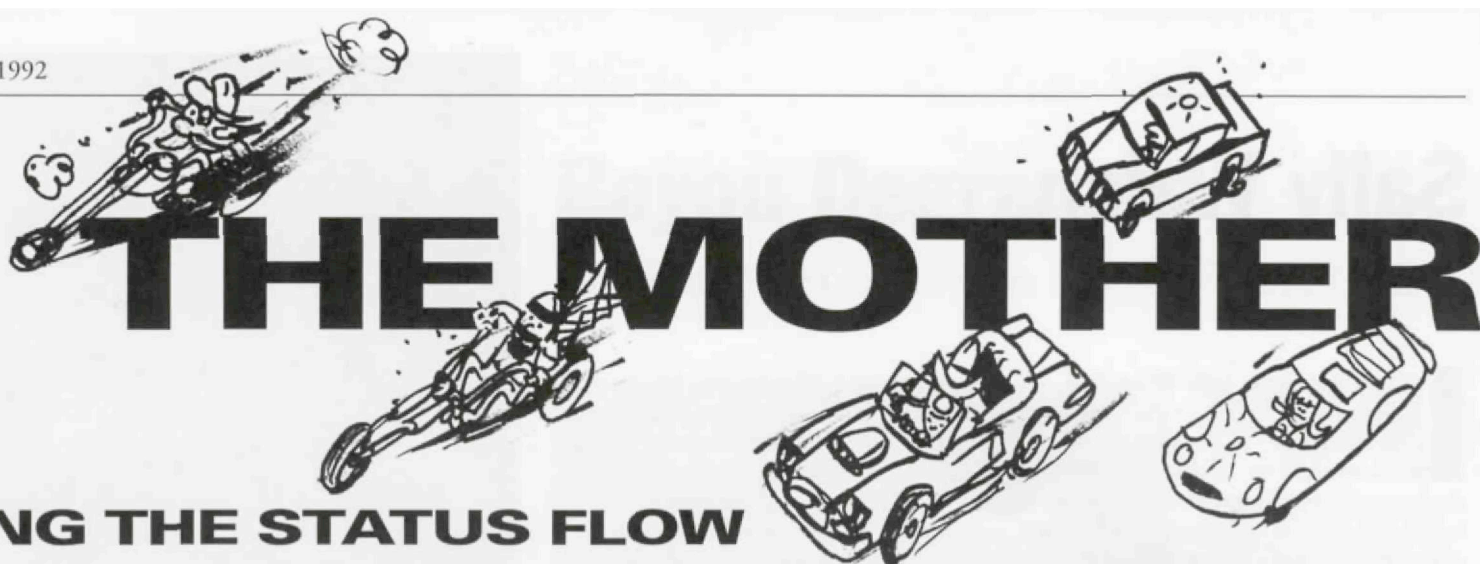
JOEL WARREN BARNA

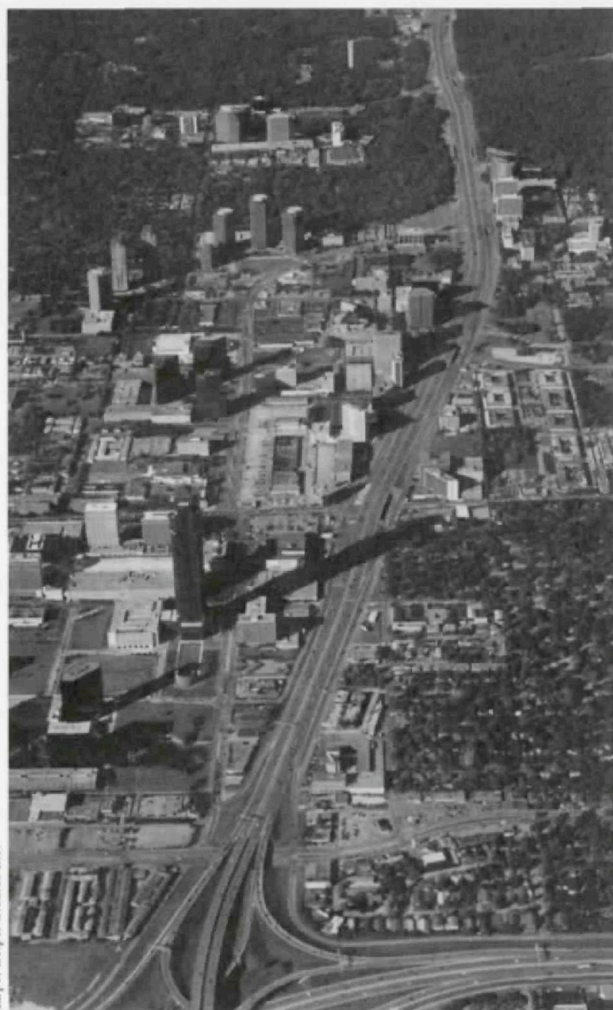


MAINTAINING THE STATUS FLOW ON HOUSTON'S WEST LOOP

THE "Uptown" section of the West Loop, a 4.1-mile-long stretch of Loop 610 between Interstate 10 and U.S. 59 that is the heart of post-downtown, perpetually smog-bound Houston (and until recently was destined to become the widest freeway in the world) has always enjoyed a certain apartness among Houston's major traffic arteries. The other freeways may be ordinary land-despoiling paths of commerce, taking farmers to market, connecting the port to its hinterlands, collecting workers for their trudge to the still-shimmering office towers downtown or the incendiary chemistry mills along the ship channel, and speeding harried salarymen to and from the airports. But by the standards of this choicest vignette of the West Loop, Houston's other freeways have always been levelers of humankind, the domain of off-price malls, budget motels, and used-car lots, where billboards broadcast the forbidden impulses of the city's autonomic nervous system, flashing images of whiskey and cigarettes, psychiatric hospitals for women and children, and vasectomies for men.

Not so the West Loop, the flagship of Houston's head-over-wheels embrace of the automobile age. By a happy coincidence of its birth – an engineering decision that reportedly ratified a deal cut in Houston City Council in the 1950s to benefit R. E. "Bob" Smith, then a major financial backer of Mayor Roy Hofheinz – the West Loop passes through the western end of Memorial Park, ensuring its safe transit south through Smith's holdings, close to and paralleling Post Oak Boulevard.[1] The West Loop is relatively free of billboards and therefore is more purely itself – a connector, like the other Houston freeways, but insulated by them into a field of activity without poles.

Metaphorically, the West Loop is not electrical path but Brownian motion. This shows in the difference between its traffic patterns and those of other freeways. Other freeways are congested at peak hours or when there are wrecks or floods or roadwork to contend with. The West Loop, by comparison, evolved past that point in the mid-eighties, when, for a while, it was the busiest stretch of freeway in the nation, with an average daily traffic count of 231,000 vehicles. The latest published daily average, for 1990, is a mere 224,000, making the West Loop still the busiest freeway in the city but only the second busiest in the state, after a stretch of the LBJ Freeway in north Dallas (227,000 vehicles per day for 