



**God struck
the building
with lightning»**
**Lawndale
Art Center**

came about when the University of Houston art annex—a long, thin, World War II vintage Quonset hut building with a wonderful factory-like cross section housing art studio spaces on the main campus—burned; the official cause was a lightning strike. The annex had been an interesting place in its own right: architecture students occupied one end, and art students, a messier opposite end. A long central space ran between, like a mall, and it was in this unairconditioned no man’s land that James Surls, chairman of the sculpture program, could often be seen slugging away at a log with an axe or chain saw, fashioning one of his distinctive wood sculptures. After the fire, Surls became the impresario of Lawndale.

He told the story of Lawndale’s beginnings in August 1979 at a standing-room-only lecture in the much more refined quarters of Lawndale’s present Art Deco building on Main Street. Surls visibly enjoys telling the story of how UH administrators came to him after the annex fire and said, “Oh my goodness, Mr. Surls, we are sorry the building burned. We just don’t know what we’re going to do. We’re going to have to put you in this old

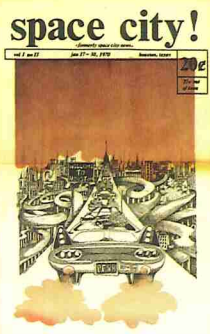
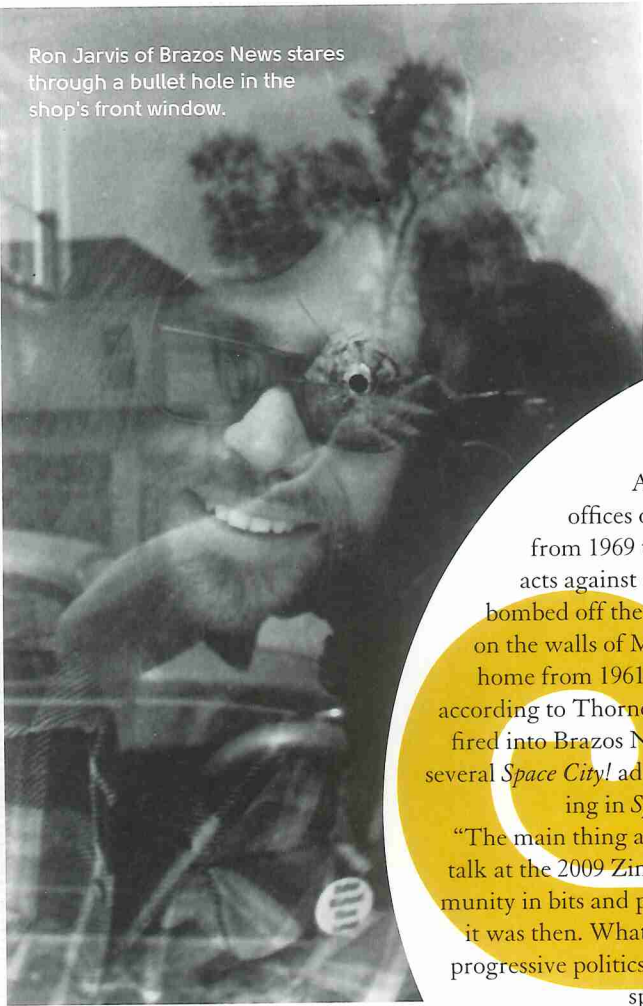
warehouse [an abandoned cable factory] off campus.”

“They put us in that building, apologized, and left,” Surls remembered. “And I was the happiest man on the planet. All that big raw space is paradise for artists. So Lawndale came about because God struck the building with lightning.”

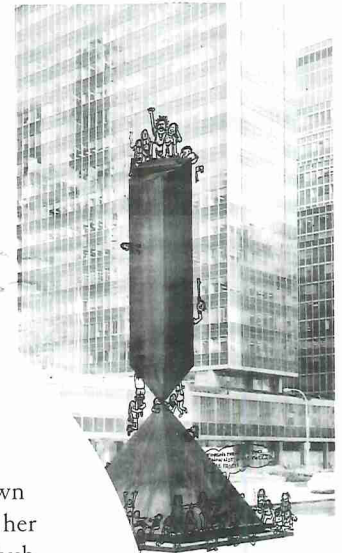
Lawndale was more an artists’ cooperative or colony than anything else, and as such it was a radicalized model of what a university department could be. The UH administration tended to look the other way, even though they were paying the bills for the space. Surls and others close to Lawndale’s mission chipped in money of their own for various events. It was a place for making art, and for local artists and musicians to exhibit and perform, an incubator workshop where students worked alongside seasoned artists. It also hosted performances by groups like Sun Ra, Black Flag, and Sonny Rollins, readings by Allen Ginsberg and Spalding Gray, and legendary all-night parties that coalesced around Houston’s art community.

Hidden away in the grubby, film noir-ish industrial district of the East End, Lawndale served as the ultimate outpost of Houston’s counterculture from 1979 to 1989, when it became independent from the university—a tribute to how rough space and ad hoc programs could be creative counterpoints to the university’s sense of necessary order.

Ron Jarvis of Brazos News stares through a bullet hole in the shop's front window.



SPACE CITY NEWS



200
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vol. 1, no. 2
june 19, 1969
houston, texas

In this second dynamic issue of Space City News you will find: G's ranting about Vietnam, the woman's liberation movement, poor people's plight in Big H, a feature on Lightning Hopkins and the outright integrative adventures of Duke Kaji!

"The Knights of the Ku Klux Klan is watching you."

An arrow bearing that note was shot into the offices of *Space City!*, an underground paper published from 1969 to 1972. The incident was one among many violent acts against countercultural groups. The KPFT transmitter was bombed off the air twice. Bullets were shot at and yellow paint thrown on the walls of Margaret Webb Dreyer's gallery, which she ran out of her home from 1961 to 1975. The gallery had served as a counterculture hub according to Thorne Dreyer, her son and an editor of *Space City!*. Six shots were fired into Brazos News late Friday, April 9, 1971, during a night of attacks on several *Space City!* advertisers. All received calls saying, "If you don't stop advertising in *Space City!*, you'll lose more than just a window."

"The main thing about Houston was that it was all spread out," Dreyer said in a talk at the 2009 Zine Fest Houston. "There was no Houston there, [only] community in bits and pieces everywhere. Houston is much more of a city now than it was then. What *Space City!* did was to help to identify all these pockets of progressive politics and kindred spirits, and pull them together into a cohesive spirit... a network of countercultural stuff."

Underground in H-Town, an exhibition at the Museum of Printing History organized in partnership with the Houston Metropolitan Research Center, presents *Space City!* and other alternative press. *Voice of Hope*, *El Papel Chicano*, *Breakthrough*, and others are on view until July 24, 2010.

by Raj Manḡad

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Pictured is a gathering of the paper's staff outside the *Space City!* office at 1217 Wichita. Front row, from left: Victoria Smith, Sherwood Bishop, Tanya Phillips (on Sherwood's shoulders), Susie Le Blanc, Molly Bing, Tina Phillips, Thorne Dreyer, Mark Wilson. Top row, from left: Russ Noland, Bobby Eakin (with lampshade), Sue Mithun Duncan, Tom Hylden, Bryan Baker, Bill Narum, Lynne Bateman, Kerry Fitzgerald, Vicki Gladson, Ernie Shawver, [Unidentified], Judy Gitlin Fitzgerald, Jim Shannon. Above lampshade: Connie Mendez. *Space City!* photo by Jerry Sebesta.



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