

# The Quilted City

## Planning for Houston

William F. Stern

To zone or not to zone is no longer the question. Suddenly, in this season of unforeseen change, a growing number of voices are saying that the old way is not good enough, that the time has come to consider an appropriate form of comprehensive planning for Houston. Ironically, those economic forces that were long assumed to oppose any form of comprehensive planning — including zoning — are the same ones suggesting a fresh look at Houston's future. In the preceding decades of rapid growth, zoning was often portrayed as a barrier to growth and development that could better be monitored by market conditions. Moreover, many residential neighborhoods, and even some commercial districts, protected themselves from outside encroachment through deed restrictions. But deed restrictions have limitations: they are often inadequate, are subject to expiration, and are not able to control development beyond the periphery. As property values and the stability of residential communities and commercial development are jeopardized, the climate for comprehensive planning and zoning now becomes favorable, for both the good of the market and the betterment of the city.

Houston can begin its *perestroika* with comprehensive planning by absorbing the lessons and changes of 60 years of zoning practice elsewhere in America. From their beginnings, the fundamental principles of zoning have been the regulation of land use by zones, the establishment of building setbacks from property lines, and the control of building size and bulk calculated as a ratio of building square footage to property size. By the late 20th century, zoning has evolved from a generalized form of regulation and restriction into a much more complex instrument of planning and development incentives, far more sensitive to the character and subtleties that make a city. In concert with historic preservation, community redevelopment, transportation, protection of the environment, and other urban issues, zoning has become part of a more general strategy serving an ever wider agenda shaping the American city.

With the enactment of its 1982 development ordinance, the city of Houston started to move in the direction of purposeful land-use planning. That ordinance established a citywide building setback of 25 feet along major thoroughfares and 10 feet on secondary streets. With the best intentions, its sponsors were trying to give more space to the public realm of the street. More recently, city council passed a comprehensive off-street-parking ordinance to replace its previous ordinance, which was limited only to residential properties. The intention of the new ordinance is to protect neighborhoods adjoining office and institutional complexes, such as the Post Oak area and the Texas Medical Center, from inundation by parked automobiles. There are problems with these ordinances and with those being discussed for the future. In attempting to address such concerns of planning and land use, the planning commission and city council have taken an ad hoc, Band-Aid approach that addresses concerns after they become critical rather than before. Moreover, the ordinances as they are presently being enacted tend to throw a blanket of uniformity over the city, treating the city as a single entity without regard to the differences between one area or neighborhood and another. For instance, while a ten-foot building setback might be appropriate for one part of a given neighborhood, it might not be adequate for another part of the same neighborhood. Similarly, a uniformly mandated supply of parking may operate at cross purposes with efforts to encourage wider use of mass transit or more efficient building densities in designated areas. A city is composed of unequal parts, and any future plan must take this into account. So it would seem logical that the first step be to remove the blanket and make a map that will more nearly resemble a patchwork quilt.

To pose a few questions: Should the ordinance go beyond land use and building setbacks to regulate building size through height and bulk ratios, a typical feature of zoning laws? Will the ordinance be written in such a way as to establish special districts with separate guidelines, such as downtown and neighborhood historic districts, a museum district, a theater district, retail districts — in other words, zones that define the character of the city? And will the many civic and

neighborhood associations, such as Downtown Houston, Freedmen's Town Association, Neartown Association, South Main Center Association, and Uptown Houston, be asked to help determine planning regulations for their communities, and will they be involved in plat approval and questions of zoning variances as they arise? Will zoning be used to manage particular kinds of future development, such as the inevitable growth that will occur near Metro rail stations? These questions ultimately lead to another: How do we see ourselves as a city, and what kind of city do we want to be?

This will also be the time to consider those broader objectives of planning that we deem essential to the city's future. Acknowledging, for example, that without designating certain buildings and neighborhoods for preservation, the Houston we care about will not be the same, it is important that the comprehensive plan incorporate landmark and preservation laws for Houston, which is years behind most other cities in America in recognizing that the past preserved makes for a city that attracts people from both within and without. Likewise, if we admire that stretch of Main Street between the Museum of Fine Arts and the Texas Medical Center and agree that this is one of the truly memorable boulevards in the city, then we should find ways to invest other streets with equal grace. The pattern of live oaks lining Main Street, in combination with wide sidewalks and peripheral landscaping, is exactly what gives the street its distinction. The trees act as a protective no less than aesthetic canopy to mitigate Houston's steamy climate. If landscaping, planting of trees, provision for new parks, and improvement of existing parks are all part of Houston's comprehensive plan, maybe in 50 years Houston will realize its full potential as the garden city of Texas. As Houston continues to struggle with plans for rail transit, a way should be determined to make transit part of the comprehensive plan. The density and mix of activities valued in European cities could be encouraged around the new rail stations through the right set of guidelines and

**To zone  
or not to zone  
is no longer  
the question.**

incentives. Finally, and perhaps most important, where the city has neglected housing and community redevelopment, a comprehensive plan becomes the perfect way to establish a new commitment to the most fundamental aspect of any settlement. For example, a workable means could be found for salvaging and rehabilitating the Fourth Ward district of Freedmantown and Allen Parkway Village as a viable neartown community. Such examples illustrate the potential of comprehensive planning to deal with the city broadly and particularly, to account for and build on those qualities that distinguish this city from others.

For years Houston stood alone in the United States as the city that resolutely shunned zoning and the constraints associated with zoning that complicate the making of a city. For decades the status quo was proffered as the best for all, despite evidence to the contrary. But the city has changed significantly in recent years. It is larger, more complex, culturally richer, and socially far more diverse than it was a generation ago. Now a consensus seems to be building that the only way to hold the city together and redress neglected urban problems is through a process of comprehensive planning that incorporates zoning. With a sufficiently sophisticated approach to this process, Houston may succeed in reconstituting itself as a model for the American city of the 21st century. ■

Unusually Fine  
Metal Fabrications  
Railings · Beds  
Custom Items

the  
**BRASS maiden**

2035 Portsmouth, Houston, Texas (713) 523-8413

**Terra Surveying Company—**  
providing a full range of land surveying  
services to the Houston and Austin  
development communities:

- Development Plats •Topographic Surveys
- Boundary Surveys •Tree Surveys
- Completion Surveys

4900 Woodway  
Tenth Floor  
Houston, Texas  
77056  
(713) 993-0327

**TERRA**  
SURVEYING  
COMPANY, INC.