1990). The Nilotic inundations of the West Loop's traffic stream have been almost unbelievably stimulating, turning the freeway's frontage roads and the commercial zones visible from its overpasses into a valley of giants ruled by Philip Johnson and John Burgee's beacon-topped Transco Tower, in company with lesser marvels by Johnson, Cesar Pelli, and Skidmore, Owings & Merrill and the enfilade of the Woodway Canyon. "Uptown" Houston, as this aggregation is now called as a public relations convention in preference to the earlier designation Magic Circle, is the eighth-largest business district in the United States and is expected to double in worker population over the next 20 years.


Harper Leiper Studios Inc.

West Loop looking north from U.S. 59.

Best of all, the West Loop joins what is perhaps the most exquisitely symbolic pairing in the American landscape. On the west side, shielded by scraggly pines within a gated sports-and-health center for stressed-out executives (which recently filed for Chapter 11 bankruptcy protection), is the hotel room that serves as the primary private residence of the President of the United States, at least for tax and voting purposes. On the east stands the Houston headquarters of the Resolution Trust Corporation, a $500 billion work-out center for the real estate lending industry, created to ensure that profits stay private and losses are duly socialized.

All the development in the corridor was predictable, but little of it was, in fact, comprehended in the 1950s, when Loop 610 was planned. Back then, the Loop was intended simply as a bypass route to relieve congestion downtown and on the city's thoroughfares through the end of the century. But, as Peter C. Papademetriou explains in his authoritative *Transportation and Urban Development in Houston, 1830–1980*, the Texas Highway Department's decision to develop the Loop and the new freeways of the 1950s and 1960s with parallel frontage roads embodied "a philosophy that it was less costly to build more roadway than [to] buy out access rights."[2] This all but guaranteed that the Loop would also function "as a local street, or a collector street, conceptually at the opposite end of the traffic spectrum [from a freeway loop]." This potential was nowhere more heroically realized than on the West Loop, in part because of the spectacular highrise building spree that acquired a self-fulfilling momentum with the development by Gerald D. Hines Interests of the Galleria complex, thereby exploiting the market demographics inherent in the charmed geographic area that the West Loop passes by.

