


Street of Dreams

IS A BIGGER AIRLINE
A BETTER AIRLINE?

by Susan Rogers

AIRLINE DRIVE, JUST INSIDE THE NORTH LOOP, IS A MESSY MIX OF ALL THE INGREDIENTS THAT MAKE FOR AN **UNPLANNED**, UNADULTERATED URBAN EXPERIENCE. LOCAL CHEFS STOCK UP AT ITS HUGE FARMER'S MARKET. FAMILIES WALK THE LONG AISLES OF PRODUCE AND OTHER GOODS BARGAINING IN SPANISH AND ENGLISH. TACOS AL CARBON AND HOT CHILI-DUSTED MANGOS ON A STICK FILL EMPTY STOMACHS. AS THE GREATER HOUSTON CONVENTION AND VISITORS BUREAU CELEBRATES, "THERE'S **NO PLACE ELSE** IN THE CITY YOU CAN BUY A FARM-FRESH PINEAPPLE (IN BULK, IF YOU WISH) AT 6 A.M. ANY DAY OF THE WEEK, YEAR-ROUND."





Airline Drive is the seam between several distinct neighborhoods, some lined with renovated bungalows and others with affordable apartments. It supports the sort of gritty vitality that Houston as a whole should rejoice in more and work harder not to destroy—especially through “stock” design standards that sterilize instead of invigorate. Unfortunately, a major public works project to improve Airline Drive could unintentionally diminish this vibrancy, privileging the car (and speed) over all else. While many talk a good game about “good” urbanism, we are still trying to figure out how to make it work in real life, how to collaborate across disciplines and draw in community voices—all within the constraints of time, politics, and economics.

“Collaboration” is a word that is thrown around loosely as if it were easy to accomplish. But the truth is that it is extremely difficult to collaborate across disciplines, agencies, institutions, publics, and interests, and to engage everyone in a meaningful way. So much is working against this ideal, not only the time commitment and difficulty of “messy” public participation, but also the coordination across disciplines whose well-meaning practitioners can speak radically different languages and more often than not have different goals. The very definition of the problem can shift across professional and political landscapes, obscuring how each stakeholder might approach the solution. It is no wonder that this negotiation is often set aside in favor of the simplicity and ease of approaching a problem from a single position and with a singular goal.

Infrastructure projects, and the processes of their development, provide one of the most instructive examples of how fortress-like boundaries can rise around distinct professions and the widely divergent worldviews of various stakeholders. Infrastructure is the framework of the city. Streets, for example, are nearly all that is left of truly public space. Streets are the spines of communities. Streets move people and cars, organize real estate, carry infrastructure, serve as connective tissue, provide a framework for development, and serve as anchors for commercial, cultural, and civic spaces. Yet streets prompt divergent aims: traffic engineers dedicate their energies to moving more cars, designers work to create

space and form, business owners seek ample access and parking, politicians want money spent in their districts, and the public wants many, many different things—sidewalks, safety, convenience, and so on. So amid all of these competing interests, who makes decisions about public projects, who establishes the goals, and how can we make these goals more inclusive, multifunctional, and extensive?

One method is to adopt the concept of “complete streets,” joining progressive cities across the U.S. that are redesigning their streets simultaneously for cars, people, bikes, and transit and optimizing all public improvements as an opportunity for equally privileging multiple forms of mobility. I prefer a more all-embracing idea, which I call “thick infrastructure,” meaning the expansion of public works projects to include elements that enhance civic and public spaces. The goal is to reconfigure existing, single-purpose infrastructural landscapes into more robust, multifunctional systems. This is a new approach to what infrastructure is or should be. It requires a new direction for local decision-making related to infrastructure investment, one that welcomes the disorderliness of the participatory process. The idea advances the vision of infrastructure as multifunctional, designed and integrated into the fabric of the city, a new process displacing the reality of single-purpose, disconnected infrastructural landscapes.

The Airline Drive widening project, currently in the engineering phase, has emerged as the perfect place to test this hypothesis. The project first appeared in the city’s Capital Improvement Plan (CIP) in 2008 after Airline was identified in the 2007 Major Thoroughfare and Freeway Plan as requir-

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ing “widening.” Projects can linger in the CIP for years, and while the Airline Drive project was pushed back slightly, funding was approved in 2009, and it is scheduled to be fully “engineered” by 2012, at which point the project will go to construction.

Today, Airline Drive is defined more by the lack of public amenities than by their presence. In the 3,600 feet of Airline Drive between the North Loop and Cavalcade Street, there are 30 parking lots, ten markets, seven produce companies, seven restaurants and bars, two gas stations, one washateria, one used appliance store, one unsavory motel, and one very popular Mexican bakery, but there are no parks, no plazas, no places to sit, no public restrooms, and no general public parking. The closest sizable public park is more than a mile from the center of the corridor. Sidewalks are narrow, uncomfortably close to vehicular traffic, and interrupted frequently by driveways, loading docks, and parked cars.

