Collage by Polly Ledvina and Rome Schelhaas Hruska

The

BY BRUCE WEBB

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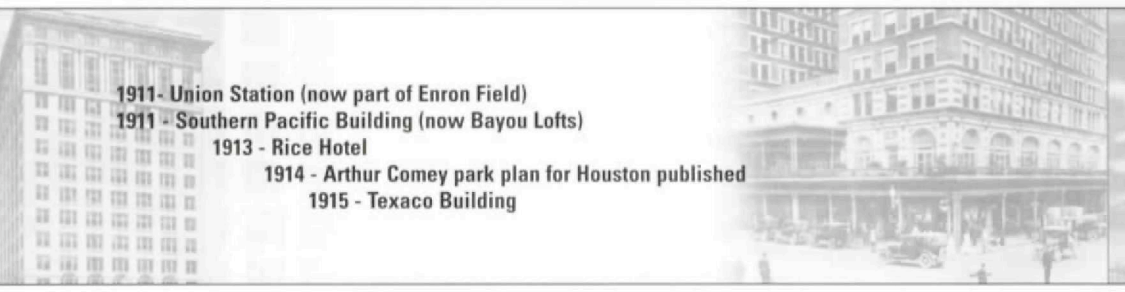
1910

1913 - Houston Symphony organized
1914 - Hermann Park given to city
1914 - Opening of Ship Channel
1915 - Last No Tsu Oh festival
1917 - Camp Logan race riot



1911- Union Station (now part of Enron Field)
1911 - Southern Pacific Building (now Bayou Lofts)
1913 - Rice Hotel
1914 - Arthur Comey park plan for Houston published
1915 - Texaco Building

1913 - 16th Amendment establishes income tax
1915 - Panama Canal opens
1915 - Alexander Graham Bell places first transcontinental phone call
1917 - U.S. enters World War I

1920

1925 - KTHT, first radio station
1926 - First airmail service to Houston
1928 - National Democratic Convention
1929 - Zoning Commission report voted down

1925 - Hermann Hospital, first building in Texas Medical Center
1926 - Houston Public Library (now Julia Ideson Building)
1927 - Niels Esperson Building
1928 - Bayou Bend, River Oaks
1929 - Gulf Building

1920 - 19th Amendment gives women the vote
1920 - America's first commercial radio station goes on the air
1927 - Lindbergh flies across the Atlantic
1929 - Stock market crash begins Great Depression

Name Game

WHAT'S IN A NAME? FOR HOUSTON, A CHANCE TO EXPLAIN ITSELF TO ITSELF.

Every city as it grows creates its own myths, or, failing that, at least a collection of interpretive metaphors, adjectives, or second names to describe itself to itself and to the world. Houston has plenty of myths; some of them, such as the story of Judge Roy Hofheinz's building of the Astrodome, aspire to the level of country and western allegory in personifying the city's entrepreneurial spirit. But it is the names that have become attached to the city, with their higher abstraction and economy of concept, that are of greater interest.

Second names, nicknames, are often pure poetry. Giving a second name, a label, to something is a way of shaping its contents and giving it an essence. In Italo Calvino's *Invisible Cities* metaphorical names — "Isaura, city of a thousand wells," "Leonia, the city that refreshes itself every day," "Octavia, spider web city" — become surrogates for geographical places, describing cities of pure concept situated in the imagination.

Second names are like the names in a novel. They are never neutral. "They always signify," novelist David Lodge writes. "The naming of characters is always an important part of creating them, involving many considerations and hesitations." That is the kind of problem facing Houston as it enters the new millennium faced with the task of what to call its new National Football League franchise now that the old name has been carried off with the team and buried somewhere in Tennessee. It's not a small matter. Does the team (and hence the city) want to be identified as a working man's town (Steelers, Packers, Oilers, Cowboys)? An animal (Lions, Bears, Rams)? A bird (Eagles, Falcons, Ravens)? By its history (Forty-niners, Patriots)? Or its machismo (Pirates, Buccaneers, Gladiators, Titans)?