To the east of the West Loop, below and beyond Memorial Park, is River Oaks, while to the west lie Tanglewood and the incorporated Memorial villages. The neighborhoods west of the freeway have a peculiar unity: in them, low-scaled fifties and sixties ranch houses are set behind open drainage ditches. A remnant of the not-so-distant agricultural past, these ditches link the region visually as much with Bordersville and West Columbia as with River Oaks. Even so, these neighborhoods are in the top tier of Houston's elite residential areas, and all predate the West Loop. It was the proximity of these top-dollar demographic swatches, in fact, that made the Galleria, precociously conceived as specialty retail on a quasi-European theme, Houston's special contribution to high-speed consumer-urbanism.

Stands of old trees and the topographical variations afforded by Buffalo Bayou (its waters laced at the Loop only with effluent from the nascent communities of the pine forests and prairies to the west) were among the chief attractions abetting the creation of these enclaves, insulated, like a piney dream of southeastern Connecticut, from the unpleasantness to be found in working-class neighborhoods. This preservation of a semblance of primeval identity was embraced by area residents as a matter of both principle and interest, and they strove to keep the bayou free from such unwelcome intrusions as continuous north-south roads. As a result, until 1989 not a single north-south street crossed the bayou to link I-10 and U.S. 59 between Shepherd Drive and Voss/Hillcroft. An impregnable green curtain meandering along the bayou across the western half of the city secured the social position of a relative handful of houses. Consequently, all the area's local north-south traffic, not just that coming from outside the West Loop corridor or generated by Uptown growth, was pushed onto the West Loop. Ergo, non-peak-hour congestion where the green curtain parted.

INTERESTINGLY, the routing of the freeway through Memorial Park actually helped preserve the development options for privately held land to the west. Plans for a second breach, the 1989 extension of Chimney Rock across the bayou to join Memorial Drive with I-10, resulted in an acrimonious process that, as former Houston Planning Commission chairman Burdette Keeland notes, took from the 1940s to the 1980s to effect (*Cite*, Fall 1990, p. 24). The maintenance of the bayou barrier was a strategically brilliant social and political achievement, in view of Houston's zoning-free, no-lands-barred pattern of development. For as anyone who has bought a house in a subdivision or even merely studied ads for residential real estate knows, all new suburban houses, from the Houston Heights in the 1890s and Montrose in the 1910s to Kingwood and First Colony today, were sold with an implicit promise: "Move out here, live in tamed but otherwise unspoiled nature, and you will be a happier, more fulfilled person. In addition, you will be spared, forever, from the churning real estate market that afflicts the rest of the city. Your neighborhood won't turn into a slum, and it won't skyrocket up

OF ALL FREEWAYS

in value so much that speculators will drive you out to build a mall or an office park."

And as anyone who has lived in Houston more than half a boom-bust cycle knows, in a city that thrives on the unabated churning of the real estate market, the sellers of most subdivisions have no intention of honoring any such promise, which evaporates like a sulphurous Clinton Drive fog as soon as the developer's investment is recovered and control of his municipal utility district is sold out to the home buyers. From that point on, the dynamism of the market takes over, and the subdivision's value begins to fall or rise, almost never standing still. As Houston's long-deferred experiment with zoning begins to counteract the relentless neighborhood displacements occasioned by this unbridled speculation, the example of the neighborhoods to either side of the West Loop holds certain lessons.

Of all the participants in the great real estate casino that Houston has been since the Allen brothers began selling lots, only the residents of the Buffalo Bayou barrier have managed to achieve stasis for more than a year or two. Unfortunately, the lesson of the bayouside communities is that the only thing that actually worked was sufficient spare cash to create economic and political buffer zones. Now it appears that, zoning or no zoning, the buffer zone that held for the past 40 years will not be enough. Because the West Loop has in effect redefined the city's physical center and become its central artery, the bayouside communities have become, in essence, part of a new inner city. If Billy Joe Don needs to get from FM 1960 to Pearland, he doesn't much care that the residents of Tanglewood wish to maintain what remains of its traditional connection with Memorial Park. All he knows is that the West Loop is bumper-to-bumper.

