



TOP: The “Best Overall” entry addresses community life along corridors.

ABOVE: The “Honorable Mention” includes an armature on Crawford and Southmore to ease traffic through the neighborhood.

CHARRETTE

A TIGHTER FIT: THE MUSEUM DISTRICT CHARRETTE

WITH TWELVE MILLION VISITORS A YEAR AND SEVENTEEN CULTURAL INSTITUTIONS within walking distance of one another, Houston’s Museum Park Neighborhood has enormous potential. Home to Hermann Park, The MFAH, Houston Museum of Natural Science, Houston Center for Contemporary Craft, the Holocaust Museum, and hundreds of residences, the neighborhood could have it all—community, great design, and world-class cultural life. Yet, the very “unzoned” uniqueness of the neighborhood holds back the realization of its full potential. The neighborhood suffers from poor connectivity, fragmented community, broken sidewalks, and overgrown promenades.

The presence of museums alone does not guarantee a vibrant neighborhood. In the Spring 1996 issue of *Cite* (35), Peter Papademetriou lamented that without “a vision that extends beyond the needs of separate institutions” the neighborhood would be doomed to a “loose fit” in which “[y]esterday’s back door could be tomorrow’s address.”

The residential parts of the neighborhood are split awkwardly at points between remnants of historic Third Ward and new townhouses of dizzying stylistic variety. Kathleen O’Reilly, Vice President of the Museum Park Super Neighborhood, sees these disparate realities as an opportunity and contacted rDAGENTS, RDA’s young professional group, to vet the area as the focus of the annual design charrette.

On Saturday, August 4, 33 designers came out to conceptualize a master plan for the neighborhood—improving the pedestrian and car realms by widening sidewalks and creating parking spaces, building a cohesive campus by clarifying east/west and north/south routes, enhancing the mixed-use capabilities of the area, and enabling a more livable, attractive urban space through sustainable landscaping.

The entries were then blindly judged by an all-star jury consisting of Buffalo Bayou Partnership Project Manager Guy Hagstette; City Council member Ellen Cohen; Associate Director of Administration at The Museum of Fine Arts, Houston Willard Holmes; and O’Reilly, who assessed the designs based on which solution addressed as many of the program elements as possible in a manner that was at once creative and realistic.

Bayardo Selva, Neda Izadi, Laura Beth Mertz, Will Denman, and Ray Mora took home the “Best Overall” prize for their design “EnLIVEN.” The entry stood out based on the cultural and residential programs created for the north/south and east/west corridors. Community life was addressed with the addition of food markets, spaces for convening, residential signage and graphics, and parking and pathway solutions that extend from Hermann Park.

The Gensler team of Meredith Epley, Suvama Gupta, Al Deliallisi, Marissa Campos, and Ashley Griffin were awarded “Honorable Mention” for the simplicity and practicality of their design, and its inclusion of an armature on Crawford and Southmore, which would ease traffic through the neighborhood. The design took a bold and welcomed leap with its focus on Almeda—a historic thoroughfare on the eastern end of the neighborhood known for its mix of restaurants and retail. Go to ricedesignalliance.org to see images of all the charrette entries. **C**

—Katie Plocheck