For every 20 steps you take along the street today, ten of those steps are not on a sidewalk but instead in a street, a driveway, or a parking lot. The proposed plan for Airline will improve this situation slightly, providing the pedestrian with a few more steps in a dedicated safe sidewalk zone. But while the proposed sidewalks will be slightly more continuous than those that exist today, they will remain narrow: a mere four feet wide (according to the plans, which is below the city’s minimum standard of five feet), not quite wide enough for two people to walk abreast.

Currently Airline is 44 feet wide from curb to curb with a 70-foot right-of-way. This includes four nine-foot traffic lanes and an eight-foot left turn lane. The proposed expanded right-of-way will be 80 feet, measuring 60 feet from curb to curb, and will include two 12-foot-wide outside lanes (the typical dimension of a freeway lane), two 11-foot-wide inside lanes, and a 14-foot wide left turn lane, primarily to accommodate the turning radius of semitrailers.

The expanded street and wider lanes will undoubtedly move more traffic, and at higher speeds, but the larger issue at stake is the potential impact of the project on the vibrant street life of the corri-

Profile of a Street

A vibrant mix of uses is distributed along Airline Drive between North Loop and Cavalcade Street.

30 PARKING LOTS

10 MARKETS

7 PRODUCE COMPANIES

7 LOADING DOCKS

6 RESTAURANTS + BARS

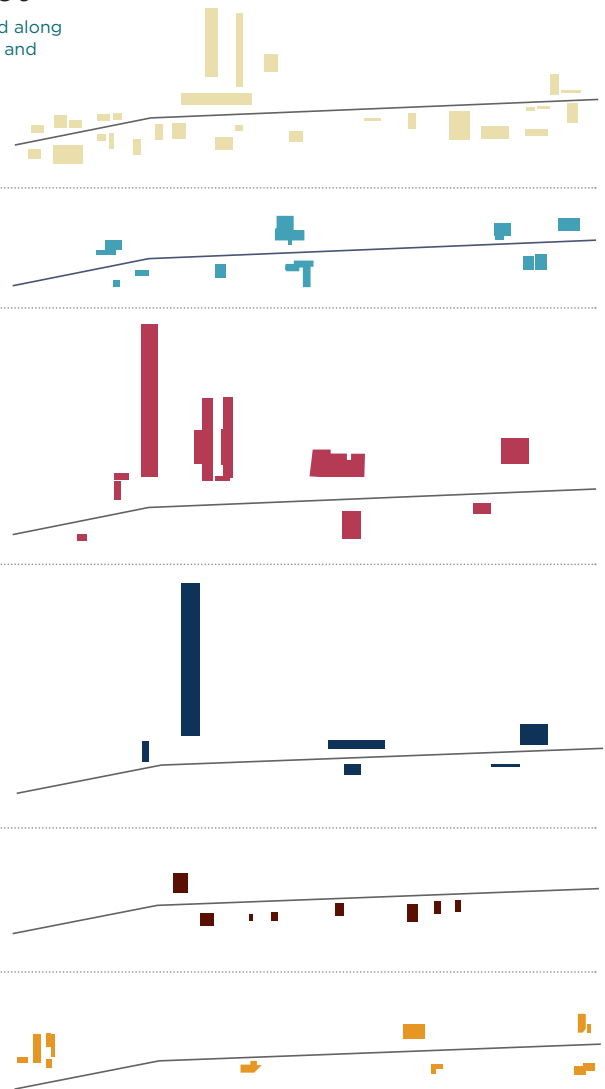
2 GAS STATIONS

1 WASHATERIA

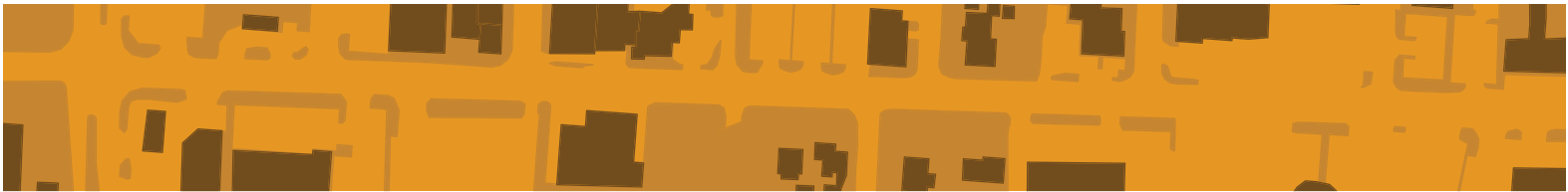
1 UNSAVORY HOTEL

1 MEXICAN BAKERY

1 USED APPLIANCE STORE



Orange shading illustrates potential spaces that could be developed in association with the widening of Airline Drive as currently planned by the city.



