

RECITE:

Ancient curse OF FREEWAY FRONTAGE EXCAVATED FROM ARCHIVES

by Harbeer Sandhu

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 barriers, 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 suburbs. Growing up in Houston has its advantages. For instance, you'll never break your clavicle flying head-first over your handlebars while mountain biking down a gnarly trail. Never. 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 entwine 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 scooped tennis balls out of the bayou that ran behind the neighborhood tennis courts, then hung a long piece of swamp grass from my mouth 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 northwest 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 billboards 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 floodlights, its stately columns echoed the lush palm trees silhouetted against the blank facade 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 concrete 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 whimsical 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 village, like a page out of a children's pop-up book... If everything has an ideal distance and point of vantage from which it should be seen—especially stage sets, shams, and follies, which depend on the principle of aesthetic distance to preserve their illusion of verisimilitude—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 citomag.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. Rubbery 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 construction 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 station 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 become 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 furniture store room, completed in 1971. The site is a freeway palimpsest. **c**

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