

MAINSTREAMING THE MILITANTS

ON THE FOUNDING OF RICE DESIGN ALLIANCE

By Raj Mankad





OPPOSITE
Cover illustration from *The Bayou Strategy*, 1977, by aqui.

TOP
Juanita McGinty, 1934-2007, was a leader in the effort to desegregate Houston schools, the first secretary of the RDA, and its second president.

BELOW
Interior of the McGinty house where the first RDA meetings were held.

Explaining the mission of Rice Design Alliance is like trying to define Houston's allure. Give some examples of activities, throw around some superlatives, and then say, "You have to experience it yourself." Attend the civic forums, the home tour, the lectures, and the charrettes. Read *Cite*. But what does it all add up to? What was the vision that gave rise to all these activities? I spoke with several individuals involved in the founding of RDA forty years ago to get a sense of the original motivations.

"To make a short story long," Jack McGinty begins, "I was on the search committee for a new dean for the Rice School of Architecture with [fellow alumni] Ben Brewer, Raymond Brochstein, and others...[and] David Crane was selected in 1972." Crane came to Houston from the University of Pennsylvania and focused on urban design challenges.

"David Crane's vision was that there should be a critical research and practice arm in the school, which was the Rice Center, and also a civic advocacy and consciousness-raising component which ended up being the Rice Design Alliance," says Drexel Turner. Crane's model for RDA was a public forum at Boston College that successfully brought together elected officials, technocrats, designers, and community leaders. Various sources described Crane as a visionary, an idealistic son of missionaries, and more likely to take action than go through all the steps of proper diplomacy.

"One of the first things he did was get acquainted with a core group of alumni and friends of the school," McGinty says. "He had several ideas to get the school immediately more involved in the community." Whereas the Rice Center and RDA focused on local issues, the Southwest Center for Urban Research (SCUR) took on regional challenges. "He didn't come up with the name [for RDA]," McGinty continues. "It was to be a community engagement in design issues with Rice being the intellectual center of it."

Placing University of Houston architecture faculty on the RDA board was "an early goal," according to McGinty. Furthermore, the appointment of Juanita McGinty, who was not an architect, as the first secretary and second president of RDA underscores the organization's history of broad-based community involvement. She played a key role in setting up the membership model.

An early RDA event, perhaps the first, was a civic forum on the bayous held on November 22, 1973 at the Cohen House on the Rice University campus. Ideas now widely held by mainstream Houstonians were at the time bold and contentious. Legendary activist Terry Hershey, who stopped the concretization of Buffalo Bayou with the help of George H. W. Bush and George Mitchell, introduced the keynote speaker, Major General John W. Morris of the Army Corps of Engineers.

Jack McGinty recalls that at another event focused on

the bayous Mayor Louie Welch debated with Hershey. Welch dismissed the idea of treating the bayou system as a recreational and wildlife resource, and stormed out.

O. Peck Drennan, the first RDA president, remembers an event on urban planning where a Ku Klux Klan Grand Dragon asked to speak. "He came with a green jacket," Drennan says. "The people from Harvard were terrified. He had a few things to say. It was kind of incoherent." Drennan, however, emphasizes that RDA succeeded in putting together alliances of civic-minded people, including "good old boys" who "came in cowboy boots" and the aforementioned "Harvard architects."

The focus on the bayous was sustained over the first five years, and beyond. The findings of the 1973 forum were published as a short book, *Bayous: Recycling an Urban Resource*. In 1977, RDA published *The Bayou Strategy* under the direction of David Crane, Charles Tapley, and Jim Blackburn.

RDA's formation was only one of several key events in the early '70s that, taken together, mark a watershed moment. Jack McGinty was elected president of the local American Institute for Architects chapter in 1973 and the national president in 1976, thereby tying together the efforts of multiple non-profits, as well as local and national pushes for change. After Crane brought a vision of community-based advocacy for the built environment from the northeast, Houston returned the favor by serving as an incubator for ideas and strategies nationwide.

Looking back at the period of RDA's founding, the number of organizations that were launched is remarkable. In the late 1960s and early '70s, a core group of people formed whatever entity seemed most effective—Citizens for Good Schools, Blueprint for the Future, Houston Urban Bunch, RDA, Rice Center, SCUR, Architects for Hofheinz, Park People, Citizens' Environmental Coalition, Houston Parks Board, and others—that failed as often as they achieved monumental changes. Although the Rice Center disappeared, Central Houston and other area-focused organizations can trace their roots to Crane's vision.

The question remains: Has the vision given way to the perpetuation of an institution for its own sake?

"It's still amazing to me to look at RDA now and to see how not controversial and highly respected it has become," says Barry Moore, one of the founders.

"When we first started, these ideas were kind of radical and revolutionary and outside the mainstream," adds McGinty. "The ideas themselves became more successful as Houston became more sophisticated and began to appreciate good design. The quality of architecture improved with Gerald Hines bringing in the starchitects to design buildings here... It wasn't so much that RDA changed. It rode a wave into being what it is." ●

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