The political power of Tanglewood and its neighbor communities remains enormous, but it has been perceptibly eroded over the 1980s, with changes in the Houston City Council that emphasized (and may soon eliminate altogether) at-large representation in an effort to increase minority-group membership. Most of all, the residents of the barrier have to contend with the patchwork emergence of the "Uptown" business district, which has established itself as a formidable economic generator and political force, and which is beginning to tire of the rustic-domestic pretensions of its neighbors. It is in this context that the plan to expand the West Loop became a big – often literally screaming – deal. The Texas Department of Transportation (a 1991 renaming of what, since the 1970s, had been called the Texas Department of Highways and Public Transportation) sees itself as responsible to the through-traffic commuter and has been planning to expand the West Loop for over a decade to alleviate congestion and to deal with actual and projected growth in traffic. From the start, the department has sought to achieve this expansion by double-decking the West Loop, like the portion of I-35 that runs to the east and north of downtown Austin. The state's intentions have been reflected as a matter of course in its long-range planning and also in studies released by Metro, the Houston-Galveston Area Council, and other local planning bodies over the years.

The first public controversy over the plan arose in 1989, when highway officials released a double-decking scheme for public comment. This much must be said for the scheme: it had a certain physical grandeur. Two elevated lanes in each direction would have started on the Southwest Freeway near South Rice, risen above the 610–59 interchange to a height of about 100 feet, run some 50 feet above the outer lanes of the West Loop, crossed over the top of the 610–10 interchange, and extended along I-10 eastward to T. C. Jester Boulevard and westward to Antoine. At the same time, the current width of the West Loop would have been expanded by two lanes in each direction, increasing the total number of lanes (not counting frontage roads) from 8 to 12. And the area's access ramps would have been reconfigured to make entering and leaving the freeway less difficult and hazardous.

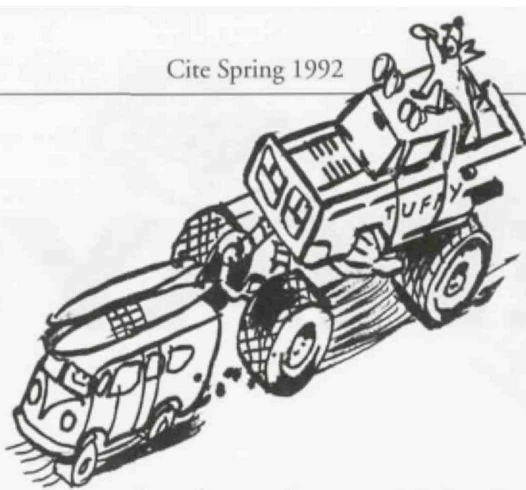
ENGINEERS at the highway department estimated that the designed capacity of the West Loop would increase from the then current 200,000 average daily trips to 275,000; this capacity, they said, would be reached in 2010. The specific purpose of the double-decked lanes would be to reroute long-distance traffic, taking it out of what one engineer called "the turbulence in the corridor that is caused by all the entering and exiting vehicles."

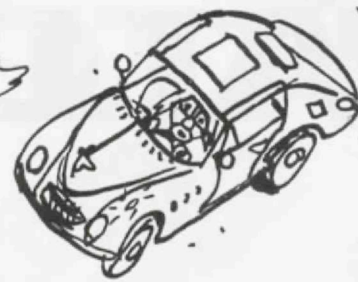
Hedging their bets, officials said that the proposal for elevated lanes was only one of three options under consideration. They were also studying widening the West Loop at its current grade level and sinking the roadway below grade. But both alternatives to double-decking had big problems, they said. Widening the freeway at grade would have demanded that state officials acquire an additional 40 feet of right-of-way on each side of the freeway, and this was complicated by the fact that several large structures would stand just over 20 feet from the freeway frontage roads. The cost of acquiring the buildings and land would have added perhaps $100 million to the $80 million needed for the freeway improvements. Sinking the roadway would have taken even more land, to account for the thickness of retaining walls. And it would have been complicated by the proximity of Buffalo Bayou, which has a tendency to overflow into low-lying areas during heavy rains.

