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Houston's historic Rice Hotel, transformed into a 312-unit loft apartment building.

By Dan Searight

For one day in early May, downtown Houston looked like its promoters have long claimed it could. The streets were filled with people; families strolled along Buffalo Bayou; restaurants were bursting with patrons. The central business district glowed with life that continued deep into the evening. In fact, it wasn't until midnight that the crowds thinned and the city fell quiet.

The catalyst for all this energy was the official opening of phase two of Sesquicentennial Park, 8.2 acres of green space on the western side of the Wortham Center. Of course, special events have always managed to breathe some vitality into downtown, however ephemerally, but this one was particularly instructive. Even

make it to the park they could see beneath them. It was hardly the crowds that had been visualized. True, it can take time for unfamiliar projects to settle into the city's fabric, but the nearly vacant park did raise a question: just how effective has all the attention given to downtown really been in terms of creating a sustainable urban community? In creating, that is, a community in which people go to work, spend time on the street, and enjoy all the amenities of traditional suburban life: the grocery store, movie house, schools, and recreational opportunities? Once all the touted central city projects are completed, will downtown Houston resemble Sesquicentennial Park at the height of its dedication — full and bustling — or will

'there' there. The problem becomes, how do we make a 'there'?"¹ Belzer defined four key factors that combine to yield a successful urban revitalization effort:

- **Context**
Know the community or the context and have a vision plan within which projects are created;
- **Scale**
Match the level of investment with the level of risk. Don't risk beyond what the private sector will support;
- **Diversity**
Projects must occur in a broad context; no one project will solve all the problems in a neighborhood or community;
- **Image**
Good projects will fit the vision for the target neighborhood or city.²

Belzer's four criteria are something of a test for the urban revitalization process. And on her first point, at least, Houston doesn't fare particularly well. It lacks both a formal master plan and a well defined public policy to guide planning efforts, the only major U.S. city that can boast of such a dubious honor. This

Urban Glue

Getting people downtown is one thing.

Making them stay is another.

though there were activities such as the Buffalo Bayou Regatta, the dedication of seven 70-foot-tall "Pillars of the Community" created by artist Mel Chin working with local schoolchildren, and WaterFire Houston, in which 30 bonfires were set ablaze down the middle of the bayou, the point was not simply to create a new spring festival. Rather, the point was to suggest that downtown had become an appealing place to be regardless of whether or not a festival was in the offing, that the area could be engaging on its own. Further, it was suggested that one of the reasons for this was such new amenities as Sesquicentennial Park.

But later in the week, after the remains of the opening ceremonies had been cleared away, it appeared there might be a problem with that suggestion. On this particular downtown day Sesquicentennial Park was almost empty. Only a few people wandered next to the bayou, while a few others walked along the edge of the Wortham Center, unsure of how to

it be more like the park in the week following — a well built monument all but bereft of life?

The answer to this question depends in great part on how well the city fills the spaces between signature structures such as the Ballpark at Union Station and Bayou Place. There have been encouraging signs. The growing activity in the theater district, with lines snaking out of new Market Square restaurants such as Tasca, Cabo, and Solero, give off a strong sense of life. But can this last?

In 1996, Dena Belzer, an economist with San Francisco's Bay Area Economics, offered up a few guidelines for people interested in tracking how well their city is doing in restoring vigor to its urban center. In an address to the Mayor's Conference on Urban Planning held in her home city, she struck at the heart of Houston's current downtown redevelopment effort when she noted that "when starting to revitalize a community you usually start with a place that has no

could be a problem, since any real estate venture, private or public, that seeks to develop land to its best use needs to understand the market in which it's working, or as Belzer puts it, its context. Since Houston has no master plan, as well as no zoning laws for creating use policy, the Houston Downtown Management District (HDMD), a private organization, has served as de facto planning department for the city's downtown redevelopment. Working in conjunction with elected officials, representatives of both the Metropolitan Transit Authority and the city's Public Works and Engineering Department, and various professional and civic groups such as the American Institute of Architects, the Cultural Arts Council of Houston, and the Downtown Historic District, HDMD has developed a vision plan for downtown. Currently, that vision plan designates nine districts. Three of these — the Theater District, the