"The pell-mell of nicknames that accrues to a city in the course of time is a forceful reminder of metropolitan complexity," cultural geographer Yi-Fu Tuan writes. "In any large urban center, multifarious interests exist and each will push for a label that suits it purpose." To put its own official spin on the issue, the city often has its own public relations wonks come up with slogans they hope will stick. Some of them, such as two recent ones for Houston — "Houston's Hot" from the 1980s and the current "Houston, Expect the Unexpected" — drip with heavy irony. Both are statements of uninspiring fact presented as virtues. Both are true, if not authentic.

But other nicknames stand out as a part of the genius loci. The eight that follow are by no means a complete list of the labels that have been slapped on the city, but they do show how different people at different times have labeled Houston as a way of giving it an identity that they could possess.

BAYOU CITY

Like Magnolia City, one of the city's earliest nicknames, Bayou City is a link to Southern culture in tune with Louisiana, our neighbor to the east. It's an association that modern Houston has attempted to dump in favor of a more cosmopolitan and progressive sense of itself, although the name Bayou City remains attached to more than 150 Houston businesses, and still shows up regularly in the city's newspapers as the only identifier editors can think of that will be easily recognized by the reader.

Houston's natural site and its formation recall the surrealist Marcel Duchamp's definition of collage. "What is the mechanism of collage?" Duchamp asked. "I think it amounts to the chance meeting on a non-suitable plane, of two mutually distant realities." The non-suitable plane in this case was described by the Allen brothers as a picture of"jungle and swampy woods" on the Gulf Coast, a hot, steamy region of expanding an contracting, clay-bottom land that shares the 30th parallel with the Sahara Desert and is somewhat south of Algiers and Baghdad.

The natural site was never sufficiently romanticized to exclude remaking it into something more temperate and more accommodating. To that end, the city embraced technology, guided by an ethos that said no problem loomed so large that it couldn't be altered. Displacement was the norm. The natural city was swallowed by the industrial city. The industrial city by the post-industrial city. Little residential neighborhoods were swallowed by big apartment complexes and sprawling subdivisions; little downtown buildings were hidden by glass towers. The street system was overshadowed by high-powered freeways, the outdoors by the air-conditioned indoors. Houston outgrew its roots, emerging in the 20th century as a city flavored by Texas but not exactly contiguous with it. That may be why I rarely hear anyone in Houston employ the Bayou City sobriquet in ordinary conversation.

Houston is crisscrossed by an intricate network of sleepy capillaries, but anyone who has gone looking for them finds out that they are not very much a part of the city's consciousness. Not quite rivers, the bayous have been more a problem than an amenity, necessitating hundreds of perfunctory little bridges to accommodate the expanding network of city streets and highways. They have been robbed of whatever romantic connota-

1930 1930 1930 1930 1930 1930 1930 1930 1930 1930 1940 1940 1940 1940 1940 1940 1940 1940 1940 1940 1940

1930

1934 - University of Houston founded
1935 - Houston College for Negroes, later Texas Southern University, founded
1938 - Jesse Jones founds Houston Endowment
1939 - Last street car goes out of service

1930 - Merchants & Manufacturers Building (now UH, Downtown)
1935 - River Oaks Shopping Center
1937 - San Jacinto Monument construction begins
1939 - Sears-Roebuck on Main
1939 - Houston City Hall

1933- FDR's New Deal begins
1933 - "Century of Progress" World's Fair in Chicago
1937 - Hindenberg explodes at Lakehurst, New Jersey
1939 - Regularly scheduled commercial TV broadcasts begin

1940

1947 - Texas Medical Center
1947 - Texas City disaster
1947 - KLEE, first TV station
1949 - Gulf Freeway opens

1940 - Houston Municipal Airport (Hobby)
1941 - Downtown YMCA
1947 - Baylor College of Medicine
1949 - Shamrock Hotel (demolished)
1949 - Foley's Department Store

1941 - America enters World War II
1944 - G.I. Bill of Rights promotes housing boom, suburbs
1945 - Atomic bomb dropped on Japan
1946 - ENIAC, first electronic computer, developed

tions they may have once harbored by the Army Corps of Engineers, which lined them with concrete and made them into a backyard plumbing system. They are also evidence to the city's abhorrence of natural water, a breeding ground for mosquitoes, and a reminder of just how low-lying much of Houston is, especially during a serious rain storm, when the bayous prove to be inefficient ways of dealing with run-off and the whole urban enterprise seems fragile and precarious.