Local residents argued against the highway department's plan. Mike Globe, president of the Afton Oaks Neighborhood Association, said: "Elevated lanes would introduce additional noise into what is already a very noisy area, and it would be visually degrading to what is now an attractive portion of Houston. The scope of the type of structure they are talking about is such that it removes any human scale from the area." By proposing a least-cost engineering solution for West Loop traffic, Globe maintained, officials risked exacting a greater cost from the neighborhoods and work centers that would be damaged. "A neighborhood without zoning like ours is extremely fragile; it only takes a little to tip the scales toward urban decay, and we

Courtesy Texas Department of Transportation

Visual simulation of 24-lane widening of the West Loop, looking south from San Felipe.





already have the roar of two freeways." Don Olson, director of the city's parks and recreation department, also condemned the double-decking proposal, saying the noise it would generate would threaten Memorial Park. "From the standpoint of the city, we own some highly scenic park land that has already been cut into by the West Loop and by Memorial Drive, and that already has significant noise problems," Olson noted in a 1990 interview. "We don't want to lose any more land to highway projects. And we want to see the mobility problems of the area solved in a comprehensive way that has the least impact on the park, instead of having them dealt with piecemeal." Olson said he was concerned about any solution "that will just push more traffic through the corridor, making the relief valves more congested" – and leading inexorably to calls to widen Memorial Drive. But it was opposition from Uptown Houston and individual commercial-property owners in the area that killed the double-decking plan. John Breeding, director of the Uptown Houston Association, said in an interview in early 1990, just before highway officials abandoned double-decking, that "an elevated expressway is inconsistent with an urban situation like this" and urged highway department planners to design a sunken roadway.

THE matter moved out of public discussion in early 1990, and a West Loop Task Force was constituted, with two representatives of the highway department (including then highway commissioner Wayne Duddlesten of Houston), five representatives of Post Oak business interests, and representatives from Metro, the city of Houston Parks Board (including Don Olson) and Planning Department, the Greater Houston Partnership, and the Citizens Environmental Coalition. Late in 1990, both Duddlesten and Olson were quoted in press accounts as saying that widening the freeway at grade level looked like the best compromise, even though it meant some loss of park land, which Olson put at 1.5 acres.

Again, there was little reaction to this testing of the waters. Then came the public presentation in late November at the Doubletree Hotel, at which department officials hoped to release details and answer questions about their quietly negotiated compromise: a $280 million, 24-lane wonder that would require three acres of Memorial Park and provide five lanes in either direction for express traffic, four in either direction for local freeway traffic, and three on either side for frontage, so as to accommodate not 275,000 vehicles daily but 350,000.

The department officials did not want to emphasize what they saw as the true but misleading fact that this would produce the world's widest single freeway; after all, it was only an addition to what was already a 14-lane project. They came armed with computer-generated views of the new freeway, showing how it could incorporate landscaping in its medians, and they were ready to talk about some new sound-absorbing structures they would use to cut noise. Instead, they found themselves confronted by an angry crowd of between 500 and 600 people, including city council members Jim Greenwood and Sheila Jackson Lee and a well-coordinated series of parks advocates, neighborhood representatives, and emissaries from citywide environmental groups. All expressed outrage at the scale of the project, its violation of the park, and its obvious intent to stimulate automobile traffic through the corridor. The project would turn Houston "into one big shoulder to Loop 610," said Greenwood, who suggested that the department turn instead to comprehensive planning to expand other traffic routes and alternative mobility measures. Lee was quoted as saying, "This expansion goes right in the face of the city's efforts to comply with the Clean Air Act."

In December the Houston City Council voted 13-0 (with two members absent) to oppose the 24-lane expansion plan. Outgoing mayor Kathy Whitmire spoke against the plan, even though officials of her administration had been involved in the task force negotiations and had proceeded with her apparent blessing. Incoming mayor Bob Lanier waffled on the matter, saying that the highway department's plan should proceed if it was the right thing to do. Of those involved in the negotiations, only the Uptown Houston representatives held firm. In an interview in early 1992, John Breeding of Uptown Houston said that his group had given up the sunken-freeway option, convinced by highway department officials that it would be too costly and technically too difficult: "The widening option would bring the freeway within a few feet of some buildings, but at ground level. We feel that is a lot more acceptable than at the third or fourth floor." Breeding also vowed that, if the compromise plan unraveled, his group would oppose any attempt to reintroduce the elevated-express-lane option. "There are groups that have fought freeway proposals for thirty years and finally won, and we are prepared to go to similar lengths if necessary," Breeding said.

