

Floating Along

In search of creative friction

by José Solís

illustration by Amir Kasem

I WAS BORN IN THE MID '70S, STILL IN MY DIAPERS WHEN policemen killed Vietnam veteran José Campos Torres; when J. Gary Van Ooteghem, Ray Hill, and thousands of others marched Downtown for gay rights; when John Zemanek's students designed and built the 3-H Services Center; and when James Surls worked out of the original Lawndale warehouse. I see the origins of my everyday activities in the radical instability of that era.

The back-to-the-Earth movement has become my weekly trip to the Midtown Farmers Market. The Eastern mysticism has become my morning yoga class. Lawndale, DiverseWorks, Menil, CAMH, and MFAH exhibitions are on my calendar on a regular basis. I have served on the boards of organizations that were founded in the more tumultuous days of the 1960s, '70s, and early '80s and have had others as my clients. *The Whole Earth Catalog* has become my LEED credentials. And as I write this article in the middle of a very busy Discovery Green on a beautiful Sunday afternoon, there isn't even a flicker of racial tensions flowing through this culturally diverse crowd.

In my twenties, I spent many a Friday and Saturday night on Pacific Street in the heart of gay Montrose. The murder of Paul Broussard was recent enough to haunt our revelry. Now, one of the activists to come out of that period is in the mayor's office. Shortly after the election, I was featured with eleven other gay Houstonians in a handout produced by The Greater Houston Convention and Visitors Bureau to attract gay tourism. Counterculture meets big business.

In many ways, we are all living the results of this earlier more tumultuous and more experimental age. Houston, with its vast developed area, lends itself particularly well to allow this relatively accepting temperament to exist unchecked. Unlike much denser cities like New York or Chicago, there really is room for you to do your thing over there and for me to do mine over here. All you have to do is drive along major streets like Holcombe/Bellaire, Hillcroft, Long Point, or Harrisburg to see different ethnic groups continually creating their unique ideas of the city. The gay community has expanded from the traditional bases of Montrose and the Heights to neighborhoods like Westbury, Oak Forest, and Eastwood. The gritty West End has become a magnet for upscale restaurants, clubs, and townhomes. The more peripheral neighborhoods with their quiet, uniform cul-de-sacs allow people to live relatively free from external scrutiny.

Today, there is much more of a tendency for people, myself included, to work within the system than to challenge it externally or in a radical manner. After witnessing the sustained mass protests last year in Tehran, comprised largely of students and young adults, against a

perceived stolen election, it is hard to imagine what would mobilize the majority of students at Rice, UH, or TSU to hold anything larger than a moderately attended rally for an hour or two. Student protest is more likely to mean joining a Facebook group.

Many of the solutions I saw at a recent final review of an architecture studio at Rice University differed only in form from the theoretical urban solutions proposed by groups such as Archigram in the 1960s and '70s. Their concepts and intents were relatively familiar. Although artist run spaces might be considered on the forward, more experimental edge of art in Houston, achieving 501(c)3 IRS not-for-profit status is frequently one of their first activities. Important urban planning issues in Houston like historic preservation or zoning are pursued in what have now become fairly traditional activist approaches as opposed to more radical actions. The spark that charged people to push harder seems to have been lost somewhere.

The stories and events from Houston in the 1960s and '70s reflect struggles within society against very entrenched dominant viewpoints. From the tin house Eugene Aubrey designed that spawned the geographic and aesthetic redevelopment of the West End to Ray Hill's Town Hall Meeting I that galvanized the gay community—all of these activities created lasting change for the city of Houston. Because the social challenges and cultural upheaval were more intense, the creative results were that much more dramatic.

The major challenges the city of Houston faces today— flood control, urban sprawl, demolition of historic buildings, mobility, education, economic growth, global warming—come across as mundane, even impersonal, in the face of the open and sometimes violent racial discrimination of the recent past. Many of these new challenges inspire indifference rather than passion in the typical Houstonian. Imagine how many people would show up at a rally protesting flood control or congestion. Fights over the alignment of the University light rail line and the construction of the Ashby Highrise take place in courtrooms or the City Council chamber. The only evidence of them on the street is the yard signs.

Has this relative calm dulled the drive to push the envelope of creativity? What external forces or events might shake us out of our complacency and push us to do more experimental work? The city might be more interesting if we gave up some of the social stability we've achieved for a little more creative friction. Comfort is good, but not at the expense of inspiration. Given the real challenges our city still faces, inspiration is sorely needed. It's time to shake things up. 🚗

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