However, Houston's bayous did inspire writer Max Apple to "imagine what Houston might be like if we turned the bayous into canals, and we became the Venice of Texas, moving about to the slow rhythm of water instead of the slower than water-torture traffic." But with the exception of occasional special events — the rubber ducky races, for example — the bayous have remained uncelebrated. Modern buildings have not opened themselves to the bayous as sites, and insurance maps help to keep it that way. The network of linear parks overlaid on the bayou ways, envisioned in a 1920s city plan, has been implemented only in pieces, primarily as hike and bike trails that reach a kind of crescendo at Sesquicentennial Park, where the flank of the Wortham Theater Center meets up with the drab edge of Buffalo Bayou.

But the bayous do infuse Houston with lines of greenery, untamed for the most part and much of the best of it visible only from a canoe. And they harbor an impressive collection of mostly abandoned industrial sites and buildings from an earlier era that mutely remind us of the important role they once played in the city's life. As testament to the low regard with which bayou land is viewed, these places are frozen in time, offering a considerable record of how things once were. The section north of downtown along Buffalo Bayou in particular is a de facto, if undesignated, historic and nature preserve that attracts the imagination of artists and architecture students, who admire it as a gritty nether land that stands in contrast to the city's newer development.

SPACE CITY

Space City was the name given to Houston during its ride out of its wild west past following the coming of the NASA Manned Space Center to Clear Lake. And for a brief time in the 1960s nothing captured the imagination like venturing to the moon and beyond. The Space City connection begat the Astros, the Astrodome (whose site, especially when viewed from the air, looks more like a colony in the inhospitable environment of the moon than an earth-bound building complex), and the costuming of the grounds crew in Halloween space suits to replace the western-themed Colt 45s. It also created the city as mixed metaphor with the conjunction of cowboys and astronauts, frontier heroes of different eras, as described by critic Peter Papademetriou.

The implication in the name Space City was that Houston was on its way to becoming a high-tech town modeled on NASA. But while technology has been a definer of Houston's modern condition, the city doesn't celebrate the fact. Today, it is hard to find examples of Houston architecture that approach the marvels of the raw technical constructions on view at local refineries, not to mention the space-age wonders being engineered close by at NASA.

But if Houston failed to become the Space City of science-fiction tales, it is nonetheless a Space City of sorts. Space is an elastic word — outer space, inner space, urban space, architectural space, personal space, empty space. In Houston, space is the background, infill condition of the non-place realm. Houston is not exactly a garden city; gardens appear as figures against an unattended emptiness. There is enough of that emptiness to create a second city in the interstices without having to advance another foot into the prairie. Space as it is understood by NASA is a void unmarked by sign posts, unfathomable distances of vacuum between one cosmic destination and another. Space that must be navigated by technical coordination. And it is precisely that kind of space, in miniature, that exists in much of Houston. Navigating is vectoring through space: "Just two exits past the Westheimer interchange on the West Loop. Ten minutes if you don't get into traffic." Space in that sense is a region of mystery: a place where you don't want to get lost, where you don't want to run out of gas.