WEST

EAST

AIRLINE BLVD

Parking and driveway interrupt sidewalk



Narrow sidewalk, market spills into the public realm



Parking lot in place of sidewalks



Narrow sidewalk with bollards to protect pedestrians



Driveway interrupts sidewalk



Driveway interrupts sidewalk



Parking and driveway interrupt sidewalk, no place to comfortably browse merchandise



Driveway interrupts sidewalk



No sidewalks, street lighting, or other amenities



Parking interrupts sidewalk and hides market behind



Loading dock interrupts sidewalk



The existing sidewalks on both sides of the streets are interrupted frequently with parking lots, driveways, and loading docks. The gray represents the parking lots blending into the street.

dor. Right now, largely as a product of existing road conditions—giant potholes, rough surfaces, and tiny little lanes like those found on lower Westheimer—traffic moves slowly, making it easy for pedestrians to jog across the street. This is a benefit for anyone who might want to venture to the other side, as there is only one traffic light between the Loop and Cavalcade, at Link Road. So while the “along” problem may be solved for the traffic counters, the “across” problem will remain a difficult challenge, and this will be even more the case when the proposed freeway-sized lanes are constructed, encouraging drivers to speed. Finally, the street is a social forum, a meeting place, and there is something incomplete about the idea of streets as simple traffic conduits.

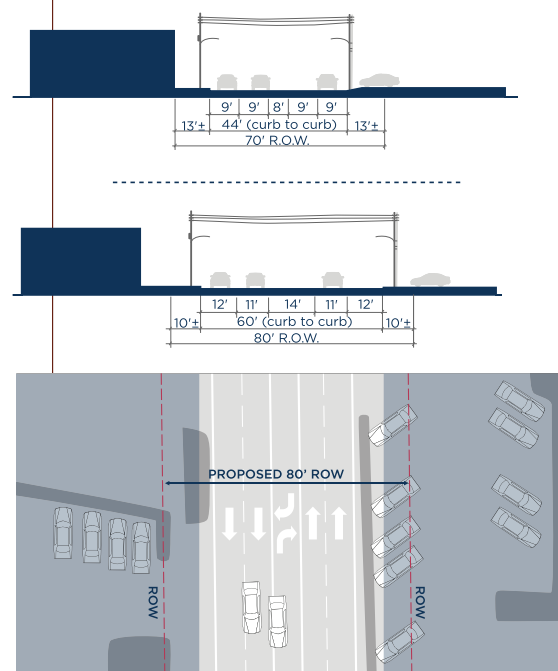
Amid the existing limitations and challenges, not the least of which is that the plans are nearly complete, there are two possible approaches. One is to try to turn the clock back, rethink the width of the street and its traffic lanes, and accommodate a wider pedestrian zone, especially since a city report noted that current traffic counts do not warrant two lanes in each direction. The other is to work within the realities of what is being proposed and try to improve it by uncovering ways to combine public and private property to expand the public realm along the corridor. This is where “thick infrastructure” comes in, exploring ways to build the civic infrastructure of Airline Drive by carving out public places from parking areas and leftover spaces that will become otherwise unusable remnant pieces after the street widening, and then repurposing these spaces to thicken the public realm. To this end, the Community Design Resource Center at the University of Houston has identified and mapped all the areas along the street that will become unusable when the right-of-way is expanded and that have the potential to become part of the public realm. Nearly all of these areas are currently parking lots.

As illustrated in the map on the previous page, the opportunities for thick infrastructure exist on both sides of Airline Drive. These locations add up to approximately a thousand linear feet of potentially “thickened” public space adjacent to the proposed right-of-way. Small-scale interventions in these locations would be integral to supporting the street life, walkability, and local culture of the district, and would enhance the area’s qualities as a “destination.” Possible interventions include small plazas, pocket parks, and a food truck zone complemented with outdoor seating, ample shade, and places for vendors. The proposals hinge on collaboration between public and private interests and on the coordination of plans and strategies. It would require that property owners be open to the restructuring of their lot frontages,

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that the city work with the property owners to expand this public space, and that designers recognize the opportunities that exist with public investments.

I imagine a future where public works projects are a collaboration among engineers, designers, the public, and others—where everyone is open to the idea that we can create multifunctional and hybrid landscapes. The ReBuild Houston Initiative, passed narrowly by voters in November 2010, could be the first step. The program establishes a fee for landowners that will raise approximately \$125 million per year to improve drainage, but it is about more than bigger pipes below ground. The drainage work will



FROM TOP: Section of existing roadway, section of proposed roadway, and plan of proposed roadway.

trigger the larger redesign of Houston’s streets. Some prominent Houstonians, including architect and former city council member Peter Brown, have called for the adoption of complete streets. As things stand now this outcome is by no means inevitable but will instead require a re-evaluation of how we conceive of and execute street design, and exactly who is at the table during this process. I too imagine a city where the streets are “complete” and then some, accommodating everyone’s needs but also adding to the social density of sites where the active presence of people warrant it.

In this time of austerity, we need more than streets for nothing but traffic, parking lots for nothing but cars, and stadiums for but a single sport. We need to ask more from our infrastructure. It is time to “thicken” our purposes, to create more robust and useful multiples from singulars. The Airline project illustrates the potential synergy of merging public works expenditures—in this case, street widening—with public amenities and of forming new strategies for decision-making that combine investment in infrastructure with investment in the public realm, regardless of how messy or time-consuming the prospect may be. **c**