With the compromise apparently undone, highway department officials again dropped back. The 24-lane proposal was only one of 12 options they were studying, they said. They were still plotting out everything from "no-build" ($50 million) to closing the West Loop's entrance lanes to local traffic ($450 million) to variations of a sunken freeway ($500 to $800 million, not counting air-handling equipment, water pumps, and generators).

WHILE highway officials ran their numbers, the focus again shifted. In a manner typical throughout modern Texas, private interests began to develop the comprehensive vision that public entities had failed to achieve. Uptown Houston, which as a group knows that expansion of mobility represents the difference between its own growth projections and stagnation, has had consultants working on plans for incorporating some form of public transit into a reworked street network for the business center. What form that transit will take keeps changing. Until last fall, it looked like it would be monorail. With the election of Bob Lanier, that changed to light rail on existing railroad lines, and in February it shifted to a regional bus plan. By then John Breeding said he believed that rail transit in Houston was dead, and that an all-bus system would be the choice of the future. With that realization, he hoped to ensure that the future expansion of the West Loop would at least be coordinated with the plans emerging for increasing mobility in Uptown. "There's no way you can justify having 24 lanes of concrete out there," he said. What he anticipated at that point was forgoing one lane in either direction of both the express and local highway lanes in favor of a single lane for high-occupancy or "fixed-guideway" vehicles – buses, or even trains.

Neighborhood activists were still hoping to kill every expansion option but the sunken freeway. Dr. Robert Silverman, representing one resident coalition, felt that the 1990 amendments to the federal Clean Air Act, which require city and regional planners to find ways to cut automobile emissions, would help block the expansion. He also was of the opinion that the 1991 Intermodal Surface Transportation Efficiency Act (signed into law by President Bush in Arlington the day that General Motors announced it was planning to cut 70,000 jobs from its work force), which requires that future highway-construction projects not contribute unnecessarily to expanding the demand for automobile use, might make it possible to kill the project altogether. Moreover, according to Silverman, with the Houston City Council on record opposing the project, state officials would be compelled to bring forth a locally acceptable solution.

Not so, according to Don Garrison of the Texas Department of Transportation. "Legally, under the new federal funding bill, it's between the state and the feds," says Garrison. He added that his office had kept both the Environmental Protection Agency and federal highway administration officials abreast of plans from the start. Clean-air requirements would be met by expanding the freeway, he said: "Having cars in stop-and-go traffic produces a lot of pollutants. If you can get them moving faster, you actually reduce the amount of pollutants in the area, which satisfies the EPA. Same thing with noise: get the traffic moving faster and it decreases." Silverman and other neighborhood activists vowed to test Garrison's assertions in court and through the political process and to do their best to knock the freeway-expansion plan off the tracks.

Whether elevated, at grade, sunken, or even not at all, the expansion of the West Loop seems to have settled back down into the realm of technicalities. By April its future appeared seriously, if not fatally, imperiled, as Silverman had predicted by the impending application of the 1991 Intermodal Surface Transportation Efficiency Act, the effect of which even in Houston was to shift substantial appropriations originally intended for highways to mass transportation. Milton Dietert, district engineer for the Houston district of the Texas Department of Transportation, was reported in April as hoping simply "to do small projects such as the Westheimer entrance ramp, and leave the loop widening headaches for the next century."[3]

But whatever its fate, the 24-lane "compromise" that had emerged under the guidance of business leaders with the power to forge a working political consensus in the vacuum left by city and state officials signaled a shift in the city's political geography of far greater significance than the size or arrangement of the freeway itself. The West Loop, which in a sense came into being as a guardian of the neighborhoods through which it passed, had at last become an indistinguishable extension of Uptown, the business center it had done so much to make possible. In the process, the West Loop had been socially leveled, and was now, like the other freeways of Houston, just another massive culvert of cars. Let Houston zone itself blue in the face, but if economic motives could override the Buffalo Bayou barrier, no force for neighborhood stability could be depended on to count for anything, anywhere, any longer inside the Beltway. ■

1 Mel Young, "Loop Freeway Gets Tough Punch," *Houston Chronicle*, 23 December 1954.

2 Peter C. Papademetriou, *Transportation and Urban Development in Houston, 1830–1980* (Houston: Metropolitan Transit Authority of Harris County, 1982), p. 85.

3 Karen Weintraub, "Mass Transit Gets a Leg Up at Expense of Area Highways," *Houston Post*, 13 April 1984.