PATCHWORK CITY

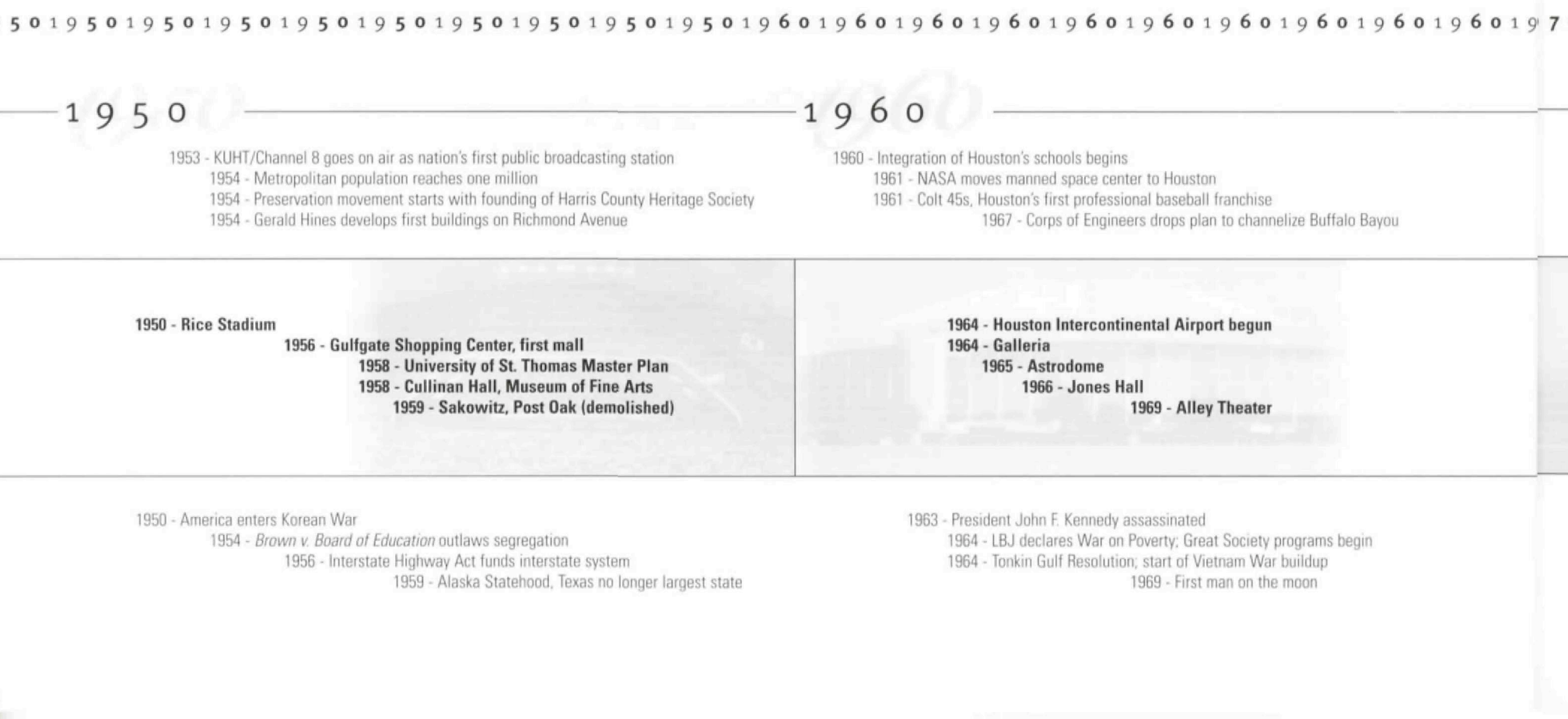
University of Houston architecture professor Burdette Keeland coined the term Patchwork Quilt City as an affectionate way to describe Houston's fragmented and often incongruous land use patterns, a crazy mosaic of enclaves, strips, corners, and mini-districts that represent the city's culture of heterogeneity. Programming the city has been left to chance — or economic opportunity. As George Trow observed a few years ago in the *New Yorker*, "People live all over the place in Houston. It's the only American city without zoning, and almost anything can happen anywhere."

Houston is certainly something less than the sum of its parts. Ever since H.R. Cullen went toe to toe with Jesse Jones over zoning, Houstonians have consistently resisted land-use controls, and the city still lacks comprehensive planning. What has been put up instead are settings that range in scale from well protected backyard gardens of Eden to whole controlled subdivisions and commercial districts. They include the authentic charm of many older neighborhoods unified and held together over time, themed subdivisions created de novo, and unabashedly Disneyesque backgrounds such as those found at Uptown Park on the West Loop near Post Oak. The collection of settings is like the back lot of a movie studio. You go to one place and it's a little world with its own population held together by a measure of internal consistencies. But it is always threatening to come apart by invasion, or by a nibbling away at the edges, or from lifting your gaze and looking out to whatever is beside it. Internal cohesion (abetted by deed restrictions and, more recently, TIFs) helps to hold things in a semblance of order and gives political sanction to the bits and pieces. A planned city is like an allegory, but a city of settings, a patchwork city, is a place for the novelist. The jigsaw puzzle theme permeates down to the smaller scale, where blocks are subdivided into little fiefdoms of residential prototypes that never get longer than a few lots before they are interrupted by someone else's speculative three-block budget.