A Walk Through Downtown

What a difference a few years makes. In early 1995, *Cite* presented a survey of downtown projects either underway or on the drawing board, and while the list was impressive, it lacked many of what have come to be seen as signature examples of Houston's inner-city revival. As recently as three years ago, the Rice Hotel was still a question mark, the Ballpark at Union Station had yet to be proposed (though Bud Adams and his then Houston Oilers were pushing for a downtown football arena), the Sam Houston Coliseum was being touted as a possible casino site (as was the western half of the Albert Thomas Convention Center), and Cotswold still referred only to a region of England. If anything, the rapid changes between 1995 and today make it clear how even the best laid plans can often turn in unexpected directions — something that should be remembered by those promoting the new downtown as a pedestrian's paradise just waiting to be born. Still, even the most skeptical observers have to admit that there seems to be a new spirit animating the central city, and crucial to that spirit have been the projects detailed on these two pages.



2 Bayou Place

Like many other downtown projects, Bayou Place was late in being completed. It was four years late, in fact. But in this case the delay proved propitious. On the recommendation of the Houston architectural firm Gensler, an inward-looking mall was changed into an outward-looking retail complex that has already given a boost to the street life in the Theater District. As downtown revitalization's most visible success to date, Bayou Place has raised hopes for, and enthusiasm in, other downtown ventures. But what remains to be seen is what will be done with the still empty sections of the old Albert Thomas Convention Center. That second phase of Bayou Place remains on hold.

3 Hobby Center for the Performing Arts

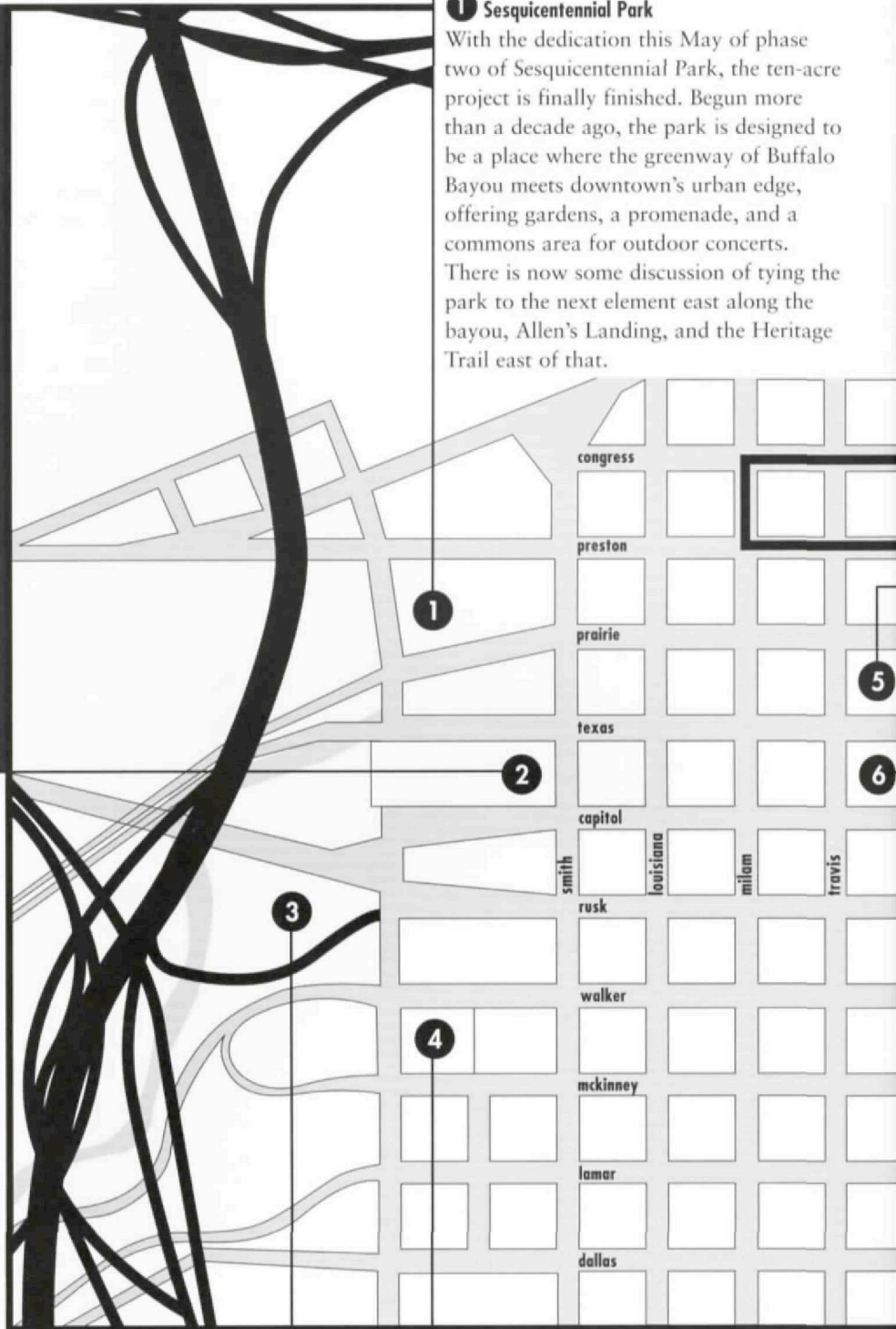
What was planned a few years back as a \$25 million renovation of the Music Hall by Theatre Under the Stars has become, instead, a \$75 million performing arts center designed by New York architect Robert A.M. Stern and Morris Architects in Houston. The new facility, to be located on the old Music Hall and Sam Houston Coliseum site, will contain two performance halls, one that will seat 2,650 and another that will seat 500, as well as rehearsal studios, the offices of Theatre Under the Stars, and the Humphreys School of Musical Theatre. Demolition of the old Music Hall and the Coliseum began in June, following the May closing of *Victor, Victoria*, the final show to play the hall. The site is slated to be cleared by October, when work will start on the Hobby Center, which is scheduled to open in 2001.



