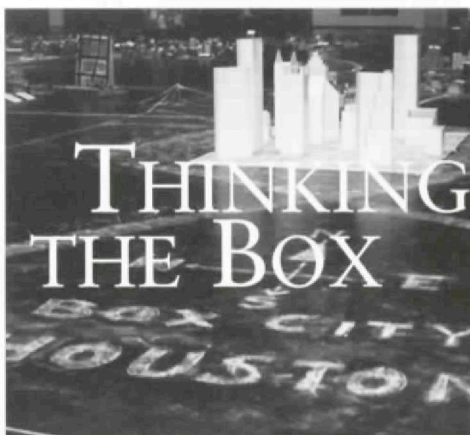


OUTSIDE



All Photos Courtesy AIA/Houston

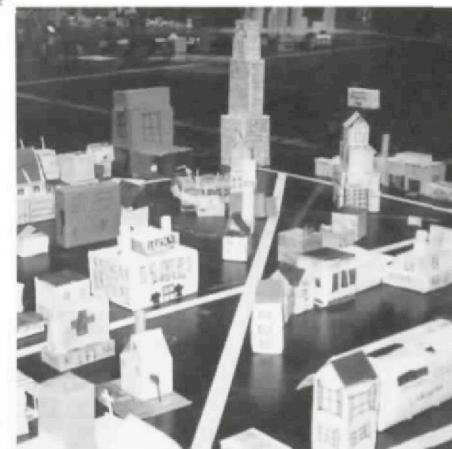
BY BARRY MOORE



Project by Argyle Elementary School.



Project by Lockhart Elementary School.



Project by Condit Elementary School.

In late February, a visitor to the George R. Brown Convention Center could have walked into a vast, unfurnished hall and stumbled upon a model megalopolis showing what Houston might look like in 2024. Designed by local children, the assemblage — titled Box City Houston because the core building material of this fantasy community was boxes — stretched across the entire floor, with business districts, neighborhoods, and freeways laid out to scale and in the same configuration of the city itself as it sprawls across the coastal Harris County plain.

Some 3,500 students, almost all of them from the Houston Independent School District, participated in the project. Although downtown and various high-rise structures were represented, most students chose to design their own neighborhoods. There were miniature grocery stores, strip malls, video stores, taquerias, parks, apartment buildings, cottages, freeways — even a model of a controversial communications tower recently erected in the Heights. Students from one middle school explored the idea of a meteor landing on their school and a giant pileup on the freeway. Another,

having invited architectural historian Stephen Fox to talk to their art club, produced a model historic neighborhood centered around a small park with a gazebo.

How did this creative explosion come about? Box City, an urban design and city planning exercise for young children, was conceived 25 years ago by Ginny and Dean Graves of Kansas City. Since then, it has been staged many times across the country as an educational event. This year marked Houston's first time participating, and according to Marie Hoke, who chaired the event for the Houston



Project by Crespo Elementary School.



Project by Browning Elementary School.



Project by Hogg Middle School.



Project by Sharpstown Middle School.



Project by Scarborough Elementary School.

chapter of the American Institute of Architects, it was by far the largest in Box City's history.

How do you get so many to accomplish so much? First, you gather together a group of partners to run the program that includes AIA/Houston, HISD, the mayor's office, the city's Department of Planning and Development, the Cultural Arts Council of Houston/Harris County, the Museum of Fine Arts, Houston, the student council of the Rice University School of Architecture, and the AIAS, University of Houston College of Architecture. Then you begin with a teachers' workshop. When that workshop was scheduled last fall, 30 educators were expected; 180 showed up. The overwhelming response helped get the enthusiastic cooperation of area school districts. Each participating classroom (there were 65 from 35 different schools) received a kit of boxes and a grid. Each class determined its own scale, what kind of buildings it wanted to represent, and how they wanted to interpret their neighborhood. Before glue ever touched paper, however, the students, in an exercise in looking and seeing, were led in a "walk

around the block" at school.

Box City Houston was an overwhelming experience, and not just because of its size. The best thing about it, according to the sponsors and volunteers, was the way it encouraged young people to perceive their surroundings. It also offered a lesson in community activism: in one class the boys were focused on a location for a cantina, until the girls persuaded them that such a business had no place in a neighborhood with young children. Almost every participant declared the process fun, but more than a few were surprised to learn that architecture and planning can be hard work.

Throughout America's past architectural toys have been out there — from building blocks to Lincoln Logs to cereal boxes with printed building facades. But Box City goes way beyond toys and play. The young builders of Box City have completed the first chapter in the how-to book of planning a community. ■