MONOPOLY CITY

Following a visit in the 1970s, British critic Reyner Banham described Houston as a full-scale Monopoly game, a training ground for right wing entrepreneurs. To Banham, the condo with a mansardic roof (or some other stylistic embellishments) was the prime game piece "on a clear site, or backed up against a giant refinery or the 50-foot wall of greenery that marks the edge of what remains of the Big Thicket or even buried in replanted sections of the Big Thicket."

Banham even uncovered a localized



version of the venerable board game called Houston Scene (manufactured for a time by Groovy Games, Inc.), which upped the ante and the profits but retained the same objective: to accumulate wealth.

The game of Houston began as a business deal with the Allen brothers, the New York sharpies who successfully promoted the "jungle and swampy sweet gum woods that a good portion of the city is built upon" as the great, interior commercial emporium of Texas. Either as a game or a city, modern Houston is wide open and impenetrable at the same time. "Property wheels and deals there with less restrictions than anywhere else in the Anglo-Saxon world," Banham wrote, and as a result, "Los Angeles in the Chinatown epoch seems like a socialist economy by comparison."

In Monopoly the game eventually comes to an end; the board is developed, someone has all or most of the money, and everything is swept up and put away. But in Houston there are infinite numbers of additional phases, and the game becomes ever more complex, suggesting a need for an authenticating sequel, the Post Monopoly Game, in which the objective would be to tidy up the board and make it behave like a city.

MOBILITY CITY

New York Times architecture critic Ada Louise Huxtable was not the first to be a bit awestruck by the degree to which the automobile had invaded the Houston experience when she penned a paean to the city's kinetics in an article titled "Deep in the Heart of Nowhere," describing Houston as "freeway city, strip city, mobility city." Mobility City does much to capture the Houston spirit, though it doesn't entirely explain the city's dedication to the private automobile, a dedication that is as much an expression of Houston's culture of personal freedom and identity as anything else.

Houston's road system has marked the landscape in powerful ways, providing a determined economic and social partitioning of the city and spawning aggressive commercial development along its flanks. It is Autorama from the 1939 World's Fair, but with a heavy layer of glitz and neon missing from that Norman Bel Geddes vision of the city of the future. In their sheer vastness, Houston's roads have become, like Reyner Banham's description of the Los Angeles freeways, "a single comprehensible place, a coherent state of mind, a complete way of life, a fourth ecology."

Houston was a benefactor of the freeway building mania that overtook the country during the Eisenhower administration. Francis Turner, chief administrative planner of the interstate highway system and a product of Texas A&M, was a freeway advocate of the first order whose lines-of-desire maps became the work orders for paving contractors' forays into country and city. (Among the people whose lives were disrupted by the spreading network of freeways were Turner's own parents, who had a home near I-45 south of Houston.) As it spread its spiderweb linkages of concentric and radial lines outward from the city, the freeway allowed the city to metastasize in an even density urban sprawl.

Indeed, much of the urban experience in Houston occurs in a maladroit space between two points of view — one, the view from the road looking outward; the other, the view from the fringe looking at the road. It's a space mediated by little buildings with big signs. And the freeways are its amusement park rides. Out on the highway, it's God burgers, sex burgers, hamburgers, as David Green, the poet of the English design group Archigram, put it. You just ride along and need. And the search goes on for a building that looks perfect at any speed.

> Houston is a city built around rapid change, obsolescence, indeterminacy, and a culture of style and instant gratification.

LIQUID CITY

The title of a fine poem by Lorenzo Thomas in a little book of writings by Houston writers on Houston by the same name, the term Liquid City was inspired by the shimmering glass ("Glass is a shifting liquid in disguise") in Houston's new architecture: "City of glass, a place of material dreams/Bestowed in plain sight and transparently denied."