Photo courtesy Buffalo Bayou Partnership

1 Sesquicentennial Park

With the dedication this May of phase two of Sesquicentennial Park, the ten-acre project is finally finished. Begun more than a decade ago, the park is designed to be a place where the greenway of Buffalo Bayou meets downtown's urban edge, offering gardens, a promenade, and a commons area for outdoor concerts. There is now some discussion of tying the park to the next element east along the bayou, Allen's Landing, and the Heritage Trail east of that.

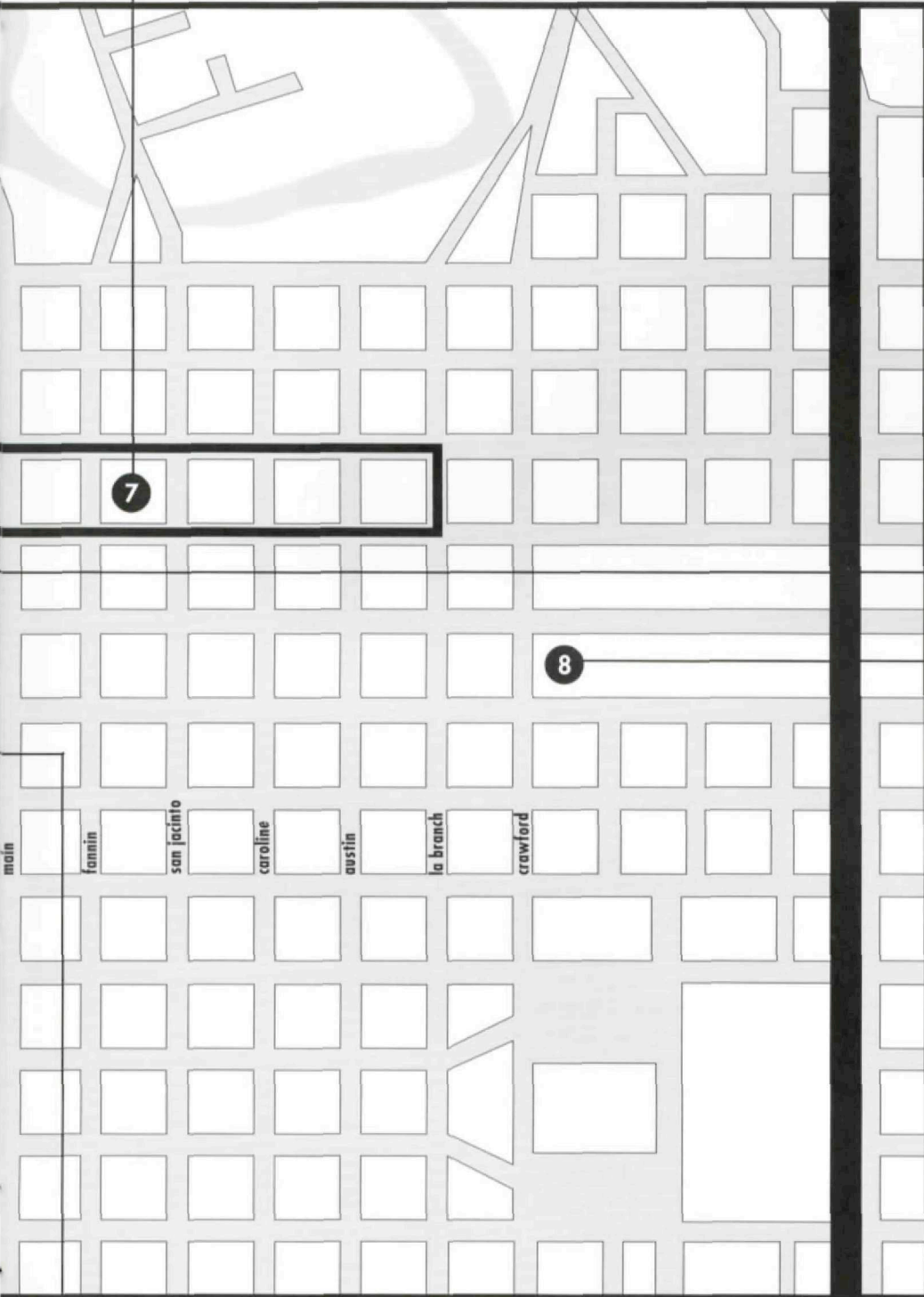


4 City Hall

The mayor may be back in the old City Hall building at 901 Bagby, but City Hall isn't completely back in action. Though the mayor's offices are basically completed, much of the public space is still under construction. The project began in 1994 when City Council approved \$13 million to renovate the 1939 building in order to address safety issues. At the time, work was scheduled to be finished in two years; it's now four years and counting. In June, the Brown administration began a probe of the delays in response to allegations of spending irregularities. And at the moment, the project has no firm completion date.

7 Cotswold Project

Two years ago, the Cotswold Project was touted as an urban miracle that would, through a series of fountains, ponds, and a pedestrian mall along Congress Avenue, tie Market Square to the new Ballpark at Union Station. Now it's struggling to keep its head above the very water with which it was identified. Part of the problem was that Cotswold was a private plan that wanted to use public space, and the city couldn't see its way to turning control of the area over to the foundation that would run Cotswold. Too, the talk by Cotswold boosters of closing Congress conflicted with Metro's downtown transit plans. Recently, Mayor Lee Brown has pushed the idea of the city taking over the project, which has been scaled back to focus on narrowed rather than closed streets, broader sidewalks, diagonal parking, and tree-lined blocks, along with a reduced number of fountains. The cost is estimated at \$40 million, which Cotswold supporters say could be financed by increased income from area parking.



