EARLY LAST DECEMBER CITE HELD A RELEASE PARTY AT
Green Bank. The building incorporates recycled and
locally-sourced materials, and many other admirable
sustainable design choices, but the first thing I noticed
when I got out of my car was that I was standing in the
shadow of Magic Island.

It was a crisp fall evening. I stood beside the U.S. 59
Greenbriar/Shepherd overpass as hundreds of cars
sped past both ways, their drivers happy to be headed
home after work. The intermittent wind gusted cold, and
somewhere beyond Greenway Plaza, out past the
Galleria, the sun was setting, and as it set it united
everything—the sky, the white concrete freeway barri-

ers, me, all the cars in the parking lot, the parking lot
itself, the bank, and this big, iconic Egyptian temple—
everything—in a rich, pink, lambent singularity.

Gong.

I grew up in Houston, by which I mean the subur-

bs. Growing up in Houston has its advantages. For
instance, you’ll never break your clavicle fl

ever. The closest thing we have
to “inspiration point” is the flyover interchange from
the West Belt South to I-10 East—not a good place to
twine fingers and kiss. Around these parts,
“scenic vistas” are the stuff of bank calendars and
Windows desktops.

And ghosts? Pshaw. A kid growing up in suburban
Houston can swagger down any street confident that
the undead don’t inhabit such new haunts. In the
absence of old buildings, we are untethered in time so
that history reads like mythology—George Washington
may as well have been Gilgamesh.

Still, I made do. I dove into books. I feasted my
imagination. I pinched my nose, stuck a funnel onto
the end of a pole, and pretended my buddy and I were Huck
Finn and Tom Sawyer fishing on the banks of the
Mississippi. Dozing, there, on the banks of our
neighborhood drainage ditch, I dreamt of escaping to
a magnificent place with majestic castles and magic
mountains, a place where the streets didn’t
all meet at right angles. I dreamt of Walt Disney
World.

My parents had a brown Ford Fairmont
station wagon with mustard pinstripes. We
lived on the southwest side, but most of my
parents’ community was way up on the north-
west side, so we often made two round-trips
clear across town on weekends. I loved to sit in the “back back,” the way back, because I had
three big windows to look out of and I didn’t
have to sit between my sisters. Innumerable hours of
my childhood were spent cruising along Houston’s
freeways staring out of those windows at all the bill-
boards and businesses that define our landscape.

Magic Island was one of my favorite sites to drive
past. Lit up from below with blue and white flood-
lights, its stately columns echoed the lush palm trees
silhouetted against the blank façade with its too-big
doors, and the generic pharaoh’s head looked serenely
unperturbed by the commuter hubbub passing beneath
his perch. An inverse mirage, it transformed the con-
crete swamp around it into desert. Driving past Magic
Island transported me to ancient Egypt and commuted
the Southwest Freeway into the River Nile.

Another such site was the Castle Golf putt-putt golf
course on the West Loop. Reclining in the way back, I
was transfixed by the sight of a
grand castle protected by a moat
with a fountain and, splayed out
before it, all manner of fairy-tale
windmills, space palaces, Alpine
cottages, and pirate shipwrecks. As
it shrank and disappeared amid
neon signs, billboards, and freeway
lights, I would close my eyes and
explore the Black Forest or the
moon or the Bermuda Triangle—
whatever one would call the place
that could give rise to such whis-
mical architectural juxtapositions.

Bruce Webb, writing in the
Spring-Summer 1989 issue of Cite,
described driving past that same
location: “From the superscale of
the freeway, Castle Golf
appears as a distant, ideal vil-
lage, like a page out of a
children’s pop-up book…If
everything has an ideal dis-
tance and point of vantage
from which it should be seen—
especially stage sets, shams, and
follies, which depend on the
principle of aesthetic dis-
tance to preserve their
illusion of verismi-
itude—for Castle Golf
that point of view is from
the freeway at 50 miles
per hour.” (Bruce Webb,
“Castle Golf,” Cite 8, now
available at citemag.org.)

I never set foot in
either of these places.

Had I gotten any closer, it’s likely that I would have
seen them for the cheesy “stage sets, shams, and follies”
that they were. Bad carpet and Astroturf. Fluorescent
lighting. Stale tobacco odor. Rubberly pizza. Webb
called it a “thin example of architectural trompe l’oeil”
and wrote that “despite the presence of real live
ducks,…the extensive waterways have the artificial
look and smell of blue toilet bowl water.”

Though losing one’s illusions is the definition of
growing up, in this case my journey to adulthood was
hastened along prematurely by Houston’s freeway
gods. In the 1980s Houston began its second major
wave of freeway construction. The new eastbound
U.S. 290 carpool lane—elevated and free-floating as it
wended toward the NW Transit Center—sliced and
murdered the open view of Castle Golf. New con-
struction on U.S. 59 mocked the pharaoh by stretching
an on-ramp right across the Magic Island façade.

Redacted! My two favorite sites in Houston had been
upstaged by the very feeder roads their builders had
sought for the visibility they provided.

My parents traded in the Ford Fairmont
wagon for a VW station wagon, and then made the
switch to a minivan. Abandoned for a decade, Castle
Golf was eventually taken over by a cast-stone outfit—
the fake castle with its Astroturf putting green has
become a supplier of fake rocks—and much of the
property has returned to its natural swamp prairie
state. Magic Island caught fire after Hurricane Ike, has since
come a glorified pigeon coop, and will allegedly reopen
some day.

Perhaps the strangest
twist to the story, which I
learned recently, is that
beneath the Pharaoh is a simple
Miesian glass and steel box,
designed by Wilson, Morris,
Crain, and Anderson as a fur-
niture store room, completed
in 1971. The site is a freeway
palimpsest. c

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