Houston owes its prosperity to the conjunction of two liquid conditions, the Ship Channel and the liquid gold discovered nearby at Spindletop. They come together in a liquid atmosphere, a thick soup congealing out of the superheated air that causes shapes to lose their starch.

Houstonians may be indifferent to water, but the city thrives on liquidity. It's the descriptor of convertible capital that fuels speculative investments and the conversion of old land into new developments. Liquid City describes the changing state of things: some degree of heat causes Houston to lose its solid state, its permanence, giving way to a molten, amorphous condition. Houston always seems to be melting; liquidity is its atmosphere, both literally and figuratively. Liquid City marks a period of development somewhere between the classically abstract structure of the modern city and the nonplace realm of the communication city of bytes. Even the Net may be only a physical metaphor for the universal flow of liquid information in which money, property, community, organization, and identity are as virtual as they are real.

EPHEMERAL CITY

Houston is a city built around characteristic features of modern life: rapid change, built-in obsolescence, indeterminacy, media orientation, a culture of style and instant gratification. It is an urban-scale example of artist Gyorgy Kepes' description of the runaway pace of our times, which he described in a maelstrom of dynamic images. For Kepes and his collaborators in the book *The Art and Science of Motion*, the problem of motion had thoroughly invaded modern experience, posing a formidable challenge to

1950 1960 1970 1980 1990

1970

1970 - Elvis plays the Astrodome
1972 - Fifth Circuit Court rules magnet schools an allowable alternative to forced busing
1978 - Voters approve creation of Metropolitan Transit Authority

1971 - Rothko Chapel
1971 - One Shell Plaza
1972 - Contemporary Arts Museum
1975 - Best Products Company Showroom (demolished)
1976 - Pennzoil Place

1973 - Last American ground troops leave Vietnam
1973 - *Roe v. Wade* legalizes abortion
1974 - Nixon impeached, resigns presidency
1977 - Apple introduces first personal computer

1980

1980 - Movie *Urban Cowboy* released, helps define Houston nationally
1981 - Orange Show opens
1982 - Slump in the oil industry stops the boom, starts the bust
1987 - First Art Car parade

1981 - Texas Commerce Bank
1983 - Transco Tower (now Williams Tower)
1987 - The Menil Collection (Piano)
1987 - George R. Brown Convention Center

1980 - Reagan elected, Reaganomics and downsizing follow
1980 - CNN begins broadcasting
1986 - Space shuttle *Challenger* explodes
1989 - Berlin Wall comes down

concepts of order that belonged to an earlier, slower scale of existence.

Houston's stability is literally attacked by time and motion; it is a city formed in a series of conjunctive episodes that hold their relationships for relatively brief periods. Buildings come and go. Businesses come and go. Displacements of traditional patterns of stability and urban rituals have become the norm. Time has become a prime variable in determining the genius loci.

It was in recognition of this truth that, in a 1998 essay for the *Southwest Review*, I characterized Houston as the City of Short Lived Phenomena. Today, I would shorten that to Houston as the Ephemeral City. Houston's public life has come to resemble the "instant city" concept that, in the 1960s, Archigram proposed as a way to bring color and eventfulness to England's new towns. In Houston, the Ephemeral City appears in the form of parades, art fairs, craft festivals, food fairs, international bazaars, and trade shows, not to mention outdoor performances of every description. The architecture is the architecture of the temporary: tents, banners, pavilions, inflatables. Festivals are set up on marginal sites, empty acreage, parking lots, and nondescript grassy spaces between buildings and the freeway. Taking a cue from the success of these festivals, I proposed in my *Southwest Review* article that we should stop thinking of our public life in terms of permanent places. Instead, we should set to work turning the city into a continually evolving festival, catalyzing what is already here. Give the local artists and architects and sometimes an invited outsider the chance to remake Houston over and over again, to develop projects that reline and reinterpret the functional city. Then when someone asks for the locations of our great civic monuments and public spaces, the tour guides can refer him to both a map and a calendar, and tell him that he missed a great one last week on the lawn of the design center, but that if he hurries he may still be able to catch something going on in the parking lot of Gulfgate Mall. The festival is a metaphor for the spirit of Houston, a city Italo Calvino might well have written about in *Invisible Cities*: a place that never repeats itself and is never seen to be quite the same.