6 Metro Downtown and Midtown Streets Transit Project

After close to two years of delays resulting from a federal court ban against the Metropolitan Transit Authority's affirmative action program, Metro this June finally began a five-year, \$215 million project to rebuild some 300 blocks of downtown and Midtown. Plans are for the streets to be repaved in concrete and given designated bus lanes, brick sidewalks, improved bus stops, informational kiosks, and new landscaping. The first stage is the reworking of seven blocks of San Jacinto from Walker to Leeland, a \$5.5 million contract handled by MEB Engineers Inc, and according to Metro, by December the work should extend to 12 more street segments. Fifty percent of the project's funding is being covered by Metro, while the Federal Transit Authority is picking up 32 percent, the city 16 percent, and the Houston Downtown District 2 percent.



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5 The Rice Hotel

Much of the hopes for downtown revitalization have been vested in this \$32 million project, which is scheduled to open officially this fall. Already, though, more than 80 residents have settled into the historic structure, and the ground floor ballroom has hosted some public events. When finished, the Rice will have 312 rental units and 25,000 square feet of retail space.



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8 The Ballpark at Union Station

This year's drought may have been a bane to farmers, but it was a boon to the builders of the Houston Astros' new home. The dry weather meant that construction was able to keep well on schedule. As of early September the facility was almost 25 percent complete, putting the \$249.5 million stadium on track to open at the start of the 2000 baseball season. Fans have been able to follow work on the ballpark on-line courtesy of Houston Sidewalk (houston.sidewalk.com/ballpark), which has set up a camera to record the stadium's move toward the millennium. A \$201 million bond issue has been issued to cover the bulk of the construction costs. But some questions remain, among them, where will all the cars park?



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 Twenty-four-hour life for downtown: Residences (the Rice Hotel, rear) and restaurants (Cabo, front).

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Main Street Corridor around Foley's Department Store, and the Historic District, which includes Market Square and Sesquicentennial Park — have been targeted to receive priority treatment. Lighting, banners, and special decorative street furniture are being used to give the various downtown districts discrete identities.

HDMD's vision plan views the street as the framework and backbone of Houston's redevelopment effort. With that in mind, planning for downtown considers pedestrians to be as important as drivers. Metro's Downtown and Midtown Streets Transit Project, coupled with private funds from HDMD, seeks to knit together the central city's various districts through both a vehicular and a pedestrian network, with distinctive paving and landscaping being used to designate which zones belong to vehicles, and which to walkers.

The pedestrian network is being created in part by widening sidewalks to encourage street interaction and retail activity. When building a walking community, creating a lively street environment is as key as giving people a place to go. In essence, the trip needs to be made as intriguing as the arrival. People need places to sit and work, play Hearts on a laptop computer, enjoy a beverage, and otherwise feel a connection with their surroundings.

Various downtown developments have attempted to create a sensitive interaction

with the street. One contributing factor to this has been HDMD's grant program, which has been in effect since 1992 and has distributed more than a half-million dollars to 39 projects.³ The program began with small grants for cleanup and refurbishment with the intent of changing public perception of the downtown target districts. But it has also given larger grants to such ventures as the Hogg Palace at 401 Louisiana, one of downtown's first and most interesting success stories. A conversion of an historic office building to loft housing and retail, the Hogg Palace received a grant of \$15,000, which allowed developer Randall Davis to turn what might have been ground floor parking into the Palace Cafe and, more recently, the Hogg Grill.⁴

Many current downtown ventures are following this model of using the street as an anchor for building a sense of place. Two of the city's most ambitious projects to date, the metamorphosing of the Albert Thomas Convention Center into Bayou Place and the renovation of the Rice Hotel, focus a great deal of their attention on their connection with the street.

It might not have been that way, particularly with Bayou Place. Located in the heart of the Theater District and developed by the Cordish Company of Baltimore, Bayou Place as an idea goes back to 1987. At first, the plan was to make the project into a downtown mall, with all the retail outlets facing onto a central court and presenting their backs to the

street. But money problems stalled the venture. According to Michael Stevens, then head of the Houston Housing Finance Authority and the city's financial overseer on the Bayou Place project, Houston was offering the wrong kinds of incentives. The city, he says, had written a contract guaranteeing Cordish payments of \$1 million per year for 50 years. Though that's a lot of money to guarantee, it didn't do the developer any good in getting the financing needed to undertake the improvements required to get Bayou Place occupied, Stevens says. At the same time, the city had no say in what type of tenants went into the project. "It could have been one giant shoeshine stand," says Stevens, "and that would have met the terms of the deal the city was offering."

