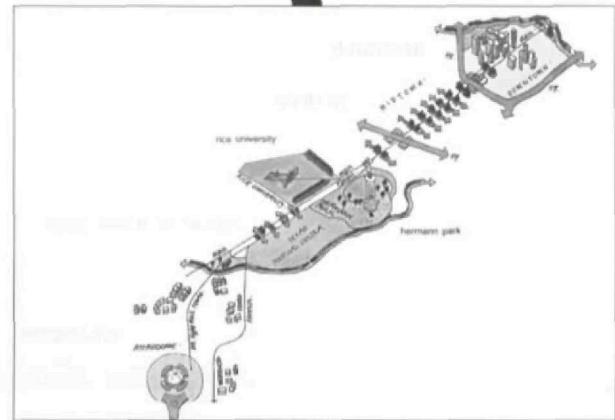
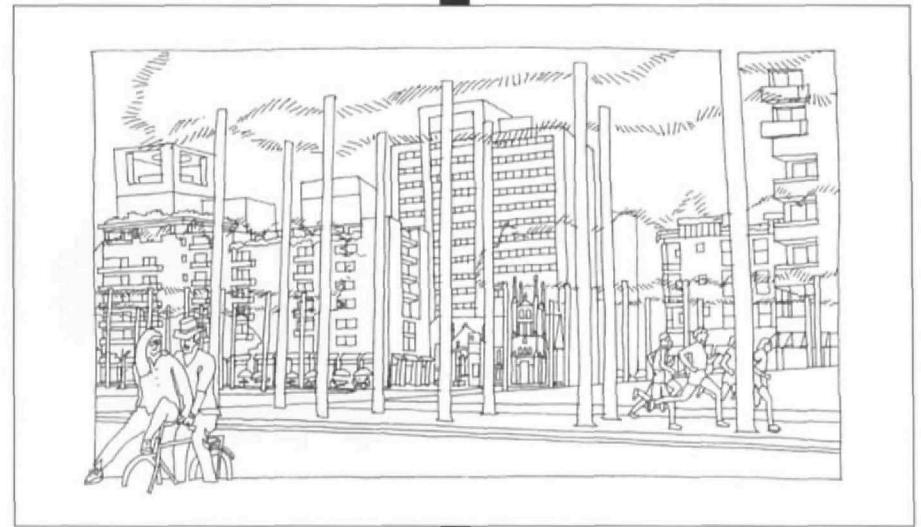
All three of these schemes accepted that a great city or a great street is an open-ended endeavor where the story cannot be completely illustrated or told in advance. In contrast, the Eckstut scheme did not so much preclude surprise as script it out of existence. Eckstut told the whole story, and when it was over, like a blockbuster movie, you either liked it or did not like it, but regardless, you were ushered out of the theater. In the end, a city is not a script, nor a narrative, nor are you ushered out of the theater. In the contemporary city the citizens remain to discuss the future. They are called upon to anticipate the unanticipated over and over again. This sense of surprise and unscripted adventure is the prize captured in the stone, glass, steel, and asphalt of great contemporary cities and great contemporary streets. And it is the democratic and discursive open-ended element of surprise that is missing in the

Eckstut scheme.

Adding urban surprise, unscripted adventure, and democratic uncertainty as criteria (and admittedly they were not) and retaining the request for qualification's mandates would suggest further study of the strong points of three of the five Main Street proposals. TEN's mechanics of chance are theoretically important and a wave of the very near future, even if they are as yet too unformed to merit serious consideration when real dollars are on the table. ZGF's compression of effort into the improvement of Main Street may be the best way to maximize the benefits of a rail scheme.

As the Main Street Coalition and Eckstut move forward, they will necessarily consider again the constructive role that neighborhoods contribute to the revitalization of Main Street. They may also need to consider the intelligence of developing a transit system that is smart and sexy and serves more than one street. They will also, in ways small and large, acknowledge the climate, land, and regional situation within which they find themselves situated. Finally, all the entities will surely need to compromise and adjust their visions to accommodate the reality of implementing overly big ideas. As these situations occur, the energy and public-minded spirit that led the Main Street Coalition to risk considerable time on the revitalization of Main will hopefully not be deterred. At these moments the neighborhood-based organizational principles, regional specificity, transit flexibility, and everydayness of the SOM entry should be recalled and acted upon. Remembering these directions, as well as the sparkle of Eckstut's urbanism of spectacle, will lead to the making of a livable community of everyday existing places, as well as a happening destination and street that all will enjoy. ■

1. Gerald Moorhead, *Main Street Houston: An Urban Design Charrette and Exhibition* (American Institute of Architects et. al, Houston, 1992).
2. "Request for Qualifications: Planning and Urban Design Consulting Services," Making Main Street Happen, Inc., page 3.
3. There were a total of 11 judges for the competition, led by Jay Brodie, executive director of the Baltimore Development Corporation. The other jurors were Peter Brown of Making Main Street Happen, Inc.; Shirley DeLibero, president and CEO of Houston's Metropolitan Transit Authority; Alan Ehrenhalt, executive editor of *Governing*; Jim Hill, president of the Houston chapter of the American Institute of Architects; the Reverend William A. Lawson of Wheeler Avenue Baptist Church; Bob Litke, director of the Houston Department of Planning and Development; Art Storey, Harris County engineer and head of the county's public infrastructure department; Barron Wallace, chairman of the Midtown Redevelopment Authority; Bob Eury, president of Central Houston, Inc.; and E.D. Wulfe, chairman of the Main Street Coalition.
4. *Project Plan and Reinvestment Zone Financing Plan, Reinvestment Zone Number Two, City of Houston, Texas, Midtown* (May 1997, amended October 1997). See illustration on page 13.



More than the other competitors, Zimmer Gunsul Frasca focused on transit, including a series of cross sections (above) showing how areas of Main Street would change as a light-rail train passed by. ZGF also suggested echoing the rail line's linearity by placing stands of loblolly pines along Main, thus bringing the East Texas forest into the city.