As it enters the 21st century, Houston grows ever more elusive. Its unique qualities are being dismantled, razed, and marginalized.

ELUSIVE CITY

A trump card of a name, Elusive City was the title of writer Doug Milburn's catalogue essay for a 1999 exhibit of photographs by *Cite* photographer Paul Hester. In his essay, Milburn illustrated the difficulties of the name game: "From my earliest days of thinking and writing about Houston, I have played a little game. I ask people to describe the city in one word, with one restriction: the word cannot be hot, humid, or flat." Milburn's collected responses included "reticulated," "fetid," "boring," "festive," and "demanding." His own conclusion: "Elusive. Take the urban complexities and contradictions, racial and economic, so visible in every other American city, add certain peculiar elements of geography, climate, and history, and you have city as conundrum, chameleon. Hard to pin down. Hard even to perceive."

Every city likes to think of itself as a mystery, a kind of labyrinth that can only be understood existentially, by living there and getting a feel for it, finding your own beats, your own circuits, your own city. A city has moods, tempos, that make it change with amazing regularity. Maybe it's the light, maybe the temperature. Perhaps it's the events that shift across the city. Maybe it's the way you string it all together in an endless sequence.

With a voracious appetite for annexing whatever settlement appears on the distant horizon, even if the intervening distances seem decidedly un-urban, Houston leaves the 20th century at an astounding 620 square miles, large enough to absorb several of the nation's largest cities. As Houston grew it became more and more of an urban anomaly, a puzzle, still struggling to find the difference between "building a great city or merely a great population," an admonition included in a 1929 report of the City Planning Commission.

As it enters the 21st century, Houston grows ever more elusive. Like all modern cities, its unique qualities are being dismantled, razed, and marginalized, then replaced by universal forms belonging to the heterotopia. As Italo Calvino writes, "Cities begin to resemble one another in a labyrinth of reflections." But until all the forms are used up, the age of the city will continue. The nickname of Elusive City may be an evasion, a tactic to keep Houston in reserve and open to new interpretations. Elusive City makes a case for not knowing as a part of the urban adventure.

In a modern city there may no longer be anything like a sense of place as it has been understood in the past, but instead only place metaphors that drift across the city, giving it names. As Japanese architect Assushi Kitagawara put it, "The city is not streets, buildings, crowds, and freeways. It's just that metaphorical condition we call the city." But in Houston, behind the corporate city reaching for seamlessness, there are still lazy bayous harboring mysteries as they move in a different time frame. There is still the liquidity and transformative properties of the city as it melts, flows, and congeals into new formations. There are still the distinct chunks of the patchwork quilt, recalling the city eternal — places named and without name, that exist in the cracks and grooves and margins. There is still a city of profit, a monopoly city expressing the calculus of speculation beyond civic control. There is still a city of mobility, always restless, always on the move, slipstreaming through space in pursuit of a million individual dreams and destinations. There is still a city half empty, part garden, part wilderness, where a persistent background technology makes temperate biotopes in a lunar landscape. There is a city where time makes a sense of place. ■

1990 1990 1990 1990 1990 1990 1990 1990 1990 1990 2000 2000 2000 2000 2000 2000 2000 2000 2000 2000

1990

1992 - Republican National Convention
1995 - *Houston Post* folds, Houston becomes one newspaper town
1997 - Lee Brown elected as Houston's first African-American mayor
1999 - Metro requests funding for light rail
1999 - Houston passes Los Angeles as ozone capital of U.S.

1992 - Children's Museum of Houston
1996 - Holocaust Museum
1998 - Rice Hotel reopened as Rice Lofts
2000 - Enron Field

1991 - Gulf War
1991 - Soviet Union collapses
1993 - *North American Free Trade Agreement*
1994 - "Contract with America"; Republicans take control of Congress