The financing problems stalled work on Bayou Place. So Stevens restructured the deal by focusing on what the developer needed to make the improvements that would attract high-quality tenants. The answer was \$13 million in up-front financing at a favorable interest rate. Stevens says he arranged the loan from a Houston bank, to be paid by Cordish but guaranteed with parking revenues from adjacent city garages, which would benefit from Bayou Place. At the same time, the deal was rewritten to decrease the payments to Cordish to \$900,000 per year, and the payment stream was limited to 13 years. This change, says Stevens, saved the city more than \$25 million. In addition, the city gained the right to over-

see what types of tenants went into Bayou Place.

But the most important result of the financial problems was that Bayou Place was basically turned inside out, with the businesses facing the street and separate entrances for most of the tenant spaces. In May, David Cordish told a development conference that the decision to do this was dictated by cost-consciousness, as it wasn't possible to attract the tenants he wanted and still charge them the high shared-space-maintenance fees that typical mall development required. But much of the credit should also go to the architects from Gensler, Bayou Place's designers, who helped encourage their client to think outside the conventional Houston big box mentality.

Bayou Place is strictly a retail venture. Its tenants include the Angelika Film Center, a multi-screen movie theater; a pool hall; several restaurants; and the Aerial Theater, which features live music. It has been a great success, and phase two is currently in the planning stage. Some have argued that part of the reason for Bayou Place's success is that it seems to sit on a pedestal, a "retail Parthenon" resting on a plinth of concrete, and is thus an easily visible destination. And indeed, it's hard to argue with the crowds that descend on the location. Still, if the project has a single shortcoming it is that it fails to link directly with the street. The underground parking and phalanx of valet parking drops make it car friendly, but not necessarily as pedestrian friendly as one would like.⁵

struction remains to be seen. In recent years the Houston economy has been so strong that it seemed almost impossible to overbuild. But as the past has shown, that can change quickly. Urban revitalization is, if anything, a slow process and one in which momentum is built gradually over years by changing attitudes and by creating psychological and economic consensus for the transformation. If all the townhomes being thrown up in Midtown and Montrose suddenly had trouble finding buyers, or if the new lofts across from the Ballpark at Union Station remained empty, then the momentum carefully developed since the early nineties could wither, and with it wither some of the grand hopes of downtown.

But for now, revitalization appears to be operating at a manageable scale. As for diversity of development, Belzer's

interaction and a sense of connectivity with others. Thus, open space or common ground, as some planning professionals call it, remains a key element in the redevelopment puzzle. Places that allow for serendipitous interaction become vital.

Open space and greenbelts are listed in HDMD's literature as a vital component for the revitalization of downtown and the adjoining areas of Midtown, Washington Avenue, Second Ward, and Chinatown. Buffalo Bayou, within which downtown nestles, is targeted for a major transformation so that Houston can reconnect with its waterfront. The Rails to Trails project, which is partially funded by the federal government, creates hike and bike paths that will link several miles of green space along Buffalo Bayou and Braes Bayou and connect neighborhoods along the way. Setting aside land

Merrill in 1961. Located at 1001 Main, the bank was linked to its companion high rise office tower by a glass walkway; it was demolished in order to make way for a new parking garage. Such a story is symptomatic of what can happen when redevelopment becomes a slash and burn process. One can only hope that the owner has plans to provide space for retail businesses at the garage's ground level. This would take advantage of the high foot traffic along Main Street, and assist in pedestrian flow down this key downtown artery.

In the final analysis, one has to ask what, exactly, Houston's downtown wants to be. Buffalo Bayou will never become a San Antonio River Walk or rival Baltimore's Inner Harbor. Main Street will likely never match Chicago's Miracle Mile. Still, through downtown can be seen the bones of a great urban place, one that can attain its own image over time. Some have already taken to calling the area bounded by the Theater District and Buffalo Bayou NoDo, for north downtown. They're following the lead set by such well known urban areas as New York's SoHo (for south of Houston Street). Names and labels are important. They give people a sense of ownership in the places they live.

Louis Kahn once said that "spaces evoke their use." Even though a project may be designed for a certain use, once it's built people almost always find a use for it beyond what was first imagined. In terms of urban planning, it is the creation of a good "space" that may best define the essential element needed for Houston's downtown to thrive. Granted, the majority of the population may always prefer a suburban plot of land. Traditional urban life is certainly not for everyone. However, a growing number of young professionals, empty nesters, and even families are seeking an environment like that promised by the promoters of downtown. They are seeking a walking environment, one in which home, work, entertainment, neighbors, and the corner grocery store are all closely entwined, are all elements of a round-the-clock community. Perhaps this is the grandest and most ambitious promotional scheme in Houston's history: the birth of an urban core in which the journey is as interesting as the destination. ■

1. Dena Belzer, "Creating Place to Create Value," the Mayor's Institute on City Design: West, November 14-17, 1996, Berkeley, California.

2. Ibid.

3. Downtown Houston Management District, Development Concepts, Fall 1997.

4. Ibid.

5. Additional research information on Bayou Place provided by Joel Warren Barna.

In contrast to the purely business focus of Bayou Place, the Rice Hotel project combines both housing and retail components. The landmark building's rooms have been reconfigured into lofts, while the remainder of the space will include support amenities such as a grocery store, a newsstand, restaurants, and clubs. With its ground floor shops spilling out onto Texas Avenue, the Rice Hotel will tie directly to the street. Its residents will be able to enjoy both the grand lobby of old and updated retail amenities. The building, which is listed on the National Historic Registry, has recently been under scrutiny for going too far with its alterations. The bad news is that the same renovations that have helped make the project more attractive to prospective tenants may end up causing the loss of key tax breaks that assisted in the Rice Hotel's original financial viability.

The success of Bayou Place and the potential success of the Rice Hotel suggest that, despite the lack of an official master plan, Houston's downtown revitalization is nonetheless taking place within a context understood by both the city and its developers. So to a degree, at least, it succeeds in meeting Belzer's first criterion. As for her second criterion — not risking beyond what the private sector will support — HDMD and others appear to have been effective in their efforts to match levels of investment with levels of risk. Whether the economy can sustain the ever increasing pace of con-

Making a good place is so hard to begin with, let's not throw away anything that's already okay.

third criterion, that has also been a component of both the public and the private redevelopment push. As connections between the large scale projects that act as anchors for the nine downtown districts identified by HDMD are established, a variety of smaller projects, from stores and restaurants to offices and housing, is expected to spring up. Again, it is the street that is the armature for investment. Without proper planning of pedestrian and vehicular linkages between downtown's various parts, no project, large or small, has a chance of succeeding.

As for image, Belzer's final criterion, that may be more properly defined as a firm connection between a place and the people who live in it. If a project is to fit the vision of a neighborhood, then it has to be part of that neighborhood; residents' images of who they are and where they are need to be congruent. As simple as it sounds, people need to be able to identify with their surroundings. They need to feel a sense of community. With all the hype of our digital age, human beings remain social animals. We all need

for pocket parks within the densely developed area of downtown is important as well.

In her speech in San Francisco, Belzer also touched on one other crucial notion that downtown's developers need to remember. "Making a good place is so hard to begin with," she noted, "let's not throw away anything that's already okay." The point, of course, is that redevelopment shouldn't always mean tearing down and starting over. Many of the elements already in place in Houston are valuable, and to avoid leveling the good along with the bad, it's necessary to carefully survey and assess the quality of existing buildings and open spaces.

The adaptive reuse of many downtown buildings as loft residences and restaurants has been a positive sign that the good from the past has not been overlooked. Still, Houston has a sad history of not always cherishing the buildings it should. One example of this was the razing this spring of the banking hall of the First City National Bank, an international style building designed by the legendary Gordon Bunshaft of Skidmore, Owings &